

**THE WHISTLING  
BUOY, PP. 871-1044**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649733330

The Whistling Buoy, pp. 871-1044 by Charles Barnard

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Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.  
Cover @ 2017

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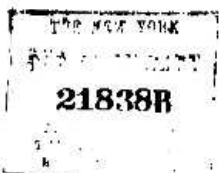


THE  
WHISTLING BUOY.

BY  
CHARLES BARNARD,  
AUTHOR OF "THE TONE-MASTERS," "THE SOPRANO," ETC.

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PHILADELPHIA:  
J. B. LIPPINCOTT COMPANY.



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LIPPINCOTT'S  
MONTHLY MAGAZINE.

JUNE, 1887.

THE WHISTLING BUOY.

I.

EVERY time it moved it moaned. On calm summer days when the sea was smooth it seemed to rest in peace, as if meditating in silence on its griefs. When gales swept over the water from the southwest it rocked in restless, uncertain motions and mingled its dismal voice with the roar of the surf, the tolling of the fog-bell, and the cries of the sea-birds as it moaned and moaned in perpetual reiteration as if it had a tale to tell, but could only mourn over it in fitful inarticulate sighs meaning much and saying little. On calmer days and nights, when there was only a gentle swell moving in from the Atlantic, it spoke slowly at intervals, like a child who sobs over some little grief that is past, but not forgotten.

To the fishermen it was a commonplace affair. An iron buoy anchored in mid-channel just at the entrance of the little port,—at once a guide and warning. Within the buoy was a curious arrangement of valves, air- and water-chambers, and pipes. On top was a steam whistle. When the buoy swayed on the waves the water enclosed in its hollow chambers flowed to one side, and the valves opened to admit air to fill the vacuum caused by the moving water. When the wave passed and the buoy keeled over in the opposite direction the air-valve closed, and the water within, rushing back to its first position, forced out the imprisoned air through the whistle, and it spoke, in a harsh and mournful note. The sound began as a murmur, swelled out to a discordant forte, and then died away in a despairing sigh. At the next roll of the huge iron mass it moaned again in the same manner. If it rolled one way the right-hand valve opened and admitted a supply of air; when it rolled the other way the left-hand valve opened; and thus it kept up its dismal crying at every wave that swept beneath it. The note could be heard for more than a mile, and sailing-masters bound into the little harbor

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listened for it through the darkness, through fog and storm, as a guide to port and a home.

To the under side of the great iron buoy was secured a chain that extended down through the green water to a massive rock below, a rock whereon the hopes of a lifetime were wrecked and lost long years ago. On yachting-parties sailing out the port the moaning buoy had a depressing effect. Its unending moan seemed to be for the young life whose fate was bound up in some strange secret lost in the sea. They listened to its note, floating faint and sad over the blue water, and wondered if any would solve the riddle of that life, if ever knight would come to redress a grievous wrong.

It is said the buoy knew all about it, and would tell everything, if it could speak. Being merely a buoy, it could only moan.

Two miles to the west by north stood the harbor light. It was a short round tower of brick and painted white. At the top was the black lantern, its shining windows decked in yellow curtains by day and opening a lurid eye on sea and land by night. The light-house, too, was said to be familiar with the lost secret under the sea, and every night appeared to look furtively all around the horizon as if revolving something in its mind and yet not daring to speak of it. It could only look askance at the world and wait. There was behind the light-house a small white house with a little garden, grass-plot and picket fence. Everything was orderly, neat, and comfortable, as befitted the residence of an official of the United States government. There was also beside the house a wooden structure, half trestle, half tower, in which hung a bell. Beneath the wooden cage where hung the bell was a long pendulum and a chain and heavy weight, these being parts of the clock-work whereby the bell was rung when gray fogs crept up from the misty Atlantic.

The light-house stood at the extreme point of a miniature Cape Cod at the southeast end of the island, and in the bay formed by the curving arm of the cape was an anchoring-ground for the fishing-boats and yachts that used it for a summer harbor. Along the shore of this bay were the few scattered houses of the little village. On the south side towards the sea stood the big yellowish-green hotel and the fantastic cottages of the transient guests who made the cape their summer pleasure-ground.

By some oversight on the part of the officers of the United States Coast Survey, the exact position, latitude and longitude of the light-house and the port were not put on any of the official maps. Neither were there any sailing directions printed giving the right course to take to enter the port or find the moaning buoy. It is really not important, because he who steers by "the light that never was on sea or land" can find any port where life and love have found an anchorage.

The buoy was known to the fishermen and visitors at Wilson's Holl as "the two-fathom buoy." It was painted in alternate horizontal stripes of black and red; and every one knows that the Light-House Board by these marks meant to say that the buoy marked an obstruction in mid-channel, and that the navigator in entering port might pass on either side of it in safety. It also stood as the mark of a terrible ob-



struction at the entrance of a fair young life. He who would come to the knowledge of all she was and all she did and said must steer carefully and pass by on either side the moaning memento of a mystery and heavy sorrow. Two fathoms deep in her young heart lay the unspoken secret of her life and the sea.

Could there be any connection between that prosy buoy and a young girl's life and love? Wait. Everything comes ashore at last.

People wondered why old Captain Breze Johnson gave his daughter such a strange name. Captain Johnson, retired Sandy Hook pilot, and now keeper of the light-house, best knew what the three letters that made his daughter's name meant,—if they meant anything. She had never been baptized; the name had simply been given to her by the old captain, and apparently for no reason whatever. There were those in the village who said it was an "outlandish heathen name anyway, and not fit for a sweet young thing like old Captain Johnson's darter."

Merely three letters,—*MAL*. Mai Johnson. The old man, her father, pronounced it as if spelled "May;" so, for those who never saw it written out, it seemed a proper and rather pretty name for a young girl just touching seventeen.

As for Mai herself, she thought its curious spelling merely some pretty conceit of her father's fancy, and wore her name with becoming pride and dignity. It was her name, and it never entered her young heart to ask what it meant. The old man knew in part, and so did the moaning buoy, but one would not tell, and the other spoke only in moans no man could understand.

## II.

The season had fairly opened. The white steamboats had already begun to make their daily trips to Wilson's Holl from New London, Connecticut. The procession of vessels continually drifting along the horizon to the northeast, bound east or west between Long Island Sound and the Vineyard, or turning southeast past the cape and making for the open sea, had largely increased. Already a yacht or two had anchored at the Holl, and the yellowish-green hotel and fantastic cottages were open and expectant of summer boarders. There was a broad piazza at the front of the hotel, where the guests sat to view the sea spread out before them; and here, on a bright morning early in July, sat two ladies,—mothers of grown-up daughters, and women prepared to look at the world in a certain calm expectation of anything that might happen to the advantage of their blooming girls.

"Did you see the arrival last night?"

"No. I understood the barge came over from the steamboat-landing with only a man. I was not interested."

"You would have been, had you seen him."

"Have you learned his name, my dear?"

"I examined the hotel register after breakfast, because he sat next to our table. Rather good-looking,—fine eyes,—and very gentlemanly,

of course. A man that many girls would like, though I must confess I did not."

"What is his name?"

"Tell you soon as I come to it. It's a little singular, because I hear his mother, who was a widow for many years, has married again,—married very well, too, for her, and for the young man too, for I hear he has nothing and spent it all in Paris."

"And who was she?"

"His mother? Oh, I don't know; but she first married some person by the name of Yardstickie."

"Yardstickie?"

"Yes. Curious name,—pronounced Yedstick, with the accent on the first syllable, and spelled with an *ie*. Royal Yardstickie is his name."

Then she added, in a lower voice,—

"Here he comes now."

A young man about twenty-eight years of age walked slowly out of the open door of the hotel. He was dressed in white flannel, and seemed very much at ease with himself and the world. He gazed round with an air of calm assurance on the few ladies and children scattered over the piazza, and then looked out over the garden, the path along the bluff, and the blue sea beyond. The view did not seem to interest him in the least, and he looked a trifle bored, as if he wondered why he should be cast upon such a charming and uneventful shore. Seeing the top of the light-house, he sauntered down the steps and took a leisurely pace along the path that followed the shore on top of the sandy dunes that bordered the broad beach.

"I do not like him."

"Why not, dear? I'm sure he's very handsome."

"Dissipated,—or has been. Comes down here for rest-cure. I shall tell my Milly to decline an introduction."

"It may not be saked, dear."

"Well, I must say I don't see why not. Milly is not as handsome as your Clara, my dear, but she's very bright, you must admit."

"Milly can take care of herself."

"Perfectly; but I shall decline any advances,—if made; and I hope they will not be."

"Why not?"

"I do not know. I do not like him: that's all."

The young man wandered aimlessly along the path on the bluff, as if in no haste. Well might he linger, for at his feet lay the broad beach, now creamy with breaking surf, and, beyond, the blue sea sparkling in the sun and stirred by a salt and fragrant breeze. To the left the sandy dunes, here and there dotted with patches of bronze-colored grass and dark waxberry-bushes, stretched off towards a fringe of small pines and oaks. Before him stood the quaint tower of the light-house. With all this charming scene and beautiful day, he was gloomy and silent. Why had his mother insisted on his coming down to this dreary place? He had not needed rest: he wanted money. If he had that he would leave this stupid country and once more cross the water

to charming Paris. He looked over the sea that he had crossed only three days before with a little sigh of regret,—regret for past pleasures, regret for things done that could never be undone.

"And here I must stay for two weeks or more, till they come down here for the summer,—or till she lets me have some money."

Just then he reached the neat wooden fence that stretched across the end of the cape and enclosed the plot of land belonging to the government and on which the light-house stood. Just where the path met the fence there was a stile or low place in the fence, with a big yellow boulder for a step over the gap. He paused here a moment, debating whether he would enter the government grounds or return to the hotel, when the door of the little white house opened, and a young girl stepped out on the flat blue boulder that served as a door-stone and came briskly towards the stile. She was neatly and plainly dressed, and wore a large white sun-bonnet that half hid her face. She seemed preoccupied, and did not observe the stranger by the fence till she was close to the stile.

"Allow me to help you over, miss."

She paused abruptly to see who spoke, and found young Mr. Royal Yardstickie at the stile with one hand offered as if to help her over. The next instant she stepped easily and gracefully over the stile, and said,—

"Thank you, I can help myself."

"Beg pardon, miss. I'm a stranger here. Can you tell me the name of this light-house?"

"I can. I live here,—with my father."

He was not accustomed to this particular phase of the Massachusetts female mind, and was vexed, though he took care not to show it.

"What is it called?"

"Hedgefence Light. Good-morning, sir."

With that she moved away towards the hotel with a free and vigorous step, as if quite able to take care of herself.

Mr. Royal Yardstickie had a new sensation. Never before had he met with quite this kind of rebuff. Women commonly bowed down to him, or he thought they did. And those who he imagined declined his acquaintance had always left an impression that they had been pleased to meet him—once.

"She has gone to the hotel on some errand. From the lay of the land, she must come back on this path. I may as well look about here for a little while and see what happens. I'll go into the light-house,—I always did enjoy light-houses,—and see what sort of a creature the father may be."

The young man watched the retreating figure as it followed the path on the bluff. Here was a girl of character and with a mind of her own. How different from one he knew in Paris!

"If Julie had been like that, I shouldn't be in this hole,—figuratively speaking,—and I might never have seen Wilson's Holl, which would be a blessing."

By this time he had crossed the little yard, and, mounting the great door-step, he knocked at the green door of the house.