

# The Romance of Lighthouse Tom

## A San Francisco Story By Frederick R. Bechdoit

This is the first of a series of short stories, each having to do in one way or another with "Lighthouse Tom," which name thinly disguises a famous character of the San Francisco waterfront. Each story is complete in itself. The author, Frederick R. Bechdoit, is one of the best known of the California writers and novelists. The next story will appear on this page on Sunday, August 25th.

"I was lowerin' her away. Yes, I was one of the bearers, and there is no man had better reason to do that turn than Mother Martin. The time was when my heart was like black pizen ag'in her, and I had cause fer that, too. But things come different."

"I entered the Street of Foreign Parts, where Lighthouse Tom keeps his saloon for fishers and sailormen. Really it is not a street, but a neighborhood, a neighborhood of old wooden buildings most of which lean back wearily as if they were tired from standing through all the years and wanted rest, a back-water into which the swirling tides of humanity overflow at times from other thoroughfares. The windows of the saloons and boarding houses have many panes, and the buildings have false fronts or mansard roofs. The paint upon them is blistered by sun and faded by wind. Such places are the homes of stories. In the hope of hearing one, I went straight to the saloon of Lighthouse Tom.

"I had been there a week before, when the men of the cod and salmon fleets were spending their advance money. The memory of roaring voices singing deep-sea chanteys, tattooed fists as huge as hams, and boasts that contained the meat of epics had tured me back again. But the dingy room was silent as I stepped down from the sidewalk through the front door. Only the dents upon the bar remained to tell the tale of the tattooed fists whose owners were already well on their way toward Bering sea and the re-treating ice packs. A grizzled old ex-skipper was in command. Lighthouse Tom, he said, would be back directly.

"So I sat down at a little round table, littered with old copies of the Coast Seaman's Journal; and I waited. The parrot in the corner struck up 'Weigh! Hey! Blow a man down!' as I was settling myself in my chair; but he subsided at once, and refused to answer my entreaties for more with aught but a solitary string of fore-castle profanity. Yet even in the depressing silence of the bar, and the old mariner behind the bar, it was worth while to wait. For Lighthouse Tom was what some persons call 'material,' and I was dry of stories as a new sponge is dry of water.

"A giant was Lighthouse Tom, a giant with silver hair. He had a voice that boomed like surf on a hard sand beach when a three days' blow is over. His eyes were bright as a boy's. And behind him he had life-life that was rich in many things that I longed to hear; in closeness to death, in battle, and—in this I was learning—sweet romance. He had listened to the secrets of the Seven Seas and he had tasted the hot joys of fifty ports. They called him Lighthouse Tom in accordance with the custom of cod fishing fleet. It was this way: He got lost in his dory one ugly afternoon off Bering sea. All night he drifted about, and the next day, the blow that had carried him beyond the skyline had scattered the schooners, and it so happened that one of them ran across him when night was falling the second time. They dragged him on deck, half frozen and three-quarters dead. The one-quarter that lived hung grimly on; and what had come close to a tragedy became the basis for a nickname. From that time he remained Lighthouse Tom in memory of the fact that he had peered into the darkness that covers the deep from dusk until the next dawn.

"He came in before long. I stared at him; for such men as he are made for ruffled shirts and ruffled collars, and he was clad this afternoon in sober black. A frock coat came to his knees; it was of ancient style. His shoes shone with polish. He wore a derby hat. His neck, cravat, and many criss-cross lines, was constricted within the lofty ruffles of a white collar. No giant looks at home in such garb as this. Even as I stared, Lighthouse Tom's muscles seemed to be trying to burst their bonds. As quickly as he could, taking time only to nod in my direction, he went behind the bar and removed his necktie and then his hat and coat. In shirtsleeves, he poured himself a drink and winked over to me as he swallowed it. He fumbled with the button at the back of his neck, loosened it and moved his head from side to side.

"There," said he. "That feels better." "A wedding?" I queried. "No, lad, a funeral. We buried Mother Martin this afternoon."

"Now, the fame of Mother Martin was as all as it was wide, and it reached as far as there was salt water. Of all the crimps on San Francisco's city front none had shanghaied more hapless sailormen than she. Although she was not my time, I had heard many tales about her grog shop where the new seawall now stands. It used to be out over the tide on piles, and in the days of smuggling they lifted the opium through a trap door in the floor. But chiefly I knew about her as a boarding master (mistress would be implying a femininity of method which she never owned). Even in these latter years, when the lads that they had suffered were but memories, many cursed her name. 'There,' he exclaimed.

"Me and the Missus," said Lighthouse Tom, "was out to the funeral. 'Twas the Missus made me wear them.' He pointed to the discarded coat and haberdashery. 'We went because we had good reason to go. Right you are when you talk of Mother Martin, and you do not know much about her no way; not half the story from standing tenth part as far as that goes—only the yarns of a few wore-out seamen that you've had in tow, buying whiskey for them over my bar so they would talk. She was a bad one, I know it; but I know she had a heart in her and 'twas in the right place. Stand by a bit and I'll be with you.

"I took it and I could taste the knockout drops that she had slipped into the glass. I got to me feet and already I felt the white stuff going aloft in me. I started for the door. 'Not so fast,' says she. 'Bide here a bit.' I shook her loose, and me head was spinning like a top. I'd made a step or two, when the bullock came in on a run from the bar. They piled on top of me. I managed to clout one alongside the nose and to this day he wears it sideways on his face. But it was no use; they was all over me and the choral was working; no man could carry that and the deckload that I had. I went to the floor under five of them. Mother Martin threw a bight of rope over my heels; I felt the hitches chawing at my shins as she made it fast. She took another turn about me wrists, and the last thing I heard from her, she was cursing me as they lowered me away through the hatch in the floor. I went to sleep in the Star of Asia's boat and I never come to me senses until we was outside the Golden Gate, with the water washing me about in the lee scuppers. 'My wrists and ankles was all swelled from the ropes. And when I come to look into the damage bag that Mother Martin had sent along with me, I found it filled with two or three women's petticoats and a busted accordion. A three years' v'y'ge around the horn, too! Naaty weather come

one of them two places, and it come to me that they would stick with me in this proposition. I was about to make for the Antwerp, when I caught sight of the Missus."

"Lighthouse Tom paused and his clear old eyes went far away.

"She was standing in the door of her old man's second hand store. The building's been tore down fer 20 years; even then 'twas ready to go to the stars and stripes. It was where sailor men buys mouth organs and Kanaka water when they're in port and where the boarding masters sets the worn out sea boots they put in the damage bags. All was dark inside; but she was in the sun. I clapped my eyes on her, and something struck me all in a heap.

"I think it was the eyes of her. For she was looking square at me. Many a pair of eyes I've seen in my time, but

never one that I did not think it; it never come to my mind. But I knowed it as I had allys knowed it. I stood there and I ferreted the City of Antwerp and the Belle of Shandon and Mother Martin. I ferreted all of them; I only seen that girl's black eyes. They was soft as water; and the hair of her was dead black; now it's near as white as mine.

"The sidewalk was full of sea faring men. I started straight toward her. I crossed the bows of one or two; I tromped all over the toes of a big nigger mate from off a Honolulu packet and had some words with him. But in them days, drunk or sober, I always got by. I walked up beside her and I give her good afternoon. She sort of smiled; it was the way a kid smiles up at you, and she said something back in Portuguese. The words come off her tongue like singing. I cursed myself for not knowing of her language. Says I: 'Can't you talk English, miss?'

"And then old Pedro called out from the shop, like the creakin' of a parrot: 'What is it ye want to buy?'

"That was the first I noticed of the place. I cast a look about and seen where I was, and I sung out that I was lookin' fer silk handkerchiefs.

"Come in, then," says he; and I passed on in. A little old man was in East street, when some one started a fight in the place that I was in. I had no wish to mix in anybody else's fun with me own waiting fer me down the line. So I slipped my cable as soon as the fists began to fly. I wasn't really hot enough with whiskey fer to do things up ship shape, so I took me bearings like, on the edge of the sidewalk, the City of Antwerp lay dead ahead and around the corner was the Belle of Shandon. It was in the spring of the year and the fishermen would be blowing in their advance money; I knowed that I would be likely to fetch up with some old mates of mine in

the place went dark like a shadow. I seen a man standin' there in the doorway.

"He took up all the way there was; his head came to the top, and his shoulders touched both sides. Big as a house, and his face was all black with coal dust. I seen the whites of his eyes and the streak of his teeth, and then I seen him lay his big black paw on the girl's shoulder. Old Pedro looked up at me and then out at him. 'Here's yer handkerchiefs, Jack,' he says, cool enough. I grabbed them up. There was no two ways about it; this big hulky of a coalheaver had the run of things so far as old Pedro went. And just as plain was the lay of things in the other quarter. I could see the girl sort of a-pullin' back and in like to get from under that hairy, black paw of his. I Jewsharped and a bottle of perfumery was in me pockets when I went to bed the next night. But I had seen Annette

"I've seen the compass needle swinging to the north. I headed straight back for Old Pedro's second hand shop. There was no one in the door now. I went on by and I come back down East street ag'in. Ten or a dozen times I passed, and I got no sign of her. Then I went inside; and Old Pedro sold me a pair of blue silk suspenders. I'd never wore that sort of tackle in me life, nor wanted to. Annette did not show her head, in spite of my takin' a half hour to make the dicker. Late that evenin' I sighted her again.

"She was in the door this time. I fetched up on the sidewalk. She seen me there; her eyes come to my eyes. And then Old Pedro sung out to her from inside and she went back to him. But she cast a look over her shoulder while she was making for him. I went to a lodging house uptown that night fer fear of crimps.

"That's the truth. I wasn't aiming to be shanghaied from this port so long as there was any chance to see that lass. I was not botherin' my head with anything only that. I got up the next morning and I patrolled East street all day long. Two times that day I found meself inside Old Pedro's store buying the first thing come to hand. I loaded up with all sorts of foolish junk. A coalheaver had the run of things in the other quarter. I could see the girl sort of a-pullin' back and in like to get from under that hairy, black paw of his. I Jewsharped and a bottle of perfumery was in me pockets when I went to bed the next night. But I had seen Annette

"I had drawn back to fetch me one with his right that would have killed me if he had landed it. I think it was a-comin' I smashed him in the middle of his black face. I felt his nose crunch under me knuckles and the blood flow over the two of us. I didn't know it then, but this is what I did. Lighthouse Tom laid his great left fist on the table and showed two knuckles driven back a half an inch below the others.

"I'd sized him just a little bit. I seen his head fly back a jinch or so. I slipped my right fer his jaw and went wide. He roared like a bull and made a grab for me, I pulled clear just as he got his fingers on my coat; it tore away like rotten paper. He threw the pieces from him, and I took the time while he was doing that to come again. I reached in to get him where it was soft. I felt his stomach give and I heard him cough as my flat sunk into him. Then I stepped back and swung with all that was in me. You could hear the cracker half a block as I landed on his jaw. He was cap-sizing as I caught him with the other, and that put him down like a bag of nails. I strained up and seen Annette in the door.

"Lad, I was young then, and she was but a lass. It's a passing strange how things is with young people; it's another matter when your blood is runnin' cold and thin. But then! There was no word between us.

"When I had looked into them eyes of hers before, I had got signals. There was something had pulled me to her, and it had made me afraid of her—bashful like, as if she had said, 'Stand by, but give me berth.' Now it was not that way at all. The red was coming back into her face; her mouth was a little open so that I seen the white teeth of her. And her eyes was all big and soft with something that I could not name. I could not tell ye why it was so or how; but I stepped over Big Joe's hulk, and I took her by the hand. 'Come on, lass,' I says.

"And she slipped her hand in mine. We went away. We passed through the pack of them on the sidewalk, and they give us leeway as we come. We headed down East street, was not thinkin' of anything, only that I had her now in tow. We just walked away together. I never so much as wondered about Old Pedro. 'Twas long, long ago, afterwar she told me that he'd gone out that night and left her to mind the shop, and she'd been waiting in the doorway hopin' to get sight of me. But now we said nothing; we could have talked, I do not think we would have.

"I had drawn a block or so when I come to meself enough to know that we had to make all sail so long as there was a fair wind. We turned one corner and then another and then we headed southward. I shook one sleeve of me coat—'twas all that was left of it—of my arm and I wiped some of Big Joe's blood off me face with the back of me hand. We passed the steamship docks and come into the nest of little sheds and shacks and small slips where they have built a seawall. At the time we were holding to each other's arms, I looked at her and seen her face turned up to mine, like a little child's. And then I remembered.

"I was a sailor man, a fool when he is in port; he does not know the ways of the land. I knowed then that we two was in trouble, but that was all that come to me—only that that she was mine and I could kiss the feet of her. But what to do I did not know. As I was looking into her big, black eyes, wondering, I heard some one a calling of me name. I turned to see who that might be, and there was Mother Martin.

"She was standing in front of her grog shop, and she was as savage as a hungry shark. But at that, she hardly took a look at me; she turned her gimlet eyes on the lass.

"'Lighthouse Tom,' she had sung out, as ugly as a misgiver, 'I give an answer. 'What is it ye want with me?'

"'What be ye a-doing with Old Pedro's Annette?' she. It comes from her mouth like captain's orders; all the time she was scowling at the lass. 'I stood fast and looked at her, and then I looked at Annette. She smiled up at me, and she said to Mother Martin, 'She's mine,' says I. 'That's what I'm a-doing with her.'

"Mother Martin never give me one look then, but she stiffened up and took two wide steps. She planted herself dead ahead of us. 'Give way,' says I, 'or I'll make it, if ye be a woman, I've a reckonin' to make with ye as it is.'

"She paid no heed, but said some words in Portuguese to the girl, and the lass give answer in the same tongue. They swapped words fer as much as a minute, and I begun to feel foolish.

"There's a note I know cast to a man look like a bigger fool to himself than when two women is talking and he does not know what it is about. I had no win in my sails at all, when Mother Martin in my sails at all, when the gray hair on it trimmed as snug as mine is now, and looked me in the eye.

"'Now, ye big hulk,' says she, 'what is this I hear?' Where be ye a-headin' fer? Her face was different than I ever see it, or any other man. 'Is this on the square?' she says.

"And then I seen that it was an answer. 'Mother Martin, I want ye should stow her away somewheres while I go and get the papers to marry her.

"I knewed them coalheavers of old and I seen how he was like the rest of them, all muscle bound from handling heavy scoops. A sailor man is handier and I was better with me hands than most sailors—or fishermen either, for the matter of that. Such hulks as him was meat and drink fer me. I laughed in his teeth and ducked when he swung fer me. It was the biggest fool thing I ever done, but I was drunk from looking into Annette's eyes. It left me close in on him and he grappled me.

"I felt his big paws clamping down fast and hard, and my bones was like water under them. My feet come clear

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of the sidewalk and my heart turned sick inside me. I was awing me aloft. He lifted me like a man dandling a baby and then he hove me like I was a bit of old timber that he had picked up. I smashed down the little shelf of her. Then I went inside; and Old Pedro sold me a pair of blue silk suspenders. I'd never wore that sort of tackle in me life, nor wanted to. Annette did not show her head, in spite of my takin' a half hour to make the dicker. Late that evenin' I sighted her again.