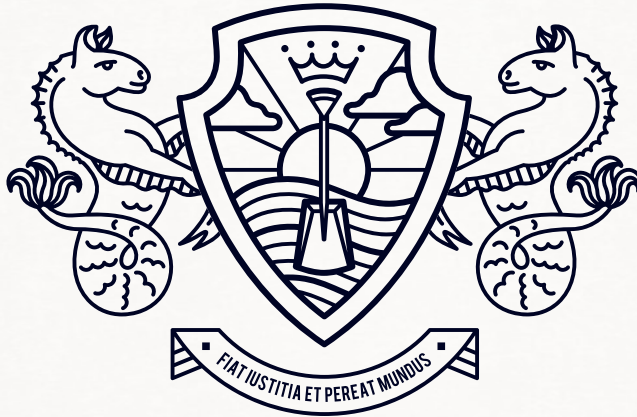




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MS LUCY MARIE

A ship epic

Written by Sir Webbster
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Background

A harbour city in the 1900s. The air is thick with the smoke of steamships, coal furnaces and factories. There are few cars, but already there is sense that the age of carriages and carts is coming to an end. Fog hangs thickly in the alleyways, mixing with the swirling dust of the streets. Amid the general hustle and bustle of the town, people go about their work in an unhurried, leisurely manner, trudging along to the steady rhythm of the steam engines all around them, which set the pace for the city's labourers – always the same movement, the same routine, the same daily walk to and from work. Like well-oiled cogs that mesh and move the machines forward, machines that seem to pump life into the city, only to take it away again immediately.

The various smells of oil, fish, seaweed and sweat hang in the air, sticky and thick. They hint at the misery that pervades the city, like a fungus; a parasite that has taken hold of its host and is slowly sucking it dry.

Somehow life goes on. People make the necessary arrangements. They take their turn in a common bed, sleeping in shifts, and live in hope that things will get better. Occasionally they might even catch a fleeting whiff of love, of security, that lifts them a moment from the mire of everyday life, before dropping back into that same mire of anonymity. Of course, some people try to pull themselves out of it – they try to jump higher, to stand out from the crowd. They try to be seen, to be someone. But few know how to crack open life's bag of tricks and really make use of its treasures. John is not one of them and he knows it. This fact makes him angry.

Cemetery Polka



John has just disembarked, earlier than expected. The captain had promised the crew a bonus if they docked early – time is money, after all – and they had made rapid progress. So, John leaves the freighter, tired and hungry. All he cares about is getting home and seeing his Claire. It's two years now that they've been together, living above the Black Cat, their favourite harbour pub. It's not much of a place – just one room and a little kitchen with a table. There's a toilet in the courtyard, and they can use the pub bathroom once a week, for a fee, of course. So, yes, it's not much, but it's home. And luckily for Claire, the Black Cat isn't in the red-light district. She's a decent girl, after all. She works in the kitchen or in the bar and every time John comes back from sea, it's like the two of them are meeting for the first time. That gives you courage.

If only there weren't so many weirdos, and gropers and other scum hanging around the pub and the harbour pier. Who knows how many of them have already hit on Claire. None have ever got anywhere with her, but John still feels the urge to break the bones of anyone who dares to try and touch her.

John Stoker

(Back at the Mole)

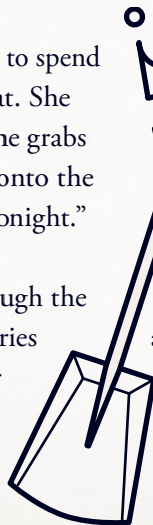
The smell of stew and cabbage fills the corridor. Slowly and somewhat unsteadily, John climbs the stairs. In his hand is a fish wrapped in newspaper and a bunch of thirsty flowers. He has taken his time. He went past Miss Rutherford's shop and, after helping her to restock the shelf of tins, hung around for a while. The old lady regaled him with stories from the days when her husband was still alive. "Those were the days, all right, when you could be sure that customers would pay you and not just pay on tick..." and such like. She slipped him two or three glasses of the good stuff. He couldn't say no to that. Then he's at the door, and as he opens it, he sees Claire standing at the hob, her hair pinned up, a cigarette in her mouth, listlessly chopping vegetables. Her work clothes may have seen better days but still she looks stunning. She puts the knife aside, wipes her hands on her apron and looks at him in surprise. "John! What are you doing here? I wasn't expecting you until the end of the week!" Relieved and happy at the same time, she approaches John and then pauses for a moment. "You've been drinking again!" "Oh, come on! I was at old Ruth's, listening to her stories. You know what's she's like... she offered me a glass of brandy... just a taste" She rolls her eyes: "Oh what hell! Give us a hug, mon amour!"

Well, they're not going to spend Claire is far too excited for that. She just like when they first met. She grabs takes John out of the flat and onto the asks. "There'll be music there tonight."

They stroll slowly through the then Claire laughs at John's stories sit on the edge of the pier, their

the evening cooking, wants to go dancing, two bottles of ale and street. "Where to?" he

harbour district. Every now and and sayings from life at sea. They feet dangling, and drink the ale



as the evening draws in. They don't say much. Claire talks about what's been going on in the neighbourhood, but there's not much to tell. Together they listen to the evening atmosphere and savour the moment that belongs only to them. The neighbourhood that they have known since childhood both binds and divides them at the same time.

Dusk comes and goes and the night falls. Claire stands up and points in the direction of the pub. They make their way towards it.

The Down Under is no ordinary pub, and nothing like the dives so typical of this area. It has the feel of a small theatre that has seen better days. It had once been a stable with a covered courtyard, and a previous owner had visions of turning it into a cabaret. He'd poured all his money into it, and lost everything in the end, including his sanity, but he managed to leave a mark on the place – the splendid facade and remodelled inner courtyard; the beautifully ornate stucco work and framed signboard that had once read Metropol, but now carried the name Down Under. People had laughed at him – why would anyone want a cabaret round here? Who would pay to go to that? People round here didn't have the money for that kind of thing and all they wanted to do was take a break from their monotonous existence.

“Come on!” Claire takes him by the hand and pulls him inside. The large, hexagonal room opens up with a long bar on one side. In the centre is a kind of arena with parquet flooring that's framed by six thick, wooden pillars forming an arcade. It ends in a kind of dome that looks like the sky, but the paint has suffered badly from the constant smoke and humidity. Around the dance stage are small round tables with stools and bar tables, which are slowly filling up with guests. A small orchestra has set up opposite the bar; the whole room is warm and stuffy.

John walks straight to the bar, sits down, orders a whisky and another ale for Claire. The bartender stiffens and lets out a hiss. “Alright John, whatever you say...” He knows these two well. John won't be dancing – he'll spend the whole evening here until he's drunk enough to start a fight. How many times has he witnessed Claire trying to get John to dance? How many times has she been left disappointed, realising that nothing is going to persuade John Stoker,

the man she loves, to get up and play out harmlessly, but most end over a couple of heavies to Claire is a nice girl, looks getting anyone else to nights. The more exuberant partner. And the better the John becomes.

This evening the are not going to end well.



dance? Sometimes these scenes with the barman having to call remove John from the premises.

good and has no trouble dance with her on these Claire is, the better the partner, the more jealous

bartender knows that things

Popkatepl

“**Y**ou’ve gone too far this time, John!” Claire had said and he knows. His mouth is dry, his head is buzzing, he can vaguely remember what happened yesterday. It was like a rush, a storm on the high seas, when you stand on deck and feel the power of the water, this irrepressible force, the roaring and roaring in your ears, when the ship is carried back and forth by the waves, crashing into the trough of the wave, only to climb a hill again straight away ... No chance of fighting it. It’s like being attacked and you act without thinking. He sees Claire’s pleading eyes, the youngster boldly standing in the way with Claire by the hand.

The bottle, the shattered glass, the stool, the crunching and cracking of bursting bones. Red—he only sees red. Like the embers in the hungry mouth of the oven that he feeds incessantly so that the ship can get its precious human cargo to its destination on time. He shakes his head. Still dazed and freezing, he looks around. The morning dawns, his breath forms little clouds of vapour.

He runs his right hand over his sniffling nose ... blood: "Jesus Christ, this bloody nosebleed!" He touches his nose, but there seems to be nothing wrong with it, no new blood to be seen. He looks down at himself and sees small, dried blood splashes and streaks all over his trousers and shirt. "Never mind, it's not the first time." Without paying any further attention, he gets up with difficulty and slowly drags himself home.

The flat is empty. There are still the chopped vegetables from yesterday, when life seemed to be in perfect order. The knife is missing. He picks up the one chair that has been knocked over, sits down on it and looks around the small dwelling. Everything lies on the floor as if after a hurricane. The bed is untouched, dishevelled like yesterday, but with a tear drenched pillow. The wardrobe on Claire's side has been completely emptied. The suitcase, gone. Her brush, which he gave her and which she loves so much, is still on the floor. Thrown carelessly, as if to say: "I don't need you any more!" In his head he hears her scream: "Stop it John! Please, please, stop it! Leave him, it's not his fault!" He couldn't, he had to go on, finish it. Now she has finished it. For good. He turns his head towards the kitchen and sees it – the casserole.



Casserole

When he wakes up again, dawn is already breaking. Outside, he hears the pounding of the machines in the factories. It roars in his ears. A foul odour rises to his nose. He goes to the sink where the water jug is and takes a gulp. The cool water does him good and clears his vision a little. He sees the almost empty whisky bottle next to the bed, next to it an indescribable puddle of vomit. He pours the rest of the water over his head and groans. He shakes himself, takes a worn cloth and dries himself off. Then he takes his few clothes from the wardrobe, adds the brush and a few other small items, stuffs everything into his duffel bag and leaves the small flat that has been their home for the last two years.

1-2-3

The MS Lucy Marie is moored at Pier 18. A steamer amongst steamers, 12'000 gross registered tonnes and capable of transporting up to 500 people in first and second class cabins, in addition to freight and goods. The stoker looks at the huge ship on which he has just been hired. Good, strong stokers are always in demand, especially if they are happy to trim the coal. John doesn't care, as long as the wages are right. He doesn't mind the hard labour of loading coal. On the contrary, it distracts him from his anger and causes him physical pain. It's just what he needs.

After two days of shift work and the last free watch, the Lucy Marie is ready to sail. John has been firing up the large boiler assigned to him since the early hours of the morning. The pressure has to be right, 17 atmospheres. All the stokers check the pressure valves on the huge steam pipes again. The signal to open the valves sounds: "Creep speed." The huge pistons of the two four-cylinder engines begin to move slowly and powerfully, pushing



the Lucy Marie out of the harbour towards the sea. John shovels coal incessantly, oblivious to the ship's departure, unaware of the shouts of the few remaining people on the pier. He also notices nothing of the woman in steerage, who wipes a tear from her face and looks back to her hometown one last time.

MS Lucy Marie

A few first-class passengers stroll along the upper deck. The women with their loose, demure dresses and parasols enjoy the fresh air on deck, a few bearded men in top hats or bowler hats stroll along the railing in small groups, smoking. Their every movement is deliberate and stiff. They look condescendingly at the second-class lower deck and talk mainly about their business. A mixed company gathers here, consisting of the nobility with their traditional titles, nouveau riche upstarts and speculators of all kinds, all of whom want to take a share of the existing wealth of the few. It is a mixture of traditions and rigid customs, the language is cumbersome and awkward, the conversations correspondingly diplomatic and formal. People feel their way around instead of blurting things out. They want to make a good impression and always on their guard so as not to make fools of themselves. Mostly they are only concerned with their own advantage.

Amongst this elite group, on the edge, stands Count Albert. As the only heir to a rich, highly respected aristocratic family with a considerable fortune, he should be at the centre of events. At 28 with an immaculate appearance and first-class manners, he moves eloquently in society and has already attracted attention several times with his negotiating skills. And he is aware of his skill, his title, his status and knows the manners of the old guard, which he sees as more of a hindrance than something to aspire to. So he seems somewhat bored in this in this seemingly feudal society. He moves slowly towards the stairs leading to the lower decks. Time for a change. Time for an adventure ...



The Aristocrat

After four hours, John's shift is over. Sweating, but still full of energy, he puts down his shovel. His eyes are bright and alert in the light of the oven. Tonight he is going to have a look round the lower deck by the lounges. As well as serving ale and brandy, there are always travelling musicians entertaining the crowd to shorten the long crossing across the pond. And so it proves to be. Even from a distance, he can hear the pulsating rhythm that drives the crowd. Just the right thing to celebrate his new-found freedom. But he is not the only one. In the midst of the swaying crowd, Claire Eclair dances exuberantly with an extremely good-looking stranger who somehow doesn't quite fit in with the rest of society.

Get Away

When the Count saw her yesterday, he was blown away. She was like a savage to him, like an Amazon, so strong and independent, so free, no compromises, no conventions, unfettered by the constraints of manners. Self-confident and unbiased, she had drawn him into the wild twitching, into the maelstrom of ecstatic rhythms. Never in his wildest dreams had he imagined that this wild music would sweep him away like this.

“I have to see her again, I have to know who she is,” he murmurs to himself. So engrossed in his thoughts, he doesn’t hear his butler enter the room.

“Good morning sir. Would you like to have breakfast here, or in the dining room?”

No reply. Count Albert looks absently, transfixed into the distance and continues to take no notice of him. When he tries again: “Sir? Is everything all right?”, he taps the tray on the table a little louder than usual, causing the teapot and cup to rattle slightly. “What...?” Count Albert looks at him in confusion. “Edwin, forgive me, I didn’t hear you come in. Did you say something?” Edwin looks at him with some consternation, but still politely: “I wanted to know if you would like to have breakfast here or in the dining room, sir.” “Of course, of course, I’ll just have tea here and then go on deck,” replies Count Albert firmly and calmly. “Please bring me the newspaper on deck in half an hour.” With these words, Albert leaves his cabin and goes on deck. A fresh breeze blows around his head, but he barely feels it. Lost in his thoughts of Claire, he looks towards the horizon, where the sun is slowly and steadily rising and moving towards the storm clouds looming in the distance.

Beautiful

He must tell her today. He simply can't delay. This happiness doesn't come along every day and if he wants to hold on to it, he has to act now.

After Edwin has brought him the newspaper, he asks: "Tell me, is there a clergyman here on the ship?" "What do you mean?" Edwin asks in astonishment. "Just as I say," returns Count Albert impatiently. "Is there a clergyman on board? A priest of some kind, or anyone else who could preside over a marriage or engagement ceremony on this ship?"

Edwin now looks at his earl more penetratingly: "An engagement?" "Yes, something like that," he replies quickly. Edwin thinks for a moment and replies: "You wouldn't need a cleric to oversee a betrothal, but I should think having engagement rings would be an advantage." "That's the problem, I don't have rings," replies Count Albert, now visibly annoyed, as he is not used to this kind of predicament. "I want some sort of ceremony to set the tone. After all, this is about a lady whose heart I intend to win. You see, Edwin, that's why I need a clergyman." "Well, I'm sure a priest or chaplain can be found," Edwin replies, "there's also a chapel on the ship. I'll see to it immediately." Relieved, he gives the butler the final instructions in his usual busy manner: "Do that, Edwin. Organise the pastor for this evening at 6 p.m. at the pavilion on the upper deck, I still need some time to set things up. And Edwin, be discreet about this matter, after all, I have a reputation to lose if, God forbid, anything goes wrong. I don't want an audience and the vicar will be bound by his vow of silence."

"Very well, Sir Albert," said Edwin, moving away quickly.

Count Albert now has a plan. A good plan, he thought. Now he just has to track down the lady and convince her of it. With his influence and charm, that shouldn't be a problem. Time to see the steward and go through the passenger list with him.



John is stunned. He wanted to forget her, get away from her, make a fresh start! And now this ... she's here, here on the ship. And in the best of company. How dare this bouncer make a pass at her, and in such an obvious way. The way she danced with him ... close, playful, laughing ... and the way she looked at him ... no, that shouldn't be. The minute he's out of her life, she throws herself at the first pretty boy who comes along. He didn't expect that. This isn't the Claire he knows – so ruthless and shameless with no conscience or scruples. As if she was deliberately trying to hurt him. No, it couldn't be. She doesn't even know he's on board. She feels safe.

He has to get out now, otherwise he'll burst!

Once on deck, he takes in the cool breeze, takes a deep breath and walks around the lower deck in a wide arc ... when he has calmed down enough to think a little more clearly again, he finds a place on a bench and lies down, uncaps his bottle and takes a big swig.

The brown liquid runs down his throat, leaving behind the pleasant burning sensation and the lightness that comes with it. Forgetting, just forgetting, that's what still counts. Maybe it's not what he thinks. Maybe it was just a coincidence or a flirtation, a brief, meaningless episode of two people meeting in one place and dancing together. He doesn't know. All he can see is Claire's happy, glowing face passing before his mind's eye, and her eyes fixed on the young and extremely attractive man strolling along with her. He takes another deep swig from the bottle. The comforting warmth of the alcohol spreads and allows John to drift off to a time when everything was still fine between him and Claire.

As evening falls, John is woken abruptly by the rain. His mouth is dry and he wishes he was in his musty cabin, where it would at least be warm and dry. Despite the rain, he is slow to get to his feet. His thin clothes soak up the water eagerly. He closes his eyes, tilts his head towards the sky and opens his mouth. The cool water revitalises him and reminds him why he is here in the first place. One look at the empty bottle next to him is enough to bring it all back to him. His jealousy smoulders inside him and with every minute that passes, it feels like someone is blowing into it to rekindle the fire.

It is already dark and the cloudy sky matches his mood. Well, he would take the anger flaring up again out on his work this time. They'll probably already be waiting to reprimand him for his obvious tardiness. Deep in thought, John sets off in the direction of the engine room. Well, let them. It would fit the picture. John, the good-for-nothing, the loser, the one who is always late, who only ever realises what's going on after the fact. Even his father had called him a lost cause, and maybe he'd been right. Maybe And yet he's the one with it, not them. He has to feel every day that he is nothing, that he should be as invisible as possible to the others. They have no idea. They are ahead of the game and look down on people like him. "It's like this ship," he thinks, "the ladies and gentlemen are up in first class and look down on the mess below them. It doesn't matter whether it's second or third class or the crew; we serve them. They feel they are better than us. They take what they want, our money, our lives, our women ..."



He pauses at the last thought. About 20 metres in front of him, he sees two figures standing in the rain. They don't look like they belong here. Their clothes, although soaking wet, are too smart for this corner of the ship and one of them is talking loudly to the other. "That's a priest!" John thinks. "What the hell?"

Albert's Lament

John moves closer to the two, unnoticed, and eavesdrops: "Sir, we should probably get back. You'll have to accept the fact that the lady of your heart

won't be coming back in this weather." "But she promised me this afternoon. I made her promise that she would meet me here and ..." Thunder drowns out their conversation. It seems to be about a woman. He hears Claire's name being mentioned, how the man raves about her and completely forgets himself. It seems to John like a song that the gentleman is singing ... and then he recognizes him, the bounder from yesterday. How dare he show his face here? He's asking for her, for Claire? He wants to marry her? Does he want to turn her into one of them? Anger flares up in him again, the embers are now a blazing fire ready to explode. He clenches his fists. But before John can walk towards them, the steward comes rushing up with another person, apparently one of the master's servants, in tow. Armed with umbrellas and blankets, the two take the soaked waiting passengers inside to the upper deck.

John screams. He is so angry! The opportunity has come and gone, just because he hesitated too long, and now she's gone! He has to let off steam, destroy something, crush it, break it ... he has to, he has to! He runs straight towards the engine room, pushes open doors, bumps into comrades who want to greet him, only to fall silent as soon as they see his gaze and make way for him. He doesn't hear them, doesn't see them, he is caught up in his rage. When he arrives at his fire, he grabs his shovel and starts swearing and shovelling like mad. He ignores the objections of the others and shakes off the foremen who, one by one, try to reason with him. His madness is superhuman and John's madness knows no bounds!

The Stoker
Underwater
Waltz of Death



THE END



