

WITH M.A. BACCICH

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One day, as we were passing through New Orleans, a city that even in November is bathed by the spring sun, we came across an elegant street that stretched onwards for about fifty blocks.

We read its name: Baccich Avenue.

On the same day we inquired and discovered that this person was still alive and well.

We decided to pay him a visit.

A few days later we enter the residence of the maritime captain M.A. Baccich.

December had just begun. The entire house is engulfed by greenery. Surrounded by thick, cut and manicured grass and some blood red flowers. White path ... Oleander and palms ... Palms, tall and still, like some kind of ceremonial guards reaching for the sky ... Peace ... Silence ...

Captain Baccich had been waiting. On the first sound of the doorbell, an elderly man in his seventies appeared, elderly in bearing and with a reddish face. The mustache hung carelessly over the lips and on them rested the grey of his years. He had a welcoming smile and greeted us warmly.

Somewhat diminutive and small of stature. Steps measured and assured. The movement is elegant; the look is dignified and noble.

He invites us in graciously. Our feet sink into a thick and expensive carpet.

He leads us into the living room, speaks with a Dubrovnik dialect. We notice that he has some difficulties and struggles to find words. He explains. I am not young. I have been here for fifty-four years and it is, as you can see ...

- We sit down on sofa chairs ...
- Change to English ...

His English is flowing and precise, we quickly become self-conscious of our own imperfections.

Excuse us Captain for asking, but your name ...

Yes, yes, I understand. According to contemporary conventions I ought to be writing it differently, but as it is I write it in its archaic form. All my relatives wrote it that way as do I.

You are originally from Dalmatia? We ask, on the assumption that he, like most of our people in New Orleans, is Dalmatian.

I am *Dubrovčanin* he proclaims with a voice brimming with disarming pride.

You are in good condition for your years Captain, Sir.

Yes, everyone tells me that ... and indeed I struggle on heroically if only because my relatives at home considered me dead long time ago, some sixty years ago.

I don't understand what you have in mind, Mr. Baccich.

I was, my dear friend, ... he continued with a smile, ... a castaway.

We knew that you were a naval captain but that you were a castaway – that is something new.

Allow me, the old captain went on, to tell you this story. You may find it interesting and it is interesting to me if only because – as Americans have it – it is a story with a “happy ending” without which my relatives would have been right all along. The old mariner then began his long tale that unraveled like a ball of string.

My departed uncle was an old mariner, who had three ships. In their days these ships were large, eight hundred to a thousand tons each. Some time after my elementary school I was placed on one of these as a cadet. That ship carried coal from Cardiff in England to Hong Kong. The flag was Austrian.

The crew consisted of the captain, fifteen sailors and me. We sailed along slowly as we depended on wind. When we were about ten miles from the coast of Western Australia, the captain ordered the helmsman to turn in the north-west direction but the helmsman mistakenly turned the vessel in the north-east direction, the ship sailed towards the shore, hit an underwater rock and broke up.

With these words, the captain's face became grave and in the deep lines we could discern a distant pale shadow of fear that some sixty years ago died over his young and then still childlike face.

The captain paused as if to straighten himself before recommencing his story.

And yes ... If the ship did not hit the rock it would have been wrecked on the shore as the wind was driving it with great speed.

Our captain died on the ship, and the sixteen of us began swimming towards the land holding on to floating pieces of timber. Six mariners could not make it and drowned while ten of us made it to the shore. On land eight died of hunger and thirst and only two of us remained alive before moving inland where we came across an Aboriginal tribe. They embraced us and kept us alive. Their food consisted almost entirely of turtle meat. When they caught turtle they shared their food with us but when they went hungry so did we. We lived with them in this fashion, constantly keeping to the coast. After four months of this ordeal we came to be rescued by an English vessel that was fishing for pearl shells in the Indian Ocean.

This happened in October 1875. It was a long time ago but to me it seems as if it was only yesterday. Of course I was most interested in the captain who saved my life but until 1893 I was unable to discover anything about him.

Please excuse me for a moment, the captain said. He quickly got up and departed to his library. A minute or two later he returned again with a yellowing letter in his hand. In this letter, the Australian captain – his savior – informed him that he now lives in Sydney and is well, and because he rescued Baccich and his friend, he received a gold watch from the Austrian Government as a reward.

His return home to Dubrovnik – the captain continued – I remember it well, everyone met me with an expression of disbelief, amazed at seeing me alive and at the same time frightened. They were both happy and uncomfortable at the same time. Because of this I went to Rijeka where I completed studies at the maritime academy.

My uncle built a new ship to replace the one that was wrecked and named it the *Resurrection* in remembrance of the lost vessel and placed me in command. After two years as a captain of this vessel, in 1880, I found myself in New Orleans.

At that time New Orleans was not what it is today. Life in the beginning was difficult but somehow I managed ... and ran with it ... some say I succeeded.

It now seems likely that I will remain here.

In truth, I would rather be in my beloved Dubrovnik, but life is not always what one wishes. In any case, I am at peace here and I have to be here ... I have six daughters and one son. My son runs the business and I, well ... I walk, read and wait ... It has been a long journey for me. From 1859 until now it has been a long journey. It has been many years and the time has come for me to sit down and begin my rest.

Blood red sunset lit the tops of white houses, dark cypresses and tall palms, as we bid farewell to Captain Baccich.

We felt that our conversation was enjoyable, and for us it was exceptionally touching to witness one sinuous tree transplanted from our old Dubrovnik that did not wither but still feels that his place is beside our *Jadrana* [Adriatic] where the spirits of noble men, the living and the dead, guard our South Slav sea, the blue and the bloody sea, the sea that carries our living and our dead kings and guards our living and our dead children.

Translated Josko Petkovic © 2017