

**W**HOEVER HAS BEEN EVERYWHERE AND SEEN everything, last of all should pay a visit to Stitchings. Simply take a seat in a sleigh and, before being overcome by sleep, speed across a plain that's as empty as a blank sheet of paper, boundless as life itself. Sooner or later this someone – perhaps it is a traveling salesman with a valise full of samples – will see great mounds of snow stretching along streets to the four corners of the earth, toward empty, icy expanses. He'll see pillars made of icicles, their snowy caps lost in the dark of a wintry sky. He'll draw into his lungs air as sharp as a razor that cuts feeling away from breath. He'll come to appreciate the benefits of a climate forever unencumbered by restless springtime breezes, by the indolence of summer swelter, or the misty sorrows of autumn. He'll take a liking to frost, which conserves feelings and capital, protecting both from the corruption of decay.

Winter every day of the year and a darkness that softens contrasts and smoothes the sharpness of edges. In Stitchings the

gloom would dissipate for a short moment around lunchtime. Before the soup a pink glow lit up the sky, during the main course the sun cast a handful of oblique rays over the rooftops, then after dessert the dusk would set in irrevocably. The stars in the local sky were strangers to movement and change, just like the gaslights that clung to their places among the constellations.

In the darkness the company of Loom & Son, Strobbel's works, and Neumann's factory went about their business, their affairs interwoven with those of the Swedish garrison. Upon a hard-frozen wilderness where only the winds howled from the four corners of the earth, the garrison, which was only of use for parades, endured in its daily routine. Its very existence should be regarded as an especially favorable sign, bearing in mind that a Swedish garrison is better than any Russian, Prussian, or Austrian one, just as a Swedish partition is better than any other possible partition.

The officers' mess, the barracks, the stables, the *manège*, the magazine, and the parade ground covered in beaten, slippery snow, upon which, whenever necessary, leapfrog was played in full gear to the point of exhaustion – all these emerged from around successive curves as unexpectedly as sudden turns of fate. For Guards Street took its shape from the sinuous melody of the taps played every evening on the bugle. The instrument's golden sounds soared into the air and wafted over the roofs of the apartment houses. But on the far side of the market square they dropped at once with the labored flight of a stunned bird.

For there, in the slums, boys in caps with earflaps threw snowballs at anything that managed to rise above the down-to-earth. The factory hooter carried low, barely above the ground, wailing each morning on a single note that could express only the infinite darkness that flowed down the ravine of Factory Street at all hours of the day and the night. The whine of the hooter bounced off the bare brick wall of the barracks like peas off a tray. Guards Street and Factory Street fled from one another toward opposite ends of the earth.

Strobbel's works was a porcelain factory. Its warehouses contained piles of hotel dishware: mute stacks of plates and bowls, large and small, countless silent gravy boats, and tureens, all bearing the emblem of a four-pointed snowflake on the bottom. In Neumann's phonograph-record factory noble tenors, supercilious baritones, ominous or cheerful basses, and sopranos limpid as glass were pressed by unmelodiously clattering machines into black ebonite, where they remained invisible yet audible, forever cocooned in incomprehensible Italian words. As the factory workers fell asleep over their soup at home after work, disks spun before their eyes, white in the case of Strobbel's men, black for Neumann's.

The company of Loom & Son had its offices at the point where the axes of the main streets intersected. All the cash in Stitchings passed through its vault, while its depots handled all the goods manufactured in the town, which were packed into boxes and crates in which they then departed for the outside

world from the railroad sidings at the far end of Factory Street. In addition, Loom owned majority shares in the famous local sewing shops. These produced ladies' corsets that were snapped up by department stores abroad and were purchased just as eagerly by the local ladies, who thanks to the whalebone stays were able to sit straight even when waves of sleepy tedium were sweeping them toward the isles of afternoon naps. The gentlemen, resting their chins on the stiff collars of shirts sewn in those same shops, dozed in a quiet that could not be disturbed by the cannon of the Russo-Japanese War, even less by rifle fire from the German colonial forces in Africa.

The buildings of the railroad station extended along Coal Street. Sparks shot up from the smokestacks of unseen locomotives; prolonged whistles pierced the darkness. Porters with tin number plates on their caps waited for other people's luggage. Railroad workers carried oil lamps along the storehouses, the jolting lights flashing across the undercarriages of cars and only by chance summoning out of the dark the coal heaps by the tracks with their perpetual sprinkling of snow, or the mounds of snow covered with coal dust – as like one another as day here is to night.

Salt Street was wreathed in a briny dust that made the eyes water. It ran through a suburb where miners lived, and led to the mines. On the way it left behind houses that poked out of snowdrifts here and there like abandoned wooden crates of the kind used to transport Stitchings salt. The houses sank in up to

their windowsills, up to their roofs. In the nighttime the miners listened hopefully to cracking sounds somewhere beneath the floor. The deeper in the earth the better. For they knew only words that sound good far underground, words such as “Take cover!” or “Like the blazes!” Dazed by the bustle of the town, they would come to a halt in the middle of the sidewalk, lost, mute as beasts of burden, jostled on every side. A strident whistle would bring them back to alertness; they’d have to take shelter in a gateway to escape a hunting party out in search of fun, dressed in ill-fitting pants and oversized cloaks. They preferred to stay at home, in their houses that gravitated toward the antipodes.

But it was to them alone that the factories, stores, banking houses, and law firms owed their prosperity. Any kind of enterprise would have run aground in a heartbeat if there’d been a lack of salt, which, as everyone knows, is the essence of tears. For along with riches, success in industry and commerce brings weeping. A boom requires weeping if it is to last. Otherwise it will dry up. A certain number of tears are needed to fill the channels of trade and allow the expeditious flow of assets and liabilities, just as water under the keel is essential for ships with holds full of cargo.

The assets and liabilities of Loom & Son streamed back and forth around the world, acquiring now the form of Stitchings salt, now that of crude oil in large barrels, sacks of wheat, or heavy bolts of fabric. These goods had been traded by many

generations of men whose mustaches had from their young days been covered with hoarfrost, their jaws set, their icy gaze free of illusions and capable of seeing right through faded varnish. The first of them had been a sailor in his youth. He had left behind a sailing ship under an English flag that cruised invisible waves inside a bottle, into which it had been blown by who knows what longings, having overcome the armada of the Spanish king and the narrow bottleneck of thick glass.

The Looms married late. Their wives each gave them an only child, a boy who was always given the name Sebastian. Each of them was able at the right moment to replace his predecessor in such a perfect manner that Sebastian Loom endured in the memory as a single person. The first girl in the family had come into the world at the turn of the century. Her mother had died in childbirth. Since that time the merchant Sebastian Loom had lived alone, applying his icicle-cold Stitchings common sense in every matter. He kept a tight rein on his servants, and rarely indulged himself either. He would spend entire mornings plunged in a vortex of bookkeeping and commercial correspondence. "Coffee!" he would call from time to time, ringing the little handbell. Rather than remarrying, Loom preferred fleeting acquaintances struck up on his travels. Upon his return, operetta programs and knickknacks would come spilling from his suitcase. He spent his afternoons in Corelli's café, talking business over a game of billiards with Councilor Krasnowolski, an expert on business law; on Wednesdays the two gentlemen

were wont to meet at the restaurant of the Hotel Angleterre, where they would always order pork knuckle. At times Sebastian Loom would lose himself in thought over his accounts and would decide to marry off Emilka to young Kazimierz Krasnowolski, known as Kazio, as soon as the two reached a suitable age. In this way he sought to prevent the losses that Loom & Son could incur from the circumstance that Loom had no son.

The officer of the German colonial forces, in white jacket with gold buttons and tropical pith helmet, had arrived in Stitches no one knew where from. One Wednesday he appeared out of the blue, at lunchtime, right between the soup and the main course. He unfastened the button at his collar and wiped his brow; he was evidently unaffected by Stitches's frosts. The sun had just appeared for a brief moment over the Looms' house and was casting a few slanting rays onto the rooftops through gaps in the clouds, only to vanish in darkness soon afterward as it did day after day. The new arrival from the distant colonies walked by the town hall, whose golden weathercock blazed on its tower in the first and last rays of the sun, and entered the hotel restaurant just as Councilor Krasnowolski, his cheeks pink as could be, had emptied his frost-covered glass and was rubbing his hands in anticipation of the pork knuckle. The officer removed his pith helmet.

"Today I am taking your wife to South-West Africa," he said, clicking his heels.

"Surely you are joking, sir."

“I never joke,” the officer said laconically, showing the councilor a letter.

The latter began to read, but his face flushed. All at once he tossed the sheet of paper on the table as if it had burned his fingers. The German colonial officer folded the letter carefully, put it away, then clicked his heels once again in farewell. He walked away with the brisk step of a man who knows where he is going. He vanished behind the cloud of white steam rising from the mountainous portion of greasy pork knuckle that had just at that moment been served. Councilor Krasnowolski ate, choking on his tears and wiping his spectacles on a checkered handkerchief. For he was every inch the civilian.

The councilor’s wife left him with a stack of blank letter paper, wrinkled from her tears, a torn-up telegram, empty photograph frames, and a pincushion stained with blood from a pricked finger. She never contacted him again. Perhaps when she arrived at her destination she was devoured by African lions. For a long time Councilor Krasnowolski was sick from his woes, till one night he died.

The job of caring for Kazio fell to his aunts, each of whom took him in reluctantly and was glad to see him go, all because of his wearisome affliction – he could not fall asleep. In the night he would rise from his bed and wander the rooms, tormented by tedium. From time to time a floorboard or door would creak. In the morning he would be kneeling on the floor

in his nightshirt. In a reddish glow from the half-open door of the stove he would open his boxes of lead soldiers. The hulloaloo from skirmishes between the uhlands of Stitchings and the German colonial forces echoed against the pink wallpaper of the children's rooms, waking infants and nannies. Uncles would quarrel with aunts by night in their mahogany-furnished bedrooms. Kazio's fate would be weighed amid muffled whispers, sarcastic questions, sobs, angry exclamations. Once they got their way, the uncles ensured that Kazio was sent to cadet school in Sweden; his aunts would shed tears every evening as they recalled his sorry story.

Shortly before her seventeenth birthday Loom's only daughter became engaged to Councilor Krasnowolski's son, who had returned to Stitchings as a professional officer; he was most handsome, especially in his dress uniform, with his splendid mustache and that absent look in his dark eyes, always faintly ringed with sleeplessness.

"He never falls asleep because he never wakes up either," women would say bitterly when he jilted them. The merchant had heard the rumors about Kazio's romances, but for him neither romances nor military service were serious things and he nursed the hope that after marrying, his son-in-law would exchange his uniform for a snuff-colored frock coat and devote himself entirely to the company.

"Not on your life," the young lieutenant would declare as he

shuffled cards in the mess. The other officers would exchange knowing looks over the card table and smirk, asking themselves why in that case was he marrying into Loom & Son.

He would deal and look about, blinking, as if the unuttered question had disturbed his peaceful sleep. Then he would pat the pockets of his uniform in search of a little pasteboard rectangle. He always carried a photograph of his fiancée. With a rapid glance he would look right through the childlike countenance, in which there was nothing unspoken, no secret, nothing that would be capable of hurting him.

The spitting image of the other officers, whose polished boots gave off the same gleam and the same smell of wax, he ate, drank, and lived reasonably happily until the arrival from Germany of Augustus Strobbel, nephew of old Strobbel the owner of the porcelain factory. Thanks to his long lashes and sweet-tempered gaze, this polite young man became the favorite of the young ladies. At the *thés dansants* he would blush, surrounded by a giggling throng that would sing “*Meine lieber Augustus, Augustus, Augustus . . .*” The aunts sitting along the edges of the room said nothing, alarmed, though they recognized a song that was older than they were, as one after another they lowered their lorgnettes to resume their interrupted conversation. Augustus Strobbel positively glowed when he expatiated upon porcelain. He maintained that it was the most durable substance in the world, and that the thinner it is the more durable it becomes, because its fragility makes people handle it with utmost care,

which, he claimed, could most clearly be seen in the Chinese vases in Strobbel's private collection. Augustus Strobbel wore a striped silk vest of a kind never before seen in Stitchings; beneath it beat his heart, noble and delicate as a porcelain handbell. Nothing irked Kazimierz so much as porcelain, especially that stupid little bell.

The day of the annual festival, commemorated with a lavish celebration on the market square and dances in people's salons, was for Loom marked by a festive tedium of broth and boiled beef with horseradish sauce at the ceremonial dinner of the town council, which he had served on since time immemorial. As his black tailcoat was being prepared for him, his daughter, Emilka, put on her ball gown with the help of a maid and began looking out for the sleigh that was to take her to the dance, straight into the arms of Kazimierz Krasnowolski – or perhaps Augustus Strobbel? "*Embarras de richesses, de richesses, de richesses,*" she sang, her hand upon her heart, which was beating wildly. She ran, now to the mirror, now to the window, till all her happiness and agitation made her head start to spin.

At long last the sleigh pulled up and Emilka was just about to take her seat when Kazimierz's jaunty orderly ran out of Guards Street and in front of Loom's house bumped into Augustus Strobbel's melancholy manservant, who was hurrying from Factory Street. They appeared before Emilka at the same time, twisting their caps in their hands, holding under their arms notes in Strobbel's rounded hand and Krasnowolski's angular