

JOSEP PLA

One from Begur

Translated from Catalan by Peter Bush

OF THE COUNTLESS PEOPLE who visited the Pla farmstead when I was an adolescent I have distinct, very precise memories of two men.

In the summer a traveling musician used to drop by, a short, even-tempered old man, with sad eyes, a long, drooping mustache, and such pale white skin he looked as if he'd been boiled or at least that he would faint at any moment. He roamed the world with a violin he kept in a bread sack as his only baggage. Although he was a tramp, a vintage tramp of the old school, he was a relatively dapper dresser, which was in a way a requirement of his profession; he went around farmsteads, hamlets, and villages and was hired to play on official holidays or entertain at marriages or baptisms in celebrations held at home. He wore a straw hat with a broad black band, a celluloid collar, round cuffs, and a green tie fixed on a piece of wire that hung from his top button. However, when he was on the road, he took off his tie, wrapped it in a piece of paper, and tucked the small bundle in his pocket. Only his huge, dusty shoes betrayed a messy, tottering way of life.

His musical repertoire was limited; he played a mazurka—his signature tune—a languid little waltz, and two or three ancient rural airs. At the time country folk had no pretensions and were happy with very little. Besides, the artist was a pleasant, likable fellow, and if his repertoire was restricted and hardly diverse, he was always ready to play his tunes for as long as his honorable customers wanted. He found it so quick and easy to roll out his tunes that the youngsters tired of tripping the light fantastic before he wearied of scraping his bow over his violin's ravaged strings. He was highly respected by everyone and was invited to eat at their table and even offered the odd spare coin, and rarely had to sleep in the barn, something that is a boon for tramps, particularly those who are the worse for wear. There was always a bed in the house for him, and, come the morning, out of respect for his gray hair nobody gave him a wake-up call. He could sleep in and get up when he felt like it. That fine fellow had another excellent side: he left the places where he lodged without

making a fuss, and tried to do so unnoticed, not saying a word. Nothing is more wearisome for sensitive souls than to be forced to contemplate the existence of so many people condemned to sleeping rough, to poverty and insecurity, and be unable to offer a helping hand. Feeling pity is tolerable, not to say pleasant, provided one doesn't have to feel too much. If people go too far, it can be counterproductive and have the opposite effect. It can lead to icy responses. That wretched musician understood that his poverty-stricken life and destitute air shouldn't overtax other people's feelings, so when he'd eaten, slept, and received the pittance they gave him, he tiptoed off—as they say—without so much as a by your leave. Thus his presence never overly stirred anyone's conscience and his subtle sense of tact was much appreciated.

In the winter a man from Begur by the name of Miner occasionally called in; he was one-armed and seemed shy and distant. He engaged in long conversations with my father and always spoke in a deep, muted tone.

As a young man he preferred to fish with explosives, and one day, by the Fitor lighthouse, hoping to slaughter sea bass, he kept his hand on the charge for a tenth of a second too long and the device shattered his wrist as if it had been severed by an axe. He always gave me goose bumps when he talked in his gruff, monotonous voice about the pool of blood that spread over the sea and the rim of the boat after the accident. He had strength enough to reach the Sa Tuna beach by his own means; he wasn't the kind to ask others for help. He kept the accident quiet and not a single word got into print. What's more, he was lucky with his doctor and his arm turned out fine: he was fitted with a first-rate stump. Even so, he could never again call on his truncated arm; it was completely useless. He generally wore a jacket so he could put his dead-arm sleeve inside a pocket. After such a horrific accident, another man would have turned to begging but he never came to the farmhouse for charity. He came—as he himself said—to relax and while away the time. Throughout the Begur winter he never scrounged, and I don't think he ever asked for anything. He learned to do countless things with his remaining arm and reckoned he did them better than before, because he had to concentrate more. He couldn't use much muscle, but resolved everything with guile, doing so perfectly, with a peace of mind the crippled often possess.

In fact, the main traits of his character blossomed after that unfortunate accident. His individualism became more marked. He'd never been fond of working for others; he now turned into a complete loner, a free agent disconnected from what people call everyday life. It became impossible

to say, with any confidence, where you might find him. He had what one could describe as his official abode, a large half ruin of a house on carrer de Vera in Begur, though he often went months without going there. He had the key to a hut on every beach. He gallivanted around the coves following no fixed timetable. Poacher, fisher of eels in the Ter marshes, smuggler, cardplayer and money-dealer, Miner cannily exploited everything direct and elemental the area could offer. Endless gossip circulated about his activities and a time came when the Guardia Civil decided to keep an eye on him. This tussle was completely wrongheaded. It could never have been a tussle over anything on paper, as Miner was mysteriously discreet. I mean it would have been hard to imagine they could ever have prosecuted him. Nevertheless, for that very reason, the tussle—a tussle over the tiniest things—became fierce in a restrained kind of way. One day, a perfectly aimed bullet drilled a hole through a civil guard's three-cornered helmet. Nobody could say exactly who had fired that bullet or from where . . .

“DURING THE 1914 WAR . . .”

“Go on, Miner, go on . . .” said my father.

It was a winter's day and the north wind was blowing. When Miner called on a day like that, my father took him to an arbor of cypress trees behind the farmhouse. The temperature was ideal in the shelter those old trees gave. The sun blistered down. The wind blasted over the fields. The brightness in the air and sky was dazzling. In that shady spot, the roar of the wind seemed to deepen your sense of tranquility. I'd sit next to my father.

“As I was saying, then, two German gentlemen came to see me during the 1914 war. I'd known them for years because I'd had dealings with them in the cork trade and they were very congenial. They said: ‘Miner, we should have a word . . .’ ‘I don't know what there is to have a word about,’ I replied, ‘no doubt you will tell me.’ ‘Have you anything on this evening?’ ‘No, gentlemen, I don't.’ ‘It would be best if we had a quiet word where nobody can bother us.’ ‘This part of the country is ideal for a quiet chat,’ I answered. There's not a soul about at night.’ ‘How about along the road with the traffic lights, past the third telegraph post, after the last houses?’ ‘All right, what time suits you? Ten o'clock?’ ‘No, one o'clock,’ they replied after conferring for a while. ‘Agreed, one o'clock it is. I'll be there.’

“At midnight I took a roundabout route to that spot. I stretched out on a patch of dry graybeard away from the road and lit up a cheroot. It was a muggy, murky August night. There was a light, clammy breeze. The sky

seemed overcast. Lightning flashed over distant Canonigó. From time to time a hot gust blew. Everything pointed to the start of summer's stifling heat. It was a solitary place, without a sound where everything seemed to hang in midair. From my vantage point I could see the distant walls of Begur in the yellow glow from an electric bulb. I smoked and thought about those German lads. What could they want from me? I started to think how well they spoke the language of our country. Talking to people who don't understand you can be dangerous and dull as ditchwater.

"At the time we'd agreed I heard footsteps along the road. Theirs were good-quality shoes. I went over and whispered: 'And a goodnight to you.' It was them. But my first surprise was that they were three and not two. I glanced at the newcomer. It was a pitch-black night. I didn't think I'd ever seen him before. He was young and fair like the others, but taller and thinner. He smoked a pipe and I noticed how he kept looking me up and down. The others, who could see I was on edge, said he was a close friend of theirs, and completely trustworthy. When the stranger realized we were talking about him, he offered me his hand, though he didn't say a word. We shook hands.

"'Fire ahead . . .' I said to start the ball rolling.

"'If you like, we can take a walk. We have the time.'

"'You have no urgent business to see to?'

"'No, sir, I rarely have anything urgent . . .'

"'Good,' said the young man who was clearly in charge, when he started on up the road, 'we've known you for a long time. We think you know the locality like the back of your hand. If we can reach an accord, you could be very useful to us. We don't think anyone knows this coast like you do . . .'

"'From Port Vendres to Garraf, inch by inch . . .'

"'Precisely. I'd now like to ask you a question. How do you fancy earning a good weekly wage for doing next to nothing?'

"'What's your idea of a good weekly wage?'

"'A hundred pesetas a week.'

"'Can't argue with that: it's a good weekly whack. So what do I have to do for a hundred pesetas a week? Cook your meals?'

"I saw the two Germans I knew smile broadly. The stranger—though he didn't seem to understand a word—also smiled, no doubt following their lead.

"'You'd have to board . . . Listen carefully: you'd have to board a submarine . . .'

“A submarine, what on earth . . .?’

“A German submarine . . .’

“And where is this German submarine?’

“You don’t need to worry about that. That’s completely secondary.’

“And what could a poor fellow like me do on a submarine?’

“You’d act as pilot . . .’

“Piloting what . . .?’

“Piloting the submarine along the coast.’

“Ah, now there’s a thought!’

“I mean . . .’ said the young man, after hesitating for a moment, ‘that while the submarine is sailing, you’ll have nothing to do. You’ll obviously be subject to ship’s discipline. Now, when the submarine is close inshore, you must answer every question the captain asks and answer him clearly. If he orders you to take the helm, you must take on that responsibility.’

“And that’s all.’

“That’s all. What do you reckon?’

“And what if something goes badly wrong? What do you think my skin is worth?’

“You must nominate someone you trust completely,’ the German replied in a strange, stiff voice, ‘and there will be proper compensation. A man is worth three thousand pesetas.’

“That’s fine. But what if, for example . . .?’

“Don’t worry. It’s all catered for. If you have to disembark, we’ll give you a wonderful reward.’

“I thought it over for a moment and said nothing. I was rather weary of my dreary life in Begur, of walking up and down to and from its beaches. The tobacco trade had fallen away and the Majorcans seemed to have disappeared. It had been a poor summer and winter wasn’t looking flush. I was a bag of nerves because of the Guardia Civil. I immediately agreed to their proposal—at least to myself. Naturally I was slightly put off by the German’s bossy manner. It was quite different to when we were chatting on the beach! On the other hand, I’ve always been one for adventures . . . To hit the thing on its head I said I needed to sleep on it for a couple of nights.

“Of course,’ chorused the two Germans.

“And supposing I accept, when do we start?’

“Straightaway! You’ll hear from us.’

“A few drops of rain started falling and we walked back. The heat was oppressive. We speeded up, in silence. The huge drops were few and far

between and plashed on the dusty road. We stopped in the spot where we'd met half an hour before. The young man who had taken the lead so far—a tall blue-eyed fair muscular fellow—suddenly gave me a strange look and said: 'The conversation we've just had is confidential. Do you know what the word "confidential" means?'

"Yes, sir . . ."

"At the start of our exchanges, I said we held to you to be a friend we could trust one hundred percent. Do you know what a hundred percent trustworthy person is . . . ? Yes, of course you do. I must also tell you that if there is the slightest indiscretion or leak, you should realize what might happen . . . You'd pay very dearly . . ."

"Of course, of course . . ." I laughed quite spontaneously, though the German's chill tone shocked me.

"In the meantime, the rain had got worse and the sky looked even more threatening. We said goodbye. I saw them continue rather stiffly along the road toward the village. I took the shortcut, put my jacket over my head, and was back home in a flash.

"ALL THAT HAPPENED on a Tuesday. The following Sunday evening, past midnight, I was drinking a beer in the bar run by my old friend Judas Elias in Estartit. The café had emptied out come one o'clock. The owner said he wanted to close. 'However, if you want to wait for the sardine fishers, I can leave you these chairs in the street and a table.' I thanked him for his kindness, because I don't know where I'd have found a bed at that time of night. The oil lamps slowly went out and everything sank into a deep silence. You could barely hear the sea. It was a still, becalmed night.

"I don't know how much time went by. I fell asleep; all of a sudden I noticed a man standing next to me. I blinked as I woke up and caught a glimpse of a pale hazy dawn light over the sea. I'd been asleep longer than I'd imagined, even though summer nights are short. I heard him say: 'Are you Miner from Begur?'

"It was a voice I'd heard before. It was the voice of the skipper of a small fishing smack from Estartit, an acquaintance of mine. I'd brought tobacco ashore with him on other occasions and he was known as Genoese. We had a long chat. He gave me my first weekly wage packet. Then added that as 'there was nothing in sight,' I simply had to wait. There was no knowing how long the wait might be. Meanwhile, to avoid arousing suspicion, we agreed I'd sign up on the boat he skippered and we'd go and try our luck with some lobster pots near the Isles Medes. I'd lodge with Genoese's

son-in-law and that way everything would look aboveboard. Nothing came up in our conversation that hadn't been previously agreed.

"My life in Estartit started to be very boring. Genoese's family was very friendly. Both the skipper and his son said very little. They were people who got on with their lives, honest, hardworking types. Every week they paid me the promised weekly wage. In the early morning if the weather was good we'd go and haul up the lobster pots. We'd return in the afternoon. These forays were a pretext to familiarize me with the sea beyond the Medes. That doesn't mean we caught nothing. There were lots of lobsters in our patch although we lost a number of catches when the bad autumn weather began. At the equinox, with the storms from the east, we lost our markers. Then we fished longline. In fact, the main point of our comings and goings was to watch out for the submarine on which I was to embark. Week after week went by like that. In the course of our many trips to the empty sea beyond the Isles Medes, Genoese spoke to me off and on, and quite offhandedly, about the work I was involved in. I don't think he was very enthusiastic. He'd been a submarine pilot the year before. He'd refused to let his son-in-law take his place, when, on the excuse that that way of life didn't suit him, he managed to disentangle himself. 'I don't know if you'll like it,' he'd say as if he were talking to himself, though making sure I heard. 'Frankly, I don't know if you'll like it,' he added in that gruff, deadpan voice of his. I didn't dare ask what was behind his views. The drowsiness of life in Estartit had stirred my spirit of adventure. I started to think I was capable of anything—of any escapade whatsoever. When that cautious old salt—who was perhaps a little past it—looked at me, and constantly worried about a northerly wind blowing up, I decided his views were shaped by considerations of age and that kind of work was for younger, bolder people. I tired of hearing him repeat his litany of 'I don't know if you'll like it' in such an impersonal, unpleasant tone, and one day told him to stop worrying on my behalf. I was amazed how he reacted to my mild remarks, as if I'd issued some kind of challenge. He gave me a withering look, then chuckled under his gray mustache and didn't say a word. I don't know if he wanted to send out the message that he felt contempt for me. At any rate, that's how it seemed.

"IT WAS A DULL DEAD AFTERNOON. The days had gotten shorter. We were in the middle of December. Daily life was beginning to pall. When it was fine, we went out fishing. Once we were done, we laid anchor for a couple of hours in case they turned up. If we couldn't take the boat out,

we spent hours by the fireside or dealing cards. On Sundays, a hurdy-gurdy played in an abandoned warehouse and people danced. I never managed to get off with anyone, married or single. An unfriendly lot.

“That afternoon we sailed off into the dim light of dusk. The sky was gray and low. Covered in wisps of white, gray and matte mist, the horizon seemed to have moved nearer. The air was heavy and humid and a light, languid southwesterly blew over a sea that was a dirty tin color. The breeze gave you a headache and puckered up tiny, choppy waves that splashed to their death on the beach. Countless hungry, shrieking seagulls circled above the sea. The day seemed ready-made for staying by the hearth in the lethargic round of winter life. In any case, it wasn’t cold and there were no signs of gales or rain.

“When we passed the Gran Meda, the horizon opened before us and we saw a boat rigged up as a schooner close to land. It looked like a small coastal trader. Its sails were furled and it seemed to be at anchor. Genoese gazed at the boat looking highly intrigued, though he said nothing. Then a hint of a smile came to his lips. The schooner was less than a mile away and, although its masts were a blur in the mist, it stood out clearly enough.

“‘It looks like an Italian . . .’ Genoese’s son suddenly blurted out.

“‘An Italian?’ rasped his father. ‘Why do you say that, you fool? Don’t you recognize it?’

“Then added in the same tone: ‘We will drop anchor right here. We’ll soon have work to do . . . Miner, your time is up. They’ve come for you.’

“We dropped anchor and in the meantime dusk fell. For a second the mist seemed to thicken, but it wasn’t the case: that was an effect of the vanishing light. As soon as the last long fishing line was pulled in we rowed silently toward the schooner. Meanwhile Genoese lit a lamp he placed on the rim of the boat that flashed green. A couple of seconds later we received back a very faint signal in the same color. Then the beam from the Meda light began to swirl. The wind had dropped and the sea was lathery. It was extremely humid and the air was heavy. When we reached the beam of the schooner, we saw no signs of life: no people moving, no noise of any kind.

“‘Good night,’ shouted Genoese gruffly.

“The silhouette of what looked like a large stout man appeared over the ship’s rail and replied: ‘Aye, and a good night to you!’

“The Majorcan let down a rope. We moored our boat to it.

“‘You got the goods?’ asked the stout man.

“‘He’s right here . . .’ answered Genoese, pointing at me.

“ ‘He can get on whenever he likes. . . . We’re in a hurry. We must set sail in the early hours. Have you got any fresh fish?’

‘The skipper showed him a basket of hog- and scorpion fish.

“While he unraveled a rope ladder, I said goodbye to Genoese and his son. The Majorcan was quite surprised to see I only had one arm that was any use. We hoisted up the basket of fish. The Estartit father and son sailed home. I thought they left unmoved, with no regrets.

“The Majorcan was talkative. He wasn’t the skipper; he was the first mate. He said the crew was asleep because they’d just sailed from the northern coast of Majorca to the Isles Medes—against the current and into a driving wind—and they were exhausted. The schooner was carrying a supply of fuel for the submarine. He asked after the fishermen who’d just left, whether they were to be trusted or not.

“ ‘It’s quite fair in these waters,’ he added. ‘The Meda rocks would shield us against the northwesterly, but there’s too much traffic here, we can’t hang around. Once we’ve done the business, best scarper, right?’

“ ‘Is that right. . . .?’ I agreed vaguely.

“He didn’t respond but indicated I should follow him. When we reached the poop, I saw a cable extending into the water and a long shape, like a giant fish. As my eyes adapted, I could make out the blur of a submarine turret in the early nighttime glow. Even though the darkness meant I saw things more with the eyes of my imagination than with my real ones, I thought it was fascinating. It was obvious that was the submarine I’d been waiting for over so many weeks. When I suddenly saw the palest orange steam rising from the turret, all my doubts disappeared. The schooner was acting as a buoy for the submarine. I couldn’t tell you how long I stood on the poop deck staring down. A good long time, I expect. I only recall there was a moment when I asked the Majorcan a question, as I thought he was next to me. But nobody replied. He’d tired of waiting and I expect he’d gone off to work without telling me, respecting my natural curiosity.

“I saw a small crack of greasy light in the galley and went over. I have to confess that we men who’ve always sailed in fishing boats are always thrilled to be on the deck of a vessel like that. Everything seems more spacious and well appointed and rather fantastic. It’s like being a child again. ‘In this ship,’ you think, ‘you could go down to Davy Jones’s locker.’ A lovely, succulent smell of fish stew wafted my way from that same crack. The cook, who heard me tramping around, invited me inside. While he stirred the potatoes with a big spoon, he told me he was from Ibiza via Oran. Then he put the rings of fish on the stack of potatoes, poured water

over everything, and stoked the fire. The small cabin was filled with an out-of-this-world aroma — out of paradise. The pot had only been boiling for two minutes when I heard footsteps on deck and immediately heard people's voices. I expect the smell from the scorpion-fish gravy had woken up the crew. They opened the door looking dreamy-eyed; their faces and eyes soon lit up after the first sniff. It was instantaneous.

“They carried the stew-pot up to the poop deck and we sat in a circle and ate supper in complete silence. Five men and the skipper. I don't recall their faces because an oil lamp next to the stew gave out very little light. However, the way they stayed so quiet made me realize that they were very practical people, because of the kind of work they did. Old smugglers, no doubt. The sea demands silence and calm. Everyone was starving. It was a pitch-black night. The sea was tranquil and seemed mysterious. The only sound—and that barely—was the small scraping noise of the hemp anchor ropes against the ship's rail. The place was completely solitary. The Meda light burned like a firefly hanging in the air. Toward the end of supper, I thought the pale orange glow floating above the submarine turret had thickened and become more visible to the eye.

“AFTER SUPPER, they lowered the schooner's dinghies into the water and began the operation of transferring the fuel the vessel was carrying in a mass of drums to the tanks of the submarine. Any operation out to sea is tricky, but I could see at a glance that those men were highly experienced. Though they were working in the pitch dark, they transferred the liquid via the dinghies completely calmly, making almost no noise, with amazing skill and orderliness. The night was on their side: the sea was still and empty, and it was humid rather than cold.

“I didn't take part. Smoking my pipe, I leaned on the railing and watched them hard at it. It took several hours. It was past midnight when the first mate came over accompanied by a tall man who was wearing a sailor's cap and a leather raincoat. I didn't immediately recognize him, but after I'd shaken his hand and looked him in the face, I saw it was the same man who had accompanied the two Germans when I met them that night in Begur. I understood almost everything he said because he spoke a smattering of Spanish. The Majorcan introduced him as the submarine's commander. Although he seemed to be following the loading operations with a mixture of irritation and impatience, he struck me as being open and friendly. We watched them for ages from the poop, but whenever the beam from the Meda light dragged over the water and seemed to strike—or maybe that was an illusion—the sopping wet, iron frame of

the submarine, the commander clenched his teeth. He'd have been much happier eighty miles from land. It was as if he felt we were boxed in.

"Finally, the transfer was completed. It was the middle of the night. A wind had blown up inland. I moved to the submarine in the last trip the dinghies made. I was traveling light—a bag with a change of clothes—and didn't make them waste a moment. The commander was in the turret. The submarine switched on its engines that had been on standby. The men from the schooner released their moorings. You could hear the halyards squeal as they hoisted the mainsail. The moment we moved off, I felt the iron hulk judder, first almost imperceptibly, increasing until every hinge in the vessel vibrated. From the foot of the turret we saw the schooner switch on its sidelights. The commander glanced at me and laughed. With a back wind, its sail billowing, gearing up for a sirocco, the Majorcan made rapid headway. We turned our prow eastward. We soon lost sight of the schooner. We proceeded quickly. The Meda light faded. As we forged ahead, the commander seemed to calm down.

"When the engines were turned on I felt as happy as a small child, as if I'd been released from the terrible boredom of the last few months. The vessel was flying at a pace and I felt I was in a really fast boat, much faster than any I'd sailed in over recent years. Hardly rippled by the wind, the sea was so still the submarine moved effortlessly forward. It was like sailing across a lake. However, after half an hour I started to feel the engine vibrating on the iron hull. It wasn't a great din; the engines turned with rather a muffled hum. But the juddering was so violent it seemed to penetrate the bones in your legs and climb up your body until your teeth started to click together most unpleasantly. It felt as if someone was shaking the outside of your body. The vibrations reached into your guts. I felt forced to lock my jaws tightly together—the commander was by my side. It was exhausting. I felt anxious, increasingly so, as we continued to cut through the water. The cold took hold of me. A cold from within, as if my bone marrow had frozen. But now wasn't the time to give in. I kept up appearances until the commander decided it was time to retire. It was dawn. To the west land hovered like an uncertain shadow, veiled in grayish mist. We'd traveled more than twenty-five miles. The sea was white and empty. Damp drops dripped on my eyelids. They rested there like a slug and made me feel colder than ever; I shivered. A time came when I didn't know whether I was shivering from the cold or the vibrations of the submarine.

"WE CLAMBERED DOWN the metal-rung ladder. The lukewarm tem-

perature immediately put me in better spirits. I thought there was less vibrating. Perhaps the submarine slowed down. I followed the commander to a small bedroom. By the dazzling light of an electric bulb, I tried to imagine what I must look like: in poor shape, I expect. The commander filled two cups of cognac—two big aluminum cups—and silently pushed one my way. I gulped it down without flinching.

“He then signaled to me to accompany him and we left the bedroom. The hazy glare inside the submarine would sometimes turn to an oily glow when reflected off the surface of a machine. We walked down a long corridor. Inside the submarine was just that, a long narrow corridor with a large number of things stowed either side, admirably tidy in their rightful places. Rather than the things themselves—for if I started on them the inventory would be endless—I was struck by the neat way they were organized. For a man like me, used to arranging stuff any old how, it seemed somewhat manic. What’s more, it was all iron and that made for even eerier effects. As we proceeded down the corridor to the poop we walked past two or three crewmen—very young-looking lads in mechanics’ overalls. They stood to attention and saluted the commander. I thought their skins were a bright yellow and that made them look tired out. However, perhaps it was only the greenish-yellow light floating inside.

“We reached a spot with berths up against the ribs of the vessel. There were three to the ceiling on each side and nearly all were taken. I could hear one lad snoring evenly. The commander pointed me to one that was empty and left. I stripped off and climbed in. The bunk was narrow and gave little room for movement. But I was so tired I was soon sleeping the sleep of the just.

“When I woke up the next morning, I didn’t feel at all well. My head felt heavy. My senses seemed to have sunk into some peculiarly thick substance. It was an effort to sit up. As if my whole body was surrendering to some invisible, spongy pressure that was both heavy and choking. I was surprised how long it took to get a clear grasp on my surroundings. I felt poisoned by a kind of air I’d never breathed before, one that had spread through my body tissue via my lungs. Yes, that was it: I was being poisoned by air that was stale, if not exactly polluted. I was used to the open-air life and have always been sensitive to everything that comes in via the nose. My sense of smell appeared to be impregnated by a gas that had entered my innermost cells and sent me to sleep. The faint, hazy light floating in that iron cylinder was unreal. I made a big effort, and now

dressed, walked toward the turret. As I drew nearer, the air became purer and the light brighter. The turret was open. The submarine was sailing abovewater. I climbed up the iron ladder and poked my head outside. Some sailors were on guard duty. It was a dull, gray day with a very low sky; the odd drop of rain fell. The horizon had closed in; there was no wind and the sea was still calm. I tried to figure out where we were, but with no sight of land that was impossible. With its engines turned down, the submarine was making slow progress. It was on patrol. Evidently expecting something to happen. Now and then I thought I must be on-board a smugglers' boat waiting for the fateful hour to head to an exact spot along the coast to unload.

"Contact with fresh air cleared my head and the drowsy buzz in my head slowly faded. When I felt more in control, I went back down inside. That was when my pituitary gave me a real sense of the air floating there. It wasn't the fetid or smelly stink of decomposing matter. On the contrary, it was all clinically clean, tidy and sterilized. But it *was* air I had never breathed before. It was air charged with the fumes from fuel oil, lubricants, mineral oils, human odors, greasy flock, and the acrid stink from the engine room and all that iron plating. I'd never breathed an atmosphere like that and couldn't possibly describe the smell. Perhaps if life had led me to work in a place with machines, I might be able to give you an idea of that air, though I doubt it. I'd always been a woodcock that could tell wild pine from cultivated pine and that stench was so new to me and so repellent I could never have got used to it. It wasn't fetid. It was worse. It was air I couldn't adapt to.

"The commander reappeared and ushered me into his small cabin. A little table had been laid. He sat on his bunk and asked me to sit by the table. We spoke at length. He said we were patrolling twenty-five miles off the coast between Sant Sebastià and Cap Creus and, if nothing changed, we would stay in these waters for several days. He seemed much calmer than on the previous night. He gave the impression that he was absolutely confident in what he was doing and couldn't even imagine that danger was around the corner. He was a pleasant, really nice fellow. He laughed and said that way of life was soporific, but he was sure we could stay on the surface for several days, and that was always better than being underwater. He asked me if I played chess, but, as I only play draughts, he promised to challenge me to a few games of draughts. I told him the air in his vessel gave me headaches and that sometimes I felt strangely queasy. He laughed and replied that I should ignore it; it was

nothing to worry about.

“Then a sailor served lunch. A mug of hot broth, boiled greens, and a slice of salt fish that had been soaked, and stewed plums. Beer to drink. I wasn’t hungry, but I’d not eaten for so long I knew I had to eat something. It was all well presented and cooked, but I couldn’t say what it tasted of. Rather: it all tasted the same, a taste that was completely impregnated by the foul air floating inside that submarine. The commander said the bread was excellent. It was served in very thin slices, a very dark toasted color, with a crust that was practically black. I tried it as it came and then buttered. I didn’t like it either way. To be frank, the butter seemed the substance that most had the greasy oil flavor the whole lunch had. I can’t say I’ve ever eaten a lot of butter. But I’m sure that stuff had nothing in common, in terms of taste, with what they sell in this country. It tasted of axle grease. It was disgusting. The commander, who saw I was forcing a slice of bread down, told me I didn’t have to. At the end of the meal, smiling as broadly as ever, he poured me a glass of cognac. It was the only thing that didn’t seem impregnated. I left the table with quite an empty stomach. That was the least of it. I left the table with an extremely unpleasant sense of physical discomfort — as if I’d eaten something so alien my body couldn’t digest it. I felt that indigestibility above all in my sense of smell.

“After lunch we went up on deck and spent a long time in the open air. I immediately felt better and much perkier. The vessel was moving slowly. It was using as little fuel as possible. The weather was unchanged, perhaps everything was a little lighter and less closed in. We couldn’t see land but the commander said we were off Cap Norfeu and sailing toward the edge of the Gulf of Lyon. ‘We’ll carry on like this for another three hours,’ he added, ‘then we’ll turn our back on the gulf and head south. We only need to keep a watch on this expanse of water . . .’

“Then he asked me lots of questions, particularly about the ships we’d see near the coast. I told him what I’d seen, the truth, I mean: lots of small coastal traffic with France. And that these vessels plied close to land. That there wasn’t a great volume of shipping; it was rare to see a lone steamer sail by. ‘On the other hand, from time to time,’ I added, ‘convoys of quite large vessels do come through.’ The commander barely seemed to be listening, as if he knew all that.

“The natural feel to our conversation led me to dare ask if lack of visibility was an advantage or not. He said that right then it didn’t matter either way, because they weren’t expecting anything immediately. He added that he was expecting something big, but it wouldn’t show up for

several days. ‘When the time comes,’ he added quite matter-of-factly, ‘we shall go closer inshore and see what happens. For the moment we can enjoy a few days of peace and quiet. It’s all about being patient and waiting. I’m sure you won’t be disappointed. . . .’

“He didn’t laugh when he said that. He said that—no doubt reluctantly—with a taut, nervous expression on his face.

“I DON’T KNOW how many days went by. The monotony of life aboard made me lose all idea of time. The fact I had nothing to do made me sluggish. Life as such wasn’t exactly great fun, but I could have put up with that. What I felt was disgusting from the very first was the air we breathed belowdeck and the dearth of tasty food. I made an effort to adapt. It was impossible. I visibly wilted. My clothes were too big on me. My body felt drowsy, then queasy. I spent as long as possible on deck, breathing in the fresh air. It was my only nourishment.

“I missed one other thing: conversation. I could only make myself understood with the sailors by way of signs and they’d viewed me with suspicion from the beginning. Some knew the odd word of Spanish, but such words only helped to make their gestures more obscure rather than shedding any light. I sometimes spoke to the commander but he was very busy and I spent days on end without saying a word. I couldn’t seek out the commander if he didn’t summon me. It was very tiresome communicating with the others with gestures. When I felt like saying something, I’d start to whistle or hum, though never too loudly.

“The discipline on board was remarkable. Everybody knew what he had to do and jumped to it mechanically. I saw sad faces, resigned faces, dead faces. I never saw one that ever expressed violence or indignation. I don’t think anyone on board was unaware of the dangers of that way of life. Perhaps I was the most unaware. Beneath that dull silence of interment and demeaning discipline a hidden current of understanding ran between the crew and their commander. Life at sea, that of itself creates a kind of tame resignation and tendency to daydream—compatible with berserk outbreaks of crazy violence—was much in evidence in that vessel. It was a limp, robotic state; nervous depression that hid simmering explosiveness; quiet, duly regulated expectations before the ever-imminent eruption of an incident that could decide one’s life. When the sailors heard me whistling or humming on deck, they looked wide-eyed in amazement at the way I expressed my feelings.

“We had fair weather in all that time. Though it was midwinter, every

day was fine. Some were splendid. January usually sees bright days, gentle breezes, becalmed seas, clear skies, and no rain. The kind waters of January never fail: they always return. Of course, there are the usual blasts from a northwesterly that made us toss and turn a little, but they were short-lived and never vicious. If it hadn't been for the cold they brought—that made me abandon deck and ask for extra overcoats—it would have been hardly noticeable. After this cold spell, I found the gray days, low skies, and wet light southwesterly much more unpleasant. Nothing is as irksome as being wet and icy—when everything seems sopping and freezing cold.

“We stayed twenty to thirty miles from the coast over that time. The ships we saw as we kept watch were of no interest—the smallest kind of coastal traffic. Though we almost always sailed abovewater, I don't think we were visible from the coast. If we ever moved closer to land it was to take advantage of dawn or twilight's unsteady glow, or nighttime.

“It must have been around twenty January and early morning. The eight o'clock watch had been relieved. We were a long way from land, and, as it was clear and bright, we could see the Sant Sebastià lighthouse across the water. All the signs were that we would swing around at any minute and once again make for the waters off Cap Creus. The commander, with his binoculars, was leaning on the turret and scrutinizing the sea to the southwest. At first sight, the sea by Cap Tossa seemed deserted. But the intent look on his face suggested that might change. As the sky was cloudless, I was surprised to see something like a slightly darker brushstroke on the sea near the spot where the commander was training his binoculars. Time passed and I registered that no order was being given to turn around as was usually the case; I decided that something had indeed changed. Another half an hour went by. Then the order was issued for the vessel to point its prow westward and to land. What had seemed an almost invisible brushstroke a moment ago now looked like smoke from a steamer's funnel or perhaps from a number of steamers. It was obvious: we could see the front of a large convoy coming from the southwest and probably heading toward Marseille. The commander didn't seem at all surprised by that sight. He was clearly expecting it. The discovery made him nervous, and though he kept his nerves under control, they were apparent enough.

“We cruised abovewater for almost an hour. Meanwhile everyone took up his position and the silence seemed denser. Preparations were made to go down. The convoy was still a long way away, but the silhou-

ettes of the first ships were clearly outlined against and beyond the Tossa promontory. We submerged without a snag. At first it didn't seem any different from sailing on the surface. However, as time passed, the air stewed and thickened, the temperature rocketed, and the stench in the air seemed more unpleasant than ever. My shirt felt tight, and my clothes sticky and uncomfortable.

"Now the commander was rooted by the sights of the periscope, with an admiralty map spread out next to him and his system of communicating with the services onboard all at the ready. As we moved closer inshore he beckoned to me and pointed several times at a spot on the map that really seemed to be bothering him. They were the tiny, insignificant Isles Formigues. They were still many miles away, but, as you know, when real sailors see a rock, they start to quake. We now began to get a proper perspective on the convoy, even though it was following the coast, and could see a line of over twenty large ships. Most were camouflaged. Whenever I could, I looked at the sights out of the corner of an eye so I could see how the commander reacted to what he could see. It was my impression—my first surprise—that the convoy was under heavy escort. The first twenty or twenty-five merchant ships were being patrolled by at least four large antitorpedo boats on either side. That made the commander repeatedly moisten his lips. The second surprise came when I saw that the vessels, against usual custom, weren't sailing within or beside jurisdictional waters; they were quite a way from them and that gave them much greater freedom of movement. I also thought that if we attempted any kind of attack from a position close to land, we would be lethally trapped. We recognized the sense of security the presence of a heavy escort gave that long procession of vessels—more than thirty were now visible—as the distance between us closed. We were as near as we could be. Not a soul was to be seen on their decks, except for the watch on the bridge. Not a soul manned the cannon on prow or poop. We even thought some had been covered. It was obvious those men thought they were safe. What's more, they probably thought the danger was over, as far as they were concerned, that the worst patch was behind them and closeness to French seas justified their complete self-confidence.

"As the convoy drew nearer and became clearer, the strength of their escort was also more evident. We counted over eight antitorpedo boats. Given that, the commander reluctantly issued the order for our submarine to slow down. The absolute inequality of firepower between that fleet and our small submarine was all too obvious. Was there anything we

could do? The convoy, which was now level with us, proceeded slowly, but their escort vessels were frantic. They went to our portside and starboard as they reconnoitered inshore and the open sea, crazily speeding from the front to the center of the convoy. The submarine continued in parallel for a long time—three or four miles away with a firm eye on their gunboats. Meanwhile I watched all the officers pay the commander's cabin a visit. I didn't understand a word of what was said. In effect there was no attack. The inequality of firepower clinched it. When the front of the convoy drew level with Cap Sant Sebastià it veered off toward Marseille. You couldn't ask for better proof of how safe those people felt they were.

“The peculiarly painted procession filed past: more than forty large cargo boats and eight to ten antitorpedo boats. The officers watched them pass through their sights with rage on their faces. But could they do anything? I don't think so. The commander was simply acknowledging their immense superiority.

“So I thought that must be the end to our little adventure—it was past one p.m., with glorious weather and visibility and the cloud of smoke from the convoy disappearing over the eastern horizon, when a vessel suddenly came into view in the same style as the fleet had done that morning. Orders went out to go full steam ahead. Within the hour we could see it perfectly. It was evidently a hostile ship—an American tramp of some eight thousand tons (said the commander)—and it belonged to the previous group, but had got delayed for some reason or other. Perhaps it hadn't joined them at the agreed time. In any case, it was making extremely slow progress and seemed damaged. It was a magnificent four-master, the like of which we rarely see in these waters. When we were close enough for the commander to get a precise look, he burst out laughing. There didn't seem to be any watch; it was a ship without defenses, one hit and . . .

“From that moment on it all happened amazingly quickly. We maneuvered close and took up a position where we had perfect freedom of movement. They noticed nothing. We were ten or twelve miles off Sant Sebastià. They noticed nothing until they heard the crisp, simultaneous, shattering impact of two torpedoes on iron panels at the float line. The submarine surfaced almost at once. I had a perfect view of what happened from the bridge. The vessel lurched slightly twice on the side where it had been hit and very soon began to keel over. Meanwhile lots of people appeared on deck amid the predictable confusion and uproar. Nobody went near the cannons; everyone headed for the lifeboats. How-

ever, we hardly heard any of the human hue-and-cry because of a din from the bilge that made your hair stand on end. The frenzied neighing and whinnying of three, four, or five hundred horses—I probably underestimate—inexorably trapped within the dying ship rose above the majestic sea. Their chilling neighs were followed by a dull, heavy, terrible clatter, as if the cargo of horses were trying to break through the iron plating with their legs, teeth, and whole bodies. The horrific din, high-pitched shrieks rent with explosions of sound, made a deep impression on me. I started to cry like a child. And through a veil of tears, like a vision in a dream, I suddenly saw the great breaches in the hull packed with a frenzied succession of terrified horses hurling themselves into the sea. Our crew watched the tragic exodus as if they were at some sporting event. The animals churned up the water as they swam, heads and manes windswept, kicking up their front legs as if about to take flight at any moment. But the ship continued to keel over and water soon engulfed the gaping holes. The last horse to get out seemed to erupt from the depths of the sea. Then the ship went slowly down—not that the frenzy and neighing ceased for a moment. The vessel slipped down solemnly like a lead weight. Peace was restored. We could see the crew rowing strongly toward land. When we departed, the horses were still swimming tirelessly. The pinkish yellow glow of a wintry twilight—cold, pure, and stark—touched the foamy broiling water the horses’ legs churned . . .

“A FEW HOURS LATER we were off the north coast of Majorca. Those hours of my life were haunted by what I’d been so unfortunate to see. I couldn’t pluck up the courage to say a word. I’d not enjoyed that spectacle one bit. We met up in a place that will remain nameless—with the schooner I had first seen by the Isles Medes.

“My state of health wouldn’t allow me to sail any further. I disembarked. A few months later, when I happened to be in Begur, I received a present: some wonderful binoculars I sold a few days after for three hundred pesetas. They were obviously worth much more. But some things are best forgotten, don’t you think?”