
The Sealed Message

Hume Fergus

Title: The Sealed Message

Author: Hume Fergus

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The Sealed Message

BY
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A "I"
AUTHOR OF

"The Mystery of a Hanson Cab," "The Pagan's Cup,"
"The Mandarin's Fan," "The Red Window."



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The Sealed Message

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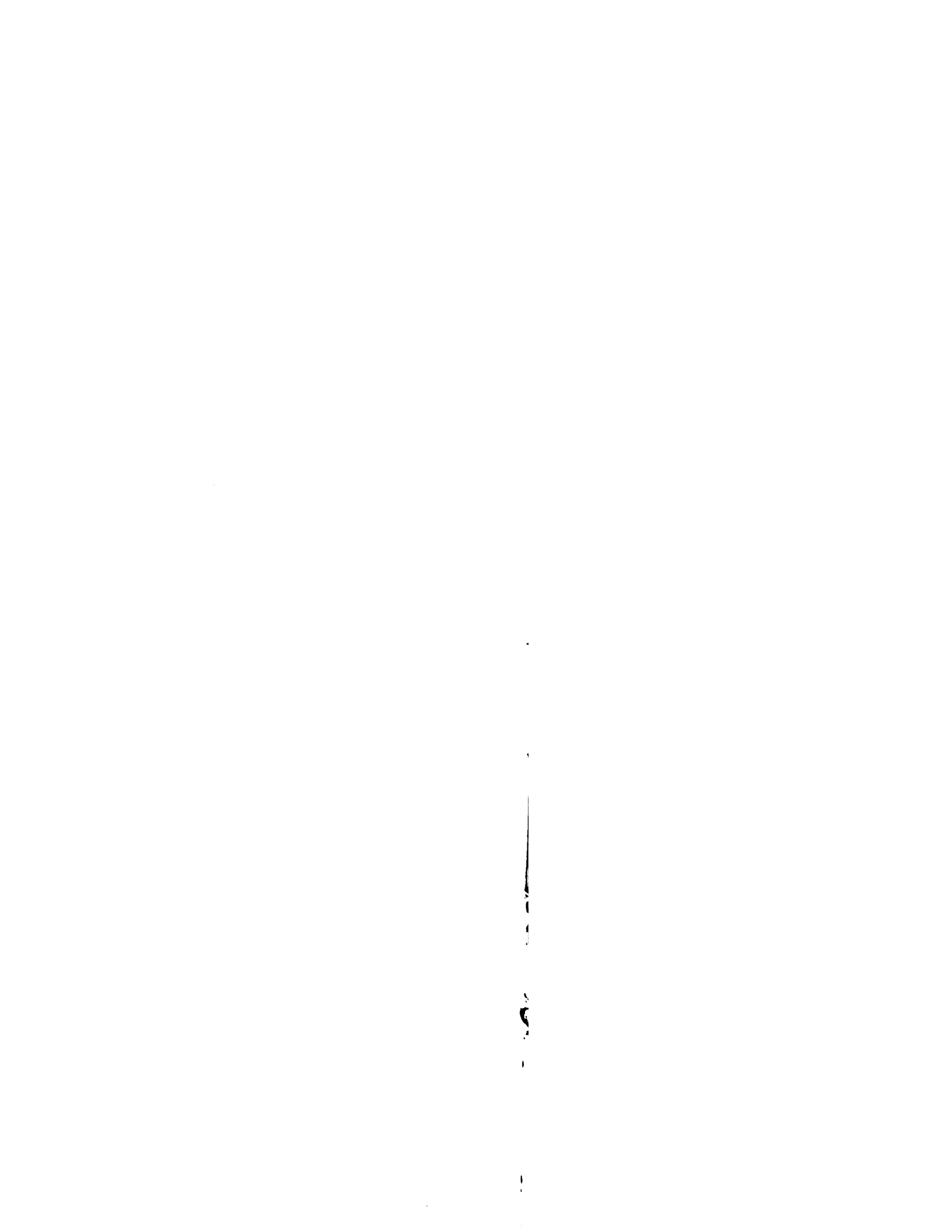
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THE SEALED MESSAGE

CHAPTER I.

A QUEER FISH.

IT was a sultry July afternoon, and in the azure arch of the firmament flamed an unclouded sun. The corn was ripening to a rich yellow in some meadows, and the newly mown hay in others was being piled on lumbering wains by perspiring laborers. The red earth of the sunken lanes was caked, and their blossoming hedges were burnt up by the merciless heat. Under spreading foliage, or knee-deep in rapidly drying pools, stood weary cattle, switching lazy tails to brush away the teasing flies. Honey-bees, ostentatiously industrious, buzzed noisily from flower to flower, and the sleepy birds twittered faintly midst the grateful shade of leaves. The land was parched for want of rain, and the languid hours dragged on slowly to the wished-for evening. On some such day, long ago, must Elijah have sent his servant up the mount to watch for the growing of the small black cloud.

Only by the trout stream was the weather endurable, for the overhanging trees made the atmosphere of translucent green deliciously cool. Yet here and there spears of dazzling light pierced through the emerald twilight to smite the waters. These moved smoothly in amber floods

between the grassy banks, and in places swirled pearly-white round mossgrown stones. The stream brawled over pebbles, gushed through granite rifts, and gloomed mysteriously in deep and silent pools, gleaming mirror-like under exposed tree trunks. May-flies dipped to the waters, swallows darted through the warm air, and kingfishers glanced here and there, each a flash of blue fire. And ever the river talked to the voiceless woods as it babbled seawards. From the woods came no reply, for the wind had died away, and the tongues of multitudinous leaves could no longer speak. Had they been able even to whisper, they surely would have rebuked the gay spirits of the two young men who had invaded their sacred solitude.

"This is simply ripping," murmured one, who lay on his back with a battered Panama over his eyes, "we are doing ourselves up to the top hole, I don't think. Heavenly, ain't it?"

"It would be, if you did not chatter," retorted the other, fixing a fly on his line; "why do you desecrate this beauty with slang?"

"Because I'm not a poet like you to spout blank verse."

"There is a medium between mutilation of the language and pedantic usage thereof."

"Huh!" with scorn, "who's pedantic now?"

"My dear Tod, as a lawyer, you should use better English."

"It is only a barrister who requires a superfine jaw," retorted Tod elegantly, "and I'm only a solicitor of sorts. Don't worry, Haskins."

Aware of the futility of argument, the other man merely shrugged his square shoulders and threw a skilful line in a pool wherein lurked a famous wary trout. The fly fell lightly on the water, and would have deceived

any fish but the trout in question. There was no response to his dilly-duck-come-and-be-killed invitation, and the angler made another cast with still less success as the fly hit the stream heavily, scaring the trout into retreat. Haskins said one word under his breath, but Tod overheard and giggled. That was exactly like Tod Macandrew: he had no sense of the fitness of things.

"Silly ass!" commented his friend savagely, spinning up the line, "you frighten the fish."

"Not on to your hook, anyhow," chuckled Tod into the depths of his hat, "what a sinfully bad angler you are, Jerry."

"As bad an angler as you are a lover, perhaps," snapped Gerald, throwing his rod on the grass and squatting to manufacture a cigarette.

Tod sat up abruptly with a wounded air. "I call that beastly: to taunt a chap, because a girl won't bite."

"Won't kiss, you mean."

"I'm taking an illustration from your infernal angling," said Tod, with aggressive dignity. "If you were a lover yourself you would understand."

"Oh, I understand well enough," replied the other lightly: he paused to run his tongue along the tissue paper, then added calmly: "I was in love with Charity Bird myself, before you came along, Tod."

"Well, now that I have come along, perhaps you'll call her Miss Bird."

"Right oh! Miss Bird in the hand is worth two——"

"There are not two," interrupted Macandrew indignantly, "but only one school-girl cousin. As if," cried Tod to the woods, "I would sell myself."

Gerald Haskins cast a sly look on Tod's ungraceful figure. "I see: you present yourself to Miss Bird as a desirable gift?"