

THE LIGHT-HOUSE.

OUT there! You see that revolving light which comes and goes with all the regularity of night and day, which is tended by human hands, which is human work, set up to warn noble ships from hidden rocks and death, which is, perhaps, the most gracious work of man. Tended through the long solitary nights and days by solitary men, the light-house shines refulgent on the watery way.

What do the two lonely men who tend it talk of, think of, as day after day they live, hearing no voices but their own, each learning no news but that stored up in the other's mind? They must talk—what then do they talk of? Of who was in the last boat that brought oil for the beneficent lamp and food for themselves? Of who shall come in the next boat, and what their news will be? Do they thumb the old newspaper till it falls in pieces from very holding, and is blown away by the breezes? Do they tell each other of their early lives, in pauses of the wind which so often sweeps about them and screams at finding them? Or do they quarrel and grow silent, as the two poor Italian prisoners did? What do they do and say, those lonely men in lighthouses far away from land?

How they must look for the next boat and count the weeks, and days, and hours (as boys at school looking out for holidays count) that must elapse before it comes. Three months always—sometimes longer—ebb away between the boat-visittings to some of our light-houses—far away from shore, where there seems to be always wind, and where the sea seems ever angry with the light-house rocks, and washes over them, and seethes and strives to bring down the work of arrogant humanity.

Of one such light-house—where dwelt two men—a light-house rarely visited, for about it the sea never ceases to lash, and boats tremble and shake dreadfully when they draw near it—of one such light-house I have a tale to tell.

The daring little boat had come upon a visit and brought the wanted oil and food, for it had been long since the sea had been calm enough to let a boat approach, and that sea had raged and heaved so awfully and so continually that the provisions had run short, and the oil cans had grown nearly empty, and for the two men the days had grown longer and longer, and the nights longer and longer, till they had come to think time meant to stand still.

And the oil and food were landed, and the two men who had stayed their term (and over—by the sea's command) wished those who came to replace them luck—and mugs were clicked, and beer and grog were drunk, and there was much good fellowship. And then the two who had stayed their allotted time jumped joyfully into the boat that was to take them to the shore for three long months.

For, you see, it seems a natural law that men cannot bear a changeless solitude very long—reason will fly when there is no work for her; and in light-house life it is a rule that two shall tend the light while two are on the shore. And when three months are passed, those upon

the shore take up the solitary work, and let their other fellow-workmen go home and have their holiday.

Of the two men who came with the oil and food, one went down and down the steps to see the boat off, and the other stayed behind, beside the fire—his head resting on his hands, and his lips pale—he was a great, brawny, six-foot man, with streaming hair, wide shoulders, and clear, look-out-afar bold eyes; but, for all the brawniness and strength and daring eyes, he drooped his head upon his hands and he sat leaning by the fireplace—he felt no how, he said, as his companions joked him, and said he did not like his turn on, and wanted to go home again. And as they went out of the room the lights grew dim to him, and when the men had reached the bottom of the stone steps, he had fallen on his face—and the daring eyes closed, never again to open in this world—he was dead.

“Good bye,” said the living tender of the light-house lamp, as he shook his mates’ hands and wished them safe at home—“there—there” he said—“see, the wind was rising, they had better come up, and have another glass.” “No, no,” they answered. But he again said, “do,” quite urgently, and called up to his mate to come and ask them to drink again, and wish good luck.

“George—come and ask them—or—or bring it down to them.”

But no voice answered from above, and the sailor-fellows in the boat said Georgy was surly, and huffed, and wanted to go home, and they roared up to him, and above the noise of the rising wind, which set right against the light-house, they bellowed out that he was a shaggy bear, and that if he did not cheer up, Jack ’ud have to pitch him out. What—he would not answer? Then he was surly. And they all laughed loud and long—and the laughter rose up on the wind and was carried far away.

They let go the rope, and the boat was steered for shore—“good-bye,” they said to him who could and did answer—“good-bye, and go up and stroke the bear down for us, and tell him we sent him luck.” Then they struck up a bold sea-faring song, and plashed their oars in the now boiling water. And as they saw the watcher go up the steps and reach the illuminated door and turn and look after them, they raised the lantern they carried (for it had grown night-time while they tarried at the light) and bellowed out their song louder than ever, and the notes, carried on the wind hit against the light-house and were lost there. He tried to answer them, and called out, but the wind was dead against him and bore his words round the light-house, and far away from the boat—quite—quite in another direction.

Then he went in.

He saw the form lying stretched upon the floor, and calling to it by the name of “George, old boy,” asked it why he was lying there. And when his mate didn’t answer, he laughed again, and called him a surly bear, Robin Rough-head, and pushed his foot against him in a free, rough, sailorly way, and told him to get up and take a drink and cheer his spirits.

But the great sailor form stretched on the ground did not move. It still kept with its face turned towards the ground—the head lying on the hands.

Then he stooped down, and roughly and jollily laid hold of the beard about the chin, and cried out, "George man, George, what ails you."

And yet it was motionless.

Then he got up and swore an oath, and said that George *was* surly, and might lie there.

But as he rose, he felt the hand with which he had pulled the beard quite wet, and looking at it by the lamp-light he saw that it was red with blood.

"George man, George," he then cried, and he flung himself down and turned his comrade over, and yet by the lamplight he found that all the beard was blooded, and that from the mouth ran hot blood, and that the arms fell down loosely to the floor, and that the eyes were partly closed, and that his mouth gaped slightly. And as he upheld the limp form, and as the blood dropped on to him, he saw that his companion was dead.

"Holloa," said one of them in the boat, stopping his singing, "he's opened the door—see how the light shines from it. Why, surely he's not calling—a true seaman like he is must know his voice could'n't reach us, through such a wind as sets against him. Holloa, he's waving his hat and arms—ah, ah, all right mate—he's come to, has he—bring him down, make him show himself—the old bear. Now Harry, swing up the lantern to let him know we see him—and sing out with a will—all's well—all's well."

And he saw the swinging lamp grow smaller and smaller, and he heard the singing voices grow fainter and fainter, and he called and called, and the wind carried the sounds away round the lighthouse, and far away from the boat. And then he fell to the stone ground and tried to tear it up with his hands, and to bite it with his teeth.

And as he looked up, when he ceased to hear the singing, though he strained his ears for it, he could see the lantern no more, and he was alone with it lying on the floor there—all dyed in blood and stiffening, stiffening.

Though, perhaps, he might not be dead. He might only have fainted. He was such a strong fellow—he could'n't die like that—no, he had only fainted. He would call.

"George—George—my boy, mate?"

He did not turn and look, he kept his head away as he called. Then he thought he had answered, and as he asked himself whether he should look up, the same sound came upon him and he knew it was the wind.

He dared not go in, as the lamp high up there was brightly burning, he had no need, no need to do so—hence he went down the steps till his feet touched the water, and only returned as the tide drove him up them again, and the water plashing at his feet told in its own sound of death, death.

At last the water drove him up to the door, and by that time the day was breaking, so now fearing death a little less, he turned and looked, and once looking he could not tear his eyes away.

He saw the light grow stronger and stronger, and play upon the dead features, and at last up came the great sun and shot his beams through

the lighthouse window, and played gaily with the hair of the dead lying on the floor.

Then he thought it moved again, and he ran to it, but a touch, a mere touch on the hand told him he was wrong; and he fell back again, pressing against the wall that he might be as far away as possible from the terrible thing, that he had lately laughed and talked with.

Still though he pressed away from it, he kept his eyes on it, and he still looked and looked, and could not turn his eyes away from it.

At last, from far over the sea came the voices of sailor-men, who with their ship had perhaps been saved from death by that same shining light under which lay the gone sailor.

And as the sound came upon him he looked up, then started to his feet, and peered through the windows at the wind-filled sails. He thought for a moment he would wave something white and shining from the window, that should tell the sailors in the ship that he was in trouble, but the next moment he remembered that lighthouse men often, for the sake of mere good-fellowship, would wave white linen in the breeze when a great ship passed by, and he thought they would but return his salute, and sail on and away.

But, again, the voices came upon him.

Then he wept.

And all his terror melting in his love for an old mate, who had lived with him as man and boy, he stooped down, took up the stained hand, and wept like any child.

But when the night came again, and he had gone up to trim the lamp, he was afraid to return, and he sat up there trembling.

By next morning he had grown to fear it more than ever, so he covered it up with the blankets off the bed; but then he could see the outline of the form; then he threw more clothes upon it—threw the jacket that he wore upon the heap—but still he could see the dreadful shape. Then he built the table and chairs round about it; but still he saw the form through openings in the wood. Then out he ran again, down the steps, and dashed himself upon the rocks, covered thinly with water.

And here was but one day gone, he thought; one day out of three long months of days. Then, perhaps, even the boat might not come.

Oh! how wearily the time sped on—wearily, wearily.

Ships went past, and little dreamed their inmates as they looked up that the lamp was tended by a man who lived in one long agony. There he knew the form must be and lie. He dared not bring it out, and lay it on the rocks, and let it drift away; they would say he murdered him. And every time the lamp had to be tended he had to step over the dead man; and every day, as day succeeded day, the lighthouse grew more dreadful. Every day the sun came and shone upon the form, and played upon the covering laid over it.

He used to dread the return of the tide, which drove him higher and higher up the steps till he was at the door, past which was the secret. He used to go down those steps and wait for the boat—the boat that he thought would never come. He could not read, or he might

have driven the time away by reading, but he took the old pack of cards that had been in the lighthouse so long, and he took them with him down the steps and played the old games they had played together, by himself—looking up every minute for the boat, or looking out longingly to sea, as the proud ships rode past.

But when the three months had gone, and when the lighthouse had grown so dreadful that he sometimes asked to die—when the time was fully up for the boat to come, and when no boat grated on the lighthouse rocks, then he gave way, and began to despair.

And yet all this, while the lighthouse had shone out bright and brave, and warned many and many a ship from the treacherous rocks. All through these months of agony the light had not once grown dim—not once.

But when the boat had been due a fortnight, and did not come, then, as the sun went down in a great sea of blood, he threw himself upon the steps, and thought himself the last man left on earth, and that he must die too. He took no heed of the water swelling up about his feet; he took no heed of the dusk coming on, and of the lamp unlit; he would go in no more; the water might rise and drown him; he would not move. Then things began to swim about him; the low wind talked and the sea also, and then he felt sick and lay immovable.

And yet the dusk was growing darker, and the lamp was unlit.

And as he lay with his eyes looking up towards the sky, and his thin hands (for he had grown thin) stretched out on either side of him, he thought he heard the wind say, or rather hollow, "How is it with you, lads?" But he did not move, the wind had spoken to him so often: then he thought he heard the grating of a boat's keel; but that he knew was the rising water; so he closed his eyes and waited till it should rise above him.

And as he closed his eyes he thought a hand touched him. He knew it was only fancy. Then he felt himself lifted.

Then yet unbelieving, yet thinking it all fancy, he unclosed the eyes he had never meant to open again, and looked about him.

Great God!—there it was before him, rising and falling on the water:—The boat, the boat, the BOAT!

A MERRY CHRISTMAS.

BY JOHN V. BRIDGEMAN.

"A VERY pleasant Christmas I shall pass this year!" said Edward Houghton, half aloud, half to himself, as he walked down the High-street of a large provincial town, in the north, towards the railway station. "A very pleasant Christmas, indeed!"

Now when Edward Houghton asserted this, he meant the direct contrary. His observation was ironical, and the tone in which he