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THE SHIPS IN LISS

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I

There are people who remind you of an old-fashioned snuffbox. When you pick up such an object, you ponder it fruitfully. It is an entire generation, and we are alien to it. The snuffbox is placed among other appropriate little objects and is shown to guests, but rarely does its owner use it as an everyday item. Why? Do the centuries daunt him? Or are the forms of another time, so deceptively similar to modern forms geometrically, so different in essence that to see them constantly, to be in constant contact with them, means to live imperceptibly in the past? Is this perhaps a shallow thought about a complex disparity? Hard to tell. But, as I began to say, there are people who remind you of an ancient everyday item, and the spiritual essence of these people is as alien to the manner of life around them as the above-mentioned snuffbox to a price gouger from the Hotel Lisbon. Whether in childhood, or at one of those turning points in life when the developing character seems to be like a liquid saturated with a mineral solution -- disturb it just a little and it will all irreversibly congeal into crystals that form with the speed of lightning-maybe at such a turning point, thanks to a chance impression or something else, their soul adopts a steadfast form once and for all. Its needs are naive and poetic: the integrity, completeness, and the charm of the habitual, where daydreams dwell so serenely and comfortably, free of the moment's cavils. Such a person prefers horses to trains, candles to electric bulbs, the downy plait of a girl to her artful coiffure with its smell of burning and musk, roses to chrysanthemums, and the ungainly sailing vessel with its lofty mass of white sails that reminds you of a jawly face with a clear brow above blue eyes, to the steamship pretty as a toy. His inner life is of necessity guarded, while his external life consists of mutual repulsions.

II

Just as there are such people, so are there families houses, and even cities and harbours that are guided by a spirit all their own.

There is no port more disorderly and marvellous than Liss, except of course Zurbagan. The international, multilingual city strongly reminds one of a tramp who has finally decided to bury himself in the fog of a settled life. The homes straggle helter-skelter along the vague suggestions of streets, but streets in the proper sense of the word could not exist in Liss, if only because the city emerged on the sides of cliffs and hills, connected by steps, bridges, and spiral-shaped pathways. All of this is covered by a solid mass of tropical greenery, in the fan-shaped shadow of which glitter the childlike, blazing eyes of women. A yellow rock, a blue shadow, and picturesque cracks in old walls; in some knoll-shaped yard a huge boat is being repaired by a barefoot, unsociable person smoking a pipe; there is distant singing and its echo in a ravine; a market on piles beneath tents and huge umbrellas; a weapon's gleam, bright frocks, the fragrance of flowers and greenery that gives rise to a dull yearning, as in a dream, for love and trysts; the harbour, as filthy as a young chimney sweep; sails furled in sleep and a winged morning, green water, coves, and the ocean's expanse; at night, the magnetic conflagration of stars and boats with laughing voices-such is Liss. There are two hotels here: the Prickly Pillow and the Heaven Help Us. The sailors naturally crowded more thickly in the one that was nearer at hand. It is hard to say which was nearer in the beginning, but as a result of their competition these venerable institutions began to skip towards the harbour- in the literal sense of the word. They moved, rented new quarters, and even built them. The Heaven Help Us won. A deft move on its part left the Prickly Pillow rooted amidst some barely negotiable ravines, while the triumphant Heaven Help Us, after a ten-year struggle and having been the ruin of three eating houses, settled down to reign right beside the harbour.

Liss's population consists of adventurers, smugglers, and sailors. The women are divided into angels and shrews; the angels of course are young, searingly beautiful and tender, while the shrews are old-but one must not forget that even a shrew can be useful. Take for instance a happy wedding during which a shrew who had previously concocted infernal machinations repents and begins a better life.

We will not investigate the reasons why Liss was and is visited exclusively by sailing vessels. These reasons are of a geographic and hydrographic nature; altogether, every-' thing in this town produced on us precisely that impression of independence and poetic rhythm that we tried to elucidate through the example of a person with pure and clear needs.

III

At the time our story begins four people were sitting at a table on the top floor of the hotel Heaven Help Us before a window with a picturesque view of Liss's harbour. They were Captain Duke, a quite corpulent and effusive individual; Captain Robert Estamp; Captain Renior; and a captain better known by the nickname "I know you", because he greeted everybody, even strangers, with just this phrase if the person evinced an inclination to go on a spree. His name, though, was Chinchar.

Such a glittering, even aristocratic company could not, naturally enough, be gathered round an empty table. On it were standing various festive bottles brought out by the proprietor of the hotel on special occasions-namely those like the present one, when captains, who generally had no love lost for each other for reasons of professional swashbuckling, got together to do some heavy drinking. Estamp was an elderly, very pale, grey-eyed, taciturn man with reddish eyebrows; Renior, with long black hair and bulging eyes, looked like a disguised monk; Chinchar, a one-eyed, agile old man with black teeth and a mournful blue eye, was notable for his scathing tongue.

The inn was full; people were singing at one table and arguing noisily at another; from time to time some merry-maker, who had reached the stage of complete oblivion, would head for the exit knocking over the chairs in his path; the plates and dishes were rattling; and amidst this noise Duke twice caught the name "Bitt-Boy". Evidently someone was recalling this glorious person. The name came up apropos, for a difficult situation was under discussion.

"Now with Bitt-Boy," Duke exclaimed, "I wouldn't be afraid of an entire squadron! But he's not around. My dear captains, I'm loaded with vile explosives -- a terrible thing! That is, not I, but the 'Marianne. However, the Marianne is I and I'm the Marianne, therefore I'm loaded. It's an irony of fate: I-with a cargo of grapeshot and powder! Let God be my witness, my dear captains," Duke continued in a gloomily animated voice, "after that knock-out dish they treated me to in the commissariat I would have even agreed to carry seltzer and soda water!"

"A privateer showed up again the day before yesterday," put in Estamp.

"I don't know what he's looking for in these waters," said Chinchar, "but one's afraid to weigh anchor."

"What's burdening you now?" asked Renior.

"Utter rubbish, captain. I'm transporting tinware and perfume. But I've been promised a bonus!"

Chinchar was lying, however. He was "burdened" not with tinplate, but with an insurance policy, and was seeking a suitable time and place to sink his Hermit for a large sum. Such dirty tricks are no rarity, although they require great circumspection. The privateer was bad news; Chinchar had received information that his insurance company was on the brink of ruin, and so he had to hurry.

"I know what that pirate's looking for," declared Duke. "Did you see the brigantine that cast anchor at the very entrance? The Felicity. They say it's loaded with gold."

"I don't know that vessel," said Renior. "I saw her, of course. Who is her captain?"

Nobody knew. Nobody had seen him. He had not made a single call and had not come to the hotel. Just once three sailors from the Felicity, middle-aged and decorous people pursued by curious glances, came from the ship into Liss, bought some tobacco, and did not appear again.

"A pup," grumbled Estamp. "A lout. Stay in your cabin, lout," he suddenly flushed and turned towards the window, "maybe you'll grow a moustache."

The captains broke into guffaws. When the laughter had died down, Renior said:

"There's nothing to be done, we're locked in. I'd give up my cargo with pleasure--after all, what do I care about someone else's lemons? But to give up the President...."

"Or the Marianne," interrupted Duke. "What if she were blown up?" He grew pale and drank down a double shot. "Don't speak to me about such terrible and fateful things, Renior!"

"I'm so sick of hearing about your Marianne," shouted Renior, "that I would even welcome an explosion!"

"And may your President sink!"

"Wha-a-at?"

"Captains, don't quarrel," said Estamp.

"I know you!" cried out Chinchar to a very surprised visitor. "Come here, treat an old fellow!"

But the visitor turned his back. The captains sank into thought. Each had his own reasons for wishing to leave Liss as quickly as possible. A distant fortress was expecting Duke. Chinchar was in a hurry to play out his little swindle. Renior thirsted for a reunion with his family after a two-year's absence, while Estamp was afraid that his

crew, which was a loose assemblage, would leave him. Two of them had already run off and were now at the Prickly Pillow bragging about fantastic adventures in New Guinea.

These vessels - the Marianne, the President, Chinchar's Hermit, and Estamp's Aramea - had taken refuge in Liss from the pursuit of hostile privateers. The high-speed Marianne had been the first to fly in, the next day the Hermit had come crawling, and two days later the Aramea and the President dropped anchor, panting. Including the mysterious Felicity, there were in all five ships in Liss, not counting barges and small coastal vessels.

"Therefore I say that I want Bitt-Boy," the tipsy Duke began to speak again. "I'll tell you a little something about him. Of course, you all know that milksop, Beppo Malastino. Well, there was Malastino staying in Zurbagan, drinking 'Good God', (*Deadly stuff. Pure alcohol infused with cayenne pepper, and containing a small amount of honey.—Author*). and holding his Butuzka on his lap. In walks Bitt-Boy. 'Malastino, weigh anchor, I'll pilot your vessel through Kasset. You'll be in Akhuan Skap before everyone else this season.' What do you think, captains? Many a time I'd sail through Kasset with a full cargo, and that idiot Malastino would have done well to heed Bitt-Boy blindly. But Beppo thought it over for two days. 'Oh a storm belt... oh, blah blah, the buoys've been torn off....' But the crux of it, lads, wasn't in buoys. Ali the Turk, Beppo's ex-boatswain, made a hole in his brig directly across from the mizzen and sealed it with pitch. A wave would have quickly washed it away. Finally the swooning Beppo sailed through the infernal strait with Bitt-Boy; he was late, of course, and the money in Akhuan Skap had come to like others more than that wop, but ... isn't Bitt-Boy a lucky-chap! In Kasset they were hurled against the reefs.... Now, several barrels of honey that stood near the Turk's hole had begun to ferment, most likely back in Zurbagan. These barrels burst, and about four tons of honey battened down the hole with such a collision mat that the planking never gave way. Beppo turned cold when he discovered it during the unloading in Akhuan Skap.

"Bitt-Boy.... I would have begged him to come to me," remarked Estamp. "Some day, Duke, they'll hang you for the powder anyway, but I have children."

"I'll tell you another story about Bitt-Boy," Chinchar began. "This affair...."

A dreadful, jolly racket interrupted the old swindler. Everyone turned towards the door, many began to wave their hats, and some rushed to greet the newcomer. A collective roar raced like the wind through the vast hall, while individual shouts burst through the enthusiastic uproar:

"Bitt-Boy! Bitt-Boy! Bitt-Boy, bearer of good fortune!"

IV

The person greeted by such a meaningful and delightful appellation reddened deeply, stopped at the entrance, laughed, waved a greeting, and went to the captains' table. He was a well-built person of no more than thirty, not tall, and with a pleasant, open face that expressed tenderness and strength. There was a calm liveliness in his eyes, while his facial features, his figure, and all his movements were notable for their dignity, which was more a reflection of an inner calm than an habitual assertion of character. His thoughtful voice was extremely distinct but not loud. Bitt-Boy wore a pilot's cap, a brown jersey, a blue belt, and heavy-looking shoes; a raincoat was thrown over his arm.

Bitt-Boy shook dozens and hundreds of hands.... His smiling glance moved freely about the circle of friendly grins; wreaths of pipe smoke, the white glitter of teeth in coffee-coloured faces, and a multi-hued fog of eyes surrounded him for several minutes

-- the vibrant cloud of a cordial meeting. He finally disentangled himself and fell into Duke's embrace. Even Chinchar's mournful eye cheered up, as did his caustic jaw. The stolid, ox-like Renior softened, and the tough, egotistical Estamp gave a slight but childlike smile. Bitt-Boy was everyone's favourite.

"You, fortune's drummer!" said Duke. "Haven't seen hide nor hair of you! You weren't perhaps some modern Jonah in the belly of a nasty whale? Where did you disappear to? What d'you know? Take your pick: the whole damn fleet's on hand. But we're stuck, like a wedge driven into some blockhead. Save the Marianne."

"You mean the privateer, do you?" asked Bitt-Boy. "I saw him. A short tale, lads, is better than long interrogations. Here's the story; yesterday I took a yawl in Zurbagan and sailed to Liss; it was a dark night. I'd heard about the privateers; therefore I stole along the shore behind the rocks, where the cliffs are overgrown with moss. I was protected by their colour. Twice the search light of an unfriendly cruiser passed by me; the third time something made me lower the sail. In an instant... the yawl and I were illuminated like a fly on a plate. Because of the rocks, the shadows, the moss, and the clefts, I couldn't be distinguished from the emptiness, but had I not lowered the sail.... And so Bitt-Boy got here safe and sound. Renior, do you remember the firm Heaven and Co.? It sells tight shoes with nails driven right through; I bought a pair yesterday, and now my heels are all bloody."

"Aye-aye, Bitt-Boy," said Renior, "but you're a courageous person. Bitt-Boy, pilot my President, if you were married...."

"No, the Hermit," declared Chinchar. "I know you, Bitt-Boy. I'm rich now."

"Why not the Aramea?" asked the stern Estamp. "I'm prepared to defend my right to leave with a knife. With Bitt-Boy it's a sure thing."

The young pilot was about to say something else when he suddenly became grimly serious. With his chin propped on his small hand he looked at the captains, quietly smiled with his eyes, and, out of consideration for the mood of others, got control over himself. He took a drink, tossed up the empty glass, caught it, lit a cigarette, and said:

"I thank you; I thank you for your kind words, for your confidence in my luck.... I do not seek it. I can't give you my answer now; that is, a definite one. There is a certain circumstance.

"Although I've already spent all the money I earned in the spring, nonetheless.... Besides, how can I choose among you? Duke?... Oh, dear old fellow! One would have to be near-sighted not to see your secret tears for wide-open space and your desire to tell everyone: 'Watch me do it!' The sea agrees with you, old fellow, as it does with me; I like you, Duke. And you, Estamp? Who hid me from the foolish Sepoys in Bombay when I saved the rajah's pearls? I also like Estamp; he has a warm spot in his heart. Renior lived at my place for two months, and when I broke a leg his wife fed me for half a year. And you, 'I know you', Chinchar, you inveterate sinner, how you cried in church over a meeting with an old woman.... You had been separated by twenty years and unintentional bloodshed. I've had a drink and I'm jabbering, captains; I like all of you. The privateer, to be sure, is no joking matter, but how can I make a choice? I can't even imagine."

"Lots," said Estamp.

"Lots! Lots!" the table began to shout. Bitt-Boy looked around. People had long since moved in from the corners and were following the conversation; many elbows rested on the table, and behind those who were close others stood and listened. Then Bitt-Boy's glance passed to the window, beyond which the harbour was shining serenely. The evening, giving off vapours, descended on the water. With a glance Bitt-Boy asked the mysterious Felicity about something comprehensible only to himself and said:

"That's quite an imposing brigantine, Estamp. Who's commanding it?"

"Some lout of an ignoramus. Only nobody's seen him."

"And its cargo?"

"Gold, gold, gold," Chinchar began to mutter, "sweet gold."

And several people on the side corroborated this:

"That's what they say."

"A vessel with gold was supposed to pass by here. That must be the one."

"The watch on board is scrupulous."

"They don't let anyone on board."

"It's quiet on it..."

"Captains!" Bitt-Boy began to speak. "I'm embarrassed by my strange reputation, and the hopes placed in me throw my heart into confusion, really and truly. Listen: cast lots provisionally. You don't have to roll scraps of paper into little tubes. In a lively matter something living will watch over us. I'll go with whoever wins out, if a certain circumstance doesn't change."

"Let them have it, Bitt-Boy!" cried out someone who had just woken up in the corner.

Bitt-Boy laughed. He would have liked to have already been far from Liss by now. The noise and jokes amused him. He started up the "lots" business in order to drag out the time so that he could imbibe as much as possible of the strange, bustling influences and diffusions of this crush of sailors and their affairs. However, he would have religiously kept his word should a "certain circumstance" have changed. But now, while he looked at the Felicity, this circumstance was still too vague to himself and in mentioning it he was guided only by his amazing instinct. Thus a sensitive person, expecting a friend, is reading or working, and then suddenly stands up, goes to the door and opens it: the friend is coming, but the person who opened the door has already shaken off his absentmindedness and is surprised at the correctness of his action.

"Blast your circumstance!" said Duke. "All right—we'll draw lots! But you didn't finish what you were saying, Bitt-Boy."

"Yes. Evening's falling," Bitt-Boy continued, "the person who wins me, a paltry pilot, will not have long to wait. At midnight I'll send a lad with tidings to the boat of the one with whom it falls to my lot to travel. The fact of the matter is that I might refuse outright. But all the same, for the time being, go ahead."

Everyone turned towards the window into whose variegated distance Bitt-Boy was peering intently, apparently seeking some natural sign, indication, or chance portent. All the ships were clearly visible, as plain as on the palm of one's hand: the graceful Marianne; the long President with its tall bowsprit; the bulldog-like gloomy Hermit with the figure of a monk on its prow; the tall, light Aramea; and that nobly imposing Felicity with its powerful, well-proportioned body that had the neatness of a yacht, an elongated stern, and jute rigging, that Felicity about which they had argued in the tavern as to whether it had a cargo of gold on board.

How sad are summer evenings! Their regular penumbra that has embraced the weary sun wanders over the hushed land; their echo is drawn-out and sadly delayed; their distant vistas wane in silent melancholy. To the eye everything around is still brisk and full of life and activity, but the rhythm of an elegy already holds sway over a saddened heart. Whom do you pity? Yourself? Do you hear a previously inaudible moaning from the earth? Are the dead clustering around us at that perspicacious hour? Are memories subconsciously straining in some lonely soul and seeking an expressive song? ... But you are overwhelmed by pity, as for someone who is lost in the wilderness.... And many moments of decision fall in the untranquil circle of these evenings.

"Look, a cormorant's flying," said Bitt-Boy, "soon it will land on the water. Let's see which ship it lands closest to. Is that all right, captains? Now," he continued after receiving the approval of all, "that's how we'll decide. This very night I'll pilot whichever one it lands closest to, if ... as I've said. Well, well, my thick-winged one!"

At this our four captains exchanged glances, and not even the devil himself, the father of fire and torment, could have sat at the intersection of those glances without being burned through. One has to know how superstitious sailors are in order to understand them at that moment. Meanwhile the cormorant, ignorant of this, described several ponderous figure-eights among the ships and landed right between the President and the Marianne, so close to the middle of the distance that Bitt-Boy and everyone else grinned.

"The bird is taking us both in tow," said Duke. "So well? We'll weave floormats together, Renior my friend, eh?"

"Wait!" Chinchar shouted. "The cormorant can swim, cant' he? Where will he swim now? An excellent question!"

"All right, the one to which it swims," agreed Estamp.

Duke covered his face with his hand, as though he were dozing; however, secretly he watched the cormorant malevolently. The Aramea was lying ahead of the others, closer to the Felicity. The cormorant headed that way, diving now and then and staying somewhat closer to the brigantine. Estamp straightened up and his eyes glittered defiantly.

"There!" was his concise judgment. "Did everyone see?"

"Yes, yes, Estamp, everyone!"

"I'm going," said Bitt-Boy, "goodbye for now; I'm expected. My dear captains! The cormorant is a stupid bird, but I swear to you that if I could have torn myself into four I would have done so. And so, farewell! Well then, Estamp, you'll hear from me. We'll sail together or ... we'll part 'once and for all', lads."

He uttered the last words under his breath-and was not clearly heard or understood. Three of the captains were sunk morosely into their chagrin. Estamp had bent over to pick up his pipe, and thus no one caught the moment of parting. Bitt-Boy stood up, waved his cap, and walked quickly to the exit.

"Bitt-Boy!" they began to shout after him.

The pilot did not turn around and hurriedly ran down the steps.

V

Now it is time to explain why this person served as a living talisman for people whose profession was, so to speak, "organised risk".

Contrary to minds that are logical and miserly in their attitude towards life, to minds that have displayed their tiny, grey flag over the majestic mass of the world, full of unresolved mysteries-in the faint-hearted and absurd hope that everyone who came, astounded, would direct his steps towards this flag-contrary to that, we say, there are lives that seem to have assumed the task of making others notice the stirrings and mysterious whispers of the unexplored. There are people who move in a black ring of pernicious coincidences. Their presence is depressing; their speech is filled with foreboding; their proximity brings on misfortune. On the other hand, there are certain expressions that are in everyday use among us to indicate a different, bright type of soul. We hear "a sunny person", or "he brings luck". However, let us not draw hasty conclusions or discuss the trustworthiness of our own conjectures. The fact is that in the company of lucky people the mood is lighter and brighter; they alter the course of our

personal events through the slightest remark, a gesture, or a hint; their initiative in our affair indeed insures success. Sometimes these people are absentminded and carefree, but more often they are lively and serious. They bear one sure mark: simple laughter-laughter because something is funny and for no other reason; laughter that is not directed at those present.

The pilot Bitt-Boy, with his inexplicable and unerring power, was such a person. Everything that he undertook for others invariably came out well, no matter how difficult the circumstances, and sometimes even with an unexpected bonus. No vessel was wrecked on a voyage when he piloted it out of the harbour. The incident that Duke related about Beppo was no invention. A ship given his personal counsel at parting was never subjected to epidemics, attacks, or other dangers; nobody on it fell overboard or committed any crimes. Bitt-Boy had a wonderful knowledge of Zurbagan, Liss, and Kasset, and of the peninsula's entire coastline, but he did not get lost even in little-known channels. He had occasion to pilot ships through dangerous places in far-off countries where he had found himself only by chance and under his hand the rudder always turned in the right direction, as if Bitt-Boy could see the entire bottom with his own eyes. People trusted him blindly, and he blindly trusted himself. Let us call it keen instinct-what's the difference? "Bitt-Boy, bearer of good fortune"- he was known by this name everywhere that he had been and worked.

Bitt-Boy walked across several ravines, skirted the Prickly 'Pillow Hotel and set out along a path that wound among mighty gardens to a short, stony street. All the while he walked with his head lowered in deep reverie and at times would suddenly grow pale under the impact of his thoughts. He stopped beneath the shade of trees, near a small house with windows looking out into the yard, he sighed, straightened up, and walked through a gate in the low stone fence.

Apparently he was expected. No sooner had he, rustling through the grass, crossed the garden and begun to approach the windows, peering at the light glowing in their shadowy depths, than a young girl appeared at one of the windows brushing the opened curtain with her shoulder. The sight of the familiar figure did not deceive her expectations. She was about to run off to the doorway, but after impatiently measuring the two distances, she returned to the window, jumped through it, and ran to meet Bitt-Boy. She was about eighteen; two dark braids under a yellow and violet scarf fell along her graceful neck and almost her entire body, which was so lithe that in moving and turning it looked like a restless ray of light. Her irregular, childlike face with shyly proud eyes held the fascinating charm of budding feminine life.

"Regie, the Queen of Eyelashes," said Bitt-Boy between kisses. "If you don't smother me, I'll have something to remember our evening by."

"Ours, ours, my dear, my own dear!" said the girl. "Tonight I didn't go to bed; after your letter I thought you'd come rushing yourself a minute later."

"A girl should eat and sleep a lot," Bitt-Boy absentmindedly objected. But he shook off his depression at once. "Did I kiss both eyes?"

"You didn't kiss either of them, you miser!"

"No, I think I kissed the left one.... So the right eye must be offended. Let me have that little eye...."And he was given it along with its radiance.

But the essence of such conversations is not in our poor words, and we well know that. Try to listen in on such a conversation -- you will feel sorry, envious, and sad: you will see two souls struggling, trying to transmit their aroma to each other through sounds. Regie and Bitt-Boy, however, continued this conversation to their heart's content. Now they were sitting on a small garden settee. It grew dark.

As often happens, silence fell: hearts are full and it is a signal for decisions, should they be urgent. Bitt-Boy felt it was convenient to begin speaking about the most important thing, without delay.

The girl unconsciously helped him.

"Arrange our wedding, Bitt-Boy. I'm going to have a baby."

Bitt-Boy roared with laughter. His awareness of the situation poisoned it, and he shut it off with a short sigh.

"Now then," he said in a different tone, "don't interrupt me, Regie." He sensed her growing alarm and began to hurry. "I asked and went everywhere ... there is no doubt...-- I can't be your husband, dear. Oh, don't start crying right away! Wait, hear me out! Can't we be friends? Regie ... silly, you're the very best! How could I make you unhappy? I'll tell you more: I only came to say good-bye! I love you so much that even a giant's heart would burst! My heart's been killed, it's already been killed, Regie! And besides, am I the only man on earth? There are lots of good and honest men! No, no, Regie; listen to me, try to understand everything, agree ... how could it be otherwise?"

He continued to speak for a long time in the same vein, grinding with clenched teeth the painful tears that had been driven far away, until his agitation finally wrought complete confusion in his thoughts.

He fell silent, worn out physically and morally-he fell silent, and kissed the little hands that he forcibly pulled away from her eyes.

"Bitt-Boy...," the sobbing girl began to speak. "Bitt-Boy, you're a fool, a silly chatterer! Why, you don't know me at all. I wouldn't surrender you to either misfortune or fear. You see.," she continued, becoming more and more impassioned, "you're upset ... but I'll calm you ... now, now!" She took his head and pressed it to her breast. "Lie here calmly, my little one. Listen-if things are bad for you, I want them to be bad for me too. If things are good for you, let them be good for me. If you hang yourself, I'll also hang myself. We'll go halves in all that's bitter, but give me the larger half. To me you will always be like porcelain, pure.... I don't know how to convince you: perhaps by dying?"

She straightened up and thrust her hand behind her bodice, where, according to the local custom, girls carried a stiletto or small dagger.

Bitt-Boy restrained her. He was silent, overwhelmed by his new awareness of a heart close to his own. Now his decision, which was still inexorable, took another form.

"Bitt-Boy," continued the girl, under the spell of her own words and deceived by the unhappy man's depression, "it's wise of you to keep quiet and listen to me." She nestled against his shoulder and continued: "Everything will be all right, believe me. Here's what I think sometimes when I daydream or get angry at your absences. We'll have a riding horse named Bitt-Boy; a dog, Wise; and a cat, Regie. You will have no reason to leave Liss any more. You will buy me new copper kitchenware. I'll smile at you absolutely everywhere: in the company of enemies, friends, of all who come; let everyone see how you are loved. We'll play at being bride and groom -- how you wanted to slip away, you bad boy-but I won't cry any more. Then, when you have your own brig we'll sail around the world thirty-three times...."

Her voice sounded sleepy and nervous, while her eyes kept opening and closing. For several minutes she drew a picture of the imaginary journey in confused images, then she pulled her legs underneath her to make herself comfortable and yawned gently. Now they were sailing in a starlit garden above bright underwater flowers.

"And there are many seals there, Bitt-Boy. People say that these seals are nice. They have human eyes. Don't move, please, it's more peaceful that way. You wouldn't drown me, would you, Bitt-Boy, because of some ... I don't know ... Turkish girl perhaps? You

said that I'm the Queen of Eyelashes.... Take them for yourself, dear, take them all, all...."

The even breathing of sleep reached Bitt-Boy's ear. The moon was shining. Bitt-Boy took a sidelong glance; the eyelashes were resting softly on her pale cheeks. Bitt-Boy smiled awkwardly, and then, concentrating all his movements in an effort at imperceptible smoothness, he freed himself, stood up, and lowered the girl's head onto the settee's oilcloth cushion. He felt neither dead nor alive. However, time was slipping by; the moon had risen higher.... Bitt-Boy silently kissed Regie's feet and went out into the street; in his heart was a stifled scream.

On his way to the harbour he dropped in at the Prickly Pillow for several minutes.

VI

It was about 10:00 p. m. when a boat approached the Felicity and gently bumped against its side. A lone person was rowing it.

"Hey, on the brigantine!" rang out the restrained hallo.

The sailor on watch came to the side. "Whom do you want?" he asked sleepily, peering into the darkness.

"Judging by the voice I'd say it's you, Reksen. Here's Bitt-Boy."

"Bitt-Boy! Is it really...." The sailor raised his lantern to see into the boat. "What an undreamed of surprise! Have you been in Liss long?"

"We'll talk later, Reksen. Who's the captain?"

"You would hardly know him, Bitt-Boy. It's Exquiros, from Columbia."

"No, I don't know him." While the sailor hastily unwound a ladder, Bitt-Boy stood in the middle of the boat deep in reverie. "So, you're gadding about with gold?"

The sailor laughed.

"Oh, no-we're loaded with edibles, our own provisions, and a little incidental freight for the island of Sandy."

He lowered the ladder.

"But as I understand it ... you must have some gold," muttered Bitt-Boy as he came up onto the deck.

"We decided on something else, pilot."

"And you're agreeable?"

"Yes, things will probably be good this way, I think."

"Excellent. Is the captain sleeping?"

"No."

"Well, take me to him."

A light was shining through a chink in the captain's cabin. Bitt-Boy knocked, opened the door, and strode in rapidly and purposefully.

He was dead drunk and as pale as though he were facing a firing squad, but he had complete control of himself and held himself amazingly steadily. Esquiros left his chart, walked up to him, and squinted at the stranger. The captain was a middle-aged, tired-looking person, with a slight stoop and a sickly yet open and pleasant face.

"Who are you? What brought you here?" he asked without raising his voice.

"I'm Bitt-Boy, Captain," began the pilot. "Perhaps you've heard of me, I'm here...."

Esquiros interrupted him:

"You? Bitt-Boy, 'bearer of good fortune'? People turn around at these words. I know all about you. Sit down, my friend, here's a cigar and a glass of wine; and here's my hand and my gratitude."

Bitt-Boy sat down, having forgotten for a moment what he wanted to say. He gradually returned to his senses. He took a swallow, lit up, and gave a forced laugh.

"Where will the Felicity be touching shore?" he asked. "What is its goal in life? Tell me that, Captain."

Esquiros was not particularly surprised by the direct question. Goals -- or more precisely, intentions-like those set by him sometimes induce frankness. However, before beginning to speak the captain walked back and forth in order to concentrate.

"Well, all right ... let's talk," he began. "The sea sometimes nourishes strange dispositions, my dear pilot. My disposition will, I think, seem strange to you. In the past I experienced misfortunes. They couldn't break me, but thanks to them new and unfamiliar desires were revealed to me, my outlook was broadened, and the world became nearer and more accessible. It lures me to go visiting. I'm a loner. I've done all kinds of maritime work, my dear pilot, and was an honest labourer. The past is well known. Moreover I have, and always had, a great need for movement. Thus I have now conceived my own journey. We will deliver thirty barrels of someone else's corned beef to Rock Sandy; after that we'll lovingly and attentively sail around land and sea without any specific plan. To look in on others' lives, seek important and significant meetings, never hurry, sometimes save a fugitive or take on board those who've been shipwrecked; to stop in the flowering gardens of huge rivers, perhaps to put down roots temporarily in a foreign land, letting the anchor become encrusted with salt, and then, getting bored, to tear away once again and set your sails to the wind -- that's quite nice, isn't it, Bitt-Boy?"

"I'm listening," said the pilot.

"My crew is completely new. I did not rush in assembling it. After I paid off the old one, I sought out congenial meetings, talked with people, and one by one I collected the men who suited me. A crew of thoughtful people! The privateer is keeping us in Liss. I eluded him the other day, but only because of the port's proximity. Stay with us, Bitt-Boy, and I'll give the order to raise anchor at once! You said that you knew Reksen...."

"I know him through the Radius," Bitt-Boy said with surprise, "but I haven't yet said so. I ... was thinking about it."

Esquiros did not insist and explained the little disagreement to himself as resulting from his interlocutor's absentmindedness.

"So you have confidence in Bitt-Boy?"

"Perhaps I was unconsciously expecting you, my friend."

Silence fell.

"On the way then, Captain!" Bitt-Boy said suddenly in a clear and hearty voice. "Send a boy over to the Aramea with a note for Estamp."

He got the note ready and gave it to Esquiros.

It said:

"I'm as stupid as the cormorant, my dear Estamp. The 'circumstance' has occurred. Farewell to everyone: you, Duke, Renior, and Chinchar. From now on this coast will not see me."

When he had sent the note, Esquiros shook hands with Bitt-Boy.

"Let's get under way!" he shouted in a ringing voice, and his presence had already become businesslike and commanding. They went out onto the deck.

In each of their hearts a different wind was blowing and singing: the wind of the grave in Bitt-Boy's, the wind of movement in Esquiros! The captain whistled to the boatswain. Before ten minutes had passed, the deck was covered with trampling and the silhouettes of shadows cast by the lanterns on the stays. The vessel awoke in the dark and the sails flapped; fewer and fewer stars glittered among the yards; the windlass creaked as it turned in circles, and the anchor hawser, slowly hauling the ship to, freed the anchor from the silt.

Bitt-Boy took the helm and for the last time turned towards where the Queen of Eyelashes had fallen asleep.

The Felicity departed with its lights out. Silence and quiet reigned on the ship. When he had left the port's rocky entrance, Bitt-Boy turned the helm sharply to the left and steered the vessel that way for about a mile, then he set course directly for the east by making virtually a right-angle turn; next he turned to the right, obeying his instincts. At that point, not seeing the unfriendly vessel nearby, he again headed east.

Then something strange happened: there seemed to be a soundless cry over his shoulder. He glanced back, as did the captain, who was standing near the compass. Behind them a huge blue beam from the coal-black towers of the cruiser fell on the cliffs of Liss.

"You're looking in the wrong place," said Bitt-Boy. "Better add some sails, though, Esquiros."

That and an increase in the wind quickly took the brigantine, which was sailing at a speed of twenty knots, about five miles off. Soon they rounded the cape.

Bitt-Boy handed the helm over to the sailor on watch and went below to the captain. They uncorked a bottle. On deck the sailors, who had also had a drink to their "safe dash", were now singing unrestrainedly, and the sound carried into the cabin. They were singing the song of "John Dickey".

*Don't growl, sea, or try to make us quail.
Dry land frightened us long before this.
We'll set sail
Without fail,
To warm climes' sunny bliss.
Chorus:
Say, old woman, fill the glasses tall!
Bottoms up it will be with a clink.
Strange John Dickey, feigning not at all,
Drinks for those who themselves don't drink!
You, dry land, are a vacuous place:
Growing grey.... Wounded heart... Forgive!
Such the trace
That you place,
Now-farewell and let live!
Chorus:
Say, old woman, fill the glasses tall!
Bottoms up it will be with a clink.
Strange John Dickey, feigning not at all,
Drinks for those who themselves don't drink!
Far off glitters the Southern Cross.
The compass wakes at the first wind squall.
Lord, preserve
Ships from loss,
And have mercy on us all!*

When the cabin boy, who had gone to Estamp with the note, came in for some reason, Bitt-Boy asked him:

"Did he badger you for a long time, lad?"

"I didn't say where you were. He stamped his feet and shouted that he'd hang me from the yardarm, and I ran away."

Esquiros was lively and cheerful.

"Bitt-Boy!" he said. "I thought of how happy you must be if someone else's luck means nothing at all to you."

Sometimes a word has a deadly effect. Bitt-Boy slowly turned pale; his face became pathetically distorted. The shadow of an inner convulsion passed over it. He put his glass on the table, rolled his jersey up to his chin, and unbuttoned his shirt.

Esquiros shuddered. An ugly, ulcerous tumour protruded against the white skin.

"Cancer..." he said, sobering.

Bitt-Boy nodded and, turning away, began to put his bandage and clothing in order. His hands shook.

Above they were still singing the same song, but already for the last time. A gust of wind dispersed the words of the last part; all that they could catch below was:

"Far off glitters the Southern Cross..." and, after a vague echo, there came through the door that had been slammed shut from the rolling:

"...have mercy on us all!"

The pilot Bitt-Boy, "bearer of good fortune", made out these five words better and more clearly than anyone else.

1918.
