CHAPTER IV.

A CLOUD DIFFERENT FROM THE OTHERS ENTERS ON THE SCENE.

The old man whom the chief of the band had named first the Madman, then the Sage, now never left the forecastle. Since they crossed the Shambles shoal, his attention had been divided between the heavens and the waters. He looked down, he looked upwards, and above all watched the north-east.

The skipper gave the helm to a sailor, stepped over the after hatchway, crossed the gangway, and went on to the forecastle. He approached the old man, but not in front. He stood a little behind, with elbows resting on his hips, with outstretched hands, the head on one side, with open eyes and arched eyebrows, and a smile in the corners of his mouth—an attitude of curiosity hesitating between mockery and respect.

The old man, either that it was his habit to talk to himself, or that hearing some one behind incited him to speech, began to soliloquize while he looked into space.

"The meridian, from which the right ascension is calculated, is marked in this century by four stars—the Polar, Cassiopeia's Chair, Andromeda's Head, and the star Algenib, which is in Pegasus. But there is not one visible."

These words followed each other mechanically, confused, and scarcely articulated, as if he did not care to pronounce them. They floated out of his mouth and dispersed. Soliloquy is the smoke exhaled by the inmost fires of the soul.

The skipper broke in, "My lord!"

The old man, perhaps rather deaf as well as very thoughtful, went on,—

"Too few stars, and too much wind. The breeze continually changes its direction and blows inshore; thence it rises perpendicularly. This results from the land being warmer than the water. Its atmosphere is lighter. The cold and dense wind of the sea rushes in to replace it. From this cause, in the upper regions the wind blows towards the land from every quarter. It would be advisable to make long tacks between the true and apparent parallel. When the latitude by observation differs from the latitude by dead reckoning by not more than three minutes in thirty miles, or by four minutes in sixty miles, you are in the true course."

The skipper bowed, but the old man saw him not. The latter, who wore what resembled an Oxford or Gottingen university gown, did not relax his haughty and rigid attitude. He observed the waters as a critic of waves and of men. He studied the

billows, but almost as if he was about to demand his turn to speak amidst their turmoil, and teach them something. There was in him both pedagogue and soothsayer. He seemed an oracle of the deep.

He continued his soliloquy, which was perhaps intended to be heard.

"We might strive if we had a wheel instead of a helm. With a speed of twelve miles an hour, a force of twenty pounds exerted on the wheel produces three hundred thousand pounds' effect on the course. And more too. For in some cases, with a double block and runner, they can get two more revolutions."

The skipper bowed a second time, and said, "My lord!"

The old man's eye rested on him; he had turned his head without moving his body.

"Call me Doctor."

"Master Doctor, I am the skipper."

"Just so," said the doctor.

The doctor, as henceforward we shall call him, appeared willing to converse.

"Skipper, have you an English sextant?"

"No."

"Without an English sextant you cannot take an altitude at all."

"The Basques," replied the captain, "took altitudes before there were any English."

"Be careful you are not taken aback."

"I keep her away when necessary."

"Have you tried how many knots she is running?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"Just now."

"How?"

"By the log."

"Did you take the trouble to look at the triangle?"

"Yes."

"Did the sand run through the glass in exactly thirty seconds?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure that the sand has not worn the hole between the globes?"

"Yes."

"Have you proved the sand-glass by the oscillations of a bullet?"

"Suspended by a rope yarn drawn out from the top of a coil of soaked hemp? Undoubtedly."

"Have you waxed the yarn lest it should stretch?"

"Yes."

"Have you tested the log?"

"I tested the sand-glass by the bullet, and checked the log by a round shot."

"Of what size was the shot?"

"One foot in diameter."

"Heavy enough?"

"It is an old round shot of our war hooker, La Casse de Par-Grand."

"Which was in the Armada?"

"Yes."

"And which carried six hundred soldiers, fifty sailors, and twenty-five guns?"

"Shipwreck knows it."

"How did you compute the resistance of the water to the shot?"

"By means of a German scale."

"Have you taken into account the resistance of the rope supporting the shot to the waves?"

"Yes."

"What was the result?"

"The resistance of the water was 170 pounds."

"That's to say she is running four French leagues an hour."

"And three Dutch leagues."

"But that is the difference merely of the vessel's way and the rate at which the sea is running?"

"Undoubtedly."

"Whither are you steering?"

"For a creek I know, between Loyola and St. Sebastian."

"Make the latitude of the harbour's mouth as soon as possible."

"Yes, as near as I can."

"Beware of gusts and currents. The first cause the second."

"Traidores."[4]

"No abuse. The sea understands. Insult nothing. Rest satisfied with watching."

"I have watched, and I do watch. Just now the tide is running against the wind; by-and-by, when it turns, we shall be all right."

"Have you a chart?"

"No; not for this channel."

"Then you sail by rule of thumb?"

"Not at all. I have a compass."

"The compass is one eye, the chart the other."

"A man with one eye can see."

"How do you compute the difference between the true and apparent course?"

"I've got my standard compass, and I make a guess."

"To guess is all very well. To know for certain is better."

"Christopher guessed."

"When there is a fog and the needle revolves treacherously, you can never tell on which side you should look out for squalls, and the end of it is that you know neither the true nor apparent day's work. An ass with his chart is better off than a wizard with his oracle."

"There is no fog in the breeze yet, and I see no cause for alarm."

"Ships are like flies in the spider's web of the sea."

"Just now both winds and waves are tolerably favourable."

"Black specks quivering on the billows—such are men on the ocean."

"I dare say there will be nothing wrong to-night."

"You may get into such a mess that you will find it hard to get out of it."

"All goes well at present."

The doctor's eyes were fixed on the north-east. The skipper continued,—

"Let us once reach the Gulf of Gascony, and I answer for our safety. Ah! I should say I am at home there. I know it well, my Gulf of Gascony. It is a little basin, often very boisterous; but there, I know every sounding in it and the nature of the bottom—mud opposite San Cipriano, shells opposite Cizarque, sand off Cape Peñas, little pebbles off Boncaut de Mimizan, and I know the colour of every pebble."

The skipper broke off; the doctor was no longer listening.

The doctor gazed at the north-east. Over that icy face passed an extraordinary expression. All the agony of terror possible to a mask of stone was depicted there. From his mouth escaped this word, "Good!"

His eyeballs, which had all at once become quite round like an owl's, were dilated with stupor on discovering a speck on the horizon. He added,—

"It is well. As for me, I am resigned."

The skipper looked at him. The doctor went on talking to himself, or to some one in the deep,—

"I say, Yes."

Then he was silent, opened his eyes wider and wider with renewed attention on that which he was watching, and said,—

"It is coming from afar, but not the less surely will it come."

The arc of the horizon which occupied the visual rays and thoughts of the doctor, being opposite to the west, was illuminated by the transcendent reflection of twilight, as if it were day. This arc, limited in extent, and surrounded by streaks of grayish vapour, was uniformly blue, but of a leaden rather than cerulean blue. The doctor,

having completely returned to the contemplation of the sea, pointed to this atmospheric arc, and said,—

"Skipper, do you see?"

"What?"

"That."

"What?"

"Out there."

"A blue spot? Yes."

"What is it?"

"A niche in heaven."

"For those who go to heaven; for those who go elsewhere it is another affair." And he emphasized these enigmatical words with an appalling expression which was unseen in the darkness.

A silence ensued. The skipper, remembering the two names given by the chief to this man, asked himself the question,—

"Is he a madman, or is he a sage?"

The stiff and bony finger of the doctor remained immovably pointing, like a sign-post, to the misty blue spot in the sky.

The skipper looked at this spot.

"In truth," he growled out, "it is not sky but clouds."

"A blue cloud is worse than a black cloud," said the doctor; "and," he added, "it's a snow-cloud."

"La nube de la nieve," said the skipper, as if trying to understand the word better by translating it.

"Do you know what a snow-cloud is?" asked the doctor.

"No."

"You'll know by-and-by."

The skipper again turned his attention to the horizon.

Continuing to observe the cloud, he muttered between his teeth,—

"One month of squalls, another of wet; January with its gales, February with its rains—that's all the winter we Asturians get. Our rain even is warm. We've no snow but on the mountains. Ay, ay; look out for the avalanche. The avalanche is no respecter of persons. The avalanche is a brute."

"And the waterspout is a monster," said the doctor, adding, after a pause, "Here it comes." He continued, "Several winds are getting up together—a strong wind from the west, and a gentle wind from the east."

"That last is a deceitful one," said the skipper.

The blue cloud was growing larger.

"If the snow," said the doctor, "is appalling when it slips down the mountain, think what it is when it falls from the Pole!"

His eye was glassy. The cloud seemed to spread over his face and simultaneously over the horizon. He continued, in musing tones,—

"Every minute the fatal hour draws nearer. The will of Heaven is about to be manifested."

The skipper asked himself again this question,—"Is he a madman?"

"Skipper," began the doctor, without taking his eyes off the cloud, "have you often crossed the Channel?"

"This is the first time."

The doctor, who was absorbed by the blue cloud, and who, as a sponge can take up but a definite quantity of water, had but a definite measure of anxiety, displayed no more emotion at this answer of the skipper than was expressed by a slight shrug of his shoulders.

"How is that?"

"Master Doctor, my usual cruise is to Ireland. I sail from Fontarabia to Black Harbour or to the Achill Islands. I go sometimes to Braich-y-Pwll, a point on the Welsh coast. But I always steer outside the Scilly Islands. I do not know this sea at all."

"That's serious. Woe to him who is inexperienced on the ocean! One ought to be familiar with the Channel—the Channel is the Sphinx. Look out for shoals."

"We are in twenty-five fathoms here."

"We ought to get into fifty-five fathoms to the west, and avoid even twenty fathoms to the east."

"We'll sound as we get on."

"The Channel is not an ordinary sea. The water rises fifty feet with the spring tides, and twenty-five with neap tides. Here we are in slack water. I thought you looked scared."

"We'll sound to-night."

"To sound you must heave to, and that you cannot do."

"Why not?"

"On account of the wind."

"We'll try."

"The squall is close on us."

"We'll sound, Master Doctor."

"You could not even bring to."

"Trust in God."

"Take care what you say. Pronounce not lightly the awful name."

"I will sound, I tell you."

"Be sensible; you will have a gale of wind presently."

"I say that I will try for soundings."

"The resistance of the water will prevent the lead from sinking, and the line will break. Ah! so this is your first time in these waters?"

"The first time."

"Very well; in that case listen, skipper."

The tone of the word "listen" was so commanding that the skipper made an obeisance.

"Master Doctor, I am all attention."

"Port your helm, and haul up on the starboard tack."

"What do you mean?"

"Steer your course to the west."

"Caramba!"

"Steer your course to the west."

"Impossible."

"As you will. What I tell you is for the others' sake. As for myself, I am indifferent."

"But, Master Doctor, steer west?"

"Yes, skipper."

"The wind will be dead ahead."

"Yes, skipper."

"She'll pitch like the devil."

"Moderate your language. Yes, skipper."

"The vessel would be in irons."

"Yes, skipper."

"That means very likely the mast will go."

"Possibly."

"Do you wish me to steer west?"

"Yes."

"I cannot."

"In that case settle your reckoning with the sea."

"The wind ought to change."

"It will not change all night."

"Why not?"

"Because it is a wind twelve hundred leagues in length."

"Make headway against such a wind! Impossible."

"To the west, I tell you."

"I'll try, but in spite of everything she will fall off."

"That's the danger."

"The wind sets us to the east."

"Don't go to the east."

"Why not?"

"Skipper, do you know what is for us the word of death?"

"No."

"Death is the east."

"I'll steer west."

This time the doctor, having turned right round, looked the skipper full in the face, and with his eyes resting on him, as though to implant the idea in his head, pronounced slowly, syllable by syllable, these words,—

"If to-night out at sea we hear the sound of a bell, the ship is lost."

The skipper pondered in amaze.

"What do you mean?"

The doctor did not answer. His countenance, expressive for a moment, was now reserved. His eyes became vacuous. He did not appear to hear the skipper's wondering question. He was now attending to his own monologue. His lips let fall, as if mechanically, in a low murmuring tone, these words,—

"The time has come for sullied souls to purify themselves."

The skipper made that expressive grimace which raises the chin towards the nose.

"He is more madman than sage," he growled, and moved off.

Nevertheless he steered west.

But the wind and the sea were rising.

CHAPTER V.

HARDQUANONNE.

The mist was deformed by all sorts of inequalities, bulging out at once on every point of the horizon, as if invisible mouths were busy puffing out the bags of wind. The formation of the clouds was becoming ominous. In the west, as in the east, the sky's depths were now invaded by the blue cloud: it advanced in the teeth of the wind. These contradictions are part of the wind's vagaries.

The sea, which a moment before wore scales, now wore a skin—such is the nature of that dragon. It was no longer a crocodile: it was a boa. The skin, lead-coloured and dirty, looked thick, and was crossed by heavy wrinkles. Here and there, on its surface, bubbles of surge, like pustules, gathered and then burst. The foam was like a leprosy. It was at this moment that the hooker, still seen from afar by the child, lighted her signal.

A quarter of an hour elapsed.

The skipper looked for the doctor: he was no longer on deck. Directly the skipper had left him, the doctor had stooped his somewhat ungainly form under the hood, and had entered the cabin; there he had sat down near the stove, on a block. He had taken a shagreen ink-bottle and a cordwain pocket-book from his pocket; he had extracted from his pocket-book a parchment folded four times, old, stained, and yellow; he had opened the sheet, taken a pen out of his ink-case, placed the pocket-book flat on his knee, and the parchment on the pocket-book; and by the rays of the lantern, which was lighting the cook, he set to writing on the back of the parchment. The roll of the waves inconvenienced him. He wrote thus for some time.

As he wrote, the doctor remarked the gourd of aguardiente, which the Provençal tasted every time he added a grain of pimento to the puchero, as if he were consulting it in reference to the seasoning. The doctor noticed the gourd, not because it was a bottle of brandy, but because of a name which was plaited in the wickerwork with red rushes on a background of white. There was light enough in the cabin to permit of his reading the name.

The doctor paused, and spelled it in a low voice,—

"Hardquanonne."

Then he addressed the cook.

"I had not observed that gourd before; did it belong to Hardquanonne?"

"Yes," the cook answered; "to our poor comrade, Hardquanonne."

The doctor went on,—

"To Hardquanonne, the Fleming of Flanders?"

"Yes."

"Who is in prison?"

"Yes."

"In the dungeon at Chatham?"

"It is his gourd," replied the cook; "and he was my friend. I keep it in remembrance of him. When shall we see him again? It is the bottle he used to wear slung over his hip."

The doctor took up his pen again, and continued laboriously tracing somewhat straggling lines on the parchment. He was evidently anxious that his handwriting should be very legible; and at length, notwithstanding the tremulousness of the vessel and the tremulousness of age, he finished what he wanted to write.

It was time, for suddenly a sea struck the craft, a mighty rush of waters besieged the hooker, and they felt her break into that fearful dance in which ships lead off with the tempest.

The doctor arose and approached the stove, meeting the ship's motion with his knees dexterously bent, dried as best he could, at the stove where the pot was boiling, the lines he had written, refolded the parchment in the pocket-book, and replaced the pocket-book and the inkhorn in his pocket.

The stove was not the least ingenious piece of interior economy in the hooker. It was judiciously isolated. Meanwhile the pot heaved—the Provençal was watching it.

"Fish broth," said he.

"For the fishes," replied the doctor. Then he went on deck again.

CHAPTER VI.

THEY THINK THAT HELP IS AT HAND.

Through his growing preoccupation the doctor in some sort reviewed the situation; and any one near to him might have heard these words drop from his lips,—

"Too much rolling, and not enough pitching."

Then recalled to himself by the dark workings of his mind, he sank again into thought, as a miner into his shaft. His meditation in nowise interfered with his watch on the sea. The contemplation of the sea is in itself a reverie.

The dark punishment of the waters, eternally tortured, was commencing. A lamentation arose from the whole main. Preparations, confused and melancholy, were forming in space. The doctor observed all before him, and lost no detail. There was, however, no sign of scrutiny in his face. One does not scrutinize hell.

A vast commotion, yet half latent, but visible through the turmoils in space, increased and irritated, more and more, the winds, the vapours, the waves. Nothing is so logical and nothing appears so absurd as the ocean. Self-dispersion is the essence of its sovereignty, and is one of the elements of its redundance. The sea is ever for and against. It knots that it may unravel itself; one of its slopes attacks, the other relieves. No apparition is so wonderful as the waves. Who can paint the alternating hollows and promontories, the valleys, the melting bosoms, the sketches? How render the thickets of foam, blendings of mountains and dreams? The indescribable is everywhere there—in the rending, in the frowning, in the anxiety, in the perpetual contradiction, in the chiaroscuro, in the pendants of the cloud, in the keys of the ever-open vault, in the disaggregation without rupture, in the funereal tumult caused by all that madness!

The wind had just set due north. Its violence was so favourable and so useful in driving them away from England that the captain of the Matutina had made up his mind to set all sail. The hooker slipped through the foam as at a gallop, the wind right aft, bounding from wave to wave in a gay frenzy. The fugitives were delighted, and laughed; they clapped their hands, applauded the surf, the sea, the wind, the sails, the swift progress, the flight, all unmindful of the future. The doctor appeared not to see them, and dreamt on.

Every vestige of day had faded away. This was the moment when the child, watching from the distant cliff, lost sight of the hooker. Up to then his glance had remained fixed, and, as it were, leaning on the vessel. What part had that look in fate? When the hooker was lost to sight in the distance, and when the child could no longer see aught, the child went north and the ship went south.

All were plunged in darkness.

CHAPTER VII.

SUPERHUMAN HORRORS.

On their part it was with wild jubilee and delight that those on board the hooker saw the hostile land recede and lessen behind them. By degrees the dark ring of ocean rose higher, dwarfing in twilight Portland, Purbeck, Tineham, Kimmeridge, the Matravers, the long streaks of dim cliffs, and the coast dotted with lighthouses.

England disappeared. The fugitives had now nothing round them but the sea.

All at once night grew awful.

There was no longer extent nor space; the sky became blackness, and closed in round the vessel. The snow began to fall slowly; a few flakes appeared. They might have been ghosts. Nothing else was visible in the course of the wind. They felt as if yielded up. A snare lurked in every possibility.

It is in this cavernous darkness that in our climate the Polar waterspout makes its appearance.

A great muddy cloud, like to the belly of a hydra, hung over ocean, and in places its lividity adhered to the waves. Some of these adherences resembled pouches with holes, pumping the sea, disgorging vapour, and refilling themselves with water. Here and there these suctions drew up cones of foam on the sea.

The boreal storm hurled itself on the hooker. The hooker rushed to meet it. The squall and the vessel met as though to insult each other.

In the first mad shock not a sail was clewed up, not a jib lowered, not a reef taken in, so much is flight a delirium. The mast creaked and bent back as if in fear.

Cyclones, in our northern hemisphere, circle from left to right, in the same direction as the hands of a watch, with a velocity which is sometimes as much as sixty miles an hour. Although she was entirely at the mercy of that whirling power, the hooker behaved as if she were out in moderate weather, without any further precaution than

keeping her head on to the rollers, with the wind broad on the bow so as to avoid being pooped or caught broadside on. This semi-prudence would have availed her nothing in case of the wind's shifting and taking her aback.

A deep rumbling was brewing up in the distance. The roar of the abyss, nothing can be compared to it. It is the great brutish howl of the universe. What we call matter, that unsearchable organism, that amalgamation of incommensurable energies, in which can occasionally be detected an almost imperceptible degree of intention which makes us shudder, that blind, benighted cosmos, that enigmatical Pan, has a cry, a strange cry, prolonged, obstinate, and continuous, which is less than speech and more than thunder. That cry is the hurricane. Other voices, songs, melodies, clamours, tones, proceed from nests, from broods, from pairings, from nuptials, from homes. This one, a trumpet, comes out of the Naught, which is All. Other voices express the soul of the universe; this one expresses the monster. It is the howl of the formless. It is the inarticulate finding utterance in the indefinite. A thing it is full of pathos and terror. Those clamours converse above and beyond man. They rise, fall, undulate, determine waves of sound, form all sorts of wild surprises for the mind, now burst close to the ear with the importunity of a peal of trumpets, now assail us with the rumbling hoarseness of distance. Giddy uproar which resembles a language, and which, in fact, is a language. It is the effort which the world makes to speak. It is the lisping of the wonderful. In this wail is manifested vaguely all that the vast dark palpitation endures, suffers, accepts, rejects. For the most part it talks nonsense; it is like an access of chronic sickness, and rather an epilepsy diffused than a force employed; we fancy that we are witnessing the descent of supreme evil into the infinite. At moments we seem to discern a reclamation of the elements, some vain effort of chaos to reassert itself over creation. At times it is a complaint. The void bewails and justifies itself. It is as the pleading of the world's cause. We can fancy that the universe is engaged in a lawsuit; we listen—we try to grasp the reasons given, the redoubtable for and against. Such a moaning of the shadows has the tenacity of a syllogism. Here is a vast trouble for thought. Here is the raison d'être of mythologies and polytheisms. To the terror of those great murmurs are added superhuman outlines melting away as they appear—Eumenides which are almost distinct, throats of Furies shaped in the clouds, Plutonian chimeras almost defined. No horrors equal those sobs, those laughs, those tricks of tumult, those inscrutable questions and answers, those appeals to unknown aid. Man knows not what to become in the presence of that awful incantation. He bows under the enigma of those Draconian intonations. What latent meaning have they? What do they signify? What do they threaten? What do they implore? It would seem as though all bonds were loosened.

Vociferations from precipice to precipice, from air to water, from the wind to the wave, from the rain to the rock, from the zenith to the nadir, from the stars to the foam—the abyss unmuzzled—such is that tumult, complicated by some mysterious strife with evil consciences.

The loquacity of night is not less lugubrious than its silence. One feels in it the anger of the unknown.

Night is a presence. Presence of what?

For that matter we must distinguish between night and the shadows. In the night there is the absolute; in the darkness the multiple. Grammar, logic as it is, admits of no singular for the shadows. The night is one, the shadows are many.[5]

This mist of nocturnal mystery is the scattered, the fugitive, the crumbling, the fatal; one feels earth no longer, one feels the other reality.

In the shadow, infinite and indefinite, lives something or some one; but that which lives there forms part of our death. After our earthly passage, when that shadow shall be light for us, the life which is beyond our life shall seize us. Meanwhile it appears to touch and try us. Obscurity is a pressure. Night is, as it were, a hand placed on our soul. At certain hideous and solemn hours we feel that which is beyond the wall of the tomb encroaching on us.

Never does this proximity of the unknown seem more imminent than in storms at sea. The horrible combines with the fantastic. The possible interrupter of human actions, the old Cloud compeller, has it in his power to mould, in whatsoever shape he chooses, the inconsistent element, the limitless incoherence, the force diffused and undecided of aim. That mystery the tempest every instant accepts and executes some unknown changes of will, apparent or real.

Poets have, in all ages, called this the caprice of the waves. But there is no such thing as caprice. The disconcerting enigmas which in nature we call caprice, and in human life chance, are splinters of a law revealed to us in glimpses.

CHAPTER VIII.

NIX ET NOX.

The characteristic of the snowstorm is its blackness. Nature's habitual aspect during a storm, the earth or sea black and the sky pale, is reversed; the sky is black, the ocean white, foam below, darkness above; a horizon walled in with smoke; a zenith roofed with crape. The tempest resembles a cathedral hung with mourning, but no light in that cathedral: no phantom lights on the crests of the waves, no spark, no phosphorescence, naught but a huge shadow. The polar cyclone differs from the tropical cyclone, inasmuch as the one sets fire to every light, and the other extinguishes them all. The world is suddenly converted into the arched vault of a cave. Out of the night falls a dust of pale spots, which hesitate between sky and sea. These spots, which are flakes of snow, slip, wander, and flow. It is like the tears of a winding-sheet putting themselves into lifelike motion. A mad wind mingles with this dissemination. Blackness crumbling into whiteness, the furious into the obscure, all the tumult of which the sepulchre is capable, a whirlwind under a catafalque—such is the snowstorm. Underneath trembles the ocean, forming and re-forming over portentous unknown depths.

In the polar wind, which is electrical, the flakes turn suddenly into hailstones, and the air becomes filled with projectiles; the water crackles, shot with grape.

No thunderstrokes: the lightning of boreal storms is silent. What is sometimes said of the cat, "it swears," may be applied to this lightning. It is a menace proceeding from a mouth half open and strangely inexorable. The snowstorm is a storm blind and dumb; when it has passed, the ships also are often blind and the sailors dumb.

To escape from such an abyss is difficult.

It would be wrong, however, to believe shipwreck to be absolutely inevitable. The Danish fishermen of Disco and the Balesin; the seekers of black whales; Hearn steering towards Behring Strait, to discover the mouth of Coppermine River; Hudson, Mackenzie, Vancouver, Ross, Dumont D'Urville, all underwent at the Pole itself the wildest hurricanes, and escaped out of them.

It was into this description of tempest that the hooker had entered, triumphant and in full sail—frenzy against frenzy. When Montgomery, escaping from Rouen, threw his galley, with all the force of its oars, against the chain barring the Seine at La Bouille, he showed similar effrontery.

The Matutina sailed on fast; she bent so much under her sails that at moments she made a fearful angle with the sea of fifteen degrees; but her good bellied keel adhered

to the water as if glued to it. The keel resisted the grasp of the hurricane. The lantern at the prow cast its light ahead.

The cloud, full of winds, dragging its tumour over the deep, cramped and eat more and more into the sea round the hooker. Not a gull, not a sea-mew, nothing but snow. The expanse of the field of waves was becoming contracted and terrible; only three or four gigantic ones were visible.

Now and then a tremendous flash of lightning of a red copper colour broke out behind the obscure superposition of the horizon and the zenith; that sudden release of vermilion flame revealed the horror of the clouds; that abrupt conflagration of the depths, to which for an instant the first tiers of clouds and the distant boundaries of the celestial chaos seemed to adhere, placed the abyss in perspective. On this ground of fire the snow-flakes showed black—they might have been compared to dark butterflies flying about in a furnace—then all was extinguished.

The first explosion over, the squall, still pursuing the hooker, began to roar in thorough bass. This phase of grumbling is a perilous diminution of uproar. Nothing is so terrifying as this monologue of the storm. This gloomy recitative appears to serve as a moment of rest to the mysterious combating forces, and indicates a species of patrol kept in the unknown.

The hooker held wildly on her course. Her two mainsails especially were doing fearful work. The sky and sea were as of ink with jets of foam running higher than the mast. Every instant masses of water swept the deck like a deluge, and at each roll of the vessel the hawse-holes, now to starboard, now to larboard, became as so many open mouths vomiting back the foam into the sea. The women had taken refuge in the cabin, but the men remained on deck; the blinding snow eddied round, the spitting surge mingled with it. All was fury.

At that moment the chief of the band, standing abaft on the stern frames, holding on with one hand to the shrouds, and with the other taking off the kerchief he wore round his head and waving it in the light of the lantern, gay and arrogant, with pride in his face, and his hair in wild disorder, intoxicated by all the darkness, cried out,—

"We are free!"

"Free, free, free," echoed the fugitives, and the band, seizing hold of the rigging, rose up on deck.

"Hurrah!" shouted the chief.

And the band shouted in the storm,—

"Hurrah!"

Just as this clamour was dying away in the tempest, a loud solemn voice rose from the other end of the vessel, saying,—

"Silence!"

All turned their heads. The darkness was thick, and the doctor was leaning against the mast so that he seemed part of it, and they could not see him.

The voice spoke again,—

"Listen!"

All were silent.

Then did they distinctly hear through the darkness the toll of a bell.

CHAPTER IX.

THE CHARGE CONFIDED TO A RAGING SEA.

The skipper, at the helm, burst out laughing,—

"A bell! that's good. We are on the larboard tack. What does the bell prove? Why, that we have land to starboard."

The firm and measured voice of the doctor replied,—

"You have not land to starboard."

"But we have," shouted the skipper.

"No!"

"But that bell tolls from the land."

"That bell," said the doctor, "tolls from the sea."

A shudder passed over these daring men. The haggard faces of the two women appeared above the companion like two hobgoblins conjured up. The doctor took a

step forward, separating his tall form from the mast. From the depth of the night's darkness came the toll of the bell.

The doctor resumed,—

"There is in the midst of the sea, halfway between Portland and the Channel Islands, a buoy, placed there as a caution; that buoy is moored by chains to the shoal, and floats on the top of the water. On the buoy is fixed an iron trestle, and across the trestle a bell is hung. In bad weather heavy seas toss the buoy, and the bell rings. That is the bell you hear."

The doctor paused to allow an extra violent gust of wind to pass over, waited until the sound of the bell reasserted itself, and then went on,—

"To hear that bell in a storm, when the nor'-wester is blowing, is to be lost. Wherefore? For this reason: if you hear the bell, it is because the wind brings it to you. But the wind is nor'-westerly, and the breakers of Aurigny lie east. You hear the bell only because you are between the buoy and the breakers. It is on those breakers the wind is driving you. You are on the wrong side of the buoy. If you were on the right side, you would be out at sea on a safe course, and you would not hear the bell. The wind would not convey the sound to you. You would pass close to the buoy without knowing it. We are out of our course. That bell is shipwreck sounding the tocsin. Now, look out!"

As the doctor spoke, the bell, soothed by a lull of the storm, rang slowly stroke by stroke, and its intermitting toll seemed to testify to the truth of the old man's words. It was as the knell of the abyss.

All listened breathless, now to the voice, now to the bell.

CHAPTER X.

THE COLOSSAL SAVAGE, THE STORM.

In the meantime the skipper had caught up his speaking-trumpet.

"Strike every sail, my lads; let go the sheets, man the down-hauls, lower ties and brails. Let us steer to the west, let us regain the high sea; head for the buoy, steer for the bell—there's an offing down there. We've yet a chance."

"Try," said the doctor.

Let us remark here, by the way, that this ringing buoy, a kind of bell tower on the deep, was removed in 1802. There are yet alive very old mariners who remember hearing it. It forewarned, but rather too late.

The orders of the skipper were obeyed. The Languedocian made a third sailor. All bore a hand. Not satisfied with brailing up, they furled the sails, lashed the earrings, secured the clew-lines, bunt-lines, and leech-lines, and clapped preventer-shrouds on the block straps, which thus might serve as back-stays. They fished the mast. They battened down the ports and bulls'-eyes, which is a method of walling up a ship. These evolutions, though executed in a lubberly fashion, were, nevertheless, thoroughly effective. The hooker was stripped to bare poles. But in proportion as the vessel, stowing every stitch of canvas, became more helpless, the havoc of both winds and waves increased. The seas ran mountains high. The hurricane, like an executioner hastening to his victim, began to dismember the craft. There came, in the twinkling of an eye, a dreadful crash: the top-sails were blown from the bolt-ropes, the chess-trees were hewn asunder, the deck was swept clear, the shrouds were carried away, the mast went by the board, all the lumber of the wreck was flying in shivers. The main shrouds gave out although they were turned in, and stoppered to four fathoms.

The magnetic currents common to snowstorms hastened the destruction of the rigging. It broke as much from the effect of effluvium as the violence of the wind. Most of the chain gear, fouled in the blocks, ceased to work. Forward the bows, aft the quarters, quivered under the terrific shocks. One wave washed overboard the compass and its binnacle. A second carried away the boat, which, like a box slung under a carriage, had been, in accordance with the quaint Asturian custom, lashed to the bowsprit. A third breaker wrenched off the spritsail yard. A fourth swept away the figurehead and signal light. The rudder only was left.

To replace the ship's bow lantern they set fire to, and suspended at the stem, a large block of wood covered with oakum and tar.

The mast, broken in two, all bristling with quivering splinters, ropes, blocks, and yards, cumbered the deck. In falling it had stove in a plank of the starboard gunwale. The skipper, still firm at the helm, shouted,—

"While we can steer we have yet a chance. The lower planks hold good. Axes, axes! Overboard with the mast! Clear the decks!"

Both crew and passengers worked with the excitement of despair. A few strokes of the hatchets, and it was done. They pushed the mast over the side. The deck was cleared.

"Now," continued the skipper, "take a rope's end and lash me to the helm." To the tiller they bound him.

While they were fastening him he laughed, and shouted,—

"Blow, old hurdy-gurdy, bellow. I've seen your equal off Cape Machichaco."

And when secured he clutched the helm with that strange hilarity which danger awakens.

"All goes well, my lads. Long live our Lady of Buglose! Let us steer west."

An enormous wave came down abeam, and fell on the vessel's quarter. There is always in storms a tiger-like wave, a billow fierce and decisive, which, attaining a certain height, creeps horizontally over the surface of the waters for a time, then rises, roars, rages, and falling on the distressed vessel tears it limb from limb.

A cloud of foam covered the entire poop of the Matutina.

There was heard above the confusion of darkness and waters a crash.

When the spray cleared off, when the stern again rose in view, the skipper and the helm had disappeared. Both had been swept away.

The helm and the man they had but just secured to it had passed with the wave into the hissing turmoil of the hurricane.

The chief of the band, gazing intently into the darkness, shouted,—

"Te burlas de nosotros?"

To this defiant exclamation there followed another cry,—

"Let go the anchor. Save the skipper."

They rushed to the capstan and let go the anchor.

Hookers carry but one. In this case the anchor reached the bottom, but only to be lost. The bottom was of the hardest rock. The billows were raging with resistless force. The cable snapped like a thread.

The anchor lay at the bottom of the sea. At the cutwater there remained but the cable end protruding from the hawse-hole.

From this moment the hooker became a wreck. The Matutina was irrevocably disabled. The vessel, just before in full sail, and almost formidable in her speed, was now helpless. All her evolutions were uncertain and executed at random. She yielded passively and like a log to the capricious fury of the waves. That in a few minutes there should be in place of an eagle a useless cripple, such a transformation is to be witnessed only at sea.

The howling of the wind became more and more frightful. A hurricane has terrible lungs; it makes unceasingly mournful additions to darkness, which cannot be intensified. The bell on the sea rang despairingly, as if tolled by a weird hand.

The Matutina drifted like a cork at the mercy of the waves. She sailed no longer—she merely floated. Every moment she seemed about to turn over on her back, like a dead fish. The good condition and perfectly water-tight state of the hull alone saved her from this disaster. Below the water-line not a plank had started. There was not a cranny, chink, nor crack; and she had not made a single drop of water in the hold. This was lucky, as the pump, being out of order, was useless.

The hooker pitched and roared frightfully in the seething billows. The vessel had throes as of sickness, and seemed to be trying to belch forth the unhappy crew.

Helpless they clung to the standing rigging, to the transoms, to the shank painters, to the gaskets, to the broken planks, the protruding nails of which tore their hands, to the warped riders, and to all the rugged projections of the stumps of the masts. From time to time they listened. The toll of the bell came over the waters fainter and fainter; one would have thought that it also was in distress. Its ringing was no more than an intermittent rattle. Then this rattle died away. Where were they? At what distance from the buoy? The sound of the bell had frightened them; its silence terrified them. The north-wester drove them forward in perhaps a fatal course. They felt themselves wafted on by maddened and ever-recurring gusts of wind. The wreck sped forward in the darkness. There is nothing more fearful than being hurried forward blindfold. They felt the abyss before them, over them, under them. It was no longer a run, it was a rush.

Suddenly, through the appalling density of the snowstorm, there loomed a red light.

"A lighthouse!" cried the crew.

CHAPTER XI.

THE CASKETS.

It was indeed the Caskets light.

A lighthouse of the nineteenth century is a high cylinder of masonry, surmounted by scientifically constructed machinery for throwing light. The Caskets lighthouse in particular is a triple white tower, bearing three light-rooms. These three chambers revolve on clockwork wheels, with such precision that the man on watch who sees them from sea can invariably take ten steps during their irradiation, and twenty-five during their eclipse. Everything is based on the focal plan, and on the rotation of the octagon drum, formed of eight wide simple lenses in range, having above and below it two series of dioptric rings; an algebraic gear, secured from the effects of the beating of winds and waves by glass a millimetre thick[6], yet sometimes broken by the sea-eagles, which dash themselves like great moths against these gigantic lanterns. The building which encloses and sustains this mechanism, and in which it is set, is also mathematically constructed. Everything about it is plain, exact, bare, precise, correct. A lighthouse is a mathematical figure.

In the seventeenth century a lighthouse was a sort of plume of the land on the seashore. The architecture of a lighthouse tower was magnificent and extravagant. It was covered with balconies, balusters, lodges, alcoves, weathercocks. Nothing but masks, statues, foliage, volutes, reliefs, figures large and small, medallions with inscriptions. Pax in bello, said the Eddystone lighthouse. We may as well observe, by the way, that this declaration of peace did not always disarm the ocean. Winstanley repeated it on a lighthouse which he constructed at his own expense, on a wild spot near Plymouth. The tower being finished, he shut himself up in it to have it tried by the tempest. The storm came, and carried off the lighthouse and Winstanley in it. Such excessive adornment gave too great a hold to the hurricane, as generals too brilliantly equipped in battle draw the enemy's fire. Besides whimsical designs in stone, they were loaded with whimsical designs in iron, copper, and wood. The ironwork was in relief, the woodwork stood out. On the sides of the lighthouse there jutted out, clinging to the walls among the arabesques, engines of every description, useful and useless, windlasses, tackles, pulleys, counterpoises, ladders, cranes, grapnels. On the pinnacle around the light delicately-wrought ironwork held great iron chandeliers,

in which were placed pieces of rope steeped in resin; wicks which burned doggedly, and which no wind extinguished; and from top to bottom the tower was covered by a complication of sea-standards, banderoles, banners, flags, pennons, colours which rose from stage to stage, from story to story, a medley of all hues, all shapes, all heraldic devices, all signals, all confusion, up to the light chamber, making, in the storm, a gay riot of tatters about the blaze. That insolent light on the brink of the abyss showed like a defiance, and inspired shipwrecked men with a spirit of daring. But the Caskets light was not after this fashion.

It was, at that period, merely an old barbarous lighthouse, such as Henry I. had built it after the loss of the White Ship—a flaming pile of wood under an iron trellis, a brazier behind a railing, a head of hair flaming in the wind.

The only improvement made in this lighthouse since the twelfth century was a pair of forge-bellows worked by an indented pendulum and a stone weight, which had been added to the light chamber in 1610.

The fate of the sea-birds who chanced to fly against these old lighthouses was more tragic than those of our days. The birds dashed against them, attracted by the light, and fell into the brazier, where they could be seen struggling like black spirits in a hell, and at times they would fall back again between the railings upon the rock, red hot, smoking, lame, blind, like half-burnt flies out of a lamp.

To a full-rigged ship in good trim, answering readily to the pilot's handling, the Caskets light is useful; it cries, "Look out;" it warns her of the shoal. To a disabled ship it is simply terrible. The hull, paralyzed and inert, without resistance, without defence against the impulse of the storm or the mad heaving of the waves, a fish without fins, a bird without wings, can but go where the wind wills. The lighthouse shows the end—points out the spot where it is doomed to disappear—throws light upon the burial. It is the torch of the sepulchre.

To light up the inexorable chasm, to warn against the inevitable, what more tragic mockery!

CHAPTER XII.

FACE TO FACE WITH THE ROCK.

The wretched people in distress on board the Matutina understood at once the mysterious derision which mocked their shipwreck. The appearance of the lighthouse raised their spirits at first, then overwhelmed them. Nothing could be done, nothing attempted. What has been said of kings, we may say of the waves—we are their people, we are their prey. All that they rave must be borne. The nor'-wester was driving the hooker on the Caskets. They were nearing them; no evasion was possible. They drifted rapidly towards the reef; they felt that they were getting into shallow waters; the lead, if they could have thrown it to any purpose, would not have shown more than three or four fathoms. The shipwrecked people heard the dull sound of the waves being sucked within the submarine caves of the steep rock. They made out, under the lighthouse, like a dark cutting between two plates of granite, the narrow passage of the ugly wild-looking little harbour, supposed to be full of the skeletons of men and carcasses of ships. It looked like the mouth of a cavern, rather than the entrance of a port. They could hear the crackling of the pile on high within the iron grating. A ghastly purple illuminated the storm; the collision of the rain and hail disturbed the mist. The black cloud and the red flame fought, serpent against serpent; live ashes, reft by the wind, flew from the fire, and the sudden assaults of the sparks seemed to drive the snowflakes before them. The breakers, blurred at first in outline, now stood out in bold relief, a medley of rocks with peaks, crests, and vertebræ. The angles were formed by strongly marked red lines, and the inclined planes in blood-like streams of light. As they neared it, the outline of the reefs increased and rose—sinister.

One of the women, the Irishwoman, told her beads wildly.

In place of the skipper, who was the pilot, remained the chief, who was the captain. The Basques all know the mountain and the sea. They are bold on the precipice, and inventive in catastrophes.

They neared the cliff. They were about to strike. Suddenly they were so close to the great north rock of the Caskets that it shut out the lighthouse from them. They saw nothing but the rock and the red light behind it. The huge rock looming in the mist was like a gigantic black woman with a hood of fire.

That ill-famed rock is called the Biblet. It faces the north side the reef, which on the south is faced by another ridge, L'Etacq-aux-giulmets. The chief looked at the Biblet, and shouted,—

"A man with a will to take a rope to the rock! Who can swim?"

No answer.

No one on board knew how to swim, not even the sailors—an ignorance not uncommon among seafaring people.

A beam nearly free of its lashings was swinging loose. The chief clasped it with both hands, crying, "Help me."

They unlashed the beam. They had now at their disposal the very thing they wanted. From the defensive, they assumed the offensive.

It was a longish beam of heart of oak, sound and strong, useful either as a support or as an engine of attack—a lever for a burden, a ram against a tower.

"Ready!" shouted the chief.

All six, getting foothold on the stump of the mast, threw their weight on the spar projecting over the side, straight as a lance towards a projection of the cliff.

It was a dangerous manoeuvre. To strike at a mountain is audacity indeed. The six men might well have been thrown into the water by the shock.

There is variety in struggles with storms. After the hurricane, the shoal; after the wind, the rock. First the intangible, then the immovable, to be encountered.

Some minutes passed, such minutes as whiten men's hair.

The rock and the vessel were about to come in collision. The rock, like a culprit, awaited the blow.

A resistless wave rushed in; it ended the respite. It caught the vessel underneath, raised it, and swayed it for an instant as the sling swings its projectile.

"Steady!" cried the chief; "it is only a rock, and we are men."

The beam was couched, the six men were one with it, its sharp bolts tore their arm-pits, but they did not feel them.

The wave dashed the hooker against the rock.

Then came the shock.

It came under the shapeless cloud of foam which always hides such catastrophes.

When this cloud fell back into the sea, when the waves rolled back from the rock, the six men were tossing about the deck, but the Matutina was floating alongside the rock—clear of it. The beam had stood and turned the vessel; the sea was running so fast that in a few seconds she had left the Caskets behind.

Such things sometimes occur. It was a straight stroke of the bowsprit that saved Wood of Largo at the mouth of the Tay. In the wild neighbourhood of Cape Winterton, and under the command of Captain Hamilton, it was the appliance of such a lever against the dangerous rock, Branodu-um, that saved the Royal Mary from shipwreck, although she was but a Scotch built frigate. The force of the waves can be so abruptly discomposed that changes of direction can be easily managed, or at least are possible even in the most violent collisions. There is a brute in the tempest. The hurricane is a bull, and can be turned.

The whole secret of avoiding shipwreck is to try and pass from the secant to the tangent.

Such was the service rendered by the beam to the vessel. It had done the work of an oar, had taken the place of a rudder. But the manoeuvre once performed could not be repeated. The beam was overboard; the shock of the collision had wrenched it out of the men's hands, and it was lost in the waves. To loosen another beam would have been to dislocate the hull.

The hurricane carried off the Matutina. Presently the Caskets showed as a harmless encumbrance on the horizon. Nothing looks more out of countenance than a reef of rocks under such circumstances. There are in nature, in its obscure aspects, in which the visible blends with the invisible, certain motionless, surly profiles, which seem to express that a prey has escaped.

Thus glowered the Caskest while the Matutina fled.

The lighthouse paled in distance, faded, and disappeared.

There was something mournful in its extinction. Layers of mist sank down upon the now uncertain light. Its rays died in the waste of waters; the flame floated, struggled, sank, and lost its form. It might have been a drowning creature. The brasier dwindled to the snuff of a candle; then nothing; more but a weak, uncertain flutter. Around it spread a circle of extravasated glimmer; it was like the quenching of: light in the pit of night.

The bell which had threatened was dumb. The lighthouse which had threatened had melted away. And yet it was more awful now that they had ceased to threaten. One was a voice, the other a torch. There was something human about them.

They were gone, and nought remained but the abyss.

CHAPTER XIII.

FACE TO FACE WITH NIGHT.

Again was the hooker running with the shadow into immeasurable darkness.

The Matutina, escaped from the Caskets, sank and rose from billow to billow. A respite, but in chaos.

Spun round by the wind, tossed by all the thousand motions of the wave, she reflected every mad oscillation of the sea. She scarcely pitched at all—a terrible symptom of a ship's distress. Wrecks merely roll. Pitching is a convulsion of the strife. The helm alone can turn a vessel to the wind.

In storms, and more especially in the meteors of snow, sea and night end by melting into amalgamation, resolving into nothing but a smoke. Mists, whirlwinds, gales, motion in all directions, no basis, no shelter, no stop. Constant recommencement, one gulf succeeding another. No horizon visible; intense blackness for background. Through all these the hooker drifted.

To have got free of the Caskets, to have eluded the rock, was a victory for the shipwrecked men; but it was a victory which left them in stupor. They had raised no cheer: at sea such an imprudence is not repeated twice. To throw down a challenge where they could not cast the lead, would have been too serious a jest.

The repulse of the rock was an impossibility achieved. They were petrified by it. By degrees, however, they began to hope again. Such are the insubmergable mirages of the soul! There is no distress so complete but that even in the most critical moments the inexplicable sunrise of hope is seen in its depths. These poor wretches were ready to acknowledge to themselves that they were saved. It was on their lips.

But suddenly something terrible appeared to them in the darkness.

On the port bow arose, standing stark, cut out on the background of mist, a tall, opaque mass, vertical, right-angled, a tower of the abyss. They watched it open-mouthed.

The storm was driving them towards it.

They knew not what it was. It was the Ortach rock.

CHAPTER XIV.

ORTACH.

The reef reappeared. After the Caskets comes Ortach. The storm is no artist; brutal and all-powerful, it never varies its appliances. The darkness is inexhaustible. Its snares and perfidies never come to an end. As for man, he soon comes to the bottom of his resources. Man expends his strength, the abyss never.

The shipwrecked men turned towards the chief, their hope. He could only shrug his shoulders. Dismal contempt of helplessness.

A pavement in the midst of the ocean—such is the Ortach rock. The Ortach, all of a piece, rises up in a straight line to eighty feet above the angry beating of the waves. Waves and ships break against it. An immovable cube, it plunges its rectilinear planes apeak into the numberless serpentine curves of the sea.

At night it stands an enormous block resting on the folds of a huge black sheet. In time of storm it awaits the stroke of the axe, which is the thunder-clap.

But there is never a thunder-clap during the snowstorm. True, the ship has the bandage round her eyes; darkness is knotted about her; she is like one prepared to be led to the scaffold. As for the thunderbolt, which makes quick ending, it is not to be hoped for.

The Matutina, nothing better than a log upon the waters, drifted towards this rock as she had drifted towards the other. The poor wretches on board, who had for a moment believed themselves saved, relapsed into their agony. The destruction they had left behind faced them again. The reef reappeared from the bottom of the sea. Nothing had been gained.

The Caskets are a figuring iron[7] with a thousand compartments. The Ortach is a wall. To be wrecked on the Caskets is to be cut into ribbons; to strike on the Ortach is to be crushed into powder.

Nevertheless, there was one chance.

On a straight frontage such as that of the Ortach neither the wave nor the cannon ball can ricochet. The operation is simple: first the flux, then the reflux; a wave advances, a billow returns.

In such cases the question of life and death is balanced thus: if the wave carries the vessel on the rock, she breaks on it and is lost; if the billow retires before the ship has touched, she is carried back, she is saved.

It was a moment of great anxiety; those on board saw through the gloom the great decisive wave bearing down on them. How far was it going to drag them? If the wave broke upon the ship, they were carried on the rock and dashed to pieces. If it passed under the ship....

The wave did pass under.

They breathed again.

But what of the recoil? What would the surf do with them? The surf carried them back. A few minutes later the Matutina was free of the breakers. The Ortach faded from their view, as the Caskets had done. It was their second victory. For the second time the hooker had verged on destruction, and had drawn back in time.

CHAPTER XV.

PORTENTOSUM MARE.

Meanwhile a thickening mist had descended on the drifting wretches. They were ignorant of their whereabouts, they could scarcely see a cable's length around. Despite a furious storm of hail which forced them to bend down their heads, the women had obstinately refused to go below again. No one, however hopeless, but wishes, if shipwreck be inevitable, to meet it in the open air. When so near death, a ceiling above one's head seems like the first outline of a coffin.

They were now in a short and chopping sea. A turgid sea indicates its constraint. Even in a fog the entrance into a strait may be known by the boiling-like appearance of the

waves. And thus it was, for they were unconsciously coasting Aurigny. Between the west of Ortach and the Caskets and the east of Aurigny the sea is hemmed in and cramped, and the uneasy position determines locally the condition of storms. The sea suffers like others, and when it suffers it is irritable. That channel is a thing to fear.

The Matutina was in it.

Imagine under the sea a tortoise shell as big as Hyde Park or the Champs Elysées, of which every striature is a shallow, and every embossment a reef. Such is the western approach of Aurigny. The sea covers and conceals this ship-wrecking apparatus. On this conglomeration of submarine breakers the cloven waves leap and foam—in calm weather, a chopping sea; in storms, a chaos.

The shipwrecked men observed this new complication without endeavouring to explain it to themselves. Suddenly they understood it. A pale vista broadened in the zenith; a wan tinge overspread the sea; the livid light revealed on the port side a long shoal stretching eastward, towards which the power of the rushing wind was driving the vessel. The shoal was Aurigny.

What was that shoal? They shuddered. They would have shuddered even more had a voice answered them—Aurigny.

No isle so well defended against man's approach as Aurigny. Below and above water it is protected by a savage guard, of which Ortach is the outpost. To the west, Burhou, Sauteriaux, Anfroque, Niangle, Fond du Croc, Les Jumelles, La Grosse, La Clanque, Les Eguillons, Le Vrac, La Fosse-Malière; to the east, Sauquet, Hommeau Floreau, La Brinebetais, La Queslingue, Croquelihou, La Fourche, Le Saut, Noire Pute, Coupie, Orbue. These are hydra-monsters of the species reef.

One of these reefs is called Le But, the goal, as if to imply that every voyage ends there.

This obstruction of rocks, simplified by night and sea, appeared to the shipwrecked men in the shape of a single dark band, a sort of black blot on the horizon.

Shipwreck is the ideal of helplessness; to be near land, and unable to reach it; to float, yet not to be able to do so in any desired direction; to rest the foot on what seems firm and is fragile; to be full of life, when o'ershadowed by death; to be the prisoner of space; to be walled in between sky and ocean; to have the infinite overhead like a dungeon; to be encompassed by the eluding elements of wind and waves; and to be seized, bound, paralyzed—such a load of misfortune stupefies and crushes us. We imagine that in it we catch a glimpse of the sneer of the opponent who is beyond our

reach. That which holds you fast is that which releases the birds and sets the fishes free. It appears nothing, and is everything. We are dependent on the air which is ruffled by our mouths; we are dependent on the water which we catch in the hollow of our hands. Draw a glassful from the storm, and it is but a cup of bitterness—a mouthful is nausea, a waveful is extermination. The grain of sand in the desert, the foam-flake on the sea, are fearful symptoms. Omnipotence takes no care to hide its atom, it changes weakness into strength, fills naught with all; and it is with the infinitely little that the infinitely great crushes you. It is with its drops the ocean dissolves you. You feel you are a plaything.

A plaything—ghastly epithet!

The Matutina was a little above Aurigny, which was not an unfavourable position; but she was drifting towards its northern point, which was fatal. As a bent bow discharges its arrow, the nor'-wester was shooting the vessel towards the northern cape. Off that point, a little beyond the harbour of Corbelets, is that which the seamen of the Norman archipelago call a "singe."

The "singe," or race, is a furious kind of current. A wreath of funnels in the shallows produces in the waves a wreath of whirlpools. You escape one to fall into another. A ship caught hold of by the race, winds round and round until some sharp rock cleaves her hull; then the shattered vessel stops, her stern rises from the waves, the stem completes the revolution in the abyss, the stern sinks in, and all is sucked down. A circle of foam broadens and floats, and nothing more is seen on the surface of the waves but a few bubbles here and there rising from the smothered breathings below.

The three most dangerous races in the whole Channel are one close to the well-known Girdler Sands, one at Jersey between the Pignonnet and the Point of Noirmont, and the race of Aurigny.

Had a local pilot been on board the Matutina, he could have warned them of their fresh peril. In place of a pilot, they had their instinct. In situations of extreme danger men are endowed with second sight. High contortions of foam were flying along the coast in the frenzied raid of the wind. It was the spitting of the race. Many a bark has been swamped in that snare. Without knowing what awaited them, they approached the spot with horror.

How to double that cape? There were no means of doing it.

Just as they had seen, first the Caskets, then Ortach, rise before them, they now saw the point of Aurigny, all of steep rock. It was like a number of giants, rising up one after another—a series of frightful duels.

Charybdis and Scylla are but two; the Caskets, Ortach, and Aurigny are three.

The phenomenon of the horizon being invaded by the rocks was thus repeated with the grand monotony of the abyss. The battles of the ocean have the same sublime tautology as the combats of Homer.

Each wave, as they neared it, added twenty cubits to the cape, awfully magnified by the mist; the fast decreasing distance seemed more inevitable—they were touching the skirts of the race! The first fold which seized them would drag them in—another wave surmounted, and all would be over.

Suddenly the hooker was driven back, as by the blow of a Titan's fist. The wave reared up under the vessel and fell back, throwing the waif back in its mane of foam. The Matutina, thus impelled, drifted away from Aurigny.

She was again on the open sea.

Whence had come the succour? From the wind. The breath of the storm had changed its direction.

The wave had played with them; now it was the wind's turn. They had saved themselves from the Caskets. Off Ortach it was the wave which had been their friend. Now it was the wind. The wind had suddenly veered from north to south. The sou'-wester had succeeded the nor'-wester.

The current is the wind in the waters; the wind is the current in the air. These two forces had just counteracted each other, and it had been the wind's will to snatch its prey from the current.

The sudden fantasies of ocean are uncertain. They are, perhaps, an embodiment of the perpetual, when at their mercy man must neither hope nor despair. They do and they undo. The ocean amuses itself. Every shade of wild, untamed ferocity is phased in the vastness of that cunning sea, which Jean Bart used to call the "great brute." To its claws and their gashings succeed soft intervals of velvet paws. Sometimes the storm hurries on a wreck, at others it works out the problem with care; it might almost be said that it caresses it. The sea can afford to take its time, as men in their agonies find out.

We must own that occasionally these lulls of the torture announce deliverance. Such cases are rare. However this may be, men in extreme peril are quick to believe in rescue; the slightest pause in the storm's threats is sufficient; they tell themselves that they are out of danger. After believing themselves buried, they declare their resurrection; they feverishly embrace what they do not yet possess; it is clear that the

bad luck has turned; they declare themselves satisfied; they are saved; they cry quits with God. They should not be in so great a hurry to give receipts to the Unknown.

The sou'-wester set in with a whirlwind. Shipwrecked men have never any but rough helpers. The Matutina was dragged rapidly out to sea by the remnant of her rigging—like a dead woman trailed by the hair. It was like the enfranchisement granted by Tiberius, at the price of violation.

The wind treated with brutality those whom it saved; it rendered service with fury; it was help without pity.

The wreck was breaking up under the severity of its deliverers.

Hailstones, big and hard enough to charge a blunderbuss, smote the vessel; at every rotation of the waves these hailstones rolled about the deck like marbles. The hooker, whose deck was almost flush with the water, was being beaten out of shape by the rolling masses of water and its sheets of spray. On board it each man was for himself.

They clung on as best they could. As each sea swept over them, it was with a sense of surprise they saw that all were still there. Several had their faces torn by splinters.

Happily despair has stout hands. In terror a child's hand has the grasp of a giant. Agony makes a vice of a woman's fingers. A girl in her fright can almost bury her rose-coloured fingers in a piece of iron. With hooked fingers they hung on somehow, as the waves dashed on and passed off them; but every wave brought them the fear of being swept away.

Suddenly they were relieved.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE PROBLEM SUDDENLY WORKS IN SILENCE.

The hurricane had just stopped short. There was no longer in the air sou'-wester or nor'-wester. The fierce clarions of space were mute. The whole of the waterspout had poured from the sky without any warning of diminution, as if it had slided perpendicularly into a gulf beneath. None knew what had become of it; flakes

replaced the hailstones, the snow began to fall slowly. No more swell: the sea flattened down.

Such sudden cessations are peculiar to snowstorms. The electric effluvium exhausted, all becomes still, even the wave, which in ordinary storms often remains agitated for a long time. In snowstorms it is not so. No prolonged anger in the deep. Like a tired-out worker it becomes drowsy directly, thus almost giving the lie to the laws of statics, but not astonishing old seamen, who know that the sea is full of unforeseen surprises.

The same phenomenon takes place, although very rarely, in ordinary storms. Thus, in our time, on the occasion of the memorable hurricane of July 27th, 1867, at Jersey the wind, after fourteen hours' fury, suddenly relapsed into a dead calm.

In a few minutes the hooker was floating in sleeping waters.

At the same time (for the last phase of these storms resembles the first) they could distinguish nothing; all that had been made visible in the convulsions of the meteoric cloud was again dark. Pale outlines were fused in vague mist, and the gloom of infinite space closed about the vessel. The wall of night—that circular occlusion, that interior of a cylinder the diameter of which was lessening minute by minute—enveloped the Matutina, and, with the sinister deliberation of an encroaching iceberg, was drawing in dangerously. In the zenith nothing—a lid of fog closing down. It was as if the hooker were at the bottom of the well of the abyss.

In that well the sea was a puddle of liquid lead. No stir in the waters—ominous immobility! The ocean is never less tamed than when it is still as a pool.

All was silence, stillness, blindness.

Perchance the silence of inanimate objects is taciturnity.

The last ripples glided along the hull. The deck was horizontal, with an insensible slope to the sides. Some broken planks were shifting about irresolutely. The block on which they had lighted the tow steeped in tar, in place of the signal light which had been swept away, swung no longer at the prow, and no longer let fall burning drops into the sea. What little breeze remained in the clouds was noiseless. The snow fell thickly, softly, with scarce a slant. No foam of breakers could be heard. The peace of shadows was over all.

This repose succeeding all the past exasperations and paroxysms was, for the poor creatures so long tossed about, an unspeakable comfort. It was as though the punishment of the rack had ceased. They caught a glimpse about them and above

them of something which seemed like a consent, that they should be saved. They regained confidence. All that had been fury was now tranquillity. It appeared to them a pledge of peace. Their wretched hearts dilated. They were able to let go the end of rope or beam to which they had clung, to rise, hold themselves up, stand, walk, move about. They felt inexpressibly calmed. There are in the depths of darkness such phases of paradise, preparations for other things. It was clear that they were delivered out of the storm, out of the foam, out of the wind, out of the uproar. Henceforth all the chances were in their favour. In three or four hours it would be sunrise. They would be seen by some passing ship; they would be rescued. The worst was over; they were re-entering life. The important feat was to have been able to keep afloat until the cessation of the tempest. They said to themselves, "It is all over this time."

Suddenly they found that all was indeed over.

One of the sailors, the northern Basque, Galdeazun by name, went down into the hold to look for a rope, then came above again and said,—

"The hold is full."

"Of what?" asked the chief.

"Of water," answered the sailor.

The chief cried out,—

"What does that mean?"

"It means," replied Galdeazun, "that in half an hour we shall founder."

CHAPTER XVII.

THE LAST RESOURCE.

There was a hole in the keel. A leak had been sprung. When it happened no one could have said. Was it when they touched the Caskets? Was it off Ortach? Was it when they were whirled about the shallows west of Aurigny? It was most probable that they had touched some rock there. They had struck against some hidden buttress which they

had not felt in the midst of the convulsive fury of the wind which was tossing them. In tetanus who would feel a prick?

The other sailor, the southern Basque, whose name was Ave Maria, went down into the hold, too, came on deck again, and said,—

"There are two varas of water in the hold."

About six feet.

Ave Maria added, "In less than forty minutes we shall sink."

Where was the leak? They couldn't find it. It was hidden by the water which was filling up the hold. The vessel had a hole in her hull somewhere under the water-line, quite forward in the keel. Impossible to find it—impossible to check it. They had a wound which they could not stanch. The water, however, was not rising very fast.

The chief called out,

"We must work the pump."

Galdeazun replied, "We have no pump left."

"Then," said the chief, "we must make for land."

"Where is the land?"

"I don't know."

"Nor I."

"But it must be somewhere."

"True enough."

"Let some one steer for it."

"We have no pilot."

"Stand to the tiller yourself."

"We have lost the tiller."

"Let's rig one out of the first beam we can lay hands on. Nails—a hammer—quick—some tools."

"The carpenter's box is overboard, we have no tools."

"We'll steer all the same, no matter where."

"The rudder is lost."

"Where is the boat? We'll get in and row."

"The boat is lost."

"We'll row the wreck."

"We have lost the oars."

"We'll sail."

"We have lost the sails and the mast."

"We'll rig one up with a pole and a tarpaulin for sail Let's get clear of this and trust in the wind."

"There is no wind."

The wind, indeed, had left them, the storm had fled; and its departure, which they had believed to mean safety, meant, in fact, destruction. Had the sou'-wester continued it might have driven them wildly on some shore—might have beaten the leak in speed—might, perhaps, have carried them to some propitious sandbank, and cast them on it before the hooker foundered. The swiftness of the storm, bearing them away, might have enabled them to reach land; but no more wind, no more hope. They were going to die because the hurricane was over.

The end was near!

Wind, hail, the hurricane, the whirlwind—these are wild combatants that may be overcome; the storm can be taken in the weak point of its armour; there are resources against the violence which continually lays itself open, is off its guard, and often hits wide. But nothing is to be done against a calm; it offers nothing to the grasp of which you can lay hold.

The winds are a charge of Cossacks: stand your ground and they disperse. Calms are the pincers of the executioner.

The water, deliberate and sure, irrepressible and heavy, rose in the hold, and as it rose the vessel sank—it was happening slowly.

Those on board the wreck of the Matutina felt that most hopeless of catastrophes—an inert catastrophe undermining them. The still and sinister certainty of their fate petrified them. No stir in the air, no movement on the sea. The motionless is the inexorable. Absorption was sucking them down silently. Through the depths of the

dumb waters—without anger, without passion, not willing, not knowing, not caring—the fatal centre of the globe was attracting them downwards. Horror in repose amalgamating them with itself. It was no longer the wide open mouth of the sea, the double jaw of the wind and the wave, vicious in its threat, the grin of the waterspout, the foaming appetite of the breakers—it was as if the wretched beings had under them the black yawn of the infinite.

They felt themselves sinking into Death's peaceful depths. The height between the vessel and the water was lessening—that was all. They could calculate her disappearance to the moment. It was the exact reverse of submersion by the rising tide. The water was not rising towards them; they were sinking towards it. They were digging their own grave. Their own weight was their sexton.

They were being executed, not by the law of man, but by the law of things.

The snow was falling, and as the wreck was now motionless, this white lint made a cloth over the deck and covered the vessel as with a winding-sheet.

The hold was becoming fuller and deeper—no means of getting at the leak. They struck a light and fixed three or four torches in holes as best they could. Galdeazun brought some old leathern buckets, and they tried to bale the hold out, standing in a row to pass them from hand to hand; but the buckets were past use, the leather of some was unstitched, there were holes in the bottoms of the others, and the buckets emptied themselves on the way. The difference in quantity between the water which was making its way in and that which they returned to the sea was ludicrous—for a ton that entered a glassful was baled out; they did not improve their condition. It was like the expenditure of a miser, trying to exhaust a million, halfpenny by halfpenny.

The chief said, "Let us lighten the wreck."

During the storm they had lashed together the few chests which were on deck. These remained tied to the stump of the mast. They undid the lashings and rolled the chests overboard through a breach in the gunwale. One of these trunks belonged to the Basque woman, who could not repress a sigh.

"Oh, my new cloak lined with scarlet! Oh, my poor stockings of birchen-bark lace! Oh, my silver ear-rings to wear at mass on May Day!"

The deck cleared, there remained the cabin to be seen to. It was greatly encumbered; in it were, as may be remembered, the luggage belonging to the passengers, and the bales belonging to the sailors. They took the luggage, and threw it over the gunwale. They carried up the bales and cast them into the sea.

Thus they emptied the cabin. The lantern, the cap, the barrels, the sacks, the bales, and the water-butts, the pot of soup, all went over into the waves.

They unscrewed the nuts of the iron stove, long since extinguished: they pulled it out, hoisted it on deck, dragged it to the side, and threw it out of the vessel.

They cast overboard everything they could pull out of the deck—chains, shrouds, and torn rigging.

From time to time the chief took a torch, and throwing its light on the figures painted on the prow to show the draught of water, looked to see how deep the wreck had settled down.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE HIGHEST RESOURCE.

The wreck being lightened, was sinking more slowly, but none the less surely.

The hopelessness of their situation was without resource—without mitigation; they had exhausted their last expedient.

"Is there anything else we can throw overboard?"

The doctor, whom every one had forgotten, rose from the companion, and said,

"Yes."

"What?" asked the chief.

The doctor answered, "Our Crime."

They shuddered, and all cried out,—

"Amen."

The doctor standing up, pale, raised his hand to heaven, saying,—

"Kneel down."

They wavered—to waver is the preface to kneeling down.

The doctor went on,—

"Let us throw our crimes into the sea, they weigh us down; it is they that are sinking the ship. Let us think no more of safety—let us think of salvation. Our last crime, above all, the crime which we committed, or rather completed, just now—O wretched beings who are listening to me—it is that which is overwhelming us. For those who leave intended murder behind them, it is an impious insolence to tempt the abyss. He who sins against a child, sins against God. True, we were obliged to put to sea, but it was certain perdition. The storm, warned by the shadow of our crime, came on. It is well. Regret nothing, however. There, not far off in the darkness, are the sands of Vauville and Cape la Hogue. It is France. There was but one possible shelter for us, which was Spain. France is no less dangerous to us than England. Our deliverance from the sea would have led but to the gibbet. Hanged or drowned—we had no alternative. God has chosen for us; let us give Him thanks. He has vouchsafed us the grave which cleanses. Brethren, the inevitable hand is in it. Remember that it was we who just now did our best to send on high that child, and that at this very moment, now as I speak, there is perhaps, above our heads, a soul accusing us before a Judge whose eye is on us. Let us make the best use of this last respite; let us make an effort, if we still may, to repair, as far as we are able, the evil that we have wrought. If the child survives us, let us come to his aid; if he is dead, let us seek his forgiveness. Let us cast our crime from us. Let us ease our consciences of its weight. Let us strive that our souls be not swallowed up before God, for that is the awful shipwreck. Bodies go to the fishes, souls to the devils. Have pity on yourselves. Kneel down, I tell you. Repentance is the bark which never sinks. You have lost your compass! You are wrong! You still have prayer."

The wolves became lambs—such transformations occur in last agonies; tigers lick the crucifix; when the dark portal opens ajar, belief is difficult, unbelief impossible. However imperfect may be the different sketches of religion essayed by man, even when his belief is shapeless, even when the outline of the dogma is not in harmony with the lineaments of the eternity he foresees, there comes in his last hour a trembling of the soul. There is something which will begin when life is over; this thought impresses the last pang.

A man's dying agony is the expiration of a term. In that fatal second he feels weighing on him a diffused responsibility. That which has been complicates that which is to be. The past returns and enters into the future. What is known becomes as much an abyss as the unknown. And the two chasms, the one which is full by his faults, the other of his anticipations, mingle their reverberations. It is this confusion of the two gulfs which terrifies the dying man.

They had spent their last grain of hope on the direction of life; hence they turned in the other. Their only remaining chance was in its dark shadow. They understood it. It came on them as a lugubrious flash, followed by the relapse of horror. That which is intelligible to the dying man is as what is perceived in the lightning. Everything, then nothing; you see, then all is blindness. After death the eye will reopen, and that which was a flash will become a sun.

They cried out to the doctor,—

"Thou, thou, there is no one but thee. We will obey thee, what must we do? Speak."

The doctor answered,—

"The question is how to pass over the unknown precipice and reach the other bank of life, which is beyond the tomb. Being the one who knows the most, my danger is greater than yours. You do well to leave the choice of the bridge to him whose burden is the heaviest."

He added,—

"Knowledge is a weight added to conscience."

He continued,—

"How much time have we still?"

Galdeazun looked at the water-mark, and answered,—

"A little more than a quarter of an hour."

"Good," said the doctor.

The low hood of the companion on which he leant his elbows made a sort of table; the doctor took from his pocket his inkhorn and pen, and his pocket-book out of which he drew a parchment, the same one on the back of which he had written, a few hours before, some twenty cramped and crooked lines.

"A light," he said.

The snow, falling like the spray of a cataract, had extinguished the torches one after another; there was but one left. Ave Maria took it out of the place where it had been stuck, and holding it in his hand, came and stood by the doctor's side.

The doctor replaced his pocket-book in his pocket, put down the pen and inkhorn on the hood of the companion, unfolded the parchment, and said,—

"Listen."

Then in the midst of the sea, on the failing bridge (a sort of shuddering flooring of the tomb), the doctor began a solemn reading, to which all the shadows seemed to listen. The doomed men bowed their heads around him. The flaming of the torch intensified their pallor. What the doctor read was written in English. Now and then, when one of those woebegone looks seemed to ask an explanation, the doctor would stop, to repeat—whether in French, or Spanish, Basque, or Italian—the passage he had just read. Stifled sobs and hollow beatings of the breast were heard. The wreck was sinking more and more.

The reading over, the doctor placed the parchment flat on the companion, seized his pen, and on a clear margin which he had carefully left at the bottom of what he had written, he signed himself, GERNARDUS GEESTEMUNDE: Doctor.

Then, turning towards the others, he said,—

"Come, and sign."

The Basque woman approached, took the pen, and signed herself, ASUNCION.

She handed the pen to the Irish woman, who, not knowing how to write, made a cross.

The doctor, by the side of this cross, wrote, BARBARA FERMOY, of Tyrrif Island, in the Hebrides.

Then he handed the pen to the chief of the band.

The chief signed, GAIZDORRA: Captal.

The Genoese signed himself under the chief's name. GIANGIRATE.

The Languedocian signed, JACQUES QUARTOURZE: alias, the Narbonnais.

The Provençal signed, LUC-PIERRE CAPGAROUPE, of the Galleys of Mahon.

Under these signatures the doctor added a note:—

"Of the crew of three men, the skipper having been washed overboard by a sea, but two remain, and they have signed."

The two sailors affixed their names underneath the note. The northern Basque signed himself, GALDEAZUN.

The southern Basque signed, AVE MARIA: Robber.

Then the doctor said,—

"Capgaroupe."

"Here," said the Provençal.

"Have you Hardquanonne's flask?"

"Yes."

"Give it me."

Capgaroupe drank off the last mouthful of brandy, and handed the flask to the doctor.

The water was rising in the hold; the wreck was sinking deeper and deeper into the sea. The sloping edges of the ship were covered by a thin gnawing wave, which was rising. All were crowded on the centre of the deck.

The doctor dried the ink on the signatures by the heat of the torch, and folding the parchment into a narrower compass than the diameter of the neck, put it into the flask. He called for the cork.

"I don't know where it is," said Capgaroupe.

"Here is a piece of rope," said Jacques Quartourze.

The doctor corked the flask with a bit of rope, and asked for some tar. Galdeazun went forward, extinguished the signal light with a piece of tow, took the vessel in which it was contained from the stern, and brought it, half full of burning tar, to the doctor.

The flask holding the parchment which they had all signed was corked and tarred over.

"It is done," said the doctor.

And from out all their mouths, vaguely stammered in every language, came the dismal utterances of the catacombs.

"Ainsi soit-il!"

"Mea culpa!"

"Asi sea!"

"Aro raï!"

"Amen!"

It was as though the sombre voices of Babel were scattered through the shadows as Heaven uttered its awful refusal to hear them.

The doctor turned away from his companions in crime and distress, and took a few steps towards the gunwale. Reaching the side, he looked into space, and said, in a deep voice,—

"Bist du bei mir?"[8]

Perchance he was addressing some phantom.

The wreck was sinking.

Behind the doctor all the others were in a dream. Prayer mastered them by main force. They did not bow, they were bent. There was something involuntary in their condition; they wavered as a sail flaps when the breeze fails. And the haggard group took by degrees, with clasping of hands and prostration of foreheads, attitudes various, yet of humiliation. Some strange reflection of the deep seemed to soften their villainous features.

The doctor returned towards them. Whatever had been his past, the old man was great in the presence of the catastrophe.

The deep reserve of nature which enveloped him preoccupied without disconcerting him. He was not one to be taken unawares. Over him was the calm of a silent horror: on his countenance the majesty of God's will comprehended.

This old and thoughtful outlaw unconsciously assumed the air of a pontiff.

He said,—

"Attend to me."

He contemplated for a moment the waste of water, and added,—

"Now we are going to die."

Then he took the torch from the hands of Ave Maria, and waved it.

A spark broke from it and flew into the night.

Then the doctor cast the torch into the sea.

The torch was extinguished: all light disappeared. Nothing left but the huge, unfathomable shadow. It was like the filling up of the grave.

In the darkness the doctor was heard saying,—

"Let us pray."

All knelt down.

It was no longer on the snow, but in the water, that they knelt.

They had but a few minutes more.

The doctor alone remained standing.

The flakes of snow falling on him had sprinkled him with white tears, and made him visible on the background of darkness. He might have been the speaking statue of the shadow.

The doctor made the sign of the cross and raised his voice, while beneath his feet he felt that almost imperceptible oscillation which prefaces the moment in which a wreck is about to founder. He said,—

"Pater noster qui es in coelis."

The Provençal repeated in French,—

"Notre Père qui êtes aux cieux."

The Irishwoman repeated in Gaelic, understood by the Basque woman,—

"Ar nathair ata ar neamh."

The doctor continued,—

"Sanctificetur nomen tuum."

"Que votre nom soit sanctifié," said the Provençal.

"Naomhthar hainm," said the Irishwoman.

"Adveniat regnum tuum," continued the doctor.

"Que votre règne arrive," said the Provençal.

"Tigeadh do rioghachd," said the Irishwoman.

As they knelt, the waters had risen to their shoulders. The doctor went on,—

"Fiat voluntas tua."

"Que votre volonté soit faite," stammered the Provençal.

And the Irishwoman and Basque woman cried,—

"Deuntar do thoil ar an Hhalàmb."

"Sicut in coelo, sicut in terra," said the doctor.

No voice answered him.

He looked down. All their heads were under water. They had let themselves be drowned on their knees.

The doctor took in his right hand the flask which he had placed on the companion, and raised it above his head.

The wreck was going down. As he sank, the doctor murmured the rest of the prayer.

For an instant his shoulders were above water, then his head, then nothing remained but his arm holding up the flask, as if he were showing it to the Infinite.

His arm disappeared; there was no greater fold on the deep sea than there would have been on a tun of oil. The snow continued falling.

One thing floated, and was carried by the waves into the darkness. It was the tarred flask, kept afloat by its osier cover.

BOOK THE THIRD.

THE CHILD IN THE SHADOW.

CHAPTER I.

CHESIL.

The storm was no less severe on land than on sea. The same wild enfranchisement of the elements had taken place around the abandoned child. The weak and innocent become their sport in the expenditure of the unreasoning rage of their blind forces. Shadows discern not, and things inanimate have not the clemency they are supposed to possess.

On the land there was but little wind. There was an inexplicable dumbness in the cold. There was no hail. The thickness of the falling snow was fearful.

Hailstones strike, harass, bruise, stun, crush. Snowflakes do worse: soft and inexorable, the snowflake does its work in silence; touch it, and it melts. It is pure, even as the hypocrite is candid. It is by white particles slowly heaped upon each other that the flake becomes an avalanche and the knave a criminal.

The child continued to advance into the mist. The fog presents but a soft obstacle; hence its danger. It yields, and yet persists. Mist, like snow, is full of treachery. The child, strange wrestler at war with all these risks, had succeeded in reaching the bottom of the descent, and had gained Chesil. Without knowing it he was on an isthmus, with the ocean on each side; so that he could not lose his way in the fog, in the snow, or in the darkness, without falling into the deep waters of the gulf on the right hand, or into the raging billows of the high sea on the left. He was travelling on, in ignorance, between these two abysses.

The Isthmus of Portland was at this period singularly sharp and rugged. Nothing remains at this date of its past configuration. Since the idea of manufacturing Portland stone into Roman cement was first seized, the whole rock has been subjected to an alteration which has completely changed its original appearance. Calcareous lias, slate, and trap are still to be found there, rising from layers of conglomerate, like teeth from a gum; but the pickaxe has broken up and levelled those bristling, rugged peaks which were once the fearful perches of the ossifrage. The summits exist no longer where the labbes and the skua gulls used to flock together, soaring, like the envious, to sully high places. In vain might you seek the tall monolith called Godolphin, an old British word, signifying "white eagle." In summer you may still gather on those surfaces, pierced and perforated like a sponge, rosemary, pennyroyal, wild hyssop, and sea-fennel which when infused makes a good cordial, and that herb full of knots, which grows in the sand and from which they make matting; but you no longer find gray amber, or black tin, or that triple species of slate—one sort green, one blue, and the third the colour of sage-leaves. The foxes, the badgers, the otters, and the martens have taken themselves off; on the cliffs of Portland, as well as at the extremity of Cornwall, where there were at one time chamois, none remain. They still fish in some inlets for plaice and pilchards; but the scared salmon no longer ascend the Wey, between Michaelmas and Christmas, to spawn. No more are seen there, as during the reign of Elizabeth, those old unknown birds as large as hawks, who could cut an apple in two, but ate only the pips. You never meet those crows with yellow beaks, called Cornish choughs in English, pyrrocorax in Latin, who, in their mischief, would drop burning twigs on thatched roofs. Nor that magic bird, the fulmar, a wanderer from the

Scottish archipelago, dropping from his bill an oil which the islanders used to burn in their lamps. Nor do you ever find in the evening, in the plash of the ebbing tide, that ancient, legendary neitse, with the feet of a hog and the bleat of a calf. The tide no longer throws up the whiskered seal, with its curled ears and sharp jaws, dragging itself along on its nailless paws. On that Portland—nowadays so changed as scarcely to be recognized—the absence of forests precluded nightingales; but now the falcon, the swan, and the wild goose have fled. The sheep of Portland, nowadays, are fat and have fine wool; the few scattered ewes, which nibbled the salt grass there two centuries ago, were small and tough and coarse in the fleece, as became Celtic flocks brought there by garlic-eating shepherds, who lived to a hundred, and who, at the distance of half a mile, could pierce a cuirass with their yard-long arrows. Uncultivated land makes coarse wool. The Chesil of to-day resembles in no particular the Chesil of the past, so much has it been disturbed by man and by those furious winds which gnaw the very stones.

At present this tongue of land bears a railway, terminating in a pretty square of houses, called Chesilton, and there is a Portland station. Railway carriages roll where seals used to crawl.

The Isthmus of Portland two hundred years ago was a back of sand, with a vertebral spine of rock.

The child's danger changed its form. What he had had to fear in the descent was falling to the bottom of the precipice; in the isthmus, it was falling into the holes. After dealing with the precipice, he must deal with the pitfalls. Everything on the sea-shore is a trap—the rock is slippery, the strand is quicksand. Resting-places are but snares. It is walking on ice which may suddenly crack and yawn with a fissure, through which you disappear. The ocean has false stages below, like a well-arranged theatre.

The long backbone of granite, from which fall away both slopes of the isthmus, is awkward of access. It is difficult to find there what, in scene-shifters' language, are termed practicables. Man has no hospitality to hope for from the ocean; from the rock no more than from the wave. The sea is provident for the bird and the fish alone. Isthmuses are especially naked and rugged; the wave, which wears and mines them on either side, reduces them to the simplest form. Everywhere there were sharp relief ridges, cuttings, frightful fragments of torn stone, yawning with many points, like the jaws of a shark; breaknecks of wet moss, rapid slopes of rock ending in the sea. Whosoever undertakes to pass over an isthmus meets at every step misshapen blocks, as large as houses, in the forms of shin-bones, shoulder-blades, and thigh-

bones, the hideous anatomy of dismembered rocks. It is not without reason that these striæ of the sea-shore are called côtes.[9]

The wayfarer must get out as he best can from the confusion of these ruins. It is like journeying over the bones of an enormous skeleton.

Put a child to this labour of Hercules.

Broad daylight might have aided him. It was night. A guide was necessary. He was alone. All the vigour of manhood would not have been too much. He had but the feeble strength of a child. In default of a guide, a footpath might have aided him; there was none.

By instinct he avoided the sharp ridge of the rocks, and kept to the strand as much as possible. It was there that he met with the pitfalls. They were multiplied before him under three forms: the pitfall of water, the pitfall of snow, and the pitfall of sand. This last is the most dangerous of all, because the most illusory. To know the peril we face is alarming; to be ignorant of it is terrible. The child was fighting against unknown dangers. He was groping his way through something which might, perhaps, be the grave.

He did not hesitate. He went round the rocks, avoided the crevices, guessed at the pitfalls, obeyed the twistings and turnings caused by such obstacles, yet he went on. Though unable to advance in a straight line, he walked with a firm step. When necessary, he drew back with energy. He knew how to tear himself in time from the horrid bird-lime of the quicksands. He shook the snow from about him. He entered the water more than once up to the knees. Directly that he left it, his wet knees were frozen by the intense cold of the night. He walked rapidly in his stiffened garments; yet he took care to keep his sailor's coat dry and warm on his chest. He was still tormented by hunger.

The chances of the abyss are illimitable. Everything is possible in it, even salvation. The issue may be found, though it be invisible. How the child, wrapped in a smothering winding-sheet of snow, lost on a narrow elevation between two jaws of an abyss, managed to cross the isthmus is what he could not himself have explained. He had slipped, climbed, rolled, searched, walked, persevered, that is all. Such is the secret of all triumphs. At the end of somewhat less than half an hour he felt that the ground was rising. He had reached the other shore. Leaving Chesil, he had gained terra firma.

The bridge which now unites Sandford Castle with Smallmouth Sands did not then exist. It is probable that in his intelligent groping he had reascended as far as Wyke Regis, where there was then a tongue of sand, a natural road crossing East Fleet.

He was saved from the isthmus; but he found himself again face to face with the tempest, with the cold, with the night.

Before him once more lay the plain, shapeless in the density of impenetrable shadow. He examined the ground, seeking a footpath. Suddenly he bent down. He had discovered, in the snow, something which seemed to him a track.

It was indeed a track—the print of a foot. The print was cut out clearly in the whiteness of the snow, which rendered it distinctly visible. He examined it. It was a naked foot; too small for that of a man, too large for that of a child.

It was probably the foot of a woman. Beyond that mark was another, then another, then another. The footprints followed each other at the distance of a step, and struck across the plain to the right. They were still fresh, and slightly covered with little snow. A woman had just passed that way.

This woman was walking in the direction in which the child had seen the smoke. With his eyes fixed on the footprints, he set himself to follow them.

CHAPTER II.

THE EFFECT OF SNOW.

He journeyed some time along this course. Unfortunately the footprints were becoming less and less distinct. Dense and fearful was the falling of the snow. It was the time when the hooker was so distressed by the snow-storm at sea.

The child, in distress like the vessel, but after another fashion, had, in the inextricable intersection of shadows which rose up before him, no resource but the footsteps in the snow, and he held to it as the thread of a labyrinth.

Suddenly, whether the snow had filled them up or for some other reason, the footsteps ceased. All became even, level, smooth, without a stain, without a detail.

There was now nothing but a white cloth drawn over the earth and a black one over the sky. It seemed as if the foot-passenger had flown away. The child, in despair, bent down and searched; but in vain.

As he arose he had a sensation of hearing some indistinct sound, but he could not be sure of it. It resembled a voice, a breath, a shadow. It was more human than animal; more sepulchral than living. It was a sound, but the sound of a dream.

He looked, but saw nothing.

Solitude, wide, naked and livid, was before him. He listened. That which he had thought he heard had faded away. Perhaps it had been but fancy. He still listened. All was silent.

There was illusion in the mist.

He went on his way again. He walked forward at random, with nothing henceforth to guide him.

As he moved away the noise began again. This time he could doubt it no longer. It was a groan, almost a sob.

He turned. He searched the darkness of space with his eyes. He saw nothing. The sound arose once more. If limbo could cry out, it would cry in such a tone.

Nothing so penetrating, so piercing, so feeble as the voice—for it was a voice. It arose from a soul. There was palpitation in the murmur. Nevertheless, it seemed uttered almost unconsciously. It was an appeal of suffering, not knowing that it suffered or that it appealed.

The cry—perhaps a first breath, perhaps a last sigh—was equally distant from the rattle which closes life and the wail with which it commences. It breathed, it was stifled, it wept, a gloomy supplication from the depths of night. The child fixed his attention everywhere, far, near, on high, below. There was no one. There was nothing. He listened. The voice arose again. He perceived it distinctly. The sound somewhat resembled the bleating of a lamb.

Then he was frightened, and thought of flight.

The groan again. This was the fourth time. It was strangely miserable and plaintive. One felt that after that last effort, more mechanical than voluntary, the cry would probably be extinguished. It was an expiring exclamation, instinctively appealing to the amount of aid held in suspense in space. It was some muttering of agony, addressed to a possible Providence.

The child approached in the direction from whence the sound came.

Still he saw nothing.

He advanced again, watchfully.

The complaint continued. Inarticulate and confused as it was, it had become clear—almost vibrating. The child was near the voice; but where was it?

He was close to a complaint. The trembling of a cry passed by his side into space. A human moan floated away into the darkness. This was what he had met. Such at least was his impression, dim as the dense mist in which he was lost.

Whilst he hesitated between an instinct which urged him to fly and an instinct which commanded him to remain, he perceived in the snow at his feet, a few steps before him, a sort of undulation of the dimensions of a human body—a little eminence, low, long, and narrow, like the mould over a grave—a sepulchre in a white churchyard.

At the same time the voice cried out. It was from beneath the undulation that it proceeded. The child bent down, crouching before the undulation, and with both his hands began to clear it away.

Beneath the snow which he removed a form grew under his hands; and suddenly in the hollow he had made there appeared a pale face.

The cry had not proceeded from that face. Its eyes were shut, and the mouth open but full of snow.

It remained motionless; it stirred not under the hands of the child. The child, whose fingers were numbed with frost, shuddered when he touched its coldness. It was that of a woman. Her dishevelled hair was mingled with the snow. The woman was dead.

Again the child set himself to sweep away the snow. The neck of the dead woman appeared; then her shoulders, clothed in rags. Suddenly he felt something move feebly under his touch. It was something small that was buried, and which stirred. The child swiftly cleared away the snow, discovering a wretched little body—thin, wan with cold, still alive, lying naked on the dead woman's naked breast.

It was a little girl.

It had been swaddled up, but in rags so scanty that in its struggles it had freed itself from its tatters. Under it its attenuated limbs, and above it its breath, had somewhat melted the snow. A nurse would have said that it was five or six months old, but perhaps it might be a year, for growth, in poverty, suffers heart-breaking reductions

which sometimes even produce rachitis. When its face was exposed to the air it gave a cry, the continuation of its sobs of distress. For the mother not to have heard that sob, proved her irrevocably dead.

The child took the infant in his arms. The stiffened body of the mother was a fearful sight; a spectral light proceeded from her face. The mouth, apart and without breath, seemed to form in the indistinct language of shadows her answer to the questions put to the dead by the invisible. The ghastly reflection of the icy plains was on that countenance. There was the youthful forehead under the brown hair, the almost indignant knitting of the eyebrows, the pinched nostrils, the closed eyelids, the lashes glued together by the rime, and from the corners of the eyes to the corners of the mouth a deep channel of tears. The snow lighted up the corpse. Winter and the tomb are not adverse. The corpse is the icicle of man. The nakedness of her breasts was pathetic. They had fulfilled their purpose. On them was a sublime blight of the life infused into one being by another from whom life has fled, and maternal majesty was there instead of virginal purity. At the point of one of the nipples was a white pearl. It was a drop of milk frozen.

Let us explain at once. On the plains over which the deserted boy was passing in his turn a beggar woman, nursing her infant and searching for a refuge, had lost her way a few hours before. Benumbed with cold she had sunk under the tempest, and could not rise again. The falling snow had covered her. So long as she was able she had clasped her little girl to her bosom, and thus died.

The infant had tried to suck the marble breast. Blind trust, inspired by nature, for it seems that it is possible for a woman to suckle her child even after her last sigh.

But the lips of the infant had been unable to find the breast, where the drop of milk, stolen by death, had frozen, whilst under the snow the child, more accustomed to the cradle than the tomb, had wailed.

The deserted child had heard the cry of the dying child.

He disinterred it.

He took it in his arms.

When she felt herself in his arms she ceased crying. The faces of the two children touched each other, and the purple lips of the infant sought the cheek of the boy, as it had been a breast. The little girl had nearly reached the moment when the congealed blood stops the action of the heart. Her mother had touched her with the chill of her own death—a corpse communicates death; its numbness is infectious. Her feet,

hands, arms, knees, seemed paralyzed by cold. The boy felt the terrible chill. He had on him a garment dry and warm—his pilot jacket. He placed the infant on the breast of the corpse, took off his jacket, wrapped the infant in it, took it up again in his arms, and now, almost naked, under the blast of the north wind which covered him with eddies of snow-flakes, carrying the infant, he pursued his journey.

The little one having succeeded in finding the boy's cheek, again applied her lips to it, and, soothed by the warmth, she slept. First kiss of those two souls in the darkness.

The mother lay there, her back to the snow, her face to the night; but perhaps at the moment when the little boy stripped himself to clothe the little girl, the mother saw him from the depths of infinity.

CHAPTER III.

A BURDEN MAKES A ROUGH ROAD ROUGHER.

It was little more than four hours since the hooker had sailed from the creek of Portland, leaving the boy on the shore. During the long hours since he had been deserted, and had been journeying onwards, he had met but three persons of that human society into which he was, perchance, about to enter—a man, the man on the hill; a woman, the woman in the snow; and the little girl whom he was carrying in his arms.

He was exhausted by fatigue and hunger, yet advanced more resolutely than ever, with less strength and an added burden. He was now almost naked. The few rags which remained to him, hardened by the frost, were sharp as glass, and cut his skin. He became colder, but the infant was warmer. That which he lost was not thrown away, but was gained by her. He found out that the poor infant enjoyed the comfort which was to her the renewal of life. He continued to advance.

From time to time, still holding her securely, he bent down, and taking a handful of snow he rubbed his feet with it, to prevent their being frost-bitten. At other times, his throat feeling as if it were on fire, he put a little snow in his mouth and sucked it; this for a moment assuaged his thirst, but changed it into fever—a relief which was an aggravation.

The storm had become shapeless from its violence. Deluges of snow are possible. This was one. The paroxysm scourged the shore at the same time that it uptore the depths of ocean. This was, perhaps, the moment when the distracted hooker was going to pieces in the battle of the breakers.

He travelled under this north wind, still towards the east, over wide surfaces of snow. He knew not how the hours had passed. For a long time he had ceased to see the smoke. Such indications are soon effaced in the night; besides, it was past the hour when fires are put out. Or he had, perhaps, made a mistake, and it was possible that neither town nor village existed in the direction in which he was travelling. Doubting, he yet persevered.

Two or three times the little infant cried. Then he adopted in his gait a rocking movement, and the child was soothed and silenced. She ended by falling into a sound sleep. Shivering himself, he felt her warm. He frequently tightened the folds of the jacket round the babe's neck, so that the frost should not get in through any opening, and that no melted snow should drop between the garment and the child.

The plain was unequal. In the declivities into which it sloped the snow, driven by the wind into the dips of the ground, was so deep, in comparison with a child so small, that it almost engulfed him, and he had to struggle through it half buried. He walked on, working away the snow with his knees.

Having cleared the ravine, he reached the high lands swept by the winds, where the snow lay thin. Then he found the surface a sheet of ice. The little girl's lukewarm breath, playing on his face, warmed it for a moment, then lingered, and froze in his hair, stiffening it into icicles.

He felt the approach of another danger. He could not afford to fall. He knew that if he did so he should never rise again. He was overcome by fatigue, and the weight of the darkness would, as with the dead woman, have held him to the ground, and the ice glued him alive to the earth.

He had tripped upon the slopes of precipices, and had recovered himself; he had stumbled into holes, and had got out again. Thenceforward the slightest fall would be death; a false step opened for him a tomb. He must not slip. He had not strength to rise even to his knees. Now everything was slippery; everywhere there was rime and frozen snow. The little creature whom he carried made his progress fearfully difficult. She was not only a burden, which his weariness and exhaustion made excessive, but was also an embarrassment. She occupied both his arms, and to him who walks over ice both arms are a natural and necessary balancing power.

He was obliged to do without this balance.

He did without it and advanced, bending under his burden, not knowing what would become of him.

This little infant was the drop causing the cup of distress to overflow.

He advanced, reeling at every step, as if on a spring board, and accomplishing, without spectators, miracles of equilibrium. Let us repeat that he was, perhaps, followed on this path of pain by eyes unsleeping in the distances of the shadows—the eyes of the mother and the eyes of God. He staggered, slipped, recovered himself, took care of the infant, and, gathering the jacket about her, he covered up her head; staggered again, advanced, slipped, then drew himself up. The cowardly wind drove against him. Apparently, he made much more way than was necessary. He was, to all appearance, on the plains where Bincleaves Farm was afterwards established, between what are now called Spring Gardens and the Parsonage House. Homesteads and cottages occupy the place of waste lands. Sometimes less than a century separates a steppe from a city.

Suddenly, a lull having occurred in the icy blast which was blinding him, he perceived, at a short distance in front of him, a cluster of gables and of chimneys shown in relief by the snow. The reverse of a silhouette—a city painted in white on a black horizon, something like what we call nowadays a negative proof. Roofs—dwellings—shelter! He had arrived somewhere at last. He felt the ineffable encouragement of hope. The watch of a ship which has wandered from her course feels some such emotion when he cries, "Land ho!"

He hurried his steps.

At length, then, he was near mankind. He would soon be amidst living creatures. There was no longer anything to fear. There glowed within him that sudden warmth—security; that out of which he was emerging was over; thenceforward there would no longer be night, nor winter, nor tempest. It seemed to him that he had left all evil chances behind him. The infant was no longer a burden. He almost ran.

His eyes were fixed on the roofs. There was life there. He never took his eyes off them. A dead man might gaze thus on what might appear through the half-opened lid of his sepulchre. There were the chimneys of which he had seen the smoke.

No smoke arose from them now. He was not long before he reached the houses. He came to the outskirts of a town—an open street. At that period bars to streets were falling into disuse.

The street began by two houses. In those two houses neither candle nor lamp was to be seen; nor in the whole street; nor in the whole town, so far as eye could reach. The house to the right was a roof rather than a house; nothing could be more mean. The walls were of mud, the roof was of straw, and there was more thatch than wall. A large nettle, springing from the bottom of the wall, reached the roof. The hovel had but one door, which was like that of a dog-kennel; and a window, which was but a hole. All was shut up. At the side an inhabited pig-sty told that the house was also inhabited.

The house on the left was large, high, built entirely of stone, with a slated roof. It was also closed. It was the rich man's home, opposite to that of the pauper.

The boy did not hesitate. He approached the great mansion. The double folding-door of massive oak, studded with large nails, was of the kind that leads one to expect that behind it there is a stout armoury of bolts and locks. An iron knocker was attached to it. He raised the knocker with some difficulty, for his benumbed hands were stumps rather than hands. He knocked once.

No answer.

He struck again, and two knocks.

No movement was heard in the house.

He knocked a third time.

There was no sound. He saw that they were all asleep, and did not care to get up.

Then he turned to the hovel. He picked up a pebble from the snow, and knocked against the low door.

There was no answer.

He raised himself on tiptoe, and knocked with his pebble against the pane too softly to break the glass, but loud enough to be heard.

No voice was heard; no step moved; no candle was lighted.

He saw that there, as well, they did not care to awake.

The house of stone and the thatched hovel were equally deaf to the wretched.

The boy decided on pushing on further, and penetrating the strait of houses which stretched away in front of him, so dark that it seemed more like a gulf between two cliffs than the entrance to a town.

CHAPTER IV.

ANOTHER FORM OF DESERT.

It was Weymouth which he had just entered. Weymouth then was not the respectable and fine Weymouth of to-day.

Ancient Weymouth did not present, like the present one, an irreproachable rectangular quay, with an inn and a statue in honour of George III. This resulted from the fact that George III. had not yet been born. For the same reason they had not yet designed on the slope of the green hill towards the east, fashioned flat on the soil by cutting away the turf and leaving the bare chalk to the view, the white horse, an acre long, bearing the king upon his back, and always turning, in honour of George III., his tail to the city. These honours, however, were deserved. George III., having lost in his old age the intellect he had never possessed in his youth, was not responsible for the calamities of his reign. He was an innocent. Why not erect statues to him?

Weymouth, a hundred and eighty years ago, was about as symmetrical as a game of spillikins in confusion. In legends it is said that Astaroth travelled over the world, carrying on her back a wallet which contained everything, even good women in their houses. A pell-mell of sheds thrown from her devil's bag would give an idea of that irregular Weymouth—the good women in the sheds included. The Music Hall remains as a specimen of those buildings. A confusion of wooden dens, carved and eaten by worms (which carve in another fashion)—shapeless, overhanging buildings, some with pillars, leaning one against the other for support against the sea wind, and leaving between them awkward spaces of narrow and winding channels, lanes, and passages, often flooded by the equinoctial tides; a heap of old grandmother houses, crowded round a grandfather church—such was Weymouth; a sort of old Norman village thrown up on the coast of England.

The traveller who entered the tavern, now replaced by the hotel, instead of paying royally his twenty-five francs for a fried sole and a bottle of wine, had to suffer the humiliation of eating a pennyworth of soup made of fish—which soup, by-the-bye, was very good. Wretched fare!

The deserted child, carrying the foundling, passed through the first street, then the second, then the third. He raised his eyes, seeking in the higher stories and in the

roofs a lighted window-pane; but all were closed and dark. At intervals he knocked at the doors. No one answered. Nothing makes the heart so like a stone as being warm between sheets. The noise and the shaking had at length awakened the infant. He knew this because he felt her suck his cheek. She did not cry, believing him her mother.

He was about to turn and wander long, perhaps, in the intersections of the Scrambridge lanes, where there were then more cultivated plots than dwellings, more thorn hedges than houses; but fortunately he struck into a passage which exists to this day near Trinity schools. This passage led him to a water-brink, where there was a roughly built quay with a parapet, and to the right he made out a bridge. It was the bridge over the Wey, connecting Weymouth with Melcombe Regis, and under the arches of which the Backwater joins the harbour.

Weymouth, a hamlet, was then the suburb of Melcombe Regis, a city and port. Now Melcombe Regis is a parish of Weymouth. The village has absorbed the city. It was the bridge which did the work. Bridges are strange vehicles of suction, which inhale the population, and sometimes swell one river-bank at the expense of its opposite neighbour.

The boy went to the bridge, which at that period was a covered timber structure. He crossed it. Thanks to its roofing, there was no snow on the planks. His bare feet had a moment's comfort as they crossed them. Having passed over the bridge, he was in Melcombe Regis. There were fewer wooden houses than stone ones there. He was no longer in the village; he was in the city.

The bridge opened on a rather fine street called St. Thomas's Street. He entered it. Here and there were high carved gables and shop-fronts. He set to knocking at the doors again: he had no strength left to call or shout.

At Melcombe Regis, as at Weymouth, no one was stirring. The doors were all carefully double-locked, The windows were covered by their shutters, as the eyes by their lids. Every precaution had been taken to avoid being roused by disagreeable surprises. The little wanderer was suffering the indefinable depression made by a sleeping town. Its silence, as of a paralyzed ants' nest, makes the head swim. All its lethargies mingle their nightmares, its slumbers are a crowd, and from its human bodies lying prone there arises a vapour of dreams. Sleep has gloomy associates beyond this life: the decomposed thoughts of the sleepers float above them in a mist which is both of death and of life, and combine with the possible, which has also, perhaps, the power of thought, as it floats in space. Hence arise entanglements. Dreams, those clouds, interpose their folds and their transparencies over that star, the mind. Above those

closed eyelids, where vision has taken the place of sight, a sepulchral disintegration of outlines and appearances dilates itself into impalpability. Mysterious, diffused existences amalgamate themselves with life on that border of death, which sleep is. Those larvæ and souls mingle in the air. Even he who sleeps not feels a medium press upon him full of sinister life. The surrounding chimera, in which he suspects a reality, impedes him. The waking man, wending his way amidst the sleep phantoms of others, unconsciously pushes back passing shadows, has, or imagines that he has, a vague fear of adverse contact with the invisible, and feels at every moment the obscure pressure of a hostile encounter which immediately dissolves. There is something of the effect of a forest in the nocturnal diffusion of dreams.

This is what is called being afraid without reason.

What a man feels a child feels still more.

The uneasiness of nocturnal fear, increased by the spectral houses, increased the weight of the sad burden under which he was struggling.

He entered Conycar Lane, and perceived at the end of that passage the Backwater, which he took for the ocean. He no longer knew in what direction the sea lay. He retraced his steps, struck to the left by Maiden Street, and returned as far as St. Alban's Row.

There, by chance and without selection, he knocked violently at any house that he happened to pass. His blows, on which he was expending his last energies, were jerky and without aim; now ceasing altogether for a time, now renewed as if in irritation. It was the violence of his fever striking against the doors.

One voice answered.

That of Time.

Three o'clock tolled slowly behind him from the old belfry of St. Nicholas.

Then all sank into silence again.

That no inhabitant should have opened a lattice may appear surprising. Nevertheless that silence is in a great measure to be explained. We must remember that in January 1790 they were just over a somewhat severe outbreak of the plague in London, and that the fear of receiving sick vagabonds caused a diminution of hospitality everywhere. People would not even open their windows for fear of inhaling the poison.

The child felt the coldness of men more terribly than the coldness of night. The coldness of men is intentional. He felt a tightening on his sinking heart which he had

not known on the open plains. Now he had entered into the midst of life, and remained alone. This was the summit of misery. The pitiless desert he had understood; the unrelenting town was too much to bear.

The hour, the strokes of which he had just counted, had been another blow. Nothing is so freezing in certain situations as the voice of the hour. It is a declaration of indifference. It is Eternity saying, "What does it matter to me?"

He stopped, and it is not certain that, in that miserable minute, he did not ask himself whether it would not be easier to lie down there and die. However, the little infant leaned her head against his shoulder, and fell asleep again.

This blind confidence set him onwards again. He whom all supports were failing felt that he was himself a basis of support. Irresistible summons of duty!

Neither such ideas nor such a situation belonged to his age. It is probable that he did not understand them. It was a matter of instinct. He did what he chanced to do.

He set out again in the direction of Johnstone Row. But now he no longer walked; he dragged himself along. He left St. Mary's Street to the left, made zigzags through lanes, and at the end of a winding passage found himself in a rather wide open space. It was a piece of waste land not built upon—probably the spot where Chesterfield Place now stands. The houses ended there. He perceived the sea to the right, and scarcely anything more of the town to his left.

What was to become of him? Here was the country again. To the east great inclined planes of snow marked out the wide slopes of Radipole. Should he continue this journey? Should he advance and re-enter the solitudes? Should he return and re-enter the streets? What was he to do between those two silences—the mute plain and the deaf city? Which of the two refusals should he choose?

There is the anchor of mercy. There is also the look of piteousness. It was that look which the poor little despairing wanderer threw around him.

All at once he heard a menace.

CHAPTER V.

MISANTHROPY PLAYS ITS PRANKS.

A strange and alarming grinding of teeth reached him through the darkness.

It was enough to drive one back: he advanced. To those to whom silence has become dreadful a howl is comforting.

That fierce growl reassured him; that threat was a promise. There was there a being alive and awake, though it might be a wild beast. He advanced in the direction whence came the snarl.

He turned the corner of a wall, and, behind in the vast sepulchral light made by the reflection of snow and sea, he saw a thing placed as if for shelter. It was a cart, unless it was a hovel. It had wheels—it was a carriage. It had a roof—it was a dwelling. From the roof arose a funnel, and out of the funnel smoke. This smoke was red, and seemed to imply a good fire in the interior. Behind, projecting hinges indicated a door, and in the centre of this door a square opening showed a light inside the caravan. He approached.

Whatever had growled perceived his approach, and became furious. It was no longer a growl which he had to meet; it was a roar. He heard a sharp sound, as of a chain violently pulled to its full length, and suddenly, under the door, between the hind wheels, two rows of sharp white teeth appeared. At the same time as the mouth between the wheels a head was put through the window.

"Peace there!" said the head.

The mouth was silent.

The head began again,—

"Is any one there?"

The child answered,—

"Yes."

"Who?"

"I."

"You? Who are you? whence do you come?"

"I am weary," said the child.

"What o'clock is it?"

"I am cold."

"What are you doing there?"

"I am hungry."

The head replied,—

"Every one cannot be as happy as a lord. Go away."

The head was withdrawn and the window closed.

The child bowed his forehead, drew the sleeping infant closer in his arms, and collected his strength to resume his journey. He had taken a few steps, and was hurrying away.

However, at the same time that the window closed the door had opened; a step had been let down; the voice which had spoken to the child cried out angrily from the inside of the van,—

"Well! why do you not enter?"

The child turned back.

"Come in," resumed the voice. "Who has sent me a fellow like this, who is hungry and cold, and who does not come in?"

The child, at once repulsed and invited, remained motionless.

The voice continued,—

"You are told to come in, you young rascal."

He made up his mind, and placed one foot on the lowest step.

There was a great growl under the van. He drew back. The gaping jaws appeared.

"Peace!" cried the voice of the man.

The jaws retreated, the growling ceased.

"Come up!" continued the man.

The child with difficulty climbed up the three steps. He was impeded by the infant, so benumbed, rolled up and enveloped in the jacket that nothing could be distinguished of her, and she was but a little shapeless mass.

He passed over the three steps; and having reached the threshold, stopped.

No candle was burning in the caravan, probably from the economy of want. The hut was lighted only by a red tinge, arising from the opening at the top of the stove, in which sparkled a peat fire. On the stove were smoking a porringer and a saucepan, containing to all appearance something to eat. The savoury odour was perceptible. The hut was furnished with a chest, a stool, and an unlighted lantern which hung from the ceiling. Besides, to the partition were attached some boards on brackets and some hooks, from which hung a variety of things. On the boards and nails were rows of glasses, coppers, an alembic, a vessel rather like those used for graining wax, which are called granulators, and a confusion of strange objects of which the child understood nothing, and which were utensils for cooking and chemistry. The caravan was oblong in shape, the stove being in front. It was not even a little room; it was scarcely a big box. There was more light outside from the snow than inside from the stove. Everything in the caravan was indistinct and misty. Nevertheless, a reflection of the fire on the ceiling enabled the spectator to read in large letters,—

URSUS, PHILOSOPHER.

The child, in fact, was entering the house of Homo and Ursus. The one he had just heard growling, the other speaking.

The child having reached the threshold, perceived near the stove a man, tall, smooth, thin and old, dressed in gray, whose head, as he stood, reached the roof. The man could not have raised himself on tiptoe. The caravan was just his size.

"Come in!" said the man, who was Ursus.

The child entered.

"Put down your bundle."

The child placed his burden carefully on the top of the chest, for fear of awakening and terrifying it.

The man continued,—

"How gently you put it down! You could not be more careful were it a case of relics. Is it that you are afraid of tearing a hole in your rags? Worthless vagabond! in the streets at this hour! Who are you? Answer! But no. I forbid you to answer. There! You are cold. Warm yourself as quick as you can," and he shoved him by the shoulders in front of the fire.

"How wet you are! You're frozen through! A nice state to come into a house! Come, take off those rags, you villain!" and as with one hand, and with feverish haste, he

dragged off the boy's rags which tore into shreds, with the other he took down from a nail a man's shirt, and one of those knitted jackets which are up to this day called kiss-me-quicks.

"Here are clothes."

He chose out of a heap a woollen rag, and chafed before the fire the limbs of the exhausted and bewildered child, who at that moment, warm and naked, felt as if he were seeing and touching heaven. The limbs having been rubbed, he next wiped the boy's feet.

"Come, you limb; you have nothing frost-bitten! I was a fool to fancy you had something frozen, hind legs or fore paws. You will not lose the use of them this time. Dress yourself!"

The child put on the shirt, and the man slipped the knitted jacket over it.

"Now...."

The man kicked the stool forward and made the little boy sit down, again shoving him by the shoulders; then he pointed with his finger to the porringer which was smoking upon the stove. What the child saw in the porringer was again heaven to him—namely, a potato and a bit of bacon.

"You are hungry; eat!"

The man took from the shelf a crust of hard bread and an iron fork, and handed them to the child.

The boy hesitated.

"Perhaps you expect me to lay the cloth," said the man, and he placed the porringer on the child's lap.

"Gobble that up."

Hunger overcame astonishment. The child began to eat. The poor boy devoured rather than ate. The glad sound of the crunching of bread filed the hut. The man grumbled,—

"Not so quick, you horrid glutton! Isn't he a greedy scoundrel? When such scum are hungry, they eat in a revolting fashion. You should see a lord sup. In my time I have seen dukes eat. They don't eat; that's noble. They drink, however. Come, you pig, stuff yourself!"

The absence of ears, which is the concomitant of a hungry stomach, caused the child to take little heed of these violent epithets, tempered as they were by charity of action involving a contradiction resulting in his benefit. For the moment he was absorbed by two exigencies and by two ecstasies—food and warmth.

Ursus continued his imprecations, muttering to himself,—

"I have seen King James supping in propriâ personâ in the Banqueting House, where are to be admired the paintings of the famous Rubens. His Majesty touched nothing. This beggar here browses: browses, a word derived from brute. What put it into my head to come to this Weymouth seven times devoted to the infernal deities? I have sold nothing since morning I have harangued the snow. I have played the flute to the hurricane. I have not pocketed a farthing; and now, to-night, beggars drop in. Horrid place! There is battle, struggle, competition between the fools in the street and myself. They try to give me nothing but farthings. I try to give them nothing but drugs. Well, to-day I've made nothing. Not an idiot on the highway, not a penny in the till. Eat away, hell-born boy! Tear and crunch! We have fallen on times when nothing can equal the cynicism of spongers. Fatten at my expense, parasite! This wretched boy is more than hungry; he is mad. It is not appetite, it is ferocity. He is carried away by a rabid virus. Perhaps he has the plague. Have you the plague, you thief? Suppose he were to give it to Homo! No, never! Let the populace die, but not my wolf. But by-the-bye I am hungry myself. I declare that this is all very disagreeable. I have worked far into the night. There are seasons in a man's life when he is hard pressed. I was to-night, by hunger. I was alone. I made a fire. I had but one potato, one crust of bread, a mouthful of bacon, and a drop of milk, and I put it to warm. I said to myself, 'Good.' I think I am going to eat, and bang! this crocodile falls upon me at the very moment. He installs himself clean between my food and myself. Behold, how my larder is devastated! Eat, pike, eat! You shark! how many teeth have you in your jaws? Guzzle, wolf-cub; no, I withdraw that word. I respect wolves. Swallow up my food, boa. I have worked all day, and far into the night, on an empty stomach; my throat is sore, my pancreas in distress, my entrails torn; and my reward is to see another eat. 'Tis all one, though! We will divide. He shall have the bread, the potato, and the bacon; but I will have the milk."

Just then a wail, touching and prolonged, arose in the hut. The man listened.

"You cry, sycophant! Why do you cry?"

The boy turned towards him. It was evident that it was not he who cried. He had his mouth full.

The cry continued.

The man went to the chest.

"So it is your bundle that wails! Vale of Jehoshaphat! Behold a vociferating parcel! What the devil has your bundle got to croak about?"

He unrolled the jacket. An infant's head appeared, the mouth open and crying.

"Well, who goes there?" said the man. "Here is another of them. When is this to end? Who is there? To arms! Corporal, call out the guard! Another bang! What have you brought me, thief! Don't you see it is thirsty? Come! the little one must have a drink. So now I shall not have even the milk!"

He took down from the things lying in disorder on the shelf a bandage of linen, a sponge and a phial, muttering savagely, "What an infernal place!"

Then he looked at the little infant. "'Tis a girl! one can tell that by her scream, and she is drenched as well." He dragged away, as he had done from the boy, the tatters in which she was knotted up rather than dressed, and swathed her in a rag, which, though of coarse linen, was clean and dry. This rough and sudden dressing made the infant angry.

"She mews relentlessly," said he.

He bit off a long piece of sponge, tore from the roll a square piece of linen, drew from it a bit of thread, took the saucepan containing the milk from the stove, filled the phial with milk, drove down the sponge halfway into its neck, covered the sponge with linen, tied this cork in with the thread, applied his cheeks to the phial to be sure that it was not too hot, and seized under his left arm the bewildered bundle which was still crying. "Come! take your supper, creature! Let me suckle you," and he put the neck of the bottle to its mouth.

The little infant drank greedily.

He held the phial at the necessary incline, grumbling, "They are all the same, the cowards! When they have all they want they are silent."

The child had drunk so ravenously, and had seized so eagerly this breast offered by a cross-grained providence, that she was taken with a fit of coughing.

"You are going to choke!" growled Ursus. "A fine gobbler this one, too!"

He drew away the sponge which she was sucking, allowed the cough to subside, and then replaced the phial to her lips, saying, "Suck, you little wretch!"

In the meantime the boy had laid down his fork. Seeing the infant drink had made him forget to eat. The moment before, while he ate, the expression in his face was satisfaction; now it was gratitude. He watched the infant's renewal of life; the completion of the resurrection begun by himself filled his eyes with an ineffable brilliancy. Ursus went on muttering angry words between his teeth. The little boy now and then lifted towards Ursus his eyes moist with the unspeakable emotion which the poor little being felt, but was unable to express. Ursus addressed him furiously.

"Well, will you eat?"

"And you?" said the child, trembling all over, and with tears in his eyes. "You will have nothing!"

"Will you be kind enough to eat it all up, you cub? There is not too much for you, since there was not enough for me."

The child took up his fork, but did not eat.

"Eat," shouted Ursus. "What has it got to do with me? Who speaks of me? Wretched little barefooted clerk of Penniless Parish, I tell you, eat it all up! You are here to eat, drink, and sleep—eat, or I will kick you out, both of you."

The boy, under this menace, began to eat again. He had not much trouble in finishing what was left in the porringer. Ursus muttered, "This building is badly joined. The cold comes in by the window pane." A pane had indeed been broken in front, either by a jolt of the caravan or by a stone thrown by some mischievous boy. Ursus had placed a star of paper over the fracture, which had become unpasted. The blast entered there.

He was half seated on the chest. The infant in his arms, and at the same time on his lap, was sucking rapturously at the bottle, in the happy somnolency of cherubim before their Creator, and infants at their mothers' breast.

"She is drunk," said Ursus; and he continued, "After this, preach sermons on temperance!"

The wind tore from the pane the plaster of paper, which flew across the hut; but this was nothing to the children, who were entering life anew. Whilst the little girl drank, and the little boy ate, Ursus grumbled,—

"Drunkenness begins in the infant in swaddling clothes. What useful trouble Bishop Tillotson gives himself, thundering against excessive drinking. What an odious draught of wind! And then my stove is old. It allows puffs of smoke to escape enough to give you trichiasis. One has the inconvenience of cold, and the inconvenience of fire. One

cannot see clearly. That being over there abuses my hospitality. Well, I have not been able to distinguish the animal's face yet. Comfort is wanting here. By Jove! I am a great admirer of exquisite banquets in well closed rooms. I have missed my vocation. I was born to be a sensualist. The greatest of stoics was Philoxenus, who wished to possess the neck of a crane, so as to be longer in tasting the pleasures of the table. Receipts to-day, naught. Nothing sold all day. Inhabitants, servants, and tradesmen, here is the doctor, here are the drugs. You are losing your time, old friend. Pack up your physic. Every one is well down here. It's a cursed town, where every one is well! The skies alone have diarrhoea—what snow! Anaxagoras taught that the snow was black; and he was right, cold being blackness. Ice is night. What a hurricane! I can fancy the delight of those at sea. The hurricane is the passage of demons. It is the row of the tempest fiends galloping and rolling head over heels above our bone-boxes. In the cloud this one has a tail, that one has horns, another a flame for a tongue, another claws to its wings, another a lord chancellor's paunch, another an academician's pate. You may observe a form in every sound. To every fresh wind a fresh demon. The ear hears, the eye sees, the crash is a face. Zounds! There are folks at sea—that is certain. My friends, get through the storm as best you can. I have enough to do to get through life. Come now, do I keep an inn, or do I not? Why should I trade with these travellers? The universal distress sends its spatterings even as far as my poverty. Into my cabin fall hideous drops of the far-spreading mud of mankind. I am given up to the voracity of travellers. I am a prey—the prey of those dying of hunger. Winter, night, a pasteboard hut, an unfortunate friend below and without, the storm, a potato, a fire as big as my fist, parasites, the wind penetrating through every cranny, not a halfpenny, and bundles which set to howling. I open them and find beggars inside. Is this fair? Besides, the laws are violated. Ah! vagabond with your vagabond child! Mischievous pick-pocket, evil-minded abortion, so you walk the streets after curfew? If our good king only knew it, would he not have you thrown into the bottom of a ditch, just to teach you better? My gentleman walks out at night with my lady, and with the glass at fifteen degrees of frost, bare-headed and bare-footed. Understand that such things are forbidden. There are rules and regulations, you lawless wretches. Vagabonds are punished, honest folks who have houses are guarded and protected. Kings are the fathers of their people. I have my own house. You would have been whipped in the public street had you chanced to have been met, and quite right, too. There must be order in an established city. For my own part, I did wrong not to denounce you to the constable. But I am such a fool! I understand what is right and do what is wrong. O the ruffian! to come here in such a state! I did not see the snow upon them when they came in; it had melted, and here's my whole house swamped. I have an inundation in my home. I shall have to burn an incredible amount of coals to dry up this lake—coals

at twelve farthings the miners' standard! How am I going to manage to fit three into this caravan? Now it is over; I enter the nursery; I am going to have in my house the weaning of the future beggardom of England. I shall have for employment, office, and function, to fashion the miscarried fortunes of that colossal prostitute, Misery, to bring to perfection future gallows' birds, and to give young thieves the forms of philosophy. The tongue of the wolf is the warning of God. And to think that if I had not been eaten up by creatures of this kind for the last thirty years, I should be rich; Homo would be fat; I should have a medicine-chest full of rarities; as many surgical instruments as Doctor Linacre, surgeon to King Henry VIII.; divers animals of all kinds; Egyptian mummies, and similar curiosities; I should be a member of the College of Physicians, and have the right of using the library, built in 1652 by the celebrated Hervey, and of studying in the lantern of that dome, whence you can see the whole of London. I could continue my observations of solar obfuscation, and prove that a caligenous vapour arises from the planet. Such was the opinion of John Kepler, who was born the year before the Massacre of St. Bartholomew, and who was mathematician to the emperor. The sun is a chimney which sometimes smokes; so does my stove. My stove is no better than the sun. Yes, I should have made my fortune; my part would have been a different one—I should not be the insignificant fellow I am. I should not degrade science in the highways, for the crowd is not worthy of the doctrine, the crowd being nothing better than a confused mixture of all sorts of ages, sexes, humours, and conditions, that wise men of all periods have not hesitated to despise, and whose extravagance and passion the most moderate men in their justice detest. Oh, I am weary of existence! After all, one does not live long! The human life is soon done with. But no—it is long. At intervals, that we should not become too discouraged, that we may have the stupidity to consent to bear our being, and not profit by the magnificent opportunities to hang ourselves which cords and nails afford, nature puts on an air of taking a little care of man—not to-night, though. The rogue causes the wheat to spring up, ripens the grape, gives her song to the nightingale. From time to time a ray of morning or a glass of gin, and that is what we call happiness! It is a narrow border of good round a huge winding-sheet of evil. We have a destiny of which the devil has woven the stuff and God has sewn the hem. In the meantime, you have eaten my supper, you thief!"

In the meantime the infant whom he was holding all the time in his arms very tenderly whilst he was vituperating, shut its eyes languidly; a sign of repletion. Ursus examined the phial, and grumbled,—

"She has drunk it all up, the impudent creature!"

He arose, and sustaining the infant with his left arm, with his right he raised the lid of the chest and drew from beneath it a bear-skin—the one he called, as will be remembered, his real skin. Whilst he was doing this he heard the other child eating, and looked at him sideways.

"It will be something to do if, henceforth, I have to feed that growing glutton. It will be a worm gnawing at the vitals of my industry."

He spread out, still with one arm, the bear-skin on the chest, working his elbow and managing his movements so as not to disturb the sleep into which the infant was just sinking.

Then he laid her down on the fur, on the side next the fire. Having done so, he placed the phial on the stove, and exclaimed,—

"I'm thirsty, if you like!"

He looked into the pot. There were a few good mouthfuls of milk left in it; he raised it to his lips. Just as he was about to drink, his eye fell on the little girl. He replaced the pot on the stove, took the phial, uncorked it, poured into it all the milk that remained, which was just sufficient to fill it, replaced the sponge and the linen rag over it, and tied it round the neck of the bottle.

"All the same, I'm hungry and thirsty," he observed.

And he added,—

"When one cannot eat bread, one must drink water."

Behind the stove there was a jug with the spout off. He took it and handed it to the boy.

"Will you drink?"

The child drank, and then went on eating.

Ursus seized the pitcher again, and conveyed it to his mouth. The temperature of the water which it contained had been unequally modified by the proximity of the stove.

He swallowed some mouthfuls and made a grimace.

"Water! pretending to be pure, thou resemblest false friends. Thou art warm at the top and cold at bottom."

In the meantime the boy had finished his supper. The porringer was more than empty; it was cleaned out. He picked up and ate pensively a few crumbs caught in the folds of the knitted jacket on his lap.

Ursus turned towards him.

"That is not all. Now, a word with you. The mouth is not made only for eating; it is made for speaking. Now that you are warmed and stuffed, you beast, take care of yourself. You are going to answer my questions. Whence do you come?"

The child replied,—

"I do not know."

"How do you mean? you don't know?"

"I was abandoned this evening on the sea-shore."

"You little scamp! what's your name? He is so good for nothing that his relations desert him."

"I have no relations."

"Give in a little to my tastes, and observe that I do not like those who sing to a tune of fibs. Thou must have relatives since you have a sister."

"It is not my sister."

"It is not your sister?"

"No."

"Who is it then?"

"It is a baby that I found."

"Found?"

"Yes."

"What! did you pick her up?"

"Yes."

"Where? If you lie I will exterminate you."

"On the breast of a woman who was dead in the snow."

"When?"

"An hour ago."

"Where?"

"A league from here."

The arched brow of Ursus knitted and took that pointed shape which characterizes emotion on the brow of a philosopher.

"Dead! Lucky for her! We must leave her in the snow. She is well off there. In which direction?"

"In the direction of the sea."

"Did you cross the bridge?"

"Yes."

Ursus opened the window at the back and examined the view.

The weather had not improved. The snow was falling thickly and mournfully.

He shut the window.

He went to the broken glass; he filled the hole with a rag; he heaped the stove with peat; he spread out as far as he could the bear-skin on the chest; took a large book which he had in a corner, placed it under the skin for a pillow, and laid the head of the sleeping infant on it.

Then he turned to the boy.

"Lie down there."

The boy obeyed, and stretched himself at full length by the side of the infant.

Ursus rolled the bear-skin over the two children, and tucked it under their feet.

He took down from a shelf, and tied round his waist, a linen belt with a large pocket containing, no doubt, a case of instruments and bottles of restoratives.

Then he took the lantern from where it hung to the ceiling and lighted it. It was a dark lantern. When lighted it still left the children in shadow.

Ursus half opened the door, and said,—

"I am going out; do not be afraid. I shall return. Go to sleep."

Then letting down the steps, he called Homo. He was answered by a loving growl.

Ursus, holding the lantern in his hand, descended. The steps were replaced, the door was reclosed. The children remained alone.

From without, a voice, the voice of Ursus, said,—

"You, boy, who have just eaten up my supper, are you already asleep?"

"No," replied the child.

"Well, if she cries, give her the rest of the milk."

The clinking of a chain being undone was heard, and the sound of a man's footsteps, mingled with that of the pads of an animal, died off in the distance. A few minutes after, both children slept profoundly.

The little boy and girl, lying naked side by side, were joined through the silent hours, in the seraphic promiscuousness of the shadows; such dreams as were possible to their age floated from one to the other; beneath their closed eyelids there shone, perhaps, a starlight; if the word marriage were not inappropriate to the situation, they were husband and wife after the fashion of the angels. Such innocence in such darkness, such purity in such an embrace; such foretastes of heaven are possible only to childhood, and no immensity approaches the greatness of little children. Of all gulfs this is the deepest. The fearful perpetuity of the dead chained beyond life, the mighty animosity of the ocean to a wreck, the whiteness of the snow over buried bodies, do not equal in pathos two children's mouths meeting divinely in sleep,[10] and the meeting of which is not even a kiss. A betrothal perchance, perchance a catastrophe. The unknown weighs down upon their juxtaposition. It charms, it terrifies; who knows which? It stays the pulse. Innocence is higher than virtue. Innocence is holy ignorance. They slept. They were in peace. They were warm. The nakedness of their bodies, embraced each in each, amalgamated with the virginity of their souls. They were there as in the nest of the abyss.