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A tale

about a Hanseatic journey

to Pskov Land

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I

The sun was shining unusually bright on that day. There was not a single cloud in the blue sky, and the weather seemed to accompany the unhurried pace of Pskov. The sunbeams were reflected in the cupolas of churches, in the slow waters of the Velikaya River, in the helmets of the warriors who were harmoniously marching in rows near the mighty walls of the Pskov Kremlin. There were women entering a wooden footpath with baskets full of washing, who started to do it while gossiping and sharing the latest news.

Not far from the pier a couple of peasant boys were fishing. They liked the place because here one could often see overseas ships delivering outlandish goods and foreigners wearing fabulous costumes.

Exactly at this moment they noticed some red and white sails at the azure distance. In a while a convoy of various ships nearing the pier could be clearly seen on the horizon. Their decks were crowded with people in foreign clothes resembling those who were called “Germans” or “guests”. The ships moored to the pier, and soon there appeared people on the ladder walking ashore and rolling out barrels and carrying huge bales and sacks on the shoulders. On the deck of the front ship with the silver engraving «Der Schwann» («The Swan») two men were standing and talking. One was tall, well-built, about forty. He had chestnut side-whiskers and was wearing a dark blue travelling cloak over a long caftan with the sleeves neatly tucked up and tightened at the elbows. He had a black hat on his head which was trimmed with lambskin fur on the fringe and tight black boots on his feet. It was none other than the owner of the ship, a very respected Hansa merchant Hieronymus Mayer from Königsberg. This was not his first visit to Pskov to sell fish, yellow amber, blue Flanders cloth and at the same time to buy fine presents for the burgomaster and his spouse. The other man was young, wearing a scarlet beret with fair locks coming out from it, and his grey eyes were shining with enthusiastic dreaminess. His cloak was the same cut as the Mayer’s but it was light

brown. He was the ship owner's nephew named Jakob and it was his first sea voyage. They were talking to each other about the following.

"You will see, Jakob," Mayer said, as he was looking at the pier where people were scurrying about dressed in various garments and one could hear foreign conversations, "you'll see we will find here more beautiful and valuable goods than in Aalborg and Amsterdam. As I have heard, Russians are very keen on fish, and glorious Hansa won't back me up, if the fortune doesn't favour us!"

"No doubt, my dear uncle," the young man answered, "I supposed I will find something worthy for my dear Margaret and her mother."

"Of course, my boy! When I was your age, my father often sailed to this glorious land and told me about the local folk – krivichi. The local people of Pskov land are indeed very interesting folk..."

"Herr Mayer, the last barrel with herring is unloaded," a Hungarian sailor reported with a heavy accent.

"Good, Matia, you may go," the ship owner nodded, and turning to his nephew waved to him. "Let's go, my boy."

Jakob followed his uncle down the ladder. There were a lot of townsmen of different estates, titles and ages already gathered on the pier and all of them were looking at the merchant visitors curiously and delightfully. Among them were boyars wearing tall hats and red high boots, boyar women dressed in povoiniks and headscarves covering the head, soldiers in red homespun coats with sabres in their belts, two clerks with beards rolled like a spring, apprentice boys, bakery women with trays ... in short, a real human roundabout.

Off another ship "Saint Anna" two merchants went ashore. The clothes betrayed them to be Venetians as well as their conversation in Italian between each other.

"Well, Vincenzo, if all these people stay crowded here, we'll have no place to unload our goods", one of them, who had a melancholic narrow pale face, complained in a nice tenor. He wore a folded cloak in emerald green, elegant hands with long slender woman-like fingers peeped out from underneath.

“Hey, you! Be careful, it’s fragile glass!” The words were addressed to a helmsman hitching ahead with the load.

“You are right, Beraldo,” the other answered in a somewhat hoarse with a cold voice, who was dressed in dark purple and wore black gloves. He resembled an eagle owl due to his peaky nose and gloomy eyes. “Look! There come damned Prussian merchants!”

Jakob and his uncle also noticed them and hurried to pass by. They as most Germans did not like arrogant Venetians both for their commitment to the Pope and, as rumoured, for smuggling dealings that had found there its hotbed. Italians, on their part, neglected Prussians, firstly, for their Protestant confession and, secondly, for the alliance between the Prussian king and Henri II, who was claiming some northern duchies. Moreover, they believed that their goods, silver and glass dishes, could attract more customers than any herring.

“I will be right back, Jakob. Wait for me here,” Mayer said and headed to a clerk sitting not far away and writing down the amount of goods.

“Yes, dear uncle,” the nephew answered absently. He was already engrossed in this motley roundabout and could hardly turn himself to the right and to the left. Suddenly a starveling in a threadbare shirt slipped by him. At the same time there came a scream of a woman in the crowd.

“Good gracious! What is happening here?”

After having elbowed his way, Jakob saw two women. One was elderly, with a scarlet brocade kichka covering her head and a motley shawl over the shoulders, the younger one wore a marine green summer dress and a kokoshnik with emeralds on her head. The first one had a face expression full of infinite indignation and the latter - confusion.

“What happened, madam?” a village constable in a homespun coat asked the elderly woman.

“Oh, dear! One knave stole a ring from the little finger of my niece!” The woman’s cheeks were swollen from indignation and flushed crimson like her kichka. She resembled a fluffy turkey hen. “We came to have a look at silverware,

and there was he! Pulled the ring and took to his heels! There he is! The impudent! He is jumping aboard!”

Indeed, the thief, whom Jakob had noticed, ran up astern of “Saint Anna” and was rocking on the captain’s bridge with impudent delight. The people, who had gathered around, pointed at him with their fingers. One could hear astonished cries and chuckles. The Venetians, who had just presented their goods to customers, were at first mute from surprise and then furiously burst out into curses. The village constable was the first one to grasp what to do.

“Follow me, guys! Let’s catch the thief!” he ordered. Other constables dismounted and dashed to the ship. One was faster than the others and rushed to the captain’s bridge to catch the troublemaker but he climbed up the sail yard as dexterously as a monkey and, balancing on it, quizzed down at the constables.

“We’ll make it hot for you, son of a gun!” the first village constable cried from below. Jakob, not hesitating any more, ran up to the ship, climbed up a barrel under the mast, pushed himself with both feet from it and hung holding the sail yard. It was obviously unexpected for the thief. Jakob used his confusion to seize his leg and pulled him down on soft sacks, and then jumped down.

“My, what a German, what a grip!” the constables voiced their approval. The defeated, who was lying pitifully, blinked in fright and covered his face with the hands. Jakob caught a sight of a lilac-stone-ring rolling out of his bosom. Carefully the young man picked it up and saw just the girl dressed in marine green walking to the ladder together with her chaperone. Jakob stretched his hand out to her with the ring in it.

“Thank you, merchant!” the voice of the young lady sounded like a lute string. Jakob felt drowning in her sea-deep eyes, and that was why he hurried to bow and to whisper the first thing that came to his mind.

“Meine Fräulein, ich bin immer zu Ihren Diensten!“ (Madam, I am always at Your Service!)

He whispered in German but the young woman understood him.

“I beg you to take this ring as a gift. My mother told me this stone, the lilac garnet, would keep you from betrayal.” She moved her eyelashes toward the big stone in the ring. Jakob put the ring on his finger and reverently kissed the hand of his new patroness.

“The infidel is a smart chap! In a word, a brave one!” the elderly woman spoke in approval as she noticed how the face of her niece glowed. “It’s a pity he doesn’t speak our language. Otherwise, he would be a good match for you, Nastyenka!”

“Ah, auntie, please!” Nastyenka set the kokoshnik straight on her head, cast a radiant glance at the young merchant and glided with her aunt through the crowd. Jakob followed her with enchanted eyes for a while and didn’t see when his uncle approached him.

“I have watched everything! I am proud of you!” Mayer tapped him on the shoulder so heavily that Jakob almost lost his balance. “Now let’s get off before the papists turn us out!” The Venetians were implied. Jakob went after his uncle. Dozens of maiden eyes and exalted whisper followed him.

“We’ll clear it up with you, smart guy!” the constables said as they walked the unlucky thief down off the ship. “We’ll take you to the posadnik, he’ll give you hell!”

II

A warm summer night shut down in Pskov. Merchant ships, boats and vessels were rocking at the pier with their proud carved rostrums up. The water was splashing quietly under the broadsides. Everybody on “The Swan” was sleeping. Only the old boatswain Peter van Hegel was standing on the deck keeping the watch at Mayer’s request and peering into the cloudless starlit distance. His thoughts were as clear and, at the same time, mysterious as the night sky. He was thinking about his native town, his wife Luise and daughter Katrin, and also what was awaiting them in the future... Suddenly Hegel turned his head. A grey shadow seemed to have moved along the broadside and slipped in to the hold with herring barrels. Rats? It was unlikely. Hegel put the lantern out and walked down the stairs to the

hold trying to keep quiet. He pressed himself into the corner, where a twisted rope and food boxes were, and began to peer into the darkness. After a while, he could see a human figure looming near the barrels. For a moment the figure turned the face to him, and Peter almost dropped the lantern. It was Matia!

“Why is he here? What is he doing at this time?” While Peter was hectically thinking what to do, Matia peeped into one barrel then into another, and out of his belt he took a small velvet bag with something friable and fine, either sand or pepper, and threw it into a barrel, putting a couple of herrings over and went at ease to the stairs past the boatswain, hiding behind the boxes. Hegel heard him going up.

“Is the rogue going to poison the fish?” The old man froze with horror. He hardly got out of his simple hideout and went upstairs too. When his head was above the deck, he saw Matia. The latter was standing in the stern, and there were two more persons by him. Peter looked attentively and recognized the Venetians from “Saint Anna.”

“What do they want here?” he thought. He could not be seen behind the mast but he could hear their conversation.

“I have done everything as you told, senor Vincenzo!” Matia reported in a hushed voice, he spoke Italian. “I have heard that Mayer is heading his ship to Livonia. Thus we’ll have the most luck!”

“Good boy, Matia!” Vincenzo, the merchant who resembled an eagle owl, answered. “You will get the reward you deserve!” He took a moneybag with silver out of his bosom and gave it to the Hungarian. The latter pulled it greedily under his jacket, and Beraldo added, “Nobody will suspect you, you can be sure. Everybody knows how much you are devoted to Herr Mayer!” A sinister smile slipped off his thin lips. “Who would ever think of searching the fish through for smuggled goods?”

“So that’s it! Smuggling! Abject hireling!” Hegel realized everything. He did not know, what had been planted into the barrel, but he understood that his master was in danger. His first thought was to run to the cabin and tell everything.

Being too excited, he hit his head against the mast. Of course, he was heard.

“There is somebody there!” Vincenzo said hoarsely. “Matia, go and check!”

Matia rushed to the mast and found the paper-pale boatswain there.

“Senores!” he cried. “Look, what a fish we caught in our net!”

Vincenzo and Beraldo ran up and saw the old man too.

“You, old wolf, you were spying on us!” Vincenzo took him by the collar.

“Matia! I will throttle you with my own hands, abject degenerate!” Peter exclaimed and tried to get out of the hands of the Italian, but the latter held him tight.

“Listen to me, my friend!” Beraldo spoke in oily insinuating voice. “If you try to raise your hand to our helper Matia or tell Mayer about it, you will have to pay for it.” He took a dagger out of his belt as a proof.

“When we are back, I will tell everything to His Majesty, and your gang of robbers will be caught!” poor Hegel promised.

“You don’t say, dear!” Beraldo bleated still sweeter and then became serious again. “Remember, we are not to get frightened this way. Our doge, Madonna bless him (and he crossed himself), will not let take advantage of his loyal servants!”

Vincenzo and Matia nodded in agreement.

“Then your doge is just a robber like you!” Peter said fiercely and stopped short because Beraldo put the dagger to his throat.

“For saying that, old man,” Vincenzo warned gloomily, “you can be hanged. Matia, pull him to the sailyard!”

“You don’t say, dear friend,” Beraldo spoke in his oily voice again, “let me better cut his throat with this dagger!”

“Come to your senses, Beraldo! We don’t need blood on the ship. Well, old man, you may live,” and he released Hegel. “But remember, Matia will watch you and if you say a word to any one of the crew about our deal, your wife will never see you again!”

“We warn you!” Beraldo confirmed with meaning. “Let’s go, Vincenzo!” And both pals went back to their ship, wrapping themselves up in the cloaks.

“Have you got that?” Matia asked the poor boatswain and waved his hand when the latter nodded in obedience. “All right, old shrimp, go to bed, now it is my relief!”

It was sleepless as well in the chambers of Posadnik Shigona. The host was visited by his sister Varvara Afanasyevna, the woman who had accompanied Nastyenka at the pier. He was listening to the story, told excitedly by his sister about the incident as she was sipping water from a drinking bowl.

“...And then, brother, he gave the ring back to your daughter and she said, “Take it as a gift from me”. And he took and kissed her hand. There are really such fine young men in Germany, aren’t there?” the old boyar woman finished her story with a superior air.

“The game leaves the den to look for the hunting man,” Posadnik nodded and leaned on his elbow with a sigh. “Only one thing is not good about them, Varvara. They are said to have a weakness for girls and can lead somebody else’s bride away from the altar.”

“Really?” Varvara Afanasyevna was astonished and took a big sip. “Well, brother, I’ll tell you my story. When I was young, I enjoyed going to the pier to watch merchants unloading their goods. Of course, my mother didn’t know about it. And one infidel, a Swede or a Saxon, set his heart on me... He gave me a shawl as a gift – cloth from overseas, colour of the moon, with silver threads. And I thought what to do with it, so that my mother didn’t get suspected. I hung it over the window in a room to protect from the bright sunshine. And? Nobody got any clue.” Varvara Afanasyevna burst out laughing and her earrings quivered.

“Dear sister, what a chatterbox you are!” Shigona waved his hand in annoyance. “Let’s go to bed, there must be the cockcrow soon.”

The next day was exceptionally fortunate. Mayer selected some black polecat fells and, while putting them into a trunk, he fancied the joy the burgomaster would have about them. And Jakob found wonderful fresh-water pearl necklaces for Margaret and her mother Frau Marta. The treasures were immediately brought to “The Swan”.

“Well, my nephew, things are going well and it means that we can set off soon. And on our way we’ll turn to Livonia and sell the rest herring there.” Mayer, who was content, spoke to his nephew on their way to the ship.

“To Livonia, uncle?” Jakob asked. “And what about the pirates who rob merchant ships on their way to Lake Peipus?”

“Pirates? Jakob, my boy, you are timid as a hare!” the merchant said with indulgence. “The Swan” has already been crossing Livonian and Russian rivers and lakes for ten years and suffered a lot, believe me! My crew is well trained to stand up to robbers. So don’t worry!” He put his hand fatherly over young man’s shoulder. Jakob had still a presentiment of this fight to become fatal for them, but he didn’t argue with his uncle.

On his way he met the boatswain. He took his hat off to greet the master and cast a desperate glance on him as if willing to say something ... but then he remembered the threats of the Italians and Matia’s promise to watch him, he also remembered his only daughter, and drooped. He had no choice but to follow him hanging his head.

III

“May 20th, 1528. Finally our “Swan” left the hospitable Pskov land. Livonia is awaiting us ahead. Many Pskov citizens came to wave goodbye to us...”

Here Jakob stopped remembering the girls on the pier streaming their handkerchiefs as the ship drew away. And among them was she – Nastyenka, the daughter of the town’s governor, who gave him such a priceless gift... Her sky-colour eyes seemed to follow exactly him! Jakob remembered another woman – loving and beloved Margaret, who was waiting for him in his native town of Konigsberg. It was as if he saw her sitting at the sunlit window with embroidery and Frau Marta cutting out a shirt. The marjoram - brown eyes of Margaret were full of dream and hope...

And again! Jakob caught himself out constantly comparing these two looks. The image of one ousted in his mind the other. Being annoyed, the young man shook his head with resolution. Enough! The fate has already taken the decision for him.

He has his sweetheart, Margaret, he is engaged to her once and for all and will not change her for anybody. But no sooner cast he a glance on the ring than he was back to where he had started.

“What on earth is it? I should think of business after all!” Jakob got angry with himself once and for all and, his teeth gritted, went on writing.

“Hegel is sick. He has a toothache. He thinks because of the draught. The doctor applied a compress to him and he felt a relief. I don’t know how long it will take us to get to Livonia, may Saint Martin and Blessed Virgin help us...” At this point he had to stop to say “come in” as somebody knocked at the cabin door.

“Herr Jakob,” Matia said entering the cabin. “Herr Mayer wants to see you on the deck.”

“All right. Tell him I am coming,” Jakob answered. He felt annoyed with his uncle. He always calls the nephew when he is busy with something! Nevertheless, he put on his cloak and went up to the deck trying to guess the reason Mayer needed him this time.

“Have you called me, uncle?” he asked.

“Yes, Jakob. Can you see that ship in front of us?” The merchant pointed his arm at the distance. Jakob saw dim outlines of a ship with blue in the moon night sails.

“I see. So what?”

“Look closer.” Uncle gave him a spyglass. Jakob had a look and saw cannons aboard the ship.

“They are armed!” he cried.

“That’s it. It is not a merchant ship. I don’t know what their intentions are, but we’d better keep in readiness to be on the safe side. Tell everyone about it. And call Hegel here.”

“As you say, uncle,” Jakob nodded and went to do the errand.

Meanwhile the ships approached each other faster. Mayer could already see people standing on the deck. These were men looking terrifying and wearing hats, open kaftans and motley shirts. One had an earring; another had no arm or no eye. They were armed to the teeth with every possible clubs, sables and axes, some of them

had even arquebuses. They were runaway villains, peasants and Cossacks joined in a gang to rob ships. The chief seemed to be a man of powerful physique with shaggy red beard resembling lion's mane. He held himself grandly and arrogantly, his look was terrifying. He was talking to the robbers about something, at the same time he was sharpening his sabre with a muzzle on the handle, obviously anticipating the coming fight.

"Russian corsairs!" Mayer realised. "They won't probably hanker after the fish, but in case of boarding they will not miss the most valuable - fells and pearls!"

"Give the order to bring the ship and the crew into readiness to repel the attack," Mayer told the boatswain who had just come.

"Yes, sir!" Hegel uttered distinctly. "Listen to my command!" he shouted loud to the sailors. "Sail down, with guns to the starboard side!"

In some seconds the whole crew was at the starboard side armed with what one could find on the ship. Jakob squeezed a small axe in his hands. He was overwhelmed both with fear and thirst for a real fight. The chief finished sharpening his weapon and gave "The Swan" a hostile look. Cold sweat ran down Jakob's spine. All were silent and even tried not to breathe. The tension was the highest ever. "Fire!" the chief cried suddenly and pulled his sabre up. The next moment several cannons and arquebuses fired in salvos at the same time. The robber ship's side was covered with smoke. Two cannonballs missed the target but the third one hit the side of "The Swan" just above the waterline. Mayer ordered to close the shut hole with bales and food sacks. The robber's boat came quite near and chief's mate folded his hands horn-like and shouted, "Hey, you, overseas turkeycocks! You'd better not resist! Look who is standing in front of you, the merciless chief Nikita Fedorovich himself, nicknamed Bear's Ear. None of merchants could escape from him. So give us your treasures, martens, beavers, pearls, silver! It will be better for you!"

"What is he saying?" Mayer asked the doctor who spoke Russian and served as interpreter. He scratched his beard and answered, "They seem to want you to give them your valuable goods of free will. Then it will be easier for you."

“Oh, no!” the merchant cried in excitement and his eyes shone. “That won’t happen! Friends,” he spoke to the crew, “put up the sails! Full ahead! Let’s see if the Russian pirates have hard bones!”

Jakob ran up to the helmsman and told him, “Tomas, slew the ship about!”

“Why?” the helmsman wondered.

“We’ll ram their boat!” the young man blurted out, and Tomas saw the excitement flickering in his eyes.

“Are you kidding?” Tomas was taken back.

“No!” the young man answered firmly. “Slew “The Swan” about and quickly!”

Slowly “The Swan” was making a 90-degree turn and was about to transfix the robber’s boat like an arrow.

“Chief, they seem to start a ram!” a sinewy man with a coal-black beard cried to the chief of corsairs.

“I can see it myself,” the chief said gloomy. “Now, Stepan, turn the boat about to get board to board. And tell the guys to get ready to attack.”

“The Swan” came nearer and nearer to the boat. It was very close to break it into pieces, but the boat turned just in time and two vessels crashed side by side. The people on both ships fell down to the deck, but the gang of Nikita the Bear’s ear jumped up quickly and rushed to boarding. Sabres and daggers began to clang colliding in the heat of the fight. Mayer fought against the chief’s mate, who was not tall but fast and dodgy. He resembled a polecat in his face and body, even his grin was beastly. Mayer pushed him to the captain’s bridge, but the robber could knock out his sword. He was about to pierce Mayer, but fortunately Jakob appeared from behind right in time and split the “polecat’s” head with his axe.

“You were right in time here, son! Thank you.” Mayer spoke emotionally shaking his nephew’s hand. “Now let’s defeat the rest!” And they rushed downstairs.

Forgetting about his tooth, Hegel, armed with two bone-handled knives, darted out on the deck, where the fight was in full swing. He took the aim at the robber, who was fighting with the helmsman at the mast, swung his arm to the full ... and both knives nailed the villain’s sleeves to the mast.

The Bear's Ear had sharpened his sabre no in vain. He was adroit and quick with it, causing death right and left. Having killed the next enemy, he found himself face to face with Jakob. A close fight ensued. The chief's face, red and breathless, was sweating. He was angry that he could not finally kill the importunate enemy and so his every next cut became heavier and heavier.

No one noticed Matia, the spy, in such a bustle. Like a rat leaving a drowning ship, he sneaked to the rear of the broadside and jumped into a rowing boat rolling on the water (someone of the crew had put it down in advance) and headed southeast, rowing hard to get away from the unlucky ship.

Meanwhile, the fight on the ship was in the full swing. Peter van Hegel, wiping the sweat from his forehead, decided to use a stratagem.

"Guys!" he gave an order to two of his mates. "Hurry downstairs and get the sacks with rusks out, all of them but one! Quickly!"

They disappeared in the hold and came back with two food sacks. Hegel ordered to bring them to the left side of the deck and then he came out himself. He made a cough and shouted to get robbers' attention.

"Hey, you, greedy rats! Here are the treasures that we are giving to the river! Watch!"

He gave a sign, and both of his mates raised the sacks over the head and threw them overboard. There came a loud splash. Nikita the Bear's Ear, who had just been cutting the enemy with his sabre, stopped. His arm froze for a moment in the air, and then, with his eyes wide open, he rushed to the broadside and jumped over it into the water. His mates, looking so spacey as well, rushed after him. They dived in trying to get the "precious" as they thought goods. Meanwhile, Tomas took his place at the wheel and headed slowly away from the fighting site.

The robbers, who came up to the surface, burst out cursing as they realised they had been tricked. Some of them swam up to the ship trying to climb up the gangway, but got hit on the head by the brave Germans. "The Swan" was sailing farther and farther, and the robbers were forced to stay back. The crew tapped each other on the shoulder in triumph and wiped the sweat off the foreheads.

“Gosh, they won’t forget this fight for a long time!” Mayer said with his face shining. “By the way,” he said to the helmsman, “and where is Matia?”

“I don’t know,” the man shook his head in confusion and looked at his mates. They exchanged glances with the same uncertainty and shrugged their shoulders.

“Probably, he was killed in the fight, and his body was thrown aboard”, Tomas made a timid conjecture.

“May he rest in peace!” the merchant bowed his head and turned to boatswain.

“And you are our hero today! If we hadn’t got your mates, we’d all have been killed, as sure as gun! I wonder what was inside those sacks that they threw overboard.”

“Provisions, Herr Mayer!” one of the mates shouted.

“Stale rusts!” the other explained.

“You did what?” Mayer threw a strict glance at the boatswain. “What self-will!”

“My fault, master!” Peter uttered distinctly and sprang to attention with hands at his sides.

“Did you get my permission for that?” Mayer was about to grab him at the front of his shirt, but suddenly remembered his heroic deed and calmed down. “All right, I forgive you for the first time, but when we are short of food, it will be your debt!”

IV

In Rugodiv Mayer’s crew changed to the ship “Lynx” and set off into the Baltic Sea. The weather was clear and stormless. Black-head seagulls were skimming over the waves. All the crew were elated. One could see that even Peter van Hegel cheered up and forgot little by little about the dark secret covering the herring in the hold. On the tenth day Jakob saw a town appearing far away on the horizon. It was their desired destination – Riga, an important Livonian merchant harbour.

“Uncle, have a look!” the young man cried with excitement.

“Thank God!” Mayer said. “Then we’ll anchor soon.”

As they were coming closer to the land, he saw some people on the pier, who were dressed in black judge kaftans and black gloves. When the ship moored to the pier, a tall elderly man in the front went aboard.

“What do I owe your visit to, sirs?” Mayer asked politely.

“Bailiff Rupert Ericsson,” the elderly man announced in cracked voice and bowed.

“To prevent illegal activities I must inspect your ship.”

“Uncle, why...?” Jakob tried to protest, but Mayer put his imperious hand on nephew’s shoulder. Other bailiffs came aft in the same dignified manner.

“What is your name, sir, and where are you from?” one of them asked strictly.

“Hieronymus Mayer, a merchant from Prussia. We are sailing now from Pskov.”

“What do you have on board, my good man?” asked the other.

“Fish to sell in your town and some expensive things for my burgomaster. If you want to, I will myself follow you to the hold where we keep the goods.”

Mister Ericsson and other officials followed the merchant downstairs. They cautiously inspected all the bales, sacks and baskets, peeped into the barrels and rummaged all the herring. Hegel, standing aside, murmured to himself. “Impudent pen-pusher! Won’t leave us in peace! Damn them!”

“Good gracious! What is it?” a short bailiff exclaimed suddenly, taking with two fingers the ominous velvet bag out of the barrel. Hegel gasped and even sat down on the floor.

“Let us see!” Ericsson rubbed his hands with anticipation.

“What if there is opium inside?!” the third bailiff asked in fear.

“Open it!” Ericsson ordered.

The short one pulled the ribbon carefully and untied it, then looked into the bag. His eyes moved up slowly, the mouth opened. He made a deep sound resembling the squeaking of a dry wheel and dipped his hand inside. All crowded around him. The arm of the short man unclenched, presenting everyone a handful of blood-red stones resembling carnelians. At the sight of these stones the bailiffs drew back in superstitious horror like Egyptians in front of the picture of Anubis.

“Scarlet amber!” Rupert Ericsson whispered in one breath and was about to faint.

“God keep us!”

“The goods of the mean Italians!” his fellow groaned as well. “Smuggled goods!”

The short one put the stones back into the bag and turned strictly to Mayer and his nephew, who were not less overwhelmed.

“What?” he said. “What is your explanation?”

“I assure you, sirs, it is a mistake!” Mayer tried to explain. “I swear on my honour that we didn’t and don’t have any relations with Italians. And I have no idea who could plant the forbidden in Livonia stones into the barrel!”

“My uncle tells the truth!” Jakob nodded heatedly.

“And you, young man, keep quiet when adults are speaking!” Ericsson checked him. “So, sir, do you refuse to explain this strange occurrence?”

“I have nothing to say, sirs!” the merchant answered firmly.

“In this case we have to seize your ship and all the goods,” the old man promised indifferently, “and you will be taken into custody until the trial passes the verdict.”

“But it’s impossible!” Jakob dashed forward again, but was stopped by the dry hand of the respected bailiff.

“Keep it in mind, sirs, that we are acting for the benefit of the law and justice,” Ericsson said in hard and calm voice, “therefore, you have no right to object. Is everything clear to you?”

Nothing could be said against it. Mayer, quite diminished and followed by icy looks of the bailiffs, and his nephew were forwarded to land. The whole crew were almost crying when the master was leaving. Peter van Hegel suffered the most torments.

“What an old idiot I am! What an empty cast-iron pot!” he repeated over again wringing his hands.

“Why didn’t I warn my master about this damned forgery? Now he will be put into prison through my fault! What have I done!”

Mayer had never felt such a shame. Just imagine – he, a respectable merchant of Hansa, was convoyed up the street as a convict followed by curious eyes of idles... What humiliation for an honest burgher! Jakob clenched his fists silently and looked down. He wished it were a dream, but it was the terrible reality. They were brought to the town hall, where trials usually took place. There two guards took

them to the underground floor. There were cells where they would spend the night, maybe not the only one. Then, the guards left commissioning the arrested to the warder.

“Uncle, how did it happen?” Jakob asked.

“I am afraid, son, I don’t have any explanation for it. Well, I have one idea... but no! It can’t be true!”

“What do you guess?”

“I have an idea that there is a betrayer in my crew.”

“A betrayer?”

“Yes, a spy hired by these disgusting catholic! He must be the one to plant the bag with the forbidden stone to my goods!”

“But who could it be, uncle?”

“Who, indeed?... It can’t be Hegel! I know him for eight years and trust him as my own brother. He will go through fire and water for me. Tomas Neumann? Rudolf Mitze? They are still quite green and who knows what is on their mind... Maybe it is Fabian Krause? He always seemed to me to be reserved and unsociable... “

“And what if..” Jakob lingered, “if it was our Hungarian captive?”

“Matia? Why do you think so?”

“He is Hungarian, and Hungary is quite close to Venice, then we could suppose that he had relations with Venetian Doge and used a chance to get a reward. Am I right in my reasoning, uncle?”

“Yes, Jakob. Your reasoning is rather well-grounded, but we shouldn’t jump to conclusions. Who knows what comes out then...”

Soon the warder brought the prisoners their meal.

“Your case has been submitted to the court,” he said. “There will be a trial and if they reach no verdict, they will inform the Great Magister himself.” At these words his eyes lit up with reverence. “He will settle the dispute, who is right and who is not!”

“Will the trial come to a conclusion soon?” The merchant asked impatiently.

“I know nothing about it,” the warder answered. “Maybe three days and maybe a week, it depends on how much time the judges will need. And until then, you’d better be quiet and wait!”

“A week!” Mayer cried. “My God! We are expected in Konigsberg and my crew feel restless, and we have to stay here like robbers...”

The warder went away. The night shut down. Physically and mentally exhausted Mayer fell asleep on the bank. But Jakob could not sleep. He was sitting at a low window, looking at the smoky lead starless sky, and was thinking of his beloved. Thinking of her, he fell into somewhat half-conscious state, but suddenly his daydreaming was interrupted by a knock at the door. Only the warder could knock this way.

“Come in!” Jakob said, coming to himself.

The warder came in. He was accompanied by a stranger dressed like an official, his hat and shoes, unlike the ones of the judges, were white. He seemed to be about thirty. His face was covered with a small beard, and there was a sly look in his eyes. Mayer woke up right away.

“Your old friend wants to see you. You have no more than ten minutes,” the warder said and left.

Jakob stared at the visitor’s face. He gave his uncle an inquiring glance, but the latter was not less surprised.

“Who are you, sir?” Mayer asked. “It seems to me that I have seen you somewhere...”

“You know me very well, my dear!” the guest answered taking his hat off and revealing his fair curls. “Can you remember the poor binder that you saved from debt-serfdom five years ago?”

“Good gracious! I have recognised you!” Mayer cried. “You are Theodor Gernstein!” And they embraced like old friends.

“And who is this young man?” Gernstein asked.

“Jakob, the son of my cousin. I took him with me for the first time to grasp the rules of trading. Jakob, this is my friend Mister Gernstein.”

“Nice to meet you,” the binder shook Jakob’s hand. “I owe my freedom to your uncle. He was in Livonia five years ago. The Great Magister gave me an order to bind the Bible, but there was a fire and my workshop burnt down. I would not escape the bondage but fortunately Herr Mayer defended me before the authorities and paid them his own money. In a short time, I built a new workshop, bought new materials and finally got my job ready. But why are you here? I saw you being taken by the bailiffs and realised that you got in trouble.”

Mayer told him everything.

“Yes, you are in trouble,” Gernstein said. “I have heard a lot so far about the deeds of these villains. You are not the first to fall their victim. My father, a serving seafarer, who was sailing to Italy on official business, told me about the gang smuggling scarlet amber through their spies. Their chief is a certain Baron Santorini. There was more than one attempt to catch him, but it is impossible to annihilate the whole gang. Listen, as I am your debtor, I will help you to get out of here!”

“Theodor, my friend!” Mayer cried.

“Hush! Listen to me carefully. Firstly, we need to get rid of the warder... What have you said, Herr Mayer? Did the bailiffs take all your money? It isn’t bad. You must have something valuable left, mustn’t you?”

Jakob sighed and looked at the ring with a lilac garnet, and his heart began to beat. Now it’s the time the gift of his Russian patroness would serve him!

“I will take care of the guards,” the unexpected rescuer went on. “At midnight a carriage is waiting for you at the town hall to bring you to the harbour. Don’t hesitate! I know what I am doing!”

“Heaven has sent you, dear Mister Gernstein!” Jakob made a deep bow.

“Time is out!” the warder shouted.

“See you soon!” Theodor said goodbye stretching his hand to Mayer and Jakob.

At the appointed time Jakob looked out of the window. He saw the guards in the street drinking wine, and decided that it was high time. He called up the warder and explained everything to him. The ring was successful in playing its role and

the warder, who just loved rare stones and put it into his purse, agreed to lead them through a secret passage and told them beforehand to put on hooded cloaks.

“Uncle, let’s run!” Jakob whispered. They left the town hall from the western side, where there was a two-horse carriage waiting for them, covered with black cloth.

A coachman dressed in black was sitting on the coach box. At this moment the light went on in the top window and a man in a long robe looked out and cried “Betrayal!”, and then disappeared. Jakob saw Theodor Gernstein running to them from the eastern side, where both guards were lying unconscious.

“What are you waiting for? Get quickly into the carriage!” he said shortly. They got into the carriage, and the coachman urged on the horses snapping a whip.

“You were just right in time!” Mayer said. “But what have you done to the guards?”

“Ah, fiddlesticks!” the binder grinned. “I have borrowed belladonna powder from my brother-in-law, who is a doctor, and mixed it to tobacco and offered them to have a sniff. These people are greedy for tobacco and alcohol. They had been sniffing until they fainted.

The carriage was fast at the harbour where there was a tavern. The coachman stopped. Mayer and Jakob got out.

“How can we thank you for what you have done for us, my friend Theodor?” asked Mayer with tears in his eyes, squeezing Gernstein’s hand.

“Don’t mention it, my dear Hieronymus,” the latter answered. “One good turn deserves another! Now it’s time to say goodbye, and God save you wherever you are!”

When the carriage was out of sight, sailors, somewhat drunk, started to go out of the tavern. One of them was Hegel. They stopped and froze when they saw their masters safe and sound, and then began to cry hooray and thank all saints for the happy end. Of course, Hegel confessed to his master that Matia was Italians’ spy and begged to forgive him, a silly old man.

“Remembering how you saved us from the robbery,” Mayer said, “I forgive you, old man. Serve me as you have done so far, and I won’t forget you.”

At this moment some sailors screamed in surprise. Many court officers rode to the pier. One of them was Rupert Ericsson. He dismounted and came up to Mayer.

“We followed you, sir,” he said. “You tried to escape, but he is right who follows the law. You will have to deal with the Great Magister. Hey, you, give the horses to the prison breakers!”

Jakob was horror struck. In his thoughts he was just embracing Margaret at home, and now they were about to be imprisoned again! But Mayer did not bat an eyelid.

“Wait, Mister Ericsson!” he said. “Give us the confiscated amber and I will release you from trying us again!”

Ericsson hemmed, exchanged glances with his mates and then followed the request of the merchant. The latter took the bag, went into the water knee-deep, swung his arm and threw the bag as far as possible into the sea.

“That’s it, dear sirs!” He turned back to amazed Ericsson and the others. “No evidence means no trial! You should know that we are not guilty but betraying hirelings! Goodbye and don’t think ill of us. Jakob, friends! It is high time to set off! Our homeland flags are awaiting us!”

Epilogue

The ship “Lynx” sailed back to the native town of Konigsberg over the Baltic Sea. The friends and the family welcomed them with tears of joy, and the burgomaster threw a feast on their return. Jakob and Margaret got married on the first day of summer in the church of Saint Sebastian. Nobody could count how many pork sausages were eaten and how much wine was drunk. Mayer bought a house for them, and with time Jakob succeeded in trade and became rich.

What happened to betrayer Matia, nobody knows. He is said to become ill with consumption and be brought to Venice, where he was doctored to death.

In some time in far-away Pkov, the cook of Posadnik Shigona, struck with amazement, found sparkling pieces of scarlet amber in two fishes caught in the Baltic Sea. Posadnik sent them right away to Tsar Vasiliy Ioannovich in Moscow, and ordered a religious service on such a miracle. There was such a bell toll, which

Pskov hadn't heard for a very long time. People say that ravens at once flew away in fright as if cannon-fired, when they were about to land on the bell tower.