

## CHAPTER I

### *A Torpedoed Transatlantic Liner*

Suddenly crushed by invisible submarine hands, an enormous transatlantic liner sank in the ocean. It carried with it its count of living beings; to wit, two hundred. They were, for the most part, young Frenchmen resident in Brazil, responding to the appeal of the endangered fatherland.

One day among many, therefore, the first of March 1915, saw another drama of the war: the majestic and superb Brazilian steamer *España*, and its passengers, became, at the whim of a German torpedo-boat, those rigid forms with which the waves play tennis. The balls that furrowed the water were human beings. The hull of the boat gave the impression of a net. Sirens with floating hair amused themselves singing and calling, sending the bodies back and forth.

Carried away, rolled among the cold cadavers and similar to them in appearance, one young man floated who was not entirely dead. The cork lifejacket had done its job; it retained at the surface the matter, deprived of consciousness, of the escapee: the only one.

He might have been twenty-six years old. His tall stature, his apparent muscles and his entire supple and vigorous being made him one of the finest human specimens. He had the slightly bronzed complexion of mixed race individuals, born to a Toulousan father and a Brazilian mother, with regular European features.

While the morning sun continued to rise over the ocean, Jean Harvez finally opened his eyes. He realized his terrible situation. Remembrance returned to him, seething with youth, and a flood of memories that, colliding in his weary head, made him physically ill.

Gradually, he succeeded in ordering his thoughts. He pictured the engulfment of the liner at dawn and the conditions of his shipwreck. He had gone up on deck, and had retired to an isolated spot under one of the lifeboats hanging from its davits, plunged in a profound meditation.

With a bleak obstinacy he was still dreaming about the same adventure, and doubtless the same amour: "*The Alluring...! Niña...! Niña...!*" like a thirsty man who, having already drunk too much, can no longer say anything but: "Water!" A lugubrious voice rose from the lounge, lulling his nostalgia without breaking his solitude.

*Deprived of a bier  
On the cold stone  
Closing my eyes,  
I seem to be asleep...*

All of a sudden the ship received a mighty shock, which shook it. The angle of inclination of the floor augmented with an alarming rapidity. On the deck, a few passengers, having already emerged from their cabins, clung on to the rail or the equipment; they were howling: "Help!" The captain of the steamer and his officers tried to organize aid, but the vessel nose-dived so rapidly that it was impossible to put the lifeboat in the water.

Without trying to elucidate the causes of the accident, Jean understood immediately the inanity of means of assistance. He reached the officers' ward-room. There he saw numerous lifejackets. He took off his jacket, and then his shirt, and unhooked a lifejacket from the wall. Hastening to the rail, he leapt into the sea. He fell from a height of twenty meters. The water hissed in his ears violently.

He returned to the surface. The ship was sinking deliberately, it seemed to him.

The bold man shoved himself away from the hull with a furious kick and reached open water. Only the instinct of self-preservation was guiding him. What insensate hope did he have of escaping the catastrophe? It seemed to him that there did not exist, at that moment, any other law than that of death: no longer to think, no longer to feel.

Jean strove to remain alive, ran out of breath, and delivered himself to a passing wave.

The caressant hair of sirens balanced his departing body voluptuously.

The engines of the *España* were not yet drowned. The rear propeller was rotating with a frightful noise out of the water, and perhaps, by means of its whirling in the air, sustained the fine ship, which did not want to end, upright on its stem. The part out of the water was still brilliantly illuminated.

Suddenly, as if drawn, clutched by giant invisible fingers, the enormous steamer sank, carrying with it its entire complement of passengers, except one.

With rapid decision, Jean had recovered his senses fully. The sun was high above the horizon. When the wave lifted him up to its summit, he glimpsed the ocean in the space of a few seconds, the waves of which bristled one after another with a regular splashing. Then he went down again, and his view was limited to the extent of the water that bore him.

He tried to cry out, hoping that a voice might respond to his own, but the agitation of the waters was such that his words only carried a few meters, vain and utterly futile.

At each ascent he gazed around him avidly, but he only saw the ever-menacing immensity of the ocean, suddenly unleashed round the catastrophe of the magnificent vessel *España*, entirely drowned by a final trick of humans, swallowed body and contents in the watery abyss.

Suddenly, the sun disappeared, and a livid light covered the surface. At the same time, a devastating gust of wind fell.

As if lifted up by a colossal force, the waves leapt up, rising to a vertiginous height. In spite of his lifejacket, the handsome swimmer was picked up, rolled, and tumbled into the hollow of the wave like a toy kicked along by a capricious child.

*I'm doomed!* he thought. *I'd do better, instead of fighting for my life, to unfasten this lifejacket and let myself sink. The sea takes me for an enemy!*

But he was young, full of strength and audacity. There would always be time to abandon himself. After the malevolence of hostile humans, a torpedo-strike, there was the anger—no, the bad luck—of the elements: a tempest. To struggle is to live. The exhaustion of strength does not annihilate the will. Jean Harvez did not want to consent to the cowardice of his body, which was begging for mercy.

The more he lost his vigor, therefore, the more an appetite was born within him for risk and battle, tenacity against misfortune, the pride in victory that makes a man sublime and renders him heroic.

Stuck to his legs, the stiffened fabric of his trousers was embarrassing him horribly; he tried to take them off. After a terrible gust of wind, there was a calm. The shipwreck victim took advantage of it, bringing his feet up behind him, taking his boots off, one after the other; then, unbuckling the belt of his trousers, he rolled it up, with difficulty. Once the knees were passed, the task became easier, and the trousers went to join the footwear on the sea bed.

The hurricane was unleashed again, with an insensate fury. From then on the unfortunate was borne away, losing consciousness of the struggle, along with an exact notion of obstacles. He only had the instinct of gulping mouthfuls of air every time the wave lifted him up to its summit.

Fortunately, the young man had fastened the lifejacket securely under his arms, a precaution more than necessary; with the impacts inflicted on him by the furious sea, his head was more often under the water than above it.

Sometimes, lifted up to the crest of a gigantic wave, he was projected, and fell back into the water from a height of fifteen or twenty meters. Then, stunned and inanimate, he floated. Thought escaped him; he became inert matter, a simple item of wreckage delivered to the caprice of the squalls. In that rag rolled by the wind and suffocated by the foamy brine, however, the soul still lived.

In spite of corporeal suffering, the poor devil's agony was mingled with intimate dreams; tableaux and scenes arrived to add the anguish of memories to his momentary dolor.

He was in his studio, in Paris, a debutant sculptor already considered as a future master; he was modeling a bust. The model was smiling at him softly. He felt a juvenile tenderness inspire him, for the pure and smiling face was that of his mother.

Suddenly, a door opened and a young woman, brown-haired, white, beautiful and splendid, came in. A strange detail: she was naked, but did not seem to care. She approached, curious to see the artist's work; then, unceremoniously, she took the place of Madame Harvez, who disappeared. She posed.

The sculptor set to work furiously; the piece did not make progress. The clay slid under the soft shaper, almost fluid. The artist repeated his gesture without tiring. He looked at his model, but that model too faded away. Jean ran to the young woman in order to retain her, but she was diluted in his hands and he saw with horror that he was kneading an earthenware statue. A burst of laughter behind him made him turn round. She was there, superb, standing on the saddle, resuming the pose.

Furious, Jean ran to the woman, seized her and clasped her in his arms. He felt himself entering into her slowly; with a sentiment of superhuman sensuality, he melted into that magnificent body.

Jean no longer existed. In the studio, sovereignly, in a faultless marble statue, stood *The Alluring*.

In the midst of the spray, perched on the foamy swirl of the waves, *The Alluring*, perhaps his masterpiece, surged forth in her marvelous nudity: the body, so feminine, swathed in front, the arms falling toward the thighs in a gesture of appeal, the hands joined, their thumbs horizontal and the other fingers lowered and rigid, in the form of a yoni.<sup>1</sup> Simultaneously taking and refusing, in a last troubling defense, like a consenting and dominating offer, she seemed to be saying:

"I am Beauty, the immortal radium that is worth any sacrifice. Physical and mental sensuality resides in me. Mine is your intelligence, which has seen me, your art, which has created me, your will, which wanted me thus, and your soul, which animates me!

"My power surpasses that of living statues, stifled by clothing and conventions.

"In my attitude, in the pose of my legs crossed like Buddha, I am sitting on my rivals, the poor women who only know how to speak by making noise. I dominate by silence. My beauty speaks. My mysterious smile is an appeal to which everyone listens.

"In seeking to decipher my secret, one becomes my prisoner, and never my possessor.

"Repose your feverish head on my lap, man, my hands will part the divine triangle that they form in order to caress your weary brow.

"I am the idol that is adored, not the slave who serves her master on her knees.

"Now that you have realized that feminine, carnal and solar debauchery, *The Alluring*, you will no longer be able to submit to other laws than those of your creation.

"Your model is nothing, you have expelled her. Your mother and your dead father cannot defend you against me. You love me as you have never loved.

"I am your creature and the sonorous and victorious, yet soft and tender, name of Nano, Nini—a variant in my country of 'little girl,' Niña—that you have given me, participates in your name, Jean, as my sculpted body comes to the gesture of your hands."

He saw himself in his studio again before his work, caressing it fearfully, kissing it devotedly, a new Pygmalion. A fury sometimes agitated him, throwing him breathlessly upon the sculpture in order to animate it, to clasp it, to warm up its coldness, to communicate his fever to it, in order that his creature might belong to her creator entirely.

Nano, *The Alluring*, was smiling at a vague dream, as inaccessible as if she were immaterial. Then Jean ran his tremulous fingers over the firm and beautiful curves of his creature, recognizing all the contours and charming corners kneaded with his amour, and he suffered with desire, to the point of going mad.

After having exhibited it at the Salon, he refused to sell his work to the State; and as his morbid passion began to be known and mocked, he abandoned Paris and his nascent glory in order to take shelter in Santos, where his mother had been born. He lived tranquilly there, hidden, working with more or less success on other works, which never equaled *The Alluring*. The war determined him to return to France.

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<sup>1</sup> This pose, significant in terms of the novel's symbolism, is reproduced in the original edition in the cover illustration and in a line-drawing employed as a frontispiece, both by the artist Fabius Lorenzi, who provided illustrations for several of Champsaur's later works.

And the transatlantic liner *España*, in which he was sailing, had just been torpedoed while traversing the tropical waters.

Jean is still struggling against the tempests and his visions of fury. The ocean, whistling and blowing, is only danger revealed and danger to dread. After the visit of the ideal, The Alluring, the harassed shipwreck victim receives the more dangerous one of phantom ships. Is it a fever occasioned by the peril, the torpedo-strike, the wind, the turbulent ocean and the sun, terrible on a male and cerebral nudity? But that submarine warfare against a steamship evokes for him ancient petty struggles and great sea battles; they come, the accursed, in series, in all shapes and sizes, ironclads and sloops, triremes and galleys.

The impeccable crewmen and ragged fishermen make signals and gestures of appeal. The ocean is populated with fantastic rescuers. They are the souls of old ships lost during their wrecks that are passing by. At close range, Jean, who calls out, sees wooden skeletons maneuvered by human skeletons. It's all over; he is in the realm of nightmares and shades.

Here comes a three-master, and up above the figurehead, the prow and the masts, the arms of the mainmast, broken at the level of the impact, the halyards and the rigging. It launches forward to attack; then, crack, the bowsprit is ripped away. The ship is opened up. Jean is rolled by a wave and screams in horror.

It is a brig that follows, as neat as a jewel. Here comes a schooner, its captain making signs in the prow. Frigates pass by, steamers, ironclads, warships and merchant ships, centuries mingled.

Sounds of bells in the distance, knells.

Splashed by the surf, the wrecks are abandoned now in a bizarre procession; Jean's quasi-cadaver brushes them, soft and lugubrious, made of a wisp of fog; the spirits of the ocean push them toward an unknown goal, and the shadow devours them.

The water is mordant, crushing. Jean feels a thousand teeth, a thousand claws, strangulations and chokings harassing him. All his fibers have become cords of suffering. The naked man, still struggling in spite of everything, no longer has any but one impression, that of the tempest that is martyrizing him lamentably.

Hours have passed.

The equatorial sun, its radiance too ardent, burned a poor lost soul floating at the whim of the water, calm at present. Under the terrible bite, the sculptor recovered consciousness, but, devoid of strength and thought, he had the bewildered gaze of a moribund passing through his swollen eyelids.

Mechanically, he put his hands to his head for a few moments, but always, always, with the same mechanical movement, he brought his arms alternately one over the other.

The day went by like that. When the star descended over the horizon the ocean was completely calm and the waves were following one another, long and flat; the swell was mild and regular. With the night, a little peace descended over the shipwreck victim. How long had he been struggling against the tempest? He had no idea, but his exhaustion was extreme, and above all, the thirst that tormented him was becoming a torture. Even so, he held firm, very tiny and stark naked, in the immense ocean.

The night was bright and serene. In those tropical regions the air is so diaphanous that the stars give enough light to see a long way; the sea was deserted.

A comforting impression determined that Jean Harvez suddenly thought that he was heading toward a goal. It was more a sensation than a certainty. By virtue of an almost superhuman courage, he constrained himself then to judge coldly and envisage his situation.

He did not know of any land where he might be fortunate enough to come ashore.

The war, which had become torpedo warfare, in continuing that deadly game, would gradually reduce commercial navigation; thus, the chance of being picked up by a ship was slender. Increasingly, that minuscule nothing, a man at sea, could only be spotted by a miracle.

Wait, then? Continue suffering?

Tomorrow, could he bear the implacable tortures of the sun for another day? No, undoubtedly. Better to finish it, then.

He consented to his defeat. Vitality gradually withdrew from him. Jean Harvez gave up.

The probable death was slow in coming. He was about to hasten to meet it. He put his last resources of strength into unfastening his lifejacket. The swollen leather did not lend itself to that easily; twisted and rolled around the cork rectangle, it doubled the difficulty. Jean had to lacerate it piece by piece. A singular condition of the shipwreck-victim; it was now necessary to toil in order to have the right to die.

There were only three things to untie; it took two hours. Finally, the last one gave way. In the dark, thought almost escaped him; no longer anything but an object, a wisp delivered to all the unconscious forces of nature, he was a human rag, burned by the day's sun, rolled by the interminable ocean. In a supreme surge, he held on to the lifejacket for a moment; then, pushing it away, he let himself sink...