

## Lottery of Deception

by Pete Claisse

It was a problem with wrought iron in the masts. Hollow, they were, but still so much heavier than timber. She had laid over. When the tide rose they would dip right down into it and as the water covered the decks she would be just another wreck in the fog on the Labrador banks.

The port side rail was so low in the water that the captain could have easily stepped across into the cutter floating alongside.

"It's flooded to the number three bulkhead. The doors won't open. The only way in is from the deck hatches." The mate was barely up to the captain's shoulder but he still managed to look him straight in the eye from under his sou'wester.

"The man who goes down with the diving helmet can have the biggest rock. The size of an egg it is, clear as sunlight on the morning dew. I saw it in the manifest and had the chest opened to see it." He looked up at the men above him clutching onto hatch combings and a windlass. None moved. None even looked at him.

"And if nobody goes down, nobody gets anything. Without those stones there is nothing, no money, no pay, nothing."

Still there was no movement from the men.

Taking off his hat he tore pages out of his notebook, folded them and put them in it. He then reached up to the gear on the windlass and ran his finger through the black grease. Smearing a fine film across the one gold button on a cuff of his jacket he used it to make a clear imprint on one last page before ripping off the button and throwing it over the rail. The print showed an anchor with rope wound around and five mermaids with flowing hair and smooth forked fish-tails.

The first one forward was the cabin boy, thin frail and scared, reaching into the hat with his eyes closed and fumbling the folds to reveal a blank page before scrambling back up to a hatch lid. Nobody followed so the mate took his turn, as a powerful man they knew he had a chance of coming out alive with the chest, but his page was blank. He took the hat and shook it as the captain made his draw.

"A fine manor house with a farm. Think of it." They could see now, his page was blank. He was looking first at the stokers, all showing the easy strength and balance won from shovelling coal for twelve hour shifts in the North Atlantic storms. Then the deck crew, not so fit but tanned wind-blown. These came as a group following a leading seaman they climbed down and took their lots quickly, one after another, calling out at each blank page.

He tried to hold the gaze of a stoker but none would face him. These men lived and died together and knew their own law. The fog was thickening and coming down, the hat felt damp as he held it out. One big man had come forward, walking down the sloping deck as easily as easily as a finely paved city promenade. Still he would not look the master in the eye but he reached into the hat with a hand stained with coal dust. Glancing at his page he said nothing, walking back to his comrades. Then they saw him folding a long whale-skin wallet over and over so the oils in the brown, un-tanned leather would make a perfect seal.

The oldest stepped forward. Even the dust could not conceal the grey of his beard. "Go with God. Have faith or the devil will take your soul."

The diving helmet was green with corrosion and the vulcanised rubber in the canvas below it was cracked with age. Taking a length of the air hose he pulled gently on it and seemed surprised as much as relieved when it held. First he fixed the weights around his waist before strapping on the helmet and signalling to the men on the pump that the air was coming through. He never flinched, stepping into the water, grasping the rails of the ladder leading down into the darkness, pulling the rope and the hose with him.

"A man can take five minutes among the sea-ice." The captain was holding a silver fob with the engraved lid open. "A strong man ten and a fool might try for more. The cargo will have moved and the iron bound chest will be hard to uncover and fix to the rope."

Ten minutes came and went. The men on the pump said nothing, just keeping up the steady rhythm and watching, always watching for bubbles rising at the hatch. It was fully fifteen minutes when they saw them. "Man on the companionway ladder" they shouted, pulling as they dared on the hose to ease the climb. [needs more here].

The corrugated iron roof of the desolate cannery port building dripped as the fog blew in each time the door opened, overpowering the stove in the far wall. Men from windjammers down from the Greenland sea, reeking of rotting fish, were crowding in to see. The captain and his crew sat on low benches, hunched down in exhaustion. The storm that they had out-run was gathering outside, howling through the eaves and rattling the windows. They had carried in the iron bound chest and placed it on the stone floor in front of them. The locks were broken with cold chisels and the lid raised to reveal a solid iron strong box within. When lifted clear this revealed the markings of the Pacific Railroad company.

"We cannot open it. The railroad agent will have a key". The captain was looking at the fishermen beyond rather than risk the gaze of his own crew.

"But will he honour this?" The man now standing was scarcely recognisable as the tall stoker of a week before. The voyage from the banks in the open cutter had been bad enough for all the crew but he had set out frozen, wet and exhausted. The fingers that held out the ticket were black down to the first knuckle as the frostbite set in. Gangrene would follow and the fingers would be lost by spring. His proud back was now bent, his voice harsh and faint.

He placed the ticket on the chest. The whaleskin wallet had kept it dry and clean and the five mermaids were still clearly to be seen, attending to the anchor. One of the fishermen came forward to look at it. "The telegraph was sent. He will soon be on the track from the railhead, here by dusk. He was told the price that was paid when his treasure was lost, and the payment offered."

As the dull winter light was fading into night, a carriage arrived, bumping across the harbour front, with bright pressure lanterns reflecting off the glistening sheds. The agent pulled his cloak around him to protect his immaculate uniform and was taken directly into the building, followed by two guards with brightly polished brown holsters for their revolvers.

He shook the damaged hand with care not to hurt the blackened fingers. "I do not carry the key. You must come with us. Your deed was heroic, far more than most men could achieve. The big diamond will certainly be found inside when it is opened at our treasury."

The strong box was loaded on the back of the carriage and secured with broad leather straps. The big man was helped to sit inside between the guards. More hands were shaken and congratulations offered as the horses sought purchase on the smooth stones to pull the carriage back to the track.

Many minutes passed and the men were on their way back to their normal duties when a faint shot was heard drifting in on the rising wind.

“They must have found a bear” one of them said, but nobody believed him.

The ticket lay on the remains of the chest, drips of water landing on the mermaids, diffusing them into the anchor, hiding their shame at their deadly deception.