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The Secret Notebook

by Ali Giles

Many tales abound of the sea; tales of murder and mystery, mayhem and mutiny. Most grow the more fantastical with their telling, becoming bound up and lost in myth. I can only pray that my own tale does not follow a similar fate, but serves as a caution to you all.

We were enjoying a tenuous truce with Spain at the time my story takes place, although Napoleon still breathed down our necks. I recall how uneasy we were sailing into Mediterranean waters.

Or perhaps we were made uneasy on account of what happened there.

Nathanial Betts was given my father's name, having made various enquiries around the docks, looking to hire a ship and its Captain. His aim was to sail to the port of Cadiz for April 19 and arrive there for 00.00 hours precisely. Betts had offered a good sum for the hire, half to be paid now if my father accepted, and the remainder to be paid after the voyage.

My father told me he became most excited upon seeing our old Dutch fluyt, and thought it a Spanish galleon. "Most befitting if it were," he had said, "for I am on rather an odd sort of quest."

Of the many lies he was to tell, he did not lie about that.

I did not much care for Nathaniel Betts but could not explain why at the time, although much later it was to become very clear. My father, however, was quite taken with him; intrigued I think by the strange quest he chased, and of course the chance to take the fluyt out to a place he had always loved.

A curious little man, Betts; as pretty as a girl with his big brown, long-lashed eyes and fleshy little red mouth. A proper toff too, in his buttoned breeches, but I thought him quite without manners for all that, and did not care for the way he spoke to my father. But all this is by-the-by, and the same day that he met with my father he joined us for supper and told us of his 'quest'.

"I was most fortunate enough to acquire an old shipping atlas dated 1587, and within its pages to discover a map." Betts produced the said map, and laid it flat upon the table before us. "This map is of the old Spanish Treasure Fleet route."

I followed the faint pencil marks until I came to an 'X' with tiny script written beside it, so faint as to be barely legible.

"'X' marks the spot, my boy," said Betts with much satisfaction.

My father ran his hand across his whiskers, trying to suppress a smile of amusement. "Buried treasure, Mr Betts?"

The other man refolded the map briskly then. "It's not *buried* treasure, Mr Barrett. It's *floating* treasure, and it floats in the hold of an old Spanish galleon."

"Even so –"

"'Even so' nothing, Mr Barrett," he challenged, "I offered you a handsome sum. Are you to take it or not?"

My father drew us all a small measure of whisky, then sat back to pack his pipe. The night was drawing in but he made no move to close the curtains or light the lamp.

"An old Spanish Treasure Fleet galleon? Lost at sea?" I ventured then, into the awkward silence, "that means she would have been sailing the Meditteranean for over 200 years."

"She sails *once* a year," Betts primly corrected me, "on April 19. At 00.00hrs, to be exact... the anniversary of her sinking off the Port of Cadiz."

"So, a ghost ship?"

"A ghost ship bearing many riches."

Nathanial Betts did not show us the second piece of paper tucked within the atlas. He kept that in a secret little notebook, and I have faithfully recorded it here:

*'Three small coins be the greater wealth
Of this be not mistaken.
But all mankind be much the same
It's how I keep my fortune'*

I do not think Betts understood its message; or at least he did not take it seriously enough.

In any event, I have kept the notebook to this day, together with the three small coins.