

THE TRYST - 004

The boys were impatient the time Marie crossed the spot where they made their playfield on her way to the hilltop, for where the sun had burned like a red seal was now plum, and the boys were squeezing the day of its last drop of play.

Marie's breath came quicker after she had climbed the long flight of steps cut out of the hillside up to the schoolhouse perched on the hilltop like a fortress. When she turned and cast her eyes down the darkness had fallen upon the valley like a fell blow, and the cottage windows glowed like yellow, half-shut eyes. Out to sea the place where the ships were looked but a stone's throw, and the roving beacon of the lighthouse was like the red eye of a god. One by one, the stars were stealing to their places like tardy school boys, but when the night struck at the hilltop the sky was formidable with them.

Marie let her eyes drop from the stars' glittering host, to the spot in the bay where the lights spangled the ships which were anchored. In the long day that had lingered, when the sun seemed to stalk naked to and fro, Marie had climbed the steps up to the schoolhouse with the two moist palms of the schoolboys clutched in her own, and reaching the summit of the hill had turned, after watching her charges disappear in the hive of the schoolroom and had cast her eyes over the waters of the bay where her heart was.

It was noon the time she saw the ship as big as a child's toy, with its plume of smoke and its face set for the roadstead. The stricken cows were stretched inert about the chastened fields, beneath the sun fierce as a welder's torch, and the sweep of the sea was like a burnished girdle. Marie had watched raptly while the incoming ship grew, unconscious of the hum of the schoolroom behind her, and the eyes of the masters paying her a second's sly tribute as they passed the open door. Marie had watched, with rapt eyes and bounding heart, until the lines of the distant ship seemed familiar to her sight, and the rotund funnel far aft with the single circle of gold near up to its top.

In the evening when she returned for her charges Marie had taken the glasses which Rolande had given her, and from the eminence of the hill, with the schoolmaster canting an evening prayer behind her and the boys revelling like birds in their chorus, had scanned the new ship. And when she had read the name on its bluff bows she wanted to join the boys in their singing, and to run and to shout and to jump in the exuberant maelstrom of their freedom.

The wind had blown the puffs of silk cotton again since the time they had walked the cool wood, the time Marie had felt her lips to see if what Rolande had said about the soft fluff was true. The sun had burnt the leaves crisp and brown as new loaves once more, and the wind had ravaged and tortured them before tossing them into the stream. The banks where they were wont to lie were warm and more cushiony than

ever with the dead fibres of the mile-trees, whilst everywhere the palms still shed their barks like dropped gloves and burst their caskets of black fruit. Now, in the trees through whose branches the sun at even struck like a transept, the birds were mating for the second time since Rolande sailed, and the boys were sniping them unmolested with their rude catapults, for Marie had no spirit to harass them whilst Rolande was away. The laden bees droned, as Rolande said, like friendly fighters on a foray, whilst the butterflies were like gaily painted chasers zigzagging through an ambushed convoy.

Marie had watched the slow cavalcade of the seasons and the waxing and waning of the moons with a stoicism born in the faith of her first love. But always her eyes were upon the ships in the harbour, and when, at night, a passing vessel bellowed impatience, waking the sleeping harbour with its hoarse fanfare, her heart would leap like a live thing in her mouth as sleep fled, and she would lie tossing, eager as a thirsty hind, for the morning, when she would steal a minute from her duty, and going down along the littered wharves, search carefully among the tethered ships.

The Sunday the great ship came Marie had donned her dress of fine cambric, and taking the little boys, had set out after the sun had been assuaged. The Sabbath-stricken village lay wrapped in shaded melancholy, mourning the children's cries, peaceful and quiet as a sleeping monk. When Marie and the two boys reached there evening

had laid their thousand years upon the drowsy docks, but when the great battle-grey ship came through her black smoke and kept her distance afar off like a proud stranger the whole harbour was stirred with new life. Marie opened the glasses and gave them to the boys, that they might better see the gaping, savage guns. Marie and the two boys watched while feverish men threw off the moorings of the cargo boats, and how the fussy tugs hitched up and tugged them, one after the other, further out in the roadstead, after which the great ship deigned cautiously nearer and was tended to the moorage. And then, as night fell with the swiftness of a stone, Marie and the boys saw the three walls of flame that shot up to the sky around the two ships which had withdrawn further out in the roadstead, and how one of the ships buckled in mortal throes as the roars fell. Marie had shepherded the two boys home through the quick crowd that had gathered, while her heart beat a fervent prayer that Rolande might never be upon a ship which buckled so.

The stars had shrunk to a brave few and the moon was glazing the sky over the schoolroom when the certainty that Rolande would not come impaled Marie with its cruel thrust. She turned away, her eyes still bent across the dark valley upon the sparsely spangled ships, and with laggard steps, outflanked the red walls of the schoolroom and climbed up to its rear where she and Rolande had kept a hundred trysts. Behind the schoolroom the leaves of the garden the boys tended were inlaid with rare silver, and the facets of the pebbles glinted like cut stones.

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The memory of the night before Rolande sailed, when his passion had soared like an eagle, in a moment turned bitter-sweet, and how the moon had sailed through the clots of cloud, as Rolande said, like a proud queen through her courtiers.

When she came down the steep steps hewn out of the hillside her head was no longer lifted to the ships, but drooped upon her cheated breast. Tomorrow would come, she knew, with its fields flaunting their heritage of sun, and maybe, Rolande seeking her out, but, for her young love, the broken tryst on the hilltop was like a pungent wreath.

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