

Price of Admiralty

By Mrs. Belloc Lowndes

“O mort, vieux capitaine, il est temps! levons l’ancre!
Ce pays nous ennuie, O mort! Appareillons!”

I

Claire de Wissant, wife of Jacques de Wissant, Mayor of Falaise, stood in the morning sunlight, graceful with a proud, instinctive grace of poise and gesture, on a wind-blown path close to the edge of the cliff.

At some little distance to her left rose the sloping, mansard roofs of the Pavilion de Wissant, the charming country house to which her husband had brought her, a seventeen year old bride, ten long years ago.

She was now gazing eagerly out to sea, shielding her grey, heavy-lidded eyes with her right hand. From her left hand hung a steel chain, to which was attached a small key.

A hot haze lay heavily over the great sweep of deep blue waters. It blotted out the low grey line on the horizon which, on the majority of each year’s days, reminds the citizens of Falaise how near England is to France.

Jacques de Wissant had rejoiced in the *entente cordiale*, if only because it brought such a stream of tourists to the old seaport town of which he was now Mayor. But his beautiful wife thought of the English as gallant foes rather than as friends. Was she not grand-daughter to that admiral who at Trafalgar, when both his legs were shattered by chain-shot, bade his men place him in a barrel of bran that he might go on commanding, in the hour of defeat, to the end?

And yet as Claire stood there, her eyes sweeping the sea for an as yet invisible craft, her heart seemed to beat rhythmically to the last verse of a noble English poem which the governess of her twin daughters had made them recite to her that very morning. How did it run? Aloud she murmured:

“Yet this inconstancy is such,
As you too shall adore—”

and then she stopped, her quivering lips refusing to form the two concluding lines.

To Claire de Wissant, that moving cry from a man’s soul was not dulled by familiarity, or hackneyed by common usage, and just now it found an intolerably faithful echo in her sad, rebellious heart, intensifying the anguish born of a secret and very bitter renunciation.

With an abrupt, restless movement she turned and walked on till her way along the path was barred by a curious obstacle. This was a small red-brick tower, built within a few feet of the edge of the cliff. It was an ugly blot on the beautiful stretch of down, all the uglier that the bricks and tiles had not yet had time to lose their hardness of line and colour in the salt wind.

On the cliff side, the small circular building, open to wind, sky and sea, formed the unnatural apex of a natural stairway which led steeply, almost vertically, down to a deep land-locked cove below. The irregular steps carved by nature out of the chalk had been strengthened, and a rough protection added by means of knotted ropes fixed on either side of the dangerous descent.

In the days when the steps had started sheer from a cleft in the cliff path, Jacques de Wissant had never used this way of reaching a spot which till last year had been his property, and his favourite bathing-place; and he had also, in those same quiet days which now seemed so long ago, forbidden his daughters to use that giddy way. But Claire was a fearless woman; and she had always preferred the dangerous, ladder-like stairs which seemed, when gazed at from below, to hang 'twixt sky and sea.

Now, however, she rarely availed herself of the right retained by her husband of using one of the two keys which unlocked the door set in the new brick tower, for the cove—only by courtesy could it be called a bay—had been chosen, owing to its peculiar position, naturally remote and yet close to a great maritime port, to be the quarters of the Northern Submarine Flotilla.

Jacques de Wissant—and it was perhaps the only time in their joint life that his wife had entirely understood and sympathized with any action of her husband's—had refused the compensation his Government had offered him; more, in his cold, silent way, he had shown himself a patriot in a sense comparatively few modern men have the courage to be, namely, in that which affected both his personal comfort and his purse.

After standing for a moment on the perilously small and narrow platform which made the floor of the tower, Claire grasped firmly a strand of the knotted rope and began descending the long steps cut in the cliff side. She no longer gazed out to sea, instead she looked straight down into the pale green, sun-flecked waters of the little bay, where seven out of the nine submarines which composed the flotilla were lying half-submerged, as is their wont in harbour.

A landsman, coming suddenly upon the cliff-locked pool, might have thought that the centuries had rolled back, and that the strange sight before him was a school of saurians lazily sunning themselves in the placid waters of a sea inlet where time had stood still.

But no such vision came to Claire de Wissant. As she went down the cliff-side her lovely eyes rested on these sinister, man-created monsters with a feeling of sisterly, possessive affection. She had become so familiarly acquainted with each and all of them in the last few months; she knew with such a curious, intimate knowledge where they differed, both from each other and also from other submarine craft, not only here, in these familiar waters, but in the waters of France's great rival on the sea. . . .

It ever gave her a thrill of pride to remember that it was France which first led the way in this, the most dangerous as also the most adventurous new arm of naval warfare: and she rejoiced as fiercely, as exultantly as any of her sea-fighting forbears would have done in the terrible potentialities of destruction which each of these strange, grotesque-looking craft bore in their narrow flanks.

It was now the hour of the crews' midday meal; there were fewer men standing about than usual; and so, after she had stepped down on the sandy strip of shore, and climbed the ladder leading to the old Napoleonic hulk which served as workshop and dwelling-place of the officers of the flotilla, Madame de Wissant for a few moments stood solitary, and looked musingly down into the waters of the bay.

Each submarine, its long, fish-like shape lying prone in the almost still, transparent water, differed not only in size, but in make, from its fellows, and no two conning towers even were alike.

Lying apart, as if sulking in a corner, was an example of the old "Gym note" type of under-sea boat. She went by the name of the *Carp*, and she was very squat, small and ugly, her telescopic conning tower being of hard canvas.

To Claire, the *Carp* always recalled an old Breton woman she had known as a girl. That woman had given thirteen sons to France, and of the thirteen five had died while serving with the colours—three at sea and two in Tonkin—and a grateful country had given her a pension of ten francs a week, two francs for each dead son.

Like that Breton woman, the ugly, sturdy little *Carp* had borne heroes in her womb, and like her, too, she had paid terrible toll of her sons to death.

Occasionally, but very seldom now, the *Carp* was taken out to sea, and the men, strange to say, liked being in her, for they regarded her as a lucky boat; she had never had what they called a serious accident.

Sunk deeper in the water was the broad-backed *Abeille*, significantly named “La Pétroleuse,” the heroine of four explosions, no favourite with either crews or commanders; and, cradled in a low dock on the farther strip of beach, was stretched the *Triton*, looking like a huge fish which had panted itself to death. The *Triton* also was not a lucky boat; she had been the theatre of a terrible mishap when, for some inexplicable cause, the conning tower had failed to close. Claire was always glad to see her safe in dock.

Out in the middle of the bay was *La Glorieuse*, a submarine of the latest type. Had she not lain so low, little more than her flying bridge being above the water, she would have put her elder sisters to shame, so exquisitely shaped was she. Everything about *La Glorieuse* was made delicately true to scale, and she could carry a crew of over twenty men. But somehow Claire de Wissant did not care for this miniature leviathan as she did for the older kind of submarine, and, with more reason for his prejudice, the officer in charge of the flotilla shared her feeling. Commander Dupré thought *La Glorieuse* difficult to handle under water. But he had had the same opinion of the *Neptune*, one of the two submarines which were out this fine August morning.

An eager “Bonjour, madame,” suddenly sounded in Claire de Wissant’s ear, and she turned quickly to find one of the younger officers at her elbow.

“The *Neptune* is a few minutes late,” he said smiling. “I hope your sister has enjoyed her cruise!” He was looking with admiring and grateful eyes at the young wife of the Mayor of Falaise, for Claire de Wissant and her widowed sister, Madeleine Baudoin, were very kind and hospitable to the officers of the submarine flotilla.

The life of both officers and men who volunteer for this branch of the service is grim and arduous. And if this is generally true of them all, it was specially so of those who served under Commander Dupré. By a tacit agreement with their chief, they took no part in the summer gaieties of the watering-place which has grown up round the old port of Falaise, and out of duty hours they would have led dull lives indeed had it not been for the hospitality shown them by the owners of the Pavillon de Wissant, and for the welcome which awaited them in the freer, gayer atmosphere of Madame Baudoin’s villa, the Chalet des Dunes. Madeleine Baudoin was a lively, cheerful woman, younger in nature if not in years than her beautiful sister, and so she was naturally more popular with the younger officers. They had felt especially flattered when Madame Baudoin had allowed herself to be persuaded to go out for a couple of hours in the *Neptune*; till this morning neither of the sisters had ever ventured out to sea in a submarine.

And now ’twas true that the *Neptune* had been out longer than her commander had said she would be, but no touch of fear brushed Claire de Wissant; she would have trusted what she held most precious in the world—her children—to Commander Dupré’s care, and a few moments after her companion had spoken she suddenly saw the little tricolor, for which her keen eyes had for long swept the sea, bravely riding the waves, and making straight for the bay.

The flag moving swiftly over the surface of the blue water was a curious, almost an uncanny sight; one which never failed to fill Claire with a kind of spiritual exaltation. For the tiny strip of waving colour was a symbol of the gallantry, of the carelessness of danger, lying under the dancing, sun-flecked ripples which alone proved that the tricolor was not some illusion of sorcery.

And then, as if the submarine had been indeed a sentient, living thing, the *Neptune* lifted her great shield-like back up out of the sea and glided through the narrow neck of the bay, and so close under the long deck on which Madame de Wissant and her companion were standing.

The eager, busy hum of work slackened—discipline is not perhaps quite so taut in the French as it is in the British Navy—for both men and officers were one and all eager to see the lady who had ventured out in the *Neptune* with their commander. Only those actually on board had seen Madame Baudoin embark; there was a long, rough jetty close to her house, the lonely Chalet des Dunes, and it was from there the submarine had picked up her honoured passenger.

But when Commander Dupré's stern, sun-burnt face suddenly appeared above the conning tower, the men vanished as if by enchantment, while the eager, busy hum began again, much as if a lever, setting this human machinery in motion, had been touched by some titanic finger.

The officers naturally held their ground.

There was a look of strain in the Commander's blue eyes, and his mouth was set in hard lines; a thoughtful onlooker would have suspected that the exciting, dangerous life he led was trying his nerves. His men knew better; still, though they had no clue to the cause which had changed him, they all knew he had changed greatly of late; to them individually he had become kinder, more human, and that heightened their regret that he was now quitting the Northern Flotilla.

Commander Dupré had asked to be transferred to the Toulon Submarine Station; some experiments were being made there which he was anxious to watch. He was leaving Falaise on the morrow.

Claire de Wissant reddened, and a gleam leapt into her eyes as she met the naval officer's grave, measuring glance. But very soon he looked away from her, for now he was bending down, putting out a hand to help his late passenger to step from the Conning tower.

Smiling, breathless, a little dishevelled, her grey linen skirt crumpled, Madame Baudoin looked round her, dazed for the moment by the bright sunlight. Then she called out gaily.

"Well, Claire! Here I am—alive and very, very hot!"

And as she jumped off the slippery flank of the *Neptune*, she gave herself and her crumpled gown a little shake, and made a slight, playful grimace.

The bright young faces round her broke into broad grins—those officers who volunteer for the submarine services of the world are chosen young, and they are merry boys.

"You may well laugh, messieurs,"—she threw them all a lively challenging glance—"when I tell you that to-day, for the first time in my life, I acknowledge masculine supremacy! I think that you will admit that we women are not afraid of pain, but the discomfort, the—the stuffiness? Ah, no—I could not have borne much longer the horrible discomfort and stuffiness of that dreadful little *Neptune* of yours!"

Protesting voices rose on every side. The *Neptune* was not uncomfortable! The *Neptune* was not stuffy!

"And I understand"—again she made a little grimace—"that it is quite an exceptional thing for the crew to be consoled, as I was today, by an ice-pail!"

“A most exceptional thing,” said the youngest lieutenant, with a sigh. His name was Paritot, and he also had been out with the *Neptune* that morning. “In fact, it only happens in that week which sees four Thursdays or when we have a lady on board, madame!”

“What a pity it is,” said another, “that the old woman who left a legacy to the inventor who devises a submarine life-saving apparatus didn’t leave us instead a cream-ice allowance! It would have been a far more practical thing to do.”

Madame Baudoin turned quickly to Commander Dupré, who now stood silent, smile-less, at her sister’s side.

“Surely you’re going to try for this extraordinary prize?” she cried. “I’m sure that you could easily devise something which would gain the old lady’s legacy.”

“I, madame?” he answered with a start, almost as if he were wrenching himself free from some deep abstraction. “I should not think of trying to do such a thing! It would be a mere waste of time. Besides, there is no real risk—no risk that we are not prepared to run.” He looked proudly round at the eager, laughing faces of the youngsters who were, till to-morrow night, still under his orders.

“The old lady meant very well,” he went on, and for the first time since he had stepped out of the conning tower Commander Dupré smiled. “And I hope with all my heart that some poor devil will get her money! But I think I may promise you that it will not be an officer in the submarine service. We are too busy, we have too many really important things to do, to worry ourselves about life-saving appliances. Why, the first thing we should do if pressed for room would be to throw our life-helmets overboard!”

“Has one of the life-helmets ever saved a life?”

It was Claire who asked the question in her low, vibrating voice.

Commander Dupré turned to her, and he flushed under his sunburn. It was the first time she had spoken to him that day.

“No, never,” he answered shortly. And then, after a pause, he added, “the conditions in which these life-helmets could be utilized only occur in one accident in a thousand—”

“Still, they would have saved our comrades in the *Lutin*,” objected Lieutenant Paritot.

The *Lutin*? There was a moment’s silence.

The evocation of that tricky sprite, the *Arid* of French mythology, whose name, by an ironical chance, had been borne by the most ill-fated of all submarine craft, seemed to bring the shadow of death athwart them all.

Madeleine Baudoin felt a sudden tremor of retrospective fear. She was glad she had not remembered the *Lutin* when she was sitting, eating ices, and exchanging frivolous, chaffing talk with Lieutenant Paritot in that chamber of little ease, the drum-like interior of the *Neptune*, where not even she, a small woman, could stand upright.

“Well, well! We must not keep you from your *déjeuner*!” she cried, shaking off the queer, disturbing sensation. “I have to thank you for—shalt I say a very interesting experience? I am too honest to say an agreeable one!”

She shook hands with Commander Dupré and Lieutenant Paritot, the officers who had accompanied her on what had been, now that she looked back on it, perhaps a more perilous adventure than she had realized.

“You’re coming with me, Claire?” She looked at her sister—it was a tender, anxious, loving look; Madeleine Baudoin had been the eldest, and Claire de Wissant the youngest, of a Breton admiral’s family of three daughters and four sons; they two were devoted to one another.

Claire shook her head. "I came to tell you that I can't lunch with you to-day," she said slowly. "I promised I would be back by half-past twelve."

"Then we shall not meet till to-morrow?"

Claire repeated mechanically, "No, not till to-morrow, dear Madeleine."

"May I row you home, madame?" Lieutenant Paritot asked Madeleine eagerly.

"Certainly, *mon ami*."

And so, a very few minutes later, Claire de Wissant and Commander Dupré were left alone together alone, that is, save for fifty inquisitive, if kindly, pairs of eyes which saw them from every part of the bay.

At last she held out her hand. "Good-bye, then, till to-morrow," she said, her voice so low as to be almost inaudible.

"No, not good-bye yet!" he cried imperiously. "You must let me take you up the cliff to-day. It may be—I suppose it is—the last time I shall be able to do so."

Hardly waiting for her murmured word of assent, he led the way up the steep, ladder-like stairway cut in the cliff side; half-way up there were some very long steps, and it was from above that help could best be given. He longed with a fierce, aching longing that she would allow him to take her two hands in his and draw her up those high, precipitous steps. But of late Claire had avoided accepting from him, her friend, this simple, trifling act of courtesy. And now twice he turned and held out a hand, and twice she pretended not to see it.

At last, within ten feet of the top of the cliff, they came to the steepest, rudest step of all—a place some might have thought very dangerous.

Commander Dupré bent down and looked into Claire's uplifted face. "Let me at least help you up here," he said hoarsely.

She shook her head obstinately—but suddenly he felt her tremulous lips touch his lean, sinewy hand, and her hot tears fall upon his fingers.

He gave a strangled cry of pain and of pride, of agony and of rapture, and for a long moment he battled with an awful temptation. How easy it would be to gather her into his arms, and, with her face hidden on his breast, take a great leap backwards into nothingness. . . .

But he conquered the persuasive devil who had been raised—women do not know how easy it is to rouse this devil—by Claire's moment of piteous self-revelation.

And at last they stood together on the narrow platform where she, less than an hour ago, had stood alone.

Sheltered by the friendly, ugly red walls of the little tower, they were as remote from their kind as if on a rock in the midst of the sea. More, she was in his power in a sense she had never been before, for she had herself broken down the fragile barrier with which she had hitherto known how to keep him at bay. But he felt rather than saw that it was herself she would despise if now, at the eleventh hour, he took advantage of that tremulous kiss of renunciation, of those hot tears of anguished parting—and so—"Then at eleven o'clock to-morrow morning?" he said, and he felt as if it was some other man, not he himself, who was saying the words. He took her hand in farewell—so much he could allow himself—and all unknowing crushed her fingers in his strong, convulsive grasp.

"Yes," she said, "at eleven to-morrow morning Madeleine and I will be waiting out on the end of the jetty."

He thought he detected a certain hesitancy in her voice.

“Are you sure you still wish to come?” he said gravely. “I would not wish you to do anything that would cause you any fear—or any discomfort. Your sister evidently found it a very trying experience to-day—”

Claire smiled. Her hand no longer hurt her; her fingers had become quite numb.

“Afraid?” she said, and there was a little scorn in her voice. And then, “Ah me! I only wish that there were far more risk than there is about that which we are going to do together to-morrow.” She was in a dangerous mood, poor soul—the mood that raises a devil in men. But perhaps her good angel came to help her, for suddenly, “Forgive me,” she said humbly. “You know I did not mean that! Only cowards wish for death.”

And then, looking at him, she averted her eyes, for they showed her that, if that were so, Dupré was indeed a craven.

“*Au revoir*,” she whispered; “*au revoir* till to-morrow morning.”

When half-way through the door, leading on to the lonely stretch of down, she turned round suddenly. “I do not want you to bring any ices for me to-morrow.”

“I never thought of doing so,” he said simply. And the words pleased Claire as much as anything just then could please her, for they proved that her friend did not class her in his mind with those women who fear discomfort more than danger.

It had been her own wish to go out with Commander Dupré for his last cruise in northern waters. She had not had the courage to deny herself this final glimpse of him—they were never to meet again after to-morrow—in his daily habit as he lived.

II

At nine o'clock the next morning Jacques de Wissant stood in his wife's boudoir.

It was a strange and beautiful room, likely to linger in the memory of those who knew its strange and beautiful mistress.

The walls were draped with old Persian shawls, the furniture was of red Chinese lacquer, a set acquired in the East by some Norman sailing man unnumbered years ago, and bought by Claire de Wissant out of her own slender income not long after her marriage.

Pale blue and faded yellow silk cushions softened the formal angularity of the wide cane-seated couch and low, square chairs. There was a deep crystal bowl of midsummer flowering roses on the table, laden with books, by which Claire often sat long hours reading poetry and volumes written by modern poets and authors of whom her husband had only vaguely heard and of whom he definitely disapproved.

The window was wide open, and there floated in from the garden, which sloped away to the edge and indeed over the crumbling cliff, fragrant, salt-laden odours, dominated by the clean, sharp scent thrown from huge shrubs of red and white geraniums. The balls of blossom set against the belt of blue sea, formed a band of waving tricolor.

But Jacques de Wissant was unconscious, uncaring of the beauty round him, either in the room or without, and when at last he walked forward to the window, his face hardened as his eyes instinctively sought out the spot where, if hidden from his sight, he knew there lay the deep transparent waters of the little bay which had been selected as providing ideal quarters for the submarine flotilla.

He had eagerly assented to the sacrifice of his land, and, what meant far more to him, of his privacy; but now he would have given much—and he was a careful man—to have had the submarine station swept away, transferred to the other side of Falaise.

Down there, out of sight of the Pavilion, and yet but a few minutes away (if one used the dangerous cliff-stairway), dwelt Jacques de Wissant's secret foe, for the man of whom he was acutely, miserably jealous was Commander Dupré, of whose coming departure he as yet knew nothing.

The owner of the Pavilion de Wissant seldom entered the room where he now stood impatiently waiting for his wife, and he never did so without looking round him with distaste, and remembering with an odd, wistful feeling what it had been like in his mother's time. Then "le boudoir de madame" had reflected the tastes and simple interests of an old-fashioned provincial lady born in the year that Louis Philippe came to the throne. Greatly did the man now standing there prefer the room as it had been to what it was now!

The heavy, ugly furniture which had been there in the days of his lonely youth, for he had been an only child, was now in the schoolroom where the twin daughters of the house, Clairette and Jacqueline, did their lessons with Miss Doughty, their English governess.

Clairette and Jacqueline? Jacques de Wissant's lantern-jawed, expressionless face quickened into feeling as he thought of his two little girls. They were the pride, as well as the only vivid pleasure, of his life. All that he dispassionately admired in his wife was, so he sometimes told himself with satisfaction, repeated in his daughters. Clairette and Jacqueline had inherited their mother's look of race, her fastidiousness and refinement of bearing, while fortunately lacking Claire's dangerous personal beauty, her touch of eccentricity, and her discontent with life—or rather with the life which Jacques de Wissant, in spite of a gnawing ache and longing that nothing could still or assuage, yet found good.

The Mayor of Falaise looked strangely out of keeping with his present surroundings, at least so he would have seemed to the eye of any foreigner, especially of any Englishman, who had seen him standing there.

He was a narrowly built man, forty-three years of age, and his clean-shaven, rather fleshy face was very pale. On this hot August morning he was dressed in a light grey frock-coat, under which he wore a yellow waistcoat, and on his wife's writing-table lay his tall hat and lemon-coloured gloves.

As mayor of his native town—a position he owed to an historic name and to his wealth, and not to his very moderate Republican opinions—his duties included the celebration of civil marriages, and to-day, it being the 14th of August, the eve of the Assumption, and still a French national fête, there were to be a great many weddings celebrated in the Hotel de Ville.

Jacques de Wissant considered that he owed it to himself, as well as to his fellow-citizens, to appear "correctly" attired on such occasions. He had a deep, wordless contempt for those of his acquaintances who dressed on ceremonial occasions "à l'anglaise," that is, in loose lounge suits and straw hats.

Suddenly there broke on his ear the sound of a low, full voice, singing. It came from the next room, his wife's bedroom, and the mournful passionate words of an old sea ballad rang out, full of a desolate pain and sense of bitter loss.

The sound irritated him shrewdly, and there came back to him a fragment of conversation he had not thought of for ten years. During a discussion held between his father and mother in this very room about their adored only son's proposed marriage with Claire de Kergouët, his father had said: "There is one thing I do not much care for; she is, they say, very musical, and Jacques, even as a baby, howled like a dog whenever he heard singing!" And his mother had laughed,

“*Mon ami*, you cannot expect to get perfection, even for our Jacques!” And Claire, so he now admitted unwillingly to himself, had never troubled him overmuch with her love of music. . . .

He knocked twice, sharply, on his wife’s door.

The song broke short with an almost cruel suddenness, and yet there followed a perceptible pause before he heard her say, “Come in.”

And then, as Jacques de Wissant slowly turned the handle of the door, he saw his wife, Claire, before she saw him. He had a vision, that is, of her as she appeared when she believed herself to be, if not alone, then in sight of eyes that were indifferent, unwatchful. But Jacques’ eyes, which his wife’s widowed sister, the frivolous Parisienne, Madeleine Baudoin, had once unkindly compared to fishes’ eyes, were now filled with a watchful, suspicious light which gave a tragic mask to his pallid, plain-featured face.

Claire de Wissant was standing before a long, narrow mirror placed at right angles to a window looking straight out to sea. Her short, narrow, dark blue skirt and long blue silk jersey silhouetted her slender figure, the figure which remained so supple, so—so girlish, in spite of her nine-year-old daughters. There was something shy and wild, untamed and yet beckoning, in the oval face now drawn with pain and sleeplessness, in the grey, almond-shaped eyes reddened with secret tears, and in the firm, delicately modelled mouth.

She was engaged in tucking up her dark, curling hair under a grey yachting cap, and, for a few moments, she neither spoke nor looked round to see who was standing framed in the door. But when, at last, she turned away from the mirror and saw her husband, the colour, rushing into her pale face, caused an unbecoming flush to cover it.

“I thought it was one of the children,” she said, a little breathlessly. And then she waited, assuming, or so Jacques thought, an air at once of patience and of surprise which sharply angered him.

Then her look of strain, nay, of positive illness, gave him an uneasy twinge of discomfort. Could it be anxiety concerning her second sister, Marie-Anne, who, married to an Italian officer, was now ill of scarlet fever at Mantua? Two days ago Claire had begged very earnestly to be allowed to go and nurse Marie-Anne. But he, Jacques, had refused, not unkindly, but quite firmly. Claire’s duty of course lay at Falaise, with her husband and children; not at Mantua, with her sister.

Suddenly she again broke silence. “Well?” she said. “Is there anything you wish to tell me?” They had never used the familiar “thee” and “thou” the one to the other, for at the time of their marriage an absurd whim of fashion had ordained on the part of French wives and husbands a return to eighteenth-century formality, and Claire had chosen, in that one instance, to follow fashion.

She added, seeing that he still did not speak, “I am lunching with my sister to-day, but I shall be home by three o’clock.” She spoke with the chill civility a lady shows a stranger. Claire seldom allowed herself to be on the defensive when speaking to her husband.

Jacques de Wissant frowned. He did not like either of his wife’s sisters, neither the one who was now lying ill in Italy, nor his widowed sister-in-law, Madeleine Baudoin. In the villa which she had hired for the summer, and which stood on a lonely stretch of beach beyond the bay, Madeleine often entertained the officers of the submarine flotilla, and this, from her brother-in-law’s point of view, was very far from “correct” conduct on the part of one who could still pass as a young widow.

In response to his frown there had come a slight, mocking smile on Claire’s face.

“I suppose you are on your way to some important town function?”

She disliked the town of Falaise, the town-folk bored her, and she hated the vast old family house in the Market Place, where she had to spend each winter.

“To-day is the fourteenth of August,” observed Jacques de Wissant in his deliberate voice; “and I have a great many marriages to celebrate this morning.”

“Yes, I suppose that is so.” And again Claire de Wissant spoke with the courteous indifference, the lack of interest in her husband’s concerns, which she had early schooled him to endure.

But all at once there came a change in her voice, in her manner. “Why to-day—the fourteenth of August—is our wedding day! How stupid of me to forget! We must tell Jacqueline and Clairette. It will amuse them—”

She uttered the words a little breathlessly, and as she spoke, Jacques de Wissant walked quickly forward into the room. As he did so his wife moved abruptly away from where she had been standing, thus maintaining the distance between them.

But Claire de Wissant need not have been afraid; her husband had his own strict code of manners, and to this code he ever remained faithful. He possessed a remarkable mastery of his emotions, and he had always showed with regard to herself so singular a power of self-restraint that Claire, not unreasonably, doubted if he had any emotions to master, any passionate feeling to restrain.

All he now did was to take a shagreen case out of his breast pocket and hold it out towards her.

“Claire,” he said quietly, “I have brought you, in memory of our wedding day, a little gift which I hope you will like. It is a medallion of the children.” And as she at last advanced towards him, he pressed a spring, and revealed a dull gold medal on which, modelled in high relief, and superposed the one on the other, were Clairette’s and Jacqueline’s childish, delicately pure profiles.

A softer, kindlier light came into Claire de Wissant’s sad grey eyes. She held out a hesitating hand—and Jacques de Wissant, before placing his gift in it, took that soft hand in his, and, bending rather awkwardly, kissed it lightly. In France, even now, a man will often kiss a woman’s hand by way of conventional, respectful homage. But to Claire the touch of her husband’s lips was hateful—so hateful indeed that she had to make an instant effort to hide the feeling of physical repulsion with which that touch had suddenly engulfed her in certain dark recesses of memory and revolt.

“It is a charming medallion,” she said hurriedly, “quite a work of art, Jacques; and I thank you for having thought of it. It gives me great—very great pleasure.”

And then something happened which was to her so utterly unexpected that she gave a stifled cry of pain—almost it seemed of fear.

As she forced herself to look straight into her husband’s face, the anguish in her own sore heart unlocked the key to his, and she perceived with the eyes of the soul, which see, when they are not holden, so much that is concealed from the eyes of the body, the suffering, the dumb longing she had never allowed herself to know were there.

For the first time since her marriage—since that wedding day of which this was the tenth anniversary—Claire felt pity for Jacques as well as for herself. For the first time her rebellious heart acknowledged that her husband also was enmeshed in a web of tragic circumstance.

“Jacques?” she cried. “Oh, Jacques!” And as she so uttered his name twice, there came a look of acute distress and then of sudden resolution on her face. “I wish you to know,” she exclaimed, “that—that—if I were a wicked woman I should perhaps be to you a better wife!” Thanks to the language in which she spoke, there was a play on the word—that word which in French signifies woman as well as wife.

He stared at her, and uttered no word of answer, of understanding, in response to her strange speech.

At one time, not lately, but many years ago, Claire had sometimes tried his patience by the odd, unreasonable things she said, and once, stung beyond bearing, he had told her so. Remembering those cold, measured words of rebuke, she now caught with quick, exultant relief at the idea that Jacques had not understood the half-confession wrung from her by her sudden vision of his pain; and she swung back to a belief she had always held till just now, the belief that he was dull—dull and unperceptive.

With a nervous smile she turned again to her mirror, and then Jacques de Wissant, with his wife's enigmatic words ringing in his ears, abruptly left the room.

As if pursued by some baneful presence, he hastened through Claire's beautiful boudoir, across the dining-room hung with the Gobelins tapestries which his wife had brought him as part of her slender dower, and so into the oval hall which formed the centre of the house.

And there Jacques de Wissant waited for a while, trying to still and to co-ordinate his troubled thoughts and impressions.

Ah yes, he had understood—understood only too well Claire's strange, ambiguous utterance! There are subtle, unbreathed temptations which all men and all women, when tortured by jealousy, not only understand but divine before they are actually in being.

Jacques de Wissant now believed that he was justified of the suspicions of which he had been ashamed. His wife—moved by some obscure desire for self-revelation to which he had had no clue—had flung at him the truth.

Yes, without doubt Claire could have made him happy—so little would have contented his hunger for her—had she been one of those light women of whom he sometimes heard, who go from their husbands' kisses to those of their lovers.

But if he sometimes, nay, often heard of them, Jacques de Wissant knew nothing of such women. The men of his race had known how to acquire honest wives, aye, and keep them so. There had never been in the de Wissant family any of those ugly scandals which stain other clans, and which are remembered over generations in French provincial towns. Those scandals which, if they provoke a laugh and cruel sneer when discussed by the indifferent, are recalled with long faces and anxious whisperings when a young girl's future is being discussed, and which make the honourable marriage of daughters difficult of achievement.

Jacques de Wissant thanked the God of his fathers that Claire had nothing in common with such women as those: he thought he did not need her assurance to know that his honour, in the usual, narrow sense of the phrase, was safe in her hands, but still her strange, imprudent words of half-avowal racked him with jealous and, yes, suspicious pain.

Fortunately for him, he was a man burdened with much business, and so at last he looked at his watch. Why, it was getting late—terribly late, and he prided himself on his punctuality. Still, if he started now, at once, he would be at the Hotel de Ville a few minutes before ten o'clock, the time when the first of the civil marriages he had to celebrate that morning was timed to take place.

Without passing through the house, he made his way rapidly round by the gardens to the road, winding ribbon-wise behind the cliffs, where his phaeton was waiting for him; for Jacques de Wissant had as yet resisted the wish of his wife and the advice of those of his friends who considered that he ought to purchase an automobile: driving had been from boyhood one of his few pleasures and accomplishments.

But as he drove, keeping his fine black bays well in hand, the five miles into the town, and tried to fix his mind on a commercial problem of great importance with which he would be expected to deal that day, Jacques de Wissant found it impossible to think of any matter but that which for the moment filled his heart to the exclusion of all else. That matter concerned his own relations to his wife, and his wife's relations to Commander Dupré.

This gentleman of France was typical in more than one sense of his nation and of his class—quite unlike, that is, to the fancy picture which foreigners draw of the average Frenchman. Reserved and cold in manner; proud, with an intense but never openly expressed pride in his name and of what the bearers of it had achieved for their country; obstinate and narrow as are apt to be all human beings whose judgment is never questioned by those about them, Jacques de Wissant's fetish was his personal honour and the honour of his name—of the name of Wissant.

In his distress and disturbance of mind—for his wife's half confession had outraged his sense of what was decorous and fitting—his memory travelled over the map of his past life, aye, and even beyond the boundaries of his own life.

Before him lay spread retrospectively the story of his parents' uneventful, happy marriage. They had been mated in the good old French way, that is, up to their wedding morning they had never met save in the presence of their respective parents. And yet—and yet how devoted they had been to each other! So completely one in thought, in interest, in sympathy had they grown that when, after thirty-three years of married life, his father had died, Jacques' mother had not known how to go on living. She had slipped out of life a few months later, and as she lay dying she had used a very curious expression: "My faithful companion is calling me," she had said to her only child, "and you must not try, dear son, to make me linger on the way."

Now, to-day, Jacques de Wissant asked himself with perplexed pain and anger, why it was that his parents had led so peaceful, so dignified, so wholly contented a married life, while he himself—?

And yet his own marriage had been a love match—or so those about him had all said with nods and smiles—love marriages having suddenly become the fashion in the rich provincial world of which he had then been one of the heirs-apparent.

His old-fashioned mother would have preferred as daughter-in-law any one of half a dozen girls who belonged to her own good town of Falaise, and whom she had known from childhood. But Jacques had been difficult to please, and he was already thirty-two when he had met, by a mere chance, Claire de Kergouët at her first ball. She was only seventeen, with but the promise of a beauty which was now in exquisite flower, and he had decided, there and then, in the course of two hours, that this demoiselle de Kergouët was alone worthy of becoming Madame Jacques de Wissant.

And on the whole his prudent parents had blessed his choice, for the girl was of the best Breton stock, and came of a family famed in the naval annals of France. Unluckily Claire de Kergouët had had no dowry to speak of, for her father, the Admiral, had been a spendthrift, and, as is still the reckless Breton fashion, father of a large family—three daughters and four sons. But Jacques de Wissant had not allowed his parents to give the matter of Claire's fortune more than a regretful thought—indeed, he had done further, he had "recognized" a larger dowry than she brought him to save the pride of her family.

But Claire—he could not help thinking of it to-day with a sense of bitter injury—had never seemed grateful, had never seemed to understand all that had been done for her. . . .

Had he not poured splendid gifts upon her in the beginning of their married life? And, what had been far more difficult, had he not, within reason, contented all her strange whims and fantasies?

But nought had availed him to secure even a semblance of that steadfast, warm affection, that sincere interest and pride in his concerns which is all such a Frenchman as was Jacques de Wissant expects, or indeed desires, of his wedded wife. Had Claire been such a woman, Jacques' own passion for her would soon have dulled into a reasonable, comfortable affection. But his wife's cool aloofness had kept alive the hidden fires, the more—so ironic are the tricks which sly Dame Nature plays—that for many years past he had troubled her but very little with his company.

Outwardly Claire de Wissant did her duty, entertaining his friends and relations on such occasions as was incumbent on her, and showing herself a devoted and careful mother to the twin daughters who formed the only vital link between her husband and herself. But inwardly? Inwardly they two were strangers.

And yet only during the last few months had Jacques de Wissant ever felt jealous of his wife. There had been times when he had been angered by the way in which her young beauty, her indefinable, mysterious charm, had attracted the very few men with whom she was brought into contact. But Claire, so her husband had always acknowledged to himself, was no flirt; she was ever perfectly “correct.”

Correct was a word dear to Jacques de Wissant. It was one which he used as a synonym for great things—things such as honour, fineness of conduct, loyalty.

But fate had suddenly introduced a stranger into the dull, decorous life of the Pavilion de Wissant, and it was he, Jacques himself, who had brought him there.

How bitter it was to look back and remember how much he had liked—liked because he had respected—Commander Dupré! He now hated and feared the naval officer, and he would have given much to have been able to despise him. But that Jacques de Wissant could not do. Commander Dupré was still all that he had taken him to be when he first made him free of his house—a brilliant officer, devoted to his profession, already noted in the Service as having made several important improvements in submarine craft.

From the first it had seemed peculiar, to Jacques de Wissant's mind unnatural, that such a man as was Dupré should be so keenly interested in music and in modern literature. But so it was, and it had been owing to these strange, untoward tastes that Commander Dupré and Claire had become friends.

He now reminded himself, for the hundredth time, that he had begun by actually approving of the acquaintance between his wife and the naval officer—an acquaintance which he had naturally supposed would be of the most “correct” nature.

Then, without warning, there came an hour—nay, a moment, when in that twilight hour which the French call “*Twixt dog and wolf*,” the most torturing and shameful of human passions, jealousy, had taken possession of Jacques de Wissant, disintegrating, rather than shattering, the elaborate fabric of his House of Life, that house in which he had always dwelt so snugly and unquestioningly ensconced.

He had come home after a long afternoon spent at the Hôtel de Ville to learn with tepid pleasure that there was a visitor, Commander Dupré, in the house, and as he had come hurrying towards his wife's boudoir, Jacques had heard Claire's low, deep voice and the other's ardent, eager tones mingling together. . . .

And then as he, the husband, had opened the door, they had stopped speaking, their words clipped as if a sword had fallen between them. At the same moment a servant had brought a lamp into the twilight room, and Jacques had seen the ravaged face of Commander Dupré, a fair, tanned face full of revolt and of longing leashed. Claire had remained in shadow, but her eyes, or so the interloper thought he perceived, were full of tears.

Since that spring evening the Mayor of Falaise had not had an easy moment. While scorning to act the spy upon his wife, he was for ever watching her, and keeping an eager and yet scarcely conscious count of her movements.

True, Commander Dupré had soon ceased to trouble the owner of the Pavilion de Wissant by his presence. The younger officers came and went, but since that hour, laden with unspoken drama, their commander only came when good breeding required him to pay a formal call on his nearest neighbour and sometime host. But Claire saw Dupré constantly at the Chalet des Dunes, her sister's house, and she was both too proud and too indifferent, it appeared, to her husband's view of what a young married woman's conduct should be, to conceal the fact.

This openness on his wife's part was at once Jacques' consolation and opportunity for endless self-torture.

For three long miserable months he had wrestled with those ignoble questionings only the jealous know, now accepting as probable, now rejecting with angry self-rebuke, the thought that his wife suffered, perhaps even returned, Dupré's love. And to-day, instead of finding his jealousy allayed by her half-confidence, he felt more wretched than he had ever been.

His horses responded to his mood, and going down the steep hill which leads into the town of Falaise they shied violently at a heap of stones they had passed sedately a dozen times or more. Jacques de Wissant struck them several cruel blows with the whip he scarcely ever used, and the groom, looking furtively at his master's set face and blazing eyes, felt suddenly afraid.

III

It was one o'clock, and the last of the wedding parties had swept gaily out of the great *salle* of the Falaise town hall and so to the Cathedral across the market place.

Jacques de Wissant, with a feeling of relief, took off his tricolor badge of office. With the instinctive love of order which was characteristic of the man, he gathered up the papers that were spread on the large table and placed them in neat piles before him. Through the high windows, which by his orders had been prised open, for it was intensely hot, he could hear what seemed an unwonted stir outside. The picturesque town was full of strangers; in addition to the usual holiday-makers from the neighbourhood, crowds of Parisians had come down to spend the Feast of the Assumption by the sea.

The Mayor of Falaise liked to hear this unwonted stir and movement, for everything that affected the prosperity of the town affected him very nearly; but he was constitutionally averse to noise, and just now he felt very tired. The varied emotions which had racked him that morning had drained him of his vitality; and he thought with relief that in a few moments he would be in the old-fashioned restaurant just across the market place, where a table was always reserved for him when his town house happened to be shut up, and where all his tastes and dietetic fads—for M. de Wissant had a delicate digestion—were known.

He took up his tall hat and his lemon-coloured gloves—and then a look of annoyance came over his weary face, for he heard the swinging of a door. Evidently his clerk was coming back to ask some stupid question.

He always found it difficult to leave the town hail at the exact moment he wished to do so; for although the officials dreaded his cold reprimands, they were far more afraid of his sudden hot anger if business of any importance were done without his knowledge and sanction.

But this time it was not his clerk who wished to intercept the mayor on his way out to *déjeuner*; it was the chief of the employés in the telephone and telegraph department of the building, a forward, pushing young man whom Jacques de Wissant disliked.

“M’sieur le maire?” and then he stopped short, daunted by the mayor’s stern look of impatient fatigue. “Has m’sieur le maire heard the news?” The speaker gathered up courage; it is exciting to be the bearer of news, especially of ill news.

M. de Wissant shook his head.

“Alas! there has been an accident, m’sieur le maire! A terrible accident! One of the submarines—they don’t yet know which it is—has been struck by a big private yacht and has sunk in the fairway of the Channel, about two miles out!”

The Mayor of Falaise uttered an involuntary exclamation of horror. “When did it happen?” he asked quickly.

“About half an hour ago more or less. I said that m’sieur le maire ought to be informed at once of such a calamity. But I was told to wait till the marriages were over.”

Looking furtively at the mayor’s pale face, the young man regretted that he had not taken more on himself, for m’sieur le maire looked seriously displeased.

There was an old feud between the municipal and the naval authorities of Falaise—there often is in a naval port—and the mayor ought certainly to have been among the very first to hear the news of the disaster.

The bearer of ill news hoped m’sieur le maire would not blame him for the delay, or cause the fact to postpone his advancement to a higher grade—that advancement which is the perpetual dream of every French Government official.

“The admiral has only just driven by,” he observed insinuatingly, “not five minutes ago—But still Jacques de Wissant did not move.

He was listening to the increasing stir and tumult going on outside in the market place. The sounds had acquired a sinister significance; he knew now that the tramping of feet, the loud murmur of voices, meant that the whole population belonging to the seafaring portion of the town was emptying itself out and hurrying towards the harbour and the shore.

Shaking off the bearer of ill news with a curt word of thanks, the Mayor of Falaise strode out of the town hail into the street and joined the eager crowd, mostly consisting of fisher folk, which grew denser as it swept down the tortuous narrow streets leading to the sea.

The people parted with a sort of rough respect to make way for their mayor; many of them, nay the majority, were known by name to Jacques de Wissant, and the older men and women among them could remember him as a child.

Rising to the tragic occasion, he walked forward with his head held high, and a look of deep concern on his pale, set face. The men who manned the Northern Submarine Flotilla were almost all men born and bred at Falaise—Falaise famed for the gallant sailors she has ever given to France.

The hurrying crowd—strangely silent in its haste—poured out on to the great stone-paved quays in which is set the harbour so finely encircled on two sides by the cliffs which give the town its name.

Beyond the harbour—crowded with shipping, and now alive with eager little craft and fishing-boats making ready to start for the scene of the calamity—lay a vast expanse of glistening sea, and on that sun-flecked blue pall every eye was fixed.

The end of the harbour jetty was already roped off, only those officially privileged being allowed through to the platform where now stood Admiral de Saint Vilquier impatiently waiting for the tug which was to take him out to the spot where the disaster had taken place. The Admiral was a naval officer of the old school—of the school who called their men “my children”—and who detested the Republican form of government as being subversive of discipline.

As Jacques de Wissant hurried up to him, he turned and stiffly saluted the Mayor of Falaise.

Admiral de Saint Vilquier had no liking for M. de Wissant—a cold prig of a fellow, and yet married to such a beautiful, such a charming young woman, the daughter, too, of one of the Admiral’s oldest friends, of that Admiral de Kergouet with whom he had first gone to sea a matter of fifty years ago! The lovely Claire de Iclergouet had been worthy of a better fate than to be wife to this plain, cold-blooded landsman.

“Do they yet know, Admiral, which of the submarines has gone down?” asked Jacques de Wissant in a low tone. He was full of a burning curiosity edged with a longing and a suspense into whose secret sources he had no wish to thrust a probe.

The Admiral’s weather-beaten face was a shade less red than usual; the bright blue eyes he turned on the younger man were veiled with a film of moisture. “Yes, the news has just come in, but it isn’t to be made public for awhile. It’s the submarine *Neptune* which was struck, with Commander Dupré, Lieutenant Paritot, and ten men on board. The craft is lying eighteen fathoms deep—”

Jacques de Wissant uttered an inarticulate cry—was it of horror or only of surprise? And yet, gifted for that once and that once only with a kind of second sight, he had known that it was the *Neptune* and Commander Duprè which lay eighteen fathoms deep on the floor of the sea.

The old seaman, moved by the mayor’s emotion, relaxed into a confidential undertone. “Poor Dupré! I had forgotten that you knew him. He is indeed pursued by a malignant fate. As of course you are aware, he applied a short time ago to be transferred to Toulon, and his appointment is in to-day’s *Gazelle*. In fact he was actually leaving Falaise this very evening in order to spend a week with his family before taking up his new command!”

The Mayor of Falaise stared at the Admiral. “Dupré going away?—leaving Falaise?” he repeated incredulously.

The other nodded.

Jacques de Wissant drew a long, deep breath. God! How mistaken he had been! Mistaken as no man, no husband, had ever been mistaken before. He felt overwhelmed, shaken with conflicting emotions in which shame and intense relief predominated.

The fact that Commander Dupré had applied for promotion was to his mind absolute proof that there had been nothing—nothing and less than nothing—between the naval officer and Claire. The Admiral’s words now made it clear that he, Jacques de Wissant, had built up a huge superstructure of jealousy and base thoughts on the fact that poor Dupré and Claire had innocently enjoyed certain tastes in common. True, such friendships—friendships between unmarried men and attractive young married women—are generally speaking to be deprecated. Still, Claire had always been “correct;” of that there could now be no doubt.

As he stood there on the pier, staring out, as all those about him and behind him were doing, at the expanse of dark blue sun-flecked sea, there came over Jacques de Wissant a great lightening of the spirit. . . .

But all too soon his mind, his memory, swung back to the tragic business of the moment.

Suddenly the Admiral burst into speech, addressing himself, rather than the silent man by his side.

“The devil of it is,” he exclaimed, “that the nearest salvage appliances are at Cherbourg! Thank God, the Ministry of Marine are alone responsible for that blunder. Dupré and his comrades have, it seems, thirty-six hours’ supply of oxygen—if, indeed, they are still living, which I feel tempted to hope they are not. You see, Monsieur de Wissant, I was at Bizerta when the *Lutin* sank. A man doesn’t want to remember two such incidents in his career. One is quite had enough!”

“I suppose it isn’t yet known how far the *Neptune* is injured?” inquired the Mayor of Falaise.

But he spoke mechanically; he was not really thinking of what he was saying. His inner and real self were still steeped in that strange mingled feeling of shame and relief—shame that he should have suspected his wife, exultant relief that his jealousy should have been so entirely unfounded.

“No, as usual no one knows exactly what did happen. But we shall learn something of that presently. The divers are on their way. But—but even if the craft did sustain no injury, what can they do? Ants might as well attempt to pierce a cannon-ball”—he shrugged his shoulders, oppressed by the vision his homely simile had conjured up.

And then—for no particular reason, save that his wife Claire was very present to him—Jacques de Wissant bethought himself that it was most unlikely that any tidings of the accident could yet have reached the Chalet des Dunes, the lonely villa on the shore where Claire was now lunching with her sister. But at any moment some casual visitor from the town might come out there with the sad news. He told himself uneasily that it would be well, if possible, to save his wife from such a shock. After all, Claire and that excellent Commander Dupré had been good friends—so much must be admitted, nay, now he was eager to admit it.

Jacques de Wissant touched the older man on the arm.

“I should be most grateful, Admiral, for the loan of your motor-car. I have just remembered that I ought to go home for an hour. This terrible affair made me forget it; but I shall not be long—indeed, I must soon be back, for there will be all sorts of arrangements to be made at the town hall. Of course we shall be besieged with inquiries, with messages from Paris, with telegrams—”

“My car, monsieur, is entirely at your disposal.”

The Admiral could not help feeling, even at so sad and solemn a moment as this, a little satirical amusement. Arrangements at the town hall, forsooth! If the end of the world were in sight, the claims of the municipality of Falaise would not be neglected or forgotten; in as far as Jacques de Wissant could arrange it, everything in such a case would be ready at the town hall, if not on the quarter-deck, for the Great Assize

What had a naval disaster to do with the Mayor of Falaise, after all? But in this matter the old Admiral allowed prejudice to get the better of him; the men now immured in the submarine were, with two exceptions—their commander and his junior officer—all citizens of the town. It was their mothers, wives, children, sweethearts, who were now pressing with wild, agonized faces against the barriers drawn across the end of the pier. .

As Jacques de Wissant made his way through the crowd, his grey frock-coat was pulled by many a horny hand, and imploring faces gazed with piteous questioning into his. But he could give them no comfort.

Not till he found himself actually in the Admiral's car did he give his instructions to the chauffeur.

"Take me to the Chalet des Dunes as quickly as you can drive without danger," he said briefly. "You probably know where it is?"

The man nodded and looked round consideringly. He had never driven so elegantly attired a gentleman before. Why, M. de Wissant looked like a bridegroom! The Mayor of Falaise should be good for a handsome tip.

The chauffeur did not need to be told that on such a day time was of importance, and once they were out of the narrow, tortuous streets of the town, the Admiral's car flew.

And then, for the first time that day, Jacques de Wissant began to feel pleasantly cool, nay, there even came over him a certain exhilaration. He had been foolish to hold out against motor-cars. There was a great deal to be said for them, after all. He owed his wife reparation for his evil thoughts of her. He resolved that he would get Claire the best automobile money could buy. It is always a mistake to economize in such matters. .

His mind took a sudden turn—he felt ashamed of his egoism, and the sensation disturbed him, for the Mayor of Falaise very seldom had occasion to feel ashamed, either of his thoughts or of his actions. How could he have allowed his attention to stray from the subject which should just now be absorbing his whole mind?

Thirty-six hours' supply of oxygen? Well, it might have been worse, for a great deal can be done in thirty-six hours.

True, all the salvage appliances, so the Admiral had said, were at Cherbourg. What a shameful lack of forethought on someone's part! Still, there was little doubt but that the *Neptune* would be raised in—in time. The British Navy would send her salvage appliances. Jacques de Wissant had a traditional distrust of the English, but at such moments all men are brothers, and just now the French and the English happened to be allies. He himself felt far more kindly to his little girls' governess, Miss Doughty, than he would have done five years ago.

Yes, without doubt the gallant English Navy would send salvage appliances. .

There would be some hours of suspense—terrible hours for the wives and mothers of the men, but those poor women would be upheld by the universal sympathy shown them. He himself as mayor of the town would do all he could. He would seek these poor women out, say consoling, hopeful things, and Claire would help him. She had, as he knew, a very tender heart, especially where seamen were concerned.

Indeed, it was a terrible thought—that of those brave fellows down there beneath the surface of the waters. Terrible, that is, if they were alive—alive in the same measure as he, Jacques de Wissant, was now alive in the keen, rushing air. Alive, and waiting for a deliverance that might never come. The idea made him feel a queer, interior tremor.

Then his mind, in spite of himself, swung back to its old moorings. How strange that he had not been told that Commander Dupré had applied for a change of command! Doubtless the Mediterranean was better suited, being a tideless sea, for submarine experiments. Keen, clever Dupré, absorbed as he was in his profession, had doubtless thought of that.

But, again, how odd of Claire not to have mentioned that Dupré was leaving Falaise! Of course it was possible that she also had been ignorant of the fact. She very seldom spoke of other people's affairs, and lately she had been so dreadfully worried about her sister's, Marie-Anne's, illness.

If his wife had known nothing of Commander Dupré's plans, it proved as hardly anything else could have done how little real intimacy there could have been between them. A man never

leaves the woman he loves unless he has grown tired of her—then, as all the world knows, except perchance the poor soul herself, no place is too far for him to make for.

Such was Jacques de Wissant's simple, cynical philosophy concerning a subject to which he had never given much thought. The tender passion had always appeared to him in one of two shapes—the one was a grotesque and slightly improper shape, which makes men do silly, absurd things; the other came in the semblance of a sinister demon which wrecks the honour and devastates, as nothing else can do, the happiness of respectable families. It was this second and more hateful form which had haunted him these last few weeks.

He recalled with a sick feeling of distaste the state of mind and body he had been in that very morning. Why, he had then been in the mood to kill Dupré, or, at any rate, to welcome the news of his death with fierce joy! And then, simultaneously with his discovery of how groundless had been his jealousy, he had learnt the awful fact that the man whom he had wrongly accused lay out there, buried and yet alive, beneath the glistening sea, which was stretched out, like a great blue pall, on his left.

Still, it was only proper that his wife should be spared the shock of hearing in some casual way of this awful accident. Claire had always been sensitive, curiously so, to everything that concerned the Navy. Admiral de Saint Vilquier had recalled the horrible submarine disaster of Bizerta harbour; Jacques de Wissant now remembered uncomfortably how very unhappy that sad affair had made Claire. Why, one day he had found her in a passion of tears, mourning over the tragic fate of those poor sailor men, the crew of the *Lutin*, of whose very names she was ignorant!

At the time he had thought her betrayal of feeling very unreasonable, but now he understood, and even shared to a certain extent, the pain she had shown; but then he knew Dupré, knew and liked him, and the men immured in the *Neptune* were men of Falaise.

These were the thoughts which jostled each other in Jacques de Wissant's brain as he sat back in the Admiral's car.

They were now rushing past the Pavillon de Wissant. What a pity it was that Claire had not remained quietly at home to-day! It would have been so much pleasanter—if one could think of anything being pleasant in such a connection—to have gone in and told her the sad news at home. Her sister, Madeleine Baudoin, though older than Claire, was foolishly emotional and unrestrained in the expression of her feelings. Madeleine was sure to make a scene when she heard of Commander Dupré's peril, and Jacques de Wissant hated scenes.

He now asked himself whether there was any real necessity for his telling his wife before her sister. All he need do was to send Claire a message by the servant who opened the door to him. He would say that she was wanted at home; she would think something had happened to one of the children, and this would be a good thing, for it would prepare her in a measure for ill tidings.

From what Jacques knew of his wife he believed she would receive the news quietly, and he, her husband, would show her every consideration; again he reminded himself that it would be ridiculous to deny the fact that Claire had made a friend, almost an intimate, of Commander Dupré. It would be natural, nay "correct," for her to be greatly distressed when she heard of the accident.

There came a familiar cutting in the road, and again the sea lay spread out, an opaque, glistening sheet of steel, before him. He gazed across, with a feeling of melancholy and fearful curiosity, to the swarm of craft great and small collected round the place where the *Neptune* lay, eighteen fathoms deep. . . .

He hoped Claire would not ask to go back into the town with him in order to hear the latest news. But if she did so ask, then he would raise no objection. Every Falaise woman, whatever her rank in life, was now full of suspense and anxiety, and as the mayor's wife Claire had a right to share that anxious suspense.

The car was now slowing on the sharp decline leading to the shore, and Jacques de Wissant got up and touched the chauffeur on the shoulder.

"Stop here," he said. "You needn't drive down to the Chalet. I want you to turn and wait for me at the Pavilion de Wissant. Ask my servants to give you some luncheon. I may be half an hour or more, but I want to get back to Falaise as soon as I can.

The Chalet des Dunes had been well named. It stood enclosed in rough palings in a sandy wilderness. An attempt had been made to turn the immediate surroundings of the villa into the semblance of a garden; there were wind-blown flowers set in sandy flower-beds, and coarse, luxuriant creepers flung their long, green ropes about the wooden verandah. In front, stretching out into the sea, was a stone pier, built by Jacques' father many a year ago.

The Chalet looked singularly quiet and deserted, for all the shutters had been closed in order to shut out the midday heat.

Jacques de Wissant became vaguely uneasy. He reconsidered his plan of action. If the two sisters were alone together—as he supposed them to be—he would go in and quietly tell them of the accident. It would be making altogether too much of the matter to send for Claire to come out to him; she might very properly resent it. For the matter of that, it was quite possible that Madeleine Baudoin had some little sentiment for Dupré. That would explain so much—the officer's constant presence at the Chalet des Dunes added to his absence from the Pavilion. It was odd he had never thought of the possibility before.

But this new idea made Jacques grow more and more uneasy at the thought of the task which now lay before him. With slow, hesitating steps he walked up to the little front door of the Chalet.

He pulled the rusty bell-handle. How absurd to have ironwork in such a place!

There followed what seemed to him a very long pause. He rang again.

There came the sound of light, swift steps; he could hear them in spite of the rhythmical surge of the sea; and then the door was opened by his sister-in-law, Madame Baudoin, herself.

In the midst of his own agitation and unease, Jacques de Wissant saw that there was a look of embarrassment on the face which Madeleine tried to make amiably welcoming.

"Jacques?" she exclaimed. "Forgive me for having made you ring twice! I have sent the servants into Falaise to purchase a railway time-table. Claire will doubtless have told you that I am starting for Italy to-night. Our poor Marie-Anne is worse; and I feel that it is my duty to go to her."

She did not step aside to allow him to come in. In fact, doubtless without meaning to do so, she was actually blocking up the door.

No, Claire had not told Jacques that Marie-Anne was worse. That of course was why she had looked so unhappy this morning. He felt hurt and angered by his wife's reserve.

"I am sure you will agree, Madeleine," he said stiffly—he was not sorry to gain a little time—"that it would not be wise for Claire to accompany you to Italy. After all, she is still quite a young woman, and poor Marie-Anne's disease is most infectious. I have ascertained, too, that there is a regular epidemic raging in Mantua."

Madeleine nodded. Then she turned, with an uneasy side-look at her brother-in-law, and began leading the way down the short passage. The door of the dining-room was open; Jacques could

not help seeing that only one place was laid at the round table, also that Madeleine had just finished her luncheon.

“Isn’t Claire here?” he asked, surprised. “She said she was going to lunch with you to-day. Hasn’t she been here this morning?”

“No—I mean yes.” Madeleine spoke confusedly. “She did not stay to lunch. She was only here for a very little while.”

“But has she gone home again?”

“Well—she may be home by now; I really don’t know”—Madeleine was opening the door of the little drawing-room.

It was an ugly, common-looking room; the walls were hung with Turkey red, and ornamented with cheap coloured prints. There were cane and basket chairs which Madame Baudoin had striven to make comfortable with the help of cushions and rugs.

Jacques de Wissant told himself that it was odd that Claire should like to spend so much of her time here, in the Chalet des Dunes, instead of asking her sister to join her each morning or afternoon in her own beautiful house on the cliff.

“Forgive me,” he said stiffly, “but I can’t stay a moment. I really came for Claire. You say I shall find her at home?”

He held his top hat and his yellow gloves in his hand, and his sister-in-law thought she had never seen Jacques look so plain and unattractive, and—and tiresome as he looked to-day.

Madame Baudoin had a special reason for wishing him away; but she knew the slow, sure workings of his mind. If Jacques found that his wife had not gone back to the Pavilion de Wissant, and that there was no news of her there, he would almost certainly come back to the Chalet des Dunes for further information.

“No,” she said reluctantly, “Claire has not gone back to the Pavilion. I believe that she has gone into the town. She had something important that she wished to do there.”

She looked so troubled, so—so uncomfortable that Jacques de Wissant leapt to the sudden conclusion that the tidings he had been at such pains to bring had already been brought to the Chalet des Dunes.

“Ah!” he exclaimed, “then I am too late! Ill news travels fast.”

“Ill news?” Madeleine repeated affrightedly.

“Is anything the matter? Has anything happened to one of the children? Don’t keep me in suspense, Jacques. I am not cold-blooded—like you!”

“The children are all right,” he said shortly. “But there has been, as you evidently know, an accident. The submarine *Neptune* has met with a serious mishap. She now lies with her crew in eighteen fathoms of water about two miles out.”

He spoke with cold acerbity. How childishly foolish of Madeleine to try and deceive him! But all women of the type to which she belonged make foolish mysteries about nothing.

“The submarine *Neptune*?” As she stammered out the question which had already been answered, there came over Madame Baudoin’s face a look of measureless terror. Twice her lips opened—and twice she closed them again.

At last she uttered a few words—words of anguished protest and revolt. “No, no,” she cried, “that can’t be—it’s impossible!”

“Command yourself!” he said sternly. “Remember what would be thought by anyone who saw you in this state.”

But she went on looking at him with wild, terror-stricken eyes. “My poor Claire!” she moaned. “My little sister Claire—”

All Jacques de Wissant's jealousy leapt into eager, quivering life. Then he had been right after all? His wife loved Dupré. Her sister's anguished sympathy had betrayed Claire's secret as nothing Claire herself was ever likely to say or do could have done.

"You are a good sister," he said ironically, "to take Claire's distress so much to heart. Identifying yourself as entirely as you seem to do with her, I am surprised that you did not accompany her into Falaise: it was most wrong of you to let her go alone."

"Claire is not in Falaise," muttered Madeleine. She was grasping the back of one of the cane chairs with her hand as if glad of even that slight support, staring at him with a dazed look of abject misery which increased his anger, his disgust.

"Not in Falaise?" he echoed sharply. "Then where, in God's name, is she?"

A most disagreeable possibility had flashed into his mind. Was it conceivable that his wife had had herself rowed to the scene of the disaster? If she had done that, if her sister had allowed her to go alone, or accompanied maybe by one or other of the officers belonging to the submarine flotilla, then he told himself with jealous rage that he would find it very difficult ever to forgive Claire. There are things a woman with any self-respect, especially a woman who is the mother of daughters, refrains from doing.

"Well?" he said contemptuously. "Well, Madeleine? I am waiting to hear the truth. I desire no explanations—no excuses. I cannot, however, withhold myself from telling you that you ought to have accompanied your sister, even if you found it impossible to control her."

"I was there yesterday," said Madeleine Baudoin, with a pinched, white face, "for over two hours."

"What do you mean?" he asked suspiciously. "Where were you yesterday for over two hours?"

"In the *Neptune*."

She gazed at him, past him, with widely open eyes, as if she were staring, fascinated, at some scene of unutterable horror—and there crept into Jacques de Wissant's mind a thought so full of shameful dread that he thrust it violently from him.

"You were in the *Neptune*," he said slowly, "knowing well that it is absolutely forbidden for any officer to take a friend on board a submarine without a special permit from the Minister of Marine?"

"It is sometimes done," she said listlessly.

Madame Baudoin had now sat down on a low chair, and she was plucking at the front of her white serge skirt with a curious mechanical movement of the fingers.

"Did the submarine actually put out to sea with you on board?"

She nodded her head, and then very deliberately added, "Yes, I have told you that I was out for two hours. They all knew it—the men and officers of the flotilla. I was horribly frightened, but—but now I am glad indeed that I went. Yes, I am indeed glad!"

"Why are you glad?" he asked roughly—and again a hateful suspicion thrust itself insistently upon him.

"I am glad I went, because it will make what Claire has done to-day seem natural, a—a simple escapade."

There was a moment of terrible silence between them.

"Then do all the officers and men belonging to the flotilla know that my wife is out therein the *Neptune*?" Jacques de Wissant asked in a low, still voice.

"No," said Madeleine, and there was now a look of shame, as well as of terror, on her face. "They none of them know—only those who are on board." She hesitated a moment—"That is

why I sent the servants away this morning. We—I mean Commander Dupré and I—did not think it necessary that anyone should know.”

“Then no one—that is, only a hare-brained young officer and ten men belonging to the town of Falaise—were to be aware of the fact that my wife had accompanied her lover on this life-risking expedition? You and Dupré were indeed tender of her honour—and mine.”

“Jacques!” She took her hand off the chair, and faced her brother-in-law proudly. “What infamous thing is this that you are harbouring in your mind? My sister is an honest woman, aye, as honest, as high-minded as was your own mother—”

He stopped her with a violent gesture. “Do not mention Claire and my mother in the same breath!” he cried.

“Ah, but I will—I must! You want the truth—you said just now you wanted only the truth. Then you shall hear the truth! Yes, it is as you have evidently suspected. Louis Dupré loves Claire, and she”—her voice faltered, then grew firmer—“she may have had for him a little sentiment. Who can tell? You have not been at much pains to make her happy. But what is true, what is certain, is that she rejected his love. To-day they were to part—for ever.

Her voice failed again, then once more it strengthened and hardened.

“That is why he in a moment of folly—I admit it was in a moment of folly—asked her to come out on his last cruise in the Neptune. When you came I was expecting them back any moment. But, Jacques, do not be afraid. I swear to you that no one shall ever know. Admiral de Saint Vilquier will do anything for us Kergouëts; I myself will go to him, and—and explain.”

But Jacques de Wissant scarcely heard the eager, pitiful words.

He had thrust his wife from his mind, and her place had been taken by his honour—his honour and that of his children, of happy, light-hearted Clairette and Jacqueline. For what seemed a long while he said nothing; then, with all the anger gone from his voice, he spoke, uttered a fiat.

“No,” he said quietly. “You must leave the Admiral to me, Madeleine. You were going to Italy to-night, were you not? That, I take it, is true.”

She nodded impatiently. What did her proposed journey to Italy matter compared with her beloved Claire’s present peril?

“Well, you must carry out your plan, my poor Madeleine. You must go away to-night.”

She stared at him, her face at last blotched with tears, and a look of bewildered anguish in her eyes.

“You must do this,” Jacques de Wissant went on deliberately, “for Claire’s sake, and for the sake of Claire’s children. You haven’t sufficient self-control to endure suspense calmly, secretly. You need not go farther than Paris, but those whom it concerns will be told that Claire has gone with you to Italy. There will always be time to tell the truth. Meanwhile, the Admiral and I will devise a plan. And perhaps “—he waited a moment—” the truth will never be known, or only known to a very few people—people who, as you say, will understand.”

He had spoken very slowly, as if weighing each of his words, but it was quickly, with a queer catch in his voice, that he added—“I ask you to do this, my sister”—he had never before called Madeleine Baudoin “my sister”—“because of Claire’s children, of Clairette and Jacqueline. Their mother would not wish a slur to rest upon them.”

She looked at him with piteous, hunted eyes. But she knew that she must do what he asked.

IV

Jacques de Wissant sat at his desk in the fine old room which is set aside for the mayor's sole use in the town hail of Falaise.

He was waiting for Admiral de Saint Vilquier, whom he had summoned on the plea of a matter both private and urgent. In his note, of which he had written more than one draft, he had omitted none of the punctilio usual in French official correspondence, and he had asked pardon, in the most formal language, for asking the Admiral to come to him, instead of proposing to go to the Admiral.

The time that had elapsed since he had parted from his sister-in-law had seemed like years instead of hours, and yet every moment of those hours had been filled with action.

From the Chalet des Dunes Jacques had made his way straight to the Pavilion de Wissant, and there his had been the bitter task of lying to his household.

They had accepted unquestioningly his statement that their mistress, without waiting even to go home, had left the Chalet des Dunes with her sister for Italy owing to the arrival of sudden worse news from Mantua.

While Claire's luggage was being by his orders hurriedly prepared, he had changed his clothes; and then, overcome with mortal weariness, with sick, sombre suspense, he had returned to Falaise, taking the railway station on his way to the town hall, and from there going through the grim comedy of despatching his wife's trunks to Paris.

Since the day war was declared by France on Germany, there had never been at the town hail of Falaise so busy an afternoon. Urgent messages of inquiry and condolence came pouring in from all over the civilized world, and the mayor had to compose suitable answers to them all.

To him there also fell the painful duty of officially announcing to the crowd surging impatiently in the market place—though room in front was always made and kept for those of the fisher folk who had relatives in the submarine service—that it was the *Neptune* which had gone down.

He had seen the effect of that announcement painted on rough, worn, upturned faces; he had heard the cries of anger, the groans of despair of the few, and had witnessed the relief, the tears of joy of the many. But his heart felt numb, and his cold, stern manner kept the emotions and excitement of those about him in check.

At last there had come a short respite. It was publicly announced that owing to the currents the divers had had to suspend their work awhile, but that salvage appliances from England and from Cherbourg were on their way to Falaise, and that it was hoped by seven that evening active operations would begin. With luck the *Neptune* might be raised before midnight.

Fortunate people blessed with optimistic natures were already planning a banquet at which the crew of the *Neptune* were to be entertained within an hour of the rescue.

Jacques de Wissant rose from the massive First Empire table which formed part of the fine suite of furniture presented by the great Napoleon just a hundred years ago to the municipality of Falaise.

With bent head, his hands clasped behind him, the mayor began walking up and down the long room.

Admiral de Saint Vilquier might now come at any moment, but the man awaiting him had not yet made up his mind how to word what he had to say—how much to tell, how much to conceal from, his wife's old friend. He was only too well aware that if the desperate attempts which

would soon be made to raise the *Neptune* were successful, and if its human freight were rescued alive, the fact that there had been a woman on board could not be concealed. Thousands would know to-night, and millions to-morrow morning.

Not only would the amazing story provide newspaper readers all over the world with a thrilling, unexpected piece of news, but the fact that there had been a woman involved in the disaster would be perpetuated, as long as our civilization endures, in every account of subsequent accidents to submarine craft.

More intimately, vividly agonizing was the knowledge that the story, the scandal, would be revived when there arose the all-important question of a suitable marriage for Clairette or Jacqueline.

As he paced up and down the room, longing for and yet dreading the coming of the Admiral, he visualized what would happen. He could almost hear the whispered words: "Yes, dear friend, the girl is admirably brought up, and has a large fortune, also she and your son have taken quite a fancy for one another, but there is that very ugly story of the mother! Don't you remember that she was with her lover in the submarine *Neptune*? The citizens of Falaise still laugh at the story and point her out in the street. Like mother like daughter, you know!" Thus the miserable man tortured himself, turning the knife in his wound.

But stay—Supposing the salvage appliances failed, as they had failed at Bizerta, to raise the *Neptune*? Then with the help of Admiral de Saint Vilquier the awful truth might be kept secret.

At last the door opened.

Jacques de Wissant took a step forward, and as his hand rested loosely for a moment in the old seaman's firmer grasp, he would have given many years of his life to postpone the coming interview.

"As you asked me so urgently to do so, I have come, M. de Wissant, to learn what you have to tell me. But I'm afraid the time I can spare you must be short. As you know, I am to be at the station in half an hour to meet the Minister of Marine. He will probably wish to go out at once to the scene of the calamity, and I shall have to accompany him."

The Admiral was annoyed at having been thus sent for to the town hall. It was surely Jacques de Wissant's place to have come to him.

And then, while listening to the other's murmured excuses, the old naval officer happened to look straight into the face of the Mayor of Falaise, and at once a change came over his manner, even his voice softened and altered.

"Pardon my saying so, M. de Wissant," he exclaimed abruptly, "but you look extremely ill! You mustn't allow this sad business to take such a hold on you. It is tragic no doubt that such things must be, but remember"—he uttered the words solemnly—"they are the Price of Admiralty."

"I know, I know," muttered Jacques de Wissant.

"Shall we sit down?"

The deadly pallor, the look of strain on the face of the man before him was making the Admiral feel more and more uneasy. "It would be very awkward," he thought to himself, "were Jacques de Wissant to be taken ill, here, now, with me—Ah, I have it!"

Then he said aloud, "You have doubtless had nothing to eat since the morning? " And as de Wissant nodded—"But that's absurd! It's always madness to go without food. Believe me, you will want all your strength during the next few days. As for me, I had fortunately lunched before I received the sad news. I keep to the old hours; I do not care for your English de'jeuners at one o'clock. Midday is late enough for me!"

“Admiral?” said the wretched man, “Admiral—?”

“Yes, take your time; I am not really in such a hurry. I am quite at your disposal.”

“It is a question of honour,” muttered Jacques de Wissant, “a question of honour, Admiral, or I should not trouble you with the matter.”

Admiral de Saint Vilquier leant forward, but Jacques de Wissant avoided meeting the shrewd, searching eyes.

“The honour of a naval family is involved.” The Mayor of Falaise was now speaking in a low, pleading voice.

The Admiral stiffened. “Ah!” he exclaimed. “So you have been asked to intercede with me on behalf of some young scapegrace. Well, who is it? I’ll look into the matter to-morrow morning. I really cannot think of anything to-day but of this terrible business—”

“—Admiral, it concerns this business.”

“The loss of the *Neptune*? In what way can the honour of a naval family be possibly involved in such a matter?” There was a touch of hauteur as well as of indignant surprise in the fine old seaman’s voice.

“Admiral,” said Jacques de Wissant deliberately, “there was—there is—a woman on board the *Neptune*.”

“A woman in the *Neptune*? That is quite impossible!” The Admiral got up from his chair. “It is one of our strictest regulations that no stranger be taken on board a submarine without a special permit from the Minister of Marine, countersigned by an admiral. No such permit has been issued for many months. In no case would a woman be allowed on board. Commander Dupré is far too conscientious, too loyal, an officer to break such a regulation.”

“Commander Dupré,” said Jacques de Wissant in a low, bitter tone, “was not too conscientious or too loyal an officer to break that regulation, for there is, I repeat it, a woman in the *Neptune*.”

The Admiral sat down again. “But this is serious—very serious,” he muttered.

He was thinking of the effect, not only at home but abroad, of such a breach of discipline.

He shook his head with a pained, angry gesture—“I understand what happened,” he said at last. “The woman was of course poor Dupré’s”—and then something in Jacques de Wissant’s pallid face made him substitute, for the plain word he meant to have used, a softer, kindlier phrase—“poor Dupré’s *bonne amie*,” he said.

“I am advised not,” said Jacques de Wissant shortly. “I am told that the person in question is a young lady.”

“Do you mean an unmarried girl?” asked the Admiral. There was great curiosity and sincere relief in his voice.

“I beg of you not to ask me, Admiral! The family of the lady have implored me to reveal as little of the truth as possible. They have taken their own measures, and they are good measures, to account for her—her disappearance.” The unhappy man spoke with considerable agitation.

“Quite so! Quite so! They are right. I have no wish to show indiscreet curiosity.”

“Do you think anything can be done to prevent the fact becoming known?” asked Jacques de Wissant—and, as the other waited a moment before answering, the suspense became almost more than he could endure.

He got up and instinctively stood with his back to the light. “The family of this young lady are willing to make any pecuniary sacrifice—”

“It is not a question of pecuniary sacrifice,” the Admiral said stiffly. “Money will never really purchase either secrecy or silence. But honour, M. de Wissant, will sometimes, nay, often, do both.”

“Then you think the fact can be concealed?”

“I think it will be impossible to conceal it if the *Neptune* is raised”—he hesitated, and his voice sank as he added the poignant words “in time. But if that happens, though I fear that it is not likely to happen, then I promise you that I will allow it to be thought that I had given this lady permission, and her improper action will be accepted for what it no doubt was—a foolish escapade. If Dupré and little Paritot are the men of honour I take them to be, one or other of them will of course marry her!”

“And if the *Neptune* is not raised—” the Mayor’s voice also dropped to a whisper—“*in time*—what then?”

“Then,” said the Admiral, “everything will be done by me—so you can assure your unlucky friends—to conceal the fact that Commander Dupré failed in his duty. Not for his sake, you understand—he, I fear, deserves what he has suffered, what he is perhaps still suffering,”—a look of horror stole over his old, weather-roughened face—“but for the sake of the foolish girl and for the sake of her family. You say it is a naval family?”

“Yes,” said Jacques de Wissant. “A noted naval family.”

The Admiral got up. “And now I, on my side, must exact of you a pledge, M. de Wissant—” he looked searchingly at the Government official standing before him. “I solemnly implore you, monsieur, to keep this fact you have told me absolutely secret for the time being—secret even from the Minister of Marine.”

The Mayor of Falaise bent his head. “I intend to act,” he said slowly, “as if I had never heard it.”

“I ask it for the honour, the repute, of the Service,” muttered the old officer. “After all, M. de Wissant, the poor fellow did not mean much harm. We sailors have all, at different times of our lives, had some *bonne amie* whom we found it devilish hard to leave on shore!”

The Admiral walked slowly towards the door. To-day had aged him years. Then he turned and looked benignantly at Jacques de Wissant; the man before him might be stiff, cold, awkward in manner, but he was a gentleman, a man of honour.

And as he drove to the station to meet the Minister of Marine, Admiral de Saint Vilquier’s shrewd, practical mind began to deal with the difficult problem which was now added to his other cares. It was simplified in view of the fact—the awful fact—that according to his private information it was most unlikely that the submarine would be raised within the next few hours. He hoped with all his heart that the twelve men and the woman now lying beneath the sea had met death at the moment of the collision.

All that summer night the cafés and eating-houses of Falaise remained open, and there was a constant coming and going to the beach, where many people, even among those visitors who were not directly interested in the calamity, camped out on the stones.

The mayor sent word to the Pavilion de Wissant that he would sleep in his town house, but though he left the town hail at two in the morning he was back at his post by eight, and he spent there the whole of the next long dragging day.

Fortunately for him there was little time for thought. In addition to the messages of inquiry and condolence which went on pouring in, important members of the Government arrived from Paris and the provinces.

There also came to Falaise the mother of Commander Dupré, and the father and brother of Lieutenant Paritot. De Wissant made the latter his special care. They, the two men, were granted the relief of tears, but Madame Dupré’s silent agony could not be assuaged.

Once, when he suddenly came upon her sitting, her chin in her hand, in his room at the town hall, Jacques de Wissant shrank from her blazing eyes and ravaged face, so vividly did they recall to him the eyes, the face, he had seen that April evening “twixt dog and wolf,” when he had first leapt upon the truth.

On the third day all hope that there could be anyone still living in the *Neptune* was being abandoned, and yet at noon there ran a rumour through the town that knocking had been heard in the submarine. . . .

The mayor himself drew up an official proclamation, in which it was pointed out that it was almost certain that all on board had perished at the time of the collision, and that, even if any of them had survived for a few hours, not one could be alive now.

And then, as one by one the days of waiting began to wear themselves away, the world, apart from the town which numbered ten of her sons among the doomed men, relaxed its painful interest in the fate of the French submarine. Indeed, Falaise took on an almost winter stillness of aspect, for the summer visitors naturally drifted away from a spot which was still the heart of an awful tragedy.

But Jacques de Wissant did not relax in his duties or in his efforts on behalf of the families of the men who still lay, eighteen fathoms deep, encased in their steel tomb; and the townspeople were deeply moved by their mayor’s continued, if restrained, distress. He even put his children, his pretty twin daughters, Jacqueline and Clairette, into deep mourning; this touched the seafaring portion of the population very much.

It also became known that M. de Wissant was suffering from domestic distress of a very sad and intimate kind; his sister-in-law was seriously ill in Italy from an infectious disease, and his wife, who had gone away at a moment’s notice to help to nurse her, had caught the infection.

The Mayor of Falaise and Admiral de Saint Vilquier did not often have occasion to meet during those days spent by each of them in entertaining official personages and in composing answers to the messages and inquiries which went on dropping in, both by day and by night, at the town hall and at the Admiral’s quarters. But there came an hour when Admiral de Saint Vilquier at last sought to have a private word with the Mayor of Falaise.

“I think I have arranged everything satisfactorily,” he said briefly, “and you can convey the fact to your friends. I do not suppose, as matters are now, that there is much fear that the truth will ever come out.”

The old man did not look into Jacques de Wissant’s face while he uttered the comforting words. He had become aware of many things—including Madeleine Baudoin’s cruise in the *Neptune* the day before the accident, and of her own and Claire de Wissant’s reported departure for Italy.

Alone, among the people who sometimes had friendly speech of the mayor during those sombre days of waiting, Admiral de Saint Vilquier did not condole with the anxious husband on the fact that he could not yet leave Falaise for Mantua.

V

Jacques de Wissant woke with a start and sat up in bed. He had heard a knock—but, awake or sleeping, his ears were never free of the sound of knocking,—of muffled, regular knocking. .

It was the darkest hour of the summer night, but with a sharp sense of relief he became aware that what had wakened him this time was a real sound, not the slow, patient, rhythmical, tapping which haunted him incessantly. But now the knocking had been followed by the opening of his

bedroom door, and vaguely outlined before him was the short, squat form of an old woman who had entered his mother's service when he was a little boy, and who always stayed in his town house.

"M'sieur l'Amiral de Saint Vilquier desires to see M'sieur Jacques on urgent business," she whispered. "I have put him to wait in the great drawing-room. It is fortunate that I took all the covers off the furniture yesterday."

Then the moment of ordeal, the moment he had begun to think would never come—was upon him? He knew this summons to mean that the *Neptune* had been finally towed into the harbour, and that now, in this still, dark hour before dawn, was about to begin the work of taking out the bodies.

Every day for a week past it had been publicly announced that the following night would see the final scene of the dread drama, and each evening—even last evening—it had been as publicly announced that nothing could be done for the present.

Jacques de Wissant had put all his trust in the Admiral and in the arrangements the Admiral was making to avoid discovery. But now, as he got up and dressed himself—strange to say that phantom sound of knocking had ceased—there came over him a frightful sensation of doubt and fear. Had he been right to trust wholly to the old naval officer? Would it not have been better to have taken the Minister of Marine into his confidence?

How would it be possible for Admiral de Saint Vilquier, unless backed by Governmental authority, to elude the vigilance, not only of the Admiralty officials and of all those that were directly interested, but also of the journalists who, however much the public interest had slackened in the disaster, still stayed on at Falaise in order to be present at the last act of the tragedy?

These thoughts jostled each other in Jacques de Wissant's brain. But whether he had been right or wrong it was too late to alter now.

He went into the room where the Admiral stood waiting for him.

The two men shook hands, but neither spoke till they had left the house. Then, as they walked with firm, quick steps across the deserted market-place, the Admiral said suddenly, "This is the quietest hour in the twenty-four, and though I anticipate a little trouble with the journalists, I think everything will go off quite well."

His companion muttered a word of assent, and the other went on, this time in a gruff whisper: "By the way, I have had to tell Dr. Tarnier—" and as Jacques de Wissant gave vent to a stifled exclamation of dismay—"of course I had to tell Dr. Tarnier! He has most nobly offered to go down into the *Neptune* alone—though in doing so he will run considerable personal risk."

Admiral de Saint Vilquier paused a moment, for the quick pace at which his companion was walking made him rather breathless. "I have simply told him that there was a young woman on board. He imagines her to have been a Parisienne,—a person of no importance, you understand,—who had come to spend the holiday with poor Dupré. But he quite realizes that the fact must never be revealed." He spoke in a dry, matter-of-fact tone. "There will not be room on the pontoon for more than five or six, including ourselves and Dr. Tarnier. Doubtless some of our newspaper friends will be disappointed—if one can speak of disappointment in such a connection—but they will have plenty of opportunities of being present to-morrow and the following nights. I have arranged with the Minister of Marine for the work to be done only at night."

As the two men emerged on the quays, they saw that the news had leaked out, for knots of people stood about, talking in low hushed tones, and staring at the middle of the harbour.

Apart from the others, and almost dangerously close to the unguarded edge below which was the dark lapping water, stood a line of women shrouded in black, and from them came no sound.

As the Admiral and his companion approached the little group of officials who were apparently waiting for them, the old naval officer whispered to Jacques de Wissant, using for the first time the familiar expression, "*mon ami*," "Do not forget, *mon ami*, to thank the harbour-master and the pilot. They have had a very difficult task, and they will expect your commendation."

Jacques de Wissant said the words required of him. And then, at the last moment, just as he was on the point of going down the steps leading to the flat-bottomed boat in which they were to be rowed to the pontoon, there arose an angry discussion. The harbour-master had, it seemed, promised the representatives of two Paris newspapers that they should be present when the submarine was first opened.

But the Admiral stiffly asserted his supreme authority. "In such matters I can allow no favouritism! It is doubtful if any bodies will be taken out to-night, gentlemen, for the tide is already turning. I will see if other arrangements can be made to-morrow. If any of you had been in the harbour of Bizerta when the Lutin was raised, you would now thank me for not allowing you to view the sight which we may be about to see."

And the weary, disappointed special correspondents, who had spent long days watching for this one hour, realized that they would have to content themselves with describing what could be seen from the quays.

It will, however, surprise no one familiar with the remarkable enterprise of the modern press, when it is recorded that by far the most accurate account of what occurred during the hour that followed was written by a cosmopolitan war correspondent, who had had the good fortune of making Dr. Tarnier's acquaintance during the dull fortnight of waiting.

He wrote:

None of those who were there will ever forget what they saw last night in the harbour of Falaise.

The scene, illumined by the searchlight of a destroyer, was at once sinister, sombre, and magnificent. Below the high, narrow pontoon, on the floor of the harbour, lay the wrecked submarine; and those who gazed down at the *Neptune* felt as though they were in the presence of what had once been a sentient being done to death by some huge Goliath of the deep.

Dr. Tarnier, the chief medical officer of the port—a man who is beloved and respected by the whole population of Falaise—stood ready to begin his dreadful task. I had ascertained that he had obtained permission to go down alone into the hold of death—an exploration attended with the utmost physical risk.

He was clad in a suit of india-rubber clothing, and over his arm was folded a large tarpaulin sheet lined with carbolic wool, one of half a dozen such sheets lying at his feet.

The difficult work of unsealing the conning tower was then proceeded with in the presence of Admiral de Saint Vilquier, whose prowess as a midshipman is still remembered by British Crimean veterans—and of the Mayor of Falaise, M. Jacques de Wissant.

At last there came a guttural exclamation of "*ça y est!*" and Dr. Tarnier stepped downwards, to emerge a moment later with the first body, obviously that of the gallant Commander Dupré, who was found, as it was expected he would be, in the conning tower.

Once more the doctor's burly figure disappeared, once more he emerged, tenderly bearing a slighter, lighter burden, obviously the boyish form of Lieutenant Paritot, who was found close to Commander Dupré.

The tide was rising rapidly, but two more bodies—this time with the help of a webbed band cleverly designed by Dr. Tarnier with a view to the purpose—were lifted from the inner portion of the submarine.

The four bodies, rather to the disappointment of the large crowd which had gradually gathered on the quays, were not taken directly to the shore, to the great hall where Falaise is to mourn her

dead sons; one by one they were reverently conveyed, by the Admiral's orders, to a barge which was once used as a hospital ward for sick sailors, and which is close to the mouth of the harbour. Thence, when all twelve bodies have been recovered—that is, in three or four days, for the work is only to be proceeded with at night,—they will be taken to the Salle d'Armes, there to await the official obsequies.

On the morning following the night during which the last body was lifted from within the *Neptune*, there ran a curious rumour through the fishing quarter of the town. It was said that thirteen bodies—not twelve, as declared the official report—had been taken out of the *Neptune*. It was declared on the authority of one of the seamen—a Gascon, be it noted—who had been there on that first night, that five, not four, bodies had been conveyed to the hospital barge.

But the rumour, though it found an echo in the French press, was not regarded as worth an official denial, and it received its final quietus on the day of the official obsequies, when it was at once seen that the number of ammunition wagons heading the great procession was twelve.

As long as tradition endures in the life of the town, Falaise will remember the Neptune funeral procession. Not only was every navy in the world represented, but also every strand of that loosely woven human fabric we civilized peoples call a nation.

Through the long line of soldiers, each man with his arms reversed, walked the official mourners, while from the fortifications there boomed the minute gun.

First the President of the French Republic, with, to his right, the Minister of Marine; and close behind them the stiff, still vigorous, figure of old Admiral de Saint Vilquier. By his side walked the Mayor of Falaise—so mortally pale, so what the French call undone, that the Admiral felt fearful lest his neighbour should be compelled to fall out.

But Jacques de Wissant was not minded to fall out.

The crowd looking on, especially the wives of those substantial citizens of the town who stood at their windows behind half-closed shutters and drawn blinds, stared down at the mayor with pitying concern.

“He has a warm heart though a cold manner,” murmured these ladies to one another, “and just now, you know, he is in great anxiety, for his wife—that beautiful Claire with whom he doesn't get on very well—is in Italy, seriously ill of scarlet fever.” “Yes, and as soon as this sad ceremony is over, he will leave for the south—I hear that the President has offered him a seat in his saloon as far as Paris.”

As the head of the procession at last stopped on the great parade ground where the last honours were to be rendered to the lowly yet illustrious dead, Jacques de Wissant straightened himself with an instinctive gesture, and his lips began to move. He was muttering to himself the speech he would soon have to deliver, and which he had that morning, making a great mental effort, committed to memory.

And after the President had had his long, emotional, and flowery say; and when the oldest of French admirals had stepped forward and, in a quavering voice, bidden the dead farewell on behalf of the Navy, it came to the turn of the Mayor of Falaise.

He was there, he said, simply as the mouthpiece of his fellow-townsmen, and they, bowed as they were by deep personal grief, could say but little—they could indeed only murmur their eternal gratitude for the sympathy they had received, and were now receiving, from their countrymen and from the world.

Then Jacques de Wissant gave a brief personal account of each of the ten seamen whom this vast concourse had gathered together to honour. It was noted by the curious in such things that he

made no allusion to the two officers, to Commander Dupré and Lieutenant Paritot; doubtless he thought that they, after all, had been amply honoured in the preceding speeches.

But though his care for the lowly heroes proved the Mayor of Falaise a good republican, he showed himself in the popular estimation also a scholar, for he wound up with the old tag—the grand old tag which inspired so many noble souls in the proudest of ancient empires and civilizations, and which will retain the power of moving and thrilling generations yet unborn in both the Western and the Eastern worlds:

“Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori.”