

# The Black Cat

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## The Storm Warrior.

BY MAX WAGNER.



CHRISTMAS, of a year within the last decade, was a day that the Surf-Side Life Saving Crew of that winter will long remember, and the never monotonous log of that stirring station contains no more thrilling record than the page that briefly describes the events of that holiday and the twenty-four hours preceding it.

The 24th of December began balmily and serenely enough; remarkably so in view of the fact that the snow-covered, ice-bound New England coast was only thirty miles away. At the first approach of dawn a dense fog had hung over land and sea, while from out its ghostly depths had come the sound of whirring wings and discordant cries as ducks and gulls flew by in search of their morning meal. But as the mist disappeared, so mild and May-like was the scene disclosed that the last dog-watch, just coming off their beat, tired and hungry though they were, involuntarily paused on the bluffs a few moments in admiration. Not a cloud floated overhead, not a breath was stirring, and hardly a ripple marred the surface of the ocean, whose glassy bosom heaved only in a gentle motion that sent a lazy swell rolling softly up the beach.

When finally the older of the two men, reminded of the rest and less æsthetic treat that awaited them at the cabin, suggested

that they "go and see what the cook had to show," his companion, "Long" Tom Coffin, moved away reluctantly. As he cast one fascinated backward glance, his gaze was suddenly riveted, and he stopped short with a quick arresting word to his companion.

Away out on the horizon where sky and water met, a wall of dark-green water rose like a huge wrinkle on the glistening surface of the ocean and rushed shoreward with incredible velocity. Sweeping across the rips and shoals that, from the South Shoal on the outside to Wiscasset on the inside, spread their treacherous network off Nantucket to catch unwary seamen, its crest was crowned with leaping foam that sparkled and glistened in the sunshine for a moment like newly fallen snow, and then disappeared as the huge wave struck the beach a five-foot breaker and broke with a roar of muffled thunder.

"Great Heavens, Tom," said the older man, "that's a tidal wave, or I'm no sailor. Call the rest of the men."

In a moment the entire crew were out on the bluff gazing, some wonderingly, others awestricken, at a second and even mightier wave that rapidly thundered in, covering the Surf-Side shore where it had not been covered for years.

Other waves followed, but each smaller than that preceding it, and soon the sea was once more as smooth as a mill pond.

As the patrolmen trudged back to their breakfast they talked long and wonderingly of the strange sight just observed. Bill Smith, recently returned from years of wandering in the antipodes, declared the phenomenon the result of a "yearthquake." The Keeper, or, as his crew called him, the "Skipper," advanced the somewhat vague theory that "Suthin' had busted out to sea"; and one and all scoffed at the theoretical knowledge which prompted Tom Coffin's remark that "the wave was the forerunner of a big storm."

Half an hour later the crew lounged coatless out of doors, smoking and basking in the sunshine, and chaffing Long Tom good-naturedly about the coming storm.

"Why, the glass been a-risin' all night, Tom. An' jes' look at that sky, will you!" remonstrated the Skipper. "Why, boy, there ain't a cloud in sight!"

The few wisp-like plumes of cottony vapor floating in from the

south hardly warranted a continuation of the argument, and for some time thereafter nothing broke the silence but the occasional snapping of a match and the deep, contented puffing of the sea-dogs as they pulled at their pipes.

In the stillness that followed, most of the group, wearied with the long tramp and broken rest of the night previous, dropped into a gentle doze. Not so, however, with Smith, or, as he was generally called, "Bill B." The Keeper's last remarks had aroused a wild hope within his breast. A long-cherished plan of Smith's had been to spend with his family this, his first Christmas ashore for many years; but by some unforeseen complication at the last minute it had been impossible to get a substitute or obtain "liberty," so Bill B. had resigned himself to a mess dinner at the station, in place of the turkey cooked at home, and a long jaunt on the beach at the very time he had hoped to help his wife fill the children's stockings. But with perfect, calm weather ahead, perhaps, after all, the Keeper might give him the coveted liberty by letting one of the men do double duty, — Long Tom Coffin, the newly initiated "extra," for instance, who, in spite of his disinclination for the games or jests of lighter hours, had proved as loyal and obliging in comradeship, as sure in the performance of his duty, as the oldest surfman at the station.

At gun drill he it was who followed the shot or flaked the line, and he was always first to enter and last to leave the boat room on the rarer occasions when the beautiful craft of the life savers was brought out for a dip. No patrolman ever had to wait over time for Coffin to relieve him, yet many a night that worthy did double duty to give some gay young surfman a chance for a much-needed sleep after a day's revelry on leave. While obliging to a fault, no one ever attempted to impose upon Tom a second time, for although not quite arrived at his majority, he was a broad-shouldered young chap, as tall as a Tuckernucker, and there was that in his clear blue eyes that forbade trifling.

Thus communing with himself, Bill B. glanced furtively, first at the Keeper, who seemed about ready to drop asleep, and then at Tom Coffin, as he sprawled his six feet of manhood along the ground and gazed with unseeing eyes out on the ocean, now ruffled by the first gentle stirring of the morning breeze.

"I say, Skipper," began Bill, tentatively. And, as the eyes of several of the group, the Keeper included, opened lazily and fastened themselves upon him, he floundered on:—

"I say you're sure there's no blow comin' to-morrow?"

"To-morrow? Demmit, man!" replied the Keeper testily, but unsuspectingly, "there won't be no blow fer a month! That is, — er — a, I mean fer a week anyway!

"Not fer a few days an' way," agreed Bill B. hastily. "Well, I were a-thinkin' that bein' the case, mebbe there'd be a show of my gettin' liberty to-night."

"Who'd take your watch?" sharply queried the Keeper. Then, more kindly, "I'd like mighty well to let you off, Bill, fer I know how you want to be home Christmas. But you see there's no one to walk your beat, unless I do. And the regulations won't permit that!" he wound up, with an attempt at jocularity.

Before poor Smith could voice his acquiescence he felt rather than saw that on Tom Coffin's face the usual look of sadness had given place to one of pity. Nor was he surprised to hear the other say, "I'll take Bill's watch, Skipper, and be glad enough to do him a favor. I was just thinkin'," he added ingenuously as he made a move toward sleeping quarters, "I was just thinkin' how I should hate to be away from my wife and children to-night."

Upon his heels followed the crafty Bill B. who, fearing the Keeper's revoke of his reluctant consent, harnessed his horse and was half way to town before Tom was fairly settled in his bunk.

The sleeping room of the Surf-Side Station was a large, airy chamber that ran the entire length of the building; the substantial iron beds ranged in a row along the carpetless floor were as comfortable as first-class springs, hair mattresses, and scrupulously clean sheets and blankets could make them. When the light-excluding curtains were drawn, Morpheus usually reigned supreme throughout the darkened chamber,— but not this morning. Though he lay with closed eyes, determinedly composed for slumber, he was still awake when, half an hour later, approaching footsteps sounded on the stairway.

"Tom's asleep, I see," remarked one of the crew to the other in a stage whisper, as the entering pair softly hauled off their outer garments preparatory to taking a nap themselves.

"Well, he'll need it all right by this time to-morrow," answered the other in a tone low yet perfectly audible to young Coffin. "Say, Henry, I see by yesterday's paper that the *Yankee Girl* sailed from Boston the day before."

"Is that so! How did Whitty Macy ship? Supercargo or before the mast?"

"I heard tell he tried for second mate; he's got gall enough for anything. But the owners couldn't stand that even if he did buy ten shares in her, so they offered to take him either supercargo or before the mast, and he went as able seaman."

"Able seaman be hanged! I'll bet he pinches the tar out of the ratl'ns fust time he goes aloft. Why, only last summer I took out that bluefishin' party he gave in honor of Long Tom's old sweetheart, and Whitty dun nothin' but make 'slicks' from the time we left the jetties until we got back. What did Patience ever see in him, anyway? Why, Long Tom there is worth a dozen of him. You know they say she's throwed him over for Macy, an' he's come off here to forget her."

"Money! money! And Macy has got it to burn. Oh, Patience is purty as a peach and all that, but girls is all alike, you know. Money'll make most anything go with them. Even a shoal-water craft like Whitty!"

And with a suppressed chuckle the pair relapsed into silence that was broken only by their deep, regular breathing.

But for Tom that whispered conversation had murdered sleep. "Patience!" "Macy!" With those words the whole flimsy air castle of a year and a half ago arose, and was dashed to earth again.

Given a spirited girl pledged by no engagement, a lifelong but jealous, poor lover confronted for the first time by a new, rich lover, and a very small misunderstanding may lead to an early change of partners. Literally it was what Tom considered a dance too much given his rival that drove him to hot-headed reprisals, alienation, and finally a month ago to seeking this situation as surfman, which seemed the only substitute for the sea-going career of his ancestors. For over the islands had stolen, though so gently as hardly to be noticed, a great sea change. The ships that once lined the wharves were now either at the bottom of the sea or dismantled hulks in distant ports; and com-

merce, except that carried on by the line of passenger steamers, had degenerated into the irregular trips of the Boston packet or the even less frequent visits of a grimy collier.

Ship and sweetheart — both seemed to have vanished from the hope of him who had not to be added unto Macy, — Macy, the alien landsman, the lady's man, the spender of fortunes gained by the hard toil of his Nantucket grandsires.

Such was the undercurrent in the life of the new "extra"; and such was the treadmill of memory in which his mind moved to-day, until finally, from sheer exhaustion, he drifted into a deep sleep.

It was about an hour before sunset when Tom awoke. A quick glance at the sky showed that the cottony plumes were floating in from the south more frequently. Still there was nothing threatening in the aspect of the heavens, when the hearty meal finished, Tom and Henry, who formed the dog watch, began to make ready for their patrol of the beach from sunset to eight o'clock; and it was amidst the chaffing of the crew that Tom put on his oilers and drew a battered sou'wester down over his curly pate.

"Long Tom's still a-countin' on that storm of his'n!" remarks one, while "Well, he dassn't bet a dollar it'll rain before mornin'?" comes tantalizingly from "Haulover" Harry, who has sporty tendencies, and is the first middle watch east.

"I'll just go you on that," replies Tom, promptly placing a coin in the Keeper's hands. And amid cries of "Bluffer! Put up!" "Haulover!" is forced to follow his example.

As the patrolmen step out of doors a most magnificent spectacle silences them. The sun is just sinking with a ruddy glare, in which the waves and objects along the shore stand out with startling distinctness. Then a deep, black cloud, the cloud no bigger than a man's hand, obscures the face of the sinking disk, and as cloud and sun both disappear the crimson tints slowly merge into the deep reds and violets which dye the western heavens long after night has descended over the island. In the dim and prophetic twilight the phenomenon is awe inspiring and portentous of evil to almost all who witness it. Not so to Tom. His active spirit rises with the coming struggle.

When the first dog watch came in at eight o'clock Tom's oilskins dripped in a miniature flood from the pelting rain outside, the wind, which had been but a breath all day, was coming in puffs that grew stronger with each gust, and the "Old Man," the reef so called which lies off the South Shore, could be heard moaning dismally as the waves dashed across his wicked old breast.

"A bit damp, Skipper!" ejaculated Tom as he emerged, dry and warm, from his dripping outer garments, and grinning a trifle maliciously at the wet and bedraggled Henry, as the latter hung his sweater near the stove to dry.

To the Keeper's anxious acquiescence and offer to turn over the stakes, Tom, *en route* for his bunk, replied with a cheerful "Oh, that's all right. Put that into the mess fund, then all hands will have a whack at him." And when, after what seemed to him only a moment of rest, Coffin was aroused by the Keeper, profuse in apologies for sending him to extra duty, Tom's cheerfulness still persisted.

"You know I always did like a storm," he said, as he stopped in the kitchen to drink a cup of tea, mark the half-inch fall of the barometer, and climb into his rubber suit. A taste which, as the Keeper observed, Tom was likely to get his fill of, with a heavy snow falling, and the station, low, broad, and strong as it was, swaying and rocking with the northeast wind.

Slipping a Coston light into an inside pocket, Tom took up his lantern, and pulling his sou'wester more firmly down over his ears, drew a long breath, opened the storm door, and stepped outside. The instant he cleared the lee of the building the full fury of the tempest broke upon him.

Each frenzied gust swept up tons of sand, which, flying with terrific speed in the gale, cut his face like fine shot from a gun; and so quickly did little hills and valleys appear and disappear among the sand dunes that the whole surface of the upper beach seemed to undulate, slowly, yet, in unison with the wilder heaving of the ocean, keeping time, like the bass notes to the treble, in the grand symphony that the spirit of the storm was playing. From out the black abyss of the deep, colossal breakers rose in swift succession, and dashed, leviathan-like, far up the beach in

one wild agony of spray which was caught up by the gale and mingled with the snow and sand. And above all the wild tumult and turmoil the "Old Man" could be heard roaring like a wild beast at the scent of blood.

Foot by foot Tom fought his way along the shore, backing as he went, perspiring at every pore in spite of the intense cold, compelled every few hundred feet to crouch until he could get his breath. In that flying mass of frozen spray, snow and sand, advance in the ordinary way would have been as impossible as in the face of a gigantic sand blast.

Arriving at last at the post to which was fastened the time key safe, and which marked the end of his beat, some three miles from the station, young Coffin, after several vain attempts, for a fleeting instant obtained a light. The time detector showed a quarter to four. "I'll have just fifteen minutes before beginning the last dog watch," thought Tom grimly as he lay panting for breath.

Now a hurricane of between sixty and eighty miles per hour exerts a pressure of about twenty-five pounds to any square foot of surface opposing it. Long Tom's six feet of manhood represented a surface of twice that number of square feet. In coming east three miles it is therefore evident that he had fought his way against a giant who constantly opposed him with a strength of over three hundred pounds pressure. No wonder, then, that, on the return journey, in spite of the gale, which almost carried him along without effort, he made frequent stops, not only to consume time, — for there was no need of his arriving at the station before sunrise if he was to finish out his watch, — but for rest also.

It had stopped snowing, and he was just debating within himself whether to complete his patrol or to accept the relief that he knew would be offered the instant he arrived at the building, when his weary eyes caught a momentary flicker, like a distant lightning flash, away out on the "Old Man."

His heart seemed to stand still as he listened, and a few seconds later a muffled report was swept to his straining ears by the gale.

Jerking out the Colton light, he struck the plunger a sharp blow, and an instant later a blood-red answering glare lighted up the wild sea about him. As the signal light began to die out Tom ran like a deer for the station.



"Skipper! Men!" he shouted as he burst through the door, "there's a ship on the 'Old Man.'"

"My God! You don't say," roared the Keeper, tumbling out of his room. Four heavy thuds upstairs indicated that as many men had jumped from their bunks to the floor, and a moment later they came pouring down the stairs, dressing as they ran.

"Signal Henry to come in!" yelled the Keeper, as he rang wildly at the telephone to warn the neighboring stations and the cable office in town.

"Say, 'Long' Tom, how'd yer know she's a ship?" queried one of the crew as he fairly jumped into his hip boots.

"Because she's firing a cannon!" shouted Tom from the boat room, where he was looking over the gear, which, however, was ready, as ever, for instant use.

"She's a square rigger, sho' 'nuff, lads. A fore-'n-after don't carry no cannon!" exclaimed the Keeper sagely.

"Hullo! Here's Bill back. Couldn't stay away no longer!" shouted one of the crew as the absentee came through the door.

"He's arter that present the Skipper's got fer him," said another.

"Well, I'm a-thinkin' he'll have to pull fer it," answered the Keeper. "Get inter yer suit, lad! Get inter yer suit!"

With a military swiftness and precision the men rushed through their preparation, obeying the leader's command "Places," just as he caught the flash of another gun.

"Boys! she's off the 'Old Man,' and a-drivin' toward Miacomet Rip!" exclaimed the Keeper. "Mebbe we'll get a chance to use the guns. Better put 'em both on, lads."

It was nearly daybreak before guns and gear had been hauled across the beach to the point whence could be seen the outlines of a noble ship, sharply silhouetted against the brightening sky. The waves that swept over her decks and crashed against her sides, like wild beasts digging at the vitals of their prey, sent the spray flying high into the tops, where the crew could be seen hanging on for their lives.

Though the wreck was beyond the range of the guns, the life savers soon had both of the little brass cannon heavily charged, and elevated as high as possible, in order that the lines might be

shot to their furthest limit. When it grew light enough to see clearly, two shots were fired, one the solid Lisle, and the other the hollow Hunt projectile. As the little messengers of life and mercy sped through the air, dragging the life lines behind them, the prayers of all seemed to urge them on in their flight, and when they fell several hundred yards short of the ship, a groan burst from hundreds of throats. For from all parts of the island had thronged men, women, children, even, drawn thither by the instinct that is in the blood of all seacoast people — until the beach was black with the crowd of spectators.

A second and a third round proved equally futile.

"It's no use, lads," said the Keeper, shaking his head sadly. "We'll have to wait until we can launch the lifeboat. You, Joe, run back to the station and fetch the Code signals and the Shipping List, and then we'll see if we kin spell out her colors."

While the surfman was gone for the book and bunting the low, black clouds that had overhung the heavens suddenly parted, and the patches, flying away as if in a panic, revealed the clear, blue sky. The wind, too, suddenly weakened, dropping to a brisk breeze. And all in less than the twenty minutes it took the fleet-footed Joe to return with the list and flags. During this sudden calm the thunder of the surf sounded all the more terrible, focusing sight and hearing on the huge waves that for a second rose black and threatening, as though about to sweep across the island, carrying everything before them, and then, tripped by the resistless undertow, fell harmless at their feet, a Niagara of spray and foam.

Out on the doomed ship the ensign, union down, flapped dolefully from the mizzen rigging, while from the main rigging streamed a mass of bright bunting, three flags, and a pennant.

"J, H, Q, F," slowly called out Joe, while he squinted through a telescope at the gaily waving colors.

The Keeper's forefinger moved slowly down the column of "J's." Suddenly with a startled look he glanced around and said, "Boys, that ar ship's the *Yankee Girl*, of Boston."

Tom started as though struck by some unseen hand. Turning quickly, he gazed at the black objects clinging to the swaying rigging, while a curious, puzzled look came over his face; only for

a second, however, for the look changed to one of stern determination as he jumped to obey the Keeper's command to the crew to return the guns to the station and bring out the lifeboat.

Slight as the chance seemed of getting even a surf boat out into that high sea, it was the only one, for a deep, portentous roar could be heard, low banks of flying scud began to blot out the blue sky, and it was evident to all that the hurricane was preparing to break with renewed fury.

So while men cheered wildly, and women sobbed and wrung their hands, the patrolmen pushed with a mighty swing the boat down to the water's edge. For an instant crew and volunteers stood anxious, tense, waiting until the Keeper's eager eye caught a break in the procession of breakers.

"Ready!" he cautions.

"Now!" and with a wild rush the crew impel the boat after the receding wave, scrambling in just in time for a powerful shove from the volunteers to carry the craft through the undertow. A second later the oars dipped and flashed, and the boat shot forward to meet the first wave — up, up, till the bow hung almost perpendicular over the stern, and the crew seemed fairly standing on each other's shoulders.

With a gasp of horror many of the spectators closed their eyes.

For an instant the boat toppled with long, white prow high in the air; then a shout of triumph broke from the watchers on the shore as the craft leaped forward over the crest and disappeared into the hollow beyond. When she rose on the crest of the next wave her crew were pulling a strong, steady stroke that slowly but surely carried them to the ship.

Fifteen minutes — half an hour — an hour of dangerous maneuvering dragged away before the lifeboat reappeared, sagging heavily under the human freight that loaded her almost to the gunwales. Laboring, straining, fighting her way through the angry sea that menaced even more at landing than at launching, the craft swung on until within half a dozen breakers of the shore. Then, at the word of command, the weary rowers rested on their oars, waiting anxiously for the word of command from the Keeper, who stood erect and motionless in the stern, by an almost mechanical sweep of the steering oar keeping the boat headed straight, while he

strained eagerly forward, awaiting an opening in that threatening sea.

After what seemed an age to those on shore — it must have been an eternity to those in the boat — the lifeboat darted forward.

Like a race-horse she came, in sight all the time, for she was riding just back of the crest of a giant comber before whose advance the waves in front seemed to make way and vanish.

With a crash and roar the huge billow dashed far up the beach.

When it receded the lifeboat, with all its precious freight, was seen high and dry on the shore, while in the wake of that on which the lifeboat had ridden followed a second wave, whose surf would carry the boat still higher up the beach, a fact the life savers well knew, and so sat perfectly still bracing themselves with the oars.

Not so with one of the passengers, however ; for before those on shore could shout a warning, or a restraining hand could be extended from the boat, a young man, mad with fear from his awful night's adventure, seeing nothing, knowing nothing, but that the kelp-strewn sands beside him led up to the safe, dry land above, leaped over the boat's side. A second later the lifeboat shot forward on the incoming surf, and left him struggling in the deadly undertow.

Then quick as a thought a form, clad in the suit of the life savers, jumps past the helmsman and dives over the stern.

"Throw him a line!" roars the Keeper, as all hands leap from the boat now far above the breaker's reach.

Hardly has he spoken when a rope thrown from the shore goes whirling through the air and falls over the heads of the two men struggling out in the surf, one of whom is seen to tread water while he passes the line under his arms. And then the sea, raging at being cheated of its prey, swallows them both.

But scores of sinewy hands have a hold on the line, and hauling it swiftly in, snatch its precious freight from out the watery jaws of death. And when the dripping, unconscious form of 'Long' Tom Coffin lies upon the beach, there, clasped in his arms, so tightly that with difficulty they loosen his grasp, is the half-drowned body of Whittier Maey.

As two groups of men start for the building, gently yet swiftly carrying their human burdens, a young girl breaks away from the

hands that would restrain her, and follows the solemn procession as one who belongs therein by sacred right.

It is Patience!

But it is not Macy upon whom the girl's anxious eyes are riveted, nor is it Macy to whose deaf ears are directed those sobbing protestations of a love concealed all these months under a veil of cruel misunderstanding. For when Tom Coffin's eyes opened from his first peaceful sleep after days of delirium, they rested, first on the loved face of his mother, and then, close beside it, on that of Patience, her eyes bright with happy auguries.

