Leblanc Maurice

# The Tremendous Event

# Maurice Leblanc
# The Tremendous Event

*http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=23170291*
*The Tremendous Event:*

# Содержание

# Leblanc Maurice
# The Tremendous Event

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

The tremendous event of the 4th. of June, whose consequences affected the relations of the two great Western nations even more profoundly than did the war, has called forth, during the last fifty years, a constant efflorescence of books, memoirs and scientific studies of truthful reports and fabulous narratives. Eye-witnesses have related their impressions; journalists have collected their articles into volumes; scientists have published the results of their researches; novelists have imagined unknown tragedies; and poets have lifted up their voices. There is no detail of that tragic day but has been brought to light; and this is true likewise of the days which went before and of those which came after and of all the reactions, moral or social, economic or political, by which it made itself felt, throughout the twentieth century, in the destinies of the world.

There was nothing lacking but Simon Dubosc's own story. And it was strange that we should have known only by reports, usually fantastic, the part played by the man who, first by chance and then by his indomitable courage and later still by his clear-sighted enthusiasm, was thrust into the very heart of the

adventure.

To-day, when the nations are gathered about the statue overlooking the arena in which the hero fought, does it not seem permissible to add to the legend the embellishment of a reality which will not misrepresent it? And, if it is found that this reality trenches too closely upon the man's private life, need we object?

It was in Simon Dubosc that the western spirit first became conscious of itself and it is the whole man that belongs to history.

# PART THE FIRST

## CHAPTER I
## THE SUIT

"Oh, but this is terrible!" cried Simon Dubosc. "Edward, just listen!"

And the young Frenchman, drawing his friend away from the tables arranged in little groups on the terraces of the club-house, showed him, in the late edition of the *Argus*, which a motorcyclist had just brought to the New Golf Club, this telegram, printed in heavy type:

> "Boulogne, *20 May*. – The master and crew of a fishing-vessel which has returned to harbour declare that this morning, at a spot mid-way between the French and English coasts, they saw a large steamer lifted up by a gigantic waterspout. After standing on end with her whole length out of the water, she pitched forward and disappeared in the space of a few seconds.
>
> "Such violent eddies followed and the sea, until then quite calm, was affected by such abnormal convulsions that the fishermen had to row their hardest to avoid being dragged into the whirlpool. The naval authorities are sending a couple of tugs to the site of the disaster."

"Well, Rolleston, what do you think of it?"

"Terrible indeed!" replied the Englishman. "Two days ago, the *Ville de Dunkerque*. To-day another ship, and in the same place. There's a coincidence about it.."

"That's precisely what a second telegram says," exclaimed Simon, continuing to read:

> "3. O. p. m. – The steamer sunk between Folkestone and Boulogne is the transatlantic liner *Brabant*, of the Rotterdam-Amerika Co., carrying twelve hundred passengers and a crew of eight hundred. No survivors have been picked up. The bodies of the drowned are beginning to rise to the surface.
>
> "There is no doubt that this terrifying calamity, like the loss of the *Ville de Dunkerque* two days ago, was caused by one of those mysterious phenomena which have been disturbing the Straits of Dover during the past week and in which a number of vessels were nearly lost, before the sinking of the *Brabant* and the *Ville de Dunkerque*."

The two young men were silent. Leaning on the balustrade which runs along the terrace of the club-house, they gazed beyond the cliffs at the vast circle of the sea. It was peaceful and kindly innocent of anger or treachery; its near surface was crossed by fine streaks of green or yellow, while, farther out, it was flawless and blue as the sky and, farther still, beneath the motionless cloud, grey as a great sheet of slate.

But, above Brighton, the sun, already dipping towards the downs, shone through the clouds; and a luminous trail of gold-

dust appeared upon the sea.

"*La perfide!*" murmured Simon Dubosc. He understood English perfectly, but always spoke French with his friend. "The perfidious brute: how beautiful she is, how attractive! Would you ever have thought her capable of these malevolent whims, which are so destructive and murderous? Are you crossing to-night, Rolleston?"

"Yes, Newhaven to Dieppe."

"You'll be quite safe," said Simon. "The sea has had her two wrecks; she's sated. But why are you in such a hurry to go?"

"I have to interview a crew at Dieppe to-morrow morning; I am putting my yacht in commission. Then, in the afternoon, to Paris, I expect; and, in a week's time, a cruise to Norway. And you, Simon?"

Simon Dubosc did not reply. He had turned toward the club-house, whose windows, in their borders of Virginia creeper and honeysuckle, were blazing with the sun. The players had left the links and were taking tea beneath great many-coloured sunshades planted on the lawn. The *Argus* was passing from hand to hand and arousing excited comments. Some of the tables were occupied by young men and women, others by their elders and others by old gentlemen who were recuperating their strength by devouring platefuls of cake and toast.

To the left, beyond the geranium-beds, the gentle undulations of the links began, covered with turf that was like green velvet; and right at the end, a long way off, rose the tall figure of a last

player, escorted by his two caddies.

"Lord Bakefield's daughter and her three friends can't take their eyes off you," said Rolleston.

Simon smiled:

"Miss Bakefield is looking at me because she knows I love her; and her three friends because they know I love Miss Bakefield. A man in love is always something to look at; a pleasant sight for the one who is loved and an irritating sight for those who are not."

This was spoken without a trace of vanity. For that matter, no man could have possessed more natural charm or displayed a more alluring simplicity. The expression of his face, his blue eyes, his smile and something personal, an emanation compounded of strength and suppleness and healthy gaiety, of confidence in himself and in life, all contributed to give this peculiarly favoured young man a power of attraction to whose spell the onlooker readily surrendered.

Devoted to out-door games and exercises, he had grown to manhood with those young postwar Frenchmen who made a strong point of physical culture and a rational mode of life. His movements and his attitudes alike revealed that harmony which is developed by a logical training and is still further refined, in those who comply with the rules of a very active intellectual existence, by the study of art and a feeling for beauty in all of its forms.

For him, indeed, as for many others, liberation from the lecture-room had not meant the beginning of a new life. If, by reason of a superfluity of energy, he was impelled to give much

of his time to games and to attempts at establishing records which took him to all the running-grounds and athletic battle-fields of Europe and America, he never allowed his body to take precedence of his mind. Every day, come what might, he set apart the two or three hours of solitude, of reading and meditation, which the intellect requires for its nourishment, continuing to learn with the enthusiasm of a student who is prolonging the life of the school and university until events compel him to make a choice among the paths which he has opened up for himself.

His father, to whom he was bound by ties of the liveliest affection, was puzzled:

"After all, Simon, what are you aiming at? What's your object?"

"I am training."

"For what?"

"I don't know. But an hour strikes for each of us when we must be fully prepared, well equipped, with our ideas in good order and our muscles absolutely fit. I shall be ready."

And so he reached his thirtieth year. It was at the beginning of that year, at Nice, through Edward Rolleston, that he made Miss Bakefield's acquaintance.

"I am sure to see your father at Dieppe," said Rolleston. "He will be surprised that you haven't returned with me, as we arranged last month. What shall I say to him?"

"Say that I'm stopping here a little longer.. or no, don't say

anything… I'll write to him.. to-morrow perhaps.. or the day after.."

He took Rolleston's arm:

"Tell me, old chap," he said, "tell me. If I were to ask Lord Bakefield for his daughter's hand, what do you think would happen?"

Rolleston appeared to be nonplussed. He hesitated and then replied:

"Miss Bakefield's father is a peer, and perhaps you don't know that her mother, the wonderful Lady Constance, who died some six years ago, was the grand-daughter of a son of George III. Therefore she had an eighth part of blood royal running in her veins."

Edward Rolleston pronounced these words with such unction that Simon, the irreverent Frenchman, could not help laughing:

"The deuce! An eighth! So that Miss Bakefield can still boast a sixteenth part and her children will enjoy a thirty-second! My chances are diminishing! In the matter of blood royal, the most that I can lay claim to is a great-grandfather, a pork-butcher by trade, who voted for the death of Louis XVI.! That doesn't amount to much!"

He gave his friend a gentle push:

"Do me a service. Miss Bakefield is alone for the moment. Keep her friends engaged so that I can speak to her for a minute or two: I shan't be longer."

Edward Rolleston, a friend of Simon's who shared his athletic

tastes, was a tall young man, too pale, too thin and so long in the back that he had acquired a stoop. Simon knew that he had many faults, including a love of whisky and the habit of haunting private bars and living by his wits. But he was a devoted friend, in whom Simon was conscious of a genuine and loyal affection.

The two men went forward together. Miss Bakefield came to meet Simon, while Rolleston accosted her three friends.

Miss Bakefield wore an absolutely simple wash frock, without any of the trimmings that were then the fashion. Her bare throat, her arms, which showed through the muslin of her sleeves, her face and even her forehead under her hat were of that warm tint which the skin of some fair-haired women acquires in the sun and the open air. Her eyes were almost black, flecked with glittering specks of gold. Her hair, which shone with metallic glints, was dressed low on the neck in a heavy coil. But these were trivial details which you noted only at leisure, when you had in some degree recovered from the glorious spectacle of her beauty in all its completeness.

Simon had not so recovered. He always paled a little when he met Miss Bakefield's eyes, however tenderly they rested on him.

"Isabel," he said, "are you determined?"

"Quite as much as yesterday," she said, smiling; "and I shall be still more so to-morrow, when the moment comes for action."

"Still… We have known each other hardly four months."

"Meaning thereby?."

"Meaning that, now that we are about to perform an

irreparable action, I invite you to use your judgment.."

"Rather than listen to my love? Since I first loved you, Simon, I have not been able to discover the least disagreement between my judgment and my love. That's why I am going with you to-morrow morning."

"Isabel!"

"Would you rather that I left to-morrow night with my father? On a voyage lasting three or four years? That is what he proposes, what he insists upon. It's for you to choose."

While they exchanged these serious words, their faces displayed no trace of the emotion which thrilled the very depths of their beings. It was as though, in being together, they experienced that sense of happiness which gives strength and tranquillity. And, as the girl, like Simon, was tall and bore herself magnificently, they received a vague impression that they were one of those privileged couples whom destiny selects for a life more strenuous, nobler and more passionate than the ordinary.

"Very well," said Simon. "But let me at least appeal to your father. He doesn't know.."

"There is nothing he doesn't know, Simon. And it is precisely because our love displeases him and displeases my step-mother even more that he wants to get me away from you."

"I insist on this, Isabel."

"Speak to him, then, Simon, and, if he refuses, don't try to see me to-day. To-morrow, a little before twelve o'clock, I shall be at Newhaven. Wait for me by the gangway of the steamer."

He had something more to say:

"Have you seen the *Argus*?"

"Yes."

"You're not frightened of the crossing?"

She smiled. He bowed over her hand and kissed it and said no more.

Lord Bakefield, a peer of the United Kingdom, had been married first to the aforesaid great-grand-daughter of George III. and secondly to the Duchess of Faulconbridge. He was the owner, in his own right or his wife's, of country-houses, estates and town properties which enabled him to travel from Brighton to Folkestone almost without leaving his own domains. He was the distant player who had lingered on the links; and his figure, now less remote, was appearing and disappearing according to the lay of the ground. Simon decided to profit by the occasion and to go to meet him.

He set out resolutely. In spite of the young girl's warning and though he had learnt, from her and from Edward Rolleston, something of Lord Bakefield's true character and of his prejudices, he was influenced by the memory of the cordial welcome which Isabel's father had invariably accorded him hitherto.

This time again the grip of his hand was full of geniality. Lord Bakefield's face – a round face, too fat for his thin and lanky body, too florid and a little commonplace, though not lacking in intelligence – lit up with satisfaction.

"Well, young man, I suppose you have come to say good-bye? You have heard that we are leaving?"

"I have, Lord Bakefield; and that is why I should like a few words with you."

"Quite, quite! You have my attention."

He bent over the tee, building up, with his two hands, a little mound of sand on whose summit he placed his ball; then, drawing himself up, he accepted the brassy which one of his caddies held out to him and took his stand, perfectly poised, with his left foot a little advanced and his knees very slightly bent. Two or three trial swings, to assure himself of the precise direction; a second's reflection and calculation; and suddenly the club swung upwards, descended and struck the ball.

The ball flew through the air and suddenly veered to the left; then, curving to the right after passing a clump of trees which formed an obstacle to be avoided, it fell on the putting-green at a few yards' distance from the hole.

"Well done!" cried Simon. "A very pretty screw!"

"Not so bad, not so bad," said Lord Bakefield, resuming his round.

Simon did not allow himself to be disconcerted by this curious method of beginning an interview and broached his subject, without further preamble:

"Lord Bakefield, you know who my father is, a Dieppe ship-owner, with the largest merchant-fleet in France. So I need say no more on that side."

"Capital fellow, M. Dubosc," said Lord Bakefield, approvingly. "I had the pleasure of shaking hands with him at Dieppe last month. Capital fellow."

Simon continued, delightedly:

"Let us consider my own case. I'm an only son. I have an independent fortune from my poor mother. When I was twenty, I crossed the Sahara in an aeroplane without touching ground. At twenty-one, I made the record for the running mile. At twenty-two, I won two events at the Olympic Games: fencing and swimming. At twenty-five, I was the world's champion all-round athlete. And mixed up with all this was the Morocco campaign: four times mentioned in dispatches, promoted lieutenant in the reserve, awarded the military medal and the medal for saving life. That's all. Oh no, I was forgetting: licentiate in letters, laureate of the Academy for my essays on the Grecian ideal of beauty. There you are. I am twenty-nine years of age."

Lord Bakefield looked at him with the tail of his eye and murmured:

"Not bad, young man, not bad."

"As for the future," Simon continued, without waiting, "that won't take long. I don't like making plans. However, I have the offer of a seat in the Chamber of Deputies at the coming elections, in August. Of course, politics don't much interest me. But after all.. if I must… And then I'm young: I shall always manage to get a place in the sun. Only, there's one thing.. at least, from your point of view, Lord Bakefield. My name is Simon

Dubosc. Dubosc in one word, without the particule.. without the least semblance of a title… And that, of course.."

He expressed himself without embarrassment, in a good-humoured, playful tone. Lord Bakefield, the picture of amiability, was quite imperturbed. Simon broke into a laugh:

"I quite grasp the situation; and I would much rather give you a more elaborate pedigree, with a coat-of-arms, motto and title-deeds complete. Unfortunately, that's impossible. However, if it comes to that, we can trace back our ancestry to the fourteenth century. Yes, Lord Bakefield, in 1392, Mathieu Dubosc, a yeoman in the manor of Blancmesnil, near Dieppe, was sentenced to fifty strokes of the rod for theft. And the Duboscs went on valiantly tilling the soil, from father to son. The farm still exists, the farm *du Bosc*, that is *du Bosquet*, of the clump of trees.."

"Yes, yes, I know," interrupted Lord Bakefield.

"Oh, you know," repeated the younger man, somewhat taken back.

He intuitively felt, by the old nobleman's attitude and the very tone of the interruption, the full importance of the words which he was about to hear.

And Lord Bakefield continued:

"Yes, I happen to know… When I was at Dieppe last month, I made a few inquiries about my family, which sprang from Normandy. Bakefield as you may perhaps not be aware, is the English corruption of Bacqueville. There was a Bacqueville

among the companions of William the Conqueror. You know the picturesque little market-town of that name in the middle of the Pays de Caux? Well, there is a fourteenth-century deed in the records at Bacqueville, a deed signed in London, by which the Count of Bacqueville, Baron of Auppegard and Gourel, grants to his vassal, the Lord of Blancmesnil, the right of administering justice on the farm du Bosc.. the same farm du Bosc on which poor Mathieu received his thrashing. An amusing coincidence, very amusing indeed: what do you think, young man?"

This time, Simon was pierced to the quick. It was impossible to imagine a more impertinent answer couched in more frank and courteous terms. Quite baldly, under the pretence of telling a genealogical anecdote, Lord Bakefield made it clear that in his eyes young Dubosc was of scarcely greater importance than was the fourteenth-century yeoman in the eyes of the mighty English Baron Bakefield and feudal lord of Blancmesnil. The titles and exploits of Simon Dubosc, world's champion, victor in the Olympic Games, laureate of the French Academy and all-round athlete, did not weigh an ounce in the scale by which a British peer, conscious of his superiority, judges the merits of those who aspire to his daughter's hand. Now the merits of Simon Dubosc were of the kind which are amply rewarded with the favour of an assumed politeness and a cordial handshake.

All this was so evident and the old nobleman's mind, with its pride, its prejudice and its stiff-necked obstinacy, stood so plainly revealed that Simon, who was unwilling to suffer the humiliation

of a refusal, replied in a rather impertinent and bantering tone:

"Needless to say, Lord Bakefield, I make no pretension to becoming your son-in-law just like that, all in a moment and without having done something to deserve so immense a privilege. My request refers first of all to the conditions which Simon Dubosc, the yeoman's descendant, would have to fulfil to obtain the hand of a Bakefield. I presume that, as the Bakefields have an ancestor who came over with William the Conqueror, Simon Dubosc, to rehabilitate himself in their eyes, would have to conquer something – such as a kingdom – or, following the Bastard's example, to make a triumphant descent upon England? Is that the way of it?"

"More or less, young man," replied the old peer, slightly disconcerted by this attack.

"Perhaps too," continued Simon, "he ought to perform a few superhuman actions, a few feats of prowess of world-wide importance, affecting the happiness of mankind? William the Conqueror first, Hercules or Don Quixote next?.. Then, perhaps, one might come to terms?"

"One might, young man."

"And that would be all?"

"Not quite!"

And Lord Bakefield, who had recovered his self-possession, continued, in a genial fashion:

"I cannot undertake that Isabel would remain free for very long. You would have to succeed within a given space of time.

Do you consider, M. Dubosc, that I shall be too exacting if I fix this period at two months?"

"You are much too generous, Lord Bakefield," cried Simon. "Three weeks will be ample. Think of it: three weeks to prove myself the equal of William the Conqueror and the rival of Don Quixote! It is longer than I need! I thank you from the bottom of my heart! For the present, Lord Bakefield, good-bye!"

And, turning on his heels, fairly well-satisfied with an interview which, after all, released him from any obligation to the old nobleman, Simon Dubosc returned to the club-house. Isabel's name had hardly been mentioned.

"Well," asked Rolleston, "have you put forward your suit?"

"More or less."

"And what was the reply?"

"Couldn't be better, Edward, couldn't be better! It is not at all impossible that the decent man whom you see over there, knocking a little ball into a little hole, may become the father-in-law of Simon Dubosc. A mere nothing would do the trick: some tremendous stupendous event which would change the face of the earth. That's all."

"Events of that sort are rare, Simon," said Rolleston.

"Then, my dear Rolleston, things must happen as Isabel and I have decided."

"And that is?"

Simon did not reply. He had caught sight of Isabel, who was leaving the club-house.

On seeing him, she stopped short. She stood some twenty paces away, grave and smiling. And in the glance which they exchanged there was all the tenderness, devotion, happiness and certainty that two young people, can promise each other on the threshold of life.

# CHAPTER II
# THE CROSSING

Next day, at Newhaven, Simon Dubosc learnt that, at about six o'clock on the previous evening, a fishing-smack with a crew of eight hands had foundered in sight of Seaford. The cyclone had been seen from the shore.

"Well, captain," asked Simon, who happened to know the first officer of the boat which was about to cross that day, having met him in Dieppe, "well captain, what do you make of it? More wrecks! Don't you think things are beginning to get alarming?"

"It looks like it, worse luck!" replied the captain. "Fifteen passengers have refused to come on board. They're frightened. Yet, after all, one has to take chances.."

"Chances which keep on recurring, captain, and over the whole of the Channel just now.."

"M. Dubosc, if you take the whole of the Channel, you will probably find several hundred craft afloat at one time. Each of them runs a risk, but you'll admit the risk is small."

"Was the crossing good last night?" asked Simon, thinking of his friend Rolleston.

"Very good, both ways, and so will ours be. The *Queen Mary* is a fast boat; she does the sixty-four miles in just under two hours. We shall leave and we shall arrive; you may be sure of that, M. Dubosc."

The captain's confidence, while reassuring Simon, did not completely allay the fears which would not even have entered his mind in ordinary times. He selected two cabins separated by a state-room. Then, as he still had twenty-five minutes to wait, he repaired to the harbour station.

There he found people greatly excited. At the booking-office, at the refreshment-bar and in the waiting-room where the latest telegrams were written on a black-board, travellers with anxious faces were hurrying to and fro. Groups collected about persons who were better-informed than the rest and who were talking very loudly and gesticulating. A number of passengers were demanding repayment of the price of their tickets.

"Why, there's Old Sandstone!" said Simon to himself, as he recognized one of his former professors at a table in the refreshment-room.

And, instead of avoiding him, as he commonly did when the worthy man appeared at the corner of some street in Dieppe, he went up to him and took a seat beside him:

"Well, my dear professor, how goes it?"

"What, is that you, Dubosc?"

Beneath a silk hat of an antiquated shape and rusty with age was a round, fat face like a village priest's, a face with enormous cheeks which overlapped a collar of doubtful cleanliness. Something like a bit of black braid did duty as a necktie. The waist-coat and frock-coat were adorned with stains; and the over-coat, of a faded green, had three of its four buttons missing and

acknowledged an age even more venerable than that of the hat.

Old Sandstone – he was never known except by this nickname – had taught natural science at Dieppe College for the last twenty-five years. A geologist first and foremost and a geologist of real merit, he owed his by-name to his investigations of the sedimentary formations of the Norman coast, investigations which he had extended even to the bottom of the sea and which, though he was nearly sixty years of age, he was still continuing with unabated enthusiasm. Only last year, in the month of September, Simon had seen him, a big, heavy man, bloated with fat and crippled with rheumatism, struggling into a diver's dress and making, within sight of Saint-Valéry-en-Caux, his forty-eighth descent. The Channel from Le Havre to Dunkirk and from Portsmouth to Dover, no longer had any secrets for him.

"Are you going back to Dieppe presently, professor?"

"On the contrary, I have just come from Dieppe. I crossed last night, as soon as I heard of the wreck of the English fishing-smack, you know, between Seaford and Cuckmere Haven. I have already begun to make inquiries this morning, of some people who were visiting the Roman camp and saw the thing happen."

"Well?" said Simon, eagerly.

"Well, they saw, at a mile from the coast, a whirl of waves and foam revolving at a dizzy speed round a hollow centre. Then suddenly a column of water gushed straight up, mixed with sand and stones, and fell back on all sides, like a rain of rockets. It was magnificent!"

"And the fishing-smack?"

"The fishing-smack?" echoed Old Sandstone, who seemed not to understand, to take no interest in this trivial detail. "Oh, yes, the fishing-smack, of course! Well, she disappeared, that's all!"

The young man was silent, but the next moment continued:

"Now my dear professor, tell me frankly, do you think there's any danger in crossing?"

"Oh, that's absurd! It's as though you were to ask me whether one ought to shut one's self in one's room when there is a thunder-storm. Of course the lightning strikes the earth now and again. But there's plenty of margin all round… Besides, aren't you a good swimmer? Well, at the least sign of danger, dive into the sea without delay: don't stop to think; just dive!"

"And what is your opinion, professor? How do you explain all these phenomena?"

"How? Oh, very simply! I will remind you, to begin with, that in 1912 the Somme experienced a few shocks which amounted to actual earthquakes. Point number one. Secondly, these shocks coincided with local disturbances in the Channel, which passed almost unnoticed; but they attracted my attention and were the starting point of all my recent investigations. Among others, one of these disturbances in which I am inclined to see the premonitory signs of the present water-spouts, occurred off Saint-Valéry. And that was why you caught me one day, I remember, going down in a diving-suit just at that spot. Now, from all this, it follows.."

"What follows?"

Old Sandstone interrupted himself, seized the young man's hand and suddenly changed the course of the conversation:

"Now tell me, Dubosc," he said, "have you read my pamphlet on *The Cliffs of the Channel*? You haven't, have you? Well, if you had, you would know that one of the chapters, entitled, '*What will occur in the Channel in the year 2000*,' is now being fulfilled. D'you understand? I predicted the whole thing! Not these minor incidents of wrecks and water-spouts, of course, but what they seem to announce. Yes, Dubosc; whether it be in the year 2000, or the year 3000, or next week, I have foretold in all its details the unheard-of, astounding, yet very natural thing which will happen sooner or later."

He had now grown animated. Drops of sweat beaded his cheeks and forehead; and, taking from an inner pocket of his frock-coat a long narrow wallet, with a lock to it and so much worn and so often repaired that its appearance harmonized perfectly with his green over-coat and his rusty hat:

"You want to know the truth?" he exclaimed. "It's here. All my observations and all my hypotheses are contained in this wallet."

And he was inserting the key in the lock when loud voices were raised on the platform. The tables in the refreshment-room were at once deserted. Without paying further heed to Old Sandstone, Simon followed the crowd which was rushing into the waiting-room.

Two telegrams had come from France. One, after reporting

the wreck of a coasting-vessel, the *Bonne Vierge*, which plied weekly between Calais, Le Havre and Cherbourg, announced that the Channel Tunnel had fallen in, fortunately without the loss of a single life. The other, which the crowd read as it was being written, stated that "the keeper of the Ailly lighthouse, near Dieppe, had at break of day seen five columns of water and sand shooting up almost simultaneously, two miles from the coast, and stirring up the sea between Veules and Pourville."

These telegrams elicited cries of dismay. The destruction of the Channel Tunnel, ten years of effort wasted, millions of pounds swallowed up: this was evidently a calamity! But how much more dreadful was the sinister wording of the second telegram! Veules! Pourville! Dieppe! That was the coast which they would have to make for! The steamboat, in two hours' time, would be entering the very region affected by the cataclysm! On sailing, Seaford and Hastings; on nearing port, Veules, Pourville and Dieppe!

There was a rush for the booking-office. The station-master's and inspectors' offices were besieged. Two hundred people rushed on board the vessel to recover their trunks and bags; and a crowd of distraught travellers, staggering under the weight of their luggage, took the up-train by assault, as though the sea-walls and the quays and rampart of the cliffs were unable to protect them from the hideous catastrophe.

Simon shuddered. He could not but be impressed by the fears displayed by these people. And then what was the meaning of this

mysterious sequence of phenomena, which seemed incapable of any natural explanation? What invisible tempest was making the waves boil up from the depths of a motionless sea? Why did these sudden cyclones all occur within so small a radius, affecting only a limited region?

All around him the tumult increased, amid repeated painful scenes. One of these he found particularly distressing; for the people concerned were French and he was better able to understand what they were saying. There was a family, consisting of the father and mother, both still young, and their six children, the smallest of whom, only a few months old, was sleeping in its mother's arms. And the mother was imploring her husband in a sort of despair:

"Don't let us go, please don't let us go! We're not obliged to!"

"But we are, my dear: you saw my partner's letter. And really there's no occasion for all this distress!"

"Please, darling!.. I have a presentiment… You know I'm always right.."

"Would you rather I crossed alone?"

"Oh no! Not that!"

Simon heard no more. But he was never to forget that cry of a loving wife, nor the grief-stricken expression of the mother who, at that moment, was embracing her six children with a glance.

He made his escape. The clock pointed to half-past eleven; and Miss Bakefield ought to be on her way. But, when he reached the quay, he saw a motor-car turning the corner of a street; and

at the window of the car was Isabel's golden head. In a moment all his gloomy thoughts were banished. He had not expected the girl for another twenty minutes; and, though he was not afraid of suffering, he had made up his mind that those last twenty minutes would be a period of distress and anxiety. Would she keep her promise? Might she not meet with some unforeseen obstacle?.. And here was Isabel arriving!

Yesterday he had determined, as a measure of precaution, not to speak to her until they had taken their places on the boat. However, as soon as Simon saw her step out of the car, he ran to meet her. She was wrapped in a grey cloak and carried a rug rolled in a strap. A sailor followed with her travelling-bag.

"Excuse me, Isabel," said Simon, "but something so serious has happened that I am bound to consult you. The telegrams, in fact, mention a whole series of catastrophes which have occurred precisely in the part which we shall have to cross."

Isabel did not seem much put out:

"You're saying this, Simon, in a very calm tone which does not match your words at all."

"It's because I'm so happy!" he murmured.

Their eyes met in a long and penetrating glance. Then she continued:

"What would you do, Simon, if you were alone?"

And, when he hesitated what to answer:

"You would go," she said. "And so should I.."

She stepped onto the gangway.

Half an hour later, the *Queen Mary* left Newhaven harbour. At that instant, Simon, who was always so completely his own master and who, even in the most feverish moments of enthusiasm, claimed the power of controlling his emotions, felt his legs trembling beneath him, while his eyes grew moist with tears. The test of happiness was too much for him.

Simon had never been in love before. Love was an event which he awaited at his leisure; and he did not think it essential to prepare for its coming by seeking it in adventures which might well exhaust his ardour:

"Love," he used to say, "should blend with life, should form a part of life and not be added to it. Love is not an aim in itself: it is a principle of action and the noblest in the world."

From the first day when he saw her, Isabel's beauty had dazzled him; and he needed very little time to discover that, until the last moment of his life, no other woman would ever mean anything to him. The same irresistible and deliberate impulse drove Isabel towards Simon. Brought up in the south of France, speaking French as her native tongue, she did not feel and did not evoke in Simon the sense of embarrassment that almost invariably arises from a difference of nationality. That which united them was infinitely stronger than that which divided them.

It was a curious thing, but during these past four months, while love was blossoming within them like a plant whose flowers were constantly renewed and constantly increasing in beauty, they had had none of those long conversations in which lovers eagerly

question each other and in which each seeks to find entrance into the unknown territory of the other's soul. They spoke little and rarely of themselves, as though they had delegated to gentle daily life the task of raising the veils of the mystery one by one.

Simon knew only that Isabel was not happy. After losing at the age of fifteen a mother whom she adored, she failed to find in her father the love and the caresses that might have consoled her. Moreover, Lord Bakefield almost immediately fell under the dominion of the Duchess of Faulconbridge, a vain, tyrannical woman, who rarely stirred from her villa at Cannes or her country-seat near Battle, but whose malign influence exerted itself equally close at hand and far away, in speech and by letter, on her husband and on her step-daughter, whom she persecuted with her morbid jealousy.

Naturally enough, Isabel and Simon exchanged a mutual promise. And, naturally enough, on coming into collision with Lord Bakefield's implacable will and his wife's hatred, they arrived at the only possible solution, that of running away. This was proposed without heroic phrases and adopted without any painful struggle or reluctance. Each formed a decision in perfect liberty. To themselves their action appeared extremely simple. Loyally determined to prolong their engagement until the moment when all obstacles would be smoothed away, they faced the future like travellers turning to a radiant and hospitable country.

In the open Channel a choppy sea was beginning to rise before

a steady light breeze. In the west the clouds were mustering in battle array, but they were distant enough to promise a calm passage in glorious sunshine. Indifferent to the assault of the waves, the vessel sped straight for her port, as though no power existed which could have turned her aside from her strict course.

Isabel and Simon were seated on one of the benches on the after deck. The girl had taken off her cloak and hat and offered to the wind her arms and shoulders, protected only by a cambric blouse. Nothing more beautiful could be imagined than the play of the sunlight on the gold of her hair. Though grave and dreamy, she was radiant with youth and happiness. Simon gazed at her in an ecstasy of admiration:

"You don't regret anything, Isabel?" he whispered.

"No!"

"You're not frightened?"

"Why should I be, with you? There is nothing to threaten us."

Simon pointed to the sea:

"That will, perhaps."

"No!"

He told her of his conversation with Lord Bakefield on the previous day and of the three conditions upon which they had agreed. She was amused, and asked him:

"May I too lay down a condition?"

"What condition, Isabel?"

"Fidelity," she replied, gravely. "Absolute fidelity. No lapses! I could never forgive anything of that sort."

He kissed her hand and said:

"There is no love without fidelity. I love you."

There were few people around them, for the panic had affected mainly the first-class passengers. But, apart from the two lovers, all those who had persisted in crossing betrayed by some sign their secret uneasiness or their alarm. On the right were two old, very old clergymen, accompanied by a third, a good deal younger. These three remained unmoved, worthy brothers of the heroes who sang hymns on the sinking *Titanic*. Nevertheless, their hands were folded as though in prayer. On the left was the French couple whose conversation Dubosc had overheard. The young father and mother, leaning closely on each other, searched the horizon with fevered eyes. Four boys, the four older children, all strong and robust, their cheeks ruddy with health, were coming and going, in search of information which they immediately brought back with them. A little girl sat crying at her parents' feet, without saying a word. The mother was nursing the sixth child, which from time to time turned to Isabel and smiled at her.

Meanwhile, the breeze was growing colder. Simon leant toward his companion:

"You're not feeling chilly, Isabel?" he said.

"No, I'm used to it.."

"Still, though you left your bag below you brought your rug on deck, very wisely. Why don't you undo it?"

The rug was still rolled up in its straps; and Isabel had even

passed one of the straps around an iron rod, which fastened the bench to the deck, and buckled it.

"My bag contains nothing of value," she said.

"Nor the rug, I presume?"

"Yes, it does."

"Really? What?"

"A miniature to which my poor mother was very much attached, because it is a portrait of her grandmother painted for George III."

"It has just a sentimental value, therefore?"

"Oh dear no! My mother had it set in all her finest pearls, which gives it an inestimable value to-day. Thinking of the future, she left me, in this way, a fortune of my own."

Simon laughed:

"And that's the safe!"

"Yes, that's the safe!" she said, joining in his laughter. "The miniature is pinned to the middle of the rug, between the straps where no one would think of looking for it. You're laughing, but I am superstitious where that miniature is concerned. It's a sort of talisman.."

For some time they spoke no further. The coast had disappeared from sight. The swell was increasing and the *Queen Mary* was rolling a little.

At this moment they were passing a beautiful white yacht.

"That's the Comte de Bauge's *Castor*," cried one of the four boys. "She's on her way to Dieppe."

Two ladies and two gentlemen were lunching under an awning, Isabel bowed her head so as to hide her face.

This thoughtless movement displeased her; for, a moment later, she said (and all the words which they exchanged during these few minutes were to remain engraved on their memories):

"Simon, you really believe, don't you, that I was entitled to leave home?"

"Why," he exclaimed, in surprise, "don't we love each other?"

"Yes, we love each other," she murmured. "And then there's the life which I was leading with a woman whose one delight was to insult my mother.."

She said no more. Simon had laid his hand on hers and nothing could reassure her more effectually than the fondness of that pressure.

The four boys, who had disappeared again, came running back:

"You can see the company's mail-boat that left Dieppe at the same time that we left Newhaven. She's called the *Pays de Caux*. We shall pass her in a quarter of an hour. So you see, mama, there's no danger."

"Yes, but it's afterwards, when we get closer to Dieppe."

"Why?" objected her husband. "The other boat hasn't signalled anything extraordinary. The danger is altering its position, moving farther away.."

The mother made no reply. Her face retained the same piteous expression. The little girl at her knee was still silently crying.

The captain passed Simon and saluted.

And a few more minutes elapsed.

Simon was whispering words of love which Isabel did not catch very distinctly. The little girl's constant tears were causing her some distress.

Shortly after, a gust of wind made the waves leap higher. Here and there streaks of white, seething foam appeared. There was nothing remarkable in this, as the wind was gaining in force and lashing the crests of the waves. But why did these foaming billows appear only in one part and that precisely the part which they were about to cross?

The father and mother had risen to their feet. Other passengers were leaning over the rails. The captain was seen running up the poop-steps.

And it came suddenly, in a moment.

Before Isabel and Simon, sitting self-absorbed, had the least idea of what was happening, a frightful clamour, made up of a thousand shrieks, rose from all parts of the boat, from port and starboard, from stem to stern, even from below; from every side, as though the minds of all had been obsessed by the possibility of disaster, as though all eyes, from the moment of departure, had been watching for the slightest premonitory sign.

A monstrous sight. Three hundred yards ahead, as though in the centre of a target at which the bows of the vessel were aimed, a hideous fountain had burst from the surface of the sea, bombarding the sky with masses of rock, blocks of lava and

flying masses of spray, which fell back into a circle of foaming breakers and yawning whirlpools. And a wind of hurricane force gyrated above this chaos, bellowing like a bull.

Suddenly silence fell upon the paralysed crowd, the deathly silence that precedes an inevitable catastrophe. Then, yonder, a rattle of thunder that rent the air. Then the voice of the captain at his post, roaring out his orders, trying to shout down the monster's myriad voices.

For a moment there seemed some hope of salvation. The vessel put forth so great an effort that she appeared to be gliding along a tangent away from the infernal circle into which she was on the point of being drawn. But it was a vain hope! The circle seemed to be increasing in size. Its outer waves were approaching. A mass of rock crushed one of the funnels.

And again there were shrieks, followed by a panic and an insane rush for the life-boats; already some of the passengers were fighting for places..

Simon did not hesitate. Isabel was a good swimmer. They must make the attempt.

"Come!" he said. The girl, standing beside him, had flung her arms about him. "We can't stay here! Come!"

And, when she struggled, instinctively resisting the course which he had proposed, he took a firmer hold of her.

She entreated him:

"Oh, it's horrible.. all these children.. the little girl crying!.. Couldn't we save them?"

"Come!" he repeated, in a masterful tone.

She still resisted him. Then he took her head in his two hands and kissed her on the lips:

"Come, my darling, come!"

The girl fainted. He lifted her in his arms and threw one leg over the rail:

"Don't be afraid!" he said. "I will answer for your life!"

"I am not afraid," she said. "I am not afraid with you.."

They leapt into the water.

# CHAPTER III
# GOOD-BYE, SIMON

Twenty minutes later, they were picked up by the *Castor*, the yacht which by this time had passed the *Queen Mary*. As for the *Pays de Caux*, the steamer sailing from Dieppe, subsequent enquiries proved that the passengers and the crew had compelled the captain to flee from the scene of the disaster. The sight of the huge waterspout, the spectacle of the ship lifting her stern out of the waves, rearing up bodily and falling back as though into the mouth of a funnel, the upheaval of the sea, which seemed to have given way beneath the assault of maniacal forces and which, within the circumference of the frenzied circle, revolved upon itself in a sort of madness: all this was so terrifying that women fainted and men threatened the captain with their levelled revolvers.

The *Castor* also had begun by fleeing the spot. But the Conte de Bauge, detecting through his field-glasses the handkerchief which Simon was waving, persuaded his sailors, despite the desperate opposition of his friends, to put about, while avoiding contact with the dangerous zone.

For that matter, the sea was subsiding. The eruption had lasted less than a minute; and it was as though the monster was now resting, sated, content with its meal, like a beast of prey after its kill. The squall had passed. The whirlpool broke up into warring

currents which opposed and annulled one another. There were no more breakers, no more foam. Beneath the great undulating shroud which the little waves, tossing in harmless frolic, spread above the sunken vessel, the tragedy of five hundred death-struggles was consummated.

Under these conditions, the rescue was an easy task. Isabel and Simon, who could have held out for hours longer, were taken to the two cabins and supplied with a change of clothing. Isabel had not even lost consciousness. The yacht sailed away immediately. Those on board were eager to escape from the accursed circle. The sudden subsidence of the sea seemed as dangerous as its fury.

Nothing occurred before they reached the French coast. The oppressive, menacing lull continued. Simon Dubosc, directly he had changed his clothes, joined the count and his party. A little embarrassed in respect of Miss Bakefield, he spoke of her as a friend whom he had met by chance on the *Queen Mary* and by whose side he had found himself at the moment of the catastrophe.

For the rest, he was not questioned. The company on board the yacht were still profoundly uneasy; the thought of what might happen obsessed them. Further events were preparing. All had the impression that an invisible enemy was prowling stealthily around them.

Twice Simon went below to Isabel's cabin. The door was closed and there was no sound from within. But Simon knew

that Isabel, though she had recovered from her fatigue and was already forgetting the dangers which had threatened them, nevertheless could not shake off the horror of what she had seen. He himself was still terribly depressed, haunted by the vision so frightful that it seemed the extravagant image of a nightmare rather than the memory of an actual thing. Was it true that they had one and all lost their lives: the three clergymen with their austere faces, the four happy, cheerful boys, their father and mother, the little girl who had cried, the child that had smiled at Isabel, the captain and every single individual of all those who had covered the *Queen Mary's* decks?

About four o'clock, the clouds, unrolling in blacker and denser masses, had conquered the heavens. Already the watchers felt the first breath of the great squalls whose precipitous onset was at hand, whose battalions, let loose across the Atlantic, were about to rush into the narrow straits of the Channel and mingle their devastating efforts with the mysterious forces rising from the depths of the sea. The horizon was blotted out as the clouds released their contents.

But the yacht was nearing Dieppe. The Count and Simon Dubosc, each gazing through a pair of binoculars, cried out as with one voice, struck at the same moment by the most unexpected sight. Looking at the row of buildings, which line the long sea-front like a tall rampart of brick and stone, they could plainly see that the roof and upper storey of the two largest hotels, the Imperial and the Astoria, situated in the middle,

had collapsed. And the next instant they caught sight of other houses which were tottering, leaning forward, fissured and half-demolished.

Suddenly a flame shot up from one of these houses. In a few minutes there was a violent outbreak of fire; and on every side, from one end of the sea-front to the other, a panic-stricken crowd, whose shouts they could hear, came pouring down the streets and running to the beach.

"There is no doubt about it," spluttered the Count. "There has been an earthquake, a very violent shock, which must have synchronized with the sort of waterspout in which the *Queen Mary* disappeared."

When nearer, they saw that the sea must have risen, sweeping over the sea-wall, for long streaks of mud marked the lawns, while the beach to right and left was covered with stranded shipping.

And they saw too that the end of the jetty and the light-house had disappeared, that the breakwater had been carried away and that boats were drifting about the harbour.

The wireless telegram announcing the wreck of the *Queen Mary* had redoubled the panic. No one dared fly from the peril on land by taking to the open sea. The relatives of the passengers stood massed together, in witless and hopeless waiting, on the landing stage and what remained of the jetty.

In the midst of all this turmoil, the yacht's arrival passed almost unperceived. Each was living for himself, without

curiosity, heedless of all but his own danger and that of his kinsfolk. A few distraught journalists were darting about feverishly for news; and the port-authorities subjected Simon and the Count to a hasty and perfunctory enquiry. Simon evaded their questions as far as possible. Once free, he escorted Isabel to the nearest hotel, saw her comfortably settled and asked her for permission to go in search of information. He was uneasy, for he believed his father to be in Dieppe.

The Duboscs' house stood at the first turning on the great slope which climbs to the top of the cliffs on the left, itself hidden behind a clump of trees and covered with flowers and creepers, it had a series of terraced gardens which overlooked the town and the sea. Simon was at once reassured on learning that his father was in Paris and would not be home until next day. He was also told that they had felt only a slight shake on this side of Dieppe.

He therefore went back to Isabel's hotel. She was still in her room, however, needing rest, and sent down word that she would rather be alone until the evening. Somewhat astonished by this reply, the full meaning of which he was not to understand till later, he went on to his friend Rolleston's place, failed to find him in, returned to his own house, dined and went for a stroll through the streets of the town.

The damage was not so widespread as he had supposed. What is usually described as the first Dieppe earthquake, to distinguish it from the great upheaval of which it was the forerunner, consisted at most of two preliminary oscillations, which were

followed forty seconds later by a violent shock accompanied by a tremendous noise and a series of detonations. As for the tidal wave, improperly called an eagre, which rushed up the sea-front, it had but a very moderate height and a quite restricted force. But the people whom Simon met and those with whom he talked remembered those few seconds with a terror which the hours did not appear to diminish. Some were still running with no idea of where they were going, while others – and these were the greater number – remained in a state of absolute stupefaction, making no reply when questioned or answering only with incoherent sentences.

It was of course different in a town like this from elsewhere. In these long-settled regions, where the soil had assumed its irrevocable configuration hundreds and hundreds of years ago and where volcanic manifestations were not even contemplated as possible, any phenomenon of the kind was peculiarly alarming, illogical, abnormal, and in violent contradiction with the laws of nature and with those conditions of security which each of us has the right to regard as unchanging and as definitely fixed by destiny.

And Simon, who since the previous day had been wandering to and fro in this atmosphere of distraction, Simon, who remembered Old Sandstone's unfinished predictions and who had seen the gigantic waterspout in which the *Queen Mary* was swallowed up, Simon asked himself:

"What is happening? What is going to happen? In what

unforeseen fashion and by what formidable enemy will the coming attack be delivered?"

Though he had meant to leave Dieppe on that night or the following morning, he felt that his departure would be tantamount to a desertion just when his father was returning and when so many symptoms announced the imminence of a final catastrophe.

"Isabel will advise me," he said to himself. "We will decide together what we have to do."

Meantime night had fallen. He returned to the hotel at nine o'clock and asked that Isabel should be told. He was amazed, almost stunned by the news that Miss Bakefield had gone. She had come down from her room an hour earlier, had handed in at the office a letter addressed to Simon Dubosc and had suddenly left the hotel.

Disconcerted, Simon asked for explanations. There seemed to be none to give, except that one of the waiters said that the young lady had joined a sailor who seemed to be waiting for her in the street and that they had gone off together.

Taking the letter, Simon moved away with the intention of going to a café or entering the hotel, but he had not the courage to wait and it was by the light of a street lamp that he opened the envelope and read:

> "I am writing to you with absolute confidence, feeling happy in the certainty that everything I say will be understood and that you will feel neither bitterness nor

resentment, nor, after the first painful shock, any real distress.

"Simon, we have made a mistake. It is right that our love, the great and sincere love which we bear each other, should dominate all our thoughts and form the object of our whole lives, but it is not right that this love should be our only rule of conduct and our only obligation. In leaving England we did what is only permissible to those whose fate has persistently thwarted all their dreams and destroyed all their sources of joy. It was an act of liberation and revolt, which people have a right to perform when there is no other alternative than death. But is this the case with us, Simon? What have we done to deserve happiness? What ordeals have we suffered? What efforts have we made? What tears have we shed?

"I have done a great deal of thinking, Simon. I have been thinking of all those poor people who are dead and gone and whose memory will always make me shudder. I have thought of you and myself and my mother. Her too I saw die. You remember: we were speaking of her and of the pearls which she gave me when dying. They are lost; and that distresses me so terribly!

"Simon, I don't want to consider this and still less all the horrors of this awful day as warnings intended for us two. But I do want them to help us to look at life in a different way, to help us put up a prouder and pluckier fight against the obstacles in our path. The fact that you and I are alive while so many others are dead forbids us to suffer in ourselves any sort of weakness, untruth or shuffling,

anything that cannot face the broad light of day.

"Win me, Simon. For my part, I shall deserve you by confidence and steadfastness. If we are worthy of each other, we shall succeed and we shall not need to blush for a happiness for which we should now have to pay – as I have felt many times to-day – too high a price of humiliation and shame.

"You will not try to find me, will you, Simon?

"Your promised wife,

"Isabel."

For a few moments Simon stood dumbfounded. As Isabel had foreseen, the first shock was infinitely painful. His mind was full of conflicting ideas which eluded his grasp. He did not attempt to understand nor did he ask himself whether he approved of Isabel's action. He suffered as he had never known that it was possible to suffer.

And suddenly, in the disorder of his mind, among the incoherent suppositions which occurred to him, there flashed a horrible thought. It was obvious that Isabel, determined to submit to her father before the scandal of her flight was noised abroad, had conceived the intention of returning to Lord Bakefield. But how would she put her plan into execution? And Simon remembered that Isabel had left the hotel in the most singular fashion, abruptly, on foot and accompanied by a sailor carrying her bag. Now the landing-stage of the Newhaven steamers was close to the hotel; and the night-boat would cast off her moorings in an hour or two.

"Can she be thinking of crossing?" he muttered, shuddering as he remembered the upheavals of the sea and the wreck of the *Queen Mary*.

He rushed towards the quay. Despite Isabel's expressed wish, he intended to see her; and, if she resisted his love, he would at least implore her to abandon the risk of an immediate crossing.

Directly he reached the quay, he perceived the funnels of the Newhaven steamer behind the harbour railway-station. Isabel, without a doubt, was there, in one of the cabins. There were a good many people about the station and a great deal of piled-up luggage. Simon made for the gangway, but was stopped by an official on duty:

"I have no ticket," said Simon. "I am looking for a lady who has gone on board and who is crossing to-night."

"There are no passengers on board," said the official.

"Really? How's that?"

"The boat is not crossing. There have been orders from Paris. All navigation is suspended."

"Ah!" said Simon Dubosc, with a start of relief. "Navigation is suspended!"

"Yes; that is to say, as far as the line's concerned."

"What do you mean, the line?"

"Why, the company only troubles about its own boats. If others care to put to sea, that is their look-out; we can't prevent them."

"But," said Simon, beginning to feel uneasy, "I suppose none

has ventured to sail just lately?"

"Yes, there was one, about an hour ago."

"Oh? Did you see her?"

"Yes, she was a yacht, belonging to an Englishman."

"Edward Rolleston, perhaps?" cried Simon, more or less at a venture.

"Yes, I believe it was… Rolleston. Yes, yes, that's it: an Englishmen who had just put his yacht in commission."

Simon suddenly realized the truth. Rolleston, who was staying at Dieppe, happened to hear of Isabel's arrival, called at her hotel and, at her request, gave orders to sail. Of course, he was the only man capable of risking the adventure and of bribing his crew with a lavish distribution of bank-notes.

The young Englishman's behaviour gave proof of such courage and devotion that Simon at once recovered his normal composure. Against Rolleston he felt neither anger nor resentment. He mastered his fears and determined to have confidence.

The clouds were gliding over the town, so low that their black shapes could be distinguished in the darkness of the night. He crossed the front and leant upon the balustrade which borders the Boulevard Maritime. Thence he could see the white foam of the heavy breakers on the distant sands and hear their vicious assault upon the rocks. Nevertheless, the expected storm was not yet unleashed. More terrible in its continual, nerve-racking menace, it seemed to be waiting for reinforcements and to be delaying its

onslaught only to render it more impetuous.

"Isabel will have time to reach the other side," said Simon.

He was now quite calm, full of faith in the present and the future. In absolute agreement with Isabel, he approved of her departure; it caused him no suffering.

"Come," he thought, "it is time to act."

He now recognized the purpose in view of which he had been preparing for years and years: it was to win a woman who was dearer to him than anything on earth and whose conquest would force him to claim that place in the world which his merits deserved.

He had done with hoarding. His duty was to spend, ay, to squander, like a prodigal scattering gold by the handful, without fear of ever exhausting his treasure.

"The time has come," he repeated. "If I am good for anything, I must prove it. If I was right to wait and husband my resources, I must prove it."

He began to walk along the boulevard, his head erect, his chest expanded, striking the ground with a ringing step.

The wind was rising to a gale. Furious showers swept the air. These were trifles to a Simon Dubosc, whose body, clad at all times of the year in light materials, took no heed of the rough weather and, even at the end of a day marked by so many trials, did not betray the slightest symptom of fatigue.

In truth, he felt inaccessible to ordinary weaknesses. His muscles were capable of unlimited endurance. His arms, his

legs, his chest, his whole body, patiently exercised, were able to sustain the most violent and persistent efforts. Through his eyes, ears and nostrils he participated acutely in every vibration of the outer world. He was without a flaw. His nerves were perfectly steady. His will responded to every demand. He had the faculty of making up his mind at the first warning. His senses were always on the alert, but were controlled by his reason. He had keen intelligence and a clear, logical mind. *He was ready.*

He was ready. Like an athlete at the top of his form, he owed it to himself to enter the lists and accomplish some feat of prowess. Now, by a wonderful coincidence, it seemed that events promised him a field of action in which this feat of prowess might be performed in the most brilliant fashion. How? That he did not know. When? That he could not say. But he felt a profound intuition that new paths were about to open up before him.

For an hour he walked to and fro, fired by enthusiasm, quivering with hope. Suddenly a squall leapt at the sea-front, as though torn from the crest of the waves; and the rain fell in disorderly masses, hurtling downwards in all directions.

The storm had broken and Isabel was still at sea.

He shrugged his shoulders, refusing to admit a return of anxiety. If they had both escaped from the wreck of the *Queen Mary*, it was not in order that one of them should now pay for that unexpected boon. No, come what might, Isabel would reach the other side. Fate was protecting them both.

Through the torrents of rain pouring across the parade and

by the flooded streets, Simon returned to the Villa Dubosc. An indomitable energy bore him up. And he thought with pride of his beautiful bride, who, disdainful like himself of the day's accumulated ordeals and untiring as he, had gone forth bravely into the terrors of the night.

# CHAPTER IV
# THE GREAT UPHEAVAL

The next five days were of those whose memory oppresses a nation for countless generations. What with hurricanes, cyclones, floods, swollen rivers and tidal waves, the coasts of the Channel and in particular the parts about Fécamp, Dieppe and Le Tréport suffered the most infuriate assaults conceivable.

Although a scientist would not admit the least relation between this series of storms and the tremendous event of the 4th of June, that is to say, of the last of these five days, what a strange coincidence it was! How could the masses ever since help thinking that these several phenomena all formed part of one connected whole?

In Dieppe, the undoubted centre of the first seismic disturbances, in Dieppe and the outlying districts hell was let loose. It was as though this particular spot of the earth's surface was the meeting-place of all the powers that attack and devastate and undermine and slay. In the whirlpools, or the water-spouts, or the eddies of overflowing rivers, under the crash of uprooted trees, crumbling cliffs, falling scaffoldings and walls, tottering belfries and factory-chimneys and of all the objects carried by the wind, the deaths increased steadily. Twenty families were thrown into mourning on the first day, forty on the second. As for the number of victims destroyed by the great convulsion which

accompanied the tremendous event, it was doubtful whether this was ever accurately estimated.

As happens in such periods of constant danger, when the individual thinks only of himself and those akin to him, Simon knew hardly anything of the disaster save through the manifestations that reached him directly. After receiving a wireless telegram from Isabel which assured him of her safety, he spread the newspapers only to make certain that his flight with her was not suspected. With the rest – details of the foundering of the *Queen Mary*, articles in which his presence of mind, his courage and Isabel's pluck were extolled, or in which the writer endeavoured to explain the convulsions in the Channel – with all this he had hardly time to concern himself.

He remained with his father. He told him the secret of his love, told him the story of the recent incidents, told him of his plans. Together they wandered through the town or out into the country, both of them drenched and blinded by the showers, staggering under the squalls and bowing their heads beneath the bombardment of slates and tiles. The trees and telegraph-poles along the road were mown down like corn. Trusses of straw, stacks of fodder, faggots of wood, palings, coils of wire were whirled through the air like autumn leaves. Nature seemed to have declared a merciless war upon herself for the sheer pleasure of spoiling and destroying.

And the sea was still trundling its gigantic waves, which broke with deafening roar. All navigation between France and England

was suspended. Wireless messages signalled the danger to the great liners coming from America or Germany; and none of them dared enter the hell that was the Channel.

On the fourth day, the last but one, Tuesday the 3rd of June, there was a slight lull.

The final assault was marshalling its forces. M. Dubosc worn out with fatigue, did not get up that afternoon. Simon also threw himself on his bed, fully dressed, and slept until evening. But at nine o'clock a shock awakened them.

Simon thought that the window, which suddenly burst open, had given away under the pressure of the wind. A second shock, more plainly defined, brought down the door of his room; and he felt himself spinning on his own axis, with the walls circling round him.

He ran downstairs and found his father in the garden with the servants, one and all bewildered and uttering incoherent phrases. After a long pause, during which some tried to escape while others were on their knees, there was a violent downpour of rain, mingled with hail, which drove them indoors.

At ten o'clock they sat down to supper. M. Dubosc did not speak a word. The servants were livid and trembling. Simon retained in the depths of his horrified mind an uncanny impression of a shuddering world.

At ten minutes to eleven there was another vibration, of no great violence, but prolonged, with beats that followed one another very closely, like a peal of bells. The china plates fell

from the walls; the clock stopped.

All the inmates of the house went out of doors again and crowded into a little thatched summer-house lashed by slanting rain.

Half-an-hour later, the tremors recommenced and from this time onwards, were so to speak, incessant. They were faint and remote at first, but soon grew more and more perceptible, like the shivers of fever which rise from the depths of our flesh and shake us from head to foot.

This ended by becoming a torture. Two of the maids were sobbing. M. Dubosc had flung an arm about Simon's neck and was stammering terrified and meaningless words. Simon himself could no longer endure this execrable sensation of earthquake, this vertigo of the human being losing his foothold. He felt that he was living in a disjointed world and that his mind was registering absurd and grotesque impressions.

From the town arose an uninterrupted clamour. The road was crowded with people fleeing to the heights. A church-bell filled the air with the doleful sound of the tocsin, while the clocks were striking the twelve hours of midnight.

"Let us go away! Let us go away!" cried M. Dubosc.

Simon protested:

"Come, father, there's no need for that! What have we to fear?"

But one and all were seized with panic. Everybody acted at random, making unconscious movements, like a crazy piece of

machinery working backwards. The servants went indoors again, looking about them stupidly, as do those who go over a house which they are leaving for the last time. Simon, as in a dream, saw one of them cramming a canvas bag with the gilt candlesticks and silver boxes of which he had charge, while another wrapped himself in a tablecloth and a third filled his pockets with bread and biscuits. He himself, turning by instinct to a small cloak-room on the ground floor, put on a leather jacket and changed his shoes for a pair of heavy shooting-boots. He heard his father saying:

"Here, take my pocket-book. There's money in it, bundles of notes: you'd better have it.."

Suddenly the electric light went out; and at the same time they heard, in the distance, a strange thunder-clap, curiously different from the usual sound of thunder. It was repeated, with a less strident din, accompanied by a subterranean rattling; and then, growing noisier again, it burst a second time in a series of frightful detonations, louder than the roar of artillery.

Then there was a frantic rush for the road. But the fugitives had not left the garden when the frightful catastrophe, announced by so many manifestations, occurred. The earth leapt beneath their feet and instantly fell away and leapt again like an animal in convulsions.

Simon and his father were thrown against each other and then violently torn apart and hurled to the ground. All around them was the stupendous uproar of a tottering world in which

everything was collapsing into an incredible chaos. The darkness seemed to have grown denser than ever. And then, suddenly, there was a less distant sound, a sound which touched them, so to speak, a sort of cracking noise. And shrieks rose into the air from the very bowels of the earth.

"Stop!" cried Simon, catching hold of his father, whom he had succeeded in rejoining. "Stop!"

He felt before him, at a distance of a few inches, the utter horror of a gaping abyss; and it was from the bottom of the abyss that the shrieks and howls of their companions rose.

And there were three more shocks..

Simon realized a moment later that his father, clutching his arm, was dragging him away with fierce energy. Both were clambering up the road at a run, groping their way like blind men through the obstacles with which the earthquake had covered it.

M. Dubosc had a goal in view, the Caude-Côte cliff, a bare plateau where they would be in absolute safety. But, on taking a cross-road, they struck against a band of maddened creatures who told them that the cliff had fallen, carrying numerous victims with it. All that these people could think of now was to run to the seashore. With them, M. Dubosc and his son stumbled down the paths which led to the valley of Pourville, whose beach lies in a cove some two miles from Dieppe. The front was obstructed by a crowd of villagers, while others were taking shelter from the rain behind the bathing-huts overturned by the wind. Others again, as the tide was very low, had gone

down the sloping shingle and crossed the sands and ventured out to the rocks, as though the danger had ended there and there only. By the uncertain light of a moon which strove to pierce the curtain of the clouds, they could be seen wandering to and fro like ghosts.

"Come, Simon!" said M. Dubosc. "Let's go over there.."

But Simon held him back:

"We are all right here, father. Besides, it seems to be calming down. Take a rest."

"Yes, yes, if you like," replied M. Dubosc, who was in a greatly dejected mood. "And then we will go back to Dieppe. I want to make sure that my boats have not been knocked about too much."

A squall burst, laden with rain.

"Don't move," said Simon. "There's a bathing-hut a few yards off. I'll just go and see.."

He hurried away. But there were already three men lying under the hut, which they had lashed to one of the buttresses of the parade. Others came up and tried to share the shelter. Blows were exchanged. Simon intervened. But the earth shook once more; and they could hear the crash of cliffs falling to right and left.

"Where are you, father?" cried Simon, running back to the spot where he had left M. Dubosc.

Finding no one there, he shouted. But the roar of the gale smothered his voice and he did not know in what direction to seek. Had his father been overcome by fresh fears and gone closer

to the sea? Or had he, in his anxiety for his boats, returned to Dieppe as he had hinted?

At a venture – but is it right to apply this term to the unconscious decisions which impel us to follow our destined path? – Simon began to run along the sand and shingle. Then, through the maze of slippery rocks, hampered by the snares spread by the wrack and sea-weed, stumbling into pools of water in which the towering breakers from the open sea had died away in swirling eddies or in lapping waves, he joined the ghostly figures which he had seen from a distance.

He went from one to another and, failing to see his father, was thinking of returning to the parade, when a small incident occurred to make him change his mind. The full moon appeared in the sky. She was covered again immediately, then reappeared; and several times over, between the ragged clouds, her magnificent radiance flooded the sky. At this juncture, Simon, who had veered towards the right of the beach, discovered that the fallen cliffs had buried the shore under the most stupendous chaos imaginable. The white masses were piled one atop the other like so many mountains of chalk. And it looked to Simon as if one of these masses, carried by its own weight, had rolled right into the sea, whence it now rose some three hundred yards away.

On reflection, he could not believe this possible, the distance being far too great; but then what was that enormous shape outstretched yonder like a crouching animal? A hundred times,

in his childhood, he had paddled his canoe or come fishing in this part; and he knew for certain that nothing rose above the waters here.

What was it? A sand-bank? But its outlines seemed too uneven and its grey colour was that of the rocks, naked rocks, without any covering of wrack or other sea-weed.

He went forward, actuated in part by an eager curiosity, but still more by some mysterious and all-powerful force, the spirit of adventure. The adventure appealed to him: he must go up to this new ground whose origin he could not help attributing to the recent earthquake.

And he went up to it. Beyond the first belt of sand, beyond the belt of small rocks where he stood, was the final bed of sand over which the waves rolled eternally. But from place to place there rose still more rocks, so that he was able, by a persistent effort, to reach what appeared to be a sort of promontory.

The ground underfoot was hard, consisting of sedimentary deposits, as Old Sandstone would have said. And Simon realized that, as a result of the violent shocks and of some physical phenomenon whose action he did not understand, the bed of the sea had been forced upwards until it overtopped the waves by a height which varied in different places, but which certainly exceeded the level of the highest spring tides.

# Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.