

Morning The Daily Astorian

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THE BLACK BUOY.

"Swim!" said my grandmother, as we sat around the crackling logs one evening. "Every boy and girl should learn to swim. I could swim like a duck when I was a girl, and there came a time when it served me in good stead."

My grandmother sat bolt upright in her high-backed chair, resting her elbows on the arms and smiled across at the general, who sat on the other side of the hearth. There was a conscious look in her bright old eyes. My grandfather, panning in the net of raising his tumbler to his lips, nodded and smiled back again. They were both white-haired, bright-eyed and fresh-colored; each saw the other through an effacing medium, which smoothed out wrinkles, restored hyacinthine locks and blotted out the 50 years that lay between them and youth.

We, the diverse-aged descendants of this stately pair, were grouped in lazy attitudes around the fire, roaring hearth, with its tall, carved chimney-piece, and, as we saw the meaning looks that were exchanged between our respected progenitors, we sensed a story.

My grandmother hesitated for a moment at our many-voiced appeal and shook her head, then looked across at the general, who nodded again, and after a little pressing thus began:

"You know, young people, that you are of good family only on your grandfather's side and not on mine, for he came of an old and honorable stock, while my father was only the master of a vessel that traded between England and the West Indies. He was killed in a sea-fight when I was a child and I was brought up by my grandfather, who, ostensibly a boat-builder and fisherman, was in reality a smuggler. In those days smuggling meant great risks and enormous profits. It was not only a profitable trade, but it was reputable in a peculiar sort of way. It required great skill and courage. England was always at war in those days and the smuggler had to run the risk of being snatched up by an enemy's cruiser as well as the chance of falling into the clutches of a revenue cutter. In addition there were the inevitable risks of the sea.

"Thus, a smuggler must possess a knowledge of navigation. He had to know into harbor on the darkest nights with the utmost secrecy and dispatch. To do that he must know every inch of his way; be able to distinguish landmarks and bays in what would seem to the uninitiated to be blank darkness, and to know to a nicety at what time the tide turned, and the twists of sand-banks and the position of sunken rocks.

"There was only one channel leading into the harbor, for the mouth of our little river was choked with sand, and the banks extended out to sea. It was necessary to hit this channel some distance out to sea, and a small black buoy bobbed up and down to indicate its commencement. One side of the harbor was formed by a line of rocks shelving down gradually into the water, and the buoy was distant from the extremity of these rocks about three-quarters of a mile, or a little more. The headland was called the point.

"The black buoy, a mere speck on the waters, was hard enough for any one to find in the broad day, but my grandfather never failed to find it in the dark—for, of course, it was only on a moonless night that the smugglers dared to run a cargo. The usual course of proceeding was this: The lugger arrived off our coast at nightfall, lay to until a signal was flashed from our friends on shore, flashed a reply, found the entrance to the channel and worked in with the tide.

"I had a very independent kind of life, getting a good deal of book learning from the old vicar and passing many hours in the bright sunshine and the free fresh air. I could run a couple of miles, and pull an oar, and swim with the best. The sea had no terrors or difficulties for me, except such as it was a pleasure to overcome. So at 16 I was a fresh-colored, freckled, and I believe, bright-eyed young man, whose only trouble was her long tresses of thick brown hair, and who thought very little of the outside world.

"On a certain day in September, my grandfather being absent and expected back at night, I set off for a long ramble in the country, taking some sandwiches with me for dinner. At midnight I was returning, tired and hungry, when I passed on the cliffs for a moment to take a last look around before striking into the path that led to the village. With a sigh of contented fatigue I had turned homeward, when I recollected that a little suit of blue serge, which I used for bathing, required some trifling repairs. I kept it in a little cave not far from the gully up which our contraband goods used to be conveyed, so without approaching the village I hastened to the cave by the shortest route. I passed down the gully, slipped into the cave and felt about for my dress. Having found it I was just about to come out again, when a strange sound broke the stillness of the night and I stopped short. Apparently coming from the gully I heard the tramp of feet and the noise of voices, and a queer, little thin sound, but curiously distinct—the clink of steel.

"I peered out cautiously. Two men emerged from the gully. They had long cloaks on, but by the clank of their arms and the manner of their hearing I knew them to be soldiers. They were talking in low voices; but I could hear what they said, for the night was very still.

"That is the place, sir," said one, who seemed to be the leader. "The goods are landed here and carried up this gully. The carts stand at the head of the gully, where we came down."

"The other, the careless ease of whose bearing, coupled with the deferential manner of his companion, showed him to be an officer, had a paper in his hand. He looked around him, up and down the little ravine,

evidently taking in the features of the place.

"Very well, said he, speaking in a low tone that I well remember, I shall post half the men here and place the rest of the gully between this and the village to stop any one who attempts to pass. At 8:15 o'clock the tide turned. At 12 o'clock the signal, You understand the signal, don't you?"

"The sergeant produced a lantern from under his cloak.

"Here is the signal, sir."

"Then order the men down and place the others as you think best."

The sergeant saluted and clanked up the gully. The officer walked toward the water and stood there at the edge some distance from me, for the tide was low—with his head bowed and his hands behind his back. Now or never for me to get away. Quick as thought I slipped out of my hiding place and hastened up the gully. Horror! at the end of it was some men, their figures winding methodically down their heads every now and then bobbing up and down against the twilight sky. The rocks were steep, but not high, and I was half-way up them in an instant. Behind a sheltering ledge I crouched, scarcely daring to breathe, while they marched, tramp, tramp, silently down the ravine.

"They passed out of sight. I heard a sharp, clear tone, the rattle of arms, and all was still. Then I breathed again. I looked to the head of the gully and there, athwart the sky, appeared at intervals a black figure. A sentinel was posted there.

"Up to this moment I had only thought of escaping and arousing some of our friends in the village. It would be hard if we could not devise some means of warning the lugger of our danger. Now that hope was gone, for my return to the village was cut off. Still, every man must know what was going on, and would not some one slip out a boat? How could they? The tide was low; the only channel, even for a small boat, was close to the lower end of the gully, and the soldiers could prevent any one passing out.

"I covered my face with my hands and busied myself to think. There could be no reasonable doubt why the soldiers had been brought, twenty miles at least, to our little village. Penal servitude for life! What did that mean? It was no uncommon punishment, I had heard, for a smuggler taken, as my grandfather would surely be, re-landed. For a moment the hope flashed into my head that he might not come to-night. But no! The wind was light and not unfavorable, there was no suggestion of a fortunate storm in the sky, and I knew that the people with the cars had arranged to come and that all was in readiness. My heart sank within me.

"Suddenly I raised my head and formed a bold resolve. I would save him. Yes, I! The skill which I had attained for my own heedless pleasure should be put to stern service. I determined that when the lugger showed her signal in answer to that treacherous one from the shore, I would swim out to the buoy and keep myself aloft at the entrance of the channel until I could hail our people and warn them of their danger.

"I never hesitated after I had formed this resolution. I forgot that I was hungry and tired, and began instantly to make my preparations. On the narrow ledge of rock where I now knelt I undressed and put on my little bathing costume, which consisted only of a tunic and drawers. I made my clothes in a bundle and stowed them in a cleft. Then like a cat I clambered up the rocks, hiding behind every projection and keeping a fearful watch upon the sentinel at the head of the gully.

"Fortunately the gully was not very deep. When I reached the top I crept on my hands and feet till I judged I was well out of sight, and started for the end of the point. I took my time, for the moment of action was long enough distant, and I had to husband my strength. At length I reached the rock from which I meant to dart and sat down to wait for the lugger's signal.

"I did not know the time, and could only guess it by calculating from the sunset. How long would I have to wait? Heaven knows, but it seemed an age. I got sleepy from my day's exertion. The night air was cold, too; and my clothing, admirably adapted for exercise, was somewhat scanty for sitting still. Besides, it was damp. The wetness of that long watch sometimes before me now. And oh! would the slow minutes never pass!"

"I waited so long that I believed I must have fallen asleep and missed the signal, and I was on the brink of burying my face in my hands and giving away to despair, when I checked myself—and, flash!—far out on the dark sea, there it was! I sprang to my feet, every nerve tingling. The moment for action had arrived.

"I paused a moment to take the bearings of the buoy. I knew exactly how it lay from the point, for I had swam around it often enough. But not in the dark. Not with the water a vast, heaving, black plain, mingling with the black sky.

"But I never hesitated. In I went and after a few strokes the sense of vigorous exercise, exultation in physical power and skill, overcame my misgivings. On I went, straggling hard to keep my wits about me, in spite of the horror that would rush over my brain now and again. It was hard work, too for the tide was coming in, there were breakers in the shallows and in the channel the tide ran fast and strong. Once I all but gave up. I got out of the channel, among the breakers, and the buffeting and hanging bewildered me, so that I fell into a sort of a panic. I threw myself on my back, and in the very act, thanks to my practiced eyesight, I caught sight of the buoy. There it was, bobbing up and down, like a silly black cork!

"I swam up to it and kept close by it. It was like a friend in all this desolation of heaving seas. But now came the worst watch of the whole. The lugger must pass within hail of me, but what if my strength gave out?

For it was ebbing fast. I had been without food for hours. I had walked many miles, and swimming is a most exacting exercise. Still I was not going to give up at the last pinch, and I had my reward.

"A little gleam of parting waves, a black mass coming on, towering blacker than the darkness, and I hailed them, "White Swans, ahoy!"

"A voice came from the darkness, "White Swans, it is—who are you?"

"Lay to and throw a rope over your starboard quarter."

"The lugger was only about 30 yards distant. I made my last effort, and swam to her. A rope was thrown and they hauled me on board, and I had just time to give my warning before I felt fainting on the deck.

"When I came to myself the last keg of our cargo was being lowered overboard. We were some little distance up the coast and boats were attached to the kegs so that we might be able to find them again.

"So expeditiously was this done that it was only some two hours afterwards that we beat up the channel with the last of the flood and cast anchor at the mouth of the gully. All was perfectly still. We pulled ashore in our boat and stepped on land, where in a moment dark figures started up, lights flashed upon us and we were surrounded by soldiers.

"In the king's name!" said the officer, coming forward.

"It was a picturesque group, illuminated as it was by the flickering light of the torches which some of the soldiers carried. My tall, old grandsire, with his weather-beaten face and gray hair; the boyish, handsome young officer, bright with scarlet and gold and steel; the stolid seamen in their blue jerseys and sou'-wester hats; the soldiers, with their bronzed faces and glittering accoutrements, and I suppose, myself, disguised in a suit of oilskins and a big sou'-wester that covered my rebellious hair.

"My grandfather said nothing when the young lieutenant ordered the sergeant to board the lugger, and only a twinkle of his keen, gray eye showed his enjoyment of the scene. The soldiers had to row, and clumsily enough they did it, provoking one of the stout seamen to a loud laugh, which he instantly suppressed.

"The sergeant was back again pretty soon, his face, formerly red, now purple with wrath.

"We've been made fools of, sir!" he exclaimed, saluting the lieutenant. "Nothing on board, except some nets!"

"The lieutenant's face fell for a moment; then he looked amused at the sergeant's discomfiture.

"Search them!" he said; "we'll make it sure!"

"A couple of soldiers held my grandfather while the sergeant searched him and found nothing. Nor did the other prove better worth examination.

"I was hiding behind my grandfather's back, hoping to escape observation. But the sergeant caught me by the wrist. My grandfather interposed.

"There is nothing contraband on that boy," said he, peremptorily.

"I'll soon see that," answered the soldier, grasping my wrist until I could have screamed with pain.

"My grandfather did not strike him, but administered a kind of a push with his heavy shoulder that sent the sergeant, big as he was, staggering some yards away. With the loosening of his hold I slipped and almost fell; off came my sou'-wester and down, alas! came my long brown hair all over me. The young officer instantly stepped between the sergeant and me.

"I don't think we need search this youngster, sergeant," he said, in a tone of quiet authority. "He is not likely to have anything contraband about him. Where have you been tonight?" He added, turning to my grandfather, while I got into the background, greatly confused and conscious that the officer had found me out.

"Lobster-fishing," answered my grandfather, coolly.

"Not much sport, I'm afraid," said the lieutenant, sarcastically.

"Oh, yes; we caught a few," answered my grandfather, glancing around at the soldiers' coats.

"The lieutenant was good-humored and could take a joke. 'Ah! but they're black when they're caught,' said he, with a smile that showed a very white and even set of teeth.

"Aye, aye, sir," said my grandfather, with a twinkle in his eye again; "but they're red when they're done!"

"The lieutenant laughed outright. 'You've got the best of us this time, Mr. Wilson,' said he, preparing to depart. 'But,' he added, in a lower tone, 'you had better be careful for the future. Meanwhile, I am sorry to have troubled you. Good night!'

"He put himself at the head of his men, gave a sharp, short order and away they went.

"And away we went. But my grandfather had learned a lesson. He was a rich man and gave up the trade from that very night, sold the lugger and retired into private life."

Here my grandmother paused and looked at the general with a smile.

"And did you never see the Lieutenant again?" inquired a young lady of 14, who had long brown hair, probably like granddaddy's was once.

"Aye, dear," said grandpapa, "I was the Lieutenant."



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