

The Last Word

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Once upon a time, long years ago, I read of a dangerous seacoast where shipwrecks often occurred. Seeing the need, some of the people along the shore built a crude little lifesaving station. The building was only a hut of bamboo poles and palm thatch roof. They had but one boat, a battered old dinghy with rusted oarlocks and two life jackets. The only expensive item was a large incandescent light erected on a pole to give hope to floundering survivors.

The lifesavers were deeply committed to their task. They covenanted together to put lifesaving before anything else. Any who have seen the bloated bodies washed up on the shore knew how critical the task was. With no thought of themselves, they kept constant watch over the sea, going out day and night in tireless search for the lost.

The situation was made more tragic when it was discovered that most of the ships going on the rocks had been chartered by the big Inland Club—a group which had at one time been a lifesaving station before the hurricanes forced it inland to safer ground.

The story is that many lives were saved by this wonderful little band of people who manned the lifesaving station. Many of those saved refused to return to the Inland Club. All they had, they said, they owed to those who had plucked them from the raging sea. They remained on the rugged shore, giving their money and begging the lifesavers to train them that they, too, might save lives. The station grew and the leaders of the band became famous, traveling abroad and teaching others the techniques of saving lives. Since many wanted to become a part of the original group, they formed a loose knit network of lifesaving groups all over the nation—each looking to the home station for

supervision.

Then a great argument arose concerning techniques. Some said the band should not be organized under leaders, but each lifesaver should walk the shore as he pleased. Others felt the lifesaving station was the last hope for those in peril on the sea, since the Inland Club was obviously not interested. Indeed, they were part of the problem. Still a third group insisted on a big, comfortable building like the Inland Club. It would provide refuge for those saved from the sea and give the band a feeling of security and respectability. Finally, there were those who said the whole principle of lifesaving was wrong. If the Inland Clubbers were foolish enough to go out in a storm, they deserved to drown. The Band (now spelled with a capital letter) should be limited only to those who were committed to the Lifesavers (also capitalized).

The group was ready to divide. A large segment felt it was too expensive to maintain the incandescent light on the tower. The lights along the shore were enough, they maintained—citing the words from the old hymn, *Let the Lower Lights Be Burning*.

The division was friendly, but final. *The Incandescents* (their newsletter carried the picture of a lighthouse) would continue to meet on Sunday. The *Lower Lighters* (their newsletter had a picture of Jesus standing at the door with a lamp in his hand) would meet on Saturday night. It made them feel spiritual to give way to their self-righteous brothers.

The *Incandescents*, who had more money, built a beautiful lighthouse on the site of the old hut. It had a spacious club room on the ground floor which they rented to the

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Lower Lighters on Saturday night.

As the battle between the groups raged, each side became more defensive. Fewer and fewer members were interested in going on lifesaving missions, preferring to spend their time correcting the other members of the Band. Disgruntled members returned to the Inland Club, declaring the Band had grown legalistic. The Lifesavers, they said, were insisting the members could not go on vacation during the monsoon season and were even demanding financial accountings from some who were slothful in paying their dues. Lifeboat crews had been hired to do the actual work of plucking the lost from the sea, which enabled the Lifesavers time to travel around the country teaching techniques.

About this time a large ship was wrecked off the coast and the hired crews brought in loads of cold, wet, half-drowned people. A great debate arose whether these outsiders should be allowed to enter the clubhouse since they had not made commitments to the Lifesavers—who were all in New Zealand

teaching techniques. During the debate many of the survivors died from exposure.

At the next meeting the Band divided. The *Lower Lighters* pulled out, insisting their primary purpose was to save lives, not just maintain the lighthouse and keep the bulb burning. They agreed among themselves to go down the coast and start their own lifesaving station. They had done it before, they could do it again.

As the years went by, I understand, the new station slowly went through the same changes that had occurred in the old. A huge lighthouse was built with clubrooms, bowling alley, bingo parlor, and paneled study for the Lifesaver. The committed ones finally pulled out and started another station down the coast. Now, they tell me, if you visit that coast you will find a number of lighthouses along the shore—all calling themselves Lifesaving Stations.

Shipwrecks are frequent in those waters; but most of the people drown.