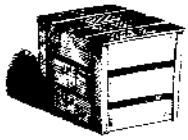
1. The Saddest Song



It's quiet and dark here, and the forest floor sways and rolls beneath my feet. Sometimes I stumble, but I do not fall over, because I'm trapped inside this tree where it is always dark. Oh, how I long to see the sun again.

How did I get here? I can hardly remember . . .

Ah, yes, that's it. I followed my tongue. The sweet petals tasted so good, melting in my mouth, until I walked into this tree and got trapped inside.

Now there is no more sun. Just quiet and darkness and swaying. I feel so sad. My heart is so full of sadness that it must surely break . . .

I will sing to let the sadness out. Perhaps if I sing, the forest will stop rolling and swaying, and the sun will come back, and my heart will not break . . . just yet.

The SS *Euphonia*, ablaze with twinkling lights, glided across a moonlit sea. Its funnels were topped with streams of frothy white smoke, its gleaming sides peppered with brightly lit portholes and its decks thronged with glamorous promenaders, taking the air and watching the stars.

It was all so wonderful. So magical . . .

Corby Flood reached up and touched the glass that protected the faded poster. She traced the lettering in the starry sky above the beautiful ship with a finger.

'*The SS* Euphonia,' she read. '*"Empress of the Seas". Enjoy the voyage of a lifetime aboard this miracle of modern nautical engineering! Cruise the oceans of the world and explore the magical places along the way! Book now for the deluxe ten-ports-of-call cruise and receive your free copy of the famous* Hoffendinck's Guide.'

Corby's grip tightened on the battered leather-bound book she was clutching under her arm.

'Why, if it isn't one of those *Hoffendinck's Guides,*' said a gloomy voice.

Corby turned to find Captain Boris Belvedere standing before her. The captain – never cheerful at



the best of times – was looking gloomier than ever. With his sagging skin and drooping moustache, he looked like nothing so much as a disappointed walrus.

'Didn't think we had any of those left on board,' he said. 'After all, it's not as if the poor old *Euphonia* stops anywhere interesting any more. In fact she doesn't stop anywhere at all any more! Dandoon to Harbour Heights non-stop, and back again . . .' His voice was low, lugubrious and tinged with regret. 'More's the pity.' He sighed. 'Hauling cargo is all the old "Empress of the Seas" and I are fit for. That, and

the odd passenger or two who can't afford anything better . . .' He looked Corby up and down somewhat disapprovingly.

'Well, I think she's a lovely ship,' said Corby. 'And after Father's great disappointment . . .' Her voice wavered for a moment and she swallowed hard. 'Mother says we've got to learn to make the best of things and try to stay cheerful.' And she gave the captain what she hoped was a meaningful stare.

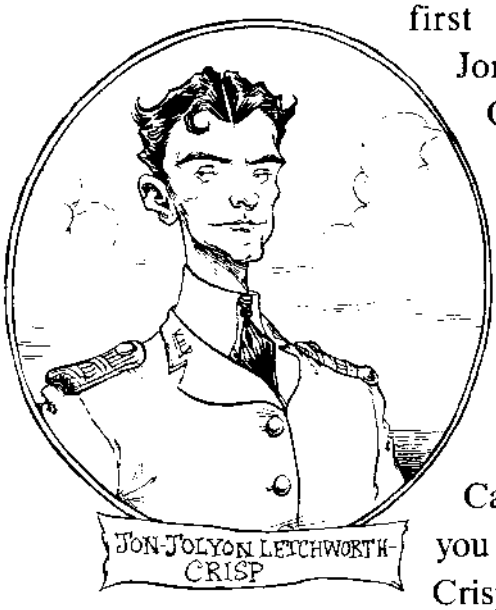
'Yes, well, ahem . . .' The captain turned away. 'Sometimes that's easier said than done, little girl. Especially when the bilge pump has broken and your first *and* your second engineers have left for better jobs.'

He cast a gloomy eye over the chipped paintwork, rusty railings and scuffed decking of the old ship.

'Still, that's only to be expected when hardly anything works any more,' he went on. 'The automatic parasols, the self-adjusting railings, the moving windbreaks . . .' He gestured about him in a wide arc. 'The *Euphonia*'s only fit for the scrapheap,' he muttered, shaking his head. 'Just like me!'



'Good news, Captain,' came a smooth, polished voice, and both he and Corby turned to see the ship's first officer Lieutenant Jon-Jolyon Letchworth-Crisp standing there, a suave smile on his lips. 'Arthur's managed to fix the bilge pump,' he said. 'At least, for the time being . . .'



'Good news?' said Captain Belvedere. 'If you say so, Letchworth-Crisp, if you say so . . .' The captain turned and walked slowly away. 'I'll be in my cabin if you need me,' he added gloomily. 'Though why anybody should need me, I don't know . . .'

Jon-Jolyon turned to Corby and flashed a brittle smile. 'And how is young Miss Corby Flood today?' he asked.

'Fine, thanks,' said Corby.

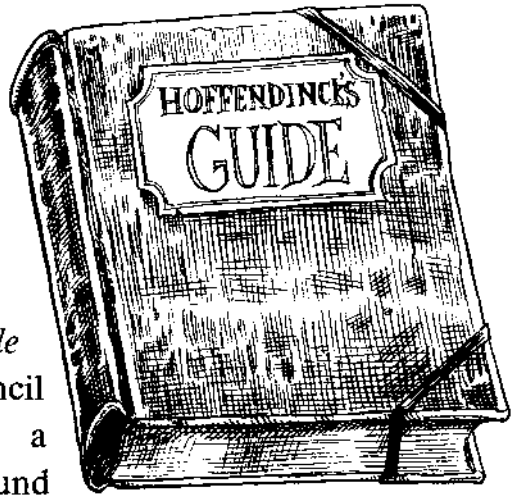
'And your delightful mother and father?'

'Also fine.'

'And your four energetic brothers?'

Corby nodded. They both knew that there was only one person in the Flood family he was truly interested in. 'The same as ever,' she said. 'And before you ask, so is my *enchanting older sister, Serena.*'

Jon-Jolyon grinned. 'Glad to hear it. Do give her my very best regards, won't you?' he said, as he turned on his heels and strode off. 'And I hope we shall all meet up at dinner,' he called back over his shoulder.



Corby smiled – a smile which faded the moment she was sure the lieutenant had gone. She opened *Hoffendinck's Guide* and, taking the pencil that dangled on a piece of string around her neck, she started writing . . .

THE HERMIT ISLANDS

These tiny crags, several hundred in number, were occupied by hermit fishermen for many years and are ideal for an afternoon picnic if passing. Consult the captain for details of tides, and always have a stout rowing boat at the ready in case of emergencies.

Some of the more interesting islands are:

Mortimer's Crag – very rocky, but home to a legendary mermaid so hideous that she is said to frighten fishermen to death with one look.

Stefan's Pile – covered in soft, grey sea-moss up to five feet thick, and home to eider crabs.

The Old Man of Fub – famous for its nesting colony of blue-tailed goobies. Well worth a visit.



OLD SUSANNE

SIGHTS TO LOOK OUT FOR:

De Witt's Moonlight Flying Fish; a.k.a. Love Fish – on moonlit nights, these extraordinary fish can be seen swimming in large shoals close to the surface of the ocean. As the moonlight glints on the tops of the waves, the love fish engage in elaborate displays, leaping into the air in graceful arcs.

Legend has it that any who witness the flight of the love fish fall instantly in love.

NOTES

Lieutenant Jon-Jolyon Letchworth-Crisp

Good points	Bad points
Nice manners	bites his finger nails
Smiles a lot	Smiles a lot
good looking (sort of if you like that sort of thing)	a bit smarmy
always asks how you are	Too much hair grease
uniform is very neat.	doesn't listen to your answers
	only interested in Serena
	Always trying to impress her with stories of how good and clever and brilliant at things he is.

Corby stopped writing for a moment and gazed reflectively out to sea. How strange, she thought, to be writing notes about the people she met on board, instead of notes about the interesting places mentioned in *Hoffendinck's Guide.*

When they boarded the SS *Euphonia,* she'd been so excited by the prospect of all the fascinating sights she would see on her voyage home to Harbour Heights - not that Corby could call Harbour Heights 'home' exactly. The only home she had ever known was the large white bungalow in Dandoon where she had been born eight years earlier. And as for the sights, it wasn't long before Corby had discovered that the closest she would ever get was peering at them on the distant horizon as the ship sailed past.

Still, at least she could read all about them in the guide. She squinted at a tiny black speck on the horizon.

Was that Mortimer's Crag? she wondered. Or Stefan's Pile? But she was too far away even to make a guess, she realized with a sigh.

At that moment Corby heard the sound of low

muttering and shuffling footsteps coming up the stairs from the cabins below her.

Uh-oh, she thought, snapping shut *Hoffendinck's Guide.* It's the Hattenswillers!

Mr and Mrs Hattenswiller appeared at the top of the stairs. They were both wearing tall, conical hats with ear flaps, and matching ankle-length coats with lots of pockets. Whenever she met them, Mr Hattenswiller would click his heels together and nod at Corby politely, while Mrs Hattenswiller would smile, and the pair of them never failed to exchange greetings. And that was where the problem lay – for no matter how hard she listened, Corby could never, ever, make out what they were saying.



Sometimes *Mr* Hattenswiller would speak, and his wife would smile knowingly as though he had just

said the cleverest thing. But Corby had heard only a mumbled murmur. And sometimes *Mrs* Hattenswiller would say something, and her husband would nod vigorously in agreement. But again, Corby had heard nothing but a quiet whisper.

Once, taking a chance, she'd replied that she was 'very well, thank you' - but both Hattenswillers had looked at her as if she were mad. His eyebrows had shot upwards, her smile had frozen, and the pair of them had continued on their way, exchanging puzzled comments that, of course, Corby couldn't hear properly.

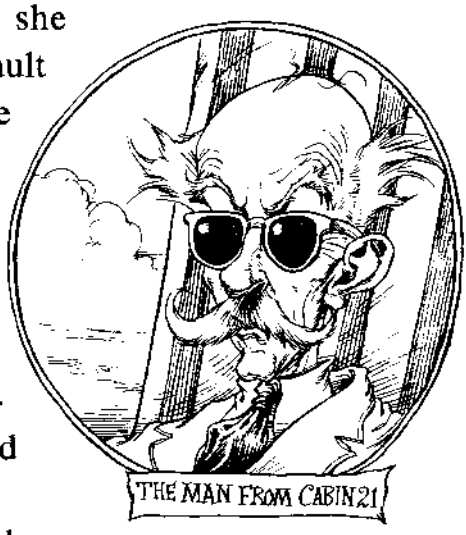
No, far better all round if she avoided them, she thought, as she scooted through the side door and onto the starboard deck.

It was warm outside, with the sun shining down out of a cloudless sky. It was also very bright - particularly after the shadowy darkness of the hallway at the top of the stairs. Corby screwed up her eyes and stepped blindly ahead, only to trip over something in her path.

It was a leg, or rather, a pair of legs belonging to the man from Cabin 21. He was sitting in a deckchair wearing dark glasses, a white suit and navy-blue deck

shoes. The man from Cabin 21 always wore dark glasses, a white suit and navy-blue deck shoes, and he sat in the same mechanical deckchair on the same deck every day - when he wasn't in Cabin 21, that is.

'Sorry,' Corby called across to him politely - even though she didn't think it was her fault at all; even though, if the truth be told, she thought it was the man from Cabin 21 who should have apologized to *her*.



But he neither apologized nor acknowledged Corby's apology. It was impossible to know whether he'd heard her - or if he even realized what had happened. That was the thing about the man from Cabin 21. He sat all day every day in his deckchair on the starboard deck, staring out to sea - and most of the time no one knew whether he was looking for land, or just at the waves, or was fast asleep.

Trust her, Corby thought, to avoid the Hattenswillers, only to fall over the man from Cabin 21. Shaking her head, she continued along the starboard walkway, past the raised main deck, the funnels, the lifeboats, more stairs and on towards the prow of the ship.

This was where the really grand cabins used to be – the ones with the big bathrooms and huge sitting rooms and bedrooms the size of ballrooms. Cabin 21 was the only grand cabin left. The others had all been knocked through to make room for an enormous cargo hold.

Corby arrived at the prow, which was – as always – deserted. That was why she liked it.

The Hattenswillers seldom ventured far from their cabin; nor did the man from Cabin 21. As for her family, they were always far too preoccupied with other things to spend time taking in the view. That left the five sinister gentlemen in their smart suits and bottle-green hats, who had made such a fuss over the loading of their luggage when they'd boarded the SS *Euphonia* in Dandoon. Not only did they keep themselves to themselves, but they always stopped talking whenever Corby, or anyone else, passed by.