

A sailor's tale

It was a hot summer day when my crew and I set sail for Lübeck. The birds woke me with their sweet song. I reached out my hand to the bedside table and grabbed my freshly washed uniform. It smelled of Swedish meadows and the fresh sea breeze. The sea breeze of the Baltic Sea found its way into my cabin. With my uniform on, I reached out once more to put on my beret. The yellow cross of the Swedish Empire dazzled me, and I looked up at the sky. I hoped it was not too late. 'Take care of yourself, my beloved Kristina. I'm going to see the doctor and bring home your medicine,' I thought to myself. I took off my beret and held it to my chest. A heavy silence surrounded me. The crew had been ordered to take the fastest route through the Baltic Sea to reach Lübeck - all for my beloved, sick wife back home in Kalmar.

'Gustaf Jansén!' I heard someone call after me on the upper deck, and I hurried up.

I leaned against the mast and watched my crew with a careful eye. I saw how they themselves were in desperate need to reach the harbour. My right-hand man, Torsten, was standing on the other side of the mast. Without a word, he got up and took something out of his pocket.

'Here Gustaf, you'll need this when you get to the doctor.'

In his hand was an envelope, pearly white like a pigeon's feathers. I turned the letter over and saw a blood-red stamp. The royal seal.

'What does this mean, Torsten? Have we been ordered to withdraw? Those nobles can go to hell. I have nothing to do with them any more!'

'No, they say this will help your wife. Someone has translated your wish. Olof from the Council has written this.'

I admired the letter carefully, only a few words away from saving my beloved. Olof was an acquaintance of my wife Kristina, and he was the first to help me when she fell ill. He had carried her home when she had fallen on her way home from the city. He now supported me by donating a large sum of money so that I could leave Kalmar. Lost in thought, I started writing in my logbook.

I didn't realise that darkness was slowly falling. My crew was getting more and more tired. I stood alone with a couple of my men facing the dark embrace of the night. We couldn't see each other in the darkness that surrounded us and we had to follow the stars to find our way. I wrapped my coat tighter around me to keep warm.

- My thoughts took me to her. Her white hair led me to the place that could bring me back to life. The cradle of the sea calmed me - for here I was of use. I was not a learned man, but the sea and the earth I was born on had brought me to her. To my beloved Kristina

We reached the harbour of Lübeck just as the sun was sinking behind the horizon. The journey had been longer and more demanding than we expected, but there, at the quay, a horse and cart were waiting. My crew remained on board, ready to cast off at a moment's notice. I left the deck and made my way alone through the narrow streets, my heart heavy with worry, towards Dr Heinrich's clinic. The road to the clinic seemed endless, each step agonising.

I reached inside my uniform and pulled out a document with the Queen's seal. With her seal in my

possession, Dr Heinrich would give me what I needed without hesitation. The first stars of the night lit up the sky as I finally reached the doctor's clinic. I ran up the stairs, and there was Dr Heinrich waiting at his patient's bedside.

Without hesitation, I reached for my envelope and at the same time my voice broke with desperation. A cry for help came out.

'My wife... She is so very ill, Dr Heinrich. You must help me!' I shouted in despair.

The doctor's eyes narrowed as he took the letter from my hand. Silently he read the letter. Without a word, he handed me a small bag filled with different kinds of herbs, along with a folded note. Without reading the note, I accepted it, bowed deeply and ran out to go back to the harbour.

But when I reached the street, my horse and cart were gone. Panic gripped me. I started running towards the harbour, holding the bag the doctor had given me tightly and desperately. My legs were burning with exertion when I arrived at the harbour. Immediately we hoisted sail back towards Kalmar. It was noisy and everyone was shouting at each other to get back as soon as possible. I was grateful for the support and help I received from my crew. I stood at the rail, at the nearest exit, in readiness to give the medicine to my soul mate as soon as we were ashore.

We travelled as fast as the wind allowed over the waves of the sea. The day was short and the sun was beginning to sink into the sea when we saw Kalmar harbour on the horizon. As soon as we docked, I threw myself over the rail and started running.

I was greeted by the cold evening air of Kalmar as I stormed through the harbour. All around me, sailors were unloading goods, and merchants were shouting out their prices. I ran upwards through the town. The square was always crowded. It was just as usual. Some merchants were discussing the day's business loudly, some ladies were standing at a textile stall looking at fabrics, farmers were selling meat and vegetables, sailors were selling the day's catch... and of course, Father John, the priest, was there too.

When he saw me, he slowly lifted his hat and looked at me with a sadness in his eyes that I did not understand. I didn't understand what he meant by his look, and I didn't have time to find out, because I was going home with the medicine for my wife!

It was then that I saw a hearse pass by on the square's pavement. I thought I saw something familiar - a lock of hair sticking out through the gaps. I walked slowly towards the carriage and saw my beloved's hair sticking out between its cracks. The priest, John, looked at me and lifted the sheet that lay over the bodies of the dead. There I saw her - my beloved Kristina. Her beautiful green eyes had faded to white as winter snow, and her skin was pale like all the sailors I had seen die on the ship. I was shaking and refused to accept what had happened. I collapsed to my knees and screamed out my grief and anger.

Not long after, the funeral was held. The days had become heavy and grey for me. It's not easy to feel joy when your heart is just screaming with loss. The only thing that could silence the screams inside was alcohol. It was now the only thing that could dull the pain. I had given my money to the vicious circle of alcohol addiction. The last penny was being spent on the booze.

The funeral was held by John in the church at the castle. The church was silent, and the coffin at the altar caught my attention and that of the others. I couldn't believe that I had lost my wife. The thoughts swirling in my head became louder and louder. I put the back of my hand against her

cheek and felt the cold chill of winter spread through my body. The money from my job allowed me to bury her in the cemetery and hold a memorial service, but there was nothing more I could do for my beloved Kristina.

Johan stood next to me and put his hand on my shoulder. He reeked of church wine.

- 'Come now, my son. We must pray for her, so that she can be reunited with God,' Johan whispered.

-Who do you think you are, you sinning priest! Don't pretend to be spiritual when you yourself reek of the devil's drink. How can you conduct a funeral in your condition?

John left without saying a word, and I stood alone by the open hole in the ground.

The ground was frozen and cold - there was no life left in our mother earth anymore. I pulled myself away from the church and headed for home. My little cottage was not far away. I dared not be seen near my home. I failed as a husband. Therefore, I could not return to the home she had once cared for. I lay down on a bench and fell asleep while the streets of the square slowly quieted down.

The next evening, I walked along the hard cobblestone road. I turned round and looked out over my beautiful city. I saw the newly built houses where the citizens now lit candles waiting for the night to be over. I saw a young woman embracing her children. Her husband kissed her tenderly on the forehead, and the light from the window flickered in her eyes. Kristina and I had never had any children, and now I was all alone. I lowered my eyes to the ground, and the guilt fell over me, making every step heavy and difficult to take. Was it my fault that she died? Would she have lived if I had been able to get the medicine in time? My worn-out shoes made me vulnerable to the snow, which was slowly but surely burning my feet. I ran my hand over my chapped lips and wondered to myself what could have been different.

I continued through the city, with the still winter night as my only company. In the distance I saw the castle in the distance and the guards outside, who had lit a fire. I, a lonely and now poor sailor, would never be able to warm myself by their fire.

I arrived at an old wooden shed with a broken facade. Peering inside, I saw no light inside. As I entered, I was greeted by the sight of the other occupants, already asleep. This was how I had to live now, when I could no longer afford to stay in the small cottage where Kristina and I had once lived.

It stank of alcohol and urine. I lay down on the floor next to a skinny old man and the cold of the night burned my back. Missing my wife kept me awake for a long time, while the cold slowly bit into my skin. Finally, I fell asleep.

The morning light stung my eyes when I woke up. I stood up and pulled on my dusty hat. I shook it off lightly and headed for the city centre.

On my way to the harbour, I opened my small leather bag to see how many coins I had managed to scrape together. I sighed at the sad sight of two single coins. The people in the street looked at me and whispered. I had got used to it. However, going from the top to the bottom was something

that even I could not have foreseen.

Now they were all looking at me with their judgemental eyes. Alcoholism is not a popular trait.

A month later

When I got down to the square, I saw a new harbour pub. I went there. It was warm inside, not like the abandoned shack I had slept in.

The longing was still as great, despite all the time that had passed, I was still looking for her, even though I knew she was waiting for me in the arms of the earth I walked on. I sat down at the table and saw her in the glass in front of me - a vision born of pure hallucination and longing. Her voice was heard in the sips, and her beautiful eyes were visible through the liquor.

I looked towards the stately building by the sea - Kalmar Castle. The sun was setting over the top of the castle as darkness slowly enveloped the city. On the horizon, the great sails of the ships could be seen. I walked towards the castle, where guards calmly patrolled with torches shining in the darkness of the night sky.

It had now been two months since I hung up my uniform, shortly after Kristina had passed away. I thought I could still hear the cold of the sea in the waves. I had finally broken free from the grip of alcohol, but the hole in my heart had only grown. Not a day went by without me thinking about her. The same questions kept running through my head: Was it my fault? What should I have done to get there in time? I miss her so much. The thoughts were overwhelming.

When I got to the top of the hill by the castle, I saw the sunset, the boats, all the sailors hurrying to finish the last of their ships for the day. I sat down on one of the wooden benches and let myself be enveloped by the calm around me. The birds were chirping down by the shore, and the spring flowers were coming out of the ground. After a moment of silence, while I looked out towards Öland, I took a lap around the castle.

As I passed one of the long sides, I saw an old lady sitting leaning against the castle wall.

‘Good evening!’ I greeted her solemnly.

The lady looked friendly. She looked at me and smiled. I wondered why she was sitting there alone, so I stopped and started talking to her.

She told me her name was Britt, and then I remembered her. Britt was a quiet but pleasant lady with a slightly crooked back and wrinkled cheeks. Her kind blue eyes carried a mysterious look and her grey hair moved gently in the wind. I sat down next to Britt. She seemed to enjoy the company - and so did I.

‘You are Kristina's husband, I am told. She was a good friend of mine. I am sorry for your loss.’

‘Thank you...’ I replied sadly.

Just hearing her name hurt me. I turned my eyes away from Britt and looked up at the great castle. Just a few years earlier, we had stood here, hand in hand, and witnessed the coronation of Erik of Pomerania as King of Sweden, Denmark and Norway. It was an exciting day, not only for the

kingdom but also because I got to spend it with my beloved Kristina.

'I have to tell you something...' Britt whispered. 'It was not a disease that killed your wife. I-'

'What do you mean by that?' I interrupted her loudly. I saw her body on the hearse. Only those who have died of disease are allowed to travel in the hearse. You cannot come now and say that she did not die of it. It has taken me a long time to accept her death - I simply cannot go through it again. Don't try to tell me otherwise!

'Just listen to me,' Britt said.

She took a deep breath and started to talk. 'I went to the pub a few days ago. As usual, Father John, the priest, was drinking his brandy. You know how he mumbles when he's drunk, but that's when I heard him mention Kristina. I sat down closer and asked about her. Then he replied: 'He paid me a large sum to keep the secret!'

Britt swallowed hard before continuing:

'I threatened to report him to the bishop for all the drinking, and then he told me what it was all about. 'He killed her...' I wish I could give you more answers, but I got more out of him. I asked him who he was talking about, but then he started mumbling and rambling again.

My eyes were wide with horror. What was she saying? What happened to Kristina? Could I really trust an old woman I barely knew?

'How do I know you're not lying...' I asked thoughtfully.

Britt sighed.

'If I were you, I wouldn't trust me either. But ask him yourself. He's in church.'

After a quick nod, I started running towards the church. Through the streets and squares I slipped past the people. The church was not far away now. I opened the doors and saw the horrified look on the priest Johan's face when I interrupted his ceremony.

'What have you done with my wife!' . My voice echoed through the silent church.

I approached the altar with heavy steps.

'What are you talking about? You can't open the doors so aggressively. You don't want a frozen service...' The priest's ignorance made anger boil inside me.

'Answer my question! I know it was not a disease that killed her. Who killed her? Tell me!' I shouted with a mixture of sadness and frustration in my voice. I could hear whispers spreading through the rows of pews.

'What has gotten into you, Gustaf? I have no idea what you want me to answer!'

This was the last straw. I grabbed a bottle of beer and threw it at the priest. Once I got the truth out of him, I wouldn't need it anyway. If I hadn't been so furious, I might have kept my mouth shut, gone home, got drunk and cried myself to sleep. But not this time. This time I would be brave. The bottle's path through the church seemed endless. Was I a sinner now? Would the Father punish me for hurting his messenger? Perhaps it was already too late for both me and Johan. But as long as my beloved Kristina rested in the paradise of the Kingdom of Heaven, I was content.

I never thought the priest would have time to duck. Whether it was a sign from God or pure instinct did not matter. The glass shattered against the altar and broke into thousands of pieces. Splashes of alcohol flew over the priest's habit. I didn't hesitate - there was no time to waste. I ran to the altar and frantically searched for the sharpest piece of glass. At the same time, John the priest stood up and shouted:

'What in God's name are you doing!'

Only seconds later I stood up, the piece of glass pressed tightly against his neck.

'Tell me now - who paid you, and why?'

Johan stood rigid, his eyes wide with terror.

'Gustaf, put down the piece of glass! Let's talk about this in private. Everyone else, clear the room!'

Johan's voice echoed between the walls of the church and the pews emptied quickly.

I was still completely explosive and filled with adrenaline, my heart was beating so hard that I could barely hear my own thoughts. But I slowly lowered the piece of glass and backed away from John. I couldn't hurt the priest in the Lord's house. Then I would never see my Kristina again, never be reunited with her in heaven.

Johan walked towards the pulpit. I took a few deep breaths before following him and standing on the other side. I put my hands on the edge of the pulpit and stared into Johan's eyes, my gaze ice-cold and unwavering.

'Why?' I asked loud and clear. I refused to take my eyes off him. The silence dragged on, and I could see the hesitation on his face. Finally, he opened his mouth and answered, his voice trembling:

'Okay, I'll explain...'

He swallowed hard before continuing:

'I was sitting in the confessional when a person came in. As you know, I cannot see who is coming, as I am only an intermediary between you and our Lord. But I heard his voice - muffled and manly. He spoke of his sins, said he had fallen victim to the seven deadly sins and was now asking God for forgiveness.'

He told us that he had taken a woman's life. He said he had killed her two days earlier... and then he asked for forgiveness, again and again. Finally, he whispered her name.

Kristina. Kristina Jansén. '

His words sank into me like a cold wind through marrow and bone. I felt empty. Had the lady at the castle really been right?

Johan continued:

'When he left, I found a letter where he had been sitting.'

He bent down to the bottom drawer of the table and took out an envelope. Before he could even

get up, I snatched it from his hand. It was beautiful, neatly sealed with a blood-red royal seal. My heart pounded in my chest as I tore it open and began to read:

Dear John Smith,

Since you have heard my confession to God, I therefore order you to keep quiet about this! If you so much as say a word about this to anyone, I will set fire to your house and tell the bishop about your alcohol abuse. Therefore, do us both a favour by keeping quiet about this and instead tell Gustaf and her other close ones that she died of the disease.

You have been warned!"

I was struck dumb. The letter burned between my fingers. Slowly I put the letter down on Johan's table, while I felt the tears coming from behind my eyelids. The anger flowed out of me, replaced by a bottomless sadness.

'I'm so sorry, Gustaf,' said the priest Johan in a low voice and put a hand on my shoulder.

Someone really had murdered my beloved Kristina. The old lady had been right. I was utterly devastated.

The next day I lay in my cold bed and thought about what I had heard the day before. Try as I might, I could find no clarity in the situation. My wife had been murdered and there was nothing I could do about it. There were no answers, no hope and no future. >Finally, I got up and went to buy a new bottle with the last coins I had left. When I opened it, I saw it. A letter. I bent down, picked it up and read it:

*'We must hurry, it's urgent. I have found a way to get more information about the killer. Meet me at the bench at midnight.
Sincerely, Britt"*

When midnight came, I crept out into the empty streets. Past the square, towards the castle, I found the same bench where I had been told the truth earlier. Where Britt revealed everything to me. I looked out over the dark fields that lay in front of the castle. The fields were empty after the harvest, and no one would believe that there was a figure slowly approaching me. It was dressed in a long, pitch-black cloak with the hood pulled down low. I barely had time to react before the unknown figure suddenly grabbed me and covered my mouth. My heart skipped a beat. Panic struck. I tried to pull away, but then I heard the whisper:

'Don't say anything.'

I froze. The voice was familiar.

'It's a miracle I found the tunnel, just follow me!' Britt whispered.

I hesitated, but her eyes were filled with seriousness. So I obeyed.

We moved across the fields, our feet sinking into the soft, uneven ground. It made the walk heavy. But soon, further away from the castle, Britt stopped in front of what looked like an old castle ruin. I had walked past here many times. Yet I had never noticed the place until now.

'Help me move the stones,' Britt whispered. Several mossy rocks were scattered around the site.

As we moved the stones, I felt the damp moss smear my hands. After we had carried away the boulders, an iron handle was revealed in the ground. We removed the last of the stones lying over the lid, before gently pushing the handle down. The lid was sluggish but we pulled it open together. We looked down into the pit, and inside there was a ladder that reached far down to the tunnels in the ground.

'We must make sure no one knows we've been here,' she ordered.

Once we descended, nothing could be seen. The only thing I felt was bricks around me. It smelled rancid and felt confined. This feeling intensified the further into the tunnel we got. Only drops of water could be heard between the sounds of our cautious footsteps. We walked forwards in what was like a corridor. The many alleys forced us to hold out our hands to make sure we didn't walk into the walls in the dark.

Eventually Britt stopped in the middle of the corridor. There was a ladder in front of us. Above the ladder we saw a faint glimpse of light, which we followed. The ladder led to another entrance, inside the castle. Above the tunnel entrance was a shelf to hide the secret passage. Silently we co-operated to move the shelf, which turned out to be surprisingly difficult. Probably it was so heavy to prevent intruders, which for the moment was us.

In the grand bedroom that appeared behind the shelf, there was no one. The room looked like royalty, with red velvet curtains and golden details here and there. It was quiet, and there was no sign of any guards nearby.

'The letter the priest gave you was stamped with a royal seal. You remember the letter the murderer left in the confessional? It means that the court is involved in the murder, or even that the murderer *is part of* the court! This is the Queen's bedroom. There's a chance there's information you're looking for. The palace has many guards and we have to be quick.' Britt explained.

Carefully we rummaged through the room in silence. It was so quiet that I could hear my own heartbeat, and it wasn't slow! What would we do if someone came? We didn't have time to think about any *ifs*, we just had to search quickly. There were several documents, contracts, papers and the like on the room's many shelves and desks. No sign of murder. I felt excitement and nervousness fill my body. How long did we have? It seemed that all the books and files would never end.

As if by magic, I found a letter that read: *About the Murder, Summer of 1483.*

'It is with the deepest sorrow that I write this letter. You are an important asset in the espionage of our three kingdoms. The murder of Mrs Jansen has come as a great disappointment. All the letters you have sent cannot justify your hasty actions. Erik recruited you for good reason. You are a skilful diplomat who has repeatedly shown loyalty. Thus, I see only one suitable solution: exile through a foreign mission to the Republic of Novgorod. Start packing, I will send you more information soon.'

Your Majesty, Queen Margaret of the Kingdoms of Sweden, Denmark and Norway.

The letter left me in a state of total shock. I had been searching for answers in hopelessness, but only got more questions without answers. Who was this spy? What was it doing in the east? It all

led back to the same question: Why? Why had it killed my Kristina?

Britt saw my tears and gently rushed to me to see what had happened. She read the letter and tucked it behind her cloak. She put her hand on my shoulder and said:

'I hope you know what you have to do. You must find the truth. Don't let her death happen in vain, she deserves her justice, revenge and honour! Now we must return, we cannot stay much longer.'

I knew what I had to do.

Translated with DeepL.com (Pro version)