The Sin of Monsieur Pettipon

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Moistening the tip of his immaculate handkerchief, M. Alphonse Marie Louis Camille Pettipon deftly and daintily rubbed an almost imperceptible speck of dust from the mirror in Stateroom C 341 of the liner Voltaire of the Paris-New York Steamship Company, and a little sigh of happiness fluttered his double chins.

He set about his task of making up the berths in the stateroom with the air of a high priest performing a sacerdotal ritual. His big pink hands gently smoothed the crinkles from the linen pillow cases; the woolen blankets he arranged in neat, folded triangles and stood off to survey the effect as an artist might. And, indeed, Monsieur Pettipon considered himself an artist.

To him the art of being a steward was just as estimable as the art of being a poet; he was a Shelley of the dustpan; a Keats of the sheets. To him the making up of a berth in one of the cabins he tended was a sonnet; an orange pip or burnt match on the floor was as intolerable as a false quantity. Few poets took as much pains with their pens as he did with his whisk. He loved his work with a zeal almost fanatical.

Lowering himself to his plump knees, Monsieur Pettipon swept the floor with a busy brush, humming the while a little Provence song:

“My mama’s at Paris,

My papa’s at Versailles,

But me, I am here,

Sleeping in the straw.

CHORUS:

“Oo la la,

Oo la la,

Oo la, oo la,

Oo la la."

As he sang the series of "Oo la las" he kept time with strokes of his brush, one stroke to each "la," until a microscope could not have detected the smallest crumb of foreign matter on the red carpet.

Then he hoisted himself wheezily to his feet and with critical eye examined the cabin. It was perfection. Once more he sighed the happy little sigh of work well done; then he gathered up his brush, his dustpan and his collection of little cleaning rags and entered the stateroom next door, where he expertly set about making things tidy to an accompaniment of "Oo la las."

Suddenly in the midst of a "la la," he broke off, and his wide brow puckered as an outward sign that some disquieting thought was stirring beneath it. He was not going to be able to buy his little son Napoleon a violin this trip either.

The look of contentment he usually wore while doing the work he loved gave way to small furrows of worry. He was saying silently to himself: "Ah, Alphonse, old boy, this violin situation is getting serious. Your little Napoleon is thirteen, and it is at that tender age that virtuosos begin to find themselves. And what is a virtuoso without a violin? You should be a steward of the first class, old turnip, where each trip you would be tipped the price of a violin; on second-class tips one cannot buy even mouth organs. Alas!"

Each trip now, for months, Monsieur Pettipon had said to his wife as he left his tiny flat in the Rue Dauphine, "This time, Thérèse, I will have a millionaire. He will see with what care I smooth his sheets and pick the banana skins from the floor, and he will say, 'This Pettipon is not such a bad lot. I will give him twenty dollars.' Or he will write to M. Victor Ronssoy about me, and Monsieur Ronssoy will order the captain to order the chief steward to make me a steward of the first class, and then, my dear, I will buy a violin the most wonderful for our little cabbage."

To which the practical Thérèse would reply, "Millionaires do not travel second class."

And Monsieur Pettipon would smile hopefully and say "Who can tell?" although he knew perfectly well that she was right.

And Thérèse would pick a nonexistent hair from the worn collar of his coat and remark, "Oh, if you were only a steward of the first class, my Alphonse!"

"Patience, my dear Thérèse, patience," he would say, secretly glowing as men do when their

life ambition is touched on.

“Patience? Patience, indeed!” she would exclaim. “Have you not crossed on the Voltaire a hundred and twenty-seven times? Has a speck of dust ever been found in one of your cabins? You should have been promoted long ago. You are being done a dirtiness, Monsieur Pettipon.”

And he would march off to his ship, wagging his big head.

This trip, clearly, there was no millionaire. In C 341 was a young painter and his bride; his tip would be two dollars, and that would be enough, for was he not a fellow artist? In C 342 were two lingerie buyers from New York; they would exact much service, give hints of much reward and, unless Monsieur Pettipon looked sharp, would slip away without tipping him at all. In C 343 were school-teachers, two to a berth; Monsieur Pettipon appraised them at five dollars for the party; C 344 contained two fat ladies—very sick; and C 345 contained two thin ladies—both sick. Say a dollar each. In C 346 was a shaggy-bearded individual—male—of unknown derivation, who spoke an explosive brand of English, which burst out in a series of grunts, and who had economical habits in the use of soap. It was doubtful, reasoned Monsieur Pettipon, if the principle of tipping had ever penetrated the wild regions from which this being unquestionably hailed. Years of experience had taught Monsieur Pettipon to appraise with a quite uncanny accuracy the amount of tips he would get from his clients, as he called them.

Still troubled in his mind over his inability to provide a new violin for the promising Napoleon, Monsieur Pettipon went about his work, and in the course of time reached Stateroom C 346 and tapped with soft knuckles.

“Come,” grunted the shaggy occupant.

Monsieur Pettipon, with an apologetic flood of “pardons,” entered. He stopped in some alarm. The shaggy one, in violently striped pajamas, was standing in the center of the cabin, plainly very indignant about something. He fixed upon Monsieur Pettipon a pair of accusing eyes. With the air of a conjurer doing a trick he thrust his hand, palm upward, beneath the surprised nose of Monsieur Pettipon.

“Behold!” cried the shaggy one in a voice of thunder.

Monsieur Pettipon peered into the outstretched hand. In the cupped palm was a small dark object. It was alive.

Monsieur Pettipon, speechless with horror, regarded the thing with round unbelieving eyes. He felt as if he had been struck a heavy, stunning blow.

At last with a great effort he asked weakly, “You found him here, monsieur?”

“I found him here,” declared the shaggy one, nodding his bushy head toward his berth.

The world of Monsieur Pettipon seemed to come crashing down around his ears.

“Impossible!” panted Monsieur Pettipon. “It could not be.”

“It could be,” said the shaggy one sternly, “because it was.”

He continued to hold the damnatory evidence within a foot of Monsieur Pettipon’s staring incredulous eyes.

“But, monsieur,” protested the steward, “I tell you the thing could not be. One hundred and twenty-seven times have I crossed on this Voltaire, and such a thing has not been. Never, never, never.”

“I did not make him,” put in the passenger, with a show of irony.

“No, no! Of course monsieur did not make him. That is true. But perhaps monsieur——”

The gesture of the overwhelmed Pettipon was delicate but pregnant.

The shaggy passenger glared ferociously at the steward.

“Do you mean I brought him with me?” he demanded in a terrible voice.

Monsieur Pettipon shrugged his shoulders.

“Such things happen,” he said soothingly. “When one travels——”

The shaggy one interrupted him.

“He is not mine!” he exploded bellicosely. “He never was mine. I found him here, I tell you. Here! Something shall be done about this.”

Monsieur Pettipon had begun to tremble; tiny moist drops bedewed his expanse of brow; to lose his job would be tragedy enough; but this—this would be worse than tragedy; it would be disgrace. His artistic reputation was at stake. His career was tottering on a hideous brink. All Paris, all France would know, and would laugh at him.

“Give me the little devil,” he said humbly. “I, myself, personally, will see to it that he troubles you no more. He shall perish at once, monsieur; he shall die the death. You will have fresh bedding, fresh carpet, fresh everything. There will be fumigations. I beg that monsieur will think no more of it.”

Savagely he took the thing between plump thumb and forefinger and bore it from the stateroom, holding it at arm’s length. In the corridor, with the door shut on the shaggy one, Monsieur Pettipon, feverishly agitated, muttered again and again, “He did bring it with him. He did bring it with him.”

All that night Monsieur Pettipon lay in his berth, stark awake, and brooded. The material side of the affair was bad enough. The shaggy one would report the matter to the head steward of the second class; Monsieur Pettipon would be ignominiously discharged; the sin, he had to admit, merited the extremest penalty. Jobs are hard to get, particularly when one is fat and past forty. He saw the Pettipons ejected from their flat; he saw his little Napoleon a café waiter instead of a virtuoso. All this was misery enough. But it was the spiritual side that tortured him most poignantly, that made him toss and moan as the waves swished against the liner’s sides and an ocean dawn stole foggily through the porthole. He was a failure at the work he loved.

Consider the emotions of an artist who suddenly realizes that his masterpiece is a tawdry smear; consider the shock to a gentleman, proud of his name, who finds a blot black as midnight on the escutcheon he had for many prideful years thought stainless. To the mind of the crushed Pettipon came the thought that even though his job was irretrievably lost he still might be able to save his honor.

As early as it was possible he went to the head steward of the second class, his immediate superior.

There were tears in Monsieur Pettipon’s eyes and voice as he said, “Monsieur Deveau, a great misfortune, as you have doubtless been informed, has overtaken me.”

The head steward of the second class looked up sharply. He was in a bearish mood, for he had lost eleven francs at cards the night before.

“Well, Monsieur Pettipon?” he asked brusquely.

“Oh, he has heard about it, he has heard about it,” thought Monsieur Pettipon; and his voice trembled as he said aloud, “I have done faithful work on the Voltaire for twenty-two years, Monsieur Deveau, and such a thing has never before happened.”

“What thing? Of what do you speak? Out with it, man.”

“This!” cried Monsieur Pettipon tragically.

He thrust out his great paw of a hand; in it nestled a small dark object, now lifeless.

The head steward gave it a swift examination.

“Ah!” he exclaimed petulantly. “Must you trouble me with your pets at this time when I am busy?”

“Pets, monsieur?” The aghast Pettipon raised protesting hands toward heaven. “Oh, never in this life, monsieur the head steward.”

“Then why do you bring him to me with such great care?” demanded the head steward. “Do you think perhaps, Monsieur Pettipon, that I wish to discuss entomology at six in the morning? I assure you that such a thing is not a curiosity to me. I have lived, Monsieur Pettipon.”

“But—but he was in one of my cabins,” groaned Monsieur Pettipon.

“Indeed?” The head steward was growing impatient. “I did not suppose you had caught him with a hook and line. Take him away. Drown him. Bury him. Burn him. Do I care?”

“He is furious,” thought Monsieur Pettipon, “at my sin. But he is pretending not to be. He will save up his wrath until the Voltaire returns to France, and then he will denounce me before the whole ship’s company. I know these long-nosed Normans. Even so, I must save my honor if I can.”

He leaned toward the head steward and said with great earnestness of tone, “I assure you, monsieur the head steward, that I took every precaution. The passenger who occupies the cabin is, between ourselves, a fellow of great dirtiness. I am convinced he brought this aboard with him. I have my reasons, monsieur. Did I not say to Georges Prunier—he is steward in the corridor next to mine—‘Georges, old oyster, that hairy fellow in C 346 has a look of itchiness which I do not fancy. I must be on my guard.’ You can ask Georges Prunier—an honest fellow, monsieur the head steward—if I did not say this. And Georges said, ‘Alphonse, my friend, I incline to agree with you.’ And I said to Georges, ‘Georges, my brave, it would not surprise me if——’ ”

The head steward of the second class broke in tartly: “You should write a book of memoirs, Monsieur Pettipon. When I have nothing to do I will read it. But now have I not a thousand and two things to do? Take away your pet. Have him stuffed. Present him to a museum. Do I care?” He started to turn from Monsieur Pettipon, whose cheeks were quivering like spilled

jelly.

“I entreat you, Monsieur Deveau,” begged Pettipon, “to consider how for twenty-two years, three months and a day, such a thing had not happened in my cabins. This little rascal—and you can see how tiny he is—is the only one that has ever been found, and I give you my word, the word of a Pettipon, that he was not there when we sailed. The passenger brought him with him. I have my reasons——”

“Enough!” broke in the head steward of the second class with mounting irritation. “I can stand no more. Go back to your work, Monsieur Pettipon.”

He presented his back to Monsieur Pettipon. Sick at heart the adipose steward went back to his domain. As he made the cabins neat he did not sing the little song with the chorus of “oo la las.”

“There was deep displeasure in that Norman’s eye,” said Monsieur Pettipon to himself. “He does not believe that the passenger is to blame. Your goose is cooked, my poor Alphonse. You must appeal to the chief steward.”

To the chief steward, in his elaborate office in the first class, went Monsieur Pettipon, nervously opening and shutting his fat fists.

The chief steward, a tun of a man, bigger even than Monsieur Pettipon, peeped at his visitor from beneath waggish, furry eyebrows.

“I am Monsieur Pettipon,” said the visitor timidly. “For twenty-two years, three months and a day, I have been second-class steward on the Voltaire, and never monsieur the chief steward, has there been a complaint, one little complaint against me. One hundred and twenty-seven trips have I made, and never has a single passenger said——”

“I’m sorry,” interrupted the chief steward, “but I can’t make you a first-class steward. No vacancies. Next year, perhaps; or the year after——”

“Oh, it isn’t that,” said Monsieur Pettipon miserably. “It is this.”

He held out his hand so that the chief steward could see its contents.

“Ah?” exclaimed the chief steward, arching his furry brows. “Is this perhaps a bribe, monsieur?”

“Monsieur the chief steward is good enough to jest,” said Pettipon, standing first on one foot and then on the other in his embarrassment, “but I assure you that it has been a most

serious blow to me."

"Blow?" repeated the chief steward. "Blow? Is it that in the second class one comes to blows with them?"

"He knows about it all," thought Monsieur Pettipon. "He is making game of me." His moon face stricken and appealing, Monsieur Pettipon addressed the chief steward. "He brought it with him, monsieur the chief steward. I have my reasons——"

"Who brought what with whom?" queried the chief steward with a trace of asperity.

"The passenger brought this aboard with him," explained Monsieur Pettipon. "I have good reasons, monsieur, for making so grave a charge. Did I not say to Georges Prunier—he is in charge of the corridor next to mine—'Georges, old oyster, that hairy fellow in C 346 has a look of itchiness which I do not fancy. I must be on my guard.' You can ask Georges Prunier —a thoroughly reliable fellow, monsieur, a wearer of the military medal, and the son of the leading veterinarian in Amiens—if I did not say this. And Georges said——"

The chief steward held up a silencing hand.

"Stop, I pray you, before my head bursts," he commanded. "Your repartee with Georges is most affecting, but I do not see how it concerns a busy man like me."

"But the passenger said he found this in his berth!" wailed Monsieur Pettipon, wringing his great hands.

"My compliments to monsieur the passenger," said the chief steward, "and tell him that there is no reward."

"Now I am sure he is angry with me," said Monsieur Pettipon to himself. "These sly, smiling, fat fellows! I must convince him of my innocence."

Monsieur Pettipon laid an imploring hand on the chief steward's sleeve.

"I can only say," said Monsieur Pettipon in the accents of a man on the gallows, "that I did all within the power of one poor human to prevent this dreadful occurrence. I hope monsieur the chief steward will believe that. I cannot deny that the thing exists"—as he spoke he sadly contemplated the palm of his hand—"and that the evidence is against me. But in my heart I know I am innocent. I can only hope that monsieur will take into account my long and blameless service, my one hundred and twenty-seven trips, my twenty-two years, three months and——"

“My dear Pettipon,” said the chief steward with a ponderous jocosity, “try to bear your cross. The only way the Voltaire can atone for this monstrous sin of yours is to be sunk, here, now and at once. But I’m afraid the captain and Monsieur Ronssoy might object. Get along now, while I think up a suitable penance for you.”

As he went with slow, despairing steps to his quarters Monsieur Pettipon said to himself, “It is clear he thinks me guilty. Helas! Poor Alphonse.” For long minutes he sat, his huge head in his hands, pondering.

“I must, I shall appeal to him again,” he said half aloud. “There are certain points he should know. What Georges Prunier said, for instance.”

So back he went to the chief steward.

“Holy Blue!” cried that official. “You? Again? Found another one?”

“No, no, monsieur the chief steward,” replied Monsieur Pettipon in agonies; “there is only one. In twenty-two years there has been only one. He brought it with him. Ask Georges Prunier if I did not say——”

“Name of a name!” burst out the chief steward. “Am I to hear all that again? Did I not say to forget the matter?”

“Forget, monsieur? Could Napoleon forget Waterloo? I beg that you permit me to explain.”

“Oh, bother you and your explanations!” cried the chief steward with the sudden impatience common to fat men. “Take them to some less busy man. The captain, for example.”

Monsieur Pettipon bowed himself from the office, covered with confusion and despair. Had not the chief steward refused to hear him? Did not the chief steward’s words imply that the crime was too heinous for any one less than the captain himself to pass judgment on it? To the captain Monsieur Pettipon would have to go, although he dreaded to do it, for the captain was notoriously the busiest and least approachable man on the ship. Desperation gave him courage. Breathless at his own temerity, pink as a peony with shame, Monsieur Pettipon found himself bowing before a blur of gold and multi-hued decorations that instinct rather than his reason told him was the captain of the Voltaire.

The captain was worried about the fog, and about the presence aboard of M. Victor Ronssoy, the president of the line, and his manner was brisk and chilly.

“Did I ring for you?” he asked.

“No,” jerked out Monsieur Pettipon, “but if the captain will pardon the great liberty, I have a matter of the utmost importance on which I wish to address him.”

“Speak, man, speak!” shot out the captain, alarmed by Monsieur Pettipon’s serious aspect. “Leak? Fire? Somebody overboard? What?”

“No, no!” cried Monsieur Pettipon, trickles of moist emotion sliding down the creases of his round face. “Nobody overboard; no leak; no fire. But—monsieur the captain—behold this!”

He extended his hand and the captain bent his head over it with quick interest.

For a second the captain stared at the thing in Monsieur Pettipon’s hand; then he stared at Monsieur Pettipon.

“Ten thousand million little blue devils, what does this mean?” roared the captain. “Have you been drinking?”

Monsieur Pettipon quaked to the end of his toes.

“No, no!” he stammered. “I am only too sober, monsieur the captain, and I do not blame you for being enraged. The Voltaire is your ship, and you love her, as I do. I feel this disgrace even more than you can, monsieur the captain, believe me. But I beg of you do not be hasty; my honor is involved. I admit that this thing was found in one of my cabins. Consider my horror when he was found. It was no less than yours, monsieur the captain. But I give you my word, the word of a Pettipon, that——”

The captain stopped the rush of words with, “Compose yourself. Come to the point.”

“Point, monsieur the captain?” gasped Pettipon. “Is it not enough point that this thing was found in one of my cabins? Such a thing—in the cabin of Monsieur Alphonse Marie Louis Camille Pettipon! Is that nothing? For twenty-two years have I been steward in the second class, and not one of these, not so much as a baby one, has ever been found. I am beside myself with chagrin. My only defense is that a passenger—a fellow of dirtiness, monsieur the captain—brought it with him. He denies it. I denounce him as a liar the most barefaced. For did I not say to Georges Prunier—a fellow steward and a man of integrity—‘Georges, old oyster, that hairy fellow in C 346 has a look of itchiness which I do not fancy. I must be on my guard.’ And Georges said——”

The captain, with something like a smile playing about among his whiskers, interrupted with, “So this is the first one in twenty-two years, eh? We’ll have to look into this, Monsieur

Pettipon. Good day."

"Look into this," groaned Pettipon as he stumbled down a gangway. "I know what that means. Ah, poor Thérèse! Poor Napoleon!"

He looked down at the great, green, hungry waves with a calculating eye; he wondered if they would be cold. He placed a tentative hand on the rail. Then an inspiration came to him. M. Victor Ronssoy was aboard; he was the last court of appeal. Monsieur Pettipon would dare, for the sake of his honor, to go to the president of the line himself. For tortured minutes Alphonse Pettipon paced up and down, and something closely resembling sobs shook his huge frame as he looked about his little kingdom and thought of his impending banishment. At last by a supreme effort of will he nerved himself to go to the suite of Monsieur Ronssoy. It was a splendid suite of five rooms, and Monsieur Pettipon had more than once peeked into it when it was empty and had noted with fascinated eyes the perfection of its appointments. But now he twice turned from the door, his courage oozing from him. On the third attempt, with the recklessness of a condemned man, he rapped on the door.

The president of the line was a white-haired giant with a chin like an anvil and bright humorous eyes, like a kingfisher.

"Monsieur Ronssoy," began the flustered, damp-browed Pettipon in a faltering voice, "I have only apologies to make for this intrusion. Only a matter of the utmost consequence could cause me to take the liberty."

The president's brow knitted anxiously.

"Out with it," he ordered. "Are we sinking? Have we hit an iceberg?"

"No, no, monsieur the president! But surely you have heard what I, Alphonse Pettipon, steward in the second class, found in one of my cabins?"

"Oh, so you're Pettipon!" exclaimed the president, and his frown vanished. "Ah, yes; ah, yes."

"He knows of my disgrace," thought Monsieur Pettipon, mopping his streaming brow. "Now all is lost indeed." Hanging his head he addressed the president: "Alas, yes, I am none other than that unhappy Pettipon," he said mournfully. "But yesterday, monsieur, I was a proud man. This was my one hundred and twenty-eighth trip on the Voltaire. I had not a mark against me. But the world has been black for me, monsieur the president, since I found this."

He held out his hand so that the president could view the remains lying in it.

“Ah,” exclaimed the president, adjusting his pince-nez, “a perfect specimen!”

“But note, monsieur the president,” begged Monsieur Pettipon, “that he is a mere infant. But a few days old, I am sure. He could not have been aboard long. One can see that. I am convinced that it was the passenger who brought him with him. I have my reasons for making this serious charge, Monsieur Ronssoy. Good reasons too. Did I not say to Georges Prunier—a steward of the strictest honesty, monsieur—‘Georges, old oyster, that hairy fellow in C 346 has a look of itchiness which I do not fancy.’ And Georges said, ‘Alphonse, my friend——’ ”

“Most interesting,” murmured the president. “Pray proceed.”

With a wealth of detail and with no little passion Monsieur Pettipon told his story. The eyes of the president encouraged him, and he told of little Napoleon and the violin, and of his twenty-two years on the Voltaire and how proud he was of his work as a steward, and how severe a blow the affair had been to him.

When he had finished, Monsieur Ronssoy said, “And you thought it necessary to report your discovery to the head steward of the second class?”

“Yes, monsieur.”

“And to the chief steward?”

“Yes, monsieur.”

“And to the captain?”

“Yes, monsieur.”

“And finally to me, the president of the line?”

“Even so, monsieur,” said the perspiring Pettipon.

M. Victor Ronssoy regarded him thoughtfully.

“Monsieur Pettipon,” he said, “the sort of man I like is the man who takes his job seriously. You would not have raised such a devil of a fuss about so small a thing as this if you were not that sort of man. I am going to have you made steward of my suite immediately, Monsieur Pettipon. Now you may toss that thing out of the porthole.”

“Oh, no, monsieur!” cried Alphonse Pettipon, great, grateful tears rushing to his eyes. “Never in this life! Him I shall keep always in my watch charm.”