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THE SEALED PACKET.

I had served twenty-five years on board an East-Indiaman, and for the last ten years had command of the Belle, one of the finest craft that ever floated. I was an old sea dog, and had dwelt so long on salt water that I felt almost haired for the land.

On the 20th of October, 1854, I received orders to put myself in readiness to sail for Cayenne. I was to transport seventy-five soldiers and a convict. I had orders to treat this individual well, and the letter I received from the Directory inclosed another with a huge red seal, which I was not to open until between 27 and 28 deg. west longitude; that is just before we were about to cross the line.

The letter was a long packet, so well closed on every side that it was impossible to catch the slightest glimpse of its contents. I am not naturally superstitious, but there was something in the look of the letter that I did not altogether like, though I could give no reason why. However, I carried it in to the cabin and stuck it under the glass of a little old shabby English clock, which was fastened above my head. I was busy fixing the letter under the clock, and who should come into my cabin but the convict and his wife. This was the first time I had ever seen either of them, and I may say that a more prepossessing couple I never met. The woman was scarcely more than fifteen, and as handsome as a picture; white the husband was an elegant magnificent formed man, on whose features nature had never written villain.

His crime, to be plain, was the unfortunate of being a hundred years ahead of his age. He and others had attempted something which our Government called treason, and which it punished with death. I therefore occasioned me considerable wonder that he should be placed under my charge—but more of this afterwards.

He had, as I said, his wife hanging upon his arm. She was as merry as a bird; she looked like a turtle-dove cooing and nestling under his great wing.

Before a month passed over our heads I looked upon them as our own children. Every morning I used to call them into my cabin. The young fellow would sit, waiting at my table—that is to say, at my chest, which was my bed. He would often help me at reckoning, and soon learned to do better than I could. I was amazed at his ability. His young wife would sit upon one of the round stools in my cabin, working at her needle.

One day we were all three sitting in this way, when I said:

"Do you know, my young ones as it seems to me, we make a very pretty family picture?" Mind, I don't mean to ask questions; but may be you have not much money to spare, and you are, both of you, as I think, too handsome to dig in the burning sun of Cayenne, like many a poor wretch before you. It's a bad country—a bad country, take my word for it. I, who have roughed it through tempest, wind and sunshine, till I've got the skin of a rhinoceros, might get along there; but you—I am afraid of you. So, if you should chance to have a bit of foolish friendship for your poor old captain, I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll get rid of this old brig; she's not much better than an old tub, after all; so I'll settle down there with you, if you like. You see I have not a living soul in the world to care for, or that cares for me. I want relations, I want a home, I want a family. I should like to make my home with you, my pretty young ones! What say ye?"

They said nothing at all, but sat looking, first at each other and then at me, as if they doubted whether they understood what I said.

At last the little bird threw her arms round my neck, and cried like a baby.

"But," said she, suddenly pausing, "you haven't looked at the letter with the big red seal."

"Hang it!" I exclaimed, "it slipped my mind entirely."

With a cold dread of sensation, I went to my chest to see where we were. I found

that we had several days remaining before we could reach the proper longitude for opening the letter.

Well, there we stood, all three of us looking up at the letter as if it could have spoken to us. As it happened the sun was shining full upon the face of the clock case, and fell upon the great star red seal of the letter. I could not help fancying it looked something like a big monster, an ogre's face, grinning from the middle of the fire; it looked so horrid.

"Could not one fancy," said I, to make them laugh, "its great big eyes were staring out of its head?"

"Ah, my love," said the wife, "it looks like blood."

"Pooh, pooh!" said her husband, taking her arm under his. "It looks like a letter of invitation to a wedding. Come, come, leave the letter alone if it troubles you so. Let's go to our room and prepare for bed."

And on they went. They went upon deck and left me with that beast of a letter. I remember that I kept looking at it as I smoked my pipe; it seemed to fix its great red eye upon me, fastening like the eye of a serpent. It was a wide, raw, staring like the maw of a fierce wolf. I took my great coat and hung it over both chest and letter, and then went upon deck to finish my pipe.

We were now in the vicinity of the Cape de Verde Islands, the Belle was running before a fair wind at the rate of ten miles an hour. It was a splendid tropical night—the stars large and shining, the moon rising above the horizon, as large as a sun of silver, the line of ocean parting it, and long beams of bare shimmering light falling upon the waves, which, as they broke, sparkled like jewels. I sat upon the deck, smoking my pipe and looking at them.

All was still except the footfall of the officer of the watch as he paced the deck, gazing as he did upon the shadow of the vessel-tealting over the silent waters.

I love silence and order—I hate noise and confusion. The lights should all have been extinguished by this time; but when I looked upon the deck I thought I saw a glimmering line of light beneath my feet. At another time this would have made me angry, but knowing that the light came from the cabin of my little *de parties*, I determined to see what they were about.

I had only to look down—I could see into the cabin from the skylight.

The young girl was upon her knees and was saying her prayers. A lamp swinging from the ceiling lighted their room. She had on a long, white night dress, and her fair golden hair floated over her shoulders, and almost touched two little bare feet which were peeping from under her white dress so pretty. I turned away; but 'shaw! said I, I am an old sailor! What matters it. So I stand.

The husband was sitting upon a little trunk, his head resting upon his hands, looking at her as she prayed. She raised her face to heaven, and then I saw that her eyes were filled with tears. She looked like a Magdalene. As he rose he said:

"Ah, my sweet Laurette, as we approach America I cannot help being anxious. I do not know why—but I feel that this voyage has been the happiest part of our lives."

"So it seems to me," she answered. "I only wish it might last forever."

Suddenly clasping his hands in a transport of love and affection, he said:

"And you, my little angel, I see you cry in your prayers, and that I cannot stand, for I know what causes it, and then I fear you must repent what you have done."

"Repent," she said, in a rebuking tone, "repent of having come with you? Do you think because I have been yours only such a very short time, that I should not love you? Was I not your wife? How can you be sorry that I should be with you, to live with you if you live, and to die with you if you are to die?"

The young man began to sigh, striking the floor impatiently with his feet, while he kissed repeatedly the little hand and arm which she was holding out.

"Ah, Laurette, Laurette! When I think of our marriage had only been delayed five days—only five days—that I should have been arrested and transported alone, I cannot forgive myself!"

At this the little one stretched out her round white arms, clasped his head, pressed his forehead, his hair, his eyes, smiling like a cherub, and murmuring all sorts of woman's fond things. I was quite affected, and considered it one of the prettiest scenes I ever witnessed.

"And besides we are so very rich, too," said she, bursting out laughing. "Look at my purse—some gold Louis d'or—al, my worldly wealth."

He began to laugh too.

"Yes, dear, I have spent my last half crown. I gave it to the fellow who carried our trunks on board."

"Ah, poor!" cried she; "what matters it? Nobody so merry as those who have nothing at all; besides I have my two diamond rings that my mother gave me; they are good for something all the world over; we can sell them when you like; and besides, I am sure that the captain meant kindly by us, and I suspect he knows very well what is in the letter."

It's a recommendation to the Governor of Cayenne."

"Perhaps so; who knows?" "To be sure it is," continued the captain's little wife. "You are so good I am sure the government has banished you only for a short time—I know they have no feeling against you."

It was high time that the lights should be struck out, and now I rapped on the deck and called to them to do so.

They instantly obeyed, and I heard them laughing and chattering like two innocent school fellows.

The morning when I awoke I was surprised not to feel the slightest motion of the vessel. Hurraying in deck I found that we were becalmed—latitude one degree north; longitude between 27 and 28 degrees west.

I waited until night; when I descended to my cabin and opened the letter, with a soft and sweet feeling. I held my breath while I broke the big red seal and read:

Captain Fountainbleau—the convict, Antoine Hindsclair, stands convicted of high treason against the Republic. The Directory orders that he be shot in mid-ocean, and you are hereby instructed to see that these orders are carried into effect.

I read the letter backward and forward. I went on deck. There they were, she looking upon the ocean, and he gazing upon her with an expression of unutterable fondness. Catching his eye, I signed for him to come into the cabin, and bidding her good bye, he came down, his face all smiles.

I was bathed in a cold sweat. I felt as if I were sick; I handed him the letter, and he read it, together with the death warrant, which was drawn up in due form, and attached. I gathered voice as he finished.

He colored slightly and bowed.

"I ask nothing, Captain," he said, in the same gentle voice that always characterized his speech; "no man can be expected to swerve from his duty. I only wish to speak a few words to Laurette, and to entreat you to take care of her, if she should survive. I hardly think she will."

"All that is fair, my good fellow," I said. "If you request it, I will carry her back to France, to her family. I will never leave her until she wishes to get rid of me, but I do not think she will survive it."

He took my hand and pressed it.

"Most kind captain, I see you suffer more in this business than I do; but there is no help for it. I trust you will preserve what little property of mine is left for her sake, and that you will take care she gets what her poor old mother may leave her. I put her life—her honor in your hands. She is," and how fondly low his voice became, "a delicate little creature. Her chest is often affected. She must keep it warm; and if she could keep the two diamond rings her mother gave her, I should be glad; but, of course, if money is need-

ed, they must go. My poor Laurette, how pretty she looks!"

It was getting too much for me, and I began to knit my brows.

"One word is as good as a thousand," I said. "We understand each other. Go to her."

I squeezed his hand; he looked wistfully at me, and I added: "Stay a moment; let me give you a word of advice. Don't say a word to her; be easy; that is my business. It shall be managed in the best manner."

"Ah!" said he; "I did not understand; yes, much better. Besides, this leave-taking; this leave-taking!"

"Yes," said I, "don't behave like a child; much better. No leave-taking; if you can help it, or you are lost?"

"I kept my seat. I saw them walking arm-in-arm upon the deck for about half an hour."

I called the mate to me, and when he had read the letter, I said:

"Garley, this is bad business—bad business. I put it in your hands. I obey the orders, but remain in the cabin until it is all over."

"How do you wish the thing done?" he asked in a nonchalant manner.

"Take him out in a boat—out of sight; do it as quick as possible; don't say anything of this until the time comes."

Garley sat five minutes looking at me without saying a word. He was a strange fellow. I didn't know what to make of him. He went out of the cabin without saying a word.

Night came at last. "Man a boat; go a quarter of a mile; be quick."

To obey a slip of paper! for it was but a slip of paper after all. Something in the very air must have urged me on. I saw the young man kneel down before his Laurette; kiss her knees! her feet! her gown! I cried like a madman:

"Part them! part them this instant! Part them! Curse the Republic—curse the Directory—the Directors! I quit the service! Curse the lawyers! You may tell them if you will."

She was dragged into her berth, and the boat rowed away in darkness.

Some time after, a dull volley came over the sea to the vessel. It was all over.

Fool! madman! How I paced the deck and cursed myself. All night long I heard the moaning of the poor stricken bird.

Often I halted and was tempted to throw myself into the sea, and so end this horrid torture of brain and heart.

Days passed. I saw nothing of Laurette—I would not see her. She avoided me, and I was glad of it. I could not bear the sight of the woe-stricken face.

The mate, Garley, how I hated him. He was as cool and unconcerned as though he had no remembrance of shooting the poor wretch.

At Cayenne I resigned my ship. Going to the city I made all my arrangements, and took the steamer for New York. I placed ample funds in the hands of a trusty friend, and told him to send Laurette to me at the end of six months. I could not see her until her grief had lost its edge.

Weary, sick, and careless of my life, I wandered off into York State, and finally bought a little place, where I hoped I should lay down and die.

I sent for Laurette. Poor bird, I must see her. I could wait no longer.

One summer night I sat on the porch of my house smoking my pipe, and gazing down the road. Soon the rumble of wheels was heard, and the stage halted.

The next moment a pair of soft arms were around my neck, and the head of my sobbing Laurette was on my bosom.

"Oh! dear, excellent, captain!"

"Heavens! what is that behind you?"

There stood the fine manly form of Antoine Hindsclair, the convict.

"What does this mean?" I demanded, hardly knowing whether I was dreaming or not.

"Are you glad to see me?"

"Thank God! Thank God!" was all that I could ejaculate.

I understood it all. The mate Garley had read my heart better than I did myself.