

Tracy Louis

Flower of the Gorse



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Louis Tracy

Flower of the Gorse

*Dans la ville des meunières,
Pont Aven, pays d'Amour,
Au Bord des ruisseaux d'eau claire,
Fleur d'Ajonc chante toujours.*

– Breton Song.

CHAPTER I

THE TOWER AND THE WELL

"O, là, là! See, then, the best of good luck for each one of us this year!"

Although Mère Pitou's rotund body, like Falstaff's, was fat and scant o' breath, and the Pilgrims' Way was steep and rocky, some reserve of energy enabled her to clap her hands and scream the tidings of high fortune when the notes of a deep-toned bell pealed from an alp still hidden among the trees.

Three girls, fifty paces higher up the path, halted when they heard that glad cry – and, indeed, who would not give ear to such augury?

"Why should the clang of a bell foretell good luck, Mother?" cried Barbe, the youngest, seventeen that September day, and a true Breton maid, with eyes like sloes, and cheeks the tint of ripe russet apples, and full red lips ever ready to smile shyly, revealing the big, white, even teeth of a peasant.

"Mother" signaled that explanations must await a more opportune moment.

"Madame Pitou can't utter another word," laughed Yvonne, the tallest girl of the trio.

"She has had some secret on the tip of her tongue all day," said Madeleine, who was so like Barbe that she might have been an elder sister; though the sole tie between the two was residence in the same village. "Don't you remember how she kept saying in the train? – 'Now, little ones, ask Sainte Barbe to be kind to you. She'll hear your prayers a kilometer away, even though you whisper them.'"

"Yes, and Mama would have liked us to begin singing a hymn when we started from the foot of the hill, but she thought Monsieur Ingersoll and Monsieur Tollemache would only be amused," put in Barbe.

"They would certainly have been amused before Madame Pitou reached the top, singing!" tittered Yvonne.

"Is it possible that I shall ever be as stout as Mama?" murmured Barbe, and the mere notion of such a catastrophe evoked a poignant anxiety that was mirrored in her eyes.

"Ah, Mignonne, now you know the form your petition to Sainte Barbe must take," smiled Yvonne.

"It's all very well for you, Yvonne, to chaff us smaller ones," pouted Madeleine. "You're tall, and slim, and fair, and you carry yourself like the pretty American ladies who come to Pont Aven in the season, the ladies who wear such simple clothes, and hardly look a year older than their daughters, and walk leagues in men's boots, and play tennis before *déjeuner*. Of course you can't help being elegant. You're American yourself."

The recipient of this tribute turned it aside deftly. "Sometimes I think I am more Breton than American," she said.

"Yes, everyone says that," agreed Barbe loyally. "Next year, Yvonne, they'll make you Queen of the Gorse."

With the innocence of youth, or perhaps with its carelessness, Barbe had raised a topic as prickly as the gorse itself, because Madeleine had been a maid of honor that year, and might reasonably expect the regal place in the succeeding Fête of the Fleurs d'Ajonc. Happily, Yvonne, if endowed with a sense of humor, was eminently good-natured and tactful.

"Nothing of the sort," she replied. "My father will never allow me to be photographed, and there would be a riot in Pont Aven if the shops couldn't sell picture postcards of the Queen."

"Hurry up!" cried single-minded Barbe. "Let's pray to Sainte Barbe before Mother comes, or she'll be telling me what I must ask for, and I mean to take your advice, Yvonne."

Two faces were turned instantly toward the invisible shrine of the puissant saint, and it would place no heavy strain on the intellect to guess what favors were sought. But Yvonne hesitated. She had

not been reared in the precise religious faith of her companions. Opinions garnered in the Bohemian atmosphere of John Ingersoll's studio were in ill accord with the uncompromising dogma taught in the convent on the hill overlooking the estuary of the Aven and labored by every sermon preached in the picturesque church near the bridge.

Yet at that instant some words uttered by her father reached her ears, and, moved by sudden impulse, she raised her eyes to the tiny arch of light that marked the spot near the summit where the interlacing branches of the avenue of elms came to an end.

"Sweet Lady Barbara," she breathed, "if you have it in your power to favor us poor mortals, please give my dear father a happy year!"

The bell, after a few seconds of silence, renewed its clamor, and the pretty unbeliever accepted the omen. Her friends, of course, regarded the answer as more than propitious: it was an assurance, an undoubted promise of saintly intercession.

"I love Mama more than anyone in the world, but I couldn't bear to measure a meter round my waist," said Barbe confidently.

"Even though I may never be Queen, it is something to have been a maid of honor," said Madeleine, demurely conciliatory now that her prayer was safely lodged.

Yvonne heard, but paid no heed. She was looking at the three people approaching the ledge of rock on which she and the others were standing.

Madame Pitou, like the girls, wore the costume of Brittany, conforming, of course, to the time-honored fashion that allots a special headgear to womankind in each district. Thus the coif supplies an unerring label of residence. A woman from Pont Aven would recognize a woman from Riec and another from Concarneau though she had never seen either before in her life; while all three would unite, without possibility of error, in saying of a fourth, "She comes from Auray."

The two men in Mère Pitou's company were just as surely classed by their attire as the women by their coifs. Both were artists, and each obeyed the unwritten law which says that he who would paint must don a knickerbocker suit, wear a wide-brimmed felt hat, disregard collar buttons, and display a loosely knotted necktie. Ingersoll, the elder, was content with clothes of brown corduroy which had seen many, if not better, days. His boots were strong and hobnailed, and his easy stride up the rough and uneven track would reassure one who doubted the stamina of his seemingly frail body. Tollemache, who affected gray tweed, a French gray silk tie, gray woolen stockings, and brown brogues, looked what he was, a healthy young athlete who would be equally at home on springy heather whether carrying an easel or a gun.

Tollemache had caught Mère Pitou's arm when she announced the message of the bell.

"One more outburst like that, my fairy, and we'll have to carry you up the remainder of the hill," he grinned.

"*Mon Dieu!* but I'm glad I made the best part of the pilgrimage in a train and a carriage!" twittered Madame. "Yet, though I dropped, I had to warn the little ones that the dear saint knew they were coming to her shrine."

"Is that what it means?"

"What else? A pity you are not a good Catholic, Monsieur Tollemache, or you might be granted a favor today."

"Oh, come now! That's no way to convert a black Presbyterian. Tell me that Sainte Barbe will get my next picture crowned by the Academy, and I'll fall on my knees with fervor."

"*Tcha!* Even a saint cannot obtain what Heaven does not allow."

Ingersoll laughed. "Mère Pitou may lose her breath; but she never loses her wit," he said. "Now I put forward a much more modest request. Most excellent Sainte Barbe, send me some mad dealer who will empty my studio at a thousand francs a canvas!"

Yvonne heard these words; yet, be it noted, she asked the saint to make her father happy, not prosperous. It was then that the bell rang a second time.

"*Tiens!*" exclaimed Madame Pitou. "The saint replies!"

"Like every magician, you achieve your effect by the simplest of contrivances – when one peeps behind the scenes," said Ingersoll. "Old Père Jean, custodian of the chapel, who will meet us at the summit, keeps a boy on guard, so that all good pilgrims may be put in the right frame of mind by hearing the bell accidentally. The boy saw our girls first, and then spied us. Hence the double tolling. Now, Madame, crush me! I can see lightning in your eye."

"Mark my words, Monsieur Ingersoll, the saint will send that dealer, and he will certainly be mad, since none but a lunatic would pay a thousand francs for any picture of yours."

Ingersoll seized her free arm. "Run her up, for Heaven's sake, Tollemache!" he cried in English. "Her tongue has scarified me every day for eighteen years, and age cannot wither, nor custom stale, its infinite variety."

Laughing, struggling, crying brokenly that *ces Américains* would be the death of her, and tripping along the while with surprising lightness of foot, – for Mère Pitou had been noted as the best dancer of the gavotte at any *pardon* held within a radius of ten miles of Pont Aven, – she was hurried to the waiting girls.

"Ah, that rascal of a father of yours!" she wheezed to Yvonne, relapsing into the Breton language, as was her invariable habit when excited, either in anger or mirth. "And this other overgrown imp! When they're beaten in argument they try to kill me. *Gars!* A nice lot I'm bringing to the holy chapel!"

"Never mind, *chère maman*," said the girl, taking her father's place, and clasping the plump arm affectionately. "When we descend the other side of the hill you'll have them at your mercy. Then you can tell them what you really think of them."

"They know now. Artists, indeed! Acrobats, I call them! Making sport of a poor old woman! Not that I'm astonished at anything Monsieur Ingersoll does. Everybody admits that he is touched here," and she dabbed a fat finger at her glistening forehead, "or he wouldn't bury himself alive in a Brittany village, because he really has talent. But that hulking Monsieur Tollemache ought to be showing off his agility before you girls instead of lugging me up the Pilgrims' Way. *Cré nom!* When little Barbe's father – Heaven rest his soul! – met me here one fête day before we were married, he wouldn't rest till he had swung himself round Sainte Barbe's tower by the shepherd's hooks; and me screaming in fright while I watched him, though bursting with pride all the time, since the other girls were well aware that he was only doing it to find out if I cared whether or not he fell and broke his neck."

"What's that?" inquired Tollemache; for Madame Pitou was speaking French again. "Where is this tower?"

"Oh, you'll shiver when you see it! You Americans eat so much beef that you can never leave the earth. That's why Frenchmen fly while you walk."

"Or run, my cabbage. You must admit that we can run?"

"The good Lord gave you those long legs for some purpose, no doubt."

"Well, *Maman*, we offered our petitions. What did you ask for?" said Yvonne.

Madame flung up her hands with a woebegone cry. "May the dear saint forgive me, but the monkey chatter of those two infidels put my prayer clean out of my head!"

"Gee whizz!" exclaimed Tollemache. "This time I'll run in earnest, or I'll catch it hot and strong," and he made off.

"No harm done," said Ingersoll. "Mère Pitou has all she wants in this world, and will enter the next with pious confidence."

For once the elderly dame kept a still tongue. Like every Breton woman, she was deeply religious, and rather given to superstition, and the momentary lapse that led her to forget a carefully thought out plea for saintly aid caused a pang of real distress.

Yvonne guessed the truth, and sympathized with her. "Father dear," she said, "promise now, this minute, that you will bring us all here again next year on Barbe's fête day, and that we shall fall on our knees while Madame offers her prayer, or she will be unhappy all day."

Ingersoll read correctly the look of reproach his daughter shot at him, and was genuinely sorry. He too understood the tribulation that had befallen his friend.

"By Jove!" he said instantly, "better than that, though I make the promise willingly, Madame Pitou and I must do immediate penance for our sins – she for neglect and I for irreverence – by going halfway down the hill again and toiling back."

He was by no means surprised when Mère Pitou took at his word. Away they went, and Yvonne did not fail to grasp the meaning of her father's significant glance toward the belfry as he turned on his heel. On no account was the boy to miss the arrival of yet a third batch of pilgrims!

Now, the belfry stood on the farther edge of a tiny plateau of rock and gorse that crowned the summit. On the left was Père Jean's cottage with its stable and weaving shed. Among the trees in the background rose the diminutive spire of Sainte Barbe's chapel, and it was evident that the slope of the hill was precipitous, because spire and treetops, though quite near, were almost on a level with the girl's eyes. From the side of the belfry a paved causeway led to a quaintly carved and weather-beaten open-air altar, and long flights of broad steps fell thence on one hand to the door of the chapel and on the other to the first of many paths piercing the dense woodland of the hillside.

Père Jean, a sprightly and wizened old peasant dressed in white linen, was already chatting with Tollemache and the other two girls. The boy, thinking the avenue was clear, had gone to the cottage for a tray of picture postcards.

Yvonne followed, and sent him to his lookout with definite instructions. "Make no mistake," she said, "and we'll buy at least a franc's worth of cards later." Then she rejoined her friends.

"Yes, I've seen it done," Père Jean was saying. "Sailors were the best; but the shepherds were brave lads too. Nowadays it is forbidden by the prefect."

"Why? Were there many accidents?" inquired Tollemache.

"Oh, yes, a few. You see, it seems easy enough at the commencement; but sometimes the heart failed when the body was swinging over the cliff. It is fatal to look down."

Madeleine's shoulders were bent over a low parapet. Yvonne, leaning on her, saw that the caretaker was talking of the feat that Barbe's father had accomplished many years earlier. The altar at the end of the causeway was shielded by a squat, square tower. In its walls, about six feet above the causeway, some iron rings were visible. They hung loose; but their staples were imbedded in the masonry, and each ring was about a yard apart from its fellow. A mass of rock gave ready access to the first pair; but thenceforth the venturesome athlete who essayed the passage must swing himself in air, gripping a ring alternately in the left hand and in both hands.

On one side, the left, the tower sank only to the level of the path beneath; but a glance over the opposite parapet revealed an awesome abyss.

Madeleine shuddered when she felt Yvonne's hand. "To think that men should be so foolish as to risk their lives in such a way!" she murmured.

"I suppose that anyone who let go was killed?" said Tollemache.

"*Mais, non, M'sieu'*," Père Jean assured him. "The blessed saint would not permit that. No one was ever killed, I'm told. But the prefect has forbidden it these twenty years."

"Are the rings in good condition?"

"Certainly, *M'sieu'*. Where now does one get such iron as was made in those days?"

"Let's test some of 'em, anyhow," said Tollemache, and before the horrified girls realized what he meant he had leaped from parapet to rock, and was clinging to a couple of rings.

"Oh, Monsieur Tollemache!" screamed Barbe.

"Please come back, Monsieur!" cried Madeleine.

"Hi! Hi! It is forbidden by the prefect!" bellowed Père Jean.

But Yvonne, though angry and pallid with fright, only said, "Don't be stupid, Lorry. I should never have thought you would show off in that silly manner."

She spoke in English. Tollemache, gazing down at her in a comical, sidelong way, answered in the same language.

"I'm not showing off. Do you think that any Frenchman ever lived who could climb where I couldn't?"

"No one said a word about you."

"Yes. Mère Pitou said I'd shiver when I saw the place. Now watch me shiver!"

He swung outward. Even in her distress, Yvonne noticed that he took a strong pull at each ring before trusting his whole weight to it. But she made no further protest, nor uttered a sound; though Madeleine and Barbe were screaming frantically, and the old caretaker's voice cracked with reiteration of the prefect's commands.

Tollemache was soon out of sight round the angle of the tower, and the two Breton girls ran to the other parapet to watch for his reappearance. Not so Yvonne. The dread notion possessed her that she might see Laurence Tollemache dashed to his death on those cruel rocks some sixty feet beneath, and she knew that, once witnessed, the horrific spectacle would never leave her vision. So she waited spellbound in front of the altar, and gazed mutely at some tawdry images that stood there. Could they help, these grotesque caricatures of heavenly beings, carved and gilded wooden blocks with curiously inane eyes and thick lips? Her senses seemed to be atrophied. She was aware of a feeling of dull annoyance when the boy, attracted by the screams and Père Jean's shrill vehemence, came running from his post, and thus would surely miss the second appearance of her father and Mère Pitou. But the young peasant was quick witted. He had seen the "pilgrims" turn and resume the ascent; so he dashed into the belfry, because he could thence obtain a rare view of an event that he had often heard of but never seen, – a man swinging himself round Sainte Barbe's tower by the shepherd's hooks, such being the local name of the series of rings.

So the bell tolled its deep, strong notes, and simultaneously Madeleine and Barbe shrieked in a wilder pitch of frenzy. Tollemache had just swung round the second angle of the tower. His left hand had caught the outermost ring on that side; but the staple yielded, and he vanished.

"Ah, *mon Dieu!* he has fallen!" cried Barbe, collapsing forthwith in a faint.

Fortunately Madeleine saved her from a nasty tumble on the rough stones; though she herself was nearly distraught with terror. Père Jean raced off down the right-hand flight of steps, moving with remarkable celerity for so old a man, and gasping in his panic:

"*Mille diables!* What will *M'sieu' le Préfet* say now?"

Evidently the caretaker feared lest Sainte Barbe's miraculous powers should not survive so severe a test. Yet his faith was justified. A shout was heard from the tower's hidden face.

"*Je m'en fiche de ça!*" was the cry. "I'm right as a nail. I've got to return the way I came – that's all."

Yvonne listened as one in a dream. She saw her father and Madame Pitou crossing the plateau. For an instant her eyes dwelt on the features of the frightened boy peering through an embrasure in the belfry. From some point beneath came the broken ejaculations of Père Jean, who was craning his neck from some precarious perch on the edge of the precipice to catch a glimpse of the mad American's shattered body. Madeleine was sobbing hysterically over the prostrate Barbe, and endeavoring with nervous fingers to undo the stiff linen coif round the unconscious girl's throat.

Now, after leaving the cottage, Yvonne had looked at the chapel, the entrance to which lay at the foot of the left-hand stairway. The sanctuary had a belfry of its own, a narrow, circular tower, pierced with lancet windows beneath a pointed roof. These windows were almost on a line with and about ten feet distant from the top of the wall of rock left by the excavation that provided a site for the building. Through one of them, which faced the causeway, could be seen a tiny white statue of

Sainte Barbe. No more striking position could have been chosen for it. The image was impressive by reason of its very unexpectedness.

Hardly conscious of her action, Yvonne turned to the saint now to invoke her help. She murmured an incoherent prayer, and as she gazed distraught at the Madonna-like figure, so calm, so watchful in its aery, she heard the rhythmic clank of iron as the rings moved in their sockets. One fleeting glance over the left parapet revealed Tollemache in the act of swinging himself to the pair of rings above the rock that gave foothold.

Again he peered down at her, twisting his head awkwardly for the purpose. "Nothing much to it," he laughed, jerking out breathless words. "Of course it was a bit of a twister when that ring came away; but – "

He was safe. Yvonne deigned him no further heed. She hurried to Barbe's side.

"For goodness' sake help me to shake her and slap her hands!" she cried to Madeleine. "Monsieur Tollemache has spoiled the day for us already, and Mère Pitou will be ill if she thinks Barbe is hurt."

Barbe, vigorous little village girl, soon yielded to drastic treatment, and was eager as either of her friends to conceal from her mother the fact that she had fainted.

Tollemache, feeling rather sheepish in face of Yvonne's quiet scorn, strolled to the top of the steps down which Père Jean had scuttled. The old man's voice reached him in despairing appeal.

"M'sieu! Speak, if you are alive! Speak, *pour l'amour de Dieu!*"

"Hello there!" he cried. "What's the row about? Here I am!"

Père Jean gazed up with bulging eyes, and himself nearly fell over the precipice. "Ah, *Dieu merci!*" he quavered. "But, M'sieu', didn't you hear me telling you that the prefect – "

"What's the matter?" broke in Ingersoll's quiet tones. "You all look as if you had seen a daylight ghost."

"I behaved like a vain idiot," explained Tollemache, seeing that none of the girls was minded to answer. "I tried to climb round the tower by those rings, and scared Yvonne and the others rather badly."

"How far did you go?"

"Oh, I was on the last lap; but a ring gave way."

Ingersoll knew the place of old, and needed no elaborate essay on the danger Tollemache had escaped. His grave manner betokened the depth of his annoyance.

"What happened then?" he said. "I went back, of course."

"Where did the ring break?"

"It didn't break. I pulled the staple out. That one – you see where the gap is."

Ingersoll leaned over the parapet. A glance sufficed.

"You crossed the valley face of the tower twice?" he said.

"Couldn't help myself, old sport."

"Then you described yourself with marvelous accuracy, – a vain idiot, indeed!"

"Dash it all!" protested Tollemache. "I've only done the same as scores of Frenchmen."

"Many of whom lost their lives. You had a pretty close call. Lorry, I'm ashamed of you!"

Mère Pitou added to Tollemache's discomfiture by the biting comment that her man had got round the tower, whereas *he* had failed.

Altogether it was a somewhat depressed party that was shown round the quaint old chapel of the patroness of armorers and artillerymen by Père Jean, who had lost a good deal of his smiling bonhomie, and eyed Tollemache fearfully, evidently suspecting him of harboring some fantastic design of dropping from the gallery to the floor, or leaping from the chapel roof to the cliff.

Their spirits revived, however, as they descended a steep path to Sainte Barbe's well. Every chapel of Saint Barbara has, or ought to have, a well, and that at Le Faouet (three syllables, please, and sound the final T when you are in Brittany) is specially famous for its prophetic properties in affairs

of the heart. Thus, a spring bubbles into a trough surmounted by a canopy and image of the saint. In the center of the trough, beneath two feet of limpid water, the spring rises through an irregular orifice, roughly four inches square, and all unmarried young people who visit the shrine try to drop pins into the hole. Success at the first effort means that the fortunate aspirant for matrimony will either be married within a year or receive a favorable offer.

So, after luncheon, which had been carried by a boy from the village on the hill opposite the Pilgrims' Way, the girls produced a supply of pins. Barbe was the first to try her luck. Three pins wriggled to the floor of the well; but a fourth disappeared, and Mère Pitou took the omen seriously.

"You will be married when you are twenty-one, *ma petite*," she said, "and quite soon enough, too. Then your troubles will begin."

Madeleine failed six times, and gave up in a huff. Yvonne's second pin vanished.

"*O, là, là!*" cried Mère Pitou, still deeply interested in this consultation of the fates. "Mark my words, you'll refuse the first and take the second!"

The old lady darted a quick look at Ingersoll; but he was smiling. He had schooled himself for an ordeal, and his expression did not change. Tollemache, too, created a diversion by seizing a pin, holding it high above the surface of the water, whereas each of the girls had sought apparently to lessen the distance as much as possible, and dropping it out of sight straight away.

"Look at that!" he crowed. "My girl will say *snap* as soon as I say *snip*. Here's her engagement ring!"

Plunging his left hand into a pocket, he brought to light the ring and staple torn from Sainte Barbe's tower. When hanging with one hand to the last hold-fast, on the wall overlooking sixty feet of sheer precipice, he had calmly pocketed the ring that proved treacherous.

Evidently Laurence Tollemache was a young man who might be trusted not to lose his head in an emergency.

Mère Pitou was not to be persuaded to tempt fortune, and Ingersoll, who was sketching the well rapidly and most effectively, was left alone, because Barbe, who would have called him to come in his turn, was bidden sharply by her mother to mind her own business.

Tollemache and Yvonne climbed the rocky path together when they began the return journey to Le Faouet. In the rays of the afternoon sun the rough granite boulders sparkled as though they were studded with innumerable small diamonds.

"Haven't you forgiven me yet, Yvonne?" he said, noticing her distraught air.

She almost started, so far away were her thoughts. "Oh, let us forget that stupidity," she replied. "I was thinking of something very different. Tell me, Lorry, has my father ever spoken to you of my mother?"

"No," he said.

"Do you know where she is buried?"

"No."

She sighed. Her light-hearted companion's sudden taciturnity was not lost on her. Neither Madame Pitou, Ingersoll's friend and landlady during eighteen years, nor Tollemache, who worked with him daily, could read his eyes like Yvonne, and she knew he was acting a part when he smiled because Sainte Barbe's well announced that she would be married at the second asking. And the odd thing was that she had endeavored to drop the first pin so that it would not fall into the fateful space. None but she herself had noted how it plunged slantwise through the water as though drawn by a lodestone.

Even Tollemache nursed a grievance against the well's divination. "I say," he broke in, "that pin proposition is all nonsense, don't you think?"

For some occult reason she refused to answer as he hoped she would. "You never can tell," she said. "Mère Pitou believes in it, and she has had a long experience of life's vagaries."

From some distance came Madeleine's plaint. "Just imagine! Six times! In six years I shall be twenty-five. I don't credit a word of it – so there! At the last *pardon* Peridot danced with me all the afternoon."

Even little Barbe was not satisfied. "Mama said the other day," she confided, "that I might be married before I was twenty."

Ingersoll and Mère Pitou, bringing up the rear, were silent; Madame because this hill also was steep, and Ingersoll because of thoughts that came unbidden. In fact, Sainte Barbe had perplexed some of her pilgrims.

CHAPTER II

THE FEAST OF SAINTE BARBE

On the morning of December 4 in that same year a postman walked up the narrow path leading to the front door of Mère Pitou's house in the Rue Mathias, Pont Aven, and handed in a bundle of letters. The family was at breakfast, the *petit déjeuner* of coffee and rolls that stays the appetite in every French household until a more substantial meal is prepared at noon. The weather was mild and bright, though a gusty sou'westerly wind was blowing; so door and windows were open.

Barbe saw the postman ere he unlatched the garden gate, and rose excitedly, nearly upsetting a cup in her haste.

"Why, what's the rush?" cried Ingersoll. "And who in the world are all these letters for?"

"Father dear, have you forgotten the date? This is Barbe's name day," said Yvonne.

"Oh, that's the explanation of tonight's festivity," laughed Ingersoll. "Sorry. It quite slipped my mind. Of course she has wagonloads of friends who make a point of remembering these things. Lucky Barbe! And, by the way, Madame, what about those pictures which the Lady of Le Faouet was to dispose of? It's high time she was getting busy. Here are three months sped and – if anything rather a slump in Ingersolls. Actually, my best commission thus far is a series of picture postcards of Le Pouldu – with benefits deferred till next season."

"Perhaps the good saint knew that you kept your tongue in your cheek while you were seeking her help," retorted Madame.

"Impossible. It was lolling out. You ungrateful one, didn't I climb the hill twice for your sake?"

Barbe exchanged a friendly word with the postman, who was well aware of the cause of this sudden increase in the mail delivery at the cottage. Then she ran in.

"One for you, M'sieu' – all the rest for me," she announced gleefully.

Ingersoll took his letter. It bore the Pouldu postmark and the printed name of a hotel. Usually such missives came from brother artists; but the handwriting on the envelop was essentially of the type that French hotelkeepers cultivate for the utter bamboozling of their foreign patrons. Yvonne glanced at it with some curiosity, and was still more surprised to see the look of humorous bewilderment on her father's face when he had mastered its contents.

"I take back everything I said, or even thought, about Sainte Barbe," he cried. "Learn how she has squelched me! The proprietor of the chief hotel at Le Pouldu offers four hundred francs for a picture of the *plage* with his hotel in the center. Certainly four hundred is a heap short of a thousand, which was the sum I named to her saintship; but then, a *hôtelier* isn't a dealer, and he promises to pay cash if the sketch is delivered in a week, because he wants it for a summer poster. Yvonne, have you finished breakfast? Run and find Peridot, there's a dear, and ask him if we can sail to Le Pouldu this morning. It'll save time to go by sea, and the tide will serve, I know. If Peridot says the weather is all right, drop in at Julia's, and invite Tollemache. We'll lunch gloriously with my hotel man, rub in the best part of the drawing afterward, and be back here in good time for the feast."

Yvonne hurried out. The hour was half-past eight, and the tide in the estuary of the Aven was already on the ebb. But she had not far to go. The Rue Mathias (nowadays glorified by a much more ambitious name) was not a minute's walk from the bridge that gives the village its name. Another minute brought her to the quay, where the brawling river escapes from its last millwheel, and tumbles joyously into tidal water. She was lucky. Peridot was there, mending a blue sardine net, – a natty, square-shouldered sailor, unusually fair for a Breton, though his blond hair was French enough in its bristliness, as a section of his scalp would have provided a first-rate clothes brush. He touched his cap with a smile when she appeared, and in answer to her query raised to the heavens those gray-green eyes which had earned him such a euphonious nickname.

"Yes, Mademoiselle Yvonne, we can make Le Pouldu by ten o'clock with this wind," he said. "We may get a wetting; but it won't be the first. Is – er – is Madeleine coming?"

"Not today. She promised to help Mère Pitou with tonight's supper. You will be there?"

"Wind and weather permitting, Ma'mselle. We go in your own boat, I suppose?"

"Yes. Can you allow fifteen minutes?"

"There will be plenty of water for the next half-hour."

Yvonne raced off again, this time to the Hotel Julia, not the huge modern annex, – that dominates the tiny marketplace of Pont Aven, – but the oldtime hostelry itself, tucked in snugly behind its four sycamores, like some sedate matron ever peering up in wonderment at its overgrown child across the street. In winter the habitués – the coterie of artists and writers who cluster under the wing of the famous Julia Guillou – eat in the dining room of the smaller hotel.

Crossing the terrace, a graveled part of the square shielded by the trees, Yvonne met Mademoiselle Julia herself, bustling forth to inspect eggs, poultry, and buckets of fish. This kindly, outspoken, resourceful-looking woman has tended and housed and helped at least two generations of painters. In her way she has done more for art than many academies.

"Is Monsieur Tollemache at breakfast, Mademoiselle?" inquired Yvonne.

Julia smiled broadly. Evidently it was the most natural thing imaginable that the pretty American girl, known to everyone in the village, should be asking the whereabouts of the stalwart youngster who would never be an artist, but was one of the hotel's most valued guests.

"*Oui, ma chérie!* I heard him shouting to Marie for three boiled eggs not so long ago. Out of three eggs one hatches a good meal. And how is your father? I haven't set eyes on him this week."

"He is so busy, Mademoiselle. There is so little daylight."

"Bring him to dinner on Sunday. We're roasting two of the biggest geese you ever saw!"

"He will be delighted, I'm sure."

Then Julia marched to conquer the venders of eatables. There would be a terrific argument; but the founder of modern Pont Aven would prevail.

Yvonne looked in through an open window of a delightful room, paneled in oak – on every panel a picture bearing a signature more or less eminent in the world of color. Tollemache was there, tapping his third egg.

"Lorry," she said, "Father and I are sailing to Le Pouldu. Will you come?"

"Will a duck swim?" was the prompt reply. "When do we start?"

"Soon. Be at the quay in ten minutes."

"By the clock. Plenty of oilskins in the locker?"

"Yes."

She sped away. A Frenchman, an artist who knew the Breton coast in all weathers, shook his head.

"Dangerous work, yachting off Finistère in December," he said. "What sort of boat are you going in?"

"Ingersoll's own tub, a *vague* – a sardine boat, you know."

"First-rate craft, of course. But mind you're not caught in a change of wind. The barometer is falling."

"Oh, as for that, we'll probably have Peridot in charge, and he was born with a caul; so he'll never be drowned. Even if he's not there, Ingersoll and Yvonne are good sailors, and I'm no fresh-water amateur."

"Well – good luck! I only ask you not to despise the Atlantic. Why is Ingersoll going to Le Pouldu at this time of the year?"

"Don't know, and don't care. It's an unexpected holiday for me; so my Salon study of the Bois d'Amour in winter must miss a day."

The Frenchman sighed; whether on account of the doubtful prospect before Tollemache's Salon picture or because of his own vanished youth, it would be hard to say.

"What a charming peasant girl – and how on earth did she acquire English with that perfect accent?" said a woman, a newcomer.

"She is the daughter of a celebrated American artist," explained the Frenchman.

"But why does she wear the Breton costume?"

"Because she has good taste."

"Oh! Is that a hit at current fashions?"

The Frenchman shrugged his shoulders. "Madame asked for information," he said. "To wander off into an essay on clothes would be impolite."

Before nine o'clock the Hironde, registered No. 415 at Concarneau, was speeding down the seven kilometers of the Aven estuary on a rapid-falling tide. Owing to the force and direction of the wind it would have been a waste of time to hoist a sail, even in those reaches of the winding river where some use might have been made of it. Tollemache and Peridot (whose real name was Jean Jacques Larraidou) rigged two long sweeps, and Yvonne took the tiller, keeping the boat in mid-stream to gain the full benefit of the current. In forty minutes they were abreast of the fortlike hotel at Port Manech, the summer offshoot of the Hotel Julia, and a steel-blue line on the horizon, widening each instant, told of the nearness of the sea. It was an uneven line too, ever and anon broken by a white-capped hillock.

Peridot, pulling his oar inboard, poised himself erect for a few seconds with an arm thrown round the foremast, and gazed steadily seaward. "She'll jump a bit out there," he said; though the fierce whistling of the wind drowned his words. He was aware of that, because he converted both hands into a megaphone when he turned and shouted to Yvonne. "We'll take the inside passage, Ma'mselle."

Before attempting to hoist the foresail he rummaged in a locker and produced oilskin coats and sou'westers. There was no delay. The four donned them quickly. Yvonne had changed her Breton dress for a short skirt and coat of heather mixture cloth, because coif and collar of fine linen were ill adapted to seagoing in rough weather.

Peridot held up three fingers. The girl nodded. Peridot and Tollemache hauled at the sail, and Yvonne kept the boat in the eye of the wind until three reefs were tied securely. Then the Hironde swung round to her task. She careened almost to the port gunwale under the first furious lash of the gale, and a sheet of spray beat noisily on oilskins and deck. But the stanch little craft steadied herself, and leaped into her best pace.

Ingersoll dived into the cabin, and reappeared with his pipe alight, the bowl held in a closed and gloved hand. Tollemache made play with a cigarette. Peridot clambered aft to relieve Yvonne.

"We'll make Le Pouldu in little more than the hour," he said.

"It's blowing half a gale," said the girl.

"Yes. If the wind doesn't veer, we should have a record trip. But we shouldn't start back a minute after three o'clock."

"Oh, my father will see to that. Moreover, we're due at Mère Pitou's at six."

Peridot showed all his white teeth in a smile. Madeleine would be there. He meant to marry Madeleine. There was no use in asking her to wed until after the Festival of the Gorse Flowers next August, since her heart was set on being Queen. Once that excitement was ended, Heaven willing, Madeleine Demoret would become Madame Larraidou!

In taking the rudder the man was not showing any distrust of Yvonne's nerve; but there was just a possibility that a crisis might call for instant decision, when the only warning would come from that sixth sense which coastal fishermen develop in counteracting the sea's fitful moods.

Perhaps once during the hour – perhaps not once in a year – some monstrous wave would roar in from the Atlantic, seeking to devour every small craft in its path. No one can account for these phenomena. They may arise from lunar influence, or from some peculiar action of the tides; but that

they occur, and with disastrous results if unheeded, every fisherman from Stornoway to Cadiz will testify. Their size and fury are more marked in a southwesterly gale than at any other time, and the only safe maneuver for a boat sailing across the wind is to bring her sharply head on to the fast-moving ridge, and ride over it. Yvonne knew of these occasional sea dragons, but had never seen one. She knew what to do too, and for an instant was vexed with Peridot. He read her thought.

"I'd trust my own life to you, Ma'mselle," he said gallantly; "but I'd never forgive myself if anything happened to you."

She smiled in spite of her pique. To make her voice heard without screaming, she put her lips close to his ear. "This time, if anybody goes, we all go," she cried. He shook his head. "No, no, Ma'mselle. The sea will never get me," he said. "Hold tight here. This is the bar."

Certainly, even among experienced yachtsmen, there would not be lacking those who might have regarded the Hironnelle's present voyage as a piece of folly. There is no wilder coast in Europe than the barrier of shaggy rock that France opposes to the ocean from St. Malo to Biarritz. At Finistère, in particular, each headland is not a breakwater, but a ruin. During heavy storms the seas dash in frenzy up a hundred feet of shattered cliff, the Atlantic having smashed and overthrown every sheer wall of rock ages ago.

Of course the adventurers were not facing a No. 8 gale. That, indeed, would have been rank lunacy. But the estuaries of the Aven and the Belon, joining at Port Manech, were sending down no inconsiderable volume of water to meet a strong wind, and the opposing forces were waging bitter war. A mile farther on a channel ran between the mainland and a group of rocks called Les Verrés. There the tide and wind would not be so greatly at variance, and the partly submerged reef would lessen the force of the sea; though the only signs of its existence were a patch of high-flung spray and a small tower, with a black buoy at its easterly extremity. This was what Peridot had called the "inside passage." To the landsman it was a figure of speech. To the sailor it meant seas diminished to half their volume as compared with the "dirt" outside.

The Hironnelle raced through the turmoil at the bar as though she enjoyed it, and, once the islets were to windward, the journey became exhilarating. None of the four people on board displayed the least concern. Indeed, they reveled in the excursion. When their craft swept into the sheltered cove at Le Pouldu, not without a tossing on another bar, and was brought up alongside the small quay, their flushed faces and shining eyes showed that they looked on the outing as a thoroughly enjoyable one.

They were ready for an early luncheon too, and did full justice to the menu. Afterward, while Ingersoll planned his picture, Yvonne and Tollemache strolled along the right bank of the Laita to the hamlet of Le Pouldu.

The girl told her companion of the singular coincidence that brought her father an unexpected commission by that morning's post; but Tollemache pooh-poohed it.

"You're becoming almost as superstitious as these Bretons," he said. "It's high time your father took you to New York for a spell. Spooks can't live there since the automobile came along. They don't like the fumes of petrol, I fancy. But these silly Bretons appeal to a saint or dread a devil for every little thing. One stained-glass proposition can cure rheumatism in a man and another spavin in a horse. It's unlucky to gather and eat blackberries because the Crown of Thorns was made out of brambles. You can shoot a wretched tomtit; but you mustn't touch a magpie. If you want to marry a girl, you pray to Saint This; if you're anxious to shunt her, you go on your marrow-bones to Saint That. I'm fond of Brittany and its folk; but I can't stomach their legends. Look at that pin-dropping business at Sainte Barbe's well! Poor Madeleine couldn't get a pin home to save her life; whereas everybody knows that she and Peridot will make a match of it before this time next year."

Yvonne did not like to hear her friends' amiable weaknesses exposed thus ruthlessly. "If Homer nods, a poor girl who has watched ever so many love affairs since A.D. 235 may surely be forgiven an occasional mistake," she said.

"Has she been at it so long? What is the yarn?"

"Please don't speak so disrespectfully of Saint Barbara. Because she wanted to marry someone whom her father didn't approve of he imprisoned her in a tower, and when she was converted to Christianity beheaded her."

"The old rascal! Did the other fellow – the one she liked – climb the tower? Perhaps that accounts for the rings."

"It is possible. I have no doubt men were just as foolish seventeen centuries ago as they are today."

"Thanks. That personal touch helps a lot. But, supposing I asked your father to sanction – "

"If you will apply the moral, I must remind you that I am to refuse my first offer. But don't let us talk nonsense. It is time we made for the harbor."

"Crushed again!" murmured Tollemache, assuming an air of blithe indifference. He was only partly successful. Stealing a glance at Yvonne, he noted her heightened color and a curiously defiant glint in her blue eyes. Unconsciously she quickened her pace too, and Tollemache interpreted these outward and visible tokens of displeasure as hostile to the notion that had sprung into thrilling life in his mind that day at Le Faouet, when he peered down into Yvonne's agonized face when he was clinging like a fly to the wall of the tower.

"She regards me as a silly ass," he communed bitterly, "and not without good cause. What place do I fill in the world, anyhow? God created me a live-wire American, and the devil egged me on to spoil clean canvas. I'm little better than a hobo, and she knows it. Well, I'll swallow my medicine."

"I say, Kiddie," he cried aloud, "you needn't go off in a huff just because I was talking through my hat. Wait till I light a cigarette."

Though he was not sure that the bantering protest had deceived her, she pretended that it had; so the object aimed at was achieved. But Tollemache was of the tough fiber that regards no sacrifice as worth while unless it is complete.

"If you knew the facts, Yvonne, you'd never get mad with me when I talk about marrying anybody," he went on. "Why do I live in Pont Aven all the year round? Because it's cheap. Last year I earned three hundred and twenty francs for three pictures. At that rate of progress any girl who married me would jolly soon starve."

Yvonne remembered the famous three. Two were portraits of the oleograph order, in which Tollemache had shamelessly flattered his sitters. For these he received the three hundred francs. The twenty were paid for a sketch of a new villa which the builder wished to send to his mother-in-law! Still, she allowed herself to be surprised.

"Of course I knew you were only joking, Lorry," she said. "And while we are on the subject, I may as well tell you that I shall never leave my father. What you say about your means is rather astonishing, for all that. How can you possibly hire autos and live as you do?"

"Oh, I don't," he explained, with a sudden grimness of tone that she had never heard before. "My father pays all my bills, – living expenses, tailors, and that sort of thing, you know. The moment I marry without his approval I revert to my pocket-money allowance."

The girl knew they were trenching again on a dangerous topic. She was so exquisitely sensitive that she felt the imminence of some avowal that it would be better, perhaps, not to hear.

"What does money matter if we are happy?" she cried cheerfully. "And our small community in Pont Aven is a very united and pleasant one, don't you think?"

"Top notch," said he. "There's Ingersoll, coming down from the front. Bet you fifty centimes he has washed in a little gem – something I couldn't touch if I tried every day for ten years!"

"Dad is really very clever," agreed Yvonne, momentarily deaf to the irony of the words. "I often wonder why he has remained in our village eighteen years. People say he would soon find a place in Paris or New York. Sometimes I fancy that my mother's death must have distressed him beyond measure. He never speaks of her, even to me. Perhaps he can't bear to revive sad memories."

"I can understand that," said Tollemache. "I believe I should go dotty if married to a woman I really loved, and I lost her."

Yvonne darted into a shop to buy caramels. She had to escape somehow. When she emerged one side of her face was bulging, and she held out a cardboard box.

"Take one," she gurgled. Not yet twenty, she was sufficient of a woman to play a part when it suited her. By the time the two had joined Ingersoll they were boy and girl again, and the curtain, lifted for an instant on a tragedy, had fallen.

Tollemache, searching for some commonplace remark to relieve the tension of his own feelings, noticed the drift of smoke curling from a cottage chimney.

"What has happened to the wind?" he said.

"It has veered to the southeast, Monsieur," answered Peridot.

"I thought something of the sort had taken place, but was so busy that I did not pay any heed," said Ingersoll. Then his forehead wrinkled reflectively. "Southeast from southwest," he muttered. "On a rising tide that change should kick up a nasty sea. Is the return trip quite safe, Peridot?"

"The sea will be a trifle worse, Monsieur; but we'll travel on an even keel."

"And be swept by an occasional wave from stem to stern?"

"I've heard of such things," grinned Peridot.

"And very uncomfortable things they are too. Yvonne, you must decide. Shall we take the rough passage, or hire the hotel auto?"

Yvonne rounded her eyes at her father, and stepped on board the *Hirondelle*.

He laughed. "That settles it!" he cried. "'Of Christian souls more have been wrecked on shore than ever were lost at sea.' But I warn you, my merry adventuress. Before half an hour has passed you may be ready to cry with honest old Gonzalo in 'The Tempest,' 'Now would I give a thousand furlongs of sea for an acre of barren ground, long heath, brown furze, anything,' obviously having the coast of Finistère in his mind."

The behavior of the maritime folk of Le Pouldu showed that there was an element of risk in the voyage. Knots of fishermen watched Peridot's preparations with a professional eye, and spat approval when he cast loose a small jibsail. A few carried interest so far that they climbed the seaward cliff to watch the boat's progress across the Basse Persac and Basse an Hiss, the two nearest shallows on the homeward line across the Anse du Pouldu.

The *Hirondelle* passed the bar of the Laita quickly and safely. A sea that would have smothered her in churning water broke within a boat's length. After that escape she made a drier passage than her occupants expected. She was abreast of Douélan, and Yvonne was listening to the thunder of the Atlantic on the black reef that stretches from Kerlogal Mill to Les Cochons de Beg Morg, while her eyes were watching the changing bearings of the church spires of Moëlan and Clohars, when a shout from Peridot recalled her wandering thoughts.

"There's a steam yacht out there, making heavy weather," he said.

Ingersoll had evidently noted the other vessel already, because he had gone into the cabin – not the cubbyhole of a sardine boat, but the hold converted into a saloon fitted with a table screwed to the deck, and four comfortable bunks – and reappeared with a pair of binoculars. From that moment all eyes were fixed on the newcomer.

At a guess she might be coming from Brest to Lorient, because it was safe to assume that her Captain was not a fool, and he must have started the day's run before the change of wind. It must be remembered that the very conditions that helped the five-ton *Hirondelle* were the worst possible for the sixty- or seventy-ton stranger, hard driven into a head sea whipped by a fierce wind. She had shaped a course outside l'Isle Verte, and was well clear of the Ar Gazek shallow when first sighted by those on board the *Hirondelle*. The tidal stream was running strongly there, and Yvonne with difficulty repressed a cry of dismay when the yacht's bare masts and white funnel vanished completely in a cloud of spray.

"If that fellow has any sense, he'll turn while he is able, and make for Concarneau," said Peridot, as the spume dissipated, and the stricken vessel's spars came into view again.

"Perhaps he doesn't know this coast. Can we signal him?" inquired the girl.

"He wouldn't take any notice of a fishing boat. The skipper of a ten-centime steam yacht thinks more of himself than the commander of an Atlantic liner. Of course he should make Lorient tonight – if he understands the lights."

The self-confident Peridot seldom qualified his words: now he had twice spoken with an if. Yvonne hauled herself forward, and joined her father and Tollemache.

"Peridot thinks that the vessel out there may get into difficulties," she said. "I suggested that we should signal her; but he says she would pay no heed."

"What sort of signal?"

"To turn back – Concarneau for choice."

"Let's try, anyhow. Lorry, you'll find a codebook in the chart locker, and flags in the one beneath. Look for 'Recommend change of course' or something of the sort, and the Concarneau code letters. Get the necessary flags, and we'll run 'em up."

Peridot, who missed nothing, understood Tollemache's quick descent into the cabin. His shout reached father and daughter clearly.

"They're signaling from the Brigneau station already. It'll do no harm if we give him a tip too."

During the next ten minutes the situation remained unchanged, save that yacht and fishing boat neared each other rapidly, the Hironde traveling three kilometers to the yacht's one, while lines of flags, each identical – whereat Tollemache winked at Yvonne and preened himself – fluttered from signal station and mast. The yacht disregarded these warnings, and pressed on.

Ingersoll was watching her through the glasses; but Yvonne's keen vision hardly needed such aid.

"They must have seen both signals," she said. "There are two men on the bridge. What a big man one of them is! Can you make out her name, Dad?"

"No. I've been trying to; but the seas pouring over the fore part render the letters indistinct. You have a look. Mind you brace yourself tight against that stay."

He handed her the binoculars, and Yvonne lost a few seconds in adjusting the focus.

"The first letter is an S," she announced. "There are six. The last one is an A. Oh, what a blow that sea must have given her! It pitched on board just beneath the bridge. Why, what's the matter? She is swinging round!"

The girl was sufficiently versed in the ways of the sea to realize that no shipmaster would change course in that manner, nor attempt such a maneuver at the instant his craft was battling against hundreds of tons of water in motion.

"Gars!" yelled Peridot excitedly. "She's broken down – shaft snapped, or propeller gone!"

At once the fierce and thrilling struggle had become a disaster. The yacht was drifting broadside on, utterly at the mercy of wind and tide. Unless a miracle happened, she would be ground to matchwood on that rock-bound coast within a few minutes. Unhappily she had gained considerable speed in the direction where destruction awaited her before her crew could let go the anchor. The agonized watchers from shore and boat knew when a fluke caught in some crevice of the rocks buried twelve fathoms deep, because the vessel's bows were brought up against the sea with a jerk. Then she fell away again. The cable couldn't stand the strain. It had parted.

"Good God!" groaned Ingersoll. "Every soul on board will be drowned before our eyes!"

Yvonne could not speak. Neither could she see. She was blinded with tears. The suddenness of the affair was appalling. At one instant she had been following a fascinating fight between man and the elements, a fight in which man was gaining ground yard by yard. Now by some trick of Fate man was delivered, bound and crippled, to become the sport of savage and relentless enemies. She heard her father shouting to Peridot:

"Bear a couple of points to port. They may lower a boat."

"No use," came the answer. "Better crack on. They'll strike on Les Verrés. We may pick up one or two in the channel if they wear life belts."

Tollemache had leaped down into the cabin. He was out on deck again now, bareheaded, having discarded oilskin coat and sou'wester. A cork jacket was strapped round his tall, alert body. If any life could be snatched back from the abyss, Tollemache might be trusted not to spare himself in the effort. In that moment of stress the cheery, devil-may-care American artist had become a calm, clear-headed man of action. He looked almost heroic, standing on the sloping deck forward, with one sinewy, brown-skinned hand clasping a mast-hoop, and the other thrust into a pocket of his Norfolk jacket. By a queer trick of memory Yvonne was reminded of her fright when she saw Lorry clinging to the rings of Sainte Barbe's tower. He had come through that ordeal unscathed.

Would he conquer in this far more dreadful test? There he could depend on his own taut muscles and iron nerve. Here he was at the mercy of circumstances. Still, it was helpful to see Lorry's fingers clenched on a ring. Somehow it seemed to offer good augury.

CHAPTER III

THE WRECK

There were brave hearts, too, on board the vessel now seemingly doomed to utter destruction. Each of her two masts carried canvas, and when the cable parted a ready command had evidently sent the crew racing to cast loose both sails from their lashings. But the very trimness and tautness of everything on board proved the yacht's final undoing. Knives were brought into play, and the foresail was hoisted within a few seconds. The yacht answered her helm promptly. There seemed to be a real chance that she might haul into the wind and clear the black fangs of Les Verrés, in which case she would either run into the small estuary at Brigneau, or at the worst beach herself on the strip of sand there.

At that moment the occupants of the *Hirondelle* saw her name, the *Stella*, and they were on the point of breaking into a frantic cheer of relief when the unlucky craft crashed into a submerged rock, swung broadside on, and was saved from turning turtle only by another rock which stove her in amidships.

"Ah, Les Verrés have caught her! I thought they would. God help those poor fellows!"

It was Peridot who spoke, and the mere fact that he had abandoned hope sounded the requiem of the *Stella* and all her company.

Then indeed her plight was like to have passed beyond human aid. She was lodged on the outer fringe of an unapproachable reef, whence a rapidly rising tide would lift her at any minute. Being built of steel, she would sink forthwith, because her bows were crushed and plates started below the load line. She carried four boats; but, with the ingenuity of malice that the sea often displays in its unbridled fury, the two to port were crushed to splinters when she heeled over, and those to starboard, swinging inward on their davits, filled instantly, since the waves poured in cascades over the hull, as though the mighty Atlantic was concentrating all its venom on that one tiny adversary.

The marvel was that no one was swept overboard. Nothing could have saved the men on deck had the *Stella* lurched on to her beam ends without warning; but the fleeting interval while she was being carried round on the pivot of her fore part enabled them to guard against the expected shock. Nine figures were visible, two standing on the port rails of the bridge, and the others on the deck rails, every man having braced his shoulders against the deck itself. Masts, funnel, and upper saloon were practically vertical with the plane of the sea, and the hull quivered and moved under the assault of each wave. Yet the very injuries that would swamp the vessel instantly when she rolled into deep water now gave her a brief lease of life. The rocks that pierced the hull held her fast. Her plight resembled that of some poor wretch stabbed mortally who breathes and groans in agony, only to die when the knife that causes his distress is withdrawn.

The horror of the sight brought a despairing cry to Yvonne's lips. "Peridot, Peridot, can nothing be done?" she shrieked, turning to the Breton sailor as though, at his prayer, the sky might open and Providence send relief.

The boat was now nearly abreast of the wreck, and running free before the wind. The girl's frantic appeal seemed to arouse the three men from a stupor of helplessness.

"Look out, everybody!" shouted Peridot. "We're going head on."

It was a dangerous maneuver in a heavy sea; but fortune favored the *Hirondelle* in so far that no mountainous wave struck her quarter as she veered round. All were equally alive to the possibility of disaster. Ingersoll, though he uttered no word till the boat had reversed her course, was almost moved to protest.

"We are powerless," he said, coming aft to make his voice audible. "Even if some of the yacht's people are swept clear of the reef, they will be smothered long before they drift in this direction. The thing was so unexpected that none of them has secured a cork jacket, or even a life belt."

"There is one chance in a hundred, Monsieur," said Peridot, speaking so that Ingersoll alone could hear. "The point is – will you take it? You and Monsieur Tollemache would agree, of course. Will you risk Mademoiselle's life as well?"

"A chance? What sort of chance?"

"I know every inch of Les Verrés. A little inlet, not much longer than the yacht, and perhaps forty feet wide, runs in from the south just where she lies. Her hull and the reef itself form a breakwater. We can make it, and get a line aboard."

"Then for the love of Heaven why wait?"

"One moment, Monsieur. We have yet a second or two for decision. You see how the wreck lifts each time a sea hits her. The tide is rising. If she shifts when we are in there, goodbye to the Hironde!"

The eyes of the two met, and Ingersoll wavered, but only as a brave man takes breath before essaying some supreme test of hardihood.

"My daughter would never forgive me if she knew I chose the coward's path," he said. "Go ahead, Peridot! Tell us what we have to do, and it shall be done."

A cheerful chuckle was the Breton's answer as he thrust the tiller over to port and sent the boat reeling on the starboard tack. Once she was fairly balanced, he began to bellow instruction.

"Within a couple of minutes I'll put her head on again, and we'll drift alongside the ship yonder. Monsieur Ingersoll and Monsieur Tollemache will each take a sweep, and fend the after part off the rocks. Mademoiselle will remain for'ard, and be ready to drop the anchor as a last resource if I find the tide running too strong for the sweeps to hold us back. Leave the rest to me!"

It is a glorious heritage of the English-speaking race that the men of other nations regard sea valor as the birthright of its sons and daughters. Peridot had stated the case for and against the attempted rescue to Ingersoll as a father. When the die was cast, the decision made, he counted on *ces Américains* acting with the same cool heroism he would himself display.

The Hironde quickly reached the position from which the Breton judged it possible to drop into a natural dock, the existence of which he had learned when catching lobsters and crabs. Wind and tide carried the boat swiftly backward. At first it seemed that she was simply rushing to destruction, and every eye was bent on the swirling maelstrom toward which she was speeding rather than on the stricken yacht. Even Peridot's face paled beneath its bronze, and he had a hand uplifted as a warning to Yvonne to be ready instantly with the anchor, while Ingersoll and Tollemache were standing, each with a long oar couched like a knight's lance, when the Hironde swept past the bows of the wreck; only to be checked immediately by a backwash from the higher part of the reef.

"*Dieu merci!*" sighed Peridot, jubilant because his faith was justified. "Keep her steady now, *mes amis*, and with God's help we'll succeed!"

A tremendous sea dashed over the Stella, and for one appalling moment it appeared that she must roll bodily into deep water, and involve the Hironde in her own ruin. But she settled again, with a rending of her framework and inner fittings that was sweetest music in Peridot's ears, since it meant that she was becoming wedged more firmly on the teeth of the rock, and, owing to her construction, possessed no natural buoyancy to be affected by the rising tide.

Already he had a coil of rope in his right hand, and was yelling orders to the crew of the Stella. The noise of the seas pounding on Les Verrés was deafening; but a hoarse cry from one of the men on the bridge penetrated the din:

"No *comprenez!* Heave away!"

So they were English or Americans – which, none could tell. Even at a distance of fifteen feet or thereabouts it was hardly possible to distinguish nationality by facial traits owing to the torrents

falling continuously over the rounded hull, the smoke pouring from the funnel, the flapping of the loosened sails, and the clouds of spray that lashed the Hironde. At any rate, Tollemache, deciding instantly, as was his way, sent back an answering shout:

"Haul in twenty feet of the rope when it reaches you, make fast, and throw back the loose end. You must get across as best you can. No time to rig a safer tackle."

"Ay, ay, Sir!" was the reply.

"Heave away, Peridot!"

Tollemache, though not neglecting his special duty, spared one glance over his shoulder; but the rope did not undertake its spiral flight at once. The resourceful Breton awaited a momentary lull in the wind. Then the heavy coil was flung, and fell into the hands of one of the men on the bridge. As he was securing it to a stanchion, his companion, he whose gigantic stature had first caught Yvonne's attention, climbed into the tiny wheelhouse, and reappeared almost immediately, carrying a woman in his arms.

The sight caused a fresh thrill on board the Hironde. Somehow it was totally unexpected.

"Fools!" said Tollemache, meaning, no doubt, that men might, if they chose, venture their lives in fair fight against the storm gods, but they had no right to subject a woman to the ordeal.

Ingersoll overheard, and understood. He even smiled. Lorry regarded Yvonne as a chum to be trusted in fair weather or foul. It did not occur to him that her father might reasonably have urged the same plea against attempting a seemingly mad and impracticable rescue.

Evidently some fierce dispute was being waged on the Stella. The other man on the bridge, who turned out to be the captain, had thrown back the rope to Peridot, and summoned all hands to gather near. Now he was urging the big man to intrust his inanimate burden to one of the sailors, but met with the most positive refusal. Every second was vital, and Peridot blazed into annoyance.

"Gars!" he roared. "If they waste time, I'll back out!"

The commander of the yacht, however, was well aware of the greatest peril which threatened now; so without more ado he steadied the giant while the latter raised the woman's body to his left shoulder, grasped the double rope in both hands, and lowered himself into the water.

The passage was not difficult. The ropes were fairly taut, and the distance between the two craft not more than sixteen feet. Indeed, such a Hercules in physique might well regard the task as a mere nothing, and he set out with quiet confidence, extending his left arm in each onward movement, and closing up with the right.

Yvonne, watching his progress, suddenly yielded to another memory of Tollemache swinging from the shepherds' hooks of Sainte Barbe's tower. Suppose the rope were to break – just as one of the rings had come away in Lorry's grip? Of course the notion was stupid. She knew that each strand of that particular rope was sound, that it might be trusted to hold the Hironde herself against the straining of wind and tide, let alone bear the dead weight of two people; but a woman's intuition is stronger than reason. And in this instance her foreboding came true, though from a cause that she had not foreseen.

All at once Peridot uttered a yell that degenerated into a semihysterical shriek; for temperament counts in such crises, and the Breton nature was being strung to a high pitch.

"Hold tight, all hands! Here's a tidal wave!" The monster whose coming the fisherman had feared all day was upon them before Tollemache could translate the warning. It broke against the Stella's hull, and literally dashed solid tons of water on the Hironde and the hapless pair now midway between the two vessels. During some seconds the stanch sardine boat seemed veritably to have foundered. Even in the convulsive and choking effort needed to cling with the strength of desperation to the nearest rope or stay, her occupants were aware that she sank appreciably beneath the sheer weight and fury of that tremendous sea.

Then their blinded eyes emerged into blessed daylight again, their lungs filled with air, the flood subsided, the Hironde rose, trembling like a living creature, and the wave boomed away across the half-mile of channel to tear at the rocks of Finistère in a last paroxysm.

Peridot, secure in the faith that one born with a caul could not drown, was perhaps the first to regain his senses. When he swept the water from his eyes he looked for the Stella; but that unfortunate little vessel had only been driven still more tightly into the jaws of the reef, though a great gap showed to starboard amidships. She was breaking in two.

"God be thanked for that, at any rate!" he muttered.

The concession was due to the strong commonsense of a Breton, which told him that signs and portents would prove of no avail against instant death if the Stella had rolled over. Then, having ascertained that his own people were safe, he looked for the colossus he had last seen clutching the ropes. The ropes were there; but man and woman had vanished. Something bobbed up among the spume and foam close to the Hironde's side. He leaned over and grabbed a huge arm. With one powerful tug he drew a body half out of the water. It was the man; but the woman had been reft from his close embrace at the moment when some chance of safety seemed to have come most surely within reach. His sou'wester cap had been wrenched off, and, even when hauling the limp body on board, Peridot knew that his quickness of eye and hand would avail naught.

He held a corpse in his grasp. The top of the unfortunate man's skull was visibly flattened, and the gray hair was already darkened by an ominous dye. In all likelihood the wave struck him when least prepared, tore his fingers from the ropes, and dashed him head foremost against the Hironde's timbers.

Peridot was no sentimentalist. He did not waste a needless sigh over the fate of one when the lives of many were trembling in the balance. Even when he was placing the body at Yvonne's feet, where it would be out of the way for the time, he peered up at her with a grim smile.

"Two gone, Ma'mselle," he said; "but with the help of the Madonna we'll save the rest!"

A shriek from the girl's lips, and an expression of terror in her eyes which assuredly was not there after the gallant Hironde had thrown off her mightiest and most vindictive assailant, told him that some worse tragedy was imminent. He turned, and saw Tollemache leaping into the frothing vortex that raged between the stern of the boat and the nearest rock. The Breton guessed instantly that the young American had seen the drowning woman. Leaving the Stella momentarily in charge of Ingersoll and Yvonne, he raced aft, and seized the sweep that Tollemache had dropped. Simultaneously his friend's head rose above the maelstrom; for the cork jacket bore Lorry bravely. He was clasping the woman's apparently lifeless form with one hand, and battling against the sea with the other when the long oar was thrust within reach, and he too was drawn to the side.

Meanwhile Ingersoll, exercising splendid self control, had not deserted his post. After the heavy backwash caused by the tidal wave, a sea had curled in from the open to fill the inlet again, and the Hironde was carried so near the reef that the stout oar bent under the strain of fending her off, and might conceivably have snapped had not some assistance been given by the ropes attached to the Stella. Another and more normal backwash came in the nick of time, and the boat retreated to her earlier position. Now, if the Fates were aught but merciless, there might be a breathing space.

Peridot's gray-green eyes sparkled as they met Tollemache's brown eyes, gazing up steadily from the swirl of waters.

"You all right?" he said, seizing the woman's arms.

"Why not?" said Tollemache. "Lift her aboard. Don't bother about me."

Ere Peridot had laid the dead or unconscious woman by the side of the man who had already given his life for her sake, Tollemache was on deck again, and lending a hand to the first sailor to cross by the ropes. The survivors followed rapidly, and the last to leave the Stella was her captain.

Ten men were rescued, – five sailors, including the master, two stokers, an engineer, a steward, and a passenger. The two last were in the saloon when the vessel struck, and had crawled on deck as best they could, the passenger having sustained a broken arm, and the steward a sprained ankle.

It was obvious, from the measures taken to safeguard the injured pair, that they were in urgent need of attention; but Peridot knew that the lives of all still trembled in the balance. So he bawled to Tollemache:

"Get the lady below, and as many of the others as you can pack in. During the next few minutes I want none but sailors on deck. *Gars!* Be quick about it too! No, don't trouble about that poor fellow. He's gone!"

Already he had cast off the ropes that formed the precarious bridge. Tollemache told the shipwrecked crew what the Breton had said, and they obeyed with the readiness of men who were aware of the paramount necessity of prompt action.

The Stella's captain had already summed up the new problem facing the Hironnelle, and issued his orders with decision. He and a sturdy deckhand helped Tollemache and Ingersoll with the sweeps, which were now to be used as oars, while the others carried the woman to the cabin, and helped their disabled shipmates to make the descent.

Yvonne, though unwilling to leave the deck until the next ordeal was ended, felt that she ought to sacrifice her own wishes to the need of a sister in distress; but Peridot settled the matter by bidding her take the tiller.

"We can't get back to the inside passage on this wind. If we tried it, Les Verrés would catch us," he said. "We'll forge out a bit with the sweeps. When clear of the yacht we'll be just clear of the reef too. When you see me begin to haul at the sail put the helm hard over for the seaward tack. We're going outside. You understand?"

"Perfectly," she said.

She ran between the four men laboring at the oars, well pleased to have a task that would absorb her mind to the exclusion of all else, and profoundly relieved because it took her away from the vicinity of the dead body. Even as the Stella's company were climbing on board she could not avoid an occasional glance at the huge and inert form at her feet. It was a dreadful thing to see the soul battered out of such a magnificent frame in such a way. Never before had she set eyes on a man of similar proportions. He was inches over six feet in height, and stout withal, so that he completely dwarfed the tall and sinewy frame of Laurence Tollemache, who hitherto had loomed as a giant among undersized Frenchmen. Oilskins and heavy sea boots added to the dead man's apparent bulk. His face, which wore a singularly placid expression, was well modeled. In youth he must have been extremely good looking; in middle age – apparently he was over fifty – he still retained clear-cut features, and strands of a plentiful crop of iron-gray hair dropped over a broad and high forehead.

The woman whom he had declined to intrust to the care of any but himself was probably his wife. Was she dead too? Yvonne wondered. It was almost equally certain that the yacht was theirs; though perhaps they might have hired it for a winter cruise in the Mediterranean by way of the Spanish coast.

These thoughts flitted through the girl's brain as she followed the last phases of the rescue. Now that her hand was on the tiller, and the open sea began to show beyond the yacht's bowsprit, her mind was occupied by the one remaining hazard to the exclusion of all else. She had every confidence in Peridot's seamanship, having been out with him many a time in weather that, if not quite so threatening as this, offered sufficient test of skill and nerve. But she knew well that once the full force of the tide was felt the oars would be useless, chiefly owing to their unwieldy length, and the doubt remained whether the Hironnelle would gain enough way to win out close hauled into deep water.

Still her heart leaped with high courage as her eyes took in the bold and striking picture presented by the deck of the fishing boat during that brief transit through broken seas. In the immediate foreground a small hatchway framed the weather-tanned faces of two men lodged in the

companionway so as to avoid overcrowding the cabin. Behind were her father and the yacht's Captain at one oar, and Tollemache and a sailor at the other, pulling with the short, jerky, but powerful stroke alone possible in the conditions. Ingersoll's sallow, well marked, intellectual features were in sharp contrast with the fiery red skin, heavy cheeks and chin, bullet head, and short neck of the man by his side. For an instant the eyes of father and daughter met. He smiled encouragement, and the odd notion occurred to Yvonne that strangest of all the occurrences in an hour packed with incident was the fact that the thin hands that could achieve such marvels by the delicate manipulation of a camel's hair brush should be able to toil manfully at a cumbrous oar.

Then she looked at Lorry, and he grinned most cheerfully.

Skipper and sailor wore the stolid expression of men who didn't know, and didn't particularly care, what happened next. If anything, their watchful glances betrayed a total lack of belief in the wisdom of intrusting the helm to this slip of a girl.

Amidships, and slightly forward, Peridot was standing, both hands laced in the rope that should hoist the sail. The small jib had not been lowered. It was now flapping in the wind with reports like irregular pistol shots; but Yvonne knew it would fill and draw instantly when the tiller brought the boat's head around.

And beyond Peridot was the body of the man who had been snatched from life with such awful suddenness. The broad back and slightly outstretched legs kept it motionless no matter how the deck tilted; but the front skirts of the oilskin coat crackled noisily in the gale, and a lock of hair, though soaked and thick with salt, freed itself from the clammy forehead, and moved fitfully in every gust.

The artist instinct in the girl's heart dominated every other emotion at that moment. She felt that she could transfer this somber scene to canvas if she was spared. And what a study of action it would make! What staring lights and shadows! What types of character! The four men in strenuous effort, the anxious faces peering from the semiobscurity of the hatch, Peridot's sturdy figure braced for prompt and fierce endeavor, the still form with sightless eyes peering up at the sky, and all contained within the narrow compass of the deck, with the boat's prow now cutting the horizon, now threatening to take one last horrific dive into a wave overhanging it like a moving hillock! Beyond were a slate-blue sea flecked with white and scurrying clouds tipped with russet and gold by the last beams of a wintry sun.

All this, and more, Yvonne caught in one wide-eyed glance. She saw every touch of color, every changeable flicker of light on the wet deck and glistening oilskins. Tollemache alone supplied a different note. The light brown squares of the cork jacket, and the dust-colored canvas straps that clasped it to his body, stood out in marked relief. He, who had been overboard and submerged for a few seconds, looked bone dry. The others, wet as he no doubt, Ingersoll alone excepted, seemed to have come straight from the depths.

But Peridot, watching the sea with sidelong glance, suddenly bent in a very frenzy of exertion, and Yvonne, thrusting her right foot against the low gunwale, put the tiller to port and leaned against it until her left knee touched the deck. The men at the oars imitated her as best they might, while striving to keep the boat moving.

At the first mighty pull of the partly raised sail the *Hirondelle* flinched and fell back a little. Then she took hold, as sailors put it, and careened under the strain until the iron socket on the starboard sweep was wrenched off its pin, and Tollemache and the sailor were hard pressed to keep it from swinging inboard and dealing Yvonne a blow. Something black and sinister showed for a second in the yeasting froth beneath the boat's quarter; whether rock or patch of seaweed none could tell, though five pairs of eyes saw it.

Peridot's call came shrilly, "Keep her there, Ma'mselle!" Back swung the tiller, and Yvonne "kept her there," though during a long minute the *Hirondelle* tore at the rudder as a startled horse snatches at the bit, and it seemed as if she must capsize without fail.

Again the Breton's cry rang out, "Ease her now, Ma'mselle!"

The boat fell away before the wind. Soon she was on an even keel, save for the unavoidable rolling and pitching that resulted from the furious seas. But, if stout canvas and trustworthy cordage held, they were safe as though tied to the quay in the land-locked harbor at Pont Aven. Already Les Verrés were a furlong or more in the rear. It was impossible to see what had become of the Stella, because the spray was leaping high over the reef, until its irregular crests were bitten off by the gale. But a fishing smack which had gallantly put out from Brigneau was signaled back before it crossed the bar, and the signal station was hoisting a fresh set of flags which spelled in the *lingua franca* of the ocean, "Well done, Concarneau 415!" which was as near the Hirondelle's name as the watchers on shore could get on the spur of the moment.

Peridot paid Yvonne the greatest of all compliments by not coming aft to relieve her. But her father, who had betrayed no flurry even when death seemed unavoidable, drew near, and placed a hand on her shoulder.

"You're another Grace Darling, my dear!" was all he said.

But the look accompanying the words was enough, and the girl's eyes began to smart painfully, because the sudden moisture in them revealed how they had suffered from the spindrift.

And again, by sending her below on an errand of mercy, he only added subtly to Peridot's tribute.

"We can spare you now, Yvonne," he said. "Tell those men to come on deck, and you give an eye to the lady. You have some dry clothes down there. If she has no bones broken, she will recover more quickly in a warm bunk than under any other conditions. Get her undressed, and give her a little cognac. Take some yourself, – don't spare it, – and pass the bottle up here."

He took her place at the tiller, and she made off at once, only pausing to pat Lorry's wet and shaggy head.

Six men came up the companion stairway; but two returned at her call to lift the injured men into a lower and an upper bunk on the same side. They had contrived already to bandage the broken arm with handkerchiefs. The sprained ankle they could not deal with. The man with a broken arm was making some outcry; but the other sufferer was patient and even smiling.

"Gawd bless yer, Miss!" he said to Yvonne when he discerned her identity in the dim light of the cabin. "If it 'adn't a been fer you an' yer shipmites, we on the Stella 'ad as much chawnce as a lump o' ice in hell's flimes!"

The Cockney accent was new in Yvonne's ear, and its quaintness helped to soften the speaker's forcible simile.

"You'll soon be all right," she assured him. "We'll reach Pont Aven within the hour, and the good folk there will look after you splendidly. Please lie still now, as I must pin a blanket across these two bunks."

Then she was left alone with the insensible woman, who was alive, the sailors said, but completely unconscious. She had fainted, they believed, when the shaft snapped and the yacht was like to be lost forthwith. The immersion in the sea seemed to have revived her for a few seconds; but she swooned off again in the cabin, and, while the boat was lurching so heavily, they thought it wiser to pillow her head on a coat and not attempt to restore her senses.

On deck the captain of the Stella had picked out Ingersoll as the probable owner of the Hirondelle. He came and stood by the artist's side.

"Is this craft yours, Sir?" he inquired.

"Yes."

"And is that young lady your daughter, Sir?"

"Yes."

"Well, I need hardly say that we owe our lives to her, and you, and your two friends. I've seen some rum things durin' thirty years at sea; but I've never seen anything to ekal your pluck in runnin'

into that death trap. And that girl of yours – the way she behaved! Well, there! I never could talk much. This time I'm clean stumped!"

"We did what we could. The real credit for your rescue lies with that cool-headed Breton fisherman yonder. Is the poor fellow who was killed the owner of the Stella?"

"Yes, Sir."

"And the lady is his wife?"

"Yes, Sir. Mr. and Mrs. Walter H. Carmac. Look out, Sir! You must ha forgotten you were leaning against the tiller."

The sailor acted promptly in bringing the *Hirondelle* back on her course; but, owing to her quickness in answering the helm, she had swung round a couple of points when an involuntary movement, a sort of flinching on Ingersoll's part, caused her to change direction.

Peridot came aft, smiling and debonair. "We're all a bit shaken, Monsieur," he said, noting the increased pallor of Ingersoll's ordinarily rather delicate-looking face. "A tot of cognac, eh? That's what we want. What do you say, Monsieur?"

The bluff English skipper had caught the key word of the sentence, and the Breton's merry eye supplied a full translation.

"Good for you, my hearty!" said he. "Gimme one fair pull at a bottle of decent stuff now, an' I'll load you to the bung with the same once we're ashore."

CHAPTER IV

THE HOME-COMING

Peridot had stipulated that the *Hirondelle* should start on her homeward run "not a minute later than three o'clock." He had cast off from the wharf at Le Pouldu slightly before that hour; but the wreck of the *Stella* and its attendant circumstances – not least being the necessity enforced by the change of wind to take the deep-sea course after leaving the reef – cost a good deal of time. As a consequence daylight had almost failed before the bar of the Aven was crossed.

On Pointe d'ar Vechen, within thirty feet of the Port Manech Hotel, stands a tiny lighthouse which sheds a mild beam over the entrance to the estuary. It is essentially a harbor light. A broad white band covers the safe channel extending from Les Verrés to l'Isle Verte, a red sector forbids the former, and a green one indicates the narrow inside passage between reef and mainland.

In crossing the bar, of course, each color became visible in turn. Ingersoll had seen the light scores of times. Never a week passed in summer that he did not spend a day, or even three days, at sea with the fishermen. His studies of the sardine fleet, in particular, were greatly in request.

Yet on this night of nights, when the return to his beloved Pont Aven might well be reckoned the close of the most notable achievement of his whole life, he seemed to have collapsed physically and mentally. His eyes had a vacant look. Their wonted expression of a somewhat sarcastic yet not intolerant outlook on life had fled for the hour, and he peered at the Breton and the sailor as though he had never before seen either. His slight but usually alert and wiry frame appeared to have shrunk. He remained deaf to Peridot's suggestion as to the brandy, and became curiously interested in the red gleam of the lighthouse which came in sight just before the bar was reached.

The Breton imagined that his employer's bodily resources had been unduly taxed. Catching the eye of the yacht's skipper (whose name, by the way, was William Popple), he nodded toward the tiller, pointed straight ahead, and held up a finger. "Wan mineet," he said.

Captain Popple was not to be outdone in linguistic amenities. "*Comprenny*," he grinned, and took control.

Peridot thrust his head into the hatch. "Ma'mselle," he said, "these poor devils' teeth are chattering with the cold. Will you pass the cognac?"

Yvonne felt the urgency of the request. Nearly every man was wet to the skin, and the wind bit keenly. She abandoned her nurse's work for the moment, opened a locker, and produced a bottle of generous size.

"Here you are," she said. "See that a little is left. I have given some to the men, and I hope my other invalid will soon be able to take a small quantity."

The fisherman removed a plug which had replaced the ordinary cork, and handed the bottle to Captain Popple. The brandy was a fine old liquor, brown, and mellow, and smooth to the palate, and Popple took a draft worthy of a Russian grand duke.

"Gosh!" he said, passing the bottle to Ingersoll, "that's the stuff! It warms the cockles of yer heart."

Ingersoll swallowed a mouthful. It seemed to restore his wits. The eye of the lighthouse had changed from red to green. "It is singular," he said, "how a quality of evil can be associated with certain colors. Red means danger and possible death, while green implies a jealous love perilously akin to hate."

He had not the least notion of the incongruity of such a remark just then. He might have been making conversation for some boarding-school miss whom Yvonne had brought on a summer cruise.

The other man, puzzled, stared stolidly into the gathering gloom.

"When you're plashin' at sea on a dark night you find them colored sectors mighty useful, Sir," was all he could find to say.

Ingersoll roused himself, as though from sleep, and indeed he had been wholly unconscious of his surroundings during the last few minutes. "Oh, doubtless," he said apologetically, "I was thinking aloud, a foolish habit. You were telling me about the owner of the Stella. Carmac is the name, I think? I knew a Walter H. Carmac many years ago. He was very tall, but slightly built. Surely a man cannot change his physique so markedly in the course of, say, twenty years!"

"Well, as to that, Sir, on'y the other day I was talkin' of Mr. Carmac's size to Mr. Raymond, the gentleman with the broken arm (Mr. Carmac's secretary, he is), an' he said the guv'nor used to be thin as a lath once. P'raps it was a case of laugh and grow fat. Very pleasant gentleman, Mr. Carmac was; an' his lady too – one of the best. Excuse me, Sir, but I couldn't help starin' at your girl. She's that like Mrs. Carmac it's surprising. If anyone said they was mother an' daughter, I'd agree at once – if I didn't know different."

There was a pause. Peridot had intrusted the supply of brandy to Tollemache for further distribution. He came aft now, as careful piloting would soon be needed.

"Once we're inside, Monsieur," he said, "we'll set the men at work by turns with the sweeps. That will drive the chill away."

Ingersoll explained the scheme to the skipper, who gave it his hearty approval.

"Did the yacht belong to Mr. Carmac?" went on the artist.

"Yes, Sir. He bought her a fortnight ago. She used to be Lord Aveling's Nigger; but Mr. Carmac didn't like that name, and changed it to the Stella, after his wife's Christian name."

"He didn't care to sail in a yacht called the Nigger, eh?"

A bitterness of aloes was in the words. Apparently they suggested some unpleasing notion to Popple, who branched off to another topic.

"I've a sort of idea his heart was affected," he said. "I know that some bigwig of a London doctor recommended a long voyage, and Mr. Carmac bein' several times a millionaire he just up and grabbed the first suitable craft that offered. Wouldn't wait for a survey. Took everything for granted; though I warned him that white paint may cover a lot of black sins. He an' the missis had planned a regular tour in the Mediterranean, goin' from Gib to the Balearics, and dodgin' in and out of ports all along the north coast until we brought up at Constantinople sometime in April. I advised him to let me meet him at Gib or Marseilles; but he was one of the men who will have their own way, and nothin' would suit but that he should come straight aboard. We left Southampton Tuesday evenin', and made Brest yesterday afternoon. Today we were for callin' at Belle Isle and berthin' at Lorient; but the foul weather met us, an' he was half inclined to put in at this very place we're headin' for, – Pont Aven is the name, isn't it? – on'y poor Mrs. Carmac wouldn't hear of it. She said Belle Isle was no distance, an' made out she was a good sailor – which was hardly correct, because she was ill as could be for the last two hours."

"Why didn't you turn back?"

"There was no turnin' back about Mr. Carmac, Sir. He wasn't built that way, bein' a sure enough American. Though I've never known anybody more devoted to his wife than he was, he ought to have let a younger man take her across to your boat. Not as I mean to argy that anyone could have held up against that sea. Lord love a duck! it was a oner an' no mistake! But there, what has to be will be. Poor Mr. Carmac was fated to hand in his checks on the coast of Finistère, an' we others weren't, and that's all there is to it; though I'd be flyin' in the face of Providence if I didn't say in the same breath that if four of the pluckiest and best hadn't been aboard this 'ere craft, none of our little lot would ever have seen daylight again."

Tollemache joined them. He had just exchanged a word with Yvonne, who had evidently placed her guest in a bunk, because the gleam of an oil lantern came through the open hatch, and, like the good yachtswoman she was, she had passed out the side lights trimmed and ready for use.

"Well, Ingersoll," he said cheerily, "how are you feeling now?"

"Rather tired," was the unexpected answer.

"I'm not surprised at that. You've had a pretty strenuous time."

"Of course you, Lorry, have had the day of your life!"

"Y-yes. I wouldn't go through it again, though, for a small fortune; that is, with Yvonne on board. It was nip and tuck when we were jammed up against the reef."

"It didn't take you long, Sir, for all that, to jump in after Mrs. Carmac," said Popple.

"Oh, is that the lady's name? What a weird specimen one of your sailormen must be! I asked him the name of the yacht's owner, and he didn't know it."

"If it's the beauty I saw you talkin' to, the swine didn't know his own name when he kem aboard at Southampton," snorted Popple indignantly. "Sink me! I've never seen a man so loaded. Took me for his long-lost uncle. Me, mind you! If I hadn't been rather short-handed, I'd have run him ashore to find an uncle in a policeman."

"He is sober enough now," laughed Tollemache. "I had some difficulty in persuading him to take a sip of brandy. He said he was a teetotaler."

"He what? Which one?"

"That fellow there, leaning against the mast."

"Of all the swabs! Look here, Sir, you come with me an' listen!"

"But I don't want to get the poor chap into a row."

"There'll be no row. Just language! It'll be a treat."

Tollemache, an overgrown schoolboy in some respects, accompanied Popple gleefully. Broken scraps of the skipper's comments boomed back to Ingersoll's unheeding ears.

"Guess you signed the pledge when the shaft snapped... Coughin' up stale beer all Tuesday night, an' all nex' day made you feel you weren't fit to die on a Thursday... You can't run a bluff of that sort on Saint Peter. He'd smell your breath a mile off, an' say, 'To the devil with any Jack who can't take his liquor decent-like when he's paid off without fillin' up when he's signed on!'... You struck a wrong job in goin' to sea. You ought to be a brewer's drayman."

"Peridot," said Ingersoll suddenly, "you saw something of the lady's state of collapse when you pulled her on board. She is not likely to recover her senses before we reach Pont Aven?"

"No, Monsieur, I think not. Women are marvels at times; but this one may not even live. Mademoiselle Yvonne is doing what she can – "

"I know, I know! Now do me a great favor. When we berth at the quay Mademoiselle and I will slip away quietly in the confusion and darkness. See to it that none of the strangers learns our name. I'll warn Monsieur Tollemache myself. Get all these people to Julia's. Tell her that the lady, Madame Carmac, is very wealthy, and that the man with the broken arm is Mr. Carmac's secretary; so every sort of expenditure will be met, though Julia's kind heart would leave nothing undone for a shipwrecked crew if they were paupers. There may be some inquiry about Mademoiselle Yvonne; but refer to her only by her Christian name, and say she lives at Madame Pitou's."

"*Oui, M'sieu'.*" Peridot promised willingly enough. Nevertheless he was obviously bewildered.

"I ask this," explained Ingersoll, "because my daughter and I will depart for Paris by the first train tomorrow. You see, by extraordinary mischance, this Mr. and Mrs. Carmac and I were not on good terms years ago, and I don't wish old scores to be reopened."

"*Gars!*" spat Peridot. "You're not leaving Pont Aven because we pulled these fools off Les Verrés?"

"No, no. I need a little holiday, and I'm taking it now. That is all. We shall come back to the old life – never fear."

"You mean that, M'sieu'?"

"I swear it."

"Of course, M'sieu', you understand that I cannot silence the tongues of the whole town?"

"I don't care what anybody hears tomorrow. Remember, if poor Madame Carmac dies, no other person will have the slightest interest in my whereabouts. If she lives, and is able to travel, she will certainly endeavor to get away from Pont Aven as speedily as possible. Peridot, it is Yvonne I am thinking of, not of myself."

"Monsieur, you can count on me absolutely."

"And not a word of this to a soul?"

"*Cré nom!* I'll lie like a gendarme, even to Madeleine."

"But you need not lie at all. Simply forget what I have told you – as to my reason for tomorrow's journey, I mean."

"Monsieur, it is forgotten already."

Tollemache came, chuckling. "Sorry you missed the skipper's homily, Ingersoll," he said. "I laughed like a hyena. I hope the people in the cabin couldn't overhear me. By Jove! to tell you the truth, I didn't even remember that there was a dead man aboard."

"The best tragedies indulge in a what is called 'comic relief'," said Ingersoll dryly. "Give Yvonne a hail, will you? I want a word with her."

Tollemache stooped to the hatch. "Yvonne!" he said.

"Yes," came the girl's voice.

Her father, intent on its slightest cadence, deemed it placid and self-possessed.

"Socrates wants you."

Socrates was a title conferred on Ingersoll by his artist friends owing to his philosophic habit of mind. Nothing disturbed him, they vowed. Once, when the queer little steam tram that jingles into and out of Pont Aven four times daily was derailed, some alarm was created by the fact that Ingersoll, though known to be a passenger, was missing. When found he was perched on the side of the overturned carriage in which he had been seated. On climbing out through a window he discovered that from this precise locality and elevation he obtained a capital view of a wayside chapel; so he sketched it without delay. The chance, no less than the point of view, might not offer again!

Yvonne appeared, her head and shoulders dimly visible in the frame of the hatch. "What is it, Dad?" she inquired.

"We're in the river now, Dearest, and I thought you might join us on deck. You have done all that is possible, I'm sure."

"I simply cannot desert that poor woman until she shows some signs of returning consciousness."

"Oh, is she still insensible?"

"Yes. If only I could get her to swallow a little brandy."

"Well, she will be in the doctor's hands soon. Better leave matters to him."

"But one must try."

"Of course. If you prefer remaining below –"

"Father dear, what else can I do?" She vanished again.

Ingersoll, having ascertained exactly what he wished to know, sighed in sheer relief, and turned to Tollemache. "Lorry," he said, "have you a dry cigar in your pocket? How stupid of me! You're soaked through and through. I hope none of us picks up a stiff dose of pneumonia as the sequel to today's excitement. Now a quiet word in your ear. Yvonne and I are going away tomorrow for a week or so."

"Going away – from Pont Aven?"

Tollemache's voice executed a crescendo of dismay; but Ingersoll only laughed, and, for the first time since that disastrous reef was left behind, his manner reverted to its normal air of good-humored cynicism.

"Why select two words from a sentence and invest them with a significance they don't possess? I put in a saving clause. A week, or even two, can hardly be twisted into a lifetime."

"Does Yvonne know?"

"No. I have decided on the journey only within the last ten minutes. We're taking a little trip to Paris solely to avoid the gush and sentiment that will flow in Pont Aven during the next few days like a river in flood. Moreover, Lorry, if you're wise, you'll come with us."

Tollemache little realized how truly spontaneous was his friend's invitation. "D'ye mean that, Ingersoll?" he said elatedly.

"Why not? Don't let any question of expense stop you. This outing will be my Christmas treat."

"Expense! Dash it all! I've money to burn. Er – that is – enough, at any rate, to afford a jaunt to Paris. When do we start?"

"Soon after seven o'clock."

"By jing! Sharp work."

"If we really intend to escape, why stand on the order of our going?"

"I'm not saying a word. You rather took my breath away at first, you know."

"You should allow for the kinks in the artistic temperament, Lorry. Enthusiasm is too often the herald of despair."

"What sort of job do you really recommend me to take up, Socrates?"

Ingersoll smiled. "I am not in the habit of dealing my friends such shrewd blows," he said. "I was talking of myself – and Yvonne. Make no mistake about her. She has a sane mind in a sound body; but the artist's nature will triumph some day, and she will surprise all of us. By the way – nothing of this project to her till I have explained it. We shall see you at Mère Pitou's, of course?"

"I've promised to shake a leg with Madame herself in a gavotte. You don't suppose that Carmac's death will interfere with the feast?"

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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