

The Wreck

By Guy de Maupassant

It was yesterday, the 31st of December.

I had just finished breakfast with my old friend Georges Garin when the servant brought him in a letter covered with seals and foreign stamps.

Georges said:

“Will you excuse me?”

“Certainly.”

And so he began to read eight pages in a large English handwriting, crossed in every direction. He read them slowly, with serious attention and the interest which we only pay to things which touch our hearts.

Then he put the letter on a corner of the mantle-piece, and he said:

“That was a curious story! I’ve never told you about it, I think. And yet it was a sentimental adventure, and it happened to me. Aha! That was a strange New-year’s Day indeed! It must be twenty years ago, since I was then thirty, and am now fifty years old.

“I was then an inspector in the Maritime Insurance Company, of which I am now director. I had arranged to pass the fête of New-year’s in Paris—since it is a convention to make that day a fête—when I received a letter from the manager, directing me to proceed at once to the island of Re, where a three-masted vessel from Saint-Nazaire, insured by us, had just gone ashore. It was then eight o’clock in the morning. I arrived at the office at ten, to get my instructions and the same evening I took the express, which put me down in La Rochelle the next day, December 31st.

“I had two hours to spare before going aboard the boat for Ré. So I made a tour in the town. It is certainly a fantastic city, La Rochelle, with a strong character of its own—streets tangled like a labyrinth, sidewalks running under endless arcaded galleries like those of the Rue de Rivoli, but low, mysterious, built as if to form a fit scene for conspirators, and making an ancient and striking background for those old-time wars, the savage heroic wars of religion. It is indeed the typical old Huguenot city, grave, discreet, with no fine art to show, with no wonderful monuments, such as make Rouen so grand; but it is remarkable for its severe, somewhat cunning look; it is a city of obstinate fighters, a city where fanaticisms might well blossom, where the faith of the Calvinists became exalted, and where the plot of the ‘Four Sergeants’ was born.

“After I had wandered for some time about these curious streets, I went aboard the black, fat-bellied little steamboat which was to take me to the island of Ré. It was called the *Jean Guiton*. It started with angry puffings, passed between the two old towers which guard the harbor, crossed the roadstead, and issued from the mole built by Richelieu, the great stones of which are visible at the water’s edge, enclosing the town like an immense necklace. Then the steamboat turned off to the right.

“It was one of those sad days which oppress and crush the thoughts, tighten the heart, and extinguish in us all energy and force—a gray, icy day, salted by a heavy mist which was as wet as rain, as cold as frost, as bad to breathe as the lye of a washtub.

“Under this low ceiling of sinister fog, the shallow, yellow, sandy sea of all gradually receding coasts lay without a wrinkle, without a movement, without life, a sea of turbid water, of greasy water, of stagnant water. The *Jean Guiton* passed over it, rolling a little from habit, dividing the

smooth, opaque sheet, and leaving behind a few wax-es, a little chopping sea, a few undulations, which were soon calm.

“I began to talk to the captain, a little man almost without feet, as round as his boat and balancing himself like it. I wanted some details about the disaster on which I was to deliver a report. A great square-rigged three-master, the *Marie Joseph*, of Saint-Nazaire, had gone ashore one night in a hurricane on the sands of the island of Ré.

“The owner wrote us that the storm had thrown the ship so far ashore that it was impossible to float her, and that they had had to remove everything which could be detached, with the utmost possible haste. Nevertheless, I was to examine the situation of the wreck, estimate what must have been her condition before the disaster, and decide whether all efforts had been used to get her afloat. I came as an agent of the company in order to bear contradictory testimony, if necessary, at the trial.

“On receipt of my report, the manager would take what measures he judged necessary to protect our interests.

“The captain of the *Jean Guiton* knew all about the affair, having been summoned with his boat to assist in the attempts at salvage.

“He told me the story of the disaster, and very simply too. The *Marie Joseph*, driven by a furious gale, lost her bearings completely in the night, and steering by chance over a heavy foaming sea—‘a milk-soup sea,’ said the captain—had gone ashore on those immense banks of sand which make the coasts of this region seem like limitless Saharas at hours when the tide is low.

“While talking I looked around and ahead. Between the ocean and the lowering sky lay a free space where the eye could see far. We were following a coast. I asked:

“ ‘Is that the island of Ré?’

“ ‘Yes, sir.’

“And suddenly the captain stretched his right hand out before us, pointed to something almost invisible in the middle of the sea, and said:

“ ‘There’s your ship!’

“ ‘The *Marie Joseph*?’

“ ‘Yes.’

“I was stupefied. This black, almost imperceptible speck, which I should have taken for a rock, seemed at least three miles from land.

“I continued:

“ ‘But, captain, there must be a hundred fathoms of water in that place?’

“He began to laugh.

“ ‘A hundred fathoms, my boy! Well, I should say about two!’

“He was from Bordeaux. He continued:

It’s now 9.40, just high tide. Go down along the beach with your hands in your pockets after you’ve had your lunch at the Hotel du Dauphin, and I’ll engage that at ten minutes to three, or three o’clock, you’ll reach the wreck without wetting your feet, and have from an hour and three-quarters to two hours aboard of her; but not more, or you’ll be caught. The farther the sea goes out the faster it comes back. This coast is as flat as a bed-bug! But start away at ten minutes to five, as I tell you, and at half-past seven you will be aboard of the *Jean Guiton* again, which will put you down this same evening on the quay at La Rochelle.’

“I thanked the captain, and I went and sat down in the bow of the steamer to get a good look at the little city of Saint-Martin, which we were now rapidly approaching.

“It was just like all the miniature seaports which serve as the capitals of the barren islands scattered along the coast—a large fishing village, one foot on sea and one on shore, living on fish and wild-fowl, vegetables and shell-fish, radishes and mussels. The island is very low, and little cultivated, yet seems to be filled with people. However, I did not penetrate into the interior.

“After having breakfasted, I climbed across a little promontory, and then, as the tide was rapidly falling, I started out across the sands towards a kind of black rock which I could just perceive above the surface of the water, far out, far down.

“I walked quickly over the yellow plain; it was elastic, like flesh, and seemed to sweat beneath my foot. The sea had been there very lately; now I perceived it at a distance, escaping out of sight, and I no longer distinguished the line which separated the sands from ocean. I felt as though I were assisting at a gigantic supernatural work of enchantment. The Atlantic had just now been before me, then it had disappeared into the strand, just as does scenery through a trap; and I now walked in the midst of a desert. Only the feeling, the breath of the salt-water, remained in me. I perceived the smell of the wrack, the smell of the wide sea, the rough good smell of sea-coasts. I walked fast; I was no longer cold; I looked at the stranded wreck, which grew in size as I approached, and came now to resemble an enormous shipwrecked whale.

“It seemed fairly to rise out of the ground, and on that great, flat, yellow stretch of sand assumed surprising proportions. After an hour’s walk I reached it at last. Bulging out and crushed, it lay upon its side, which, like the flanks of an animal, displayed its broken bones, its bones of tarry wood pierced with enormous bolts. The sand had already invaded it, entered it by all the crannies, and held it, possessed it, refused to let it go. It seemed to have taken root in it. The bow had entered deep into this soft, treacherous beach; while the stern, high in air, seemed to cast at heaven, like a cry of despairing appeal, the two white words on the black planking, *Marie Joseph*.

“I scaled this carcass of a ship by the lowest side; then, having reached the deck, I went below. The daylight, which entered by the stove-in hatches and the cracks in the sides, showed sadly enough a species of long sombre cellar full of demolished wood-work. There was nothing here but the sand, which served as foot-soil in this cavern of planks.

“I began to take some notes about the condition of the ship. I was seated on a broken empty cask, writing by the light of a great crack, through which I could perceive the boundless stretch of the strand. A strange shivering of cold and loneliness ran over my skin from time to time; and I would often stop writing for a moment to listen to the vague mysterious noises in the wreck: the noise of the crabs scratching the planking with their hooked claws; the noise of a thousand little creatures of the sea already installed on this dead body; the noise, so gentle and regular, of the worms, who, with their gimlet-like, grinding sound, gnaw ceaselessly at the old timber, which they hollow out and devour.

“And, suddenly, very near me, I heard human voices; I started as though I had seen a ghost. For a second I really thought I was about to see two drowned men rise from the sinister depths of the hold, who would tell me about their death. At any rate, it did not take me long to swing myself on deck with all the strength I had in my wrists. There, below the bow, I found standing a tall gentleman with three young girls, or rather a tall Englishman with three young misses. Certainly, they were a good deal more frightened at seeing this sudden apparition on the abandoned three-master than I had been at seeing them. The youngest girl turned round and ran; the two others caught their father by the arms; as for him, he opened his mouth—that was sole sign of his emotion which he showed.

“Then, after several seconds, he spoke:

‘Aw, *môsieu*, are you the owner of this ship?’

“ ‘I am.’

“ ‘May I go over it?’

“ ‘You may.’

“Then he uttered a long sentence in English, in which I only distinguished the word ‘gracious,’ repeated several times.

“As he was looking for a place to climb up, I showed him the best, and lent him a hand. He ascended. Then we helped up the three little girls, who were now quite reassured. They were charming, especially the oldest, a blonde of eighteen, fresh as a flower, and so dainty, so pretty! Ah yes! the pretty Englishwomen have indeed the look of tender fruits of the sea. One would have said of this one that she had just risen from the sands and that her hair had kept their tint. They all, with their exquisite freshness, make you think of the delicate colors of pink sea-shells, and of shining pearls rare and mysterious, hidden in the unknown deeps of ocean.

“She spoke French a little better than her father, and she acted as interpreter. I must tell all about the shipwreck, to the very least details, and I romanced as though I had been present at the catastrophe. Then the whole family descended into the interior of the wreck. As soon as they had penetrated into this sombre, dim-lit gallery, they uttered cries of astonishment and admiration. And suddenly the father and his three daughters were holding sketch-books in their hands, which they had doubtless carried hidden somewhere in their heavy weather-proof clothes, and were all beginning at once to make pencil sketches of this melancholy and fantastic place.

“They had seated themselves side by side on a projecting beam, and the four sketch-books on the eight knees were being rapidly covered with little black lines which were intended to represent the half-opened stomach of the *Marie Joseph*.

“I continued to inspect the skeleton of the ship, and the oldest girl talked to me while she worked.

“I learned that they were spending the winter at Biarritz, and that they had come to the island of Ré expressly to see the stranded three-master. They had none of the usual English arrogance; they were simple honest hearts of that class of constant wanderers with which England covers the globe. The father was long and thin, with a red face framed in white whiskers, and looking like a living sandwich, a slice of ham cut in the shape of a head, placed between two wedges of hair. The daughters, like little wading-birds in embryo, had long legs and were also thin—except the oldest. All three were pretty, especially the tallest.

“She had such a droll way of speaking, of talking, of laughing, of understanding and of not understanding, of raising her eyes to ask a question (eyes blue as deep water), of stopping her drawing a moment to make a guess at what you meant, of returning once more to work, of saying ‘yes’ or ‘no’—that I could have listened and looked indefinitely.

“Suddenly she murmured:

“ ‘I hear a little movement on this boat.’

“I lent an ear; and I immediately distinguished a low, steady, curious sound. What was it? I rose and looked out of the crack, and I uttered a violent cry. The sea had come back; it was about to surround us!

“We were on deck in an instant. It was too late. The water circled us about, and was running towards the coast with prodigious swiftness. No, it did not run, it slipped, it crawled, it grew longer, like a kind of great limitless blot. The water on the sands was barely a few centimetres deep; but the rising flood had gone so far that we no longer saw the flying line of its edge.

“The Englishman wanted to jump. I held him back. Flight was impossible because of the deep places which we had been obliged to go round on our way out, and into which we should certainly fall on our return.

“There was a minute of horrible anguish in our hearts. Then the little English girl began to smile, and murmured:

“ ‘So we too are shipwrecked.’

“I tried to laugh; but fear caught me tight, a fear which was cowardly and horrid and base and mean, like the tide. All the dangers which we ran appeared to me at once. I wanted to shriek ‘Help!’ But to whom?

“The two younger girls were cowering against their father, who regarded, with a look of consternation, the measureless sea which hedged us round about.

“And the night fell as swiftly as the ocean rose—a lowering, wet, icy night.

“I said:

“ ‘There’s nothing to do but to stay on the ship.’

“The Englishman answered:

“ ‘Oh yes!’

“And we waited there a quarter of an hour, half an hour, indeed I don’t know how long, watching that yellow water which grew deep about us, whirled round and round, and seemed to bubble, and seemed to sport over the reconquest of the vast sea-strand.

“One of the little girls was cold, and we suddenly thought of going below to shelter ourselves from the light but freezing wind which blew upon us and pricked our skins.

“I leaned over the hatchway. The ship was full of water. So we must cower against the stern planking, which shielded us a little.

“The shades were now inwrapping us, and we remained pressed close to one another, surrounded by the darkness and by the sea. I felt trembling against my shoulder the shoulder of the little English girl, whose teeth chattered from time to time. But I also felt the gentle warmth of her body through her ulster, and that warmth was as delicious to me as a kiss. We no longer spoke; we sat motionless, mute, cowering down like animals in a ditch when a hurricane is raging. And, nevertheless, despite the night, despite the terrible and increasing danger, I began to feel happy that I was there, to be glad of the cold and the peril, to rejoice in the long hours of darkness and anguish which I must pass on this plank so near this dainty and pretty little girl.

“I asked myself, ‘Why this strange sensation of well-being and of joy?’

“Why! Does one know? Because she was there? Who? She, a little unknown English girl? I did not love her, I did not even know her. And for all that I was touched and conquered. I should have liked to save her, to sacrifice myself for her, to commit a thousand follies! Strange thing! How does it happen that the presence of a woman overwhelms us so? Is it the power of her grace, which infolds us? Is it the seduction in her beauty and youth, which intoxicates us like wine?

“Is it not rather, as it were, the touch of Love, of Love the Mysterious, who seeks constantly to unite two beings, who tries his strength the instant he has put a man and a woman face to face, and who suffuses them with a confused, secret, profound emotion just as you water the earth to make the flowers spring?

“But the silence of the shades and of the sky became dreadful, because we could thus hear vaguely about us an infinite low roar, the dull rumor of the rising sea, and the monotonous dashing of the current against the ship.

“Suddenly I heard the sound of sobs. The youngest of the little girls was crying. Then her father tried to console her, and they began to talk in their own tongue, which I did not understand. I guessed that he was reassuring her, and that she was still afraid.

“I asked my neighbor:

“ ‘You are not too cold, are you, miss?’

“ ‘Oh yes. I am very cold.’

“I wanted to give her my cloak; she refused it. But I had taken it off, and I covered her with it against her will. In the short struggle her hand touched mine. It made a charming shiver run over my body.

“For some minutes the air had been growing brisker, the dashing of the water stronger against the flanks of the ship. I raised myself; a great gust blew in my face. The wind was rising!

“The Englishman perceived this at the same time that I did, and said, simply:

“ ‘That is bad for us, this—’

“Of course it was bad, it was certain death if any breakers, however feeble, should attack and shake the wreck, which was already so loose and broken that the first big sea would carry it off in a jelly.

“So our anguish increased from second to second as the squalls grew stronger and stronger. Now the sea broke a little, and I saw in the darkness white lines appearing and disappearing, which were lines of foam; while each wave struck the *Marie Joseph*, and shook her with a short quiver which rose to our hearts.

“The English girl was trembling; I felt her shiver against me. And I had a wild desire to take her in my arms.

“Down there before and behind us, to left and right, light-houses were shining along the shore—light-houses white and yellow and red, revolving like the enormous eyes of giants who were staring at us, watching us, waiting eagerly for us to disappear. One of them in especial irritated me. It went out every thirty seconds and it lit up again as soon. It was indeed an eye, that one, with its lid ceaselessly lowered over its fiery look.

“From time to time the Englishman struck a match to see the hour; then he put his watch back in his pocket. Suddenly he said to me, over the heads of his daughters, with a gravity which was supreme:

“ ‘I wish you a Happy New Year, *mô sieu*.’

“It was midnight. I held out my hand, which he pressed. Then he said something in English, and suddenly he and his daughters began to sing ‘God save the Queen,’ which rose through the black and silent air and vanished into space.

“At first I felt a desire to laugh; then I was seized by a strong, fantastic emotion.

“ It was something sinister and superb, this chant of the shipwrecked, the condemned, something like a prayer, and also like something grander, something comparable to the ancient sublime ‘*Ave Cæsar morituri te salutamus*.’

“When they had finished I asked my neighbor to sing a ballad alone, a legend, anything she liked, to make us forget our terrors. She consented, and immediately her clear young voice flew off into the night. She sang something which was doubtless sad, because the notes were long drawn out, issued slowly from her mouth, and hovered, like wounded birds, above the waves.

“The sea was rising now and beating upon our wreck. As for me, I thought only of that voice. And I thought also of the sirens. If a ship had passed near by us what would the sailors have said? My troubled spirit lost itself in the dream! A siren! Was she not really a siren, this daughter

of the sea, who had kept me on this worm-eaten ship, and who was soon about to go down with me deep into the waters?

“But suddenly we were all five rolling on the deck, because the *Marie Joseph* had sunk on her right side. The English girl had fallen across me, and before I knew what I was doing, thinking that my last moment was come, I had caught her in my arms and kissed her cheek, her temple, and her hair.

“The ship did not move again, and we, we also, remained motionless.

“The father said, ‘Kate!’ The one whom I was holding answered, ‘Yes,’ and made a movement to free herself. And at that moment I should have wished the ship to split in two and let me fall with her into the sea.

“The Englishman continued:

“ ‘A little rocking; it’s nothing. I have my three daughters safe.’

“Not having seen the oldest, he had thought she was lost overboard!

“I rose slowly, and suddenly I made out a light on the sea quite near us. I shouted; they answered. It was a boat sent out in search of us by the hotel-keeper, who had guessed at our imprudence.

“We were saved. I was in despair. They picked us up off our raft, and they brought us back to Saint-Martin.

“The Englishman was now rubbing his hands and murmuring:

“ ‘A good supper! A good supper!’

“We did sup. I was not gay. I regretted the *Marie Joseph*.

“We had to separate, the next day, after much handshaking and many promises to write. They departed for Biarritz. I was not far from following them.

“I was hard hit; I wanted to ask this little girl in marriage. If we had passed eight days together, I should have done so! How weak and incomprehensible a man sometimes is!

“Two years passed without my hearing a word from them. Then I received a letter from New York. She was married, and wrote to tell me. And since then we write to each other every year, on New Year’s Day. She tells me about her life, talks of her children, her sisters, never of her husband! Why? Ah! why? . . . And as for me, I only talk of the *Marie Joseph*. That was perhaps the only woman I have ever loved. No—that I ever should have loved. . . . Ah, well! who can tell? Facts master you. . . . And then—and then—all passes. . . . She must be old now; I should not know her. . . . Ah! she of the by-gone time, she of the wreck! What a creature! Divine! She writes me her hair is white. . . . That caused me terrible pain. Ah! her yellow hair. . . . No, *my* English girl exists no longer. . . . They are sad, such things as that!