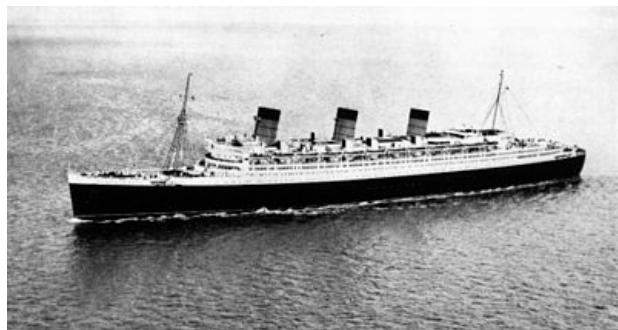


Fear

By Guy de Maupassant



We went up on deck after dinner. Before us the Mediterranean lay without a ripple and shimmering in the moonlight. The great ship glided on, casting upward to the star-studded sky a long serpent of black smoke. Behind us the dazzling white water, stirred by the rapid progress of the heavy bark and beaten by the propeller, foamed, seemed to writhe, gave off so much brilliancy that one could have called it boiling moonlight.

There were six or eight of us silent with admiration and gazing toward far-away Africa whither we were going. The commandant, who was smoking a cigar with us, brusquely resumed the conversation begun at dinner.

"Yes, I was afraid then. My ship remained for six hours on that rock, beaten by the wind and with a great hole in the side. Luckily we were picked up toward evening by an English coaler which sighted us."

Then a tall man of sunburned face and grave demeanor, one of those men who have evidently traveled unknown and far-away lands, whose calm eye seems to preserve in its depths something of the foreign scenes it has observed, a man that you are sure is impregnated with courage, spoke for the first time.

"You say, commandant, that you were afraid. I beg to disagree with you. You are in error as to the meaning of the word and the nature of the sensation that you experienced. An energetic man is never afraid in the presence of urgent danger. He is excited, aroused, full of anxiety, but fear is something quite different."

The commandant laughed and answered: "Bah! I assure you that I was afraid."

Then the man of the tanned countenance addressed us deliberately as follows:

"Permit me to explain. Fear—and the boldest men may feel fear—is something horrible, an atrocious sensation, a sort of decomposition of the soul, a terrible spasm of brain and heart, the very memory of which brings a shudder of anguish, but when one is brave he feels it neither under fire nor in the presence of sure death nor in the face of any well-known danger. It springs up under certain abnormal conditions, under certain mysterious influences in the presence of vague peril. Real fear is a sort of

reminiscence of fantastic terror of the past. A man who believes in ghosts and imagines he sees a specter in the darkness must feel fear in all its horror.

"As for me I was overwhelmed with fear in broad daylight about ten years ago and again one December night last winter.

"Nevertheless, I have gone through many dangers, many adventures which seemed to promise death. I have often been in battle. I have been left for dead by thieves. In America I was condemned as an insurgent to be hanged, and off the coast of China have been thrown into the sea from the deck of a ship. Each time I thought I was lost I at once decided upon my course of action without regret or weakness.

"That is not fear.

"I have felt it in Africa, and yet it is a child of the north. The sunlight banishes it like the mist. Consider this fact, gentlemen. Among the Orientals life has no value; resignation is natural. The nights are clear and empty of the somber spirit of unrest which haunts the brain in cooler lands. In the Orient panic is known, but not fear.

"Well, then! Here is the incident that befell me in Africa.

"I was crossing the great sands to the south of Onargla. It is one of the most curious districts in the world. You have seen the solid continuous sand of the endless ocean strands. Well, imagine the ocean itself turned to sand in the midst of a storm. Imagine a silent tempest with motionless billows of yellow dust. They are high as mountains, these uneven, varied surges, rising exactly like unchained billows, but still larger, and stratified like watered silk. On this wild, silent, and motionless sea, the consuming rays of the tropical sun are poured pitilessly and directly. You have to climb these streaks of red-hot ash, descend again on the other side, climb again, climb, climb without halt, without repose, without shade. The horses cough, sink to their knees and slide down the sides of these remarkable hills.

"We were a couple of friends followed by eight spahis and four camels with their drivers. We were no longer talking, overcome by heat, fatigue, and a thirst such as had produced this burning desert. Suddenly one of our men uttered a cry. We all halted, surprised by an unsolved phenomenon known only to travelers in these trackless wastes.

"Somewhere, near us, in an indeterminable direction, a drum was rolling, the mysterious drum of the sands. It was beating distinctly, now with greater resonance and again feebler, ceasing, then resuming its uncanny roll.

"The Arabs, terrified, stared at one another, and one said in his language: 'Death is upon us.' As he spoke, my companion, my friend, almost a brother, dropped from his horse, falling face downward on the sand, overcome by a sunstroke.

"And for two hours, while I tried in vain to save him, this weird drum filled my ears with its monotonous, intermittent and incomprehensible tone, and I felt lay hold of my bones fear, real fear, hideous fear, in the presence of this beloved corpse, in this hole scorched by the sun, surrounded by four mountains of sand, and two hundred leagues from any French settlement, while echo assailed our ears with this furious drum beat.

"On that day I realized what fear was, but since then I have had another, and still more vivid experience—"

The commandant interrupted the speaker:

"I beg your pardon, but what was the drum?"

The traveler replied:

"I cannot say. No one knows. Our officers are often surprised by this singular noise and attribute it generally to the echo produced by a hail of grains of sand blown by the wind against the dry and brittle leaves of weeds, for it has always been noticed that the phenomenon occurs in proximity to little plants burned by the sun and hard as parchment. This sound seems to have been magnified, multiplied, and swelled beyond measure in its progress through the valleys of sand, and the drum therefore might be considered a sort of sound mirage. Nothing more. But I did not know that until later.

"I shall proceed to my second instance.

"It was last winter, in a forest of the Northeast of France. The sky was so overcast that night came two hours earlier than usual. My guide was a peasant who walked beside me along the narrow road, under the vault of fir trees, through which the wind in its fury howled. Between the tree tops, I saw the fleeting clouds, which seemed to hasten as if to escape some object of terror. Sometimes in a fierce gust of wind the whole forest bowed in the same direction with a groan of pain, and a chill laid hold of me, despite my rapid pace and heavy clothing.

"We were to sup and sleep at an old gamekeeper's house not much farther on. I had come out for hunting.

"My guide sometimes raised his eyes and murmured: 'Ugly weather!' Then he told me about the people among whom we were to spend the night. The father had killed a poacher, two years before, and since then had been gloomy and behaved as though haunted by a memory. His two sons were married and lived with him.

"The darkness was profound. I could see nothing before me nor around me and the mass of overhanging interlacing trees rubbed together, filling the night with an incessant whispering. Finally I saw a light and soon my companion was knocking upon a door. Sharp women's voices answered us, then a man's voice, a choking voice, asked, 'Who goes there?' My guide gave his name. We entered and beheld a memorable picture.

"An old man with white hair, wild eyes, and a loaded gun in his hands, stood waiting for us in the middle of the kitchen, while two stalwart youths, armed with axes, guarded the door. In the somber corners I distinguished two women kneeling with faces to the wall.

"Matters were explained, and the old man stood his gun against the wall, at the same time ordering that a room be prepared for me. Then, as the women did not stir: 'Look you, monsieur,' said he, 'two years ago this night I killed a man, and last year he came back to haunt me. I expect him again to-night.'

"Then he added in a tone that made me smile:

"And so we are somewhat excited.'

"I reassured him as best I could, happy to have arrived on that particular evening and to witness this superstitious terror. I told stories and almost succeeded in calming the whole household.

"Near the fireplace slept an old dog, mustached and almost blind, with his head between his paws, such a dog as reminds you of people you have known.

"Outside, the raging storm was beating against the little house, and suddenly through a small pane of glass, a sort of peep-window placed near the door, I saw in a brilliant flash of lightning a whole mass of trees thrashed by the wind.

"In spite of my efforts, I realized that terror was laying hold of these people, and each time that I ceased to speak, all ears listened for distant sounds. Annoyed at these foolish fears, I was about to retire to my bed, when the old gamekeeper suddenly leaped from his chair, seized his gun and stammered wildly: 'There he is, there he is! I hear him!' The two women again sank upon their knees in the corner and hid their faces, while the sons took up the axes. I was going to try to pacify them once more, when the sleeping dog awakened suddenly and, raising his head and stretching his neck, looked at the fire with his dim eyes and uttered one of those mournful howls which make travelers shudder in the darkness and solitude of the country. All eyes were focused upon him now as he rose on his front feet, as though haunted by a vision, and began to howl at something invisible, unknown, and doubtless horrible, for he was bristling all over. The gamekeeper with livid face cried: 'He scents him! He scents him! He was there when I killed him.' The two women, terrified, began to wail in concert with the dog.

"In spite of myself, cold chills ran down my spine. This vision of the animal at such a time and place, in the midst of these startled people, was something frightful to witness.

"Then for an hour the dog howled without stirring; he howled as though in the anguish of a nightmare; and fear, horrible fear came over me. Fear of what? How can I say? It was fear, and that is all I know.

"We remained motionless and pale, expecting something awful to happen. Our ears were strained and our hearts beat loudly while the slightest noise startled us. Then the beast began to walk around the room, sniffing at the walls and growling constantly. His maneuvers were driving us mad! Then the countryman, who had brought me thither, in a paroxysm of rage, seized the dog, and carrying him to a door, which opened into a small court, thrust him forth.

"The noise was suppressed and we were left plunged in a silence still more terrible. Then suddenly we all started. Someone was gliding along the outside wall toward the forest; then he seemed to be feeling of the door with a trembling hand; then for two minutes nothing was heard and we almost lost our minds. Then he returned, still feeling along the wall, and scratched lightly upon the door as a child might do with his finger nails. Suddenly a face appeared behind the glass of the peep-window, a white face with eyes shining like those of the cat tribe. A sound was heard, an indistinct plaintive murmur.

"Then there was a formidable burst of noise in the kitchen. The old gamekeeper had fired and the two sons at once rushed forward and barricaded the window with the great table, reinforcing it with the buffet.

"I swear to you that at the shock of the gun's discharge, which I did not expect, such an anguish laid hold of my heart, my soul, and my very body that I felt myself about to fall, about to die from fear.

"We remained there until dawn, unable to move, in short, seized by an indescribable numbness of the brain.

"No one dared to remove the barricade until a thin ray of sunlight appeared through a crack in the back room.

"At the base of the wall and under the window, we found the old dog lying dead, his skull shattered by a ball.

"He had escaped from the little court by digging a hole under a fence."

The dark-visaged man became silent, then he added:

"And yet on that night I incurred no danger, but I should rather again pass through all the hours in which I have confronted the most terrible perils than the one minute when that gun was discharged at the bearded head in the window."