

Case Studies

This case study is based on the harrowing experiences of Dr. John Thomas when he emigrated from England to America in 1832. It tells us a lot about people and it can tell us a lot about ourselves. Who would we have been most like in this story? How would we have reacted under the same circumstances? Read the story and discuss the questions provided at the end.

Voyage of the Marquis of Wellesley John Thomas and a Case Study in Human Nature

The Story

Early in the year 1832, Dr. Thomas' father, who had left the Independents and joined the Baptists, and was, concurrently with his secular employment, preaching to a small congregation at Brentford, was seized with the American emigration fever. He was desirous of winding up his affairs and proceeding to the new country at once. The Doctor, having no special prospects, and intensely disliking a priest-ridden state of society, such as prevailed in England at the time, did not disrelish the idea of emigrating, but, knowing his father's impetuous disposition, he was afraid he would act rashly, and therefore proposed that, he (the Doctor) should go America, and spy the land. In this suggestion his father concurred, and arrangements were made for the Doctor's departure to what was destined to be the sphere of his great work. He procured an appointment as surgeon to a passenger ship, the *Marquis of Wellesley*, which was about to sail from St. Katherine's Docks, London, to New York. The ship was about 500 tons burthen, built of teak and copper bottomed. When the day of departure arrived, Dr. Thomas found himself the medical attendant of eighty-nine souls, seventy being passengers, the remainder consisting of the crew. There were only three cabin passengers, a man of the name of Williams and a woman and boy whom he represented to be his wife and son. The voyage constituted an important link in the chain of events that determined the Doctor's career.

The ship sailed on the 1st of May, 1832, but had no sooner cleared the river than foul weather set in, which lasted throughout a long and tedious voyage. For a fortnight they were driven about by unfavorable winds, and heavy seas. At the end of that time, the main-mast snapped off close by the main-yard, and the fore-top mast and mizen top were carried away. A heavy sea stove in the bulwarks, and swept the deck of everything movable and some things not intended to be movable.

The ship was tossed about like a chip in a boiling cauldron. The situation was alarming. The people were frightened, and turned religious, and pressed the captain to hold "divine service" on Sundays. The captain consented, and organized a "service" after the forms of the English Church. Williams (who turned out to be a rogue) was appointed to read the prayers, and the captain undertook the responses, which were

eagerly joined in by the frightened congregation. It fell to the Doctor's part to read a chapter from the Bible, and then a sermon from Chalmers' published Sermons. The arrangement evidently worked well, and calmed the excited feelings of the people.

For days the storm showed no abatement, and there was danger of the ship becoming water-logged, to prevent which she was relieved of a large number of chalk blocks. The cloudy condition had prevented observations from being taken for some days, and the ship's progress was quite uncertain. The captain was confident as to the position of the vessel, but Dr. Thomas had strong doubts from the fact that the reckonings of all the ships they passed differed from theirs. One Sunday, at dinner, the ship's position was the subject of conversation, and the captain remarked that if the reckoning of the other ships was correct, they could not be far from Sable Island, but added that he believed that their own reckoning was the correct one, which made them upwards of 250 miles away from it. The Doctor suggested that it would be as well to assume that the other ships were right, and they wrong, and to take soundings; but his suggestion was disregarded.

That same evening, the Doctor was reading in his cabin, which was so placed that he could see the whole length of the vessel and the aspect of the water, and he was struck with the appearance of the sea, which looked as though they were in shallow water. Seeing the second mate standing by the window, he called his attention to it, and told him he was satisfied that if the ship continued on her present course, she would run ashore. The second mate ridiculed the remark, telling the Doctor he knew nothing at all about it, being a landsman. The Doctor retired to his cabin, but came out again in a few minutes, being ill satisfied with the general aspect of things, and again warned the second mate, who returned about the same reply. The Doctor again went into his quarters, and was in the act of taking off his coat, for the purpose of turning into his berth, when the ship scraped on the bottom and struck heavily, almost jerking him off his feet. The cry was instantly raised, "Breakers ahead!" Consternation seized on every soul. The vessel rose with the next wave, and again struck the bottom with crashing force. Each succeeding wave lifted her in this way, and let her down again with a heavy bump, which threatened to break her to pieces every moment. She struck twelve times in succession, the passengers screamed and the sailors ran about excitedly, in their endeavours to carry out the orders of the captain, who strove to get the vessel about with her head to the sea. One man was lying near the Doctor, exclaiming with the terror of a child: "We shall go to the bottom! We shall go to the bottom!" The Doctor remarked to him that they were already at the bottom, and could not get lower than they were. At the same time, he felt the prospect was pretty certain that the ship would be broken up.

His mind was powerfully acted on by the situation, and received a bent which determined his future career. Naturally hopeful, he could not persuade himself that he had come to the end of his life, but the chances of escape were so small that he felt uncomfortably pressed by the question of what would become of him in that event. He

was far from being irreverent or irreligious, but he had never made religion a question of practical interest. The consequence was that at such a trying moment as the one described, he felt a cloud of uncertainty. He concluded that the best thing to do would be, as the waves were closing over him, to go down with the prayer upon his lips, "Lord, have mercy upon me for Christ's sake". At the same time he determined that if ever he got ashore again, he would never rest till he found out the truth of the matter, that he might no more be found in such an uncertain state of mind.

Aided by a change of wind, the captain's efforts to get the vessel's head round to sea were successful, and ecstatic cries rose from every part of the ship, "She rides! She rides!" The words, however, were scarcely out of their mouths when the ship again struck the ground with a crash that made every plank tremble. This was her last and worst collision, and for the moment destroyed all hope that they would be saved. She immediately rose on the waves, but it was every moment expected she would settle down and founder. The pumps were put into action, lights were called for, and the ship was examined, when it was found that the stem-post had started, and that the water was rushing in at various points. Something was done to repair the damage, but the leakage could not be entirely stopped, and the pumps had to be kept constantly at work during the remainder of the voyage. At the end of ten days, during which the weather continued more or less boisterous, the ship arrived safely in New York harbour, having occupied eight weeks in the passage.

Having left the ship, Dr. Thomas went to a boarding-house in the city, and his astonishment may be imagined when, on the third day, his father presented himself at the door. He had lost patience after his son's departure, and throwing up his situation, had resolved to commit himself and his fortunes to the emigration scheme, without waiting for the report of his son. He started three weeks after the Doctor, and arrived only three days behind him.

Robert Roberts, *Dr. Thomas, His Life and Work*, pp.6-8.

Questions

- 1 – How would you characterize the people involved in this frightening experience?
Circle the letter or letters that you feel apply to:

The passengers	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L
The captain	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L
The second mate	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L
The doctor	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L

Characteristics:

A – Calloused to the predicament.

B – Had well established concerns about their relationship with God.

- C – Heedless of danger signs.
- D – Instinctively hoped that God would save them.
- E – Instinctively realized that death would be the end of life.
- F – Had little or no concern about their relationship with God.
- G – Perceptive of danger signs.
- H – Responsive to the deeper meaning of the predicament.
- I – Self-confident.
- J – Had sudden concern about their relationship with God when death seemed imminent.
- K – Unwilling to listen to the advice of a non-expert.
- L – Unprepared to face death.

- 2 – Do we turn a blind eye to the reality of death and our need of salvation, except, perhaps, when these are forcibly thrust upon us? If so, why do we do this?
- 3 – How do you think the “religious” people on the *Marquis of Wellesley* might have responded if, in the height of the storm, the Apostle Peter had suddenly appeared and told them to “repent and be baptized” if they wanted to be saved?

How many different ways might people on the ship have interpreted the idea of being saved? How would this have affected their response?

- 4 – Examine yourself. What characteristics of the people in this story do you see in yourself? Do these characteristics help or hinder your living, day-to-day relationship with God? Please explain.