

PART ONE
THE PRISONERS OF THE SEA

I

*How, after a disagreeable quadrille,
a ship's lieutenant was charged
with an equally disagreeable mission*

On Thursday 5 September 1892 there was a dance aboard the front-line battleship *Guichen*, carrying the flag of Vice-Admiral de la Rénolière, anchored at Piraeus with the rest of the squadron.

The French vessels had been moored in the port for a week, and following a tradition that went back to the Battle of Navarin, which profoundly unites our fatherland and Greece, our officers and matelots had been fêted all week in every possible way by the Hellenes. On the other hand, there had also been at Piraeus, at the same time, a Russian battleship, the *Dimitri-Donskoi*, and a Spanish frigate, the *Almanza*. On the day after Cronstadt,¹ the Russians had invited their French comrades to a fraternal feast, and the Spaniards, not wanting to be left out, had deployed all their Castilian amiability in their regard—to such an extent that the worthy admiral, pulled in all directions by all these assaults of refined courtesy and cordial hospitality, lacking the time to display the marks of his gratitude, had made the decision to thank everyone at once by offering those friends of France one of those celebrations that obtain from their setting and the ingenuity of our mariners such a particular glamour and such an original flavor.

The deck of the *Guichen* had been transformed into a magnificent ballroom, covered by a tent descending over the rails, entirely lit by clusters of electric light-bulbs disposed in chandeliers made with sheaves of weapons. Electric footlights garlanded the gun-turrets, which disappeared under tangles of green plants, only allowing the polished bronze of their formidable breeches to show in the midst of that luxuriant ornamentation.

The flags of all the countries, draped by improvised and adroit interior decorators, hid the austerity of the iron walls, raised in large pleats maintained by dazzling trophies. The signal-stations had been stripped of all their signal-flags, which hid the canvas vault beneath a multicolored lining. The *Guichen's* excellent orchestra had taken its place on the bridge, and underneath the aft canopy a comfortable and original buffet had been set up, illuminated by luminous clusters disposed behind enormous mirror-balls, which reflected the light at the whim of their immense facets, scintillating like implausibly enormous precious stones.

Had it not been for the military appearance of the buffet attendants and the martial aspect of the cannons and trophies, even hidden beneath flowers, no one would have thought that the gracious ballroom was accommodated in one of the powerful and terrible engines of death that ironclad vessels are. No one could have imagined that the polished floor, trodden by dainty satin slippers and the iridescent hall in which so many pretty dressed and brilliant uniforms were whirling in the warm radiance of Edison lamps, might someday require to be transformed into a bloody battlefield, disemboweled by shells, swept by machine-guns, and threatened by the fulgurant impact of torpedoes. No one could have imagined that, of all those flags associating the bizarreries of their bright colors, there might one day remain nothing but a shredded tricolor, proudly nailed to the sheet-metal of the masthead of war.

We ought to add that no one was thinking about those terrible possibilities. Aboard the *Guichen*, people were amusing themselves, without any afterthought or philosophical reflections, the naval officers

¹ Negotiations for the Franco-Russian alliance, signed in August 1892 began in earnest when the French fleet was officially welcomed in the naval base of Kronstadt, or Cronstadt.

enjoying the present movement like brave men for whom such opportunities are rare, and the guests, savoring the originality of the setting, surrendering to the charm of French hospitality. Invitations to the dance had been snatched up.

So, while the quadrilles were already beginning to find the space cramped, the launches were still bringing cargoes of bright dresses, decorated shirt-fronts and black suits to the starboard stairway, coming alongside without encumbrance, illuminated in their journey by the luminous beams of searchlights and colored flares, which, as they burst, cast an intense light over the harbor and houses of Piraeus.

The admiral, installed at the port of the gangway, escorted by the general staff of the *Guichen* and its duty officers, was greeting the guests and expending a large provision of amiable words which he had sagely stored up with that intention.

Monsieur de la Rénolière was a man of the world in every sense of the term, as perfect a gentleman as he was a mariner. Nevertheless, after a sojourn of an hour and a half at the gangway, he was seriously beginning to wish that the last guests would arrive. His entire stock of welcoming formulae was exhausted; he was making the most energetic efforts of the imagination in order not to repeat himself, and, during a moment of calm, he said to one of his officers as he put on a third pair of white gloves:

“I’ve already had two pairs killed under me.”

To which the officer replied with a fit of hilarity conventionally adjusted to rank.

At that moment, a highly decorated individual disembarked from his launch; as soon as the admirable had seen him he took two steps forward to meet him, his arms extended. “Ah, my dear Consul,” he said, amicably. “You’re late.”

“That’s true, Admiral,” the French consul replied, in a low voice, “but I’ve just received important news, and I confess that I’m really not in the mood to enjoy myself.”

“What news?”

“I’ll communicate it to you shortly, inasmuch as I have a dispatch for you. Give me a sign at the first moment of liberty you have, and we’ll talk in your cabin. There’s no need to disturb the party.”

“But what is it? Some diplomatic complication?”

“Less and more, Admiral. There’s cholera at Beyrouth.”²

During that short conversation, two men were chatting while sitting in a corner formed by a gun-turret and the bulwark.

One of the two was a naval lieutenant, about twenty-eight years old. Bronzed and energetic in appearance, the young officer seemed slightly melancholy, as if out of place in the middle of the party. His companion, who was much older, was wearing a simple black suit, and not wearing any decoration. By his distinguished but rather stiff appearance, as well as the blond tint of his beard and hair, which was beginning to turn silvery at the temples, it was easy to recognize an Englishman.

That gentleman was Sir Owen J. Townsend, a distinguished naturalist, created a baronet by Her Majesty the Queen for his fine work on oceanic fauna and flora, and the owner of the magnificent steam-yacht *Investigator*, presently anchored at Piraeus. That superb pleasure-boat had attracted the admiration of our officers; it drew eight hundred tons and contained, as well as its master’s luxury apartments, marvelously well-equipped laboratories, an abundantly-provided library and a complete set of instruments dedicated for the studies to which Sir Owen was devoted.

The naval lieutenant’s name was Georges de Malher, and he was the English naturalist’s nephew by marriage. He had, in fact, married a young woman born and brought up in France, whose father, Monsieur Aubertot, now deceased, was a French ironmaster, but whose mother was Sir Owen’s sister.

In his capacity as a dedicated seaman, the scientist had acquired a considerable affection for his nephew, by reason of the latter’s profession. As his yacht was cruising at present along the coast of Egypt, he had taken the opportunity offered by the French fleet’s stopover at Piraeus to cross the Mediterranean and come to shake his young relative’s hand, offering him a few amicable consolations at the same time.

² I have retained the author’s French spelling of Beyrouth rather than substituting the modern Beirut.

The officer was, indeed, somewhat melancholy; he had only been married six months when he had been obliged to take command of the *Sirius*, a light vessel of barely six hundred tones, attached to the Levant squadron in order to do the work of a dispatch-boat, something akin to the work of an errand-boy. It was not that the situation was repugnant to him; after all, he was the master of his modest ship, just as the commander of the *Richelieu* was aboard his. His general staff only comprised the vessel's ensign, a midshipman first-class, a purser, a physician and a pharmacist, and his crew only consisted of thirty men, but he was able to meditate the aphorism of the conquering Roman according to whom it was better to be the first in a small village than the second in Rome.

He was, however, having difficulty reconciling himself to the separation that the unsentimental Ministry of Marine had imposed on him at the very beginning of his marriage, and he needed all his Christian resignation and all his instincts of discipline not to curse his inconvenient superior.

Thus, during the ball, Sir Owen was occupied in seriously scolding his relative for his gloomy expression, and trying to comfort him, after his fashion.

"Come on, my friend—you have scarcely three months to wait before going home. Three months will soon pass."

"That's easy for you to say..."

"Not at all. Yes, I know, you're going to tell me that I'm an old bachelor—that's perfectly true, but it doesn't prove anything. You'll see how glad you'll be to see your wife again. You'll love her a hundred times more than if you'd never left her. Believe me, although I'm a simple naturalist, I'm something of a psychologist, and I can assure you that absence is to affection what pickles are to roast beef. Forgive me that ludicrous comparison, but it renders my thought accurately."

To which Georges de Malher replied: "All that's charming, but I can assure you that I'd give three years' advancement right now, and many other things besides, including the portfolio of my ministry, to be in the little white house hidden under tall trees at Mourillon, in which my wife is probably playing chess with a respectable female cousin.

At that moment, a frigate captain deigned to ask Georges to make up a foursome with him. One cannot do otherwise than be very flattered by such a request from a superior. The young officer bowed, took his place in a quadrille with some dancing-partner or other, muddled up the steps, endured the irritated gaze of the frigate captain and his uncle's ironic smiles, and, having escorted his partner back to her seat, experienced the first moment of real satisfaction that he had known for a long time.

As he was returning to Sir Owen, an officer with shoulder-knots approached him and took him to one side.

"Monsieur," he said "the Admiral requests that you come to speak to him immediately, without telling anyone. Please come with me."

Very surprised, Georges bowed. He followed his guide through the crowd of guests, went into the aft apartments, went through a door guarded by a matelot armed with a halberd, and waited while the orderly officer went to inform the Admiral.

Monsieur de la Rénolière, very worried, was alone with the French consul

"My dear Monsieur de Malher," he said, "I summoned you immediately because the mission I have to give you will not suffer any delay. You're to go back aboard the *Sirius* immediately, light the fires, and as soon as you're under pressure, you're to go to the quay to collect a cargo. Cholera has broken out in Beyrouth with great violence. Our nationals, and the schools that we protect, are being decimated. In sum, given our role in the Orient, we must go immediately to the aid of the unfortunate populations tested by the scourge.

"Monsieur le Consul has taken urgent measures this evening to have medicines prepared, and all the disinfectant that you can carry. As soon as you're moored, you'll take aboard six physicians, two of them civilian, chosen by Monsieur le Consul, and four belonging to our sanitary service. You'll go directly to Beyrouth and await orders there, while reconciling, in accordance with your conscience, the cares of your crew and the duties of humanity."

"Understood, Admiral. I'll leave immediately."

“Go, Monsieur—I’m counting on your discretion. There will be time for people to hear the sad news tomorrow. The mission is not without danger; I wish you good luck.”

Five minutes later, Georges de Malher took his leave of Sir Owen, who asked for explanations in vain.

“I’ll give them to you aboard the *Sirius*, my dear uncle, if you would like me to give you hospitality until tomorrow. If not, I’m bound to silence.”

“So be it,” said Sir Owen. And he descended into the launch in company with the young man, not without having phlegmatically lit a cigar.