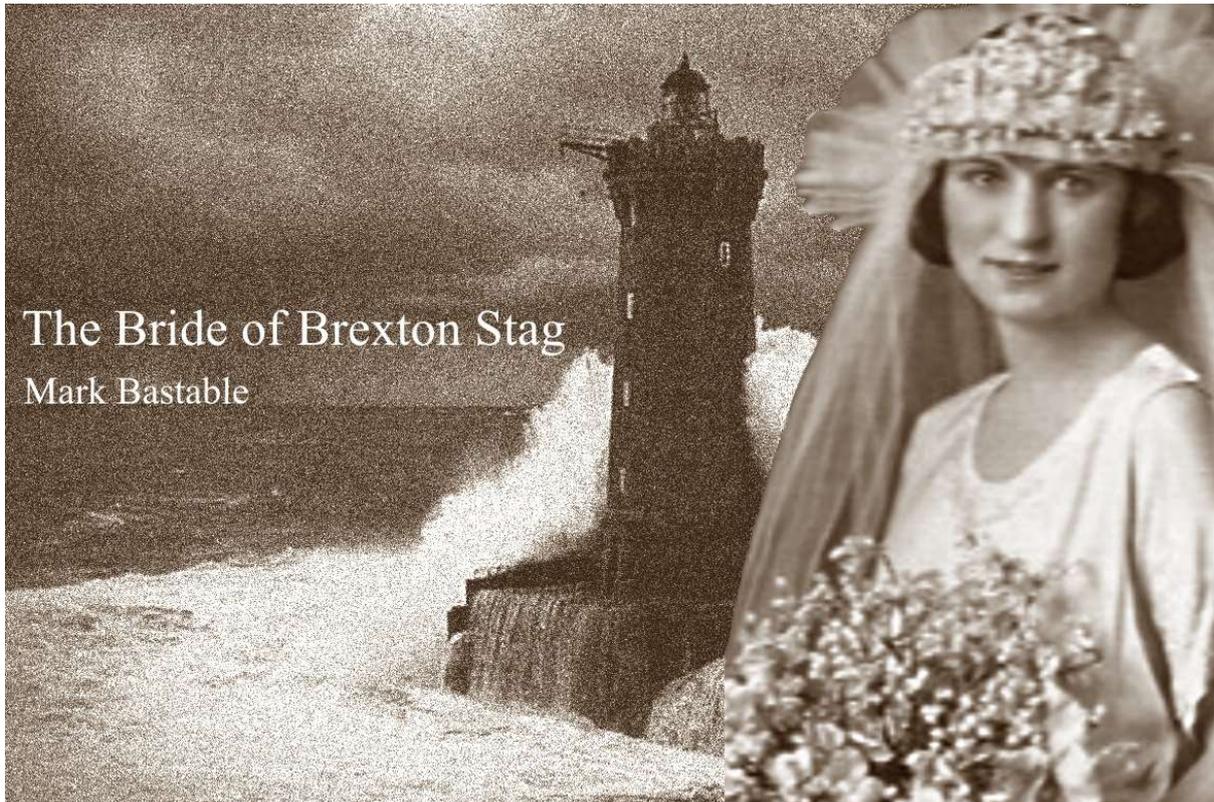


# THE TWISTED THREAD

*Short stories by Mark Bastable*



**187.5 kHz.** A storm is coming, so the shipping forecast tells me. A big one, in from the Atlantic.

The shipping forecast is all I listen to on the wireless. Nothing else. I don't like all those jabbering voices talking tosh. I don't like any talking at all.

The three-hundred-and-first step is missing. Or anyway, the centre of the board is. Every other step – all three hundred and forty-one of them – are worn and bowed, but completely intact. I haven't any idea what happened to the three-hundred-and-first step. It was like that when I took this position eleven years ago

**Mother.** My mother came to see me. Not really my mother. I'm not a madman. My mother died in 1902, when I was eight. I've seen her twice since she died, not counting this time.

I last saw her in a bombed-out church in France. I was lying next to my old schoolfriend Albert, and he was dead. We were under fire and we'd taken cover in the church, and it got

hit. Albert took the worst of it. I told him he was going to be good as new, but I could see he wasn't. Half his face was gone.

"You all right, love?" my mother said. She was there at the end of the pew that we were lying behind. She had on her maroon coat with the fur collar and her best bonnet.

"I was trying to look after him, Mum. I done my best." I was weeping. "What will his mum say?"

"Oh, she'll just get on with it. You know Dot."

"Will I be all right? Am I going to die too?"

"You will if you stay here. You'll end up like Albert. You need to go back where you came from."

I wiped my eyes with the back of my hand.

"You're not really me mum at all, are you?"

"I know what's best for you, love."

"Like at Judy's."

"Yes – just like that."

**The Victorian engineer.** Most lighthouse keepers aren't as solitary as folk think, because there's at least two fellows in a lighthouse. The lens rotation is driven by clockwork that needs winding up every few hours, so the two or three keepers are on shifts.

But this lighthouse is unique – the rock it's built on has a hole in the middle and water spouts out of it with tremendous force. The Victorian engineer who designed this place realised that you could harness that force, like in a water mill, to rotate the lens at the top of the tower. Very clever. So you only need one keeper here, as long as he remembers to light the wick each night. Not that I'd ever forget.

Every room is circular of course, and has a broad column in the middle, which is the bore for the driveshaft that rotates the lens. The seawater spouts into the gear room downstairs and powers the mechanism that winds the springs that turn the shaft. In every room, the thump of each wave resounds like a pulse in your ear. I don't hear it anymore because it's there all the time.

**15:59.** My memory's not been the same since the war. I forget things. Maybe I just don't want to remember. People. Places. France. Dawn duty. All memories I can manage without.

But I forget everyday things too. Where I put my reading glasses. Whether I've had dinner yet. What year it is.

When the alarm clock goes off, it's time to light the wick. Before I go up, I'll set the alarm for tomorrow. I have to look at the book for the time. It's November, so each evening the lighting time is a little earlier. I'll wind the clock too. The Victorian engineer didn't have a clever idea for driving the clock with seawater.

**Alcohol** is strictly forbidden in all the Authority's lighthouses. You can see why. An inebriated lighthouse keeper would be a very dangerous proposition. I pass my evenings reading, and smoking cigarettes.

Sometimes I allow myself a little laudanum to help me sleep - but never before lighting up the lantern. I only take it to be sure I sleep. I don't like being awake all night. I don't like to see the dawn.

The three-hundred-and-first step is missing. Not all of it – just the centre of the board. Did I write that already? I think I did.

Oh - I had a dream of some of the keepers who've been here before me. I must write that down,

**Sixteen.** All storms are different, like people. I think of them like people. I give them names. The one that's coming is Emmie. I didn't choose that.

There was a big one last year that was just like my sister Judy – loud, unpredictable and playful. She roared around, rattling the windows. She blew out a pane in the lantern room. That's my big sister.

Judy died of the influenza in 1908. She was twenty. I was fourteen. Stan was twelve. Judy had looked after the two of us since Dad died two years earlier. He'd had the cough, like Mum.

I was standing with Stan at the graveside while the vicar said the words that I very nearly knew by heart by that time. I looked towards the road and there was Mum, beckoning me over. I went as soon as I could.

"You alright, Jim, love?" She had her tight-lipped, get-things-done expression on. I thought she was my mum. I didn't cotton on that she wasn't really. I wouldn't till France.

"Judy's gone now," I said, my voice shaking.

She frowned. "Now don't you cry, James Atley. Not today. You need to put your face right."

"What are we going to do, me and Stan?"

"There's a man who'll come to see you at home. He'll come tonight. He's going to want to snoop around."

"At home?"

"Listen, Jim. You tell him you're sixteen. Just swear till you're blue in the face that you're sixteen. What year would you've been born, to be sixteen?"

"Eighteen..er..."

"Quicker than that! 1892. Say it!"

"1892."

“If you don’t say that, they’ll take you and Stan to St Botolph’s. It’s a dreadful place.”

“But...”

“It’s all right. The man doesn’t want to have to arrange all that. Just say sixteen and mean it, and he’ll decide to believe you. Then you and Stan can stay at home, and you can be in charge. Get lodgers for upstairs and ask Mr Peavey for a job at the yards. What year was you born in?”

“1892.”

“Good boy. I can’t have you going to St Botolph’s.”

**342.** From the door at the bottom to the lantern at the top it’s three hundred and forty two steps. From the galley to the lantern, it’s two hundred and ninety-eight steps. From the pantry, two hundred and fifty two. Then there’s the main room, then my bedroom, then the workshop, then the lantern itself.

I can climb those stairs in the dark, or with my eyes shut. You have to be able to, in case there’s no light – if you run out of candles, say, or one blows out when you’re up top. You’ve still got to light the wick of the lantern. So I make sure I can go up and down in the dark, by practising with my eyes shut.

The three-hundred-and-first stair is missing. If you start from the galley, the missing stair is the two-hundred-and-fifty-seventh. From the pantry, it’s the two-hundred-and-fifth.

From the top, coming down, it’s the forty-first.

**The brides.** I had a dream of some of the keepers who’ve been here before me. I came down from the lantern to the main room, and there were five or six fellows in there, each with a young bride. All in white the ladies were, veils lifted, holding their posies. And the men were smart and dressed-up – hair oiled back, pressed suits and white shirts, neatly-knotted ties.

There was a newly-wed couple in the north window-seat, and two more couples at the table. As I walked round to the southside, I could see another couple in the south window. All of them canoodling in their pairs, smiling and touching each other’s cheeks. I went up to the bedroom and there was a chap and his bride in my bed – and they weren’t sleeping. I was about to tell them to get out of my room, but my mother was there and she told me to shush.

“These girls are all my daughters,” she said. “They’ll look after you boys.”

**Habits.** We had an outside privy at home, in Chatham. Too bloody cold to go out there in the night. I did it out the window of me and Stan and Judy’s bedroom. I was the only one that would. I didn’t care.

“You’re a filthy ossity, James Atley,” my mother would say. “I don’t know how you’re ever going to get a wife, with habits like that.”

She was right. Nine years after Mum died I proposed to Emmie Hazelhurst, and she turned me down. A couple of years later she married my brother Stan.

Me, I joined the army, first day they asked.

When my friend Albert was dying with his half his face off, I talked to him about going home. I said we were both going back to England and I would marry Emmie, and he'd be my best man - which was nonsense because Emmie had a little 'un by then, and Stan was a young copper at St Mary Hoo. They had quarters in an Elizabethan manor house. Very lovely.

I've never been there.

**The boat.** The supply boat will come in a day or two, with enough food to get me through till spring. I need to be careful with the food I've got left. I've been using it too fast and I barely have provisions to last. Or candles. I only have half a candle left.

The supply boat captain brings my tincture and my tobacco. Alcohol is forbidden in the lighthouse, but there's no rule against laudanum. It's just to help me sleep.

I was heating up some soup when the alarm went off. I climbed up to the lantern with my eyes closed, to practice, because I have only half a candle left. Going from the galley, the missing step is the two-hundred-and-fifty-seventh. Coming down, it's the forty-first.

The wind was getting up. White foam was dancing on the black rocks below, dancing right to the door. There was a ship two or three miles out, rolling and dipping - heading for port. She'll be all right. The storm won't be here before this time tomorrow, maybe earlier.

I opened the door out to the walkway, to answer the call. It's too far to trek all the way to the bottom just to have a wee. I put the door on the hook.

"How do, Jim," my mother said.

I was startled. I did myself up and turned, and there she was, standing in the door.

"Hello, Mum."

I knew she wasn't my mum. She wasn't my mum in France, nor at Judy's funeral.

"You're not looking after yourself, Jim," she said. "You're not acting civilised - doing your business off the balcony here. Shameful! And look at the state of your clothes. Is that gravy down your shirt?"

"Doesn't matter," I said. "There's no one here."

"Like an animal, Jim. Like a dirty beast rather than a man."

"Mum," I said, "men can do things much more beastly than get beef gravy down their shirt, believe me. I've seen it."

"You need to be looked after, like all the other boys. I'll arrange for you to meet my youngest, Emmie. She'll be here tomorrow."

I went to bed early. I had some tincture in warm water, because I had to get to sleep. The storm's coming, and I may have to light the wick during the day. I need my wits about me.

The thump of the seawater in the bore was louder than usual. It was thumping in my head. I couldn't read a book because I daren't use even an hour of the last candle. I felt in the drawer in the dark and took a little swig of tincture straight from the bottle, to help me sleep.

**The shakes.** I've got the shakes a bit this morning. I dropped the tea caddy when I was making tea. The whole lighthouse seemed to bending in the wind like an oak. The waves were crashing up as high as the pantry windows. It was barely even the start of the storm. It was just the barrage that comes before the order to advance.

At noon the thunder and lightning started. That meant the storm was nearly here, and I needed my wits about me. But the explosions of thunder and the flashes of lightning get me all confused. I had to calm myself down. I had a little sip of my tincture.

I went up to the lantern. There was still enough light to see by, and I didn't close my eyes climbing up. I wasn't sure I'd keep count properly.

The sky was black to the north and coming towards me. Soon it would be dark, though it was only early afternoon. I lit the wick. I engaged the rotation lever, and the lens began to move, driven by the shaft that's powered by the waves down below. The lens circled the lantern and sent the sweeping beam out over the sea.

As I turned to go back down, there was a bright flash that lit up the lantern chamber and a bang so loud I felt it in my chest. I threw myself down flat like we used to in France. I didn't mean to - I just did it. Threw myself flat on the wooden boards.

You hold your breath a few seconds, waiting to see if anything hurts. If you seem to be all right, you look around, keeping your head low, to see who's still with you. When I turned that day in the church, I saw Albert beside me, our shoulders touching, and half his face was gone.

In the lantern chamber, I realised I was crying. I wanted my mum, just like I had in the church in France. But she didn't come this time. The thunder and lightning crashed and flashed again and again, over and over. I couldn't move. I knew it wasn't artillery. I'm not a madman. But I just couldn't stand up. I had my bottle of tincture in my trouser pocket so I took a good sip or two of that, to calm myself.

It was hours before the barrage of the thunderstorm ceased and was replaced by the battery of wind and rain. I'd drifted off to sleep somehow, and when I woke up I thought for a moment that the lighthouse had been torn from the rock and was being tossed about on the waves. I couldn't see anything but water outside the windows, lit by the lantern, and I thought that I was upside-down in the sea. I felt wet too. I had pissed myself. I don't know what my mother would have said about that.

I had to get downstairs. I swigged from my little bottle of tincture, to calm myself. I had to tip it right up. I shook it beside my ear and held it to the light of the lantern. There were only a few drops left. I was sure it was nearly full this morning, but perhaps not. I forget things. I have another one in the main room.

I got to my feet and looked down the spiral stairs. The lighthouse lantern lit the first few steps and even some more past the point that they curved out of sight. But beyond that, there was only the light from the tiny window, and it was pitch black outside. Many, many times I'd

gone down the stairs with my eyes closed, or in the dark. The missing step was the forty-first from the top. Yes, forty-first.

Was that right? I forget things. No - it's right. Forty-first.

You have to concentrate on the counting. It was difficult though. I was confused, and the wind and rain were loud. And I could hear the thump of the waves in the bore, as if it was in my head. I got to twenty-four, just about where the light from the lantern couldn't reach, and I looked down into the blackness and I wasn't sure I'd counted right.

I thought it would be best to start again. I didn't want to go back up, in case there was thunder and lightning again. But I was nervous about going down because I wasn't sure about my counting. I was confused. I turned and went back up.

I started down again, watching my feet. One, two, three, four, five. Once I caught a fish alive. Six, seven, eight, nine, ten. Then I let it go again. What comes after that? Something about toes.

I stopped again at the edge of the dark. I was on twenty-three. But last time I thought the edge of the dark was twenty-four. Perhaps I was right that time.

I decided to do it again, and believe whichever happened. Yes, I'd go back up and do it again.

But the thumping in the bore was a drum, loud and muffled, like at a dawn execution. The wind was howling like a young mother in the ruins of a cottage. And I could still hear the barrage of thunder and lightning – far away now, behind me, miles behind me, behind me along with all the blood and the noise and screaming boys caught on the wire, crying for their mums. All of that behind me, where I left Albert dead in the church with half his face gone. I didn't want to end up like Albert. I was going back to where I came from. I didn't care.

I looked into the blackness down the stairs and I took a deep breath. I wasn't going to do it again. Not this time. I wasn't going to turn this time, and go back where I'd come from. I was just going to walk forward. Even though I was scared, I was just going to walk into the blackness and the noise with my eyes open.

I took a step. And another. I wasn't counting.

**Emmie** came in the night. I was propped up in the north window-seat, clasping my last bottle of tincture. The tincture keeps me calm, and helps with the pain in my chest and with my leg, as long as I don't look at it. It took me an hour or more to get from the door of the main room to the medicine cupboard, and then here to the seat.

I don't know how long I was staring out into the rain, trying not to look at the bone sticking out of my leg. But the darkness was just starting to weaken when I saw her down there, in her white wedding gown dancing on the black rocks below, dancing right to the door. She looked up and waved to me, and then she was here with me, sitting in the window seat.

I lifted her veil. She was beautiful and pale like the sky after a storm.

“She sent me for you,” she said. “My mother, I mean.”

I coughed and blood came out.

“I’ve done something to my chest,” I said. “I fell. So many of us fell.”

“I’ll look after you,” Emmie said. “But I have things to do. I’ll be back later.”

It’s past noon now. There’s blood all down my shirt. I don’t know what my mother would say.

I can see the supply ship, a long way out – they’re an hour away or more. They’re going to have a wasted journey, because by the time they get here, I’ll be gone. Emmie’s down there, dancing on the black rocks in her white wedding dress. She waves up at me. She goes to the door.

“You won’t be needing that any more, Jim,” my mum says. She takes the tincture bottle from my hand. “My Emmie will look after you.”

“I knew you’re weren’t my mum,” I say, “I’m not a madman.”

“I’ve always known what’s best for you.”

“She went long ago – before Dad and Judy. And long before France. You weren’t my mum.”

She smiles. “Well, let’s not argue about it,” she says. “I am now.”