

"If she can't make the harbour she'll be to pieces in half an hour," said an old sailor.

"But ye may save some of them," cried a woman.

"And how?"

"The lifeboat!"

"Oh! and who's to man her?"

"We'll have her out, anyway!"

A rush to the boathouse, where the lifeboat lay snug, and in less than seemed possible it was ready.

"Now, who's here?" said the old man.

"There's me and there's Martin."

"And I, Jerome Leduc."

"Thou here from thy sick bed!"

"Yes! when lives are in peril!"

"Where is Jean Pitou?"

"Eh! where? Down at the wine-shop, or sleeping off his liquor."

Most of the men were away with their boats. Only one able-bodied man, the invalid, and the old man were to be found.

"It is a fearful risk," said one, "and short-handed too!"

"I will go!" cried a voice, and out of the darkness a small figure sprang into the boat as it was launched.

"Dieudonné!"

Various exclamations of surprise burst from the lips of the assembled crowd.

"I will go," repeated the boy, as if fearing opposition. But none was offered, the need was too great. Already the boat was on the move.

A woman flung out a life-buoy. "God bless thee, child!"

Dondon caught it.

In silence they started. Every heart throbbed too painfully for speech. With difficulty they made way to the mouth of the harbour. Here the fierce winds and waters seemed to concentrate their force to hurl the boat to destruction, but the brave hearts within might have endowed the inanimate thing with their spirit, so gallantly did she strive.

The gale, howling with fury, swooped down upon the waters, threatening annihilation to all upon them.

The lifeboat now shivered, now lay as it were, prostrate, then righted herself, and struggled on unvanquished.

Another rocket flew upward with its silent appeal for help. A flash of blue lightning quivered in the air, then the thunder crashed.

For the first time one man spoke. "She is on the Black Caps. 'Tis a yacht."

For the next few minutes breath was precious. They labored manfully, yet made little progress.

Now and again a heavy sea would dash over them, and leave them half blinded and drenched.

"It will likely be the yacht of the English milord. He left the harbour—"

The speaker stopped, as a loud cry came across the dark tossing waters in a lull of the storm from the direction of the distressed vessel.

"Look out! She's breaking up!" cried the younger of the men.

Dieudonné, raising his head, beheld the outline of a dark mass lifted for one second high above them against the white seething billows. Then it sank, and the cries ceased. Only the howling of the wind and foaming of the waters made themselves heard.

The men in the lifeboat drew breath in one deep low sigh of horror. Now came swirling past pieces of the wreck. The keen eyes of the sailors peered out to discover if any living thing was to be seen.

But no! Yes! Here was one clinging frantically to a broken spar. They caught at him, and dragged him on board, fainting, speechless. He lay in the bottom of the boat; dead, the boy believed.

Dieudonné had forgotten his dread of the sea, himself, everything but the scene before him. "Look! look!" he exclaimed, as a floating mass came drifting past, to which clung some form of humanity, and a voice was heard faintly calling.

"'Tis a man! he is crying to us!"

A boat-hook and a rope were flung, and the rail to which the swimmer clung was hauled towards the boat, while one of the crew bent forward to help the fainting creature. But at the moment they touched him his strength failed. He flung up his arms. "My child!" was all he said, in a cry of utter despair. Then he would have sunk, but that the rail on which the grappling held caught him momentarily by the shirt and kept him afloat just the instant of time which sufficed for the united efforts of the men to drag him into the boat. As they did so the rail went floating away, unnoticed by all, save Dieudonné.

Horror-stricken, he had caught sight of a small white face, a mass of hair drifting slowly by. With never a word, with but one thought, the boy plunged into the sea. In an instant he had grasped the rail, had twined his hand in the long floating hair. He could not swim, but the belt kept him afloat. He glanced round, but alas! he was already far from the boat. He shouted, but well he knew the wind bore his voice from his mates to the shore.

The cold waters pierced to his heart, but he clung to the rail, and kept the child afloat upon it. It was in all but a few minutes. It seemed hours to Dieudonné. Oh! if only he could make them hear! Surely they would miss him and look out.

That was the boat now, between him and the land. They were returning. He shouted, and there was a gruff shout in reply.

Oh, joy! They would come now. Yes, they were here; an oar is held out—a rope thrown. They know nothing of his burthen.

At that moment the rail snapped and whirled away. Without support other than his brave little arms the child still floated. No breath to speak, he clung with his teeth to the rope.

"Here he is, mates! Hurrah! Why, what's this? Here's two of 'em. Bear a hand here. 'Tis a girl!" They lifted the child, and laid her beside her unconscious parent.

Dieudonné's stiffening fingers dropped to his sides, and he fell forward, striking his head against the oar. "Why, hold up, my lad!" sang out one of the men. "Thou hast done a good night's work for certain—thou that wast afraid." He stopped, for, by the light of his lantern, he saw the change which was passing over that set, white face. He felt the figure relax upon his arm.

In silence they rode into the harbour. The storm was abating, the moon was looking out pitifully from between the parting clouds, as amid the cheers of the women assembled on the quay, the lifeboat made its way.

But as the rescued ones were carried in—none knew whether dead or alive—a word was spoken by the sailor which stopped the cheering.

"Ah! poor Dieudonné! Oh! the brave child!"

Suddenly the crowd was broken up. A man, brown and stalwart, rushed through them to where lay the silent figure of the boy. "Who says he is dead?" he cried.

He raised him in his arms. He looked into the pallid face, he put back the black wet hair from the cold brow. The people standing round shook their heads. He was answered.

"How?—how?"

It was all he could say.

"He must have struck his head against the boat," one of the men made answer.