

Françoise

Leo Tolstoy

1891

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Part 1

On May 3, 1882, 3-masted ship "Lady of Winds" sailed from port Le Havre to Chinese seas. It's unloaded in China, took the new cargo, delivered it to Buenos Aires, and from there took goods to Brazil.

Crossings, damage repairs, a lull for several months, winds pushing ship away from its way, sea adventures and tribulations detained it so that it sailed for four years in foreign seas and only by May 8, 1886 arrived to Marseille with a cargo of tin boxes with American canned goods.

When the ship exited Le Havre, it had a captain, his assistant and fourteen sailors aboard. During the journey one sailor died, four got missing in different adventures and only nine returned to France. To replace the retired sailors on a ship, they hired two Americans, one Swede and one Negro, who they found in the same tavern in Singapore.

The ship picked up the sails and tied criss-cross gear to the mast. The tow steamship approached and, puffing, dragged it to the line. The sea was quiet, the remaining waves barely moved near the shore. The ship entered the line, where ships of all countries of the world stood along the waterfront line, ships were large and small, all sizes, and shapes. "The Lady of Winds" reared between the Italian Brig and the British, which yielded room for the new comrade.

As soon as the captain finished with the customs and port officials, he let half of the sailors go ashore overnight.

The night was warm, summer. Marseille was all lit, streets smelled of food from kitchens, from all sides were heard chats, rumbling wheels and cheerful shouts.

Sailors from the ship "The Lady of Winds" weren't on land for four months and now, stepping off on the shore, timidly, by two, walked around the city, as foreign, unaccustomed to cities, people. They looked around, smelled the streets next to the port, as if they were looking for something. Four months they had not seen women and they were driven by lust. Ahead of them was walking Celestin Duclos, a muscular and bright guy. He always guided others when they went ashore. He had a knack for finding good places, and was able to get rid of it when it was necessary, and wasn't getting in fights which often happened with sailors when they went ashore; but when a fight started, he did not lag behind from his comrades and was able to stand for himself.

Sailors wandered for a while along dark streets. The street were, like drains, all sloped down to sea, and which stank with a heavy smell from basements and storage rooms. Finally, Celestin picked one narrow alleyway, with lights bulging over doors, and entered it. Sailors, gabbing and humming, walked behind him. Huge numbers stood out on matte painted glass lamps. Under low-ceiling doors, on straw stools, women sat in aprons; they pop up at the sight of the sailors and, running to the middle of the street, obstructed their way and seduced in each own stash.

Sometimes from a deep entry way, a door accidentally opened. From it, half-dressed girl appeared in coarse cotton tight pants, short skirt and velvet black bib with gold-plated accessories. "Hey, handsome, come in!" she called even from afar and sometimes ran out herself, clinging to one of the sailors and tugged him with all her power to the door. She grabbed him, like a spider when it drags a fly stronger than itself. The guy, pliable from his lust, barely resisted, and the rest guys stood and watched what was going to happen; but Celestin Duclos shouted: "not here, don't come in; further!" and the guy listened to the voice and escaped from the girl by force. And sailors went further, accompanied by the lashings of the disgruntled slut. Others jumped out to the noise all along the alley, jumped on them, and with hoarse voices praised their merchandises. That

way they went farther and farther. Occasionally they passed by walking toward them soldiers, knocking with their spurs, or a lonely bourgeois, or a shop assistant, getting to their familiar place. In other lanes the same lights shone, but the sailors went on and on, stepping through the smelly goo, leaking from under the houses full of women's bodies. And, finally, Duclos stopped at some house better than others and took his guys in there.

Part 2

Sailors sat in the great hall of the restaurant. Each of them chose a girlfriend and didn't not part with her all evening: such was the custom in the tavern. Three tables were pushed together, and, first of all, the sailors drank together with the sluts, then they got up and went upstairs with them. Their twenty heavy boots banged long and loud on wooden stairs, until they all squeezed through narrow doors and spread across bedrooms. From bedrooms they went down again to drink, then walked upstairs again.

It was in the middle of the party. All their bi-yearly salary went to four-hour binge. By eleven o'clock they were already drunk and with bloodshot eyes incoherently screamed something, they didn't know what themselves. Each had a girl sitting on his lap. Who sang, who screamed, who pounded his fist against the table, who poured wine into his throat. Celestin Duclos sat among his comrades. Riding on his knees, was a large, thick, red-cheeked girl. He drank no less than others, but was not yet completely drunk; some thoughts still wandered in his mind. He softened up and was searching for what to speak about with his girlfriend. But the thoughts was coming to him and immediately leaving him, and he could not catch them, to remember and express.

He laughed and said:

- Well, well, well... And for how long are you here?

- Six months, - answered the girl.

He nodded, as if he approved her for that.

- Well, and are you happy here?

She thought.

- I got used to, - she said. - Have to, somehow. Still better, than in servants or laundry.

He nodded his head, as if he approved of her.

- And you're not from around here?

She shook her head in a gesture that she wasn't local.

- Distant?

She nodded.

- But from where?

She thought, as if she just recalled it.

- I see. . . I see. . . I see. . . And since when you're here?

- Six months, - answered the girl.

He nodded, as if approved it for that.

- Well, and are you OK here?

She thought.

- I got used to, - she said. - Need to, somehow. Still better than in servants laundry.

He nodded his head, as if he approved of it.

- And you're not from around here?

She shook her head in a gesture that is not local.

- Distant?

She nodded.

- But from where?

She thought, as if she just recalled it.

- I'm from Perpignan, - she said.
- I see. . . I see. . . I see. . . - he said, and paused.
- And what are you, a sailor? - She now asked.
- Yes, we're sailors.
- So, have you been far away?
- Not near. We've seen everything.
- Perhaps, even traveled around the world?
- Not once, almost twice circled.

She looked as if she was thinking, trying to recall something.

- You must've saw a lot of ships? - She asked.
- Of course.
- Have you seen "The Lady of Winds"? It's a ship.

He was surprized that she name his ship, and decided to crack a joke.

- Why not, I saw it last week.
- Truly, really? - She asked and turned pale.
- Truly.
- Not lying?
- Swear to God, - he swore.
- And, have you met Celestine Duclos? - She asked.
- Celestine Duclos? - He repeated, and got surprised and even scared. How could she know his name?
- What, do you know him? - He asked.

It was evident that she got scared of something.

- No, not me, but one woman from here knows him.
- What woman? From this house?
- No, nearby.
- Nearby where?
- Oh, not far.
- Who is she?
- Oh, she's just a woman, just like I am.
- And why should she need him?
- How do I know? Maybe, she's his compatriot.

They looked straight into the eyes of each other inquisitively and exploratory. - I would like to see this woman, - he said.

- What for? Do you want to say something?
- To say...
- What to say?
- To say that I saw the Celestine Duclos.
- You did you see Celestine Duclos? And he is alive, healthy?
- Healthy. But why?

She paused, again gathered with her thoughts, and then quietly said:

- But where is the "The Lady of Winds"?

- Where? In Marseille.

- Truly?! - She screamed.

- Truly.

- And you do know Duclos?

- But said that I know him.

She pondered.

- Well, well. It's good, - she said quietly.

- But what do you need him for?

- If you see him, tell him... No, it is not necessary.

- But what?

- No, nothing.

He stared at her and started to worry more and more.

- But do you know him? - He asked.

- No, I don't.

-So why do you need him?

She did not reply, suddenly jumped up and ran to the desk behind, at which the hostess sat; she took a lemon, cut it, pressed the juice into a glass, then poured water in it, and gave it to Celestine.

- Here, have a drink, - she said, and sat on his laps, as before.

- What's this for? - He asked, taking the glass from her.

-To make you soberer. I'll tell after. Drink.

He drank and wiped his lips with a sleeve.

- Well, tell now, I'm listening.

- But you do not tell him that you saw me, don't say from whom you heard what I'll say?

- Oh well, I will not say.

- Swear!

He sworn.

- By God?

- By God.

- So you tell him that his father has died and his mother has died, and his brother has died.

There was a fever. In one month, all three have died.

Duclos felt that all his blood stiffened at his heart. For a few minutes, he sat silently, not knowing what to say, and then pronounced:

- And you surely know?

- Surely.

- Who told you?

She put her hands on his shoulders and looked straight in his eyes.

- Swear that you won't tell.

- Well, I swear.

- I am a sister to him.

- François! - He cried out.

She looked at him intently and quietly-quietly moved her lips, almost without issuing the words:

- So it's you, Celestin!

They didn't move, got frozen as were, looking into the eyes of each other.

And the rest people around them yelled in drunken voices. Tinkling glasses, knocking with palms and heels, and shrill screeching of women were mixed with the hubbub of songs.

- How did it happen? - Quietly, so quietly that even she barely-barely understood his words, he said.

Suddenly her eyes got filled with tears.

- Just like that, have died. All three in one month, - she continued. - What I was supposed to do? I have only one left. To the pharmacy, and to the doctor, then for the funeral of three... I sold all that we had, paid everything off, and left in what was on me. Went into servants, to master Cascio... Remember him, the lame one? I just turned fifteen, I wasn't even fourteen at the time when you left. I sinned with him. Because we, sisters, are stupid. Then I went as a nanny to a notary, - and he, too. At first, he took over the upkeep, I lived at the apartment. But not for long. He threw me out, and I lived without food for three days, no one takes me, and I came here, like the rest.

She was talking, and tears trickled down from her eyes, nose, cheeks, and into her mouth.

- What have we done! - He said.

- I thought you also died, - she said through the tears. - It's not me, - she whispered.

- How did you not recognize me? - He whispered.

- I don't know, it's not my fault, - she said and cried even more.

- How could I recognize you? Were you like that when I left? How did you not recognize?

She gestured with despair.

- Oh! I see so many of these men, they all look the same to me.

His heart shrank so painfully and so hard that he wanted to shout and roar, like a little boy when he gets slapped.

He stood up, moved her away from himself, grabbed her head with his big sailor's hands, and stared straight into her face.

Little by little, he recognized her, finally, that small, thin, and joyful girl who he left home with those ones, whom she closed their eyes.

- Yes, you are Françoise! Sister! - He said. And all of a sudden, heavy sobs, sobs of a man similar to hiccup of a drunkard, came up to his throat. He let go of her head, slapped on the table so that the glasses overturned and flew into pieces, and cried with a wild voice.

His companions turned to him and stared at him.

- Look how he tanked-up, - said one.

- Enough yelling, - said another.

- Hey! Duclos! Why are you screaming? Let's go back upstairs, - said the third, with one hand jerking Celestine's sleeve, and with the other hand embracing his laughing, reddened faced, with shiny black eyes, girlfriend in a pink open silk bodice.

Duclos suddenly went silent and with bated breath, stared at his comrades. Then with so strange and resolute expression, with which he used to come into the fight, he, staggering, came to the sailor hugging a girl, and hit his hand between him and the girl, separating them.

- Away! Do you not see it, she is your sister! They are all sisters to someone. So is this, sister François. Ha-ha-ha-ha! - he sobbed, similar to laughing, and he staggered, then raised his arms, and dropped on the floor face down, and began to roll on the floor, thrashing it with his hands and feet, wheezing, like dying.

- We must lay him to sleep, - said one of his comrades, - or they'll arrest him on the street.
And they lifted Celestine, and dragged him upstairs to Franco ise's room, and laid him on her bed.

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