



Learn English Through Stories.

B Series

B39

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The Oblong Box

By Edgar Allan Poe



My home is in New York. But several years ago, I stayed in Charleston, South Carolina, for a few months. At the end of my visit, I returned to New York by ship.

In those days, we travelled by sailing ships. Sailing ships took about a week to sail from Charleston to New York. When the winds and the tides were good, the journey took six days. If there was little wind and we had to wait for a good tide, the journey took eight days.

There were no regular days and times for ships to sail. Passengers went to a shipping office. They asked a clerk where ships were going. The clerk told the passengers the names of the ships and their destinations. Then he wrote the passengers' names beside the names of the ships. The captains of the ships looked at this list. Then they sent messages to the passengers when their ships were ready.

A ship was going to sail from Charleston in the middle of June. Its destination was going to be New York. I booked a cabin on the ship. Then I waited in a hotel.

I wanted to find out the names of the other travellers. The list of the passengers' names was kept in the shipping office. So I went to the shipping office and I looked at the list. There was one name on the list that I knew- Cornelius Wyatt. Cornelius and I were students together at university.

A few months earlier, I had heard news about Cornelius Wyatt. A friend in New York wrote me a letter. Cornelius had married a beautiful and charming young woman. I wanted to meet Mrs Wyatt. I had never seen her.

Why were Cornelius and his wife in Charleston?

Cornelius was an artist. He painted pictures. He also bought and sold paintings. Old paintings were worth a lot of money in New York. Was that the answer to my question?

Maybe Cornelius had found a valuable painting in Charleston. There were many old families in South Carolina. The families had brought many paintings from Europe. Was Cornelius taking an old painting to New York?

I was going to find the answer to both these questions soon. We were travelling together on the same ship.

A captain sent a message. His ship was going to sail to New York the next day-June 15th. I went to the harbour and boarded his ship. I looked at the list of passengers and their cabins.

Cornelius Wyatt had booked three cabins. He had the two cabins opposite mine and the cabin beside mine. He was not travelling alone. He had three ladies with him-his wife and his two sisters. The two sisters were in a cabin opposite my own cabin. I expected Cornelius and his wife to take the second cabin opposite mine. But who was going to be in the third cabin?

I was surprised when I met Mr and Mrs Wyatt at last. Cornelius looked ill and he was not pleased to see me.

"My friend, we have much to talk about," I said. "And is this your charming and beautiful wife?"

The lady with Cornelius was wearing a veil. The thin material covered her face and I could not see her clearly. But she said "Good morning" to me politely. She spoke slowly-she had the accent of South Carolina. She did not speak with a New York accent.

Cornelius did not speak to me. He took his wife into the cabin opposite mine and shut the door.

"Cornelius was very rude," I thought. "But he is an artist. Artists can be very selfish. We will talk later. But who is staying in the third cabin? Maybe a servant will be in the cabin beside me."

Two men brought a box onto the ship. It was an oblong box, about six feet long.

The men took the box to Cornelius Wyatt's third cabin-the cabin beside mine. They put the box down on the floor while they opened the door. The words WYATT and NEW YORK were written on the top of the box.

I watched the two men carry the oblong box into the cabin. Then I heard the men talking. The walls of the cabin were thin and I could hear their conversation.

"It smells bad, doesn't it?" said one man.

"Yes," said the other man. "What's in it, do you think?"

The two men left the cabin and closed the door.

I wanted to look at the strange box more carefully. But I could not do that. First, I must speak to Cornelius.

There were paintings in the box. That is what I believed. But I wanted to see them. What had Cornelius found in Charleston? Maybe the paintings were secret and valuable.

I saw Cornelius later in the evening. All the passengers were in the dining-room eating dinner. I tried to speak to Cornelius. But he did not want to talk. He was rude to me. Also he was not hungry. He ate nothing. Was he ill?

"Well," I said. "We're old friends, but you're behaving badly."

Cornelius said nothing. I was angry with him now. I wanted to be rude too.

"Are you worried about the things in your box?" I asked. "I have guessed what is inside it. But I won't tell anyone."

I said the words. Then I wished that I had not said them. Suddenly, Cornelius Wyatt's face became very pale. His eyes were large and bright. Was he ill? Or was he mad? Cornelius Wyatt suddenly fell to the floor and was still. He had fainted.

The captain and two sailors helped Cornelius to his cabin. I went to my own cabin and tried to sleep. But I could not rest.

I heard someone open the door of the cabin beside me. Had Cornelius gone into the cabin? Had he gone to look at his pictures? I heard the sound of metal on wood. Was Cornelius opening the box?

Maybe I slept a little then. Maybe I dreamt. I thought that I heard the sound of someone crying.

Cornelius stayed in that cabin. He did not want to come out. Food was taken to him. He did not eat it.

"Those paintings must be extremely valuable," I said to myself. "Cornelius cannot leave them for a minute."

Then I thought of another reason for my old friend's strange behaviour. Mrs Wyatt did not stay in her cabin. She came out and talked to the other passengers. I saw her in the dining room.

I was very surprised. I had been told that Mrs Wyatt was beautiful and charming. But she was neither beautiful nor charming. And she was not young. My friend had said that Mrs Wyatt was from New York. But she spoke with a South Carolina accent.

Was this the reason for my friend's strange behaviour? Had Cornelius made a mistake? Had he married the wrong woman? Was he sad and upset about this? The door of the cabin was locked and Cornelius did not come out. What was he going to do when we reached New York?

Then something happened and I forgot Cornelius Wyatt's secrets. A few days after we left Charleston, there was a storm. The wind blew and the sea became rough. The waves grew taller and taller. It was a very bad storm. It blew the ship south-back toward Charleston.

The wind was very strong. It blew all night. The ship moved from side to side. It almost turned over. The mast broke. The captain could not steer the ship and it went toward the shore. The ship hit some of the sharp black rocks on the coastline and it started to sink. Soon seawater came along the corridors and into the cabins.

"Leave the ship!" the captain shouted to everyone. "Quickly! Go to the small boats! Do not stop to take anything with you!"

I ran out of my cabin and I saw Mrs Wyatt. I saw Cornelius Wyatt's two sisters. The sailors helped us to get into a rowboat. There were fifteen of us in the boat. The captain was with us.

It was daylight, but black clouds were in the sky. We could see land two miles away. The wind was blowing toward the land.

We looked up at the ship. It was now low in the water. The ship was sinking. Soon it was going to be under the sea.

Suddenly we saw Cornelius Wyatt. We had forgotten him. Cornelius was pulling the oblong box toward the side of the ship. He was pulling the box toward our rowboat. His eyes were wild. He was terribly frightened.

"Mr Wyatt!" shouted the captain. "Get into this boat now! The ship is sinking!"

"I cannot leave my box," Cornelius replied. "I must get into the boat with my box."

"No!" shouted the captain. "We can only take you. You cannot bring your box. Quick! Get into the boat! The ship is sinking!"

"I cannot leave my box!" Cornelius shouted again.

"Is your box more important than your life?" I shouted.

Cornelius looked at me. I saw madness in his eyes. He hated me. He hated my question.

"Yes! Yes! Yes!" Cornelius shouted.

He lifted the box onto the side of the ship. As he pushed it over the side, he held onto it. The box and Cornelius fell into the sea. Both the man and the box went straight down into the water. Cornelius and the oblong box did not come up again.

"Get the boat away from the side of the ship!" shouted the captain. We pulled on the oars and the rowboat moved away from the sinking ship. In a few minutes, the ship had sunk beneath the sea.

The wind blew our rowboat to the shore. At last, we were safe.

A month later, I met the captain again. We talked about the storm and our escape from the sinking ship. We talked about Cornelius and the oblong box.

"It was a mistake to bring that box onto the ship," the captain said. "The box brought bad luck to the ship. I did not want to take the box."

"What was in the box?" I asked.

"The body of Mr Wyatt's dead wife," the captain replied. "Mr Wyatt's wife died suddenly on June 14th. She died in Charleston, on the day before we sailed. Mr Wyatt had to return to New York. And he wanted to take his dead wife's body with him. None of the other captains wanted to carry a dead body in their ships.

Some people believe that it is bad luck to keep a dead person on a ship. But Mr Wyatt asked me again and again. He became very upset. At last I agreed. He lied to the shipping clerk and the other passengers. He said that there were valuable paintings in the box."

"So who was the Mrs Wyatt that I met?" I asked him.

"She was his servant," said the captain. "Wyatt loved his beautiful wife very much. Only I knew the truth."

2. Picture Dictionary

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Introducing Yourself and Others



Getting Someone's Attention



Expressing Gratitude



Saying You Don't Understand



Calling Someone on the Telephone



- 12 Hello. My name is / Hi. I'm
- 13 Nice to meet you.
- 14 Nice to meet you, too.
- 15 I'd like to introduce / This is

- 16 Excuse me.
- 17 May I ask a question?
- 18 Thank you. / Thanks.
- 19 You're welcome.

- 20 I don't understand. / Sorry. I don't understand.
- 21 Can you please repeat that? / Can you please say that again?
- 22 Hello. This is May I please speak to?
- 23 Yes. Hold on a moment.
- 24 I'm sorry. isn't here right now.