

# A Complete Story

## At Leckwood Light

WHEN THE HELOISE PUT OUT TO SEA

(By CHARLES J. QUIRK, S.J., in the *Irish Catholic*.)

Sam Wycliff was leaning over the table, whispering to his two confederates.

"Better be careful," hoarsely spoke up one of them, half glancing around. "You'd better not talk too loud. You can't tell who might hear."

Wycliff laughed.

"There ain't no danger."

Nevertheless, to make certain, he turned and took in the whole bar-room at a sweeping glance. Only a sleepy bar-tender was in sight at the other end of the apartment, hunched over a greasy table, a greasier newspaper spread out before him. The two windows faced the sea, framing a vision of blue, sparkling waters, sunlit and tossing. Wycliff turned once again towards his friends.

"I tells you it can be done," he said, as he brought his fist lightly down upon the table. "There'll be no trouble at all. There ain't no moon to-night, and there's a big blow acomin' on; that's what them weather guys says. It's all ours jest for the tryin'." He rubbed his huge, gross hands together in anticipation, while a broad, fiendish grin spread over his grizzled face, impurpling to a darker hue the scar which ran in a large zigzag down the left side of his cheek. "Listen, and I'll tell you how we'll do the job."

The three heads drew closer together.

"Now, here's the best way to go about it."

Sundown, and a tempestuous night swiftly closing in.

Around a big deal table in the living room of Leckwood Lighthouse were seated Joseph Brett, the lighthouse keeper, and his daughter Kate. The old man sat with a huge book of adventure in his lap, his spectacles pushed far back upon his forehead, his eyes filled with pictured memories. Finally, the girl rose to her feet, and going over to a corner of the room, she lit a large lamp, which she brought and so arranged on the table that its light fell full and clear on the open book of her father.

"Well, dad," she said, leaning lovingly over the back of his chair. "I guess it's about time for me to fix my lights. I think it's going to be a bad night. God help all who are at sea!"

The old man glanced up at his daughter for a second and patted her hand and smiled.

"Yes, yes, my dear, and may Our Lord guard the outgoing Heloise which carries so many lives and such precious freight."

Lightly the girl ran up the narrow stairs which led to the topmost room of the lighthouse where, arranged in a wide circle, the great polished lamps were waiting to burst forth in a warm, flowing radiance. For some time the girl gazed dreamily below her where the sea rose and fell in sullen murmurs. Above, she could just discern the outline of towering ragged masses of clouds. Night was already at hand. Very quietly she

knelt and drew her rosary from her dress.

"O Mary, Star of the Sea," she whispered half aloud, "keep thy children safe from all harm this night!"

Suddenly from below she heard a noise, as though a chair had been overturned; then all was silent save the low requiem of wind and wave.

"I wonder if dad could have fallen from his chair," she thought anxiously, and going to the head of the stairs she called:

"Dad!" Dad!" but received no reply. "I wonder—"

A cold fear gripped her heart. For a moment or two she hesitated, looking at the matches in her hand, and then at the lamps that still remained unlit. Should she light them before going down, or should she first see what had befallen her father?"

"I must see what's the matter with dad; it won't hurt for the lamps to wait a minute or two."

Suiting her actions to her words, she hastened down the darkened stairs, and flung open the door of the sitting-room. All was black and silent within, where only a short time before she had left her father basking so peacefully in warmth and light. What could have occurred?

"Oh, dad, I say, I—"

The rest of the sentence was never completed, for at that instant she felt herself grasped from behind and flung violently to the floor.

A scream of terror burst from her lips.

"Oh, father! father! where are you? Oh, save me, save me!"

"Yell on, my lady," growled a voice from the darkness. "No one will hear ye, anyhow."

She felt her hands being tied behind her.

"Say, you over there, can't you strike a light? What youse take dis for?"

Out of the darkness a match flared. When the lamp had been lit the girl beheld, to her horror, her father lying on his back, a bright stream of crimson issuing from his breast. Her father had been foully done to death. At that terrible sight she seemed born anew. Forgetful of her own danger, unmindful of the gaze of the three masked ruffians, she flung back her head, her blue eyes blazing with righteous indignation, her breath coming in quick, short gasps.

"You cowards, you murderers," she cried, "to kill a poor old man! God will punish you for this horrible deed."

"Close yer mouth," said the largest of the three men, "you've had your say. Keep quiet," and he fairly leaped towards the girl.

The struggle was brief, as Kate was easily overpowered. Something smashed down upon her head, and all was darkness. How long she was in this state she never knew. When she first regained consciousness she could not discern anything around her. Where

was she? What had happened? Gradually as her head cleared, the whole of the awful tragedy came vividly back to her. But what was this place in which they had left her? As if in answer to this question, a terrific flash of lightning illumined the darkness, and she recognised instantly the cellar of the lighthouse. The storm at this moment seemed to have commenced. The wind roared and beat with rage against the walls, and she could hear the waves dashing on the rocky foundations of the island whereon the lighthouse was built. The lightning was swift and luridly bright.

The girl now began to collect her thoughts and to endeavor to unravel the mystery that confronted her. First of all, what was the motive that led these men to do murder? Certainly there was nothing of value in the lighthouse. Then why had they come? Why? There must have been some prize worth winning? What was that prize? Were they hoping to wreck some ship? Then the whole truth flashed before her. She had found the key that promised to solve everything. These men were nothing more or less than wreckers. They had found out that the Heloise was due to-night and that she carried a fortune in her hold. Foreseeing a storm, they realised how easy it would be, provided the lighthouse remained in darkness, to wreck the ship as she made for the open sea. That was the gist of the dastardly plot. She understood it only too well. And she was perfectly helpless; and her father!

"O my God, help me to save these poor people and to outwit these devils!"

She tugged and strained to undo the ropes that bound her hands but to no avail. Finally, when she was about to give up hope, she saw by one of the frequent flashes of lightning a piece of an old rusty knife that she and her father had used in one of their former fishing excursions, lying in a far corner of the cellar. After two or three unsuccessful attempts she managed to roll over to where the knife was.

Half an hour later she was free. She had gashed her hand in one or two places in cutting the cord, but, except for this and a feeling of nausea and weakness, she was as strong and capable as ever. She must now get out of the cellar. She knew that she must exert the utmost caution, for she could not tell if anyone guarded the doorway that led to the upper part of the lighthouse. She reached the door and tried it; to her joy it was unlocked. They had thought she was so securely bound that it was not necessary to fasten the door.

Once in the open the fresh salt winds did much to revive her. By the almost unceasing lightning she was able to discover, at no great distance from her, the three ruffians, enveloped completely in oilskins. Thank God, she was not too late! There was yet ample time. The good God help and aid her!

On the left hand side of the island there was a small cove where a lifeboat swung at anchor. So well was this sheet of water protected from the tossing bay beyond that its surface was now scarcely disturbed. Her plan was to reach this boat and endeavor to steer for the channel. She knew how extremely perilous, and even foolhardy, this