

A Canadian Grace Darling

BY REV. JOHN MORRISON.

"Langton, Ont., March 21, 1935.—Mrs. Rohrer, familiarly known as Abigail Becker, the heroine of Long Point, died suddenly to-day at her late home in Walsingham Centre."

THE above item was what caught my eye and arrested my attention, as whirling along on a fast train the day following, I was reading the daily paper, and on my return home set my pen at work on this article.

In connection with the U. E. Loyalist movement of a century and more ago there came into the County of Frontenac from York State one named Elijah Jackson, of pure Dutch blood. He married a French Canadian, Marie Grozaine. They set up the sacred hearth-stone of home in the Township of Portland, in that county, and there it was on the 14th day of March, 1831, a daughter was born to them who was destined to write her name, by the splendor of her heroism, alongside that of Florence Nightingale, Grace Darling and Laura Secord. The child was given a goodly Scripture name, Abigail; and worthily did she bear it through a life of more than threescore years and ten. When eleven years of age she removed to Townsend Township, Norfolk County, and within that county continued till death.

George Eliot, in her "Adam Bede," says, "If you would maintain the slightest belief in human heroism, you must never make a pilgrimage to see the hero." In the face of such pronouncement we were daring enough to make a pilgrimage, and found the proverb—a failure.

It was Tuesday, June 14th, 1904, a hazy, summer morning, air fragrant with the odor of wild flowers, as we swung along on our trusty wheel, faithful companion in many a pleasant excursion, past orchards laden with young fruit, well cultivated fields, alternating with wild tangles of ferns, climbing vines and stately trees, along the creek bottoms, sufficiently beautiful to lure us from our wheel at times to feast our eyes upon their beauty; southward, ho! on the centre road of Walsingham, now east on the seventh concession, over sand hills and sandier hollows, and one mile east of the centre road we reach our destination, and before us is the dream of many days, the home of Abigail Becker, standing conveniently back from the road on the north side, an unpretentious one-and-a-half story frame house, with a one-story kitchen projecting to the east. Entering by the garden gate we pass through an old-fashioned garden, in which in luxuriant profusion are growing the flowers common to the days of our boyhood, conspicuous among them being a well-laden snowball in full bloom.

Within the house as without, there is not anything, according to ordinary human standards, to indicate the heroic—an old-fashioned wooden dash-churn, plain furniture, a capacious rocking-chair, hand made—splendid relic of a generation dead and gone—low ceilings, and in cages on the wall are a pair of Japanese sparrows and a parakeet. From the front door a fine view is had of our Canadian landscape, tree-dotted and forest-backed, while from the rear windows the outlook is over the fields and deep ravines which, like huge gashes, cut across the home farm.

Now, there comes in from the garden a tall, robust woman, and we stand face to face with one whose shoulders are yet unbent, and dark hair only lightly threaded with silver, whose face reflects the purity of soul possessed only by the truly great, and our hand grasps the hand of one whose heroic valor brought an autograph letter from Queen Victoria, of illustrious memory, and whose name has been spoken with reverent tone and gratitude by those whom she, by her courageous valor, on the 29th of November, 1854, saved from an untimely death beneath the waves of Lake Erie.

"The wind, the wind, where Erie plunged,
Blew, blew, nor-east from land to land;
The wandering schooner dipped and plunged;
Long Point was close at hand.

She pounded over, lurching and sank
Between two sand-bars, settling fast;
Her leaky hull the water drank,
And she had sail'd her last."

The vessel was a three-masted schooner, owned in Amherstburg and named *The Conductor*. Captain Hackett was her commander; six sailors and a cook made up the balance of her crew. In the terrible gale which broke over the lakes that November night she was driven on to the sand-bar about a quarter of a mile from the west end of Long Point Island.

"Yes, the day was bitterly cold when I rescued the sailors. My husband, 'Trapper' Becker was away much of the time on the island, and I said to him, I may as well go, too, and not live here and you away so much. That was how I came to be on the island. In the morning I heard the cracking of the torn sails in the wind, and going along the shore, soon sighted the vessel and the men in the rigging. I waded out in the breakers and signalled them to jump in and swim, and I would help them. This they did one at a time, and each man, half frozen and half drowned, I clutched, and through the terrible breakers dragged ashore; then helped them to the fire on the



From "Types of Canadian Women."

ABIGAIL BECKER

beach; then to our house, where warmth and food awaited them. To one I gave my shawl, to another my shoes to protect his partly-frozen feet, and barefooted I toiled on—my clothes frozen like iron upon me—but all day I toiled, and rescued seven. The other poor fellow remained another night in the rigging, and was so terribly frozen when I rescued him the following morning that he had to stay several weeks with us before he was able to go home. I only did my duty and any other would have done the same. I never wanted that my name should be honored this way in the world. I insisted that Captain Hackett should not tell it, but he afterwards told me he had to, and so it got out. The day following the rescue, the ice froze so that men crossed on foot the channel between the island and mainland. The rescued crew and Buffalo merchants made up a purse of \$550, with which I bought the farm on which I live."

Only when I asked to see it did this grandly heroic, but truly modest woman, bring forth and show the solid gold