

from Pearson's Magazine, 1903
by Theodore Waters

"It will be the worst hurricane that swept the Cape," said Captain Pugh of the Gull Shoal Life-Saving Station on Hatteras Island. And none of the men who were about to patrol the beach that fateful August morning [1899] doubted his word. For days the newspapers had chronicled the approach of the storm and the Weather Bureau had warned vessels not to leave port. On the thirteenth the centre was off Jupiter Inlet and now, on the sixteenth, it had almost reached Hatteras. Early in the morning the local signalman reported an increasing wind velocity of fifty miles an hour. The sky was darkening and the noise of the surf was getting louder and louder, tide was higher than it ever had been, and in places where the sand strip was narrow the water occasionally dashed clear across into Pamlico Sound, threatening to cut a permanent channel. "Keep a sharp lookout, boys," called the Captain after the two surf men, who climbed upon their horses and started off in opposite directions. "If there is anything out there, it will come in. So get back with the word as soon as you can." Then he turned into the station to get the beach apparatus in readiness for whatever might happen. They often have premonitions, these surfmen, of what is in store, and the Captain had a vague idea that this day's work was to be a long one. The name of the surfman who rode to the north does not matter, but he who rode to the south was William G. Midgett of the life-saving Midgetts, three of whom patrol Hatteras.

Surfman Midgett rode slowly along, scanning the sea, noting the inrush of the breakers and drawing his horse up sharply when an especially strong wave tried to submerge the sand strip. The wind came hard out of the East, and with it a fine rain that made the weather particularly hazy off shore.

Midgett had proceeded a mile and a half below Gull Shoal Station when he thought he saw off shore what looked like a vessel. He had to peer some time before he was sure, and then as the haze lightened a bit he made out a three-masted schooner about a mile and a half off shore heading north and "doing the best she could, now making a little headway and then dropping back." He watched her for nearly an hour during the intervals when the weather lightened, being joined meanwhile by a patrolman from the Little Kinnakeet Station, which is the next south of Gull Shoal. Finally the vessel dropped her anchors.

Now one of the explicit instructions of the Life Saving Service to mariners is never to drop anchor in the surf. It prevents the vessel from coming in far enough before she breaks up, and so makes it hard for the guards to reach those on board in time to save life. "As soon as she did it," said Midgett afterwards, "I knew she was doomed, and I made my way to the station as fast as I could, leaving the Little Kinnakeet man to watch her." In fact he urged

his horse all the way, but the going was rough and he was fifteen minutes making the mile and a half.

When Captain Pugh got the news he telephoned to Kinnakeet Station on the south and to Chicamacomico on the north to come also to the rescue. Then the horses were hitched to the beach-apparatus cart, and with Midgett, his brother, G. L. Midgett, and another surfman named D. L. Gray, Captain Pugh galloped back to the stranded schooner.

Only half an hour had intervened since the vessel dropped anchor, but death had stalked on her deck meanwhile.

She was the Aaron Reppard, Captain Oscar Wessel, from Philadelphia, four days out, for Savannah, Ga. She had met the gale the previous day and lay hove to off Hatteras all night under a fore-staysail and mainsail, the helm lashed hard down. The strain made her leak, and when breakers were discovered under her stern, Captain Wessel, thinking more of his ship perhaps than of his safety, ordered both bower anchors let go. And then while the man from Kinnakeet watched, the vessel dragged slowly in, the crew clinging to the rigging to escape the heavy seas that broke over her.

Captain Pugh found her about seven hundred yards off shore; but at this point there was a gully through which the sea was rushing over the sand into Pamlico Sound. The suction thereabouts was terrific and no boat could have lived in it, so they prepared to fire the Lyle gun, and drop a line over the vessel's rigging. Meantime the crews from the other stations arrived. The schooner had dragged to within five hundred yards of the shore. Nevertheless the first shot fell short. The second missed fire. But Captain Pugh got the range at last and shot a No. 4 line directly across the vessel's stays. Then the beachmen waited for the sailors to haul off the "whip," to which was attached the rigging for the breeches buoy. But not one of the men on board moved to secure the line. As was afterward found, none of the wrecked seamen was able to leave the spot where he was clinging. The Reppard was coal-laden, with seven hundred tons of anthracite, and she was pounding with such terrific force that it actually required the use of both hands for the men to hold on.

"She is breaking up," observed Captain Pugh.

The last wave that went over her took with it the deck house. Presently the hatch coamings went over the side, and after that the deck went, piece by piece. There were six men in the fore rigging, one in the main and one clinging to the mizzen shrouds. The bulwarks followed the decks, breaking away from the stern forward. When that part which held the mizzen shrouds let go, the man clinging to them swung about on the end of the ropes like an uneasy

pendulum. The life-savers, helpless on shore, saw him caught by one leg in the rat-lines and "slammed back and forth," head downward, until dead. The mizzenmast, relieved of the support of the shrouds, gave way and went over the port side, dragging the man with it. As soon as she began to break up, the lifesavers prepared for action. Three surfmen from Gull Shoal Station, two from Little Kinnakeet and two from Chicamacomico put on cork jackets and tied the ends of shot lines around their waists. They were to wade out as far as possible into the surf and help any of the seamen who might happen to get within fifty yards of the beach. While they were adjusting the jackets and lines the main shrouds gave way and the mast broke in two pieces, dropping the sailor who clung to it among the debris. The mast slipped over the side, pulling the deadly mass of cordage with it. The sailor, nimble in spite of the injuries he must have suffered from the fall, scrambled clear of the sliding mass of rope, but a sea followed and took him with it. One of the men on the foremast, the captain of the vessel as it proved, knowing that his support must presently follow the other masts, jumped overboard and tried to swim ashore. He made a strong fight against the backlash of the sea, making progress and sliding back. After minutes that must have seemed ages he gave it up and tried to return to the vessel. He got within five yards of her and threw up his arms and sank. Immediately after this the foremast snapped, killing one man on deck and carrying the remaining four into the sea. One of these sank at once; the other three struggled to the surface and grasped pieces of wreckage.

The seven life-savers on shore at once plunged into the water, the line from each being held by two men on the beach. In the sea that was running there was no trouble getting out. The danger lay not in the undertow, for the jackets held them up and the lines held them back, but the surf was filled with terrible battering rams in the form of spars and other wreckage. To avoid these they had to move swiftly and to work their way by devious courses out to where the three men were fighting to keep above water. One of the life-savers, the veteran keeper of Little Kinnakeet, refusing to leave the work to his surfmen, rushed in and came out again disabled, with a compound fracture of the leg.

Gradually the linemen worked their way out and as gradually the waves buffeted the castaways shoreward, until finally the sailors were pulled from their wreckage, two life-savers to each sailor and fourteen men on shore pulling them all hard toward the beach. There were times when the undertow held them down beneath, in spite of the jackets, but the sailor's grip is proverbially hard to break, and out of the big receding waves they all came at last, the sailors so exhausted that they could not stand, and the surfmen almost as bad. Those who could not walk were lifted into the beach carts and the horses pulled them slowly back to the Gull Shoal Station where the wrecked men were given dry clothing and made comfortable.

Thus ended the first half of the lifesavers' day's work.

In spite of the terrible exertion already undergone by the surfmen they were compelled to keep up the patrol, for the storm was increasing. The wind was now speeding along at the rate of seventy miles an hour and the government records show that it finally reached a maximum velocity of one hundred and twenty miles an hour. Never had the breakers dashed so high, and frequently the patrolmen rode through gullies where the water dashed across into Pamlico, with forebodings that they might thus be cut off from their fellows on new islands and have to be rescued therefrom as they had rescued the men from the Reppard. All day, while the hurricane lasted and the rain and wind and wave cut across the sand strip, they drove their tired horses up and down the beach, peering through the mist, scanning the beach for wreckage, listening for signals above the roar of the breakers, wet, tired drenched to the skin, but not once intimating that it was any more than an ordinary day's work.

Night fell over a roaring tempest and still they kept the vigil, and at length it came time at three in the morning [August 17, 1899] for surfman Rasmus S. Midgett to make the regular south patrol.

Now Rasmus Midgett was the brother of the man who had discovered the Reppard, and he himself had helped to pull the three sailors from the water, and therefore when he arrived in the vicinity where the Reppard struck he was interested in looking at the wreck again and in watching the pieces of wreckage bobbing about in the surf. Evidently the water had opened passages clear through the vessel's sides, for boxes and barrels and covered buckets were floating about. Suddenly it struck him that these could not have come out of the Reppard. They were part of a vessel's cargo, and the Reppard was laden with coal. Midgett whipped up his horse and urged the animal across the gully where the water was sweeping over into Pamlico. He had to plunge in to his saddle girth to get over. Then he guided the animal along the beach, peering out to sea as he went.

The farther Midgett rode the more evidence of a wreck did he see; boxes, barrels, crates were strewn along the beach; and occasionally parts of a vessel itself came ashore. The night was so dark that he was often compelled to get down from his horse to examine these tokens of disaster; and then, sure he had not yet reached the scene of the trouble, he would push on again. Finally, when about three miles south of Gull Shoal Station, he thought he heard voices. He stopped and listened intently, and he heard them again—the faint call of men for help. He got down from his horse and went to the water's edge, and there, about a hundred yards away, he made out a part of a vessel [the Priscilla] with human beings clinging to it.

Midgett ran down waist deep into the surf and shouted encouragement to the men and then retired up the bank to deliberate. He was on the horns of a dilemma. It had taken him an hour and a half to make the patrol. To return to the station and bring the crew would therefore take at least three hours more, and it was plain to him that the wreck would not last that long. On the other hand, if he tried to do anything unaided he might lose his life, and by the time the next patrol happened along the men would be lost. Nevertheless, he thought the latter course the most feasible, so he resolved to do what he could alone. He watched his chance and when a big wave receded far out almost to the wreck, he raced after it down the beach as far as he dared and shouted his plan to the men on the vessel.

Midgett's idea was to run down after each big wave and get as close to the wreck as he dared. Then, one of the men was to jump and the life-saver was to catch him and drag him back before the wave could overwhelm them. When he was ready, he ran swiftly down and yelled:

"Jump!"

A man who had been crouching on the edge of the wreck leaped toward him and landed with a splash almost at his feet. Midgett seized the sailor, who seemed not to have strength enough to stand, and half dragged, half carried him up the beach and laid him on the sand. Then he waited for another chance.

"Jump!"

Again he had run down, again a man had leaped from the wreck, and again he had beaten the waves up the bank. He laid the second man beside the first, and down he went again. Thus he brought away the third man, and thus did he keep at it until he had helped seven up the bank. Each time he had waited longer and longer between efforts, for the fatigue was beginning to tell on him; but the heaviest part of his work lay before him. There were still three men on the wreck so disabled that they could not jump, and to save them it would be necessary for him to go right down to the wreck, lift them off and carry them up before the waves came back. He could see these men lying on the edge of the hulk gazing after their rescued comrades with yearning eyes, begging to be saved.

There is always one biggest wave in a series. It comes farther up the beach than its fellows, and when it goes out it prevents the next wave from racing far up, and sweeps the beach bare. It has a more or less regular period, and Midgett knew it when it was yet far out. He waved his hand warningly to the men on the wreck, watching the mother wave as it swept in. It climbed the beach to his feet and started back, and then with a shout he was after it,

running down the sandy slope like a deer and reaching the wreck when the water, still going out, was yet at his knees. The nearest man on the gunwale stretched down a hand to him. The life-saver clutched it, and the man slid off on to his back, almost knocking him down. He staggered uphill with his burden with the water in full cry. It caught him and surged around him, but he kept on, knowing it was not the mother wave and must soon stop. It had him by the waist when it turned to go back, but he had not lost his footing, and with a great effort he rushed on, getting out above his knees before it unfooted him.

Two mother waves went by before he tried again, and then, being experienced, he got away quicker and the wave hardly wetted him. The third man came hard, like the first, but he landed him safe at last with the others.



Rasmus Midgett Rescues the Crew of the Priscilla:

(Image from <http://www.uscg.mil/history/awards/goldlsm/18aug1899.asp>)

It was an Herculean task with all the odds against him; one that surpassed all singlehanded deeds of valor in the history of the service. But he gave that aspect of it little thought just then. The men were off the wreck to be sure, but they still needed help. Their clothes were in ribbons, and aside from their bodily discomfort their mental woe was great. The captain

of the crew, Benjamin E. Springsteen, had seen his wife and eldest son swept from the deck of his ship during the night, leaving him with his youngest child in his arms, and later in the night a wave had torn his child from his arms. Midgett gave his coat to the forlorn man, and getting upon his horse urged it toward Gull Shoal Station.

Captain Pugh was amazed at Midgett's story. He ordered that man to bed, hitched up the beach cart and sent two men with it to bring in the shipwrecked men. The rest of the men set to work, building fires, getting dry clothing and beds ready and preparing to give the poor fellows a warm reception. Midgett refused to go to bed until they were brought in and were made comfortable.

"Rasmus Midgett," remarked Captain Pugh, again, "I told you to go to bed. You've done enough work for one day." And then, after the surf man had gone to his bunk, the captain turned to one of his men and added: "Rasmus'll get a gold medal for this day's work."

And he did. It was presented to him by the Secretary of the Treasury, who also sent him a commendatory letter telling the story of the brave man's heroism.

Theodore Waters, author and lecturer, was born in Philadelphia April 10, 1870. He contributed to newspapers and magazines. In 1897 he became editor of the McClure Syndicate, then press secretary for the University of Pennsylvania in 1900, associate editor of Everybody's in 1904, Pearson's Magazine in 1905, and later press secretary for the American Association for the Advancement of Science.

According to Wikipedia, "Pearson's Magazine was an influential monthly periodical which first appeared in Britain in 1896. It specialised in speculative literature, political discussion, often of a socialist bent, and the arts. Its contributors included Upton Sinclair, George Bernard Shaw, Maxim Gorky, George Griffith, H.G. Wells, Dornford Yates and E. Phillips Oppenheim, many of whose short stories and novelettes first saw publication in Pearson's."