

The Colomber – by Dino Buzzati

(Translated by Anna Battista)

When Stefano Roí turned twelve, he asked his father, a sea captain and owner of a beautiful sailboat, to take him aboard.

"When I grow up," he said, "I want to go to sea like you. And I will command ships even more beautiful and bigger than yours."

"May God bless you, son," replied the father. And since that very day his ship was due to depart, he took the boy with him.

It was a splendid sunny day, and the sea was calm. Stefano, who had never been on a ship before, happily wandered on deck, admiring the complicated maneuvers of the sails. He asked the sailors about this and that, and they smiled, giving him all the explanations.

When he reached the stern, the boy stopped, intrigued, to observe something intermittently surfacing about two to three hundred meters away, in line with the ship's wake.

Although the ship soared propelled by a magnificent wind, that thing always kept its distance. And although he did not understand its nature, it had something indefinable that intensely attracted him.

Not seeing Stefano around anymore, after calling him loudly in vain, the father came down from the quarterdeck and went to look for him.

"Stefano, what are you doing standing there?" he asked, finally spotting him standing aft, staring at the waves.

"Dad, come here and see," the boy said.

The father came and looked too, in the direction indicated by the boy, but he couldn't see anything.

"There's a dark thing that pops up occasionally from the wake," he said, "and it's following us."

"Despite my forty years," said the father, "I believe my eyesight is still sharp. Yet, I see absolutely nothing."

As the son persisted, he fetched the telescope and surveyed the sea's surface, where the wake trailed. Stefano observed him grow pale.

"What's wrong? Why that face?"

"Oh, if only I hadn't listened to you," exclaimed the captain. "I fear for you now. That thing you see surfacing from the waters and following us, it's not a thing. That's a colomber. It's the fish sailors fear above all, in every sea of the world. It's a terrible and mysterious shark, more cunning than a man. For reasons that perhaps no one will ever know, it chooses its victim, and when it does, it chases them for years and years, for an entire lifetime, until it succeeds in devouring them. And the strange thing is this: no one can see it except the victim itself and people of their own blood."

"Isn't it a fable?"

"No. I had never seen it myself. But from the descriptions I've heard so many times, I recognized it immediately. That bison-like muzzle, that mouth that constantly opens and closes, those terrible teeth. Stefano, there's no doubt, unfortunately, the colomber has chosen you and as long as you go to sea, it won't leave you alone. Listen to me: now we return immediately to land, you'll disembark and you'll never leave the shore again, for any reason in the world. You must promise me this. The sea is not for you, son. You must come to terms with that. Besides, you can make a fortune on land too."

Having said this, he immediately changed course, returned to port, and, under the pretext of a sudden illness, disembarked his son. Then he set sail without him.

Deeply troubled, the boy remained on the shore until the last peak of the rigging disappeared behind the horizon. Beyond the pier that closed the port, the sea remained completely deserted. But, squinting his eyes, Stefano managed to spot a black dot intermittently emerging from the waters: "his" colomber, cruising slowly up and down, stubbornly waiting for him.

From then on, the boy's inclination towards the sea was thwarted by multiple diversions. His father sent him to study in a city inland, hundreds of kilometers away. And for a while, distracted by the new environment, Stefano didn't think about the sea monster anymore. However, for the summer holidays, he returned home and as soon as he had a free moment, he hurried to the end of the pier, for a kind of check, although deep down he thought it was unnecessary. After so long, the colomber, even if all the story told by his father were true, had surely given up the siege.

But Stefano remained there, astonished, with his heart pounding. Two to three hundred meters from the pier, in the open sea, the sinister fish swam up and down, occasionally lifting its muzzle from the water and turning it toward the land, as if anxiously looking to see if Stefano Roi was finally coming.

Thus, the idea of that enemy creature waiting for him day and night became a secret obsession for Stefano. Even in the distant city, he would sometimes wake up in the middle of the night with unease. He was safe, yes, hundreds of kilometers separated him from the colomber. Yet he knew that beyond the mountains, beyond the woods, beyond the plains, the shark was waiting for him. And even if he moved to the remotest continent, still the colomber would lurk in the nearest stretch of sea, with the relentless persistence that the instruments of fate possess.

Stefano, who was a serious and determined young man, continued his studies successfully and, as soon as he became a man, found a dignified and lucrative job in a warehouse in that city. Meanwhile, his father died of illness, his magnificent sailboat was sold by the widow, and the son found himself inheriting a decent fortune. Work, friendships, leisure, first loves: Stefano had built his life, yet the thought of the colomber haunted him like a dark and simultaneously fascinating mirage; and as the days passed, instead of fading, it seemed to become more insistent.

Great are the satisfactions of a laborious, comfortable, and peaceful life, but even greater is the attraction of the abyss. Stefano was only twenty-two when, after saying goodbye to his friends in the city and quitting his job, he returned to his hometown and informed his mother of his firm intention to follow his father's profession. The woman, to whom Stefano had never mentioned the mysterious shark, welcomed his decision with joy. Having her son abandon the sea for the city had always seemed to her, in her heart, a betrayal of family traditions.

And Stefano began to sail, demonstrating seamanship qualities, endurance, and intrepid spirit. He sailed and sailed, and in the wake of his ship, day and night, in calm and storm alike, trailed the colomber. He knew that this was his curse and his punishment, but precisely because of this, perhaps, he could not find the strength to break free. And no one on board saw the monster, except him.

"Do you see anything over there?" he would occasionally ask his companions, pointing to the wake. "No, we don't see anything at all. Why?" "I don't know. It seemed to me..."

"You didn't happen to see a colomber by any chance," they would say, laughing and knocking on wood.

"Why are you laughing? Why are you knocking on wood?"

"Because the colomber is a beast that does not forgive. And if it starts to follow this ship, it would mean that one of us is lost."

But Stefano didn't give up. The uninterrupted threat that pursued him seemed to only multiply his determination, his passion for the sea, his courage in moments of struggle and danger.

With the small fortune left to him by his father, as he felt himself master of the trade, he bought with a partner a small cargo steamer, then became its sole owner, and, thanks to a series of successful expeditions, later acquired a real merchant ship, embarking on ever more ambitious goals. But the successes, and the millions, did not remove from his mind that constant torment; nor was he ever tempted, on the other hand, to sell the ship and retire to land to pursue different ventures. Sailing, sailing, was his only thought. As soon as, after long voyages, he set foot in some port, he immediately felt the impatience to set sail again. He knew that out there the colomber was waiting for him, and that the colomber was synonymous with ruin. Nothing. An indomitable impulse drove him tirelessly, from one ocean to another.

Until suddenly, one day Stefano realized he had become old, very old; and no one around him could understand why, being as wealthy as he was, he didn't finally leave the damned life of the sea. Old, and bitterly unhappy, because his entire existence had been spent in that sort of mad flight across the seas, to escape the enemy. But greater than the joys of a comfortable and peaceful life had always been for him the temptation of the abyss.

And one evening, while his magnificent ship was anchored off the port where he was born, he felt near death. Then he called the second officer, whom he trusted greatly, and instructed him not to oppose what he was about to do. The other, on his honor, promised.

With this assurance, Stefano, to the second officer who listened in astonishment, revealed the story of the colomber, which had continued to pursue him for almost fifty years, in vain.

"He has escorted me from one end of the world to the other," he said, "with a loyalty that not even the noblest friend could have shown. Now I am about to die. He, too, will be terribly old and tired. I cannot betray him."

With that said, he bid farewell, lowered a small boat into the sea, and climbed aboard after being given a harpoon. "Now I am going to meet him," he announced. "It's only fair that I don't disappoint him. But I will fight, with my last strength." With tired strokes of the oars, he drifted away from the ship. Officers and sailors saw him disappear there, on the calm sea, enveloped by the shadows of the night. There was a crescent moon in the sky.

He didn't have to struggle much. Suddenly, the horrible muzzle of the colomber emerged beside the boat.

"Here I am, finally," said Stefano. "Now, it's just you and me!" And, gathering his remaining strength, he raised the harpoon to strike.

"Uh," moaned the colomber pleadingly, "what a long journey to find you. I am also exhausted from the effort. How much you made me swim. And you fled, you fled. And you never understood anything."

"Why?" asked Stefano, stung deeply. "Because I didn't chase you across the world to devour you, as you thought. From the king of the sea, I was only given the task of delivering this to you." And the shark stuck out its tongue, offering the old captain a small phosphorescent sphere.

Stefano took it between his fingers and looked at it. It was a pearl of disproportionate size. And he recognized the famous Pearl of the Sea that gives, to whoever possesses it, fortune, power, love, and peace of mind. But it was too late now.

"Alas!" he said, shaking his head sadly. "How everything is wrong. I managed to damn my existence: and I ruined yours."

"Goodbye, poor man," replied the colomber and sank back into the black waters forever.

Two months later, pushed by the undertow, a small boat landed on a rugged cliff. It was spotted by some fishermen who, intrigued, approached it. In the boat, still seated, was a white skeleton: and among the tiny bones of the fingers, it held a small round stone.

The colomber is a large fish, terrifying to behold, extremely rare. Depending on the seas and the people who inhabit its shores, it is also called kolomber, kahloubrrha, kalonga, kalu-balu, chalung-gra. Naturalists strangely ignore it. Some even claim that it does not exist.