

# BARCAROLLE

Leslie Gordon Barnard

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*A story with the tang  
of the Northern Woods—*

# Barcarolle

By LESLIE GORDON BARNARD

*Illustrations by Roy Fisher*

They were to leave at dawn. That would get them there while the daylight lasted.

Faint streakings of dawn showed across the lake—this last lake of the series, wherein M'sieu had fished to his heart's content. Damase had seen to that. Damase was a good guide, and it was his pride that the secrets of the lakes were his. Who went with Damase, came back contented. Listen to M'sieu right now! Down by the water's edge he was, small pocket mirror tied up to a sapling, *shaving*—as if such things mattered in the wilds. And singing as he shaved, or in snatches between the deft strokes of the funny little “contraption” he called his safety razor! One could not see him for the rising mist, but one knew what he was at, and his voice awakened echoes on the lonely lake.

“Just a song at twilight,  
When the lights are low—”

Damase's lips curved a little, but there was a tremble in them, for after all he had scarcely come to man's estate. A man in the wilderness, in his knowledge of the wilds, but a boy in his emotions. Enough English at his command to speak quite well, and more than enough to understand that this was no song for the morning.

Twilight!

“Breakfast, M'sieu!” he called sullenly.

“Coming, Damase!”

M'sieu came presently out of the mist, feeling his chin with satisfaction. Blonde and pinkish and smooth, was M'sieu. And Damase with the bristle of days covering a leathery face. Tall and athletic and graceful was M'sieu. To see him stripped for a swim was to look upon creation at its best. When he swam, the waters seemed to open before him. Let him look well to his swimming! *He would need it!* Damase was insignificant beside him, and little of a swimmer for a man of the woods and wilds. Good enough in ordinary waters, but not there, not there! Well, no need of that. A deftness of the hands would do. No, no, please the good God—not that!

*Stop him, God, stop him humming this song of his!* Yvette had liked to hear it. Yvette had raptly watched the face of M'sieu as he sang it for her—an old, old song he had told her, that they sang back in the towns and cities when folk grew—sentimental! M'sieu should have a song for the morning; when he sang of twilight at dawn, then, of course, it was of Yvette he was thinking.



**“The utter stillness of dawn was upon them, but in the ears of Damase was a curious roaring like the sound of many waters. . . .”**

“Better hurry, eh, Damase, if we are to get there with the daylight? You say if we once get through the rapids we can do the rest in the dusk?”

“Yes, M’sieu!”

“Good. I have a fancy, Damase, much as I like your wilds, to sleep tonight under the roof of mine host, Duhamel. And there is Yvette to consider, eh, Damase; we must get back to see our Yvette!”

Damase bent over the sizzling pan of bacon. He set a tin plate before M'sieu; though without appetite, he took one himself. The utter stillness of dawn was upon them, but in the ears of Damase was a curious roaring, like the sound of many waters. . . .

## II.

The last lake of all; then the river—winding, varied—depths and shallows—smooth flowings and white water—after that—home!

M'sieu in the bow, the muscles under his sweater barely suggested. Damase in the stern, paddling with the precision and ease of an expert remembering a full day ahead. It pleased him to think that M'sieu, for all his energy, would tire, would tire before evening. Wraiths of mist swirled about them. M'sieu trailed a hand overside.

“How warm the water is, Damase!”

It would be cold where it flowed whitely! So cold it would cramp a swimmer quickly!

The wraiths of mist danced away; waved aside by the finger of the sun, poking its way through the cloudy east. The sun shone brightly. M'sieu discarded his sweater, and bent to his paddle. The muscles leaped and played in suppleness under the light singlet, and where the skin showed bare and bronze. Aye, but they would tire—they would tire by evening! Not too much haste, Damase, take *your* time, conserve your strength! The hills lifted themselves now from the shores of the lake, and were mirrored in its still depths. Damase's hills—he felt them to be so. As quite a child he had come and seen them—alone—and known them to be his, God's gift to him, uplifting, strengthening in some way he knew not of, speaking to him. Later he had known. There had come a man seeking a guide—a man quite different. He like others had lodged with Joseph Duhamel, and Duhamel, who knew of towns and churches, and such like, had wrinkled his brow and shaken his head at his own liberality of thought, but said, with a confirmatory oath, “Well, he is not of Mother Church, and doubtless the fires of purgatory will find much dross and heresy in him, but, by Saint Joseph himself, he is a good man!” This man Damase had guided by these ways, and by these hills, and he had shared Damase's reverence, and taught him this, in stumbling English as it was repeated by the lad, stumblingly following the rich full tones from the man himself:

“Unto the hills around do I lift up  
My longing eyes,  
Oh whence for me shall my salvation come,  
From whence arise?”



Nor had it needed explanation to Damase that not in the hills was the strength but in Him who made them.



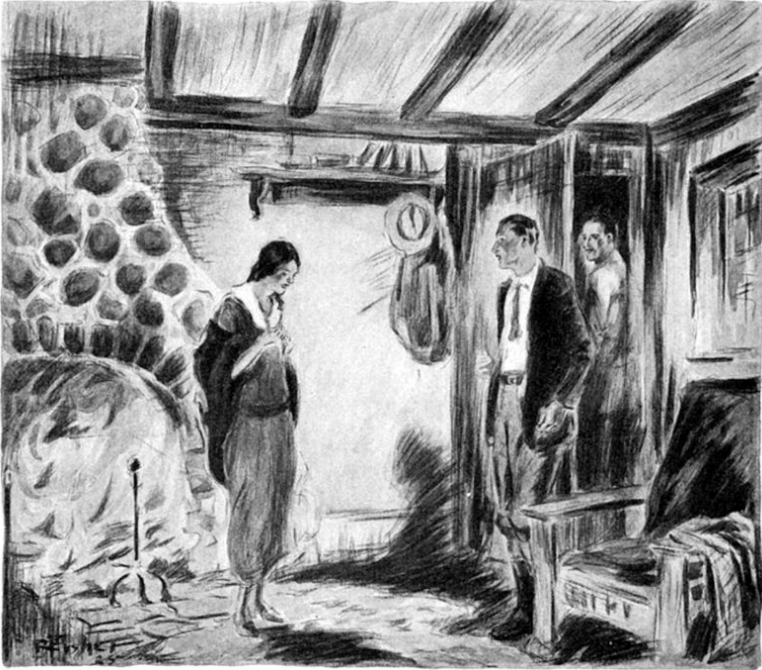
**“Damase! Damase! A ledge of rock was ahead. Whew! That was close!”**

Even today the sweep of them, green where the sun lay full upon them, blue where the shadow was, caught at his heart, and made his eyes fill with boyish tears. And Damase lifted his head, and was strong. . . .

Then a breeze came up, ruffling the water, setting it sparkling. Sparkling blue water—Yvette’s eyes, Yvette’s eyes! And M’sieu ahead called out that there were rocks; so Damase knew that in thinking of the hills he had almost forgotten the river that was ahead, and its shallows. . . .

### III.

Down stream now with the current. Swift, rushing water, and jagged rocks like the teeth of a grinning, malicious giant, but never a scratch to the canoe, for Damase was deft, and proud that even M'sieu must marvel at his skillfulness. Ah, if only Yvette were here to see! That she might know there were other things than smooth blonde faces, and big frames and a trick to the wearing of clothes, and the singing of sentimental songs!



**“Good Lord, if you don’t believe me, look at the girl yourself!”**

Down stream with the current! Smooth flowing reaches beyond the white water, now shallow, so that M'sieu's unskillful blade scraped on the sandy bottom, stirring the grains like gold and startling the minnows into darting frenzy; now deep and placid, and, underneath the overhanging branches here and there, tender, liquid pools, like Yvette's eyes when something softened them.

Down stream with the current! Broad marshy flats, where rushes grew, and at times the canoe bottom skimmed with a gentle, pleasing swish over

green bending grasses, and tadpoles scuttled to safety, and lazy frogs were startled to activity, leaving their slumbers on broad-leaved rafts to “plop” into the water.

The heat here was intense. Presently the rushes grew more rankly, and the marsh became a maze of a dozen water routes. Damase knew them all, aye, trust him for that! One could not see ahead, what with the twists and turns, the island of green, the hot placid reaches of blue, faded blue, no longer clear and sparkling. The hot haze of noon lay over the baking marshland.

M’sieu was wet with perspiration. He stopped every now and again to wipe his brow, and rest his paddle.

“M’sieu is not tired already!”

Sly Damase! His voice held just the right inflection. The man in the bow returned to work. His muscles no longer leaped beneath the bronzed skin of the shoulders; they laboured.

“Are we not taking a long time to get through the marsh? I don’t remember it being this long coming.”

“Perhaps the heat makes it seem longer, M’sieu!”

But Damase was not hot. Or if he was he did not notice it. There was a chill at his heart that even the fever in his veins could not overcome. For Damase knew these ways, and had chosen a long route, winding, twisting, wasting time. Even now they would scarcely be there till twilight.

“Hullo! Hullo! Where’re you taking us, Damase?”

Almost aground on an island of rushes! What happened? The deft Damase at fault in his steering? Well, who should steer aright when suddenly the sunlight is darkened into twilight, and the roaring in one’s ears is like the sound of many waters, and one sees beyond the white waters the placid marshy sweep again—like this, but greater—where a body might long lie, undiscovered, floating whitely among the rushes with its sightless eyes and white face upturned in the moonlight?

No, no, he did not really mean it! He was playing with the idea like he would play a mighty fish, was Damase, and he would not let his line be run away with. There is a thrill to the sport, and in the end he will win. He will win! For M’sieu has been very quiet, and that is well.

## IV.

They were through the marsh now; and into flowing water, where trees overhung, and rocky grottoes invited. Here they had lunch, M'sieu first stripping and plunging in the cool depths of a pool near a small waterfall. Damase, making ready the meal, paused often to watch. The man clambered up the rocky side of the little fall, poised himself in naked grace upon the topmost jutting, raised his hands like a lesser god invoking some superior deity, and plunged downward, a flying white arrow piercing the green heart of the deep pool in which the falling water lost itself.

And Damase remembered, with a sudden sense of inevitable fate. . . .

So, one day, by a thousandth chance, in a ramble through an unfrequented waterway near his own home, he had come upon *a goddess* such as this. He had known, of course, that the old house, relic of still earlier pioneers, was once more occupied by the family of Duhamel. As yet he had met none of them. Intuitively he knew this one to be Yvette. Of her beauty he had heard rumour—and laughed as a boy will at his age, for they had told him: “She will be for you, Damase. You are the only eligible of about her age!”

Transfixed he had stared through a screen of bushes and interlacing trees, upon the secluded pool, and upon a white apparition suddenly appearing on a height above, poising with incredible daintiness, and plunging cleanly into the depths. Then, confused and overcome, he had fled away. If he had never pressed his suit in words since, it was memory of that day that halted him. Slim goddess of the summer pool!—who was he, ungainly Damase, to mate with her? And now he knew he was right. Here was her mate! As parts of a picture so they fitted. This was the thing that he had always known, and feared would happen!

Damase's eyes filled with boyish tears again; but there was renunciation in them. He hurried the meal. He told himself now he had won! For Yvette's sake, M'sieu should return. Her love was great enough to kill this evil thing in his heart.

They ate, companionably enough. M'sieu chided him on his lack of appetite. They lay stretched out upon a mossy, shaded bank, the voice of the waterfall in their ears pleasantly. M'sieu's pipe was fragrant.

“Well, Damase, when shall we push on? All aboard for home—and Yvette, eh?”

Damase started; controlled himself.

“Come, now Damase,”—M’sieu nudged him gently,—“confess that you, too, worship at this shrine! . . . Well, if not you’re slow. Someday, Damase, the outside world will take her back.” M’sieu lay back on his arms, and mused. Then he sat up, and took his pipe from his mouth, and said, very seriously: “What think you, Damase? Would Yvette take it kindly if I asked her to return with me? You know her well enough to answer that!”

M’sieu’s face was very grave.

Oh, the good God, why would He not stop M’sieu from speaking? Where was renunciation now? In the face of this actuality gone—gone!

“She is hardly—your kind, M’sieu!” he stammered. Ah, but Damase didn’t believe that! This was the inevitable thing! This was the mate that should come, a god for this goddess.

“I think,” said M’sieu musingly, “I think the city would suit her well, and ribbons and clothes and all the fol-de-rols. I think, Damase, it would be well for me to take her!”

Oh, the good God, why did he let M’sieu speak so—with such insolent assurance, as if he had but to speak after all and she would go? Aye, so she would. Damase remembered her eyes as she gazed at M’sieu when he sang. She would go. And he, Damase—

“Come,” he said shortly, rising. “We will get nowhere if we do not make a start!”

## V.

Down stream with the current again. And now it was Damase whose muscles worked swiftly and surely under his leathery skin, as if by prowess of the paddle, he could outstrip the bitter tempter lodged in his heart. Ah, but if only he could outstrip the falling dusk! For who would believe that by daylight the deft Damase could fail to bring his craft and passenger safe through the white and treacherous waters of the Rapides du Nord? But after dusk . . . Well, it was said that after dusk none could assay the passage safely . . . and there were ways of doing the evil thing, and a greater marsh beyond, where a body might lie long, undiscovered, floating whitely among the rushes, with its sightless eyes and white face upturned to the sun by day and the moon by night!

For a time, renewed by the swim and the food and the resting, M'sieu, too, paddled with renewed energy, his muscles supple again, but they began to labour as the rim of the world moved up against the sun.

And now a wind set in against them, so that the friendly current no longer counted as it should. A warm wind it was, like the breath of an eastern furnace, for they had the west behind them now, where the sun and the horizon hurried to their meeting. This wind was a fire of hell to Damase, whose simple mind conceived, indeed, a devil literally in it, a malicious, grinning devil, who though he said not aloud: "Keep back! Go slow! You must not reach the white water till the tempting, covering darkness comes!" breathed out his baleful message with the hot breath of his nostrils.

When the boy, panic-stricken at the creeping fire in his veins, cried out: "M'sieu, it is suffocating! Let us make the last bit to-morrow!", the man in the bow turned around to say: "No, no, Damase, it will be cooler presently with evening. The sun's getting low already. And you forget Yvette, Damase. You forget Yvette!"

Oh, the good God, why did he not stop this man's provoking tongue?

The sun lay level now across the waters and the flat lands, timbered with low scrub, stunted in the rocky soil. Ahead lay rising ground again, at sight of which Damase caught a painful breath, not without its intoxicating thrill. He glanced back at the sun, and forward again. Yonder lay the canyon-like

Rapides du Nord. Impossible to reach them before dusk. And after dusk one should not risk the passage.

But he—he knew just how the thing, his thing, could be done. No, no, please the good God, not that! But God seemed far away, and the hot breath from the east was from the nostrils of the evil one. The current swept them on, for it grew swifter here. And suddenly Damase realized that the wind from the east had ceased, that they were making their own slight breeze; indeed, that now it had turned and blew fitfully, but with refreshing coolness, from the west.

“That’s better,” called M’sieu, cheerfully, “now we shall get home comfortably!”

Swift, swift the water now, and no wind to oppose. Any relief Damase had felt died quickly. If the hot baffling breath was not ahead, delaying them till dusk had come; now there was a power behind, invincible, inevitable, driving them on. Down with the current! Their paddles seemed to count for little, the stream had its way with them.

Oh, but the evil one was not in the wind now; he was in the water, smooth, gliding water, impelling them forward! Damase saw that. The devil was not in the wind or the waters but in his heart. For he had no desire to land and make camp. The canyon-like place yawned ahead; he could catch the first glimpse of the white manes of the waters tossing in the dusk.

For love of Yvette, Damase! This man was made for her. What love is this that would not sacrifice and take him back?

“M’sieu!” His voice was faint. He spoke again. “M’sieu! It is dangerous to risk it after dark. We had better camp here. It is our last chance to stop. Round the next point there is no stopping!”

“I am not afraid, Damase!”

“But yes, M’sieu! I cannot promise to guide you safely!”

“Are you afraid?”

“Not for myself!”

“It is possible to make it?”

“Possible!”

“A good chance?”

“With any luck.”

“Then let us go ahead.”

“But if anything happens to M’sieu—”

“Tell them I took the risk myself!”

So he could! So he would! And speak the truth about it to—salve his conscience a bit.

Then Damase knew the devil would have his way with him. And the fierce joy of surrender to a greater power flooded him with murderous lust.



## VI.

They passed the point. No sign of turmoil or of danger here. On either side the mountains rose up sheer, upon high rocky bases, between which the flood was caught into a solid mass of water. Only when one forgot the mountains and looked at the shore line, did the thing grip the heart with awe. The waters were held in, but not *tamed*. The leash would soon be slipped; then watch them leap forward to snarl at the rocky ledges that still stood in their way to freedom!

Between these walls the dusk lay close, and the silence was intense. The sound of the waters below was an overtone that had nothing to do with this silence. This silence was of the evening hour; the peace of nature that stilled the songs of birds on the mountain slopes above; the peace of eternity that throbbed beyond the sunset hour; the peace of the hills that towered above.

The hills! The waters were hushed in their presence. The waters were restrained. They hurried by silently, as if their devilish raging was reproached by the tranquil hills. They bore with them to the white waters, two men in a frail craft.

Damase called in a strained voice: "Leave it to me now, M'sieu!"

The quarrel was on; the issue joined—water and rocks, raging, foaming, roaring.

Damase sat there in the stern, coolly enough. Coolly, because for the moment his mind was all on his work; and his heart sang with the joy of conquest over natural forces. His pulse leaped then. If only Yvette could see him now! Yvette! Yvette!

M'sieu in the bow there, brave as a god, too, facing homewards to her!

There was the ledge beyond, the ledge he had in fancy seen all day, and the jutting tree—quite shallow from there to land, scarcely a wetting to make it! A clever twist and the thing would be done . . . himself clinging securely to the tree, the canoe and the man swept to swift destruction. An accident, for which M'sieu took the risk. He would tell them that, and it was truth. Easy! Easy!

No one to see it. No witnesses but the hills!

Like flashing spears the words pierced his mind.

“Unto the hills around do I lift up  
My longing eyes,  
Oh, whence for me shall my salvation come,  
From whence arise?”

Ah, the hills, Damase—what help in them now? They will look on in silent witness, and see this evil done, and never tell. They will look on, their tranquillity undisturbed, and in the morning, while a white-faced corpse lies in the rushes of the marshland below, well hidden, they will be full of the singing of birds.

Oh, the good God, Damase is lost in the dark flood of his jealous lust! No strength of will is in him. He can lift his heart in a last fight with evil, but not his eyes, for they are busy with the waters and the approaching ledge. . . .

What was that red light in the waters, thrusting aside the darkness? Red as blood! Red as jealous lust!

Damase shivered, but his eyes instinctively looked up. Caught on an overshadowing peak, where the barren granite stood boldly up, was an amazing glow. The setting sun, looking up through a notch in the rim of the world, bathed this hill-top in celestial light. Dimly he was aware that the dancing foam was all about him, jewelled in the ruby glow.

Fascinated, he stared at the beauty of the hills.

“Damase! Damase! A ledge of rock ahead. Whew! that was close!”

They were past! Past while the radiance still dazzled him! Damase stared, white-faced, at the retreating ledge. Then he settled down to the task ahead.

“Yes, M’sieu,” he said, lips trembling, “it was close! But the worst danger is now over!”

## VII.

M'sieu was laughing to the group in the Duhamel home. Quite boldly, before them all, he told of the exploit of Damase. And Damase, overcome, did not raise his eyes to see the rapt face of Yvette who watched M'sieu breathlessly as he told the tale.

“I had no idea it was such a business!” laughed M'sieu. “Well, mam'selle, I brought him through dangerous waters, but I promised I'd bring him safely home, Yvette, didn't I?”

Yvette was rosy red. As for Damase, he stood like a numbskull though M'sieu, it seems, motioned the others away, and left the stage clear for the thing.

M'sieu took Damase by the shoulder, almost hissing at him: “You poor fool, speak up now, or I *will* run off with her! I've done my best to bring you to the point all day, because I saw how things were. Good lord, if you don't believe me, look at the girl yourself!”

Then Damase looked up; whereat M'sieu nodded his satisfaction and went out to light his pipe. And Damase saw the eyes of Yvette, that they were like the tender pools of the river, and as inviting; and saw her face, that it was as rosy as the hill-top kissed by the belated sun.

## THE END

## TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *Barcarolle* by Leslie Gordon Barnard]