

Pierre Billaume and Pierre Hégine: *Journey to the Isles of Atlantis*
(1914)

The centuries led then to the inevitable day, the disastrous night, when, in an earthquake, amid floods, all our warriors were dragged into the abyss, and the isle of Atlantis was covered again forever by the waves... That, Socrates, is the story that old Critias heard Solon tell.

Plato, *Timaeus*.

Part One

I. The Tempest

“Captain,” I cried, “are we doomed?”

“Go to the devil!” replied the mariner, coldly.

“Alas,” I said, “we’re going.”

The ocean swelled and seethed, seemingly wanting to mingle with the sky, to renew the ancient confusion of chaos. To the obscurity of the night was added the opacity of the atmosphere charged with compact mists. The heaviness of the air scarcely permitted respiration. When the wind chased away the fog, flashes of lightning showed my bewildered eyes livid clouds like immense rocks suspended above the waves.

Our wretched ship was spinning in the eddies. It descended into the hollows of colossal waves, and then, lifted in to their crests, seemed to quit the sea momentarily. It creaked and groaned beneath the thunderous breakers. The squall whinnied horribly in the rigging. Surges of sea-water swept the entire deck. Sometimes the bow plunged into the water, sometimes the stern. Then the vessel almost lay on its side. I heard the howls of those close by who disappeared. The mariners ran around; the captain shouted into his loud-hailer; and the rest of us, desperate travelers, hung on to ropes with both hands, to the rails, and to all the asperities of the deck.

It was the third and most terrible night of the tempest, the mighty breath of which had been driving us for sixty hours. Until that moment I had conserved hope, but it finally appeared to me that black destiny was about to be accomplished and that we were going to sink.

Stoical people, it is said, support such proofs proudly. They gaze with a cold eye at the horrible death that besieges them and scorn the elements that are engulfing them as they perish. Resigned men, whose soul remains serene in the midst of calamities, I am not one of you and I have never been able to remain fearless in such circumstances.

Alas, I said, weeping, I have merited this great misfortune. Why did I abandon firm ground? At this moment I could be sleeping in a dry bed and having sweet dreams after an agreeable meal. What obliged me to venture on to these fragile planks? My debts, only my debts! The most insufficient of all pretexts! A fine motive to go and drown in a savage sea! I must be stupid! And you, my creditors, by whose fault I am perishing, all my blood is on your miserly heads. Did you desire my death? At any rate, you’ll have caused it. I’d still be at home if you hadn’t harassed me so much. Your debtor is going to die, and your debts with him.

I was lamenting thus when the main mast collapsed, with the noise that poplars make when uprooted by a tempest. As it fell, it broke a part of the planking to which several men were clinging. Some fell into

the sea, and the least crippled dragged themselves, moaning, under the tangled ropes and the debris of yardarms. The ship lurched.

“Use the axes!” cried the captain. “Clear the deck!”

In a matter of seconds, the mariners finished severing the cables that retained the mast and shoving it overboard. The vessel straightened again.

Lying face down in the middle of the deck, I clung with all my might to a small capstan whose situation and solidity seemed favorable. I was resuming the course of my interior laments when I perceived a wounded mariner who was crawling toward me slowly.

He made one last effort, and succeeded in reaching my capstan, which he seized in such a way that we were face to face, our arms intersecting.

“I have a broken leg,” he said, calmly. “It’s the work of that villain of a mast that has just fallen. I’ll stay here now. We won’t come back from this.”

“Do you think so?” I said, fearfully. My eyes saw the victory of the tempest and my reason believed in the final disaster, but my heart conserved an insensate hope.

“I’m sure of it,” the sailor replied. “Before the day’s end, we’ll be sailing underwater.”

My fate appeared to me to be more frightful than I could say. I’m astonished now by my terror then, and reproach myself for my cowardice in that situation. Thanatos is not a cheerful divinity, but one owes it to him to put on a brave face, as to a patient creditor. The fear that one conceives of him doesn’t help to escape him, and only aggravates the horror of him. Why, in danger, do we forget such accurate maxims?

“Where are we?” I said.

“I have no idea, Monsieur. Not on our route, at any rate. We don’t have the Antilles before us, you can be sure of that. From three days we’ve been running northwards at a crazy speed, and we won’t find any land or ships there.”

It’s cruel, I thought, to die like this at twenty-eight. Those who die in their beds, late in life, surrounded by their friends, of some petty malady don’t know what death is. For them, it’s a gentle, gradual termination of existence, and enviable, by comparison with this long, terrible agony, from which one suffers all the more because one is in good health.

I remembered my flask then, large and marvelously stout, and full of liquid consolation, the delicious soul of good wine known as cognac. When I leave home, I don’t leave it in the house and I don’t forget to fill it up. It cheers me up in ordinary times, comforts me in peril, and this time, like the others, makes my heart the heart of a lion. Holding on to my support with one hand, and the flask in the other, I took four large swigs, and invited my companion to savor the noble elixir.

“The sharks won’t have it,” I said, when the flask was empty.

“Yes, Monsieur,” said the man, “they will.”

On reflection, I was convinced of my error, and the conversation continued, punctuated by gusts of wind and claps of thunder.

A wave as high as a bell-tower loomed up, all white, to starboard; then, with thunderous crash, collapsed over the ship. I pressed the capstan to my heart. For a minute, I remained submerged without letting go. My body floated in the water like a flag in a storm wind. An instant later, I found myself out of the water, but when I opened my eyes, I no longer saw my comrade, the mariner with the broken leg.

The situation was worse. The vessel was no longer bounding lightly from one wave to another. The water had broken the awning and invaded the depths of the hold. The engines were drowned and the rudder had been carried away.

A calm followed, however. The waves and the wind diminished. Rain began to fall, dense and mingled with hail.

It was the end of the tempest. Salvation became possible. Of the ship, nothing remained but the hull, razed but it was unbreached. In good weather, we might remain on the surface, on the wreck, for a long time, and eventually find aid.

Everyone breathed again. The captain went back and forth, shouting: “The hardest part is over. There’s hope.”

In spite of the wind having dropped, the ship, borne by some current, was still advancing rapidly. The deplorable vessel was never as fast when it possessed propellers and a boiler. I was unworried by that at first, thinking that the more headway we made, the more chance there was of encountering a ship or a shore, but our velocity became so precipitate, so frenetic, that a sinister thought seized me: "Where are we going like this?"

From time to time the crew fired rockets. Their lines of flame rose up vertically to a great height and fell back in a curve, to burst into multicolored sparks.

The moon rose over the calmed sea. The ocean appeared to us bright and green-tinted, and the sky half black and half dark blue, speckled with stars.

Suddenly, a great solitary rock loomed up head of us. The water was seething at its base. Tall and narrow, it resembled those raised stones that one finds in Brittany. We were heading straight toward it. We no longer had a tiller and we judged ourselves doomed. Several people uttered loud cries. Women wept and hid their faces. But we left it to starboard and passed ten meters away from it.

And the fantastic navigation continued. The clouds hid the moon and all the stars. The night seemed never-ending.

It was then that a horrible shock ripped the ship, with a muffled detonation. We had run on to reefs. All the timbers creaked, and I sensed them dislocating beneath me. The vessel stopped, described a semicircle, and set off again slowly, like mortally wounded beast still trying to flee.

We were sinking.

A voice dominated the lugubrious clamors: "Launch the lifeboat!"

Everyone ran. I quit my capstan in order to race to the lifeboat; but a further impact threw me on to the deck so brutally that I lost consciousness.

II. Land

When I recovered consciousness, beautiful sunlight was warming me gently.

Motionless, I stared at first at the infinite profundity of the blue sky. I had no consciousness of the place or the situation I was in. I only seemed to be escaping from one of those painful dreams, the memory of which dissipates at the moment of awakening, but the confused horror of which still stirs us momentarily.

On looking down, my eyes perceived the sea and the deck of the ship. The masts, severed at the base, a few battered cadavers forgotten by the waves, and the solitude in which I found myself, represented all the circumstances of the previous night to me.

Surprised to be still alive, and wondering by what means the vessel was still afloat, I got to my feet, painfully. My knees were wounded, and it was that injury, combined with exhaustion, that had made me fall into the weakness from which I was emerging. I leaned over the edge and perceived that the keel was wedged between reefs at water level, some of which, protruding further, were sustaining it in places.

The sea was absolutely calm. There was no wind. Albatrosses with huge sparkling wings were circling and calling, descending in spirals, seizing invisible fish from the waves, which they carried away high into the sky in perpendicular flight.

I discerned a long, thin, cloudy streak limiting the sea on the edge of the horizon, the blue silhouette of a coast, the sight of which rendered me more madly joyful than the Hebrews before Canaan or Xenophon's Greeks perceiving the Black Sea at Trebizond

Then I glimpsed the difficulty of reaching that shore. All the means employed by shipwreck victims whose memoirs I had read returned to mind. I suspect the majority of those honest men of never having been in maritime peril except in the imagination, without leaving home. Their inventions are inapplicable, and, although full of charm and whimsy, they appeared to me at that difficult moment as pure mockery and extravagant lucubration.

Those fellows always assure us that they found on their apprehended wreck an infinite number of objects of dire necessity. This one was furnished with barrels, tools and nails; that one inherited some large sheet of fabric with which he made a sail for his raft. I can only speak from memory of those who

collected various food provisions, not only salted and smoked meat and fish, but also livestock and fat poultry. Were they sailing on Noah's Ark? And what of the one that lived on his hunting, with the aid of a complete artillery that he contrived to discover on his vessel, with a profusion of powder and bullets of every caliber? Those people are joking, I tell you, and their words make me angry.

I went around the deck three times, and only found shards with which the most industrious man would not have been able to do anything. Everyone knows, besides, that mariners at the height of a tempest, throw overboard everything that might weigh down a ship, with the exception of people. One traveler of times past, if the tale is true, profited from such an occasion to send his wife to the fish, attesting to all the gods that no object weighed upon him more.

The ship, therefore, with its denuded deck and its hold in which the waves were splashing, did not offer me any resource. There was only rope aplenty, with which I might have been able to lash the planks of the vessel together to form a raft. I tried for some time to detach a few of them. My fingernails were bloody and my fingers bristling with splinters, but I did not get any further benefit from the labor.

Sitting on the deck, I gazed at the coast, my last and only hope. *Oh, the beautiful shore! I thought. The admirable, sublime, delightful shore! Why is it so far away from me? Why am I so far away from it? The land is surely deserted: not a single sail, not the smallest boat.*

I sobbed, discouraged.

"Great gods!" I cried. "How hungry I am! How thirsty I am! How unhappy I am! Why didn't I die just now? Unconscious as I was, I'd have passed away without perceiving it. Or rather, why didn't I die a long time ago, on the solid earth of my homeland? Why was I even born, if it was to run to such a destiny and perish in such a frightful manner?"

And, turning my eyes toward the cadavers, I continued: "That's what I shall soon be. I'll be worse, alas! I'm going to die of starvation, and my body will be as dry as a smoked herring. O insupportable thought!"

Looking at the sea again, I saw a long object floating a short distance away, like the spine of a sleeping sperm whale. I recognized the lifeboat on which the crew had embarked, leaving me to die on the vessel in perdition. I had cursed those mariners furiously, so impatient to save their own lives that they had neglected mine. My sentiment changed when I had observed that the boat, overturned, was displaying its keel I desisted from all complaint against the disappeared and begged the Lord very devoutly to have mercy on their poor souls. Then, seizing a long piece of rope, I knotted one end around the capstan that had served me so fortunately the previous night. Holding the other end, I leapt into the sea.

After a hundred brasses I reached the boat and attached my cable to the hook of the tiller. I swam back to my wreck, from which I began to haul, so much and so well that I drew the launch slowly toward me. I succeeded, with difficulty, in making it assume a position more appropriate to the usage I wanted to make of it. It only remained to rid its vast hull of the water that half-filled it. The operation might seem easy, but remember that I was disinherited of all useful objects, such as jugs, buckets or saucepans. But the Creator has been kind enough to put into my mind a faculty that informs me, in moments of peril, of the necessary expedient.

The tempest had left me my hat. It was a complicated item of headgear. Folded three times with the aid of clasps, it acquired a vast capacity on being spread out like an accordion. This distended, it resembled the canvas buckets that masons use. With its office, and a lot of patience, I slowly dried out the lifeboat. Then I found myself in possession of a buoyant hull, still furnished with a few oars.

I set forth. The tranquility of the ocean permitted me to advance and steer quite easily. The crossing was fortunate and short. On the way, I perceived the cadavers of my traveling companions. The overloaded boat had doubtless capsized, causing them to drink more sea-water than one can swallow without dying. Perhaps it was God himself, irritated, who ordered that chastisement, and then wanted the vessel to return to the abandoned man, thus offering to the impious a marvelous and very edifying miracle, for which I shall be grateful to him for as long as I live, and even thereafter, if I can.

The coastline increased gradually, and toward the end of the day, my boat ran on to the sand. I leapt ashore and started running like a madman. That was the greatest happiness of my life.

I found myself confronted by a steep cliff. Landslides would enable me to scale it, but my exhaustion made me dread false steps, and I postponed the ascent until the following day. The dusk might also have deceived me and caused me to fall into one of the cavities that it was filling with shadow.

I was hungry. Here again I knew the exaggerations of the stories of so-called castaways. On the deserted shores where they run aground they always find trees laden with fruits, under which game of all kinds is waiting to be cooked. I only had rock-pools. I fished in them for crabs, which I ate raw. A waterfall was running between the rocks, hollowing out the sand of the beach as it fell. For the first time, I took pleasure in drinking water.

Finally, the obscurity becoming total, I lay down on a mound sheltered from the waves and went to sleep, lulled by the song of the sea.

III. The Old Man

Dawn woke me up. I began the day with the necessary reflections. Was the land deserted? Was I going to subsist there like a petty Robinson Crusoe? *That would, however, I said to myself, be preferable to the company of cannibals. Would I have traversed so many dangers only to end up on this shore roasted over a little fire under the greedy eyes of black men?*

The dangers run, my wretched situation and fear for the future changed my soul, and, from its previous irreligious state, made it devout, sanctified by dread, ready to repent if time gave it a chance to do so.

Aloud, I implored the Eternal and the benevolent principles. Don't mock, I beg you, incredulous individuals who live tranquil lives by your firesides, for there is no merit in being impious in security. A stormy sea would extinguish your blasphemies, and you would fall to your knees, saying in a pitiful voice: "Celestial Father, if I escape this, I shall bring to your chapel the most beautiful candle that has ever been seen." The example is frequent, and I have seen many atheists, in dangerous circumstances, summoning to their aid by means of invocations and supplications, all sorts of gods and goddesses, and saints of both sexes.

In my homeland there are many strong minds who do not admit either God or the Devil. They rejoice in mocking the passage of priests and processions. They laugh publicly, to excess, at our pious superstitions, but those people don't undertake journeys on a Friday. If in counting guests, they find thirteen, they go pale in mid-meal, lose their thirst and their appetite, and get up, sure of being in evident peril of death all year long. They secretly conserve against their heart a scapular full of medallions or punctured coins, by the virtue and singular benediction of which they seek to escape the accidents and calamities of existence.

Without wishing to displease those bizarre souls, I confess to having found relief and consolation in my ordeals in supplications to hypothetical divinities.

I scaled rocks heaped up into steps and reached the top of the cliff. I finally discovered the country. It resembled in every respect the most beautiful part of Normandy, which is near Aubeck and is called Vallée d'Auge. Apple-trees with twisted trunks projected their shadow on to the grass of meadows. Fields of barley and wheat extended all the way to the horizon, designed by rounded hills. A multitude of streams ran between the trees. In the distance, smoke denounced thatched cottages buried in the verdure. The wind brought me the thousand perfumes of trees and fallow fields. Wheat with heavy ears undulated and rustled.

Joyfully, I headed toward the habitations I perceived, not doubting that I had landed on the territory of some great and hospitable nation. I stopped continually, charmed by the song of warblers, a curious admirer of butterflies, flying flowers dancing in the sunlight. Everything seemed new and astonishing to me, full of a pure beauty. Having escaped the maritime desert, the terrors of shipwreck and death, I savored the emotion of a man who, after a long winter, travels through verdant woods and florid plains, weeping tenderly at the contemplation of a nature entirely similar to that of my homeland.

I arrived on the bank of a stream whose rapid current was stirring the pebbles of its bed, ornamented with large bright water-lilies, where blue irises grew in abundance.

The stream reflected my frightful image. I knew than what a sad figure I cut. The beautiful princess Nausicaa, kind to castaways, would not have listened to such a miry Ulysses. My muddy hair fell over my face. My scrawny nudity was veiled here and there by damp rags; I gave the impression of a drunkard still covered in the filth of the sewer in which he has slept.

I washed myself and gave my rags a more decent arrangement. Kneeling on the bank still looking into my mirror, I suddenly saw the reflection of another man. I turned round. Too emotional to say a word, I considered the individual: tall, old, clad in a fashion very similar to our peasants. He was gazing at me sadly.

In the end, I said, in French: "I'm an unfortunate whom the tempest has cast up on the shore. Help me. Tell me what land this is."

He expressed by means of signs that he did not understand. I spoke to him in English. He shook his head.

He spoke, and I understood. He was speaking in a sublime language believed to be dead for two thousand years, a language with harmonious syllables that can only be compared to ours. The old man was speaking ancient Greek.

But I can hear the clamors of collegiate pedants and other scholarly rodents of stupid books in which they think all knowledge is contained. Listen to them crying in their jargon: "No people uses that dialect today. Even if it had been conserved, it would have been subjected, by virtue of changing mores, over the succession of the centuries, to such profound alterations and such numerous admixtures, that it would have become unrecognizable." Don't agitate so in your pulpits, O ignorant quibblers, for it isn't the first time that your reasoning has proved false. I'm not relating hearsay. What I'm reporting, I haven't read in your compilations. And as I'm not advancing anything that isn't the fruit of experience acquired through terrible dangers, I shall find your insolent contradiction difficult to tolerate.

But you will find the means of educating yourselves in the seven folio volumes that I shall soon publish. Therein are inscribed all the definitive explanations, all the necessary information, sustained and justified by a marvelous abundance of evidence. Read that great work and then come, if you wish, to treat me as a liar, a crackpot and a faker. But in truth, I have no fear.

The man said to me: "You are in one of the isles of Atlantis, a vast, populous and fertile land. But it would have been better for you to perish last night in the tempest than to land on our shores. The law orders the death of all strangers. Those who are collected are executed as traitors. Weep then, young man, for I don't believe that you'll live for another three days."

"What!" I cried. "Are you so barbaric? Have the Hellenes, from whom you seem to be descended and whose language you speak, given you such lessons in hospitality? In every other land, people care for, nourish and comfort castaways. You massacre them! Execrable fury!"

The old man seemed troubled. "Listen," he said. "I won't betray you. Come and live in my house. You know our language and, passing for a native, you'll doubtless escape. Remember never to tell anyone your adventure; you'd cause our doom."

I embraced his knees, weeping. He lifted me up. We crossed the stream on an old stone bridge covered in moss and wild vines. Then we followed a path through a wood of crimson beeches.

"What is the reason," I asked, "for that frightful law directed against innocent travelers?"

"Know, my friend," he said, "that it is not as unreasonable as it seems. We owe to it the liberty and security in which we live. Four hundred years ago, our forefathers learned from voyagers, who were welcomed then, that the peoples of distant lands had put armies on the sea, which traveled the world burning cities, ravaging territories and annihilating nations. Our only chance of salvation was to remain unknown. The various kings and republics of our islands agreed to kill all those who disembarked on their shores if they were not born in the archipelago. Our forefathers all swore to observe the treaty. Many unfortunates have been sacrificed thus. For you, I am violating the oath of my ancestors. But you will never return to your homeland, and your existence will not be divulged by my fault."

We arrived at the old man's dwelling, a cabin of planks backed up against large trees and surrounded by an extensive garden in which a multitude of edible plants were growing. My host invited me in, gave me a stool, and disappeared.

A moment later he returned, carrying dishes and bottles. He sat down facing me and said: “Drink and eat, my son, without any more ceremony than in your father’s house.”

It was a memorable meal. Never had wine seemed so good to me. The fresh cheese and vegetables cooked in milk appeased my formidable hunger delightfully.

The old man dressed me in his best clothes. The charitable man was named Agathos, which means “good,” a name thrice merited.

He took me into his garden. “You see here my means of subsistence,” he said. “You can work here if you wish, to keep ennui at bay.”

I accepted, saying that I like gardening more than any other occupation, being agreeable, poetic and conducive to meditation.

Agathos smiled. “The cultivation of salad vegetables,” he said, “requires little labor here. My industry is different. On these plants I raise innumerable insects of the same family. They are ladybirds.¹ The people of the town make delectable preserves with them. They also extract a famous alcoholic beverage from them. You can’t imagine the care and the science that livestock demands. Those tiny beings are susceptible. They dread heat and cold. Rain drowns them, wind carries them away. They have mortal enemies in birds and snails. This year has been disastrous for them. I lost a great many last month, a little more than four hundred thousand, as many by virtue of an epidemic as because of an invasion of frogs.

“However,” he added, “I lead a happy and worthy life in these travails. I owe nothing to anyone, and no one owes me anything. I’m neither rich nor poor. May I end my days thus.”

¹ Most coccinellids [ladybirds] are predators eating other insects, but there are a few herbivorous species, and other kinds of beetles of similar appearance were sometimes added to the category at the time when the story was written.