

The Oarsmen

By A. Le Braz

One evening, after supper, we sat talking over the fire. It was in the depth of winter, and you know how, in that bitter season, the wind blows round our shores. I was but ten years old at that time, and now I am sixty-three; but there are some recollections that linger as long as life lasts. Listening to the moaning of the storm, we came naturally to talk of my eldest brother William, who was a sailor out at sea.

My mother observed that it was long since we had heard of him. His last letter was dated from Valparaiso, and in it he spoke of himself as in good health; but that was six months ago. Sailors are known to be chary of letters. "Anyhow," said my mother, "I wish I knew where he is now. I trust he is not at the mercy of such a gale as we have here to-night." Thereupon we began our evening prayers, to which we added a special "*Pater*" for my brother William. Then we went to bed. I shared the bed of my sister Coupaïa.

We were almost asleep when my mother's voice aroused us. "Children," she cried, "do you not hear?" "Hear what, mother?" "That noise out of doors." I was sleeping on the outside of the bed. I sat up and listened. "Yes," I said; "I hear the sound of four oars keeping time in the water." "Is that all?" she asked. "No, I also hear people talking." "Get out of bed, Marie Hyacinthe, and open a little bit of the window that we may try to find out what language they are speaking." I obeyed. I opened the window cautiously, lest the squall should blow its bars into my face.

The voices came from off the sea, from which our house (the house in which I still live), is only separated by the road. They were undoubtedly the voices of the four oarsmen; but, singularly enough, each of them appeared to speak in a different language. Only one of the men in the mysterious boat spoke in Breton; but in the confusion of tongues and, above all, because of the wind, I could not distinguish what he said. "Well, Marie Hyacinthe?" said my mother. "It must be, I think, a boat belonging to some ship in distress off the coast, having sailors from various countries on board." "Light a candle, then, that the poor creatures may see their way to our house when they land."

My mother was a kind woman, who loved to aid others so far as her means permitted, especially sailors, for all the men of our family had been such from father to son.

I lighted the candle, and put on my petticoat and jacket. I shivered with cold, and, I must own, somewhat too with fear, as I stood waiting at the window one half-hour and then another. But no knock came to the door. Still, surely the men in the boat must have landed, for there was no longer any sound of oars or of voices. At last my mother bade me go back to my bed. Coupaïa, my sister, had fallen asleep again. Notwithstanding the strange fear I had endured, I was not long in following her example.

Next morning, at daybreak, my mother went out to sift into the matter. But it was in vain that she made enquiries. She could obtain no information. No one had heard anything, and the coastguards between Buguélèz and Trézél declared on oath that no vessel had been sighted and that no boat had skirted the shore.

My mother's face was pale when she returned. All through the day we waited with impatience for the coming of the night, which, nevertheless, we dreaded.

As we were sitting down to table for supper, my second brother, who had gone by sea to Perros on the previous day, appeared at the door. We had not expected him back until the next tide. I set his place, and the meal began.

All at once my brother exclaimed: "Some of you must have hung freshlykilled meat from the rafters!" "You must have been taking too much to drink," answered my mother, who seemed troubled at this speech. "Good gracious! but do just look," cried my brother; "these drops on my hand are not salt water!" He laid his hand upon the table. On the back of it three red drops had unquestionably fallen, from whence, no one could imagine. My mother became white as death. "Surely," she murmured, "this bodes misfortune to one belonging to us."

We all went to bed, but a common thought kept us waken till fatigue overcame fear.

We were all listening for the sound of the oars of mysterious rowers. The wind had abated and the night was still, but nothing unusual was to be heard. It was not until the third night that the silence was broken.

My mother had just extinguished the candle when again the sound reached us of the splash of four oars, two and two alternately striking the water. I got up as before. This time I was determined to make sure, so I dressed and went out. The sea shone in the moonlight. I strained my eyes out over the clear stretch of waters, I saw nothing but the rocks of St Gildas looking like spectres, and further off the weird, wild Seven Islands.¹ No boat was to be seen. Yet the phish-plash of oars sounded on monotonously and distinctly like the regular tick of a clock. But that was all. The rowers went on their way in silence, and no longer spoke their various jargons. My brother had joined me on the beach, but he saw no more than I. "Well?" questioned our old mother when we re-entered the house. My brother answered, "It must be a sailor's warning." Immediately my mother began reciting the "*De Profundis*" aloud from her bed. We thought of William, and we could not help sobbing as we said our prayers. I am not sure that we even wept quite as much a month later when my mother on her return from Tréguier, whither she had gone to receive her pension, announced to us that William was dead.

The sub-commissioner had communicated the sad tidings to her. On the evening on which we had first heard the sound of the oars, my brother William, who was in the Indies, had been ordered to go on shore in the ship's boat in company with three other sailors to bring back some officers. He returned with a bad headache. The next day he had a bleeding of the nose, and on the day following, his corpse was consigned to the boat to be conveyed to the Catholic cemetery for burial.

In this world nothing need surprise us. All happens by the Will of God.

(Related to *M. le Braz* by Marie Hyacinthe, Toulouzau. Port Blanc, August 1891.)

¹ "*Ar Gentilès*" the Seven Islands, of which "*Rouzig*" ("*La Roussote*"), is the principal. They indeed have the appearance of apparitions, capricious phantoms, which on clear days seem as if advancing almost to touch the coast, then suddenly disappearing into grey and unfathomable depths of fog, like the enchanted cities which the Breton imagination beholds emerging now and again from out the shifting tide.