

CHAPTER III FRENZY

When I carry my mind back to that terrible moment, my heart stands still.

And today, as, sitting quietly in front of my desk, I try to bring order into the medley of sensations and shocks that then rioted within me, I find the task a difficult one.

At first, I could not believe that what had occurred was a disaster. Among the various submarine commanders, Jacques had a high reputation. For 18 months, he had been in charge of the *Alose*. And subsequently, he had been transferred to the *Dragonfly*, our largest submarine, because he was the one in whom most confidence was felt. Unless he had had a like confidence in himself, he would not have resolved to make a trial experiment of the boat's speed in descending without the presence of a convoy-ship, and by night instead of by day. His acceptance of special conditions proved how sure he felt of his craft, of his crew, and of himself.

Yes; but this shock!

This shock had been caused by something: by what?

It did not come into my mind at the time that the *Dragonfly* might have collided with an ironclad, since I was unaware that, on account of the great depth of water close to Cape Bon, vessels from Malta hug the coast in this spot.

My first thought was: we had struck on a rock rising up from the sea-bottom, and had damaged our prow in consequence.

The damage must be serious, for we had dipped down with a suddenness indicating the instantaneous invasion of one or several compartments.

My second thought was: Jacques would get us out of the dilemma.

I knew by my conversation with him that, in this new submarine, there were water-tight compartments well separated from each other, and that, in the front part, there was one especially adapted for resisting collisions, and arranged so as to render an inrush of water harmless.

I knew also that several compartments were filled with cellulose, and provided with automatically closing doors.

I knew that, from inside his conning-chamber, Jacques could cast off the safety-leads, either individually or collectively.

Last of all, I knew that, when freed from the weight of the eight or ten tons these leads added, the *Dragonfly* must rise to the surface like a cork, even with one or two water-logged compartments.

And I waited for the ascent. I waited, holding on to the brass rail running round the place where we were, and my pulse beating more rapidly at each second.

No movement happened.

I put my ear to the partition that cut us off from the engine-room. What was taking place on the other side?

"Yvonnec," I cried in a choked voice, "do you hear? What is it?"

A fresh gasping rattle was again audible in the engine-room, and a queer gurgling like that of a person trying in vain to speak.

"You must open," I exclaimed. "Open quickly!"

And I seized one of the knobs on the nuts which the quartermaster had just finished screwing in.

But Yvonnec's hand was on mine directly. "No," he said. "You mustn't."

"Why not? If there is anything the matter, it's only through there we can escape."

"When anything is the matter," he replied, "our orders are to shut the doors... all the doors!"

At this tragic moment, this man thought only of his orders; and, without pausing to ask himself whether it would be fatal or not to him, he had, first and foremost, executed them. There was grandeur in the manifestation of discipline which I had before me; but, to my shame, I confess I did not see the thing in the same light. Since we were at the further extremity of the boat, the way for us towards deliverance, so it seemed to me, was through the room containing the engine; and to close the door giving access to it, I looked upon as madness.

I renewed my attempt. But Yvonnec checked me again; and, without speaking, pointed to a thin stream of water trickling from beneath the screwed-up door. Then, I perceived, what my distraction had prevented me so far from noticing, that my feet were ankle deep in the stream.

The machinery was flooded, and we should have been ourselves submerged if my companion had not acted so promptly.

There was a moment of intense anguish. We looked at each other, Yvonnec and I, without daring to open our lips.

No noise now came from the other side except an occasional whining, which must be that of Phanor. I held my breath, trying to catch an echo of Jacques' voice. I said to myself that a sailor would soon come from him to reassure me.

I had forgotten the water which continued to trickle from under the door, and now filtered along the gutta-percha paddings, until at length the pool crept up to the torpedo tube. Its greater depth against the door showed that the submarine still remained in a somewhat slanting position, the back part where we were standing being less invaded than the fore part. Was our room going to be flooded too?

Once more Yvonnec set himself to twisting the nut handles, and ultimately the water ceased entering. When he had finished, he turned to me and said:

"Captain, we are at the bottom... and shall have to stay here for some time."

This sentence, so dreadful in its quiet brevity, aroused me from the torpor into which I had sunk.

At the bottom, like the *Farfadet*, like the *Lutin*. Was it possible?

If so, it meant death, hideous death, with physical and mental torture, lasting several days, such as I had never thought of without shuddering.

I had formerly read a full account of each of these catastrophes, which had both occurred near to Bizerte, one in the lake, the other not far from the jetty; and I had cursed the lack of foresight responsible for the absence of cranes sufficiently powerful to raise the submarine before its crew were asphyxiated. I remembered that the *Farfadet* had been brought to the surface four days after its accident, and that the imprisoned men had been heard knocking for assistance at the moment when the boat slipped back to the bottom.

If the means requisite for raising the *Farfadet* had been wanting in the Lake of Bizerte, in calm water only four or five fathoms deep, it was not likely they would be forthcoming in the Gulf of Tunis. It was not even likely we should be found.

Who had witnessed the catastrophe? No one, since it had happened at night. On the morrow, when it was perceived that the submarine did not return to Bizerte, the authorities would be anxious, would institute a search... which would be fruitless. We should not be found, because no one had caught sight of us since the moment of our going under water abreast of the antique citadel of Byrsa.

The girl who had waved her handkerchief from the villa, and to whom I had waved mine in return, was the last human creature that had seen us on the surface of the sea; and, after disappearing from her eyes, we had navigated for 25 minutes under water in a direction unknown to any one save ourselves, but which would be rather supposed to lead to Bizerte, whereas we had steered for several miles in an opposite direction, in order to have a freer field towards the east.

Consequently, however prompt such search might be, it would not be in our vicinity. We were lost.

These reflections, rapidly traversing my mind, drove me nearly mad. I called out to Yvonnec, beseeching him to get us out of this prison. I asked him to do all sorts of impossible things. Then I began to stride about the narrow place in which we were confined, incapable of mastering the wild beast's restlessness which a man always feels when pent up. Silence reigned... a silence such as I could never have imagined. It enwrapped us like a thick shroud. Since the engine—the boat's pulse—had ceased to throb, all noise had died away; and no one can realize the despair and frightfulness of absolute immobility who has not experienced it at the bottom of the sea.

Exhausted at length, I stopped once more in front of Yvonnec, who was still standing against the door; and the tranquility in his look restored me somewhat to myself.

It must be the hope of escaping from our dreadful situation which caused this man of inferior social condition and limited education to exhibit such calmness of mind.

"Is all hope gone?" I asked with choking voice.

"Gad, Captain, I don't know any more than you do... We can only wait till somebody comes."

"But who will come?"

"That's more than I'm able to say."

"The commander?"

“Oh! The Commander! It’s not likely any but ourselves are alive now in the boat.”

“You really think the other compartments are full of water?”

“Since the water is in the engine-room, it must have filled the conning-tower, the forward compartments, perhaps those of the crew and the officers’ cabins... if they didn’t shut them in time.”

“Then are we the only ones left?”

“You see the slant, the fore part is at the bottom, that’s sure, and we, who are aft, still float, because there is air here, and perhaps, too, in the compartments below the engine, because they are always shut...”

“What compartments are those?”

“The magazines and the compressed air reservoirs.”

There was a fresh silence, until my anguish broke out into a sob.

“My God! my God!” I cried.

“You are right, captain,” exclaimed the Breton, with a grave voice, “only the Good Lord can deliver us from this!”

My companion’s tone was so impressive that it momentarily diverted my despair. His clear blue eyes gazed at me, and, with his hand on one of the nut fastenings, he seemed like a sentinel placed in front of the fateful gate.

His tranquility at such a time confounded me. I could understand that contact with permanent danger had engendered a habit of resignation, but that in such a desperate pass he should count solely on a problematic intervention appeared to me hardly human. I felt angry with him for staying there so apathetically, and especially for belittling me with his serenity.

A new fit of excitement attacking me, I began to pace backwards and forwards again. It seemed to me I should soon go mad.

Today I cannot well analyze, in the quiet of my recovered life, the tumult of sentiments that agitated me during that revolt against destiny. And what would be the use of evoking the utterances of that miserable piece of humanity I had become? I am ashamed enough to have to expose my weakness, ashamed to have found myself so cowardly, after embracing a career in which death has to be faced.

Death, yes; but not a death like that!

Death in broad daylight, as I had often dreamed of it, in a day of battle, leaving behind me the remembrance of a great warrior-effort, of a supreme assault! Yes, my mind was familiar with that. I had no fear of it.

But the agony of this burial alive! When I think of it even now, it causes me to break out into a cold sweat.

Exhausted again by my emotions, I sank into a state of complete prostration.

How long it lasted; by what hallucinations it was traversed; what noises I thought I heard, calls produced only by the bubbling of my own brain, visions of safety rising amid the chaos of my hurtling ideas—I have no clear recollection now.

When I came back to the consciousness of our situation, I looked round for Yvonnec. He was no longer beside me. By the light of the Edison lamp shining above the torpedo-tube I perceived him leaning over the fore part of the tube, with his head hidden in his hands.

I spoke to him in a low tone; but he did not answer.

Alarmed, I rose. Was he sleeping, or had he fainted? Had he felt the first effects of asphyxia? It could not be that, for I myself still breathed freely.

I went up to him and touched him.

“Yvonnec, are you asleep? Answer me,” I said.

The Breton lifted his head slowly, and I saw round his clasped hands a chaplet of big boxwood beads, terminating in a small crucifix.

He was praying.

I was neither a skeptic nor a church-goer. It was long since I had prayed. During the years that had followed my Confirmation, I had listened to my mother as, kneeling at my bedside, she repeated the prayers with which she had cradled me; and, on reaching manhood, I had joined her in saying them whenever I went to see her, but with none of her sincerity, fervor, and faith.

At the moment of performing any important act, it would never have occurred to me to ask help from God, in whom, however, I believed. My mind being impregnated with fatalism after a dozen

years spent in Africa amongst Arabs, I had lost all conception of a Providence interfering in small human interests, and capable of succoring the atom of humanity buried in the infinity of worlds. Even at this hour of doom, I had not thought of such aid.

Yet, I believed in another life, with its rewards and punishments. I had a settled conviction that the souls of men after quitting the body would receive what was their due; it was strange, therefore, that, on seeing Yvonnec kneeling and praying, I did not imitate him, though a voice within me said: "That man is stronger than you."

"Come, Yvonnec, we must do something; we can't stay here doing nothing," I said.

"At your service, captain; but I have been doing the first thing that was to be done. I have prayed to our Saint Anne of Auray."

"You've done right, since you believe she can help to get us out of this. But now we must act...and act quickly, because, if the light should fail..."

I did not finish my sentence; the consequences it suggested were the most terrible of all... our being in an obscurity rendering all action impossible, an obscurity peopled only with nightmare phantoms! Something must be attempted, at any rate, before such a thing could happen. Yvonnec kissed the cross on his chaplet, put it in his pocket and replied:

"I am at your orders, captain !"

This simple sentence, with its recognition of my rank, strengthened my will. In our desperate position, which might have been supposed to destroy social distinctions in favor of the animal instinct of self-preservation, this sailor attributed superiority to me, and showed that he relied on me.

In order to justify his confidence in the officer, I summoned up all my energy. Twenty years passed in the army had given me a fund of coolness. It was time I proved to this sailor, who was 15 years my junior, that I was able to master my weakness.

Getting up, I glanced round the compartment. In the corner near the door, my friend Jaubert's oxylyth apparatus was working silently, and automatically diffusing throughout the narrow space in which we were confined the gas we needed to breathe; at the same time, it absorbed the carbonic acid our lungs exhaled into the air.

Its two big cylinders went up to the ceiling. I knew they had been charged at our departure, and could therefore supply us with oxygen for a week; so it was not asphyxia that was our immediate danger.

A week! The apparatus might even last longer; for it was intended also to feed the engine; and the big copper tube communicating with the engine-room passed through the steel partition an inch or two above the door.

Since the machinery was swamped, all the excess oxygen would be utilizable for ourselves. There was no reason to fear that our gas-producing apparatus might be invaded by the water, since the inside pressure of cylinders and tubes sufficed to keep it out.

I was making these reflections to myself when Yvonnec, stroking the torpedo that hung from the ceiling, said:

"If only we could get out like the torpedo, captain!"

I turned round, and for a few instants I stared at the monster, hypnotized by its glittering form. The thought just expressed by the Breton had passed through my own mind before the accident, and I had mentioned it to d'Elbée; and indeed the torpedoes used on board the *Dragonfly* were of a diameter equal about to the body of an ordinary-sized man.

Since the launching-tube communicated with the sea, one might take one's place in it, like a torpedo, and be shot out. Then, once out...

"Yvonnec," I cried, "quick, open the shutter."

My companion at once seized the knob, somewhat similar to that of an old cannon of 80, turned it a sixth part round, and the shutter opened, allowing us to see inside.

I stooped down and put my arm in. If a torpedo had already been introduced in readiness, the plan was not feasible. But no, the tube was empty.

"Now, Yvonnec," I said, "can't we escape through there?"

"At first, it seemed to me we could, captain; but after a bit of reflection, I fancy it's impossible."

"Why?"

"Because we are not torpedoes."

"You told me they were driven out by powder."

“Yes, in that tube; in the other, compressed air is used.”

This was unfortunate, for compressed air was preferable to powder with a man in front. However, the powder could not be really dangerous, having only just the expanding and driving force to project the torpedo out into the water, where its own screws came into action as propellers.

“Try if you can get in, Yvonnec.”

“It’s not necessary, captain; I did try some time ago with one of my comrades, just for fun. There isn’t much elbow room, but one can get in.”

“Do you think I could?”

“Surely. You’re no bigger than me.”

The hope of employing the tube as a means of escape began to shape itself. I weighed the objections; but they presented no insurmountable difficulties, although, the evening before, I should have said they did. Feverishly I questioned my companion.

“How is the tube closed at the other end?”

“By a thick cap garnished with leather rubbers.”

“And how is the cap held tight?”

“By the water.”

The question even was useless; for evidently the pressure of water on the outside held it the tighter in proportion as the depth increased.

The next question was more doubtful.

“At what depth are we?”

A column of water measuring ten meters corresponds to a pressure equal to that of the air at the Earth’s surface, and is balanced in the barometer by a column of mercury of 30 inches. If, therefore, we were 20 or 30 fathoms under the surface, we had a pressure above us of between 60 and 80 pounds per square inch, and the same pressure, of course, on the cap of the tube. It was enormous.

I tried to collect my ideas and to remember. A little before the accident, I had seen the boat’s hydrographic chart. It was dotted all over with quotations of depth. Even in the Gulf of Tunis they varied from five to 15 and 20 fathoms. And a trifle further northwards, it seemed to me I had noticed figures showing depths of between 30 and 40. If the accident had occurred in these parts, we could not possibly get out. Nor could any human aid reach us at such a depth.

No professional divers would risk themselves at this depth. At between 15 and 20 fathoms it would appear that they are attacked by giddiness, which forces them to return to the surface at once. I had read somewhere, at the time of the disaster to the *Lutin*, which lay 17-1/2 fathoms deep, that a trained diver could never go deeper than 25 fathoms.

Where were we?

The sweat broke out on my forehead as I asked this question aloud.

When the commander of the *Dragonfly* gave up his project of descending to 20 fathoms, his last words to the second lieutenant were an order to steer towards Ras-al-Fortas.

This was the cape opposite Cape Carthage, on the other side of the gulf. Since the eastern side of the gulf was rocky and ran sheer down into the sea, there must be considerable depths there, for I recalled the dotted curves indicating the submarine differences of depth for each ten meters of distance; and, if I was not mistaken, the first three of these curves passed close to the shore, very near together.

If, therefore, our boat had reached anywhere near that shore, we must be in a depth of 16 fathoms. But if, on the other hand, we had already veered in the direction of Plane Island, towards Bizerte, we might have sunk in a depth of 35 or 40 fathoms. And then we had no hope.

I cannot say that I argued the matter out exactly in this orderly manner at the moment. My brain was too confused. Amidst the rush of thoughts, my one fixed idea was to get out through the tube, if possible.

Still, I was forced to reckon with the shock that would be felt from the explosion of the powder; with the mephitic gases created by the explosion; with the distance to be covered in reaching the surface. To lessen the force with which my head would be driven against the cap of the outlet, I would protect my head with a pad made of my clothes; and, since it would be the pressure of the powder-generated gases which would open the cap, not the impact of my head, I should stand a decent chance of getting through without a fractured skull.

The powder-generated gases were mephitic; but, as I should be affected by them only for a moment or so, I concluded they could not be fatal to me.

What would be the most difficult was the having to rise through 15 or 20 fathoms of water, in order to reach the surface; yet, even here, I argued I was bound to come to the top, though perhaps unable to hold my breath long enough to avoid swallowing water, for I would surround my neck, arms, and waist with pieces of cork. There was no lack of this article in our prison. It hung on the walls in the form of chaplets and flat sections; and I had remarked similar supplies in each other compartment, a reminder of the ever-threatening danger.

As if one could escape from a submarine!

Once in the upper air I should be saved; the coast could not be far away. I was a good swimmer; I should be held up by the cork; and the joy of being free of this tomb would increase my strength tenfold.

Throughout these interweavings of plans and hopes, I had not once thought of Yvonnec, who stood motionless and silent beside the open tube. Or, rather, I had just once thought of him, but solely because he would close the shutter behind me, and fire the powder necessary for my being thrust forth.

But I had built up my plan without asking if he were willing to play the role of staying and dying alone. But now the question arose: Why should he stay, and not I? By what right could I save my life in sacrificing his? If there were the least chance of escape, it ought to be utilized for both; and, if a choice were to be made between us two, it ought to be made by casting lots. Yvonnec must have read my thoughts at present, for, on raising my head to look at him, he said:

“Captain, if you feel yourself a good enough swimmer to reach the coast, I will send you off as soon as you like!”

