

JURE FRANICEVIC-PLOČAR — Born at Vrisnik on the island Hvar on December, 12, 1918. His prose contains unforgettable characters of islanders at the time of social changes. His poems have been translated into a number of foreign languages.

Works: *Over the Trenches*, poems, 1943; *Fire of the Earth*, poems, 1946; *Sunny Girl*, a poem, 1951; *Rider on the Hill*, poems, 1952; *On the Island*, a play (written in collaboration with his brother Marin), 1952; *Steps on Stone*, poems, 1953; *Deaf Bells*, a play, 1956; *Cracks*, a novel, 1957; *Leaning Skies*, poems, 1957; *Bells in Heaven*, a novel, 1961; *Pigeons and Trumpets*, poems, 1966; *The Chain*, a novel, 1967.



JURE FRANICEVIC PLOČAR

The Living Torpedo

FROM THE NOVEL »CHIMES IN THE SKY«

THE SEARCHLIGHT beam swung towards the boat again from the left. It wavered on the water perilously close, but instead of moving further forward it drew back to about a hundred metres from the stern and began dragging itself over the dead sea like a vast golden cuttle fish. »Will it find us?« wondered Griše, his throat dry. A head peered out from below the deck. A thin inquiring voice wound upwards:

»Well? Has it gone?«

»Relax, comrades!« said the commander. »Just take it easy.« He added and strengthened his grip on his gun.

The sea was slowly shifting the ship toward the West.

»How far is it to the shore?« asked Griše.

»Two miles,« said the fat sailor with the rifle.

»That's not much. When the torpedo boat settles behind us, I would give her full speed ahead. We'll have done a mile by the time they pick up the sound of the engine, work out our exact position and catch us with that damn searchlight. Then we'll be too close to the shore, and they won't come too near because Podgorje's in Partizan hands. If we drift on like this the sea'll take us right in front of the guns, captain.« Griše stopped.

»How do you know, grandad?«

»Well, I was an admiral after all, wasn't I? I served in the Navy for eight years.«

The torpedo boat kept doggedly circling, and the searchlight swept the water. Sometimes it reared up and plunged down, sometimes it groped haltingly from point to point.

»This is all because of you, grandad,« muttered the commander sullenly.

»How?«

»We lost ten minutes through you, and here we are. We would have put out earlier. I kept saying we had to hurry.«

»You should have taken me on board straight away.«

»Well, I didn't. I told you why not.«

»It's not my fault at all,« said Griše. »If the boat goes down, you'll make me answer for all these boys. It's not right. I'd never have said such a thing to you.«

»I'm telling you the truth. We were late because of you, and now look at us.« Griše shivered and drew into himself.

»Of course it's your fault: why didn't you say you had permission as soon as you arrived and board immediately? War is war. Keep quiet and do what you have to do.«

»Then listen...«

»What?«

»Give me a gun and I'll settle it.«

»How?«

»There's a rowing boat behind the ship.«

»So?«

»Simple: I'll get into the dinghy and row towards the lousy torpedo boat, and when I get close, I'll let them have it with the rifle. At that moment you'll start the engine and set off at full speed. Tell them on shore to let my children know. Say I went to insure some travellers' crossings, that's all.«

»Don't talk nonsense, grandad.«

»I was made for this kind of fight. I only can't walk any more. I'd just slip away in the dinghy... easy. You'd get away, I'm sure. They'll go on looking for us till they find us. And then I'll burn in torment for having held you up. Captain, be a man! Let me fight!«

»But it's certain death, pop. I'm responsible.«

»Can't you see the way it's circling round us? Thirty eight lads will make it to Podgorje and it'll be as though I never set out. In any case I'm not going to see the end of all this and eat my fill of soup and white bread, so what's the difference? This will go on and I'm just about at the end. You haven't seen me in the light. Let me go, captain, and tell my sons: »Griše was left in the channel between midnight and dawn. He set out like a living torpedo.« Nothing more. Save these youngsters, captain, and let me go! It's nothing.«

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»It's nothing,« mused the captain, not taking his eyes off the movement of the searchlight. It seemed that the boat was reducing its range. Their ship was a dead weight, rocking silently. In its bowels was the hush of helpless suspense. The sky weighed increasingly heavily on the mast, on the fat, black water. He believed they could make it. But he could not decide, he had not the strength to send the old man to his death. He wavered. He thought of sending one of the crew. »But no«, he decided, »better the old man.« He gripped the bow, claspng his machine-gun more firmly, as though he could wring the decision out of it. The sea smouldered in the circle in front of the searchlight. He could hear the torpedo boat's engine throbbing. Rain fell softly, thin and chill, and cooled his burning face. Could he let an old man going to visit his sons on Bijorino be a living torpedo? No, no, not possibly! It would be everyone or no-one.

Then the light flew like a wing of flame over the mast and struck the water some hundred metres away from the bow. The torpedo boat was just behind the stern of the ship, only closer now it seemed. The captain thought that the night was waning. He was afraid that the torpedo boat might wait there till daybreak. »All right, then, if he wants to so much, if he voluntarily... voluntarily. It's not voluntary. He's going because I accused him. What's the difference, I opposed him. He's still pestering me, saying it's quite voluntary. If they didn't get him straight away, he'd fire, they'd fire their machine gun, and the searchlight would hit on the dinghy. That's when we'd slip away. We'd make it. The shore isn't far. The old man would have to open fire from quite a way off, to hold them up for as long as possible. Damn his eyes, you call this war! Let him go if he really wants to!«

»Have you decided, granddad?« said the commander suddenly without turning his head.

»Uh?« said Griše, as though he had been hit.

The light began to move again like a great flaming hoop towards the ship.

»Have you decided?« the commander repeated resolutely.

»Yes,« said Griše quietly.

»Of your own accord?«

»No, on your orders.« Griše made a face. »Don't be a fool, captain. Of my own accord, of course.«

»Then you can carry out your resolution.«

»I can, can I?«

»You can.«

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He shivered, feeling the chill in his bones. He drew himself up, swaying slightly, and set out unsteadily towards the stern. »Oh, Griše, you fool... Griše, my poor old fool,« he thought. »If you die tonight, who'll save your children? Let it come, whatever it is. I'm going, I'm not backing out. I suggested it myself. I'll get into the dinghy. I'll row straight for them. I'll fire...«

He began to loosen the rope that tied the dinghy. No-one said a word. The sailors below deck peered out, but restrained themselves from asking what was going on. Then Griše smiled stiffly, frailly.

»Well then, you keep going, lads! You know the way, and so do I.« He spoke from his stomach.

The commander left his position for a moment, ran to the stern and said to Griše:

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»Don't get too close! Fire from far away to hold them up as long as you can, and fire quickly to cover the sound of the engine. Are you afraid?»

»Don't be a fool! Only don't forget to ask HQ to send my youngest back to the island. He's called Jakov Česminić, from Kamensko. Got that?»

»Don't you worry, grandad,« said the commander awkwardly.

He let himself down with difficulty. Three of the sailors watched him from above, bending over the stern. They handed him his weapons and untied the boat. Down below in the darkness he looked small, lost.

He was alone, cut off from the world, in the middle of round, bulging, sluggish waves which were washing the dinghy to the right. He began to row, bending over the oar. The rifle and bullets lay before him in the bottom of the boat. He had already moved thirty or so metres from the ship. He did not turn round, and he did not say anything more. He leant against the oars with all his strength to reach the torpedo boat as quickly as he could. It was still circling. It seemed that the sea was growing, that it was swelling, vast, all-embracing. He was soaked to the skin, but did not think about it. He rowed steadily and moved slowly away. They could not see him from the ship any longer. He was lost to all on sea and shore.

A wave broke over him and swept him off course. »Damned waves,« he said with a start, »they'll overturn me next and the plan'll be ruined. They're waiting over there to hear firing, they're waiting for a battle on the sea, so that they can start the motor and sail into harbour. The lads are hoping, they're waiting for my message. It's all up to me now. I must watch these treacherous waves so that they don't take me by surprise. The sea is alive. It's always lying in wait.«

He remembered distant journeys over yellow seas in the Emperor's cruiser. It had masts as high as the sky. »Huh, and this is a coffin between the sky and the earth, not a bird, nor a fish, not a ray of light, nor a boat. Was there ever such a warship on the seas, for this is a ship, and a warship at that. It's got a real gun. I'm the crew. I'm the captain. I'm everything and nothing. How suddenly a man can find himself where he never expected to be! Now let the worst happen. I'm here. I'm a living torpedo! But that's the end,« he said in a dry voice, »the end on the open sea. Hail sea star! Was I crazy? Crazy or wise? Now I'm here. I shall die without suffering. This is just right for me, it's clear, it's sure. I'll save those youngsters on the ship. At last I'm doing something. It's right, it's just what I should be doing, exactly...«

He rowed on persistently. His shoulder-blades creaked with the effort, and the oars creaked on the sides of the boat.

»I'll attack out of the darkness. I'll aim at the searchlight. I know exactly what I'll do. Only I musn't let the sea trick me. The rest is decided. Let them tell the story! I shan't run away. Who'd live any longer than this?! They'd laugh at me if anyone survives this night. If only they don't find me before I have time to fire! What's the difference, I've had it anyway, whichever way I turn. I could have stayed with them, no matter what happened. That fool of commander got me. Was it really my fault? Ah Griše, you became a real man

tonight, and out of the blue. Because of that fool. It was quite accidental, admit it. No, it wasn't altogether accidental. Who says it was? I am doing it with my eyes wide open.»

He was drawing near to the point from which he would have to start shooting. At that moment the torpedo boat moved, still circling. He looked around him. There was nothing but black sea, waves, black bulging clouds, rain, everything was hostile, vast. »Here I am! It's easy to fire!« He felt as though he had grown huge, high into the heavens, that he had for the first time straightened up his head above the dark, in the darkness to his very bones.

He stopped. The torpedo boat now swerved off to the right as it circled. He trembled with fatigue. He took hold of the gun. He stood up, waiting. He rocked to and fro and had difficulty in keeping his balance. »Now,« he whispered drily, and he was nothing but eyes and ears, hushed, frozen. All his thoughts had vanished. He stared with his old man's eyes into the night, into the barrel of dense, lying blood.

The searchlight on the torpedo boat went out. You could see only the green light now. »Now, here they come... straight for me.« But the light seemed to me moving away. He stared fixedly. He felt a pain in his eye balls. The green light had moved away and suddenly disappeared.

He went on standing there, not believing his eyes. He could only see darkness, tangible, wet, as though the night had been pierced by the stab of the searchlight and was bleeding, pouring over his forehead, dripping down his face. He stood, balancing between sea and sky. Gradually the tension began to ease.

»It's gone,« he whispered, »it's given up.«

He felt exhausted and dropped heavily on to the seat. He sat like that, dumb, drained by the emotion, neither pleased, nor sad, but empty. He liked the rocking of the boat. He would have slept, he would have liked to curl up into nothing, but with the last shred of his consciousness he knew he must not sleep. He thought that the others would come to look for him. Only they could not see the dinghy. He must not go to sleep, whatever happened.

He decided to wait a little in the same place, because the torpedo boat might come back. »You see,« thought Griše, »the trawler is only a black tear on the open sea. They couldn't find it, even with a searchlight, although they were close.« But he did not even have a match. He could only shout. But not yet. The others would certainly come looking for him. »Ha ha ha ha!« he laughed at the top of his voice. »I'm a living torpedo, but I wasn't given the chance to be alive. Life plays all kinds of tricks on people, Devil take it! They really made fun of me this time. Ah, Griše, you old ass! you never make it, do you?!«

He took hold of the oars and slowly and painfully turned the boat back... Soon he heard the trobbing of the engine. He rowed faster, gritting his teeth. His arms ached.

»I certainly rowed quite a way!« he said aloud. The sound of the engine drew nearer. »I must mind that they don't knock into me,« he said aloud. Then he began to shout: »Hey, heey, ahooy! Hey, hey...«

Translated by Celia Williams