

Strange STORIES

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THE LIGHT MUST BURN

By
CAPT. GEORGE
J. RAWLINS

Author of "Twenty Drops of Blood," "The Ghost of Galena Mine," etc.

JOHAN DERRINGER climbed slowly down the spiral stairs of Devil's Reef Lighthouse. The howling wind outside echoed hollowly in the iron cylinder that housed the stairway. He could feel the slight sway of the sturdy steel tower, could feel it shudder under the lash of the storm. For forty hours the storm had raged, and this was going to be a night even worse than the last—but Derringer grinned maliciously at the thought. It suited his purpose. . . .

He entered the kitchen where his superior, old man Howard, was getting supper. Howard looked up and said something, but a deluge of sea spray driving against the outside walls drowned out his words. Derringer nodded. He knew Bill Howard was inquiring about the light. After thirty years of service the old fool

While Storm Rages, an Eerie Drama Is Enacted within the Devil's Reef Lighthouse!



Derringer raised the wrench as Howard climbed upward

was as jittery about his light as a young mother with her first born!

Derringer went into the engine room and threw the switch that started the light. He glanced out through one of the storm ports. Not yet dark enough to see the flashes reflected on the foam streaked waters.

An outside iron door clanged. That was like the old man—damn him—couldn't take his assistant's word for anything! He'd gone out in the storm where he could look up into a little mirror like the rear-view mirror in an automobile, fastened to the top rail far above. There he could see the light and count its five flashes. . . .

Well, the old man hadn't slept since the storm started and at his age it was beginning to tell on him. Tonight he'd be on duty until twelve. After that it was Derringer's trick and maybe the old man would sleep. He'd better!

John Derringer really had nothing against Bill Howard except that the old man unconsciously stood in the way of the satisfaction of an all-consuming hate against a certain Captain Carter, master of the freighter *Kilworth Castle*.

Derringer had been mate aboard the *Kilworth Castle* until Carter beached him for insubordination. Carter's influence was such that Derringer was unable to obtain another berth at sea. In the lonely lighthouse service he had brooded much on this presumed injustice. The thirst for vengeance became a passion. The passion grew into a mania. . . .

Now, tonight, was the time of his opportunity. If Bill Howard would act like a sensible man and sleep while off duty from midnight till morning, all would go well with his plans. If not—

After supper Derringer went to bed, but not to sleep. Nor was it the wail of the wind that kept him awake. He could see himself again as mate on the bridge of the *Kilworth Castle*, could see her out there in open ocean plowing her way through storm and darkness, making port tonight on her regularly scheduled run in spite of wind or weather.

That schedule, regular as clockwork

down almost to the minute, was a hobby of Carter's. A vision of Captain Carter arose before him and hate ran like acid through his veins dispelling all thoughts of sleep.

DERRINGER relieved Bill Howard at midnight. He signed the duty book, inspected the beacon and the power plant. He knew the old man would wait to see that done—never trusted anybody with his precious light!

He followed Howard into the bunk room.

"Why don't you take a rest?" he shouted above the roar of the storm. Howard shook his graying head. "Like to be standing-by on a night like this, John. Just got five more days to go and I ain't taking any risks. The light must burn!"

"The light must burn!" Derringer had heard that until he was sick of it. He knew Howard's story by heart. For thirty years Bill Howard had tended Devil's Reef Light and never once had it failed. Five days more and he would retire from the service. He was taking no chance of a subordinate's possible carelessness spoiling his proud record at a time like this.

"You're dead on your feet, man," insisted Derringer. "There's nothing to do! The barometer's still falling and we may have trouble later. You owe it to the light to keep yourself in condition."

It took clever persuading. Derringer promised to call him if the slightest thing went wrong and finally Howard sprawled across his bunk. As Derringer left the room he smiled to himself at the old man's final admonition:

"The light must burn!"

Derringer went to the storeroom and with trembling fingers cut a two-foot square of canvas. The storeroom was on the northeast side, and here the wind screamed loudest. It seemed that the fiends of the storm approved what he was about to do.

He climbed the steep spiral stairs to the glass-walled room that housed the light. He stared to the north through rain-drenched windows toward Sand Point Light across the

ship channel. On clear nights one could pick up its signal from this elevation—four short flashes every twenty seconds.

Incoming ships must pass between the lighthouses, taking Sand Point on the starboard and Devil's Reef on the port side. With tonight's low visibility, a ship entering the channel could not hope to see both lights at once—it would have to hug one or the other.

Derringer looked eastward into open ocean. Again total darkness, but somewhere out there the *Kilworth Castle* was steadily steaming closer. Derringer grinned and shifted his gaze into the inky blackness south of Devil's Point. He could see nothing, but there he knew the sea was a boiling witch's cauldron over the treacherous rocks of Graveyard Shoals!

JUST above his head rotated the light—that precious light which the old man worshipped. Around its brilliant central lamp the octagonal lens-frame slowly revolved. The frame had a lens port in each of its eight sides. Three of the ports were covered with metal shields. The remaining five contained lenses sending out focused light beams. Rotating regularly, the light identified itself—five short flashes in a twenty second period. Just beyond the frame on the south side of the light stood a stationary plate of colored glass. As the beams swept through it they turned a gory red, warning ships in that direction away from the dangerous Graveyard Shoals.

Derringer looked at his watch. It was time.

Deftly he hung the square of canvas over one of the lenses, cutting off its beam of light. The beacon now flashed four in twenty—the same as Sand Point! He took a monkey wrench from the tool box, removed the plate of red glass from its frame. Clear white flashes, with no hint of warning, now played over the danger area of Graveyard Shoals!

Derringer stood back and contemplated his work, indulged in a demented chuckle. He felt that he was one with the fiends of the storm that howled outside. That wail of the

wind like the shriek of a banshee was a call to comradeship in the legions of darkness which held high revelry over the frightened sea. . . .

In his mind's eye he could see the *Kilworth Castle*, Captain Carter on her bridge. Coming in from the southeast, she habitually picked up Devil's Reef on her port bow as her first landmark. She usually sighted it at this hour, and she would be on schedule—he could depend on that. Carter boasted of keeping to schedule in spite of hell and hurricanes!

Derringer knew Carter could take no observations during the storm. For at least thirty hours he must have been sailing by dead reckoning, unable to fix his position. So, when he sighted those four flashes, he would wrongly identify the light as Sand Point and turn shoreward to pass south of it. Actually, he would be passing south of Devil's Reef—a course which would pile him head-on into that seething Hell of Graveyard Shoals!

Maniacal light glittered in Derringer's eyes. A Satanic smile twisted his lips awry. . . . Then, above the boom of the wind drumming against the tower he heard his name called! Startled, he whirled around, looked down. Howard, wild-eyed and perplexed, was standing at the foot of the stairs, preparing to mount. He was breathing heavily, Derringer could see, as if in angry excitement.

"Derringer!" he called. "The light! What's wrong with the flashes?"

Caught red-handed, Derringer knew he was trapped. His grip tightened on the monkey-wrench still held in his hand. Howard was coming up. Derringer held the wrench in readiness. . . .

There he was now, looming up at the top of the stairs. A few steps more, and Derringer would swing into action. He raised the wrench, his face grim and hard.

The old man's white face was staring at him, horrified. Then, as Derringer stepped forward to bring the wrench down, Howard's body receded, and he was tumbling and rolling down the long steep spiral to the bottom.

Derringer dropped the wrench. Mo-

mentary panic seized him. He had not actually killed the old man, although he had meant to. Nevertheless, he was responsible for the fall. But, he thought, as he hurried down the stairs to where Howard lay, a crumpled mass, who could put the blame on him? At daylight, he could return the light to normal, as he'd intended, and nothing could be proved against him. The old man's death would simply appear to be an accident.

He bent over the body, felt the pulse. Yes, Howard was dead, all right—the pulse wasn't beating. He dragged the body into the bunk room and hurried out quickly.

Derringer strode into the kitchen, gulped down a cup of tepid coffee direct from the pot. Tough luck he had no liquor. He could have used it. But his nerves felt steadier as he thought of the outcome of his scheme.

By daylight his account with Captain Carter would be settled! He chuckled at the thought and the wind laughed with him. Even now the *Kilworth Castle* might be breaking up in those treacherous waters.

He tried to visualize it. The despot, Carter, on the bridge, coming in under full steam defying the elements. The sudden shout of the bow watch: "Breakers ahead, Sir!" Carter's heavy hand flying to the engine room telegraph, the jangle of bells as he hauled back the lever to full-speed astern. The premonitory shudder of the ship under reversed power. The overweening Carter's dismay as she ripped and crunched into the rocks! That north-east wind would swing her broadside leaving the braggart helpless, rolling his ship on her beam ends across the slaving fangs of the shoal. The radio would crackle, he would put up flares—if there was time! Derringer laughed a mirthless cackle. That was too good! The arrogant Carter begging, pleading for help!

The storm increased to hurricane intensity. Its howlings rose to a steady deafening roar which throbbed in Derringer's ears like the war drums of hell. The entire lighthouse trembled down to its bed-rock foundations. Rain water trickled down the walls from opened seams. Sea water spurted

through the planking of the floor. A boulder hurled high by the wild surf crashed through the platform outside the door.

Derringer caught the crash of splintering timber and began to wonder if the steel doors would hold. Again he inspected their cross-bar fastenings.

He was suddenly immersed in darkness. He fought for self-control while his eyes became accustomed to the blackness. The rain seeping through the walls must have shorted the lighting circuit. . . . A ghostly whiteness outside came and went, dimly illuminating the interior through the plate glass storm ports. . . . Ah, the beacon was still in operation! Its heavily insulated cables were impervious to sea and rain!

THE beacon flashes came and went. Fascinated, Derringer watched, subconsciously spacing the intervals between the rotating beams of the beacon. Through habit he counted as the swinging arms of light cast their pale reflected glow through the room. One—two—three—four—five. Then the long interval of darkness completing the twenty second period. His imagination tricked him and he wondered what the corpse was doing while the room was shrouded in blackness. Again the flashes came, again the dead face was illumined. One—two—three—four—five!

He started violently. *Five!* Only on the second count did that fifth flash register on his addled brain—But he had darkened that fifth flash—had covered the fifth lens with canvas!

He stumbled in his mad flight. In the kitchen he groped his way to the storm port looking southward over Graveyard Shoals. . . .

No mistaking his count of the flashes now. There were five of them! And as the beams swung over the Shoals they turned—*red!*

He mounted the spiral stairs in the tower by the faint light that trickled down from the beacon above. How could his plans have gone so far astray? The canvas cover might have fallen from the lens by accident, but the red glass couldn't get back in

place by itself! A vague foreboding growing stronger with every step seemed to hold him back—to warn him away from some unknown horror! But Derringer was made of determined stuff. He refused to believe in things intangible. Steadily he mounted the stairs.

He paused on the beacon platform. There lay the monkey wrench where he had dropped it. Beside it lay the square of canvas, crumpled and torn as if ripped from its fastenings and hurled to the floor. The red glass danger signal had been replaced in its iron bracket. Devil's Reef Light was functioning perfectly! Who had done it? Howard? Howard wasn't dead then. He had risen from his bunk and come up to tend the light! But that couldn't be. There had been no pulse-beat—or could he have been mistaken?

IN an unreasoning frenzy of frustration Derringer reached for the monkey wrench. He would smash that red glass! He would break out that fifth lens leaving the beam unfocused and dim.

He refused to be thwarted in his vengeance on Carter. No power, living or dead—

But his hand failed to grasp the wrench. Unseen fingers like cold steel seemed to close about his wrist. Fright gripped him. He had been right—Howard wasn't dead. He struggled vainly to free himself. The unseen took form—rough, wrinkled, old. It was Howard's hand.

In the darkness then, mournful as a fog-wrapped buoy's bell, Derringer heard the words:

"The light must burn!"

Then he was falling, falling through darkness, down the steep spiral stairs. . . . The storm howled on. The beacon ticked off its flashes as inexorably as fate. The light was burning. . . .

Four days later the lighthouse tender, *Spindrift*, danced across sparkling waters. Brilliant sun and a mild breeze had followed the storm, but outside the harbor's shelter a heavy sea still ran. As the sturdy little ship hove-to off Devil's Reef Light, Assistant Lighthouse Keeper

MacElroy joined the lighthouse inspector on deck.

"Well, MacElroy," said the inspector, "this is the last time you'll relieve old Bill Howard. His retirement papers are waiting for him when he gets back to headquarters."

They climbed into the dinghy.

"We need more like him," continued the inspector. "Hasn't had a light failure in all his thirty years. The *Kilworth Castle* came into port at the height of that last storm. Only a fool like Carter would have tried it. And Carter reported Devil's Reef Light okay. And after that it went right on functioning night after night as if there hadn't been any storm. Howard just takes it in his stride."

The dinghy threaded its precarious way to the lee side of the desolate rock.

"Wonder why they're not out to meet us?" speculated MacElroy, as they eyed the lonely lighthouse.

The sense of mystery deepened when they found the storm doors bolted from within, and no response to their halloos. Tools were sent for, a door pried open. Horror piled upon horror as they found first the body of Howard in his bunk and then the body of Derringer at the foot of the stairs in the tower.

The inspector took charge of the medical examination sending MacElroy to look over the power plant and beacon.

"These men have been dead for several days," he said in grave wonderment when MacElroy rejoined him. "Derringer appears to have met death by a fall. Probably groggy and tired out from doing double duty. Howard appears to have fallen too, but not down the stairs. Look there—he was about to ascend the stairs—he must have had a heart attack, and he fell, striking his head glancingly against the iron rail. There's a spot of blood and a couple of clinging hairs to mark where his head struck. But that didn't kill him. What happened was that his heart stopped and he fell, striking his head against the rail. The laceration of his scalp bears this out—"

"But the light has burned regularly
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every night since the storm!" Mac-Elroy interrupted sharply. "How could that be if they both were dead?"

"I don't know. Get the duty book!"

THE inspector ran a trembling finger down the column. "That," he said, pointing to the last plain entry, "was the night of the storm. Howard on till midnight. Derringer relieved him at 12:01."

"Look, Inspector! What's this written below?"

They took the book to the open door for better light. Below Derringer's last signature each space was filled, bringing the book up to date. Very faint but still quite legible, every line bore the scarcely discernible signature, "*Howard!*" And scrawled across the page, still in that ghostly hand was the motto: "*The Light Must Burn!*"