

A Journey
From Alexandria to Trieste
(1828)

Giacomo Cavallo



Cover: "Pompey's Pillar" , from a drawing by David Roberts, 1842.

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In I do not know which year around the middle of the nineteenth century, a banker from Paris who had very extensive trade relations in Germany and especially in the Austrian Empire, gave a party in the honor of one of those rare friends that all successful traders, bankers, and captains of industry are wont to make from time to time, provided they meet the requirements of being totally inept in getting rich and being utterly unaware of business.

This particular friend, a professor of entomology in a small German university, probably had been a handsome young man some thirty years earlier, when he wandered around the tropics armed with a net to catch butterflies. Now that the latter, lifting him on their fragile wings, had sat him immovably on the chair of entomology of the University of I no longer know which city, the appearance of handsome young man was only a memory. The light brown hair had thinned out, and a few kilos of honest Austrian lard had accumulated where it was not precisely necessary. But he had the intelligent and penetrating gaze of the

scholar, along with a kind expression that would have warned anyone: it was clear that the owner would never be able to hurt anyone. For the rest, he was “a good fork” and “a good glass” and honored the banquet. The host had selected the company of his friends and colleagues with their wives in full dress very accurately. The ladies, cheerful and twittering as they were, could not succeed in turning any dinner into a starched mortuary in the Paris of those years. There were also other intellectuals, chosen on the sole condition that they were not entomologists: a financial journalist, a painter, a writer looking for an editor, all *protégés* of the host. There was a brief discussion of financial affairs among some of the guests, but it is not worth mentioning it. Now, having finished the dessert and sheathed the weapons, one could think of the intellectual pleasures of life. "Before leaving us, Uncle Hermann will certainly tell us another German story, one of those that are scary." Thus said with a dreamy expression the only daughter of the landlord, a young lady whose head was full of Hoffmann's tales and similar, like the *Elixir of the Devil*, or the *Monk*. Since the soirée was supposed to end in the banker's house, almost everyone present applauded the idea. The valets had disappeared. The dessert was on the table like the Light Cavalry returning from the Charge of the Light Brigade; the disorder reigned, and every guest absent-mindedly tried to put some order in the vicinity of his place, according to his tastes and his

inclinations (a good subject for a study of characters). Digestion was beginning, spreading drowsiness and good feelings. Fully at ease, the guests sat down more comfortably, helped themselves to a last portion of dessert, poured half a cup of champagne and prepared to listen. "With pleasure," Hermann replied politely. "But it will be an Austrian story, not a German story." Many of those present shrugged to show that the difference for them was acceptable. "And what title will it have?" The persistent girl asked. "Well, I do not know. I could propose 'A Journey from Alexandria to Trieste, in 1828'. I wish to say just at the outset that the trip lasted eighteen days, with a stop in Zakynthos, but I do not want to scare anyone: I will speak only of the first five days of travel." The rest was a journey like any other journey of those times. "The girl seemed disappointed, but could not insist too much: "No old castles with ghosts? "No. " "Not even a single dungeon with skeletons?" Hermann shook his head sadly. He regretted that he could not please his host's daughter, whom he had known since she was a child. She pouted for an instant, then said: "All right, from Alexandria to Trieste, 1828".

"You know, it was not easy to get to and from Alexandria in those days. We must admit it, Alexandria is no longer the city of the Ptolemies and Rome. And even now that we are close to the

excavation of a canal between the Mediterranean and the Red Sea, I am afraid that Alexandria will remain cut off. However, all this is just to say that, after finishing my campaign in Upper Egypt for the study of twilight and night moths, I did not expect to find a good passage for Europe. The travel literature was full of incredible reports of journeys in filthy, ragged ships, with rude and incompetent crews, impossible food, stinking water, cabins without windows. But I was lucky. But I was lucky. My dragoman, a Greek by the name Antonio de Spiro (¹), well known to Europeans traveling through Alexandria, was full of resources, and after two days of research, he introduced me to a small one-room office on the ground floor of a house by the sea in the Turkish District. Here, I suddenly found myself at home. It was the representative office of a group of Trieste ship-owners who had big projects, as Herr Stauffacher, the man in charge of the office, explained to me. Austria wanted to set up a company of Mediterranean and maybe even Eastern navigation, but for this, we needed to join our efforts. Etcetera. Herr Stauffacher did not have the gift of brevity and did not make a statement without accompanying it with figures and diagrams. He must have felt a little lonely. I let him talk for a long time, drinking his coffee, which was very excellent indeed, to keep me awake. As God wanted, his exposure slowly came to an end. Perhaps I should add in retrospect that at that

moment I saw unknowingly the first steps of the *Oesterreichischer Lloyd*, our largest shipping company, but all this would take ten years to become a reality. I was just an impatient youngster with a trunk of entomological finds to bring to Austria as soon as possible. The local humid climate endangered them, and the possibility of a plague epidemic breaking out would endanger me. Finally, Herr Stauffacher seemed to realize that at least in the short-term I did not qualify as a prospective shareholder in the nascent company, and announced that in a few days, precisely July 1, the brigantine Trieste would leave for Trieste. He described it as an excellent ship, almost new, with a competent captain. He was proud of the punctuality, the best cuisine you could get on any ship in the Mediterranean, etc. The cost of the passage was almost three times what I knew, but I must say that, against my expectations and thanks to my foolhardiness, I had been able to live for three months spending very little, and the minuscule hoard I had deposited upon my arrival at the Austrian consulate in Alexandria remained considerable. I also think that the people of Upper Egypt, seeing me running almost every night along the banks of the Nile among swarms of mosquitoes with a butterfly net, must have considered me at least a little 'touched', excellent protection in those countries against police, bandits, thieves and so on.

Everyone had told me that the dates of departure to and from Alexandria had only an indicative value. However, Herr Stauffacher, to whom I had already paid half the price of the ticket, had announced to me that the Trieste would leave Alexandria at six o'clock on the 1st of July, whether I was or I was not on board. I spent the two days before the departure practically barricaded in my hotel, which was held by a "Frankish" (²), and according to all the travelers who had gone over there, it was the only acceptable hotel in the city. I had seen too much of Egypt, and I had more than enough. I had seen almost nothing of Alexandria, but the dirt roads, bound to become rivers of stinking mud in the first shower, the crowds always sticking out for *bakhshish* and in suspicion of plague, the obnoxious and arrogant Turks, the ferocious dogs, roaming around in packs by day and night, had convinced me that there was no need to see anything more. I could not wait to embark.

At one o'clock in the afternoon of July 1, I had finished my lunch at the tavern kept by an Italian, Pietro by name, who was displaying the sign "PAGA OGGI - DOMANI CREDITO" (³). With the help of Antonio, I went to collect my three pieces of luggage at the hotel. Followed by a bunch of vociferous people of all ages and conditions, with some animals that had spontaneously added themselves to the choir, I went to embark, in the Turkish Port, only recently

opened to the Infidels, that is to us. My three pieces of luggage had their logic. The first, with the findings religiously classified and cataloged, as well as carefully packaged, was a sturdy two-meter box with a square base of almost one meter on each side. Half of it contained books and work tools. The second was a common trunk, which could stand up as a makeshift closet, and contained clothes and other clothing. Finally, there was a boar skin suitcase with my personal belongings for more immediate use.

In Europe, many had told me that in all of North Africa and the Middle East such a suitcase would be considered impure by every True Believer. Thus, I would have to transport it by myself, which was what I desired. It was enough to say "*Kanzir, kanzir*" to every willing porter to discourage him instantly. The information was valid, of course, only if the porter was a True Believer. The Trieste, especially when compared to the many surrounding boats, made a good impression: higher than all, it was in perfect order, the veiling seemed new, the brass was shiny, the woods looked waxed. At the beginning of the catwalk a gigantic man, probably Greek, was waiting for us, with a very clean but too tight uniform, a black beard, two fiery eyes. He introduced itself as "Second in Command." He grunted approvingly, examining my documents. But as soon as he saw my luggage, especially the large trunk, he threateningly asked to

inspect the contents. I did not want him to do so, for fear that with his with his big hands he would break some of my precious glass containers. Antonio interposed speaking Greek very fast. But there was no way. I had to open the box laboriously. It was worth it, if only for the amusement that I took to see the expression of the Second. He, in front of my two hundred and fifty glass jars each containing a moth, in his eyes identical to the other two hundred and forty-nine, gasped. Then he burst into what scholars would call a "Homeric laughter." He closed the case and paternally patted his hand on my shoulder with such vigor that I found myself on the bridge almost without knowing how. Here I parted from Antonio. He had been very useful and I paid him handsomely. Only, I got annoyed when he tried to tell me that my big box had been loaded only thanks to his efforts and that therefore an additional compensation ... But he said it laughing too and did not insist.

I had been the first traveler to arrive on board. A sailor led me to my cabin. There were four two-berth cabins, but the passengers would be only six, and two were couples, so I had a very decent stateroom all by myself. I say very decent, because the builders of the ship had thought well to make the ceiling of the cabins protrude from the bridge by about half a meter, to put in two portholes each. The cabins were bright, and although they were relatively narrow and not very

tall, they were quite long and spacious. They were also clean. The four staterooms were arranged two aft and two forward of the dining room, which was an elegantly furnished square about four meters wide and taller than the stateroom so that its portholes had a clear view as far as possible towards bow and stern. The doors of the aft cabins opened onto a transverse corridor from which through a hatch one could climb onto the bridge. The two forward cabins were instead separated by another passage, this one longitudinal, and were therefore slightly smaller than the aft cabins. Later I realized that this corridor was used to pass food to the dining room from the kitchen, located forward in the bow. I had one of these cabins, and I must say that the idea of enjoying the scents of the kitchen for the whole trip, even if I had a cast-iron stomach, at first did not excite me. My fears proved to be unfounded and, although I never violated one of the time-honored principles of the experienced seafarer ("Never visit the ship's kitchen"), I must say that I never experienced the slightest disturbance from this position.

Having arranged my belongings, I climbed back to the bridge. From time to time, the clamor of the crowd announced the arrival of a passenger or two. First a young English couple arrived, who, as the Second explained to me, was on their honeymoon. It was Lord Lancelot De Vere and his wife Lavinia, young (she

was twenty years old, and he was twenty-five), rich, noble, elegant, beautiful, and with that attitude of masters of the world that the British were taking more and more each day that passed after the death of Napoleon. Half Alexandria must have followed them to the ship begging for *bakhshish*, but I do not know how successful the beggars were. While the two occupied one of the stern cabins, another passenger arrived. He was a dark-skinned Italian, more for being long in the sun than for his natural color. Porters followed him with a dozen boxes, each of them bigger than my famous chest, as well as other smaller ones. The Second left me to take care of him, but he had already been preceded by the captain himself, whom I saw then for the first time from a distance. His presence proved to be necessary: the new arrival had brought some confusion on board. The sailors seemed to argue with each other and with the passenger until the captain arrived. He had many boxes put on board without any further inspection. For the most part, they were stowed together with the rest of the cargo below deck and three were firmly secured on the bridge, while the sailors continued to grumble. The fact that this time the compact representation of Alexandrian people seemed to be present more out of curiosity than to ask for *bakhshish* puzzled me. The passenger, rather unfriendly, passed in front of my nose without greeting me and headed for the other forward cabin. I had the chance to see that his eyes were gray and

flashing, he wore no beard, but he made up for it by having long black hair. He must have been forty years old.

Two passengers were still missing, and the departure time was approaching. I finally saw captain Paravia, a native of Zara, a rather corpulent man, with two white mustaches joining the sideburns. He seemed to be affable and reliable. At this moment, however, he was annoyed by the delay of the two passengers, who evidently were known to him. Finally, shortly after six o'clock, there was a loud clamor, with the addition of a brass band that played the Marseillaise. The *Drapeau* ⁽⁴⁾ and the French consul, Monsieur Drouetty, appeared in the ragged crowd. I understood that the last two travelers were not a married couple, but two army men, that is an old cavalry colonel in charge of some mission to Cairo and his aide-de-camp, a haughty young lieutenant, who returned home. Apparently, they considered themselves entitled to make an entire ship wait for them. The captain gave his welcome by thanking them ceremoniously for deigning to travel on his humble boat and regretting the unpardonable absence of the Austrian consul who, he said, should have saluted the mission in the name of the Emperor of Austria. The Colonel seemed to appreciate the apologies and magnanimously admitted that even the consul probably had his commitments. Now we were all

there. The ship, which had long been ready to sail, immediately lifted the anchors, and at about half past seven, on a clear evening with a flat sea, barely ruffled by a light breeze, we were already a couple of miles from the coast. Dinner was scheduled for eight o'clock. We all found ourselves in the dining room, in front of a sumptuously and impeccably laid table, with the captain in uniform, a waiter in a white jacket, and all the passengers elegantly dressed, as if for a formal dinner in Vienna.

Number two rule of the marine traveler: "Eat as much fresh food as you can in the early days because you never know what will happen next". Of course, for the first evening, the menu could compete with any land lunch, with appetizers of hot and cold vegetables, partly fresh and partly preserved in salt or vinegar, excellent chicken bouillon, schnitzel (⁵) of lamb, fried potatoes, fresh fruit at will. There was also a dessert, an exquisite strudel in which dates and figs had replaced the apples. The bread itself was clean and fragrant. The wines, from Friuli, went very well with the dishes. There was also some water from the Nile, which the captain had brought in saying it was probably our last chance to drink it for a long time, and it could be worth it. We all tasted it, but otherwise, the wines seemed to us better.

During coffee, the captain allowed the waiter to retire and then began to converse wisely with everyone so that we could get acquainted a little with each other. He first addressed me, asking what I had come to do in Egypt. It did not seem true to me to be able to explain to at least six people, who could not escape me, the interest of crepuscular and nocturnal Lepidoptera. I pointed out that it is particularly interesting to discover a crepuscular moth sleeping under a leaf while waiting for the sunset. When the sun disappears behind the horizon, which is the awaited moment, the animal's eyes brighten with internal light, and it starts very fast, with a phenomenal activity flying to suck nectar from flowers in bloom, very agile despite its stocky body. The light that glows in the eyes of *Macroglossa Stellatarum*, of which I had captured different varieties, just at the southern limit of its habitat, was in my opinion in anticipation of a lively reproductive activity, which logically had to be preceded by abundant nutrition. I presented my theory with brevity and clarity, and then extracted a notebook and a pencil and made a very accurate drawing of the female copulating organs of *Macroglossa*. Only at this point, from the absolute silence with which the other passengers were following my exposition, I noticed the reactions of the other guests. The captain looked at me open-mouthed, the lieutenant seemed to be barely holding back his laughter, the colonel was obviously

indignant, the Italian Delleany, who during the whole dinner had seemed interested only in looking at his plate conscientiously chewing each bite, was staring at me with an indecipherable expression. Lady Lavinia was panting and her husband, red in the face, seemed about to say something. The captain preceded him saying: "All of this is extraordinarily interesting, but you have to allow us to digest a little the precious information that you have given us. Maybe we'll talk about it tomorrow night, how about it?" Rule number three: "The wishes of the captain of a ship are orders." I bowed and shut up.

Lord Lancelot immediately took the floor explaining that Lady Lavinia had found the pyramids a little *déjà-vu*. On the other hand, the Sphinx had enthused her, but she had been deeply disappointed by Alexandria, not so much because she had not been able to visit Alexander the Great's tomb. Above all, she could not conceal her irritation because she had not been able to have tea on top of Pompey's Pillar, as practically all her friends had done in Alexandria. Lord Lancelot said he had been ready to pay any price to please his sweet half but had discovered that there was a strict prohibition on tourists, in particular British, going up the column. It almost seemed that the ban had been made especially for the De Vere. "*Those dreadful, dreadful Turks!*" had exclaimed Lady Lavinia, discovering her perfect teeth and still

weeping with annoyance. The captain considered it appropriate to explain the matter. A few years earlier, perhaps in 1825, two Englishmen with wives, friends, and valets had climbed the capital of the Pillar thirty feet above the ground, hoisted the Union Jack and held a *champagne party*. Things had gone so far, and the joy had been so boisterous and full, that when the jolly brigade had gone down, they had forgotten the Union Jack on the column. The following morning the British Consul had been summoned still half-awake by the angry Pasha of Alexandria, who had asked him if by chance Alexandria had been annexed to the British Empire. From the window, in fact, the Union Jack could be seen waving insolently on the column. The Pasha had lowered the flag, had returned it to the consul, and finally promulgated the order that no one could climb anymore on the column, especially as many tourists had already defaced it by engraving their names. "They do not have the right to do this!" shrieked Lady Lavinia. "Lancelot, please, when you're in London do the impossible to have this hateful Turk sent into exile and replaced with someone who knows a minimum of good manners!" Lancelot answered something on the theme of "Yes, my little dove."

The lieutenant, who seemed to have conceived an instant dislike for Delleany, asked the latter about what he was doing. Delleany briefly explained that he had been twenty years in Alexandria, mainly dealing

with textiles and carpets. Now he had enough and was going back to Italy. But did he have something interesting to tell? "Well, I would not know," said Delleany, "But now that I think of it, the last real emotion I felt was just the day before yesterday when I found a rug of East Persia at an extraordinarily low price. It was a *Dorokhsh* (⁶) most probably authentic, and my hands were shaking when I could caress the perfect fabric. You see, such are the emotions of us merchants. " The captain had watched him with attention during the entire dialogue. The lieutenant was probably looking for some sarcastic *mot-d'esprit* (⁷) in his mind, but he could not find it. Delleany, perhaps not to let him make the effort to think any longer, apologized and retired to his cabin.

Meanwhile, the colonel was staring at the white tablecloth with an absent gaze as if the whiteness had awakened distant memories of him. The lieutenant noticed it and said, in an almost affectionate voice: "*Est-ce encore Eylau, mon Colonel?*" (⁸) The colonel nodded and began to speak in a low voice, gradually increasing his tone. It was curious to see how in all the military life of a man who had seen Friedland, Wagram, Moscova, Lipsia and Waterloo, the memories concentrated on a battle, perhaps secondary, but which had for him more meaning than any other. "*L'Empéreur* was here, under some trees near the church bell tower" and he marked the place

with a napkin surmounted by a silver saltcellar. "We at the Cavalry of the Guard were on his right (here he put a fork) and waited four hours to get into action, standing in the snow falling intermittently. We saw our infantry decimated by Russian batteries slowly falling back (two buns were placed to indicate the Russian positions.) Things went wrong, but finally the fanfare began to play and along our line the officers were heard shouting orders. You have no idea of the emotion that pervades men and horses in these circumstances. The action was about to begin, and my regiment wondered if we would be involved. *Parbleu* (⁹), if we were! Thus began the greatest charge in military history, twelve thousand men. We reformed, we charged a second time and then a third and finally we broke through the Russian center gaining one more great victory for France (here, in the heat of the description, the colonel forcibly planted his fork in one of the two Russian rolls, and Lord De Vere raised an eyebrow: it did not appear to him that Eylau had been a great victory, regardless of the value of the fighters). That charge was my baptism of fire, and what a baptism! I was then in the retinue of Colonel Chabert, who had personally told me: "*Allons, mon petit, On part à la charge*" (¹⁰). Chabert was missing in action, the Colonel added with some emotion, and we knew nothing more of him, although the Emperor had personally given a precise order: "*Allez donc voir si, par hasard, mon pauvre Chabert vit encore*" (¹¹).

At this point, the colonel apologized and withdrew, perhaps to hide his emotion. The lieutenant immediately followed him. The two De Vere also retired. I could have sworn that in the eyes of Lady Lavinia the same light was shining as in the eyes of *Macroglossa Stellatarum* at the beginning of evening activities, but it was none of my business.

And so I and the captain were the only two left. He looked at me smiling paternally. Finally, he took from the low sideboard a bottle of a dry white port whose color was already a marvel, and said, "We drink this one by ourselves." We were silent for a few minutes, savoring the excellent wine.

"In my opinion, Delleany is not just a merchant," I said. "You are a good observer," the captain replied, "although sometimes you lack a little finesse. What you suspect is true, and now I will tell you at least a part of Delleany's story. That fool of lieutenant believed the story of the carpet and also wanted to be witty. With Delleany! Ridiculous. Anyway the story, briefly said, is this. Delleany is a merchant, but in the antiquarian branch, and has carried out several research campaigns for Consul Drouetty everywhere in Egypt, a land he knows better than anyone else. He is a bachelor, but seven or eight months ago he had found a slave from Darfur for sale in Alexandria, a beautiful Negro woman. He had immediately bought

her dearly because he had fallen madly in love with her. He wanted to leave Egypt, take her to Italy and marry her. "Marry her?" I asked, amazed. "Sure, almost all Italians are like that. You are a man too civilized, and you probably would never dream of buying a slave, but if you bought one, you would not think of marrying her. Not so my friend Delleany. He wanted to take her to his country in Piedmont and marry her, completely unmindful of what his fellow citizens would have said. Mind you: it was not just because of her beauty. I met her, and she was indeed an extraordinary woman." The captain was silent a little. Then he said, "But it was not to be. The fame of this woman, whom although black everybody recognized as the most beautiful woman in Alexandria, arrived where it should not, that is nothing less than the Sultan's ears in Constantinople, and he decided to have her for himself. Had Delleany been a Turk, an order would have been more than enough, but he was a foreigner and a friend of the French Consul, his countryman, so the Grand Lord's emissaries felt it was opportune to use another approach. They corrupted many at Delleany's service (a boy, three maids and three servants) and one night when the landlord was traveling on business, with a ploy they kidnapped the woman, who just vanished." Delleany seemed to go crazy. He understood wherefrom the blow came and that there was nothing he could do, so he decided to hurry up his departure,

asked for a passport and customs certificates. All documents were ready in extraordinarily short time, above all considering that we are in Egypt. He was called to collect the papers and went with the French Consul, who later told me the story. As usual, they waited for a quite a long time outside the office of the Chief of Police, who then received them with all courtesy. Together they drank sweetened coffee with powdered sugar, a sign of particular distinction. While he was waiting for the documents to be brought, talking about this and that, the Chief of Police said, "By the way, surely you have heard that in the last ten days some people have been found dead on the streets of Alexandria. They were a boy, three young women, and three men. I think all of them had been for a while in the services of Mr. Delleany here. " Delleany said bitterly: "My house is an unlucky house." "There are fevers," the Consul observed generically. The Chief of Police nodded and took a sip of coffee. Then he added: "Strange fevers, however, fevers that torture the sick in a heinous way." "Probably dogs did it," the Consul observed. "They are very fierce." "Yes, it's probably the dogs," said the Police Chief, "but we thought it right to inform Constantinople." "I see," said the Consul, "your duty, and the answer?" "The answer came immediately and said something like this: *The Great Lord has been pleased to obtain a precious object for which he cared a lot. To have it, he considered it appropriate to secure the services of*

some faithful subjects, whom he paid handsomely. As far as he is concerned, the affair is closed. The Great Lord has obtained the precious object, the faithful subjects a more than abundant reward. If they, to satisfy the wishes of the Great Lord, have contracted other debts in their turn, it is right that pay them.

Nothing else." The three continued to drink coffee. Then the Chief said, "Oh, here come our documents, all in perfect order." He handed the documents to Delleany, who took them with a bow. The Turk added: "I'm afraid we will not see you again in Alexandria, Mr. Delleany." "I'm afraid, too," Delleany answered grimly. And the interview ended. And now, the captain concluded, I think it's time for us to go to sleep too. "

The next day, the second of July, the navigation was very pleasant. There was a breeze from the north-west, but that was enough for our light brig, which proceeded to unfurled sails, slicing the sea like a razor and easily overtaking all the fishing boats that came close to us. The sea had that "Mediterranean blue" color that one can't find in any other sea, and that does not change with changing atmospheric conditions. The captain had a red and white striped awning on deck to protect from the sun those who wanted to take a walk, and the two couples took advantage of it putting every effort not to meet, even if the walking area was minimal. Delleany never appeared on the

deck, and I stayed in the cabin to rearrange my papers. The tea was served on the deck, accompanied by excellent biscuits. As far as we were concerned, the ship could be driven by ghosts, because nobody ever saw the men of the crew, who must have been at least a dozen, unless one was looking for them.

At seven sharp in the evening, we were all in the dining room. To my amazement, dinner was at the level of the previous day's. Apparently, the bread was made on board, and there must have been a small hen-coop with live animals. As usual, the appetizer composed of various vegetables preceded a typical Venetian soupe made with rice and peas and a delicious chicken with fried potatoes and other vegetables. There was still fresh fruit and a curiously friable cake, which those who wanted could enliven with a good cognac. At the cafe, we were chatting a little less than the previous night. The captain, to further stimulate the conversation, sent for two bottles of champagne "*Veuve Cliquot*" and proposed a toast. We all drank to a prosperous journey. Then we drank to the ladies present. There was only one, who blushed deeply, whispering to her husband "How charming, my darling Lancelot!" After other toasts that I do not remember, the lieutenant proposed one "To peace and fatherland." This time Delleany left the glass on the table. The lieutenant looked at him with undisguised hatred and asked him in a glacially polite

voice: "Do you have anything against peace and fatherland, Monsieur Delleany?" "No," said Delleany. I have nothing, especially against peace, to which I drink now (and took two sips). And not even against fatherland, to which I now drink for your satisfaction (and took two more sips). " The lieutenant, who was once again searching his mind for a sarcastic joke, was caught off-guard. He asked: "*Et alors?*"⁽¹²⁾ Is it perhaps an insult to me personally? ". "Not at all, said Delleany. But drinking to peace and fatherland together seems to be a contradiction in terms. There can be no peace until the concept of the fatherland is understood as it is understood today ". The colonel was suffocating with bile, and all he could say was: "*Mais la Patrie ...*"⁽¹³⁾ the fatherland is everything". The English Lord looked like a fish out of water more than usual and did not know what to say. The captain carefully followed the scene without intervening. But finally the lieutenant had found the phrase he was looking for, and he blurted out: "You say so because the Italians do not have a fatherland." Perhaps he hoped to be challenged to a duel, but Delleany replied: "Technically it is not correct because I am from Piedmont, which France annexed in 1802. When Piedmont became free again, I was in Egypt, and I preferred to remain a French citizen ... *mon cher compatriot* "⁽¹⁴⁾. Although I must say, it is certainly not France that I would have chosen as my Fatherland." The lieutenant was certainly a brave man, but

intellectually he must not have been worth much more than his horse, and it took him a while to figure out if he had to apologize or be offended. The colonel was quicker than his aide, and all red in the face said, "But you insult France!" "Not at all, said Delleany, calmly. But in fifteen years you French people have made such a mess while drawing and re-drawing maps and assigning homelands, that to speak today of "fatherland," apart from the cases of some lucky country, is grotesque. And the Vienna Congress did the rest. The captain here was Venetian and finds himself Austrian; we the Piedmontese did well, but now we find ourselves paired with the Genoese, with whom we quarreled for centuries. And I speak only of two of us, but what about the German states, Finland, Poland, Norway? And do you expect all of these people to cheerfully drink at the various fatherlands that the Big Powers have imposed on them? Not to mention that ... "But at this point, Delleany saw the captain's expression, which was a silent invitation to stop. He then said: "That's enough for tonight." He nodded a greeting and retired to his cabin.

We sat in silence for a few minutes, while the two furious French officers caught their breath. The lieutenant, who in his view had remained master of the field, was as pompous as a turkey and said: "*C'est un lâche* (¹⁵). Tomorrow we will settle our accounts ". The captain replied: "I am the one who gives the

orders on this ship, and there will be no duels. If you wish, you can make your challenge and fight at your pleasure, but only once you are back on land. "The lieutenant bowed, saying, " It is your right, captain. If I understand correctly, we'll call Zakynthos, and I'm asking you to give us time to settle our accounts on that island, where no one can save the vile Delleany from my saber or my gun. " The captain looked at him with a vaguely amused expression and said, " Mon lieutenant, I would recommend prudence, because in all of Alexandria no one would dream of challenging Delleany with any existing weapon unless life had become exceedingly boring to him. Listen to me, *mon lieutenant* (¹⁶): Delleany does not feel offended, and he has not offended you. Forget the whole story." The colonel also intervened to calm the lieutenant, who, finally, yielding to our prayers (as the captain later commented) granted us the favor of staying alive."

Hermann's description of this scene had raised a multitude of comments from the listeners. Some, especially the ladies, thought that the lieutenant should have slapped Delleany and would have been widely justified - captain or non-captain - to kill him with the saber on the spot; the others defended the good right of the captain. One or two said that after all Delleany was not wrong, and that the concept of the fatherland, for many populations, was utterly artificial. The journalist even said that he would have

liked to hear the sequel to Delleany's speech - sequel that, as we have seen, had not been there. But the vague doubt that in Europe there would be no peace until the concept of fatherland had been eliminated or at least radically changed was like the image of a pale sun making its way through the mists of winter. A banker asked for permission to tell an anecdote about the subject, even if he could not remember either the time or the people.

A young man of high hopes had found employment as an office boy at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Since his more experienced colleagues dealt with the important papers, he had nothing to do and spent his time studying. One day he saw that all his colleagues were springing up, in the vast room where they all worked together. None other than *Monsieur le Ministre* had decided to take a look at the hall of younger collaborators. Finally, he arrived at our hero and asked him what he was doing. The young man replied that, since he did not have immediate tasks, he occupied his time studying all bilateral treaties with France, country by country. *Monsieur le Ministre* asked at what country he had arrived. "At Livonia, *Monsieur le Ministre*. And tomorrow I hope to start with Curlandia ". The Minister burst out laughing and said, turning to the room: "Come here, you all, and I will hold a course of international politics in a single lesson. Bodard, *s'il te plait* (¹⁷), bring me the map of

Europe. " Bodard promptly unfolded the map on a large table without even removing the mountains of existing files, and the Minister said, brandishing a pencil: " Observe well. The borders of the various countries are not straight lines, but all have protrusions and recesses. Well, every protrusion like every recess is potentially a war whose only purpose – please note - is to make the border of the two countries straight. Every hundred years there is a general war followed by a congress, in which the efforts of the most powerful countries are especially concerned with eliminating the straight lines that bloody wars have painstakingly formed, and creating new protrusions and recesses so that they can start over playing the game. If there were no such conferences, we would soon be out of work, and the military with us. End of the lesson. " The newcomer boy was dismayed and said "*Mais, Monsieur le Ministre*, will there never be peace in Europe?". The Minister, who was already leaving, with the group of his assistants, stopped short, took another pencil from a table and said: "The method would be this." And furiously he started drawing big bars across the map of Europe to clear all the borders. Then with a smile, he added: "Luckily nobody knows. Otherwise, we should all be looking for another job". The banker concluded by saying that he found a certain resemblance between the theory of the Minister and that of Delleany.

"But let Uncle Hermann continue," the girl pleaded. "I'm still waiting for the scenes of horror." "Come to think of it, my child," said Uncle Hermann, "I fear you will be disappointed. My story does not have great scenes of horror, and perhaps it would be better to stop here ".

"No, go on, uncle, I know you. Your story will not be boring ". The other guests joined their prayers to those of the girl, and Hermann resumed his story.

"The next morning, the third of July, I went up on deck around six in the morning. For some reason, perhaps because of the excitement of the previous night, I had not slept well. On deck, I found the captain, who was scanning the horizon with his telescope. I did not disturb him until he lowered the telescope, then I said "A glorious day!". "Do you believe so?" the captain asked. I replied that I knew very little about the sea. The captain told me, "You are a scientist, though, and you should have noticed some differences from yesterday." I felt cut to the quick and examined the sea with more attention. The color was always blue, but it seemed slightly milkier. I told the captain, who seemed satisfied. "Is not it a good sign?" "In itself maybe it means little, but there are other details you should observe." I looked again and said: "I seem to notice that the small waves we had yesterday are superimposed today over very long

waves." "That's right too," said the captain. Then he asked me: "And how about the animals?" At that moment I noticed that among the birds that had been with us for two days, smaller and faster ones had appeared (I think they were specimens of *Hydrobates pelagicus*, var. *melitensis*). The captain nodded again. I could not stand it anymore and said, "Well, captain, what do you expect?" And he replied: "The long waves, in my opinion, indicate that a storm is going on somewhere. The different birds that you have noticed, we call them storm birds. The color of the sea indicates that the sky is hazier than yesterday. Now, given the season, maybe the storm will be short-lived, and when we get there it will be dissolved, but there are also storms that last for days. " I had been in the Indian Ocean, and I did not think that the Mediterranean Sea could produce dangerous storms. I told the captain, and he took it as a personal offense. "Do you think we are navigating in a bathtub?" he asked me. "Well, get rid of that illusion: every year a hundred ships or so sink into the Mediterranean, and its storms have nothing to envy to those of the Indian Ocean." It seemed an exaggeration, but I kept my comments for myself. Then I said, "But in your opinion, where is the storm?" "North, compared to us, even if you cannot see anything, even with the telescope. The horizon still seems clear, apart from being a little more hazy than usual. This season, the storms come from West-North-West, and if we hold

our course, which I believe is parallel to the storm, it is probable that if it does not end, it will pass us on our right ". "But to be sure shouldn't we tack Westward?". The captain laughed: "If I had a cargo for Tripoli I would have already done it, but I have a cargo and passengers who want to go to Trieste, not to Tripoli, and I cannot afford more than a day or two of delay."

If at breakfast almost all the passengers, except for Delleany, had been present, I noticed that their vivacity had been decreasing as the day progressed. The long, increasingly notable waves had taken their toll on the English couple first, then on the two military men, who had disappeared in their respective cabins. At lunch there were only Delleany and I. We ate without talking. The food was always excellent, but I must say that the wines of Friuli made the difference. However, speaking to Delleany was impossible. In the afternoon, the long waves continued to rise, and everyone except the two of us deserted the tea. In particular, I wanted to taste some more of those cookies from the day before, which had made an excellent impression on me. The wind increased in strength, and the long waves had disappeared under short waves a couple of meters high. About seven o'clock we were in conditions of "tense wind," in a sea that the English navy would call "force 5". The ship had already significantly

shortened sails, but it seemed to me that we were still in ordinary routine.

However, only the captain, the waiter, Delleany and I attended the dinner. The captain congratulated us for our appetite and invited us to eat as much as we could since he was not sure about the service for the following day. But he looked worried. We had coffee in silence and then we climbed briefly on the deck. Here I saw a new show. Above us, the sky was hazy but cloudless, and there were still a few stars to be seen, but the whole horizon seemed to be on fire three hundred and sixty degrees around. There were continuous, noiseless flashes of electricity. We withdrew immediately.

I woke up long before dawn, tossed wildly into my bunk. The ship pitched, rolled and moaned, while still maintaining a vertical attitude. In the following hours, I remained in a sort of half-sleep, hoping for some improvement of the weather, which instead continued to worsen. I looked anxiously now from one of my two portholes near the ceiling, now from the other, but I could not see any sign of the dawn. I awoke to the smell of toasted bread, but it was still dark. Was the cook befuddled, or he had decided to cook before receiving the order to turn off all the fires? I staggered into the dining room, and once again I found only Delleany slowly munching his breakfast. I asked him

if he knew the time, and for the first time he told me four words: "It's eight o'clock." I felt my heart fail me. It was already eight o'clock, and it was still pitch dark.

Talking about the hours that followed would be difficult. The storm increased in intensity throughout July 4th, under a sky as black as China-ink. About ten o'clock in the morning I tried to put my head out of the hatch to get on deck. By chance, the captain was just a few steps away with two other sailors whom I had never seen before. His face turned purple: "Do not be foolish, he shouted at me, and go downstairs immediately." As I said, on a ship the captain's orders are not to be discussed. Moreover, in those few seconds, I was thoroughly drenched. From my portholes, I saw the shadows of the sailors, wrapped in black tarpaulin cloaks, laboriously moving across the deck. I could see that the sails were shortened to zero, and the creaks of the ship were scary. One could no longer say that she held a direction: she twisted, rolled, bent; she climbed mountains of water with splashes and strips of foam, and descended into deep valleys.

At lunch a kind of pendulum had appeared on the table: I understood that it measured the side inclination of the ship, but I did not understand what it was doing on the dining table. Delleany did not seem surprised at all. During the afternoon the weather

remained more or less constant: always frightful, but still allowing for some hope for possible improvement. At dinner, however, the situation began to worsen rapidly. Only the waiter, Delleany and I were present. The cook had done what he could: he had not cooked any food, but we had cheese, jam, vegetables and preserved fish, bread. And a lot of wine, which we definitely needed. There was also hot coffee at will, which, it seems, the captain had given orders always to keep ready for passengers and crew. Getting around was practically impossible for someone like me who was not used to it, so I decided that I would spend the night in the dining room drinking coffee to be ready for any eventuality. But, as we sipped coffee, as usual, without exchanging a word, the captain appeared, wearing the black wax-cloth soaked in water that made him look like a big sea animal, a sort of walrus. Still, what scared me was his face, as dark as I had never even imagined it. He had just sat down exhausted to get his coffee when the ship gave an incredible skid leaning on its side, overturning the coffee mugs. I held on to the table, whose plan even seemed to me vertical. Of course, it was just an impression. The ship slowly and creaking frighteningly rose upward, while the captain, picking up the pieces of the pendulum, said: "I think, Delleany, that we have to exchange a few words." I staggered up and motioned to withdraw, but Delleany signaled me to stay and said to the captain, "There is

no need for words. We made a deal. Give me two men ". "They are waiting outside here." Then the captain got up and did something I never expected: all dripping water as he was, he embraced Delleany. The latter returned the hug and went out to the storm.

We went to the portholes of the dining room, and between flashes of lightning and bursts of rain, we saw the three shadows of Delleany and the two sailors, head towards the bow, and work in the storm to the three big boxes that, as no doubt you remember, had remained on deck. I was amazed. The captain saw my expression and said, "We hope to make it. Delleany was transporting prohibited goods, and now he is disposing of them according to the agreements. " " Prohibited goods? But what? Opium?". "No, it's not opium. In his baggage, there are three mummies, precisely in those three boxes that I left as a precaution on deck ". "But you cannot transport mummies?". "No law forbids it, but there is a strong superstition that the transport of a mummy by sea involves serious risk. No sailor would accept to sail on a ship carrying a mummy ". I was not convinced: "But not few mummies are now in museums in Europe and even America, and they seem to have traveled very well by sea." "What can I say? Here is my idea: mummies in Egypt are probably thousands, so much so that, as you know, there is still an active distillation industry of mummies, which should

produce a long life elixir, sold in Europe at an exorbitant cost. Incidentally, I would not touch it with the tip of one foot. But I think that most of these mummies are of unimportant people: clerks, officials, low-ranking priests. The mummies of the truly mighty men, pharaohs, nomarchs and high priests ... well, those, in my opinion, are the mummies who should never travel. ". "Interesting, I said. And Delleany? ". "He explained to me that the three mummies he carries are mummies from the Greek or Roman era, all found in the same tomb near Thebes. As such, they should not be mummies of important people. But one of the three mummies, though found in the same tomb, seemed to him much, but much older. " "And how would you explain that?" "It seems that in Roman times the thieves of graves had already looted all the important tombs. Therefore, to avoid further desecration, the mummies of the Pharaohs had been moved to hidden places or newer and more anonymous tombs ".

All these things were shouted to me more than said, because the screams of the wind, the roar of the waves, together with the creaking of the ship made the conversation almost impossible, even though we were under the deck. "Besides, the captain cried out to me, do you think it fair that a man who has had millions of adoring subjects at his feet, should be put naked in a display case and exposed to the ignorant masses who look at him as a simple curiosity and pass over? Or to

some silly children who would say, 'Look, mama, what teeth does that mummy have! I'm afraid to have a nightmare tonight!' " I felt that there was no need to answer.

From the portholes of the dining room, fogged and beaten by gusts of wind and rain, we could just glimpse the shadows of the three men who were busy at the bow. Now and then the brigantine sank its bow into the sea, and the three disappeared, submerged by the waves. Evidently, they urged themselves to hurry, but in the roar of the storm, nothing but fragments of shouts came. Two of the caissons ended up in the sea, and the storm, not giving any sign of abating, seemed to increase in strength. But when the second caisson was gone, and only one remained on deck, I suddenly saw the sea calm down quickly, the clouds retreat to the horizon, while the wind quieted down, as if nature wanted to facilitate the task of the three men. Nothing remained of the storm except small waves that rinsed the bridge. There was a silence filled with expectation. The three stood for a moment as petrified. Meanwhile, the chaotic shapes of the clouds all around were transformed into the solemn vision of a crowd of majestic silent shadows, dignitaries, priests, immobile soldiers. Columns of fire rose up from the sea one after the other, like the pillars of a gigantic temple. The sky was studded with stars and strange forms of ancient deities. High on the sea, in

front of the brig, appeared a procession that came towards the ship carrying a throne, and on the throne, there was a black and majestic figure, the image of a pharaoh with the "blue crown," the hooked scepter and the scourge. He stopped at maybe one-sixth of a mile from us. It was a terrible and angry image, the one that raised the scourge. I heard Delleany's voice shouting, "Quick, hurry up before He lowers the scourge!" The three hurried and the third trunk slipped into the sea. The pharaoh folded the flagellum on his chest, while the vision quickly disappeared. The vision had lasted perhaps three minutes in all, and I am sure I saw it with my own eyes, even if no one else who was on board, from the captain, who was next to me, to Lady Lavinia, who moaned in her bunk, never admitted seen it.

Two shadows returned to the hatch in the storm that had resumed its fury. I shouted to the captain: "But one is missing!" "He is not missing," he said. He is just fulfilling to the end the deal we made ". And he stood thoughtfully without saying anything. I murmured "*Requiescant in pace,*" I do not even know referring to whom.

Now to make you happy I should perhaps say that the storm ceased immediately and that the navigation was very happy from that moment on, but it was not so.

The storm raged the whole night, but I was asleep as a stone in my cabin.

When I got up, the sea was barely rough. The other passengers, with evident relief and a certain appetite, but with a very beaten look, were already having breakfast. Contrary to usual, the captain came to have breakfast with us. I noticed that he had red eyes. He announced that Mr. Delleany had been carried away in the night by a sea uprush. The lieutenant commented "A *lâche* (¹⁸) less on Earth." He did not have time to look around, savoring the effect of his words, because he found himself seated on the ground with a bleeding lip: with lightning speed, the captain had hit him in the face with a kind of thunderbolt. The lieutenant stood up staggering, ready to ask for satisfaction, but the colonel stopped him saying: "*Il a bien raison, le capitain.* (¹⁹) Leave the dead in peace".

As I said at the beginning, from then on the journey was devoid of events. Only, it became very slow due to the many damages that the ship had suffered and that just in part could be repaired in Zakynthos, so that instead of fifteen days, the trip required eighteen. When we left, the captain, who had taken a liking to me, said to me as a last farewell: "Do not fail to keep me informed of your studies on *Macroglossa!*" But I guess he was joking.

Thus, you have heard my story." He turned to the daughter of his host: "I hope I have not disappointed you, my dear, even though I have not spoken about skeletons or dungeons. "

The girl was a little hesitant, and said, "You concluded a little too fast for me. There are some things I did not understand. You really cannot carry mummies on ships? " "This is an ancient tradition, cited by many scholars and travelers. The first that comes to my mind is Jean Bodin, in his "*Colloquium Heptaplomeres*," where Octavius, at the end of Book I, tells a story of this kind. He wrote in the sixteenth century. One should remember that for the ancient Egyptians it was imperative to be buried in Egypt. Apparently, Delleany and the captain had agreed to transport the three mummies, no doubt at a very high price and without the crew's knowledge, but with the agreement that if there was a severe storm, the mummies would have to be thrown into the sea. I think that in the case of the *Trieste*, the crew had discovered the transport and had demanded that also the owner of the mummies should be thrown at sea. Otherwise, there would have been a mutiny, and the captain would have ended into the sea too, which, at least, is my interpretation. Maybe, today, with steamships and all the rest, the superstition has been lost.

"But, a lady asked, what use was the pendulum that had appeared on the table?" "That's something I did not understand either, on the spot. I think the pendulum was just an objective way of indicating the severity of the storm. Probably the agreement was that if the ship overcame a certain inclination, Delleany would have had to proceed to get rid of the mummies". "It seems to me all quite exaggerated, observed a banker. I understand why to throw the mummies into the sea, but why also the owner? ". "Who knows, replied Hermann. At that time the Mediterranean crews were very superstitious. Or perhaps, Delleany himself no longer wanted to live. However, nobody is obliged to believe this story of mine ".

NOTES.

“Journey from Alexandria to Trieste – 1928” is, for the connoisseur, a modest tribute to Honoré de Balzac. The beginning is based on that of the *Auberge Rouge*, while Le Colonel Chabert is the hero of a short novel by the Comédie Humaine (Scenes of Private Life). The story of the champagne party on the Pillar of Pompey is a historical fact, while the story of the slave of Darfur is taken - but only in the initial part - from the life of Antonio Lebolo, from Castellamonte, collaborator of the French Consul, here called in the French way Drouetty, while his name was Bernardino Drovetti, from Barbania Canavese. As is known, the Drovetti collection formed the initial nucleus of the Egyptian Museum in Turin.

(¹) Antonio de Spiro is actually cited in many travel reports of the time.

(²) “*Frankish*” from the time of the crusades, indicated a westerner.

(³) Pietro and his sign are not invented either.

(⁴) *Drapeau*, Fr. is the flag (here, par excellence, is the French tricolor)

(⁵) *bouillon*, Fr., is the broth; *schnitzel*, Ger., is the schnitzel. I do not think it is necessary to translate *strudel*, Ger. a little further.

(⁶) *Dorokhsh*, village of Khorasan, where the best carpets of the region were made.

(⁷) *Mot d’esprit* (Fr): witty remark.

(⁸) “*Est-ce encore Eylau, mon Colonel?*”: Fr. “Are you still thinking of Eylau, Colonel?”

(⁹) “*Parbleu!*” By Jove!

(¹⁰) “*Allons, mon petit. On part à la charge*”: Fr. “Come on,

my boy. We are going to charge ahead! ""

(¹¹) "*Allez donc voir si, par hasard, mon pauvre Chabert vit encore* ":

Fr. "So go and see if by chance my poor Chabert is still alive!"

(Quote from the novel by Balzac).

(¹²) "*Et alors?*" Fr. Then what?

(¹³) "*Mais la Patrie...*" Fr. But Fatherland...

(¹⁴) *mon cher compatriote*: Fr. My dear compatriot.

(¹⁵) *C'est un lâche*: Fr. He is a coward.

(¹⁶) *mon lieutenant*: Fr. Lieutenant.

(¹⁷) *s'il te plait*: Fr. Please.

(¹⁸) *Un lâche*: Fr. A coward.

(¹⁹) *Il a bien raison, le capitain*: Fr.: « The Captain is right ».