

1. Abbé Bernard

It was eight o'clock in the evening on the twenty-eighth of October 1875. The weather was magnificent, although slightly cool.

In the pathways of a garden, which still contained a few belated flowers, a priest was walking, while reciting his rosary devotedly. The priest in question might have been forty or perhaps forty-five years old. His intelligent and handsome face was still young, although white hairs were mingled with his blond tresses.

The priest was Abbé Bernard. His poor health did not permit him to carry out any holy ministry, and he was visiting one of his friends, a parish priest. Abbé Bernard was doubtless ever ready to hasten to the bedside of someone who was dying, and although he was supposed to be resting completely, that did not mean that he was inactive.

The garden in which Abbé Bernard was walking on that October evening belonged to the presbytery and was situated on the edge of the ocean. The Atlantic waves came to break within the very confines of the garden. The abbé loved to contemplate the immensity, which led him to meditate on the grandeur and power of the Creator. For him, nothing was more impressive than the ocean, because for him, nothing spoke more loudly of God. The sea had always exercised a powerful attraction on Abbé Bernard; he sometimes said that if he had not had a priestly vocation, he would not have chosen any other profession than that of mariner...but the Lord's voice had made itself heard, and he had not resisted its call.

Slightly fatigued by his walk, Abbé Bernard sat down on a garden bench, in an attitude of profound meditation. The waves came to die at his feet, and their lapping seemed to be the echo of a hymn of adoration, which rose up from his poetic and pious soul.

Suddenly, the priest started at the sound of a voice nearby, which said: "Is it Abbé Bernard to whom I have the honor of speaking?"

The abbé turned his head and saw a man dressed like a mariner leaning against the bench on which he was sitting. The priest had not heard him approach.

"Yes, my friend. What can I do for you?"

"Would you come with me, Monsieur l'Abbé? I want to take you to a dying man. Come quickly, please."

"I'll come with you. I'll run to the presbytery, collect the things I need, and I'll be with you momentarily."

The abbé went into the presbytery and went to the library. The priest who was his host was not there. Hastily, Abbé Bernard scribbled a few words to inform him of the reason for his absence; then he took a warm overcoat and a few light objects that he might need, and left.

When he arrived in the garden he saw the sailor, who seemed to be waiting for him impatiently.

"We're going by water, Monsieur l'Abbé," he said, abruptly.

The priest sat down on the bench of a strangely-formed yacht, and they set off. Complete silence reigned on board; nothing could be heard but the sound of the yacht's engine. Abbé Bernard did try to ask the mariner a few questions, but the latter probably did not hear him, as he made no reply.

After an hour or thereabouts of that silent navigation, on a very calm sea, the mariner left his engine, came over to the priest, and said to him, in a very polite tone: "I regret, Monsieur l'Abbé, that it will be necessary for you to consent to wearing a blindfold."

"Why the mystery?" replied the abbé. "I refuse."

"It's necessary," his companion repeated, without any rudeness. "I give you my word that no harm will come to you." And without giving the priest time to reply, he threw a tarpaulin sack over his head, which he tied up tightly.

The abbé did not even try to defend himself. No one could mean to harm a man who had done nothing but good all his life. Besides, he was not strong enough to struggle against the robust matelot.

Abbé Bernard thought that he heard a strange noise, as if the waves were opening up to swallow the yacht, but he told himself that it was a trick of the imagination, for the navigation continued rapidly and calmly.

It continued for another hour at least, and then he felt the vessel come to a sudden stop. He heard the sound of voices and footsteps, and then a hand gripped his own.

Someone said, still without any rudeness: "Come with me, Monsieur l'Abbé."

They took a few steps—perhaps fifty—and then the priest felt his blindfold being removed.

He saw that he was in a room brightly-lit by electricity, in the middle of which, on an extremely tidy bed, a dying man was lying.

2. A Shipwreck

Two years before the events recorded in the previous chapter, a small steamboat was struggling against the waves of the Pacific Ocean. That sea does not always justify its name, and on that day—the fourth of June 1873—it presented a terrible aspect. The steamboat was fighting, and fighting bravely, but the wind blowing from the west was causing it to pitch fearfully. The boat was shipping water, which constrained those who were not members of the crew to take refuge in their cabins or the saloon.

On the stern of the boat, its name could be seen, inscribed in large black letters on the white-painted wood: *Queen of the Waves*. She belonged to a San Francisco company.

The passengers, who were not very numerous—fifty in all—were emigrants, but not emigrants of lowly origin devoid of knowledge and education. They included a few lawyers, two physicians, engineers and mechanics. Fortune had not smiled upon them; they were merely in search of a more favorable country of residence.

The steamboat continued its frightful pitching. Suddenly, an enormous mass of water invaded the decks of the *Queen of the Waves*, putting out the fires and causing muffled explosions.

There was a danger of panic, because the steamboat, whose tiller was having hardly any effect in that torment, could not stay afloat. The *Queen of the Waves* was nothing but a wreck, swaying from port to starboard. The passengers felt that they were doomed.

And there was no land in sight! The mariners' telescopes searched the horizon in vain. There was nothing to be seen—nothing at all. It was a terrible situation! The lamentations of the women and their desperate screams mingled with the noises of the tempest. All hope of salvation seemed lost.

At about three o'clock in the afternoon, however, the man on watch shouted, resoundingly: "Land! Land! Ahead and to starboard!"

The deck of the *Queen of the Waves* was immediately covered by passengers. About five miles away, they were able to discern some kind of promontory. Was it *terra firma*? Was it merely an island? But that hardly mattered: continent or island, it was salvation—if they could reach it.

The man at the helm redoubled his efforts.

The boat was no more than a mile from land when it hit a reef. Immediately, the *Queen of the Waves* heeled over on to her side, and they realized that she could not right herself again. The passengers were all men of intelligence and courage, though. They helped the sailors get the lifeboats—of which there were only four—afloat. Risking their lives a hundred times over, the passengers were provided with the means to save themselves.

Unfortunately, the last lifeboat, containing the captain and the crewmen, came too close to a submerged rock, made contact with it, and was seen to sink beneath the seething ocean waves.

That was a great misfortune, for, even if they succeeded in freeing the steamboat, how could they put to sea again without a captain and sailors?

Alas, they could not take time out to mourn the loss of the crew; it was necessary to take care of more urgent matters, as quickly as possible. Some of the shipwreck victims devoted themselves to those tasks; they made several trips to the grounded vessel, bringing back provisions, blankets, weapons and so on.

It was as well that they did, for two hours later, the *Queen of the Waves* broke up against the reef; soon, nothing remained of her but floating debris on the furious sea.

3. A Strange Land

At what point on the Earth's surface were they? Without instruments, they could not take a bearing. The only certain thing was that they were on land somewhere in the Pacific; it was necessary to be content with that information, for the moment.

That land, off the shore of which the *Queen of the Waves* had been wrecked, was strange. There were fallen trees and profound excavations everywhere. In certain places, one might have thought that the granite that formed the basis of the ground had been opened up and split in two by some cataclysm. Evidently, there had been an earthquake there, not very long ago; the most capable of the castaways estimated the interval at two or three years at the most.

There was not a living creature to be seen, human or animal. Had the place ever been inhabited? Nothing supported that supposition.

For the moment, the castaways were obliged to give their attention to a more imperious preoccupation: that of fortifying themselves with a little nourishment and getting some rest—for they were all, as can be imagined, exhausted by fatigue. Without even taking the trouble to light a fire, they improvised a meal of cold conserves, then rolled themselves up in blankets and went to sleep, entrusting the job of guarding the camp to the dog Turko, who belonged to a young engineer by the name of Roger de Ville.

The next day, the storm had calmed down. The sun was shining, and its warm radiance put a little hope into the hearts of the castaways. When they had had breakfast—this time allowing themselves the luxury of hot coffee—they decided to undertake an expedition of discovery.

It was important to know the nature of the land on which they found themselves. Was it an island or the continent? All the castaways tried to convince themselves that the latter hypothesis might be correct, for if they were on the continent it would be easy enough to reach its habitable regions. If, on the other hand, they were on an unknown island...

They did not even want to dwell on that possibility; it was too terrifying.

In any case, the poor castaways put their trust in Providence, which had not abandoned them, and would surely come to their aid.

Two young men, Roger de Ville and Paul Lamontagne, offered to go on the expedition. They wanted to go up to the summit of a mountain some seven or eight hundred feet high, which loomed up majestically not far away. From the top of that mountain they would either be able to see the land extending as far as the eye could see, or the sea surrounding them in a circle that the castaways had little hope of crossing.

Roger and Paul left, therefore, at about nine o'clock in the morning. They took food supplies, two traveling-blankets, two carbines, a sturdy rope and a powerful marine telescope. It was decided that Turko would remain in the camp, but when the dog saw his master leaving, it was impossible to hold him back. Deep down, Roger was not displeased to be taking him along; he did not like to be separated from the faithful animal for long.

There was no lack of wishes of *bon voyage* for the expeditionaries, and the others followed them with their eyes for as long as they were in view.

It is not my intention to give you long and minute details of that excursion, and all the difficulties that the travelers encountered on the way. Try, if you can, to give yourselves an idea of what a walk of that sort might have been like, in an unknown country interrupted by ravines and rendered almost impracticable by a thousand natural hazards. It was not until dusk was approaching that Roger and Paul reached the top of the mountain.

They could not have chosen a better observatory, and both of them, in turn, scanned the horizon with the marine telescope. Then they looked at one another, and said, almost simultaneously, with a note of discouragement in their voices: "It's an island."

"A volcanic island," Roger added.

"May God protect us!" Paul replied.

The two friends went back down to the valley and continued on their way, searching for a suitable place to spend the night. They remained silent now, not daring to communicate to one another the somber thoughts that were assailing them. What horrible news they would have to take back to their companions the next day!

Both of them were thinking: *How can we get away from here?*

They might perhaps be able to build a raft, but how could they steer it? They did not know where in the ocean the *Queen of the Waves* had run aground, having drifted helplessly at sea for so long.

Soon, Roger and Paul stopped, having reached the shore of the sea. It was there that they decided to spend the night. The place was ideal in its savage beauty, with its cliffs plunging steeply into the

waves, its profound caves and its immense blocks of superimposed granite, which only seemed to require a push from some giant hand to topple into the seething water.

No vestige of vegetation was visible there, however, and by virtue of indications that could not deceive Roger's expert eyes, the two young men understood that the location had been recently visited by an earthquake—and observation that was scarcely cheerful or encouraging, in the circumstances.

The ocean, on the other hand, presented a peculiarity that could not fail to interest the two friends in spite of the anguish of the moment. The water was so clear that the gaze could plunge into it to a considerable depth; when the waves calmed down, they could even make out the sea-bed and perceive fish swimming below the surface.

The young men were so tired, though, that they did not waste time in vain commentaries. They wrapped themselves in their blankets and fell into a profound sleep.