

The Letter That Never Came by C. H. Harlow

In July, 1879, I was ordered to duty on board the United States ship *Alert*, bound for the China station, with orders to visit the South Pacific islands *en route*. We left San Francisco on the 3d of August, and as I recall the first part of the voyage out, we had strong favorable winds that carried us to the line, a distance of over two thousand miles, in sixteen days, a very fair average for a small steam corvette under sail alone. We slipped through the Doldrum regions at the rate of a 100 miles a day, and took up the southeast trades without being conscious of having lost the northeast. The morning watch would trim the sails, steady taut the braces, and “sweat home” the sheets, an hour would be devoted to routine drills, and then the balance of the day would be given up to delicious idling, the officers with pipes and books, and the men with clothing and ditty boxes. A cooling breeze swept through the flattened wind sails; the royals and all-port stern sails gave her a comfortable list, and day after day rolled over and under us until the page of the nautical almanac showed that one whole month had been crossed off. Then came a few days of tiresome calm. We were in latitude 24° S., longitude 128° W. If you will take the trouble to look on a map of the South Pacific Ocean at about that latitude and longitude, you will find a tiny speck, not larger than that made by a needle point, indicating an island. There are hundreds of such specks in the Pacific Ocean, many of them without names, and all of more or less uncertain location. This one, however, bears the name of Elizabeth or Henderson Island. I have never been able to learn anything about it—when it was discovered or who gave it its name. Some of the early English adventurers, possibly one of the ships of the Wilkes expedition or some whaler, may have run across it, taken a rough set of sights, pricked it on their charts, named it after their sweethearts or themselves, and then squared away for new bits of worlds. Maritime history is wonderfully silent on many such points. All I know is that early on the morning of September 8th the masthead lookout reported “Land ho!” and the next day we drifted sufficiently near it to warrant the captain sending an officer in a boat with sextant, chronometer, and artificial horizon, to get a careful set of sights and to give it a hurried exploration.

Many an addition to accurate geography has been made in just such a way, and I felt quite flattered when the detail fell to me to go on shore. Aside from the stretch to one’s limbs which the solid earth promised, there was the feeling that this strange bit of land had perhaps never been trodden by the foot of man before. Perhaps it was Mountain Peak of the lost Atlantis, a silent witness to some terrific convulsion that sunk it beneath the wave. Who could tell? Here it lay, however, indefinitely charted, and liable to bring some unsuspecting mariner to grief unless properly located. Here was a chance to earn the fame of having made known an unknown corner of the world, and I was pleased as well as flattered. We left the ship in a whale boat, six strong oarsmen, a coxswain, midshipman to mark time for the observations, and myself. An easy swell lifted us gently to its crest, and then lowered us with a mild taste of tobogganing to its hollow, while the sparkling wake behind us showed a line of bubbles far down through the shimmering blue. The land was fully five miles off, but the men bent to a long, steady stroke, and in an hour’s time we were near enough to see an unbroken line of white breakers rolling and tumbling over the narrow strip of beach. The sides of the island seemed nearly perpendicular, while the lead failed to give bottom at thirty fathoms, close as we were. I turned to the southward in hopes of finding an opening in the breakers there that would permit me to land, but the same threatening wall of blue with its crest of hissing white roared a defiance at me. I began to despair of ever

effecting a landing, when on turning to the northward on the west side I found the clasp of this white necklace, a patch of blue that told of a break in the reef and a passage through to the tiny inlet beyond it. Such breaks in the coral reefs that encircle these lonely islands are very common, and their explanation simple. The rainfalls find their way to the sea through some depression. Where the freshwater strikes the salt coral life is destroyed. Directly in line with this break was a gulch, the only one observed during my circuit. All the rainwater from the top flowed to the sea through this gulch, hence the little bay and the cut in the coral circle. Advancing cautiously, I found that at about two hundred yards from the beach there were ten fathoms of water. This continued until about fifty yards from the beach, when the depth abruptly shallowed to three fathoms. It was only by the exercise of extreme caution that our boat was successfully carried through the narrow passage, clear of the surf that writhed and lashed on either side, and we were enabled to land.

Having secured the boat, warned the men about straying too far away and eating any of the berries or fruit that they might find, I started up the gulch for the top of the island, accompanied by the midshipman and a man to carry the instruments. I got a fine set of sights, sent the man back to the boat, and then took a stroll about the plateau-like top. It was only about a mile in circumference, and covered with a thin coating of soil that supported a rank tropical growth. As soon as I could I examined the character of the island: as veritable a corpse as ever suffering friends followed to the grave. Once living an active, energetic life, it was now lifeless, an inert mass, an object of assault for wind, rain and wave. The first blow of my hammer betrayed the dead coral, and subsequent investigation proved that Elizabeth or Henderson Island, lying in latitude 24° 21' south and longitude 128° 19' west, was simply a mass of coral, crowning doubtless some submarine mountaintop, covered with a thin roll of disintegrated coral and vegetable mold, and planted by nature's great gardeners, the birds. We had experienced great difficulty in getting to the top; the vines, which choked the gulch up which we had clambered, were so thickly interlaced as to cover up the holes and render passage dangerous, so I decided to confine my exploration to the top, and not venture down any of the other sides, particularly as the cliffs were considerably undermined and threatened to fall at any moment. A few pandanus trees were scattered here and there, thick grass, a network of vines, bright flowers, berries, and blossoms were underfoot. I collected a few specimens, and was about to return to the boat, when my attention was arrested by the blackened ends of a log or stick that projected above the thick brush. It was sufficiently conspicuous to excite my interest, and I walked over and examined it. Calling to some of my men, I had them tear aside the vines, and then I discovered evidences of the work of human hands, for it was blocked in position by pieces of coral. Further, on careful examination, I saw that it had been carved with English letters over its entire end. Exposure had nearly obliterated them, but enough remained for me to decipher the following: "Ro ley sole su of t r. ue A . . . ta . . . ves . . is re ook un one. ix pa . . s d . . n . . th."

Nothing further could be made out, and I felt sure from the general appearance of the rest of the log, which was probably a capstan bar, that the substance of the message, disconnected as it was, lay in the above cipher. I puzzled over it a long time. All hands lent their intelligence to the work, and we finally decided that the latter part at least was "Look under stone six paces due north." Sending for the boat compass I placed it in the center of the spot, and with anxious step paced off the distance. The men soon cleared a space of several feet in diameter. Almost in the

exact spot where my footsteps landed me I found a flat piece of coral, evidently shaped by man, and beneath it, in a hole carefully lined with coral, I found a small tin tobacco case. Opening this, I produced a dingy roll of paper, its edges ragged and torn, the body wellnigh destroyed by rust and moisture. I saw at a glance that the most careful handling would be necessary in unrolling it, and as there was a slight breeze blowing over the top of the island, I decided to take it off to the ship and examine it there. Assuring myself that no further evidence of the mystery were to be found, I returned on board ship. Repairing to the cabin, I reported my discovery and displayed the box, asking the captain to appoint some officers to examine the writing and report upon it. He ordered another officer and myself as a board to examine the roll, using the utmost caution in handling it. We had a thin paste made, provided ourselves with notepaper, and as each layer was carefully unwound from the roll it was transferred to a stiff sheet of paper, over which we had first spread a thin coating of paste. Great delicacy was necessary, the sheets had little more consistency than burnt paper, but after an hour's patient labor we were rewarded by seeing all the contents of the roll safely transferred and ready for deciphering. Traces of writing were discernible, but they were so obscured by the blackened surface of the paper—sheets, by the way, from some pocket diary or memorandum book—that it was only by the aid of a magnifying glass that we were able to read them at all. Each of us read separately, and after examining together some disputed words we produced the accompanying story:

“I am Robert Harley, master and sole survivor of the bark *Acasta*, from Sag Harbor, knocked down by a white squall near this island. Charles Bennett and myself drifted ashore on some gratings and capstan bars. He died from exhaustion in the surf. I remain long enough to write this record, which the grace of God permits to do. I shall die very soon—by the side of Bennett if my strength permits me—but I want before I die to implore the good people who find this record to take it to Miss Gardner, and tell her that I still love her and her alone, and that her name will be on my lips when death comes to me on this desert island. I hope to meet and wed her in heaven.”

I returned from this trip in April, 1881, and wrote at once to the collector at Sag Harbor, relating my experience, and asking him for any light that he could throw on the subject. He replied to the effect that the bark *Acasta* had sailed from Sag Harbor in 1849 in command of one Robert Harley. There was no record of her crew to be found, and the vessel had never been heard of since. The name Gardner was a very common one in that locality, and inquiries in several directions failed to elicit any information of the one mentioned in the record. He begged that I would preserve it for their Historical Society, and he assured me that the village authorities would bear the mystery in mind and try to unravel it.

II.

The winter of 1882 found me again in San Francisco, awaiting the fitting out of the *Jamestown* for a voyage around Cape Horn to Newport, Rhode Island. Great difficulty had been experienced in securing servants for the officers' messes; Europeans and Americans scorned our offers of \$15.50 per month, while Chinamen were unwilling to take the voyage to New York without a guarantee that they would be sent back to 'Frisco again. The case was growing desperate. I, as caterer of my mess, had exhausted all the employment offices, and had descended from the level of respectable means to enter into an arrangement with a couple of murderous-looking shanghaiers, who, on consideration of \$100, had promised to deliver to me sixteen ablebodied Chinamen, who, they assured me, “would be only *too happy* to enlist.” I was to meet the

conspirators in a saloon at the foot of —— Street—a locality that boded little good for their characters. It was with some misgivings for my own personal safety that I agreed to the rendezvous, but there seemed to be no other way of securing these necessary adjuncts to one's comfort at sea. Before starting out, however, I secured the services of a private detective, who was to station himself near the door after I had entered, and be ready to respond to any call; and with pistol in pocket, I repaired to the neighborhood. The place fit the deed. There was an air of squalor and wretchedness about it that smelt of crime, and my heart shook within me as I sniffed it. I was considerably ahead of time, but I thought I would take a look at the place, at any rate. It proved to be a corner groggery near the bay, and surrounded by all the evidences of a seafaring population. There was a curious hitching post on the corner, and an uncouth villainous-looking individual was leaning against it, smoking a black, short-stemmed clay pipe. He raised his head at my inquiry as to whether this was No. ——, and snarled out, "Can't ye see?" then softened a trifle as he asked, "Be you the young feller what's to meet my chums here this afternoon?" On my replying that I was to meet Messrs. —— and ——, he said, "Well, you're on time, sure enough"; and then relapsed into his position of evil soliloquy.

I was at a loss for something to say, but in casting about for some subject of remark I hit upon the curious hitching post as a topic, and remarked: "That's a very curious post, is it not? It looks like a figurehead of some ship."

"And what might you be knowin' about figgerheads?" he quickly retorted.

"Oh, nothing much," I answered, "but being a seafaring man myself, its shape suggested the idea to me. Do you know anything about it?" I cautiously asked.

He took his pipe slowly from his mouth, glanced at me curiously from head to foot, and then inquired, with a touch of fierceness in his tone,

"What do you want to know for?"

There was a strange mixture of fear and cunning about his bearing that seemed to be roused by my question.

"No reason in particular," I said; "only it is odd that an old ship's figurehead should come to be a hitching post."

This reply seemed to satisfy him, for he resumed his pipe and careless attitude. He puffed away slowly for several minutes. That something was working away in his mind was evident. The smoke rolled out in thick bluish clouds and coiled about his head, intensifying the devilish expression of his face. At last he paused.

"You're right," he said; "it was a figgerhead, and of as neat a little bark as ever dipped in brine. I come to 'Frisco in her thirty-two year ago."

"Did you indeed?" I exclaimed. "And what was the bark's name?"

Again he paused to scrutinize me. There was a suspicion in his look that I could not understand. His eye met mine with a restless, uneasy glance. He seemed inspired by dread of some object behind my course of questions; but then, with an impatient gesture, as if throwing it aside, and a careless laugh at his own fears, he replied:

“The *Acasta* was her name, and—Hello! Here comes Bill and Jim. Step in, young feller, and we’ll settle this business.”

Before I could recover from the astonishment that the name produced, the two men joined us, and I followed them into the saloon, receiving as I entered the door a nod from the detective, who had been a witness from across the way.

As we entered I heard a tremendous racket in an adjoining room. There were unintelligible yells, preceded by loud hammerings on the door.

“We’ve got ’em, blast ’em,” said one of my villainous friends, with a significant leer and jerk of his thumb toward the room from whence the noise proceeded.

“Got what?” I innocently inquired.

“What?” He replied, in coarse jocularly. “Why, them Chinees what you wanted. Eighteen of ’em, and all dyin’ to go. Don’t you hear ’em?” and the rascal grinned at his own humor.

“Well,” said our host, “let’s get to business. Have you got your money with you, young feller?”

“I have, but” ——

“Well, hand it over,” he gruffly interrupted.

“I will when you put the men on board the Vallejo steamer,” I quickly but firmly replied.

What inspired me to revive the subject of the figurehead I know not. Perhaps it was a feeling that the taunt might strengthen my nerve for the encounter which I felt sure was to follow. The attitude that the three men assumed when I showed a determination to be treated fairly in the matter was a murderous one. That the whole thing was a trap, I saw at once. That no servants had been secured, and that the commotion in the next room was the work of confederates, to lead me to believe that the Chinamen had really been corralled, flashed across me in an instant. I might have made a dive for the door, have given some signal that would have called in the detective, and thus escaped, but one of those impulses that come to us at times and bid us do the most foolish things took possession of me, and with the effrontery of a madman I remarked: “You said the name of the bark was the *Acasta*, I believe, my friend? Perhaps, then, you knew Robert Harley and Charles Bennett and Miss Gardner?”

I remember hearing one of the men say, as all three rose: “By God! I thought so. He’s on to us. I knowed it would come;” and then everything swam before me, and I only awoke when in my room at the Occidental. Anxious friends were standing about. They told me of the events that

transpired after my injudicious remark—that I had been knocked senseless with a blow from the fist of one of the ruffians, and would undoubtedly have been murdered had the detective not entered at the noise of the scuffle. Indeed, the man with whom I had talked about the figurehead seemed determined to kill me, and the detective had to put a ball into him before he would give over his murderous design. All three were now in custody, and the police were delighted, for they had long been the terror of Chinatown. I recovered quickly, and that night was about to join a theatre party, when a hurried card from my friend the detective called me to the office.

“That fellow that I shot this afternoon is dying,” he said, “and he wants to see you before he goes off. Can you come with me to see him a little while?”

“Certainly,” I replied; “I’ll go at once.”

I excused myself from the party, and repaired with the detective to the City Hospital. The wounded man lay on a couch. The pallor of death had spread over his face.

“He is strong now and can talk well enough,” the surgeon said; “but he is bleeding internally, and nothing can save him. We have told him that he had better make his peace with God before he dies. He says that he has something to confess to you, so we sent for you. Here’s the gentleman you wished to see,” he said, turning to the dying man. “Do you want anyone present?”

“Yes,” he replied; “I want the sky pilot, and no one else.” So the Rev. Mr. —— and I were the hearers of the following remarkable story:

“Young feller,” he said, in a voice that trembled with fear and excitement, “how you come to know anything about the bark *Acasta* I don’t know, but I argues that you does, ’cause you spoke of Robert Harley, Charles Bennett, and Hadassah Gardner. Robert Harley war the master of the *Acasta*, and Charles Bennett war one of the crew. That’s me. My name’s Charles Bennett, and I killed Robert Harley. He loved Hadassah Gardner, and she loved him. I loved her too. Them war days when I was better than I am now; though not much, ’cause I killed Robert Harley. It come about in this way: It war in 1849 that the *Acasta* left Sag Harbor for whalin’ in the Pacific. I knowed that Haddie and Robert war to be married when he got back, and I made up my mind that he never would come back. So I shipped as carpenter on his bark. I made myself solid with the crew. They all swore by me, but they had nothing agin the old man, and I couldn’t get no cause to pick in row with him. We caught a few whales in the Atlantic, got around the Horn, and stood up for the islands with the southeast trades. It war somewhere about twenty-five degrees south latitude that we spoke a big American ship bound for ’Frisco. We boarded her, and learned of the diggin’s in Californy, and how everyone was bound for that country. When we got back to our ship I said to the boys, ‘Let’s ask the old man to go to Californy.’ So we come aft in a body, and asks him to let the whales go, and to stand up for the land of fortune. He refused to do so, and ordered us forward. That night I worked up the crew to take the ship away from the old man, and offered to lead them. Enough agreed to do the work, so the next day we took the ship. I killed the old man with a windlass brake, and we dropped him out of the cabin window. Nobody saw me, and nobody asked no questions. The mates guv in, and all hands was glad that we was goin’ to the land of gold. We ran across an island, and I got up a plan to fool anybody what happened to land there. I got the mate to write a letter sayin’ as how he war Robert Harley,

sole survivor of the bark *Acasta*, what was knocked down by a squall and all hands lost, and as how he loved Miss Gardner, and a lot of other stuff, and then I cuts a notice on a capstan bar to look under a stone, and I put the paper in a tobacco box under it. Then the mate steered us for 'Frisco. We got there all safe, and the first night in the bay everybody but me and my two chums—the same what you seed this afternoon—jumped the ship and put for the diggin's. A strong nor'easter come up and the cable parted, and we went ashore. The old *Acasta* piled up high and dry, and I made a hotel outen her, and made a heap of money, but somehow I couldn't keep it. I was allus a-hearin' poor Haddie calling for Robert, and went and got drunk to keep from a-hearin' of her, and now that I am a dyin' man I swears that my life has been one eternal punishment, and I thinks I ought to be let up on when I dies. I didn't do no more than what any man would ha' done when he war kept from his rights. Gold's better nor whales any day, and—" A sudden pang brought him to a stop. His face grew ghastly white. Some sudden rupture had hastened the fatal tide, and life was fast ebbing away.

"Have you any letters or papers of Robert Harley?" I asked.

"Yes; one letter for Haddie. God'll forgive me my sins if I do her right at last; won't He, parson? It's in my chest at the tavern. Take it to her, and say that—that—" He hesitated to express his mind, then began with an earnestness that bespoke his last efforts: "My chums didn't have nothing to do with the killin' of Robert Harley. Let up on them." The words came in faint whispers. His face settled down to a look of calm satisfaction: he had been loyal to his chums.

I revisited the tavern with the proper police officers. On overhauling his chest we came across a dingy letter addressed to Miss Hadassah Gardner, Southampton, Long Island. It proved to be the journal letter of Robert Harley to his sweetheart. He had written a few lines daily; but its delivery was sadly delayed. Inquiry elicited the fact that the bark had gone ashore as Bennett had related, and that the city had filled in and built about it, leaving only the figurehead to mark its grave. No one knew anything further about her history, for events of the kind were only too common in the exciting days of '49.

I wrote to the Historical Society of Sag Harbor, asking them to renew their search for one Hadassah Gardner, of Southampton, saying that I had important documents for her—a letter from Robert Harley.

We were 112 days from the Golden Gate to Narragansett Bay, and when the mail came onboard at Newport it brought me a letter from Sag Harbor, saying that Hadassah Gardner had been found—an old lady, very feeble, living entirely on the memory of her absent lover—and that she had died shortly after learning of the letter that never came.

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This edition added a penultimate paragraph to part I:

There was no date and no further information to be gathered. The letter had evidently been written in pencil, and was in a plain hand, large letters, well spelled, and carefully adjusted to the limited amount of paper. There seemed to be nothing to do except to preserve the letter. Its evident age precluded any possibility of the writer being still alive, so, with the permission of the captain, I took personal charge of it, and laid it away among my papers.