

PART ONE: THE BEAR OF SHIVA

CHAPTER I

Cicada the Street Urchin

It was night. The storm shouted and bellowed. The waves, twenty meters high, crowned with foam, separated by white abysses, slammed the jagged cliffs of Cornwall. From the dreadful Cape of Raz de Sein,¹ the extreme western point of France, near where the Bay of the Trepassed widens, where the tide comes in with long moans, from that dreadful mass right up to the rocks of Penmar'ch, in the vast forty-five miles circular arch called the Bay of Audierne, the sea was unsettled.

On the steep coast, the wild, rolling waves broke apart on the granite sides with a deafening roar, of which all the artillery in the world, firing at the same time, could have given only a small approximation. Higher up in the Heavens, the color of black ink and soot, thunder rumbled, crackled, exploded, throwing zigzagging bolts bursting with light into the shadows. It was the fireworks of shipwrecks, the very elements' Sabbath of the Damned, the breath of death passing over.

Nevertheless, as if in defiance of the unchained forces of nature, a young, piercing, mocking, voice answered with a song the whistling of the sea gulls, whose long supple wings held them aloft above the waves.

*"Let's go to Lorient to fish for sardines,
Let's go to Lorient to fish for herrings..."*

It was a young boy, still almost a child, who was mocking the storm, lying flat on his stomach at the front of a fishing boat that the waves were bouncing about dreadfully, his hands clutching the sides. The singer was looking into the distance, trying to see through the shadows.

There was a flash of lightning. For a second, one could see a boy with a pale, thin face, lit up by big dark eyes; six sailors bent over the oars; the owner of the boat hunched over the rudder. Then the darkness became thicker.

"Well?" questioned the man at the rudder.

"Nothing," answered the boy.

With the flash of lighting, it was easy to see something. The sea was bubbling up as if the devil had lit all his candles. The boat went dizzily back down the slope of a wave. The little boy added gaily:

"Pfft! That is as much fun as the seesaw at the Devil's Fair."

At the name of the Devil, the superstitious sailors crossed themselves, but the boy did not notice it. Oblivious, he went back to his observation. The fury of the storm only seemed to increase. The disorganized wash broke apart at the front of the boat and dissipated into fine powder.

Dripping with water, the boy, in a situation which made his brave, unsmiling companions turn pale, with the unconscious courage which appeared to be the basis of his character, laughing at the storm, began singing again.

*"There was a good sailor,
Hello, Hello!
Who feared neither wind nor wave..."*

The rough voice of the captain interrupted him:

"Shut up, Cicada! You're going to bring us bad luck."

Cicada, because that was the name of the boy, turned half around and with the unmistakable accent of a Paris *gamin*, shouted:

"No, that's good, that's good, Captain Kéradec." He began to smile. "Only Father Thunder makes more noise than you and I..."

There was silence.

¹ A stretch of water between the Isle of Sein and the Pointe du Raz in the Finistère (Brittany) region of France. The tidal water is an essential passage for ships wanting to go from the Atlantic to the English Channel. At high tide, the Isle of Sein and its embankment stretch more than thirty miles.

“You don’t say anything to him that’s not right. Shouldn’t something be said to him?”

Despite the gravity of the circumstances, the sailors couldn’t help smiling. The captain himself softened his voice to reply:

“Come now, hold your tongue and try to find the lighthouse of Audierne, because if we miss it...”

He didn’t finish. The boat was shaken. An enormous wave lifted it to a prodigious height like a wisp of straw, half filling it with water. Two men were thrown out, but with a sudden movement of the helm, Kéradec righted it again.

“That was a mean wave,” grumbled the boy. “It almost lifted us right up to the gates of Heaven.”

But, suddenly, changing his tone, he shouted at the top of his lungs:

“Ohé! Just ahead! A white and green light! It’s the harbor of Audierne!”

A sigh of relief left the sailors’ lips. The harbor was there, facing them. From that point onward, its lights would guide them. They were no longer lost in the shadows of the unleashed storm. Still, safety was still nothing less than uncertain. Located on the Goayen River, the estuary was obstructed by banks of sand and had dangerous currents. The harbor of Audierne was difficult to enter, even in calm weather. Many boats had been lost in its narrow channels. Because of the strong currents, many had crashed into the dikes protecting it. At its extremity was a circular concrete platform on which stood a lighthouse, the Raoulic, with its white light.

Trying to go through the violent sea into the narrow harbor was risky business, just short of crazy. It could almost not happen except for the heroic efforts of the Breton sailors. Only they were capable of doing it. They were accustomed to an unfriendly coast, guarded by countless reefs. With a steady hand, they looked forward to and played with the dangers of the ocean, the eater of men and boats. Their courage had returned at the announcement of the proximity of the Audierne light house.

Drenched, their hair stuck to their temples, the sailors’ faces welcomed the rapid sweeping beacon.

“Hang on, fellows!” shouted Captain Kéradec. “Row hard!”

A second wave lifted the boat. Cicada had seen it coming. Over there, in the depth of night, two lights, one white, the other green, shining like stars, were the way to safety. But, as if the ocean feared seeing its victims escape, it increased its fury. The thunder began to growl without interruption, darting its lights in flashes of flame; the waves began to hurl against each other.

The little boat resisted, sometimes balancing on the crest of these liquid mountains, sometimes going down with the rapidity of an arrow into space. Slowly, but surely, it went forward. The stone foundations of the Raoulic lighthouse now stood out from the shadows.

“Ohé!” the high-pitched voice of the boy shouted again. “Let it go to starboard, if you want to double the distance.”

And the maneuver was carried out.

“Good, very good! Stay to the right! We’re almost home free.”

A few more powerful strokes of the oars pushed them strongly out of the last wave and the boat finally found herself in the estuary, sheltered from the fury of the sea by the high granite foundation of the lighthouse. There, although still tumultuous, the sea was almost calm. That is to say, the waves were no longer ten or fifteen feet-high. For the fearful, their current height would still be fearsome, but for the crew of the *Saint-Kaourentin*—the name painted in white letters on the black hull of the boat—the waters were a mere ripple. To keep the boat some hundred yards away from the jetty, in the middle of the narrow channel, which allowed entry into the Goayen River and into the harbor of Audierne, the rowers pulled vigorously, firm, encouraged by strong commands from their Captain:

“Pull, boys! Port-side... Straight ahead!”

The boat raced over the waves, going up and down again and again. But, guided by a strong hand, it didn’t deviate from its course. Suddenly, a frightening thunder bolt cast a reddish light into the emptiness, showing, for half a second, the left side of the river and the straight line to the jetty. With a note of astonishment, Cicada, still at the bow, cried out:

“There is a *piéd nickelé* waiting for us.”²

“What?” asked Kéradec.

² *Les Pieds Nickelés* (The Nickel-Plated Feet Gang) was a popular French comic series created in 1908 by Louis Forton (1879-1934). It featured a trio of conmen always trying to make easy money, the expression “nickel-plated feet” being slang for slackers, work-shy people.

“A man walking on the jetty... Can you imagine, he doesn’t even carry an umbrella!” said the boy, with a cheeky sense of humor. Incorrigible, the Parisian gamin added, “That’s fine in good weather, but when it’s raining like this, you get wet right down to your bones...”

Suddenly, the boy’s voice was strangled in his throat. A heart-breaking cry, sharp, inhuman sound pierced the air like a complaint of agony. A white object, like a big sea bird with its wings outstretched, had fallen from above the jetty and into the waves with a splash.

“A *Mari Morgan!*”³ murmured the sailors in terror, remembering the Breton legend which attributed to mermaids the cause of shipwrecks.

Cicada stood up and said:

“No,” he said, “it’s just someone who fell into the sea. Captain, turn the tiller to the right. We can save him.”

But the rough voice of K radec answered:

“If we change course, the current will push us right into the dike. There are eight men aboard, for whom I am responsible. I can’t sacrifice them for a single man.”

The trembling of his voice told the emotion of the brave sailor, forced by circumstances to abandon the unknown man.

“Cicada, sit down. You, men, row straight ahead and pray for the one down there, whose name we don’t know, but who is going to drown.”

With a shudder, his hands took hold of the oars. Following his duty, the captain had assumed the terrible responsibility of abandoning someone to the sea.

“If that’s how it is,” said the boy, “well, then, I’ll save him by myself.”

Before his companions had time to guess what he was thinking, Cicada dived into the foaming waves. An agonized cry escaped from all the lips. But, at the top of a wave, the head of the courageous Parisian urchin reappeared.

“Don’t worry about me! I will swim toward the port. I’ll join you there. There are some iron bars along the side of the jetty... You’ll see that a *Parigot* is a different kind of sailor than a *Brezouec!*”⁴

There was some hesitation, but again K radec ordered, “Pull harder! Pull harder!” and with the boat bounding over the waves, the sailors could no longer see the boy. His hands holding tightly to the rudder, the Captain looked straight in front of him, but, as if petrified, big tears rolled down his immobile face.

However, Cicada, tossed about by the waves, seemed not to suspect the peril into which he had voluntarily thrown himself.

“Brrr!” he said, without thinking anymore about the boat, “the water is nice, a real four-*sous* bath...” But, on reflection, he added, “Oh, no! This is worth at least six *sous*! But it’s sea water and for that, I won’t have to pay at the cashier.”

With a vigorous blow of his heel, he hauled himself to the top of a wave and, looking around him with a piercing eye, he said:

“Let’s orient ourselves... Where is that drowning man?”

In his unconscious heroism, Cicada was obviously thinking that he had done, in the open sea, the same thing that he would have in the Seine River in the most radiant sunshine. However, night was surrounding him. The wind was hurling, lifting liquid mountains, and thunder rumbled without stopping.

By the light of the thunderbolts, the boy finally saw a white body in the water.

“Thank you, Father Thunder,” he murmured, looking towards the storm. “You have lit your Jablockoff at the right time!”⁵

With his two strong arms, he held out his hand and grabbed another, which was going to disappear, and pulled it towards him. As if to make the task easier, the lightning illuminated the sea with its reddish light.

³ In Brittany, the *Mari Morgan* were legendary mermaids who lured sailors to their doom with their hypnotic spells. They were believed to live near coasts, at cave entrances and at the mouths of rivers.

⁴ Slang for Parisian and Breton.

⁵ An electric candle, a modification of the electric arc lamp, in which the carbon rods, instead of being placed end to end, are arranged side by side, and at a distance suitable for the formation of the arc at the tip; also called by the name of the inventor, a Jablockoff candle.

“She was an idiot,” Cicada began. “Even so, there are parents that aren’t careful. To let their daughters go up on a jetty when it’s raining cats and dogs... For sure, that mother must not take very good care of her family...”

He was right. The body was that of a girl, twelve or thirteen years-old, whose long white dress surfaced for any instant. Her long brown hair was floating on the waves like algae and her motionless pale face had a golden tone, the tone that was usual on someone from a sunny country. She was pretty, the poor thing; it was a strange beauty, exotic. And the boy, after having considered her closed eyelids, delicate nose, rosy lips, clacked his tongue, saying:

“She’s a real jewel, she is.” Then, shaking himself after the passing of a wave, he said to himself, “Now, it’s a question of getting her back to the jetty, my old Cicada. Open your eyes and look around.”

In the waves that were unfurling, among the sounds of the tempest, the boy, paying no attention to the elements, was swimming with one hand; with the other, he was holding out of the water the head of that girl he was risking his life to save.

In front of him, there was the dark wall of the jetty that the waves seemed to want to jump over. Further away, Cicada knew that there were iron steps that were imbedded into the stone. They helped sailors get into the boats when the sea was too low to allow entry into the harbor. He only had to reach one of these steps and climb up with his precious cargo. But that was an arduous task in that angry sea that was jumping around, becoming quiet only to swell again. The boy could be thrown against the stone wall; there he could die, broken. Or he would fall back into the dark waters, and his devotion would have been pointless, except to give the avid waves two victims instead of one.

It could be said that the ocean itself was irritated against the bold boy who was trying to take its victim away. The crash of the waves against the granite produced loud detonations. Backwashes were produced; whirlpools dug liquid craters; all the forces of nature were united against those two frail humans.

But the body of the Parisian urchin had inside himself the soul of a hero. In addition, he had thin legs and arms, without a doubt, but strong, and accustomed to every kind of exercise. Finally, Cicada was fearless. For his salvation and that of his pretty little companion, he used what should have doomed them. He abandoned himself to the backwashes that pushed him into the direction that he wanted to go. Another flash of lightning showed him the iron steps, several feet away from him. He only had to reach them—at any cost.

The boy turned around. An enormous wave was coming. That was the one that would take them to safety. He quickly lay flat, his feet pointed toward the jetty. He was lifted by the furious wave, that messenger of death sent by the ocean to that little boy who had fought it. The wave broke apart on the granite wall; the swimmer should have been knocked out, crushed. But no! Cicada had parried the shock. His feet were slammed against the stones but, with a powerful reflex of his knees, he had avoided being crushed. And when the wave fell back, he surfaced, clinging to the iron stairway, still holding the girl, whose inert head was now lying against his shoulder.

Were they saved? Not yet! Other waves followed, covering them with water. It would seem that the sea still wanted to snatch the boy from his point of safety, as a wicked beast that dreams only of pulling in more bodies into its jaws.

“Keep going, Master Ocean,” laughed the boy, whose feet and hands were grasping the iron steps.

Slowly, without hurrying, Cicada continued climbing upward, one step at a time, between each wave. He held the bars for support against the assault of the waves, and then began climbing again. He was breathing heavily and felt fatigued, but he continued climbing. He finally raised himself above the level of the waves. He reached the top of the jetty and, there, exhausted, out of breath, dizzy, he lay down beside the inanimate body of the young woman that he had pulled right out of the arms of Death.