The Swimmers

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About Fitzgerald:

Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald (September 24, 1896 – December 21, 1940) was an American Jazz Age author of novels and short stories. He is regarded as one of the greatest twentieth century writers. Fitzgerald was of the self-styled "Lost Generation," Americans born in the 1890s who came of age during World War I. He finished four novels, left a fifth unfinished, and wrote dozens of short stories that treat themes of youth, despair, and age.

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Chapter 1

In the Place Benoït, a suspended mass of gasoline exhaust cooked slowly by the June sun. It was a terrible thing, for, unlike pure heat, it held no promise of rural escape, but suggested only roads choked with the same foul asthma. In the offices of The Promissory Trust Company, Paris Branch, facing the square, an American man of thirty-five inhaled it, and it became the odor of the thing he must presently do. A black horror suddenly descended upon him, and he went up to the washroom, where he stood, trembling a little, just inside the door.

Through the washroom window his eyes fell upon a sign—1000 Chemises. The shirts in question filled the shop window, piled, cravated and stuffed, or else draped with shoddy grace on the show-case floor. 1000 Chemises—Count them! To the left he read Papeterie, Pâtisserie, Solde, Réclame, and Constance Talmadge in Déjeuner de Soleil; and his eye, escaping to the right, met yet more somber announcements: Vêtements Ecclésiastiques, Declaration de Décès, and Pompes Funèbres. Life and Death.

Henry Marston's trembling became a shaking; it would be pleasant if this were the end and nothing more need be done, he thought, and with a certain hope he sat down on a stool. But it is seldom really the end, and after a while, as he became too exhausted to care, the shaking stopped and he was better. Going downstairs, looking as alert and self-possessed as any other officer of the bank, he spoke to two clients he knew, and set his face grimly toward noon.

"Well, Henry Clay Marston!" A handsome old man shook hands with him and took the chair beside his desk.

"Henry, I want to see you in regard to what we talked about the other night. How about lunch? In that green little place with all the trees."

"Not lunch, Judge Waterbury; I've got an engagement."

"I'll talk now, then; because I'm leaving this afternoon. What do these plutocrats give you for looking important around here?"

Henry Marston knew what was coming.

"Ten thousand and certain expense money," he answered.

"How would you like to come back to Richmond at about double that? You've been over here eight years and you don't know the opportunities you're missing. Why both my boys—"

Henry listened appreciatively, but this morning he couldn't concentrate on the matter. He spoke vaguely about being able to live more comfortably in Paris and restrained himself from stating his frank opinion upon existence at home.

Judge Waterbury beckoned to a tall, pale man who stood at the mail desk.

"This is Mr. Wiese," he said. "Mr. Wiese's from downstate; he's a halfway partner of mine."

"Glad to meet you, suh." Mr. Wiese's voice was rather too deliberately Southern. "Understand the judge is makin' you a proposition."

"Yes," Henry answered briefly. He recognized and detested the type—the prosperous sweater, presumably evolved from a cross between carpetbagger and poor white. When Wiese moved away, the judge said almost apologetically:

"He's one of the richest men in the South, Henry." Then, after a pause: "Come home, boy."

"I'll think it over, judge." For a moment the gray and ruddy head seemed so kind; then it faded back into something one-dimensional, machine-finished, blandly and bleakly un-European. Henry Marston respected that open kindness—in the bank he touched it with daily appreciation, as a curator in a museum might touch a precious object removed in time and space; but there was no help in it for him; the questions which Henry Marston's life propounded could be answered only in France. His seven generations of Virginia ancestors were definitely behind him every day at noon when he turned home.

Home was a fine high-ceiling apartment hewn from the palace of a Renaissance cardinal in the Rue Monsieur—the sort of thing Henry could not have afforded in America. Choupette, with something more than the rigid traditionalism of a French bourgeois taste, had made it beautiful, and moved through gracefully with their children. She was a frail Latin blonde with fine large features and vividly sad French eyes that had first fascinated Henry in a Grenoble *pension* in 1918. The two boys took their looks from Henry, voted the handsomest man at the University of Virginia a few years before the war.

Climbing the two broad flights of stairs, Henry stood panting a moment in the outside hall. It was quiet and cool here, and yet it was

vaguely like the terrible thing that was going to happen. He heard a clock inside his apartment strike one, and inserted his key in the door.

The maid who had been in Choupette's family for thirty years stood before him, her mouth open in the utterance of a truncated sigh.

"*Bonjour*, Louise."

"Monsieur!" He threw his hat on a chair. "But, monsieur—but I thought monsieur said on the phone he was going to Tours for the children!"

"I changed my mind, Louise."

He had taken a step forward, his last doubt melting away at the constricted terror in the woman's face.

"Is madame home?"

Simultaneously he perceived a man's hat and stick on the hall table and for the first time in his life he heard silence—a loud, singing silence, oppressive as heavy guns or thunder. Then, as the endless moment was broken by the maid's terrified little cry, he pushed through the portières into the next room.

An hour later Doctor Derocco, *de la Faculté de Médecine,* rang the apartment bell. Choupette Marston, her face a little drawn and rigid, answered the door. For a moment they went through French forms; then:

"My husband has been feeling unwell for some weeks," she said concisely. "Nevertheless, he did not complain in a way to make me uneasy. He has suddenly collapsed; he cannot articulate or move his limbs. All this, I must say, might have been precipitated by a certain indiscretion of mine—in all events, there was a violent scene, a discussion, and sometimes when he is agitated, my husband cannot comprehend well in French."

"I will see him," said the doctor; thinking: "Some things are comprehended instantly in all languages."

During the next four weeks several people listened to strange speeches about one thousand chemises, and heard how all the population of Paris was becoming etherized by cheap gasoline—there was a consulting psychiatrist, not inclined to believe in any underlying mental trouble; there was a nurse from the American Hospital, and there was Choupette, frightened, defiant and, after her fashion, deeply sorry. A month later, when Henry awoke to his familiar room, lit with a dimmed lamp, he found her sitting beside his bed and reached out for her hand.

"I still love you," he said—"that's the odd thing."

"Sleep, male cabbage."

"At all costs," he continued with a certain feeble irony, "you can count on me to adopt the Continental attitude."

"Please! You tear at my heart."

When he was sitting up in bed they were ostensibly close together again—closer than they had been for months.

"Now you're going to have another holiday," said Henry to the two boys, back from the country. "Papa has got to go to the seashore and get really well."

"Will we swim?"

"And get drowned, my darlings?" Choupette cried. "But fancy, at your age. Not at all!"

So, at St. Jean de Luz they sat on the shore instead, and watched the English and Americans and a few hardy French pioneers of *le sport* voyage between raft and diving tower, motorboat and sand. There were passing ships, and bright islands to look at, and mountains reaching into cold zones, and red and yellow villas, called Fleur des Bois, Mon Nid, or Sans-Souci; and farther back, tired French villages of baked cement and gray stone.

Choupette sat at Henry's side, holding a parasol to shelter her peach-bloom skin from the sun.

"Look!" she would say, at the sight of tanned American girls. "Is that lovely? Skin that will be leather at thirty—a sort of brown veil to hide all blemishes, so that everyone will look alike. And women of a hundred kilos in such bathing suits! Weren't clothes intended to hide Nature's mistakes?"

Henry Clay Marston was a Virginian of the kind who are prouder of being Virginians than of being Americans. That mighty word printed across a continent was less to him than the memory of his grandfather, who freed his slaves in '58, fought from Manassas to Appomattox, knew Huxley and Spencer as light reading, and believed in caste only when it expressed the best of race.

To Choupette all this was vague. Her more specific criticisms of his compatriots were directed against the women.

"How would you place them?" she exclaimed. "Great ladies, bourgeoises, adventuresses—they are all the same. Look! Where would I be if I tried to act like your friend, Madame de Richepin? My father was a professor in a provincial university, and I have certain things I wouldn't do because they wouldn't please my class, my family. Madame de Richepin has other things she wouldn't do because of her class, her family." Suddenly she pointed to an American girl going into the water: "But that

young lady may be a stenographer and yet be compelled to warp herself, dressing and acting as if she had all the money in the world."

"Perhaps she will have, some day."

"That's the story they are told; it happens to one, not to the ninety-nine. That's why all their faces over thirty are discontented and unhappy."

Though Henry was in general agreement, he could not help being amused at Choupette's choice of target this afternoon. The girl—she was perhaps eighteen—was obviously acting like nothing but herself—she was what his father would have called a thoroughbred. A deep, thoughtful face that was pretty only because of the irrepressible determination of the perfect features to be recognized, a face that could have done without them and not yielded up its poise and distinction.

In her grace, at once exquisite and hardy, she was that perfect type of American girl that makes one wonder if the male is not being sacrificed to it, much as, in the last century, the lower strata in England were sacrificed to produce the governing class.

The two young men, coming out of the water as she went in, had large shoulders and empty faces. She had a smile for them that was no more than they deserved—that must do until she chose one to be the father of her children and gave herself up to destiny. Until then—Henry Marston was glad about her as her arms, like flying fish, clipped the water in a crawl, as her body spread in a swan dive or doubled in a jackknife from the springboard and her head appeared from the depth, jauntily flipping the damp hair away.

The two young men passed near.

"They push water," Choupette said, "then they go elsewhere and push other water. They pass months in France and they couldn't tell you the name of the President. They are parasites such as Europe has not known in a hundred years."

But Henry had stood up abruptly, and now all the people on the beach were suddenly standing up. Something had happened out there in the fifty yards between the deserted raft and the shore. The bright head showed upon the surface; it did not flip water now, but called: "*Au secours!* Help!" in a feeble and frightened voice.

"Henry!" Choupette cried. "Stop! Henry!"

The beach was almost deserted at noon, but Henry and several others were sprinting toward the sea; the two young Americans heard, turned and sprinted after them. There was a frantic little time with half a dozen bobbing heads in the water. Choupette, still clinging to her parasol, but

managing to wring her hands at the same time, ran up and down the beach crying: "Henry! Henry!"

Now there were more helping hands, and then two swelling groups around prostrate figures on the shore. The young fellow who pulled in the girl brought her around in a minute or so, but they had more trouble getting the water out of Henry, who had never learned to swim.

Chapter 2

"This is the man who didn't know whether he could swim, because he'd never tried."

Henry got up from his sun chair, grinning. It was next morning, and the saved girl had just appeared on the beach with her brother. She smiled back at Henry, brightly casual, appreciative rather than grateful.

"At the very least, I owe it to you to teach you how," she said.

"I'd like it. I decided that in the water yesterday, just before I went down the tenth time."

"You can trust me. I'll never again eat chocolate ice cream before going in."

As she went on into the water, Choupette asked: "How long do you think we'll stay here? After all, this life wearies one."

"We'll stay till I can swim. And the boys too."

"Very well. I saw a nice bathing suit in two shades of blue for fifty francs that I will buy you this afternoon."

Feeling a little paunchy and unhealthily white, Henry, holding his sons by the hand, took his body into the water. The breakers leaped at him, staggering him, while the boys yelled with ecstasy; the returning water curled threateningly around his feet as it hurried back to sea. Farther out, he stood waist deep with other intimidated souls, watching the people dive from the raft tower, hoping the girl would come to fulfill her promise, and somewhat embarrassed when she did.

"I'll start with your eldest. You watch and then try it by yourself."

He floundered in the water. It went into his nose and started a raw stinging; it blinded him; it lingered afterward in his ears, rattling back and forth like pebbles for hours. The sun discovered him, too, peeling long strips of parchment from his shoulders, blistering his back so that he lay in a feverish agony for several nights. After a week he swam, painfully, pantingly, and not very far. The girl taught him a sort of crawl, for he saw that the breast stroke was an obsolete device that lingered on with the inept and the old. Choupette caught him regarding his tanned face in the mirror with a sort of fascination, and the youngest boy

contracted some sort of mild skin infection in the sand that retired him from competition. But one day Henry battled his way desperately to the float and drew himself up on it with his last breath.

"That being settled," he told the girl, when he could speak, "I can leave St. Jean tomorrow."

"I'm sorry."

"What will you do now?"

"My brother and I are going to Antibes; there's swimming there all through October. Then Florida."

"And swim?" he asked with some amusement.

"Why, yes. We'll swim."

"Why do you swim?"

"To get clean," she answered surprisingly.

"Clean from what?"

She frowned. "I don't know why I said that. But it feels clean in the sea."

"Americans are too particular about that," he commented.

"How could anyone be?"

"I mean we've got too fastidious even to clean up our messes."

"I don't know."

"But tell me why you—" He stopped himself in surprise. He had been about to ask her to explain a lot of other things—to say what was clean and unclean, what was worth knowing and what was only words—to open up a new gate to life. Looking for a last time into her eyes, full of cool secrets, he realized how much he was going to miss these mornings, without knowing whether it was the girl who interested him or what she represented of his ever-new, ever-changing country.

"All right," he told Choupette that night. "We'll leave tomorrow."

"For Paris?"

"For America."

"You mean I'm to go too? And the children?"

"Yes."

"But that's absurd," she protested. "Last time it cost more than we spend in six months here. And then there were only three of us. Now that we've managed to get ahead at last—"

"That's just it. I'm tired of getting ahead on your skimping and saving and going without dresses. I've got to make more money. American men are incomplete without money."

"You mean we'll stay?"

"It's very possible."

They looked at each other, and against her will, Choupette understood. For eight years, by a process of ceaseless adaptation, he had lived her life, substituting for the moral confusion of his own country, the tradition, the wisdom, the sophistication of France. After that matter in Paris, it had seemed the bigger part to understand and to forgive, to cling to the home as something apart from the vagaries of love. Only now, glowing with a good health that he had not experienced for years, did he discover his true reaction. It had released him. For all his sense of loss, he possessed again the masculine self he had handed over to the keeping of a wise little Provençal girl eight years ago.

She struggled on for a moment.

"You've got a good position and we really have plenty of money. You know we can live cheaper here."

"The boys are growing up now, and I'm not sure I want to educate them in France."

"But that's all decided," she wailed. "You admit yourself that education in America is superficial and full of silly fads. Do you want them to be like those two dummies on the beach?"

"Perhaps I was thinking more of myself, Choupette. Men just out of college who brought their letters of credit into the bank eight years ago, travel about with ten-thousand-dollar cars now. I didn't use to care. I used to tell myself that I had a better place to escape to, just because we knew that lobster armoricaine was really lobster americaine. Perhaps I haven't that feeling any more."

She stiffened. "If that's it—"

"It's up to you. We'll make a new start."

Choupette thought for a moment. "Of course my sister can take over the apartment."

"Of course." He waxed enthusiastic. "And there are sure to be things that'll tickle you—we'll have a nice car, for instance, and one of those electric ice boxes, and all sorts of funny machines to take the place of servants. It won't be bad. You'll learn to play golf and talk about children all day. Then there are the movies."

Choupette groaned.

"It's going to be pretty awful at first," he admitted, "but there are still a few good nigger cooks, and we'll probably have two bathrooms."

"I am unable to use more than one at a time."

"You'll learn."

A month afterward, when the beautiful white island floated toward them in the Narrows, Henry's throat grew constricted with the rest and he wanted to cry out to Choupette and all foreigners, "Now, you see!"

Chapter 3

Almost three years later, Henry Marston walked out of his office in the Calumet Tobacco Company and along the hall to Judge Waterbury's suite. His face was older, with a suspicion of grimness, and a slight irrepressible heaviness of body was not concealed by his white linen suit.

"Busy, judge?"

"Come in, Henry."

"I'm going to the shore tomorrow to swim off this weight. I wanted to talk to you before I go."

"Children going too?"

"Oh, sure."

"Choupette'll go abroad, I suppose."

"Not this year. I think she's coming with me, if she doesn't stay here in Richmond."

The judge thought: "There isn't a doubt but what he knows everything." He waited.

"I wanted to tell you, judge, that I'm resigning the end of September."

The judge's chair creaked backward as he brought his feet to the floor.

"You're quitting, Henry?"

"Not exactly. Walter Ross wants to come home; let me take his place in France."

"Boy, do you know what we pay Walter Ross?"

"Seven thousand."

"And you're getting twenty-five."

"You've probably heard I've made something in the market," said Henry deprecatingly.

"I've heard everything between a hundred thousand and half a million."

"Somewhere in between."

"Then why a seven-thousand-dollar job? Is Choupette homesick?"

"No, I think Choupette likes it over here. She's adapted herself amazingly."

"He knows," the judge thought. "He wants to get away."

After Henry had gone, he looked up at the portrait of his grandfather on the wall. In those days the matter would have been simpler. Dueling pistols in the old Wharton meadow at dawn. It would be to Henry's advantage if things were like that today.

Henry's chauffeur dropped him in front of a Georgian house in a new suburban section. Leaving his hat in the hall, he went directly out on the side veranda.

From the swaying canvas swing Choupette looked up with a polite smile. Save for a certain alertness of feature and a certain indefinable knack of putting things on, she might have passed for an American. Southernisms overlay her French accent with a quaint charm; there were still college boys who rushed her like a débutante at the Christmas dances.

Henry nodded at Mr. Charles Wiese, who occupied a wicker chair, with a gin fizz at his elbow.

"I want to talk to you," he said, sitting down.

Wiese's glance and Choupette's crossed quickly before coming to rest on him.

"You're free, Wiese," Henry said. "Why don't you and Choupette get married?"

Choupette sat up, her eyes flashing.

"Now wait." Henry turned back to Wiese. "I've been letting this thing drift for about a year now, while I got my financial affairs in shape. But this last brilliant idea of yours makes me feel a little uncomfortable, a little sordid, and I don't want to feel that way."

"Just what do you mean?" Wiese inquired.

"On my last trip to New York you had me shadowed. I presume it was with the intention of getting divorce evidence against me. It wasn't a success."

"I don't know where you got such an idea in your head, Marston; you—"

"Don't lie!"

"Suh—" Wiese began, but Henry interrupted impatiently:

"Now don't 'Suh' me, and don't try to whip yourself up into a temper. You're not talking to a scared picker full of hookworm. I don't want a scene; my emotions aren't sufficiently involved. I want to arrange a divorce."

"Why do you bring it up like this?" Choupette cried, breaking into French. "Couldn't we talk of it alone, if you think you have so much against me?"

"Wait a minute; this might as well be settled now," Wiese said. "Choupette does want a divorce. Her life with you is unsatisfactory, and the only reason she has kept on is because she's an idealist. You don't seem to appreciate that fact, but it's true; she couldn't bring herself to break up her home."

"Very touching." Henry looked at Choupette with bitter amusement.

"But let's come down to facts. I'd like to close up this matter before I go back to France."

Again Wiese and Choupette exchanged a look.

"It ought to be simple," Wiese said. "Choupette doesn't want a cent of your money."

"I know. What she wants is the children. The answer is, You can't have the children."

"How perfectly outrageous!" Choupette cried. "Do you imagine for a minute I'm going to give up my children?"

"What's your idea, Marston?" demanded Wiese. "To take them back to France and make them expatriates like yourself?"

"Hardly that. They're entered for St. Regis School and then for Yale. And I haven't any idea of not letting them see their mother whenever she so desires—judging from the past two years, it won't be often. But I intend to have their entire legal custody."

"Why?" they demanded together.

"Because of the home."

"What the devil do you mean?"

"I'd rather apprentice them to a trade than have them brought up in the sort of home yours and Choupette's is going to be."

There was a moment's silence. Suddenly Choupette picked up her glass, dashed the contents at Henry and collapsed on the settee, passionately sobbing.

Henry dabbed his face with his handkerchief and stood up.

"I was afraid of that," he said, "but I think I've made my position clear."

He went up to his room and lay down on the bed. In a thousand wakeful hours during the past year he had fought over in his mind the problem of keeping his boys without taking those legal measures against Choupette that he could not bring himself to take. He knew that she wanted the children only because without them she would be suspect, even *déclassée,* to her family in France; but with that quality of detachment peculiar to old stock, Henry recognized this as a perfectly legitimate motive. Furthermore, no public scandal must touch the mother of his

sons—it was this that had rendered his challenge so ineffectual this afternoon.

When difficulties became insurmountable, inevitable, Henry sought surcease in exercise. For three years, swimming had been a sort of refuge, and he turned to it as one man to music or another to drink. There was a point when he would resolutely stop thinking and go to the Virginia coast for a week to wash his mind in the water. Far out past the breakers he could survey the green-and-brown line of the Old Dominion with the pleasant impersonality of a porpoise. The burden of his wretched marriage fell away with the buoyant tumble of his body among the swells, and he would begin to move in a child's dream of space. Sometimes remembered playmates of his youth swam with him; sometimes, with his two sons beside him, he seemed to be setting off along the bright pathway to the moon. Americans, he liked to say, should be born with fins, and perhaps they were—perhaps money was a form of fin. In England property begot a strong place sense, but Americans, restless and with shallow roots, needed fins and wings. There was even a recurrent idea in America about an education that would leave out history and the past, that should be a sort of equipment for aerial adventure, weighed down by none of the stowaways of inheritance or tradition.

Thinking of this in the water the next afternoon brought Henry's mind to the children; he turned and at a slow trudgen started back toward shore. Out of condition, he rested, panting, at the raft, and glancing up, he saw familiar eyes. In a moment he was talking with the girl he had tried to rescue four years ago.

He was overjoyed. He had not realized how vividly he remembered her. She was a Virginian—he might have guessed it abroad—the laziness, the apparent casualness that masked an unfailing courtesy and attention; a good form devoid of forms was based on kindness and consideration. Hearing her name for the first time, he recognized it—an Eastern Shore name, "good" as his own.

Lying in the sun, they talked like old friends, not about races and manners and the things that Henry brooded over Choupette, but rather as if they naturally agreed about those things; they talked about what they liked themselves and about what was fun. She showed him a sitting-down, standing-up dive from the high springboard, and he emulated her inexpertly—that was fun. They talked about eating soft-shelled crabs, and she told him how, because of the curious acoustics of the water, one

could lie here and be diverted by conversations on the hotel porch. They tried it and heard two ladies over their tea say:

"Now, at the Lido—"

"Now, at Asbury Park—"

"Oh, my dear, he just scratched and scratched all night; he just scratched and scratched—"

"My dear, at Deauville—"

"—scratched and scratched all night."

After a while the sea got to be that very blue color of four o'clock, and the girl told him how, at nineteen, she had been divorced from a Spaniard who locked her in the hotel suite when he went out at night.

"It was one of those things," she said lightly. "But speaking more cheerfully, how's your beautiful wife? And the boys—did they learn to float? Why can't you all dine with me tonight?"

"I'm afraid I won't be able to," he said, after a moment's hesitation. He must do nothing, however trivial, to furnish Choupette weapons, and with a feeling of disgust, it occurred to him that he was possibly being watched this afternoon. Nevertheless, he was glad of his caution when she unexpectedly arrived at the hotel for dinner that night.

After the boys had gone to bed, they faced each other over coffee on the hotel veranda.

"Will you kindly explain why I'm not entitled to a half share in my own children?" Choupette began. "It is not like you to be vindictive, Henry."

It was hard for Henry to explain. He told her again that she could have the children when she wanted them, but that he must exercise entire control over them because of certain old-fashioned convictions—watching her face grow harder, minute by minute, he saw there was no use, and broke off. She made a scornful sound.

"I wanted to give you a chance to be reasonable before Charles arrives."

Henry sat up. "Is he coming here this evening?"

"Happily. And I think perhaps your selfishness is going to have a jolt, Henry. You're not dealing with a woman now."

When Wiese walked out on the porch an hour later, Henry saw that his pale lips were like chalk; there was a deep flush on his forehead and hard confidence in his eyes. He was cleared for action and he wasted no time. "We've got something to say to each other, suh, and since I've got a motorboat here, perhaps that'd be the quietest place to say it."

Henry nodded coolly; five minutes later the three of them were headed out into Hampton Roads on the wide fairway of the moonlight. It was a tranquil evening, and half a mile from shore Wiese cut down the engine to a mild throbbing, so that they seemed to drift without will or direction through the bright water. His voice broke the stillness abruptly:

"Marston, I'm going to talk to you straight from the shoulder. I love Choupette and I'm not apologizing for it. These things have happened before in this world. I guess you understand that. The only difficulty is this matter of the custody of Choupette's children. You seem determined to try and take them away from the mother that bore them and raised them"—Wiese's words became more clearly articulated, as if they came from a wider mouth—"but you left one thing out of your calculations, and that's me. Do you happen to realize that at this moment I'm one of the richest men in Virginia?"

"I've heard as much."

"Well, money is power, Marston. I repeat, suh, money is power."

"I've heard that too. In fact, you're a bore, Wiese." Even by the moon Henry could see the crimson deepen on his brow.

"You'll hear it again, suh. Yesterday you took us by surprise and I was unprepared for your brutality to Choupette. But this morning I received a letter from Paris that puts the matter in a new light. It is a statement by a specialist in mental diseases, declaring you to be of unsound mind, and unfit to have the custody of children. The specialist is the one who attended you in your nervous breakdown four years ago."

Henry laughed incredulously, and looked at Choupette, half expecting her to laugh, too, but she had turned her face away, breathing quickly through parted lips. Suddenly he realized that Wiese was telling the truth—that by some extraordinary bribe he had obtained such a document and fully intended to use it.

For a moment Henry reeled as if from a material blow. He listened to his own voice saying, "That's the most ridiculous thing I ever heard," and to Wiese's answer: "They don't always tell people when they have mental troubles."

Suddenly Henry wanted to laugh, and the terrible instant when he had wondered if there could be some shred of truth in the allegation passed. He turned to Choupette, but again she avoided his eyes.

"How could you, Choupette?"

"I want my children," she began, but Wiese broke in quickly:

"If you'd been halfway fair, Marston, we wouldn't have resorted to this step."

"Are you trying to pretend you arranged this scurvy trick since yesterday afternoon?"

"I believe in being prepared, but if you had been reasonable; in fact, if you will be reasonable, this opinion needn't be used." His voice became suddenly almost paternal, almost kind: "Be wise, Marston. On your side there's an obstinate prejudice; on mine there are forty million dollars. Don't fool yourself. Let me repeat, Marston, that money is power. You were abroad so long that perhaps you're inclined to forget that fact. Money made this country, built its great and glorious cities, created its industries, covered it with an iron network of railroads. It's money that harnesses the forces of Nature, creates the machine and makes it go when money says go, and stop when money says stop."

As though interpreting this as a command, the engine gave forth a sudden hoarse sound and came to rest.

"What is it?" demanded Choupette.

"It's nothing." Wiese pressed the self-starter with his foot. "I repeat, Marston, that money—The battery is dry. One minute while I spin the wheel."

He spun it for the best part of fifteen minutes while the boat meandered about in a placid little circle.

"Choupette, open that drawer behind you and see if there isn't a rocket."

A touch of panic had crept into her voice when she answered that there was no rocket. Wiese eyed the shore tentatively.

"There's no use in yelling; we must be half a mile out. We'll just have to wait here until someone comes along."

"We won't wait here," Henry remarked.

"Why not?"

"We're moving toward the bay. Can't you tell? We're moving out with the tide."

"That's impossible!" said Choupette sharply.

"Look at those two lights on shore—one passing the other now. Do you see?"

"Do something!" she wailed, and then, in a burst of French: "*Ah, c'est épouvantable! N'est-ce pas qu'il y a quelque chose qu'on petit faire?*"

The tide was running fast now, and the boat was drifting down the Roads with it toward the sea. The vague blots of two ships passed them, but at a distance, and there was no answer to their hail. Against the western sky a lighthouse blinked, but it was impossible to guess how near to it they would pass.

"It looks as if all our difficulties would be solved for us," Henry said.

"What difficulties?" Choupette demanded. "Do you mean there's nothing to be done? Can you sit there and just float away like this?"

"It may be easier on the children, after all." He winced as Choupette began to sob bitterly, but he said nothing. A ghostly idea was taking shape in his mind.

"Look here, Marston. Can you swim?" demanded Wiese, frowning.

"Yes, but Choupette can't."

"I can't either—I didn't mean that. If you could swim in and get to a telephone, the coast-guard people would send for us."

Henry surveyed the dark, receding shore.

"It's too far," he said.

"You can try!" said Choupette.

Henry shook his head.

"Too risky. Besides, there's an outside chance that we'll be picked up."

The lighthouse passed them, far to the left and out of earshot. Another one, the last, loomed up half a mile away.

"We might drift to France like that man Gerbault," Henry remarked. "But then, of course, we'd be expatriates—and Wiese wouldn't like that, would you, Wiese?"

Wiese, fussing frantically with the engine, looked up.

"See what you can do with this," he said.

"I don't know anything about mechanics," Henry answered. "Besides, this solution of our difficulties grows on me. Just suppose you were dirty dog enough to use that statement and got the children because of it—in that case I wouldn't have much impetus to go on living. We're all failures—I as head of my household, Choupette as a wife and a mother, and you, Wiese, as a human being. It's just as well that we go out of life together."

"This is no time for a speech, Marston."

"Oh, yes, it's a fine time. How about a little more house-organ oratory about money being power?"

Choupette sat rigid in the bow; Wiese stood over the engine, biting nervously at his lips.

"We're not going to pass that lighthouse very close." An idea suddenly occurred to him. "Couldn't you swim to that, Marston?"

"Of course he could!" Choupette cried.

Henry looked at it tentatively.

"I might. But I won't."

"You've got to!"

Again he flinched at Choupette's weeping; simultaneously he saw the time had come.

"Everything depends on one small point," he said rapidly. "Wiese, have you got a fountain pen?"

"Yes. What for?"

"If you'll write and sign about two hundred words at my dictation, I'll swim to the lighthouse and get help. Otherwise, so help me God, we'll drift out to sea! And you better decide in about one minute."

"Oh, anything!" Choupette broke out frantically. "Do what he says, Charles; he means it. He always means what he says. Oh, please don't wait!"

"I'll do what you want"—Wiese's voice was shaking—"only, for God's sake, go on. What is it you want—an agreement about the children? I'll give you my personal word of honor—"

"There's no time for humor," said Henry savagely. "Take this piece of paper and write."

The two pages that Wiese wrote at Henry's dictation relinquished all lien on the children thence and forever for himself and Choupette. When they had affixed trembling signatures Wiese cried:

"Now go, for God's sake, before it's too late!"

"Just one thing more: The certificate from the doctor."

"I haven't it here."

"You lie."

Wiese took it from his pocket.

"Write across the bottom that you paid so much for it, and sign your name to that."

A minute later, stripped to his underwear, and with the papers in an oiled-silk tobacco pouch suspended from his neck, Henry dived from the side of the boat and struck out toward the light.

The waters leaped up at him for an instant, but after the first shock it was all warm and friendly, and the small murmur of the waves was an encouragement. It was the longest swim he had ever tried, and he was straight from the city, but the happiness in his heart buoyed him up. Safe now, and free. Each stroke was stronger for knowing that his two sons, sleeping back in the hotel, were safe from what he dreaded. Divorced from her own country, Choupette had picked the things out of American life that pandered best to her own self-indulgence. That, backed by a court decree, she should be permitted to hand on this preposterous moral farrago to his sons was unendurable. He would have lost them forever.

Turning on his back, he saw that already the motorboat was far away, the blinding light was nearer. He was very tired. If one let go—and, in the relaxation from strain, he felt an alarming impulse to let go—one died very quickly and painlessly, and all these problems of hate and bitterness disappeared. But he felt the fate of his sons in the oiled-silk pouch about his neck, and with a convulsive effort he turned over again and concentrated all his energies on his goal.

Twenty minutes later he stood shivering and dripping in the signal room while it was broadcast out to the coast patrol that a launch was drifting in the bay.

"There's not much danger without a storm," the keeper said. "By now they've probably struck a cross current from the river and drifted into Peyton Harbor."

"Yes," said Henry, who had come to this coast for three summers. "I knew that too."

Chapter 4

In October, Henry left his sons in school and embarked on the Majestic for Europe. He had come home as to a generous mother and had been profusely given more than he asked—money, release from an intolerable situation, and the fresh strength to fight for his own. Watching the fading city, the fading shore, from the deck of the Majestic, he had a sense of overwhelming gratitude and of gladness that America was there, that under the ugly débris of industry the rich land still pushed up, incorrigibly lavish and fertile, and that in the heart of the leaderless people the old generosities and devotions fought on, breaking out sometimes in fanaticism and excess, but indomitable and undefeated. There was a lost generation in the saddle at the moment, but it seemed to him that the men coming on, the men of the war, were better; and all his old feeling that America was a bizarre accident, a sort of historical sport, had gone forever. The best of America was the best of the world.

Going down to the purser's office, he waited until a fellow passenger was through at the window. When she turned, they both started, and he saw it was the girl.

"Oh, hello!" she cried. "I'm glad you're going! I was just asking when the pool opened. The great thing about this ship is that you can always get a swim."

"Why do you like to swim?" he demanded.

"You always ask me that." She laughed.

"Perhaps you'd tell me if we had dinner together tonight."

But when, in a moment, he left her he knew that she could never tell him—she or another. France was a land, England was a people, but America, having about it still that quality of the idea, was harder to utter—it was the graves at Shiloh and the tired, drawn, nervous faces of its great men, and the country boys dying in the Argonne for a phrase that was empty before their bodies withered. It was a willingness of the heart.

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