

Mathurin knew well that an old bronzed mariner, like Peter Hauville, who had sailed twenty years on all the seas, was not the man to have useless misgivings to disturb his Captain, without grave reasons.

He, therefore, left the cabin at once, and followed by Moralès, who continued to be paler than usual, mounted rapidly the stair which led to the quarter deck.

The first look which he cast around the vessel convinced him that the apprehensions of Peter Hauville were not without foundation.

The atmosphere was calm and yet the sky and the sea presented a singular appearance.

Above the vessel, the firmament was of incredible purity, and myriads of stars sparkled in the infinite space.

At the horizon, however, a bank of clouds formed a deep black line. In the midst of these clouds, the moon, which was at its full and had just risen, appeared like a circular blotch of a dull sanguine hue.

That drop of blood produced a weird and sinister effect in the bosom of the ebony bank which increased in size every moment and seemed to climb from the far depths of the ocean to scale and invade the heavens.

The clouds glided with incredible swiftness and still no breath of wind reached the vessel; the flag of the main mast fell perpendicularly and the flame of the windward light did not flicker.

This was not all.

Around the "Marsouin" the sea rose in small chipping waves, crested with phosphorescent foam, which did not appear to come from the distance.

These little fleecy waves appeared to be produced by breakers. The sea was boiling. And still Mathurin was certain that he was not in the immediate vicinity of any rock, and the "Marsouin" was at least eighteen miles away from the nearest coast.

The Captain took in the whole scene in the twinkling of an eye.

Wrinkles formed on his forehead. A deep line grew between his brows.

Moralès perceived these symptoms.

"Dear Captain," he asked, "what do you think of it?"

Mathurin shook his head thoughtfully.

"Heavens!" exclaimed Moralès, "is there then any danger?"

"I still hope there is not, Don Guzman."

"But you are not certain! May St. James of Compostella and Our Lady of Atocha, protect us?"

"..... you are certain, my dear Captain?"

"What can I answer?..... Man cannot fathom the will and the designs of God... Since I have been on the sea—there are many years—I have never beheld what my eyes now witness. Look, these clouds rise without a breath to waft them. The waves are agitated without a storm to rouse them..... what will happen?..... I know not and I place my confidence on Him who rules the tempest and the sea..... Senor Don Guzman, do you know a finer prayer than that of the Breton seamen: O GOD! TAKE PITY ON ME, MY SHIP IS SO SMALL AND YOUR SEA IS SO LARGE."

"Yes... yes..." muttered Moralès... Very fine... very fine... I will remember it with pleasure when we get on shore..."

"Captain," asked Peter Hauville, "have you any orders to give me?"

"Yes."

"What are they?"

"All hands on deck, in case the wind rises and blows to a tempest."

"Enough, Captain."

In a minute or two the whole crew of the "Marsouin" was grouped on deck, at the foot of the masts, and the oldest among the tars exchanged significant looks which, had Moralès been them, would have rendered him far more nervous than he was already. But Moralès was too much of a nobleman to bestow any attention on common seamen.

The seething of the Ocean increased in intensity; the surface of the water appeared luminous, and a bubbling, similar to that of a huge cauldron, set on a raging fire, was heard far and wide.

On the horizon the black line continued deepening; it reached the half of the firmament. The sanguine blotch was merged in the gathering gloom.

Suddenly dull reverberations were heard, like the distant thunder of a hundred cannon; and simultaneously the black line widened, spread out like a fan, and veiled the entire heaven.

Then burst forth, like a signal, a formidable crash of thunder.

All the elements answered together.

A sheet of fire enveloped the embattled clouds; the angry sea leaped in mountain surges; from the four points of the compass the high winds trooped, with the hissings of demons.

The vessel, thus attacked, turned upon her own length, like a top in the hands of a child. She tottered like a drunken vixen, and her timbers gave forth a groan, while a prodigious sea broke over her, carrying off a portion of her gunwales. All this happened in less than a minute.

"Captain," said Peter Hauville, "if we go at this rate we shall make the coast in less than two hours."

"I know it," replied Mathurin, with imperious coolness.

"But then," cried Moralès, "we shall be lost."

"I fear so..... However we must struggle."

And while the Gitano rushed down to the cabin to put on a life-preserver, the captain took up his speaking trumpet and gave an order

to the crew, which was instantaneously executed. The object of the order was to tack about, so as to avoid the coast.

But the attempt was abortive. The vessel continued to drift in the eye of the storm. The sails were torn to rags, and the mizen mast, rent in twain, was blown away like a wisp of straw.

Suddenly, a loud cry was heard in the rear.

The rudder was unhinged by a shock of the sea, and the sailor who held the tiller swept into the waves.

Up to that moment, the wreck of the "Marsouin" was a probable event. Now, it was a certainty.

Mathurin Lemonnier dropped, in a state of complete discouragement, on a coil of cordage at the foot of the main mast.

Pierre Hauville approached him and asked: "Captain, have you any orders to give?"

Mathurin shook his head.

"What must we do?" continued the mate.

"Commend our souls to God and wait...."

In less than an hour we shall be on the coast. We shall then try to lower the boats and save the passengers and crew... But I am convinced all will be in vain and that we shall perish every one."

Peter Hauville left the captain without betraying any emotion.

After a while Mathurin descended slowly into the cabin. His object was to warn Annunziata and Carmen of their peril and ask them to pray for the safety of the ship.

The daughter of Don José and the widow of Tancré were sitting together in the cabin. They both appeared calm.

"Captain," said Annunziata with a sweet and resigned smile, "I know what you have to announce. There is no hope, is there?"

"No hope but in God," replied Mathurin.

"How long have we yet to live?"

"An hour at most, unless a miracle occur, and that miracle you must pray for."

Another smile, sadder than the first, wreathed the lips of Annunziata.

"Alas!" she murmured, "once at my father's dying bed I prayed for a miracle and did not obtain it. I hope for nothing, captain, yet I will pray."

Mathurin bowed and bent his steps towards the door. Annunziata stopped him.

"Captain, when the last minute arrives, you will warn me, will you not, so that we may raise a parting look at the sky?"

"I will have the honor to come myself," answered the Norman.

And he departed.

Annunziata then took Carmen in her arms and kissing her fondly, said:

"What is death to us, dear sister?..... Shall we not meet above those whom we loved most on earth?"

Carmen fancied she felt the icy hand of death flashing through her long hair. She answered nothing.

The daughter of Don José opened a little casket of chased silver which contained, as we know, several jewels and two letters. She put the letters to her lips and on her heart, then replaced them in the casket, locked the same and said to Carmen:

"This is my treasure. I will not part with it. It will go with me into the deep. And now, my sister, let us do as the captain desired; let us pray."

Time had advanced.

The storm had doubled its fury. On board a silence, as of the tomb, prevailed. This silence was suddenly broken by a great clamor from every breast.

A wave, more gigantic than the rest, seized the "Marsouin," raised her on high, where she trembled one brief moment on the crest of the surge, then dashed her forward into the yawning trough of the sea, with the rapidity of an arrow. Her keel and her bulwarks cracked. The main mast fell prone on the deck. The ship's bell tolled. It was a awful minute.

When the tumult ceased, the "Marsouin" was found hemmed in between two rocks, like an iron wedge in the trunk of an oak tree.

A cry of joy and hope arose. It was not salvation; but it was a respite. Mathurin determined to lower the boats and immediately gave orders to that effect.

Then he descended into the cabin.

"Is it death that you announce, captain?" asked Annunziata, in a calm voice.

"Not yet. It is perhaps life."

The eyes of Annunziata expressed surprise. Those of Carmen sparkled.

"Ah! what has happened?" she exclaimed.

In a few words, Mathurin Lemonnier explained the situation, and requested the young girl and the young woman to go up on deck.

Annunziata took the handle of the little silver casket and followed Carmen who had already sprung up the stair.

On reaching the deck they met Moralès who had just made his appearance. He was the picture of perplexity and despair.

The captain turned his attention to the boats. He had two—a cutter and a long boat. The cutter could hold ten persons. The long boat twenty. And there were twenty-five persons on board.

The cutter was lowered first. It was taken to the stern of the ship; two cables were attached in front and rear; four sailors, oar in hand, took their seats; the pulleys creaked and slowly the embarkation was let down. When it reached the water, the vessel gave a lurch, the cables broke, the boat was capsized and not one of the seamen in it rose to the surface.

This catastrophe nearly paralyzed the captain,

but he roused himself and ordered the lowering of the long boat. Fortunately, that was accomplished without accident.

Mathurin approached Annunziata, and said: "Pass down first, Miss, the way is perilous, but not impossible... courage and make haste."

"I shall have courage," answered the daughter of Don José; then addressing Carmen: "Hold this casket, my sister, till I reach the boat. You will then throw it to me."

Annunziata kissed her companion; murmured a short prayer; tied her dress modestly around her ankles with a handkerchief; then seizing the cable with her fragile hands, was launched into space.

While she accomplished the dangerous descent, every eye was fixed upon her. Though her hands were blistered and torn by the rope, she held on bravely, till she reached the arms of the sailors who manned the boat.

"Your turn now, Madam," said the Captain to Carmen.

The Gitana approached the side to throw down the casket and to attempt the perilous descent.

But it was too late.

A wave struck the boat, breaking the larboard oars, and sent it spinning forward in the distance.

"They are lost!" cried Mathurin.

"Not they," exclaimed Carmen, "they float. It is we who are lost!"

"We and they, Madam. They have only four oars. See, the boat does not obey its helm. She will soon founder."

In a few minutes the boat had disappeared in the darkness of the tempest.

"It is over," said Carmen. "We must die. I am only eighteen and might have lived—"

Stricken with despair, she rushed back to the cabin and threw herself upon her bed, clasping the casket of Annunziata on her bosom.

Of the whole crew of the "Marsouin," only seven remained.

Pierre Hauville approached the captain: "Captain," he said, "they want to build a raft."

"It is useless..... but let them do it?"

The sailors seized their axes and in less than an hour had accomplished their design.

It was launched at once.

At that moment, a fresh outburst of the storm overwhelmed it and the vessel. Then the sky suddenly cleared, the waters fell, the clouds parted and the silver moon shone softly over the expanse. The deck of the "Marsouin" was deserted; the raft and the men had disappeared.

Only Moralès, near the ship, was seen struggling with the waves.

Stretched on her bed in the cabin, motionless, but with eyes open, Carmen slept not. Paralyzed physically and morally by fatigue and fright she was plunged in a torpor akin unto death.

Hours passed.

Carmen recovered gradually. Slowly her memory returned. She arose trembling, and after many efforts succeeded in dragging herself to the deck.

The spectacle that met her eyes was solemn. There was the tossing sea, the white rocks, the bright sky, silence, solitude and infinity.

At length at the foot of one of the rocks, she spied a dark object. She distinguished a ship's boat, floating keel upward. She looked again. She could not be mistaken. There were the golden letters on the stern: THE MARSOUIN.

Doubt was now impossible. The long boat had capsized.

"Poor Annunziata," she murmured, "she has gone to join her father."

And the tears came to her eyes.

She then explored the vessel, but found no trace of a human being.

"Where is my brother? Where are the captain and the sailors?" she asked herself. And she called aloud.

To her voice no voice replied.

Carmen understood her position. She fell upon her knees, clasping her hands and crying, with anger and consternation:

"Oh! the cowards, the cowards, they have abandoned me. What will become of me? Have pity on me, O my God!"

Then she wept for long hours.

Day passed and night came on with its terrors and hallucinations. In the darkness, Carmen was tortured by the phantoms of her imagination. The morning dawned like a benediction. The Gitana took courage. She tore up long strips of white muslin with which she made a flag, in the hope of hailing some passing vessel.

She was not disappointed. Two vessels appeared in sight. She waved her flag, but the summons were not heeded. She did not lose courage, however. At length, toward evening, a little coaster with a triangular sail hove in view. For the third time Carmen displayed her signal and to her immense joy it was answered, a boat, manned by four sailors, put from the vessel and made for the wreck. Carmen, holding the casket of Annunziata in her hand, stood forward to meet it.

At eighteen life is so dear, and the future appears so beautiful!

XXVIII.

FATHER AND SON.

On the declivity of the beautiful hill of Ingouville, within sight of Trouville and Honfleur, the mouth of the Seine, the promontory of Heve and the fair city of Havre, there was, at the epoch of our story, a delicious habitation, surrounded by a garden so vast that it might have been taken for a park.

This habitation belonged to Philip Le Vallant.

This personage, at the time that we present him to our readers, had the appearance of a man fifty-five or sixty, though he was really ten years older.

His hair was white and abundant, but his eyebrows were black and clearly pencilled; his large blue eyes were the mirrors of a noble, and generous soul.

This old man, three or four times a millionaire, was seated in a handsomely furnished little drawing room, dreamily dressing his fire, when the sound of horse hoof were heard in the courtyard below. He rose from his seat, looked through the window and a smile of love and pride beamed on his lips.

A moment after, the door opened and a tall young man, of ideal beauty, thin and pale, with eyes as soft as a woman's, entered the room and embraced the old man respectfully, saying:

"Good-day, father."

"Did you take a long ride to-day, my son?" demanded Philip.

"Yes," replied Oliver, "I went as far as Tancarville."

"And you learned nothing on the way? You have nothing to tell me?"

"Nothing whatever, father, except that it is cold and that I am almost frozen."

"Come then and warm yourself."

Father and son sat down at opposite corners of the fireplace. They exchanged a few words, on subjects of no importance, and, after a time, lapsed into a profound silence.

At length, the old man said:

"My son, what ails you?"

"Nothing," replied Oliver.

"Oh! that is your usual answer, but I can hardly believe you. You conceal some grief of yours from me."

The young man assured his father that such was not the case.

"Listen, Oliver," continued the old man, "you cannot deceive the eyes and the heart of a father."

"I declare to you—"

"Let me continue. This sadness of yours dates from your last excursion into Brittany, where you spent three months."

Oliver kept silence.

"My son," continued the shipowner.

"Father?"

"Have you no confidence in me?"

"Do not speak thus, father."

"I beg you to open your heart to me. Tell me all."

"I have nothing to say, and I conceal nothing."

"Very well, I see you mistrust me."

The conversation continued in this tone for a considerable time. The young man made no revelation. But the father did. He told his son that he was anxious for the safety of the "Marsouin" and the arrival of Annunziata.

The mention of that name increased the pallor of the youth.

The "Marsouin," continued Philip, was the glory of my fleet—solid, elegant, swift, fit to brave any storm in any sea. Mathurin is an able and prudent commander. I repose in him an absolute trust. But see, this is the hour of the high tide. I am going on the pier to witness the coming and going of the ships, will you come, Oliver?"

The son accompanied his father. They remained on the jetty the whole afternoon. As night closed in, they returned home.

"Nothing new, Zephir?" asked the shipowner of his old domestic.

"Yes, master, a large packet of letters has come. I placed it on your table in the drawing room."

"Letters?" murmured Philip, "letters? who knows? There may be one about the "Marsouin."

And the old man hurried up into the drawing room, followed by his son.

The lights in the two silver candelabra over the chimney-piece were burning. The table was covered with letters.

"Oliver," said Philip, "will you help me to read these letters? Tear off the envelopes! Read date and signature! Glance over contents! Later I will examine all the papers in detail. What I want first and foremost is news of the "Marsouin."

The young man began breaking the seals and he read aloud!

"Venice—Angelo Viterbi—"

"Pass on."

"Amsterdam—Van Troffer—"

"Another."

"Tunis—Hadje-abd-el-Hamed."

"Continue."

"Mexico—Joaquin Moratin."

"Don't mind."

"London—William Huggs."

"Faster, Oliver, faster."

"Drontheim—Jan Byernarme."

"That is all? And not a word of what I want to know. Go on, Oliver."

The young man continued.

He passed in review a number of commercial letters from Goleonda, Stockholm, Odessa, Delhi, Pekin, Quebec, and twenty other parts.

After each signature, the shipowner repeated:

"Go on—go on."

At length, a letter, the last but one, came into the hands of Oliver. It was dated Lisbon and bore the signature of Don Juan Mendigo, the agent of Philip LeVallant in Portugal.

Oliver glanced through it, as he had done with the others, but instead of casting it aside, he held it in his hand with an expression of astonishment and horror.

"Well, my son, what is it?" exclaimed the old man.