

Traveller's Tales

: volume 1

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This book is dedicated to
Antonheta Georgieva Mihaylova

Traveller's Tales

An Olympia Press Book

*'Love is a disease
Easily caught
Tough to communicate
Whereas lust... well, lust..'
Bobbie Zander*

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***Hernandez
In
Mexico***

*By
Pablo Flores*

HERNANDEZ in MEXICO

On his way to the '*Club*

Espanol' Hernandez always made his way from the little 'Hotel Hacienda' where he habitually stayed, through the market, through the throngs of dancing children, *ambulantes*, whores, their pimps and numerous other people probably more interested in his wallet than in his personality, finally getting to the Plaza Del Victoria after about twenty minutes walking, and a little breathless with the heat.

Hernandez, being a creature of habit, then usually took a cup of coffee of that Guatemalan blend that he liked so much, and ate a little *tapas*, before continuing through the Plaza Victoria and

thence into the huge square of *El Zoloca*, where the market stalls jostled the rusty buses and the honking of klaxons drowned the baa-ing of sheep, the Ee-Aw of hapless donkeys, blinkered and confused by the distance they had come to stand here among the crowds and the smells of such a tropical place.

To some extent Hernandez was used to this bustle, as his job as a Commercial Representative for '*La Libreria Espanola*' had made him well used to the commercial quarters of most large cities in Mexico. As in fact '*La Libreria*' itself actually a trading company gone literary, dealt more or less in anything (in order to survive), he came into contact with all types and conditions of tradesmen; having had along the way, to learn to deal in barter as well as bankers drafts, in ship's plating as well as printed fabrics, and finally, in books.

He was good at his work, and as his

workbeat expanded, Hernandez had become used to spending several days at a time in various unlikely places, and so it was that in Mexico City he had become used to the cheapness and comfort of the 'Hacienda' and had got to know the Spanish Club, which was a haven of comfort in the harshness of modern Mexican Life.

Well, now Hernandez was all alone with nothing much to do that day. At first he toyed with the idea that he should go riding, or try to strike up a conversation with one of the beautiful women who he often saw just out of arms' reach around him, but for some reason his palate revolted against it for that day; perhaps it was the supper that he had had the day before, where, involved in a long conversation about furnishing satins with a wholesaler, he had had to endure a particularly revolting and badly prepared series of dishes swimming in oil.

The merchant had said: "Its perfect...my wife has such a good touch...!"

He could imagine that the size of the Merchant had quite a lot to do with his intake of oil; perhaps a situation like the famous '*EUREKA!*', but sitting up to his chest in warm olive oil, and of course chilli peppers.

Thus , the merchant would shout, 'Eureka!' and his wife would rush in with another plate of delicacies....

And also thus it was, that this day Hernandez strolled in slow motion, enjoying the Sun, his eyes half-closed, and savouring the energy of it all.

He stopped and leant against a wall, and let the world momentarily pass him by.

After a few moments he heard, perforce, a conversation taking place in a small cut-off adjoining the main thoroughfare, almost behind him.

A man in a huge sombrero, his face in such wise in darkness despite the bright sunshine, was talking animatedly to a small group of *peons* and *campesinos*,

apparently uncaring or unaware of other potential ears around them; bravura, perhaps:

"*No*, we'll take the barracks like this. !!....", and he gesticulated marking his masterwork with a stick in the dust. A second man interjected:

"*This* is a man's work...and not for amateurs now - When I was with Zapata....."

"When you were with Zapata he needed a cook!....."

"Hey! Don't insult me '*Hijo de Puta.*'"

"*Por Dios!* Stop this arguing, we need discipline for a revolution!"

"*Por Dios?* You cannot plan real revolution in the dirt with a stick..!"

"Then, shall we plan the revolution in your castle on a hill, and use real paper from a pile on the mahog.."

"Mahogany"

"Yes, Mahog. . . Any desk, with pens and, and ..eh!... Pencils? ...Eh!"

"Come here, come here and talk!"

Hernandez was both excited and amused. He could admit a certain admiration for such a grassroots initiative, but wondered if it would lead straight to the cemetery.

All at once his thoughts were disturbed, not to say interrupted, by a girl who fixed him with a stare and said;

"You're that Spaniard that I've seen at the Hotel Hacienda!" Hernandez looked around him to gauge any potential strength of threat...

"Well yes. ...Señorita!"

"And you're waiting here for something?"

"No, not at all, in fact I....". He forgot the conversation behind him and his words slowed and stopped as the combined sounds of wheels and horses momentarily broke in.

A squadron of cavalry were riding past, pulling some small field guns and their tenders with them. There was a momentary halt in the proceedings caused by this movement, and then the background sounds returned all at once to normal.

Then he noticed that quite incidentally the core group of conspirators had now almost disappeared.

But the girl was still there, standing almost against his shadow, no, almost touching him.

She looked up, into his eyes and he thought that he saw the hint of a smile framing her lips.

He smiled back, and the hint disappeared. He said:

"Now that... Well, no, I was just spending a pleasant few minutes walking through the city centre!"

"Ah!"

Then suddenly a rush of

blood to the head:

"But...could I ask you if you would like to drink a coffee with me..?" She kept him waiting for so long that his pulse crackled almost to a stop.

"I could senor!"

Another blank in the mind.

"Shall we then?"

"Yes, I have a few minutes".

So they spent an almost perfect twenty minutes together, and he had got to meet her in a most unlikely way, one which was at that time impossible in 'polite' company.

I should explain that Hernandez was not exactly Gringo, but then again, he was no Mexican.

In fact he was a Spaniard, come to

Mexico on account of his education, and the fact that at home he could find no work. Added to that, he had cast the final doom of doubt upon himself by starting an affair with the sister of the Mayor's wife's first cousin's husband, which made things much worse in that small town in Asturias, particularly as her husband had got to know about it through the chatter of the village women, one of whom was his mistress. Add to this the fact that Spaniards were not overly welcome in Mexican society at that time, perhaps because they were still seen as the progenitors of the disease of Empire, from which the Mexicans still suffered; or perhaps because they were seen as somehow superior, unapproachable and threatening - takers of the goodness but not givers of the honey, of the land-and you have a particularly pungent mixture of reasons why rumour and half-truth should flourish. (*Perhaps they were at that time, perhaps not.*)

At length he got to ask her name,

and to look into those black eyes and feel himself lose a little of that reserve and control for which he prided himself. There is a subtle something about the soul of a woman of quality which shows itself in her eyes; and in that respect this woman was no exception.

Hernandez got to know that.

Later on they would make another story together, but on this day in history, though the exact date be forgotten, Hernandez had to ask her for another meeting; to touch her hand as if by accident with a sweep of his; taste the scents of heaven in her black eyes and her smile and bid her '*Adios*'.

And so it was that he left the coffee house, both deeply troubled yet immensely light of heart, full of an unexpected, new, certain glee and yet profoundly moved by his experience.

It was in this frame of mind that Hernandez walked across the square dallying on the steps of the 'Club Espanol' before entering through the mahogany doors with the cut crystal glass panels and the aggressive moulded brass lions-paw handles and furniture, watched covertly by those bewitching dark eyes.

The interior of the Spanish Club was as grand as its entrance suggested. An unwary visitor would first have had to negotiate the potential minefield of the Major Domo, politely and finally, rudely turning away the undesired and naïve peasant or farmer. Next he would negotiate the brown marble floor, laid one hundred and twenty years before by Basques De Lisander the club's original founder, set to expiate the blood on his hands by this 'generous' offer, and to drown the cries of those whom he had thus destroyed by buying their land from under them. (For, it must be said, many pieces of gold, though these had earlier too been taken from the slaughtered Maya, transported back to

Spain to be smelted and thus neutralized, and then given a new identity to be sold back to its owners at a large multiple of the original value.)

YES , Basques was a nice man, and it must be said a truly wonderful father too; quite apart from the pure generosity of the gift of the Club to those who were his friends and business benefactors.

BUT I diverge, the floor itself remained as perfect as all the outward signs of Basques' high bourgeois morality seemed; preserved, as it were, in aspic, as Basques had preserved the heads of those *Indios* who had dared threaten him against using their (later his) land, without sufficient prior agreement.

FOR in the Mexico of those times, arrangements were rarely prior.

AND then through the small court, fringed by graceful palms and an oasis of cool and peace, the billiard room on the left, where the click of ivory upon ivory was still a

commonplace, the library where Hernandez had been honoured to supply a certain selection of volumes at cut-price in order to gain his membership, and then a secluded stairway where the privately rented rooms were situated.

But today Hernandez did not have a private meeting, lunch, or an assignation, today he wanted to savour, the delights of conjecture and imagination, for two reasons, one being that he was yet young and thus naïve, and the second - that love had peeped into his eyes and quite suddenly taken his heart for a helter-skelter ride.

So Hernandez turned away from the other entrances and circuited the various high ceilinged rooms, enjoying their imagination, their luxurious mysterious darkness, silk walls, old pictures, and peace.

Finally he found that he had walked right back through, describing a

wide circuit of the building, and then into the reading-room at its face on the first level, where the huge mahogany frames of the windows gave out onto La Zoloca.

From here, the sounds were muted, but the bustle continued.

His eyes chased through the crowds for the girl and then he fancied he could see her, but then fell into a reverie. This continued for some considerable time.

At length, he ordered a favourite brandy - '*Centenario*' and picked up a paper, enjoying the scent of the newsprint as he scanned the columns. He drank his brandy, watched the crowds in La Zoloca, and noticed the Sun dropping in the sky.

The crowds swelled and broke, running up, as it were on the wide steps of the Central Building of the Administration (Edificio Administrativo Central as the people called it, or sometimes 'El Administracion)-

the edifice was hardly charming - or non-pompous. In fact, did he but know it, the break of people against the stone steps of this monument to modernity and constancy was beginning to be increasingly agitated. Thus he intuitively cleared his mind of slumber, and watched with increased, confused, interest.

He called the waiter and ordered coffee and a glass of spring water to clear his head. Within a minute another waiter was at his elbow bearing the usual silver salver.

"Yes?"

"It's five o'clock, Sir..!"

"Is that my Coffee?"

"No, it's five o'clock on Friday, and this is '*Jornada de Revolucion*,' Sir!" The waiter insisted.

Was there some sign in this?

"Yes?"

"At this time on this day, we think it prudent to give the members their Pistols, Sir"

To his astonishment the waiter bent down and showed him a loaded pistol on the salver, under a thick linen napkin. He took it and looked more closely at it.

A passing member said:

"Be sure you don't shoot yourself in the foot; Sir..!"

Now Hernandez cleared his head, looked around the reading room, and saw with a certain shock that all the members were now similarly equipped, and that the various pistols lay on the carpet, or dangled casually from fingers whose owners were deep in newspapers, savoured *San Luis Rey* cigars or simply snoozed contentedly in the thick afternoon air.

Two moustachioed gentlemen were having a heated argument at one corner of the saloon, and one, whose huge fist dwarfed a rusting pistol, used it as an emphasis, as one would use a raised and arrogant finger to insist upon a point.

It was a scene of extraordinary comedy; the bizarre accelerated change from urbane boredom to an army camp under siege had taken him entirely by surprise.

His coffee arrived, and he drank it without interest, as the movement in the square below arrested his concentration and began to quicken, the wave motion in the crowd thickening and flexing.

And now, onto this private stage in front of a bizarre and somehow disinterested audience, strode the principal players.

The man he had seen earlier that day, the aggressive revolutionary with the huge sombrero, decorated with a single red tassel now hooked over the dome of the hat and dangled over its brim, had suddenly arisen and all at once, Hernandez realized, had begun to berate the crowd, using for

emphasis a long silver cavalry sabre which he used rather as a Maestro uses his baton.

There were long silver arcs cut in the air.

He was arguing something, and there next to him, was another of the crowd from that morning with a rifle in one hand, and a pistol in the other.

Suddenly, with a flurry, the crowd threw off a series of people who arraigned themselves along the steps, the graphic representation now being almost pyramidal, with the large tasselled sombrero at its point.

The acute symbolism of the Pyramid or Mayan Temple was lost to Hernandez at that moment, for the power of the argument he watched seemed to grow like a tidal wave, the combination of sound and movement rising more and more rapidly.

He was for some reason, fascinated by the scene; the donkeys ee-awing, the peasants and peons beginning

either to move away from - or towards the orators on the steps, the pimps disappearing along the alleys lining the square (the whores long since gone).

There was something that Hernandez did not know. Not just then.

Suddenly the square was empty, and the bustle had transmuted itself into a boxed querulous desert. For a moment the players were left the stage; and then Hernandez heard a close rattle and rumble and slap, a creak and then the sound of metal against stone.

Suddenly people were running.

The cavalry troop that he had seen earlier had entered the square at one side -stage left, as it were, and, stage right, the conspirators and orators, exhibiting faulty timing but much bravado, suddenly let fly with a barrage of irregular shots and black powder smoke which released clouds of exhaust and grime. The smoke took about twenty five seconds to clear; this was a play for reality, but in slow

motion.

One trooper was covered by blood and grease, and lay slumped on the cobblestones.

Another lay against the wheel of the cannon.

Then, all at once, a hail of bullets seemed to wage war in the centre of El Zoloca.

A little cur, running across the centre of the square was caught by a bullet and hurled five metres sideways, where it lay silent and unmoving. Bullets pinged off the cobblestones and punctured wooden signs; a grocer's cart, caught by a sudden barrage, staggered and fell lopsidedly into the road; women screamed, men ran; shadows stayed still.

Bullets shrieked and bounced silvery traces across the square. One large distorted round from a military Mauser fell, steaming hot, at his feet, missing the window by the merest fraction.

He did not notice.

Bullets continued to fall, like rain.

And now there were several corpses in the square.

Then, just like rain, the shooting ceased.

The shocked conspirators had disappeared into the shadows around the square. Now a second troop of cavalry arrived, with a Gatling gun and a steam-wagon, which creaked around the square discharging dense white billows, burping every few metres.

Finally, the troopers began to pick up the corpses and throw them into the back of the truck.

One of them looked up at the windows of the Spanish Club, and grimaced.

Then jumped into the wagon as they made their exit from the stage, trailing a thin ribbon of red in the yellow dust.

That was the end of their revolution that week.

The waiters came round and re-claimed their firearms.

The club resumed it's dark splendour and it's reserve.

And Hernandez?

Hernandez lived long and happy in Mexico, to the age of one hundred years. Knowing something: that

after all, Mexico is a beautiful country, forest and prairie and desert, built by the sinew and sacrifice of it's people.

The Passengers

by

Tamara Wells

The Passengers

Mr. Andersen and his wife arrived on the dock in good time, several hours before the ship set sail. The First Officer, expecting people like these two, saw them immediately they approached.

Longshoremen and a myriad of strangers bustled on the crumbling concrete quays and swarmed up the companionways and ramps.

It was bedlam, but it would soon be over, thought the First Mate, and then they could relax at Sea. Heaven! His stomach gave a little warning jump.

These mixed passenger-cargo liners are sometimes the scene of unlikely happenings, but the Andersen's were as likely as cheese is cheese.

The Captain turned to his First Officer and said:

"These two won't have much to talk

about!"

It was the kind of occurrence which was more an everyday situation than one could reasonably hope for. There could be nothing more everyday than two everyday people who would create no problems, ask few stupid questions: neither present any real problems, so that he could get on with his favourite pastimes and read his new novel, unworried or bothered by everyday cares.

For a moment the captain smiled, and then he turned away to his business, for the valves for number four cylinder were to be fitted urgently, and he had enough on his hands already to make sure that everything was tested and secure before they began final preparations, which included tiresome details like counting ton pallets of flour and provisions.

For the rest of that day the Andersen's became simply a continuation of the Pursers Roll, that thick wad of paper that the Purser

had such pleasure in carrying around with him on a board under his arm, when he was telling the First Officer how busy he was.

Now, the Purser was a bit eh, "*Queer*", *you know*', said the Doctor, and that the First Officer, still a youngster despite the addition of a spiky moustache and a sometimes gruff demeanour should watch himself.

He whispered it to him over a Pimm's, one day at the back-bar on the quarterdeck at the rear of the accommodation, which was strictly for officers and passengers.

The First Officer knew that though already, as he was a bit that way too, but he did not tell either the Doctor, or anyone else.

And, to complete the puzzle, the Doctor suspected that the First Officer thought he was, though if he was it was only because of what had happened to him that day at school, and thus it was that he wanted to still any disturbing ripples that might start, before they started.

The colours of the day. It was a damp day; the dock was concrete grey and granite purple, unbroken by a relieving tree or patch of green, however muddied, and the sea mist which rolled up the channel as evening approached brought only further discomfort to those who laboured over the casings and crates which were being packed at the last moment.

"Fortunately," thought the first officer, "..there won't, be any deck cargo, and thus none of that filching that there was a couple of trips ago."

He clattered down a companionway into the crew's quarters, which at this time were ill-lit and musty, with only the emergency lighting functioning. The passages here seemed often crepuscular, and space was picked out by yellowish lamps at the corners of the sweating metal corridors.

He knew the interiors of these cabins without having to look. The only decorations

would be personal ones, the usual lewd pictures of naked girls, or sometimes a curio in tortoiseshell which took one by surprise. A few chewed books. An empty mug. Some wretched things on the table or crumpled on the end of the bunk.

He hated things like that. More particularly perhaps, the sheer smell of it. It seemed to coagulate along the walls. That was what he found so extraordinary about any space where people lived together with often barely concealed animosity towards each other. There was no escape from the others in a ship in the mid-ocean, no ability to say; *'Right then, I'm leaving..!'*

Outside each door there would be a plate with something written on it, or little notes that crew members passed to each other. It reminded him of those 'In-Out' boards that he'd seen in bureaucracies, so that the movement of each member could be traced.

At the end of the corridor he came

across two startled passengers,'Exploring', they said; and shoo-ed them out

Hum. The Hoopah Indians hum their shadows home each morning. They rise in the morning and give a hum. 'Give a little Hum, and your Heart and Spirit will come together.'

Now the First Officer walked through shadows, and heard the hum of the generators starting.

Next, he entered the passenger quarters, and heard, at his elbow, so close and unexpected that he almost jumped;

"Ah!..Excuse.."

". . . . Me!" a second voice interjected upon the first.

"Yes?" He turned.

"Um. ?...". A thin grayish man stood there, at his elbow an equally graying woman with a concerned face.

"My Husband wants to know. . .?"

"Where the crew's quarters are. . .?" said the man.

The woman looked still more concerned.

"They are actually..." said the First Officer-

"Off limits. . .?" said the man

"To passengers...?" completed the woman.

"That is correct...!"

"Ah!" said the man.

"I see!" said the woman, and her aura of concern seemed to lessen.

"Good" said the First Officer.

"Yes, Good"

"Very good" said the woman.

And they turned and walked up the companionway.

Later, actually the next day, the First Officer discovered that he had been deputed for the next few days and that the Andersen's, that rather odd grey couple, would sit at his table.

His main concern was that he would

have no time to eat should they start one of their schizophrenic conversations.

But he was not at table that day, and only briefly the following day, as they had first to clear the Bay of Biscay, and then pass through a congested area that demanded all his attention.

As a result of all this activity, in fact he did not eat a complete cooked meal for those days, and so it was on the third day, now in Deep Ocean, with Africa on the Port side, way over the horizon, that he contemplated a complete meal. At last!

At last they sat at table.

"At last, at last..!"

At his table were those odd Andersen's, a Methodist Preacher, a young and pretty woman with a vacant, slightly frazzled look in her eyes, and a man who proclaimed himself as a band leader. He wore rings on most of his fingers, and looked as if he would try to rub legs with the young

woman, Miss Miers, only politesse intervening on her behalf.

"Hullo Mr. Mate", said the Bandleader brightly, "I trust you have had a productive day!"

"We're often busy," replied the First Officer, evenly. "I'm sure..."

"That you have much to do!" said the Andersen's in concert. He noticed that the wife had a slightly deeper voice than her husband.

"Yes", said the young woman brightly, as if to continue speaking, and then stopped, with the shadow of a doubt crossing her face "Yes!" She suddenly looked puzzled.

"Ha! Ha!" said the Bandleader, amused by something.

At this point the First Officer's stomach reminded him of his mission, and he prepared to open his mouth to eat a delicious morsel. Just then the bandleader held up his glass:

"Cheers!"

The First Officer replaced his fork, balanced it on the edge of the plate so as not to make an unsightly stain on the blanched linen of the table, and raised his glass too.

They all raised their glasses.

"Cheers!" said someone.

"Cheers!"

He, the First Officer, put his glass down. The Muscadet was not at all bad; he must thank the Chief Steward.

He prepared to raise the fork to his mouth once more.

"As I was saying", said Mr. Andersen, a trifle indistinctly

"Ones food is SO important, is it not!"
said Mrs. Andersen

The First Officer replaced his fork on the edge of the plate, his stomach now physically gnawing at him. All at once the pain was awful.

It gave a twinge.

Miss Miers all at once looked at him with concern.

"You look awful... I say..!" said the Miss Miers with slightly marked diction.

"No, No, I'm fine", he said, reaching for the wine, and seeing the soft tops of her breasts softly bounce, move under the light voile of the flowered dress, which gave him a sudden, unexpected frisson of lust.

"Here, let me help you" said Mrs. Andersen, and proffered the bottle.

"No, first I think I really must eat a little something", said the First Officer, with notable control.

"That . . ."

"Really is important. . .!" said the Andersen's, with perfect synchronicity.

"It's written in the book" The Priest chipped in.

"Is it really, Father – which book?"

The First Officer looked at his fork.

"No, eat, eat, for Heaven's sake...!" said

Mrs. Andersen, apparently now reading his mind as well.

"It could be the food...?" Said Mr. Andersen, cautiously.

"Now dear", said Mrs. Andersen, "You'll make yourself sick if you don't eat well. You really must!"

"We are not *Fathers!*" stated the Preacher with barely concealed contumely. "One should. ..."

"I thought everyone with a . . . Excuse me a . . . Dog Collar was a Priest. !"

"I am a Methodist Preacher!" said the Preacher in a way that he thought clear and distinct.

"Should we say Grace do you think?" Asked Miss Miers, to the assembled table.

"No dear, that's not necessary at Sea!" said Mrs. Andersen.

"There's no difference", said the Bandleader... "it's still God's good..."

"Food" said Mr. Andersen brightly.

"Well, let me say that we will if you wish

it..!", said the First Officer, "...if..."

"Well, in the Navy... "

"This is the navy!"

"I mean the *other* one..!"

"Well..?"

"I don't think they stand up for toasts and.."

"No, No, I'm certain they say grace..!"

"No, not at all!" said Mrs. Andersen

"I never heard of a democratic ship!", said the Bandleader, looking for trouble. "I vote we let the First Mate decide..!.."

"I'm not the Captain" said the First Officer coldly. He looked down at his meal and discovered that now it was too cold to eat.

The following day dawned warm and sunny.

"I think we'll have beautiful weather this trip, Number One"

"I hope so Sir!"

"How was your first meal last night?"

"Ragged, Sir"

"Ragged?"

"They're an odd bunch Sir"

"Ah Me!" said the Captain... "I've got them after next week"

"You'll have to pretend you're seasick, Sir!"

"We have our methods, Number One. .!"

The Captain was an old submariner who knew a few tricks. At least, that was what the chief said about him.

As for Miss Miers.

Miss Miers sat in her cabin after dinner and tried to remember what it was that she had tried to say.

"There must be a way. . . "Her friend Peggy had said, "You know there is always a way to hook a man if you really want him...!"

Miss Miers was practicing.

After leaving Liverpool she had first tidied-up her speech, and then bought a

collection of those books that helped one develop oneself, books like 'A Young Woman's Companion', or '200 Ways in which a Young Lady can make herself useful'.

But times were none too easy, and Miss Miers had had considerable difficulties with her social advancement; or as she phrased it herself: her "*Campaign of Social Advancement and Development - The Five Year Plan*".

It was no particular secret that she had memorized the system from one of those books. She had written it, her campaign for prestige and a little achievement - and she supposed - love; all on the backs of the pages of an old (empty) Diary. (Yes, empty Diaries would all too soon become an unwelcome part of her life were she to let them).

So, next, she saved.

But saving was a problem.

She got a job as a stenographer and saved a few shillings a week. And then she had Dental trouble and had to spend it all. All! She bit her lip at the thought; that meant

another two months to make up the deficit.

Next she was in debt to a credit union, and the man came round for her two and seven pence halfpenny each Saturday afternoon, entered it in the book by first licking his pencil; stared blank at her for a second. That was enough money for lunch; she would forego lunch one day a week.

She couldn't go out shopping on Saturdays. Saturdays were wasting her away. Perhaps she might meet the right fellow.

But she did have Sundays to herself.

She usually spent Sunday morning in her room and then rose, cast '*Self Development by Self Hypnosis*' (or whatever) aside, and dressed as prettily as decorum allowed, and then went to walk in the park.

This went on for long months.

Her manager wanted to touch her, often 'accidentally' smoothed the back of his hand against her buttocks, or her back. Once he brushed against her breast.

At first she moved away.

Then, one Christmas, she had had a drink in the Public Bar with all the others - and when he touched her she allowed him to. She had suddenly found something about herself that was with a sort of pleasure; however remote, something that she had discovered and that she wanted, secretly; albeit in someone she didn't particularly want, or even like.

This state of affairs was inconstant; there could be no balance any more.

Then she did what she had been warned against so many times. She let her emotions get the better of herself.

She had let a Commercial Man take her away from her miserable room for the weekend. It was exciting to get down to the seaside, and it was a bank holiday weekend.

Of course she had known that he was married; it was obvious from the way he behaved, how his shirt was always sparkling, his trousers always pressed.

The outcome of this was the abortion.

How could a respectable girl have a baby by someone she hardly knew? At first she tried to hide the fact of her swelling stomach by tightening her belt, then by painstakingly altering her things, spending many lonely hours letting-out her clothes.

But all to no avail for then -

Finally - there really was no choice for it. The abortion was done on a kitchen table near Baker Street. Her pain was mainly emotional, but the change of money from hand to hand was real. After that she had stayed in her room for almost five days without being able to venture out, too sick and too scared and too ashamed, as well as frightened.

That was really awful.

Then she had had to smuggle the blood soaked sheets out in a laundry hamper, and leave them on a street, but not too near.

And that had resulted in three things occurring; one being the loss of her job.

Another being the need to borrow even more.

The third being septicaemia. She had to pay the doctor eventually. How her savings had dwindled!

'Doctors and Lawyers always win'. That was what she thought. Then she had a brainwave.

There could be a way through all this. She had abstracted it from '*The Power of Positive Thinking*'.

She had arranged everything, been to the shipping agents, managed to get a passport; borrowed the seventy eight pounds she had calculated she needed to top-up her few pounds in order to get her ticket.

And left, simply left.

She had told them that she was going away to see her 'Aunt' - that had seemed appropriate enough. But she could never go back – how many weeks would seventy-eight pounds take to pay back at half-a-crown a week?

Now, she sat on her bunk and considered her next move. The sea was blue today. She thought that that must be a good sign. Credit Unions seemed to be a thing of the imagination; perhaps they were.

The Bandleader, who liked to be known as 'The Prince' sat in the bar, and regaled the unfortunate Preacher with his latest story. It had something to do with the difference between a trumpet mute and an article of women's clothing, but the Minister had little knowledge of such details.

At length 'The Prince' reached the payoff line and screeched with laughter, rolling his eyes and hanging on to the bar as if it might fly away.

Despite these emergency precautions, the Minister was not diverted.

The Captain sat in his seat on the bridge, deep in thought his book to one side: 'Was it', he thought, 'A fact, that the

basic moral misconception made by the detective has caused his disappearance?

He was still puzzling over this problem when the First Officer appeared on the bridge.

"Number One", said the Captain, "take over the Con, will you!"

The First Officer saluted, and squinted into the Binnacle.

He checked their heading on the chart table and wished he could have a nice dry Martini.

The ship held course steady just East of South. The Azores were somewhere to Starboard, the African coast to Port; he could actually smell the scent of that fragrant continent clearly from here. Extraordinary.

'Desert Grass and Savannah, Jungle and mysterious white capped mountains. Good King Solomon had been here and left his gold behind him'.

Where had he read that?

"What does that mean?" Said Mrs. Andersen to her husband

"I."

". . . . Suppose that he had brought treasure with him?"

"No, I ..."

"Do you mean that this article implies that 'Gold' has another meaning, Dear?"

"Well I.."

"I'm surprised that they let such disgusting ideas circulate", said Mrs. Andersen, horrified.

"Well.."

"I understand you perfectly well, dear", said Mrs. Andersen.

"Yes dear", said Mr. Andersen, and breathed in.

The passengers, all ten of them, sat either in the shelter of the awning by the bar or in their own lounge. Four of them played bridge, while a fifth, Mrs. Cabon,

actually the Madame of a brothel but masquerading as somebody's 'Dear Aunt', watched the play and almost unknowingly kept her skilled eye open for likely clientele, or talented personnel for her new 'Foreign Operation'.

Since leaving Curzon Street she had longed for a little 'action'. Quite what that action could be on a cargo ship with ten passengers was another matter, but Mrs. Cabon liked a touch of 'vice' with her dinner. Mrs. Cabon was, she would be the first to admit, very easily bored, and sea voyages were really quite boring. But how would you 'Internationalize' if you didn't travel?

Miss Miers found her quite engaging, and that was something; for Miss Miers this was a voyage out of bondage, and she wanted to see success writ large for her.

Miss Miers and Mrs. Cabon, now fully filling-out her temporary maiden-aunt role, sat together after a while. Miss Miers was intent upon her reading, Mrs. Cabon upon

the bandleader, who, who knew, could turn out to be a sound contact. To coin a phrase.

Miss Miers turned over a page and smiled demurely (she'd been practicing in her mirror for ages, and had it just about right).

"What will you do when we arrive, Mrs. Cabon..?"

Mrs. Cabon had thought about this a great deal but was not about to divulge her secret;

"Oh, I shall look around; I have one or two friends, you know."

For her part, Miss Miers concentrated on looking demure. She knew from '*Proper Deportment for a Young Woman*' that it was impolite to intrude into another's business. But she was still curious. Something about the over generousness of Mrs. Cabon niggled at her. Perhaps it was something that she was not aware of.

Talbot Satchwell, a planter returning to a long stretch up-country, slouched in a

big cane chair. He sat by the awning where the French-doors opened onto the rear sundeck, and wondered what he would do next. He found it so boring sitting on his plantation, that he was tempted to throw it all up and do . . . he knew not what. . Why, what could one do - return to England and the cold? He shuddered and regretted the thought.

Sensing something, the Methodist Minister watched Talbot Satchwell out of the corner of his eye. He would not like to be seen making such a close scrutiny of another. One never knew what people might say. He took another sip of his Pale Ale, and considered. The sun was warm; and the breeze off the ocean was dry and pleasant. The ship seemed to heave thoughtfully on the slight swell. Thoughtfully.

The Planter presented a somewhat crumpled figure. He sat there in his chair and sipped yet another pink gin. He tended towards thinness. All his clothes seemed permanently creased, and he'd never once

been seen with clean shoes. Added to that that he never brushed his hair and always stuck his sunhat firmly on the resultant thatch. The Minister considered that he was somewhat of a scarecrow. Oh, and he had a very loud, tuneless, laugh.

But Talbot Satchwell was thoughtful and not likely to laugh this afternoon.

The Saloon was quiet. Miss Miers coughed and leaned forward in a confidential sort of way:

"Have you ever smoked Opium, Mrs. Cabon?" Miss Miers softly, instantly regretted her choice of opening phrase.

Mrs. Cabon looked vaguely distressed.

"Why, Dear?" she said, with a question mark in the wrinkle between her eyes.

"I'd heard that it was plentiful out East", said Miss Miers.

"Well, well," said Mrs. Gabon, sensing the possibilities in a flash. (Why hadn't she thought of that.?)

The First Officer looked gloomily

through the windscreen. Despite the clear weather, the placid sea, and the reasonable company, he felt distantly disturbed. It could have been his stomach, he thought.

The Captain came in to the wheelhouse and fiddled around with the chart.

"D'you know, number one, the Andersen's drive me mad!"

"They do me too, Sir"

"Are they booked all the way to the Cape?"

"I must ask the Purser, I suspect they are. .!"

"I don't think that I've ever heard them make a decodable statement, one that I could understand!"

"Yes, they do have a rather shared mentality."

"Anyway, I must remember to be absent more evenings while they're aboard."

The Captain moved back to the chart table.

'Well, that's great!' thought the First Officer, 'Now I shall be making excuses for the Captain!'. His stomach gave him another twinge. 'I really must eat something today'.

The ship lurched. They were crossing a line of currents, and that meant that they were coming to a port.

"It is a Port isn't it..?" Said someone by the rail, holding a large pair of binoculars.

"You should ask the Captain", said the Methodist Minister as he sat reading his breviary.

"I can hear music!" said the Bandleader, laughing to himself. After all, nobody else would.

Yes, they were decidedly cutting across currents; the ship seemed occasionally to vault sideways.

At length they could see a coastline, some low houses. Then people, black ones, walking along beaches. Then, a headland, which they rounded incredibly slowly. They

could hardly wait to arrive... wherever it was.

"Where are we Officer?", said Mrs. Cabon, as if asking a Policeman the way.

The First Officer sweated slightly, with a pain now permanently in his guts:

"That's actually Rio de Oro, but we'll be putting-in to St, Louis in a day or so"

The ship off-loaded a few large crates at the port, and they caught the next tide.

After St. Louis they were scheduled to call in at Loango in French Equatorial Africa, and as the course was changed the currents began to get a little more aggressive.

The ship began to roll and pitch, particularly as darkness came down.

The First Officer said to the steersman:
"Correct for cross-currents"

Sitting by herself, Miss Miers suddenly thought; *'They could all be savages. ... I don't know how they'll behave when they see me'*. The thought frankly began to terrify her, she

had not thought of all these wooly strangers (though she had felt her heart stir uncomfortably when she saw the lovely firmness of their, well ...waists.)

'Of course', she thought further, ' I could ascertain from some responsible person aboard just exactly how they will behave towards a ... white, eh. . . woman' . She had never actually thought of herself as the representative of the white races. She looked at her form through the delicate fabric of her chemise one day, before the glass in her cabin. Suddenly her mind reeled. She had not reckoned for this '*Quality of Reality*' (a philosophical phrase gleaned from one of her books) in her London room, now half the world away. Nobody had discussed such matters with her. Yet now civilized society and its crumbling redbrick dormitories were out of her reach. She thought deeply.

Mrs. Cabon had very correct ideas

about how to deal with men in general, and these 'Natives' in particular.

"I believe they carry some strange. . . diseases," she said, mentally flicking through an immense catalogue of matters undreamt of by Miss Miers. "You really should not get involved with any strangers; I mean by that, people whom one does not know sufficiently or has properly been introduced to."

(Mrs. Cabon knew what she was talking about, that was clear). Miss Miers intuited that she herself had had experience of such a situation before, and said nothing.

Of course, she should have known. 'What silly questions!'

"What?", said Miss Miers.

"Its here, Dear", said Mrs. Cabon ". . . It's really very silly. !", and she handed her across the soft-backed book she was reading.

Miss Miers never read game and puzzle books. It was against all the rules of self development. But the sudden and

secret burgeoning of fear those past few days somehow came to a point that made her catch the breath inside herself, and clutch at the straw of communication. She took the book.

At that moment she heard a cry from the bridge. In fact they all did.

"What was that, Dear. . .?" said Mrs. Cabon, appraising the unsuspecting lamb; she could imagine that there was money to be made from those breasts, between those youthful thighs. (Despite everything else she was well versed in, Mrs. Cabon did not hear *that* well).

"Something about boats" said Miss Miers, thankful that she could now forgo the unwonted delights of the book.

Yet it was true, some muddy canoes were manouvering off the starboard bow, and the First Officer could not understand a word that was said.

An old dark dusty-brown man was standing in his canoe and having what

seemed to be an animated argument with another such man in another such unlikely craft some considerable distance away at the top of his voice. At length the exchange ceased.

The Passengers began to drift back towards their comfortable chairs in the rear lounge area, out of the breeze.

"What was that, Officer?" requested Miss Miers, dimpling slightly (as much as she dared), towards the First Officer.

"Oh, it was something we didn't catch", said the First Officer dismissively, as if that explained everything; at the same time noticing with discomfort that he felt his hands itch when he looked at Miss Miers breasts, and at once rejecting the fact; officers had been dismissed for less.

Nightfall came, and the ship slowed. They were now moving in shoal waters and the sandbanks, a delicate and deadly dusky brown, lay visible at times, close beneath

their keel.

The ship moved uneasily, and the Master decided to anchor in the roadstead where she lay.

That evening about ten thirty, after dinner and a few 'Chota Pegs' as the Bandleader would have it, most of the passengers deserted the boredom of the rear lounge, leaving only Miss Miers, the First Officer, the Minister and Mrs. Cabon remaining.

Mrs. Cabon for some reason engaged Miss Miers in conversation. As far as Miss Miers was concerned, she had begun to detect a slightly rough edge to the glossy finish that was Mrs. Cabon, which thus had begun to generate a delicate indifference to Mrs. Cabon in her, and which perversely however, to Mrs. Cabon, had convinced the older woman that Miss Miers was obviously a girl of quality, and therefore to be treated with delicacy if not positively horticultural nurture, as this might well be an unexpected

chance to find advantage.

Who knew?

"Who Knows, Dear?" Said Mrs. Gabon to Miss Miers, "You never know what may happen, and you might need some solace, or even help; anyway, lets face it, it's always an advantage to have friends, isn't it. . ?"

At that moment the rather anonymous couple, the Andersen's that Miss Miers had so often seen, entered.

As usual, the woman entered first, followed by her shadow, husband. The wife launched into a lengthy exposition [exposition - did Miss Miers have that right? She really must check] of something or other, and the shadow followed her every gesture with a raised eyebrow, a half-sigh or an appreciative gesture of the shoulder.

Miss Miers was convinced that he looked more tired and a little dusty too; much more so than last time she had noticed them together.

The *tirade* (another nice word),

continued for a while, with the wife regaling the First Officer, who began to look rather seasick (though the ship was definitely riding a flat calm).

Despite her attempts at self-development, Miss Miers had enough self awareness left over to find this somewhat amusing. The First Officer made his excuses and, with an almost slimy, though ingratiating smile, made his way across to the two women.

He found time for a few pleasantries, and Mrs. Cabon saw that he was rather pale;

"It's my stomach", he explained, "It's really nothing!"

"Oh Dear", said Miss Miers, sensing the chance for a conversational ploy and taking a page out of Mrs. Cabon's book; "You really must take it more easy, it could affect your health you know!"

The First Officer smiled, and showed some shy little teeth.

"Oh? Yes!"

Mrs. Cabon breathed in, knowing by her experience what would follow, scooped up her things and bade them good-night.

Now they were alone in the lounge. The ship was quiet and there were several hours until the first glimmerings of dawn; now was her chance.

At dawn the ship moved on, catching a new tide, and made good speed.

At seven, as usual, the Captain took a quick turn around the ship, both in the form of a quick constitutional and in the knowledge that in these waters quite a lot could go wrong, and so constant checks were important. Were he still in the Navy, he would order lookouts. But he wasn't, more's the pity.

At length he found himself in the lounge, which was at this hour, empty, though a Lascar had been cleaning and had just left the area bright and clean. It was pleasant to stand here by the rail, alone, and

breathe in the beautiful scents of Africa; he could smell all the wonders of that place. He must communicate that to number one.

All at once he was aware that there was someone else on the stern, on the lower deck. He looked over the rail and saw a head - that was all.

Suddenly the head resolved itself into Mr. Andersen, that unremarkable man; Mr. Andersen, suddenly athletic, just as suddenly vaulted over the rear rail - and was at once gone.

The odd thing was that they never found a trace of him, even amongst those sandbanks amid the shallow estuary waters.

He must have been determined to escape, *one way or another*.

Thorwald

by
Juliet Watts

THORWALD

It wasn't that the Ship's agent had kept her in the dark about the Thorwald.

No, it was rather that perhaps the Captain himself had been so cagey about the whole subject, avoiding the precise description that the agent wanted, and then evading the agents' clever questions so cleverly

herself, that somehow the need to earn his commission had overridden the agents' reputation for straight and truthful dealing-invisibly.

Then, along had come this extraordinary, no, bizarre woman - a New Zealander, and all at the depth of an Icelandic Winter, showing him her papers, gained in, of all places, Australia. Well they seemed perfectly respectable.

The wind rattled the double-glazed outer window, and the office, overlooking the harbour, seemed to need to roll drunkenly, as a storm force wind pushed salt-grime and pieces of foreign seaweed from the Lord only knew where into the most inaccessible places, and chinks in the buildings (one hesitated to call them Houses) along the jetty.

Out there in the gathering dark by the Groyne, that crazy Hendrik Petterssen was taking his boat The Sender out to sea headlong into a force ten, deepening, so they were told to a hurricane - because he said they would be smashed to pieces inside the harbour: while all the other captains sat in ale-houses, drinking schnapps, and pretending that such weather was ordinary.

Just ordinary.

And Hendrik the
Crazy? Well, his
normal state was
roaring drunk, and he
would feel more at
home on the rising
grey billows. And in
reality, at that precise
moment, Hendrik was
drunk, as usual,
singing as he headed
The Sender out, over
the bar the better to
weather the storm.

She, that New
Zealander, saw
Hendrik's boat broach

the harbour entrance and break into the vicious grey billows beyond.

It was a clean, light painted trawler, of an almost naval appearance, but with the normal addition in those waters of a raised afterpeak, where the emergent hump of the huge diesels and superchargers pushed themselves above the gunwale.

The boat looked so trim and well ordered

that she almost wished she were on it. She hefted her bag in one hand, balanced it against her light form and the additional bump between her breasts then resolved itself as the black head of a cat, Sheba, her sole companion and much trusted friend, who travelled the seas with her.

But now, to business.

When she had first set her eyes upon it, the Thorwald seemed so

dilapidated that she was forced to rub her eyes in disbelief. The smokestack had a rusty hole in it, the gunwales were rusty and the rust even washed around in the bilges and coloured the deck; which additionally, badly required caulking. The water must be streaming through.

Not a soul stirred, there were no lights and the wheelhouse door swung open on its catch.

She caught her breath in horror.

And at that moment she skidded on the slimy deck and fell into the bilges, cursing.

The cat sprang into a close-bye companionway, and vanished.

The New Zealander, whose name was Juliet, sat up and rubbed her elbow. The trawler lurched; then banged against the restraining berth and the hawsers twanged

like rusty violin strings and became taut as the grey sea burgeoned under her counter.

Then from below came the sound of crashing and banging, and a long string of Icelandic oaths of great antiquity.

Finally a head issued from the companionway with a face streaked all over with oil; then a hand clutching a bottle, a fish-slice, and a little mug in its enormous

circumference.

The face rolled its
eyes, blackface,
comical in surprise.

"You. Second Mate..?"

"Of course I am!" said
Juliet, finally
standing up.

"That you cat?"

"Sheba"

"Who?"

"Yes, she's my cat!"

"My Gott!"

The face vanished,
and she heard the
sound of a body
apparently falling
down the
companionway ladder.

She made her way into the accommodation such as it was, smelling evilly as is usual in these small ships, of heavy diesel oil and mackerel, and she found the switch for the light. Then walked along the creaking, pungent, damp, passageway, and quite by chance found the door marked SECOND MATES QUART- the remaining letters of the word being absent. She entered and found

the cabin fairly clean, but full of old clothes, with the bed linen (such as it was) crumpled-up in a corner.

She tidied a bit, dreading the thought of spending two or three weeks at a time in this rusting tub, but now arraigining herself with the elements. At least it meant money.

You see, she was flat broke. After all, travelling takes-up all one's money; and she'd

made a bad bet on a horse in the states, and seen most of it go in a few manipulated seconds.

So, now desperate, she had thought of turning to whoring, that being a fast way to turn over bucks, but she was not very good at that, only ever having one client who left without paying. Her heart was not in it.

Next, by chance she had been picked-up in a really rough part

of Atlanta by an accountant. He had thought she was a whore (she was, temporarily, though she never let him become aware of that fact). He was, she thought, surprised to meet someone intelligent, well educated, and amenable to his various strange sexual practices and ideas.

She, for her part had enjoyed this sort of sex with him; and having developed a taste for

pornography on her travels and a need for experimentation thereafter, had stayed on at his house, and quite unexpectedly and suddenly become part of the scenery.

He, for his part, was happy with this arrangement, and anyway a certain kudos had been generated because the neighbours were very taken by her 'funny' nasal accent.

It lasted quite well, the story they had

invented to explain her rapid overnight appearance in his bed sounded good: in fact all was alright.

Then she'd got that itch in her mind again. She had to go, see things, and perhaps be somebody.

He, the accountant, had wept at the airport and she had promised with a heavy and lying heart to return to him: the ticket was open and had a code on it that united it with his

Diner's Club Card at a moment's notice: that was her safety belt, her parachute.

But she half knew, upon reflection suspected, that he would be out on the strip hooking whatever he could, after a few days. They all did that, didn't they?

Which was why she never would, never could, go back.

One lonely marriage had assured that, before she had even

left Dunedin.

She often talked to herself, repeating the words like a Mantra:

"I shall die in the Sea:
I shall die in the
Sea...."

So, fate had inveigled her here: she sat in the wheelhouse of the Thorwald and half wanted to weep away into the shadows.

With one hand she found the bottle of brandy; while on the other nestled the cat, purring louder and louder, as if to

counter the fall of her spirits.

At length she wiped the back of her hand across her mouth and her nose, and felt it warm.

At this moment there was a loud thud on the deck, the companionway banged and creaked in sympathy on its broken and rusted supports, and a small man entered the wheelhouse, a huge grin on his small face. "Hullo. Welcome

aboard my boat... I am Eric!"

Hardly Eric the Red, or even the personification of a Viking, for all that.

"Hello"

"Are you cold, we are turning on the heating pumps?"

There was a clash of gears below, and the generator miraculously awoke.

Lights flickered, suddenly the wheelhouse lights were alight.

Even the binnacle cast

its green glow, as it should.

"Now we are very nearly shipshape", said Eric (from that moment she called him Eric the Unready. The Unready rubbed his hands.

"I think first we have a drink" That was customary, it kept you warm.

The Thorwald gave a lurch, and Eric very nearly sat down.

"Let's drink on a long and happy association Cap'n!"

"Righto, Mate!"

As unlikely a union as this could not have been foreseen in one's wildest imaginings, nor all the annals of sailing.

Thus they drank. Actually they drank all night, she liked a drop, too.

Come the morning, she opened one eye, and the cold light of dawn, the verdigris smell of old diesel oil, her hangover and the obscene, uneven

rolling of the ship, had her vomiting in the scuppers with most of the other crew.

Eric was no-where to be seen.

"He's drying out", said a deckhand (there were six of them, three of which seemed permanently to be sitting on the after peak playing rummy or Skat and making obscene jokes. In fact she once saw them there in a force nine gale.)

They said little and

drank much. She was sure that they would throw up as soon as they had their feet on firm ground.

*Lack-of-motion,
sickness.*

The combination, of alcohol and motion, made days in really severe conditions seem to be long dream sequences in some preposterous film.

All these men (she was the only woman in the fleet), spent their time living their own,

their sole, hallucinations.

Why? Often she did, too.

They, she and Sheba, had now spent two weeks on the Thorvald and she was at last beginning to implement some little changes. These

consisted mainly of taking the red-lead paint and scrubbing it on to the rust with an old broom.

The chain of command was attenuated however,

because often the deckhands could either not understand her, or else were too involved in playing Skat to be interested in what orders she gave them. So, she shouted, sounds too frequently lost in rising wind to maintain their authority.

At any rate, it would have been a ticklish if not diplomatic task to discover which could - or did - understand her orders.

Sure enough, if the order was to 'Drop Nets' or 'Tighten Hawsers' suddenly it was magically understood.

She comforted herself that in fact, their work was just fine.

Next, the cook. He was the giant she had seen first on 'that' evening now seemingly so long ago.

The cook had developed a soft spot for Sheba, and cooked her tender little

dishes of fish heads, which she munched with delight.

He confessed that he had at first thought Sheba was a rat.

"She looked like rat"... he said..."She all black and oily, shiny...!"

There was no point Juliet explaining that she was a Russian Water Cat, that she liked a swim every now and then, that she swam in her bath when she was lucky

enough to have one. Among the bubbles. It would have been pointless. So she did not. She was a woman of few words now, she had lost them when she lost her heart, many, many lifetimes ago.

The swell had changed that day, become more threatening as winter came on, and Thorwald began to buck like a bronco about to break its

back.

All at once, seen through the wheelhouse window, the waves began to rise directly into the sky, the only break between the precisely aligned and matched purplish grays being a delicate and strangely inconsistent jagged cream coloured line - by day - which at night, with a full moon became dark red, sometimes blood red.

That night, and then

in the early watch, she only saw the waves. Waves held a terrible fascination for her. After all, there was nothing else to see, apart from the lines she drew on the charts recording their progress across a theoretical horizontal plain of water, in fact uniformly vicious, yet caressing, beckoning, deadly and freezing, in its deeps at the same moment.

Of course she also kept

the log. Smudged
crumpled dog-eared
and stained, the
logbook was stored
between the schnapps
and several heavily
thumbed pornographic
magazines of
considerable age.

The motion of the
battered ship was
often in itself
alarming; due to the
bustling sea their
elevation changed
constantly, every
instant, and it became
normal to see an
enormous tidal wave

sweeping down upon them from miles away as they crested another, which oftentimes struck terror into her were she on watch: then Thorwald would breast the 'thunderer' and often smash his tiny bulk direct through the centre of ten thousand tons of water, the windows would heave, and the engine would give a bang and a splutter as the screw cleared the water and rotated in

air as the governor prevented it revving itself to destruction.

Once the funnel became so full of water that only its rust holes prevented it being lost, by draining away the hundreds of gallons of water.

Could that be rational?

The rusty door to the accommodation flew open with a *Smash!* as wind compressed itself somewhere in the

bowels of the ship, Thorwald strained and screeched, and put his shaggy head down to cut another ragged swathe through the cold foam of cream-grey sea.

Something came loose on the deck, and bounced along by the rail until the sea seized it and flung it away with a heave.

This boat was loosing pieces by the minute!

Thorwald heaved, cleared many tons of

grey water and screeched again, and then seemed to swoop into a permanent list of around twenty degrees, as the cargo shifted.

Juliet looked at her watch (the chronometer back by the binnacle was full of water, she was lost to explain just how), and saw that it was half-past-eight.

“No fishing this morning” said the Unready, coming up to the bridge house to

locate his bottle of rum. "I see you later!" The weather door behind her banged and sealed-in the compression of air caused by the hurricane outside.

Now the ship heaved slow, long, teetered, crashed down into a cataract, a wave, and with startled eyes, she saw the First Mate, incredibly outside the wheelhouse, banging on the window (the lock was jammed).

She left the wheel for a long minute and opened the catch. He came in and briefly wrestled with it, attempting to fasten it. He said: 'It was wet out there....' in a conversational tone.

The mate was dressed in a tracksuit and running shoes, now completely soaked. He shivered, standing there in a pool.

"Is there anything hot to drink..?"

"Check with the cook"

"I will." He disappeared along the companionway.

Next, after a few minutes, arrived the cook.

"You like some breakfast?"

"You never told me you could juggle"

"What, oh ya...hello!"

"Yes, Please"

"Seen Sheba?"

"She with me"

"Fine"

"You know, I think she love me!"

"Probably!" She smiled, frozen.

The ship staggered and crashed between two peaks of water, falling thirty feet. The flex and the lateral movement snapped a stanchion and ripped a cleat right out of the bulkhead where it was welded. She heard the clang! Saw a metallic fragment fly away on the end of its tether like a bullet into the gale, and suspected the aerial was down. She turned-on the

radio and heard only static.

"Hey Cap'n"....
(through the intercom).. "the radio's out - I think the aerial's down."

"Shit!"

A crashing down below, despite the thickness of metal and the combined sounds of motion and the sea.

The communicating door rushed open and The Unready stood there, ready.

"What?"

"What can you do?"

"Shit!" he pulled-on some torn waterproofs.

"It's wet out there!"

He disappeared through the door, leaving the scent of rum and cigars behind him; an unlikely mixture in this Arctic Ocean in February.

She pushed a button on the receiver and the static had stopped.

A disjointed voice recited in surreal clarity and perfect diction:

"... and Sea Areas

Dogger, Fourties and
Fairisle, force nine
veering to
Hurricane...low
visibility..."

"Don't tell me this is a
fucking storm...I could
have told you that..!"

"What?" said the First
Mate, hearing her
muttering.

"Take the wheel, will
you", she said, dog
tired and with an
ache from her womb
to the top of her
brain. "I'm fed up
keeping her head into
the fuckin' wind"

"You'd better take a sleep," said the First Mate, who had the most extraordinary blue sparkling eyes, of the hue of that neon, crystal transparent, translucent, tropical water from the shoals of Capricorn - aeons away from here, and half a world away in her memory.

All gone now. How sad!

"And now," said the radio, animatedly "it's your line-to Margaret Thatcher..!"

The communicating door slammed and she lurched into her cabin, to slump in the depths of sleep.

She dreamt of Capricorn, the delicate pellucid permanent transparent inky blue waters of the Australian reefs, and the sliding of wood against water as her head surfaced from the glazed wonderland of the reefs; she dreamt of angels and devil fish,

waving coral fronds
and shifting sands
covering the skeletons
and forgotten ships
down below. Water so
clear that, looking
from the deck of your
ship you could see the
bottom, clear as glass;
even the shadows calm
and hard, in which
shoals of little fish
sheltered as if they
were a haven.

Ten fathoms like two
feet.

You could fall...

She awoke with water

in the cabin, the whole frame of Thorwald airborne, requiring to jump the gap between two crests to avoid destruction. *Smash!*

Two sodden minutes later she was in the wheelhouse again.

The Unready sat in the steersman's chair, with one hand on the wheel, the other clutching a mug of rum.

The wind had worsened, and the Thorwald lurched and

banged like a rusty,
out of tune drum.

Eric turned to her.

"It's like a helter-
skelter ride."

He laughed, Thorwald
dropped twenty feet,
and her teeth seemed
to clack together.

"Are we taking water?"

"No!" He looked
horrified.

"Did you check?"

"Thorwald he no take
water! ..Huh!"

As if to answer his
doubt, the aft
accommodation door

slammed open, and a
vagrant deckhand
splashed into the
wheelhouse, soaking
wet and covered in
oil.

His black shiny face
displayed two
bloodshot eyes.

"We taking water" said
the face.

"Shit!" said Eric the
Unready.

"The Chief fixing",
said the face.

The door slammed.

"Jesus!" said Eric,
looking through the
windscreen, and

clearing it with the edge of a grimy protractor.

Through the window an enormous wave burgeoned, then rushed at them across an intervening gully of two or three hundred heaving metres of lethal foam.

But the New Zealander was transfixed by something else; for there on the Forepeak was Sheba the Cat.

The Captain saw his Second Mate start

forward and at first thought that this was due to fear at the enormous wave lurching towards them. He saw her make half a move towards the wheelhouse door against gravity, which was progressing in the opposing direction, but then cease realizing, for reasons that he could not deduce, that this was hopeless.

Sheba sat on the forepeak watching the

sea, in that mysterious mesmeric trance that only cats know.

"Stop...I mean move..!"

She pointed mutely at the cat. The Captain craned forward in his chair, curious to see.

The next thing the New Zealander saw, as the small bulk of Thorwald started down the endless rollercoaster to the trough, was spray beginning to break over the forepeak - but within a few moments the huge

wave they'd just seen was rushing at the ship as she began to rise on the billow, at a speed so fast that the bow began to break through the swell of the wave at a position at least forty feet below the crest.

Simultaneously, as the water broke around the bow, the Captain, still not entirely comprehending, opened his mouth to say something, and the tiny form of Sheba was picked up and

carried by the billow
at monstrous speed,
clearing the
wheelhouse by many
feet, like some insane
windsurfer on a
frozen arctic
surfboard.

She craned her head,
and fancied she saw a
startled look in the
eyes of her cat as she
shot the length of the
trawler at many knots
speed - and then
disappeared on the
wave into the
seaspray.

“My God!” She

clutched the rail as the grey water of the next downslope smashed a sidelight on the windscreen and flooded through.

Eric looked at her blankly. Finally, he understood.

His glazed eyes took on a certain light of understanding.

"I'm awful sorry!"

She felt weak. She was suddenly in mourning for her drowned companion.

"Oh! Fuck. ..Oh! God!"

"Bring up some hot

chocolate and another bottle of Rum quickly Fingal", said Eric to the galley, on the intercom.

Such was the pounding of the sea; Juliet did not see or hear.

The Cook came stumbling, skidding, tripping, into the wheelhouse. Sensing the mood, despite the turmoil, the engineer came up and rigged the shattered window in silence, inappropriately with

a hammer and huge nails.

There was silence of a sort. No-one said anything, they were very kind.

The Cook was noisily heartbroken.

"She gone! She gone no! NO!" he said, muttering many, numberless, imprecations in Icelandic.

There were tears down his face.

It was ridiculous to see such a giant with tears on his face. He

could have picked Sheba up in one enormous paw and crushed her, and yet he was distraught about her death.

He gave the New Zealander a hug and disappeared to mourn in his galley. The Seas still rushed on.

The Storm had not yet begun to die, and this would occupy some considerable time.

An hour later Thorwald crested another bounder and she saw that the sea,

having claimed its little victim, was just beginning to settle. The storm seemed to be blowing itself out.

The mourners wept their secret tears in their own ways around the ship.

Had any of them looked at the seas in any detail, had there been reason to do so, they would have seen, some miles out from the feathering bow of Thorwald, a tiny

broken flotsam or
jetsam riding the
swells aimlessly.

There, on a far
billow, appeared an
incongruent dark
mark. The waves
whistled and the
wind hung tatters of
spray high on the
peaks, while the dark
spot whirled round
and round, tiny,
nearer, aimlessly,
randomly, in all these
millions of square sea
miles of creamy grey
water.

Then Thorwald slid

down the slope of the next sea, the vista was lost, and the screw cleared the water for a fraction of a second.

So Eric, the Captain looked through the windscreen and saw the lessening seas; though his heart was heavy for his Second Mate, he felt relief for his ship in such a hurricane.

Now they all would make it, though he had never questioned that for one moment. And yet he was not to

know that his friend the daredevil Hendrik was dead, and Thorn, Pedder and Hendrik's brother too, all friends of his, that trim ship and their bones at the bottom of the icy sea, and that would one day hang a question mark in his mind. He should have never left the Haven that day. Which day? The New Zealander looked glumly through the windscreen. Nothing on this bloody ship worked,

and the windscreen clearer was just another broken part, apart, that was, from the ingoing channel of the two-way radio, and the permanent Long-Wave British Radio Four transmission from Scotland, jammed on every channel of the domestic radio in the Wheelhouse.

The cook grumbled that he had had to bring his own radio into the wheelhouse and leave it there!

Huh! Eric the Unready was living up to his name!

Impatiently she hammered the screen with her hand, and the clearer disc suddenly rotated for the first time in days, and then burred and started to move normally.

It was then that she saw that a dot of the flotsam on an oncoming wave was moving.

It must be her imagination.

She began to rub her eyes, but then skidded forward and corrected on the slippery deck as the wave spun, contacted, sprayed and spumed, fanned by the waveshape of the bows, and finally jarred against the battered Thorwald.

Now, the fast rotating dot zoomed back into reality, became its cargo, and then bounced almost softly against the wheelhouse.

In a surreal second,

suddenly the blur had resolved itself and miaowed at her from outside the screen.

Now urgently, recklessly, excitedly, impetuously, she pushed the side screen and it catapulted up and open, freeing gallons of freezing sea, - and the Cat, Sheba, squalling, onto the deck.

The Cat shook herself, and gave a loud, irritated miaow, while the New Zealander took a long

deep breath.

It took only a few moments for the news to circulate throughout the ship - even the skipper was surprised. To assuage things, he personally called the cook on the intercom and told him to stop blubbering, while Sheba sat herself on a heating vent by the binnacle and began to clean her oily fur, in what might have been some consternation. You can never say, with a cat.

The Thorwald continued on into the gathering dusk, all at once a happier ship.

The next day dawned flat calm. Either they were in the eye of the hurricane, or it had blown itself out.

"We Fish today and put in to Hamburg later..!" said a deckhand with a stuttering laugh...

"Then we have fun..!" He looked at the face of the Second Mate and stopped.

While the calm lasted, she resolved to do some repairs, for the radio aerial was awry, and there was a forlorn hope that the two-way might work if it were secured high enough.

That done, and not a peep out of the receiving channel, she set to work on the rust, now making another of many comebacks.

The Captain, who silently approved,

said nothing. Later however, he said to the cook when they were eating:

"You know, a woman always gets things straight!"

The cook gave one of his rare smiles, and showed his bad teeth.

The Captain thought to himself that he was lucky to have someone who hardly ever got drunk, looked clean and quite tidy, didn't smell overly -most of all, didn't permanently smell of

herrings.

One evening, indeed, he secretly sniffed her to check that she really smelled of just woman, and he was secretly pleased.

He was still in love with his wife you see, though she had run off with some townie that spent his life on his arse pushing paper, and he found that he could idolize this stranger; but privately, secretly. Love the woman he loved, through her.

For her part, his Second Mate continued her vain housekeeping. New Zealanders as someone had once said, are often dull, but worthy. So, after the rust, which had used more gallons of red-lead so far than she had imagined in her wildest dreams, was a list of things so long that it needed several soggy pieces of paper to keep it listed.

She began to tick the

list off with a pencil, but the point went quickly straight through (everything was sodden by then, even the pencil) and in future she always ripped the items off bodily as they were completed.

For one, the liferaft had disappeared on the night of the worst storm, but nobody even thought to mention it.

Then, several small square windows and one porthole had also

disappeared. Oh, and quite a lot of deck gear too.

Apart from which the lock on the wheelhouse door had now degenerated so far that a loop of wire was all that remained tight between the occupants and the now Baltic winter.

Several items of furniture had also been reduced to matchwood by she knew-not-what, but, she surmised, perhaps by the cook after a couple of bottles of Pott 90%.

And the wheelhouse ladder

now occasionally threatened to deposit it's occupants over the side as the ship rolled, and would have to be welded securely if the rust would allow it.

And then, the leak in the fuel tank which covered the deckhands in black oil whenever they entered their quarters would have to be stopped.

It was after all her function as Second Mate, Dog'sbody and Navigator.

She gave the list to Eric the Unready, and

he squinted at it. It was true that she was no great shakes at writing; she could not deny that, but Eric said a cursory 'Okay', hardly taking-in the expense, and passed it back to her.

Then he said one word;

"Hamburg"

She looked at him. He said:

"Ha!...Ha!..."

That was a code, Hamburg was obviously their next playground.

Thorwald steered further south and then east, cutting a dark froth fringed furrow into the yellow-grey of an icy, ripple textured, sea. By some miracle the refrigeration units were still working, though they gurgled as if drowning.

Night and day. Noises seemed louder at night despite the sounds of hawsers and cables rasping, the creaking of the outworn frame,

and conspired to keep her awake.

Thorwald left a thin trace of treachy black oil smoke as they steamed.

It was dusk the following day. Or the one after that - she'd lost all count of time by now. Who cared?

Eric the Unready was on the 'Bridge' - the open extension to the wheelhouse, wearing his Cap, which had clumps of what looked like golden grapes on it. Eric liked to show true pride as his ship

neared a Foreign Port.

"Shall I turn the lights on?" said the Second Mate, realizing that she had not had a moment to inspect them yet.

"Yes, by all means", said the Unready, assuming his most important expression.

"Left hand down a bit" he cried to the Bosun at the wheel, who ignored him as normal.

The Second Mate went to the lighting box,

clicked the correct selection of switches, and reported this to the First Mate, indicating that she should run up the flags indicating that they were berthing.

Rather than appear dilatory, he then disappeared onto the outer wing and fiddled around with the flag locker.

"Oh, and an Icelandic Pennant with the German flag, you know!" she said, by way of helpful

reminder.

The First Officer
looked at the Bosun.

The deckhands
stopped playing Skat
momentarily, and
then returned to more
rewarding pleasures.

The Steersman looked
at the First Officer
and the white of his
eyes against the black
oil background of his
face seemed to rotate.

They were beginning
to steam into a
maritime traffic-jam.

"Turn the radio on",
said the Unready.

"Squawk!" went the
Radio.

"This is the news at..."

"That one - off!"

"Cap'n", said the
Second Mate, "the two-
way set...we have only
got the outgoing
channel!"

"I know, I know,
Goddam it!" snapped
the Captain.

Now they were passing
the bulk of an oil
tanker, enormous and
black above them;
very, very close.

She went out onto the wing of the bridge: she was back in a flash;

"We have no fucking lights on this side!"

"Don't worry, they never worked anyway!"

"Yes but they can't see us..!"

"Open a bloody door Odin Ericsson!" Cried the Unready.

There was the noise of a door clanging back somewhere and a shaft of light streamed out on the other side.

"Blast!"

"Wrong side!"

The captain mumbled something incoherent.

The fault was corrected.

They steamed for a few minutes in silence.

"We shall put in here!" said the Captain, indicating a long line of empty Berths.

Now, all this time his Second Mate had been keeping up an animated and largely imaginary

conversation with the Harbour Controller. finally she said, into the only working channel of the two-way radio:

"This is Thorwald, this is Thorwald - I have reached the berth you mentioned earlier at Pier (she gave the number) and am Berthing. Roger. Out. Thank You."

She hoped they would swallow that one. Her Mates' ticket seemed suddenly diminutive in her pocket.

The Thorwald was finally secured at the tiny berth; dwarfed by the enormous, surreal bulks of ore carriers, tankers and a few container ships out in the pulsing harbour roadstead.

Finally, the New Zealander, knowing just how the crew would celebrate a rare evening of leisure, sat in the wheelhouse, resting, with Sheba on her lap.

They must be whoring by now. There would be other women like her, less fortunate than her, out there watching for them, and she would not see them until Monday (it was Saturday night).

The lights of Bremen glowed in the sky and cast multi-coloured backlit umbrae around the shapes of the giants around her. She had taken a walk around Thorwald and seen the mess he was in. She thought of

Thorwald as he,
because of the
battering he was
capable of taking.

The ship was all-over
red-lead patchwork.
The point was that
nothing had ever
seemed to work
anyway, but now the
radio was on the
blink, they were short
of every possible
article you could
think of, including
the right colour of
paint, toilet-paper,
and any other article
you could think of.

During their weeks on the ocean every imaginable seam, passage, ladder, instrument, stairway, companionway and component had been distorted or damaged by the attentions of the sea.

In fact at that moment the Thorwald was as seaworthy as a toy boat, no more than that.

It was a miracle that they had got through the storm in one piece. That was her

judgment.

Professionally.

But, you see, she still needed the money.

Against the lights something moved. She saw a head with an official cap on it pass under the lights where the berth ended in several large bollards, and make to jump over the gunwale, but the head with the cap slipped on the greasy deck and sprawled. She

laughed, for that was what always happened to her, like her first few moments on the Thorwald.

A moment later, a flushed face appeared by the wheelhouse door, and she loosened the twisted coat hanger that kept it fastened.

"Are you the officer of the watch?"

She suddenly wished that she knew where her uniform cap was.

"Y-es, I am".

"I am the Port

Doctor..."

"The what?"

"How's the patient?"

"What..?"

"Have you not got a patient on board?"

"No..!"

"Then why are you flying two flags: 'I Have Contagious Disease on Board', and the 'Yellow Fever' Pennant?"

Her mind turned back to the First Officer struggling with the flag locker. It never had seemed

adequately stocked,
but then she'd never
seen cause to check it.

"I think I know what happened
Doctor, here, have a small
drink to set you to rights..!"

The doctor was glad of
a small rum to assuage
his sore behind, and,
besides, there was a
sudden twinkle in his
eye.

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