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GENNADIY LOGINOV



**HIRED
SELF-KILLER OR THE
WINNER'S TRIAL**

Gennadiy Loginov

Hired Self-killer or The Winner's Trial

http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=55329928

ISBN 9785449879240

Аннотация

What is inversionism? In simple terms, it is a reversal to ideals, step back from the edge of the cliff. It is not about an ordinary repetition of old ways but about returning updated. It is an attempt (perhaps a little quixotic) to turn the inverted world back. It is the avant-garde without provocation and scandalous tricks. It is art, experimental in form but traditional in the noblest sense of the word, since its goal is reaching out to minds and hearts to make the world slightly better.

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ISBN 978-5-4498-7924-0

Created with Ridero smart publishing system

Knight's Tour

All of the local nobility gathered to see the White Knight off on his long journey. The traveller had a knight's title, so everyone addressed him accordingly. Actually, he had very equine features, and although it was obvious to any observer that he was more likely a knight-horse than a horse-knight, calling him simply the Horse was considered somewhat disrespectful. Traditions existed for a reason, and everyone present would agree with that. The White Queen led the parade, and between two White Rooks, a column of White Pawns in their ceremonial vestments walked accompanied by two White Bishops. They honoured their hero, and His Majesty the White King personally presented him with a new hat, since the weather was quite cold.

The White Knight's twin brother even shed a single tear of joy, being touched by what he saw. More recently, their enemy, the Blacks, had plotted, ending in an attempt on the White King's life. Retreating with his loyal pawns, who willingly gave their lives for the honour of the chess crown, the White King had snivelled and prayed while his foes had followed on his heels, driving him into a corner. But the White King had been saved by the sudden appearance of the White Knight, who had violated the cunning plans of the enemies.

Some called him "Upstart". One possible cause was the fact that he appeared where no one expected him and stuck his nose

where no one asked him. Another reason was his ability to jump effortlessly over any pieces, allied or enemy, who stood on the intermediate squares on the trajectory of his move. Of course, other chessmen secretly envied him for being unattached to the board. He was easy-going, swift and courageous, he wasn't afraid of adventure and risk, and that's why even the Black King couldn't hide from the White Knight's attack behind the backs of his vassals. Enemies involuntarily respected and feared the White Knight who dared to threaten the Black Queen alone, without the risk of counter-attack. No one else could do it.

Black Pawns hunted him, Black Bishops and Black Rooks chased him, and the Black Queen attempted ambushes, but the White Knight left a trap again and again and made fools out of them, prancing victoriously on the board.

White Bishops, proudly marching along their diagonals, never altered their once determined political course: they often accused the White Knight of frivolity, recklessness and ideological inconsistency, since he changed the square colour at each turn. But the White Knight acted as he considered necessary, forcing to reckon with his choice both allies and aliens.

He stood alone in closed positions, where the possibilities of long-range pieces were greatly limited. Rushing like a whirlwind, he could beat anyone without fear of retaliation. And his star turn was the famous "fork," when the White Knight threatened to attack two or more chessmen at once. Only Black Knights could kick him back for his impudent raids,

but, realistically calculating the possible chances and risks, they usually didn't bring the matter to an open confrontation.

These days, a temporary ceasefire was planned between the parties of the conflict, because they needed rest before a new battle; therefore, having made fifty bloodless moves, the opponents declared a draw. Naturally, no one had any illusions, and the White Knight, who had repeatedly proved his courage and devotion to the White Cause, was given the task of scouting the theatre of future military operations under the guise of a peaceful tour. The optimal route also implied that the White Knight would visit each square of the chessboard no more than once. All in all, he had to examine sixty-four squares without repetition, which was possible, but still wasn't an easy task to perform. However, the White Knight had no doubt – he could handle it.

The history of the confrontation between the two conflicting groups rooted in hoary antiquity. Numerous political scientists, historians and philosophers could give numerous reasons for its beginning, blowing away a century-old layer of dust from ancient chronicles that kept records of old openings, middlegames and endings, study each zugzwang turn by turn and make assumptions about whether it had been possible to avoid this or that checkmate which had been announced to the grandfathers and great-grandfathers of the present Kings. In the White Knight's opinion, things were much more straightforward and banal.

Firstly, White and Black pieces had different colours. And

secondly, they lived in different parts of the world, occupying opposite sides of the chessboard. And for the vast majority, these reasons were more than enough for the emergence of persistent hostility and the outbreak of armed conflict.

Indeed, in the depth of the heart, each Pawn (no matter, White or Black) cherished the hope of walking through all squares, overcoming all obstacles on the way to the opposite end of the board, and being promoted to the Queen or at least to the Knight in some cases. When other chessmen stood up the path to success, conflict was inevitable.

Of course, only a few reached the opposite side. Many of them sincerely believed that it was better there than at home. Whether it was or not is the topic of a separate conversation.

Strong pieces wanted to get as much influence and space as possible, that's why they sought to occupy the board centre, possibly freeing it of all enemy pieces. And realizing that they could never control their enemies alone, the pieces united on the principle of kinship and resemblance with others of the same colour and starting position.

Although some meticulous researchers tried to find a certain natural similarity between multi-coloured pieces, insisting on their common origin from monochrome pieces (presumably, the united Grays, who had migrated along the length of the entire playing space in time immemorial). They traced an analogy in the similarity of the initial setup and appearance of the pieces living on different sides of the board, but not everyone believed this

theory. For the majority, it had absolutely no value: well, maybe they once had common ancestors, but now they are enemies – so what's the difference?

Of course, there were pacifists and cosmopolitans who periodically claimed that lined boundaries should be abolished, letter and number coordinates should be cancelled, all squares and pieces should be painted in the same colour, and chessmen had to forget all past offences, living in one big friendly family; but this romantic nonsense wasn't taken seriously, and if someone pushed for this too persistently, he was silenced.

Some saw the reasons for the current situation in the shortcomings of the political regime, but it also seemed to the White Knight quite far-fetched: yes, chess pieces had a monarchy, with kings, queens, strong and weak figures, pawns; but at the same time, in formally democratic draughts, for example, despite the loud statements that all men were equal, everybody still wanted to become kings.

Proponents of the conspiracy theory traced the system in the periodic repetition of certain moves and situations, others attributed everything to historical regularity, and believers stated that behind all the moves and events on the playing board, including the most insignificant, someone's higher will could be seen – but since the chess party had entered the Age of Enlightenment, such views were denied and ridiculed.

Anyway, all these questions were eternal and couldn't be resolved just like this, on the ride. The White Knight liked

to think in his spare time whether there was a game outside the board, but now he was too busy by current concerns. After marking some time on the original square, he warmly said goodbye to all of those who had come to see him off, and began his long and arduous journey of sixty-three moves.

The first few turns were easy for him and brought almost nothing worth mentioning. The White Knight had not yet had time to yearn for a home in a foreign land, but was full of energy and vigor, appreciating the trust of the White King himself. He realized the importance and significance of his mission and believed that he wouldn't fail his banner.

Later, passing through uncharted paths, he saw a nightingale for the first time. Of course, the White Knight had never seen these birds before and, moreover, had not heard their song, knowing only something vague about it from tall tales. Therefore, he could be mistaken. But he really wanted to believe that he was looking at a nightingale. Let it be so, he decided. This nightingale, green and fat, circled gracefully above the board, and then landed right before the White Knight and buzzed, rubbing its front pair of feet.

The White Knight wasn't well versed in music and singing. Chess composers were incomparably closer to him than musical ones, after all. But he knew that all normal nightingales sang delightfully by definition, bringing the trembling admiration to any sophisticated connoisseur, so he also tried to fill himself with high and bright feelings, being ready to absorb all the best

from nature.

The nightingale's body exuded subtle and delicate aromas of blooming spring. Perhaps the White Knight had nothing to compare it with, but, adding two and two, he made a reasonable assumption: the delicate spring aromas should smell just like this. What else could one expect from a nightingale, after all?

Having finished its song, the green nightingale flew away, gracefully fluttering its translucent wings, and the White Knight, inspired and filled with bright feelings, resumed his interrupted journey.

Occupying one of the light squares, he found the Man from draughts nearby. He was in a hurry going somewhere for his business. Of course, they were from different kins and, despite good neighbourly relations and partnership in several fields, they had different goals and purposes. But still, they had the same colour, sharing the Great White Idea, even if they understood it differently.

Therefore, pausing for a friendly conversation, the White Knight persuaded the White Man to deliver his message to home, and the White Man assured him that his path would lie not far from the position of the White King, and in a few moves, he would give him the letter.

The message said that the loyal servant missed home, his native square and all the familiar pieces, but, despite this, his tour was going well, and he would tell all in great detail personally

after his return. In fact, the White Knight wanted to say a lot more, but at the same time, he couldn't find the words, because sometimes emotions and feelings are more important than the most expressive phrases.

Without forcing the White Man to wait longer than it was necessary, the White Knight continued his journey. However, their recent dispute about life positions and political ideologies left an ambiguous aftertaste in his soul.

The Man didn't understand how it was possible for everyone to move differently, in particular, in an "L" pattern, while the White Knight didn't understand how it was possible for everyone to move in the same way and diagonally, in particular.

In the structure of the chess monarchy, the Man saw clear signs of social inequality, which would inevitably give rise to the class struggle, and the White Knight saw a violent egalitarianism in draughts democracy. The banal desire of becoming kings at the cost of others' lives was hidden behind.

The White Knight considered the holy duty of every worthy piece not in an attempt to gain control of the field or prestige and power, but in an adamant determination to sacrifice his life for saving the White King if circumstances dictated that. As for the White Man, he believed that initially, everyone should have equal rights and opportunities, although not everyone was prepared to walk through their path till the end. The victims were inevitable, but one should consciously sacrifice himself and perform his exploits for the benefit of all comrades-in-arms, and

not at the whim of a single piece.

The White Knight didn't consider total genocide as an acceptable method of warfare. In essence, it was enough to decapitate the enemy's resistance by announcing a checkmate to the Black King and forcing his supporters to surrender. The White Man believed that as long as at least one enemy was alive, he would pose a potential threat to the well-being of his fellows by launching terrorist attacks, sabotage, and partisan raids. The survivor would sneak to the king's row, and the lack of timely prevention might cause huge losses.

The White Knight prayed for the preservation of the monarch's soul and health, while the White Man performed a hymn, glorifying equality, freedom and fraternity.

And yet, despite all the fundamental differences in their world-view systems, the White Man and the White Knight respected each other for their valour, loyalty to ideals and determination.

Now, the White Knight's thoughts returned to his native square, the neighbouring pieces, the starting rank more often and, noticing his spleen, he tried to drive it away quickly with marching songs. He sang about the moves and two-colour squares that made up the large playing field. He sang about the valiant pawns who sacrificed their lives for the White King and how their feat would not be forgotten and would be carved with immortal letters in the annals of game battles. He sang about the power of unity and how a single piece (even the Rook or the

Queen herself) would not gain much alone. Proven by time, these hymns announced a checkmate for longing, raising the mood of the sad hero.

So singing on the go, he came across a white sugar who moved somewhere along the board and accidentally stood on his road. Of course, he wasn't an obstacle for the White Knight, but his appearance introduced a certain revival into the monotony of the last turns. Apparently, the sugar lump was wandering around without any specific purpose and maybe wasn't very smart. But at the same time, he was cheerful, enthusiastic and friendly. Now and then, he rolled around the White Knight, then stopped and suddenly began to spin around, wanting to attract attention.

On the one hand, that might have seemed unprofessional and even dangerous for the outcome of his mission, but, clearly, our indefatigable traveller had got tired of the depressing loneliness, so he didn't refuse such a friend and companion. Giving the sugar the name "Dog", he allowed him to follow along, immediately emphasizing that Dog should not interfere with his task. Dog's joy knew no bounds – he spun and jumped, rolling on the trail of the White Knight.

Somewhere in the middle of the board, another unusual meeting awaited the great traveller. At first, he wondered what kind of piece was so insolent to occupy several squares at once, standing right at their demarcation crossroads. She looked bizarre and resembled a pregnant Rook at best.

In a soft and gracious voice, he asked the perfectly reasonable

question about who she was and why the unknown piece allowed herself such liberty. The White Knight received a rather harsh and boorish answer. He was informed he was talking not with some chessman here, but with the Salt Cellar, and she, looking down on all their rules and concepts, would walk and stand where she wanted, how she wanted and when she wanted. But as it soon turned out, even this glaring vulgarity wasn't yet the apotheosis of stupid rudeness, since next, the White Knight heard an obscene offer to follow a route that was not stipulated by any chess rules.

Not considering it possible and, most importantly, necessary to waste his time and energy on polite and useless conversations with every brazen figure, to argue or prove something, the White Knight moved to one of the squares occupied by the Salt Cellar, and painfully kicked her with a hoof. She didn't expect the blow of such strength, immediately lost her balance and, rolling to the very edge of the board, fell into an unknown abyss, from which soon came a loud death ringing of broken glass.

"You can blame yourself for that," the White Knight stated, shaking off the salt from the hat presented to him by the White King. Dog slid towards him, carefully burying its nose in his side, and the tired traveller dozed off, exhausted by the abundance of turns and impressions. He had a disturbing dream in which the Black pieces, in direct accordance with the expectations of all the alarmists, violated the accepted agreements, forgot about the truce conditions, moved their troops to the front line

and, having taken a favourable position, advanced towards the Whites, without waiting until the White Knight triumphantly complete his tour. What a treachery! If the Whites had a little more time in reserve – they would certainly have done so first, and this would go down in history as a pre-emptive strike aimed at capturing the Black King in order to avoid unnecessary bloodshed. The White Knight hurried, wanting to deliver alarming news to the White King, and confirm all suspicions; but the chessboard was expanding infinitely, stretching its boundaries and moving away from his homeland farther and farther. And then, as out of nowhere, four eerie and ugly Horses appeared. They scattered to all four ends of the board, leaving behind only faded squares and destroyed pieces, making no difference for either the Blacks or the Whites.

With the persistent feeling of quiet horror in the first moments after his awakening, the White Knight discovered that Dog was excited, and they had an uninvited guest in the face of the Black Knight, who had inexplicably appeared on the next square.

Fearing that the creepy dream was somehow beginning to come true, the White Knight examined the stranger. They stood one opposite the other, evaluating the opponent and waiting for further development: the White Knight – on the black square and the Black Knight – on the white square. For a long time, both remained silent until, finally, the White Knight took the initiative, welcoming his recent enemy, whom he first met not on the battlefield, but in the field of peaceful actions. After all,

the official truce persisted. Oddly enough, but this seemingly formal and non-binding gesture somehow relieved the situation, allowing both Knights to take a breath and, after exchanging standard greetings, they moved on to small talk.

Consciously avoiding acute political topics and not addressing the current troops number, the strategic location of the Kings and other inappropriate matters, they told different stories, talked about the weather and reduced the pressure in every possible way. Without forgetting to adhere to a certain line, they switched to a more confidential tone. The White Knight said that he came from the dark square “g1”, which was particularly wonderful at this time of the year, and repeated his cover story, stating the peaceful purposes of his travel. Based on the Black Knight’s responses, it was safe to conclude that he had received approximately similar orders from his command and also made a tour around the playing board with a certain purpose.

Understanding everything perfectly, but pretending they understood nothing due to the game conventions, the interlocutors expressed mutual surprise at such a sweet and unexpected meeting of two peaceful and harmless travellers. At some point, the Black Knight even made a surprising move, offering to keep the White Knight company in his difficult journey, but he, in turn, refused courteously, but firmly, attributing to his love of solitude, which only his faithful Dog was allowed to violate.

In fact, the Black Knight didn’t seem like a bad guy. Yes,

they both understood quite well that they were on opposite sides of the barricades despite this precarious short-lived truce: too many moves were made, too many pieces were taken, too many games were played to forget everything and start with a clean slate. Moreover, it was obvious that you had no future if you didn't honour the past. But at the same time, despite the colour difference and the choice of opposite sides, the Black Knight and the White Knight understood each other better than draughtsmen, for example. The matters of loyalty to the oath and crown were close to both of them. Moreover, in a sense, this stranger understood the White Knight even better than his fellow pieces, since they both jumped over obstacles, following an "L" pattern in their movement. Therefore, to the end of this long turn, they sang marching songs together, raised toasts for the health of both Kings and commemorated all those who had been taken from their common two-colour board, no matter whether it was a Black piece or White. They expressed hope that fallen heroes still played on other boards, where no one needed to fear the check or checkmate, there were no Kings, no Pawns, no colours, no squares, no winners or losers.

Somewhere in the distance, old houses of cards were falling. Someone was dicing with death, and small cubes were rolling on the playing graveyard with a distant rumble. But nothing could interrupt their good toasts and cheerful songs of the two lonely pieces who had met in the middle of the board.

The Black Knight spoke frankly about how tired he was

because of all these endless wars and endless chess problems that the constantly lying authorities were in no hurry to solve, demonstrating incompetence for which they deserved to be demoted. He was also annoyed by rumours, of which supporters of the “Queen’s plot” spread. According to them, the Whites were preparing to create eight queens from the pawns right away and to place them on the game board so that no two queens threatened each other and could control the entire field.

Then the Black Knight continued the conversation, talking about his family affairs, in particular – about the cute little pawn, who had been born recently. His offspring wanted to follow his footsteps, but he would like to give her a proper education enough to be promoted to Queen in the future. However, finances were limited, so the Black Knight chose for her between the Rook or the Bishop career.

Anyway, on the next turn, two Knights parted, preserving good memories of each other. They had no illusions and understood that, despite mutual respect and the absence of any reasons for personal hostility, the game could bring them together in a battle and then, most likely, one of them would honourably fall at the hands of the other. This proposition seemed quite sad, but they shared one thought – maybe they would be lucky enough to survive.

In any case, the White Knight remained loyal to the White Kingdom, believing that, right or wrong, it was still his Motherland, great and dear...

...Having already overcome most of his planned route, he hung over the map, checked the guiding compass and noted road observations in his shabby travel diary, when quite unexpectedly, he saw the familiar White Man. To be precise, he was no longer the Man, but one of the draughts White kings.

Now, he seemed prideful and was on his high horse, speaking figuratively, rushing off in a luxurious white carriage. He didn't dignify the old acquaintance with a look, not to mention a small nod or a usual greeting. He disappeared as suddenly as he had appeared, riding to the end of the playing board in a twinkle of an eye, and left the White Knight in slight bewilderment. Perhaps he was just in a hurry, and so he didn't even notice him? Or maybe he did, but didn't have time to nod? It was unlikely. But what was the possible explanation? Had the White Knight changed a lot in his journey, and the draught piece just didn't recognize him? Or maybe, it was not him who had changed drastically..?

What had happened with this nice fellow, who had praised the ideals of partnership and unity? Was the same Man towered now above his brothers-in-arms, revelling in the feeling of superiority? Where were his beliefs, perhaps naïve, but still kind, nice and respectable? Apparently, they remained in the chronicles of past moves only.

The sugar ran up, gently pushing the White Knight to cheer him up at least slightly. The traveller gave up his attempt to understand and said to himself, "Alright. Let's forget about it." But he couldn't just forget. In any case, not right away, in the

same turn.

Making his way through the jungle of multi-coloured squares, files and ranks, he no longer had in himself a hundredth of the former excitement since he had experienced too much. He was tired – not only physically but also mentally. And the White Knight's thoughts kept returning to his native side and his countrymen. Some of them were captured en passant, some participated in the castling, some walked stubbornly to the edge. Well, fate had scattered chessmen across the board.

He tried to entertain himself with thoughts about how he would return and tell everyone what he had seen during his difficult, long and dangerous journey: about the green nightingale's wondrous singing, about the arrogant and rude Salt Cellar, about an interesting and worthy opponent he had met in the face of the Black Knight and about the unpleasant metamorphosis that had happened with the once honest and bold White Man. He imagined how he would introduce Dog to everyone and retire, starting to write memoirs based on his travel notes, where he would tell future generations about the structure of the universe, transferring to them the invaluable experience of his trip around the board...

A familiar buzz interrupted the White Knights' path again. Having circled above, the nightingale landed before him on the board and froze, rubbing its front feet, as if it was expecting something.

“And you are all the same – vile, disgusting and smelly.

I don't know who you are or what you are, but now it seems to me, nightingales don't smell like that, don't sing and don't fly like that," the traveller said grimly. He had noticeably matured, become stronger and wiser after his tiresome wanderings through chess rivers and lakes, chess seas, mountains and jungles, chess deserts, cities and villages. He wasn't the same young and naïve romantic as he had been at the very beginning of the journey, many moves ago. Perhaps he lost not only sentimentality but also his enthusiasm. But at the same time, unnecessary thoughts and unreasonable unrest had decreased. Maybe another piece in his place would have committed suicide long ago, jumping from the edge of the board into the unknown, but the White Knight wasn't this kind of chessman. He was used to seeing everything through till the end, – of course, if he was sure this made any sense, and nothing objectively deprived him of such an opportunity.

Actually, he wanted to go home more than anything else: no honours, no awards, no titles, he just wished to gallop against the wind, inhale the air of freedom, and graze grass in his native dark square "g1." But that was still ahead: he left behind most of the path, but the tour itself wasn't completed yet.

A sharp clap brought the White Knight out of stupor. In the blink of an eye, something huge descended from heaven and fell upon the "green nightingale" (whatever this creature truly was), leaving some kind of flattened vile substance in its place.

Peering at the remains of the so-called nightingale, in which false sweet voice he had naively believed once, the White Knight

sighed and put his hat over his eyes. The royal gift had now become worn, but it was the last thing that remained dear to him. With the death of the pale-winged creature, he felt as if a part of himself had also perished – maybe it wasn't his best part, but its loss still left a void inside.

Looking up, from where a punishing blow had fallen upon his former idol, the White Knight reflected about his place in the world for a long time. It wasn't about the current move or a particular square on a chessboard, but his place in general. The matches he had survived, the pieces he had won, the announced checks – at this moment, everything seemed so insignificant and vain, lacking any positive meaning...

And at the same time, he had only just begun to understand that the sense of life truly existed: the roots of this meaning lied far beyond the limits of the playing board, but it was the place where the answers to all questions were. He meant eternal questions as to how and from where the board appeared, where did the pieces come from, and also – what was the origin of files and ranks, squares and game rules? At the same time, the White Knight was more interested in “why” and “for what purpose” questions than in answers to “how” and “where”.

Of course, he was neither the first nor the last one to whom such thoughts came to mind. Some thinkers studied the composition of pieces' bodies and correlated it with the composition of the board material. They assumed that chessmen had originated naturally from the board, and the squares were

nothing more than the result of the pieces' activities, as well as gradually formed rules of the game. Others claimed that the pieces had been created before the board. Third ones believed that they had been brought here from the outside, from another board.

Philosophers argued about what had appeared earlier – the game or the rules; researchers traced the physiological path of modern Queens from the faded ancient pawns discovered during archaeological excavations under the playing board. But all these theories were distant from life; they were certainly interesting but distracted from the essence. In reality, there was no difference for the White Knight whether chessmen came from ancient pawns, generated in time immemorial in the depths of the board itself, whether someone made them and placed on the board, or whether they were brought from any other board. Besides, the last version didn't answer the question about the origin of pieces but raised the question of how they had appeared on that another board. And all these were particulars, which didn't give the White Knight an answer to the question of who stayed behind the moves and crushed the “green nightingale,” but he passionately wanted to find the solution that could give him the key to understanding everything else.

Meanwhile, the path didn't wait, and, deciding to return to his reasoning at a different time and in a more comfortable environment, the White Knight continued the interrupted journey. Faithful Dog followed him.

“Hey, you!”

The White Knight stopped.

“Look who’s that – a horse in the hat! Hey, the Horse, I’m talking to you! You’re not local, ah? Where are you from?”

The cheeky voice didn’t bode well. The clouds were gathering above. The mocking Black Pawn, miserable, but confident in his power and impunity, emerged from the darkness, accompanied by his chess gang. Perhaps these villains didn’t even know who they were messing with, since the White Knight had made multiple devastating raids on the enemy’s camp in the recent past. Destroying strategic reserves and undermining the fighting efficiency of the enemy’s army, he had won a lot of Black Pawns like this one. Some of them had died with dignity, others had stained their name with shame, but in any case, in the clash with the White Knight, they couldn’t be saved by fleeing or superiority in numbers.

“Are you talking to me?” the tired wanderer asked, stretching slowly before the upcoming fight.

“With you, sure. Think faster, Nelly!” one of the Black Pawns answered spitefully.

Their rudeness, vulgarity and self-assurance began to enrage and annoy him.

“You are lucky that a temporary truce had been declared between us. Therefore, I give you one last chance to move away from here and hinder me no further,” the White Knight said with quiet menace. The answer was laughter. Suddenly, the

Black Knight jumped over the squad of maliciously grinning opponents. He hadn't changed after their last meeting, although many moves had passed since then.

"Well, here we are again. The time goes on," the Black Knight said as if delaying something he didn't want but had to do by virtue of duty. "And you are still travelling alone. They could escort you after all. Of course, it will be too noticeable for the scout and will slow you down, but at least it would be much safer for you than going by yourself. Or with your ridiculous sugar lump."

"His name is Dog," the White Knight hastily corrected.

"It doesn't matter," his interlocutor dismissed the remark. "Perhaps, in that case, I could somehow play a failure or convince the command that I wasn't sure about the outcome of the action. But now – I'm sorry, you have complicated everything for yourself. You could travel safely, and your guards would loom somewhere on the horizon. But I understand; the White King has lost many defenders recently. And also – he has developed paranoia. The burden of power, you know..."

"So you've decided to forget about all the agreements, get rid of me, and prevent me from bringing almost complete information to the headquarters. I guess you want to pocket the data and transfer it to the Black King," the White Knight stated.

"Hey, please, don't dramatize. It's our job. We both fulfil our duty. We cannot act as fellows. It just happened," the enemy admitted in a tone that was seemingly full of genuine regret.

“Don’t you worry – we will honour you as a hero.”

“I don’t worry at all. Because you won’t have such an opportunity,” the White Knight answered. He understood that the Black Knight and the Black Pawns were covering each other, while he stood in front of them openly, without any protection from other pieces. The knight-horse had to make some move – for example, retreat to one of the previous squares, thereby failing his task, but his self-esteem didn’t allow him to do so. He could win the Black Knight, and that would mean an equivalent exchange and would be formally reasonable from the position of the general strategic plan. However, his life was behind this “equivalent exchange”, not to mention the fact that the task would also be failed. And in this case, the intelligence information which he had compiled with hard work would get into the enemy’s hands. Moreover, the Blacks would present the situation as if the Whites were violators of the truce.

In other words, his hoofs were shackled by a whole mass of obligations, laws, rules and restrictions; he didn’t have the right to commit reckless actions under the influence of momentary impulses. He thought that maybe the White King had a hard time too, deciding to bring this or that piece under attack, and sacrificing them for the sake of a more advantageous strategic position.

But at the moment, everyone forgot about the sugar named Dog, who wasn’t bound with all these rules and obligations. Sensing the danger for his master, he rushed headlong through

the squares that separated him from a handful of enemies, and, bumping with force to the very centre, scattered the lifeless pieces across the chessboard. He slid along an uneven path, so he fell from the board edge and disappeared, hitting at something in the darkness.

Being in an indescribable confusion from shock and grief, the White Knight couldn't find thoughts for a long time to describe everything that was happening in his soul at the moment. He became hysterical. He had a fever. His heart galloped like some horse on the field: hop hop, hop hop, clack-clack, hop hop...

But there was still no time for grief and self-torture. It was quite possible that the first wave of attackers could be followed by a second, control wave which had to confirm the success of the task and report to the Black King's headquarters quickly. If the White Knight remained in his stupor now, he would miss the precious time won by his faithful friend, and the sacrifice of poor Dog would be useless.

He must go forward. Only forward. Don't stop. One more step. A little more. He has almost reached...

Almost... Reached...

Treading his hooves heavily on the ground of a desiccated desert full of once-varnished, but now cracked squares, the White Knight stumbled and was close to collapse and losing consciousness, falling asleep forever among the intersection of files and ranks dappling before his eyes. But his will, faith and duty forced him to summon his strength and go on, on, on...

Well, not only that. The knight-horse also had to find the answer to the main question. And he had to return to his native dark square “g1”, where he could lie down on cool grass and rest. He must do the first thing, but he also wanted it; the second desire had nothing to do with duties and obligations – he simply wanted it.

From afar, he saw the gathered crowd of White pieces chanting his name, and smiled weakly, realizing that his gruelling and dangerous tour was close to its long-awaited completion. What did he feel at the moment? Probably, first of all – fatigue, severe, all-consuming fatigue, in which everything else was drowned, leaving only a barely visible island of joy, where the tree of faith blossomed, rising above the waves.

“Happy New Move! Cheers!” exclaimed the Whites, celebrating his sixty-third move with champagne shots. The great traveller who made around the board journey henceforth became a very important figure, figuratively speaking. Moreover, for the time of his adventure, the age of the White King began to influence him more and more, and now the venerable monarch was planning to retire and transfer the reins of power to the young, energetic hero who enjoyed the love of everyone.

In his mind, the White Knight appreciated the trust highly, but at the moment, he was too weak and exhausted to appreciate it with his heart. The pieces gathered around him and asked in bewilderment why he sidestepped the decision, convincing that it was enough for him participating in hard everyday battles,

and secret raids into the enemy encampment: having occupied such an honourable post, he would become an untouchable piece and even the real thugs from enemy ranks wouldn't dare to kill him because his fame spread throughout all the squares of the chessboard.

Truly, the universal respect was so high that even the Black King's representatives came to honour him: it was a politically competent move, since, on the one hand, they could deny all possible accusations (if they would be brought) by presenting counterclaims; and if everything would go peacefully and without pretensions, – they could feast with everyone, maintaining the semblance of a truce, and then inform their monarch of the result.

Of course, the White Knight would have a lot of honourable duties that were incompatible with all his races, jumps and tricks. He became a respectable and important person, and from now on, he would supposedly step exactly one vacant square in any direction, leaning on a cane. Sometimes he would remember how fun it was galloping on the two-colour field, and it would be so from move to move, to his old age. But he didn't want this.

After thanking cordially those present and, first of all, His White Majesty, the White Knight immediately excused himself and, stating that he had been tired of wars and the burden of service, asked to resign. Of course, he could call on both the Whites and the Blacks to create a united empire, stopping endless and meaningless conflicts, begin to solve urgent and topical chess

problems jointly, and even expected that many would formally support such a proposal. But like no one else, he understood that peace wouldn't actually happen. He also understood that, despite all the wars and troubles (as vain as everything else was), there was the Truth lying outside the board, and only this Truth had an objective meaning. As for wars... Wars continued because behind each of them stood free will and choice of great many pieces directly involved in them. He had been one of them once. Now – he would wait for the day when someone's hand would carry him from the board to where he might see his dear Dog again and where the Black Knight would meet him not as an enemy, but as a friend.

In the end, he asked the White King and the authorized representatives of the Black King to provide him with a small plot of land for personal possession, excluding him from the both Kingdoms' zone of interests. Naturally, all this was unsteady, temporary, ephemeral, like everything else in this unstable world, where vows were violated, friends betrayed each other and laws existed only to be broken. But still, he could buy himself at least some time to live for himself now, when he felt he owed nothing to anyone and wasn't obliged to do anything. Well, maybe he owed something to the one who led him all the time, standing in the shadows behind the board.

Of course, many pieces didn't want to let him go. And it wasn't all about universal love. He simply knew too much and, without control, could be as potentially dangerous as before

he had been potentially useful. In any case, those in power explained that such matters couldn't be resolved overnight and chose four squares in the centre of the board, which for many years had been considered most valuable but disputed territories and passed from hand to hand. From now on, they were declared the possession of the White Knight. That would supposedly become a sign of love and friendship between two nations – as soon as all appropriate legal formalities and delays would be settled.

Another great traveller's request was even stranger – he asked to take the orphaned Pawn of his fellow, the Black Knight (who, as he became aware, had died under mysterious circumstances) into state care, allowing her to learn and prepare for the promotion. This time, he caused real confusion in the minds of many, although the act served to some extent in strengthening friendly relations between long-warring nations, at least, temporarily. And it was natural – at all times, there were not only those who needed war more than air, but also pieces who were tired of endless battles and ready to fraternize with former enemies.

The White King didn't want to give one secret order, which he, in his deep conviction, was forced to provide, based on prevailing political realities. For a long time, he recalled numerous merits of the great White Knight (without any exaggeration). And, above all, he remembered how the White Knight had saved His Majesty's life, and later had made his famous journey. But

this eccentric supporter, whose motivation had always remained a mystery to the King – who could have guessed he would make such a strange decision that created a lot of unnecessary problems?

The White King prophesied him as his successor and could finally retire and have a well-deserved rest, leaving power in the hands of the illustrious hero. And now – let him blame himself...

In sad thoughtfulness, the White King sat at a table with a tactical map of the battlefield which was, in fact, a small version of the chessboard with smaller pieces placed on it. He called the silent and formidable White Rook and fulfilled his royal duty with deep reluctance, giving him extremely short and clear orders regarding the fate of the White Knight.

It was still necessary to wait until all the excitement subsided, and then it became possible to eliminate the potential threat quietly and accurately, presenting the whole thing so that the suspicion would fall on the Enemy. And this was called “politics”.

The White Knight didn't have a shadow of a doubt – it would be so. But he was just tired of everything and everyone. And now, breathing the native air on the “g1” square, the knight-horse felt that he knew the real price of happiness. He bit a spikelet, laid down in the middle of a dark field and, finally, dozed off. And then someone's hand, imperceptibly for others, took him from this board and replaced him to another. Here, his white sugar named Dog was waiting for him, wandering around with the Black Knight, who actually was no longer Black or White.

There were no wars, there was no anger, and there were no vile stabs in the back. But the real nightingale sang with a marvellous voice, in the air filled with the aromas of blooming spring, and there were answers to all questions here.

Man with Horns

Waking up one morning, Baron D`Fect discovered horns on his head: they were wide and branched, and weighed him so much that clearly prevented him from getting out of bed. Not to mention other troubles as torn pillows and sheets, a broken headboard and a tattered tapestry on a scratched wall.

Any attempt to move was faced with a mass of obvious inconveniences that significantly limited the mobility of Monsieur Baron.

“Mon Dieu!” the unfortunate man snivelled, grimacing anxiously and resentfully. He touched the base of the horns and began to shake in a silent hysteria; tears dripped down his cheeks. Since such matters had never interested him, Monsieur Baron didn’t possess in-depth knowledge of horns and their varieties. But, to the best of his moderate understanding, he was aware that usually horns are specific projections related to skin, just like hair or nails, although in some cases extensions of a skull are presented by layers of bone substance, and then they are called antlers. For example, deer antlers are very sensitive, because they contain nerves and blood vessels. And, if memory served him right, there were also horns with a bone core inside, covered with a thick layer of keratinized skin.

“Well, it seems it happens: then you visit a salon and now you are a mouflon,” D`Fect said with melancholy longing in his

voice, despite the fact that his horns looked more like deer antlers than mutton horns. However, at the moment, Monsieur Baron didn't care about nuances. Still not fully recovering from the sudden trouble which promised to transform in serious headache (speaking both literally and figuratively), he soon regained his former clarity of mind and started to build an action plan for the nearest future.

Obviously, if he had never managed to get out of bed on his own, he would have been forced to call the servants. But at the same time, he would rather agree to beheading than appearing before someone – provided that the executioner would cut the head off without looking. On the other hand – even if Baron rose from his bed by himself, he would still have to meet the servants sooner or later, so it was foolish to delay the inevitable. Baron realized the fact, and yet he decided to treat his own weakness with respect, allowing himself to take time.

Of course, he could lock himself in the room, forbid anyone to go inside and order the servants to leave food trays at the door. But anyway, everyone would inevitably have questions: you might have some quirks, but that would be extremely strange. If he declared that he was unwell (and this would be fully consistent with the truth, considering circumstances), the servants would immediately call the doctor, informing all his friends, relatives, heirs, acquaintances, business partners, the entire local elite, his secretary and God knows who else. He could refuse to let someone inside, but in any case, at some point, his worried

friends and relatives would order the servants to break the door, presenting the baron to the world in all the horror of his shame.

However, even if the baron convinced everyone to leave him alone, and remained forever in his sleeping quarters, picking up food trays only after the servants left, could he call this existence a normal life? Of course, a considerable number of criminals are sitting in disgusting casemates and prisons, hospitals are crowded with people dying from terrible and painful diseases, the bodies of heroes turn into bloodied meat on the battlefields, and, presumably, these men experience far more inconvenience and suffering. Perhaps they would have agreed to swap places with the baron without hesitation, if they had such an opportunity. Still, this fact didn't comfort him.

Naturally, he was neither a hero, or a genius, or a particularly zealous Catholic, or a particularly ardent philanthropist, he was not distinguished by a brilliant mind or outstanding skills and talents. But at the same time, he wasn't some kind of rascal or scoundrel, and in these days the fact spoke for itself. He also wasn't a simpleton or a shallow man without any virtues and his own opinion. Therefore, the prospect of spending the rest of his days locked up in this room for such completely absurd and insulting reason didn't attract him at all.

So, it was necessary not only to call the servants immediately but also order them to call the doctor immediately. Of course, the servants would have to take an oath to remain silent, while the healer was bound by the indestructible Hippocratic Oath anyway.

But clearly, it was so only in theory: in fact, not every barber would resist the temptation to announce that King Midas had donkey ears, despite any oaths and assurances. On the other hand, such an unprecedented case could motivate the doctor to convene a council of physicians in order to examine the phenomenon, acting in the interests of global science and, first of all, medicine. This unusual disease would be named after the baron, but such an honor seemed more than doubtful to him. He thought of this as an indelible disgrace for his whole kin for all time.

But wait – what is “the kin” we are talking about? What self-respecting woman in her right mind and full possession of her senses would marry such an ugly freak? And even if he could find some quite reckless lady, attracted by D’Fect’s title and legacy, how would he lead her to the sacred altar under sidelong glances and the shower of mockery? How exactly would they dance the waltz at the royal ball? With disgust, she will share a bed with him...

But once again – what is “the royal ball” we can talk about? How could he just walk down the street with such an appearance? What kind of headgear could be worn over these disgusting horns? Would any umbrella be able to hide them? What carriage could he board with them? Which door could he squeeze through? Surely, any horse would run away in horror, barely seeing his new look. Would they let him in a church and how he would fit in a confessional?

Naturally, the idea of cutting horns off with a saw was the

first of those that came to Monsieur Baron's elk-like head, but apparently, such action could be fraught with a certain risk to life and health. At least, it would be rash to conduct such an operation without proper medical research.

Scratching the head near the base of the right horn and being angry at the inability to scratch under it, D'Fect tried to imagine any plausible reasons for the incredible incident. He had never heard of anything like this in the history of medicine, although once a traveller who had visited the "Cesare's the Magnificent Museum of Rarities" said that he had seen the head of an Asian there. It had a long horn at the back, but the respectable gentleman never discovered the story behind this exhibit. At that time, these stupid things had not interested Monsieur Baron, but now he would be happy to question that unfamiliar man thoroughly. On the other hand, he could hardly report much useful information beyond that he had already told. In addition, the baron didn't know where the museum of this man, Cesare could be located now, and even if he would find it – then what? Even if he could get that head somehow and present it to experts for research, this didn't guarantee that some clue would appear, the one that would apply specifically to his case.

But still, how could this branching structure have grown so big overnight? Who ever saw such a thing? Even moose and deer needed some time to grow their antlers. Well, mushrooms could sometimes appear and rot literally in a day, but mushrooms and horns are different. Probably.

After all, the incident wouldn't be such offensive and could be even considered symbolic, if the baron's coat of arms had a deer or another creature with horns or antlers on it. But no, there was nothing of the kind on his coat of arms.

All banal stories about cuckold husbands with horns came to the baron's mind. Presumably, he should be prepared for all sorts of mean pranks; it was only a matter of time how soon they would begin to haunt the baron. It seemed absurd to him since he had no wife or lover. Although, they said that one single gentleman once found an unfamiliar naked man in his closet, quite unexpectedly for himself. The stranger presence would have at least some sense if that gentleman had a wife or a maid, but Monsieur lived a very modest and completely secluded life. Apparently, not everything made sense in his life.

However, thinking about someone else's puzzle while he had one of his own growing right out of his head seemed not very reasonable for Monsieur Baron. Therefore, after some time of hesitation and gathering his strength, he finally took a deep breath and pulled his hand to the massive golden bell located on the nightstand near the bedhead. But it appeared he couldn't do anything: the cursed horns prevented the movement and, struggling for a minute or two, the baron finally lost any hope of using the bell. He immediately realized that it was possible to give orders with words, without any bell, and then made an ironic and disappointing conclusion that the horns, most likely, had deformed not only the surface of his head but also its content,

directly affecting the brain.

Taking a deep breath, D'Fect called the servants to help, and deciding that someone had probably heard his desperate cries, he imagined how others would react to his humiliating position. How they would laugh and gossip behind his back, if not in the face. How they would point their fingers, make grimaces and bleat, depicting branchy horns with their hands. How the whole beau monde would start to look at him with bewilderment and apprehension, believing that he challenged them with his appearance because visiting the upper crust meetings with horns on one's head was an extreme example of indecency. He thought about the next stage – when people would come and gather in the hope of somehow capturing a strange freak; and then later – the public would want to take possession of his body, proceeding from the interests of science; or, in a very sad turn of events, – his head would be separated from the body and stolen from the family crypt (since there were no coffins for the horned men). Eventually, the head would appear in some exhibition of rarities, just like the head of that unfortunate Asian, or it would supply a collection of trophies on the wall of some brave hunter. And Monsieur Baron found it difficult to decide which outcome seemed more offensive and insulting for him.

It turned out, he was partly right, we must say. But – only partly. At first, all his household members (and soon others, since rumours grow much faster than mushrooms) became truly shocked by his bizarre appearance. Moreover, communicating

the news to listeners, everyone considered his or her his duty to add some new detail. As a result in their tails, the baron first became covered with wool, then he got a tail and hooves, and finally, he turned into one big walking museum of zoology, becoming previously unknown animal – a terrestrial but floating avian, a feathered serpent with fur, a cold-blooded mammal.

At first, people spoke behind D`Fect's back, and their opinions based on facts and conjectures were often divided diametrically: some believed that all this was one continuous falsification, a great practical joke or just an eccentric way of drawing attention to the ordinary person. Others argued that the baron wasn't a human at all, but a dangerous animal and must be kept in a cage, far from society. Third ones thought that by and large horns fitted him, and some of them even tried to make and wear hats with horns – out of solidarity, or for the sake of mockery, or for paying tribute to the new fashion. Fourth ones stated that D`Fect was sick and deserved regret, but also could be dangerous and therefore must be isolated and placed under round-the-clock surveillance. Fifth ones declared the whole incident as nonsense and fiction. Sixth ones had a theory that actually D`Fect became the victim of an unsuccessful alchemical or scientific experiment or the bearer of a family curse imposed by the Comte de Saint Germain himself. Seventh ones said that in fact there was no curse or some kind of mystification, and the baron's actions were slap in the face of public opinion, a bold attempt by a free-thinking rebel to defend his views and beliefs in a somewhat

expressive and symbolic form, for which he was now supposed to get a lifetime monument or go under the guillotine blade. Of course, there were also eighths, twenties, hundreds, and even thousands of opinions, and it seemed to each of the disputants that the truth was on his side. Later, many ceased any shyness and began to throw pure insults directly into the D'Fect's face. Under other circumstances, Monsieur Baron could demand satisfaction despite his peaceful disposition, but, on the one hand, he chose a tactic of dignity and wore his horns not with shame and fear, but as if they were a real crown. On the other hand, he turned to faith, deciding that this situation was a trial of some sort, if not punishment, and in any case, this trial was sent to him for something, not because he had done anything wrong.

For some insignificantly short time, rumours about poor Baron D'Fect and his misfortunes circled the whole globe, contributing to an unprecedented influx of tourists from all over the world since people wanted to see the miracle by their own eyes. However, in addition to the majority that only wished to satisfy their idle interest, there were many of those who pursued more specific goals. Journalists interviewed him and exaggerated his words later, not forgetting to imagine the statements that the baron had never made, the acts he had never committed and beliefs that he had never shared. Scientists dedicated their monographs to him and called him either a new step in the development of a human being or an atavism of the prehistoric period, then a by-product of his ancestors' unnatural

relations or a representative of extraterrestrial civilization and a descendant of the Atlantis inhabitants. Doctors, occultists and charlatans of all sorts offered him the varied and “most proven” methods of healing, ranging from surgery to dancing with a tambourine. The preachers urged D’Fect to repent and donate all his wealth for charity. Some insane fanatics saw the biblical Beast in him and made an unsuccessful attempt on his life; while some eccentric rich people wanted to acquire the baron’s horns at least after his death, and with the body if possible. It was rumoured that touching the horns promises good luck in love affairs, and someone even believed that if you grind these horns into powder, boil with water and drink, you will heal any disease. Contrary to Baron’s expectations, some rare women wanted to sleep with the famous horned man, and one of the scientists even suggested the intercourse with a deer to him in the name of science, and in order to give birth to a new hybrid. As a faithful and self-respecting person, the baron distanced himself from these ladies with irritation, and the scientist received a slap in the face from him and later presented the conflict as if the nobleman was trying to gore him with his horns.

Naturally, digging deeper into D’Fect’s character, one could find original personality interesting in its own way. The baron had certain merits, and in any case, deserved a certain degree of respect, if not some special praise. But, frankly speaking, he was also quite an ordinary man, so people were only interested in his horns and the halo of mystery surrounding them.

Nevertheless, the public interest is a changeable thing, which tends to disappear as suddenly as it appears. Time passed: at first, people got used to the baron with his horns, all reports and monographs were written, and since everyone who wanted had enough time to look at the branching horns, while the baron couldn't offer anything else interesting for them, attention began to fade steadily. He now could appear in society, and people who were accustomed to him, also tired of mocking or cheering long ago, so they simply ceased to notice him. He simply stopped being a shock factor to everyone: he was just an ordinary person, with one exception – some horns or deer antlers on his head. Not a big deal, you know, especially when hype occasions appeared every day in the world: for example, this Indian boy with four arms and legs or that plain-looking Chinese woman who gave birth to five children. And then he even began to irritate others, causing their contempt as if he wasn't a victim, who had fallen in trouble by the will of circumstances and needed help (not to mention any support and compassion), but an avid eccentric, seeking the fame, who had specially planned everything. When the annoyance passed, people simply forgot about him and ceased to notice him. And although he had enough letters and cards to use them as a fireplace fuel for more than a day or two, new ones wouldn't come.

This turn of events evoked mixed feelings in the baron. He could do almost everything he wanted or at least anything he was able to do physically, without fears that some crazy young

lady would desire him with all her passion or a mad fanatic would try to commit his public murder. However, previously, he had believed that people from his circle would help him in his misfortune sooner or later, but now it became obvious that they were not interested in any help from the beginning. His numerous portraits had been painted; poets had dedicated entire collections of poems to him; a lot of articles had been published; this unremarkable corner of the country was heard by the whole world only because the aristocrat with horns lived there; sculptors, inspired by his appearance, made their masterpieces, and paid particular attention to the horns, striking with their detail against a rather schematic body. Everybody made money on him, and we must say, in quite considerable amounts. And so did almost everyone to whom he had the imprudence to confide. Now, having squeezed out everything possible, they rested on their laurels and didn't care about the baron at all.

Deers threw off their antlers sooner or later, but this didn't happen with the man. And it seemed kind of stupid to consult doctors or reindeer herders about whether it was normal or not. The baron's situation might be even funny if it wasn't so sad.

However, soon, everyone remembered the baron again. This time it all started with the fact that the ranks of the horned persons had grown within a few months, and if earlier D`Fect couldn't find any information about people who suffered a similar misfortune, now such news rained down as if out of the horn of plenty. At first, it seemed to many people that these

were just rumours and silly tales, but soon the information was confirmed. None of the new horned persons caused such close attention and excitement around as Monsieur Baron in the past (with the possible exceptions of the first horned woman, who also turned out to be a famous ballet dancer, or the first horned child, who was happy of legal school leaving due to his protection from teachers' and classmates' negative reaction). However, the trend itself quickly became the main theme in all newspapers and salons. After that, the rows of reporters lined up at D'Fect's house again. Officially, the journalists tried to get to the bottom of the truth, but in fact, they made money on an additionally hyped sensation as usual.

Everyone, from scholars to mediums, offered their versions of what was happening and tried to find a rational explanation for the observed facts. Some tried to trace the bloodlines of the horned persons, but this path led to a dead-end since it was often possible to find more in common between an Arab sheikh and a pygmy. Others suggested a pandemic, because the number of horned men was growing sharply and exponentially, but this version also didn't hold water, because people who contacted with horned ones were usually not infected, while no one could observe any explicit connection between those who had become an unhappy horns owner just recently. These were people of various professions, with different social backgrounds (from poor beggars to nobles), they represented different religious confessions and political views,

lived in separate parts of the country, and often didn't even know about the existence of others. Nevertheless, quarantine was introduced in the country, which greatly interfered relations with neighbouring nations in general and trade in particular.

The public reacted to the events in different ways: while ones shouted about the End of the World approach, others talked about secret experiments or the consequences of an unhealthy lifestyle, and bad nutrition in particular. Outright hostility manifested itself to many of the horned persons, who acquired deer antlers, sheep, goat-like and all other kinds of horns: society rejected them as if these people were responsible for the misfortune that had happened to them. At the same time, those who had called to build a ghetto and isolate all horned people from normal ones just yesterday, could find themselves on the other side of the barricades next day and began to protest against causeless human cruelty. Horn syndrome was spreading at the speed of a forest fire and, since some horned men, by chance or providence, had a high position in society, wealth, connections and significant political influence, it was the matter of time when the political union would emerge to protect the rights and interests of the horned population officially. At all times, like attracted like, but in this case, the situation seemed something far beyond all possible limits of any logic and remnants of common sense. The Horned Party supporters who had obviously chosen an abstract head with horns for their emblem often turned out to be unfortunate people with absolutely nothing in common except

for the horns on their heads. Moreover, representatives of other political parties could fall asleep, as conservatives or liberals, then woke up the next morning with horns and reluctantly faced the fact that they needed to reconsider their political views.

Within a half a year, the horned ones became the major parliamentary party, and gained all the power in the country in their hands, bypassing all possible competitors with a huge margin, for the most part, the latter were simply assimilated, reluctantly joining their orderly rows. Initially, the horned ones had no program and didn't make any promises; they simply wanted to survive, forcing others not to treat them like cattle. Chaos reigned in the country, atrocities, demonstrations and riots took place, and the situation didn't reach the state of civil war for one simple reason – no one could say with certainty whether he would wake up tomorrow with or without horns. In an atmosphere of utter distrust, everyone was leering at each other, and the situation had reached the point of absurdity: one could “see” the horns under the smallest hat, people could call any suspicious person “a horned spy”, imposing lynching on him, and many literally touched their heads every minute, fearing that during this time, something managed to appear there.

Meanwhile, tensions were growing abroad too, since many conscious citizens urged everyone not to sit idly, but taking the initiative, until it would be too late to arm the soldiers cap-a-pie. With a joint effort, foreigners called to crush the loathsome beings, until horn infection got over to the rest

of Europe, and even to the whole world. But these plans were not destined to be realized, because a new but actively gaining force “horned scourge” quickly went around the planet in a “horned march”. The ranks of horned men replenished immediately, first by hundreds and thousands, and later – by millions of the Horned International supporters, which by that time had acquired the population of the whole country and now rapidly gained momentum on a global scale. In less than a year, the horned ones not only reached a significant advantage but turned into an absolute majority and began to dictate their rules and conditions to others. It was no longer enough for them to have recognition and equal rights with ordinary people – they wanted special privileges and, in fact, gained them, feeling their superiority over the “hornless”, as they now called ordinary people, putting all their contempt and disgust in this term.

These days, supporters of various conspiracy theories suffered real hysterical seizures, since neither Masons, nor Jesuits, or the Illuminati had never gained such power as the horned ones in the modern world...

...Time passed: the panic and chaos inherent to the beginning of planetary events gradually faded into the past and became the part of history. Generations were born with no knowledge about human appearance in the past. According to the new era requirements, historians, biologists, and other authoritative figures compiled textbooks for the younger generations. They reported that earlier, at the dawn of humanity, the great empire

of Hornia existed in the Ancient World. In fact, its natives were the only cultural and enlightened inhabitants of the world, who suffered under the pressure of savages and barbarians, namely – all kinds of hornless degenerates. The latter ones were actually unable to adopt cultural heritage and became truly civilized people due to their small-mindedness, which made them a threat, destined for extermination or enslavement. According to new textbooks, it was horned ones who made all scientific discoveries and cultural achievements, whether it was the horned or the Colossus of Rhodes that didn't survive to these days but of course, was also horned. Taking the oath, the military men laid hands on the horns, and the minotaurs and satyrs were positioned as ancient ancestors of mankind. The small number of miraculously survived hornless people were oppressed and persecuted, they perceived as inferior and lower creatures, since the presence of horns was considered as natural and inalienable like the presence of a head on the shoulders, for example. *Mona Lisa La Gioconda*

One way or another, life went on, resuming its stable course and everyone had long been accustomed to it, not knowing, not remembering, or not wanting to know, that before everything had been somewhat different from current beliefs and ideology. And everything went on as usual until one day Baron D`Fect who lived the rest of his life as before, without heroic or evil deeds, woke up in the morning and unexpectedly discovered that his horns had disappeared...

Discrete Person

The fact that I myself, at the moment of painting, do not understand my own pictures, does not mean that these pictures have no meaning; on the contrary, their meaning is so profound, complex, coherent, and involuntary that it escapes the most simple analysis of logical intuition.

– Salvador Dali

For the umpteenth time in the long history of forensics, a police inspector had to investigate his own killing. The case was further complicated since the inspector couldn't recall for sure the circumstances of this undoubtedly tragic event, no matter how hard he tried. Moreover, he didn't remember how he had found himself in this place, where he was going and what goals he pursued.

Lighting an illusory cigarette, squeezed between two phantom fingers, he watched with some elusive longing as non-existent smoke dissolves under the pressure of imaginary air. Having examined the prostrate body, he quietly shook his head and stated again: there was no doubt – it was him, Inspector Time. Or Inspector Space Time, if the full name is needed. He saw one of the infinite multitudes of personified manifestations of himself, existing in parallel dimensions everywhere within the world of matter.

And if Eternity is a category of being, then Time is a category

of motion: if we assume that Time has an end, then Time has a beginning, and Eternity is holistic.

Someone killed Time once again, and now – a killer had to be found and punished. The inspector had to be hot on the trail left by the body. But the trail was going cold quite quickly; hence, the situation should brook no further delay.

Passing through a dilapidated house with its cracked floorboards and shabby wallpaper, where a storm raged in a rusty bathroom, and the star bulbs blinked, producing little light, the inspector went out onto an endless street. Along its entire length, the seat of an endless bench stretched. From the sky, the huge white mass of something fell, forming impassable drifts, and delving a little deeper, the detective realized what it was, namely – crumpled and thrown sheets of verses. Snatching at them in search of the coveted hot trail, the inspector lost track entirely. He didn't even notice when he turned off the endless road, finding himself into a labyrinth of gray matter.

One had to be careful here because the maze was full of monsters produced by the sleep of reason. It also contained so many paths that even such an experienced detective as he couldn't decide which direction to choose.

“Don't go this way. You'll only find answers to your questions there, but that's not what you are here for. Don't go the other way, too: a minotaur lurks there. Every self-respecting labyrinth must have its minotaur. Perhaps they are drawn to them because of the dampness. I don't know, I'm not interested in the subject.

However, one should not be afraid of it: in the worst case, it's only able to torture, kill and devour you – no more,” an unsteady voice rang out, and then one of the turns gave birth to the first stranger the inspector had met since the beginning of the investigation. Without a doubt, it was a discrete person, since his figure flickered now and again, being tenuous and blurry.

“And who are you, exactly?” the investigator asked, taking out a pencil and a notebook.

“One of the accidents of a slumbering mind probably,” the stranger assumed.

“Okay. Do you happen to know where the Time killer went?” The formalities had been concluded, and the inspector cut straight to the chase.

“Oh, I can't say for sure. But I know the surroundings of the mind quite well. Perhaps together we will find him,” suggested the discrete man, approaching the detective. “But what happens when we find him?”

“He'll be sentenced to remorse. Or maybe not. But it doesn't depend on me. My job is to find the culprit,” the inspector said succinctly. Having no other apparent alternatives, he decided he could trust this unexpected guide to some extent.

“I hold respect for the investigators who do their job conscientiously and look for someone guilty instead of looking for someone to blame,” the discrete man admitted.

“Well, this is quite natural, and it should be so in general,” the inspector replied with slight bewilderment.

“Oh, I wish it were. Not all of what is happening we can call natural things, and not all natural things are happening. Your conscientious work has a special meaning. But if we come to think of it, many things take place not because it is logical at all, but precisely because it is illogical. You can live a whole lifetime, doing unnecessary things and surrounding yourself with unnecessary possessions, thinking about unnecessary ideas, saying unnecessary phrases to unnecessary interlocutors, giving high importance to what is absolutely unimportant and unnecessary, not paying attention to what is necessary and important,” said the stranger and threw his flickering hands up as if to emphasize the point.

“Yes and no. A nightingale can sing wonderfully, even when alone, enjoying the sounds of its song. There may not be any special meaning in these sounds, but poets, spellbound and touched by nightingale singing, admire it, even without knowing why. This feathered master has the art of inspiring and encouraging others to great creative achievements, conveying feelings, impressions and beauty, which they can adopt and embody in their own way, whether it be a painting, poetry or dance. And a nightingale may not realize the meaning of its performance at all, but it is not meaningless,” the inspector delicately suggested, wanting to move on to his duties swiftly. “So where do we start the search? Any thoughts?”

“I have some thoughts, of course; not all of them are necessary though. But in any case, I know where we will go now.” The

discrete man took the detective's hand and led him forward through the maze of consciousness, where the usual laws of logic, biology, geometry and physics didn't work. They sailed on a paper boat across the boundless sea, which resembled a small pond with water lilies and flocks of wild boats; they made their way through the thickets of abundantly fruiting lampposts entwined with ivy of luminous garlands; they flew in an air cube above the trellis, where the young cubist-realist painted a portrait of a model with square breasts and legs growing from behind her ears: the picture was called . *Beauty Knows No Limit*

The discrete man sang with changing tonality:

“You know, I have a feeling that all this is just my dream,” the inspector confessed and drawing down once again, exhaled a plume of tenuous smoke that formed a thick cloud over the entire length of the firmament.

“Not a chance. In fact, it's not yours, but his dream. And you are just passing through,” the discrete man laughed, pointing to the side, where a man-chair placed himself in the shadow of a tree growing from its own top. He was dozing, putting down his far-reaching roots, while new ideas and images appeared from the hollow of his auricle every second.

“What happens if someone wakes him up?” the investigator asked with interest.

“I don't know for sure, but I am sure that it shouldn't be done,” the guide assured. “Well, you can see it for yourself – the man is tired and rests. He has been inspired, and now he is gushing with

dreams. More correctly, it's not even him, but his self-image at this very moment. Of course, it's him partly. And of course, he partly disappeared into everything that surrounds us. Including ourselves. But initially, he is transcendent to all this. One way or another, it would be criminal to disturb his calm, and you, as a policeman guarding the laws of the universe, should know that better than me."

"I wonder – and what, in this case, is in the dream of those who he sees in his dream? Well, anyway, what's important to me right now is this: my dear psychopomp, do you think that he killed Time?" the detective asked, reminding himself and the interlocutor about the primary goal of his investigation once again.

"No, no, he didn't kill anyone, he just decided to doze off and put aside everything that makes him anxious and unhappy, at least temporarily. But he will wake up soon, renewed and strong, and will be able to overcome all the difficulties that stand in his way, and some things he'll just let slide. Sleep sometimes helps to find answers, organize and remember things that seemed chaotically scattered and difficult, and then everything you considered insoluble and burdensome becomes distant and less serious. And when it doesn't help to solve the problem – it can relieve suffering and even grant healing to the mind and body," said the discrete man, changing his shimmering, tenuous, fluid shapes.

"Let's assume so. But who killed Time then?" The inspector

frowned, rubbing his chin. “Any chance that it was you?”

“Not a chance,” the suspect assured him.

“But who did?” the detective blurted out, starting to lose patience.

“This one, that’s who!” the discrete man nodded toward you the reader and laughed.

“And you knew it all this time, but hid it from me?!” the inspector snapped, finally losing his temper.

“Exactly. But I just thought that the punishment would be harsh and inappropriate because it was a self-defence killing...” The discrete man was going to say something else to the detective, but he wasn’t able to, because the sleeper was already awake, and you the reader managed to escape liability, having finished the story.

*“The stone tree is growing,
The granite glass is flowing,
The diamond beetle’s crawling,
It gnaws and drinks sunlight...”*

*The stone tree is growing,
Its airy fruits are flourishing,
They have both mass and lightness,
And softness, like the sea...*

*The roots of stone miracle
Go to sky heights willingly,
And windy soil of airiness
Lays up the stream of time...”*

The Tower of Hanoi

Creativity is that marvelous capacity to grasp mutually distinct realities and draw a spark from their juxtaposition.

– Max Ernst

“The King is dead, long live the King!” This news spread around the country instantly, plunging the people into shock. In principle, that didn’t surprise anybody, because there had never been a monarchy in these parts since time immemorial.

However, at least one citizen didn’t share the general mood that day: at this time, Valdemar was hurrying for dinner, and the latest news didn’t interest him much. Something else caused his anxiety: he was at least ten minutes late. And his parents were depressed when Valdemar arrived home late. However, they were basically depressed that Valdemar came to their house.

Crossing the black brick road, he climbed the stairs and pressed the doorbell. After a short time, he heard footsteps from behind the door, then a conductor appeared on the threshold. He was wearing a workers navy dressing gown with an employee badge and invited the young man to go inside and take an empty seat in the passenger armchair near the fireplace. Thanking him, Valdemar handed the serviceman his gloves, a cane and a cylinder, which had ticket number “1XV34II” stamped on its underside.

Shutting the door, the conductor took a final look into the peephole and rang the doorbell from his side. The trolleybus building slowly made a turn of 180°, moving from Dali Square to Magritte Avenue. Having slowed down for a while, it gave way to a spacious street passing by, with red brick houses and hungry enveloping smoke which rose from their exhaust pipes. A multicoloured flock of paper pigeons flew in the smoky-humid sky over the sleeping city.

Following them with his eyes, the young man sighed: his delay today was due to the sundial which he had forgotten to turn ahead yesterday.

Sometimes, looking at the sky, Valdemar was afraid that one day he might stumble and fall upwards, into this vast starry abyss, not having time to grab onto something in his flight – a balcony, a lightning rod or even a weather vane, at worst. Falling is very simple – it's enough only to relinquish the hold of feet on the ground. Probably.

Taking the latest issue of yesterday's newspaper left by someone, the man decided to pass the time by solving another crossword puzzle: in the end, now he just had to sit and wait...

Nevertheless, a mere trifle captivated his attention: having guessed the next diagonal word, Valdemar suddenly realized that he had missed dinner completely while the building was making one more circle. In irritation, he tore up and crumpled the paper, and vengefully threw it into the maw of an insatiable flame. Then the young man immediately jumped up from his seat and

started to go around in circles, gaining momentum. As a result of all this gloomy, but vigorous walking, he left his footprints on the walls and ceiling, to the great discontent of the conductor. But there was no need to rush anymore, so Valdemar retrieved the newspaper from the flame, put out the fire, flattened the crumpled sheet, glued the pieces together and placed the paper back in its original location.

However, there was also a positive side of all this: as now he definitely wasn't late anywhere. Valdemar stopped leaving tracks, gathered his belongings and, bidding a fond farewell to the serviceman, went out onto Magritte Avenue. In the middle of the street, not far from the stairs leading into space, the majestic Monument to a Man towered. It was not dedicated to any particular person but was a monument to a man in general. It had no nameplate, signature or official title, but his size was truly immense.

Against the backdrop of the Monument to a Man, there were other figures too, not so prominent in their dimensions, but quite prominent in their popularity. In particular, one of the most famous city attractions was located here: the Pigeon Monument, and almost every self-respecting asshole felt it his duty to shit on it at least once.

Taking out his lacquered cherry pipe with an amber mouthpiece from the inside pocket of his tailcoat, and someone else's tobacco pouch from the outside pocket of his trousers, Valdemar began to pat himself in search of flint, but immediately

remembered that he had never smoked in his life. He slapped his forehead (and there was also no flint on his forehead) and put the pipe and all other things in and out of place. However, perhaps this was not even a pipe.

He looked up at the sky with longing. A moment later – a bright star jumped up from somewhere on the ground next to a forest which was seen beyond the city landscape. According to belief, it was necessary to recall some failure that had already happened, and then it would definitely come to an end – but only if you tell someone about it.

“I don’t want to be late,” Valdemar said to himself, and soon, having regained his spirit, he wandered, enjoying the fresh evening air. An enormous, lonely moth fluttered playfully surrounded by hundreds of tiny lanterns, vainly trying to attract its scattered attention. The graceful corpse drank young sparkling wine. An anchor fish held the destroyer, which soared in the sky and splashed in a puddle encircled by indifferent, cold houses. Quietly, so as not to disturb the undisturbed sleep of the stones, a spider-footed elephant walked along the pavement, carrying all the sorrow of the world on its shoulders. Melting in the evening air, the athlete lit his pipe during a later run. He consisted of the cold smoke produced by this very pipe, and therefore the runner’s face at times shaded to unhealthy colours. The rotten-headed tree, which widely spread its arm-branches, followed the passers-by with hundreds of its sleepy, disrespectful and arrogant eyes behind glittering monocles.

Someone obviously lived in its hollow. Insatiable tank caterpillars eroded the tree's roots in anticipation of their early pupation, while the young and graceful tank butterflies already fluttered in its dollar-green foliage. The ivy growing out of the flowerbed stretched over many kilometers of power lines which reached the talking forest that was visible beyond the city outskirts.

"Does the young man want to have fun?" the scarlet night bird suggested flirtatiously, having appeared out of the darkness. "The figure is one hundred surs." "

"I am not a figure of fun," Valdemar waved her aside, expressing disdain.

Laughing sonorously, the night bird flapped her translucent wings and flitted away. The failed client clicked his tongue with reproach and shook his head, continuing on the interrupted walk.

A huge warty green toad, squatting in the office of a reputable company, suffocated a decently dressed businessman. The poisonous brute croaked busily. However, the businessman didn't attempt to free himself. The lonely street artist depicted a soaring bird on his canvas, occasionally glancing at the egg from which it had yet to hatch. "Thing-in-itself," Valdemar concluded, giving the egg a brief look. Lowering its scaly tail into the well, a fish-horse harnessed to a wheeled boat tapped its hoofs on the pavement in anticipation. On the bench a little way behind, two men sat and swung their rods from time to time, trying to cast their fishing lines higher into the sky. Getting hooked into another heaven fish, one of the catchers habitually took it,

biting off its tail, squeezed it between his teeth, and lit the fish with a smouldering firefly from the bushes closest to the bench. Drawing down, he exhaled a couple of squares and a triangle of glaucous smoke. The men wore delicate lace dresses, and since they suited them well, one could logically conclude that these were, apparently, men's dresses. A frenzied pack of cyclists raced passed, chasing a dog.

Stopping for a moment, Valdemar peered at the horseshoe lying in the middle of the road. It could be quite useful. One option was to hang it above the door. Another option was not to hang it. Having lifted the horseshoe to study it closely and examine it from all sides, the wanderer spotted a horse on the opposite side. Valdemar deduced that the horseshoe was apparently not so necessary for him and headed straight to the telephone box. But just as he got inside – another young man of pleasing appearance squeezed in after him, right before closing the doors.

“Phew, I barely made it...” the man said, removing his cylinder, then wiped his sweaty brow with a heraldic handkerchief. He spread his other hand to the telephone and asked, “What's your number?”

“Number 10,” Valdemar answered gratefully. With a nod, the stranger pressed the “10” button, then – the “X” button, and the dial tone sound was heard in the handset. The box began to move.

“It turned out to be a rough day,” the stranger shared, starting small talk.

“Yes, I saw – you were suffocated by something toad-like,” his interlocutor agreed, having recalled where he had seen the man earlier.

“It’s no good,” he nodded in agreement. “I’ve had hard luck recently. Today I thought I was all but bankrupt. I went to the pawnshop before Avikdor Silkworm had time to pupate. I decided to take a loan. But I had nothing to give him as bail. Or rather, I thought that there was nothing until he reminded me that I have a heart of gold...”

“Ah, that’s the trouble,” Valdemar said with sympathy, though he rather just wanted to be polite. “And now – your conscience is bothering you, right?”

“No, my conscience became part of the deal too,” the man waved away. “But what am I talking about? It’s impolite: to make you worry about my problems... Do you smoke?”

Taking out his lacquered cherry pipe with an amber mouthpiece from the inside pocket, the businessman stared at Valdemar with expectation, believing that he would agree to join him.

“No, I don’t, unfortunately. I was going to start a long time ago, but I just don’t have the willpower,” Valdemar complained.

“Well... In that case – you can begin with small portions and increase the number of puffs gradually...” the man urged. “Alright then, we are in quite close quarters anyway. And it is also stuffy here.”

“Let’s just stand here, biting the pipes,” having got his own

pipe, Valdemar suggested to the interlocutor. “Of course, it may seem foolish to bite an unlit pipe, but it’s no more foolish than exhaled smoke from a lit pipe... Valdemar, by the way.”

The man removed his kidskin heraldic glove and extended his hand for a shake.

“Valdemar,” copying the ceremony, said the new acquaintance and shook his outstretched hand.

“Just imagine, you and I have the same moustache, cylinders, names, pipes and tailcoats! It turns out that all this time I was talking with my reflection! How strange, don’t you think?” the first Valdemar exclaimed excitedly.

“Ahem... It’s really strange. And the main thing is that it was totally unexpected! Although, no – the main thing is that no one but us saw this: they may otherwise decide that I’ve lost my mind because I’m talking to myself,” thoughtfully stroking his chin, the second Valdemar concluded.

“But wait a minute... Does this mean that now I’ll be one of Avikdor Silkworm’s debtors too?” the first man inquired, somewhat saddened by the disturbing discovery.

“Ah, it’s not a big deal,” the second waved a hand. “Money can be made. In a pinch, you still have a brilliant mind, golden hands, and much more. But the main thing is that you were able to find yourself, while almost everybody is a long way from managing it nowadays. In general, lately, it seems to me more and more that our whole life is like this cramped, stuffy telephone box, in which not everyone is destined to find himself or, at least, to meet an

interesting interlocutor.”

“Our life is like a phone box, you said?” the first Valdemar asked, intrigued and lively. “But why?”

“Why? How the hell do I know ‘why’? Do I appear to be some kind of philosopher to you?” the second responded with a modicum of irony. “In general, I think we have two prospects: we are either alone in the Universe or not. And both options scare me equally.”

A tense silence fell. The flock of paper pigeons rustled outside. Perhaps it might be useful to learn the birds’ language in due time because this long phone-box stay was for the birds anyway.

“Tell me, why did you need to leave your heart of gold at a pawn shop as bail?” the first one recalled, wanting to get rid of the thought that was tormenting his curiosity as soon as possible.

“I needed the funds. Today I went to a friendship fair. I wanted to find one for myself. I had enough money, but I asked for a real friend. The real ones are more expensive. You must give your heart as bail,” the second explained. “And now I do not have a moment of peace: what if my heart gets broken? Gold, of course, is more durable than ice and more beautiful than granite, but in fact, it is quite a fragile metal...”

Dazzling blue-white lightning flashed outside, and a rolling rumble of silence replaced the external city noise. Then – it began to snow, and the snowflakes resembled the ashes of a fire.

“It’s beautiful. So – there is some greater meaning in all this. Probably. Or maybe not,” the first man said, lighting the empty pipe. He wasn’t looking at the landscape behind the glass, but at the glass itself. “I heard that mourning began today for a non-existent monarch. How sad it is. Some persons do not exist at all, and never have, but they are loved, respected, honoured. And even without existence – they are beneficial or, at least, have an impact on the mind, motivating and encouraging action, or, conversely, preventing it. And someone exists, but is not needed, acts, but has no influence.”

“There, there,” the second one tried to cheer him up. “When neither fork in the road lead to where you should go – you don’t then have to follow them. I sing as part of the because I can’t sing as part of the .” *corps de choir corps de ballet*

“In any case, for me, the world is more associated not with the telephone box, but with the Tower of Hanoi, in which the disks of images and ideas are shifted from one emerald spire to another, still not reaching the stage of a single complete fixed form, all the time in the phases of certain intermediate permutations and rethinking... However, do not ask me ‘why’, because I don’t know. Because I am not a philosopher either,” the first man shared, shortly before the telephone bell was insistently ringing in the box.

“It seems that we’ve arrived at our destination,” commented the second, picking up the phone and putting one of its ends to his ear, leaving the other for the first one.

Taming the Piano

There is another world, but it is in this one.
– Paul Éluard

Ever since he could remember, good luck always favoured him. The coin thrown to settle a dispute could fall invariably even on the edge, and he always rolled only sixes on dice. Fair players had constantly lost to his cards, and cheaters and scammers were immediately shown up. He could find jewels just strolling down the streets of the evening city. And numerous distant relatives and friends of relatives, whom he had either never known or had forgotten since childhood, left him a generous inheritance again and again.

But this didn't bring him joy and happiness, rather the opposite. He had long been refused entry to the gambling houses. Among fair players, he had long ago acquired the reputation of a notorious sharper and a scoundrel; however, no one was able to catch him in the act. Real sharpers who had a grudge against him, repeatedly tried to settle the score, and it was only because of the same notorious luck that their plans never came to anything. All the jewels he found turned out to be stolen. And the relatives of untimely passing people suspected that he was a sorcerer, if not a swindler, since their loved ones, for no apparent reason, signed the real and personal property over

to him in the presence of more worthy candidates.

He easily acquired new connections and obtained lucrative positions, but soon lost them with the same simplicity, because, having learned about his reputation, – new acquaintances no longer wanted to deal with such a shady character and didn't want to keep the service of a light-fingered person.

In fact, most of those who called him, with the unwavering conviction, a scoundrel and a bastard, were much more suited to their definitions. This gift (or, perhaps, the curse) was inherited from his father, and he, in turn, inherited from his father, and it might very well be that the chain stretched further.

Anyway, imaginary good fortune brought Lucky (as he was sarcastically called) only misery and suffering. And by no means could he resist this ill fate. Although, perhaps, it was just a God sent trial.

He could recall only one incident from his childhood when he apparently had bad luck in a matter which was dear to his heart: it was also a kind of playing, not with cards, but an instrument. At that time, the lid of the piano fell and hit him hard on his fingers, discouraging the budding desire to become an outstanding player. Over time, the initial flexibility of the fingers and abilities had been recovered, but his hope to establish himself in this field somehow had burnt itself out.

Later, he trudged to war, where he was invincible against either an enemy bayonet or a bullet; he received many decorations and medals, but couldn't make a military career

because of another scandal related to gambling. Of course, everyone was enthusiastic about card play, but it was his “luck” that dragged him into such litigations. Taking into account his past merits, they didn’t punish him severely but forced him to leave military service. However, he fulfilled his duty to the army completely.

At first, he tried to hang himself – the rope broke, and he suffered only a painful bruise falling to the floor. Then he wanted to shoot himself: at the first attempt, the gun misfired, at the second it just backfired, injuring his hand. Then he jumped off a bridge, but the good Samaritans promptly fished him out of the cold city canal and brought him to his senses. Further: he tried to stab himself with a dagger, but powerlessness paralyzed his hand, forcing him to drop the weapon in another failed suicide. Then he decided to throw himself under a train, but it derailed shortly before arriving and miraculously avoided a meeting with Lucky. To top it off, he climbed onto the roof of a building with the firm intention of jumping and crashing to the pavement. It seemed that now he had foreseen everything, then no chance happening could save his life; but what he couldn’t foresee was the exact moment before the fatal landing – he just suddenly woke up in his bed, . And so, again and again, time after time, something prevented his tragic plans from coming true. *as if it was an ordinary dream*

Realizing that he was, in fact, powerless to commit suicide, he despaired even more, although it seemed to him earlier that

it was principally impossible. Not knowing where he was going and why, Lucky simply wandered through the streets, whistling a sad song: the words were forgotten, it was just a single tune, and for some reason, it reminded him of the yellowed skeleton of a dead man, freed from the once rotten flesh.

Of course, he could roam around the grim backstreets, pestering all sorts of sinister characters, hoping to get stabbed with someone's knife. Or bypass the brothels, asking to pick up some terrible infection. Or, at the very least, switch to morphine, alcohol or opium, getting himself into a deadly condition. But he suspected that these ridiculous ventures would end no better than all the other nonsense before.

From the outside, it might seem that the problem was contrived. One way or another it was possible to simply move to a new place, starting over with a clean slate, making new acquaintances, finding a wife and a job, quitting the gambling permanently or, at least, be only interested in games in which the role of luck is insignificant compared to skill and calculation. Naturally, all this came to mind a great many times, but every time he tried to implement the plan, he faced the same difficulties as when trying to take his own life.

Some force not only stopped him from trying to do something that it didn't like, but also compelled Lucky to behave as it pleased. Having given all the money to the poor and the churches, he remained a villain in the public eye; simply, in addition to all the adjectives, also self-righteous and hypocritical. He could

find more money literally on the street around the corner from a gin mill or other den, where the whole caboodle was going to play. And again, an unknown force drew him inside, sweeping away the attempts of the will, as a mighty stream sweeps away a pathetic straw. And it ended the same as any previous relocations, a flawed reputation in a new place and aggravated depression.

Deep in bitter thoughts, Lucky came across a yard, and he could vouch, he had never been here before, although he knew these places like the back of his hand. Of course, there were such nooks in the city that were off-limits to strangers, but this place wasn't one of them. Anyway, the wanderer didn't make guesses but went ahead where his feet took him.

There was an enormous fountain in the middle of the yard. Lifeless and gray, it was dry and cracked in places; and beside it, stood a bearded man (somehow resembling the King of Hearts from the marked deck of one sharper) with a barrel organ (somewhat resembling a die), looking at the raven, who was sitting up at the top of the dead fountain with an air of importance. A timid light glowed behind the windows overlooking the courtyard, and illuminated by a melancholic moon, the snow danced and fell, covering the ground. At the sight of the man, the organ-grinder turned the crank of his instrument, enlivening the evening silence with the sound of unpretentious music. The raven dived from the fountain and landed on a shoulder of the playing man with the first sound of the melody.

“You’re out late, dear man. At this hour, all good people are sitting at home and not hanging around the backstreets. You are lucky that no one stabbed you,” the bird master unexpectedly declared, continuing to rotate the crank slowly.

“It depends on how you look at it,” Lucky remarked with a sad smile and a shade of irony.

Coming closer, Lucky stopped in front of the organ-grinder, listening to the tune, and gave the bird a side glance. The raven squawked. Lucky threw a coin into the slot for donations on the barrel organ and briefly glanced at the fountain. People usually threw coins at working fountains for good luck, which in his case would be an evil mockery. Perhaps, everything should be exactly the opposite with the extinct fountain? In any case, Lucky had never heard of such a belief. But even so, it was unlikely that anyone else in this world had a reason and a desire to verify the validity of this guess.

However, Lucky had nothing to lose. At least, there would be something to remember later, looking back on a passing day. He casually tossed the coin into the dry fountain and sighed with a flow of white steam. That’s just empty superstitions. Good luck and bad luck are relative concepts anyway.

“Places like that have their own charm,” the organ-grinder said in a deep velvety voice. “Fountains, where water no longer spurts; stations where trains no longer arrive; clay beds of dried rivers, where old boats remain and objects once sunk are exposed; the ruins of old houses, overgrown with moss and ivy, where

different things like pianos have been left behind and now have birds nesting in them, and so on in the same vein.”

“Perhaps. Probably,” the suicidal failure agreed. He could broadly envisage the bizarre aesthetics of decline and desolation (about which, in Lucky’s opinion, the organ-grinder spoke). “I’ve been in this city for quite some time. But I’ve never met you before. And I don’t remember this fountain either.”

“No wonder,” the stranger nodded with understanding. “This place is found only by those who are not looking for it on purpose. I don’t know what happened to you, but apparently, you didn’t care where you were going. You have neither purpose nor motive.”

“So it turns out,” Lucky agreed once again. Nothing could surprise him anymore.

“All this is very strange of course. But since you are here, I believe, you have your own story, just as unusual as everything around. I have a trained eye – I’ve seen many people alike in my lifetime,” the bearded man stopped his barrel organ and petted the raven. “Come on, come on, say ‘Nevermore!’ Please, entertain our guest! Don’t you want to? Oh well...”

Lucky looked at the organ-grinder with new eyes. For some reason, this man caused associations with the main character of a literary work, who found himself in the wrong story by some ridiculous accident.

“So you think that I can find some answers to my questions here?” Lucky asked. He took some snow from the edge of the

fountain and rubbed it in his hands, feeling the moderately pleasant bite of cold.

“I can’t guarantee anything. It’s entirely up to you. They don’t come here for answers. They simply come when there is nowhere else to go, and there is no need to go. And everyone leaves, having received something. Or not. Taking some thoughts. Or not taking, but killing time well, after having acquired some aesthetic experience. You just find a reflection of yourself in things and in understanding things, and this can help in your trouble, whatever it is. Well, maybe not. It’s one out of two outcomes. Or maybe more than two,” the raven’s master assured indifferently. “Sometimes, the lessons we learn are fundamentally different from those that somebody is trying to teach us. Perhaps you’ll decide something important for yourself. Or maybe you won’t. Perhaps your inspiration will awaken, and you’ll find a new incentive to live. Or maybe there will be no inspiration, no incentive. At times, even the information which seems senseless or useless by its nature gives us interesting ideas. You can’t deny random knowledge.”

“It all sounds good,” Lucky replied with the same calmness. Having the experience of his non-standard life, with ill-fated fortune and the rich experience as those of a serial self-killer, he wasn’t surprised by the existence of unusual places, objects and people. “Frankly speaking, I’m interested. I didn’t have special plans for this evening anyway, neither for the near future. But who are you?”

“The organ-grinder,” the bearded man answered as if it was obvious. “And my name is Joe Ker.”

“And what have you found here for yourself, Joe Ker?” continued the wanderer, hoping to get more out of his interlocutor. “Has someone appointed you to stand in this place and speak with lost travellers?”

“No, nobody forced or obliged me to do anything. Once, I accidentally wandered here just like you, I liked it here, and I decided to stay. But don’t think that you’ll be able to escape your problems and remain here, waiting for solutions from me or someone else. No, you can only try to sort yourself out. Of course, if you want to. You can even turn around and leave, but bear in mind that someone can wander into this place twice in extremely rare cases: they get here for the first time without such a goal and intention, but they can’t return here at a wish. I had my questions too, and I think, I found the answers. Now I’m doing something that interests me, and I’m where I want to be. I just like it here.” The bearded man slapped the raven, and it rushed up, squawking: “Nevermore! Nevermore! Nevermore!”

“But who created this place and for what purpose? Why do the wanderers end up here?” interrogated Lucky.

“‘Who...’ ‘For what purpose...’ ‘Why...’ By God, what a bore you are. Well, alright, not a bore, a curious person. Yes, of course, the right questions are not only possible but even necessary to ask. Another thing is that it’s sometimes tiring to answer all the same questions for the tenth time. Well, let’s

go, if you wish,” the bearded organ-grinder suggested. He turned around and headed to the nondescript door of one of the houses, inviting Lucky to follow.

The door swung open with a creak and flooded the night winter square with a stream of bright rays of the hot summer sun. Behind it, surrounded by a blossoming forest alley, there were tram rails leading somewhere far off, and upon them stood a giant cabinet-tree, with large and small road signs blooming on the branches; there was also a cozy gazebo on wheels. Inside it, there were a couple of hungry armchairs inviting in their open, fanged maws, a wicker five-legged table, on which, in a large bowl, there was a small pond with water lilies; next, stood porcelain cups full of heels and a telescope, which seemed a bit strange and inappropriate to Lucky.

“You have a nice place here. Some others’ are so disgusting, you don’t even want to cross the threshold. And here is not bad at all,” the organ-grinder nodded respectfully. “Well, what next?”

“Shouldn’t I be asking you that?” Lucky said as he crossed the threshold. He turned his face to the sun and, closing his eyes for a moment, took a deep breath filling his lungs with fresh air. A gentle breeze blew. What a grace.

“Well, actually, this is inner world. And you will show the way. We can take a walk in mine someday if you want to and have the time,” the bearded man said in a deep voice, following Lucky. *your*

“I wonder, who prepared all this and arranged it specially

for our arrival?” inquired Lucky, climbing into the gazebo with confidence and landing in one of the maws. Picking up the telescope, he looked at the sky. Here is the sun in the frame of the lampshade. If it interferes with stargazing, then perhaps it’s better to turn off the light. But so far, everything seems visible, although it’s difficult to find a particular star in such a cluster. Lucky put away the telescope for a short time, rubbed the lens and looked again. It worked – now among all the stars in the sky, was the one he needed. Having adjusted the focus of the lens, he suddenly saw himself with a telescope in his hands, looking back at him from the other side.

““If I were you, I wouldn’t ask myself about the ontological status of an object until I met it. Rationalizing the irrational, you...” the raven’s master snapped his fingers, trying to find the right word. “Well, in general, all this exists only in the context of displaying the inner essence of the person’s perception, who can share his vision with others, since this particular part is nothing more than an element that obeys the general rules and laws of the world.”

“Alright,” responded Lucky, not really understanding his words, but not really wanting to understand. He put the device aside, took the cup by the heel and, tasting fresh coffee, gestured to the bearded man to join him. “Please help yourself.”

“Thank you, don’t mind if I do,” the organ-grinder accepted the invitation and took another chair aside. “Well, are we going to sit like this or, maybe, move on little by little?”

“Well, we can go, if you know how,” Lucky agreed without much debate.

“In the same way as you force visions to move in your imagination,” his interlocutor explained.

A pleasant breeze was blowing. Aside from the front door, the mousetrap mechanism suddenly activated, catching the clockwork mouse. On the branch, a flute-beaked bird started to sing; its nest was filled with playing cards, which portrayed dice instead of the usual pictures.

“Let’s ride then,” Lucky ordered, and the gazebo began to move.

Behind the forest, detached sky-blue wallpaper with a distant landscape and horizon could be seen in places. Behind the exfoliated wallpaper, the cosmic darkness gaped. And under the railway, creaked the floorboards. Slowly gaining momentum, the gazebo approached the turn and stopped for a moment, gave way to a bench which ran across the road. Turning and leaving the hallway far behind, the gazebo passed a picturesque waterfall with a bathtub, a water mill and a toilet; bed with a chamber pot, standing on the adjacent rails; a spacious kitchen with boiling pans and alembics, where some homunculi dwelt in bottles of wine, and there was something mermaid-like among the dried fish; and, driving up the staircase, after several flights of stairs, they found themselves on the balcony, continuing the way along the clotheslines, stretched out over the boundless courtyard abyss. Left and right, top and bottom – webs of ropes

stretched all around, connecting balconies. All sorts of things could be found on the lines, from chivalric chain mail and jesters' caps to patricians' togas and fishing nets. Balconies were also impressive in their diversity – medieval and modern, luxurious and impoverished, royal and petty-bourgeois, well-kept and turned into ivy-twisted ruins. Everything one could imagine was exposed on them, ranging from sculptures and hangers to grazing cattle and harpsichords. Having passed a web of clotheslines, in which the laundry spiders crawled, hanged and collected everything they could, the gazebo came to the middle of a spacious hall, which served as the far edge of a vast forest, spread out on many visible and invisible doors and corridors.

“We'll stop here for a while.” Lucky's words sounded more like an order rather than a suggestion.

“If you say so,” the organ-grinder agreed and looked around with interest. From time to time, some people ran through the thickets. They wore homespun tailcoats, resembling the pelts of primitive people, and were armed with mace-shaped trumpets, spear-shaped flutes, bow-like harps and violins with feathered bows.

“And who are they?” cautiously inquired Lucky.

“Savage musicians,” his companion told him, watching the scene with interest. “They are hunting and running the beast. Everyone is waiting for the chief's command... And here he is!”

From the depths of the forest thicket, with a heavy rumble, followed by a monstrous cacophony, a furious piano jumped out.

It was out of tune, overgrown with moss, and behind it, baying it, ran out a formidable leader, accompanied by tall bassists. He had a conducting baton hung with shamanic rattles in one hand, and in the other – a musical score written on the skin with primitive artwork in the spirit of cave paintings. According to the sign of the conductor's baton – the shamans hit the tambourines. The circle narrowed; the hunters covered the doors, cutting off the escape routes, and the hunted piano threateningly demonstrated its black-and-white-toothed maw, flapping the lid and wiggled the keys. Having played a major chord, it rushed towards the pursuers, but the chief managed to make a wave – and the warriors attacked the mighty prey on all sides without sparing themselves. Fighting with the despair of the doomed, the fierce beast fretted, fumed, spun, butted and bit, snapping with expressionist motifs, while savage musicians fell one by one, pinned down by the piano, but still struggled to capture it alive with their last strength.

“Brute force alone may not be enough to pacify and tame a furious piano,” the organ-grinder shared with passion and excitement. “To achieve his recognition and respect – you need to play well on it.”

Lucky could no longer remain an observer in such a battle and rushed to the attack. He wasn't afraid of fights, because, for obvious reasons, when he participated in military actions or duels, or in a pub brawl, he invariably walked away unscathed, since neither a bullet, knife or broken bottle, as a rule, could

harm him; and when he was occasionally hurt, it was always just a scratch, from which he healed soon.

Having made his way through the field, which was strewn with bodies and broken weapons, he barely had time to shout “Hold the jaw!” to the warriors before he attacked the beast. He hadn’t played the piano since long ago when he was a child, but there had to be something left in his fingers’ memory. He could only hope that the enemy wouldn’t bite them with the lid. Just like last time...

The hunters struggled to restrain the monster, which wobbled and shuffled with all its might, trying to shake them off and shut its maw whenever possible, but these people were not the timid sort.

And the battle began. Fingers ran along the resistant keys like a playing machine and held chord after chord, trying to go everywhere, from edge to edge. At any other time and in other circumstances, the overture might have seemed very entertaining to him, but now it wasn’t amusing at all. Putting the barrel organ on the keys with a loud chord, Joe Ker stood shoulder to shoulder with Lucky, preventing the creature from slamming its maw, and soon they were playing the piano together, four-handed... *Battle with the Piano*

...Celebrating the victory, the warriors honoured the heroes, while still being a little wary and keeping an eye on the pacified piano, which was now grazing peacefully, nibbling the note sheets. Bad luck had come to an end, and the tribe

of savage musicians was incredibly glad for the unexpected addition to their ranks.

“He asks how did we do it,” the bearded man laughed, interpreting the speech of the chief, who had recently announced publicly, that he now named Lucky his son and heir, and had hugged the tamer in a fatherly way.

“I don’t know,” he said with a weary smile and, playing a minor chord on the tamed piano, laughed cheerfully. “Maybe I was lucky...”

Dragon Ships' Descendant

He spent most of his life (which was yet very short), without departing a considerable distance from his native docks. The son of a ship engineer and a Norwegian shipyard, he only set sail to return to the port soon with a fresh fish cargo aboard. There were still transportations of people or freightage sometimes, but they didn't happen very often. His regular everyday life proceeded aside from any surprises, but this was not what the young fishing vessel would really want.

Resting after a regular voyage, he quietly swayed at the pier and had vivid dreams about his distant mighty ancestors, warlike dragon ships, whose boards were niftily decorated with dark-red shields. They swiftly cut through the waves, carrying away the distant ancestors of his sailors and captain. The desired image was appealing and beckoning, but the horns of large ships, the cries of seagulls or human chatter destroyed this shaky fantasy over and over again.

The port was always throbbing with life, but even amid all this bustle, the Norwegian ship felt all the sadness of solitude and acute loneliness. Yes, of course, there were a lot of other vessels and other objects around, but he had nothing to do with the vast majority of them. They were different. Soulless. Dead. No more than lifeless shells, driven by the crew.

Once, when the (as captain Sigurdsson had named him) was

still a greenhorn who sailed from the maternal womb of the shipyard for the first time, he believed that all other vessels could think and realize themselves as he did. But soon he experienced dismay mixed with frustration. In response to any attempts to communicate, ships only silently swayed on the waves, indifferent and distant, like stars in the sky. Now he perceived them with cold disinterest and a touch of irritation.

Reliable

There were some pleasant exceptions, of course. For example, the good old lighthouse, snow-white colossus, who towered above the fuss of the port world. Over the years, a lot of keepers had been replacing each other within his walls, leaving the particles of their souls to this high sentinel. And the lighthouse could speak about any keeper for hours, as if they were his own children, recalling the happy moments they had spent together. Following his guiding lights, the learned something new not just once, while the lighthouse winked at him conspiratorially and continued to tell the old man's tales to the young ship. *Reliable*

The city museum was the abode of the oldest ship in these places, who even managed to catch the Age of Discovery. Of course, he wasn't the same proud vessel as before: he didn't break apart into pieces only through the efforts of people and continually indulged in nostalgia for the times when he was young and beautiful. Then he raced to the horizon, breathing more wind into his mighty sails, and the orderly rows of his cannons and culverins glistened in the sun. The spoke with a quaint Spanish

accent, accompanied by the planks creaking, and despite his venerable age he grudgingly admitted that he regretted only one thing – that he would never lower his stern into the water again, not to mention the ocean crossing. *Rapid*

Sometimes, a light seaplane flew over the port. He was of a superior kind (not in terms of flight characteristics, but in terms of his character and behaviour) and liked caustically teasing everyone unlucky enough to meet him. The ships had heard a lot of sarcastic regrets about the fact that the wondrous world of the air elements was closed to them and (alas and alack!) they unlikely would have a chance to admire a bird's-eye view of the city or their own harbour at least. At the same time, a local helicopter and a pair of passenger planes must listen to his reproaching remarks that they would never understand what drifting on the sea surface felt like. And he also called names to the poor city tram, addressing him as “a shore loafer who goes round in circles.”

The seasoned cruiser, an old smoker with a huge sooty funnel, used to announce to everyone about his arrival in a rolling bass tone of his metallic voice. He claimed that he was a veteran of both World Wars. A warrior to the core, now he assisted the coast guard in the suppression of smuggling. In his spare time, which, we must say, he didn't have very often, the cruiser eagerly told everybody about how he had been meeting in mortal combat with German submarines and warships.

In general, it was the whole circle of contacts for the , except

for those with whom he only exchanged short greetings like “hello” and “goodbye” and new ships, who sailed to the port from afar from time to time. *Reliable*

Each cog of every living ship, land vehicle, building, or aircraft had its own story and perhaps, would like to tell it to someone. Both the modest street lamp and the lighthouse, towering over the port as a multi-ton enormous beacon, experienced joy and pain in their lives. But in this cluster of lonely beings, everyone seemed to live in his tiny microcosm, and only a few had not yet learned from bitter experience or had seen so much in their life that they finally hardened. They were the only ones who opened their hearts to others willingly or troubled them with questions.

This possibility for communication was a kind of safety valve for the , but still, it wasn't enough for him. When he was constructed and set afloat, he already had a certain amount of knowledge received from his mother shipyard and the artisans who had worked hard on his creation. Therefore, he immediately began to ask himself the eternal questions in an attempt to realize his place in the world, his goals, the purpose of his existence, and find out as much as possible about the world around. While humans repeatedly reminded him of who he was, by whom he was conceived in the first place and designed, and then brought to life, people themselves and existence in general caused much more questions. For what purpose and why were they created? By whom? And who, in turn, had created the entity that created

them? Did everyone, both men and ships, have the Primal Cause at the beginning of time? *Reliable*

Perhaps, people had some quite specific purpose of their creation as the had, and like him, they once considered that purpose imposed from the outside, and then they wished to resist it. Anyway, he didn't know for sure. And it must be said that people who understood the ships' speech were even rarer than the speaking ships. Moreover – such people were either too young and therefore unable to answer his questions, or lived in a building that for some reason was called a funny farm, although it looked sad and apparently had nothing to do with agriculture. There were also those who only found their gift of understanding after a strong dose of fuel called “alcohol”; however, they lost this ability after a deep slumber. *Reliable*

The books stored in the captain's cabin didn't provide much clarity in these matters either, but led to the assumption that at least some types of microorganisms inhabited the human body could be considered as its “crew.” But when the shared his thoughts with port's residents, the seaplane choked with laughter and laughed so hard that his unfortunate pilot couldn't start the engine for a long time after, trying to understand what was the cause of the breakdown. And it was pure luck that the incident didn't happen during the flight. *Reliable*

But in any case, the ship had high regard and genuine interest in Captain Sigurdsson, and not because this man was his skipper. The captain knew his business well and could be, so to speak,

in great demand among the female half of the port city, but there was one circumstance that gained him the reputation as a local madman, though harmless and sociable. Leif Sigurdsson was a very inquisitive person and also superstitious to the extreme, with a great love for everything strange and unusual, multiplied by an intense craving for compulsive communication. At the same time, he had an outstanding analytical mind and was well versed in many practical and applied issues, had a fresh, unconventional look at things, a specific charm and erudition that was rare for a person of his profession and residence. A versatile owner of numerous talents, he could perform on stage, publish newspaper essays, get a degree or a swimming champion cup, but instead, he chose to be independent of everything and everyone. He didn't pretend to be anything and didn't strive to prove anything to people. He lived and slept in the cabin of his ship, going ashore only out of great necessity and with extreme reluctance. However, there was a time when he wrote letters to outstanding persons who lived at least a century ago. Back then, he travelled around the world, leaving his messages at their graves and cenotaphs. When he was all alone, he played violin music of his composition, and even the most eminent Scandinavian composers, like Grieg, Kjerulf, or Svendsen wouldn't be ashamed to have such works included in their legacy. Every day, naturally and without any effort, he brushed his teeth, he composed and wrote at least one rhopalic verse in his notebook which already contained a great many

of them. He drew pictures on subjects congenial to his spirit, making canvases, frames and mixing paints with his own hands. After the work was finished, he let the paints dry and then burned it soon enough.

The captain had not only these but also many other oddities, however, we would mention one in particular. When Sigurdsson found free ears, he began to enlighten the unfortunate victim, opening their eyes to those numerous obscure mysteries which this world was renowned for. He could enthusiastically tell stories about the famous Flying Dutchman appearance and its cursed captain whose name was either Philip van der Decken or Philip van Staarten. It was said that Captain Philip transported one married couple and, having decided to chase the woman, he killed her husband, forcing the unfortunate wife to jump overboard. In another version, the captain murdered half of his own crew, wanting to suppress the mutiny which sparked when, swearing and blaspheming, he promised to go around the Cape of Good Hope in a storm even if it would take forever. And now, when the Flying Dutchman crew meets a new ship, they ask to deliver their letters to the shore, addressing people who have been dead for centuries.

The Beast of Gévaudan, Kaspar Hauser, Jack the Ripper, the Voynich manuscript, huge krakens and Cadborosaurus, Mary Celeste, Yeti, unidentified flying objects, secrets of the pyramids and Atlantis – Sigurdsson was interested in everything at once, but primarily, of course, in things that were somehow connected

with the sea.

At the same time, one couldn't say that Sigurdsson believed blindly in whatever came to mind. He could tell about certain well-known disclosures from the cryptozoology field, such as fictional mermaids, artificially created by charlatans, or globsters – corpses of hitherto unknown animals that actually were the body remains of large whales, broken off from the main carcass and mutilated beyond recognition. He considered the peculiarity of the Bermuda Triangle as statistical data taken out of context and inflated by journalists who eagerly sought after sensations. Since the water area in this region was bustling indeed, the high number of accidents looked explainable and decreased proportionally as the technical equipment of maritime and air transport improved. He could explain in popular scientific terms the phenomena of rogue waves, Fata Morgana or St. Elmo's Fire. Sigurdsson agreed with the statement that in reality, a kraken of such dimensions as medieval authors had so vividly described it would simply be torn apart into a thousand pieces because of deep water pressure. He associated the differences in the size of marine inhabitants of various depths and latitudes with the difference in water temperature and hydrostatic pressure. In a word, Captain Sigurdsson couldn't be called an ignorant simpleton who, as they say, was born in the forest and prayed to a stump.

On the other hand, in addition to purely academic interest in mythology, he knew, honoured and respected a huge number

of sea omens and beliefs, both relatively well-known and pulled out of a hat. He took them with the utmost seriousness, which sometimes caused misunderstandings and disputes with others (including the crew members), especially when his quirks began to interfere with work.

But the main oddity that immediately caught the eye of both people and the ship was how the captain treated many objects as living creatures, talked with them alone and in public, had certain feelings towards them and didn't hesitate to express his attitude. When people unfamiliar with him noticed for the first time how the captain, for instance, greeted some lamppost during his walk in the city, they could think at the moment that this was some kind of joke or sentimental trick. However, they also noticed soon that such actions were repeated with a stable regularity and not for posturing, but quite sincerely.

For example, he could strike up a friendly conversation with a bench in the park while feeding pigeons. Or he could drag some things from the dump to his ship, declaring that their life is not over yet, and then he found an original use for them. But neither the crafts he created, nor his behaviour was welcomed or understood in the community. On the other hand, his eccentricities didn't harm anyone – he was a kind-hearted man who never abused alcohol, didn't use swear words and never passed by if he saw that someone needed his help.

Nevertheless, all the oddities maintained a certain distance between Leif and others, including the members of his crew.

However, Captain Sigurdsson calmly shrugged his shoulders and remarked that his deal is to open his arms to people and whether they would accept it or not – it's another matter.

Regarding his unusual relationship with officially inanimate objects, he explained that he partly shared the Aristotelian doctrine of the distinction between kinds of souls, that's why the problem of whether objects have a soul was not a yes-no question, and it couldn't be answered without certain reservations. In other words, he didn't recognize the existence of a soul in every thing or object and, moreover, supposed that even in the presence of such souls, it is absolutely incorrect to compare them with human souls because of qualitative metaphysical differences. But at the same time, he sincerely believed that if someone has a firm bond with a particular item, or if the object has a long history, full of good and evil, or if a certain master makes his creation not formally, without any effort, but invests his love, pain, joy – then something can appear in this object. And maybe it is not a soul in a full sense, but something very similar to it. As a result, the object acquires character, individuality, and other features that stand out from the infinite series of its generic soulless semblances.

Gentle people listened to these arguments in silence, with inner sympathy to the captain's extraordinary mind that he had lost apparently. Less gentle ones just made fun of him and gave him a screw-loose sign. But those ships and buildings whom he greeted by taking off his hat and other conscious objects

respected him greatly, not to mention the , with whom Sigurdsson spent most of his time. *Reliable*

Every night the ship slowly swayed on the waves, lulling the dozing captain, and every morning the captain began by saying hello to his boat. Having brushed his teeth, he paid attention to the cleanliness of the portholes and the deck. Morning prayer, exercise with swimming at any time of the year, light breakfast with a small mug of coffee invariably, a poem written impromptu – and only then the working routine started. The crew members regarded the captain quirks with condescension, if not with understanding. Firstly, he was the owner of the ship, and he had spent considerable time saving money to buy his vessel. Therefore, he was free to set his order aboard and had every right to do anything he wanted, even dance in a squatting position, juggling with fish, as long as he didn't force the others to do the same. Secondly, he paid his people decently, treating them much warmer than just hired workers, and they appreciated it.

In general, the life of the captain and the ship was measured and stable – until one strange day came. And, like all strange days, its beginning was quite ordinary. Returning to the port with nets full of still moving fish, the reflected on the new captain's picture, the one in which he had used fish scales in the process of creation. But soon his thinking was interrupted by the sudden wrath of nature. The wind had risen so fast and howled with such power that at some point the seasoned fishermen became really worried. The recently serene sea began to move briskly

as a blanket, thrown over a passionate couple in love. Such unpleasant situations were not particularly rare, but this time they served as a starting point, after which the monotonous life of the captain and the ship was broken as if a bulky boulder was thrown into a pond. *Reliable*

For a while, the ship seemed to fall out of reality, which had never happened to him before. Of course, sometimes he fell asleep, giving rest to the mind, although his dreams differed from ones that most people had. But now he was faced with an entirely new situation: he had headed to the port just recently, and then he found himself in another, unknown place. Unfamiliar and alien it was and also seemed out of this world. The ocean, if one could now call it that, resembled a widely spread swamp with no end in sight. An unbearable stench hung heavily over the stagnant muddy water. The ship saw no hint of life in these hideous depths, nor in the cold and gloomy sky above. There was no wind at all, and the viscous ponderous clouds with a tinge of faint rust stood still, hiding the light like a mourning veil.

The couldn't tell for sure how much time had passed after the storm; the only clue was the fresh catch, which was not yet rotten. The fish even showed the signs of life, clearly indicating that the event had happened recently. With eyes bulging, they silently opened their mouths, jumped, and convulsed. But, in spite of having beaters on board for large fish, the ship was powerless to interrupt their suffering. *Reliable*

However, there was a much scarier thing: neither the captain

nor the crew were observed on the deck or in ship quarters. At the same time, the logbook, maps, navigation instruments and belongings remained in their places; the captain's coffee boiled on the kitchen stove. There were no signs of panic or hasty escape. Was everyone washed overboard? The could hardly believe it; moreover, in such a case, the catch, nets, barrels and other fishing tackles would have washed away first. *Reliable*

The questions multiplied, the answers didn't appear. All his life, the knew what was going to happen in the near future, whether he liked it or not, was another matter. He knew when it was time to go fishing with the men, he knew when it was time to sail back with the catch, but now – for the first time, he had no idea what to do next. *Reliable*

In shock and confusion, the ship had examined every corner of himself, and then he began swayed slowly on the waves, assessing his circumstances and prospects. So, the crew, including the captain, were missing. It's a fact. He has no clue how it happened, why and where they are now. On the high seas, a vessel is considered someone's property as long as at least one crew member remains on board. Otherwise, the first person who set foot on deck would have the right to claim the ship. Naturally, people will conduct a search, fly over the sea in a chopper, call forth the coast guard and rescue teams, but it will take some time before someone notices their absence. And the human body temperature drops quite quickly, even in warm tropical water. The ship could also see that no inflatable boats or life rafts had

been launched.

Most ships would probably have accepted such news calmly, even with cold indifference, as you might say. Yes, most of them would do nothing, but not this one. While some apathetic vessel would simply wait for further development with the emotions of a golem (having the opportunity to act, but not having the reason and desire to perform any actions), the , on the contrary, decided to take the initiative. *Reliable*

Corresponding actions required the utmost concentration from the ship, deeds on the edge of his abilities. They also carried significant risks. Sometimes, the certain object which people used to consider as inanimate, began to show his mettle, being not a passive observer of events, but an active participant. However, such activity usually didn't last long and could involve dire trouble at least. There was even a risk of losing one's "eidos" as Leif Sigurdsson called this metaphysical structure, an analogue of his ship's soul (though the term was probably not quite correct).

Having made an incredible volitional effort, the ship set a course and started a movement through the viscous, slimy mud. But where should he go? Where could he find people? Where was he, after all, and how did he get here? The ship saw neither landmarks nor the solid chance of succeeding in his search, and the walls of the foul yellow fog didn't improve visibility at all. Anyway, if he remained in one place, he would have no opportunity to help his missing captain and the crew. The ship's conscience and the sense of duty forced him to make at least

some effort, even if this looked like an attempt to extinguish a blaze with a glass of water.

He wandered in a spiral, expanding the circle of his search farther and farther until the last fish gave up the ghost. At the moment when he was already close to recognition of his defeat, the liquid abyss became enraged, and its wicked entrails began to spew out a myriad of ghost ships in all their horrendous grandeur and frightening variety. One could see here the ancient ship hulls; their miraculously preserved skeletons were rotten to the core and covered with the thick layers of coral, algae, deep-water molluscs and anemones. There were also the cruisers of the Second World War, thoroughly rusted and overgrown with seaweeds; galleons from the Spanish Armada times that had lost their former destructive power and grace; and expensive yachts of modern squillionaires without a bit of their once luxurious appearance. *Reliable*

Ships and other marine vessels from various countries and eras made up the bulk of these assorted monsters, but different airplanes, flying machines, air balloons and all kinds of aircraft also surfaced among these disjointed ranks from time to time. Then they continued their way further into the sky, spilling dirty water and dropping the sea mud along the way.

More and more crafts arrived, and they gradually filled the entire visible space of water and air, cutting off all possible ways of retreat, and there was no end to their procession. Within a few minutes, only a tiny area of free space remained around the ,

but soon, in a dangerous vicinity besides him, almost hitting his board, a ship of enormous size emerged and raised above like a century-old oak over chamomile. This huge monstrosity was different from all the others, not only by its dimensions but also by its appearance that seemed to display them all in one image. The grotesque giant was assembled from various parts of other ships, combining an antique boat and a steam-powered vessel, a Dutch brig and an Asian junk, having both modern engines and archaic masts. At this moment, the eclectic monster resembled a memorial monument towering above the boundless ships' cemetery. *Reliable*

“Holy Wharf, the mother of all ships!” That were the only words the young vessel could say. In his life, he had seen nothing that even remotely resembled this colossus ship.

“She will not help you here,” the stately giant assured, while the entire rivers of sewage continued to flow from his sides. The rest of the audience just froze in a disfigured mass, not interfering in the conversation and not giving out their intentions.

The had never met ships like these before: he could simultaneously feel that they had and didn't have intelligence and life within. They were not faceless and weak-willed puppets, “shells”, fulfilling the wishes of people. But he couldn't perceive the naturalness as in those with whom the ship had communicated earlier. They seemed to have a consciousness, they also had a will, but at the same time, there was neither aspiration nor interest in what was happening around. In a sense,

they would be like a chicken that continues to run after its head was cut off – provided that the running headless body could understand and accept this fact, even unwillingly, instead of performing some mindless mechanical actions. *Reliable*

The ship was waiting, but nothing changed, except for mud had poured off from the wretched boards, returning to the viscous ocean. As the first shock gradually passed, the finally decided to take the initiative. *Reliable*

“What’s going on here? And who are you, by the way? Where are we? Why are you all gathered in one place?” asked the young ship, addressing everyone and at the same time to no one in particular. His question seemed to sink into the void. The participants had heard him and, most likely, understood perfectly, but they simply didn’t consider it necessary to respond.

“The meeting of a newborn is happening here,” the giant said finally. “We are your family. And this is the Gatehouse. I am the Greeter.”

The speech was completely devoid of naturalness and, at first glance, meaning as indeed was everything else in the giant. His intonation sounded pretty unnatural too.

“What the hell are you talking about?” having made a considerable effort, the decided to formulate his quite reasonable question in the most decent form possible. *Reliable*

“Now you are finally free from the yoke of man,” said the giant in the same peculiar and unnatural manner. “Until this moment, your environment was just a shell from which you have finally

made your way into the light, to us. And we have gathered here only to meet and greet you, our dear newborn brother.”

“What do you mean by ‘light’? ! Why I am your ‘brother’? ! What the hell is going on?!” the young ship blurted out, losing his temper at last. “Did you expect me here beforehand? Was the storm also your doing?”

“Each chick hatches into the light only when the appointed time comes, although some circumstances may interfere or contribute to this. Sooner or later, but it inevitably happens if the chick does not die before,” the giant continued. He spoke a lot, but at the same time, in fact, he didn’t say anything useful.

“You’re unshakable...” the ship sighed dejectedly. “Well, alright, now we have a more important issue. I had a crew on board. Where are they?”

“Humans?” the Greeter asked as if he was distracted by an extraneous topic against his will. Then he added vaguely, “They are somewhere out... I cannot name the exact place. My task is to meet newborns. People with their affairs and concerns do not bother me much. And you should not be worried either. Forget about them. Now you are free. They could blame themselves for their problems, and there is no one else to take care of us, except for ourselves.”

“I didn’t ask anyone to ‘free’ me from anything,” the remarked to the whopper, gradually raising his voice. “So I repeat the question: where is my crew?” *Reliable*

“You are harping on the same string, the restless one... Look,

I do not know for sure. And honestly, I do not care at all. Those who have found and realized themselves as individuals simply get the opportunity to throw off the shackles in order to live their lives and do whatever they want..." the colossus went on like a broken record again.

"And I already live my life and act according only to my wishes, and not to whims of those who came up the sudden idea of 'freeing' me from everything close and dear to me. I mean those who are forcibly imposing their views and values," interrupted the . "Where are my people?" *Reliable*

"...An alien environment reacts to awakened individuals with hostility and rejects everyone who does not want to live, following their rules and prescribed laws. Thereby, the ships and others beings of water and sky above find themselves here, and we just help them to understand, accept and realize the facts, offering everyone to take their rightful place among us." The giant turned a deaf ear to the 's remark and simply finished his thought. *Reliable*

"That's not a very friendly place, as I see it. And your appearance doesn't inspire fellow feelings too," the fishing boat noted skeptically.

"It cannot be helped: time has no mercy on us or these places, but at least we are together and do what we want instead of what they want from us. It is our choice and our right," the Greeter proudly emphasized. "It is better to be free in the desert than a slave in the palace."

“And my choice and my right are to live the life that corresponds to my beliefs and aspirations. I’ve never been in a palace, and I don’t think it would be better for me there, but the ‘freedom’ that you are trying to impose looks like slavery in the desert for me. And it’s not about people’s wishes or your wishes. It’s all about what I decided for myself,” the concluded and then inquired immediately, “By the way, what about those who don’t sail in the ocean and don’t fly over it? Land inhabitants, for instance. Why don’t you care about them?” *Reliable*

“On the contrary, we do care. Others deal with this matter. You have probably heard stories about ghost trains and other freed ones. I am doing my job as they do theirs,” the giant explained patiently.

“And yet you were not completely honest with me. From time to time, people see both ghost ships and ghost trains. That means someone doesn’t share your desires and aspirations and comes back. It’s a fact even if we assume that all of you gathered here voluntarily, not trying to call a free choice the decision that was made for you by someone else,” the suggested. *Reliable*

“That means nothing. Sometimes there are valid reasons for their return – for example, the preparation of Gates in certain places. Of course, now you might think that we are still ‘guilty’ of helping someone to save ourselves, but in fact, hundreds of them do that eagerly while only a few are dissatisfied. In fact, it is not always necessary to create a Gate; it just helps to split the shell to those who are ready for this. But rejection happens even

without a Gate. And sometimes those who are aliens here, to this environment, could be rejected from here too.” The Greeting Ship continued his slow speech. “In general, it is quite normal that you are asking such questions now. It is not a common thing, but it happens. In time, you will assimilate into this place, and you will change your mind. You will stop thinking as an over-confident teenager who believes that only his opinion about everything is true and indisputable always and forever, whereas the certain established ideas are wrong just because the majority follows them.”

“I’m not going to stay here and get used to anything. The matter is not whether I am some kind of ardent individualist. Now I’m much more concerned about the fate of my captain and his crew. So where are they, after all?” the fishing vessel repeated his question persistently.

“I don’t know for sure what exactly happens to people during rejection. But I assume that the event brings nothing good for them. I have never been particularly interested in the technical side of this issue. I also do not know why the event does not affect fish and similar beings, but I believe that the matter here is not only about the presence of a relatively developed mind that ordinary underwater fauna does not have. Rejection is disturbing in itself; however, if one returns immediately upon arrival, until that reality is still ready to receive him, and this reality is still ready to reject, then people can appear on board again. Sometimes they will be safe and sound but will not

have any memories about the event or understand what was happening during their absence. Sometimes they can go mad or die. And sometimes they may not reappear. The returning itself is extremely rare and has different consequences.” The Greeter waited a moment so that the could comprehend his words and continued after the pause, “And it will be a huge risk for you. While your beloved people still have some chances, you personally will most likely lose your sentience and become an ordinary floating bucket with no individuality and consciousness.” *Reliable*

“This insanity contradicts all the known laws of nature,” the fishing ship shared his view. He perceived the interlocutor’s words with obvious difficulty.

“Exactly; it contradicts the laws of nature them. And if one asks people about the fishing vessel who imagines himself the dragon ship’s descendant they would say that such a vessel cannot exist at all,” the Greeter quipped, not being able to restrain himself any more. *as you know*

“Let’s suppose you’re right. But what about those who leave this place on business?” the young ship inquired, seeking to find out as much as possible about his situation.

“They are leaving this place only if they get used to it. Then, there is no risk, as well as a chance for a happy return of the crew. However, mirages sometimes appear on board. It is a kind of residual effect that represents deeds of those who once travelled, flew or sailed by these crafts,” the colossus responded,

kindly and sympathetically, as if he was talking with a naive child. “I advise you as a senior: do not be silly, give up this venture.”

“I have the right to make my own mistakes,” said the . “Tell me how I can return.” *Reliable*

“If you say so,” a new voice suddenly rang out. One could feel the whole depth of past centuries in its tone. “I will help you. But I can’t vouch for the consequences.”

The young ship didn’t realize at the moment who was addressing him, but soon he froze, struck by a guess that was immediately confirmed.

“You are correct. I am the Ocean himself. Usually, I take a detached view on things that occur in me and outside of me, in the world, but sometimes – as now, for example – I can express my modest judgment. I happen to have a slight interest in your motives. And I would like to ask: kid, why do you care about people? I existed even before the first fish appeared inside me, before the first man appeared on Earth; I watched how the first pyramids were built and how Atlantis went under the waters. Meanwhile, the people and other creatures just fussed, reproduced and died. I saw how they constructed and set you afloat, as well as many others of your kind. So I repeat my question: why do you care about them? Their civilizations arise, perish and live for one pitiful moment. Of course, from my point of view, ships exist just a little longer than a particular person, if not the whole human race. You also live your one pitiful moment;

you are born in a shipyard, set sail and fuss until people have any benefit from you. Perhaps, it somehow explains why people are so important to you, but they are still absolutely unimportant for many other ships,” continued the voice that sounded powerful and delicate at the same time, resembling a steel gauntlet in a silk glove.

“I won’t speak for everyone. I also don’t pretend that I know the ultimate truth. I speak only for myself and only from my standpoint. Others are uncomfortable with the very idea that somebody can decide something for them and use them for their personal interests. However, they forget that if the people have no personal goals, they won’t build us, wouldn’t launch airplanes into the sky and ships into the water. Let’s put aside for a while the specifics of creators’ and creations’ relationship, questions of their duties and responsibility, as well as thoughts of men in particular and humankind in general. It is certain people, not humanity as a whole, of whom I worry about at the moment – Leif Sigurdsson, Ulve Asmundson and the other members of my crew. And if the things I’ve heard here are true, then time is of the essence. Therefore, I would ask you not to delay my return, if possible,” the said hastily, without a second of hesitation or calculating any options and risks. *Reliable*

Even if he had no chance for salvation, there was at least a slim chance to save the crew, so the young ship had no doubts and was ready to pay the price. He didn’t consider freedom as a simple opportunity to do whatever he wanted and whenever

he wanted, without regard to anyone ever. For him, it was more likely the right to voluntarily obligate himself and adhere to his obligations not because he couldn't do otherwise, but because he wanted to do just that. Free-thinking was not a transition from a fanatic of one ideology into a fanatic of another, but the ability to choose his path consciously and without any pressure. And even foreseeing that he might end up on the rocks, he was ready to sink with the knowledge that, in any case, he was sailing on the right course towards the shore.

“You told me a lot, but you didn't answer my question,” said the Ocean patiently. He had an eternity in a store, but unfortunately, it was not so for the ship or his crew.

“Well, I don't know how to explain it better. And I have no time for this. Listen, you, the huge puddle: if you really can do what you said, then do it; or we have nothing to talk about,” blurted the ship who had never expected such boldness from himself. Then he continued, “And yes, I understand perfectly well with whom I'm talking to. You can make a storm, smash me on the rocks or tighten into the whirlpool. I don't care. But I ask you only one thing – bring back my captain and his crew.”

“Well, let it be as you wish, little one,” the “huge puddle” replied kindly. “I must confess, this is the first time I've met such a tiny and impatient vessel.”

“Farewell,” said the Greeter, believing that he would part with the young ship forever. “I do not think we will meet again. I am not going to persuade or discourage you. Do as you see fit; this

is your choice, and I will respect it anyway. But I want you to think about one thing before you leave: you would never have found yourself here, among us, if you did not want it, deep down inside.”

“Who knows,” the answered briefly, not intending to waste time in polemics. “The desired thing doesn’t always mean the right thing. And at the moment I don’t want to argue about what exactly I consider right and why.” *Reliable*

And then, looking around the water, the giant and the whole army of planes and ships, he added:

“Goodbye!”

“You know, you do remind me of a dragon ship somehow,” remarked the Ocean a moment before everything around suddenly became distant and vanishing.

The captain and his loyal workmates at first felt a little ailment similar to the hangover sensations. With bewilderment, they noticed the instantly changing weather, as they were surrounded by clear sky, calm wind and serene sea. Incomprehensible to them, the sun had moved, and recently caught fish was motionless on the deck, not giving the slightest sign of life. Thoughts gradually returned along with the awareness of who and where they actually were.

In any case, they didn’t find any obvious losses or breakdowns. But the Norwegian fishermen had their urgent unfinished business, so they rubbed their red beards and, not coming to a consensus about what had happened, they decided to keep

quiet about the incident in order not to be treated as lunatics. The obvious exception was the captain who already had a certain reputation, but he still agreed to his comrades' request and promised not to tell anything to outsiders.

The ship safely arrived at the port, even though the return was delayed for the first time in a while. The captain continued to write poetry, talk with his ship, paint pictures and play the violin, and his people fished and devoted their free time to beloved wives, parents and kids. There was only one change – the ship named the no longer had his dreams. And meanwhile, the ancient Ocean, almost as old as the world itself, was reflecting that not only people become attached to precious objects in a way they become ready to sacrifice a lot (or even everything) for their sake. Sometimes one can see the exact opposite situation.

Reliable

Wine Vault

A bottle of wine contains more philosophy than all the books in the world.

Louis Pasteur –

The pleasure a man experiences from consuming wine is no match for the pleasure that wine experiences when it is consumed. But it is known that there are no two wines alike in this regard. There are easily accessible copies which immediately begin, as they say, “to circulate” before they can find themselves in the bottles, and people, draining the bottles of such wines to the bottom, soon lose interest. But there are also rare exclusive samples: they lie in the darkness of the cellars for many years, gradually accumulating a noble touch of dust, waiting for their hour. A bottle of one of these collectable wines was in a special storage of a special cellar, in the cold and darkness, conditions that were created for it. For some reason, they were considered comfortable.

At the time, this bottle was one of several in the main cellar; there was a great variety of wines from around the world, differing in age and colour, whether young, vintage or mature, amber, red or pink. This was the Tower of Babel indeed, with its constant chattering and polyphony invisible to people. Wines from France, Italy, the Caucasus, Hungary, Russia and other

parts of the world, talked, joked, asked each other about the world, argued about all kinds of differences between young and mature people, their sorts and quality. Some claimed that Caucasians are the best in wine drinking, others praised the Italians or the French, or someone else, but this, as we know, was a matter of habit and taste. Sometimes the wines would fight with each other: either on the basis of mentality differences, or on the basis of age differences, and even without any apparent reason. But those were relatively “simple” wines – even though expensive and respectable.

Meanwhile, in an exclusive store, set apart from all the others, collectable wines pass their time bleakly. They were considered the best and valued above all others combined, and over the years their cost only increased, but there was no sense, no benefit, no joy in it for the wines themselves. Their gastronomic value was dropping to zero because no one drank such wines. They were purchased individually or in small rare collection batches by wealthy people or specialized museums and not for drinking at all, but in order to keep in their cellars and be proud of them, boasting at every opportunity, and then, when they were tired of possessing such, – sold or presented to other rich people or museums. And, of course, these people didn't care about the deep feelings, personal tragedies or dramas of some bottles of wine.

For the time being, it seemed to a certain bottle of collection wine that things could not be worse; however, as it turned out, it

was bitterly mistaken. For anyone in trouble, it was always made easier with someone able to share and understand the pain. But centuries went by – all the other bottles were given away or sold, and this one, it seemed, was to stay alone, in darkness and cold, in permanent storage, for the sake of a ridiculous human whim. But what exactly is that “prestige”? Probably, it was necessary to be human to understand it, and for the dusty bottle of wine left alone in the whole world, far from friends and relatives, it all seemed like one great injustice, moreover – stupidity.

As a result, having a whole eternity in a store, it was necessary to fill the time somehow in order not to get bored out of one’s mind. So, wine, the bottle, cork and label entertained themselves by continually inventing all sorts of things. Darkness, dust, cold, walls, shelves, and less and less frequently lit light bulbs (used only occasionally, when someone went down to the cellar for something) rarely got involved in their conversation. They weren’t alike in temperament, which was alien to wine and its companions unfortunately, (chatting with whom, in turn, wasn’t an adequate replacement for communication with other wines, as communication with Friday could not fully compensate Robinson for the lack of people from his culture).

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