

Ekaterina TARATUTA

One Hundred and One Minutes

of sitting around the table and talking of voyages to far away lands and strange events, - of how it all is, and how it may be, and how it always is, and, then again, infrequently; of secret plots and signs, of flights and shots and lines, of lovely ladies and sailing laddies, of snails and demons, of deaths and endeavors, of mermaids and cats, of weather and dread, of comical people, of cannons a little, of miracle prizes and map exercises.

1.

Voyages are always precipitated by significant events. It was my custom to nail a sign to a tree where I asked forgiveness from anyone I wronged and forgave anyone who caused me pain. The “Wolf-fish”, my sister-ship, was nothing but a tub which had lost all its former glory in the course of its forgettable existence. I could only count on my own abilities, and all the bigger and better boats of our little town saluted me out of sheer amusement as I bobbed cozily in coastal waters, about to venture into the open seas.

2.

“These people shamelessly undermine lawful commerce in the entire area. While on shore, they usually gather in the tavern “Sucking-pig”. Landscapes of the local coastline hang on the walls, along with scenes from old times, pictures of ships and famous pirates. With them was an old woman who could still remember the times of the Inquisition. She possessed a remarkable sense for people.”

3.

“When I finally saw the great man, he had a very troubled expression. He was strolling about his yard surrounded by items hanging on clothes lines which I first mistook for clean laundry. But, as I came closer, I realized that they were papers hung up to dry. It turns out there was a fire in his cabinet, fortunately a small one, and many papers got wet during the extinguishing.”

4.

“Once we were transporting turtles... Yes, live turtles for soup.”

“Live?”

“Of course. The dead ones spoil/go bad. To avoid mixing them up, we named them after the customers. We painted on their shells: ‘Mr. So-and-so’ or ‘Mrs. So-and-so’. Sometimes, you know, we had to write down in our ship log: ‘Mr. So-and-so died’.”

“Did the customers get angry afterwards?”

“Well, what are you supposed to do if they died. In general we took special care not to let namesakes of royal lineage die. Sailors are superstitious, so we thought their death would bring bad luck.”

5.

“They say there is an uninhabited region on the equator where the heat is so intense that it prohibits existence. Old maps of the place sometimes depict the devil’s hand emerging out of water.”

“Yes, that’s right. Crews consisting of cowards demand to stop sailing and want to go back as soon as they approach this place. They think that another moment and the ship will reach latitudes where water comes to a boil from heat of the sun.”

“Does water actually boil?”

“I’ve never seen it. But there is a large number of whirlpools - that could have been the source of the legend. However, it’s a well known fact that human skin turns black in these parts, and it’s impossible to hide from this sun. Even under closing the body still gets exposed, because the rays of that sun are so thirsty that they can penetrate the weaving of fabric.”

“But what about gold, Marjana? The gold that is formed from the heat of the tropical sun?”

“I don’t know, dear. But it’s a certain fact that the souls of white crew members experience something like a blackening in those latitudes, and everyone becomes meaner and coarser than usual. Who knows, perhaps that sun extracts that gold out of them... And it accumulates somewhere, in those parts...”

“Yes, that can be/that’s possible.”

6.

“Their captain offered me to have a drink with him for luck, but I refused.”

“Why so/How come?”

“In the glass I saw a reflection of a man who was not in my eyeshot at the moment.”

“Did you conceal this from the captain?”

“On the contrary, I told him.”

“Do you know the man who unlawfully/contrary to laws got reflected in your glass?”

“Yes, I do. As soon as the captain found out his name, he silently went to his cabin.”

“What kind of wine was it?”

“There is an island, Satanases, it is completely black. Only grapes grow there. The wine is sweet, but tastes like ash and iodine, so one desires to drink it with salt. This wine helps in war.”

7.

“Their vessel, “Antonia-Katerina,” is lazy afloat/moves lazily. It was not difficult for us to catch up with them.

“Afterwards they took another ship and let this “Antonia” go.”

“Yes, I heard about it.”

“Well, have you encountered them again?”

“No.”

“Could their new ship be so much better than yours that you can’t even meet them?”

“As to me, I don’t believe it. However, this is quite possible.”

8.

“The smoked chicken wasn’t fresh and smelled like a dingy dish-cloth. It was consumed by a woman with a protruding belly who was a beauty in her youth. She was sorry to throw the chicken away, so she tried to eat at least a part of it. She didn’t let the children to taste this meat, and refused their suggestions to have some fresh food, which was available in abundance.”

9.

There once was a country named Kroraina or Kroran, but one could not access it by sea. Which meant that this country was too mysterious to exist for a long time. But they have, however, a lake which changes its location every three years, so it’s impossible to map it. The lake is big but boats do not venture there because the water saturates any boat in minutes no matter how well it was caulked. The water is undrinkable as well and a person must learn to drink horse blood to escape dying of thirst there. Parts of this country are called Chalmadana, Nina and Sacha. On their coins they depict a two-humped camel or a horse. Letters in those parts are written on axe-shaped wooden tablets which are called *kilamudra* and *likhitaka*. Two tablets are tied with a rope which is then sealed. This way the letter is on the inside and an address on the outside.

10.

“And when we meet, what am I to do with him if he is an enemy?”

“Such people are no one’s enemies but their own. However, he is an ill-fated doctor. As the saying goes, the drinking-horn always dangles on his chest. And when drunk, he hates everybody. So beware of asking for his help under all circumstances. On other occasions it’s best to treat him in a regular, polite way.”

11.

“After an Italian custom, she sent her beloved some pubic hair. It was especially stunning to have blood on the hair. That’s how the woman did it.”

“What are the emotions of a man who receives such a gift?”

“He is to feel honored, I suppose, but I doubt that a man can manage this with sincerity. But when one speaks of such tokens, there’s no need for any sincerity.”

12.

“Once I saw a captured wild man.”

“Where?”

“Right here at home. I don’t sail to distant lands like you.”

“There is nothing surprising in the fact that you saw him here. Wild men are ubiquitous. Occasionally, one can capture a wild man even in the open sea.”

13.

“Once we had a devil on the ship. In the nearest port we asked a priest to come aboard. He had a hard time climbing onboard and announced that before proceeding with the exorcism, a sermon must be delivered, with the entire crew present. I gathered the crew, and he applied himself to the task. Tears were honey to this priest, so they occasionally poured down his cheeks. After an hour’s sermon the very devil he was exorcising appeared in front of us. The devil swore the priest was a jay???, had a blasphemous pee on the deck and disappeared forever. The crew got so mad at the holy father for this, that I had to defend him from their rage. He hurried into the boat, sobbing his eyes out, looking completely happy.”

14.

“In this town they name the banks, not the rivers, so the banks of the same river usually have different names.”

“Strangers must have to get accustomed to this.”

“Yes, it takes a while.”

15.

“He loved looking in somebody else's mirrors.”

“Is there something evil in this?”

“I don’t think so, nor do I mind lending a mirror.”

“Then what do you think is wrong about this?”

“No, everything’s alright... Everything’s alright as usual.”

16.

“The chieftains of this tribe grow unbelievably long nails. It seems impossible that somebody could have a bearable life with such an adornment. But the nails make a huge impression on the tribe. They think that if someone misbehaves, a chieftain will cut the heavens open with his nails, and then there will be no more day or night, only eternal cold and darkness.”

“In those latitudes they may want to dream of cooler weather.”

“And what good would that do? They practically live outdoors. As to the great heat, it doesn’t frighten them, though it occasionally inflicts damage. Once I saw a man with a sack of meat come back to the village. Because of the scorching sun, only meat fibers remained in the sack, the fat melted and dripped down the man’s back.

17.

“She remembered the days spent in this academy. According to her, they walked around in nothing but skirts in the summer, with bare breasts, and each of them was occupied with her own task.”

“And what was her task, then?”

“She deciphered ancient papers on salving in the archive.”

18.

“The English call a tough captain a ‘sundowner’ which means an ‘observer of sunsets,’ or the ‘one who sees off the sun’ or, simply, the night owl. Though the same name is given to a glass of wine consumed at sunset.”

“Are you tough?”

“Pretty tough.”

19.

“The preparation of rice powder takes only four days, and there is nothing complicated or expensive about it. But I couldn’t give in to the whims of this dame and in our circumstance too.”

“Why did she need the powder?”

“Because, you see, she ran out of the supplies she brought with her.”

20.

When I visited Juana, she was examining a magnificent copy of the *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum* atlas by Abraham Ortelius. I unguardedly expressed my admiration, and the beautiful recluse took it into her head to give me these pages. I protested. And she said:

“Sister Marjana, all of us here are beyond the edge of the world. Time has an unusual flow here. And why should we be in perpetual motion and inevitably turn into dust.”

21.

“Have you seen any foreign rulers?”

“Yes, a multitude.”

“Do they differ from ours?”

“Yes, quite a bit.”

“What are the differences, then?”

“It is well known that foreign rulers are recognized by the way they eat a watermelon.”

“And how do they do it?”

“I’ve never had a chance to observe.”

22.

“In those parts people most certainly come down with fever. The most dangerous are the four-day fevers. As one doctor wrote, the only way to cure four-day fevers is a sudden

fright. However, the problem is that it's not easy to frighten such a sick man, since he is already ill-disposed because of his weakened health. He is overtaken by boredom, so everything that could remind him of danger is greeted with curiosity and hope. He speaks in a funny chirping voice, just like a child, and his eyes are constantly inflamed. He thinks that everybody in the world is against him. One of our sailors while being in this murky condition constantly attempted to write about it to the newspapers, despite the fact that he was illiterate. The rest of them simply gulped down rum and stayed in their hammocks. They couldn't overcome an overwhelming desire to sleep. However, when they would doze off, their sleep was heavy, as if the night was carved out of their heads."

23.

"He was saying afterwards: "She grabbed me with her legs and turned me upside down." He really thought that she did something to him on purpose, because ever since then he constantly wanted to call her.

"And what about her?"

"She also fell in love with him, only he was married and honest. That's why he got so frightened."

"What kind of person was he?"

"He was one of those people who roar with laughter in a company, but never laugh when they are alone."

"And what did she say?"

"Ah, I am like a ship with tons of iron cannon balls lodged in my hull. But occasionally such ships can manage to return to port'."

24.

"Then all the local cats had their fill of food. They were basking in the sun and their fur had a sheen."

"What color were they?"

"Various colors, so they looked like stones on a seashore."

25.

"The locals thought that white people lived only on water and had no other houses except ships."

"Did they invite you to visit them and spend a night on shore?"

"Yes. They gave us palm wine, since they thought that we were able to mediate between them and their river-gods."

"How was the wine?"

"It's reminiscent of light Champagne, when it's still fresh. But if you let it sit for just a few hours, it becomes very heady. The natives usually drink it with nuts or fish."

26.

“By morning the equinox storm had died down, but the weather that day was still quite bad. The wind was bringing unsettling sounds of bells out of nowhere, and this in the open sea. The sailors were telling each other all sort of nonsense (about the devil)/devilish stories.”

“But in your business the reality is more frightening than tall tales.”

“Yes, tall tales actually help.”

27.

“The local saint who protects the sailors is named Sophia. She keeps count of all sea routes, and her voice is like the sound of many streams. Once a year she appears to each sailor, to everyone of them on their own day. Her appearance is preceded by the emanation of heavenly rays, and then the sailor has to get ready for the event.”

“And what is he to do?”

“He has to give an account of all his seafaring businesses for the past year.”

28.

“He was gorgeous. Dozens of women were pining for him without any serious hope, since not one of them could gain his favor for more than a month. However, once a rumor spread in the local society about his impending marriage, apparently for great love. Moreover, this rumor was soon happily confirmed.”

“Who turned out to be the extraordinary woman?”

“An artist who painted wonderful portraits.”

29.

“Some rainbows turn out to be poisonous...”

“That’s alright since, fortunately, it’s easy to recognize a poisonous rainbow: it consists of two pillars which ascend to heaven, but are unable to connect.”

“In that spot the rainbow always appears three times a day. As one doctor said, “The birth and inception of a rainbow is similar to the birth of a woman.” He also added that a rainbow evolves for forty weeks, invisible to human eye from a special “star situated under a hardening,” until under the right “mild weather” conditions the “hour of its advent” will come.”

“Is a rainbow useful or just pleasant to look at?”

“It tells us about how medicines work. When they get into our bodies, they retain their form and create their mirror reflection inside.”

“Medicines don’t effect me.”

“Then you must look at the rainbow three times a day, to increase their effect on you.”

“There are no rainbows in our parts.”

“In that case, you see, it is necessary to produce them artificially.”

