

**The Spanish Crusoe: An Account by Maese Joan of Eight Years Spent as a  
Castaway on the Serrana Keys in the Caribbean Sea, 1528-1536**



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My associations on the island were principally with those favoring annexation, and I was advised that spies were constantly on my track. But my course of conduct was governed only by the wish to perform the duty intrusted to me truthfully and faithfully.

This narrative is placed at your disposal, to be used as you may desire.

ALEX: M. CLAYTON

Late U. S. Consul at Havana.

[Addressed:] To Honble. J. F. H. Claiborne.

## THE SPANISH CRUSOE

AN ACCOUNT BY MAESE JOAN OF EIGHT YEARS  
SPENT AS A CASTAWAY ON THE SERRANA  
KEYS IN THE CARIBBEAN SEA, 1528-1536

### INTRODUCTION

To speak of the perils of the sea is a commonplace as old as navigation. Our literature is crowded with stories of shipwrecks and castaways. What boy has not thrilled over *Westward Ho!*, *The Cruise of the Cachalot*, *Robinson Crusoe*, not to mention a host of others? But these entrancing tales, after all, are only fiction. What we are in danger of forgetting in these days is the terrible background of fact from which they sprang, for being cast away on desert islands was the frequent lot of the early sailors in the unknown and fearful waters of the new world. Unfortunately, the accounts of actual shipwrecks are usually dull and uninspired narratives of starvation and death, wanting the art of the storyteller to make them live for us. Here, however, across the centuries comes the story of a Spanish sailor who met and overcame difficulties that make Robinson Crusoe seem like the spoilt darling of fortune.

In the western Caribbean (latitude 80° west, longitude 14° north), lies a dangerous group of shoals and sandbars known as the Serrana Keys. No living thing grows on these barren

islets. Not a tree, not a blade of grass, not a drop of water, invites the habitation of man, while the terrific breakers warn vessels to give them a wide berth. To make this forbidding waste still more inhospitable, no rain falls there during the scorching months of summer. And yet, a man lived there for eight incredible years once, four centuries ago—lived without shelter from the tropical sun; lived without clothing, without food, without water, even, save such as he was able to wrest from an unwilling nature. All we know of this sailor is that his name was John—Maese Joan, as he called himself—and his stark narrative that has lain almost unnoticed for four hundred years in the great Archives of the Indies at Seville.

His story has a parallel in the account of a certain Pedro Serrano who was cast away about the same time on the shoals of Serranilla, some hundred miles to the north, and after whom both groups may have been named. Serrano's story is told at third hand by Garcilaso de la Vega, the Inca, in his *Royal Commentaries* (Pt. I, Chap. VIII, Markham's translation), and, although the two tales are close enough to make one suspect that they are one and the same, yet Maese Joan's relation is far more circumstantial and convincing than the other, not having suffered improvement at the hands of literary persons.

The resemblance of Maese Joan's narrative to *Robinson Crusoe* is, of course, the first thing that strikes the reader. They were both pious men. Crusoe was badly frightened at the footprint in the sand; Joan, when he saw the devil against his hut after he had been for several days without water. Crusoe fashioned a clumsy boat out of a log; Joan made his out of sealskins. But beyond a few fortuitous analogies, such as these, the two narratives are as far apart as truth and fiction. Nor is it at all necessary to suppose that Defoe had even so much as heard of the Spanish sailor, in view of the frequency of shipwreck in those early years.

Maese Joan has told his story with a rude eloquence and naked style which the translator has endeavored faithfully

to render into English, although some liberties have been taken with the original punctuation. The curious reader may find the story in its original Spanish in the *Documentos Inéditos del Archivo de Indias*, X. 57-66.

LESLEY BYRD SIMPSON.

Berkeley, California.  
January, 1929.

[TRANSLATION]

To comply with your Grace's command, I have undertaken to give an account of my being cast away, and if perchance the style is not so good as my will to serve your Grace, lay it to my lack of reading and writing and let my will serve instead.

I left Santo Domingo on Saturday, Palm Sunday eve, in the year 1528, in the ship of Pedro de Sifuentes, the pilot of which was a person by the name of Portogalete. We stopped at the town of Higüey to take on a cargo of supplies for the fortress of Margarita, because the ship in which I was going carried cannon and powder and munitions for the said fortress. We stopped at Porto Rico in the island of San Juan, and there we remained for five days, and thence we set out again on our way. And on the following day we landed at another port in the island of Santa Cruz to lay in a supply of water. There two war canoes came out to meet us, each with sixty Indians in it, more or less, with their bows and arrows, and in consideration of the fact that those Indians have a very poisonous herb, we put back out to sea and they pursued us for two leagues, and so we lost them and continued again on our voyage. The winds were not very scarce and at the end of five days we reached the island of Piritu which lies thirty leagues to the windward of the pearls, and our pilot was unable to recognize the land, and we doubled back toward the west, coasting Tierra Firme, and landed on the island of Guaimacaran, because we were distressed by the lack of water.

We did not find it on this island and we went back to Tierra Firme to a port in which there was a town of warlike Indians, and we were in a hiding place where we remained all of one night. The next day at dawn there came out to meet us eleven war canoes with their bows and poisoned arrows, and they came on board demanding hatchets. And one of our men, whose name was Bautista Genoves, thinking that

they were peaceful, got into one of their canoes, and they, seeing the said Bautista in their canoes, left the ship and set out toward land, and I took an arquebus and filled it with flints and fired on them after they had shot many arrows at us, and I killed the chief of the Indians and two others. And most of them from fright at the shot threw themselves into the water, and some swimming and some in the canoes they were soon all on land. And up to the present nothing has been heard of the said Bautista.

We departed thence and went to a deserted port where we took water at the mouth of a river. Thence, seeing that the pilot did not know what he was doing and had no knowledge of where he was, we agreed to turn back to Santo Domingo, whence we had come, and we landed on the island of Arriba which belongs to the factor of Santo Domingo, and there the master pilot left us, for the said Portugalete was no less than that, and he deserted us because of the poor supply of food in the ship and the poor account he had given of himself.

So we, seeing that we could not have the said pilot, set out on our way to Santo Domingo without the help of anyone to direct us, as we were all novices in the art of the sea. At midnight on a Saturday in the middle of the gulf we were suddenly struck by a tempest that carried away both our masts and all the sails, and the ship opened so that a great quantity of water entered in it. We sailed before the wind wherever it and the sea might carry us, and at the end of six days, on Wednesday night, we struck on the shoal of La Serrana, the storm not having abated in all that time, and we did not see the island, because it is so little. While the ship was going to pieces thus on the shoal we saw the whitening of the sand, and I remembered to take a powder horn that I had in my box and a steel in my mouth, and so I jumped into the sea and swam to the island.

I left the powder and the steel on shore and returned to the ship to see if I could help anyone, and after I arrived the ship broke in four pieces and all the people were on one piece. I tied together all the ends of rigging I could find and with them made a long piece and went on shore with it, and all came on shore by means of it. And with the high tide of the night the sea carried away the ship so that on the next day at dawn we did not see it. From the ship nothing could be taken except the powder and steel, as I have said, and for lack of a flint, which I could not bring off, we ate raw meat for almost two

months and drank the blood of the seals and sea-cows that came to the island.

As some thought that that life was sterile, as your Grace will see, they determined to build a raft, and we all built one out of timbers that the sea had brought to the island. After they were lashed together with seal skins and cords of the same seals, three got on the raft and three of us stayed behind, two men and a boy. Four days after those of the raft had left, one of the three who had stayed, whose name was Moreno de Malaga, seeing that there was no water or fire and that it was the month of August (for up to that time we had been delayed, as I have said above), began to eat his arms, and from several bites that he gave himself he died raving.

When I saw that my companions had left and that another had died and that only the boy was left for a companion, I made shift to find some remedy by which I might sustain myself. And so I began to dig with tortoise bones in various parts of the island to see if there was any water, and because the land was so little in the midst of the gulf I found the water everywhere as salt as that of the sea. I drank this water several times mixed with the blood of the seals. And in this time it never rained so that I might be succored by water from Heaven. And I made shift, in case it should rain, to dig pits in the sand, and I took many seal skins and lined the pits, and when God willed that it should rain, which was in the month of October, I caught some water in the pits and in a few snail shells of the sort that there are called *cobos*. The water in the pits lasted a very short time, because it sank in the sand. When it rained I was so eager to drink that I jumped into the water in such fashion that I cut my arms and legs very badly, and the remedy I found for it was to mix the water with blood.

For two months after landing on the island I was without fire, and seeing that winter was coming and that I could not support myself without fire, I set about making a raft no larger than just necessary to sustain me, and I went to the place where the ship had sunk (I mean where it may have sunk) and I made an anchor out of a stone to tie the raft in a fathom and a half of water, and by diving several times I found a pebble with which I made fire. And I was in such a state that only the mercy of God and the fire restored my life to me, and the boy who was with me was in such a state that I, fearing that

he might die, and he, from seeing me as I was, were both very fearful of losing one another, because at this time the death of the one who should remain alive was certain. After I had got fire I made fires every night, so that if by chance some ship should pass it would see us by the fires.

And on another very small island, which is to the leeward of where I was, there were two men from another ship that had been lost, and they, seeing the fires, came on a raft to where I was, and they were with me five years. And in this time we set about making a boat with timbers the sea brought, and by swimming we captured the timbers and made our boat in this manner: I with my companions built a forge and bellows from sealskins, and in the place where the ship had gone down I made a saw with some iron things that we were bringing to the church of Cubagua, and of them we made nails. And after our boat was done, with its sails of sealskins cured as best we could, we embarked, the said companions, the boy and I, and sailed away thinking we might be able to reach the island of Jamaica.

And I, when I saw myself on the sea and saw that the boat was of pieces and without tar, being greased only with seal fat blackened with charcoal, I thought at once that it was impossible to save ourselves in it, and I had them bring the boat to land, and one of the men from the other island and I got off, and the other and the boy who was with me went away, and nothing has been heard of them to this day, and the weather was adverse to them.

And so when my companion and I saw ourselves thus, we made some small boats of sealskins and in them we sailed about the shoals, which are twelve leagues long and all very shallow; in the deepest part, I say, there is no more than a fathom of water on these shoals. There are seventeen of them all covered by the sea except five. I have sent word of this to the chief pilot of his Majesty at Seville, as it is very necessary for the safety of vessels. And I have shown Francisco Gutierrez, who makes the navigation charts, how one can pass through them, in case one is by chance found among them, for there are three channels by which to pass through in which there are five fathoms. From our sealskin boats we made soundings everywhere from island to island to see if we might not find some pieces of sunken ships, and we never found anything.

We ate the turtle eggs that we found on those islands, and the seals, which were the same fare as on our island. Our sleeping was done in the same skins, and at times we would be a month and more without returning to our island. At this time my companion and I decided to build two towers, one on the south side and one on the north, out of stone with no mortar, and these were sixteen fathoms around and four high, with their stairways, and we climbed up there to watch the sea. On one of them we put wood and other things to make smoke so that we might be seen by some vessel if by chance one passed. We built a pond with twenty-two fathoms of wall to take fish, and this stone we took out of the sea, for on the island there was only sand. We also took out stone by which we made salt. We made a house covered with skins where we took shelter, and our clothing and bedding were of sealskins. During five months of the year we dug turtle eggs from the sand close to the sea. These we dried and prepared to eat, and we found them a good food for the winter. Sometimes we ate the sea-crows that came there, and when we did not, there was nothing else except some roots of a plant that seemed somewhat like greens.

Three years after the others had left, and eight years since we had come there, God permitted that we should be rescued, and one day, on St. Matthew's eve at noon, we saw a ship under sail, and we made a very great smoke on one of our towers. And when those on board the ship saw us they lowered a boat and the master and the sailors landed, and the master, whose name is Joan Bautista Jinoves, a citizen of Triana, took testimony by a notary of everything he saw. Thence we came to Havana where it was the will of God that my lord, Don Pedro de Alvarado, the adelantado, was, and he noticed our manner of dress and was informed by the master of our life, and he forthwith received us as his and provided us with necessities, and he supports the other in the Indies and me in Spain, as your majesty sees.

This is not so extensive as I could wish, because it was impossible to retain a just remembrance of everything without writing it down as it happened. Receive, your majesty, the will I have to serve you and the remembrance I will keep of it wherever I be. I kiss your majesty's hands.

MAESE JOAN.

One thing I forgot, and that is, that what caused us the most pain and torment was the crabs and sea snails, because at night we could

not prevail against them, and we protected ourselves with skins, and most of the time we made day of night and night of day.

Once being fatigued by thirst, for we had not drunk for three days and on this account we did not speak to one another except each one praying to himself, I was seated in the shade of our hut making a fish-hook and complaining to our Lord, saying that I had been naked and barefoot for eight years in that desert where there was no means of support, and that would He be pleased to take me from this world, or to a Christian country. And in my suffering I said: "Since God will not deliver me, let the devil deliver me and there I shall die!" That night I got up to urinate and I saw him against the hut in a worse form than he is painted, with a very hooked nose, and he was breathing something like smoke from his nostrils and casting fire from his eyes, and his feet were like those of a griffon, and his tails like a bat's, and his eyes like a man's, and his hair very black, with two horns not very long. I called to my companion who was lying down in the hut and we took a cross that I had made of cedar and with it we walked over the whole island and never saw anything, only later, two weeks afterwards, I got badly frightened at night, and I saw nothing, but only heard footsteps, and saw nothing. Twice I was frightened at night seeing nothing.

Your majesty must know that the white of the turtle eggs, one or two weeks after they are laid and then put under ground, turns to water, and with that water I lived five months in the year. We kept rain water also in sealskins put in pits, and also in snail shells, and also in thick beams hollowed out. And we had salt by taking stones out of the sea and filling their hollows with water and when it dried it turned to salt. And when it stormed we could not catch fish, so we took sea-crows, of which there were many, and we made them give up the fish they were carrying to their young, and we ate them too.

In order to supply ourselves for the winter, for two months, April and May, we dug turtle eggs and washed them and set them out to dry, and with these we supported ourselves seven months of winter. We also had a tank of stone without mortar which we watched at night in order to take the fish that were in it. The seals came in January to bear their young and we ate the young, and we took the milk they had in their teats and put it in snail shells, and we cooked it also in snail shells and ate it. The taste of it was very bitter. And we put

their skins under water and after three days they were free of hair and out of them, when they were dry, we made breech-clouts, jerkins, and capes with hoods. We dug three wells and we always found the water salt, and when it rained we did not dare drink it without mixing it with the water of the wells, because it caught me in all my joints; because it was raw and I was used to salt it harmed me. During this time I was twice sick, and both of the times I fell sick it was in August.

**The End.**