

POINT FERMIN LIGHT.

IT'S HISTORY, ITS KEEPER, AND ITS SURROUNDINGS.

BY A SPECIAL CONTRIBUTOR.

A long, winding shore line, grayish white in the golden sunshine; a jagged, precipitous bluff, its brown sides flecked with vivid splashes of blood-red ice plant; a wide expanse of blue water coquetting with the eager sunbeams; and above, rising straight from the jutting point, a lighthouse, white and still, the silent sentinel of the deep. Here for the past twenty-six years it has stood, and from its tower, each night, from sunset till sunrise, has shone forth a beacon light of warning and of guidance for the good ships which pass that way. It is situated about three miles from the historic little harbor town of San Pedro, upon Point Fermin, a sharp promontory cutting into the sea, in lat, 33 deg. 42 min. 14 sec. N. and long. 118 deg. 17min. 41 sec. W.

I saw this lighthouse for the first time about twelve years ago, and although I have had occasion to visit it two or three times since, I shall never forget the feeling of disappointment and shocked surprise which surged over my childish soul as I looked at the first "flesh and blood" lighthouse I had ever beheld. My knowledge of lighthouses was rather limited, having been gleaned principally from pictures with which I was wont to adorn my scrap-books, and my ideal one was a tall, somber tower, rising straight from the cliff, with a tiny circular balcony at the top, the old-fashioned kind to be found on the rock-bound shores of the Atlantic.

My ideal has never changed, but my point of view has; and while from an artistic or romantic view point the architectural value of the modern lighthouse is as naught, still one cannot but feel how infinitely more sensible and comfortable it is.

To the tourist or sightseer the place is something to be visited, explored, enjoyed, photographed, perhaps-and then forgotten while for him who keeps the light and for those who belong to him, it is not merely a place to live -it is a home.

Surrounded, as it is, by a white picket fence and its neatly white-washed outbuildings, the Point Fermin Lighthouse presents little difference in appearance from an ordinary dwelling-house. The main building, which is painted white, with a red roof, is two stories in height, while the tower rises from the front fifty feet. The house, with its twelve great rooms, must seem lonely to the genial old sea captain who is at present its sole occupant. In fact, he confessed as much to us, and added, with a knowing wink: "And I'm not going to stand it much longer, either. I tell you. I'm going to get someone to stay with me. I'll not put in another lonely six months as I have the last;" and he laughed jovially; but behind the laugh there was just a touch of pathos, after all.

His name is George N. Shaw, and a typical old sea captain he is-jovial and hearty, and always ready and glad to sit down and spin a yarn; capital stories they are which he can tell, too, and they possess all the charm and flavor of actual experience and adventure.

Short and stout, with a stubby gray beard, his visored cap pushed slightly awry on his grizzled head, disclosing a jolly, weather-beaten face, his feet encased in huge carpet slippers, he is indeed a picturesque figure as he leads the way about his interesting domain or sits upon a scarred old bench under the trees, with one leg crossed over the other, spinning a sailor's yarn. He is just enough cock-eyed to be interesting, but a very kindly light shines in the merry blue eyes, and lifelong service has not killed that

innate air of refinement which bespeaks the gentleman.

While I was inscribing my name in the great register in the entrance hall he told me that there were annually 3000 visitors to the lighthouse, callers being received every day in the week, with the exception of Friday and Saturday, the hours being from 8 to 12 and 1 till 4 o'clock. On these days it is one of the regulations that he shall never appear without his uniform, which is of blue, with cap to match, bearing a lighthouse embroidered on it in gold thread above the visor. Fridays and Saturdays are his housecleaning days, and visitors are not admitted.

Four or five parties came while I was there, and while we were waiting for them to register he ushered me through the reception-room on the right to the parlor beyond, which looked out upon the sea. It was here that I asked if he had always lived alone.

"Oh no," he said. "There is my little lassie; she is 15 now and at school in San Francisco and he pointed with fatherly pride to the portrait of a little girl above the mantel, while a very tender look stole into his rugged, weather-beaten face.

"And there was the wife, when she was with us;" and the lowered voice and the past tense told their own sad story, as he pointed to the picture of a sweet-faced woman, gowned in the fashion of thirty years ago.

"And there is her mother-her name was Clark before her marriage, and she was the belle of Staten Island at one time."

Then we climbed three flights of narrow, winding stairs, the first one landing us on the second floor, where are located the captains living-rooms, which no woman could keep more scrupulously neat than he does.

"This is my boudoir," and the merry blue eyes twinkled as he motioned us into a large sleeping-room, whose furnishings reminded me of my grandmother's eastern home, so quaint and old-fashioned were the appointments. In all, the lighthouse contains twelve rooms, six of them being fifteen feet square, while three are ten feet square, and the other three smaller.

We followed up another still darker, narrower stairway to the chartroom where the necessary books and maps relative to the lighthouse service are kept. From there we ascended still another flight into the light tower, where the linen cover was removed from the sparkling lens, that \$8000 lens which is the pride of the keeper's heart; it is of the fourth order and 400 diameters. While the wick of the lamp is but 1 1/2 inches in diameter and the flame but 2 inches in height, the magnifying powers of the lens make the light appear as large as the entire lens, and it is often seen as far away as Old Baldy . The glass windows surrounding the light are three-eighths of an inch thick and of the finest quality of glass obtainable.

Stepping out through a small door, we found ourselves upon a circular balcony, surrounded by a railing of iron. And here one could spend hours of almost perfect happiness drinking in the beauty of it all. The view which repays you for your upward climb is one of the finest obtainable on this section of the southern coast. As far as the eye can see, to the southwestward, is the limitless stretch of blue ocean, sparkling and scintillating in the golden sunshine like a liquid sapphire encrusted with diamonds, and the tender turquoise of the sky blends into the deeper blue of the sea in a faint, filmy mist. Out toward, the southwest lies Catalina, which at this point is twenty-two miles distant, the gray-blue peaks to the little island standing out softly against the sky. Turning in the direction of San Pedro Harbor, and following the curving shore

line, white in the distance, the cottages of Terminal Island, Long Beach and Alamitos can be plainly seen, nestling confidently along the bluff. In the middle distance you catch a glimpse of the San Pedro breakwater, reaching out of Deadman's Island as if to soften its dreary desolation and to link it to the shore. To the west is the long, broken shore line, with its sharp, rocky points projecting into the sea, while to the east Sentinel Rock stands 30 feet high and 30 feet from the cliff. This rock, so named from its lonely detachment from the mainland, bears a faint resemblance to the Sphinx, and adds a charming touch to the picture. The point in front of the lighthouse is carpeted thickly with the glistening ice plant, whose blood-red leaves blend together in one solid mass of flame color, adding just the requisite touch of vivid color to the scene to make it perfect.

An occasional white breasted sea-gull flies majestically across the expanse of ocean, and but for the flapping of his wings there is no sound save the gentle, ceaseless murmur of the ever-restless sea as the incoming tide urges it to the shore, where it breaks over the rocks in clouds of white spray; and you find yourself drifting-drifting away till suddenly you are sharply recalled to the prosaic realities of life by hearing the captain say, "Those outhouses? Yes they were for chickens. I did have sixty, but they are all gone but three. The weasels and badgers and wildcats killed them all. You can't raise chicken here. Why, I planted some vegetables and planned to have a garden, but the vermin scratched all the seeds up; had one lone squash-that was the only thing that ever ripened;" and he laughed good naturedly.

He told us that, after he gave up a captain's life, he tried for a time to live inland, but he couldn't do it. The sailor's love for the sea was in his blood, and had to be satisfied. For eighteen years he has been the keeper of the Point Fermin light. From 1874 till 1882, a Miss Mary L. Smith was the keeper, and she and her sister lived there alone. She resides at Sierra Madre now, in the shadow of the grand old mountains.

Although 154 feet above mean high water there is many a wild night when the winds rage and howl in maddened frenzy about this lonely abode, and the cold salt spray has many a time been dashed over the light tower, completely drenching the little balcony. They tell of one wild night when for nine long hours the faithful keeper sat in the rocking tower, and with aching arms held steady the swaying light, for it is on such nights as these that ships go down. Placid and calm as was the water on the warm, still day when last I visited it, old settlers tell of a night when four good ships, the American, Bunker Hill, Kennedy and St. Louis, all went ashore near the rocky point.

In 1898 the light was changed from a flashing ruby and white light to a steady white one, which can be seen seventeen nautical miles at sea, and is thought better. Once every three months the captain's supplies arrive in the supply boat Madrona.

As we went downstairs I asked the captain if he could not tell me of a real wreck that occurred near Point Fermin, "one with a mystery or tragedy to it-something creepy or queer?" I cried, forgetting in my eagerness to be dignified. By this time we had reached the little porch, where two more of our party were sitting, breathing in the invigorating air. Seating himself on the upper step, and crossing one leg over the other in his characteristic way, he pushed his visored cap farther back on his grizzled head, and began:

"I can remember when there were twenty-three English -ships in the outer harbor and thirty-two in the inner, and I can tell you of a wreck that occurred eight years ago, just around the point there. The Respecadero, an English ship hailing from

Cardiff, Wales-a 1000-ton steel clipper ship she was, carrying a cargo of 2000 tons of coal, bound for San Pedro-struck her bow on the end of the reef there, at 1 o'clock in the afternoon. The captain and crew just lowered the boats and put into San Pedro, and sold her to the under-writers for \$1800, and the latter afterward sold her to the Whitelaw Reid Company of San Francisco for \$2000. She was a fine ship, and was insured for \$90,000. But she was there for a long time, and people used to ask why she anchored away out here, instead of making for the harbor, not knowing that there she stuck with a rock through her.

"Well, sir, some of the seafaring men stationed in the harbor raised a pure of \$250, and sent the captain back to his home in England. There was always something strange about what happened afterward. He got a new ship after a while and set out to sea, and then one night he cut his throat, and no one has ever known the reason why. The whole thing was mighty queer- mighty queer!" and the captain shook his head and sighed.

So intensely interested had we become in the captain's story that we had lost all account of time, and found our driver becoming impatient to be off, and threatening, as drivers will, to charge us an extra fee; and we were obliged, reluctantly, to tear ourselves away, as the captain, lifting his faded cap with as courtly a grace as did ever a young lieutenant, called after us, "Good-bye, I'm glad you came; come again when you have more time to spend. You'll always find a welcome."

GRACE HORTENSE TOWER
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