

Translation: Eulenspiegel

On the quay wall two boys sat and played dice. On the steps of a monument a man read a paper in the shade of some sabre-swinging hero. At the fountain a girl filled her tub with water. A fruit vender lay next to his wares and gazed out to the sea. Through the open door and windows of a tavern one could discern two men in the depth drinking wine. The publican sat dozing at a front table. A barge floated quietly into the small harbour, seemingly hovering over the water. A man wearing a blue jacket stepped onto the shore and pulled the tow through the rings. Following the boatswain, two other men in dark coats with silver buttons carried a bier on which evidently a person lay, covered by a big fimbriated silk cloth with a floral design.

No-one on the quay took any notice of the newcomers. Not even as they set the bier down in order to wait for the boatswain who was still busy with the ropes did anyone approach them or ask them anything. No-one showed any interest in them at all.

The boatswain was further delayed by a woman with uncomposed hair who now appeared on deck, holding a child at her breast. Then he came, pointed to a yellowy, two-storey house that stood on the left close to the water. The carriers took up their load and carried it through the low doorway set between two narrow columns. A small boy opened a window, caught sight of the procession disappearing into the house, and quickly closed the window again. The house door, meticulously constructed of black oak cassettes, also was closed. A flock of doves that had circled around the bell tower settled before the house. They gathered directly in front of the gate, as if the house were the storage place for their food. One dove flew up to the first floor and pecked at the window glass. They were light coloured, well-groomed and spirited animals. With a generous sweep the woman from the boat threw them grains which they gathered and then flew across to her.

A gentleman wearing a top-hat with a crape band came out of one of the narrow, steep alleys that led to the harbour. He looked round attentively, everything seemed to annoy him. The sight of refuse in one corner distorted his face. Fruit skins lay on the steps of the monument, in passing he shoved them down with his walking stick. Holding his top-hat in the black glove of his right hand, he knocked on the door of the house into which the procession had gone. The door was opened immediately and some fifty odd small boys formed a lane in the long corridor and bowed.

The boatswain came down the stairs, greeted the gentleman, led him up to the first floor, then around the perimeter of the courtyard that was enclosed by finely constructed loggias. With the boys following at a respectful distance, the two stepped into a large, cool room at the rear of the house that here faced a bare dark grey wall of rock. The carriers were occupied with placing and lighting several long candles at the head end of the bier. But these produced effectively no additional light. Rather, the previously still shadows were now roused and flickered on the walls. The covering cloth on the bier was folded back, revealing a man with the wild unordered hair and beard, and suntanned skin typical of hunters. He lay motionless, seemingly without breath, eyes closed. But it was more the surroundings that suggested he might be a dead man.

The gentleman stepped up to the bier, laid a hand on the forehead of the lying figure, knelt and prayed. The boatswain beckoned the carriers to leave the room. They went out, dispersed the boys that had gathered outside, and closed the door. Apparently this privateness was still insufficient for

the gentleman. He glanced towards the boatswain who understood and left through a side door to the neighbouring room. At this point the man on the bier opened his eyes, and with a pained smile turned to the gentleman and said: "Who are you?" - The gentleman stood up from his kneeling position without any astonishment and answered: "The Mayor of Riva."

The man on the bier nodded. With a weakly outstretched arm he indicated an armchair. After the Mayor followed his invitation he said: "I knew it, Mayor, but in the first moment I always forget things, everything seems to be moving in circles and it's better for me to ask, even if I do know it all. You yourself will also know that I'm the hunter Gracchus."

"Certainly", said the Mayor. "You were announced to me last night. We were already fast asleep. Towards midnight my wife called: 'Salvatore', - that's my name - 'look at that dove at the window!' It really was a dove, but about the size of a rooster. It flew to my ear and said: 'The dead hunter Gracchus will arrive tomorrow. Welcome him in the name of the town.'"

The hunter nodded, moved the tip of the tongue between his lips: "Yes, the doves fly in advance of me. But Mayor, do you think that I should stay in Riva?"

"I can't say that yet", replied the Mayor. "Are you dead?"

"Yes" said the hunter, "as you can see. Many years ago - it must be an immense number of years - in the Black Forest, that's in Germany, I plunged down from a rock as I was pursuing a chamois. Since then I am dead."

"But yet you are also alive", said the Mayor.

"As it were", said the hunter, "in some sense I am also alive. My death barge missed the passage - a steering error, a moment of inattentiveness by the boatswain. A distraction through my fair homeland, I don't know what it was. I only know that I remained on the earth and that since then my barge has been plying the earthly waters. And so after my death I, who only desired to live in my mountains, travel through all the countries of the world."

"And you have no part in the hereafter?" asked the Mayor wrinkling his brow.

"I am", replied the hunter, "always on the big staircase leading upward. On this endless, wide and open staircase I hang about - higher up, further down, on the right, on the left, always in motion. The hunter has turned butterfly. Don't laugh."

"I'm not laughing", said the Mayor defensively.

"Very understanding", said the hunter. "I am always in motion. But whenever I set to undertake that great leap and the light shines down from the portal on high, I awake on my old barge resting desolately in some earthly water. The basic mistake of my one-time dying jeers at me from around the barge. Julia, the wife of the boatswain, knocks and brings me the morning drink of the country alongside whose coastline we are currently travelling. I lie on a wooden pallet, wearing - it's no pleasure to look at me - a dirty burial shroud, hair and beard grey and black, inextricably intertwined, my legs are covered by a large silk, frilled, floral patterned women's shroud. At my head, a church candle stands and gives me light. On the wall facing me hangs a small picture. Evidently a bushman who is standing behind an impressively painted shield and aiming at me with a spear. On ships you sometimes encounter such silly depictions, but this is one of the most stupid. Other than that, my wooden cage is empty. Warm air of the southern night enters through a side

porthole, and I can hear the water splashing against the old barge.

Here I lie ever since the time that I, the still living hunter Gracchus, pursued a chamois at home in the Black Forest and fell from a rock. Everything happened according to the rules. I pursued, fell, bled out in that gorge, was dead, and this barge should have brought me to the hereafter. I can still remember the first time I joyously I stretched out here on the pallet. Never had the mountains perceived such singing from me as these four dim walls.

I lived gladly, and I died gladly. Before I entered the barge I happily threw down the pack of rags that I had always proudly worn - the tin, the bag, the hunting rifle - and slipped into that burial shroud like a girl into her wedding gown. Here I lay and waited. And then the misfortune came to pass."

"An awful fate", said the Mayor with a defensively raised hand. "And you bear no blame for that?"

"None", said the hunter, "I was a hunter, would you call that guilt? I had a position as hunter in the Black Forest. At that time wolves existed. I lay in wait, shot, hit the mark, pulled off the hide. Is that my guilt? My work was blessed. I was known as 'the great hunter of the Black Forest'. Is that guilt?"

"I am not appointed to decide that", said the Mayor, "but I cannot see any blame in it. But then, who is to blame?"

"The boatswain", said the hunter, "No-one will ever read what I write here, no-one will come to help me. If the task were called out to help me, then all doors of every house would remain shut, all windows closed, all would lie in their beds, the blanket pulled over their heads, the entire planet a hostel. That makes sense because no-one knows of me. And would anyone know of me, then he wouldn't know of my whereabouts. Would he know of my whereabouts, then he wouldn't know how to keep me there, he wouldn't know how to help me. The thought, to wish to help me is a sickness and must be cured in bed.

As I know that, I don't cry for help, even if I strongly think of doing so in moments such as right now, short tempered as I am. But to rid myself of such thoughts it's enough for me to look around, and remind myself of where I am, and - as I can rightly claim - have been for centuries."

"Extraordinary", said the Mayor, "extraordinary. - And now you are considering to live here with us in Riva?"

"I am not considering", said the hunter smiling, laying his hand on the knee of the Mayor to make up for the taunt.

"I am here. I know nothing more, I cannot do more. My barge is without steering, is moved by the wind that blows in the bottommost regions of death."