

The Storyteller.

THE DEFENCE OF NORTON LIGHT.

In the winter of 1878 the steamer Polar Star was making daily trips across Northumberland Strait, which separates Prince Edward Island from the mainland Provinces of New Brunswick and Nova Scotia. In spite of her special construction for the service, she was often delayed and sometimes forced far out of her course by the ice.

Lighthouses along the coast, which were formerly closed at this season, had to be kept open and carefully tended on her account.

On Keeper Ward, of Norton Light, rested the heaviest responsibility. She left his port each morning, and seldom made it again until long after dark. This winter, however, he was nominally in charge, for he was a sick man. His wife had died during the preceding autumn; and he himself was shortly afterwards attacked by illness so severe that in the month of January he was still unable to leave his room without help.

His daughter Mary, now a little over seventeen, and her brother, Bobbie, not quite eleven, were taking care both of him and the light.

When the Polar Star arrived at Norton, on the evening of January 17, her coloured cook, Wellington Mingo, was dismissed for drunkenness and gross insubordination. He left, vowing dire vengeance; whereat those concerned only laughed.

But he had in his mind a plan, at which they would have been far from smiling had they known it, and an opportunity for its execution came very quickly.

When the Star left her dock at the usual hour the next morning, the sky was already overcast and threatening. The 'storm-drum' dangled from the arm of the meteorological signal-staff as she passed.

The 'Roaring Bull,' a dangerous reef and rocky point a mile or two to the south-east, was bellowing ominously. Close night settled down before five o'clock, with driving snow and a piping gale blowing from the north-east.

The Star could not possibly get back to Norton before seven or eight o'clock. Mingo had good reason to believe that she would never arrive, if he could keep the harbour light from showing that night as he intended.

His preparations were simple. He primed himself with bad whisky, and bought a large flask to take with him. He wiped out, reloaded and placed in his overcoat pocket a heavy revolver of the 'bulldog' variety, and was ready.

Shortly after four o'clock he set out, crossed the harbour on the ice, a little above the tract kept open by the Star, and walked over two miles down the opposite shore, and then a mile out upon the narrow tongue of beach at the farther extremity of which Norton Light stands.

Mary Ward and her brother Bobbie were at tea in the kitchen of the cottage attached to the lighthouse when the outer door opened and Mingo's ugly, bloated face looked in.

It was after six o'clock. The lighthouse lantern had been lit for nearly two hours. Mary had carried her father's tea up to him half an hour before, and he had gone to sleep shortly afterwards. His bedroom occupied the second floor of the lighthouse tower. Below was their 'best room.' The heavy door between the 'best room' and the cottage was closed. No sound loud enough to be heard above the increasing roar of the storm could penetrate it.

The cottage consisted of a kitchen and 'living room' on the ground floor, with bedrooms above. The living room adjoined the tower, the interior of which could only be reached through it, and by a steep flight of half a dozen steps. But one door led out of the cottage—the one which Mingo now held in his hand.

The lower windows of the tower were narrow, set deep in the sloping walls, and eight or nine feet from the ground. Those of the cottage were not more than four feet from the ground, and easily accessible. The door from the kitchen into the living room stood open against the front wall.

Mary and Bobbie were at opposite ends of a table which had been drawn out and set in the centre of the kitchen. A lighted lamp stood upon it. Mingo's revolver glittered in his hand and his eyes rolled ferociously upon them out of the darkness.

'Don't either of you two move nor make no noise,' he said, 'or it'll be the worse for you.' Then he came in, latched the door behind him, without turning his head, and walked up to the table.

Bobbie opened his mouth and let his hands fall in undisguised fright. The colour dropped from Mary's cheeks, and her fingers trembled. But she set her teeth, and looked the burly ruffian so unflinchingly in the eyes that his glance shifted and wavered in spite of himself.

'What do you want, and how dare you come into our house this way?' she demanded, as he stopped and rested his pistol on the table half-way between her brother and herself.

'I don't mean no harm to you, miss, nor to the kid,' he answered, surlily, but half apologetically. 'Don't you meddle with me, and I'll leave you be. All I want is to douse the lighthouse lantern for a while to-night.'

'But you shan't do that,' said Mary. 'The Star won't be in for hours yet. Without the light she'd be sure to go on the 'Roaring Bull.' I'd rather you'd kill me than that.'

'I'd kill you quick 'nough rather'n it shouldn't happen,' shouted Mingo, with so ferocious a gesture that Mary cried out and sprang to her feet.

He seized her by the shoulder and thrust her savagely down again. 'Come now, none of that!' he growled.

It was well for him that he glanced around just then. Bobbie had got hold of a long, sharp carving knife, and was coming at him

furiously. Mingo turned his revolver upon the boy with a start of fear and yelled, 'Drop it you cub; drop it quick, or I'll do for you!'

Bobbie reluctantly surrendered his weapon to irresistible force. His spirit had been thoroughly roused by the violence offered to Mary. There was nothing he would not do or dare for her sake since the night she had gone out to him and saved his life among the crushing gulf ice.

When they were both seated again, Mingo glared threateningly from one to the other for a minute. Then he fetched a chair and sat down at the side of the table between them, with his back to the door by which he had entered.

Bobbie glanced at Mary and saw a look on her face which meant anything but giving in without a struggle. He made up his mind to help her all he could.

'But there's lots of time,' went on Mingo, confidently. 'The Star won't miss the light till she's well inside of Seal Rock point. She can't get there to-night for a good while yet. I'm hungry, and I'm goin' to eat afore I make ready for her.'

'You sit still right where you are bub,' he ordered Bobbie. 'Don't you move again till I tell you, or I'll wring your neck. You, miss, you pass me a tumbler and the sugar, and hand me some hot water from the stove behind you. And mind you don't try to do but what I say.'

Mary obeyed. Mingo poured himself out almost half a tumbler of his bad whiskey, put several spoonfuls of sugar into it, and filled up the glass with hot water. 'Here's to the settin' of the Polar Star,' he chuckled, as he tossed off the dose.

The drink went immediately to his head. In a few minutes he was stupidly fumbling the dishes and giving orders in a thick voice. Mary understood, saw her chance, and promptly formed her plans.

He demanded a cup of tea, and as she gave it to him she made a well-understood sign to Bobbie, who was watching her closely. They had learned the one-hand deaf and dumb alphabet from the cover of a school-exercise book, and practised it almost daily for their own amusement.

Mingo was breathing heavily over his food. His eyes were cast down. He suspected nothing so long as they sat still, but satisfied himself with an occasional leering glance. Mary rested an elbow on the table. Bobbie did likewise, and she said with flying fingers 'You must go for help, Bobbie.'

'How am I to get out?' questioned Bobbie.

'I'll blow out the lamp when he asks me to get something else,' returned Mary. 'Be ready, and jump for the door. You'll get it before he can catch you.'

'But he'll chase me.'

'Likely he will; but it's very dark outside; he's half drunk. You know the place; he doesn't. You can easily dodge him.'

'Hain't I better try to grab his revolver? It's lying on my side of his plate. I could easily reach it and shoot him,' suggested Bobbie.

'Not for your life,' said Mary. 'He'd be sure to catch and kill you.'

'What will you do if I go?' asked Bobbie, looking uneasily at his sister.

'When he chases you I'll lock the door after him and try to keep him out till you fetch help,' said Mary.

To nerve Bobbie for the undertaking, she added. 'You and I must save the Star some way. Father would die if anything happened to her on account of the light.'

Bobbie nodded his willingness to go, just as Mingo ordered another cup of tea.

Mary arose and pushed back her chair as if to get it for him; leaned over with the pretence of taking the cup from his shaky hand, and then blew a quick, light breath directly across the top of the lamp chimney. There was instant darkness.

Mingo uttered a fierce oath and clutched at the girl. But she sprang back as the light went out, and was beyond reach. He half fell over the table in his effort to get at her. Before he could recover and steady himself, there came a rush of stormy air, and the outer door flew open with a bang.

Mary stood perfectly still, and Mingo at once concluded that both his captives were gone. He poured forth a torrent of imprecations as he groped his way to the door and plunged out in pursuit. Then Mary tiptoed across the kitchen, closed the door, turned the key in the lock, and shot a stout wooden bar into place across it.

After that she stood for a little time in such terrible suspense concerning Bobbie, that she could scarcely refrain from tearing the door open again and rushing out to his assistance. Only the thought of her responsibility to her father and the Polar Star held her back. But she began to regain confidence when a minute or more passed without any sound of capture from without.

Mary was trying to form some plan for her own defence, when the door-latch was violently rattled, and a furious demand made for admission. She almost welcomed the sound which proved that Bobbie was no longer pursued.

Mary made no answer; and Mingo, after various preliminary shakings and threatenings and cursings, threw himself against the door with such force that the whole cottage shook. His mind was made up now, that he had been tricked, and that Mary and Bobbie were both within.

Time after time he rushed at the door with savage determination. Mary expected it to break at every shock, and stood trembling in the dark until Mingo saw that it would not yield, and gave up the attempt to force it.

But there were other more vulnerable points in her defences yet to be tried. Mingo had sobered up enough in the cold air to remember this. He gave the door a vicious parting kick; and a few seconds afterwards she heard him at the front window of the kitchen.

Now she must do something. Her spirits rose at once. She