

I recall an old fisherman's rhyme told to be by my father when I was just a lad, *'If clouds are gathering thick and fast, keep sharp look-out for sail and mast. If the wind is blowing in the north, no fisherman should dare set forth'*. He'd been a fisherman since he was old enough to cast a net and had always believed it to be true, refusing to launch his boat if a north wind was blowing, much to my mother's annoyance. However, I realise now, some forty years later, that perhaps there was some truth in his theory. Because it was an icy north wind that blew on that fateful night in December: a night I won't forget in a hurry. Heavy, ragged clouds obscured the moon from time to time in a tumultuous grip and the sea was a restless beast, chewing at the rocks below the lighthouse. I watched the horizon for longer than usual, scouring the inky darkness for ships with my father's rhyme playing over and over in my mind and then eventually I decided to retire to my books.

High above the village, at the edge of the cliff, sat the Briar's Rock lighthouse. Its bright light danced over the rooftops and out to sea; the darkness was no match for its strength. In the village, the narrow walkways and paths were bathed in the pale light of a milky moon and bare, sinuous trees awaited their springtime leaves. Amber lights shone from friendly windows and inside noisy revelers danced and applauded. Houses of all sizes dotted the grassy clifftop, and beyond the cliffs and the pretty, little village, the restless sea gurgled and churned.

Light swept the village. The villagers cheered. Light swept the village. More applause.

The lighthouse, which didn't benefit from the same warm glow of the beam, or the same cheeriness of the village, stood stoically watching in the near darkness.

I was working at a table in my living quarters in the tower. Distracted by the noise of the repeated cheering, I attempted to block out the sound by closing the only open window. Suddenly, above me, I heard an unexpected grinding and then a loud clank, followed by darkness. The beam stopped turning. The villagers ceased cheering. The window blew open and extinguished my candle: almost as though it were in harmony with the light. I stood, pushing myself to my feet, accidentally knocking over a pile of books while stumbling in the darkness. I seized a matchstick from my pocket, and lit the lantern: its single flicker wavering in the eerie darkness. I lifted the lantern above my head and ascended the circular tower. Round and round. Up and up. I clambered up the narrow stairway, before freezing at the doorway. I hesitated. I could see that the machinery had stopped. I stepped closer, using the single flame to guide my eyes towards the cogs and wheels. Once inspected, I grabbed my toolkit and yet again ascended the circular tower. Round and round. Up and up. This time I reached the summit of the lighthouse. The wind whistled through the cracks in the rooftop. I stood. Frozen. After what seemed like many minutes - although it could have only been seconds - I snapped out of my trance. I calmly opened the casing of the light...

I was inspecting the inside of the lantern cover and became side-tracked by a sound outside. Peering over the rim of the heavy glass door, it became apparent that the situation had worsened. The sound was a ship...and the ship was approaching. Time was of the essence. Whilst heaving the weighty covering from its position, I stumbled over my toolbox and tumbled backwards to the group. CRASH!

The huge glass dome, which covered the inner-workings of the light, lay in pieces on the floor of the lighthouse. A feeling of helplessness hovered in the air and hope lay shattered alongside the glass casing. His heart pounded faster and faster until the drumming in his ears was unbearable and he felt suddenly very sick.

The horn sounded again. It was getting so close. I sat on the floor, trying to find a solution inside my foggy mind. The waves beneath me crashed endlessly. My tie felt as if it were choking me. I took quick, shallow breaths. In the brief seconds which passed, I glanced out to the village and realized my only hope lay at the bottom of two hundred and fifty three steps.

Awkwardly scrambling to his feet, he darted for the door. The spiral staircase seemed endless, and with every step the lighthouse keeper's fears about the boat seemed to increase. Finally, the door was in sight. He ran, gasping, towards the exit. As he flung the door open, the sight which befell him was enough to make him stop. Momentarily, he stared. Walking towards him, with lanterns blazing and torches at the ready, were the inhabitants of nearly the entire village. Their smiles illuminated the pathway almost as much as the lights they carried. The journey back up the tower was one of optimism, and with every step he felt encouraged that all was not lost. After guiding the first group of villagers to the top of the lighthouse, with their lights and lanterns shining brightly in the darkness, the lighthouse keeper watched as others gathered in swathes along the cliff top. He watched as the ship safely navigated the rocks. He watched as strangers stood shoulder to shoulder with him and he watched knowing those strangers would soon be friends.