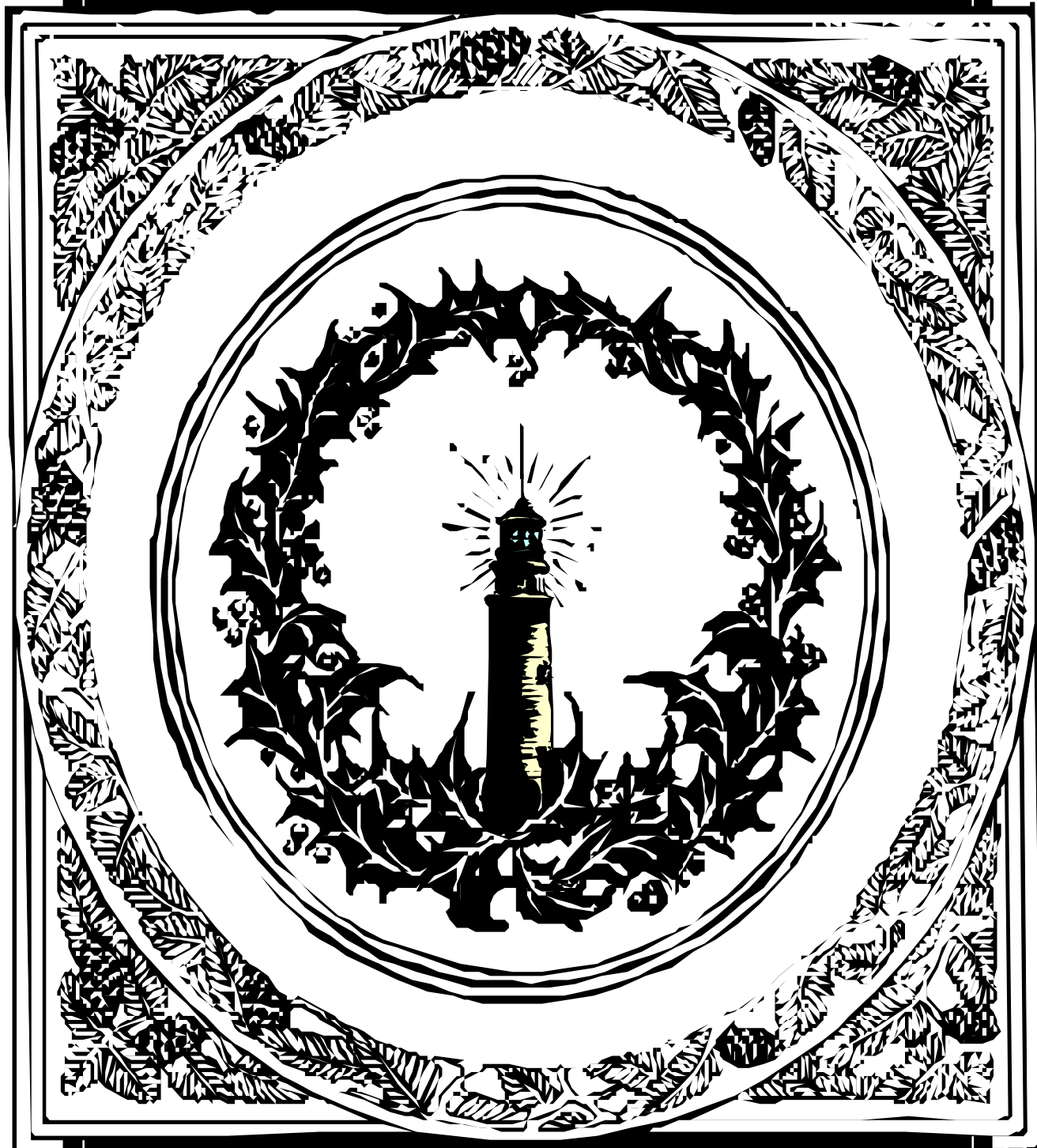


The Lighthouse of Whetstone Island



by Kerry Kistler



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for Jil, dedicated "assistant keeper" of our lighthouse

"The Lighthouse. . . appeal[s] to the interest and better instinct of man because [it is] symbolic of never-ceasing watchfulness, of steadfast endurance in every exposure, of widespread helpfulness."

George R. Putnam

"In essence, the light keeper symbolizes what we think of ourselves as doing in our better moments: when the situation calls for that extra bravery or devotion to duty, we can rise to the occasion and not be found wanting."

Francis R. Holland, Jr.

"There are no words to express the feelings that induce a sailor to offer fervent prayers when he sees this mark of sympathy expressed by his fellow men. Suddenly he sees that he is no longer alone in the midst of the ocean waves: he sees that people are caring for him. . ."

Lt. Lavrentiy Alekseyevich

(on sighting the lighthouse at Sitka, Alaska, 1839)

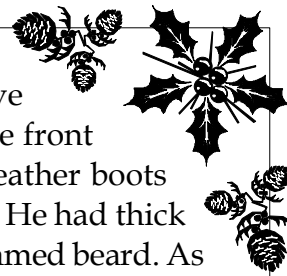
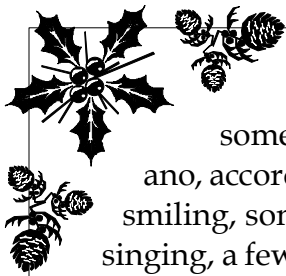
"Lighthouses symbolize a very different way of life than the one we know. They're almost like churches - singular, standing alone."

Marita Lopez Mena

Every Christmas season since my great grandmother died I have been quietly observing a personal Christmas tradition. I relate it here, not to strip it of its quiet quality but because it is, as you will see, the gateway to a richer tale. A tale that needs, finally, to be told. With this as preamble, here is the account of how, one Christmas, I received more than I gave. Much more. I was given a story. . .and a treasure.

It was time, once again, to visit the nearby home, a home for those people rich in years, a place in which my great grandmother lived out the final chapters of her life. I visited this same place every mid-December to offer the residents the gift of my music. I play a simple instrument, a small rosewood flute called a mountain ocarina which infuses every melody breathed through it with sonorous beauty. Whatever carol they request, I play it, if I know it.





Nearly every year some resident joins in on a piano, accordion or harmonica. Some sit smiling, some sleeping, most singing, a few weeping. Every year I see a few new faces, along with the familiar, and there are always some who are no more. My great grandmother had slipped through all three categories. But, this particular year as I finished playing Silent Night for the forth time in an hour, by request, I spotted a new face in the back of the meeting room. He was sitting in a wheelchair, working intently on something laying in his lap. I am sure he had not been there when I began playing.

"Any other requests before I say good-bye?" I asked scanning the room. A look of disappointment spread across several faces. "There must be at least one more!" I said trying to sound cheerful.

The man in the wheelchair looked up from his lap. "We Three Kings," he said, so softly I almost didn't hear it. I played the song through with all the feeling I could and then wished everybody a Merry Christmas.

The residents quietly left the room, a few lingered behind to thank me or just give me a gentle hug. But he remained in his wheelchair at the back of the room. He was wearing a nautical looking uniform consisting of a dark indigo-blue, double-breasted coat, vest and trou-

sers. A double row of five brass buttons ran down the front of the coat and his black leather boots gleamed with fresh polish. He had thick white hair and a neatly trimmed beard. As

I approached the silver haired gentleman I could see there were fine wood shavings scattered across his lap. In his hands were a small pocket knife and an unfinished carving.

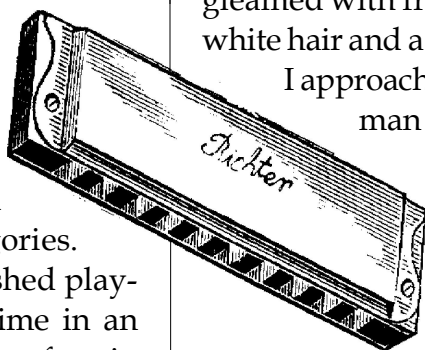
"May I see it?" he inquired, reaching toward my handmade, rosewood ocarina. I agreed, asking his name. "Jacob Carver," he smiled turning my flute over and over, inspecting it carefully. "Exquisite! As beautiful as your playing," he offered with a twinkle.

"I have carved many whistles and flutes," he concluded, tapping me on the arm with his unfinished carving. It was still mostly a block of light colored basswood nearly 6 inches long and 2 inches square. One end had been carved into what looked like the link of a chain. "Of course, I have carved thousands of other objects too but the mates almost always favored flutes and whistles."

"The mates?" I inquired.

"Sailors," he added knowingly.

"Oh, I see," I nodded, more out of politeness than because of genuine interest. "Well, I hope you have a Merry Christmas, Mr. Carver," I added, hanging my ocarina around my neck by its



thin leather string. He flashed an almost imperceptible smile and looked vacantly at his unfinished carving saying nothing.

"Good bye," I mumbled awkwardly, turning toward the hallway leading to the front door. I had a full day ahead of me and needed to get started. There was so much to do to get ready for Christmas and I had already spent longer than planned playing for these residents. Even so, I stopped for a few moments at the front desk to wish the director a Merry Christmas and to say good bye until next year. I headed toward the exit and was nearly through the heavy glass door when I spotted Jacob in his wheelchair. He was sitting next to the door, gazing outside, humming and carving away with such speed that I feared for his fingers. The first link of his wooden chain was finished. I am still not sure why I paused in my headlong rush back to my busy life but as I did so, he glanced up at me.

"Were you a sailor too?" I inquired.

"Aren't we all sailors. . . upon this changing sea of life?" he replied cryptically.

"What I mean is —"

"I know what you mean," he interrupted with a half smile. "I have lived most of my life on the open sea but, no, I was never a sailor. . . though I knew plenty of them."

"What were you doing on the open sea most of your life if you weren't a sailor?" I asked in a puzzled tone.

Jacob began to roll his wheelchair away from the door. "Let me show you."

"I don't have time for this," I thought impatiently. "Would you mind pushing?" he asked over his shoulder. "I'm trying to get this carving finished for a dear friend."

Relenting, I wheeled him down the hallway toward his room, the wood shavings fluttering off his lap like a mid-December snow.

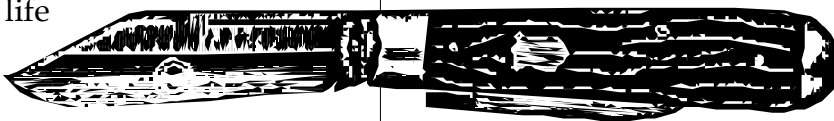
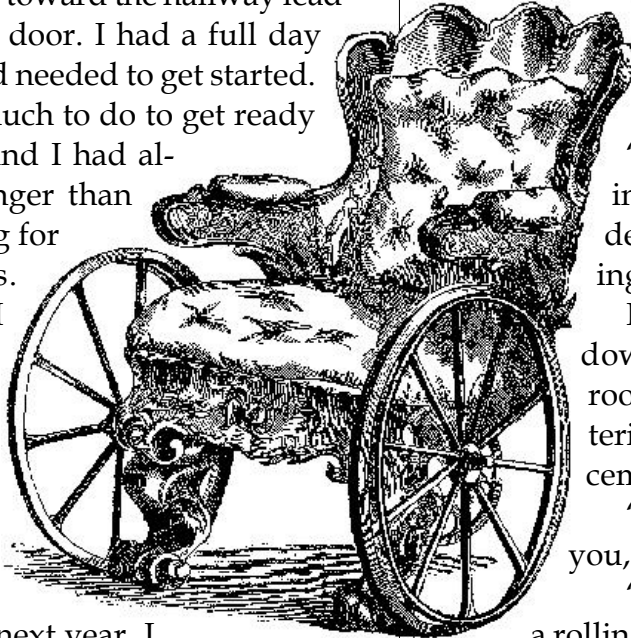
"I'll bet the janitor loves you," I teased.

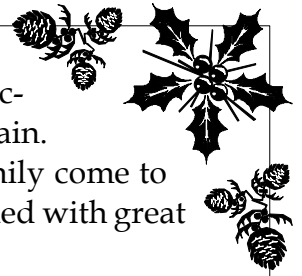
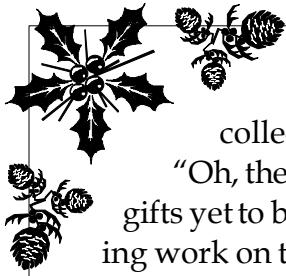
"Yes, everyone here calls me a rolling fire hazard, but at least I'm easy to find," he responded playfully.

As Jacob directed me to his room, he continued to carve and hum a carol which I recognized as "We Three Kings."

Soon we were pushing into Jacob's dimly lit room where he found a small lamp and pulled it's string. Warm light spilled over the room illuminating a vast population of carved wooden objects. There were dozens of intricately carved chess pieces, a fascinating menagerie of animals, small toys, puzzles and whistles.

A score of beautiful nativity sets were arranged neatly on a dresser and everywhere were tucked lighthouses of varying sizes and shapes. Jacob smiled at my evident surprise.





“What a magnificent collection!” I exclaimed.

“Oh, they’re not a collection. They’re gifts yet to be given,” he replied, resuming work on the wooden chain in his lap. The second link was taking shape.

“Where did you learn such a magnificent craft?” I marveled, lifting one piece after another with tender care.

“The answer is in your hand,” he replied without looking up. I was holding a beautifully detailed lighthouse and I glanced at him curiously. Jacob sharpened his pocket knife on a nearby whetstone with a delicate caress and began his story.

“The lighthouse was situated on the easternmost point of Whetstone Island, three miles from the mainland. . . surrounded by the open sea,” he said with a twinkle in his eye. “She was a magnificent lighthouse, 125 feet from threshold to lantern deck, built of white limestone blocks. The six of us lived there, in a rambling, attached cottage, my parents, two sisters and a brother. Whetstone Island was so small that most nautical charts of the time barely noted it but we knew every rock on it, every tree, every cliff. You could walk the length of it in less than 15 minutes and its breadth in 10. But we were happy there and kept busier than most people would have believed. You might say our daily routine revolved around the lighthouse as much as its light revolved around us.” His nimble fingers



continued to shape the second link of the wooden chain.

“How did your family come to tend this lighthouse?” I asked with great curiosity.

“Actually, we were considered somewhat of an oddity in that respect,” Jacob replied. “The previous keeper, a man named Stephen, whom my father knew well, had grown too old to continue in his duties. He had in fact become partially blind and urged my father to take over as keeper. It was then that my father asked Stephen why he had remained in such a

difficult position for nearly three-score years. Stephen gave a reply that sank deep into my father’s heart and soon altered the course of our whole family.”

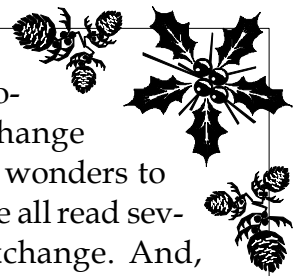
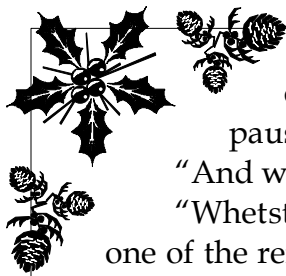
There was an intolerable pause as he carefully

brushed off his lap.

“What did Stephen tell your father!?” I finally blurted out. Jacob blew some small shavings from the finished, second link of the wooden chain he was carving.

“He told my father that being a keeper allowed him to do two invaluable things: To give light and save lives. My father would eventually carve that sentiment into one of the limestone foundation blocks of the Whetstone Lighthouse. So, my father applied for the position and waited for a decision from the Bureau of Lighthouses. The situation had to first be offered to all other existing keepers in the district. Of course, no





one wanted it," he said, pausing.

"And why was that?" I questioned.

"Whetstone Island was known as one of the remotest and loneliest bits of land along the coast. Tending a lighthouse

located on the mainland could be isolated enough but being assigned to an island or reef was consid-

ered little more than a prison sentence. Once my father heard another keeper say, 'The trouble with my life here is that I have too much time to think.' Father disagreed. He believed there was a depth of thinking which could only be achieved in solitude."

"But what about the children? What about your education?!" I asked, incredulous.

"That's where we were considered a bit odd," he continued. "When a keeper's children reached school age most would apply for a transfer or swap with a keeper from another station closer to a school.

Other keepers would board their children with someone in town or arrange for a second home for their family. One keeper we knew used to row his children to shore every day. But, my parents believed it was their duty and divine privilege to train us up. So, while my father was the principal keeper, we all became assistant keepers and the entire island became our school house. The Bureau of Lighthouses would rotate small portable libraries of books among the keepers during each quarterly inspection, es-

pecially among the more isolated locations. Each exchange brought new worlds, new wonders to us children. The books were all read several times by the next exchange. And, when books were no longer fit for circulation

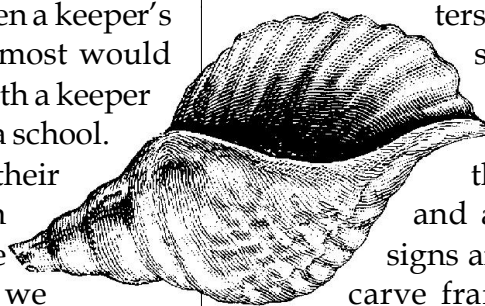
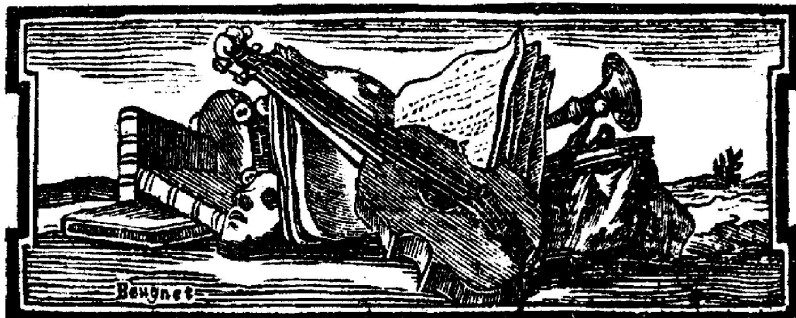
the Bureau instructed the district inspectors to give them to a deserving keeper. In time we accumulated a library of grand

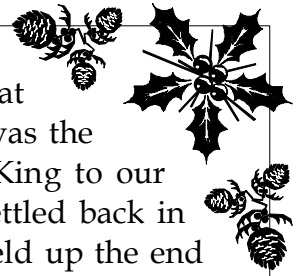
proportions," he concluded, thinking back.

"But you can only learn so much from reading books," I thought out loud.

"Well, we also received an education of another sort. In addition to the normal duties required to keep a lighthouse burning brightly, we developed other skills and abilities. My brother and I became master fishermen and harvested the sea as a farmer would his fields. My sisters mastered the fine arts of sewing and music. They also collected shells of every description from the shores of our school and arranged them into designs and pictures. I learned to carve frames for them from the abundant driftwood and, as you can see, my carving did not stop with frames. Together we gathered the eggs of sea birds, cormorants, gulls, murre and others. All of these items we took ashore from time to time finding a ready market. But of course, our first responsibility was ever to the lighthouse," Jacob paused.

"How amazing," I uttered, "that you should have all lived such an heroic





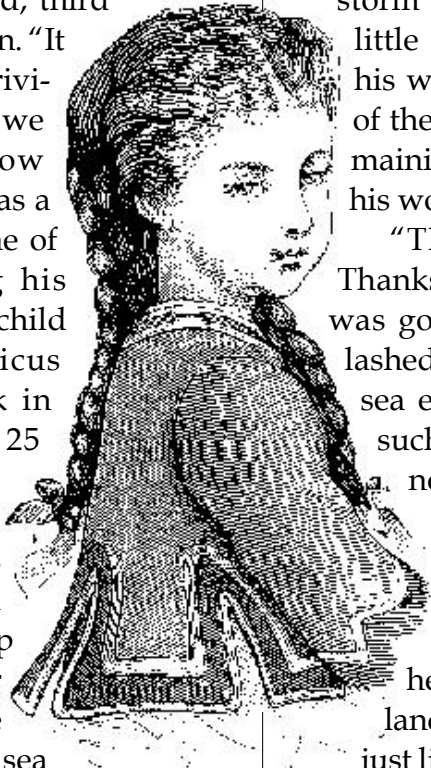
life-style!"
 "Heroic?" Jacob sniffed. He inspected the finished, third link of his wooden chain. "It was a life-style of rare privilege, as well as duty, and we fulfilled it gladly. . .now Abbie Burgess. . .there was a hero," he said with a tone of deep respect, nodding his head. "She was the only child of the keeper of Matinicus Rock Light Station back in 1856. The station was 25 miles off the coast of Maine. Her father had gone ashore for supplies and while he was there a terrific storm came up which lasted for four weeks. Every night he looked toward the angry sea with the greatest concern for his daughter," Jacob paused, carefully brushing the shavings from his lap.

"What happened!?" I finally said with wide eyes.

"Every night found the lighthouse shining brightly through the gloomy tempest. As long as the light was shining, he knew that his girl was well. And the light never failed, not even once. Now there is a hero for you. A regular legend," Jacob declared.

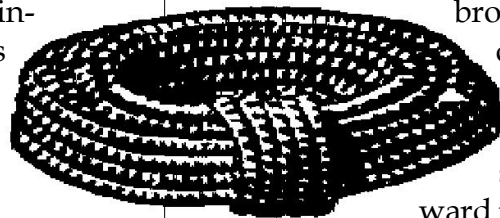
"For four whole weeks!?" I questioned in disbelief.

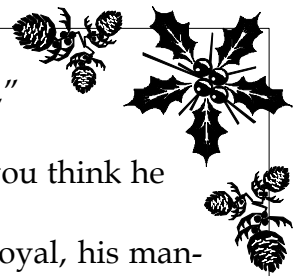
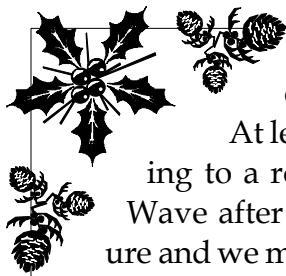
"Without exaggeration," Jacob assured me. "I remember many storms which lasted as long," he said with narrowing eyes as if peering back into his past. He looked at me with a smile spread all over his face. "There was



one unforgettable storm that stands above the rest. It was the storm that brought a King to our little island." Jacob settled back in his wheelchair and held up the end of the wooden chain, studying the remaining uncarved block. He resumed his work.

"The storm came up right after Thanksgiving. We could tell this one was going to be different. The winds lashed us with fury and the swelling sea exploded against our cliffs with such force that it sounded like cannon fire. The storm had blasted on for over four weeks and though we longed for a quiet and peaceful Christmas eve, the storm grew even worse with a heavy, thick snow pelting the island. Night was coming on and I had just lit the lighthouse lamp. The sticky snow was beginning to accumulate on the glass of the watchroom. . .the room at the top of a lighthouse where the Fresnel lens and lamp are located. My father and I were outside on the narrow balcony which encircles the watchroom, sweeping the thick snow off the glass with long handled brooms, when I heard a distant cry. I peered down from our lofty perch into the swirling snow toward the booming surf and heard the cry again. My father heard it too, and we headed inside the watchroom. Together, we raced down the spiral staircase inside the lighthouse, grabbed a length of rope and ran to the cliff's edge. We scanned the churning sea and heard the cry again. Father started over the edge and we worked our way





down to the pounding surf. At length we saw a figure clinging to a rock at the base of the cliff. Wave after wave surged over the figure and we marveled that the person had not been swept away." Jacob stopped to inspect his carving very closely. It resembled a four cornered cage but the center had yet to be carved away. I grew impatient with Jacob's frequent pauses.

"What happened next!?" I asked, my voice rising.

"Well. . .we shouted to the figure, a man. . .a dark skinned man. He looked up and we threw the rope to him. It took several attempts and we were soon soaked through with wet snow and salty spray. Finally, the man caught the rope and we pulled him up to safety. He was so weakened that it took us some time to get him up the cliff and into our cottage. We all collapsed in front of the coal stove in our living quarters, gasping for breath and trying to get warm. My mother and the other children bustled around us asking questions and peeling the drenched clothing away from us. In a moment we were in dry clothes but the stranger was unconscious, completely exhausted from his ordeal. We carried him to a bed where he slept until the next day. When he awoke on that Christmas day, he had regained enough strength to join us for a meal."

"Who was the stranger? What was his name?" I queried.

"We never found out," Jacob answered. "He spoke a language we had never heard before so, we were

not able to communicate," Jacob explained.

"Then what made you think he was a king?"

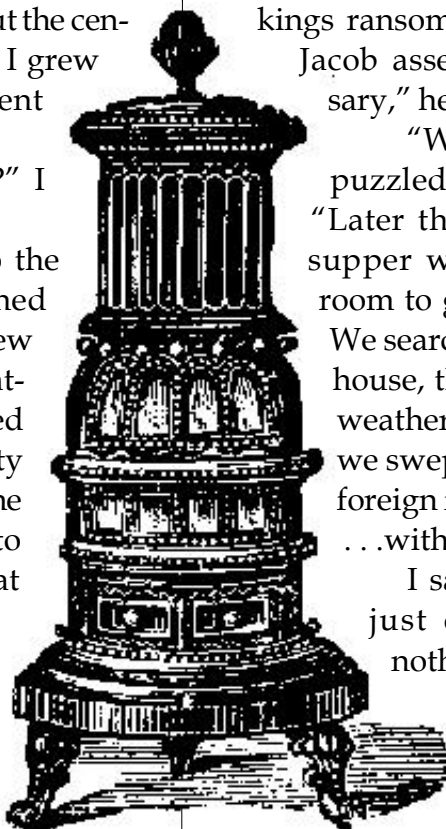
"His clothing was royal, his manner extremely refined. . .he wore an invaluable gold and pearl pendant worth a king's ransom. He was either a king," Jacob asserted, "or a king's emissary," he concluded.

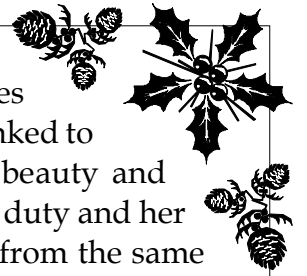
"What do you mean?" I said, puzzled.

"Later that Christmas Day when supper was ready, I went to his room to get him but he was gone. We searched the cottage, the lighthouse, the storage buildings. The weather had begun to break and we swept the entire island for our foreign friend. He was just. . .gone . . .without a trace of any kind."

I sat shaking my head. "He just disappeared? And left nothing behind at all?"

"He just vanished. We don't know where or why or how. But, we soon discovered a reminder of his mysterious visit. Each year, I carved a new piece for our Nativity scene. That year I had decided to carve one of the kings. I had finished the king and put him in the Nativity several days before Christmas but the figure was bearing no gift. I was going to carve that separately. As Christmas day drew to a close, my father sat reading to the family, as was our usual custom. I lay on the floor, ready to carve. 'What should a king's gift look like?' I wondered. I looked toward the Nativity to study my carved king and cried out in amazement. In the outstretched hands of my king lay the royal pen-





dant of our stranger. It was a gold cage, formed of a solid top and bottom, held together by four corner posts. Trapped within the four corner posts rested a huge blue pearl. My father later showed it to a jeweler who declared he had never seen its equal," concluded Jacob, holding up his finished carving.

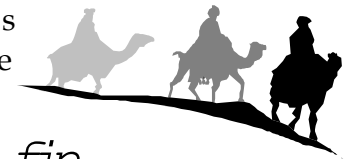
It was a wooden cage formed exactly as the royal pendant he had just described. Somehow he had managed to carve a perfectly round ball within the posts. It was clearly loose and moved freely but could not be removed without destroying the cage. He was holding it by the wooden chain — all carved from one solid piece of wood. It was remarkable. Jacob handed it to me as a gift.

"Dear friend," he said gently, "the chains of duty are a divine privi-

lege and, though sometimes burdensome, are always linked to treasures of unsurpassed beauty and value. That is the nature of duty and her rewards. They are carved from the same block and you will experience one as you partake of the other."

As I left with my treasure, I noticed that all of the Nativity scenes carved by Jacob had one king with empty hands . . . as a reminder that only we can fill in those hands. Only we know what our greatest treasure is and only we can give it to the King of Kings.

I glanced once more into Jacob's room and saw that he was carving something new from a fresh piece of wood. . . and he was humming "We Three Kings".



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