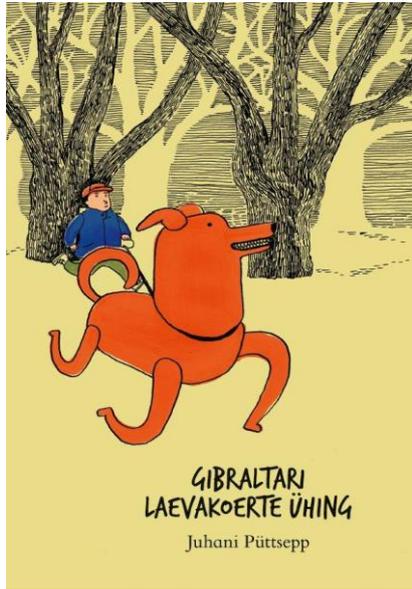


The Society of Gibraltar Ship Dogs



By [Juhani Püttsepp](#)

Illustrated by [Marja-Liisa Plats](#)

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Age: 10+

Standing in a little town of wooden buildings is a somewhat slanted three-storey house. Its colourful tenants include Sirje and her grandson Anton, who has been sent there for school. One day, a perky, clever fox-coloured dog appears at their doorstep. When Sirje and Anton are unable to find the dog's owner, they decide to keep him as their pet. They name him Saku, buy him a bowl and a collar, and pay a trip to the vet. There, Anton informs everyone that Saku is a "Gibraltar ship dog" – a breed the boy himself has thought up. However, taming the formerly free-running dog doesn't always go smoothly for his new owners. Thus, it comes as no surprise when the daring Gibraltar ship dog suddenly

disappears one day.

Awards:

2016 IBBY Honour List

2016 Nominee of the Tartu Prize for Children's Literature (Childhood Prize)

2015 Nominee of the Annual Children's Literature Award of the Cultural Endowment of Estonia

2015 Good Children's Book

2014 Children's Story Competition "My First Book", 1st place

Reading sample

Translated by Adam Cullen

[Chapter 1, pp 27–29]

F.

Jersky rang the neighbors' doorbell several hours later. Sirje, who was presently scrubbing dirty dishes in the kitchen, dried her hands on a kitchen towel and went to open the door. Judging by the ring—a characteristic short *tirr-tirr*—she had already guessed it was Jersky outside.

Yet when she opened the door, the first thing she saw was an unfamiliar fox-red dog sitting on the doorstep. The dog tilted its head to one side and stared at her.

The dog hadn't rung the doorbell, of course, but Jersky herself, who was now standing at her own apartment door.

"I was feeling sorry for that dog, because it's been sitting on your doorstep for a few hours already," Jersky informed Sirje. "Is some guest of yours completely uninterested in their pet?"

"I don't have any guests right now," Sirje replied, studying the dog. At first glance, it appeared to be just an ordinary mutt. Thick fur, medium-sized, one ear a little lopsided. Its handsome tail was ringed with black stripes

The dog's fur was also a little unique. A little like that of a squirrel or a fox, maybe? More like a fox, she reckoned.

"Come on over for a minute!" Sirje said. "Let's have coffee."

"Alright," Jersky agreed. "But what'll we do about the dog?"

"He can come in, too," Sirje graciously said without a second's thought.

Jersky stepped into Sirje's living room with its dark-red curtains and old-fashioned furniture—a room commonly known as a parlor. The strange dog also padded inside and laid down on the rug.

The water in the kettle came to a rolling boil. A steaming coffee pot and gold-rimmed porcelain mugs appeared on the short, circular coffee table.

Neither of them offered the dog coffee, of course, but it wasn't forgotten about, either. Sirje placed a bowl of cooked buckwheat in front of its nose—leftovers from her grandchild's breakfast. Sirje laid a newspaper down beneath the bowl so the rug wouldn't get dirty.

The dog ate a little bit, but not very hungrily.

"He's a pretty young dog," Jersky reckoned. "Maybe just a couple years old."

"What do you know—still a pup!" Sirje exclaimed.

"And he's definitely a "he"—look at those dark little spheres under his belly."

Jersky was a big animal-lover and spoke nicely to the fox-colored dog, just as if he was a human. "I'd take you in to live with me, but I still haven't gotten over Philip's death," she told the dog.

The dog listened attentively as she scratched him behind the ears.

"There's no place for you in our stairwell, either," Sirje added. "Upstairs-Bat's furball Susjä is a real devil and will scratch your muzzle bloody."

"Susjä's truly feral," Jersky agreed.

"If you don't have an owner, then we'll have no other choice but to call the animal shelter," Sirje told the dog.

Upon hearing those words, the dog arched an eyebrow, stood up from the rug, padded over to Sirje, and placed a paw on her hand.

The dog very obviously didn't want to go to the shelter.

"Unbelievable," Sirje said.

"He's quite the smart canine," Jersky complemented.

"I wonder how he knew to put his paw up like that?" Sirje marveled.

Thanks to that unexpected show of intelligence, the dog was given a place to stay in Sirje's apartment for one night.

[Chapter 3, pp 68–75]

E.

Sirje had already made the mental decision that she would take Saku to get his shots. As she chatted with Jersky over coffee, she learned that animals can't be vaccinated until they've been given stomach-worm medication.

"He definitely needs to take stomach-worm medication. I'll buy it myself," Jersky promised. "I *am* like a godmother to Saku, you know!"

The next day, Jersky brought over the medicine, which was in pill-form: one pill for every ten kilograms the dog weighed.

But how much did Saku weigh? Neither of them knew. They could only guess that he was lighter than the black dog Rolf downstairs, which Jersky said weighed fifty kilograms. Professor Siegfried had taken Rolf to get his vaccinations at the university veterinary office, where there was a scale so big it could even weigh cows. Alas, there was no scale like that in their slanting three-story house.

"Let's use Rolf as a touchstone and judge by eye," Sirje proposed.

Since Jersky was a bodybuilder and had to stay in shape at all times, she had a scale at home for weighing humans. She offered to let Sirje use it.

"Saku certainly won't fit on that scale," Sirje pointed out.

"I've got an idea!" Anton shouted. "I'll pick up the dog and then step on the scale with him. Then, I'll get on the scale alone, and afterwards we can subtract my weight from the first number."

"Good idea, Anton," Jersky said. "I can see something from your math lessons stuck."

"Anton's a clever little guy," Sirje praised, and the boy blushed from gladness. Or maybe it was from embarrassment, because he wasn't actually all that good at mathematics.

Anton decisively scooped Saku into his arms like a sack of flour and stepped onto the scale. It was plain to see that Saku didn't enjoy that kind of rough handling, but he put up with it.

"Holding a warm dog sure is nice," Anton said as he stood on the scale. Even so, he was breathing a little heavily, because Saku wasn't exactly as light as a feather.

"Ninety-seven kilos," Jersky announced.

Then, Saku was released and Anton got on the scale alone.

"Sixty-nine kilos," Jersky read. "Which means that Saku weighs twenty-eight kilos and has to take three pills."

The dog could sense that something suspicious was going on, and crawled to hide beneath Anton's bed. He just barely fit.

Everyone in the house tried to coax their pet out with kind words. The dog stared at them warily from behind the dust bunnies and wouldn't move a muscle.

Anton grabbed a broom and used it to carefully push the dog out from his hiding space.

"Now the floor under the bed has gotten dusted, too!" Jersky laughed. Sirje didn't say anything, but one could guess that she was a little embarrassed there were dust bunnies snoozing under Anton's bed.

Jersky had to use her smarts to give Saku the pills. She hid the three stomach-worm pills in three cutlets that Sirje had cooked. Saku might have suspected something all the same, but he couldn't resist the smell of freshly-cooked meat. The dog quickly scarfed down all three treats.

E.

There needed to be two weeks between the stomach-worm pills and the vaccinations. When the time came, the whole family (as Sirje called them) drove to the vet in Jersky's orange van. Saku didn't ride on a seat with the others, but rather in the cargo space with the empty potato sacks.

A parrot was chirping in a cage in the veterinarian's brightly-lit waiting room. Anton stopped and stared at the bird like it was a wonder of the world.

"He's here to keep us company," the white-coated woman sitting at the desk declared.

Saku showed no emotion when he saw the multicolored bird, although he was interested in the bags of cat litter heaped in one corner. The dog trotted over to the pile and before anyone had the chance to stop him, he lifted his leg.

"Now you're going to have to buy that bag," the woman in the white jacket said sternly. The name-plate on her coat read "Eva, veterinarian".

"Saku, what did you do now?!" Sirje exclaimed crossly.

"He wanted to mark it as his territory," the doctor continued. "Pay for the bag!"

"I can dig up sand in a gravel pit if I want to. I wouldn't buy that expensive sack even if I were a cat myself," Jersky snapped brusquely. Maybe she had intended to say "... if I had a cat" instead. Every once in a while, Jersky would say things differently than she meant them.

"Fine. So, you want to vaccinate your dog," the vet said, changing the subject. "What's his name?"

"Saku," Anton replied proudly.

"Is that Saku Dark or Saku Light?" the veterinarian joked. Everyone knew that Saku Dark and Saku Light were beer brands.

"Don't make those kinds of jokes with us," Jersky barked. "I could ask the same way whether you, Eva, are Adam's wife."

"Calm down, please," the vet said. "Who is the owner?"

"Write 'Anton'," Sirje proposed.

"Well, I *guess* you could write that down," Anton said, dragging out his words.

The vet looked questioningly in his direction.

"Anton," Anton introduced himself. "I definitely don't want to be any kind of owner—Saku is my friend."

"Sure thing," Eva said. "We just have that blank here on the form, and we have to fill it out. What breed of dog is he, Anton?"

"A Gibraltar ship dog," Anton replied.

A short silence followed. Jersky and Sirje exchanged puzzled glances.

"Huh, you don't say—he *is* a Gibraltar ship dog," the vet said, inspecting Saku closely. "We'll write that down. Now, your dog will get a passport where we can record all his vaccinations."

And the vet busied herself issuing the dog's passport. Anton peeked at what she was writing.

"You wrote 'light-brown Gibraltar ship dog,'" Anton remarked.

"But he *is* light-brown," Dr. Eva replied. "We have to note the color."

"I know. But Gibraltar is written with a b, not a p," Anton corrected her.

"Sorry, my hand slipped." Eva corrected the word in the passport. "I wasn't very strong in geography when I was in school, but I'm excellent at veterinary sciences. Where did you find yourself such a rare breed of dog?" There was a slightly playful tone to the doctor's voice.

"He came to us all on his own," Anton told her. "From the Valleybottom neighborhood. Three weeks ago."

"Well, I guess he knew where he was going. Dogs are very smart," Eva said with a smile. "Now, I'm going to give your dog a shot that contains a combination-vaccine against a few different diseases."

"Will it protect against rabies, too?" Sirje asked.

"Yes—rabies, too. And in addition to that, it'll stop the dog plague, parainfluenza, hepatitis, a viral disease..." Dr. Eva listed off.

"Stop!" Sirje cried out. "You don't have to name all those diseases. It's better not to know what sicknesses might be stalking all of us."

"Not to worry," Eva reassured her. "Now, let's talk about your dog's age. Since he came to you all on his own, then you probably don't know how old he is."

"We have no idea," Jersky replied.

"We'll do a little check-up here and I'll give him the injection as discreetly as I can," the veterinarian said. She kneeled down in front of Saku, pet him, and spoke to him in a soft and friendly tone. Without the dog even noticing it, she poked the needle into the thick hair at his nape. Then, she carefully pried open Saku's jaws and inspected his teeth. "We can't find out his exact age, of course... but he certainly doesn't have any tartar build-up. Your pooch seems to be pretty young—I'd say between two and four."

"One year of a dog's life is equal to seven of ours," Jersky remarked.

"That means he's the same age as me—fourteen," Anton said.

"Yep, this dog is still a juvenile," the vet said. "He's got his whole life ahead of him."

[Chapter 7, pp 157-165]

B.

The couple of weeks passed, then a couple of months, and winter was already giving way to spring when one evening, the telephone rang. Sirje answered, and a chipper female voice immediately asked her: "Do you own a dog named Saku?"

"We sure do," Sirje replied. "What has he gotten into now?"

"Oh, he's gotten into quite a lot," the woman said. "You can come and pick up your puppies!"

"What puppies?!" Sirje asked in surprise.

"Your *dog's* puppies!" the woman declared, and laughed brightly. "Come pay us a visit in Valleybottom village—we'll get to know each other and have a chat!"

The woman told Sirje her address, adding that she also had Saku's lost collar. It was thanks to the collar that she'd found the right number to call.

"Anton!" Sirje called out once she'd hung up. "Anton! Saku's collar has been found—and guess what? He's got a girlfriend in Valleybottom named Stefi, who just had puppies!"

"How could Saku have lost his collar *there*?" Anton asked, tossing his homework aside.

"I don't know, the woman didn't explain more," Sirje replied. "She invited us over and promised she'd tell us more then!"

"When?" Anton asked.

"Tomorrow evening!" said Sirje.

"Should we take Saku with us, too?" Anton asked.

"Of course not," Sirje replied.

C.

Before visiting Valleybottom, Sirje and Anton bought a big box of chocolates with red roses blooming on the lid.

"Red is the color of love," Sirje told Anton when they were picking out the box.

Saku's girlfriend Stefi's house was typical for the neighborhood. It was an old two-story wooden building painted a cheerful yellow and surrounded by a chain-link fence.

"I'm amazed that he got through that fence," Sirje marveled.

A beaming red-cheeked middle-aged woman came to meet them at the gate. "Well hello-hello, Saku's owners! I'm Ulla. Come on in and have a look at the kiddies!"

So, Sirje and Anton went inside. In the foyer, right at the bottom of stairs leading up to the second floor, there was a wicker basket, and inside the basket were three different-colored puppies. They were like little balls of fur.

"We put Stefi in the other room for now so she won't bother us," Ulla explained. "She's pretty anxious—I suppose she's afraid strangers will take away her puppies. They *are* her first!"

Tense barking sounded from another room.

"We won't test Stefi's nerves for long," Sirje said, handing Ulla the box of chocolates. "We'll just see Saku's kids for five minutes or so!"

"Oh, how nice—you shouldn't have!" Ulla exclaimed. "I'd be happier if you just took the puppies with you."

"We certainly can't promise that," Sirje said, taken aback.

"There's just no room for four dogs in our family," Ulla said briskly. "We're going to have to share responsibility, because it was *your* Saku who broke into our yard!"

"How could that have happened, anyway?" Sirje asked, dodging the subject. "I mean—how did the dogs get together in the first place?"

“What happened was that our dog was in heat just then,” Ulla said. “My elderly mother opened the door, Stefi hopped outside, and your red dog was there waiting for her.”

“What happened then?” Anton asked.

“Exactly what was meant to happen, young man,” Ulla said, laughing. “Before I had a chance to get between them, they’d already put their tails together. We’d spotted that red Saku of yours in Valleybottom before, spying on Stefi.”

“How did Saku get past the fence?” Sirje asked.

“We were wondering that too, but we finally figured out his secret,” Ulla replied. “There’s a little gap between the posts in a corner of the yard behind some berry bushes, and that’s where Saku slipped through. He escaped through the same place when I chased him back out, but his collar got stuck in the wire. He left a clue.”

“Our telephone number was on the collar—why didn’t you call us earlier?” Sirje asked.

“I didn’t look any closer, and just hung it on a lilac bush,” Ulla said. “But Stefi pulled the collar down once she was already pregnant. She kept whining and rolling on top of it. That’s when I saw the collar had a telephone number.”

“What do you know—Stefi was playing with her admirer’s collar! She wanted her family to let the daddy know,” Sirje remarked. “You see how mysterious and beautiful nature’s strange ways can be, Anton?”

“They are, indeed,” Ulla said, picking up the puppies. “One more beautiful than the next. Three puppies: two boys and a girl. So, which ones are you going to take?”

“We’ll have to talk about it a little at home first,” Sirje said diplomatically. “We’ll let you know our decision in the next couple of days.”

“That’d be great,” Ulla said. “I suppose it’s good for the puppies to stay with their mom right now, but they’re growing fast!”

“How were the puppies born?” Anton asked.

“Just like puppies always are,” Ulla said. “One morning, there was a lot of whimpering under the staircase.”

Mommy-Stefi’s barking had turned more frantic again, and it sounded like she was even jumping up against the door that separated her from the puppies.

“It was so nice to meet you,” Sirje said decisively, and stood up. “We’ll call you.”

“Yes, Stefi would like to check on her kids now,” Ulla said, and opened the door to the next room.

Stefi shot into the foyer. She was almost the same shade of red as Saku. Furiously, the dog lunged towards Sirje and Anton, who were just leaving. Anton barely managed to close the front door behind him before Stefi leapt against it so hard that it shook.

“Uhh!” Anton exclaimed, quivering. “I bet she would have bitten me if she had a chance.”

“Always remember, Anton, how a mother will protect her kids from strangers,” Sirje commented.

D.

That same night at Sirje’s coffee parlor, they held the meeting about what to do with the puppies. Jerski also attended.

“The way I see it, you’re not obliged to take a single puppy,” Jerski said. “At the same time, it’d be nice if you could help the family out. Ulla’s situation is tough enough, already—she’s got an elderly mother to care for.”

“I could go sell the puppies at the market,” Anton proposed. “Siegfried said he bought his dog there, too.”

“That might not be a bad idea,” Jerski said.

“Anton can’t handle selling the puppies all on his own,” Sirje argued. “He’ll need some support.”

“Why don’t you go with your grandson?” Jerski asked.

“I certainly don’t want to catch a chill by the market gates, what with my poor health,” Sirje grumbled.

“Unfortunately, I can’t help either—you can’t sell potatoes and puppies at the same counter,” Jerski said. “But I can certainly give Anton and the puppies a ride to the market!”

“The puppies will all scamper off in different directions if it’s only Anton there—he’ll need a helper,” Sirje insisted.

“You know what? I’ll have a word with Inks—she’s a big animal-lover!” Jerski proposed. “Inks just sits around at home, feeling bored. She never feels like doing her homework—she’ll find the time. Inks could be just the right companion for Anton.”

“How are things with you and Inks, Anton?” Sirje asked, turning to her grandson. “I assume you two get along well together?”

“Um, we’re... good,” Anton said, blushing.

“Then it’s settled—Inks will definitely join you,” Jerski concluded. “We’ll go to the market with the puppies next weekend!”

“What should one puppy cost?” Anton asked.

“That’s something you should ask Saku,” Sirje joked. “Young man, what *does* one of your kids cost? The way I hear it, you should never give a puppy away for free, even if you just ask a needle per tail.”

The “young man” in question was snoozing on the couch, and didn’t comment. Saku jerked his paws as he slept—no doubt he was dreaming about running around somewhere in Valleybottom.

“I was thinking we could tell people the puppies are the descendants of a Gibraltar ship dog,” Anton suggested.

“You know, Anton, I don’t believe that’ll increase the puppies’ value. All pups cost more or less the same at the market if you don’t have pedigree papers,” Jerski said, dampening the boy’s hopes. “It certainly won’t pay to ask a special price. The cost should be symbolic—say, fifty kroons! Or even less.”

“I dunno... I think that puppies as nice as Saku’s will definitely be a big hit!” Anton said, still optimistic.

“Time will tell, I guess,” Jerski said, shrugging. “I think it’ll be a good day if you’re able to get rid of even just one. But tell me: are you going to keep a pup for yourselves, too?”

“I definitely think we could!” Anton hurried to say.

“Why not—old Saku and young Saku,” Sirje mused with a grin.

“Give it some careful thought. Owning two dogs is no joke—two dogs are already a pack,” Jerski warned.

“I suppose you’re right. We’ll see how things go at the market, and then decide,” Sirje said, delaying her verdict on having a dog pack at home.

[pp 170–172]

F.

“What ‘Gibraltar ship dog’? What kind of nonsense is that? There’s no such breed,” a woman wearing knee-high white leather boots quibbled. “Keep your mutt locked up tight, then you won’t be having mutt-puppies! Or else sterilize your dogs.”

The woman was all worked up for some reason. After blurting out her toxic words, she threw her head back and strutted away without even a glance at the puppies. Anton thought he recognized her as the Nordic walker he’d encountered in the park one day.

"You sure shouldn't have mentioned Gibraltar ship dogs to a woman like *that*," Inks said when the woman was gone. "It's amazing that people like her to markets in the first place. They should be living in a castle somewhere, where everything pops out of the walls all by itself. I wonder what she's even looking for here."

"I've seen her before somewhere," Anton said. "In a park, maybe. I think she goes Nordic walking there."

"Well, then she's definitely got her own opinion about stray dogs and Saku," Inks said.

"Saku isn't an *actual* stray dog," argued Anton.

"He is a little," Inks replied. "Otherwise, we wouldn't be selling puppies here. What she said about sterilizing was over the line, though."

"Luckily, I don't even know what that means," Anton said.

"Hey, look at that!" Inks exclaimed, tugging Anton's sleeve. "Check out what Mrs. High and Mighty is at the market for!"

A dark-haired man was selling fireworks near the market gate. New Year's was long past and fireworks stands had disappeared from shopping centers. Even so, you could still get stuff like that at the market.

The woman in white leather boots stuffed two packages of rockets in her plastic bag, and left.

Inks and Anton had already spent three hours at the market, but hadn't sold a single puppy. The baby dogs were curled up, asleep, in the basket, their backs pressed together. Jerski had laid an empty potato sack over them so they wouldn't get cold. For some reason, no one was interested in buying the wonderful little balls of fur. There were plenty of people who came to look, and Anton even heard several of them chuckling warmly, but none of them wanted to buy a dog. A little girl had picked up one of the puppies and cradled it in her arms, but had even turned down Inks' offer to take a picture.

Someone who looked like a businessman in a suit and tie said he was looking for a genuine guard dog, but once he heard the puppies' grandmother had been a pure dachshund, he waved away any further discussion.

The children had even been scolded by marketgoers three times for not tying their dog up and letting it make puppies. The woman in the white leather boots had been the meanest of all.

It was chilly and windy outside. Jerski offered them hot tea from a thermos when the market was closing, and they drove home together with a stop in Valleybottom.

"Well, just as I expected—no dice," Ulla sighed as she took the basket back.

"We would've sold one if the sun had been shining," Anton said, still positive despite the situation.

"We're going to have to go about it some other way," Inks murmured. "I'm going to take on this problem seriously. I'll come up with something."

"I'd be truly grateful if you did," Ulla remarked, and said goodbye.

That was that. When Anton told Sirje about their day at the market, the boy noticed his grandmother looked worried. She spun a lock of hair around her finger thoughtfully—a sign that she was unsure about something or not having the sunniest thoughts.