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CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTORY.

The development of the American Life-Saving Service covers nearly a century.

“... The initiatory movement was the organization by a few benevolent persons of the Massachusetts Humane Society in 1786. In attempting to alleviate the miseries of shipwreck on the Massachusetts coast, small huts were built; and in 1807 the first life-boat station was established at Cohasset. The Society depended upon voluntary crews, but so much was accomplished of value that some pecuniary aid was received, as time wore on, from both State and general governments.

“The magnificent work of the Coast Survey, begun in earnest in 1832, absorbed the resources of Congress for a decade and a half, during which period nothing was attempted in the way of life-saving except through voluntary societies. A few public vessels were, indeed, authorized in 1837 to cruise near the coast for the assistance of shipping in distress, but it was through the movement in aid of commerce, which extended to the lighthouse system.

“In 1847, five thousand dollars were appropriated by Congress toward furnishing lighthouses on the Atlantic with the facilities for aiding shipwrecked mariners. The money, after remaining in the Treasury two years unused, was permitted to be expended by the Massachusetts society upon Cape Cod.

“In the summer of 1848, the Hon. William A. Newell, then a member of the House of Representatives from New Jersey, incited by some terrible shipwrecks on the coast of that State, induced Congress, through his eloquence, to appropriate ten thousand dollars for providing surf-boats and other appliances ‘for the protection of life and property from shipwreck on the coast between Sandy Hook and Little

Egg Harbor.’ During the next session a still larger appropriation was obtained. Twenty-two station-houses were erected on the coasts of New Jersey and Long Island, and although no persons were paid or authorized to take charge of them, and they were manned by extemporized crews, their value in several cases of shipwreck was so great thatCongress made further appropriations from year to year, and stations and life-boats gradually multiplied.

“Through the pressure of a shocking event in 1854—the loss of three hundred lives off the New Jersey coast—a local superintendent was employed, a keeper assigned to each station, and bonded custodians placed in charge of the life-boats, which had been repeatedly stolen; but the absence of drilled and disciplined crews, of general regulations, and of energetic central administration rendered the record of the institution unsatisfactory, and its benefits checkered by the saddest failures.

“In the year 1871, Sumner I. Kimball succeeded to the head of the Revenue Marine Bureau of the Treasury Department, under the charge of which were the life-saving stations. He made it his first business to ascertain their condition. Captain John Faunce was detailed to make a tour of inspection, and was accompanied a portion of the way by Mr. Kimball himself. The buildings were found neglected and dilapidated, the apparatus rusty or broken, portable articles had been carried off, the salaried keepers were often living at a distance from their posts, some of them too old for service, and others incompetent, and the volunteer crews were in a quarrelsome temper with each other and with the coast population.

“Then commenced that vigorous prosecution of reform which has crowned the humane work with unprecedented success. Making the most of slender appropriations, and in the face of perpetual discouragements, this one man, the chief of a bureau, pushed on by philanthropic impulses and guided by unerring judgment, brought a complete and

orderly system into effect. It was not the work of a day, nor of a year. It required patience, sagacity, and rare powers of organization and government. He knew no office hours, working day and night at what many were pleased to consider a hopeless task. In his brain originated the idea of guarding the entire coasts of the nation through the planting of a chain of fortresses to be garrisoned by disciplined conquerors of the sea. It is a matter of public record, and generally known to the country, that through his practical devotion to the cause this has been so nearly accomplished.

"In reorganizing what there was of the Service, he prepared a code of regulations for its absolute control. The duties of every man employed were minutely defined. The lazy, the careless, and the unworthy were dismissed, and men chosen to fill their places with sole reference to integrity and professional fitness. Politics was abolished. That is, experts in the surf were regarded as of more consequence to drowning victims than voters of any particular political ticket. The station-houses were repaired, and increased in numbers as fast as the means afforded by Congress would allow; the appliances for life-saving were restored, and improved from year to year through the best inventions and discoveries in this or any other country, and a rigid system of inspection and of patrol was inaugurated....

"The record of the first season on the New York and New Jersey coasts, where the new system first went into actual operation, showed that every person imperiled by shipwreck was saved. Consequently a commission, consisting of Mr. Kimball, Captain Faunce, and Captain J. H. Merryman, of the Revenue Marine, surveyed in 1873, by order of Congress, the vast and varied coasts of the oceans and lakes, investigating personally the characteristics of the dangerous localities, and holding consultations with underwriters, shipowners, captains of vessels, and veteran surfmen. The report of this commission placed before Congress a minute account of the disasters to vessels on every mile of coast for

the previous ten years; a bill based upon it, prepared by Mr. Kimball, became a law June 20, 1874. It provided for the extension of the field of this great national work of humanity; for the bestowal of medals of honor upon persons risking their lives to save others; and empowered the collection and tabulation of statistics of disaster to shipping, which, by reference to the periodicity of marine casualties, aided in determining the points most needing protection, and in various other ways benefited both government and maritime interests....

"The life-saving stations on the Atlantic seaboard are now within an average distance of five miles of each other, each crew consisting of a keeper and six surfmen. At sunset two men start from each station, one going to the right and the other to the left. They are equipped with lanterns and Coston signals, and each pursues his solitary and perilous way through the soft sand, in spite of flooding tides, bewildering snowfalls, overwhelming winds, and bitter cold....

"The night is divided into four watches. The keeper is required to register in his log-book the name of each patrolman, his hours on patrol, ... the direction and force of the wind at sunrise, noon, sunset, and midnight, together with the events of each day. This record is sent to the chief of the Service at Washington at the end of every week....

"The stations consist of three classes, severally denominated life-saving stations, life-boat stations, and houses of refuge. Each of the twelve districts is provided with a local superintendent, who must be a resident of the district and familiarly acquainted with its inhabitants....

"The stations are visited frequently, and the men examined in the exercises of the apparatus drill, and obliged to give verbal reasons for every step in their operations. They are trained with their life-boats in the surf, in the use of the life-dress, in saving drowning persons by swimming to their relief, in the methods of restoring the partially

drowned, and in signalling. When a wreck is attended with loss of life, a rigid examination follows to see if any of the men have been guilty of misconduct or neglect of duty. The keepers are empowered to protect the interests of the government from smuggling, and they guard all property that comes ashore from a wreck until its rightful owners appear. They are charged with the care and order of the stations, and the boats and apparatus; and they must keep accurate accounts of all receipts and expenditures, journalize all transactions, and maintain all necessary correspondence with superior officers. Thus it appears they must possess a certain amount of education and high integrity, as well as surfmanship, intrepidity, and commanding qualities....”—Harper’s Magazine, February, 1882.

At the close of the year 1894 the total number of stations in the Life-Saving Establishment was 247. Of this number, 182 were situated on the Atlantic and Gulf coasts, 51 on the coasts of the Great Lakes,13 on the Pacific Coast, and 1 at the Falls of the Ohio, Louisville, Kentucky. Their distribution by life-saving districts was as follows:

First District (coasts of Maine and New Hampshire)
12
Second District (coast of Massachusetts)
24
Third District (coasts of Rhode Island and Long Island)
39
Fourth District (coast of New Jersey)
41
Fifth District (coast from Cape Henlopen to Cape Charles)
17
Sixth District (coast from Cape Henry to Cape Fear River)
29
Seventh District (coasts of South Carolina, Georgia, and Eastern Florida)
12

Eighth District (Gulf Coast)
8
Ninth District (Lakes Erie and Ontario, including Louisville Station)
12
Tenth District (Lakes Huron and Superior)
15
Eleventh District (Lake Michigan)
25
Twelfth District (Pacific Coast)
13
Total
247

—Report of the United States Life-Saving Service.

THE LIGHTHOUSE NEAR THE STATION.

CHAPTER II. A BOY AND A DOG.

It was on the afternoon of December 23d, in the year 1893, that one of the life-saving crews in the First District was completely prepared for work, although neither vessel nor wreck was to be seen.

The wind was from the northeast and the driving sleet and snow shut out from view all that portion of the rocky coast save in the immediate vicinity of the station. During the afternoon the gale had increased in force until it was what a mariner would call “stiff”; the sea had risen with equal pace, and every indication confirmed the prediction made among the surfmen, that an ugly winter storm was at hand.

At such a time the gallant life-saving crews along the coast are ever ready for, and expecting, the signal which calls them to their perilous work; but not ordinarily do they stand by their apparatus as on this afternoon, for, fortunately, many a winter tempest fails in its harvest of death.

At noon on this day information was sent to the station that the patrol several miles down the coast had sighted a large ship so nearly inshore that, under the adverse condition of wind and sea, she could not tack, and there was not sufficient room to wear. Unless her course was speedily changed, so ran the information received,—and in the teeth of the fierce northeast tempest and the shoreward heaving of the tremendous sea that seemed impossible,—it was certain she must strike somewhere nearabout this particular station.

From the moment such information was received the patrol on the beach had been doubled, and, knowing full well how difficult it would be, under all the circumstances, for any craft to escape the perils to which it was said this

ship was exposed, the crew were keenly on the alert for the first token of wreck.

At seven o’clock in the evening no further news of the vessel had been obtained; therefore the men whose mission it is to save life understood that the ship was still fighting against the gale, and knew full well every moment gained by her increased the chances of escape, even though it had seemed impossible she could weather the point.

Half an hour later Surfman Samuel Hardy, breathless and panting, literally burst his way into the station, as he cried:

“Joe Cushing has just lighted his signal!”

All members of life-saving crews carry, while patrolling the shore on the lookout for signs of danger to others, what is known as a “Coston signal,” an ingenious contrivance which can be lighted by concussion, and, therefore, may be displayed regardless of the weather.

No further information was necessary; the crew knew full well that the ship previously reported as being in peril, and which had made such a gallant fight against the elements, had at last been conquered.

Before Sam Hardy could take his station at the beach-wagon, in which is transported all the apparatus necessary for the work of the crew when a wreck is close inshore, Joseph Cushing arrived:

“She has struck just off the west spit!”

“Then it is the ship?” Keeper Thomas Downey asked; and before the question could be answered he gave in rapid succession the orders necessary for beginning the work of rescue.

“Open boat-room doors!”

“Man the beach-wagon!”

“Forward!”

These commands were superfluous, for the crew, after long experience at such work, both during tempests when human life was to be saved, and at drill in fair weather, moved as if by instinct.

The last word had no more than been spoken before the heavy wagon rolled down the platform to the sand, every man fully aware of the fact that now had come the time when the span of many lives might be measured by seconds if they faltered or delayed.

From the official report is taken the following account of the disaster:

“It appears that the ship had been laboring heavily, the wind constantly heading her off after nightfall, and the master, although he kept up a stout heart, must have been well aware that he was constantly losing more and more of the narrow margin that lay between possible safety and inevitable destruction. Whatever misgivings the crew may have experienced, the survivor states that the first intimation they had of their immediate proximity to the shore was when they saw the breakers, and the captain, who was below at the moment, rushed on deck with the ominous outcry, ‘She has struck!’

“The boats were still on the bridge where they had been originally stowed for the voyage, their covers and lashings intact and the tackles unhooked, but Captain Clark instantly gave the order to clear them away, and, together with the men, set about the work. The ship lay with her starboard side to the waves, which the next instant lifted her farther shoreward and then fell crashing on board.

“The most of the sailors fled to the mizzen shrouds, but a few, more daring or desperate than the rest, still struggled to clear the boats.

“Another run of towering breakers was now about to leap on board, and the brave men were compelled to give over and quickly join their shipmates in the rigging. At this moment the red glare of the patrolman’s signal gleamed through the darkness, and a cheer broke forth from the shipwrecked men.

“Up to this time the master had found no difficulty in controlling the movements of the crew, who appear to have

been able and obedient sailors; but now there was no longer any occasion for the exercise of authority, and in the dreadful situation it behooved every man to look out for himself.

“Within ten minutes from the flash of the signal the great iron hull parted amidships, and the mainmast toppled over, carrying with it the mizzen-topmast. The entire ship’s company, except the captain, were at this time in the mizzen-rigging, where they were able to hold on only a few minutes, when all were washed overboard together. The captain, when last seen was standing on the ladder at the quarter-deck, supporting himself with a hand on each rail.

“The beach-apparatus was on the ground and ready for service; but the ship was only now and then faintly visible, and there was little reason to believe the crew’s efforts would be of any avail.

“However, the gun was aimed as well as possible in the direction of the wreck, which was discernible only as a black shadow that seemed a little darker than the surrounding gloom, and the shot was fired.

“That the line fell across the hulk there is no reason to doubt. That it lodged with considerable firmness somewhere was conclusive to the keeper in charge, for it resisted the slight strain put upon it to determine whether it was fast, but no pull or manipulation on the offshore end could be detected, and after waiting in vain some considerable time for that always welcome sign that the line has been found by the shipwrecked, the life-savers hauled hard on it until it finally parted under the heavy strain.

“The keeper was now satisfied that there was no living being on board the wreck. Nothing could be accomplished by additional efforts to effect communication by means of the gun, and the fury of the surf was so overwhelming that none of the men, familiar as they were with the conditions, of long experience on the coast, and brave as they had often proved themselves, even so much as entertained the

thought of launching the boat. It was out of question, absolutely and beyond all possibility of cavil. The slatting of the distant sails is described as sounding like peals of thunder, and the crashing of blocks and chains as they were flung back and forth against the wire rigging and iron foremast, sent out volumes of blazing sparks that seemed like signals of distress.

“It is the custom on occasions of this kind to build a fire on the shore as a beacon of hope to encourage the shipwrecked, and although there was believed to be nobody on the vessel, this would nevertheless have been done, if possible. But the gale blew with such force that a fire could not be maintained, and, indeed, so terrific was its fury that the polished glass lantern on the beach-apparatus cart was converted into a good specimen of ground glass by the incessant beating of the driven sand upon its surface.

“Now and then a red signal was discharged to attract the attention of any poor fellow who might be washed ashore alive, and a faithful search-patrol was maintained along the beach by the entire crew.”

That portion of the shore upon which the wind and the current would most likely cast up fragments of the wreck was thickly dotted with every available lantern from the station in the hope that these tiny rays of light might serve as beacons for some sailor whose life had not been crushed out of him by the fury of the surf, and with eager eyes the men peered into the foaming swirl of waters.

Five minutes passed, and no sign either of life or death came from the wreck.

“There is little chance the breath will yet remain in any who comes ashore now,” Keeper Downey said to Joe Cushing, and the latter replied only with a mournful shake of the head, for it did not seem possible any living thing could come through that mighty surge.

The words had no more than been spoken, however, when far away in the distance could be heard the cry of

Sam Hardy, and without being able to distinguish the words, those who heard knew from the tone that he had sighted life in some form.

All the crew ran that way in hot haste, the keeper leading, and arriving at the spot just as Hardy, all regardless of his own life, had plunged waist-deep into the surf that he might seize upon a short spar to which was lashed a dark mass.

None save those who had been trained to the duty of saving life under such circumstances would have recognized the possibility that a human being might be concealed beneath what appeared to be onlyvalueless wreckage; but the crew knew by long experience that amid this particular flotsam would be found, either alive or dead, some one from the ill-fated ship.

As Hardy had dashed into the surf so did the others, until a living chain had been formed, and by this means the spar was pulled on shore despite the heavy undertow which strove with giant force against the efforts of the life-savers.

Once the wreckage was beyond reach of the towering, roaring waves, few seconds were spent in learning whether the men had, by risking their own lives, saved a human being from death, or if it was but a corpse which had been wrested from the angry waters.

From amid wrappings of what appeared to be the fragment of a sail was seen the head of a child; the face was pallid as if death had already set its seal upon it, and not so much as a tremor of the lips could be distinguished in the faint light cast by the lanterns.

The cold was searching; the garments of the crew were already stiffening with ice, and if life was to be prevented from leaving that small body, all efforts must be made within the shelter of the station.

Acting upon the keeper’s orders, the little form was released from the bonds of rope which held it fast to the spar, and with all speed carried to the building where could

be found everything needful for the coming struggle against death.

It was a small boy, apparently ten or twelve years of age, who had been rescued, and as the kindly men with tender care removed the icy clothing, they were startled, almost alarmed for the moment, by seeing a very small dog, his long white hair soaked with water, leap from beneath the lad's tightly buttoned pea-jacket.

The animal shook itself, looked quickly around with a low whine, and, recognizing the boy, began eagerly licking his face, as if understanding that immediate aid of some kind was necessary.

The members of the crew had lost no time in taking such measures as were needful, and although the small dog growled furiously when they rolled the boy face downward, having previously laid him upon the floor of the station, the efforts at resuscitation were both skilful and vigorous.

Before the work had fairly begun the lad showed signs of life by opening his eyes, and his first glance fell upon the dog, which was standing near by, wagging its tail furiously as if to attract attention.

"I reckon he's coming around all right," Keeper Downey said in a tone of satisfaction, and then, noting the troubled look which suddenly came over the little fellow's face, he asked quickly, "What is it, my son? What are you wanting?"

"Is Mrs. Clark here?"

"Who is she?"

"The captain's wife."

"She hasn't come ashore yet; but you're not to trouble your head about anything except getting the best of the salt water you've taken aboard."

"You must be careful of Fluff until she gets here."

"Meaning this little bundle of hair?" the keeper asked with a laugh, laying his hand on the dog's head.

"Yes, sir; she thinks very much of him, an' I promised to keep him close in my arms if it so happened that we had to

come ashore lashed to the spar."

"I reckon you couldn't have done different, tied together as you two were," Surfman Dick Sawyer said with a laugh, and the keeper added kindly:

"There's no need to fret about the dog; he shall have the run of the station, and there's nothing to harm him while old Maje is in the boat-house—Maje is our dog," Downey added as he read the question in the boy's eyes. "He's large enough to swallow two or three like this little one here; but I'll answer for it your Fluff isn't in any danger, and to set your mind at rest he shall stay close by you till morning. We'll put you to bed now, I reckon; there's other work for us outside."

"I can take care of myself, sir," the lad said bravely, as he attempted to struggle to his feet, the dog meanwhile barking furiously as if cautioning his young master against being too venturesome.

"I thought you couldn't do it," Keeper Downey said, catching the boy in time to prevent a fall, and without further parley he carried him to the sleeping-room above.

When the rescued lad was tucked snugly between a generous supply of blankets, the dog curled himself up on the outside of the bed with his nose close beside the boy's cheek, and Keeper Downey muttered to himself as he descended the stairs:

"If all the ship's crew had been put away as safe and comfortable as those two, we should have done a night's work of which we might well be proud."

Then out into the howling, wintry blast went the men who had brought the lad and the dog to the station, and during the remainder of that terrible night every man did patrol duty, pacing to and fro along the rocky shore, or keeping faithful watch over the narrow strip of beach, in the faint hope that there might be other survivors, although there was little chance that such could be the case.

To continue the official report: “Only remnants of spars and cargo, however, were cast at their feet, and when daylight finally dawned all eyes were intently turned toward the wreck with a vague hope that, by some altogether improbable possibility, there might be some signs of living men on board. But there were none.

“The forward and after parts of the dismembered hull were seen to be from thirty to forty yards apart, lying at nearly a right angle with each other, the former head on, and the latter, on which no masts appeared, thrown on its beam ends, inclined toward the shore.

“The foremast and foretopmast, bowsprit and jib-boom, with most of the fore-rigging, were still in place, and the lower yard was crossed amid a confusion of tattered sails and tangled ropes. The waves ran high up the mast, breaking almost into the foretop, and shreds and fragments of the cargo of jute wrapped themselves like ragged garments around the shrouds and stays.

“A dead body was discovered entangled in the rigging on the after part of the wreck; but the keeper did not deem it necessary to make an attempt to go out with a boat while the surf was still extremely dangerous, therefore this mournful duty was postponed until the following day.”

There was nothing to be learned by remaining where they were exposed to the full fury of the gale, which had not abated, and the weary crew, saddened because they had not been permitted to save more lives, returned to the station, each man’s garments so thickly encrusted with ice that only limited movement was possible.

A large ship had foundered hardly more than half a pistol-shot distant from the building, and of all on board only a small boy and a tiny dog had been rescued from the merciless waves.

“We’ll wait till the lad wakens, and then most likely he can give us a smattering of the details, although I don’t allow he knows very much regarding the disaster, for he

must have been lashed to that spar either just before, or immediately after, the ship struck," Keeper Downey said as he sought to refresh himself with the contents of a steaming bowl of coffee.

CHAPTER III. BENNY’S STORY.

When, at a late hour next morning, the boy and the dog came down-stairs, the former appearing bewildered, and the latter hanging his tail as if doubtful of the reception he might meet with, only Keeper Downey and Surfman Sam Hardy were to be seen.

The other members of the crew were engaged outside in the effort to save such wreckage as the yet angry waters rolled in toward the shore.

A bright-looking little fellow was this survivor of the terrible disaster, although not seen at his best while clad only in his undergarments, and shivering in the frosty air despite the volumes of heat sent out by the glowing stove. The mercury in the thermometer had fallen below the zero mark, and the wind found every crevice and crack in the building, situated as it was on the open shore where nothing in the way of a shelter broke the force of the northeast gales.

“Well, lad, you’re looking bright this morning,” the keeper cried in a cheery tone. “Hungry?”

“I can take my share of breakfast when it’s ready, and I guess Fluff won’t turn up his nose at warm coffee.”

“A dog drinking coffee!” Sam Hardy cried, with a laugh that had in it a note of the tempest.

“Yes, sir; Mrs. Clark always gave him a little out of her own cup. Has she come ashore yet?”

“No, lad,” the keeper replied gravely. “None save you and the dog lived through last night.”

“They can’t be dead!” the boy cried in alarm, and as the full meaning of the words dawned upon him, the tears came. “Surely some of the men would have looked out for Mrs. Clark! She was coming ashore the same way I did.”

“Had they lashed her to a spar before you were set adrift?”