

Orion - another kind of wreck.

My husband walked our dog three times a day; usually the last walk was between eight and half past nine in the evening. On the evening of February 1st 1978, he went out a little later than usual because it had rained and been so windy that he would have been completely soaked. He waited until the rain stopped even though the wind was as strong as it had been at nine o'clock. At last, at about eleven o'clock, he put on his oil-skins and went off with the dog saying, "I won't be long."

At midnight I thought, "Where is he? What's happened?" A few minutes later he came back, very wet but rather worried.

"There's something happening between Vazon and Grandes Rocques. I could hear a helicopter and boat engines. There are lights everywhere on the sea and I think that the life-boat is there as well. Perhaps it's a wreck or a ship in danger - I couldn't make out what it was, but it was enormous. Well, we'll see tomorrow, I suppose."

Next morning, we listened to the news on the radio, and yes, there had been a wreck at Grandes Rocques. But it was not a large ship as we expected, it was an oil platform (an oil-rig as we say in English.)

At twenty-five past eight the previous evening, the police in Guernsey had received a message from the harbour station that an enormous platform, the *Orion*, had broken free from the tug which was towing it from Rotterdam in Holland to Brazil with a crew of thirty-three men on board. It was the property of an American company; it weighed nineteen thousand tons and its supports were two hundred feet high. It was mounted on a kind of boat - a barge in English - for the voyage to Brazil and it was insured for nearly seventeen million pounds, the greater part of it in London.

All the emergency services were called out and the life-boat left the harbour in Town. The tug *Seefalke* which had towed the *Orion* tried to reattach the large cable to the platform but without success. It was damaged itself when it touched bottom twice during its efforts, and its crew had to pump water out of the boat to keep it afloat.

The life-boat took two men off the *Orion* but the crew hesitated to leave it. By this time, it was drifting towards Grandes Rocques and at twenty-five past eleven it was aground on the rocks one hundred and fifty yards from the beach. It looked like a building with all its lights on. By midnight, two helicopters from Culdrose in Cornwall had saved all the crew except six men who were still on board. There were gusts of wind of between sixty and seventy knots and when the tide moved the rig, the helicopters had to stop because it was too dangerous to continue. Two men were saved by a special buoy (breeches buoy), and the four who remained the next day.

A salvage company from Holland got the contract to salvage the rig and sent two tugs to Guernsey. Another tug was necessary and after a few days, on February 27th, they succeeded in pulling it from its place on the rocks and towed it to Cherbourg.

Guernsey had never seen anything like that before. Large crowds of people went on to the rocks at Grandes Rocques each day to see that enormous platform and they were amazed by its long supports (legs). They could see them from nearly all over the island and everyone was talking about it.

The pilots of the two helicopters and the coxswain of the life-boat received awards for their part in the rescue of the thirty-six men. No-one lost his life that night, a night full of excitement.