

Amphibian Man

Alexander Romanovich Belyaev, 1928.

Preface

This pioneering sci-fi narrative delves into the themes of underwater habitation and exotic biotechnology, examining their initial clashes with human society.

Part One: “The Sea Devil”

A sultry January night of the Argentine summer set in. The black sky was covered with stars. “Medusa” lay at anchor, calm. The silence of the night was undisturbed by neither the splash of a wave nor the creak of rigging. It seemed as though the ocean was in a deep sleep.

On the deck of the schooner lay the half-naked pearl divers. Exhausted by work and the scorching sun, they tossed and turned, sighed, and cried out in their heavy slumber. Their arms and legs twitched nervously. Perhaps in their dreams, they saw their enemies - sharks. During these sweltering, windless days, people were so tired that, having finished fishing, they could not even lift their boats onto the deck. However, this was unnecessary: nothing foretold a change in the weather. Thus, the boats remained in the water for the night, tied to the anchor chain. The yards were not aligned, the rigging was poorly tightened, an un-stowed jib quivered slightly in the faint breeze. The space on the deck between the forecastle and the poop was cluttered with piles of pearl-oyster shells, coral limestone fragments, ropes on which the divers descended to the bottom, canvas bags where they placed the shells they found, empty barrels. Near the mizzenmast stood a large barrel of fresh water with an iron ladle on a chain. A dark spot from spilled water was visible around the barrel on the deck.

From time to time, one diver or another would rise, staggering in half-sleep, and stepping on the hands and feet of the sleeping, would shuffle to the barrel of water. Without opening their eyes, they drank a ladle of water and collapsed wherever they fell, as if they had drunk not water, but pure alcohol. The divers were tormented by thirst: in the morning before work, eating is dangerous - the pressure experienced by a person underwater is too strong, - so they worked all day on an empty stomach until it became dark in the water, and only before sleep, they could eat, and they were fed salt meat.

During the night, the Indian Balthazar stood watch. He was the closest assistant to Captain Pedro Zurita, the owner of the schooner “Medusa”.

In his youth, Balthazar was a renowned pearl diver: he could stay underwater for ninety and even a hundred seconds - twice as long as usual.

“Why? Because in our time they knew how to teach and started training us from childhood,” Balthazar told the young pearl divers. - “I was still a boy of about ten when my father sent me to apprentice on a tender with Jose. He had twelve

boys as apprentices. He taught us this way. He would throw a white stone or a shell into the water and order: 'Dive, retrieve!' And each time he threw it deeper. If you don't retrieve it - he would whip with a line [linen - a thin rope] or with a lash and throw you into the water, like a little dog. 'Dive again!' That's how he taught us to dive. Then he began to accustom us to staying underwater longer. An old, experienced diver would descend to the bottom and tie a basket or net to the anchor. And then we would dive and untie it underwater. And until you untie it, do not show yourself above. And if you show up - you'll get the whip or the line."

"We were beaten mercilessly. Not many could endure. But I became the foremost hunter in the entire region. I earned a good living."

As he aged, Baltazar left the dangerous trade of pearl diving. His left leg was disfigured by shark teeth, his side was lacerated by an anchor chain. He had a small shop in Buenos Aires where he traded in pearls, corals, shells, and marine curiosities. But he grew bored onshore and therefore often went out for pearl fishing. Industrialists valued him. No one knew the La Plata Bay and its shores as well as Baltazar, especially the spots where pearl oysters were found. Hunters respected him. He knew how to please everyone – both the hunters and the owners.

He taught the young hunters all the secrets of the trade: how to hold their breath, how to fend off shark attacks, and under a good hand – even how to hide a rare pearl from the owner.

The industrialists, owners of schooners, knew and valued him for his ability to flawlessly assess pearls at a glance and quickly select the best ones in favor of the owner.

Therefore, the industrialists gladly took him with them as an assistant and advisor.

Baltazar sat on a barrel, slowly smoking a thick cigar. The light from the lantern attached to the mast fell on his face. It was elongated, not gaunt, with a straight nose and large beautiful eyes, – the face of an Araucanian [Araucanians – one of the tribes of American Indians]. Baltazar's eyelids heavily fell and slowly rose. He dozed off. But if his eyes were asleep, his ears were not. They stayed alert and warned of danger even in deep sleep. But now, Baltazar only heard the sighs and muttering of the sleeping. The smell of rotting pearl oysters drifted from the shore – they were left to rot to make it easier to extract the pearls: the shell of a living mollusk is not easy to open. This smell would have seemed repulsive to an unaccustomed person, but Baltazar inhaled it with pleasure. For him, a wanderer, a pearl seeker, this smell reminded him of the joys of a free life and the thrilling dangers of the sea.

After the pearl sorting, the largest shells were transferred to the "Medusa." Zurita was calculating: he sold the shells to a factory where they made buttons and cufflinks.

Baltazar slept. Soon, the cigar fell from his weakened fingers. His head drooped onto his chest.

But then he became aware of a sound coming from far out in the ocean. The sound repeated, closer this time. Baltazar opened his eyes. It seemed as if someone was blowing a horn, and then as if a cheerful young human voice shouted: “Ah!” – and then an octave higher: “A-ah!..”

The musical sound of the horn was unlike the harsh blaring of a steamship siren, and the cheerful exclamation did not resemble the cry for help from a drowning person. It was something new, unknown. Baltazar got up; it felt as if the air had suddenly become fresher. He walked to the side and keenly surveyed the ocean’s surface. Desolation. Silence. Baltazar nudged with his foot an Indian lying on the deck and, when he rose, quietly said:

– He is shouting. It must be him.

– I do not hear, – the Indian of the Huron tribe [Huron – a tribe of American Indians], kneeling and listening intently, replied just as quietly. And suddenly the silence was again broken by the sound of the horn and the shout:

– A-ah!..

The Huron, having heard the sound, crouched as if struck by a whip.

“Yes, it must be him,” said the Huron, his teeth chattering with fear.

The other hunters woke up. They slid towards the lantern-lit spot as if seeking protection from the darkness in the weak rays of the yellowish light. Everyone sat huddled together, listening intently. The sound of the trumpet and the voice were heard again in the distance, and then all fell silent.

“It’s him. . .”

“The Sea Devil,” the fishermen whispered.

“We can’t stay here any longer!”

“It’s scarier than a shark!”

“Call the boss here!”

The slapping of bare feet was heard. Yawning and scratching his hairy chest, the owner, Pedro Zurita, appeared on deck. He was shirtless, wearing only canvas pants; a holster with a revolver hung on his wide leather belt. Zurita approached the people. The lantern illuminated his sleepy, tanned face, thick curly hair falling in strands on his forehead, black eyebrows, fluffy, turned-up mustaches, and a small streaked beard.

“What happened?”

His rough, calm voice and confident movements reassured the natives.

They all started talking at once.

Balthazar raised his hand to signal them to be quiet and said:

“We heard his voice. . . the ‘Sea Devil.’”

“You’re seeing things!” Pedro replied sleepily, dropping his head onto his chest.

“No, we’re not seeing things. We all heard ‘ah-ah!’ and the sound of the trumpet!” the fishermen shouted.

Balthazar silenced them with the same hand gesture and continued:

– I heard it myself. Only the “sea devil” can sound the horn like that. No one else at sea screams or sounds the horn in such a way. We need to get away from here quickly.

– Fairy tales, – Pedro Zurita replied just as listlessly. He did not want to take still rotting, foul-smelling shells from the shore onto the schooner and to weigh anchor.

But he could not persuade the natives. They were agitated, waving their hands and shouting, threatening that they would go ashore tomorrow and walk to Buenos Aires if Zurita did not lift the anchor.

– Curse this “sea devil” along with you! Fine. We will weigh anchor at dawn. – And, continuing to grumble, the captain went to his cabin.

He no longer felt like sleeping. He lit a lamp, smoked a cigar, and began to pace from corner to corner in the small cabin. He thought about the mysterious creature that had recently appeared in these waters, frightening fishermen and coastal residents.

No one had seen this monster yet, but it had already made its presence felt several times. Legends were being crafted about it. Sailors whispered these stories, glancing around fearfully as if worried the creature might overhear them.

To some, this being caused harm, to others it unexpectedly helped. “It is a sea god,” the old natives said, “He emerges from the ocean depths once in a millennium to restore justice on Earth.”

Catholic priests assured the superstitious Spaniards that it was a “sea devil.” It began to appear to people because the population was forgetting the holy Catholic Church.

All these rumors, passed from mouth to mouth, reached Buenos Aires. For several weeks, the “sea devil” was the favorite subject of chroniclers and feuilletonists of the tabloid newspapers. If schooners sank under unknown circumstances, if fishing boats were damaged, if fishing nets were ruined, or if the caught fish disappeared, the “sea devil” was blamed. But others told stories of how the “devil” sometimes tossed large fish into the boats of fishermen and once even saved a drowning person.

At least one drowning victim insisted that when he was already sinking under the water, someone lifted him from below by the back and, supporting him that

way, swam to the shore, disappearing into the surf the moment the rescued man stepped onto the sand.

But most astonishing was that no one had seen the “devil” himself. No one could describe what this mysterious creature looked like. There were, of course, alleged eyewitnesses – they endowed the “devil” with a horned head, a goat’s beard, lion’s paws, and a fish’s tail, or they depicted it as a gigantic horned toad with human legs.

Government officials in Buenos Aires initially paid no attention to these stories and newspaper notes, considering them idle fiction.

But the agitation – mainly among fishermen – was growing. Many fishermen dared not go out to sea. The catch decreased, and residents felt a shortage of fish. Then the local authorities decided to investigate this story. Several steam cutters and motorboats of the police coastal guard were dispatched along the coast with orders to “detain the unknown person causing confusion and panic among the coastal population.”

The police scoured the La Plata Bay and the coast for two weeks, arrested several natives as malicious spreaders of false rumors that sowed unrest, but the “devil” remained elusive.

The police chief published an official statement that there was no such thing as a “devil,” that all of it was merely the fabrications of ignorant people, who had already been detained and would receive due punishment, and he urged fishermen not to trust the rumors and to resume fishing.

For a while, this helped. However, the “devil’s” pranks did not cease.

One night, fishermen who were quite far from shore were awakened by the bleating of a goat kid, which had somehow appeared on their boat. Other fishermen found their pulled-up nets slashed.

Journalists, delighted by the new appearances of the “devil,” now awaited explanations from scientists.

The scientists did not take long to respond.

They believed that there could not exist in the ocean an unknown sea monster capable of actions that only a human could perform. “It would be a different matter,” wrote the scientists, “if such a creature appeared in the unexplored depths of the ocean.” But the scientists still could not allow for such a creature to act intelligently. The scientists, together with the head of the maritime police, considered that all this was the work of some prankster.

But not all scientists thought this way.

Other scientists referred to the famous German naturalist Conrad Gesner [Conrad Gesner – a renowned German scientist of the 16th century. He wrote “Book of Animals,” which had an extraordinarily strong influence on naturalists for a long time], who described a mermaid, a sea devil, a sea monk, and a sea bishop.

“After all, much of what ancient and medieval scholars wrote has been justified, despite the fact that new science did not recognize these old teachings. Divine creation is inexhaustible, and we, the scientists, should display more modesty and caution in our conclusions than anyone else,” wrote some of the older scientists.

However, it was difficult to call these modest and cautious individuals scientists. They believed in miracles more than in science, and their lectures resembled sermons.

In the end, to resolve the dispute, a scientific expedition was sent.

The expedition members were not fortunate enough to encounter the “devil.” However, they learned a lot of new details about the actions of the “unknown person” (the old scientists insisted that the word “person” be replaced with the word “creature”).

In the report, published in the newspapers, the expedition members wrote:

1. In several places on the sandy shallows, we noticed traces of narrow human footprints. The tracks emerged from the sea and led back to the sea. However, such traces could have been left by a person who had approached the shore by boat.
2. The nets we examined had cuts that could have been made by a sharp cutting tool. It is possible that the nets got caught on sharp underwater rocks or iron debris from sunken ships and tore.
3. According to eyewitness accounts, a dolphin thrown ashore by a storm, a significant distance from the water, was dragged back into the sea by someone at night, with footprints and what appeared to be long claws found in the sand. It is likely that some kind-hearted fisherman pulled the dolphin back to sea.

It is known that dolphins, while hunting for fish, help fishermen by driving the fish towards the shallows. Fishermen often help dolphins out of trouble. The claw marks could have been made by human fingers. Imagination turned the footprints into claws.

4. The kid could have been brought on a boat and dropped off by some prankster.

Scientists found other, no less simple reasons to explain the origin of the tracks left by the “devil”.

Scientists concluded that no sea monster could have performed such complex actions.

Yet these explanations did not satisfy everyone. Even among the scientists themselves, there were those who found these explanations dubious. How could even the most skillful and persistent prankster carry out such things without being seen by people for so long? But the main thing that the scientists did not mention in their report was that the “devil”, as it was established, performed

his feats over a short period of time in various places far apart from each other. Either the “devil” was able to swim with unprecedented speed, or he had some special devices, or, finally, there was not just one “devil” but several. But then all these pranks became even more incomprehensible and threatening.

Pedro Zurita recalled this entire mysterious story as he continued to pace the cabin.

He did not notice dawn breaking and a pink ray of light penetrating the cabin window. Pedro turned off the lamp and began to wash up.

Pouring warm water over his head, he heard frightened shouts coming from the deck. Zurita, not having finished washing up, quickly climbed up the ladder.

The bare hunters, with a canvas belt around their waists, stood at the railing, waving their arms and shouting incoherently. Pedro looked down and saw that the boats left on the water overnight were untied. The night breeze had carried them quite far into the open ocean. Now the morning breeze was slowly drifting them towards the shore. The boats’ oars, scattered in the water, floated around the bay.

Zurita ordered the hunters to gather the boats. But no one dared to leave the deck. Zurita repeated the order.

– Go jump into the “devil’s” claws yourself, – someone retorted. Zurita grasped the holster of his revolver. The crowd of hunters backed away and huddled around the mast. They looked at Zurita with hostility. A confrontation seemed inevitable. But then Baltazar intervened.

– The Araucanian fears no one, – he said, – the shark did not finish me off, the “devil” will choke on old bones too. – And, crossing his arms over his head, he dived overboard into the water and swam towards the nearest boat.

Now the hunters approached the railing and watched Baltazar with fear. Despite his age and ailing leg, he swam excellently. In a few strokes, the Indian reached the boat, retrieved the floating oar, and climbed into the boat.

– The rope was cut with a knife, – he shouted, – and cut cleanly! The knife was sharp as a razor.

Seeing that nothing terrible had happened to Baltazar, a few fishermen followed his example.

Riding on a dolphin

The sun had just risen, but it was already scorching mercilessly. The silver-blue sky was cloudless, the ocean motionless. “Medusa” was already twenty kilometers south of Buenos Aires. Following Baltazar’s advice, they dropped anchor in a small bay at a rocky shore that rose out of the water in two tiers.

The boats dispersed across the bay. On each boat, as usual, there were two catchers: one dived, the other pulled out the diver. Then they switched roles.

One boat approached quite close to the shore. The diver grabbed a large fragment of coral limestone tied to the end of a rope with his legs and quickly descended to the bottom.

The water was very warm and clear – every stone on the bottom was distinctly visible. Closer to the shore, corals rose from the bottom – motionless bushes of underwater gardens. Small fish, shimmering with gold and silver, darted between these bushes.

The diver descended to the bottom and, bending over, began to rapidly collect shells and put them in a bag tied to a strap at his side. His companion, a Huron Indian, held the end of the rope and, leaning over the side of the boat, looked into the water.

Suddenly, he saw that the diver jumped to his feet as quickly as he could, flailed with his arms, grabbed the rope, and tugged it so hard that it nearly pulled the Huron into the water. The boat rocked. The Indian hurriedly pulled up his companion and helped him climb into the boat. With his mouth wide open, the diver breathed heavily, his eyes were dilated. His dark-bronze face turned gray – so pale had he become.

– Shark?

But the diver could not answer, he fell to the bottom of the boat.

What could have frightened him so much at the bottom of the sea? The Huron leaned over and began to peer into the water. Yes, something was wrong there. The small fish, like birds seeing a hawk, hurried to take cover in the thickets of underwater forests.

And suddenly the Huron Indian saw something resembling crimson smoke appear from behind the angular protrusion of an underwater rock. The smoke slowly spread in all directions, tinting the water a pinkish color. And right there something dark appeared. It was the body of a shark. It slowly turned and disappeared behind the rock outcrop. The crimson underwater smoke could only be blood, spilled on the bottom of the ocean. What had happened there? The Huron looked at his companion, but he lay immobile on his back, gasping for air with his mouth wide open and staring senselessly into the sky. The Indian took the oars and hurried to take his suddenly sick companion on board the “Medusa”.

At last, the diver came to his senses, but as if he had lost the gift of speech, – he only grunted, shook his head, and puffed out his cheeks.

The catchers on the schooner surrounded the diver, eagerly awaiting his explanations.

– Speak! – finally shouted the young Indian, shaking the diver. – Speak, if you don’t want your cowardly soul to fly out of your body.

The diver swiveled his head and said in a muffled voice:

– Saw... the “sea devil”.

§ That one?

– Just speak, speak! – the hunters cried impatiently.

– I look – a shark. A shark is swimming straight towards me. This is the end for me! Big, black, already opened its jaws, about to eat me now. I look – and there’s another one swimming...

– Another shark?

– The “devil”!

– What’s he like? Does he have a head?

– A head? Yes, seems like it. Eyes – the size of a glass.

– If there are eyes, there must be a head, – the young Native American stated confidently. – Eyes have to be attached to something. And does it have paws?

– Paws like a frog’s. Long fingers, green, with claws and webs. Shines like a fish with scales. Approached the shark, flashed its paw – slash! Blood from the shark’s belly...

– And what about its legs? – asked one of the hunters.

– Legs? – the diver tried to remember. – No legs at all. There’s a big tail. And at the end of the tail two snakes.

– Who did you fear more – the shark or the monster?

– The monster, – he replied without hesitation. – The monster, although it saved my life. It was him...

– Yes, it was him.

– “The Sea Devil,” said the Indian.

– “The Sea God,” who comes to the aid of the poor, – the old Indian corrected.

This news quickly spread among the boats in the bay. The fishermen hurried to the schooner and hoisted the boats on board.

Everyone surrounded the diver saved by the “Sea Devil,” and made him repeat his story over and over again. And he repeated it, recounting more and more details. He remembered that red flames shot out of the creature’s nostrils, and its teeth were sharp and long, the size of a finger. Its ears moved, there were fins on its sides, and behind – a tail, like an oar.

Pedro Zurita, bare-chested, in short white pants, shoes on his bare feet, and wearing a tall, wide-brimmed straw hat on his head, shuffled his feet and walked around the deck, listening to the conversations.

The more engrossed the storyteller became, the more convinced Pedro was that all this was made up by the fisherman, frightened by the approaching shark.

“However, it might not all be made up. Someone slit the shark’s belly: after all, the water in the bay turned pink. The Indian is lying, but there is some truth in all of this. A strange story, damn it!”

Here, Zurita’s musings were interrupted by the sound of a horn suddenly coming from behind the rock.

This sound struck the crew of the “Medusa” like a thunderbolt. All conversations stopped at once, faces turned pale. The fishermen looked at the rock with superstitious terror, from where the sound of the trumpet came.

Not far from the rock, a pod of dolphins frolicked on the ocean’s surface. One dolphin broke away from the pod, snorted loudly as if responding to the trumpet’s call, quickly swam to the rock, and disappeared behind the cliffs. A few moments of intense anticipation passed. Suddenly, the fishermen saw a dolphin emerge from behind the rock. On its back rode, as if on a horse, a strange creature – the “devil” that the diver had recently spoken of. The creature had the body of a man and its face had huge eyes, like old-fashioned watch-glasses, sparkling in the sun’s rays like car headlights, its skin shimmered with a soft blue silver, and its hands resembled those of a frog – dark green, with long fingers and webs between them. Its legs were submerged in the water below the knees. Whether they ended in tails or were just normal human legs – remained unknown. The strange creature held a long, twisted shell in its hand. It blew into this shell again, laughed with a cheerful human laugh, and suddenly cried out in pure Spanish:

– Hurry up, Leading [Leading, in English], forward! – it slapped the dolphin’s gleaming back with its frog-like hand and spurred its sides with its legs. And the dolphin, like a fine horse, increased its speed.

The fishermen cried out involuntarily.

The unusual rider turned around. Seeing the people, it, with the swiftness of a lizard, slipped off the dolphin and hid behind its body. A green hand appeared from behind the dolphin’s back, striking the animal on the back. The obedient dolphin dived into the ocean along with the creature.

The strange pair made a semicircle underwater and disappeared behind the underwater rock...

This entire extraordinary departure took no more than a minute, but the spectators could not recover from their astonishment for a long time.

The hunters shouted, ran across the deck, clutched their heads. The Indians fell to their knees and implored the sea god to spare them. A young Mexican, out of fear, climbed up the mainmast and yelled. The Africans slid into the hold and huddled in a corner.

There was no point in thinking about hunting. Pedro and Balthazar had a hard time restoring order. “Medusa” lifted anchor and headed north.

Zurita's Misfortune

The captain of the "Medusa" went down to his cabin to reflect on what had happened.

– One could lose one's mind! – Zurita said, pouring a pitcher of warm water over his head. – A sea monster speaking in the purest Castilian dialect! What is this? Sorcery? Madness? But madness cannot suddenly affect the whole crew. Not even the same dream can occur to two people. But we all saw the "sea devil". That's indisputable. So, it must exist, however incredible it may seem. – Zurita again poured water over his head and looked out of the porthole to refresh himself. – Anyway, – he continued, somewhat calmed, – this monstrous creature is endowed with human intelligence and can perform rational acts. It seems to feel equally at home in water and on the surface. And it can speak Spanish, – which means, it can be communicated with. What if... What if we caught the creature, tamed it, and made it pearl fish? This one frog, capable of living in water, could replace a whole team of divers. And then, what a profit! Each pearl diver has to be given a quarter of the catch. But this frog would cost nothing. After all, one could amass hundreds of thousands, millions of pesetas in the shortest time!

Zurita became lost in dreams. Until now, he had hoped to get rich by searching for pearl oysters where nobody had harvested them. The Persian Gulf, the western coast of Ceylon, the Red Sea, Australian waters – all these pearl places are far away, and people have long been searching for pearls there. Go to the Mexican or California Gulf, to the islands of Thomas and Margarita? Sail to the shores of Venezuela, where the best American pearls are found, Zurita could not. His schooner was too old for that, and there were not enough divers, – in short, it was necessary to put the business on a large scale. And Zurita did not have enough money. So he remained off the coast of Argentina. But now! Now he could get rich in one year, if only he managed to catch the "sea devil".

He would become the richest man in Argentina, perhaps even in America. Money would pave his way to power. The name Pedro Zurita would be on everyone's lips. But one had to be very cautious. And above all, keep the secret.

Zurita went up on deck and, gathering the entire crew up to the cook, said:

– You know what happened to those who spread rumors about the "sea devil"? They were arrested by the police and are sitting in jail. I must warn you that the same will happen to each of you if you utter even a word about having seen the "sea devil". You will rot in jail. Understand? Therefore, if you hold your life dear, – not a word about the "devil" to anyone.

"Anyway, no one will believe them: it all sounds too much like a fairy tale," – thought Zurita and, calling Balthazar to his cabin, confided in him alone his plan.

Balthazar listened attentively to his master and, after a pause, replied:

– Yes, that’s good. The “sea devil” is worth hundreds of divers. It’s good to have a “devil” in your service. But how to catch him?

– With a net, – answered Zurita.

– He will cut the net, just as he slashed the shark’s belly.

"We could order a metal net.

– And who’s going to catch him? Just mention ‘devil’ to our divers, and their knees buckle. Not even for a bag of gold would they agree.

– What about you, Baltazar?

The Indian shrugged his shoulders.

– I have never hunted ‘sea devils’ before. It will probably not be easy to ambush him, but if he is made of flesh and bones, it won’t be hard to kill. But you need a living ‘devil’.

– Aren’t you afraid of him, Baltazar? What do you think of the ‘sea devil’?

– What can I think of a jaguar that flies over the sea, and of a shark that climbs trees? An unknown beast is the most fearsome. But I like to hunt a fearsome beast.

– I will reward you generously. – Zurita shook Baltazar’s hand and continued to lay out his plan before him: – The fewer participants in this matter, the better. Talk to all the Araucanians. They are brave and cunning. Choose five men, no more. If ours do not agree, find others. The ‘devil’ stays near the shores. First of all, we need to track down his lair. Then it will be easy for us to capture him in the nets.

Zurita and Baltazar quickly got down to business. At Zurita’s order, a wire mesh was made, resembling a large barrel with an open bottom. Inside the mesh, Zurita stretched hemp nets so that the ‘devil’ would get tangled in them like in a spider’s web. The hunters were calculated. From the crew of the ‘Medusa’, Baltazar managed to convince only two Araucanian Indians to participate in the hunt for the ‘devil’. He recruited three more in Buenos Aires.

They decided to start tracking the ‘devil’ in the bay where the crew of the ‘Medusa’ first saw him. To avoid raising the ‘devil’s’ suspicions, the schooner anchored several kilometers away from the small bay. Zurita and his companions occasionally engaged in fishing, as if that were the purpose of their voyage. At the same time, three of them took turns hiding behind rocks on the shore, vigilantly watching what was happening in the waters of the bay.

The second week was coming to an end, and the ‘devil’ gave no sign of himself.

Baltazar made acquaintances with the coastal residents, the Indian farmers, sold them fish cheaply, and, while talking with them about various things, subtly steered the conversation towards the ‘sea devil’. From these talks, the old Indian learned that they had chosen the right place for hunting: many Indians living

near the bay had heard the sound of the horn and seen footprints in the sand. They insisted that the ‘devil’s’ heel was human, but the toes were significantly elongated. Sometimes in the sand, the Indians noticed an impression from the back – he had been lying on the shore.

The ‘devil’ did no harm to the coastal residents, and they stopped paying attention to the traces he occasionally left, reminding them of himself. But no one had ever seen the ‘devil’.

Two weeks the ‘Medusa’ stood in the bay, ostensibly fishing. For two weeks, Zurita, Baltazar, and the hired Indians kept a constant watch on the ocean surface, but the ‘sea devil’ did not appear. Zurita was worried. He was impatient and stingy. Every day cost money, and this ‘devil’ was making them wait. Pedro was already beginning to doubt. If the ‘devil’ was a supernatural being, no nets would catch him. And it was dangerous to meddle with such a demon – Zurita was superstitious. Should he invite a priest with a cross and holy sacraments on board the ‘Medusa’ just in case? More expenses. But perhaps the ‘sea devil’ was not a devil at all, but some prankster, a good swimmer, dressed as a devil to scare people? A dolphin? But it, like any animal, could be tamed and trained. Should he give up the whole idea?

Zurita offered a reward to whoever first spotted the ‘devil’ and decided to wait a few more days.

To his delight, at the beginning of the third week, the “devil” finally began to appear.

After the day’s catch, Baltazar left the boat filled with fish at the shore. Customers were supposed to come for the fish early in the morning.

Baltazar went to visit a familiar Indian at the farm, and when he returned to the shore, the boat was empty. Baltazar immediately decided that the “devil” had done it.

“Could he really have eaten so much fish?” Baltazar wondered in surprise.

That same night, one of the Indian sentries heard the sound of a horn to the south of the bay. Two days later, early in the morning, a young Araucanian reported that he had finally managed to track down the “devil”. He had arrived on a dolphin. This time, the “devil” was not riding on top, but swimming alongside the dolphin, clutching a “harness” – a wide leather collar with his hand. In the bay, the “devil” removed the collar from the dolphin, patted the animal, and disappeared into the depths of the bay, at the base of a sheer cliff. The dolphin surfaced and vanished.

Zurita, having listened to the Araucanian, thanked him, promising a reward, and said:

– This afternoon, the “devil” is unlikely to emerge from his hideout. Therefore, we need to inspect the bottom of the bay. Who will undertake this?

But no one wanted to descend to the ocean floor, risking a face-to-face encounter with the unknown monster.

Baltazar stepped forward.

– Here I am! – he said briefly. Baltazar was true to his word.

The “Medusa” was still anchored. Everyone, except the watchmen, went ashore and headed to the sheer cliff at the bay.

Baltazar tied a rope around himself so that he could be pulled out if he were injured, took a knife, clamped a stone between his legs, and descended to the bottom.

The Araucanians eagerly awaited his return, peering into the patch flickering in the bluish haze of the shadowed bay. Forty, fifty seconds passed, a minute – Baltazar did not return. Finally, he tugged the rope, and they pulled him to the surface. After catching his breath, Baltazar said:

– A narrow passage leads to an underground cave. It’s as dark as the belly of a shark. The “Sea Devil” could have only hidden in this cave. Around it is a smooth wall.

– Excellent! – exclaimed Zurita. – It’s dark there – all the better! We’ll set up our nets, and the little fish will get caught.

Soon after sunset, the Indians lowered wire nets on sturdy ropes into the water at the entrance to the cave. The ends of the ropes were secured on the shore. Balthazar tied bells to the ropes, which were to ring at the slightest touch of the net.

Zurita, Balthazar, and five Araucanians sat on the shore and silently waited.

There was no one left on the schooner.

Darkness quickly thickened. The moon rose, and its light reflected on the ocean surface. It was quiet. Everyone was seized with an extraordinary excitement. Perhaps now they would see the strange creature that had been terrifying the fishermen and pearl divers.

The night hours slowly passed. People began to doze off.

Suddenly, the bells rang. People jumped up, rushed to the ropes, and began to pull up the net. It was heavy. The ropes twitched. Someone was flailing in the net.

There, the net surfaced on the ocean, and within it, in the pale moonlight, a half-human, half-animal body was thrashing. In the moonlight, huge eyes and the silver of scales glittered. The “devil” made incredible efforts to free his hand, which had become tangled in the net. He succeeded. He pulled out a knife hanging on a thin strap at his hip and began to cut the net.

– You won’t cut through, you’re messing around! – Balthazar said quietly, engrossed in the hunt.

But, to his surprise, the knife overcame the wire barrier. With agile movements, the “devil” enlarged the hole, while the hunters hurried to pull the net ashore as quickly as possible.

– Stronger! Heave-ho! – Balthazar was already shouting. But at the very moment when it seemed that the prey was already in their hands, the “devil” slipped through the cut hole, fell into the water, raising a cascade of glittering spray, and disappeared into the depths.

In despair, the hunters lowered the net.

– A fine knife! Cuts through wire! – Balthazar said admiringly. – Underwater blacksmiths are better than ours.

Zurita, with his head down, looked at the water as if all his wealth had sunk there.

Then he raised his head, jerked his bushy mustache, and stamped his foot.

– No, no! – he shouted. – You’d rather die in your underwater cave than I give up. I won’t spare money, I’ll hire divers, I’ll cover the entire bay with nets and traps, and you won’t escape my hands!

He was brave, persistent, and stubborn. It was no coincidence that the blood of Spanish conquerors flowed in Pedro Zurita’s veins. And there was indeed something to fight for.

The “Sea Devil” turned out to be not supernatural, but an all-powerful being. He was clearly made of bones and flesh, as Baltazar had said. This means he can be caught, put on a chain, and made to extract riches from the ocean floor for Zurita. Baltazar will get him, even if the sea god Neptune himself with his trident were to protect the “Sea Devil.”

Doctor Salvator

Zurita was carrying out his threat. He had erected many wire barriers on the bottom of the bay, stretched nets in all directions, set traps. But so far, only fish had fallen victim to them; the “Sea Devil” seemed to have vanished through the ground. He no longer showed himself and made no sign of his presence. In vain, the tamed dolphin appeared in the bay every day, diving and snorting, as if inviting his extraordinary friend for a walk. His friend did not show up, and the dolphin, snorting angrily for the last time, swam out to the open sea.

The weather turned foul. The east wind stirred the ocean surface; the bay waters became murky with sand stirred up from the bottom. The foamy crests of the waves concealed the seabed. No one could see what was happening underwater.

Zurita could stand on the shore for hours, watching the rows of waves. Massive, they followed one after another, crashing down in noisy waterfalls, while the

lower layers of water hissed as they rolled further across the damp sand, tumbling pebbles and shells, washing up to Zurita's feet.

"No, this won't do," said Zurita. "We have to come up with something else. The 'Devil' lives on the ocean floor and does not want to leave his refuge. This means that to catch him, we need to go to him – descend to the bottom. That's clear!"

And, turning to Baltazar, who was crafting a new, complicated trap, Zurita said:

"Go immediately to Buenos Aires and bring back two diving suits with oxygen tanks. The usual diving suit with an air hose won't do. The 'Devil' might cut the hose. Besides, we might have to make a little underwater journey. And don't forget to bring electric torches."

"Do you wish to pay a visit to the 'Devil'?" asked Baltazar.

"With you, of course, old-timer."

Baltazar nodded and set off on his journey. He brought back not only diving suits and torches but also a pair of long, intricately curved bronze knives.

"They don't make them like this anymore," he said. "These are ancient knives of the Araucanians, with which my great-grandfathers once slit the bellies of the whites – your great-grandfathers, no offense to you."

Zurita did not appreciate this historical note, but he approved of the knives.

– You are very thoughtful, Baltazar.

The next day, at dawn, despite the strong waves, Zurita and Baltazar put on diving suits and descended to the seabed. Not without difficulty, they untangled the nets that were set at the entrance to the underwater cave and climbed into the narrow passage. Complete darkness surrounded them. Standing on their feet and pulling out knives, the divers lit their lanterns. Startled by the light, small fish darted away, then returned to the lantern, bustling in its bluish ray like a swarm of insects.

Zurita waved them away with his hand: their scales' shine dazzled him. It was a fairly large cave, at least four meters in height and five to six meters in width. The divers examined the corners. The cave was empty and uninhabited. Only schools of small fish, obviously, took shelter here from the sea's turbulence and predators.

Moving cautiously, Zurita and Baltazar advanced. The cave gradually narrowed. Suddenly, Zurita stopped in amazement. The light of the lantern illuminated a thick iron grate that blocked the way.

Zurita couldn't believe his eyes. He grabbed the iron bars with his hand and started to pull them, trying to open the iron barrier. But the grate wouldn't budge. Lighting it up with the lantern, Zurita saw that it was firmly embedded in the cave's hewn walls and had hinges and an internal lock.

This was a new mystery.

The “Sea Devil” must not only be intelligent but also exceptionally gifted. He managed to tame a dolphin, he knew metalworking. Finally, he could create strong iron barriers on the sea bottom to protect his dwelling. But that’s incredible! He couldn’t possibly forge iron under water. That means he does not live in the water or at least he must emerge onto land for extended periods.

Zurita’s temples pounded as if there was not enough oxygen in his diving helmet, although he had been underwater for only a few minutes.

Zurita signaled to Baltazar, and they exited the underwater cave – there was nothing more for them to do there – and surfaced.

The Araucanians, who had been waiting for them impatiently, were very glad to see the divers unharmed.

Removing his helmet and catching his breath, Zurita asked:

– What do you make of this, Baltazar?

The Araucanian spread his hands.

– I’d say we are in for a long wait here. The “Devil” probably feeds on fish, and there’s plenty of fish there. We can’t lure him out of the cave with hunger. Blasting the grate with dynamite is the only option left.

– Do you not think, Baltazar, that the cave could have two exits: one from the bay, and the other from the surface of the earth?

Baltazar had not thought of that.

– We need to think about it. How did we not come up with the idea to inspect the surroundings before? – said Zurita.

Now they began to study the shore.

On the shore, Zurita stumbled upon a high wall of white stone, encircling a huge plot of land – no less than ten hectares. Zurita walked around the wall. In the entire wall, he found only one gate, made of thick sheets of iron. In the gates, there was a small iron door with a latch covered from the inside.

“A real prison or fortress,” thought Zurita. “Strange! Farmers do not build such thick and high walls. Not a gap or a crack in the wall through which one could peek inside.”

Around – a desolate, wild area: bare grey rocks, here and there overgrown with thorny shrubs and cacti. Below – the bay.

Zurita wandered along the wall for several days, for a long time watched the iron gates. But the gates did not open, no one entered or exited them; not a sound came from beyond the wall.

Returning to the deck of the “Medusa” in the evening, Zurita called Baltazar and asked:

– Do you know who lives in the fortress above the bay?

– I know, I have already asked the Indians working on the farms. Salvator lives there.

– And who is this Salvator?

– God, – replied Baltazar.

Zurita, in astonishment, raised his thick black eyebrows.

“Are you joking, Baltazar?”

The Indian smiled faintly.

“I speak of what I have heard. Many Indians call Salvator a deity, a savior.”

“What does he save them from?”

“From death. They say he is omnipotent. Salvator can perform miracles. He holds life and death in his fingers. He gives the lame new legs, living legs, gives the blind eyes as sharp as an eagle’s, and even resurrects the dead.”

“Curse it!” grumbled Zurita, brushing up his fluffy mustache with his fingers. “In the bay—‘the sea devil,’ above the bay—‘god.’ Don’t you think, Baltazar, that ‘devil’ and ‘god’ might be helping each other?”

“I think we ought to get out of here as soon as possible before our brains turn to sour milk from all these miracles.”

“Have you seen anyone healed by Salvator yourself?”

“Yes, I have. They showed me a man with a broken leg. After visiting Salvator, this man runs like a mustang. I also saw an Indian resurrected by Salvator. The whole village says this Indian, when carried to Salvator, was a cold corpse—skull cracked open, brains spilling out. But from Salvator, he came back alive and cheerful. Married after death. Took a fine girl. And I have seen Indian children too...”

“So, Salvator takes in strangers?”

“Only Indians. And they come to him from everywhere: from Tierra del Fuego and the Amazon, from the Atacama Desert and Asunción.”

Having obtained this information from Baltazar, Zurita decided to travel to Buenos Aires.

There he learned that Salvator treated the Indians and was revered among them as a miracle worker. Consulting with doctors, Zurita found out that Salvator was a talented and even a genius surgeon, but a man with great quirks, as many outstanding people are. Salvator’s name was widely known in scientific circles of the Old and New World. In America, he became famous for his daring surgical operations. When the condition of patients was considered hopeless and doctors refused to operate, they called Salvator. He never declined. His courage and

resourcefulness were boundless. During the imperialist war, he was on the French front, dealing almost exclusively with skull operations. Thousands of people owe their lives to him. After the peace treaty, he returned to his homeland, Argentina. Medical practice and successful land speculations gave Salvator a huge fortune. He bought a large piece of land near Buenos Aires, surrounded it with a huge wall—one of his eccentricities—and, settling there, ceased all practice. He worked only on scientific research in his laboratory. Now he treated and received Indians, who called him a god descended to earth.

Zurita managed to find out another detail concerning Salvator's life. Where now stood Salvator's extensive estates, before the war there had been a small house with a garden, also surrounded by a stone wall. All the time Salvator was at the front, this house was guarded by a black man and several huge dogs. These incorruptible guards did not let a single person into the yard.

Lately, Salvator had surrounded himself with even greater mystery. He does not even receive former university comrades. Having learned all this, Zurita decided: "If Salvator is a doctor, he has no right to refuse to see a patient. Why shouldn't I fall ill? I'll infiltrate Salvator's as a sick person, and then we'll see."

Zurita went to the iron gates that guarded Salvator's estate and began to knock. He knocked long and persistently, but no one opened for him. Enraged, Zurita picked up a large stone and began to strike the gates with it, raising a noise that could have awakened the dead.

Far beyond the wall, dogs started barking, and at last a small opening in the door cracked open.

"What do you want?" someone asked in broken Spanish.

"A patient, open up quickly," replied Zurita.

"Patients don't knock like that," the same voice calmly retorted, and an eye appeared at the peephole. "The doctor is not receiving."

"He dare not refuse help to a patient," Zurita heatedly argued.

The peephole closed, footsteps receded. Only the dogs continued to bark desperately.

Zurita, having exhausted his entire stock of curses, returned to the schooner.

Complain about Salvator in Buenos Aires? But that would lead nowhere. Zurita was shaking with anger. His fluffy black mustache was in serious danger, for in his agitation he kept tugging at it, and they drooped down like the needle of a barometer indicating low pressure.

Gradually, he calmed down and began to ponder what to do next.

As he thought, his sun-browned fingers more frequently flicked his disheveled mustache upwards. The barometer was rising.

Finally, he climbed onto the deck and unexpectedly for everyone gave the order to weigh anchor.

“Medusa” set off for Buenos Aires.

“Good,” said Baltazar. “How much time wasted in vain! Let the devil take that ‘demon’ along with the ‘god’!”

The sick granddaughter

The sun was mercilessly scorching. Along the dusty road bordering the lush wheat fields, cornfields, and oats, an old, exhausted Indian walked. His clothes were torn. In his arms, he carried a sick child, shielded from the sun’s rays by an old blanket. The child’s eyes were half-closed. A huge swelling was visible on his neck. From time to time, when the old man stumbled, the child would moan hoarsely and flutter his eyelids. The old man would stop, carefully blow on the child’s face to refresh him.

“If only I could get him there alive!” the old man whispered, quickening his pace.

Approaching the iron gates, the Indian shifted the child to his left arm and knocked four times on the iron door with his right hand. A peephole in the small gate opened, someone’s eye flickered through the hole, the bolts squeaked, and the gate swung open.

The Indian timidly crossed the threshold. Before him stood an old black man dressed in a white coat, with completely white curly hair.

“To see the doctor, the child is sick,” said the Indian.

The black man nodded silently, locked the door, and gestured for the Indian to follow him.

The Indian looked around. They were in a small courtyard paved with wide stone slabs. This yard was enclosed on one side by a high outer wall, and on the other by a lower wall, separating the yard from the inner part of the estate. Not a blade of grass or a green bush—a true prison yard. In the corner of the yard, by the gate of the second wall, stood a white house with large, broad windows. Near the house, on the ground, sat Indians—men and women. Many were with children.

Almost all the children looked perfectly healthy. Some were playing shells in “odds or evens,” others wrestled silently,—the old black man with white hair strictly ensured that the children made no noise.

The old Indian humbly sat down on the ground in the shadow of the house and began to blow on the motionless, blue-tinged face of the child. Next to the Indian sat an old Indian woman with a swollen leg. She looked at the child lying on the Indian’s knees, asked:

“Daughter?”

“Granddaughter,” the Indian replied.

Shaking her head, the old woman said:

“A swamp spirit has entered your granddaughter. But he is stronger than the evil spirits. He will expel the swamp spirit, and your granddaughter will be healthy.”

The Indian nodded his head in agreement.

The black man in the white coat walked around the sick, looked at the Indian’s child, and pointed towards the house door.

The Indian entered a large room with a stone slab floor. In the middle of the room stood a narrow, long table covered with a white sheet. A second door with frosted glass opened, and Doctor Salvator entered the room, wearing a white coat, tall, broad-shouldered, swarthy. Apart from black eyebrows and lashes, there was not a single hair on Salvator’s head. Apparently, he shaved his head constantly, as the skin on his head was as tanned as on his face. A rather large nose with a bump, somewhat prominent, a sharp chin, and tightly compressed lips gave his face a cruel and even predatory expression. Brown eyes looked coldly. Under this gaze, the Indian felt uneasy.

The Indian bowed low and extended the child. Salvator took the sick girl from the Indian’s hands with a swift, confident, yet careful motion, unwrapped the rags in which the child was wrapped, and threw them into the corner of the room, deftly hitting a box there. The Indian hobbled to the box, wanting to retrieve the rags, but Salvator sternly stopped him:

– Leave it, don’t touch!

Then he laid the girl on the table and leaned over her. He turned sideways to the Indian. And suddenly, the Indian thought that it was not a doctor, but a condor that had leaned over a little bird.

Salvator began to feel the swelling on the girl’s throat with his fingers. These fingers also struck the Indian. They were long, extraordinarily agile fingers. It seemed they could bend at the joints not only downwards but also sideways and even upwards. The far from timid Indian tried not to succumb to the fear that this incomprehensible man inspired in him.

– Excellent. Splendid, – said Salvator, as if admiring the swelling and feeling it with his fingers.

Having finished the examination, Salvator turned his face to the Indian and said:

– The moon is new. Come back in a month, at the next new moon, and you will get your girl back healthy.

He carried the child through the glass door, where there were a bathroom, operating room, and wards for the sick.

And a negro was already bringing a new patient into the reception room – an old woman with a sore leg.

The Indian bowed low to the glass door that closed behind Salvator and left.

Exactly twenty-eight days later, the same glass door opened.

In the doorway stood a girl in a new dress, healthy, rosy-cheeked. She looked around at her grandfather with timidity. The Indian rushed to her, picked her up, kissed her, examined her throat. There was no trace of the swelling. Only a small, barely visible reddish scar reminded of the surgery.

The girl pushed her grandfather away with her hands and even cried out when he, having kissed her, pricked her with his long-unshaven chin. He had to put her down on the floor. Following the girl, Salvator entered. Now the doctor even smiled and, patting the girl's head, said:

– Well, take your girl. You brought her just in time. A few more hours, and even I wouldn't have been able to save her life.

The old Indian's face wrinkled, his lips quivered, tears streamed from his eyes. He lifted the girl again, pressed her to his chest, fell to his knees before Salvator, and with a voice breaking from tears, said:

– You have saved my granddaughter's life. What can a poor Indian offer you as a reward, besides his own life?

– What do I need your life for? – Salvator was surprised.

– I am old, but still strong, – continued the Indian, not rising from the floor. – I will carry my granddaughter to her mother – my daughter – and then return to you. I want to give you the rest of my life for the kindness you have shown me. I will serve you like a dog. Please, do not deny me this mercy.

Salvator thought it over.

He was very reluctant and cautious about taking on new servants. Although there would be work. And a lot of work – Jim can't manage in the garden. This Indian seems suitable, although the doctor would prefer a negro.

– You give me life and ask as a favor to accept your gift. Very well. Let it be as you wish. When can you come?

– Before the first quarter of the moon is over, I will be here, – said the Indian, kissing the edge of Salvator's robe.

– What is your name?

– Mine?... Cristo – Christopher.

– Go, Cristo. I will wait for you.

– Let's go, granddaughter! – Cristo said to the girl and lifted her in his arms again.

The girl cried. Cristo hurried to leave.

The Wonderful Garden

When Cristo arrived a week later, Doctor Salvator looked intently into his eyes and said:

– Listen carefully, Kristo. I'm taking you into my service. You will receive a ready table and a good salary...

Kristo waved his hands.

– I don't need anything, just to serve you.

– Be quiet and listen, – Salvator continued. – You will have everything. But I will require one thing: you must keep silent about everything you see here.

– I would rather cut off my tongue and throw it to the dogs than say a single word.

– See to it that no such misfortune befalls you, – Salvator warned. And, summoning a negro in a white coat, the doctor ordered: – Take him to the garden and hand him over to Jim.

The negro bowed silently, led the Indian out of the white house, passed through the yard already familiar to Kristo, and knocked on the iron gate of the second wall.

The barking of dogs was heard from behind the wall, the gate creaked and slowly opened, the negro pushed Kristo through the gate into the garden, shouted something gutturally to another negro standing behind the gate, and left.

Kristo, in fright, pressed himself against the wall: with barking resembling a roar, unknown beasts of reddish-yellow color with dark spots ran towards him. If Kristo had encountered them in the pampas, he would have recognized them as jaguars at once. But the approaching beasts barked like dogs. At the moment, Kristo was indifferent to what animals were attacking him. He rushed to the nearest tree and began to climb its branches with unexpected speed. The negro hissed at the dogs like an angry cobra. This immediately calmed the dogs. They stopped barking, lay down on the ground, and placed their heads on their outstretched paws, glancing sideways at the negro.

The negro hissed again, this time addressing Kristo, who was sitting in the tree, and waved his hands, inviting the Indian to climb down.

– Why do you hiss like a snake? – said Kristo, not leaving his refuge. – Swallowed your tongue?

The negro just growled angrily.

"Probably, he's mute," Kristo thought and remembered Salvator's warning. "Could it be that Salvator cuts out the tongues of servants who reveal his secrets? Maybe this negro's tongue has been cut out too..." And suddenly Kristo felt so terrified that he nearly fell from the tree. He wanted to run away from here at all costs and as soon as possible. He estimated in his mind how far it was from the tree he was sitting in to the wall. – No, can't jump it..." But the negro

approached the tree and, grabbing the Indian by the leg, impatiently dragged him down. Kristo had to submit. He jumped down from the tree, smiled as amiably as he could, reached out his hand, and asked in a friendly manner:

– Jim?

The negro nodded.

Christo firmly shook the hand of the man of African descent. “If you’ve landed in hell, you need to be on good terms with the devils,” he thought, and continued aloud:

– Are you mute?

The man did not respond.

– No tongue?

The man was still silent.

“How can I take a look inside his mouth?” Christo thought. But Jim, apparently, had no intention of even engaging in a mimed conversation. He took Christo by the hand, led him to the red-haired beasts, and hissed something to them. The beasts got up, approached Christo, sniffed him, and calmly backed away. Christo felt somewhat relieved.

Waving his hand, Jim led Christo to look around the garden.

After the gloomy courtyard, paved with stones, the garden was striking with its abundance of greenery and flowers. The garden stretched to the east, gradually sloping down towards the sea shore. Paths sprinkled with reddish crushed shells branched off in different directions. Near the paths grew whimsical cacti and bluish-green succulent agaves [agave is a plant with juicy, fleshy leaves. Its fibers are used to make fabrics, and its juice is used to prepare “pulque,” a favorite drink of the locals], with clusters of numerous yellowish-green flowers.

Entire groves of peach and olive trees covered the thick grass with multicolored, bright flowers in their shade. Among the greenery of the grass, ponds lined with white stones glittered. Tall fountains refreshed the air.

The garden was filled with a cacophony of cries, singing, and chirping of birds, the roaring, squeaking, and screeching of animals. Christo had never seen such unusual birds and animals before. This garden was inhabited by unseen beasts.

Gleaming with copper-green scales, a six-legged lizard scurried across the path. From a tree hung a snake with two heads. Christo jumped back in fright from this two-headed reptile that hissed at him with two red mouths. The man of African descent responded with an even louder hiss, and the snake, waving its heads in the air, fell from the tree and disappeared into the thick reeds. Another long snake slithered off the path, clinging with two limbs. Behind a wire mesh grunted a piglet. It stared at Christo with a single large eye, set in the middle of its forehead.

Two white rats, fused at the sides, ran down the pink path, like a two-headed, eight-legged monster. Occasionally this dual creature began to struggle with itself: the right rat pulled to the right, the left – to the left, and both squeaked discontentedly. But the right always prevailed. Beside the path grazed “Siamese twins” – two fine-fleeced sheep fused at the sides. They did not argue like the rats. Between them, apparently, a complete unity of will and desires had long been established. One freak particularly struck Christo: a large, completely bald pink dog. And on its back, as if emerging from the dog’s body, a small monkey could be seen – its chest, arms, head. The dog approached Christo and wagged its tail. The monkey turned its head, swung its arms, patted the dog’s back, which it was a part of, and yelled, looking at Christo. The Indigenous man reached into his pocket, pulled out a piece of sugar, and offered it to the monkey. But someone quickly pulled Christo’s hand aside. Behind his back, a hissing was heard. Christo turned around – it was Jim. The elderly man of African descent explained through gestures and facial expressions that the monkey should not be fed. And immediately a sparrow with the head of a small parrot snatched the sugar piece from Christo’s fingers on the fly and disappeared behind a bush. In the distance, on a meadow, neighed a horse with a cow’s head.

Two llamas dashed across the meadow, waving horse tails. From the grass, from the thicket of shrubs, from the branches of trees, unusual reptiles, animals, and birds looked at Christo: dogs with feline heads, geese with rooster heads, horned boars, nandu ostriches with eagle beaks, rams with the body of a puma. . .

Christo felt as if he was delirious. He rubbed his eyes, splashed his head with cold water from the fountains, but nothing helped. In the ponds, he saw snakes with fish heads and gills, fish with frog legs, huge frogs with bodies as long as lizards. . .

And Cristo again felt the urge to flee from here.

But then Jim led Cristo onto a wide, sand-strewn platform. In the middle of the platform, surrounded by palms, stood a villa made of white marble, built in the Moorish style. Through the trunks of the palms, arches and columns could be seen. Copper fountains in the shape of dolphins spouted cascades of water into transparent ponds with frolicking golden fish. The largest fountain in front of the main entrance depicted a youth sitting on a dolphin, like the mythical Triton [Triton, according to Greek mythology, is the god of the sea wave. Blowing into a conch shell, he could cause or calm the turmoil of the sea. He was often portrayed sitting on a dolphin] — with a twisted horn at his mouth. This group, created by the hands of a talented sculptor, struck one with the liveliness of the movements of the youth and the dolphin.

Behind the villa were several residential buildings and service quarters, and further on there were thickets of prickly cacti, reaching up to the white wall.

“A wall again!” Cristo thought.

Jim led the Indian into a small, cool room. By gestures, he explained that this

room was provided for him, and then left, leaving Cristo alone.

The Third Wall

Gradually, Cristo got used to the extraordinary world that surrounded him. All the animals, birds, and reptiles that filled the garden were well-tamed. With some of them, Cristo even struck up a friendship. The dogs with jaguar skins, which had frightened him on the first day, followed him around, licked his hands, and fawned over him. The llamas took bread from his hands. Parrots flew down to his shoulder.

Twelve silent or mute Africans, like Jim, took care of the garden and the animals. Cristo never heard them even talk to each other. Each silently did his work. Jim was something like a manager. He watched over the Africans and distributed their duties. And Cristo, to his own surprise, was appointed as Jim's assistant. There wasn't too much work for Cristo, and he was well fed. He could not complain about his life. The only thing that worried him was the ominous silence of the Africans. He was sure that Salvator had cut out all their tongues. And whenever Salvator occasionally called Cristo to him, the Indian always thought: "He's going to cut out my tongue." But soon Cristo began to fear less for his own tongue.

One day, Cristo saw Jim sleeping in the shade of the olive trees. The African lay on his back, mouth open. Cristo took advantage of this, carefully peeked inside the mouth of the sleeping man, and assured himself that the old African's tongue was in place. Then the Indian felt somewhat relieved.

Salvator strictly scheduled his day. From seven to nine in the morning, the doctor treated sick Indians, from nine to eleven he operated, and then he would go to his villa and work in the laboratory. He operated on animals, and then studied them for a long time. When the observations were over, Salvator sent these animals into the garden. Cristo, sometimes cleaning the house, also sneaked into the laboratory. Everything he saw there astonished him. In glass jars, filled with some kind of solutions, various organs pulsated. Severed hands and feet continued to live. And when these living, detached body parts began to ache, Salvator treated them, restoring their fading life.

All of this filled Cristo with horror. He preferred to be among the living freaks in the garden.

Despite the trust Salvator showed the Indian, Cristo did not dare to go beyond the third wall. And he was very interested in it. Once at noon, when everyone was resting, Cristo ran up to the high wall. From behind the wall, he heard children's voices—he made out Indian words. But sometimes to the children's voices were added even thinner, squealing voices, as if arguing with the children and speaking in some incomprehensible dialect.

Once, meeting Cristo in the garden, Salvator approached him and, as usual looking straight into his eyes, said:

— You have been working for me for a month, Cristo, and I am satisfied with you. One of my servants in the lower garden has fallen ill. You will replace him. You will see many new things there. But remember our agreement: keep your tongue behind your teeth if you don't want to lose it.

— I have almost forgotten how to speak among your mute servants, doctor, — replied Cristo.

— All the better. Silence is golden. If you keep silent, you will receive many golden pesos. I hope to get my sick servant back on his feet in two weeks. By the way, do you know the Andes well?

— I was born in the mountains.

— Excellent. I will need to replenish my menagerie with new animals and birds. I will take you with me. And now go. Jim will take you to the lower garden.

Cristo had gotten used to many things. But what he saw in the lower garden surpassed all expectations.

On a large, sunlit meadow frolicked naked children and monkeys. These were children from different Indian tribes. Among them were very small ones — no more than three years old, the eldest were about twelve. These children were Salvator's patients. Many of them had undergone serious surgeries and owed their lives to Salvator. As the children recovered, they played, ran in the garden, and then, when their strength returned, their parents took them home.

Besides the children, there lived monkeys. Tailless monkeys. Monkeys without a tuft of fur on their bodies.

The most amazing thing — all the monkeys, some better, some worse, could talk. They argued with the children, scolded, squealed in thin voices. Yet the monkeys got along peacefully with the children and quarreled with them no more than the children among themselves. Cristo sometimes could not decide whether these were real monkeys or people.

When Cristo had familiarized himself with the garden, he noticed that it was smaller than the upper one and sloped even steeper towards the bay, ending at a cliff as vertical as a wall.

The sea was presumably not far beyond this wall. From beyond the wall came the roar of the sea surf.

After examining the cliff several days later, Cristo was convinced that it was artificial. Another wall — the fourth. In the thick wisteria thickets, Cristo found a gray iron door, painted the color of the rocks, blending in with them perfectly.

Cristo listened. No sound other than the surf reached from beyond the cliff. Where did this narrow door lead? To the seashore?

Suddenly, an excited child's cry was heard. The children looked up at the sky. Cristo raised his head and saw a small red children's balloon slowly flying across

the garden. The wind carried the balloon towards the sea.

A common children's balloon, flying over the garden, greatly excited Cristo. He became anxious. And as soon as the recovered servant returned, Cristo went to Salvator and said:

– Doctor! Soon we are going to the Andes, perhaps for a long time, allow me to see my daughter and granddaughter.

Salvator did not like it when his servants left the estate, and he preferred to have those who were alone. Cristo waited silently, looking into Salvator's eyes.

Salvator, looking coldly at Cristo, reminded him:

– Remember our agreement. Keep your tongue! Go. Return no later than three days from now. Wait!

Salvator withdrew into another room and brought out a suede pouch, in which gold pesos jingled.

– This is for your granddaughter. And for your silence.

The Attack

– If he does not come today either, I will refuse your help, Baltazar, and will invite more skilled and reliable people, – said Zurita, impatiently twitching his fluffy mustache.

Now Zurita was dressed in a white city suit and a Panama hat. He met with Baltazar in the outskirts of Buenos Aires, where the cultivated fields end and the pampas begin.

Baltazar, in a white blouse and blue striped trousers, sat by the road and silently plucked at the sunburnt grass, feeling embarrassed.

He himself was beginning to regret that he had sent his brother Cristo as a spy to Salvator.

Cristo was ten years older than Baltazar. Despite his age, Cristo remained strong and agile. He was as cunning as a pampas cat. And yet he was an unreliable man. He tried farming, – it seemed boring to him. Then he ran a tavern in the port, but, having taken to wine, he soon went bankrupt. In recent years, Cristo had been involved in the darkest of affairs, employing his extraordinary cunning, and sometimes treachery. Such a man was a suitable spy, but he could not be trusted. If it was to his advantage, he could betray even his own brother. Baltazar knew this and therefore was no less worried than Zurita.

– Are you sure that Cristo saw the balloon you sent?

Baltazar shrugged noncommittally. He wanted to abandon this whole scheme sooner, go home, moisten his throat with cold water and wine, and go to bed early.

The last rays of the setting sun lit up the clouds of dust rising from behind the hill. At the same time, a sharp, prolonged whistle was heard.

Baltazar started.

– It's him!

– Finally!

Cristo approached them with a brisk walk. He no longer looked like an exhausted old Indian. Once again whistling sharply, Cristo came up and greeted Baltazar and Zurita.

– Well, have you met the “sea devil”? – asked Zurita.

– Not yet, but he's there. Salvator is keeping the “devil” behind four walls. The main thing is done: I work for Salvator, and he trusts me. I did very well with the sick granddaughter. – Cristo laughed, squinting his cunning eyes. – She nearly spoiled the plan when she got better. I hug her, kiss her, as a loving grandfather should, and she, silly girl, resists and nearly bursts into tears. – Cristo laughed again.

– Where did you get your granddaughter? – asked Zurita.

– Money can't be found, but girls are easy to find, – replied Cristo. – The child's mother is happy. I got five paper pesos from her, and she got a healthy girl.

Cristo kept silent about the hefty bag of gold pesos he had received from Salvator, of course, he didn't intend to give the money to the girl's mother.

– Wonders at Salvator's. A real menagerie. – And Cristo began to tell about everything he saw.

– All this is very interesting, – said Zurita, lighting a cigar, – but you haven't seen the most important thing: the “devil”. What do you plan to do next, Cristo?

– Next? Take a little walk to the Andes. – And Cristo told them that Salvator was planning to go hunting for animals.

– Excellent! – exclaimed Zurita. – Salvator's territory is far from the other settlements. In his absence, we will attack Salvator's possessions and kidnap the “sea devil”.

Cristo shook his head negatively.

– Jaguars will tear off your heads, and you won't be able to find the “devil”. And even with your heads, you won't find him, if I didn't.

– Then here's the plan, – after thinking, said Zurita, – we will set an ambush when Salvator goes hunting; we'll capture him and demand a ransom – the “sea devil”.

With a deft movement, Cristo took the protruding cigar from Zurita's side pocket.

– Thank you. An ambush – that’s better. But Salvator will deceive: he’ll promise a ransom and won’t give it. These Spaniards. . . – Cristo coughed.

– But what do you propose? – Zurita asked, already with irritation.

– Patience, Zurita. Salvator trusts me, but only up to the fourth wall. We need the doctor to trust me as he trusts himself, and then he will show me the “devil”.

– Well?

– Here it is. Bandits will attack Salvator, – and Cristo jabbed his finger into Zurita’s chest, – and I, – he thumped his own chest, – an honest Araucanian, will save his life. Then there will be no secrets left for Cristo in Salvator’s house. (“And my wallet will be replenished with golden pesos,” – he finished to himself.)

– Well, that’s not bad.

And they agreed on which road Cristo would take Salvator.

– The day before we leave, I will throw a red stone over the fence. Be ready.

Despite the fact that the plan for the attack was very carefully considered, one unforeseen circumstance almost spoiled the matter.

Zurita, Baltazar, and ten cutthroats, recruited in the port, dressed in gaucho costumes [gaucho – semi-wild pastoral tribes living in the pampas, mestizos with a predominance of Indian blood. Excellent horsemen] and well-armed, waited for their victim in the pampas, far from any dwellings.

It was a dark night. The riders listened intently, waiting to hear the sound of horse hooves.

But Cristo did not know that Salvator set out hunting in a different way than he had done several years ago.

The bandits suddenly heard the rapidly approaching sound of an engine. Beyond the hill, the lights of headlights flashed dazzlingly. A huge black car whizzed past the horsemen before they had time to realize what had happened.

Zurita swore desperately, Baltazar found it amusing.

“Don’t be upset, Pedro,” said the Indian. “It’s hot during the day, they travel at night—with Salvator’s car having two suns on it. They’ll be resting during the day. We can catch up with them at their rest stop.” And, spurring his horse, Baltazar galloped after the car. Others followed behind him.

After riding for about two hours, the horsemen suddenly spotted a fire in the distance.

“That’s them. Something has happened to them. Stop. I will crawl up and find out. Wait for me.”

And, dismounting from his horse, Baltazar crawled like a snake. An hour later, he returned.

“The car is not functioning. It broke down. They’re fixing it. Cristo is on guard. We must hurry.”

Everything else happened very quickly. The bandits attacked. And before Salvator could recover, he, Cristo, and three Africans were tied up, hands and feet.

One of the hired bandits, the gang leader—Zurita preferred to stay in the shadows—demanded a rather large ransom from Salvator.

“I will pay, release me,” Salvator responded.

“That’s for you. But you must pay just as much for the three companions!” the bandit found.

“I cannot give such a sum immediately,” replied Salvator, after thinking.

“Then death to him!” the bandits shouted.

“If you don’t agree to our terms, we will kill you at dawn,” said the bandit.

Salvator shrugged and replied:

“I don’t have such a sum on hand.”

Salvator’s composure even stunned the bandit. Leaving the bound men behind the car, the bandits began to rummage and found reserves of alcohol for the collection. They drank the alcohol and, drunk, collapsed to the ground.

Not long before dawn, someone cautiously crawled up to Salvator.

– It’s me, – whispered Cristo. – I managed to untie the straps. I crept up to the bandit with the gun and killed him. The rest are drunk. The chauffeur fixed the car. We must hurry.

Everyone quickly got into the automobile, the black chauffeur started the engine, the car jerked forward and sped down the road.

From behind, shouts and disordered gunfire were heard.

Salvator firmly shook Cristo’s hand.

Only after Salvator’s departure did Zurita learn from his bandits that Salvator had agreed to pay the ransom. “Wouldn’t it have been easier,” Zurita thought, “to get the ransom rather than trying to kidnap the ‘sea devil,’ who it’s still uncertain what he represents.” But the opportunity was missed, and all that remained was to wait for news from Cristo.

The Amphibian Man

Cristo hoped that Salvator would come to him and say, “Cristo, you saved my life. Now there are no secrets for you in my domain. Come, I will show you the ‘sea devil.’”

But Salvator had no intention of doing so. He generously rewarded Cristo for the rescue and delved into his scientific work.

Without wasting time, Cristo began to study the fourth wall and the secret door. It resisted for a long time, but eventually, Cristo managed to discover its secret. One day, while feeling the door, he pressed a small bulge. Suddenly, the door gave way and opened. It was as heavy and thick as the door of a fireproof safe. Cristo quickly slipped through the door, which immediately slammed shut behind him. This puzzled him somewhat. He examined the door, pressed the projections, but the door would not open.

– I’ve locked myself in a trap, – Cristo muttered.

But there was nothing to do. He had to explore this last, unknown garden of Salvator’s.

Cristo found himself in a densely overgrown garden. The entire garden was a small hollow, surrounded on all sides by a high wall of artificially stacked rocks. Not only could the sound of the surf be heard, but also the rustling of pebbles along the sandy shore.

There were trees and shrubs that usually grow in moist soil. Among the large shady trees, well-protected from the sun’s rays, many streams flowed. Dozens of fountains scattered water droplets, moistening the air. It was humid, like on the low-lying banks of the Mississippi. In the middle of the garden stood a small stone house with a flat roof. Its walls were completely covered with ivy. The green shutters on the windows were lowered. The house seemed uninhabited.

Cristo reached the end of the garden. Near the wall separating the estate from the bay, there was a huge square pool, thickly surrounded by trees, covering an area of no less than five hundred square meters and at least five meters deep.

As Cristo approached, some creature, frightened, ran out of the bushes and plunged into the pool, raising clouds of spray. Cristo stopped in excitement. Him! “The Sea Devil”! At last Cristo would see him.

The Indian walked up to the pond and looked into the clear water.

On the bottom of the pool, on the white stone slabs, sat a large ape. With fear and curiosity, it looked out from under the water at Cristo. Cristo could not recover from his surprise: the ape was breathing underwater. Its sides were rising and falling.

Recovering from astonishment, Cristo involuntarily laughed: the “sea devil” that had been terrorizing the fishermen turned out to be an amphibious monkey. “What wonders the world holds,” thought the old Indian.

Cristo was satisfied: at last, he had managed to find out everything. But now he was disappointed. The monkey did not at all resemble the monster described by eyewitnesses. What fear and imagination can conjure!

But it was time to think about returning. Cristo went back to the door, climbed a tall tree by the fence, and, risking breaking his legs, jumped off the high wall.

As soon as he landed on his feet, he heard the voice of Salvator:

– Cristo! Where are you?

Cristo grabbed the rake lying on the path and began to gather dry leaves.

– I’m here.

– Come, Cristo, – said Salvator, approaching the camouflaged iron door in the rock. – Look, this door opens like this. – And Salvator pressed the bulge on the rough surface of the door already known to Cristo.

“The doctor is late – I’ve already seen the ‘devil’,” thought Cristo.

Salvator and Cristo entered the garden. Passing a cottage covered with ivy, Salvator headed towards the pool. The monkey was still sitting in the water, blowing bubbles.

Cristo cried out in surprise as if he had seen it for the first time. But after that, he had to be truly astonished.

Salvator paid no attention to the monkey. He just waved his hand at it as if it was in his way. The monkey immediately swam out, got out of the pool, shook itself off, and climbed a tree. Salvator bent down, felt the grass, and firmly pressed a small green plate. A muffled noise was heard. Hatches opened in the floor around the edges of the pool. After a few minutes, the pool was empty. The hatches closed. An iron ladder leading to the bottom of the pool slid out from the side.

“Let’s go, Cristo.”

They descended into the pool. Salvator stepped on a slab, and immediately a new hatch opened – in the middle of the pool, about a square meter in size. Iron steps led somewhere underground.

Cristo followed Salvator into this subterranean realm.

They walked for quite some time. From above, only diffused light penetrated through the hatch. But soon it disappeared. They were surrounded by complete darkness. Their steps echoed dully in this underground corridor.

“Don’t miss your step, Cristo, we will arrive soon.”

Salvator stopped, feeling the wall with his hand. He flicked a switch, and bright light flooded the area around them. They stood in a stalactite cave, in front of a bronze door with lion faces holding rings in their mouths. Salvator pulled on one of the rings. The heavy door smoothly opened, and the travelers entered a dark hall. Again, a switch clicked. A frosted globe illuminated the vast cave, one wall of which was made of glass. Salvator switched the lights: the cave plunged into darkness, while powerful spotlights lit up the space behind the glass

wall. It was a huge aquarium, or rather, a glass house at the bottom of the sea. Seaweeds and coral bushes rose from the ground, among them fish frolicked. And suddenly Cristo saw a humanoid creature emerging from the thickets, with large bulging eyes and frog-like limbs. The body of the unknown being shimmered with bluish-silver scales. With quick, agile movements, the creature swam up to the glass wall, nodded to Salvator, entered the glass chamber, slamming the door behind it. Water quickly drained from the chamber. The stranger opened a second door and entered the grotto.

“Take off your glasses and gloves,” said Salvator.

The stranger obediently removed his glasses and gloves, and Cristo saw before him a slender, handsome young man.

“Meet Ikhtiander, the Fish-Man, or rather, the amphibian, also known as ‘the sea devil’,” Salvator introduced the young man.

The young man, smiling affably, extended his hand to the Indian and said in Spanish:

“Hello!”

Cristo silently shook the offered hand. Astonished, he could not utter a word.

“The Negro, Ikhtiander’s servant, has fallen ill,” Salvator continued. “I will leave you with Ikhtiander for a few days. If you handle the new responsibilities, I will make you Ikhtiander’s permanent servant.”

Cristo silently nodded his head.

Ichthyander’s Day

It is still night, but dawn is not far away.

The air is warm and humid, infused with the sweet scent of magnolias, tuberoses, mignonettes. Not a single leaf stirs. Silence. Ichthyander walks along the sandy path of the garden. A dagger, goggles, hand and foot gloves – “frog’s feet” – sway rhythmically at his belt. Only the crushed shell sand crackles under his feet. The path is barely visible. Bushes and trees crowd around it with black shapeless spots. Mist rises from the ponds. Occasionally, Ichthyander brushes against a branch. Dew sprinkles his hair and hot cheek.

The path turns sharply to the right and slopes downward. The air becomes fresher and damper. Ichthyander feels the stone slabs under his feet, slows down, stops. Without hurry, he puts on large goggles with thick lenses, gloves on his hands and feet. He exhales the air from his lungs and jumps into the pond. Water envelops his body with a pleasant coolness, penetrating his gills with a chill. The gill slits begin to move rhythmically – the man has turned into a fish.

A few strong strokes with his arms, and Ichthyander is at the bottom of the pond.

The young man confidently swims in complete darkness. He stretches out his hand, finds an iron bracket in the stone wall. Next to it, another, a third bracket... This is how he makes his way to the tunnel, filled to the top with water. He walks along the bottom, overcoming the cold counter-current. He pushes off the bottom, rises to the surface – and as if immerses himself in a warm bath. Water, heated in the garden ponds, flows at the top of the tunnel towards the open sea. Now Ichthyander can swim with the current. He crosses his arms on his chest, lies on his back, and swims head first.

The end of the tunnel is near. There, near the very exit to the ocean, at the bottom, from a crevice in the rock under strong pressure, a hot spring bursts out. Its streams rustle the bottom pebbles and shells.

Ichthyander lies on his chest and looks ahead. It's dark. He stretches his hand forward. The water gets slightly fresher. His palms touch an iron grate, the bars of which are covered with soft and slippery marine vegetation and rough shells. Clinging to the grate, the young man finds a complex lock and opens it. The heavy round lattice door, blocking the exit from the tunnel, slowly opens. Ichthyander slips through the gap that has formed. The lattice door closes.

The amphibious man heads out into the open ocean, scooping water with hands and feet. It is still dark in the water. Only here and there in the black depths, bluish sparks of noctiluca and dull-red jellyfish flicker. But dawn is near, and the luminescent animals one by one extinguish their lanterns.

Ichthyander feels thousands of tiny pricks in his gills – it becomes harder to breathe. This means he has passed the rocky cape. Beyond the cape, the sea water is always polluted with particles of alumina, sand, and various substances' wastes. The water is brackish – a river flows into the ocean not far away.

"It's amazing how river fish can live in muddy, fresh water," Ichthyander thinks. "Probably, their gills are not so sensitive to grains of sand and particles of silt."

Ichthyander rises a little higher, turns sharply to the right, to the south, then descends into the depths. Here the water is cleaner. Ichthyander has hit a cold underwater current that runs along the coast from south to north, up to the mouth of the Paraná River, which deflects the cold current to the east. This current runs at great depth, but its upper boundary is fifteen to twenty meters from the surface. Now Ichthyander can once again leave himself to the current – it will carry him far into the open ocean.

He can take a little nap. There is no danger: it is still dark, and the marine predators are asleep. It is so pleasant to doze off before sunrise. The skin senses the changes in water temperature, underwater currents.

Now the ear catches a dull, rumbling sound, followed by another, a third. These are the sounds of anchor chains clanking: in the bay, several kilometers from Ichthyander, fishing schooners are lifting anchor. Dawn is close. And there's a far-off, steady rumble. It's the propeller and engines of the "Gorrox," a large English ocean liner running between Buenos Aires and Liverpool. The "Gorrox"

is still about forty kilometers away. And how clearly it can be heard! Sound travels through sea water at one and a half thousand meters per second. How beautiful the “Gorrox” is at night – a true floating city, bathed in lights. But to see it at night, you have to swim out into the open sea from the evening. In Buenos Aires, the “Gorrox” arrives at the light of the rising sun, with its lights already extinguished. No, there’s no more time to sleep: the screws, rudders, and engines of the “Gorrox,” the vibrations of its hull, the lights of its portholes and searchlights will wake up the ocean’s inhabitants. Probably the dolphins were the first to hear the approach of the “Gorrox” and, diving, raised a slight disturbance a few minutes ago, which made Ichthyander be on alert. And, probably, they have already raced towards the steamship.

The rattle of ship engines echoes from different directions; the port and the bay are waking up. Ichthyander opens his eyes, shakes his head as if to shake off the last vestiges of sleep, waves his arms, kicks with his legs, and surfaces.

Cautiously sticking his head out of the water, he looks around. No boats or schooners nearby. He emerges waist-deep and stays that way, slowly treading water.

Cormorants and seagulls fly low over the water, occasionally touching the mirror-like surface with their chests or wingtips, leaving slowly expanding ripples behind. The cries of the white seagulls resemble the wails of children. A huge snow-white albatross-petrel, whistling with its enormous wings and blowing wind, flies over Ichthyander’s head. Its soaring wings are black, the beak is red with a yellow tip, and its feet are orange. It heads toward the bay. Ichthyander watches it with a touch of envy. The mournful span of the bird’s wings is no less than four meters. If only to have such wings!

In the west, the night retreats behind distant mountains. The east is already aglow. A barely noticeable, calm swell appears on the ocean’s surface, and on it – golden streaks. White seagulls, rising higher, turn pink.

Colorful, blue and dark blue trails snake across the pale water’s surface: these are the first gusts of wind. The blue trails become more numerous. The wind strengthens. On the sandy shore, the first feathery yellow-white tongues of surf appear. The water near the shore turns green.

A whole flotilla of fishing schooners approaches. Father ordered not to be seen by people. Ichthyander dives deep into the water, finds a cold current. It carries him even further from the shore to the east, into the open ocean. All around is the blue-purple darkness of the sea depths. Fish swim by, appearing light-green, with dark spots and stripes. Red, yellow, lemon, brown fish flit about continuously, glittering like swarms of colorful butterflies.

Above, a rumble is heard; the water darkens. A military hydroplane has flown low over the water.

Once such a hydroplane landed on the water. Ichthyander clung unnoticed to the metal support of the pontoons and... barely escaped with his life: the

hydroplane suddenly took off, and Ichthyander jumped from a height of ten meters.

Ichthyander lifts his head. The light of the sun is almost directly above. Noon is near. The water's surface no longer seems like a mirror reflecting the rocks of the shallows, large fish, Ichthyander himself. Now the mirror is distorted, bending, continuously moving.

Ichthyander surfaces. The waves rock him. Now he peeks out of the water. He rises on the crest of a wave, descends, rises again. Oh, what is happening around! Near the shore, the surf already roars, howls, and tosses stones. The water near the shore has turned yellow-green. A sharp south-west wind blows. The waves grow. Whitecaps flash on the wave crests. Spray constantly falls on Ichthyander. He likes it.

"Why is it," Ichthyander thinks, "that when swimming against the waves, they seem dark blue, but when you look back – they are pale?"

Schools of fish – flying fish with long fins – tear from the tops of the waves. Rising and falling, bypassing the wave crests and troughs between them, the flying fish glide a hundred meters and then dip into the water, only to leap out again a minute or two later. White seagulls scurry, crying out. The fastest birds – frigatebirds – cut through the air with their wide wings. A huge curved beak, sharp claws, dark-brown feathers with a greenish metallic sheen, the male's throat sack is orange. And nearby another frigate, lighter, with a white breast – the female. She plummets into the water, and a moment later, a blue-silver fish trembles in her curved beak. Albatross-petrels fly about. There will be a storm.

Heading towards the storm cloud, a marvelous, brave bird – the frigatebird – is probably already on its way. It always greets the storm with its song. In contrast, fishing schooners and ornate yachts hurry to shore under full sail to seek shelter from the storm.

Greenish twilight falls, but through the thickness of the water, one can still discern where the sun is – a large bright spot. That is enough to determine the direction. He must reach the shallows before the cloud covers the sun, otherwise – goodbye breakfast. And he is long overdue for a meal. In the dark, neither the shallows nor underwater rocks can be found. Ichthyander vigorously works his arms and legs – he swims as frogs swim.

From time to time, he lies on his back and checks his course by the barely noticeable light in the dense blue-green twilight. Sometimes he looks intently ahead, to see if there is a sandbar. His gills and skin feel how the water changes: near the sandbar, the water is not so dense, it is saltier, and it has more oxygen – pleasant, light water. He tastes the water – on his tongue. Thus, an old experienced sailor, even without seeing land, knows of its approach by signs known only to him.

Gradually, it becomes lighter. To the right and left loom the long-familiar outlines of underwater cliffs. Between them a small plateau, beyond it a stone

wall. Ichthyander calls this place an underwater bay. It is calm here even during the strongest storm.

How many fish have gathered in the quiet underwater bay! Teeming like in a boiling pot of fish soup. Small, dark, with a yellow cross-stripe in the middle of the body and a yellow tail, with diagonal dark stripes, red, blue, blue. They suddenly disappear, then just as unexpectedly appear in the same place. If you float up, look around – the fish swarm, and below they have already disappeared, as if they have sunk through. For a long time, Ichthyander could not understand why this happens until he once caught a fish with his hands. Its body was the size of a palm, but completely flat. Therefore, it was difficult to see the fish from above.

Here's breakfast. On a flat area near the sheer cliff, there are many oysters. Ichthyander swims up, lies down on the platform near the shells, and begins to eat. He takes oysters out of their shells and sends them to his mouth. He is used to eating underwater: putting a piece in his mouth, he skillfully expels the water through half-closed lips. However, he swallows a little water with the food, but he is used to seawater.

Around him sway the seaweed – green leaves of agar pierced with holes, feathery green leaves of Mexican caulpera, delicate pink nitophylls. But now they all seem dark gray: the water is twilight, the storm and gale continue. Occasionally, thunder is faintly heard. Ichthyander looks up.

Why has it suddenly darkened? Right above Ichthyander's head, a dark spot has appeared. What could it be? Breakfast is over. It's time to look at the surface. Ichthyander cautiously rises to the dark spot above his head, gliding along the sheer cliff. It turns out that a huge albatross has settled on the water. The bird's orange legs are very close to Ichthyander. He reaches up and grabs the albatross by the legs. The frightened bird spreads its powerful wings and rises, pulling Ichthyander out of the water. But in the air, Ichthyander's body immediately becomes heavy, and the albatross with him clumsily falls onto the wave, covering the young man with its feathery, soft chest. Ichthyander does not wait for the petrel to peck his head with its red beak, he dives and in a few seconds emerges at the surface in another place. The albatross flies east and disappears behind the water mountains of the raging storm.

Ichthyander lies on his back. The storm has already passed. Thunder rumbles somewhere far in the east. But the downpour pours like from a bucket. Ichthyander squints with pleasure. Finally, he opens his eyes, stands up, half submerged in the water, and looks around. He is on the crest of the highest wave. Around him are the sky, ocean, wind, clouds, downpour, waves – all mixed in a wet, spinning bundle that hums, roars, bellows, thunders. Foam curls on the crests and angrily snakes on the ribs of the waves. Water mountains run up swiftly and tumble down like avalanches, waves rise, rain roars, the fierce wind howls.

What terrifies a land person delights Ichthyander. Of course, one must be careful, otherwise, a water mountain will crash down on him. But Ichthyander is no

worse than fish at dealing with waves. You just have to know them: one carries you up and down, up and down, another is about to flip over your head. He knew what happens under the wave, knew how waves disappear when the wind stops; he knew that first the small waves disappear, then the large ones, but the measured dead swell remains for a long time. He loved to tumble in the coastal wave, but he knew it was dangerous. Once a wave unexpectedly turned Ichthyander over – he hit his head hard on the bottom and lost consciousness. An ordinary person would have drowned, but Ichthyander lay down in the water.

The rain stopped. It was carried away eastward by the storm. The wind has changed. From the tropical north, it blows warm. Through the clouds, pieces of blue sky are visible. Sun rays break through and strike the waves. In the southeast, on the still dark, gloomy sky, a double rainbow appears. The ocean is unrecognizable. Now it is not lead-dark, but blue, with bright green spots where the sun rays have broken through.

The sun! In an instant, the sky and ocean, shore and distant mountains become different. What a wonderful, light, moist air after the storm and gale! Ichthyander alternately fills his lungs with clean, healthy sea air, then begins to breathe vigorously through his gills. Among people, only Ichthyander alone knows how easy it is to breathe after the storm, thunder, wind, waves, rain mix the sky with the ocean, air with water, and saturate the water with oxygen. Then all the fish, all the sea creatures come to life.

After the storm and gale from the thickets of the sea jungles, from the narrow cracks of rocks, from the thicket of whimsical corals and sponges, small fish emerge; after them, the large fish that have been hiding in the depths appear, and finally, when the disturbance has completely subsided, delicate, weak jellyfish, transparent, almost weightless crustaceans, siphonophores, ctenophores, Venus's girdles rise to the surface.

A ray of sunlight falls on the wave. The water around immediately turns green, sparkling tiny water bubbles, foam hisses... Not far from Ichthyander, his friends the dolphins frolic, glancing at him with cheerful, sly, curious eyes. Their shiny dark backs flicker among the waves. They splash, snort, chase each other. Ichthyander laughs, catches the dolphins, swims, dives with them. It seems to him that this ocean, these dolphins, this sky, and the sun were created only for him.

Ichthyander raises his head, squinting, looks at the sun. It is tilting to the west. Evening is approaching. Today he does not want to return home early. He will stay like this until the blue sky darkens and stars appear on it.

However, soon he gets tired of inactivity. Not far from him, small sea creatures are dying. He can save them. He rises and looks at the distant shore. There, towards the sandbar by the sandy spit! That's where his help is most needed. There, the sea surf rages.

This furious surf after every storm casts ashore heaps of seaweed and marine

dweller: jellyfish, crabs, fish, starfish, and sometimes an incautious dolphin. The jellyfish perish very quickly, some fish make it back to the water, but many die on the shore. Almost all the crabs return to the ocean. Sometimes they themselves come out of the water onto the shore to feast on the victims of the surf. Ichthyander loves to save the marine animals cast ashore.

For hours he would wander along the shore after a storm and save whoever could still be saved. He rejoiced, seeing how a fish he threw back into the water swam away, cheerfully flicking its tail. He was glad each time semi-conscious fish, floating on their sides or bellies in the water, eventually came back to life. Picking up a large fish on the shore, Ichthyander carried it to the water; the fish trembled in his hands, and he laughed and urged it not to be afraid and to endure a little longer. Of course, he would have gladly eaten this very fish if he had caught it in the ocean when hungry. But that was an inevitable evil. Here, on the shore, he was a protector, a friend, a savior of the sea dwellers.

Usually, Ichthyander returned to the shore in the same way as he had swum away, using underwater sea currents. But today he did not want to dive underwater for long – the ocean and the sky were too beautiful. The young man dived, swam under the water, and reappeared on the surface, like sea birds hunting for fish.

The last rays of the sun have faded. In the west, a yellow strip is still smoldering. Grim waves, like dark-gray shadows, run one after another.

After the cool air, it's so warm in the water. It's dark all around, but not scary. No one attacks at this hour. Daytime predators have already fallen asleep; nocturnal ones have not yet gone hunting.

That's what he needs: the northern current, located very close to the ocean's surface. The unsettled dead swell slightly rocks this underwater river up and down, but it continues to flow slowly from the hot north to the cold south. And much lower lies the opposite, cold current – from the south to the north. Ichthyander often uses these currents when he needs to swim long distances along the coast.

Today he swam far to the north. Now this warm current will carry him to the tunnel. Just do not fall asleep and swim past it, as it happened to him once. He now puts his hands behind his head, then stretches them to the sides, slowly spreads and then squeezes his legs together – doing gymnastics. The current carries him to the south. The warm water and the slow movements of his arms and legs have a calming effect on him.

Ichthyander looks up – above him is a dome, studded with tiny stars like dust. These are the noctilucae that have lit their lanterns and are rising to the ocean's surface. Here and there in the darkness, bluish and pinkish glowing nebulae are visible – dense clusters of the tiniest glowing animals. Soft greenish light-emitting spheres swim by slowly. A jellyfish glowing close to Ichthyander looks like a lamp covered by an intricate shade with lace and long fringe. The fringe sways gently, as if from a light breeze, with each movement of the jellyfish. On the

shallows, starfish have already lit up. In the great depths, the lights of large nocturnal predators move quickly. They chase each other, whirl around, dim and flare up again.

Again, a shallow. The whimsical trunks and branches of corals are illuminated from within by blue, pink, green, white light. Some corals burn with a pale, flickering light; others – like metal heated to white-hot.

On land at night, only small, distant stars in the sky, sometimes the moon. But here, thousands of stars, thousands of moons, thousands of little multicolored suns, burning with a soft, delicate light. The night in the ocean is incomparably more beautiful than the night on land.

And, to compare, Ichthyander surfaces to the top of the water.

The air has warmed. Above his head is a dark-blue dome of sky, studded with stars. Above the horizon stands the silvery disk of the moon. From the moon, a silvery path stretches across the entire ocean.

From the port comes a low, dense, prolonged honk. It's the giant "Gorrox" preparing for the return journey. However, how late it is. Dawn is soon. Ichthyander has been absent for almost whole two days. The father will probably scold him.

Ichthyander heads to the tunnel, inserts his hand between the bars, opens the iron grate, swims in the tunnel amid complete darkness. On this return journey, he has to swim at the bottom, in the cold current coming from the sea to the garden pools.

A gentle nudge on the shoulder wakes him. He is in the pool. He quickly rises to the surface. Begins to breathe with his lungs, inhaling the air filled with familiar scents of flowers.

A few minutes later, he is fast asleep in bed, as his father had ordered.

The Girl and the Swarthy Man

Once he was swimming in the ocean after a storm.

Surfacing, Ichthyander spotted an object on the waves not far from himself, resembling a piece of white sail torn from a fishing schooner by the storm. Swimming closer, he was surprised to see that it was a person – a woman, a young girl. She was tied to a plank. Could this beautiful girl be dead? Ichthyander was so excited by his discovery that for the first time he felt a hostile feeling towards the ocean.

Perhaps the girl had only lost consciousness? He adjusted her helplessly slumped head, grabbed the plank, and swam to the shore.

He swam quickly, straining all his strength, only occasionally making short stops to adjust the girl's head, which had slipped off the plank again. He whispered to her, as to a fish caught in distress: "Hold on a little longer!" He wanted the girl

to open her eyes, but was afraid of it. He wanted to see her alive, but was afraid she would be scared of him. Should he take off his glasses and gloves? But that would take time, and swimming without gloves would be more difficult. And he hurried to swim again, pushing the plank with the girl towards the shore.

Here is the surf line. One must be careful here. The waves carry him to the shore themselves. Ichthyander occasionally lowers his foot to feel for the bottom. At last, he reached the shallows, carried the girl ashore, untied her from the plank, carried her into the shade of a dune covered with shrubs, and began to resuscitate her – to do artificial respiration.

It seemed to him that her eyelids fluttered, her eyelashes moved. Ichthyander put his ear to the girl's heart and heard a faint beat. She is alive. . . He wants to shout for joy.

The girl opens her eyes, looks at Ichthyander, and an expression of terror appears on her face. Then she closes her eyes. Ichthyander is dismayed and delighted. He has saved the girl after all. Now he must leave – not to frighten her. But can he leave her alone, so helpless? While he pondered, he heard someone's heavy rapid footsteps. He could hesitate no longer. Ichthyander plunged headfirst into the surf, dived, swam underwater to the rocky ridge, surfaced and, hiding among the rocks, began to watch the shore.

A swarthy man with a mustache and a sombrero on his head emerged from behind the dune. He said quietly in Spanish: "There she is, glory to Jesus-Mary!" – almost ran to her, then unexpectedly turned sharply to the ocean and plunged into the waves of the surf. Soaked through, he ran up to the girl, began to perform artificial respiration (why now?), leaned over the girl's face. . . Kissed her. He started to speak quickly and heatedly. Ichthyander caught only individual words: "I warned you. . . It was madness. . . Good thing I thought to tie you to the plank. . ."

The girl opens her eyes, raises her head. . . On her face fear, replaced by surprise, anger, displeasure. The man with the sombrero continues to speak heatedly about something, helping the girl to stand. But she is still weak, and he lays her down on the sand again. Only after half an hour do they start on their way. They pass not far from the rocks behind which Ichthyander is hiding. The girl, frowning, said, addressing the man in the sombrero:

– So it was you who saved me? Thank you. May God reward you!

"Not a god, but only you can reward me," replied the swarthy man.

The girl seemed not to hear these words. She was silent, then said:

"Strange. It seemed to me, I hallucinated, that there was some monster near me."

"Of course, you imagined it," her companion replied. "Or perhaps it was the devil who thought you were dead and wanted to snatch your soul. Say a prayer and lean on me. With me, no devil will touch you."

And they passed - the wonderful girl and this unsavory swarthy man, having convinced the girl that he had saved her. But Ichthyander could not expose his lie. Let them do as they wish - Ichthyander had done his part.

The girl and her companion disappeared behind the dunes, and Ichthyander was still watching them. Then he turned his head to the ocean. How vast and desolate it is!..

The surf threw a blue fish with a silver belly onto the sand. Ichthyander looked around - no one was there. He ran out of his hiding place, grabbed the fish, and threw it back into the sea. The fish swam away, but Ichthyander felt somehow sad. He wandered along the deserted shore, picking up fish and starfish and carrying them to the water. The work gradually engrossed him. His constant good mood returned to him. He busied himself until dusk, only occasionally diving into the water when the coastal wind scalded and dried out his gills.

Ichthyander's Servant

Salvator decided to go to the mountains without Cristo, who had been successfully serving Ichthyander. This delighted the Indian greatly: in the absence of Salvator, he could meet with Baltazar more freely. Cristo had already informed Baltazar that he had found the "sea devil." All that remained was to figure out how to kidnap Ichthyander.

Cristo now lived in a white ivy-covered house and often met with Ichthyander. They quickly became friends. Ichthyander, deprived of human company, grew attached to the old Indian, who told him about life on land. Ichthyander knew about the life of the sea more than famous scientists, and he shared the secrets of the underwater world with Cristo. Ichthyander had a fairly good knowledge of geography; he was aware of the oceans, seas, major rivers; he had some knowledge of astronomy, navigation, physics, botany, zoology. But he knew little about people: some things about the races inhabiting the earth; he had a vague idea about the history of peoples; about the political and economic relationships of people, he knew no more than a five-year-old child.

During the day, when the heat came, Ichthyander descended into an underground grotto and swam off somewhere. He came to the white house when the heat subsided and stayed there until morning. But if it rained or a storm rose at sea, he spent the whole day in the house. In damp weather, he felt quite well, staying on land.

The house was small, just four rooms. In one room, near the kitchen, Cristo stayed. Next, there was a dining room, beyond it - a large library. Ichthyander knew Spanish and English. Lastly, in the farthest, the largest room, was Ichthyander's bedroom. In the middle of the bedroom, there was a pool. A bed stood against the wall. Sometimes Ichthyander slept on the bed, but preferred the bed of the pool. However, Salvator, upon leaving, ordered Cristo to ensure that Ichthyander slept in a regular bed at least three nights a week. In the evenings, Cristo would come to Ichthyander and grumble like an old nanny if

the young man refused to sleep in the bed.

“But I find it much more pleasant and comfortable to sleep in the water,” Ichthyander protested.

“The doctor ordered you to sleep in a bed,” you must obey the father.

Ichthyander called Salvator father, but Cristo doubted their kinship. Ichthyander’s skin on his face and hands was quite fair, but perhaps it had lightened from prolonged submersion underwater. The regular oval of Ichthyander’s face, straight nose, thin lips, large radiant eyes resembled the face of an Araucanian Indian, to which Cristo himself belonged.

Cristo was very eager to see what the color of Ichthyander’s skin was on the body, tightly covered by a scale-like suit made of some unknown material.

“Won’t you take off your shirt for the night?” he asked the young man.

“Why? My scales do not bother me, they are very comfortable. They do not impede the breathing of the gills and skin, and at the same time protect reliably: neither the teeth of a shark nor a sharp knife can cut through this armor,” Ichthyander replied, lying down in bed.

“Why do you wear glasses, gloves?” Cristo asked, looking at the strange gloves lying near the bed.

They were made of greenish rubber, the fingers elongated with jointed reeds embedded in the rubber, and equipped with webs. For the feet, these fingers were lengthened even more.

“The gloves help me swim faster. And the glasses protect my eyes when the storm stirs up sand from the bottom. I don’t always wear them. But in glasses, I see better underwater. Without glasses, everything underwater is like in fog.” And, smiling, Ichthyander continued: “When I was little, my father allowed me to play with the children living in the neighboring garden sometimes. I was very surprised to see that they swim in the pool without gloves. ‘Is it possible to swim without gloves?’ I asked them. And they did not understand what gloves I was talking about, as I never swam in their presence.

“Do you still swim out to the bay?” Cristo inquired.

“Of course. But I swim out through a side underwater tunnel. Some evil people nearly caught me in a net, so now I’m very cautious.”

“Hmm... so there is another underwater tunnel leading to the bay?”

“There are several. It’s a pity you can’t swim with me underwater! I would show you marvelous things. Why can’t all people live underwater? We would ride on my sea horse together.”

“On a sea horse? What is that?”

"A dolphin. I tamed it. Poor thing! A storm once threw it ashore, and it badly injured its fin. I dragged it back into the water. It was a tough job. Dolphins on land are much heavier than in the water. Everything here is heavier. Even one's own body. It's easier to live in the water. Well, I dragged the dolphin back, but it couldn't swim, so it couldn't feed either. I fed it fish— for a long time, a month. During that time, it not only got used to me but also became attached to me. We became friends. Other dolphins also know me. How fun it is to frolic in the sea with dolphins! Waves, spray, sun, wind, noise! The bottom is nice too. As if you're swimming in dense blue air. Quiet. You don't feel your body. It becomes free, light, obedient to your every move. . . I have many friends in the sea. I feed the little fish, like you feed birds,—they follow me everywhere in flocks.

"And enemies?"

"There are enemies too. Sharks, octopuses. But I'm not afraid of them. I have a knife."

– And what if they sneak up unnoticed?

Ichthyander was surprised by this question.

– After all, I hear them from afar.

– You hear underwater? – Cristo was surprised in turn. – Even when they approach quietly?

– Well, yes. What's so unclear about that? I hear with my ears and with my whole body. After all, they produce a vibration in the water – these waves precede them. Feeling these vibrations, I look around.

– Even when you sleep?

– Of course.

– But the fish. . .

– Fish perish not from sudden attacks, but because they cannot defend against a stronger enemy. And I – I am stronger than all of them. And the sea predators know it. They do not dare to come near me.

"Zurita is right: one should work over such a sea fellow," Cristo thought. "But catching him in the water is not easy. 'I hear with my whole body'! Only if he falls into a trap. I should warn Zurita."

– How beautiful is the underwater world! – Ichthyander continued to marvel. – No, I will never exchange the sea for your stuffy, dusty earth!

– Why our earth? You are also a son of the earth, – said Cristo. – Who was your mother?

– I do not know. . . – Ichthyander said uncertainly. – Father says that my mother died when I was born.

– But she was, of course, a woman, a person, not a fish.

– Maybe, – Ichthyander agreed.

Christo laughed.

– Now tell me, why were you making trouble, offending the fishermen, cutting their nets and throwing the fish out of the boats?

– Because they were catching more fish than they could eat.

– But they were catching fish to sell.

Ihtiandr did not understand.

– So that other people could eat, – the Indian explained.

– Are there really that many people? – Ihtiandr was surprised. – Don't they have enough land birds and animals? Why do they come to the ocean?

– You can't explain this all at once, – said Christo, yawning. – It's time to sleep. Just don't climb into your tub: father will be displeased. – And Christo left.

Early in the morning, Christo found Ihtiandr gone. The stone floor was wet.

– Slept in the tub again, – the Indian grumbled. – And then probably swam out to sea.

Ihtiandr came to breakfast very late. He was somewhat upset. After poking at a piece of steak with his fork, he said:

– Fried meat again.

– Again, – Christo answered sternly. – That's what the doctor ordered. And you've been eating raw fish in the sea again, haven't you? You'll completely lose your taste for cooked food. And you slept in the tub. Don't you want to sleep in a bed, – your gills will get unused to the air, and then you'll complain of a prickling sensation in your sides. And you're late for breakfast. When the doctor comes, I'll tell him about you. You don't listen at all.

– Don't say anything, Christo. I don't want to upset him. – Ihtiandr lowered his head and fell into thought. Then he suddenly raised his big, this time sad eyes to the Indian and said: – Christo, I saw a girl. I've never seen anything more beautiful – not even at the bottom of the ocean...

– Then why did you curse our land? – said Christo.

“I was swimming on a dolphin along the coast and not far from Buenos Aires, I saw her on the shore. She had blue eyes and golden hair,” said Ichthyander. And he added, “But she saw me, got scared, and ran away. Why did I wear glasses and gloves?” After a pause, he spoke very softly: “Once I saved some girl who drowned in the ocean. At that time, I didn't notice what she looked like. What if it's her? It seems to me that she also had golden hair. Yes, yes...”

I remember. . .” The young man fell into thought, then approached the mirror, and for the first time in his life looked at himself.

“And what did you do next?”

“I waited for her, but she didn’t return. Christo, will she never come to the shore again?”

“Perhaps it’s good that he likes the girl,” thought Christo. So far, no matter how much Christo praised the city, he couldn’t persuade Ichthyander to visit Buenos Aires, where Zurita could easily capture the young man.

“The girl may not come to the shore, but I will help you find her. You will put on city clothes and go with me into the city.”

“And I’ll see her?” exclaimed Ichthyander.

“There are many girls there. Maybe you’ll see the one who was sitting on the shore.”

“Let’s go now!”

“It’s already late. It’s not easy to get to the city on foot.”

“I’ll swim on the dolphin, and you walk along the shore.”

“You’re so quick,” replied Christo. “We’ll leave tomorrow at dawn. You’ll swim out into the bay, and I’ll be waiting for you with the suit on the shore. And I still need to get the suit. (”I’ll have time to meet with my brother tonight,” thought Christo.) So, tomorrow at dawn.

In the city

Ichthyander emerged from the bay and went ashore. Christo was already waiting for him with a white city suit in his hands. Ichthyander looked at the suit as if he had been brought a snake skin, and with a sigh began to dress. Apparently, he rarely had to wear a suit. The Indian helped the young man tie the tie and, having looked over Ichthyander, was pleased with his appearance.

“Let’s go,” said Christo cheerfully.

The Indian wanted to impress Ichthyander and took him through the main streets of the city – Avenida Alvear, Vertis, showed him Victoria Square with the cathedral and the town hall in Moorish style, Fuerte Square, and the May 25th Square [on May 25, 1810, the provinces of La Plata formed a revolutionary alliance “Junta,” arrested the local authority, proclaimed a temporary government, and separated from Spain] with the Liberty Obelisk, surrounded by beautiful trees, the presidential palace.

But Cristo was mistaken. The noise, motion of the big city, dust, heat, and turmoil completely overwhelmed Ichthyander. He tried to find the girl in the crowd of people, often grabbing Cristo by the arm and whispering:

– Her!.. – but then he saw that he was mistaken again. – No, it’s someone else. . .

Noon came. The heat became unbearable. Cristo suggested going to a small restaurant housed in a basement to have breakfast. It was cool here, but noisy and stuffy. Dirty, poorly dressed people smoked foul cigars. Ichthyander was choking on the smoke, and then the loud arguments began, shaking crumpled newspapers and shouting incomprehensible words. Ichthyander drank a lot of cold water but didn't touch his breakfast and sadly said:

– It's easier to find a familiar fish in the ocean than a person in this human whirlpool. Your cities are disgusting. It's stuffy and it smells bad here. I'm starting to feel a stabbing in my sides. I want to go home, Cristo.

– Alright, – agreed Cristo. – We'll just stop by a friend of mine – and then we'll return.

– I don't want to visit people.

– It's on the way. I won't be long.

Having paid, Cristo went out on the street with Ichthyander. With his head down, breathing heavily, Ichthyander followed Cristo past white houses, past gardens with cactuses, olive and peach trees. The Indian led him to his brother Baltazar, who lived in the New Port.

By the sea, Ichthyander inhaled the moist air greedily. He wanted to tear off his clothes and plunge into the sea.

– We'll be there soon, – said Cristo, glancing apprehensively at his companion.

They crossed the railway tracks.

– We're here. This is it, – said Cristo, and they descended into a dimly lit little shop.

When Ichthyander's eyes adjusted to the gloom, he looked around in amazement. The shop resembled a corner of the sea bed. Shelves and even part of the floor were cluttered with shells – small, large, spiral, bivalve. From the ceiling hung strands of corals, sea stars, stuffed marine fish, dried crabs, exotic sea creatures. On the counter, under glass, lay pearls in boxes. In one box were pink pearls – “angel skin,” as the divers called them. Ichthyander felt somewhat reassured among familiar things.

– Rest here, it's cool and quiet, – said Cristo, seating the young man on an old wicker chair.

– Baltazar! Guttieri! – the Indian shouted.

– Is that you, Cristo? – a voice replied from another room. – Come here.

Cristo bent down to enter the low door leading to the other room.

This was Baltazar's laboratory. Here he restored the lost color of pearls dampened by moisture with a weak acid solution. Cristo closed the door tightly behind

him. Dim light fell through a small window at the ceiling, illuminating bubbles and glass trays on the old blackened table.

– Hello, brother. Where is Guttieri?

– She went to the neighbor’s for an iron. She’s all about lace and ribbons. She’ll be back soon, – Baltazar answered.

– And Zurita? – Cristo asked impatiently.

– Disappeared somewhere, the cursed one. Yesterday we had a little quarrel.

– All because of Guttieri?

– Yes. Zurita was wriggling around her like a snake. And she just kept saying: “I don’t want to and I don’t want to!” What can you do with her? Capricious and stubborn. Thinks too highly of herself. Doesn’t understand that any Indian girl, even the most beautiful, would consider it a fortune to marry such a man. Owns his own schooner, a crew of hunters, – grumbled Baltazar, dipping pearls in the solution. – Probably, Zurita is drinking wine out of annoyance again.

– So what do we do now?

– Did you bring him?

– He’s sitting.

Baltazar, approaching the door, curiously peered into the keyhole.

– I don’t see, – he said quietly.

– She’s sitting on a chair, at the counter.

– I don’t see her. That’s Guttieri.

Baltazar quickly opened the door and entered the shop with Cristo. Ichthyander was not there. In the dark corner stood a girl, Baltazar’s foster daughter, Guttieri. The girl was known for her beauty far beyond the borders of the New Port. But she was shy and headstrong. Most often, she spoke with a melodious, yet firm voice:

– No!

Guttieri caught the eye of Pedro Zurita. He wanted to marry her. And old Baltazar was not averse to becoming related to the owner of the schooner and entering into a partnership with him.

But to all of Zurita’s proposals, the girl invariably responded: “No!”

When father and Cristo entered the room, the girl was standing with her head down.

– Hello, Guttieri, – Cristo said.

– Where is the young man? – Baltazar asked.

– I don't hide young men, – she replied, smiling. – When I came in, he looked at me so strangely, as if he got scared, stood up, suddenly clutched his chest, and ran away. I hadn't had time to look back when he was already at the door.

“It was her,” – Cristo thought.

Back to the sea

Ichthyander, gasping for breath, ran along the road by the seaside. Having escaped from that dreadful city, he turned sharply off the road and headed straight for the seashore. He hid among the coastal stones, looked around, quickly undressed, hid his suit among the rocks, ran to the water, and plunged into it.

Despite his fatigue, he had never swum so swiftly before. Fish, in fright, darted away from him. Only after swimming several miles away from the city, Ichthyander rose closer to the surface and swam near the shore. Here he already felt at home. Every underwater rock, every hollow on the seabed were familiar to him. Here, sprawled on the sandy bottom, live sedentary flounders; further on, red coral bushes grow, sheltering tiny red-finned fish in their branches. In this sunken fishing boat, two families of octopuses had settled – they had recently had offspring. Under the grey stones, crabs dwell. Ichthyander liked to watch their lives for hours. He knew their little joys of a successful hunt and their sorrows – the loss of a claw or an attack by an octopus. And near the coastal cliffs, there were many oyster shells.

Finally, not far from the bay, Ichthyander raised his head above the water's surface. He saw a pod of dolphins frolicking among the waves and called out loudly and long. A large dolphin snorted cheerfully in response and quickly swam towards his friend, diving and again revealing his black glossy back above the wave crests.

“Faster, Liding, faster!” Ichthyander cried, swimming to meet him. He grabbed onto the dolphin. “Let's swim faster, onwards!”

And, obeying the young man's hand, the dolphin swiftly swam into the open sea, towards the wind and waves. Raising foam, he cut through the waves with his chest and raced, but to Ichthyander, this speed still seemed insufficient.

“Come on, Liding! Faster, faster!”

Ichthyander completely exhausted the dolphin, but this ride on the waves did not calm him. He left his friend in complete bewilderment, suddenly sliding off the glossy back and sinking into the sea. The dolphin waited, snorted, dived, resurfaced, snorted discontentedly again, and, turning sharply with its tail, headed towards the shore, looking back from time to time. His friend did not appear on the surface, and Liding joined the pod, joyously greeted by the young dolphins. Ichthyander descended deeper and deeper into the twilight depths of the ocean. He wanted to be alone, to recover from new impressions, to make sense of all that he had learned and seen. He swam far, heedless of danger. He

wanted to understand why he was different from everyone else, – alien to both sea and land.

He descended more slowly. The water became denser, it pressed on him, breathing became increasingly difficult. Here stood thick green-gray twilight. There were fewer sea inhabitants, and many of them were unknown to Ichthyander, – he had never descended so deep before. And for the first time, Ichthyander felt a chill from this silent twilight world. He quickly rose to the surface and swam towards the shore. The sun was setting, piercing the water with red rays. In the water, these rays, mixing with the blue of the water, shimmered with delicate lilac-pink and greenish-blue hues.

Ichthyander was without glasses and therefore saw the surface of the sea from below as fish would: from under the water, the surface appeared not flat, but as a cone, – as if he were at the bottom of a vast funnel. The edges of this cone seemed to be surrounded by red, yellow, green, blue, and violet fringes. Beyond the cone lay the shining surface of the water, in which, like in a mirror, were reflected underwater objects: rocks, algae, and fish.

Ichthyander flipped onto his chest, swam to the shore, and sat under the water among the rocks, not far from the shallows. Fishermen came down from the boat into the water and dragged the boat ashore. One of them sank his legs up to his knees in water. Ichthyander saw above the water a legless fisherman, and in the water – only his legs, which again reflected in the mirror of the water's surface. Another fisherman plunged into the water up to his shoulders. And in the water appeared a strange, headless, but four-legged creature, as if the heads of two identical people were chopped off and the shoulders of one person were placed on the shoulders of another. As people approached the shore, Ichthyander saw them as fish see them: reflected as if in a sphere. He saw them from feet to head before they came close to the shore. Therefore, he always managed to swim away before people could notice him.

These strange torsos with four arms, headless and heads without torsos, now seemed unpleasant to Ichthyander. People... They make so much noise, smoke terrible cigars, smell bad. No, dolphins are better – they are clean and cheerful. Ichthyander smiled; he remembered how once he had drunk dolphin milk.

Far to the south lies a small bay. Sharp underwater rocks and a sandy spit block access from the sea. The shore there is rocky and steep. Neither fishermen nor pearl divers visit this bay. The shallow bottom is covered with a dense carpet of plants. There is a lot of small fish in the warm water. A female dolphin swam there many years in a row, and there, in this warm bay, she gave birth to dolphin calves – two, four, sometimes even six. Ichthyander was very amused by the young dolphins, and he watched them for hours, motionlessly hiding in the thickets. The dolphin calves amusingly tumbled on the surface, then sucked on their mother's nipples, pushing each other away with their snouts. Ichthyander began to gently tame them: he caught small fish and fed them to the dolphin calves. Gradually, the young dolphins and the female got used to Ichthyander.

He already frolicked together with the little ones, caught them, tossed them, tickled them. They apparently liked it, – they did not leave him and every time rushed to him in a group, as soon as he appeared in the bay with gifts – tasty little fish or even more delicious small tender octopuses.

Once, when the familiar female dolphin had given birth and they were still very little sucklings, – they still did not eat, but only fed on mother's milk, – Ichthyander thought: why not try the dolphin milk himself?

And so he found himself unnoticed under the female dolphin, wrapped his arms around her, and began to suck the milk. The dolphin did not expect such an attack and fled the bay in horror. Ichthyander immediately released the frightened animal. The milk had a strong fishy taste.

The frightened female, having escaped from the unexpected sucker, dashed somewhere into the watery abyss, her babies were confused and aimlessly bumped in all directions. It took Ichthyander a long time to herd the little foolish dolphin calves until their mother appeared and led them to a neighboring bay. Only after many days did their trust and friendship recover.

Christo was seriously worried. Ichthyander had not appeared for three days. When he finally showed up, he was tired, pale, but satisfied.

"Where have you been?" the Indian sternly asked, delighted by Ichthyander's appearance.

"At the bottom," Ichthyander replied.

"Why are you so pale?"

"I... I almost perished," Ichthyander lied for the first time in his life and told Christo a story that had happened to him much earlier.

In the depths of the ocean rises a rocky plateau, and on top, in the middle of the plateau, there is a large oval depression—a true underwater mountain lake.

Ichthyander swam over this underwater lake. He was struck by the unusual light-gray color of the bottom. Descending lower and taking a closer look, Ichthyander was amazed: beneath him lay a real cemetery of various sea animals—from small fish to sharks and dolphins. There were recent victims. But near them, there weren't the usual swarms of small predators—crabs and fish. Everything was dead and motionless. Only here and there, bubbles of gas rose from the bottom to the surface. Ichthyander swam over the edge of the basin. He descended even lower and suddenly felt a sharp pain in his gills, suffocation, dizziness. Almost losing consciousness, he helplessly fell and finally landed on the edge of the basin. His temples were pounding, his heart was racing, his eyes clouded with a red fog. And there was no one to expect help from. Suddenly he noticed that next to him, convulsively writhing, a shark was descending. Apparently, it had been hunting him until it too fell into these terrible poisonous dead waters of the underwater

lake. Its belly and sides were swelling and deflating, its mouth open, white pointed plates of teeth exposed. The shark was dying. Ichthyander shuddered. Clenching his jaws, trying not to take water into his gills, Ichthyander crawled out of the lake onto the shore, then got up, walked. His head spun, and he fell again. Then he pushed off with his feet from the gray stones, flailed his arms, and now he was ten meters from the edge of the lake. . .

Having finished the story, Ichthyander added what he had once learned from Salvator.

“Probably, some harmful gases have accumulated in this basin—perhaps hydrogen sulfide or carbon dioxide,” said Ichthyander. “You see, on the ocean’s surface, these gases oxidize, and you don’t feel them, but in the very basin, where they are released, they are still highly concentrated. Now let me have breakfast—I’m hungry.”

After hastily having breakfast, Ichthyander put on his glasses and gloves and walked to the door.

“Is that the only reason you came?” Christo asked, pointing to the glasses. “Why don’t you want to tell what’s with you?”

A new trait appeared in Ichthyander’s character: he became secretive.

“Don’t ask, Christo, I myself don’t know what’s with me.” And the young man quickly left the room.

A Small Revenge

Upon unexpectedly encountering the blue-eyed girl in the pearl trader Baltazar’s shop, Ichthyander was so flustered that he ran out of the shop and dashed to the sea. Now he wanted to meet the girl again, but he did not know how to do it. The easiest way was to call on Cristo for help and go together with him. But he did not want to meet her in Cristo’s presence. Every day Ichthyander came to the seashore, to the place where he first met the girl. He would sit from morning till evening, hiding behind the coastal rocks, hoping to see her. When swimming to the shore, he would take off his glasses and gloves and change into a white suit so as not to frighten the girl. He often spent entire days on the shore, diving into the sea at night, feeding on fish and oysters, falling asleep with anxiety, and early in the morning, even before the sunrise, he was already back at his lookout post.

One evening he decided to go to the pearl trader’s shop. The doors were open, but an old Indian was sitting at the counter – the girl was not there. Ichthyander returned to the shore. On the rocky coast stood the girl in a white airy dress and a straw hat. Ichthyander stopped, not daring to approach. The girl was waiting for someone. She walked back and forth impatiently, glancing at the road from time to time. Ichthyander, who had stopped at an outcrop of rock, went unnoticed by her.

But then the girl waved to someone. Ichthyander turned around and saw a young, tall, broad-shouldered man who was walking quickly along the road. Ichthyander had never before seen such light hair and eyes as on this stranger. The giant approached the girl and, extending his wide hand, affectionately said:

– Hello, Guttieri.

– Hello, Olsen, – she replied. The stranger firmly shook Guttieri’s small hand. Ichthyander looked at them with aversion. He felt sad, and he almost cried.

– Did you bring it? – the giant asked, looking at Guttieri’s pearl necklace. She nodded.

– Your father won’t find out? – Olsen asked.

– No, – the girl replied. – It’s my own pearl, I can do with it as I please.

Guttieri and Olsen walked to the very edge of the rocky shore, talking quietly. Then Guttieri unclasped the pearl necklace, took it by the end of the thread, raised her hand up, and admiring the necklace, said:

– Look how beautifully the pearls glow at sunset. Take it, Olsen. . .

Olsen had already stretched out his hand, but suddenly the necklace slipped from Guttieri’s hands and fell into the sea.

– What have I done! – the girl exclaimed.

The disheartened Olsen and Guttieri continued to stand by the sea.

– Maybe it can be retrieved? – Olsen said.

“It’s very deep here,” said Guttieri, and added: “What a misfortune, Olsen!”

Ichthyander saw how the girl was distressed. He immediately forgot that the girl wanted to give the pearls to the fair-haired giant. Ichthyander could not remain indifferent to her sorrow: he came out from behind the rock and resolutely approached Guttieri.

Olsen frowned, while Guttieri looked at Ichthyander with curiosity and surprise – she recognized in him the young man who had so suddenly fled from the shop.

“Did you, by any chance, drop a pearl necklace into the sea?” asked Ichthyander. “If you want, I can retrieve it.”

“Even my father – the best pearl diver – could not get it from here,” the girl replied.

“I will try,” Ichthyander answered modestly. And, to the surprise of Guttieri and her companion, the young man, without even undressing, leaped into the sea from the high bank and disappeared into the waves.

Olsen did not know what to think.

“Who is that? Where did he come from?”

A minute passed, then a second, and the young man did not return.

“He’s perished,” Guttieri said anxiously, looking at the waves.

Ichthyander did not want the girl to know that he could live underwater. Getting carried away with the search, he had lost track of time and stayed underwater longer than a diver can hold their breath. Surfacing, the young man said with a smile:

“A little patience. There are many rock fragments on the bottom - it’s hard to search. But I will find it.” And he dived again.

Guttieri had witnessed pearl diving many times. She was surprised that the young man, having stayed underwater for almost two minutes, breathed evenly and did not seem tired.

After two minutes, Ichthyander’s head appeared on the surface again. His face was beaming with joy. He raised his hand above the water and showed the necklace.

“It got caught on a rock protrusion,” said Ichthyander in a completely even voice, not out of breath, as if he had come out of another room. “If the pearls had fallen into a crevice, it would have taken longer to find them.”

He quickly climbed up the rocks, approached Guttieri, and handed her the necklace. Water streamed from his clothes, but he paid no heed to it.

“Take it.”

“Thank you,” said Guttieri, looking at the youth with renewed curiosity.

Silence ensued. All three did not know what to do next. Guttieri hesitated to hand the necklace to Olsen in Ichthyander’s presence.

“It seems you wanted to give the pearls to him,” said Ichthyander, pointing to Olsen.

Olsen blushed, and the embarrassed Guttieri said:

“Yes, yes,” and handed the necklace to Olsen, who silently took it and put it in his pocket.

Ichthyander was pleased. It was a small revenge on his part. The giant received the lost pearls as a gift from Guttieri, but from him—Ichthyander.

And, bowing to the girl, Ichthyander quickly strode down the road.

But Ichthyander’s good fortune did not last long. New thoughts and questions arose in his mind. He knew little of people. Who was this blond giant? Why did Guttieri give him her necklace? What were they talking about on the cliff?

That night, Ichthyander again raced through the waves with the dolphin, startling fishermen in the darkness with his cries.

The next day, Ichthyander spent under the water. With goggles, but without gloves, he crawled along the sandy bottom searching for pearl oysters. In the evening, he visited Cristo, who greeted him with grumbling reproaches. The next morning, already dressed, the youth was at the rock where Guttieri and Olsen had met. In the evening, at sunset, just like before, Guttieri arrived first.

Ichthyander emerged from behind the rocks and approached the girl. Seeing him, Guttieri nodded her head, as to an acquaintance, and asked with a smile:

“Are you following me?”

“Yes,” Ichthyander simply replied, “since the first time I saw you...” And, growing embarrassed, the youth continued: “You gave your necklace to that... Olsen. But you admired the pearls before giving them away. Do you love pearls?”

“– Yes.

– Then take this... from me.” – And he handed her a pearl.

Guttieri knew the value of pearls well. The pearl lying in Ichthyander’s palm surpassed everything she had seen and known about pearls from her father’s stories. The immaculate, huge pearl of the purest white color weighed no less than two hundred carats and was probably worth at least a million gold pesos. Astonished, Guttieri looked back and forth between the extraordinary pearl and the handsome young man standing before her. Strong, flexible, healthy, but somewhat shy, dressed in a crumpled white suit, he did not resemble the wealthy youths of Buenos Aires. And he was offering her, a girl he hardly knew, such a gift.

– Take it, please,” – Ichthyander insisted again.

– No, – Guttieri replied, shaking her head. – I cannot accept such a valuable gift from you.

– It is not at all a valuable gift, – Ichthyander protested earnestly. – There are thousands of such pearls at the bottom of the ocean.

Guttieri smiled, Ichthyander became embarrassed, blushed, and after a short silence added:

– Please, I ask you.

– No.

Ichthyander frowned: he was offended.

– If you don’t want to take it for yourself, – Ichthyander persisted, – then take it for... for Olsen. He won’t refuse.

Guttieri became angry.

– He doesn’t take it for himself, – she replied sternly. – You know nothing.

– So, the answer is no?

– No.

Then Ichthyander threw the pearl far into the sea, nodded silently, turned around, and walked toward the road.

This act stunned Guttierre. She continued to stand motionless. To throw a fortune worth millions into the sea, like a simple pebble! She felt ashamed. Why had she upset this strange young man?

“Wait, where are you going?”

But Ichthyander kept walking, his head hung low. Guttierre caught up with him, took his hand, and looked into his face. Tears were streaming down the young man’s cheeks. He had never cried before and now was puzzled why objects had become misty and blurry, as if he was swimming underwater without glasses.

“Forgive me, I’ve upset you,” said the girl, taking both his hands.

Zurita’s Impatience

After this incident, Ichthyander swam to the shore every evening, not far from the town, took the suit hidden among the stones, dressed, and went to the rock where Guttierre would come.

They walked along the shore, talking animatedly. Who was Guttierre’s new friend? She could not say. He was not foolish, witty, knew much that Guttierre did not, and at the same time did not understand such simple things that every city boy knows. How to explain this? Ichthyander spoke about himself reluctantly. He did not want to tell the truth. The girl only learned that Ichthyander was the son of a doctor, apparently a very wealthy man. He had raised his son away from the city and people and had given him a very peculiar and one-sided education.

Sometimes they would sit on the shore for a long time. The surf roared at their feet. Stars twinkled overhead. The conversation would pause. Ichthyander was happy.

“It’s time to go,” the girl would say.

Ichthyander would rise reluctantly, escort her to the outskirts, then quickly return, shed his clothes, and swim back to his place.

In the morning, after breakfast, he would take a large white loaf of bread and head to the bay. Sitting on the sandy bottom, he began to feed the fish with bread. They swam up to him, surrounded him in a swarm, slipped between his hands, and eagerly snatched the soaked bread right from his hands. Sometimes large fish would burst into this swarm and chase the small ones. Ichthyander would rise and chase away the predators with his hands, while the small fish hid behind his back.

He began collecting pearls and stored them in an underwater grotto. He worked with pleasure and soon gathered a whole pile of select pearls.

He became, without knowing it, the richest man in Argentina—perhaps even in all of South America. If he wanted, he could become the richest man in the world. But he did not think about wealth.

Thus passed the peaceful days. Ichthyander only regretted that Guttieri lived in a dusty, stifling, noisy city. If only she could live underwater, away from the noise and people! How wonderful that would be! He would show her a new, unknown world, the beautiful flowers of underwater fields. But Guttieri could not live underwater. And he could not live on land. He already spent too much time in the air. And it did not go without consequence: more and more often and more intensely, his sides began to hurt while he sat with the girl on the seashore. But even if the pain became unbearable, he did not leave the girl until she left herself. And one more thing troubled Ichthyander: what was Guttieri talking about with the blond giant? Ichthyander meant to ask Guttieri every time, but he was afraid to offend her.

One evening, the girl told Ichthyander that she would not come tomorrow.

– Why? – he asked, frowning.

– I'm busy.

– With what?

– You can't be so curious, – the girl replied, smiling. – Don't see me off, – she added and left.

Ichthyander plunged into the sea. All night he lay on the mossy stones. He felt gloomy. At dawn, he swam back home.

Not far from the bay, he saw fishermen shooting dolphins from their boats. A large dolphin, wounded by a bullet, leaped high above the water and fell heavily.

– Liding! – Ichthyander whispered in horror.

One of the fishermen had already jumped from the boat into the sea and was waiting for the injured animal to surface. But the dolphin emerged almost a hundred meters away from the hunter and, after breathing heavily, submerged again.

The fisherman quickly swam towards the dolphin. Ichthyander rushed to help his friend. Just as the dolphin surfaced again, the fisherman grabbed the dolphin by the fin and dragged the weakened creature towards the boat.

Ichthyander, swimming underwater, caught up with the fisherman and bit him on the leg with his teeth. The fisherman, thinking he had been grabbed by a shark, began to frantically kick his legs. Defending himself, the fisherman randomly slashed at the enemy with a knife he held in the other hand. The knife struck Ichthyander on the neck, not covered by scales. Ichthyander released the fisherman's leg, and the man quickly swam back to the boat. The wounded dolphin and Ichthyander headed for the bay. The young man ordered the dolphin to follow him and dived into an underwater cave. The water here reached only

halfway up the cave. Air seeped in through the cracks. Here the dolphin could breathe in safety. Ichthyander examined its wound. It was not a dangerous wound. The bullet had gone under the skin and got stuck in the fat. Ichthyander managed to pull the bullet out with his fingers. The dolphin patiently endured it.

– It will heal, – Ichthyander said, gently patting his friend on the back.

Now he had to think about himself. Ichthyander quickly swam through the underwater tunnel, rose into the garden, and entered the white cottage.

Cristo was frightened when he saw his ward wounded.

– What happened to you?

“I was wounded by fishermen when I was defending a dolphin,” said Ichthyander. But Cristo did not believe him.

“Again in the city without me?” he asked suspiciously, bandaging the wound.

Ichthyander was silent.

“Lift up your scales,” said Cristo and slightly opened Ichthyander’s shoulder.

On the shoulder, the Indian noticed a reddish spot. The sight of this spot frightened Cristo.

“Hit with an oar?” he asked, feeling the shoulder. But there was no swelling. Obviously, it was a birthmark.

“No,” replied Ichthyander.

The young man went to rest in his room, while the old Indian propped his head with his hands and pondered. He sat for a long time, then got up and left the room.

Cristo quickly headed to the city, gasping for breath, entered Balthazar’s shop and, looking suspiciously at Gutierrez sitting at the counter, asked:

“Is father at home?”

“There,” the girl replied, nodding towards the door to another room.

Cristo entered the laboratory and closed the door behind him. He found his brother washing pearls over his flasks. Balthazar was as irritated as the first time.

“You’ll go mad with you two!” Balthazar started to grumble. “Zurita is angry, wondering why you haven’t brought the ‘sea devil’ yet, Gutierrez goes off somewhere for the whole day. She doesn’t want to hear about Zurita. She only says: ‘No! No!’ And Zurita says: ‘I’m tired of waiting! I’ll take her by force. She’ll cry, and it will be over.’ You can expect anything from him.”

Cristo listened to his brother’s complaints and then said:

“Listen, I couldn’t bring the ‘sea devil’ because he, like Gutierrez, often leaves the house for the whole day without me. And he doesn’t want to go to the city with me. He has completely stopped listening to me. The doctor will scold me for not watching Ichthyander well. . .”

– So, we need to capture or steal Ichthyander sooner; you will leave Salvator before he returns, and. . .

– Wait, Baltazar. Don’t interrupt me, brother. There is no need to rush with Ichthyander.

– Why shouldn’t we rush?

Cristo sighed as if hesitating to express his plan.

– You see. . . – he began.

But at that very moment, someone entered the shop, and they heard Zurita’s loud voice.

– Here we go, – muttered Baltazar, tossing the pearls into the tub, – him again!

Zurita, on the other hand, flung open the door with a bang and entered the laboratory.

– Both brothers here. How long will you keep fooling me? – he asked, shifting his gaze from Baltazar to Cristo.

Cristo stood up and, smiling graciously, said:

– I’m doing all I can. Patience. The “Sea Devil” is not a simple fish. You can’t just pull him out of the deep. Once I managed to bring him here – you weren’t around; the “devil” saw the town, didn’t like it, and now he doesn’t want to come here.

– If he doesn’t want to, then it’s not necessary. I’m tired of waiting. This week I’ve decided to settle two matters at once. Salvator hasn’t arrived yet?

– He’s expected in a few days.

– Then we must hurry. Expect visitors. I’ve picked reliable people. You’ll open the doors for us, Cristo, and I’ll handle the rest. I’ll tell Baltazar when everything is ready. – And, turning to Baltazar, he said: – And I’ll talk to you tomorrow. But just remember, it will be our last conversation.

The brothers silently bowed their heads. When Zurita turned his back on them, the gracious smiles fell from the Indians’ faces. Baltazar quietly seethed, Cristo seemed to be pondering something.

In Zurita’s shop, he was quietly speaking with Guttierre.

– No! – the brothers heard Guttierre’s response. Baltazar shook his head in dismay.

– Cristo! – called out Zurita. – Follow me, I’ll need you today.

An Unpleasant Encounter

Ichthyander felt very ill. The wound on his neck was painful. He had a fever. It was difficult for him to breathe in the air.

But in the morning, despite feeling unwell, he went to the shore by the rock to meet Guttieri. She arrived at noon.

The heat was unbearable. From the scorching air, from the fine white dust, Ichthyander began to suffocate. He wanted to stay by the seashore, but Guttieri was in a hurry; she had to return to the city.

– Father is leaving on business, and I must stay at the shop.

– Then I'll walk you there, – said the young man, and they set out on the hot dusty road leading to the city.

Coming towards them, with his head hung low, was Olsen. He was preoccupied with something and passed by without noticing Guttieri. But the girl called out to him.

– I just need to tell him two words, – Guttieri said to Ichthyander, and turning back, approached Olsen. They spoke quietly and quickly about something. It seemed the girl was pleading with him.

Ichthyander walked a few steps behind them.

– Alright, tonight, after midnight, – he heard Olsen's voice. The giant shook the girl's hand, nodded, and quickly continued on his way.

When Guttieri returned to Ichthyander, his cheeks and ears were burning. He wanted to finally talk to Guttieri about Olsen, but he couldn't find the words.

"I can't," he began, gasping for breath, "I must find out... Olsen... you're hiding some secret from me. You have to meet him at night. Do you love him?"

Guttieri took Ichthyander's hand, looked at him tenderly, and with a smile, asked:

"Do you believe me?"

"I do... You know I love you," now Ichthyander knew this word, "but I... but it's so hard for me."

It was true. Ichthyander was suffering from the unknown, but at this moment he also felt a sharp, cutting pain in his sides. He was gasping for air. The blush had left his cheeks, and now his face was pale.

"You are really sick," the girl said anxiously. "Please calm down. My dear boy. I didn't want to tell you everything, but to calm you down, I will. Listen."

A horseman rushed past them, but, glancing at Guttieri, he sharply turned his horse and approached the young people. Ichthyander saw a swarthy, no longer young man, with fluffy, upturned mustaches and a small goatee.

Somewhere, sometime Ichthyander had seen this man. In the city? No... Yes, there, on the shore.

The horseman slapped his boot with his whip, suspiciously and hostilely looked Ichthyander over, and reached out to Guttieri.

Catching her hand, he suddenly lifted the girl to the saddle, kissed her hand, and laughed.

“Got you!” Releasing the hand of the frowning Guttieri, he continued mockingly and at the same time irritably: “Where is it seen for brides to be walking with young men the day before their wedding?”

Guttieri got angry, but he didn’t let her speak:

“Father has been waiting for you for a long time. I’ll be at the shop in an hour.”

Ichthyander didn’t hear the last words. He suddenly felt darkness in his eyes, a lump rose to his throat, his breathing stopped. He could no longer stay in the air.

“So you... still deceived me...” he said with bluish lips. He wanted to speak—to express all his resentment or to find out everything, but the pain in his sides became unbearable, he was almost losing consciousness.

Finally, Ichthyander tore himself from his spot, ran to the shore, and plunged into the sea from a steep rock.

Guttieri cried out and staggered. Then she rushed to Pedro Zurita.

– Quickly... Save him!

But Zurita did not move.

– I do not make a habit of interfering with others drowning if they wish to, – he said.

Guttieri ran to the shore to throw herself into the water. Zurita spurred his horse, caught up with the girl, grabbed her by the shoulders, seated her on the horse, and galloped away.

– I do not make a habit of interfering with others, unless others interfere with me. That’s better! Come to your senses, Guttieri!

But Guttieri did not respond. She had fainted. Only at her father’s shop did she come to.

– Who was that young man? – asked Pedro. Guttieri, looking at Zurita with undisguised anger, said:

– Let me go.

Zurita frowned. “Nonsense,” he thought. “The hero of her novel has thrown himself into the sea. So much the better.” And, turning to the shop, Zurita shouted:

– Father! Baltazar! Hey hey!..

Baltazar ran out.

– Take your daughter. And thank me. I saved her; she nearly threw herself into the sea after the young man of pleasant appearance. This is the second time I’ve saved your daughter’s life, and she still shuns me. Well, soon all this obstinacy will end. – He laughed loudly. – I will come back in an hour. Remember our agreement!

Balthazar, humbly bowing, accepted Pedro’s daughter.

The rider spurred his horse and rode away.

Father and daughter entered the shop. Guttiere, exhausted, collapsed onto a chair and covered her face with her hands.

Balthazar closed the door and, pacing around the shop, began to speak excitedly and passionately about something. But no one listened to him. Balthazar might as well have been preaching to the dried crabs and sculpins lying on the shelves.

“He plunged into the water,” the girl thought, recalling Ichthyander’s face. “Unfortunate one! First Olsen, then this absurd encounter with Zurita. How dare he call me his bride! Now everything is lost...”

Guttieri cried. She felt sorry for Ichthyander. Simple, shy—how could he be compared to the empty, conceited young men of Buenos Aires?

“What to do next?” she wondered. “Throw myself into the sea like Ichthyander? End it all?”

And Balthazar kept talking:

“Do you understand, Guttiere? This is complete ruin. Everything you see in our shop belongs to Zurita. There isn’t even a tenth of it that’s my own goods. We get all the pearls on commission from Zurita. But if you reject him again, he will take all the goods and will no longer deal with me. It’s ruin! Complete ruin. Now, be smart, pity your old father...”

“Finish your sentence: ‘...and marry him.’ No!” Guttiere sharply replied.

“Damnation!” Balthazar cried out in rage. “If so, then... then... if not I, Zurita himself will deal with you!” And the old Indian left for the laboratory, slamming the door loudly.

Battle with the Octopuses

Ichthyander, having plunged into the sea, forgot for a while all his earthly troubles. After the hot and stuffy land, the coolness of the water calmed and refreshed him. The stinging pains ceased. He breathed deeply and evenly. He needed complete rest, and he tried not to think about what had happened on land.

Ichthyander wanted to work, to move. What could he occupy himself with? He loved on dark nights to leap from a high cliff into the water so as to reach the bottom at once. But now it was noon, and the black hulls of fishing boats flickered on the sea.

“Here’s what I’ll do. I will need to sort out the grotto,” thought Ichthyander.

In the sheer cliff of the bay, there was a grotto with a large arch that opened a beautiful view of the underwater plain, gently sloping into the depths of the sea. Ichthyander had long favored this grotto. But before settling in it, it was necessary to evict the long-standing inhabitants of the grotto—the numerous families of octopuses.

Ichthyander put on his glasses, armed himself with a long, slightly curved sharp knife, and bravely swam up to the grotto. It was a bit scary to enter the grotto, and Ichthyander decided to lure the enemies outside. By the sunken boat, he had long noticed a sharp stake. He took it in his hand and, standing at the entrance to the grotto, began to move the stake. The octopuses, displeased with the invasion of the unknown, stirred. Long, writhing tentacles appeared at the edges of the arch. Cautiously they approached the stake. Ichthyander jerked the stake away before the octopus’ tentacles could seize it. This game went on for several minutes. Now dozens of tentacles, like the hair of Medusa Gorgon [Medusa Gorgon—a winged monster-woman with snakes for hair in Greek mythology], stirred at the edge of the arch. Finally, one old, enormous octopus, driven out of patience, decided to deal with the bold intruder. The octopus emerged from the crevice, menacingly waving its tentacles. It slowly swam towards the enemy, changing color to intimidate Ichthyander. Ichthyander swam aside, threw the stake, and prepared for battle. Ichthyander knew how difficult it was for a man to fight with his two arms when the opponent had eight long legs. You don’t have time to cut off one leg of the octopus, the other seven will capture and twist a man’s arms. And the young man aimed to direct the blow of his knife so that it would hit the body of the octopus. Allowing the monster to come close enough for the tips of its tentacles to reach him, Ichthyander suddenly lunged forward, into the very tangle of writhing tentacles, to the head of the octopus.

This extraordinary maneuver always caught the octopus off guard. It took no less than four seconds for the animal to gather the ends of the tentacles and wrap them around the enemy. But during that time, Ichthyander managed to strike a swift and accurate blow to the body of the octopus, strike the heart, and sever the motor nerves. And the huge tentacles, already wrapping around his body, suddenly lifelessly unfurled and limply fell downwards.

“One down!”

Ichthyander again took up the stake. This time, two octopuses swam out to meet him. One of them swam straight at Ichthyander, while the other tried to attack from behind in a flanking move. This was becoming dangerous. Ichthyander bravely lunged at the octopus that was in front of him, but before he could kill it, the second octopus, situated behind, wrapped around his neck. The young

man quickly cut through the octopus's leg, stabbing it with his knife right at his own neck. Then he turned to face the octopus and cut off its tentacles. The maimed octopus, slowly undulating, sank to the bottom. And Ichthyander was already dealing with the octopus that was in front of him.

"Three," Ichthyander continued to count.

However, the battle had to be paused for a while. A whole squad of octopuses emerged from the grotto, but the blood muddied the water. In this brown haze, the advantage could be on the side of the octopuses, who could feel their enemy by touch, while Ichthyander could not see them. He swam away from the battle site, where the water was clear, and here he took down another octopus that had emerged from the bloody cloud.

The battle continued intermittently for several hours. When at last the last octopus was killed and the water cleared, Ichthyander saw that the bodies of dead octopuses and writhing severed tentacles lay on the bottom. Ichthyander entered the grotto. There were still a few small octopuses left—about the size of a fist and with tentacles no thicker than a finger. Ichthyander wanted to kill them, but he felt sorry for them. "I should try to tame them. It would be good to have such guards."

Having cleared the grotto of the large octopuses, Ichthyander decided to furnish his underwater abode with furniture. He dragged from the house a table with iron legs and a marble slab and two Chinese vases. He placed the table in the middle of the grotto, put the vases on the table, and filled them with soil and planted sea flowers. The soil, washed away by the water, smoked above the vases like smoke for a while, but then the water cleared. Only the flowers, swayed by a gentle surge, quietly swayed as if from a breeze.

There was a projection on the wall of the cave, like a natural stone bench. The new owner of the cave lay down on this bench with pleasure. Although it was made of stone, the body in the water hardly felt it.

It was a strange underwater room with Chinese vases on the table. Many curious fish came to see the unprecedented housewarming. They darted between the table legs, swam up to the flowers in the vases as if smelling them, scurried under Ichthyander's head. A marble bullhead looked into the grotto, flapped its tail in fright, and swam away. A large crab crawled out on the white sand, raised and lowered its claw as if greeting the owner, and settled under the table.

Ichthyander was amused by this idea. "What else could I use to decorate my dwelling?"—he thought.—"I'll plant the most beautiful underwater plants at the entrance, cover the floor with pearls, and along the walls, at the edges, I'll lay down shells. What if Guttieri saw this underwater room... But she is deceiving me. And maybe she is not. She didn't have time to tell me about Olsen." Ichthyander frowned. As soon as he finished working, he again felt lonely, unlike other people. "Why can't anyone else live underwater? I am alone. I wish my father would come soon. I will ask him..."

He wanted to show his new underwater dwelling to at least one living creature. “Liding,” Ichthyander remembered the dolphin. He took a twisted shell, surfaced, and sounded the horn. Soon, the familiar snorting was heard—the dolphin always stayed close to the bay.

When the dolphin arrived, Ichthyander tenderly embraced him and said:

– Let’s go to my place, Liding, I’ll show you the new room. You’ve never seen the table and the Chinese vases.

And, diving into the water, Ichthyander ordered the dolphin to follow him.

However, the dolphin turned out to be a very restless guest. Big and clumsy, it caused such a commotion in the grotto that the vases started shaking on the table. In addition, it managed to bump its snout against the leg of the table and knock it over. The vases fell, and, had it been on land, they would have shattered. But here, all ended well, except for the scare of a crab, which ran to the rock with unusual speed somehow sideways.

“How awkward you are,” Ichthyander thought about his friend, moving the table to the back of the grotto and picking up the vases.

And, embracing the dolphin, Ichthyander continued to speak with it:

– Stay here with me, Liding.

But the dolphin soon began to shake its head and express anxiety. It could not stay underwater for long. It needed air. And, flapping its fins, the dolphin swam out of the grotto and rose to the surface.

“Even Liding can’t live with me underwater,” Ichthyander thought sadly, left alone. – “Only fish. But they are silly and skittish...”

And he settled down on his stone bed. The sun had set. It was dark in the grotto. The gentle movement of the water rocked Ichthyander.

Tired from the day’s excitement and work, Ichthyander began to doze.

A New Friend

Olsen sat on a large barge and looked over the side into the water. The sun had just risen from the horizon and with slanting rays illuminated the clear water to the very bottom of the small bay. Several Indians were crawling on the white sandy bottom. From time to time, they surfaced to catch their breath and then dived back into the water. Olsen watched the hunters keenly. Despite the early hour, it was already hot. “Why not refresh myself – take a dive or two?” he thought, quickly undressed and jumped into the water. Olsen had never dived before, but he liked it and he found that he could stay underwater longer than the usual Indians. Olsen joined the searchers and quickly became engrossed in this new activity for him.

Diving down for the third time, he noticed that two Indians, who had been kneeling on the bottom, suddenly jumped up and surfaced so quickly as if they

were being chased by a shark or a sawfish. Olsen looked back. A strange creature was rapidly swimming toward him, a half-man-half-frog, with silvery scales, huge bulging eyes, and frog-like limbs. It frog-kicked and moved forward with strong thrusts.

Before Olsen had time to get up from his knees, the monster was already near him and grabbed his arm with its frog-like paw. Frightened Olsen still noticed that this creature had a beautiful human face, which was only marred by bulging, glittering eyes. This strange creature, forgetting that it was underwater, began to talk about something. Olsen could not make out the words. He saw only the moving lips. The unknown creature held Olsen's arm tightly with two paws. Olsen made a strong movement with his legs, pushed off from the bottom, and quickly rose to the surface, working with his free hand. The monster followed, not letting go of him. Having surfaced, Olsen grabbed the side of the boat, swung his leg over, climbed into the boat, and pushed away this half-human with frog-like hands so that it noisily fell into the water. The Indians sitting in the boat jumped into the water and hurriedly swam to shore.

But Ichthyander approached the boat again and addressed Olsen in Spanish:

– Listen, Olsen, I need to talk to you about Gutierrez.

This address surprised Olsen no less than the underwater encounter. Olsen was a brave man, with a strong head. If the unknown creature knows his name and Gutierrez, then it means it is a person, not a monster.

– I'm listening, – Olsen replied.

Ichthyander climbed into the boat, sat on the bow, tucking his legs under himself, and crossed his paws on his chest.

“Glasses!” – Olsen thought, carefully examining the sparkling, bulging eyes of the stranger.

– My name is Ichthyander. Once I retrieved a necklace for you from the bottom of the sea.

– But then you had human eyes and hands.

Ichthyander smiled and shook his frog-like paws.

– They come off, – he replied curtly.

– I thought as much.

The Indians watched this strange conversation with curiosity from behind the coastal rocks, although they could not hear the words.

– Do you love Gutierrez? – Ichthyander asked after a short silence.

– Yes, I love Gutierrez, – Olsen replied simply.

Ichthyander sighed heavily.

– And she loves you?

– She loves me too.

– But she loves me.

– That’s her business. – Olsen shrugged his shoulders.

– How is that her business? She’s your fiancée.

Olsen made a surprised face and calmly replied:

– No, she’s not my fiancée.

– You’re lying! – Ichthyander flared up. – I myself heard the swarthy man on the horse speaking about her being a fiancée.

– Mine?

Ichthyander was confused. No, the swarthy man didn’t say that Guttierre was Olsen’s fiancée. But could a young girl be the fiancée of that swarthy, so old and unpleasant man? Does that happen? The swarthy is probably her relative. . . Ichthyander decided to steer his inquiries in a different direction.

– And what were you doing here? Looking for pearls?

– I must admit, I don’t like your questioning, – Olsen replied grimly. – And, if I didn’t know something about you from Guttierre, I would have thrown you off the boat, and that would have been the end of our conversation. Don’t reach for your knife. I can smash your head with an oar before you get up. But I see no need to hide from you that I was indeed looking for pearls here.

– The big pearl that I threw into the sea? Did Guttierre tell you about it?

Olsen nodded his head.

Ichthyander was triumphant.

“Well, you see. I told her that you wouldn’t refuse this pearl. I offered to take the pearl and give it to you. She disagreed, but now you are looking for it yourself.”

“Yes, because now it doesn’t belong to you, but to the ocean. And if I find it, I won’t owe anyone anything.”

“Do you love pearls so much?”

“I am not a woman to love trinkets,” Olsen retorted.

“But pearls can be. . . how is it? Yes! Sold,” Ichthyander remembered the word that was strange to him, “and make a lot of money.”

Olsen nodded affirmatively again.

“So, you love money?”

“What do you actually want from me?” Olsen asked with irritation.

“I need to know why Guttieri is giving you pearls. Did you want to marry her?”

“No, I wasn’t planning to marry Guttieri,” said Olsen. “Even if I had planned to, it’s too late to think about it now. Guttieri has become another man’s wife.”

Ichthyander turned pale and grabbed Olsen’s hand.

“Could it be that dark-skinned one?” he asked anxiously.

“Yes, she married Pedro Zurita.”

“But she. . . I think she loved me,” Ichthyander said softly.

Olsen looked at him with sympathy and, leisurely lighting a short pipe, said:

– Yes, I think she loved you. But you see, in her eyes, you threw yourself into the sea and drowned, – at least, that’s what she thought.

Ichthyander looked at Olsen in surprise. The young man had never told Guttieri that he could live underwater. It had never occurred to him that his leap from the cliff into the sea might have been interpreted by the girl as suicide.

– Last night I saw Guttieri, – Olsen continued. – Your death greatly upset her. “I am to blame for Ichthyander’s death” – that’s what she said.

– But why did she marry another so quickly? After all, she. . . after all, I saved her life. Yes, yes! I had long suspected that Guttieri was like the girl who was drowning in the ocean. I brought her to shore and disappeared into the rocks. And then that swarthy man came – I recognized him immediately – and convinced her that he was her savior.

– Guttieri told me about this, – said Olsen. She never found out who saved her – Zurita or the strange creature that flashed before her eyes when she was coming to.

– Why didn’t you tell her yourself that you saved her?

– It’s awkward to speak of such things oneself. Besides, I wasn’t entirely sure that it was Guttieri I saved until I saw Zurita. But how could she agree to it? – Ichthyander asked.

– How it happened, – Olsen said slowly, – I myself do not understand.

– Tell me what you know, – Ichthyander asked.

– I work at a button factory as a shell receiver. That’s where I met Guttieri. She brought shells – her father sent her when he was busy. We got to know each other, became friends. Sometimes we met at the port, walked along the seashore. She told me about her sorrow: a wealthy Spaniard was courting her.

– This one? Zurita?

– Yes. Zurita. Guttieri’s father, the Indian Baltazar, really wanted this marriage and was constantly persuading his daughter not to turn down such an eligible suitor.

– But what makes him eligible? Old, unpleasant, smelling bad, – Ichthyander couldn't help but say.

– For Baltazar, Zurita is a fine son-in-law. Especially since Baltazar owed Zurita a large sum of money. Zurita could ruin Baltazar if Guttiere had refused to marry him. Imagine what the girl's life was like. On one hand – the insistent courtship of the suitor, and on the other the constant reproaches, scoldings, threats from her father...

– Why didn't Guttiere send Zurita away? Why didn't you, so big and strong, beat this Zurita?

Olsen smiled and was surprised: Ichthyander is not stupid, yet he asks such questions. Where did he grow up and receive his education?

– It's not as easy as you think, – Olsen replied. – The law, the police, the court would have all stood up for Zurita and Baltazar. – Ichthyander still didn't understand. – In short, it couldn't be done.

– Well, then why didn't she run away?

– Running away would have been easier. And she decided to flee from her father, and I promised to help her. I myself had long been planning to leave Buenos Aires for North America, and I offered Guttiere to go with me.

– Did you want to marry her? – asked Ichthyander.

– Look at you, – Olsen said, smiling again. – I told you we were just friends. What could have happened next – I don't know...

– So why didn't you leave?

– Because we didn't have the money for the move.

– Is traveling on the "Gorrox" really that expensive?

– On the "Gorrox"! The "Gorrox" is proper for millionaires to travel on. Did you fall from the moon, Ichthyander?

Ichthyander was embarrassed, blushed, and decided not to ask any more questions that would show Olsen he didn't know the simplest things.

– We didn't have enough money to even move on a freight-passenger ship. And there would be expenses upon arrival too. Work isn't just lying around on the streets.

Ichthyander wanted to ask Olsen again, but restrained himself.

– And then Guttiere decided to sell her pearl necklace.

– If only I had known! – exclaimed Ichthyander, remembering his underwater treasures.

– What about?

- No, just... Carry on, Olsen.
- Everything was already prepared for the escape.
- And I... How come? I apologize... So, she intended to leave me behind as well?
- All this started before you even knew each other. And then, as far as I know, she wanted to warn you. Perhaps, even suggest that you go with her. Finally, she could have written to you on the way, had she not managed to talk to you about the escape.
- But why with you, and not with me? She consulted with you, planned to leave with you!
- I've known her for over a year, and you...
- Speak, speak, and don't mind my words.
- Well, so here it is, – Olsen continued. – But then you plunged into the water in front of Guttiere, and Zurita happened to meet Guttiere with you. Early in the morning, before going to the factory, I stopped by Guttiere's place. I often did that before. Baltazar seemed to be well-disposed towards me. Perhaps, he respected my fists, or maybe he saw me as a second suitor if Guttiere's stubbornness tired Zurita. At the very least, Baltazar did not interfere with us and only asked us not to be seen together by Zurita. Of course, the old Indian had no clue about our plans. That morning I wanted to tell Guttiere that I had bought the steamer tickets and that she must be ready by ten o'clock in the evening. Baltazar met me, he was agitated. "Guttierre is not at home. And she's... not at home at all," Baltazar told me. – "Half an hour ago, Zurita pulled up to the house in a brand-new shiny car. Imagine that! – exclaimed Baltazar. – A car is a rarity on our street, especially when a car pulls up right to your house. Guttiere and I rushed out to the street. Zurita was already standing on the ground near the open car door and offered to drive Guttiere to the market and back. He knew that Guttiere usually goes to the market at that time. Guttiere glanced at the shiny car. You understand, what a temptation it is for a young girl. But Guttiere is cunning and distrustful. She politely declined. Have you seen such stubborn girls! – Baltazar exclaimed angrily, but then he burst into laughter. – But Zurita didn't lose his composure." "I see you're shy," he said, "so allow me, I'll help you." He grabbed her, put her in the car, Guttiere only managed to shout: "Father!" – and they were gone. I think they will not come back. Zurita took her to his place," – finished Baltazar, and it was obvious that he was very pleased with what happened.
- "Your daughter was kidnapped right in front of your eyes, and you talk about it so calmly, even joyfully!" – I indignantly said to Baltazar.
- "Why should I worry? – Baltazar was surprised. – If it were someone else, then it would be a different matter, but I've known Zurita for a long time. If that miser spared no expense on a car, then it means he likes Guttiere a lot. Took

her away, so he'll marry her. And she should learn a lesson: don't be stubborn. Rich people don't just lie around on the road. She has nothing to cry about. Zurita owns the "Dolores" hacienda not far from the city of Parana. His mother lives there. That's probably where he took my Guttierre."

– And you didn't beat Baltazar up? – asked Ichthyander.

– Listening to you, one would think all I should do is fight, – replied Olsen. – To be honest, at first, I did want to beat Baltazar up. But then I decided that it would only ruin things. I was thinking that not all was lost yet... I won't burden you with the details. As I've already said, I managed to meet with Guttierre.

– At the "Dolores" hacienda?

– Yes.

"– And you didn't kill that scoundrel Zurita and didn't free Guttierre?

– Again with hitting, and even killing. Who would have thought you were so bloodthirsty?

– I'm not bloodthirsty! – Ichthyander exclaimed with tears in his eyes. – But it's outrageous!

Olsen began to feel sorry for Ichthyander.

– You are right, Ichthyander, – Olsen said. – Zurita and Baltazar are unworthy men, they deserve anger and contempt. They should have been beaten. But life is more complicated than you seem to think. Guttierre herself refused to escape from Zurita.

– By herself? – Ichthyander couldn't believe it.

– Yes, by herself.

– Why?

– Firstly, she is convinced that you have killed yourself – drowned because of her. Your death depresses her. She must have loved you dearly. "Now my life is over, Olsen, – she told me. – Now I don't need anything. I am indifferent to everything. I didn't understand anything when the priest invited by Zurita married us." "Nothing happens without God's will," – the priest said, putting the wedding ring on my finger. And what God has joined together, let no man separate. I will be unhappy with Zurita, but I am afraid to incur the wrath of God and therefore I will not leave him."

– But that's all nonsense! What God? Father says that God is a fairy tale for little children! – Ichthyander exclaimed passionately. – Couldn't you convince her?

– Unfortunately, Guttierre believes in that fairy tale. The missionaries have turned her into a fervent Catholic; I've tried for a long time but couldn't dissuade her.

She even threatened to break our friendship if I continued to talk to her about the church and God. I had to wait. And at the hacienda, I didn't have the time to convince her. I managed to exchange only a few words with her. Yes, here's what else she said. Having married Guttieri, Zurita exclaimed with a laugh: "Well, one thing done! Caught the bird and put it in a cage, now it remains to catch the fish!" He explained to Guttieri, and she to me, which fish he was talking about. Zurita is going to Buenos Aires to catch the "sea devil," and then Guttieri will be a millionaire. Is that you? You can stay underwater without any harm to yourself, frightening the pearl divers. . .

Caution kept Ichthyander from revealing his secret to Olsen. He wouldn't have been able to explain it anyway. And, without answering the question, he asked one himself:

- And why does Zurita need the "sea devil"?
- Pedro wants to make the "devil" catch pearls. And if you are the "sea devil," be careful!
- Thank you for the warning, – the young man said.

Ichthyander was unaware that his antics were known to all ashore, that he had been written about extensively in newspapers and magazines.

"I can't," Ichthyander suddenly spoke up, "I must see her. To meet with her at least one last time. The city of Paraná? Yes, I know it. The way there lies up the Paraná river. But how can I reach the hacienda 'Dolores' from the city of Paraná?"

Olsen explained.

Ichthyander shook Olsen's hand firmly.

"Forgive me. I thought you were an enemy, but unexpectedly found a friend. Farewell. I am off to search for Guttieri."

"Right now?" asked Olsen, smiling.

"Yes, without wasting a single minute," replied Ichthyander, jumping into the water and swimming towards the shore.

Olsen just shook his head.

Part Two: On the Road

Ichthyander quickly got ready for the journey. He retrieved the costume and shoes hidden on the shore, tied them to his back with a belt, which also held a knife. He put on glasses and gloves and set off.

In the bay of Rio de la Plata, there were many ocean steamers and ships, schooners, and barges. Between them scurried small coastal steam launches. From under the water, their hulls resembled water beetles, moving across the

surface in all directions. Anchor chains and ropes rose from the bottom, like thin trunks of an underwater forest. The bottom of the bay was covered in all sorts of debris, scrap iron, piles of spilled coal and discarded slag, fragments of old hoses, pieces of sails, jerry cans, bricks, broken bottles, cans from preserved foods, and closer to the shore the corpses of dogs and cats.

A thin layer of oil covered the surface. The sun had not set yet, but there were greenish-gray twilight here. The Paraná River was carrying sand and silt, muddying the waters of the bay.

Ichthyander could have gotten lost among this labyrinth of ships, but the gentle current of the river flowing into the bay served as his compass. "It's amazing how untidy people are," he thought, disdainfully examining the bottom, which resembled a dump. He swam in the middle of the bay, below the keel part of the ships. In the polluted waters of the bay, it was hard for him to breathe, just as it is for a person in a stuffy room.

In several places on the bottom, he encountered human corpses and animal skeletons. One corpse had a cracked skull, and around the neck was a rope with a stone tied to it. Someone's crime was buried here. Ichthyander hurried to swim out of these gloomy places.

But the higher he swam up the bay, the stronger the opposing current felt. Swimming was difficult. There are currents in the ocean, but there they helped him: the young man knew them well. He used them as a sailor uses a fair wind. Here there was only one opposing current. Ichthyander was an experienced swimmer, but it irritated him that he was moving forward so slowly.

Something suddenly flew by very close, barely missing him. An anchor was thrown from some ship. "However, it's unsafe to swim here," Ichthyander thought and looked around. He saw that he was being overtaken by a large steamer.

Ichthyander descended even lower, and when the bottom of the ship passed over him, he grabbed onto the keel. Barnacles had covered the iron with a rough mass that he could hold onto. Lying underwater in such a position was not very comfortable, but now he was under cover and quickly swam, carried by the steamer.

The delta ended, and the steamer sailed along the Paraná River. The river waters carried a huge amount of silt. In this fresh water, Ichthyander breathed heavily. His hands were becoming numb, but he did not want to part with the steamer. "It's a pity that I couldn't go on this journey with Liding," he remembered the dolphin. But the dolphin could be killed in the river, Liding could not swim underwater the whole way, and Ichthyander was afraid to surface on the river, where there was too much traffic.

Ichthyander's hands grew increasingly tired. In addition, he was very hungry, as he had not eaten all day. He had to make a stop. Parting with the steamer's keel, he descended to the bottom.

Twilight deepened. Ichthyander examined the muddy bottom. But he found neither flat flounders nor oyster shells. Freshwater fish darted around him, but he did not know their habits, and they seemed to him more cunning than the sea ones. It was difficult to catch them. Only when night fell and the fish fell asleep, Ichthyander managed to catch a large pike. Its flesh was tough and tasted of silt, but the hungry young man ate it with appetite, swallowing whole pieces with bones.

He needed to rest. At least in this river, he could sleep peacefully, without fear of sharks or octopuses. But he had to make sure that the current did not carry him down while asleep. Ichthyander found several stones on the bottom, piled them up, and lay down, holding one stone with his hand.

However, he did not sleep for long. Soon he felt that a steamer was approaching. Ichthyander opened his eyes and saw the signal lights. The steamer was coming from downstream. The young man quickly rose and prepared to grab onto the steamer. But it was a motorboat with a completely smooth bottom.

Ichthyander, making vain attempts to cling to the bottom, almost got caught under the propeller.

Several steamers passed down the current, until finally Ichthyander managed to hitch a ride on a passenger steamer going up the river.

Thus, Ichthyander reached the city of Paraná. The first part of his journey was over. But the most difficult part remained - the overland one.

Early in the morning, Ichthyander swam away from the noisy harbor of the city to a deserted area, looked around cautiously, and climbed onto the shore. He took off his glasses and gloves, buried them in the coastal sand, dried his suit in the sun, and got dressed. In his wrinkled suit, he looked like a vagrant. But he gave it little thought.

Ichthyander set off along the right bank, as Olsen had told him, asking the fishermen he met whether they knew where the “Dolores” hacienda of Pedro Zurita was located.

The fishermen looked at him suspiciously and shook their heads in the negative.

Hour by hour passed, the heat intensified, and the search led to nothing. Ichthyander was completely unable to find his way on land in unfamiliar places. The scorching heat tired him, his head spun, and he was slow to think.

To refresh himself, Ichthyander undressed and plunged into the water several times.

Finally, around four in the afternoon, he was fortunate enough to meet an old peasant, apparently a laborer. Having listened to Ichthyander, the old man nodded and said:

– Go like this, all along this road, through the fields. You’ll reach a large pond, cross the bridge, climb up a small hill, and there you will find the bearded Donna

Dolores.

– Why bearded? “Dolores” – isn’t that a hacienda?

– Yes, a hacienda. But the old mistress of the hacienda is also called Dolores. Dolores - mother of Pedro Zurita. A full bearded old woman. Don’t even think of hiring yourself out to her. She’ll eat you alive. A real witch. They say, Zurita brought home a young wife. She won’t have an easy life with her mother-in-law, – the talkative peasant related.

“This is about Guttierre,” – Ichthyander thought.

– Is it far? – he asked.

– You’ll get there by evening, – the old man replied, looking at the sun.

Thanking the old man, Ichthyander quickly walked along the road past wheat and cornfields. The fast pace began to wear him out. The road stretched out like an endless white ribbon. Wheat fields gave way to pastures with tall, thick grass, where flocks of sheep grazed.

Ichthyander was exhausted, the cutting pains in his sides intensified. He was tormented by thirst. There was not a drop of water around. “If only I could reach the pond soon,” – Ichthyander thought. His cheeks and eyes were sunken, he breathed heavily. He was hungry. But what was there to eat here? Far out on the meadow, a flock of sheep grazed under the watch of a shepherd and dogs. Over the stone fence, branches of peach and orange trees hung, with ripe fruit on them. Here was nothing like in the ocean. Here everything belonged to someone, everything was divided, everything was fenced off, everything was guarded. Only the free birds belonged to no one, flying, shouting along the road. But they could not be caught. And could these birds even be caught? Perhaps they too belong to someone. Here, one could easily die of hunger and thirst among ponds, gardens, and herds.

Coming towards Ichthyander, with his hands tucked behind his back, walked a corpulent man, in a white jacket with shiny buttons, a white cap, and a holster on his belt.

“Is the hacienda ‘Dolores’ far from here?” asked Ichthyander.

The stout man suspiciously eyed Ichthyander.

“What do you want there? Where are you coming from?”

“From Buenos Aires. . .”

The man in the coat became alert.

“I need to see someone there,” added Ichthyander.

“Stretch out your hands,” said the stout man. This surprised Ichthyander, but suspecting no harm, he extended his hands. The bulky man pulled out “bracelets” (handcuffs) from his pocket and quickly snapped them onto Ichthyander’s wrists.

“There, you’re caught,” muttered the man with shiny buttons and, pushing Ichthyander in the side, shouted: “Go! I’ll escort you to ‘Dolores’”

“Why have you shackled my hands?” asked Ichthyander, puzzled, lifting his hands and examining the “bracelets”.

“No talking!” the stout man snapped sternly. “Well, move!”

Ichthyander, with his head bowed, trudged along the road. It was just as well they didn’t make him walk backward. He didn’t understand what had happened to him. He didn’t know that the previous night, a murder and robbery had been committed on a neighboring farm and now the police were searching for the criminals. He also didn’t suspect that his disheveled appearance made him look suspicious. His vague answer about the purpose of his journey sealed his fate.

The policeman had arrested Ichthyander and was now leading him to the nearest village to send him to Paraná, to prison.

Ichthyander understood only one thing: he was deprived of freedom, and there was an annoying delay in his journey. He resolved to regain his freedom at the first opportunity, no matter what it took.

The stout policeman, pleased with his catch, lit a long cigar. He walked behind, enveloping Ichthyander in clouds of smoke. Ichthyander was suffocating.

“Could you not blow smoke? It’s hard for me to breathe,” he said, turning to his escort.

“Wha-at? They ask not to smoke? Ha-ha-ha!” The policeman laughed, his entire face crinkled up in wrinkles. “Such delicate sensibilities!..” and, blowing clouds of smoke into the young man’s face, he yelled: “Get lost!”

The young man complied.

Finally, Ichthyander saw the pond with a narrow bridge thrown across it and involuntarily quickened his pace.

“Don’t hurry to your Dolores!” the fat man yelled.

They climbed onto the bridge. In the middle of the bridge, Ichthyander suddenly bent over the railing and plunged into the water.

The policeman did not expect such an act from a man with his hands bound.

But neither did Ichthyander expect what the fat man did the next moment. The policeman jumped into the water after Ichthyander—he was afraid that the criminal might drown. The policeman wanted to deliver him alive: a prisoner who drowned with handcuffs could cause a lot of trouble. The policeman followed Ichthyander so quickly that he managed to grab his hair and did not let go. Then Ichthyander, risking losing his hair, pulled the policeman to the bottom. Soon Ichthyander felt the policeman’s hand loosen and let go of his hair. Ichthyander swam a few meters away and surfaced to see if the policeman had emerged. He was already flailing on the surface and, seeing Ichthyander’s head, cried out:

“You’ll drown, scoundrel! Swim to me!”

“That’s an idea,” thought Ichthyander and suddenly shouted:

“Help! I’m drowning...” and sank to the bottom.

From under the water, he watched the policeman, who was diving and looking for him. Finally, apparently despairing of success, the policeman swam to the shore.

“He’ll leave now,” thought Ichthyander. But the policeman did not leave. He decided to stay near the body until the investigative authorities arrived. The fact that the drowned man lay at the bottom of the pond, in the policeman’s opinion, did not change the situation.

At that time, a peasant was passing over the bridge, riding a mule laden with sacks. The policeman ordered the peasant to drop the sacks and go to the nearest police station with a note. The situation was turning sour for Ichthyander. Moreover, there were leeches in the pond. They clung to Ichthyander, and he could not manage to tear them off his body. But he had to do this carefully so as not to disturb the still water and thereby attract the policeman’s attention.

Half an hour later, the peasant returned on the mule, gestured towards the road, loaded his sacks onto the mule’s back, and hurried away. About five minutes later, three policemen approached the shore. Two of them carried a lightweight boat on their heads, the third—a boat hook and an oar.

The boat was launched onto the water, and they began searching for the drowned man. Ichthyander was not afraid of the search. For him, it was almost a game—he simply moved from place to place. They thoroughly searched the entire bottom of the pond near the bridge with the boat hook, but did not find the body.

The policeman who had arrested Ichthyander was spreading his arms in surprise. Ichthyander even found it amusing. But soon he began to feel unwell. The policemen stirred up clouds of silt from the bottom of the pond with their poles. The water became murky. Now Ichthyander couldn’t see anything at an arm’s length, and that was already dangerous. But the main problem was that he found it difficult to breathe through his gills in this oxygen-poor water. And then there were these clouds of silt.

Ichthyander was gasping for air and felt an increasing burning sensation in his gills. It was unbearable to endure any longer. An involuntary groan escaped him, and several bubbles popped out of his mouth. What to do? There was no other way out but to leave the pond. He would surely be captured, maybe beaten up, sent to jail. But it didn’t matter. Staggering, Ichthyander made his way to the shallows and raised his head above the water.

“A-a-a-ah!” the policeman cried out in a voice not his own, lunging over the side of the boat into the water, eager to reach the shore faster.

“Jesus-Mary! Oh!..” exclaimed another, collapsing to the bottom of the boat.

The two policemen remaining on shore were whispering prayers. Pale, they were trembling with fear, trying to hide behind each other.

Ichthyander did not expect this and did not immediately understand the reason for their fright. Then he remembered that the Spanish were very religious and superstitious. The policemen probably imagined they were seeing a creature from the underworld. Ichthyander decided to scare them even more: he bared his teeth, rolled his eyes, howled with a terrifying voice, slowly making his way to shore; he rose onto the road deliberately slowly and walked away with measured steps.

Not a single policeman moved, none of them detained Ichthyander. Superstitious terror, the fear of a ghost, prevented them from carrying out their duty.

“This sea devil!”

Pedro Zurita’s mother, Dolores, was a plump, well-fed old woman with a hooked nose and a protruding chin. Thick whiskers gave her face a strange and unattractive appearance. This rare adornment for a woman had earned her the nickname “whiskered Dolores” in the region.

When her son came to her with his young wife, the old woman unceremoniously examined Guttierre. Dolores always looked for flaws in people first. Guttierre’s beauty struck the old woman, although she did not show it. But such was whiskered Dolores: after pondering in her kitchen, she decided that Guttierre’s beauty was a flaw.

Left alone with her son, the old woman shook her head disapprovingly and said:

“She’s beautiful! Even too beautiful!” And, sighing, she added: “You’ll have trouble with such a beauty... Yes. It would have been better if you married a Spanish woman.” After a pause, she continued: “And she’s proud. And her hands are soft, delicate, — she’ll be a lady of leisure.”

“We’ll break her in,” replied Pedro, delving into his business accounts.

Dolores yawned and, not to disturb her son, went out into the garden to enjoy the evening coolness. She liked to dream under the moonlight.

Mimosas filled the garden with a pleasant aroma. White lilies sparkled in the moonlight. The leaves of laurels and fig trees rustled almost imperceptibly.

Dolores sat down on a bench among the myrtles and indulged in her dreams: she would buy the neighboring plot, breed fine-wool sheep, and build new barns.

“Oh, curse them!” the old woman angrily exclaimed, slapping her cheek. “These mosquitoes won’t let a person sit in peace.”

Unnoticed, clouds covered the sky, and the entire garden was plunged into twilight. On the horizon, a light blue strip became more distinct—it was the reflection of the lights of the city of Paraná.

And suddenly, over the low stone wall, she saw a human head. Someone with hands shackled in irons carefully jumped over the wall.

The old woman was frightened. "A convict has climbed into the garden," she decided. She wanted to scream, but she couldn't, tried to get up and run, but her legs were giving out. Sitting on the bench, she watched the stranger.

And the man in irons, carefully making his way between the bushes, approached the house, peering into the windows.

And suddenly—or she might have misheard—the convict softly called out:

– Gutiérrez!

"So that's the beauty of it. This is the kind of acquaintance she keeps! Goodness knows, this beauty will kill me and my son, rob the hacienda, and run away with the convict," Dolores thought.

The old woman was suddenly seized by a deep hatred for her daughter-in-law and a bitter sense of *schadenfreude*. This gave her strength. She jumped up and ran into the house.

– Quick! – Dolores whispered to her son. – A convict has climbed into the garden. He was calling for Gutiérrez.

Pedro rushed out with such haste as if the house was on fire, grabbed a shovel lying on the path, and ran around the house.

By the wall stood a stranger in a dirty, crumpled suit, with shackled hands, looking through the window.

– Curse it!.. – murmured Zurita and brought the shovel down on the young man's head.

Without a sound, the young man fell to the ground.

"Ready," Zurita said quietly.

"Ready," Dolores confirmed, following him, in a tone as if her son had crushed a poisonous scorpion.

Zurita looked at his mother questioningly.

"Where to take him?"

"To the pond," the old woman pointed. "The pond is deep."

"He'll float."

"We'll tie a stone to him. I'll get one..."

Dolores ran home and quickly began searching for a sack to put the body of the killed in. But she had sent all the sacks with wheat to the mill that morning. So she took out a pillowcase and a long twine.

“No sacks,” she told her son. “Put stones in the pillowcase and tie it with the twine to the shackles. . .”

Zurita nodded, hoisted the body onto his shoulders, and dragged it to the end of the garden, to a small pond.

“Don’t get dirty,” Dolores whispered, hobbling after her son with the pillowcase and twine.

“You’ll wash it off,” replied Pedro, though he tilted the young man’s head lower so the blood would flow to the ground.

At the pond, Zurita quickly filled the pillowcase with stones, tied it firmly to the youth’s hands, and threw the body into the pond.

“Now you need to change clothes.” Pedro looked at the sky. “Rain is coming. It will wash away the traces of blood on the ground by morning.”

“In the pond. . . won’t the water turn pink from the blood?” asked “mustached Dolores.”

– It won’t. The pond has a flow. . . Oh, curse it! – Zurita rasped, heading towards the house, and shook his fist at one of the windows.

– That’s what beauty is! – the old woman sobbed, following her son.

Guttiere was given a room in the mezzanine. She couldn’t sleep that night. It was stuffy, and mosquitoes were tormenting her. Grim thoughts came to Guttiere’s mind. She couldn’t forget Ichthyander, his death. She didn’t love her husband, her mother-in-law was repulsive. And she had to live with that mustachioed old hag. . .

That night Guttiere thought she heard Ichthyander’s voice. He was calling her by name. Some noise, someone’s muffled voices came from the garden. Guttiere decided she wouldn’t be able to sleep that night. She went out into the garden.

The sun had not yet risen. The garden was plunged into the twilight of the early dawn. The clouds had been driven away. The grass and trees sparkled with heavy dew. Barefoot and in a light robe, Guttiere walked on the grass. Suddenly she stopped and began to look closely at the ground. On the path, opposite her window, the sand was stained with blood. A bloodied spade lay there as well.

Some crime must have happened here at night. Otherwise, where could these traces of blood have come from?

Guttiere involuntarily followed the tracks, and they led her to the pond.

“Could it be that the last traces of the crime are hidden in this pond?” – she thought, peering with fear into the greenish surface.

From under the greenish water of the pond, the face of Ichthyander looked at her. The skin on his temple was cut. His face reflected suffering and at the same time joy.

Guttiere stared, unblinking, at the face of the drowned Ichthyander. Had she gone mad?

Guttiere wanted to run away. But she couldn't leave, couldn't take her eyes off him.

And the face of Ichthyander slowly rose out of the water. It had already appeared above the surface, stirring the quiet waters. Ichthyander extended his bound hands towards Guttiere and with a pale smile said, addressing her informally for the first time:

– Guttiere! My dear! At last, Guttiere, I... – but he didn't finish.

Guttiere clutched her head and screamed in terror:

– Begone! Vanish, wretched specter! I know that you are dead. Why do you appear to me?

"No, no, Guttiere, I am not dead," the ghost hastily replied, "I did not drown. Forgive me... I hid from you... I do not know why I did it... Do not go, listen to me. I am alive: here, touch my hands..."

He stretched out his shackled hands to her. Guttiere continued to look at him.

"Do not be afraid, I am alive... I can live under water. I am not like everyone else. I alone can live under the water. I did not drown when I threw myself into the sea. I jumped because it was hard for me to breathe in the air.

Ichthyander staggered and continued just as hastily and incoherently:

"I was looking for you, Guttiere. Tonight your husband hit me on the head when I approached your window, and threw me into the pond. In the water, I came to. I managed to remove the sack with the stones, but this," - Ichthyander pointed to the handcuffs, "I could not remove..."

Guttiere began to believe that it was not a ghost in front of her, but a living person.

"But why are your hands shackled?" she asked.

"I'll tell you about it later... Run away with me, Guttiere. We will hide at my father's place, no one will find us there... And we will live with you... Well, take my hands, Guttiere... Olsen said they call me 'sea devil', but I am a human. Why are you afraid of me?"

Ichthyander emerged from the pond all covered in mud. He collapsed on the grass in exhaustion.

Guttiere bent over him and finally took his hand.

"My poor boy," she said.

"What a pleasant meeting!" suddenly sounded a mocking voice.

They looked back and saw Zurita standing nearby.

Zurita, like Guttierre, had not slept that night. He had come out into the garden at Guttierre's scream and had heard the whole conversation. When Pedro learned that the "sea devil" he had been chasing for so long and unsuccessfully was before him, he was pleased and decided to take Ichthyander to the "Medusa" right away. But, after thinking it over, he decided to do otherwise.

"You will not be able to take Guttierre to Dr. Salvator, Ichthyander, because Guttierre is my wife. It is doubtful that you will return to your father yourself. The police are waiting for you."

"But I am innocent!" exclaimed the young man.

"The police do not reward people with such beautiful 'bracelets' without reason. And since you have fallen into my hands, it's my duty to hand you over to the police."

"Would you really do that?" Guttierre asked her husband indignantly.

"I am obliged to do it," Pedro replied, shrugging his shoulders.

"It would be nice of him," suddenly interjected Dolores, who had appeared in the conversation, "to let a convict go scot-free! For what? Is it not because this felon peeps under other people's windows and intends to abduct other men's wives?"

Guttierre approached her husband, took his hands, and gently said:

"Let him go. I beg you. I am not guilty of anything against you. . ."

Dolores, fearing that her son might give in to his wife, flailed her arms and cried out:

"Don't listen to her, Pedro!"

"I am powerless before a woman's request," Zurita said graciously. "I agree."

"Hasn't even married yet and already under the wife's thumb," grumbled the old woman.

"Wait, mother. We'll saw off your shackles, young man, dress you in a more respectable suit, and deliver you to the 'Medusa'. In Rio de la Plata, you can jump overboard and swim wherever you please. But I will release you on one condition: you must forget Guttierre. And you, Guttierre, I will take with me. It will be safer that way."

"You are better than I thought of you," Guttierre said sincerely.

Zurita smugly twirled his mustache and bowed to his wife.

Dolores knew her son well—she quickly guessed that he was up to some trickery. But, to support his play, she pretended to grumble irritably for show:

"— She charmed you! Now sit under the thumb!

Full speed ahead!

– Salvator is arriving tomorrow. The fever delayed me, but there is much we need to discuss, – said Cristo, addressing Baltazar. They were sitting in Baltazar’s shop. – Listen, brother, listen carefully and don’t interrupt me, so I don’t forget what we need to talk about.

Cristo fell silent, gathering his thoughts, and continued:

– We have worked hard, you and I, for Zurita. He is wealthier than both of us, but he wants to be richer than he already is. He wants to catch the “sea devil”...

Baltazar made a gesture.

– Be silent, brother, be silent, otherwise I’ll forget what I wanted to say. Zurita wants the “sea devil” to be his slave. And do you know what the “sea devil” is? It’s a treasure. It’s an inexhaustible wealth. The “sea devil” can collect pearls from the sea floor – many beautiful pearls. But the “sea devil” can retrieve not only pearls from the seabed. There are many sunken ships with untold treasures at the bottom of the sea. He can retrieve them for us. I say for us, not for Zurita. Do you know, brother, that Ichthyander loves Guttierre?

Baltazar wanted to say something, but Cristo didn’t let him speak.

– Silence and listen. I cannot speak when I’m interrupted. Yes, Ichthyander loves Guttierre. You can’t hide anything from me. When I found out, I said: “Good. Let Ichthyander fall even more in love with Guttierre. He will be a better husband and son-in-law than that Zurita.” And Guttierre loves Ichthyander. I’ve been watching them, not hindering Ichthyander. Let them meet.

Baltazar sighed, but did not interrupt the storyteller.

– And that’s not all, brother. Listen further. I want to remind you of something that happened many years ago. I accompanied your wife – it’s been twenty years already, – when she was returning from her relatives. Remember, she went to the mountains to bury her mother. On the way, your wife died in childbirth. The child also died. Then I didn’t tell you everything, I didn’t want to upset you. Now I will tell you. Your wife died on the way, but the child was still alive, though very weak. It happened in an Indian village. An old woman told me that not far from them lived a great miracle worker, the god Salvator...

Baltazar became alert.

– And she advised me to take the child to Salvator, so he could save him from death. I heeded the good advice and took the child to Salvator. “Save him,” I said. Salvator took the boy, shook his head, and said: “It is difficult to save him.” And took him away. I waited until evening. In the evening a negro came out and said: “The child is dead.” Then I left.

So, – continued Cristo, – Salvator said through his negro that the child died. On the newborn child – your son – I noticed a birthmark. I remember well the shape of that mark. – After a pause, Cristo continued: – Not so long ago someone

wounded Ichthyander in the neck. As I was bandaging him, I opened the collar of his scales and saw a birthmark exactly the same shape as your son's.

Baltazar looked at Cristo with wide-open eyes and, agitated, asked:

– Do you think Ichthyander is my son?

– Be silent, brother, be silent and listen. Yes, I think so. I think Salvator lied. Your son didn't die, and Salvator turned him into a "sea devil".

– Oh!.. – Baltazar cried out, beside himself. – How dare he! I will kill Salvator with my own hands!

– Be quiet! Salvator is stronger than you. And besides, maybe I am mistaken. Twenty years have passed. A birthmark on the neck could belong to another person. Ichthyander – your son, or maybe – not your son. We must be careful here. You will go to Salvator and tell him that Ichthyander is your son. I will be your witness. You will demand that he return your son to you. And if he does not, you will say that you will report him to the court for mutilating children. He will be afraid of that. If that doesn't help, you will go to court. If we fail to prove in court that Ichthyander is your son, then he will marry Guttierre; after all, Guttierre is your adopted daughter. You were then grieving for your wife and son, and I found this orphan Guttierre for you...

Baltazar jumped up from his chair. Now he paced the room, bumping into crabs and shells.

– My son! My son! Oh, what a tragedy!

– Why a tragedy? – Cristo was surprised.

– I didn't interrupt and listened attentively to you, now you listen to me. While you had the fever, Guttierre married Pedro Zurita.

This news struck Cristo.

– And Ichthyander... my poor son... – Baltazar lowered his head, – Ichthyander is in the hands of Zurita!

– It cannot be, – Cristo objected.

– Yes, yes. Ichthyander is on the "Medusa". This morning Zurita came to me. He laughed at us, mocked and cursed us. He said that we had deceived him. Think about it, he himself, without us, caught Ichthyander! Now he will not pay us anything. But I will not take his money myself. Is it possible to sell one's own son?

Baltazar was in despair. Cristo looked disapprovingly at his brother. Now was the time to act decisively. But Baltazar could do more harm than good to the cause. Cristo himself didn't quite believe in the kinship of Ichthyander with Baltazar. True, Cristo saw the birthmark on the newborn. But was that indisputable evidence? Seeing the birthmark on Ichthyander's neck, Cristo decided to take advantage of this resemblance to make some money. But how could he have

anticipated that Baltazar would take his story so to heart? However, the news brought by Baltazar frightened Cristo.

– Now is not the time for tears. We need to act. Salvator is coming tomorrow early in the morning. Be brave. Wait for me at sunrise on the pier. We must save Ichthyander. But don't tell Salvator that you are Ichthyander's father. Where did Zurita go?

– He didn't say, but I think, to the north. Zurita has long been planning to go to the shores of Panama.

Christo nodded his head.

“Remember then: tomorrow morning, before sunrise, you must be on the shore. Sit, do not leave, even if you have to wait until evening.”

Christo hurried home. He thought all night about his upcoming meeting with Salvator. He had to vindicate himself to Salvator.

Salvator arrived at dawn. Cristo, with a face expressing grief and loyalty, said upon greeting the doctor:

“A misfortune has occurred... Many times I warned Ichthyander not to swim in the bay...”

“What happened to him?” Salvator asked impatiently.

“He was kidnapped and taken away on a schooner... I...”

Salvator gripped Cristo's shoulder firmly and looked him straight in the eye. It lasted only a moment, but Cristo involuntarily changed his expression under this probing gaze. Salvator frowned, muttered something, and, releasing his fingers from Cristo's shoulder, quickly said:

“You will tell me about this in detail later.”

Salvator called a negro, spoke a few words to him in a language Cristo did not understand, and, turning to the Indian, imperiously shouted:

“Follow me!”

Without resting, without changing clothes from the journey, Salvator left the house and walked quickly into the garden. Cristo barely kept up with him. At the third wall, two negroes caught up with them.

“I guarded Ichthyander like a faithful dog,” Cristo said, gasping from the fast walk. “I did not leave him...” But Salvator was not listening. The doctor was already standing by the pool, impatiently tapping his foot while the water flowed into the sluices opening in the pool.

“Follow me,” Salvator ordered again, descending the underground staircase. Cristo and the two negroes followed Salvator into complete darkness. Salvator leaped down several steps at a time, like a man well acquainted with the subterranean labyrinth.

Having reached the lower platform, Salvator did not turn on the switch as he did the first time, but, groping in the dark, he opened a door in the right wall and walked down a dark corridor. There were no steps here, and Salvator walked even faster without lighting a fire.

“Suddenly, I’ll fall into some trap and drown in a well?” – thought Cristo, trying to keep up with Salvator.

They walked for a long time, and finally Cristo felt that the floor was gradually sloping downward. Sometimes Cristo thought he could hear a faint splash of water. But here their journey ended. Salvator, who had gone ahead, stopped and turned on the light. Cristo saw that he was in a large, water-filled, long grotto with an oval vault. This vault, extending into the distance, gradually lowered towards the water. On the water, at the very edge of the stone floor they were standing on, Cristo saw a small submarine. Salvator, Cristo, and two Africans entered it. Salvator turned on the cabin light, one of the Africans slammed the upper hatch shut, the other was already working at the engine. Cristo felt the boat tremble, slowly turned, descended downward, and just as slowly moved forward. Not more than two minutes had passed when they surfaced. Salvator and Cristo went out onto the bridge. Cristo had never had the chance to sail in submarines. But this boat, now gliding over the ocean surface, could surprise even a shipbuilder. It was of unusual design, and obviously, its engine was of enormous power. Not yet put to full speed, the boat quickly moved forward.

– Where did the kidnappers of Ichthyander head to?

– Along the coast to the north, – replied Cristo. – I would dare to suggest you take my brother with us. I have warned him, and he is waiting on the shore.

– Why?

– Ichthyander was stolen by the pearl fisherman Zurita.

– How do you know that? – Salvator asked suspiciously.

– I described to my brother the schooner that seized Ichthyander in the bay, and the brother recognized it as Pedro Zurita’s “Medusa.” Zurita probably stole Ichthyander for pearl fishing. And my brother Balthazar knows the fishing spots well. He will be useful to us.

Salvator thought.

– Good! We will take your brother.

Balthazar was waiting for his brother on the pier. The boat turned toward the shore. Balthazar, frowning, watched Salvator from the shore, who had taken away, mutilated his son. However, the Indian bowed politely to Salvator and swam up to the boat.

– Full speed ahead! – Salvator ordered.

Salvator stood on the captain's bridge, intently peering into the smoothness of the ocean.

An Extraordinary Captive

Zurita sawed off the shackles that bound Ichthyander's hands, gave him a new suit, and allowed him to take the gloves and glasses hidden in the sand with him. But as soon as the young man boarded the deck of the "Medusa," at Zurita's command, the Indians seized him and threw him into the hold. Near Buenos Aires, Zurita made a short stop to stock up on provisions. He met with Baltazar, boasted of his luck, and sailed further along the coast, heading towards Rio de Janeiro. He planned to round the eastern coast of South America and begin searching for pearls in the Caribbean Sea.

Guttiere was placed in the captain's cabin. Zurita assured her that he had let Ichthyander go free in the Rio de la Plata bay. But this lie was soon exposed. In the evening, Guttiere heard screams and groans coming from the hold. She recognized Ichthyander's voice. Zurita was on the upper deck at the time. Guttiere tried to leave the cabin, but the door was locked. Guttiere began to pound with her fists—no one responded to her cries.

Hearing Ichthyander's screams, Zurita cursed profusely, descended from the captain's bridge, and went down to the hold with an Indian sailor. The hold was unusually stuffy and dark.

"Why are you screaming?" Zurita asked gruffly.

"I... I'm suffocating," he heard Ichthyander's voice. "I can't live without water. It's so stuffy here. Let me out into the sea. I won't survive the night..."

Zurita slammed the hatch to the hold and went out onto the deck.

"He really could suffocate," Zurita thought worriedly. Ichthyander's death would not be to his advantage at all.

At Zurita's command, a barrel was brought into the hold, and the sailors hauled in water.

"Here's your bath," said Zurita, addressing Ichthyander. "Swim! And in the morning, I will lower you into the sea."

Ichthyander hurriedly immersed himself in the barrel. The Indian sailors standing in the doorway looked on in bewilderment at this bathing. They did not yet know that the prisoner of the "Medusa" was a "sea devil."

"Get back on deck!" Zurita snapped at them.

It was impossible to swim in the barrel, one could not even straighten to full height. Ichthyander had to curl up to submerge himself. This barrel once stored supplies of salted meat. The water quickly absorbed the smell, and Ichthyander felt only slightly better than in the stifling hold.

At that time, a fresh southeast wind was blowing over the sea, carrying the schooner even further north.

Zurita stood on the captain's bridge for a long time and only appeared in the cabin by morning. He assumed his wife had long been asleep. But she was sitting in a chair near a narrow table, her head on her arms. At his entrance, Guttieri rose, and in the dim light of the dying lamp hanging from the ceiling, Zurita saw her face, pale and frowning.

"You have deceived me," she said dully. Under the wrathful gaze of his wife, Zurita did not feel very good, and to cover his involuntary embarrassment, he assumed a casual look, twirled his mustache, and jokingly replied:

- Ihtiandr preferred to stay on the "Medusa" to be closer to you.
- You're lying! You are a despicable man. I hate you! – Guttieri suddenly grabbed a large knife hanging on the wall and swung at Zurita.
- Oh! – said Zurita. He quickly grabbed Guttieri by the arm and squeezed so hard that Guttieri dropped the knife.

Zurita kicked the knife out of the cabin with his foot, released his wife's hand, and said:

- That's better! You are very agitated. Drink a glass of water.

And he left the cabin, locked the door behind him, and went up to the upper deck.

The east was already blushing, and the light clouds, lit by the sun hidden behind the horizon, looked like tongues of flame. The morning breeze, salty and fresh, filled the sails. Seagulls flew over the sea, keenly looking for fish frolicking on the surface.

The sun had risen. Zurita was still walking on the deck, hands clasped behind his back.

- It's okay, I will manage somehow, – he thought of Guttieri.

Turning to the sailors, he loudly ordered to take down the sails. The "Medusa", swaying on the waves, lay at anchor.

- Bring me the chain and bring the man from the hold, – Zurita ordered. He wanted to test Ihtiandr as a pearl diver as soon as possible. "By the way, he will refresh himself in the sea," – he thought.

Escorted by two Indians, Ihtiandr appeared. He looked tired. Ihtiandr looked around. He was standing near the mizzenmast. Only a few steps separated him from the side. Suddenly Ihtiandr dashed forward, reached the side, and was already crouched for the jump. But at that moment, Zurita's heavy fist came down on his head. The young man fell on the deck unconscious.

- No need to hurry, – Zurita said edifyingly.

The clank of iron was heard, a sailor handed Zurita a long thin chain ending in an iron hoop. Zurita girded the unconscious young man with this hoop, locked the belt, and, turning to the sailors, said:

– Now pour water over his head.

Soon the young man came to his senses and looked with bewilderment at the chain he was shackled to.

– This way you won’t escape from me, – Zurita explained. – I’ll lower you into the sea. You’ll search for pearl oysters for me. The more pearls you find, the longer you’ll stay in the sea. But if you don’t gather pearl oysters for me, then I’ll lock you in the hold, and you’ll sit in a barrel. Understand? Agree?

Ichthyander nodded his head.

He was ready to gather all the treasures of the sea for Zurita, just to plunge into the clean sea water as soon as possible.

Zurita, Ichthyander on a chain, and the sailors approached the side of the schooner. Guttierre’s cabin was on the other side of the schooner: Zurita did not want her to see Ichthyander chained.

Ichthyander was lowered into the sea on a chain. If only it were possible to break this chain! But it was very strong. Ichthyander resigned himself to his fate. He started collecting pearl oysters and stacking them in the large bag that hung at his side. The iron hoop pressed his sides and made it difficult to breathe. And yet, Ichthyander felt almost happy after the stuffy hold and the stinking barrel.

The sailors from the ship’s side watched with amazement the unprecedented spectacle. Minute after minute passed, and the man lowered to the seabed did not think to rise. At first, bubbles of air surfaced, but soon they ceased.

– Let a shark eat me if there’s even a bit of air left in his chest. Apparently, he feels like a fish in water, – the old fisherman said in astonishment, peering into the water. The young man crawling on his knees was clearly visible at the bottom of the sea.

– Maybe it’s the “sea devil” himself? – a sailor whispered quietly.

– Whoever he is, Captain Zurita has made a good acquisition, – the navigator responded. – One such fisher can replace a dozen.

The sun was close to noon when Ichthyander tugged the chain, signaling to be pulled up. His bag was full of oysters. It needed to be emptied to continue the hunt.

The sailors quickly hoisted the extraordinary fisher onto the deck. Everyone wanted to find out the catch as soon as possible.

Usually, pearl oysters are left for a few days to let the mollusks rot, – it’s easier to extract the pearls then, but now the impatience of the sailors and Zurita

himself was great. And everyone immediately started to open the oysters with knives.

When the sailors finished the work, they all started talking loudly at once. There was extraordinary excitement on the deck. Perhaps Ichthyander was lucky enough to find a good spot. But what he harvested in one catch exceeded all expectations. Among these pearls, there were about two dozen that were very hefty, of beautiful shape and the most delicate colors. The first catch already brought Zurita a fortune. A single large pearl could buy a new beautiful schooner. Zurita was on the path to wealth. His dreams had come true.

Zurita saw how greedily the sailors were looking at the pearls. He didn't like that. He hurried to pour the pearls into his straw hat and said:

– Time for breakfast. And you, Ichthyander, are a good catcher. I have a spare cabin. I'll put you in there. It won't be stuffy for you. And I'll order a big zinc tank for you. Maybe you won't need it, since you'll be swimming in the sea every day. True, on a chain, but what can you do? Otherwise, you'll dive to your crabs and not come back.

Ichthyander didn't feel like talking to Zurita. But if he found himself a prisoner of this greedy man, then he had to think about decent housing.

– A tank is better than a stinky barrel, – he said to Zurita, – but, so I don't suffocate, you'll have to change the water in it often.

– How often? – asked Zurita.

– Every half hour, – answered Ichthyander. – Even better to have running water all the time.

– Eh, I see you've already become proud. You've been praised, and now you start to demand, to be capricious.

– It's not capriciousness, – the young man was offended. – I... understand, if you put a big fish in a bucket, it will soon fall asleep. Fish breathe the oxygen in the water, and I... am a very big fish, – Ichthyander added with a smile.

– I don't know about oxygen, but I do know that fish die if you don't change the water, that's for sure. Perhaps you're right. But if I assign people who will constantly pump water into your tank, it will be too expensive, more expensive than your pearls. You'll bankrupt me!

Ichthyander didn't know the price of pearls, nor did he know that Zurita paid the catchers and sailors pennies. The young man believed Zurita's words and exclaimed:

– If it's not profitable for you to keep me, then release me into the sea! – And Ichthyander looked at the ocean.

– What a character! – Zurita laughed loudly.

– Please! I will voluntarily bring pearls. I’ve long collected a pile like this, – and Ichthyander showed with his hand from the deck to his knees, – smooth, round, each one the size of a bean. . . I’ll give them all to you, just let me go.

Zurita’s breath caught.

– You’re talking nonsense! – Zurita retorted, trying to speak calmly.

“I have never lied to anyone before,” Ichthyander said angrily.

“Where is your treasure then?” Zurita asked, no longer hiding his excitement.

“In an underwater cave. No one but Liding knows where it is.”

“Liding! Who’s that?”

“My dolphin.”

“Oh, I see!”

“Indeed, some sort of obsession,” Zurita thought. “If this is true, and one must think he is not lying, then this surpasses everything I could imagine. I will be unspeakably rich. The Rothschilds and Rockefellers will be paupers compared to me. And the young man seems trustworthy. Should I actually let him go on his word?”

But Zurita was a businessman. He was not accustomed to taking anyone at their word. He began to ponder how best to seize Ichthyander’s treasure. “If only Ichthyander asks Guttieri, he would not refuse and would bring the treasure.”

“Perhaps I will let you go,” said Zurita, “but for some time you will have to stay with me. Yes. I have my reasons. I think you will not regret staying a bit longer. And while you are my guest, albeit an unwilling one, I want to make it as comfortable for you as possible. Perhaps instead of a tank, which would be too expensive, it would be better to place you in a large iron cage. The cage will protect you from sharks, and in this cage, you will be lowered overboard into the water.”

“Yes, but I need to be in the air sometimes.”

“Well, we will lift you up occasionally. It will be cheaper than pumping water into a tank. In short, we will arrange everything, you will be satisfied.”

Zurita was in a splendid mood. An unprecedented event: he ordered a glass of vodka to be issued to the sailors for breakfast.

Ichthyander was taken back to the hold again—the tank was not yet ready. Zurita, not without excitement, opened the door to the captain’s cabin and, standing in the doorway, showed Guttieri a hat filled with pearls.

“I remember my promises,” he began, smiling, “the wife loves pearls, loves gifts. To obtain a lot of pearls, one must have a good diver. That’s why I captured Ichthyander. Look, this is the catch of one morning.”

Guttiere glanced at the pearls briefly. With great difficulty, she suppressed an involuntary exclamation of surprise. However, Zurita noticed and laughed complacently.

“You will be the richest woman in Argentina, perhaps even in all of America. You will have everything. I will build you a palace that kings will envy. And now, as a pledge of the future, accept half of these pearls from me.”

“No! I do not want any of these pearls acquired by wrongdoing,” Guttiere sharply replied. “And please, leave me alone.”

Zurita was embarrassed and annoyed. He had not expected such a reception.

“Just two more words. Wouldn’t you like me to release Ichthyander?” he said, switching to a formal “you” to emphasize the gravity of the situation.

Guttiere looked at Zurita with suspicion, as if trying to guess what new trick he was plotting.

“What next?” she asked coldly.

“Ichthyander’s fate is in your hands. It’s enough for you to command Ichthyander to bring to the ‘Medusa’ the pearls he keeps somewhere underwater, and I will release the ‘sea devil’ to all four corners of the earth.”

“Remember well what I’m about to say. I don’t believe a single word of yours. You will get the pearls and then chain Ichthyander up again. This is as certain as the fact that I am the wife of the most deceitful and treacherous man. Remember this very well and never try to involve me in your dark affairs again. And once more, please leave me alone.”

There was nothing more to say, and Zurita left. In his cabin, he poured the pearls into a small bag, carefully placed it in a chest, locked it, and went out on deck. The quarrel with his wife hardly bothered him. He saw himself as wealthy and surrounded by honor.

He ascended to the captain’s bridge, lit a cigar. Thoughts of future riches pleasantly excited him. Usually vigilant, this time he failed to notice how the sailors, gathering in groups, were quietly discussing something.

Abandoned “Medusa”

Zurita stood by the rail, opposite the foremast. At the signal of the navigator, several sailors suddenly pounced on Pedro. They were not armed, but there were many of them. However, subduing Zurita was not so easy. Two sailors grabbed Zurita from behind. He broke free from the crowd and, stepping back a few paces, forcefully fell backwards, to the edge of the rail.

With a groan, the sailors released their victim and fell onto the deck. Zurita straightened up and began to fend off new attackers with his fists. He never parted with his revolver, but the attack was so unexpected that Zurita did not

manage to draw the revolver from its holster. He slowly retreated to the foremast and suddenly with the agility of a monkey began to climb the shrouds.

A sailor grabbed his leg, but Zurita with his free leg hit him on the head, and the stunned sailor fell to the deck. Zurita managed to climb up to the topsail yard and there he sat, furiously cursing. Here he could feel relatively safe. He pulled out his revolver and shouted:

“The first one who dares to come up to me, I’ll smash their head!”

The sailors were making noise below, discussing what to do next.

“There are guns in the captain’s cabin!” shouted the navigator, trying to outshout the others. “Let’s go break the door down!”

Several sailors headed towards the hatch.

“He’s done for,” thought Zurita, “they will shoot him!”

He glanced at the sea as if looking for unexpected help. And not believing his own eyes, Zurita saw that a submarine was approaching the “Medusa” at an extraordinary speed, cutting through the smooth surface of the ocean.

“If only it doesn’t dive,” thought Zurita. “There are people on the bridge. Could it be that they won’t notice me and just pass by?”

“Help! Hurry! They’re killing me!” Zurita screamed with all his might.

On the submarine, they apparently noticed him. Without reducing speed, the boat continued heading straight for the “Medusa”.

Armed sailors had already emerged from the schooner’s hatch. They poured out onto the deck and now stood hesitantly. An armed submarine was approaching the “Medusa”—probably a military one. It was not possible to kill Zurita in view of these uninvited witnesses.

Zurita was triumphant. But his triumph was short-lived. Baltazar and Cristo were standing on the bridge of the submarine, and next to them a tall man with a predatory nose and the eyes of an eagle. From the deck of the boat, he shouted loudly:

“Pedro Zurita! You must immediately hand over the abducted Ichthyander! I give you five minutes, or I will send your schooner to the bottom.”

“Traitors!” thought Zurita, looking at Cristo and Baltazar with hatred. “But it’s better to lose Ichthyander than to lose my own head.”

“I will bring him now,” said Zurita, descending the shrouds.

The sailors had already realized that they needed to escape. They quickly lowered the boats, jumped into the water, and swam to shore. Each of them was only concerned about themselves.

Zurita hurried down the gangway to his cabin, hastily pulled out a small bag of pearls, tucked it behind his shirt, grabbed some belts and a kerchief. The next minute, he opened the door to the cabin where Guttierre was, lifted her in his arms and carried her onto the deck.

– Ichthyander is not entirely well. You will find him in the boat, – said Zurita, not letting go of Guttierre. Running to the side, he put her in the boat, lowered the boat into the water and jumped in himself.

Now the submarine could not pursue the boat. It was too shallow. But Guttierre had already seen Baltazar on the deck of the submarine.

– Father, save Ichthyander! He is...

But she did not finish. Zurita gagged her mouth with the kerchief and hurried to tie her hands with the belt.

– Release the woman! – shouted Salvator, witnessing this scene.

– This woman is my wife, and no one has the right to interfere with my affairs! – Zurita shouted back, rowing vigorously.

– No one has the right to treat a woman like that! – Salvator shouted angrily. – Stop, or I will shoot!

But Zurita kept on rowing.

Salvator fired from his revolver. The bullet struck the side of the boat.

Zurita lifted Guttierre and, using her as a shield, shouted:

– Continue!

Guttierre struggled in his hands.

– An utter scoundrel, – muttered Salvator, lowering the revolver.

Balthazar leaped from the submarine's bridge and tried to swim after the rowboat. But Zurita was already at the shore. He rowed hard, and soon a wave threw the rowboat onto the sandy beach. Pedro grabbed Guttierre and disappeared into the coastal rocks.

Seeing that he couldn't catch up with Zurita, Balthazar swam to the schooner and climbed aboard via the anchor chain. He descended the ladder and began to search everywhere for Ichthyander. Balthazar went through the whole ship, down to the hold. There was no one left on the schooner.

"Ichthyander is not on the schooner!" Balthazar called out to Salvator.

"But he is alive and must be somewhere here! Guttierre said: 'Ichthyander is located...' If that bandit hadn't silenced her, we would know where to look for him," said Cristo.

Surveying the sea surface, Cristo noticed that the tops of masts were sticking out of the water. Apparently, a ship had recently sunk here. Could Ichthyander be on this doomed ship?

"Perhaps Zurita sent Ichthyander to look for treasures on the sunken ship?" said Cristo.

Balthazar lifted a chain lying on the deck with a shackle on the end.

"Zurita apparently lowered Ichthyander on this chain. Without the chain, Ichthyander would have swum away. No, he cannot be in the sunken ship.

"Yes," Salvator said thoughtfully. "We have defeated Zurita, but we have not found Ichthyander."

Sunken Ship

Zurita's pursuers were unaware of the events that had occurred on the "Medusa" that morning.

All night the sailors had been conspiring, and by morning they had decided: at the first convenient opportunity, to attack Zurita, kill him, and take possession of Ichthyander and the schooner.

Early in the morning, Zurita stood on the captain's bridge. The wind had died down, and the "Medusa" was slowly moving forward, making no more than three knots an hour.

Zurita peered at some point in the ocean. Through the binoculars, he made out the radio masts of a sunken ship.

Soon Zurita noticed a lifebuoy floating on the surface.

Zurita ordered to lower a boat and retrieve the ring.

When the ring was lifted, Zurita read on it: "Mafalda".

– "Mafalda" sunk? – Zurita was surprised. He knew this large American mail-passenger steamship. Such a ship would have many valuables. "What if Ichthyander had retrieved these treasures from the sunken steamship? But would the chain be long enough? Hardly... And if Ichthyander is lowered without a chain, he won't return..."

Zurita pondered. Greed and the fear of losing Ichthyander fought within him.

"Medusa" was slowly approaching the masts sticking out of the water.

The sailors crowded at the side. The wind died down completely. "Medusa" stopped.

– I once served on "Mafalda," – said one of the sailors. – A large, fine steamship. A whole city. And the passengers – wealthy Americans.

"Mafalda" has obviously sunk without managing to radio its distress," – Zurita thought. – Perhaps the radio station was damaged. Otherwise, fast motorboats,

gliders, yachts would have swarmed from all the nearby ports, with authorities, correspondents, photographers, cinematographers, journalists, divers on board. There's no time to delay. It's necessary to take a risk and let Ichthyander go without a chain. There's no other way. But how to make him come back? And if it's a risk, wouldn't it be better to send Ichthyander for the ransom – the pearl treasure? But is this pearl treasure really that valuable? Is Ichthyander exaggerating?"

Of course, both the treasure and the riches buried on "Mafalda" should be obtained. The pearl treasure won't disappear, no one will find it without Ichthyander, just as long as Ichthyander himself remains in Zurita's hands. And in a few days, or maybe even a few hours, the treasures of "Mafalda" will become inaccessible.

"So," Mafalda first," – Zurita decided. He ordered to drop anchor. Then he went down to the cabin, wrote some note, and with this piece of paper went to Ichthyander's cabin.

– Can you read, Ichthyander? Guttieri has sent you a note.

Ichthyander quickly took the note and read:

"Ichthyander! Fulfill my request. Near the "Medusa" is a sunken ship. Dive into the sea and bring back from this ship all that you find valuable. Zurita will let you go without a chain, but you must return to "Medusa". Do this for me, Ichthyander, and you will soon gain your freedom. Guttieri".

Ichthyander had never received letters from Guttieri and did not know her handwriting. He was very pleased to receive this letter, but immediately began to wonder. What if this is a trick by Zurita?

"Why didn't Guttieri ask herself?" Ichthyander asked, pointing to the note.

"She's not entirely well," Zurita replied, "but you'll see her as soon as you get back."

"Why does Guttieri need these valuables?" Ichthyander still asked suspiciously.

"If you were a real man, you would not ask such questions. What woman doesn't want to dress beautifully, wear expensive jewelry? And that requires money. A lot of money lies in the sunken steamer. They now belong to no one – why not retrieve them for Guttieri? The main thing is to find the gold coins. There should be postal leather bags. Besides, passengers might have had gold items, rings. . .

"Don't you think I will go as far as searching corpses?" Ichthyander asked indignantly. "And in general, I don't believe you. Guttieri is not greedy; she could not have sent me on such an errand. . ."

"Curse it!" Zurita exclaimed angrily. He saw that his plan would fall through if he could not persuade Ichthyander right now.

Then Zurita composed himself, laughed good-naturedly, and said:

“I see, you can’t be fooled. I have to be frank with you. Well, listen. It’s not Guttieri who wants the gold from the ‘Mafalda,’ but me. Do you believe that?”

Ichthyander smiled involuntarily:

“Absolutely!”

"Well, excellent! You’re starting to believe me, which means we can come to an agreement. Yes, I need the gold. And if there is as much on the ‘Mafalda’ as your pearl treasure is worth, I will immediately release you into the ocean as soon as you bring me the gold. But here’s the trouble: you don’t quite trust me, and I don’t trust you. I’m afraid that if you’re let into the water without a chain, you’ll dive and. . .

“If I give my word to return, I will keep it.”

"I haven’t had the opportunity to verify this yet. You don’t like me, and I won’t be surprised if you don’t keep your word. But you love Guttieri, and you will do what she asks of you. Right? That’s why I made a deal with her. She, of course, wants me to let you go. Therefore, she wrote a letter and gave it to me, wishing to ease your path to freedom. Now do you understand everything?

Everything Zurita said seemed convincing and plausible to Ichthyander. But Ichthyander did not notice that Zurita promised to set him free only when he sees that there is as much gold on the ‘Mafalda’ as his pearl treasure is worth. . .

“After all, to compare them,” Zurita reasoned to himself, “Ichthyander will have to – I will demand this from him – bring his pearls. And then I will have in my hands the gold of ‘Mafalda,’ the pearl treasure, and Ichthyander.”

But Ihtindr could not know what Zurita was thinking. Zurita’s frankness convinced him, and after thinking it over, Ihtindr agreed.

Zurita sighed with relief.

“He won’t deceive me,” he thought.

- Let’s hurry!

Ihtindr quickly climbed onto the deck and threw himself into the sea.

The sailors saw Ihtindr jumping into the sea without a chain. They immediately understood that Ihtindr was going after the sunken treasures of the “Mafalda”. Could it be that Zurita alone would take possession of all the “Mafalda’s” riches? There was no time to lose, and they pounced on Zurita.

While the crew pursued Zurita, Ihtindr set about exploring the sunken ship.

Through a huge hatch on the upper deck, the young man swam down, over a stairway reminiscent of a large house’s staircase, and entered a spacious corridor. It was almost dark here. Only a weak light penetrated through the open doors.

Ihtiandr swam into one of these open doors and found himself in a salon. Large circular portholes dimly illuminated the vast hall, capable of accommodating not just a hundred people. Ihtiandr settled on a luxurious chandelier and looked around. It was a strange sight. Wooden chairs and small tables had floated up and were swaying near the ceiling. On a small platform stood a piano with its lid open. Soft carpets covered the floor. Varnished wall paneling made of redwood was warped in places. Palm trees stood against one wall.

Ihtiandr pushed off from the chandelier and swam towards the palms. Suddenly he stopped in amazement. Some person was swimming toward him, mirroring his movements. “A mirror,” Ihtiandr realized. This huge mirror occupied the entire wall, dimly reflecting the salon’s interior in the water.

There were no treasures to be found here. Ihtiandr swam back into the corridor, descended one deck lower, and entered a room as luxurious and vast as the salon – clearly, a restaurant. On the buffet shelves and counters, and near stands on the floor, lay bottles of wine, cans of preserves, boxes. The pressure of the water had driven many corks inside the bottles, and tin cans were dented. The table still had its setting, but part of the crockery, silver forks, and knives lay on the floor.

Ihtiandr started making his way into the cabins.

He had already visited several cabins, furnished with the latest in American comfort, but saw not a single corpse. Only in one of the cabins on the third deck did he see a bloated corpse, swaying near the ceiling.

“Probably many were saved in the boats,” Ihtiandr thought.

But descending even lower, to the deck where third-class passengers were accommodated, the young man saw a terrible sight: in these cabins remained men, women, and children. There were corpses of whites, Chinese, blacks, Indians.

The ship’s crew first and foremost sought to save the wealthy first-class passengers, abandoning the rest to fate. Ichthyander could not penetrate some of the cabins. The doors were tightly jammed with bodies. In their panic, people crushed one another, crowding at the exits, obstructing each other and cutting off their last path to salvation.

In the long corridor, bodies gently swayed. Water had seeped through the open portholes and rocked the bloated corpses. Ichthyander felt terrified and hurried to swim away from this underwater cemetery.

“Could Guttiere not know where she was sending me?” – Ichthyander pondered. Could she really make him, Ichthyander, to turn out the pockets of the drowned and to break open suitcases? No, she could not have done that! Clearly, he had fallen into Zurita’s trap again. “I will surface,” decided Ichthyander, “and demand that Guttiere come out on deck and confirm the request herself.”

Like a fish, the young man slid through the endless passageways from deck to deck and quickly rose to the surface.

He was rapidly approaching the “Medusa”.

– Zurita! – he called out. – Guttieri!

But no one answered him. The silent “Medusa” swayed on the waves.

“Where have they all gone? – the young man thought. – What else is Zurita plotting?” Ichthyander cautiously swam up to the schooner and climbed aboard.

– Guttieri! – he called out again.

– We are here! – he heard Zurita’s voice, barely reaching him from the shore. Ichthyander looked around and saw Zurita, cautiously peering out from the bushes on the shore.

– Guttieri is sick! Swim here, Ichthyander! – Zurita was shouting.

Guttieri is ill! He will see her now. Ichthyander jumped into the water and swiftly swam to the shore.

The young man had just emerged from the water when he heard Guttieri’s muffled voice:

– Zurita is lying! Save yourself, Ichthyander!

The young man quickly turned back and swam underwater. When he had swum far from the shore, he surfaced and looked back. He saw something white flicker on the shore.

Perhaps Guttieri welcomed his rescue. Would he ever see her again?..

Ichthyander quickly swam towards the open sea. In the distance, a small vessel was visible. Surrounded by foam, the ship headed south, cutting through the water with its sharp bow.

“Away from people,” thought Ichthyander, and, diving deeply, he disappeared under the water.

Part Three: The Newly Found Father

Balthazar, after the unsuccessful journey on the submarine, was in the darkest of moods. They had not found Ichthyander, Zurita had disappeared somewhere along with Guttieri.

“Damned whites!” grumbled the old man, sitting alone in his shop. “They drove us off our land and turned us into their slaves. They maim our children and abduct our daughters. They want to exterminate all of us to the last.

“Hello, brother!” Balthazar heard the voice of Cristo. “News! Big news! Ichthyander has been found.

“What?!” Balthazar quickly rose. “Speak up!”

"I'll tell you, but don't interrupt me, or I'll forget what I wanted to say. Ichthyander has been found. I was right back then: he was on the sunken ship. We sailed further, but he surfaced and swam home.

"Where is he? At Salvator's?"

"Yes, at Salvator's."

"I will go to him, to Salvator, and demand that he returns my son to me. . .

– He won't give him up!" Christo objected. "Salvator forbids Ichthyander from swimming in the ocean. Sometimes I let him go secretly. . .

– He will give him up! If he doesn't, I will kill Salvator. Let's go right now.

Christo flailed his arms in fear.

– Wait until tomorrow at least. I barely got permission from Salvator to visit my 'granddaughter'. Salvator has become so suspicious. He looks you in the eye, it's like he's cutting with a knife. Please, wait until tomorrow.

– Fine. I will come to Salvator tomorrow. But now I'm going to the bay. Maybe, I'll catch a glimpse of my son in the sea from afar.

Balthazar sat all night on a rock by the bay, peering into the waves. The sea was rough. The cold southern wind blew in squalls, tearing the foam off the tops of the waves and scattering it across the coastal cliffs. The surf thundered on the shore. The moon, diving into the fast-moving clouds in the sky, now lit up the waves, now hid itself. No matter how hard Balthazar tried, he could not make out anything in the frothy ocean. Dawn had broken, and Balthazar was still sitting motionlessly on the coastal cliff. The dark ocean had turned gray, but it was just as desolate and uninhabited.

Suddenly, Balthazar started. His keen eyes spotted some dark, bobbing object on the waves. A man! Perhaps a drowned man! No, he is lying calmly on his back, hands tucked behind his head. Could it be him?

Balthazar was not mistaken. It was Ichthyander.

Balthazar stood up and, clutching his hands to his chest, shouted:

– Ichthyander! My son! – And the old man, raising his hands, threw himself into the sea.

Falling from the cliff, he dove deep. But when he surfaced, there was no one there. Desperately struggling with the waves, Balthazar dove again, but a huge wave lifted him, flipped him over, threw him onto the shore, and receded with a dull rumble.

All wet, Balthazar got up, looked at the waves, and sighed heavily.

– Could I have been imagining things?

When the wind and the risen sun dried Baltazar's clothes, he went to the wall guarding Salvator's estate, and knocked on the iron gate.

"Who's there?" – asked the Negro, peeking through the half-opened wicket.

"To see the doctor, on urgent business."

"The doctor is not seeing anyone," – replied the Negro, and the little window closed.

Baltazar continued to knock, to shout, but no one opened the gate for him. Behind the wall, only the threatening bark of dogs could be heard.

"Wait, you cursed Spaniard!" – Baltazar threatened and went off to the city.

Not far from the courthouse was the pulqueria [pulqueria – a tavern] "Palma" – a squat, ancient white building with thick stone walls. There was a small veranda in front of the entrance, covered with a striped awning, furnished with tables, cactuses in blue enamel vases. The veranda came to life only in the evening. During the day, patrons preferred to sit in the cool, low rooms. The pulqueria was sort of an annex to the court. Here, during court sessions, plaintiffs, defendants, witnesses, and accused not yet taken into custody would turn up.

Here, sipping wine and pulque, they preferred to while away the tedious hours until it was their turn. A nimble boy, constantly shuttling between the courthouse and the "Palma," informed what was happening in court. It was convenient. Here too, shady go-betweens and perjurers openly offered their services.

Baltazar had been to "Palma" many times on business for his shop. He knew that here he could meet the right person, write a petition. Therefore, Baltazar headed here.

He quickly passed the veranda, entered the cool vestibule, inhaled the cool air with pleasure, wiped the sweat from his forehead, and asked the boy who was bustling around him:

"Has Larra come?"

"Don Flores de Larra have come, they are sitting in their usual spot," – the boy briskly replied.

The one who was called by the grand name Don Flores de Larra had once been a minor court official, – he was fired for taking bribes. Now he had many clients: all who had dubious cases eagerly turned to this great conniver. Baltazar had dealt with him too.

Larra sat at a table near a gothic window with a wide sill. On the table in front of the agent stood a mug of wine and lay a plump red portfolio. The ever-ready pen for work was clipped to the pocket of a worn olive-colored suit. Larra was fat, bald, ruddy-cheeked, red-nosed, clean-shaven, and proud. A breeze coming in through the window lifted the remains of gray hair. Not even the presiding judge of the court could receive his clients with greater majesty.

Upon seeing Baltazar, he casually nodded his head, gestured towards the woven chair opposite him, and said:

– Please, take a seat. What brings you here? Would you care for some wine? Pulque?

Usually, he would order, but the client would pay. Baltazar seemed not to hear; he continued:

– A big matter. An important matter, Larra.

– Don Flores de Larra, – corrected the intermediary, sipping from his mug.

But Baltazar paid no attention to this correction.

– What is your matter about?

– You know, Larra. . .

– Don Flores de. . .

– Save those tricks for the novices! – Baltazar snapped angrily. – This is a serious matter.

– Well, then speak up, what is it? – Larra replied in a different tone.

– Do you know the “sea devil”?

– I have not had the honor of being personally acquainted, but I have heard a lot, – Larra answered again, importantly out of habit.

– So here it is! The one they call the “sea devil” – that’s my son, Ichthyander.

– It cannot be! – exclaimed Larra. – You’ve had too much to drink, Baltazar.

The Indian banged his fist on the table.

– I haven’t had anything in my mouth since yesterday except a few sips of sea water.

– Then the situation is even worse. . .

– Have you lost your mind? No, I am in full possession of my faculties. Be silent and listen.

And Baltazar told Larra the whole story. Larra listened to the Indian without uttering a word. His grey eyebrows rose higher and higher. Finally, he could not stand it, forgot all his Olympian grandeur, slapped the table with his fat palm, and shouted:

– A million devils!

A boy in a white apron with a dirty napkin ran up.

– What would you like to order?

– Two bottles of Sauternes with ice! – And, turning to Baltazar, Larra said: – Splendid! A fine business! Did you come up with all this yourself? Although, to be completely honest, the weakest part in all of this is your paternity.

– Do you doubt it? – Baltazar even blushed with anger.

– Well, well, don't be angry, old man. I am only speaking as a lawyer; from the standpoint of the solidity of legal evidence, they are somewhat weak. But even that can be fixed. Yes. And make a lot of money.

– I need a son, not money, – Baltazar retorted.

– Everyone needs money, especially those with a growing family, like you, – Larra said instructively and, squinting cunningly, continued: – The most valuable and most reliable thing in the whole affair with Salvator is that we managed to find out what kind of experiments and operations he was engaged in. There, mines can be laid so that from this golden bag – Salvator – pesetas will spill out like overripe oranges from a tree in a good storm.

Baltazar barely touched the glass of wine poured by Larra and said:

– I want to get my son. You must write a statement about this to the court.

– No, no! Under no circumstances! – Larra almost fearfully objected. – To start with that is to spoil everything. That should only be the endgame.

– What do you suggest then? – asked Baltazar.

– First, – Larra bent his thick finger, – we will send Salvator a letter, composed in the most exquisite expressions. We will inform him that we are aware of all his unlawful operations and experiments. And if he wants us to not disclose this matter to the public, he must pay us a round sum. One hundred thousand. Yes, one hundred thousand – that's the very least.

Larra looked questioningly at Baltazar. He frowned and was silent.

– Second, – Larra continued. – When we receive the specified sum, – and we will receive it, – we will send Professor Salvator a second letter, composed in even more exquisite expressions. We will inform him that the real father of Ichthyander has been found and that we have irrefutable evidence. We will write to him that the father wishes to take his son and will not hesitate to file a lawsuit, which could reveal how Salvator disfigured Ichthyander. If, however, Salvator wants to prevent the lawsuit and keep the child, he must pay the persons we designate at the place and time we specify one million dollars.

But Baltazar was not listening. He grabbed a bottle and was about to hurl it at the petitioner's head. Larra had never seen Baltazar in such a fierce rage.

– Don't be angry. Leave it, I was joking. Put the bottle down! – Larra exclaimed, covering his shiny skull with his hand.

– You!.. You!.. – Baltazar yelled furiously. – You suggest me to sell my own son, to renounce Ichthyander. Have you no heart? Or are you not a man, but a

scorpion, a tarantula, or are you completely unaware of paternal feelings!

– Five! Five! Five! – Larra shouted back, becoming angry in turn. – Five paternal feelings! I have five sons! Five little devils of all sizes! Five mouths! I know, I understand, I feel! And your son won't leave you either. Just be patient and listen to the end.

Baltazar calmed down. He put the bottle on the table, lowered his head, and looked at Larra.

– Well, speak!

– That's it! Salvator will pay us a million. It will be a dowry for your Ichthyander. Well, and I'll get something too. For the trouble and the copyright of the invention – maybe a hundred thousand. We'll have a deal with you. Salvator will pay the million. I stake my head on it. And as soon as he pays. . .

– We will go to court.

– Just a little more patience. We will offer the publishers and editors of the largest newspaper conglomerate to pay us, well, let's say twenty to thirty thousand – it will come in handy for minor expenses – for our report about the most sensational crime. Maybe we'll get something from the secret funds of the secret police. After all, police agents could make a career for themselves on such a case. When we squeeze out of the Salvator affair all that we possibly can, then please, go to court, invoke your paternal feelings there, and may Themis herself [Themis – goddess of order, justice, and law in ancient Greece] help you prove your rights and receive your dear son into paternal embrace.

Larra downed a glass of wine in one gulp, banged the glass on the table, and looked triumphantly at Baltazar.

"What do you say?

"I neither eat nor sleep at night. And you propose to drag this out endlessly," began Balthazar.

"But for what purpose?.." Larra interrupted him passionately. "For what? For millions! Mil-lions! Don't you understand anymore? You've lived twenty years without Ichthyander.

"Lived. And now. . . In short, write an application to the court.

"He's really stopped thinking straight!" exclaimed Larra. "Come to your senses, wake up, be reasonable, Balthazar! Understand! Millions! Money! Gold! You can buy everything in the world. The finest tobacco, a car, twenty schooners, this tavern. . .

"Write the petition to the court, or I'll turn to another solicitor," Balthazar declared decisively.

Larra realized that it was pointless to argue further. He shook his head, sighed, pulled a paper out of the ginger briefcase, and tore off his fountain pen from the

side pocket.

A few minutes later, the complaint against Salvator for illegally appropriating and mutilating Balthazar's son was written.

"I tell you for the last time: think it over," said Larra.

"Give it to me," said the Indian, reaching out for the complaint.

"Submit it to the chief prosecutor. You know?" Larra advised his client and muttered under his breath: "May you trip on the stairs and break your leg!"

As he left the prosecutor's office, Balthazar encountered Zurita on the large white staircase.

"What are you doing here?" asked Zurita, looking suspiciously at the Indian. "You haven't been complaining about me, have you?"

"One should complain about all of you," replied Balthazar, meaning the Spaniards, "but there's no one to tell. Where are you hiding my daughter?"

"How dare you address me so informally?!" flared Zurita. "If you weren't the father of my wife, I would beat you with a stick."

Zurita, having roughly pushed Balthazar aside with his hand, climbed up the staircase and disappeared behind a large oak door.

Legal Quandary

A rare guest visited the prosecutor of Buenos Aires – the dean of the local cathedral, Bishop Juan de Garcilaso.

The prosecutor, a fat, short, lively man with bleary little eyes, closely cropped hair and dyed mustaches, rose from his chair, greeting the bishop. The host carefully seated the esteemed guest in a heavy leather armchair opposite his desk.

The bishop and the prosecutor looked nothing alike. The prosecutor's face was fleshy and red, with thick lips and a wide, pear-shaped nose. His fingers resembled thick, short stubs, and the buttons on his round belly seemed ready to pop off at any moment, unable to contain the undulating sea of fat.

The face of the bishop was striking in its gauntness and paleness. A dry nose with a hump, a pointed chin, and thin, almost blue lips gave him the typical appearance of a Jesuit. The bishop never looked his interlocutor in the eye, yet he observed them keenly. The influence of the bishop was immense, and he readily tore himself away from spiritual matters to manage the complex political game. Having greeted his host, the bishop quickly moved on to the purpose of his visit.

– I would like to know, – the bishop quietly asked, – what is the status of Professor Salvatore's case?

– Ah, your Excellency, you're interested in this case too! – the prosecutor exclaimed amiably. – Yes, it's an exceptional trial! – Taking a thick folder from the table and flipping through the case files, the prosecutor continued: – Based on Pedro Zurita's report, we conducted a search at Professor Salvatore's residence. Zurita's statement that Salvatore had been performing extraordinary operations on animals was fully confirmed. In Salvatore's gardens, there was a veritable factory of animal mutants. It's something astonishing! Salvatore, for example. . .

– I am aware of the search results from the newspapers, – the bishop gently interrupted. – What measures have you taken regarding Salvatore himself? Is he under arrest?

– Yes, he is under arrest. Moreover, we have transported to the city, as material evidence and a witness for the prosecution, a young man named Ichthyander – also known as “the sea devil”. Who would have thought that the famous “sea devil”, who has occupied us for so long, turned out to be one of the monsters from Salvatore's menagerie! Now, university professors are studying all these creatures. Of course, we could not transport the entire menagerie, all these live exhibits, to the city. But Ichthyander was brought in and placed in the basement of the courthouse. He is causing us quite some trouble. Imagine, we had to construct a large tank because he cannot live without water. And he really felt very ill. Evidently, Salvatore has made some extraordinary changes to his body, turning the youth into an amphibious man. Our scientists are looking into this matter.

– I am more interested in the fate of Salvatore, – the bishop said just as quietly. – Under what charge is he to be held accountable? And what is your opinion: will he be convicted?

– Salvatore's case is a rare legal quagmire, – the prosecutor replied. – I admit, I have not yet decided under which charge to categorize this crime. The easiest, of course, would be to accuse Salvatore of conducting illegal vivisections and the mutilation he caused to this youth. . .

The bishop began to frown.

– Do you suppose that in all these actions of Salvatore's there is no element of a crime?

"– Is there or will there be, but what kind? – the prosecutor continued. – I've received another statement – from some Indian named Baltazar. He claims that Ichthyander is his son. The evidence is somewhat weak, but perhaps we can use this Indian as a witness for the prosecution if experts determine that Ichthyander is indeed his son.

– So, in the best case scenario, Salvatore will only be accused of violating medical regulations and will be tried solely for performing an operation on a child without parental consent?

– And, possibly, for causing bodily harm. That is a more serious matter. But there is another complicating factor in this case. The experts – although this is not their final opinion – are inclined to think that it could not even occur to a normal person to mutilate animals and perform such an extraordinary operation. Salvator may be declared insane by the experts, as mentally ill.

The bishop sat silently, pressing his thin lips together and looking at the corner of the table. Then he said very quietly:

– I did not expect this from you.

– What, Your Excellency? – the puzzled prosecutor asked.

– Even you, the guardian of justice, seem to justify Salvator’s actions by finding his operations not without purpose.

– But what is wrong here?

– And you hesitate to define the nature of the crime. The church’s court – the heavenly court – views Salvator’s actions differently. Allow me to come to your aid and give advice.

– Please do, – the prosecutor said, embarrassed.

The bishop began to speak quietly, gradually raising his voice like a preacher, like an accuser.

– You say that Salvator’s actions are not without purpose? You think that the animals he mutilated and the man even gained some advantages they did not have? What does this mean? Did the creator make humans imperfect? Does it require some intervention by Professor Salvator to give the human body a perfect form?

The prosecutor sat downcast and motionless. In the face of the church, he found himself in the position of the accused. He had not expected this.

– Have you forgotten what is said in the Holy Scripture, in the book of Genesis, chapter one, verse twenty-six: “And God said: Let us make man in our image, after our likeness,” and further, verse twenty-seven: “And God created man in His own image.” And Salvator dares to distort this image and likeness, and you – even you! – find this to be appropriate!

– Forgive me, holy father... – was all the prosecutor could say.

“Did not the Lord find His creation beautiful,” the bishop spoke with inspiration, “complete? You remember well the articles of human laws, but forget the articles of divine laws. Recall then verse thirty-one of the same first chapter of Genesis: ‘And God saw everything that He had made, and behold, it was very good.’ But your Salvator thinks something needs fixing, remaking, disfiguring, that people should be amphibious beings,” and you also find all this witty and sensible. Is this not blaspheming God? Not sacrilege? Not profanity? Or do civil laws no longer punish religious offenses in our country? What will happen if, following

your lead, everyone starts repeating: ‘Yes, man was poorly created by God. We must send man to be remodeled by Doctor Salvator’? Is this not a monstrous subversion of religion?.. God found all that He created to be good—all His creations. And Salvator begins to move animal heads around, change their skins, creating truly abominable monsters, as if mocking the Creator. And you hesitate to find in Salvator’s actions the elements of a crime!

The bishop paused. He was pleased with the impression his speech had made on the prosecutor, kept silent for a moment, and then began to speak again quietly, gradually raising his voice:

“I said that I am more interested in the fate of Salvator. But how can I be indifferent to the fate of Ichthyander? This being does not even have a Christian name, for Ichthyander in Greek means nothing other than ‘fish-man.’ Even if Ichthyander is not guilty himself, if he is only a victim, then he is still an anti-God, blasphemous creation. His very existence can confuse thoughts, lead to sinful reflections, tempt those of little strength, shake the faith of the weak. Ichthyander should not exist! It would be best if the Lord called him to Himself, if this unfortunate youth died from the imperfection of his disfigured nature,” the bishop looked meaningfully at the prosecutor. “In any case, he must be accused, taken into custody, deprived of freedom. After all, there were some crimes associated with him: he stole fish from fishermen, damaged their nets, and eventually scared them to such an extent that, remember, the fishermen gave up fishing and the city was left without fish. The godless Salvator and the abominable offspring of his hands—Ichthyander—are a bold challenge to the church, to God, to heaven! And the church will not lay down its arms until they are destroyed.”

The bishop continued his accusatory speech. The prosecutor sat before him overwhelmed, head bowed, not attempting to interrupt this flow of threatening words.

When the bishop finally concluded, the prosecutor stood up, approached the bishop, and said in a dull voice:

“As a Christian, I will bring my sin to the confessional, so that you may forgive it. And as an official, I thank you for the help you have provided me. Now the crime of Salvator is clear to me. He will be charged and punished. Ichthyander will also not escape the sword of justice.”

The Genius Madman

Doctor Salvator was not broken by the trial. In prison, he remained calm, self-assured, speaking to the investigator and experts with haughty condescension, as an adult to children.

He could not endure inactivity. He wrote a lot, performed several brilliant operations in the prison hospital. Among his prison patients was the jailer’s wife. A malignant tumor threatened her with death. Salvator saved her life at the

very moment when the doctors called for consultation refused to help, declaring that medicine was powerless here.

The day of the trial came.

The huge courtroom could not accommodate all those who wished to attend the trial. The public crowded in the corridors, filled the square in front of the court building, looked through the open windows. Many curious people climbed the trees near the court building.

Salvator calmly took his place on the defendants' bench. He behaved with such dignity that outsiders might have thought he was not the accused, but the judge. Salvator refused a defender.

Hundreds of eager eyes looked at him. But few could withstand the piercing gaze of Salvator.

Ichthyander aroused no less interest, but he was not in the hall. In recent days, Ichthyander felt unwell and spent almost all his time in a water tank, hiding from the prying eyes of the curious. In the process of Salvator's trial, Ichthyander was only a witness for the prosecution—rather, one of the material evidences, as the prosecutor expressed it.

The case against Ichthyander himself for criminal activity was to be heard separately, after Salvator's trial.

The prosecutor had to proceed in this way because the bishop was hurrying the case against Salvator, while gathering evidence against Ichthyander was taking time. The prosecutor's agents were actively but cautiously recruiting witnesses at the "Palma" tavern for the upcoming trial in which Ichthyander was to be the accused. However, the bishop did not cease to hint to the prosecutor that the best outcome would be if the Lord took the unfortunate Ichthyander away. Such a death would be the best proof that man's hand is only capable of spoiling God's creation.

Three scientific experts, university professors, read their conclusions. The courtroom audience listened with great attention, trying not to miss a single word of the scientists' opinion.

– At the request of the court, – began the already elderly Professor Shein, the court's chief expert, – we have examined the animals and the young man Ichthyander who underwent operations performed by Professor Salvator in his laboratories. We have inspected his small but skillfully equipped laboratories and operating rooms. Professor Salvator used in his surgeries not only the latest improvements in surgical technique such as electric knives, sterilizing ultraviolet rays, and the like, but also instruments that are still unknown to surgeons. Apparently, they were made to his specifications. I will not dwell long on Professor Salvator's experiments on animals. These experiments amounted to extremely daring in concept and brilliant in execution operations: the transplantation of tissues and entire organs, the suturing of two animals

together, the transformation of amphibians into air-breathing creatures and vice versa, the conversion of females into males, new methods of rejuvenation. In Salvator's gardens we found children and adolescents ranging in age from several months to fourteen years, belonging to various indigenous tribes.

– What condition did you find the children in? – asked the prosecutor.

– All the children are healthy and full of life. They frolic in the garden and initiate games. Many of them were saved from death by Salvator. The indigenous people trusted him and brought their children from the most remote places – from Alaska to Tierra del Fuego: Eskimos, Yaghans, Apaches, Taurepang, Sanapaná, Botocudos, Pano, Araucanians.

A sigh was heard in the room.

– All these tribes carried their children to Salvator.

The prosecutor began to worry. After the conversation with the bishop, when his thoughts took a new direction, he could not calmly listen to these praises of Salvator and asked the expert:

– Don't you think that Salvator's operations were beneficial and appropriate?

But the presiding judge, an elderly man with a stern face, fearing that the expert would affirmatively answer, hastily intervened:

– The court is not interested in the expert's personal views on scientific issues. Please continue. What did the examination of the young man Ichthyander from the Araucanian tribe reveal?

– His body was covered with an artificial scale, – continued the expert, – made of some unknown, flexible, but extremely durable substance. The analysis of this substance is not yet complete. In the water, Ichthyander sometimes used glasses with special lenses made of heavy flint glass, with a refractive index of almost two. This allowed him to see well underwater. When we removed Ichthyander's scale, we discovered under both shoulder blades round openings ten centimeters in diameter, covered by five thin strips, similar to the gills of a shark.

A muffled exclamation of surprise was heard in the room.

– Yes, – continued the expert, – it seems incredible, but Ichthyander possesses the lungs of a human and at the same time the gills of a shark. Therefore, he can live on land and underwater.

– An amphibian man? – the prosecutor asked sarcastically.

– Yes, in a way, an amphibian man – a dual-breathing amphibian.

– But how could Ichthyander possibly have the gills of a shark? – asked the chairman.

The expert spread his arms widely and answered:

– That is a mystery which, perhaps, Professor Salvator himself may wish to explain to us. Our opinion was this: according to the biological law of Haeckel, every living being in its development repeats all the forms that the given species of living creature has passed through over the centuries of the species' existence on earth. It can be said with certainty that humans descended from ancestors who once breathed with gills.

The prosecutor rose slightly in his chair, but the chairman stopped him with a gesture.

– On the twentieth day of development, the human embryo exhibits four pharyngeal arches, one after another. But later in the human embryo, the gill apparatus transforms: the first gill arch becomes the auditory canal with auditory ossicles and the Eustachian tube; the lower part of the gill arch develops into the lower jaw; the second arch – into the processes and body of the hyoid bone, the third arch – into the thyroid cartilage of the larynx. We do not think that Professor Salvator managed to arrest the development of Ichthyander in its embryonic stage. Science does know of cases where even a fully grown person retains an unfused gill slit on the neck, under the jaw. These are called branchial fistulas. But with such remnants of gills, of course, one cannot live underwater. With abnormal development of the embryo, one of two things should have happened: either the gills would have continued to develop at the expense of the development of the hearing organ and other anatomical changes. But then Ichthyander would have turned into a monster with an underdeveloped head of a half-fish-half-human, or normal human development would have prevailed, but at the cost of destroying the gills. But Ichthyander is a normally developed human, with good hearing, a fully developed lower jaw, and normal lungs, but in addition, he has fully formed gills. Exactly how the gills and lungs function, what relationship they have to each other, whether water passes through the mouth and lungs into the gills, or whether water penetrates the gills through a small opening that we found on Ichthyander's body above the round gill opening, – we do not know. We could answer these questions if we conducted an anatomical dissection. This, I repeat, is a mystery that Professor Salvator himself must explain. Professor Salvator must explain to us how there came to be dogs resembling jaguars, strange, extraordinary animals, and amphibious monkeys – these doubles of Ichthyander.

– What then is your overall conclusion? – asked the chairman of the expert.

Professor Shane, who himself enjoyed a great reputation as a scientist and surgeon, frankly answered:

– I must admit, I understand nothing in this matter. I can only say that what Professor Salvator has done is only within the reach of a genius. Salvator apparently decided that in his art of surgery he had reached such perfection that he could disassemble, assemble, and adapt the body of an animal and human to his will. And although he brilliantly realized this in practice, nevertheless his audacity and breadth of conception border on... madness.

Salvator smirked contemptuously.

He did not know that the experts had decided to lighten his fate and raise the question of his insanity in order to have the possibility to replace the prison regime with hospitalization.

– I do not assert that he is a madman, – continued the expert, noticing Salvator's smile, – but, in any case, in our opinion, the accused should be placed in a sanatorium for the mentally ill and subjected to prolonged observation by psychiatrists.

– The question of the defendant's insanity has not been raised by the court. The court will discuss this new circumstance, – said the chairman. – Professor Salvator, would you like to provide explanations to some of the questions from the experts and the prosecutor?

– Yes, – replied Salvator. – I will give explanations. But let this also be my final word.

The defendant's statement

Salvator calmly rose and surveyed the courtroom as if he were looking for someone. Among the spectators, Salvator noticed Baltazar, Cristo, and Zurita. In the front row sat the bishop. Salvator's gaze lingered on him for a moment. A faint smile appeared on Salvator's face. Then Salvator began to search the room with his eyes, carefully examining the entire hall.

"I cannot find the victim in this hall," Salvator finally said.

"I am the victim!" suddenly cried Baltazar, jumping from his seat.

Cristo tugged at his brother's sleeve and seated him back down.

"Which victim are you referring to?" asked the chairman. "If you mean the animals you mutilated, the court did not find it necessary to display them here. But Ichthyander, the amphibian man, is in the courthouse."

"I am referring to the Lord God," Salvator replied calmly and seriously.

Hearing this answer, the chairman leaned back in his chair in bewilderment. "Has Salvator lost his mind? Or is he pretending to be insane to avoid prison?"

"What do you mean by that?" asked the chairman.

"I think it should be clear to the court," answered Salvator. "Who is the main and only victim in this case? Clearly, it is the Lord God Himself. According to the court, my actions undermine His authority by encroaching on His domain. He was pleased with His creations, and suddenly some doctor comes along and says, 'This is poorly made. This requires alteration.' And begins to tailor God's creation to his own liking. . .

"This is blasphemy! I demand that the defendant's words be recorded in the minutes," said the prosecutor, looking like a man offended in his holy feelings.

Salvator shrugged his shoulders.

“I am only conveying the essence of the indictment. Isn’t this what the accusation boils down to? I have read the case file. At first, I was only accused of performing vivisection and causing mutilation. Now I have been charged with sacrilege as well. Where did this wind blow from? Could it be from the direction of the cathedral?”

And Professor Salvator looked at the bishop.

– You have created a process in which God Himself invisibly stands on the side of the prosecution as the victim, and on the defendants’ bench – along with me, Charles Darwin as the accused. Perhaps I will disappoint some in this room once again with my words, but I continue to assert that the organism of animals and even man is not perfect and requires correction. I hope that the rector of the cathedral, Bishop Juan de Garsilasso, who is present in this room, will confirm this.

These words caused surprise throughout the room.

– In the fifteenth year, shortly before my departure to the front, – Salvator continued, – I had to make a small correction to the organism of the esteemed bishop – to remove his appendix, this unnecessary and harmful appendage of the cecum. Lying on the operating table, my spiritual patient, I recall, did not object to the distortion of the image and likeness of God that I was performing with my knife, cutting out a part of the bishop’s body. Wasn’t it so? – Salvator asked, looking directly at the bishop.

Juan de Garsilasso sat motionless. Only his pale cheeks blushed slightly and his slender fingers trembled a little.

– And wasn’t there another case at that time when I was still engaged in private practice and performing rejuvenation surgeries? Didn’t the esteemed prosecutor, Señor Augusto de...

At these words, the prosecutor wanted to protest, but his words were drowned out by the laughter of the audience.

– I ask you not to digress, – the chairman said sternly.

– That request would have been much more appropriate concerning the court itself, – Salvator replied. – It is not I, but the court that has framed the question thus. Hasn’t the thought scared some here that all those present are yesterday’s monkeys or even fish, given the ability to speak and listen because their gill arches turned into organs of speech and hearing? Well, if not monkeys, not fish, then their descendants. – And, addressing the prosecutor, who showed signs of impatience, Salvator said: – Calm down! I’m not going to argue with anyone here or lecture on the theory of evolution. – And, after a pause, Salvator said: – The trouble is not that man descended from an animal, but that he has not ceased to be an animal... Crude, evil, unreasonable. My scientific colleague frightened you in vain. He need not have spoken about the development of the

embryo. I did not resort to influencing the embryo or to crossbreeding animals. I am a surgeon. My only tool was a knife. And as a surgeon, I had to help people, to treat them. Operating on patients, I often had to transplant tissues, organs, glands. To perfect this method, I undertook experiments on transplanting tissues in animals.

For a long time, I observed the operated animals in my laboratory, striving to determine and study what happens to the organs transferred to a new, sometimes unusual place. When my observations were over, the animal was moved to the garden. Thus, my garden-museum was created. I was especially engrossed by the problem of the exchange and transplantation of tissues between distantly related animals, for example, between fish and mammals and vice versa. And here I was able to achieve what scientists consider utterly unthinkable. What's so extraordinary about it? What I have done today, ordinary surgeons will do tomorrow. Professor Schön must be aware of the latest surgeries by the German surgeon Sauerbruch. He managed to replace a diseased hip with a shin bone.

– But Ichthyander? – asked the expert.

– Yes, Ichthyander is my pride. The difficulty in Ichthyander's operation lay not only in the technique. I had to change the entire operation of the human organism. Six monkeys died in preliminary experiments before I achieved my goal and could operate on a child without fearing for his life.

– What was the nature of this operation? – asked the chairman.

– I transplanted young shark gills into the child, and the child acquired the ability to live both on land and underwater.

Expressions of amazement were heard from the audience. Newspaper correspondents present in the room rushed to the telephones, eager to report this news to their editors.

– Later I was able to achieve even greater success. My latest work – the amphibious monkey you've seen, can live indefinitely long, both on land and underwater, without harm to health. And Ichthyander can live without water for no more than three to four days. Staying on land without water for too long is harmful to him: his lungs become overworked, his gills dry out, and Ichthyander begins to feel stabbing pains in his sides. Unfortunately, during my absence Ichthyander violated the regime I had established. He stayed in the air too long, overtaxed his lungs, and developed a serious illness. The balance in his organism is disturbed, and he must spend most of his time in the water. From an amphibious man, he is turning into a fish-man. . .

“May I ask the defendant a question,” the prosecutor said, turning to the chairman. “How did the idea of creating an amphibian man come to Salvator, and what goals did he pursue?”

– The idea is always the same – man is not perfect. Having gained significant advantages over his animal ancestors through the process of evolutionary devel-

opment, man has also lost much of what he had at the lower stages of animal development. Thus, life in water would give man tremendous advantages. Why not give man back this possibility? From the history of animal development, we know that all terrestrial animals and birds originated from aquatic ones – they emerged from the ocean. We know that some terrestrial animals returned to the water. The dolphin was once a fish, came out onto land, became a mammal, but then returned to the water, although it remained, like the whale, a mammal that breathes with lungs. One could have helped the dolphin become a dual-breathing amphibian. Ichthyander asked me to do this: then his friend – the dolphin Liding – could stay with him under the water for a long time. I was going to perform such an operation on the dolphin. The first fish among humans and the first human among fish, Ichthyander could not help feeling lonely. But if other people followed him into the ocean, life would become completely different. Then people could easily defeat the mighty element – water. Do you know what this element is, what power it is? Do you know that the ocean's area equals three hundred sixty-one million fifty thousand square kilometers? More than seven-tenths of the Earth's surface is the space of a water desert. But this desert with its inexhaustible food and industrial raw materials could accommodate millions, billions of people. More than three hundred sixty-one million square kilometers – that's just the area, the surface. But people could settle on several underwater floors. Billions of people could be accommodated in the ocean without crowding and squeezing.

And its power! Do you know that the waters of the ocean absorb solar heat energy equal to the power of seventy-nine billion horsepower? If not for the heat transfer to the air and other heat losses, the ocean would have long boiled. Practically unlimited energy reserves. How is it used by terrestrial humanity? Almost not at all.

And the power of ocean currents! The Gulf Stream along with the Florida current moves ninety-one billion tons of water per hour. That's three thousand times more than what a great river carries. And this is just one of the marine currents! How are they used by terrestrial humanity? Almost not at all.

And the power of waves and tides! Do you know that the force of the blows delivered by waves can be equal to thirty-eight thousand kilograms – thirty-eight tons per square meter of surface, the height of wave surges can reach forty-three meters, and with this, a wave can raise up to a million kilograms, – for example, fragments of rocks, – and the tides reach a height of more than sixteen meters – the height of a four-story building? How does humanity utilize these forces? Almost not at all.

On land, living creatures cannot rise high above the surface and do not penetrate very deep inside it. In the ocean, life is everywhere – from the equator to the poles, from the surface to depths of almost ten kilometers.

How do we use the limitless riches of the oceans? We catch fish – I would say, we only harvest the catch from the very top layer of the ocean, leaving the depths

completely unused. We collect sponges, corals, pearls, seaweed – and that’s it.

We conduct some underwater work: we install foundations for bridges and dams, we raise sunken ships – and that’s it. But we do this with great difficulty, with great risk, often with human casualties. The unfortunate terrestrial man, who perishes under water on the second minute! What kind of work is that?

It would be a different story if a man without a diving suit, without oxygen devices could live and work under water.

How many treasures would he discover! Here’s Ichthyander. He told me... but I’m afraid to tease the demon of human greed. Ichthyander brought me samples of rare metals and rocks from the sea bottom. Oh, don’t worry, he brought me very small samples, but their deposits in the ocean could be enormous.

And the sunken treasures?

Recall at least the ocean liner “Lusitania”. In the spring of nineteen hundred and sixteen, it was sunk by the Germans off the coast of Ireland. In addition to the valuables of the fifteen hundred lost passengers, the “Lusitania” carried gold coins worth one hundred and fifty million dollars and gold bars worth fifty million dollars. (Exclamations were heard in the hall.) In addition, the “Lusitania” contained two chests of diamonds, which were supposed to be delivered to Amsterdam. Among the diamonds was one of the best in the world – “Caliph”, worth many millions. Of course, even a man like Ichthyander could not descend to a great depth, – for that, one would have to create a man (the prosecutor’s indignant exclamation), who could withstand high pressure, like deep-sea fish. However, I also find nothing absolutely impossible in this. But not all at once.

– Do you seem to attribute to yourself the qualities of an omnipotent deity? – the prosecutor remarked.

Salvator paid no attention to this comment and continued:

– If man could live in water, then the development of the ocean, the development of its depths would proceed by giant steps. The sea would no longer be a formidable element for us, demanding human sacrifices. We would no longer have to mourn the drowned.

Everyone present in the hall seemed to have already witnessed the underwater world conquered by humanity. What benefits the conquest of the ocean promised! Even the chairman couldn’t resist asking:

– But then why haven’t you published the results of your experiments?

– I was in no hurry to end up in the defendant’s seat, – Salvator replied with a smile, – and besides, I feared that my invention under the conditions of our social order would do more harm than good. A struggle has already begun over Ichthyander. Who informed on me out of revenge? This Zurita, who stole Ichthyander from me. And generals and admirals would have taken Ichthyander away from Zurita, no doubt, to make the amphibian man sink warships. No, I

couldn't make Ichthyander and "ichthyanders" the common property in a country where struggle and greed turn the greatest discoveries into evil, increasing the sum of human suffering. I thought about...

Salvator fell silent and, abruptly changing his tone, continued:

– However, I won't talk about that. Otherwise, I'll be considered a madman, – and Salvator looked at the expert with a smile. – No, I refuse the honor of being a madman, even if a brilliant one. I am not insane, not a maniac. Didn't I accomplish what I wanted? You have seen all my work with your own eyes. If you find my actions criminal, judge me with all the severity of the law. I will not ask for leniency.

In prison

The experts who examined Ichthyander were supposed to pay attention not only to the young man's physical properties but also to the state of his mental faculties.

– What year is it? What month? The date? Day of the week? – the experts asked Ichthyander the usual questions in such cases.

And to all these questions, Ichthyander answered:

– I don't know.

He struggled to answer the most basic questions. But he couldn't be called abnormal. He didn't know many things due to the peculiar conditions of his existence and upbringing. He remained like a big child. And the experts came to the conclusion: "Ichthyander is incapacitated." This freed him from legal responsibility. The court dismissed the case against Ichthyander and appointed a guardian for him. Two people expressed a desire to be Ichthyander's guardian: Zurita and Baltazar.

Salvator would have been right to say that Zurita informed on him out of revenge. But Zurita was not only seeking vengeance against Salvator for losing Ichthyander. Zurita had another goal: he wanted to regain control of Ichthyander and was striving to become his guardian. Zurita spared no expense of a dozen valuable pearls to bribe members of the court and the guardianship council. Now Zurita was close to his goal.

Citing his paternity, Baltazar demanded that guardianship rights be granted to him. However, he was out of luck. Despite all of Larra's efforts, the experts stated that they could not establish the identity of Ichthyander with the son born twenty years ago to Baltazar based on the testimony of only one witness – Cristo; moreover, he was Baltazar's brother and therefore did not inspire full confidence in the experts.

Larra did not know that the prosecutor and the bishop had meddled in the affair. Baltazar, as the victim, as a father whose son was stolen and mutilated, was needed by the court during the trial. But to recognize Baltazar's paternity, to

hand over Ichthyander to him – this was not part of the court’s and the church’s plans: it was necessary to get rid of Ichthyander completely.

Christo, who had moved in with his brother, began to worry about him. Balthazar would sit in deep thought for hours on end, forgetting about sleep and food, then suddenly become extremely agitated, pacing around the shop and exclaiming: “My son, my son!” In such moments, he would curse the Spaniards with all the swear words he could find in every language he knew.

One day, after such an outburst, Balthazar abruptly told Christo:

– You see, brother, I am going to the prison. I will give my best pearls to the guards so that they let me see Ichthyander. I will talk to him. He will recognize me as his father. A son cannot fail to recognize his father. My blood must speak to him.

No matter how hard Christo tried to dissuade his brother, nothing worked. Balthazar was resolute.

Balthazar went to the prison. Pleading with the guards, he wept, lay at their feet, begged them, and, strewing pearls from the gate to the inner premises of the prison, finally reached Ichthyander’s cell.

In this small cell, dimly lit by a narrow window with bars, it was stuffy and smelled foul: the prison guards rarely changed the water in the tank and did not bother to remove the rotting fish on the floor, which they used to feed the unusual prisoner.

Against the wall opposite the window stood an iron tank.

Balthazar approached the tank and looked at the dark surface of the water, concealing Ichthyander beneath it.

– Ichthyander! – Balthazar said softly. – Ichthyander. . . – he called again.

The surface of the water rippled, but the young man did not emerge.

After waiting a bit longer, Balthazar extended his trembling hand and immersed it into the warm water. His hand touched a shoulder.

Suddenly, Ichthyander’s wet head appeared out of the tank. He rose up to his shoulders and asked:

– Who is it? What do you want?

Balthazar knelt down and, stretching out his hands, quickly began to speak:

– Ichthyander! Your father has come to you. Your real father. Salvator is not your father. Salvator is a wicked man. He disfigured you. . . Ichthyander! Ichthyander! Now, look at me closely. Don’t you recognize your own father?

Water slowly trickled from the thick hair of the youth onto his pale face and dripped from his chin. With a sad, somewhat surprised look, he gazed at the old Indian.

“I do not know you,” the youth replied.

“Ichthyander!” Balthazar cried out. “Look at me closely.” And the old Indian suddenly grabbed the youth’s head, drew him closer, and began to cover him with kisses, shedding hot tears.

Ichthyander, defending himself from this unexpected affection, flailed in the tank, spilling water over the edge onto the stone floor.

Someone’s hand firmly grasped Balthazar by the scruff of the neck, lifted him into the air, and threw him into a corner. Balthazar crashed to the floor, striking his head painfully against the stone wall.

Opening his eyes, Balthazar saw Zurita standing over him. Clenching his right fist tightly, Zurita held some kind of paper in his left hand and waved it triumphantly.

“See? An order appointing me as Ichthyander’s guardian. You’ll have to look for a rich son elsewhere. I will take this young man to my place tomorrow morning. Understand?”

Balthazar, lying on the ground, growled dully and threateningly.

But in the next moment, Balthazar sprang to his feet and with a wild cry lunged at his enemy, knocking him down.

The Indian snatched the paper from Zurita’s hands, stuffed it into his mouth, and continued to strike the Spaniard. A fierce fight ensued.

The prison guard, standing by the door with keys in hand, considered it his duty to maintain strict neutrality. He had received good bribes from both combatants and did not want to interfere. Only when Zurita began to strangle the old man did the guard become concerned.

“Don’t strangle him!”

However, the enraged Zurita paid no attention to the guard’s warning, and things would have gone badly for Balthazar if a new face had not appeared in the cell.

“Excellent! The gentleman guardian is practicing the execution of his guardianship rights!” the voice of Salvator was heard. “What are you looking at? Don’t you know your duties?” Salvator scolded the guard in a tone as if he was the warden of the prison.

Salvator’s shout had an effect. The guard rushed to separate the fighters.

Other guards came running at the noise, and soon Zurita and Baltazar were dragged apart in different directions.

Zurita could consider himself the victor in the fight. But the defeated Salvator was still stronger than his opponents. Even here, in this cell, in the position of a prisoner, Salvator did not cease to control events and people.

“Take the brawlers out of the cell,” Salvator ordered, addressing the guards. “I need to be alone with Ichthyander.”

And the guards obeyed. Despite protests and swearing, Zurita and Baltazar were taken away. The cell door slammed shut.

When the departing voices fell silent in the corridor, Salvator approached the pool and said to Ichthyander, who had emerged from the water:

“Stand up, Ichthyander. Come to the middle of the cell, I need to examine you.”

The young man obeyed.

“That’s it,” continued Salvator, “closer to the light. Breathe. Deeper. Again. Don’t breathe. So...”

Salvator tapped Ichthyander’s chest and listened to the boy’s intermittent breathing.

“Are you suffocating?”

“Yes, father,” Ichthyander replied.

“You have only yourself to blame,” Salvator responded, “you should not have stayed in the air for so long.”

Ichthyander lowered his head and pondered. Then suddenly he raised his head and, looking straight into Salvator’s eyes, asked:

“Father, but why not? Why can everyone else, but not me?”

It was much harder for Salvator to withstand that look full of hidden reproach than to answer in court. But Salvator withstood it.

– Because you possess what no other person does: the ability to live underwater... If you were given a choice, Ichthyander, to be like everyone else and live on land, or to live only under the water, what would you choose?

– I don’t know... – the young man replied, after thinking.

He equally cherished the underwater world and the land, Guttieri. But Guttieri was now lost to him...

– Now I would prefer the ocean, – said the young man.

– You made your choice earlier, Ichthyander, by your disobedience you disrupted the balance of your body. Now you can only live underwater.

– But not in this terrible, dirty water, father. I will die here. I want the expanse of the ocean!

Salvator suppressed a sigh.

– I will do everything to free you from this prison sooner, Ichthyander. Be strong! – And, patting the young man on the shoulder encouragingly, Salvator left Ichthyander and went to his own cell.

Sitting on a stool at a narrow table, Salvator fell into deep thought.

Like every surgeon, he knew failures. Many human lives were lost under his knife from his own mistakes before he achieved perfection. However, he never dwelled on these victims. Dozens perished, thousands were saved. This arithmetic fully satisfied him.

But he felt responsible for Ichthyander's fate. Ichthyander was his pride. He loved the young man as his finest work. Besides, he had grown attached to Ichthyander and loved him like a son. And now Ichthyander's illness and his further fate worried and troubled Salvator.

There was a quiet knock at the door of the cell.

– Come in, – said Salvator.

– Will I not disturb you, Professor? – asked the prison warden quietly.

“Not at all,” replied Salvator, getting up. “How are your wife and child feeling?”

“Thank you, they're doing well. I've sent them to my mother-in-law, far from here, to the Andes. . .”

“Yes, the mountain climate will be good for them,” Salvator replied.

The warden did not leave. Glancing at the door, he approached Salvator and spoke to him quietly:

“Professor! I owe my life to you for saving my wife. I love her as. . .

“Don't thank me, it's my duty.”

“I cannot remain in your debt,” the warden replied. “And not only that. I am a man of little education. But I read the newspapers, and I know what Professor Salvator means. Such a man must not be kept in prison with vagrants and robbers.

“My scientific friends,” Salvator said, smiling, “seem to have managed to get me placed in a sanatorium as a madman.”

“A prison sanatorium is the same as a prison,” the warden retorted, “even worse: instead of robbers, you will be surrounded by madmen. Salvator among the mad! No, no, this must not happen.”

Lowering his voice to a whisper, the warden continued:

“I've thought it all through. I didn't send my family to the mountains for nothing. I'll now arrange your escape and will hide myself. Necessity drove me here, but I hate this job. They won't find me, but you. . . you will leave this cursed country where the clergy and merchants rule. And here's something else I wanted to tell you,” he continued after some hesitation. “I'm revealing an official secret, a state secret. . .

“You don't have to reveal it,” Salvator interrupted.

"Yes, but... I can't... above all, I cannot carry out the terrible order I have received. My conscience would torment me all my life. But if I reveal this secret, my conscience will not torment me. You've done so much for me, and they... I owe nothing to the authorities who are also pushing me to commit a crime.

"Even?" Salvator asked briefly.

"Yes. I've learned that they won't give Ichthyander to Baltazar or to his guardian Zurita, although Zurita already has a document. But Zurita, despite generous bribes, will not get him because... they've decided to kill Ichthyander."

Salvator made a slight movement.

"Is that so? Continue!"

"Yes, to kill Ichthyander, – the bishop insisted on this the most, although he never uttered the word 'kill'. They gave me poison, cyanide, I believe. Tonight, I must mix the poison into the water in Ichthyander's tank. The prison doctor is bribed. He will establish that the operation you performed on him, turning him into an amphibian, was what killed him. If I don't carry out the order, they will treat me very harshly. And I have a family... Then they will kill me too, and no one will know about it. I am completely in their power. I have a past crime... minor... almost accidental... Anyway, I decided to escape and have already prepared everything for the escape. But I cannot, I do not want to kill Ichthyander. To save both of you – you and Ichthyander – in such a short time is difficult, almost impossible. But I can save you alone. I have thought it all through. I pity Ichthyander, but your life is more important. You can create another Ichthyander with your art, but no one in the world can create another Salvator like you."

Salvator approached the warden, shook his hand, and said:

"Thank you, but I cannot accept this sacrifice for myself. You could be caught and judged."

"No sacrifice! I have thought it all through."

"Wait. I cannot accept this sacrifice for myself. But if you save Ichthyander, you will do more for me than if you freed me. I am healthy, strong, and will find friends everywhere who will help me break free. But Ichthyander must be freed immediately."

"I take that as your order," said the warden.

When he left, Salvator smiled and said:

"That's better. Let the apple of discord not fall into anyone's hands."

Salvator paced the room, whispered softly: "Poor boy", approached the table, wrote something, then went to the door and knocked.

"Call the prison warden to me."

When the warden appeared, Salvator said to him:

“One more request. Can you arrange for me to meet with Ichthyander – one last meeting!”

– There is nothing easier. There is no one from the authorities here, the whole prison is at our disposal.

– Excellent. Oh, and one more request.

– I am entirely at your service.

– By freeing Ichthyander, you will do a great deal for me.

– But you, professor, have done me such a favor. . .

– Let’s say we are even, – Salvator interrupted him. – But I can and want to help your family. Here is a note. It only has an address and one letter: S – Salvator. Go to this address. He is a reliable person. If you need to hide temporarily, if you need money. . .

– But. . .

– No “buts”. Lead me quickly to Ichthyander.

Ichthyander was surprised when Salvator appeared in his cell.

Ichthyander had never seen him so sad and tender as at that moment.

– Ichthyander, my son, – said Salvator. – We have to part sooner than I thought, and perhaps for a long time. Your fate has worried me. You are surrounded by thousands of dangers. . . If you stay here, you could perish, or at best become a prisoner of Zurita or another such predator.

– And you, father?

– The court, of course, will convict me and lock me up in prison, where I will probably have to sit for two years, maybe even more. During the time I am in prison, you need to be in a safe place and as far away from here as possible. There is such a place, but it is very far from here, on the other side of South America, to the west of it, in the Great Ocean, on one of the Tuamotu Islands, otherwise known as the Low Islands. It will not be easy for you to get there, but all the dangers of the journey are incomparable to those you face here, at home, in the La Plata Bay. Yet it is easier to reach and find these islands than to avoid the nets and traps of a cunning enemy here.

Which way should I chart for you? You can head there, to the west, by rounding South America from the north or from the south. Both routes have their advantages and disadvantages. The northern route is slightly longer. Moreover, choosing this route, you would have to swim from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean through the Panama Canal, and that is dangerous: they could catch you, especially at the locks, or – with the slightest carelessness on your part – you could be crushed by a ship. The canal is not too wide or deep: the maximum

width is ninety-one meters, the depth – twelve and a half meters. The newest deep-draft ocean liners could almost touch the bottom with their keel.

But you would always swim in warm waters. Moreover, from the Panama Canal, three great ocean routes go west: two to New Zealand, one to the Fiji Islands and further. Choosing the middle path and following the steamships, perhaps even attaching yourself to them, you would almost reach your destination. At least both routes to New Zealand cover the Tuamotu Archipelago zone. You would only have to rise a bit northward.

The route via the southern tip is closer, but there you will swim in the cold southern waters, near the edge of the drifting ice, especially if you round Cape Horn on Tierra del Fuego—the southernmost tip of South America. The Strait of Magellan is extraordinarily tempestuous. For you, of course, it's not as dangerous as it is for ships and steamboats, but it's still dangerous. For sailing ships, it was a real graveyard. It's wide in the east, narrow in the west, and strewn with rocks and islets. The strong westerly winds drive the water eastwards—meaning, against you. Even you could be smashed to pieces in these whirlpools and underwater.

Therefore, I advise you to better extend your journey and go around Cape Horn rather than through the Strait of Magellan. The ocean water gradually becomes colder, and I hope that you will gradually get used to it and stay healthy. You need not worry about food supplies—they are always at hand, as is water. Since childhood, you have been accustomed to drinking seawater without any harm to your health.

Finding your way from Cape Horn to the Tuamotu Islands will be a bit more difficult for you than from the Panama Canal. From Cape Horn northwards, there are no wide oceanic highways with heavy steamship traffic. I will give you the exact longitude and latitude; you will determine them by special instruments made for you at my request. But these instruments will somewhat burden you and restrict your freedom of movement. . .

– I will take Liding with me. He will carry the load. Can I part with Liding? He must be longing for me already.

– It's hard to say who misses whom more, – Salvator smiled again. – So, Liding. Excellent. You will reach the Tuamotu Islands. You will then need to find a secluded coral island. Here is how you'll recognize it: there is a mast towering on it, and on the mast, like a weathervane, is a large fish. Not hard to remember. Perhaps you will spend a month, two, or three searching for this island—no matter: the water there is warm, there are plenty of oysters.

Salvator had trained Ichthyander to listen patiently, without interrupting, but when Salvator reached this point in his explanations, Ichthyander couldn't help himself:

– And what will I find on the island with the fish-weathervane?

– Friends. Loyal friends, their care and affection, – answered Salvator. – There lives my old friend—a scientist, Armand Villeneuve, a Frenchman, a famous oceanographer. I met and befriended him when I was in Europe many years ago. Armand Villeneuve is an interesting man, but right now I don’t have time to tell you about him. I hope you will get to know him yourself and the story that brought him to a lonely coral island in the Pacific Ocean. But he is not alone. With him lives his wife, a sweet, kind woman, a son, and a daughter—she was born on the island, she must be about seventeen years old, and the son about twenty-five.

They know you from my letters and, I am sure, will welcome you into their family as one of their own. . . – Salvator hesitated. – Of course, now you will have to spend most of your time in the water. But for friendly meetings and conversations, you will be able to come ashore for a few hours a day. Perhaps your health will improve, and you will be able to stay on air as long as you can in water.

In Armand Villeneuve, you will find a second father. And you will be an invaluable assistant to him in his scientific work on oceanography. What you know about the ocean and its inhabitants would suffice for a dozen professors. – Salvator smirked. – Those oddball experts asked you in court according to a template, what day, month, date it is, and you couldn’t answer simply because all this was of no interest to you. Had they asked at least about underwater currents, water temperatures, salinity in the La Plata estuary and its surroundings, – from your answers, a whole scientific volume could be compiled. How much more you will be able to learn—and then convey your knowledge to people—if your underwater excursions are guided by such an experienced person and brilliant scientist as Armand Villeneuve. Both of you, I am certain, will create a work on oceanography that will make an epoch in the development of this science, will resound throughout the world. And your name will stand alongside Armand Villeneuve’s—I know him, he will insist on it. You will serve science and thereby all humanity.

But if you stay here, you will be forced to serve the base interests of ignorant, greedy people. I am sure, in the pure, transparent waters of the atoll and in the family of Armand Villeneuve, you will find a peaceful harbor and be happy.

One more piece of advice. As soon as you find yourself in the ocean, which may even happen tonight, – swim immediately home through the underwater tunnel (at home now there is only faithful Jim), take navigational instruments, a knife, and the rest, find Liding, and set off on your journey before the sun rises over the ocean.

Farewell, Ichthyander! No, see you soon!..

For the first time in his life, Salvator hugged, kissed Ichthyander tightly. Then he smiled, patted the young man on the shoulder, and said:

– Such a fine young man will not be lost anywhere! – and quickly left the room.

Escape

Olsen had just returned from the button factory and sat down to have lunch. Someone knocked on the door.

– Who is it? – Olsen shouted, annoyed that he was disturbed.

The door opened, and Guttieri entered the room.

– Guttieri! You? Where from? – exclaimed Olsen, surprised and delighted, getting up from his chair.

– Hello, Olsen, – said Guttieri. – Continue your lunch. – And, leaning against the doors, Guttieri declared: – I can't live with my husband and his mother anymore. Zurita... he dared to hit me. And I left him. Completely left, Olsen.

This news made Olsen interrupt his lunch.

– What a surprise! – he exclaimed. – Sit down! You can barely stand on your feet. But what about? You used to say: “What God has joined together, let no man separate”? Resign? All the better. I'm glad. You returned to your father?

– Father doesn't know anything. Zurita would have found me at my father's place and would have taken me back to himself. I stayed with a friend.

– And... and what are you going to do next?

– I will get a job at the factory. I came to ask you, Olsen, to help me find a job at the factory... any job.

Olsen shook his head with concern.

– It's very difficult right now. Although I will, of course, try. – And, after thinking, Olsen asked: – And how will your husband react to this?

– I don't want to know about him.

“But the husband will want to know where his wife is,” Olsen said with a smile. “Don't forget that you're in Argentina. Zurita will find you, and then... You know yourself that he won't leave you alone. The law and public opinion are on his side.”

Gutierrez thought for a moment and then resolutely said:

“Well then! In that case, I'll go to Canada, Alaska...”

“Greenland, to the North Pole!” And more seriously, Olsen said: “We'll think it over. It's not safe for you to stay here. I myself have long been planning to get out of here. Why did I come here, to Latin America? The clerical spirit is still too strong here. It's a pity that we couldn't escape from here then. But Zurita managed to kidnap you, and our tickets and our money were lost. Now you probably don't have any more money for a steamship ticket to Europe than I do. But we don't necessarily have to go straight to Europe. If we, – I say ‘we’ because I won't leave you until you're in a safe place, – if we can get at least to

the neighboring Paraguay, or even better – to Brazil, then it will be harder for Zurita to find you there, and we will have time to prepare to move to the States or to Europe. . . Do you know that Dr. Salvator is in prison with Ichthyander?”

“Ichthyander? He’s been found? Why is he in prison? Can I see him?” Gutierrez bombarded Olsen with questions.

“Yes, Ichthyander is in prison, and he can again become Zurita’s slave. A ridiculous trial, ridiculous charges against Salvator and Ichthyander.”

“That’s terrible! Can’t he be saved?”

“I’ve been trying all the time, but to no avail. But unexpectedly, our ally turned out to be the prison warden himself. Tonight we must free Ichthyander. I’ve just received two short notes: one from Salvator, the other from the warden.”

“I want to see Ichthyander!” said Gutierrez. “Can I go with you?”

Olsen thought for a moment.

“I think not,” he replied. “And it’s better for you not to see Ichthyander.”

“But why?”

“Because Ichthyander is sick. He’s sick as a human but healthy as a fish.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Ichthyander can no longer breathe air. What will happen if he sees you again? It will be very hard for him, yes, maybe for you too. Ichthyander will want to see you, but life in the air will ultimately kill him.”

Guttiere lowered her head.

“Yes, perhaps you’re right. . .” she said after thinking.

“An insurmountable barrier has been laid between him and all other people—the ocean. Ichthyander is doomed. From now on, water becomes his native and only element.”

“But how will he live there? Alone in the boundless ocean, a man among fish and sea monsters?”

“He was happy in his underwater world, until. . .”

Guttiere blushed.

“Now, of course, he won’t be as happy as before.”

“Stop it, Olsen,” Guttiere said sadly.

“But time heals all. Perhaps he will even regain his lost peace. So he will live—among fish and sea monsters. And if a shark doesn’t eat him prematurely, he will grow old, to gray hair. . . And death? Death is the same everywhere. . .”

The twilight deepened, and the room was almost dark.

“However, it’s time for me to go,” said Olsen, getting up. Guttiere stood up as well.

“But can I at least see him from afar?” Guttiere asked.

“Of course, as long as you don’t reveal your presence.”

“Yes, I promise that.”

It was completely dark when Olsen, dressed as a water carrier, entered the prison yard from the side of Coronel Diaz [Coronel Diaz is one of the streets leading to the prison].

The watchman called out to him:

– Where are you headed?

– I’m taking sea water to the “devil,” – Olsen replied, as the prison warden had taught him.

All the guards knew that there was an extraordinary prisoner in the jail – the “sea devil,” who sat in a tank filled with seawater because he could not tolerate fresh water. This seawater was periodically changed, being brought in a large barrel set on a dray.

Olsen drove up to the prison building, turned the corner where the kitchen was located and where the door for staff entry into the prison was. The warden had already prepared everything. The guards, who usually stood in the corridor and at the entrance, had been sent away on various pretexts. Ichthyander, accompanied by the warden, freely left the prison.

– Now, jump into the barrel quickly! – said the warden.

Ichthyander did not keep him waiting.

– Let’s go!

Olsen cracked his whip, drove out of the prison yard and leisurely proceeded down Avenida Alvar, past the Ritero station, the freight depot.

Behind him, not far away, the shadow of a woman flickered.

It was already a dark night when Olsen left the city. The road ran along the seashore. The wind was getting stronger. Waves surged onto the shore and noisily crashed against the rocks.

Olsen looked around. There was no one to be seen on the road. Only in the distance, the lights of a fast-moving car were twinkling. “Let it pass.”

Buzzing and blinding with its lights, the car sped toward the city and disappeared into the distance.

“It’s time!” – Olsen turned around and signaled to Guttiere to hide behind the rocks. Then he knocked on the barrel and shouted:

“We’ve arrived! Get out!”

A head appeared from the barrel.

Ichthyander looked around, quickly climbed out, and jumped to the ground.

“Thank you, Olsen,” said the young man, firmly squeezing the giant’s hand with his wet one.

Ichthyander was breathing rapidly, as if in an asthma attack.

“It’s nothing. Goodbye! Be careful. Don’t swim too close to the shore. Beware of people, so you don’t get captured again.”

Even Olsen didn’t know what instructions Ichthyander had received from Salvator.

“Yes, yes,” Ichthyander gasped. “I will swim far away, to the quiet coral islands, where no ship ever comes. Thank you, Olsen!” And the young man ran to the sea.

Right at the very waves, he suddenly turned around and shouted:

“Olsen, Olsen! If you ever see Guttieri, send her my regards and tell her that I will always remember her!”

The young man plunged into the sea and cried out:

“Goodbye, Guttieri!” and dived into the water.

“Goodbye, Ichthyander. . .” Guttieri quietly replied, standing behind the rocks.

The wind was getting stronger and nearly knocked people off their feet. The sea was raging, the sand hissed, the stones clattered.

Someone’s hand squeezed Guttieri’s hand.

“Let’s go, Guttieri!” Olsen said kindly.

He led Guttieri onto the road.

Guttieri looked back at the sea once more and, leaning on Olsen’s arm, headed toward the city.

Salvator served his sentence, returned home, and resumed his scientific work. He is preparing for some distant journey.

Christo continues to work for him.

Zurita acquired a new schooner and is pearl fishing in the Gulf of California. And although he is not the wealthiest man in America, he still cannot complain about his fate. The tips of his mustache, like the needle of a barometer, indicate high pressure.

Guttiere divorced her husband and married Olsen. They moved to New York and work at a cannery. On the coast of the La Plata Bay, no one remembers the “sea devil”.

Only sometimes, on sultry nights, old fishermen, hearing an unknown sound in the night’s silence, tell the young:

“That’s how the ‘sea devil’ blew into the shell,” and they begin to tell legends about him.

Only one person in Buenos Aires does not forget Ichthyander.

All the boys in the city know the old, half-mad beggar Indian.

“There goes the father of the ‘sea devil’!”

But the Indian pays no attention to the boys. Every time he meets a Spaniard, the old man turns around, spits after him, and mutters some curse.

But the police do not bother old Balthazar. His madness is quiet; he does no harm to anyone.

Only when a storm rises at sea does the old Indian become unusually restless.

He hurries to the seashore and, risking being washed away by the water, stands on the coastal rocks and shouts, day and night, until the storm subsides:

– Ichthyander! Ichthyander! My son!..

But the sea keeps its secret.

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