

The Silver Swans



By Gallico Paul

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Level 2

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Contents

Chapter one

Chapter two

Chapter one

'I don't think that I've ever been in love.' She stopped for a minute and then she continued: 'How will I know?'

My name is Doctor Horatio Fundoby. But I am not the kind of doctor who sees sick people. I am called a doctor because I have spent many, many years studying. I studied history, and I now have an important job at the British Museum in London.

Every Sunday afternoon I walk along a path in Chelsea, on the bank of the River Thames. A lot of painters live in Chelsea. People often think that I am a painter. I look like one and I dress like one. I have a white beard, I carry a black wooden stick, and I wear a large, old hat. The hat is more than forty years old, and I always wear it for my walks.

I enjoy my walks very much. There is a lot to see and hear. Boats pass on the river. Birds cry noisily above it.

Along this bank of the river there are some old houseboats. People buy these houseboats because they like living on the water. They enjoy watching the passing boats and listening to the sounds of a busy river. They paint the boats in bright colours.

One Sunday afternoon I was standing by the houseboats, looking across the river. In the deepest water in the middle of the Thames, I could see a beautiful, white sailing ship. It was called the Poseidon. The back of the ship was a little unusual. I knew that the owner of the ship was Lord Struve. He was a great scientist who studied ocean life. Near the Poseidon were a large ship from South America and a dirty Spanish boat.

Then I noticed one of the houseboats near the bank. It was called the Nerine and it was very colourful. The boat was grey, but parts of it were painted in bright colours. The door was blue and the large wooden cover in the floor of the front deck was bright red. There were some steps going from the boat to the bank of the river. These were painted blue, like the door.

I saw a young girl trying to push back the cover. She wanted to get out, and she was halfway out of the hole, but she had a problem. She saw me. She didn't shout at me but her mouth formed the words: 'I can't open it!'

I hurried towards the Nerine. It was sitting on the bottom of the river and I had to walk down the blue wooden steps, over the water of the Thames.

I went carefully along the deck of the boat until I reached the girl.

'The new red paint has dried and I can't open the cover,' she said.

'Wait a minute,' I said.

I used my stick to open it. A few minutes later the girl climbed out on to the deck.

She was about twenty years old. She was wearing old, blue, paint-covered trousers and a grey shirt. I thought that she looked quite beautiful.

She looked at me with big, green eyes. They were the loveliest part of her face.

'Thank you,' she said.

'That's all right,' I replied. 'I was glad to help.'

'You're a dear man,' she said. 'Do you know who you're like? You're like one of those... older men who work in museums. Oh, I'm sorry! That wasn't very polite.' She smiled gently.

'But I am an old man,' I said. 'Please don't worry. In fact I do work at the British Museum. I'm Doctor Horatio Fundoby.'

'Oh!' she said. 'The British Museum!' She was silent for a second, and then she asked, 'Would you like to see my octopus?'

'Yes, I would,' I said, smiling.

She took me down through the blue door into a green room. I could see a small bed, bookshelves and paintings. Then I noticed two glass cases: one large and one small. In the small case were two fish and in the large one was the octopus.

'Isn't it beautiful?' she said. 'Sometimes I sit and look at it for hours.'

'Does it have a name?' I asked.

'Oh, I just call it Octopus,' she replied.

'And you? What's your name?' I asked.

After a minute she said, 'My name's Thetis.'

'Ah,' I said. 'That's the name of one of the water people in the Greek stories of long ago. Thetis was the daughter of Nereus and Doris. They lived at the bottom of the sea.'

She pulled her ear, thoughtfully. 'My real name's Alice,' she said. 'I call myself Thetis because I'd like to live at the bottom of the ocean.'

When she said this, I could understand the reason for her green room.

It was quite dark in the room. The only lights were the ones that lit the glass cases. The paintings on the wall were in blues and greens and showed fish and other underwater animals. I was sure that she was the painter. She was almost a water-child herself, with her small nose, large eyes and pretty, short, brown hair.

'Would you like me to sing for you?' she asked.

'Oh, please do,' I replied.

'My song's called "The Silver Swans",' she said.

How shall I know my true love?

When will my true heart speak to me?

Oh, when the silver swans come sailing,

Then I will know my true love.

Then I will be with my true love,

For ever with my true love.

It was a beautiful song. But I felt that there was a sadness behind the words. The words were wise and understanding. But I knew that the young girl in front of me was never in love.

'That was lovely,' I said.

Thetis opened her eyes. 'Thank you,' she said.

'Who wrote it?' I asked.

'I did,' she said. 'It's mine.'

'Do you often write songs?' I asked, surprised.

'Only when they come into my head,' she replied.

Suddenly she moved towards me.

'How will I know my true love?' she asked, seriously. 'How will I know when I'm really in love?'

'How old are you, Thetis?' I asked.

'I'm twenty-one,' she answered.

'Have you been in love?' I said.

'No,' she replied. 'I don't think that I've ever been in love.' She stopped for a minute and then she continued: 'How will I know? Who will tell me when I am? You're so old and wise. Can't you help me?'

She looked pale and unhappy. I thought carefully before I answered her questions.

At last I replied, 'When he's ill and ugly and you can still love him. Then you can be sure.'

'When he is ill and ugly...' she said to herself, quietly.

She sat there thinking. Then suddenly she remembered that I was there. 'Oh, I'm sorry, I'm being rude,' she said. 'Would you like some tea, Doctor Fundoby?'

'I'd love some. Thank you,' I replied.

She disappeared for two or three minutes. I looked round the room again.

At last she returned, carrying the tea things. She poured out the tea. As she lifted her cup to her mouth, she said again, 'When he is ill and ugly. Oh, thank you, Doctor Fundoby!' She smiled at me.

We talked for about half an hour. She told me about her mother and father. They also lived in London. But she wanted to live alone on this houseboat. She loved it because it was on the water. She had an evening job. But she did not tell me what it was.

Suddenly I began to feel quite ill. I wasn't sure why. But before I could decide, Thetis asked, 'Would you like to go out on deck?'

There was not much room at the back of the boat, but it was enough for the two of us. Then I saw with surprise that there was water all-round the boat now.

Four dirty white swans went past us. Their feathers were dirty with oil from the river, and their eyes looked very unfriendly.

Thetis looked at them. I said, smiling, 'Perhaps they're the silver swans in your song. Perhaps you're going to meet your true love.'

She only said, 'These swans are a dirty grey silver.'

Then a small wooden boat came up to us. There was a tall, strong man in the boat - he looked about thirty-five years old. He was wearing a blue sailing shirt and dark blue trousers. He had black hair, a beard, and bright, blue eyes.

'Hello!' he shouted, and his white teeth shone against his dark beard.

'Have you some cotton to mend my trousers? I caught them on a piece of wood.'

'Yes, of course,' Thetis called back. 'If you climb up here, I'll mend them for you.'

The sailor laughed. 'I'll do it. I can't tell you where they're caught!' he said.

'Oh, I understand!' Thetis said, smiling. Then she went to find the cotton.

When she returned, she put it carefully in a piece of cloth. Then she threw the cloth into the boat.

The sailor caught it. 'Clever child,' he said. 'Thanks very much. I'll be quick.'

He moved the boat away and then tied it up next to another boat.

We watched as he mended his trousers with his back towards us. While we stood there, a large boat went past. The Nerine started to go up and down in the water. I suddenly felt very sick.

Thetis saw my face.

'Oh, you poor man!' she cried. 'I forget that moving boats sometimes make people ill. Come with me - I've got a bottle of medicine. It will soon make you better.'

She helped me down into the green room, and sat me in a chair. I was feeling very ill now. She went to a small cupboard and got a small brown bottle from it. She poured something from it into a spoon, and gave it to me.

'They discovered this medicine during the Second World War,' she said. 'Some of the sailors suffered badly in storms or when the sea was rough. You'll feel fine in a few minutes. Just sit there quietly.'

She went out on deck.

I heard her shout to the man in the boat: 'Hello again! What's your name?'

'Hadley. Richard Hadley,' he called back. 'What's yours?'

'I've heard that name before,' I thought. 'But I can't remember where.'

'Thetis,' she replied.

There was silence for a minute, then he said, 'Oh, that's the name of the daughter of Nereus and Doris in the old Greek stories. They lived at the bottom of the sea.'

He was silent again.

Then I heard him call: 'Where's your father?'

'He isn't my father,' Thetis said. 'He's an old man who's visiting me. He's feeling sick so I've given him some medicine.'

I heard the laugh in the sailor's voice as he shouted, 'What! Sick! On that old houseboat? It's like dry land on there.'

Another boat passed and the Nerine suddenly moved up and down again. But the medicine was beginning to work.

'It isn't an old boat,' Thetis said, seriously. 'It's my home. And it does move up and down a lot sometimes. You need a strong stomach.'

'Oh yes, I'm sure that you do,' he said. But I knew from his voice that he didn't really believe her.

'Really, it's true,' she continued. 'Perhaps even you'll get sick, one day.'

The sailor laughed loudly. 'Who, me? Listen, child. I've sailed every ocean and sea in the world, and in all sorts of weather - and I haven't been sick yet.'

I heard Thetis say, 'There's always a first time. Would you like to try?'

'Tell me when it gets really rough,' he said.

I heard his boat touch against the Nerine, as he continued, 'You're not as young as I thought. I'm sorry that I called you a child. Perhaps I'll try your boat sometime. Well, thanks again for the cotton.'

At last I began to feel better. When I went up on deck, Thetis was looking out across the river. She was watching the sailor as he went out towards the lovely, white ship.

'Oh,' she said. 'You're better.'

'Yes,' I said.

'Good,' she said. 'That medicine always works.' Then she added, 'He said some very unkind things, didn't he?'

I started to say, 'He...'

'But wasn't he beautiful?' she continued, dreamily.

Chapter two

'He's very ill, isn't he, Doctor Fundoby? And I love him even more then when he's well.'

I did not see my friend for some weeks. Then, on a rainy Sunday, as I walked past the houseboats, somebody called my name.

'Doctor Fundoby! Doctor Fundoby!'

I turned round. Thetis was running up the steps from the Nerine.

She ran to me and said, 'Doctor Fundoby! What shall I do? My octopus has eaten one of his arms.'

I replied, 'They often do that when people keep them. Even when they feed them very well.'

'Oh,' she said. 'Thanks for telling me that. I feel much better now.'

She turned and went back to her boat. As she reached the deck, I called out to her, 'Did your sailor ever come back?'

'Yes,' she answered, and disappeared into the boat.

A few days later a friend asked me to go and see a play with him. It was called The Unwanted, and it was at Wyndham's Theatre in London.

'There's a young woman in it - Alice Adams,' my friend said. 'She's very good, they say. One day she'll be a great actress.'

When the play started, I couldn't believe my eyes. The young actress was Thetis! I remembered, then, that her real name was Alice. So this was her evening job!

It was a sad play. Thetis played a young girl who falls in love with an older man. In the end he leaves her and she kills herself. Thetis played the part with deep feeling and understanding. It seemed to me almost that she was the poor girl. I cried for her at the end of the play.

The next Sunday I visited her on her boat. There was now another glass case in her room. There were two large fish in it. She was sitting in front of the case, watching them. She got up to get the brown bottle. The boat was not moving much, but she gave me some of the medicine and I drank it.

'My dear,' I said. 'Why didn't you tell me who you were? I was at Wyndham's last week.'

'I did tell you,' she said. 'This is the person that I am here. This is the person that I really want to be.'

'You played the part very well,' I said. 'I cried at the end. How can you put so much feeling into the part night after night? How can you show all that pain and unhappiness if you have never been in love?'

She thought for a minute, then replied, 'That's the other side of me. I just do it.'

She saw me looking at the glass case. 'He gave them to me,' she said.

'The sailor?' I said.

'Yes,' she said.

'Where did he get them?' I asked.

'From the bottom of the river,' she answered.

'Did he? How?' I asked.

'He went down and looked for them,' she replied.

'Now I remember who Richard Hadley is!' I thought to myself. 'Does she know? And will her heart break, like the heart of the girl in the play?'

'Is he in love with you?' I asked.

'He laughs at me and says unkind things,' she said. 'Does that mean that he's in love?'

'And you?' I asked. 'Are you in love with him?'

'I don't know,' she cried. 'I don't know! I don't know! Oh, Doctor Fundoby, I hate being young!'

She put her head on my shoulder and started to cry. I tried to find the words to make her better.

The next Sunday I went for my usual walk. It was very windy and the river was rough. When I saw the Nerine, she was moving from side to side. Thinking of Thetis, I hurried towards the boat. Her room was small and the glass cases were not safe in bad weather.

I noticed that the blue door was open, so I quickly went down the steps. When I reached the last step, I heard a deep cry from Thetis's room. I was afraid for her, and I hurried in.

Richard Hadley was lying on the bed. He was very sick. Thetis was sitting on the side of the bed, holding his head in one of her arms. His skin was a grey colour and his face was pale. At first I thought that he was dying. Then the boat moved suddenly. I understood then why he was like this.

'Thetis!' I cried. 'The medicine! Quickly! Where is it?'

'Oh-h-h!' cried the unhappy man. 'Go away, both of you, and leave me to die alone!'

'I love him!' Thetis said, happily holding his poor head in her arms. 'Oh, now I know that I love him. He's very ill, isn't he, Doctor Fundoby? And I love him even more than when he's well.'

I went to the cupboard where Thetis kept the brown bottle of medicine. It was locked. I looked at Thetis. She looked sad. 'He refuses to say that he'll marry me,' she said. Then she added, looking down at him: 'I don't mind being a poor sailor's wife. When you sail away, I'll come with you. We can sail round the world together.'

I almost laughed at her words. Thetis had no idea about a sailor's life. And she had no idea who Richard Hadley was.

The unhappy, weak man cried out: 'All right, all right, I'll marry you! I'll do anything, if you'll just go away. Please leave me to die.'

I was beginning to feel very ill myself, so I cried, 'Thetis! You cold-hearted girl! Give me the key now. How can you leave him to suffer? How can you do this to the man that you love?'

She untied a piece of blue cloth from around her neck. The key was on it.

She looked at the floor as she gave it to me. I knew that she was sorry now.

As I opened the cupboard, I heard her say, quietly, 'He's sailed on every ocean and sea in all sorts of weather.'

I took some of the medicine, then I gave some to the great ocean scientist - Richard Hadley, Lord Struve.

Thetis looked at me. 'Will you come to our wedding, Doctor Fundoby?' she asked.

I was still feeling sick, and I was not happy with her. So I replied, 'If he marries you after this suffering, he's crazy.'

Lord Struve probably suddenly felt better, because he sat up. He said, 'I'm glad that you said that, Doctor Fundoby. Promises don't mean anything when they are made in ill-health.'

'But you wanted to come on to the Nerine in this weather,' she said, sadly. The colour was returning to his face. I came for a good reason. I love you, and I wanted to tell you that,' he said.

'So why didn't you tell me?' Thetis asked, simply.

For a minute he did not know what to say. Then he said, suddenly, 'Because I felt ill. Now listen, Thetis. If you're going to marry me, you must know two things. You must know who I am. You must know what I do.'

'They don't matter,' Thetis replied. 'I love you.'

I was feeling better, so I said, 'And your acting?'

Lord Struve looked at me in surprise. 'Whose acting?' he asked.

'This is Alice Adams,' I cried. 'She's been in the play *The Unwanted* at Wyndham's for the last two years.'

He looked at her. 'This child?' he said. 'She is a child, isn't she?'

Thetis moved her head in a silent yes.'

But I said: 'She's England's best young actress and she's twenty-one.'

He stood up. 'Yes!' he cried. 'I remember reading something a long time ago. I've just come back from the Galapagos,' he continued. 'I haven't heard anything about England for nearly two years.'

Thetis jumped up and ran to him. 'Oh, please take me there!' she said, in an excited voice. 'All my life I've wanted to go to the Galapagos. Can sailors take their wives with them when they go?'

Lord Struve cried, 'I'm not a sailor, Thetis! I'm a-' He stopped.

He found it difficult to say: 'I'm a lord.' He started again. 'I'm a kind of ocean scientist. I do a lot of my work under water. But your acting-'

Before he could finish, Thetis said: 'It doesn't matter. I never wanted to be an actress. I only do it for the money. I can buy octopuses, and live on the Nerine. Do you know what a good octopus costs?'

Lord Struve held both her arms. 'Thetis, can you be serious for a minute? Do you really mean that you'll give all that away for me?'

'Of course,' she replied. 'More than anything in the world, I would like to walk with you on the bottom of the ocean near the Galapagos, because...'

She stopped for a minute, thinking. 'Because I'm sure that I love you. Doctor Fundoby showed me that.'

For another minute Lord Struve held her two arms, while he looked up with a very happy look on his face. He seemed unable to believe what he was hearing.

And so the song of 'The Silver Swans' came true. Thetis, the water-child, married her lord of the sea - Richard Hadley.

I still walk along by the River Thames, but I don't enjoy the walk as much as before.

Lord Struve, his wife and her octopus have gone away to a beautiful island in the Pacific Ocean. There they work together with the wonderful undersea plants and animals around them.

A family have bought the Nerine and they have painted her a dark brown colour. They have changed the name to the Nelson, after one of the greatest British sailors - Sir Horatio Nelson. I pass her every Sunday and a washing line goes from the back of the boat to the front. It is filled with washing - the clothes of small children.

And I think, as I go past, 'Do they have strong stomachs like Thetis? Or did she give them the name of that wonderful medicine in the brown bottle?'

— THE END —

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