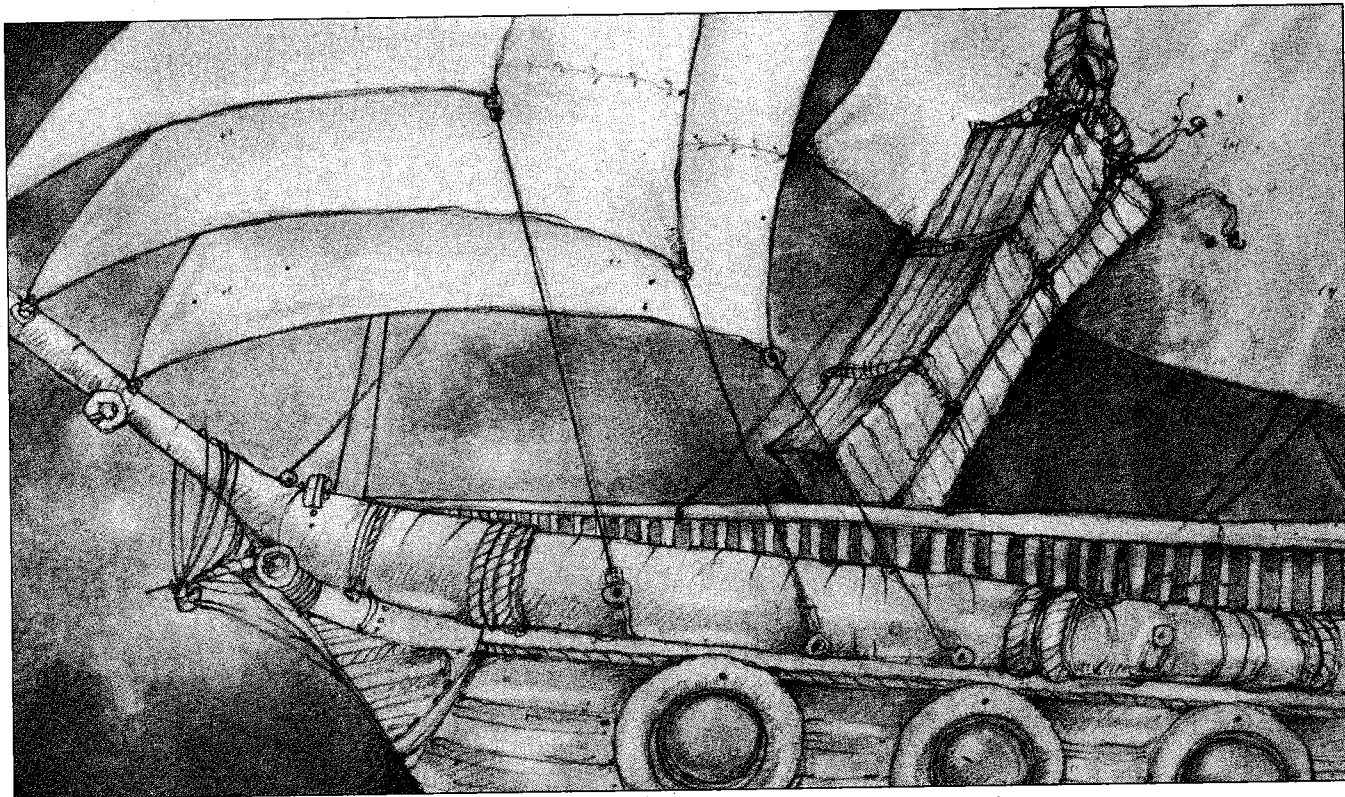


EDGAR ALLAN POE'S



Illustrations by Gimi Shurtleff

T H E O B L O N G C R A T E

Some years ago, in 1855, I bought a ticket on the ship *Independence*. It was going to sail from Charleston, South Carolina, to the City of New York. It was due to sail on June 15th.

On the 14th, I went on board to put some luggage in my room. I learned that there would be many passengers on this trip. On the passenger list were several of my friends, including Cornelius Wyatt.

Wyatt was a young artist and a good friend. We had studied at the same university. He was sometimes moody, but he was also one of the most sincere people I knew.

I noticed that he had reserved *three* rooms. He had bought tickets for his wife, himself, and his two sisters. Each room had two berths. So I could not understand why there were three rooms for these four people.

I decided that the extra room

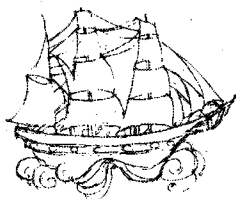
must be for a servant. I looked at the passenger list again. I was not surprised to see that a servant was to travel with them.

Before I left the ship, I asked the captain if Wyatt and his family were planning to visit the ship that day. He said he was expecting them. I knew Wyatt's sisters very well, but I had not met his wife. He had just been married, and he had told me she was a beauty. I was eager to meet her, so I waited on board for a while.

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Then a note arrived for Captain Hardy. It said: "Mrs. Wyatt is slightly ill. She will not be on board until tomorrow."

The next day, I was ready to board the *Independence*. But Captain Hardy said the ship would not sail for a day or two. He would let me know when it was ready. I thought this was strange, for the wind was right for sailing. But Captain Hardy would say no more about it.



Nearly a week later, I heard that the ship was ready to sail. I quickly went on board. Wyatt's family arrived soon after I did. There were the two sisters, the artist, and the bride. Wyatt was in one of his gloomy moods. He did not even introduce me to his wife. Instead, his sister Marian introduced us.

Mrs. Wyatt was wearing a hat with a veil that covered her face. When I bowed to her, she raised the veil. I was surprised to see that she was not beautiful. To me, she was plain-looking. My friend's idea of beauty was very different from mine.

Mrs. Wyatt was dressed well, and I was sure she must be intelligent and warm of heart. She said a few words. Then she went to her room with Mr. Wyatt.

I suddenly realized that there was no servant with Wyatt's family. Yet Wyatt still had three rooms reserved. I wondered why.

Then I said to myself, "The extra room must be for extra baggage. Wyatt must have some-

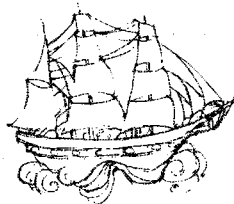
thing he doesn't want put in the baggage area. It is probably something valuable."

So I looked around for extra baggage. After a while, a cart arrived at the dock, carrying an oblong crate. As soon as the crate was put on the ship, we set sail.

The crate was about six feet long and two-and-a-half feet wide. The shape was unusual. When I learned that it belonged to Wyatt, however, I guessed what was inside.

I knew that Wyatt had recently been talking with Nicolino, an art dealer. I also knew that Nicolino owned a copy of a famous painting by Leonardo. The painting was very large, but if it were rolled up, it would fit in this oblong crate. So, I decided, Wyatt had bought the painting and was taking it to New York. This was the first time that he had kept a secret from me. I made up my mind to ask him about it.

Then another thing puzzled me. The crate did not go into Wyatt's extra room. It was placed in his own room. It took up much of the floor space, which must have been a bother to him and his wife.



For the first three days of our trip, the weather was fine. The passengers were cheerful and friendly—except for Wyatt and his sisters. They stayed in their rooms most of the time. When they came out, they did not talk to the other passengers.

I was not surprised by Wyatt. He was often gloomy. But I could

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not understand why the sisters behaved this way.

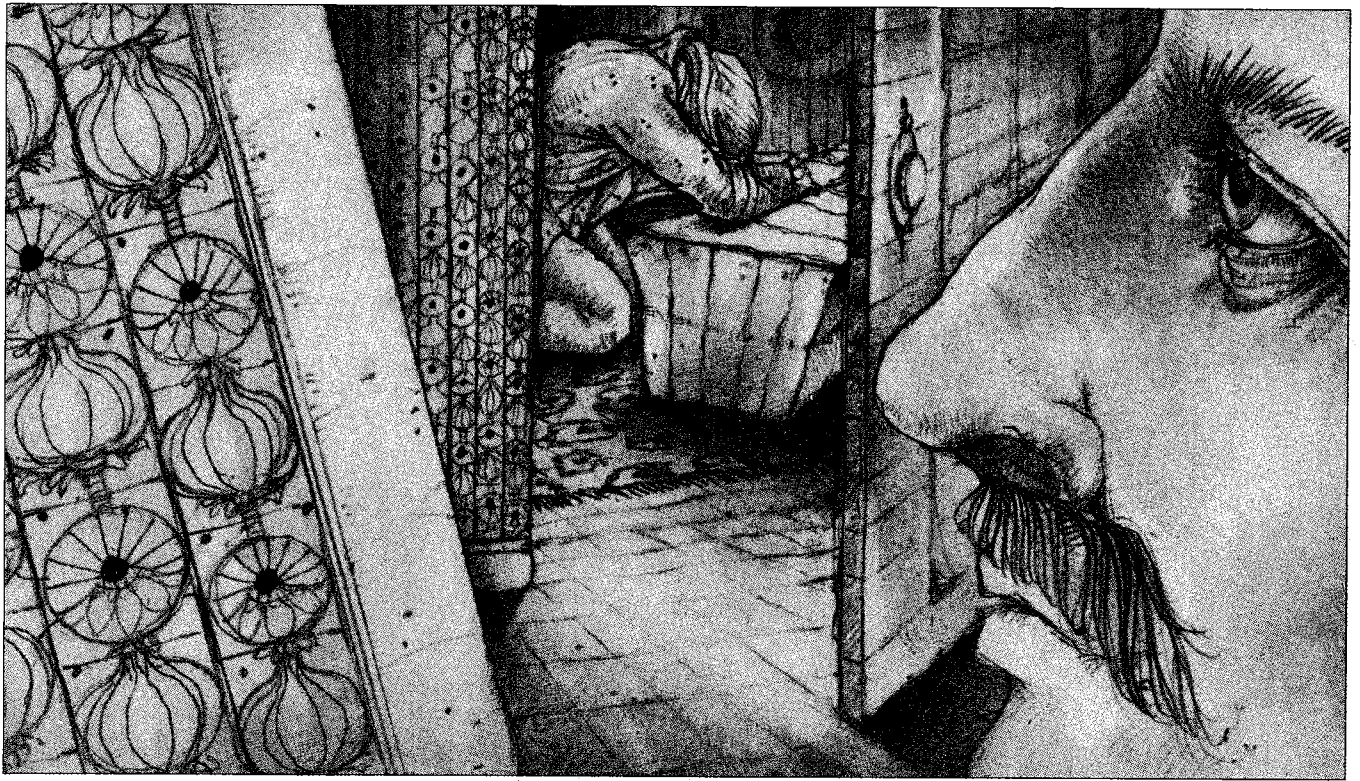
Mrs. Wyatt was different. She talked with everyone, but she talked too much. She was much too friendly with the ladies, and she flirted with the men. She tried to be amusing, but she said things she should not have said. Soon she was being laughed at—not laughed with. I could not imagine why Wyatt had married her.

I must admit that she *did* seem fond of him. She kept referring to "my dear husband, Mr. Wyatt." Yet he was avoiding her.

I decided that Wyatt had married a person who was not worthy of him. Now he was very unhappy, and I pitied him. More than ever, I wanted him to tell me about the painting he had bought. I thought it would raise his spirits a bit.

One day, he took a walk upon the deck. I joined him, and he was as gloomy as ever. I made a joke or two, but he did not smile. Then I mentioned the oblong crate. I said that its shape was odd. As I spoke, I smiled and poked him in the ribs, hoping he would share his secret with me.

The way that Wyatt reacted made me think he was mad. At first, he stared at me as if he did not understand. Then he began



to laugh wildly. Then he fell flat upon the deck. When I tried to lift him up, he seemed to be dead.

I called for help. When a doctor managed to revive him, Wyatt spoke nonsense. Finally, the doctor put him to bed.

The next day, Wyatt seemed physically well. But I wondered about his mind. I followed the captain's advice and avoided Wyatt for the rest of the trip. The captain agreed with me that Wyatt might be insane. He warned me not to mention this to anyone else on board.

Right after that, several strange things happened. They made me more curious than ever. Let me explain how I happened to notice them.

My room opened into the main cabin. Wyatt's three rooms opened into a hallway which was separated from the main cabin by a large sliding door. Whenever there was a strong wind, the ship would lean to one side, and the door would slide open. It would stay open because no one

bothered to get up and shut it.

I kept my own door open because it was hot. So when the sliding door was open, I could see the doors of two of Wyatt's rooms from my berth.

Now, twice, when I could not sleep, I saw Mrs. Wyatt leave her husband's room. She entered the extra room and stayed there until dawn. Then her husband called her back to his room.

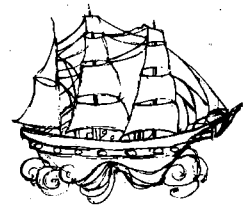
It was clear to me that they were separated. Maybe they were going to get a divorce. That, I thought, solved the mystery of the extra room.

That was not the only unusual thing I noticed, though. On those two nights that I could not sleep, I could hear Wyatt prying open the oblong crate. It sounded as if the hammer and chisel he was using were wrapped in cloth—to deaden the sound.

Then I heard Wyatt remove the lid. After that, all I heard was a murmuring or low sobbing sound. At least, it sounded like sobbing. But I must have imagined it. Wyatt, I was sure, had

opened the box to admire his painting. There was nothing about that to make him sob.

Just before dawn, I heard Wyatt replace the lid on the crate. Then I heard him nail it shut with the cloth-covered hammer.



When we had been at sea for seven days, a storm hit us. At first, the ship rode the huge waves safely. Then the storm turned into a hurricane. The fierce wind snapped off one of the masts. When the mast fell, it damaged part of the ship. Water began rushing into the damaged section. It was clear we would have to leave the ship.

We managed to lower the large lifeboat into the water. The crew and most of the passengers crowded into it. They left right

away. Later, we learned that they reached land safely.

The captain and 13 passengers were still on board. We lowered the much smaller lifeboat into the water. Soon it held the captain and his wife, Mr. Wyatt and his family, an officer, his wife and four children, and myself.

We had no room for anything but a few supplies, some food, and the clothes on our backs. That is why we were so surprised by what happened next. Wyatt suddenly stood up in the boat and demanded that we go back to the ship—to get the oblong crate!

"Sit down, Mr. Wyatt," Captain Hardy said. "The boat will turn over if you do not sit still."

"I beg you to go back for it!" cried Wyatt, still standing. "It weighs very little."

The captain looked at him with great pity. Then he said, "Mr. Wyatt, you are mad. I cannot listen to you. Sit down, or you will sink this boat. Grab him! He is going to jump overboard!"

We were too late. Before we could move, Wyatt had jumped from the boat. Somehow he managed to grab a rope hanging from the sinking ship. In a few moments, he was on board, rushing toward his room.

We tried to head back to the ship. But our little boat was like a feather in the fierce wind. We realized that Wyatt could not be saved.

As we were swept away from the ship, we saw Wyatt dragging the oblong crate along the deck. Then he tied a rope around the crate and his body. In an instant, both body and crate were in the sea. They sank at once.

No one said a word for a long time. Finally, I spoke up.

"Captain, it seems odd that he sank so quickly. I thought he

might be saved because he had tied himself to the crate."

"It is not odd that they sank so quickly," the captain said. "They will rise again—but not until the salt melts."

"The salt?" I asked, puzzled.

"Hush," the captain said. He pointed to Wyatt's wife and sisters. "We must talk of these things at another time."



Four days later, we reached land—more dead than alive. When we recovered, we went our separate ways to New York.

About a month later, I happened to meet Captain Hardy. Of course we talked about the sad fate of Wyatt. That is how I learned what really happened.

It was true that Wyatt had reserved rooms on the ship for his wife and himself, his two sisters, and a servant. But on the morning of June 14th, his wife became very sick and died.

The young husband was frantic with grief. But he could not

put off his trip. He had to take his wife's body to her mother, who lived in New York. But many people are superstitious about traveling with corpses. Captain Hardy knew that few of his passengers would agree to sail on a ship with a dead body on board. So he arranged to have the corpse packed with a large amount of salt in an oblong crate. It would be loaded on board as if it were cargo.

Nothing was to be said about the woman's death. Most of the passengers knew that Wyatt had bought a ticket for his wife. So someone had to take her place during the trip. The dead woman's maid agreed to do this.

The room reserved for the maid was not canceled. This was where the maid slept each night. During the day, she played the part of the wife. This was possible because the passengers had never seen the wife before.

I wish I had not been so curious about the oblong crate. I wish I had not been so quick to speak to Wyatt about it. I no longer sleep well at night. There is a face that haunts me. There is a wild laughing that will ring forever in my ears. *

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

1. What is in the oblong crate? What clues are you given about its possible contents during the story?

2. The narrator makes several guesses about why Wyatt has reserved an extra room on the ship and what is in the oblong crate. Why is it ironic that he keeps drawing the wrong conclusions? Does he seem quite sure that he is right each time?

3. Why does Wyatt keep the crate in his room on the ship? What does he seem to do each night?

4. Why did Captain Hardy help Wyatt make arrangements for the oblong crate? Do you think that passengers today would be as superstitious about traveling with a corpse as they were in 1855, when this story takes place?