A TRAGEDY BY THE SEA

(From a Letter written by Louis Lambert)

THE path leading from Le Croisic to Batz town was not a beaten way; a puff of wind was enough to efface every trace left by the cart-wheels or the print of the horses' hoofs. However, our guide's practiced eye was able to discover it by the track of cattle and sheep dung. This path in some places went down to the sea, and in others rose toward the fields, according to the lay of the land, and the position of the rocks which it skirted.

It was noon, and we had only gone half way.

"We can rest over there," I said, pointing to a headland composed of lofty rocks. It looked as if we might find a nook there.

When the fisherman, whose eyes followed the direction of my finger, heard this, he shook his head, and said: "There is some one there. Every one who goes from Batz town to Le Croisic, or from Le Croisic to Batz town, always goes round another way, so as not to pass him."

The man murmured these words in a low tone that suggested mystery.

"Is it a robber then, or a murderer?"

Our guide's only answer was a deep, hollow exclamation, which redoubled our curiosity.

"But if we do go by, will anything happen to us?"

"Oh! no."

"Will you go by with us?"

"No, Monsieur."

"Well, we will go, if you can assure us that there is no danger."

"I could not say that," answered the fisherman quickly. "I only know that he who is there will not say anything to you, and will do you no harm. Good God! only he won't stir an inch from where he sits."

"What is he then?"

"A man!"

I never heard two syllables uttered in such a tragic tone. At that moment we were about twenty paces from a creek in which the sea was tossing. Our guide took the road which skirted the rocks; we went on straight in front of us, but Pauline took my arm. Our guide hastened his steps, in order to reach the place where the two paths met at the same time that we did. He evidently divined that after we had seen the man we should walk on quickly. This circumstance inflamed our curiosity, which then became so burning that our hearts beat as if we had been struck by a feeling of terror.

In spite of the heat of the day, and a sort of fatigue caused by our walk through the sands, our souls were still filled with the indescribable languor of intense delight. They were full of pure pleasure that can only be expressed by comparing it to the pleasure one feels in listening to exquisite music, such music as the "Andiamo mio ben" of Mozart. The melting together of two hearts in one pure thought is like the blending of two beautiful voices in song.

To be able to appreciate fully the emotion that seized us afterward, you must have shared the half voluptuous delight into which our morning's ramble had plunged us. Sit for a while and watch a wood-dove, with all its beautiful shades of color, perched on a branch that sways above a rivulet, and you will cry aloud with grief when you see it struck to the heart by the iron claws of a hawk and borne away with murderous speed, swift as powder drives a bullet from a gun.

We soon reached a small cave, in front of which was a narrow ledge, a hundred feet above the sea, protected from the fury of the waves by a sheer wall of rock. Before we had gone two steps on this platform, we felt an electric shiver run through us, not unlike the start one gives at a sudden noise in the middle of a still night.

We saw seated on a piece of rock a man who looked at us.

His glance darted from his bloodshot eyes like the

flash of a cannon. The stoic stillness of his limbs I can only liken to the unchanging piles of granite amid which he sat. His whole body remained rigid, as if he had been turned into stone; only his eyes moved slowly. After casting upon us this look which had moved us so strongly, he withdrew his eyes and fixed them on the ocean stretched out at his feet. In spite of the light that streamed upward from it, he gazed upon it without lowering his eyelids, as the eagle is said to gaze upon the sun. He did not raise his eyes again. Try and recall, my dear uncle, one of those old butts of oak that time has stripped of all its branches, whose knotted trunk rears its fantastic form by the side of some lonely road; it will give you a true likeness of this man. His was the frame of Hercules in ruins, the face of Olympian Zeus wasted by age, and grief, and coarse food, and the hard life of them that toil on the sea; it was as it were charred by a thunderbolt. I looked at his hard and hairy hands, and I saw the sinews like bands of iron. In his whole frame were manifest signs of the same natural power.

In a corner of the little cave I noticed a great heap of moss, and a sort of rough shelf formed by chance in the face of the granite. On this shelf stood an earthen pitcher covered with the fragment of a round loaf. Never had my imagination—when it bore me into the deserts where the first Christian hermits dwelt—drawn a picture of grander religion or more

terrible repentance. Even you, my dear uncle, who have experience of the Confessional, have never perhaps seen such noble remorse; here was remorse drowned in the waves of supplication, the perpetual supplication of dumb despair.

This fisherman, this mariner, this rough Breton was sublime; I knew it, but I knew not why. Had those eyes wept? That hand, like the hand of a rough-hewn statue, had it struck? That rugged brow, stamped with fierce integrity, whereon strength had left the impress of the gentleness that is the heritage of all true strength—that brow, scarred deep with furrows, was it in harmony with a great heart? Why did the man sit there in granite? Why had the granite passed into the man? Which was humanity, which was stone?

A world of thought took possession of our brains. As our guide had anticipated, we passed on quickly in silence. When we met he must have seen that we were filled with horror and astonishment, but he did not confront us with the truth of his predictions; he only said—

"You have seen him?"

"What is the man?" said I.

"The people call him 'the man under a vow.' "

You can imagine the movement with which our heads turned toward the fisherman at these words! He was a simple man; he understood our mute interrogation, and this is what he told us. I try to pre-

serve his own words and the popular character of the story.

"Madame, people at Le Croisic, and Batz too, believe that this man has been guilty of some crime and is performing the penance given him by a well-known rector whom he went to confess to beyond Nantes. Others believe that Cambremer—that is his name—is under a spell, and that he communicates it to any one who passes him to leeward. For this reason many people look to see in what quarter the wind is before they will pass the rock. If there's a gale," and he pointed to the northwest, "they would not go on, not if they were going to fetch a bit of the true cross; they are afraid and turn back. Others, the rich people at Le Croisic, say that Cambremer has made a vow, so he is called 'the man under a vow.' There he is night and day; he never goes. This talk has a smack of truth. Look," said he, turning round to point us out a thing we had not noticed before, "there, on the left, he has set up a wooden cross, to show that he is under the protection of God and the Blessed Virgin and the Saints. He would not be let alone as he is, if it were not that the terror he causes every one makes him as safe as if he were guarded by a regiment of soldiers. He has not spoken a word since he shut himself up, as it were, out there in the open. He lives upon bread and water which his brother's child, a little wench of twelve years old, takes him every morning. He has made a will and

left her all his goods—a pretty creature she is too, a little slip of a maid, as gentle as a lamb, and as pretty spoken as could be. Her eyes are as blue—and as long as that," said he, holding up his thumb, "and her hair is like a cherub's. If you ask her, 'Tell me, Pérotte' (that's what we call Pierrette; she is dedicated to Saint Pierre. Cambremer's name is Pierrè; he is her godfather)—'Tell me, Pérotte,' he went on, 'what does uncle say to thee?' she'll answer, 'He says nothing to me, never—nothing at all.' 'Well, and what does he do?' 'He kisses me on the forehead, on Sundays.' 'Thou'rt not afraid, then?' 'Why!' she says, 'he is my godfather! He won't let any one else take him his food but me.'

"Pérotte declares that he smiles when she comes, but you might as well talk of a sunbeam in a sea-fog, for it's said he's as gloomy as storm."

"But," said I, "you are exciting our curiosity, not satisfying it. Do you know what it was that brought him to this? Was it grief? or repentance? or madness? or crime? is he——"

"Ah, Monsieur, scarcely any one but I and my father know the truth about it. My mother, who is now dead, was servant to the Justice to whom Cambremer told the whole story. The people at the port say that the priest to whom he made his confession only gave him absolution on that condition. My poor mother overheard Cambremer without intending to, because the Justice's parlor was next the kitchen.

She heard it, and she is dead, and the judge who heard it, he too is dead. My mother made us promise—father and me—never to speak of it to the people about here; but I can tell you this: the evening my mother told us the story the hairs of my head stood on end."

"Well, tell us the story, my good fellow; we will not mention it to any one."

The fisherman looked at us and continued thus: "Pierre Cambremer, whom you saw there, is the eldest of the Cambremers. They have all been seafarers, fathers and sons, for generations. As their name shows, the sea has always given way to *them*. The one you have seen was a fisherman, with craft of his own; he had boats in which he used to go sardine fishing, and he even fished for deep sea fish for the dealers. He would have fitted out a ship and fished for cod, if he had not loved his wife so much. She was a beautiful woman, a Brouin from Guérande—splendid she was—and a kind heart too. She was so fond of her husband that she could never bear him to leave her longer than was necessary for the sardine fishing. Stop! They lived down there—there," said the fisherman, going up onto a mound, in order to point out an island in a sort of little mediterranean between the dunes on which we were walking and the salt marshes of Guérande. "Do you see that house? That was his house. Jacquette Brouin and Cambremer had only one child, a boy, whom they loved—

how much shall I say?—*Dame!* like an only child; they were quite mad about him. If their little Jacques had done something into their broth—excuse me, Madame—they'd have sworn it only made it all the sweeter. How often we used to see them at the fair buying him all the finest toys! It was a folly, every one told them so. Little Cambremer soon saw he could do anything he liked, and grew up as vicious as a red ass. If any one came to his father and said, 'Your son has almost killed little So-and-so!' he'd only laugh and say, 'Bah, he'll make a fine sailor! he'll command the king's fleet one day.' Or another would say, 'Pierre Cambremer, do you know that your lad has put out Pougaud's little girl's eye?' 'There'll be a lad for the girls!' said Pierre. Nothing was wrong with him. Then at ten years old the young whelp would fight every one he met; he'd wring the fowls' necks and gut the pigs for sport. I'll swear he wallowed in blood like a pole-cat! 'He'll make a splendid soldier,' said Cambremer; 'he has got a taste for blood.'

"You see, I remembered all this afterward," said the fisherman. "And so did Cambremer," he added, after a pause.

"By the time Jacques Cambremer was fifteen or sixteen he was—well! a perfect shark. He used to go and play the fool and kick up his heels at Guérande and Savenay. Next he wanted coin; so he set to robbing his mother, and she didn't dare to say a

word of it to her husband. Cambremer was an honest man; if a man had given him two *sous* too much on a bill, he would go twenty leagues to return them.

"At last, one day his mother was plundered of everything while his father was away fishing; their son carried off the dresser, the crockery, the sheets, the linen; he left nothing but the four walls. He sold the whole of it to go on the spree with to Nantes. The poor woman cried over it for days and nights. His father would have to be told when he came back, and she was afraid of his father—not for herself—you may be sure! When Pierre Cambremer came back and saw his house furnished with things lent to his wife, he said, 'What in the world is all this?' His poor wife was more dead than alive. At last she said, 'We have been robbed.' 'And where is Jacques?' 'Jacques is away on the spree.' No one knew where the good-for-nothing fellow had gone. 'He's too fond of his larks,' said Pierre.

"Six months afterward the poor father heard that his son was going to be taken before the Justice at Nantes. He journeys there on foot (it's quicker than by sea), lays hands on his son, and brings him back. He doesn't ask him, 'What hast been doing?' He only says, 'If thou dost not stay here for two years with thy mother and me, and keep thyself straight, and go fishing and live like an honest man, thou'lt have *me* to deal with.' The mad fellow, counting on his parent's folly, goes and makes an ugly face at his

father. Thereupon Pierre gives him a cuff on the side of his head that lays up Master Jacques for six months. Meanwhile the poor mother was pining away with grief.

"One night she was sleeping peacefully beside her husband when she hears a noise; she raises herself in bed, and gets a blow from a knife in her arm. She cries out; they fetch a light, and Pierre Cambremer sees that his wife is wounded. He believes it is a robber—as if there were any robbers in our parts! Why, you might carry ten thousand *francs* in gold from Le Croisic to Saint-Nazare under your arm, and no fear of any one even asking you what you'd got there. Pierre goes to look for Jacques, but he can't find him anywhere. The next morning the villain actually had the face to come back and say that he had been at Batz. I ought to tell you that his mother did not know where to hide her money; Cambremer placed his with Monsieur Dupolet at Croisic. Their son's pranks had cost them pounds upon pounds; they were half ruined; it was a hard thing for people who had about twelve thousand *livres* altogether, counting their little island. No one knows how much Cambremer had to give at Nantes to get his son off. The whole family was in bad luck. Cambremer's brother had met with misfortunes and wanted help. To console him Pierre told him that Jacques should marry Pérotte (the younger Cambremer's child). Then, to help him to gain a living he employed him

at his fishing, for Joseph Cambremer was reduced to work for his bread. His wife had died of fever, so he had to pay for the months of Pérotte's weaning. Pierre Cambremer's wife too owed as much as a hundred *francs* to different people, for the little one, for linen and clothes, and for two or three months' wages to big Frelu, who had a child by Simon Gaudry, and nursed Pérotte. Well, Cambremer's wife had sewn a Spanish coin into the wool of her mattress, with 'For Pérotte' written on it. She had had a fine education, and could write like a clerk; she had taught her son to read; it was *that* was the ruin of him. No one knows how it was, but that good-for-nothing Jacques had sniffed gold; he had taken it and gone to run riot at Le Croisic. The good man Cambremer—as ill-luck would have it—came home with his boat, and as he was landing he sees a bit of paper floating on the water; he picks it up and takes it to his wife; she recognizes the words in her own writing, and falls down on the floor. Cambremer says nothing, goes to Le Croisic, and hears there that his son is playing billiards; then he asks to see the woman that keeps the *café*, and says to her, 'Jacques will pay you with a certain gold piece which I told him not to pay away; if you will return it to me I will wait at the door and give you silver for it instead.' The good woman brought him the coin. Cambremer takes it. 'Good,' says he, and returns home. The whole town knew that much. But this is what *I* know, and the rest can

only just guess at. He tells his wife to set their downstair room in order; he makes a fire in the grate, lights two dips, and sets two chairs on one side of the hearth and a stool on the other. Then he tells his wife to lay out his wedding clothes, and bids her rig herself out in hers. He puts on his clothes, and when he is dressed he goes for his brother and tells him to keep watch outside the house, and warn him if he hears any sound on either of the two beaches—this one and the one by the marsh de Guérande. When he thinks his wife has dressed herself, he goes in again, loads his gun, and hides it in the chimney-corner. Presently Jacques comes home; he is late; he had been drinking and gambling up till ten o'clock; he had got brought across at Carnouf Point. His uncle hears him shouting on the beach by the marshes and goes to fetch him, and brings him over without saying anything. When he comes in, his father points to the stool and says, 'Sit thee down there. Thou art before thy father and mother whom thou hast offended; they must be thy judges.' Jacques began to howl, because Cambremer's face had a strange, set look. His mother sat as stiff as an oar. 'If thou dost cry or budge an inch, if thou dost not sit there as straight as a mast on thy stool,' said Pierre, taking aim at his son with his gun, 'I'll kill thee like a dog.' The son became as dumb as a fish; the mother said no word. 'Look here,' said Pierre to his son; 'here is a piece of paper which has been used

to wrap up a Spanish gold piece in; the gold piece was in thy mother's bed; thy mother was the only person who knew where she had put it; I found the paper floating on the water when I landed; thou hast just given—this very evening—this Spanish gold piece to la mère Fleurant, and thy mother cannot find her piece in the bed. Explain.' Jacques said that he had not taken his mother's piece, and that his piece he had by him, left over from Nantes. 'So much the better,' said Pierre. 'How canst thou prove that to us?' 'I had it.' 'Thou didst not take thy mother's?' 'No.' 'Canst thou swear it on thy eternal salvation?' He was going to swear; his mother raised her eyes and looked at him and said, 'Jacques, my child, take care; do not swear what is not true; thou canst amend, and repent; there is still time.' She wept. 'You're a nice one,' said he; 'you have always tried to get me into scrapes.' Cambremer turned pale. 'What thou hast just said to thy mother will make thy account all the heavier. Let's come to the point! Art going to swear?' 'Yes.' 'Wait a minute,' said he. 'Had thy coin got this cross on it that the sardine merchant put on ours when he gave it us?' Jacques was getting sober; he began to cry.—'We've talked enough,' said Pierre; 'I am not going to say anything about what thou hast done before, but I don't choose that a Cambremer should die in the Market-place at Le Croisic. Say thy prayers, and let's make haste. There's a priest coming in a minute

to hear thy confession.' His mother had gone out; she could not stay to hear her son condemned. When she was gone, Cambremer, the uncle, came with the Rector of Piriac; but Jacques would have nothing to say to him. He was a cunning one; he knew his father well enough to be sure he would not kill him without confession. 'Thank you, Monsieur,' said Cambremer, seeing that Jacques was obstinate; 'please to excuse us, but I wanted to give my son a lesson; I beg you not to say anything about it. As to thee,' he said to Jacques, 'if thou dost not mind—the first time it'll be for good and all. I shall put an end to it without confession.' He sent him to bed. The lad believed this, and imagined that he would be able to set himself to rights with his father. He slept; the father watched. When he saw that his son was in a deep sleep, he covered his mouth with tow, bound it round tightly with a piece of sail, and then tied his hands and feet. He raved, 'he wept blood,' as Cambremer told the Justice. You may imagine, his mother threw herself at his father's feet. 'He is judged,' said he; 'thou must help me to put him into the boat.' She refused. Cambremer put him in by himself, forced him down into the bottom of the boat, and tied a stone to his neck. Then he rowed out of the cove—out to the open sea till he was as far out as the rock where he now sits. By that time the poor mother had got her brother-in-law to take her out there. She cried out as loud as she could, 'Mercy,'

but it was only like throwing a stone at a wolf. It was moonlight; she saw the father throw their son, to whom her bowels still yearned, into the sea; and as there was no wind she heard Plsh! then nothing, not a trace, not a bubble. No, the sea doesn't tell secrets. Cambremer landed to quiet his wife's groans, and found her half dead. It was impossible for the two brothers to carry her; they were obliged to put her in the boat which had just been used for her son, and rowed her round by the Le Croisic channel. Ah, well! *la belle Brouin*, as she was called, did not last a week; she died entreating her husband to burn the cursed boat. Oh! he did it too. As for him, it was all up with him; he didn't know what he wanted. When he walked, he staggered like a man who can't stand wine. Then he took a ten days' journey, and when he came back, sat down where you have seen him, and since he has been there he hasn't spoken a word."

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The fisherman did not take more than a minute or two to tell us this story, and told it even more simply than I have written it. The people make few reflections when they tell a tale; they relate the fact that has impressed them, and only translate it into words as they feel it. This narrative was as keen and incisive as the blow of a hatchet.

"I will not go to Batz," said Pauline, when we reached the upper side of the lake.

We returned to Le Croisic by the salt marshes. Our fisherman, become as silent as ourselves, led us through the bewildering paths. Our souls had undergone a change. We were both plunged in gloomy thoughts, saddened by this drama which explained the sudden presentiment we had felt at the sight of Cambremer. We both knew enough of the world to divine that part of those three lives concerning which our guide had been silent. The miseries of the three rose up before us as plainly as if we had seen them in scenes of a drama that reached its climax in the father's expiation of his necessary crime. We dared not look at the rock where the unhappy man sat, a terror to the whole country. Clouds began to darken the sky, and a mist rose on the horizon while we walked through the most gloomy and melancholy scenery I ever beheld. We trod on soil that seemed sick and unwholesome, the salt marshes, that may well be called the scrofulous places of the earth. The ground is divided into unequal squares, each encased in a deep cutting of gray earth, and each full of brackish water, on the surface of which the salt collects. These artificial pits are divided within by borders, whereon the workmen walk armed with long rakes. By the aid of these rakes they skim off the brine and carry it to round platforms contrived at certain distances, when it is ready to be formed into heaps. For two hours we walked by the side of this gloomy chessboard, where the abundance of salt chokes all vege-

tation, and where no one is to be seen, except here and there a few *paludiers*—the name given to the cultivators of the salt. These men, or rather this class of Bretons, wear a special dress, a white jacket, not unlike a brewer's. They marry only among themselves; there is no instance of a girl of this tribe having married any other man than a *paludier*. The horrible appearance of these swamps, with the mud thus raked in regular patches, and the gray earth shunned by every Breton flower, was in harmony with the pall that had been cast upon our souls. When we reached the place where one has to cross the arm of the sea formed by the irruption of its waters into this basin and no doubt serving to replenish the salt marshes, the sight of even such meager vegetation as adorns the sands on the beach was a delight to us. As we were crossing, we could see in the middle of the lake the island on which the Cambremers had lived. We turned away our heads.

On arriving at our hotel, we noticed a billiard table in one of the ground-floor rooms, and when we learned that it was the only public billiard table in Le Croisic, we made our preparations for leaving during the night. The next day we were at Guérande.

THE END

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