

Hans' channels

The barge slowly flowed along the enlightened channels of the *Dam*. Wound in a rough leather jacket, Hans drove it sure as he had always done. The shouting din of the motor boomed on the small inclined houses striking them with strong and deafening tolls. A greyish smoke covered the ephemeral wakes of the rudder, dispersing itself slowly in the air while the deaf whistle of a siren preannounced the block of the lock.

Without thinking of it, he had approached to the shore awaiting that it reopened. That manoeuvre didn't have any secrets and nobody was able to execute it as him. Lined the bars up, he run in zigzags with wisdom on the commands. Then, with a strong blow, he lowered a lever and, as for enchantment, the boat slipped toward the shore. *Lui Hollander* ("the idler Dutch") was the name that he had given it and everywhere in Amsterdam there was no one that did know it. Nobody was able to manoeuvre on the channels as he usually did. It was said that a night, cradled by the persuasive hand of the whiskey, with the shoulders to the bow, he had crossed them backwards without never jeopardizing the keel.

Otherwise from the sea dogs, he was a jovial and amusing man who detested loneliness and silence. Good-looking, he had an innate charm that he squandered with every woman stayed at

his side. He loved all women and nobody, but on rhythmical ex-pirations, he was punctually left and then he was seen in pubs draining beer and complaining. Whoever met him was careful not to reveal him anything because, in the blink of an eye, that voice would have spread with the rapidity of a river flood. He never respected his appointments, he rarely kept his word and the talkee-talkee bloomed from his lips.

He knew the laws of the sea but he had never gone further the small islets that marked the beginning of the seaport. How many times he had sworn to do it, to advance in open sea, to sail toward oceans where the sun illuminated the backdrops and the palms licked up the beach. He was always speaking about this trip and he often announced the departure unless seeing him the following day blandly advancing on the channels again. The *Amstel*¹ was his heaven, craved and hated at the same time as in every authentic love story. What's the use of pushing far if the river satisfied his wills? So his existence, deprived of some rush, dragged him in the vain hope that things would have always been unchanged.

He loved life but he escaped from its difficulties and so, victim of his same paradox, in actual fact he was already dead long time ago. Maybe for this reason he was always on the channels, deprived of cliffs and deceiving tides. Eternal undecided, he had the tendency to postpone all he could and it was better for him if an obstacle could be avoided.

He made a living by doing transport of household implements but he did that the bare minimum to live and for this he did never get rich. He considered job the worst sentence of man and he would have avoided it at all if someone had provided for his needs.

¹ River that flows through Amsterdam.

He was a great dreamer and he often stopped to think. He observed the gulls and a vein of regret ploughed his face. Why wasn't he free and serene as them, so fair to rise in flight but so strong to cross the sea? He loved those white creatures so much to the extent to satisfy their hunger every morning with the leftovers of that good food he was able to prepare.

He had a few friends and he doesn't care a lot about them but, if need be, he was always there. He often thought about old age and a pang of restlessness clamped his throat. He feared that cruel and pitiless beast to the extent that he yearned for a sudden death rather than to see himself taunted by bumptious and insubstantial boys.

It was rare he spoke seriously and when a witticism ploughed his lips, he constantly repeated it for months, so few days were enough to be already tired of his company.

When the lock reopened, Hans stood still. Restless, he thought again of that damned medical report. He damned the world cursing fate and adversity and he kept on looking at his arm with an incredulous and lost air. The diagnosis, in actual fact, raised hope but it didn't succeed in opening that door.

«I don't swallow this story - he muttered to himself – with the luck that I have!»

An imperious desire to escape quailed his thoughts and there was no way to move it away. With a sorrowful look, he started over sailing when the sight of the *Magere Brug*² infected him of an unexpected enthusiasm. Damn, it was not ended yet. A host of thoughts slowly started to hammer his conscience. Perhaps it was a sign, a clear toll of the destiny to his colorless and without rushes life. But certainly, it was quite so and the only way to prove it was inflicting a cut to the past.

² The well-known "Skinny bridge".

With reborn vigour he gave a push to the levers, bubbly accelerating the walk. He already started to appreciate that new existence, far from pubs and inactivity, he felt it flow inside himself, even next to a woman and some children, and at a stroke emotions lost in time came again to the surface from the swamp of indifference. By instinct he averted his eyes from water, and he was invaded by thousand voices. There were people that walked on the shore and this seemed to him a rather strange thing. How couldn't he ever hear them? With a devastated air, he thought over how many times he had received without getting anything in return and an original sense of guilt chilled him to the bone.

«It's time to change» he burst with determination and the lights of the channels, as only headlights, enlightened his heart and that peace was with him the whole night.

In the following days, the Dutch enjoyed that new life and the word immediately spread throughout the city. People looked at him with affection and, little by little, he had clear the sensation that such a change would have sorted things out. Extraordinary days went by and for some time he was not seen in pubs.

When a prognosis was made, Hans sighed with relief. Beaming with joy, he pushed the barge off the port and he stopped himself to look at the gulls. He didn't succeed in believing to have escaped from it. He stared at his arm as a lost friend that comes from a long way off. He still felt the weight of anguish, the tension instilled by doubt, the fatiguing and troubled ransom, and the echo of the old existence slowly started to breach in his mind.

When the first bits reached the water, the gulls quickly beat and began to shout. Hans looked at them with his usual bit of envy. They were free like the sea and a new wince filled him with pride. What was wrong there? After all, his life was only a

problem of his own and, certainly, he did nothing wrong.

Oppressed by memories, he began to fix the horizon. Far, the sea birds accompanied the fishing-boats that tiredly reentered from the night. Hans followed them as far as the benches, suddenly perceiving a familiar face.

«Maarten!» he exclaimed when his friend was passing.

«Hans» replied his friend smiling. «How do you do?»

«Great!»

«When do we go to fish?»

«...I don't know.»

«What about tomorrow morning?»

«Alright, at six o'clock at the north bench.»

«That's OK» added his friend starting to distance himself.

«See you tomorrow.»

«Hey, Hans» said the other in a loud voice. «You don't leave me stranded again, do you?»

«Don't worry» he answered, well knowing that he would not have gone.