MYSTERY TRUNK

One day, I happened to have some free time while on a business trip to San Diego, California. I had just toured the Star of India clipper ship down by the waterfront, so I was in an historic frame of mind after enjoying a leisurely fresh seafood lunch. I walked down Market Street in the Gaslamp Quarter until I saw the sign for Burnell's Antique Emporium. I gazed at the various wares in the window display, then stepped inside the front door.

The owner, Oscar, welcomed me.

"Anything in particular, sir?" he politely inquired.

"No, just looking," I replied. "You know...thinking about the past."

"Ah, yes...the good old days," Burnell added, smiling. He had a smooth, pink face and a full mane of white hair , swept back. He wore spectacles over taupe eyes, and was perhaps sixty years old.

I told him about my recent experience touring the Star of India.

"She's a fine ship, a real beauty. We'll not see the likes of her on the Seven Seas ever again, I'm afraid. But say, I have something that might interest you. It's a locked steamer trunk that was found abandoned in an old warehouse that was about to be demolished. I was contacted and got it for free. I've never bothered to open it. It's down in the basement. Wanna have a look?" Oscar asked.

My curiosity aroused, I agreed. After Burnell flipped on a light switch, we went down a creaking wooden stairwell into the shop's bowels, where I beheld a dusty plethora of antique junk and potential treasures as we side-stepped past the roughly arranged inventory.

In the very back of the basement was the trunk.

It was beat up and worn out, but in a noble way. Its metal parts were dented and tarnished, and the sides were caked with grime. Its two locked clasps looked to be rusted shut.

"It's yours for...how 'bout...$100? It's heavy, so it's loaded with something. Maybe valuable items, or maybe nothing but a pile of rocks," Oscar chuckled. "Think of it as a kind of grab bag purchase, or buying a pig in a poke. Bought sight unseen. Hopefully, a lucky find for you. What do you say?"

The mysterious trunk seemed to beckon me.

"Sure. Why not?" I answered. I liked surprises. "My car is in the Mall parking garage. I'll bring it around and you can help me load it up." I gave Oscar five twenty-dollar bills.

When we later put my purchase in the back of my Land Rover, I guessed that it weighed about eighty-pounds. Not too bad. I thanked Burnell, and drove on I-5 north back to my house in Laguna Beach.

Pulling into my driveway, I used a two-wheeled hand cart to bring the steamer trunk into my garage. Using a hammer and a screwdriver, I carefully jimmied the two rusted lock clasps open.

It sighed like an old revived friend when I lifted the lid. From the dim interior, a symphony of faint smells teased my nostrils: I detected the subtle scents of salt spray, coconuts, and perhaps camel dung. Maybe cedar forests, African savanna, and ghostly moonlight too. There was a lingering touch from minty arctic gales and dry desert winds. These smells were all mixed together -- a compelling aroma of places far away and times long ago.

The trunk was about one-third filled with reddish-orange sand, the kind rich in iron oxide -- maybe from the Australian Outback, or the high dunes of Namibia? Atop the sand lay several mysterious treasures:

Tattered sea charts with soundings and crude sea monster illustrations;

An old compass with a scratched face, attached to a sweat-stained, broken leather strap;

A yellowed newspaper in an unknown tongue, carefully folded;

A dried pod of sweet cloves, perhaps from Zanzibar, or the Spice Islands;

A brass looking-glass in need of polishing, still partly clad in cracking black leather;

A modest stack of rumpled parchment maps, with their spider web lines of latitude and longitude;

A woman's dainty silver ring, and cameo;

A fraying cloth pouch, filled with a handful of ancient, possibly Greek or Persian coins;

And finally, it was then that I experienced a unique and eerie sensation of hearing -- in my imagination -- the lone whistle of a distant train, going away, somewhere in the night.

There was no name tag on either the inside or the outside the trunk. Did it belong to one man, or to a succession of accumulating owners?

Perhaps it belonged symbolically to all who had ventured boldly to strange, exotic lands -- to all who survived to return home and tell what marvels they saw, and share in detail what they had accomplished.

I realized then that the mysterious trunk was an artifact from a lost era: the age of explorers, adventurers, trail-blazers, the ever-curious, and other restless travelers -- those who were eternally searching. Once back home, they were dramatically changed men, in many ways now lost and alienated from others. They tugged at sleeves and murmured in the ears of those who never wandered afar, futilely attempting to relate their almost unbelievable adventures to sadly uncomprehending friends, family, and strangers.

Such men were forever destined to look into the baffled faces of all those who never even understood the 'why' of the journey.

As these realizations awakened in my mind, I knew my next course of action. I loaded the re-secured steamer trunk back into my Land Rover and drove to the Laguna Beach Marina. Once there, I put the trunk aboard my Chris Craft and sailed far out into the Pacific. During a spectacular pink and purple sunset above gently swaying seas, I ceremoniously lowered the mysterious trunk -- with all of its precious and evocative contents -- over the side, and watched it slowly sink below the waves. I sent it to the deep where it belonged, with all of the lingering memories of its unknown owner -- or owners -- still intact...

THE END

by Jack Karolewski

October 13, 2020