

Face of the Drowned

**Louis Arthur
Cunningham**

Illustrated by

Charles Fainmel

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The Face of the Drowned

A haunting story of the Tantramar where Fundy's tides roll over many a grim secret

By LOUIS ARTHUR CUNNINGHAM

Illustrated

by

CHARLES FAINMEL

What are they talking about?" I asked Desloriers. The little French I knew would not serve me when the old men spoke so rapidly with such strange oaths and idioms, English words here and there besprinkled among the rich liquids and gutturals—old wine of *le pays breton*. The grandfathers of these ancients had spoken thus. But Desloriers was of the same stock; now quite Anglicized, I thought, but still strong in the tongue of his ancestors.

"I'll tell you presently," he whispered. He listened, his dark eyes a-shine. I had to be content. That was not hard. The little inn, *Les Trois Cigales*, was in the heart of Acadie, which is part and parcel of the great heart of France and pulsing still with the warm red blood of Normandy and the Bretagne. We had come to St. Irenée that afternoon. Tourists they took us for, and treated us as such. They had no register. The fat innkeeper Ludovic, his fat wife Lizette, called us *monsieur* with a smile—that was myself; and *monsieur* with gravity—that was Gerald Desloriers—dark, aloof, a bit awe-inspiring in his great height and eternal poise.

It was evening now. The board porch of the inn creaked under the weights on chairs and benches. The western sky was orange; the eastern, blue as a Norse girl's eyes and touched with little white stars, few as yet. In front of us lay the marshes like a vast amphitheatre among dark hills—the marshes cut through by a serpentine river, high-dyked on either bank, widening its path to meet the ocean, which, too, was pushed back by high green walls of dykes. White spots moving against the green of the marsh were cattle left to graze; their bells tinkled afar, dulcetly. Nighthawks wheeled above us with softly shrill cries, and grey gulls in from the waters volplaned low over the housetops of the village.



“I’ll tell you presently,” Desloriers whispered, and turned to listen again, his dark eyes a-shine.

A grey-bearded man in a drab smock, gnarled of body and bent like an old orchard tree, had been doing most of the talking, thumping his stick on the floor at doubtless significant places in his speech. When he had done, Desloriers got up and I followed him out into the road, which was dusty white and wound through the village down to the marsh.

“Well?” I asked, waking him from his own musings. “I’m waiting to hear what the old fellow was recounting.”

“What do you think it was?”

“Something eerie.” I had seen how tensely they listened to the greybeard’s speech; almost fearfully.

“Yes, eerie,” said Desloriers. “They had a fearful storm here last night. You saw the deep puddles in the road. The sea rages against the dykes; there’s no water in the world worse than the Bay of Fundy in a tempest. Even tonight—the wind is freshening—you’ll see the spray tossed to the stars.”

“And they were talking about that?”

He looked across the marshes toward the sea beginning to shimmer and quiver under the silver moon. He seemed to speak to it, and I, though I had thought to have known him well, felt awe of him just as the peasants had. He was strong, and his spirit was deep beyond man’s sounding.

“Of that . . . yes . . . and of . . . a dead, drowned face . . . with dank hair clinging to the brow and seaweed and froth on the white lips—pleasant, eh?”

I smothered my amazement, both at what he said, and at the way he said it—fiercely, chokingly.

“Is it some folk-tale—some old legend?”

“It is truth. It has come to be a legend in this country—the story of Damase Blais, the drowned dykemaster. That’s what the old man was telling his cronies back there. He didn’t know I understood. But he looked at me a lot, and it seemed odd that they should be discussing the dykemaster . . . no matter. Had they known they were understood they would not have talked of that. They guard their affairs so closely. Not that it would have made much difference . . .”

“You knew the story already?”

“Well . . . in part,” he said slowly. “Damase Blais was dykemaster of the Tantramar—that means he was entrusted with the care of the sea-walls, the great dykes. It was his duty to superintend their building, to see that all weaknesses were repaired. It is a sacred trust and a great responsibility. Human lives—men’s, women’s, little children’s—depend on it. Dykemaster—it’s a high and honorable title. Damase Blais betrayed his trust, they say, and though he perished in the flood, his name has never ceased to be infamous among his people. He haunts the land, flits across the rims of the dykes. That was what the old man was telling. He appears from time to time—you’ll see a drowned face pressed against the window—and they terrify the children with the threat of Damase Blais’s coming, in order to make them behave. And the dykemaster’s spirit always presages disaster. Last night he was seen at a cottage window, and before morning a dyke gave way and flooded miles of meadowland. Therefore and for other reasons they hate the drowned dykemaster. They believe it his way of showing his hatred for them.”



“But what was his crime, precisely?”

“There was talk of removing him from his position and putting another in his stead. Tales were circulated about him, and because he was a hot-tempered man, he resented them and used his fists on his detractors. He drank, too, and he had been drinking the night the great marsh *aboideau* gave way. A saw and an axe were missing from his cottage. Some of the timber of the sluice was found sawn, and splintered with an axe. People were drowned in the flood—murdered. They blamed Damase Blais, you see. His father and grandfather had been called dykemaster. He is supposed to have done it out of spite because he could not hold the place.”

“A strange story,” I said. I thought Gerald was even more dour than was his wont. He did not wish to talk more of this bit of local history, yet he was

thinking of it. I had studied his moods enough to know the phenomena attached to them, so I let the matter rest.

We walked in silence across the marsh. Abruptly, Gerald turned into a by-path that led toward a tree-studded knoll. A grey stone cottage stood on top of this mound, its windows boarded up, its door sagging on the hinges, desolation and neglect all about it. Moss and lichens covered the walls. I had never seen a place so forlorn.

We contemplated the ruin for full five minutes.

“Damase Blais lived there,” said Gerald. “Now it is accursed.”

Even the fir trees that grew there were blighted and rusted, the grass long, dank and faded. Thistle and burdock grew in tangled profusion, and no birds stirred in the nests beneath the eaves—swallows’ nests which he pointed out to me as if he knew them well.

We went back to the inn and did not linger among the old men who smoked tranquilly on the shadowy stoop. They talked no longer, but in silence enjoyed the magic of the night, watching the fireflies thread their lucent way through the bushes, listening to the shrill chorus of the peepers, the croaking bass of the frogs that populated the deep ditches in the marsh.

We said goodnight. My room was in the front of the house, looking out on the Tantramar. I did not feel like sleeping. The picture of the old abandoned dwelling, tumbling to ignoble ruin, haunted me, and the face of a drowned man peered at me from the shadows beyond the tall posts of the bed. I leaned on the window sill, drinking deep of the air, sweeter than the spice-freighted breezes of the Orient; studying the star-strewn sky, loving the peace of this rural paradise, marvelling that in this vale of Elysium man could still hate his fellows and still have the will to destroy. Then I thought of Desloriers, a queer chap. Intimate with no one except myself, yet very much a stranger even to me. He knew this country, this village of St. Irenée, one of the many tiny clusters of white-walled cottages and their orchards that dot the slopes of the Tantramar country, each with its tall-spired church, its plump curé in shovel hat and rusty cassock, smiling at the little gamins who peer slyly at him from cottage doors, and when they know him better, cling about his skirts like chicks under an old hen’s wings. Yes, Desloriers knew the village. I believe that he had wanted for years to come here; but this was the first time he could afford it. He had made out well at last. He did some rather decent daubs.

Chairs scraped on the boards below my window, voices murmured; then some one said insistently:

“Oui, mon homme: ce n’est ni Anglais ni Américain, ce gros-là. C’est le fils de Damase Blais le maudit. J’en suis sûr.”

It was the old man in the drab smock. I recognized his raspy voice.

“Je m’accorde avec vous, Prémélite,” said another.

The voices were loud and clear, but they dropped again to a murmur as of bees about the hives in summer. But I had grasped their meaning, and from Gerald’s interest in the story, his knowledge of its details, his emotion as he looked upon the deserted house, I did not doubt that the old men were right. I, too, agreed with Prémélite—Desloriers was the son of Damase Blais the dykemaster, whom they called the damned.

The spread of news in a small village is like the phenomenon one sees when a little tea is poured on a lump of sugar—the drop of liquid permeates the whole lump. When Desloriers and I walked down the village street next morning I could read in the faces of the people that they knew their man. They looked on him askance, and no one said good day. Ludovic, in elephantine silence, had given us eggs and bacon, toast and strong coffee. Desloriers did not seem surprised that the innkeeper had said no word.

His lips were tight-pressed now, his face sullen. He strode determinedly on, glancing neither to right nor left. Men in the orchards by the road robbed the bending boughs of ruddy fruit; on the marsh they mowed the second crop of lush green hay, and in the inn-yard a rotary saw, operated by an asthmatic motor, whined through the stout birch logs that would be stacked in neat stove-lengths against the long, cold reign of winter. The air had a tang of autumn; already the sere leaves blew in the wind, and the dust danced its mad tarantelles, whirling in little white puffs on the road before us.

“Have you noticed . . .?” asked Desloriers.

“I heard them say last night . . . that you were the dykemaster’s son.”

“I had no wish to hide it. I wondered that they did not know me at once. I am like my father. I was fifteen when he died. My mother took me away. She married again—Desloriers, and gave me that name—but I am Gerald Blais, and proud of it. They know now. And perhaps you have guessed why I’ve always wanted to come back here. They despised us, these people, and dishonored my father’s memory. He was a good man. I will prove that, and show them what they did. He could never have destroyed the dyke. He loved the dykes—loved every stake and sod that went into their building. True, he was furious when they lied about him and spoke of having him removed. But he never would take such a revenge.”

I looked at him with new understanding—only partial understanding, it is true; for to me it was incomprehensible that he should have nursed this desire for vindication so long. He was past thirty now. Fifteen years. But they are a stubborn people. The *villageois* were as stubborn to hate as Gerald was to desire the restoration of his father's good name.



He led me up a narrow road that crossed a hillside where a prosperous farmhouse stood embowered in a great orchard. A tawny-coated collie barked furiously at us, and a girl who had been kneeling by a flower-bed in the dooryard, gathering the late blossoms, rose and looked at us—a tall, full-breasted girl, her skin burned deep brown, her hair black and plaited on her

graceful head. Her cheeks were red beneath the tan—like deep shaded roses, and the loose white dress did not disguise the strong curves of her body. The wind blew it tight about her limbs.

I stopped. Desloriers's face was as I had never before seen it—transfigured with joy. He walked toward the girl and stood close to her, waiting for her to speak. But it was he who spoke first and she talked little. Yet her eyes held his unwaveringly, compellingly with their dark beauty. I did not hear what they said, but I could guess its ancient purport, and when she bade him good-by and he came back to me, I knew its outcome.

There is the prize," he said, after we had walked over the hill. "If I succeed in my purpose——. Should I fail, she will be as far from me as ever she has been since the day my father died. It's not her will, perhaps; but she is like all the rest—unforgiving when it is a sin against all the people. Why should they feel for the son what they felt for his father? Because they believe that the spirit of Damase Blais still works evil upon them, destroying their dykes and their crops. Their hatred is there; you have seen it. I am a pariah—those of my family will always be pariahs here."

"You came back, too, because of that girl?" In the years I had been with him he had known no women, nor tried to know any.

"Elodie . . . yes, because of her. We were children together and I gave her that which can never be recalled. You know"—there was a sardonic twist to his mouth—"women haven't mattered to me. You may think that only clerics and liars talk thus. But they haven't mattered—not in the flesh. Something happened when I had to go away from her, something that embittered me. I'll spend my last cent to prove that I'm worthy of her, since she requires such proof."

"I should think, if she truly cared for you . . ."

"I know what you are going to say. But not here. She has the weight of the people's opinion, her own family's antipathy, especially her father's, to fight against. It isn't done successfully; not even by spirits bigger than hers. My father tried to do it. I'm going to do it."

I wondered if he was going to do it; if it were possible for one man to overcome the force arrayed against him. I could sense everywhere we went that the dykemaster's son was known and shunned as a thing of evil. From under shaggy brows the eyes of old peasants peered suspiciously at him, the young ones gazed at him in awe. Was he not the son of a ghost—of a drowned man whose gaunt, blanched face was pressed tight against cottage windows on nights of storm, foretelling woe? He was to be dreaded, this dark-browed man, so lank

and thin himself. Those of his own age, who had been children together with him, passed by with never a word of greeting.

Only the curé, a Jerome Coignard sort of old fellow, great-paunched, with jolly face and keen bright eyes, greeted the stranger kindly and offered us snuff from a horn box.

“*Bienvenu, l'exil!*” he said, and his voice was an echo of iron-tired wheels on cobbles. “You like to visit the old home . . . *hein*, Gerald?”

“*Oui, mon père.* But with a purpose. It's not sentiment alone for the fields of home that brings me here. I came to find out who cut the great dyke. I want to prove that my father was innocent. Do you think it a worthwhile purpose, *monsieur le curé?*”

The old priest scratched his nose with his breviary and looked sharply at me, as if I held the answer to an intriguing riddle.

“*Ça me semble . . . une chose très noble,*” he said slowly. “*Ah, oui, mon enfant,* it is worth while. You 'ave my benediction.”

“He knows,” said Gerald, when the curé had shuffled away up the dusty highway and we two had seated ourselves on a grassy bank by the roadside to smoke. “I could tell he knew. Strange to think that one man has the repository of the sins of a community. Do you think he hasn't been told—hasn't heard the confession of the guilty person? Yes, yes; he did not look at me.”

“But what have you to work on? Fifteen years is surely long enough to cover up even the most envious traces, let alone the slight ones that may have survived the flood. I do not wish to discourage you, but it seems hopeless to me.”

“Fifteen years is only a day,” he returned. “Have they forgotten Damase Blais or failed to recognize him in his son? Not they. And he is still with them. It is all fresh in their minds. What have I to work on, you ask rightly—the answer is, faith alone.”

I did not ridicule this. Desloriers was, ordinarily, a hard-headed man, and when such acts on faith one is not so dubious of the event. There was an unerringness about Gerald, as if a power stronger than he guarded his steps and would show him the way. We did not meet the girl Elodie again, but on Sunday we saw her kneeling among the peasants at the mass. Beside her was a huge mountain of a man in riding-breeches, whom I took to be her father. He was red-faced, one arm was cut off at the shoulder, and the sleeve pinned up empty.

The curé spoke, fitly enough, of the sins of the fathers and how even unto the third and fourth generations they would be visited upon the children. His

eyes rested commiseratingly on Desloriers, and he pleaded for charity toward one's neighbors and forgiveness for wrong. But the faces of the old were like images carved in hickory and the young ones seemed not to understand. But Gerald looked toward Elodie, and there seemed to be sympathy in the look she returned him.

That afternoon we walked once more across the hill, past the farmstead where Elodie lived. The farmlands covered the hill and ran out on to the marsh where many cattle grazed. At the foot of the hill was the great dyke, a thirty-foot wall of solid clay, reinforced and cored with stout logs of fir and spruce. It was grass-covered and looked like a Titan rampart flung out against the giant of the waters.

We followed a worn path along its rim, and walked as far as the great sluice where the water came foaming, boiling through.

"It was here," said Desloriers, "that the dyke broke. The water flooded the country for miles around. My father built the first sluice here; he never destroyed it. He never could have wrecked what cost him years of planning and hard work. It will be a triumph for me and for his memory when the truth is known."

On the hillside below the farmstead we met the red-faced man. He seemed even larger now than he had appeared to me in the church. He carried a riding-crop; his face was apoplectic by nature and at sight of Desloriers it grew purplish. He said something in rapid French, upbraiding my companion, ordering us by his gesture off the land. Gerald answered and the argument grew hot. I heard the big man say an ugly word, and his riding-crop swished through the air and struck Gerald's cheek. Quickly it was wrenched from his hand and thrown away into the tall grass. Gerald did not return the blow or say another word. We walked away, the big man still muttering and calling threats after us.

"Pleasant, isn't he?" said Gerald. There was a red welt across his cheek and jaw. "He told me I must never dare speak to his daughter, that he'd rather see her dead than married to me. He's a hard man, Philippe Saulnier, and I believe him. Then you say if Elodie truly loved me nothing would prevent . . . you have only seen a little of what stands in the way. But I will make him regret this."

Days passed, and Gerald seemed no nearer the attainment of his high purpose. The coldness of the Acadians had increased. They did not want the son of Damase Blais in their village. But the more they showed their dislike, the more stubborn was Desloriers. He would not give up. Often he went away by himself for long tramps over the marshes. But as far as I could see, his efforts if such they were, bore no good fruit.

One evening, when we had walked far inland, it began to rain. The wind was the tocsin of the storm. Great drops of rain hit hard against the leaves and fell like small-shot on the dry carpet beneath our feet. Still we walked on. We had not passed a house for miles, but Gerald told me there would be one soon. He was hatless, and his wet hair clung about his pale forehead; his gaunt face was pallid.

At last a light showed, back from the path, among the trees whose boughs were tossed and crashed together by the wind that seemed bent on tearing the roots from their deep anchorage in the ground. We were drenched to the skin, but the rain was not too cold and I had begun to enjoy the adventure, especially when I saw the place we had come upon—a ramshackle hut too low, it seemed, for a man to enter.

“It looks like a gnome’s house—perhaps it belongs to the old man of the forest,” I said.

“It belonged to a dwarf whom we called Simon Malpeck,” Gerald told me. “I wonder if he is still alive. He was stone deaf.”

Somewhat foolishly, in the event that the dwarf was still there, we hammered upon the door. That failing, we tried the latch; but the door was bolted, and our efforts to get someone to open it met with no success. Gerald went to the window and pressed his face close to the glass, tapping against it with his fingers.

I thought then that one seeing him would surely take him for the ghost of his father . . . that gaunt white face and hair matted, dark and clinging . . . clinging like seaweed to a drowned face . . .

A wild, inhuman cry rose above the howling of the tempest—a screech of mortal terror that was taken up by the winds in the great trees and carried through the darkness of the forest.

“It’s Simon,” shouted Gerald. “I’ve scared the wits out of him. He had only half of them at best, and now he’s quite without any.”

So it seemed. I stepped aside from the door. The dwarf was pulling frenziedly at the bolt, whining and spitting like a big tomcat. The door flew open at the thrust of the wind, and Simon Malpeck bounded over the sill and started to run.



A wild, inhuman cry arose above the tempest. The door flew open at the thrust of the wind and Simon Malpeck bounded over the sill and started to run.

Gerald stood firmly in his path and held up a hand to stay him. The dwarf, a squat, distorted creature with a huge head and torso and a negligible amount of neck and leg, stopped in his tracks. His back was turned to me, and I knew he had failed to notice my presence. He believed himself alone with the ghost of Damase Blais.

Gerald walked slowly toward him, his hand held out conciliatingly. The strange creature trembled, fell face-down on the ground, beating his breast and crying out in a voice more fraught with woe than that of Jeremiah. I could catch only a word here and there—*digue, aboideau, Damase*—but I could make no sense of them.

Simon Malpeck grovelled like a devil at the feet of a god. There in the grey gloom of the forest it was a strange and arresting tableau. The dwarf crawled close to Gerald's feet, put his arms about Gerald's legs and thus immolated himself. But Desloriers kicked him angrily away.

"Come on," he called to me. "This is no place for us. There is a village a mile farther along."

We fought our way through the storm. Prolonged speech was impossible. I realized, anyway, that he did not wish to talk. We found shelter at a farmhouse

on the outskirts of the village and there we stayed until morning. But even as sleep weighed my eyelids, I knew that Desloriers was wide-awake, staring into the gloom and thinking of that night so much like this, when there was a crashing of the forest trees and the sheeted rain beat down on the turmoil of waters, and in the grey of the dawn a body drifted in on the tide.

Early next morning we walked down “from the inland valleys and woodlands” to the village on the border of the marsh. The sunlight seemed to have already that pellucid brightness of the earliest autumn, and the air after the short-lived storm was chill and scented with brine and balsam.

Gerald’s face was gaunt, strong in its intensity, and steadfast purpose shone in his eyes. He did not say much until we were near Philippe Saulnier’s farm, and the wind-blown figure of Elodie and the dog, his long coat ruffled by the wind, showed just across a stubble-field on the crest of a small hill above the farm. Then he said:

“My mission has been at once a failure and a success. Stay with me now, and you will see. I think you will be able to understand. Simon Malpeck cut the sluice that night fifteen years ago and caused the great dyke to collapse. He told me that when he grovelled at my feet. Could you not guess he told me that?”

“I wondered.”

“He thought I was Damase Blais. As I pressed my face to the window it did not occur to me how much I resembled my father when they took his body from the sea. But the dwarf’s expression I shall never forget—stark, mad horror. He was sure the ghost had come to haunt him. He babbled everything.”

“But—why, that was all you wanted! Why didn’t you go to the *villageois* then, and take the little wretch and accuse him?”

He shook his head. He smiled, less grimly and sourly than of old. Something had chastened and ennobled him.

“Simon is a harmless wretch. He didn’t know what he was doing. He was just a tool in the hands of a stronger man, a man he worshipped and feared . . .”

We had come close to the girl. A smile parted her lips, and her hands went shyly into his, while her eyes questioned him.

“Yes, *mignonne*,” he said. “I have found what I sought, and now you can come with me.”

She was glad. Careless of my presence she raised her lips to his.

“You have found out then. Tell me . . .”

“We must see your father,” he said gently, “and you must try to understand that I do this not for the sake of my own good name, so much as for the

fulfillment of our love.”

We walked toward the house. Saulnier, wielding an axe deftly with his one hand, was splitting wood in the dooryard. But he left his work abruptly when he saw us, and came quickly toward us, rage kindling in his face.

Desloriers stood, his hand on the girl’s arm possessively. He did not flinch before Saulnier’s rage, and the big man, as if he read something new and terrible in Desloriers’ eyes, stopped his advance and put his clenched fist down at his side.

“I warned you!” he said. “I told you to stay away from here. We have no dealings with such as you . . .”

“But you have, *monsieur*.” Desloriers’ face was stern, his voice calm yet vibrant. “You will have considerable dealings with me. I have you—” he crooked his fingers suggestively, his hand thrust out—“I have you there. Last night Damase Blais came again upon the earth . . . in my own person . . . came to confront the guilty one and make him bare his ugly soul. Simon Malpeck confessed; but his soul is not so ugly as that of the man who induced him to steal the tools from my father’s shed and do the devil’s work. You, *monsieur*, are that man! You cannot deny. And your persecution of me was just a cloak for your own fear. You hated my father because when long ago you quarrelled with him, you claimed he pushed you into the thresher where you lost your arm. *Soit!* You wanted my father’s place. You are dykemaster of the Tantramar—a proud office. You are respected, honored . . . as my father was.”

Saulnier’s beet-red face had paled; his jaw sagged, and the stiffness was knocked from his body. His eyes were furtive now. They could not meet his daughter’s or her lover’s. He looked steadfastly at the ground and for a perceptible time there was silence there on the windy hillside. The dykemaster could find no words. There was now something piteous about his great bulk and the empty sleeve pinned to his shoulder. But his daughter did not quit Desloriers’ side to go to his.

“I could disgrace you, *monsieur*,” went on Desloriers, a bit wearily. “I could tell them that my father knew what was afoot that night, and lost his life in an attempt to save them from the flood. But of what use? It would bring sorrow to this pretty one. She has vowed to be my wife. We shall go far away from here. I will hold my peace and let the name of Damase Blais remain forever infamous among his people. Charity should be for the living, perhaps, rather than for the dead.”

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *The Face of the Drowned* by Louis Arthur Cunningham]