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THE MIRANDA BELL

Stillwater Cove was a good name. It was almost a lagoon, protected on the seaward side by two high bluffs which enclosed it with just a narrow channel through to the open ocean. Fishing boats anchored here along with many smaller craft, all safe from the dangers of what lay beyond. The locals who ventured out knew all about them and what to look for – hazardous rocks, swift currents, and a reef waiting unseen below the surface, ready to tear the bottom out of any vessel attempting to cross it at low tide. Visiting ships, however, were unfamiliar with the area, and would sometimes run aground. Stillwater was ready for such an eventuality.

The first lifeboat, named Miranda after the daughter of the man who had built her, was propelled by six oarsmen who battled the elements to save the sailors of stranded ships. Because there were no ship-to-shore radios back then, often the alarm would be raised when a signal rocket was sighted in the sky; and as soon as it was, the Miranda's crew would spring into action. Out they would go, tossing and pitching through mountainous waves; a light shining at the top of a mast, with a bell lower down that would be rung to tell the endangered vessel that help was on its way. Once they heard a ship's bell echoing in from the distance, the lifeboat would steer towards it; knowing that there was at least one survivor, hoping there were more. As soon as those from the stricken ship had been taken on board, Miranda would return to port; and as she was passing through the channel her bell would be rung six times to announce that they were home safe.

Many sailors were rescued by the little lifeboat and its crew; then one night during a fearful storm, disaster struck. Miranda failed to return. The weather being so treacherous, it was too risky to begin a search; so it wasn't until next morning that a few boats ventured out to look for The Miranda. The stranded cargo ship was still caught on the reef, but its crew were rescued and taken on board the search vessels. As for Miranda, she was nowhere to be seen. They tried again for the next few days, in the end having to accept that the lifeboat was lost with all hands. A week later part of the Miranda's broken mast was found washed up, and still attached to it was the bell. As a mark of respect for those brave souls lost in the tragedy, a monument was built on the shore by the jetty. The names of Miranda's crew were engraved on a brass plaque; while the lifeboat's bell was hung at the end of the jetty; there to be rung whenever a future lifeboat returned safely home.

The tradition continued into more modern times when Stillwater's newest lifeboats didn't have to rely on rowers, but had outboard motors as well as radio communication. There were two now, and thanks to the updated equipment, rescues weren't as risky as they had been in the past; but there were still dangers, and all on shore were relieved to hear the Miranda bell ringing six times to welcome the lifeboats when they were seen coming through the channel into the cove. A new tradition was also practised. As they left on a rescue mission, each crew member would touch the bell lightly; for luck and the hopes of returning safely. Unfortunately, however,

not all did and lives were occasionally still lost. In memory of them, the names of those who didn't make it home were added to the memorial plaque.

Late one Thursday night a distress call came through. A fishing boat had been battling a fierce storm, trying to make it to Stillwater Cove, but had been driven onto the hidden reef where it was stuck fast. The crew of LB 12 followed the usual routine: hurrying to the jetty and touching the bell for luck as they boarded the lifeboat. LB 14 was tied up behind and as soon as its crew was on board, the two lifeboats set out across the cove towards the channel. Although they had seen this many times before, the people of Stillwater hoped and prayed for a safe return. Hours later they were able to relax when the Miranda Bell rang out six times to welcome both lifeboats home.

The men rescued from the stricken fishing trawler were climbing out of the lifeboats when one of them said: "Where's the Skipper?" Everyone looked around but there was no sign of him. Another commented: "Last I saw of him he was in the wheelhouse." The Captain, it seemed, was still out there.

"Sorry, guys," said LB 12's Chief. "We've got to go again." Although tired and wet, the brave crew headed back towards the channel and once more into the raging storm. LB 14 remained tied up to the jetty as some rescued sailors were still disembarking. If any had concerns that LB 12 had gone out alone, someone said: "No need for both boats. There's only one man to save."

Old Jeb Weames made the comment: "But they didn't touch the bell."

"They did first time out," said Sandy Crabbe.

"Not the second, though," Jeb reiterated ominously; and to make matters worse, he checked his watch and added: "It's gone midnight. That means it's Friday; and no ship should set sail on a Friday. It's bad luck."

"That's just a silly superstition," said Sandy with a little chuckle that wasn't very convincing. "They'll be right."

But they were destined not to be!

To start with, LB 12 was radioing progress: "Nearing the reef now. Waves have really picked up and the fishing boat's taking a battering, but we're almost..." The radio went dead.

Again and again the monitoring station on shore tried to renew contact; but there was nothing until a crackly voice came over the speaker: "This is Captain Pugh... Your lifeboat's gone... capsized... men in the water... being washed away... they need help!" The crew of LB14 had been listening in and set off immediately, much to the dismay of Jeb; but he decided to keep quiet.

The wait was a long one. Reassuring radio messages continued, though, as the lifeboat closed on the wrecked trawler; and sighs of relief broke out when the news came in that Captain Pugh had been fished out of the water and was safely aboard. Then the search was on for the crew of LB 12. All would have been wearing life jackets, so they should have been easy to spot. Unfortunately, the strong currents must have carried them well away; and the driving rain made it impossible to see beyond a few metres. Eventually the search was suspended. It was only hoped that the men in the water might make it to shore.

As with the tragedy of The Miranda, frequent searches went on for days, both at sea and along the coastline, but without success. Another lifeboat crew had been lost. Three weeks later the brass plaque on the memorial was removed and taken to Charlie Scrimshaw for the latest names to be engraved. He had known every one of them and it was a hard task for him; necessary, though, because they needed to be remembered – Robbie Banks, brothers Tim and Tom Bowler, Sid 'Sharky' Finn, Brody Dick, and the only woman crew member Judy Judie. Once the plaque was finished and back on the memorial, the date was set for the service.

Early on the morning of that day the folk of Stillwater gathered on the foreshore. It was always going to be a sombre affair, and on this occasion it seemed more so. The weather was calm for a change, not a breath of wind; and a damp, chilling blanket of fog had rolled in from the

sea. The service began in the usual way, including the singing of a hymn. The closing part was really moving when Jeb read out the names of those who hadn't returned. His voice wavered, but he managed it. Then Dicky McNee puffed up his bagpipes ready to play The Final Farewell. His lips had barely touched the mouthpiece when a voice said: "Listen..."

Echoing through the fog was a haunting sound. The Miranda Bell could be heard ringing. Six times it rang. Everyone looked to the end of the jetty where the bell hung, most expecting to see someone there ringing it; but there was no-one. Then a shadow could be seen approaching through the greyness. "It looks like a boat," said Dicky.

"A rowing boat," Jeb confirmed.

They all waited, hearts pumping, watching as the vessel drew closer accompanied by the splashing of oars dipping into the water. There was a thump as the hull bumped the jetty. A man hopped out and tied a rope around a bollard. Next, others began to disembark, all wearing life jackets. "Oh, my," gasped Charlie. "Isn't that Sharky?" As another figure climbed onto the jetty, he added: "And that's got to be Brody. I'd know his limp anywhere."

It seemed that the entire crew of LB 12 had been rescued; but if that wasn't incredible enough, someone said in amazement: "The names on the plaque are disappearing!" It was true: one by one, the names of the lifeboat crew that Charlie had engraved were gradually fading, then had gone completely as if they had never been.

Unbelievable as this was, attention quickly turned to face the jetty where the survivors were walking slowly towards shore. Those attending the memorial service rushed to greet them and everyone was talking at once. Jeb, however, was more interested in the rescue boat and started walking towards it. Where had it come from, he was wondering? It was an old, wooden craft; certainly wasn't one of Stillwater's; not one he recognised, anyway. Before he had reached it, the oarsmen were rowing it out across the cove. The last thing he noticed before it was swallowed by fog was the name on the stern.

His old heart was beating fast for a few moments as he pondered. Strange things did happen at sea; none, however, as strange as this. He wouldn't say anything, though. People would be bound to think it was just another of his tall sailor's tales. Even he was finding it hard to believe; and as he continued to stare he couldn't see the channel, never mind the transom of the boat that had saved LB 12's crew. But he was positive he hadn't mistaken the name – it was definitely Miranda, without a doubt.