

WHAT KATE DEVINS DID!

The girl had come from Quebec on the Government steamer; but she was a Massachusetts girl, who had said she would stay the remainder of her vacation on the Island of Anticosti, simply because everybody told her she could not possibly do it.

"What is the reason I can't?" she asked her mother. "Uncle and aunt stay on the island all the time and so does Benny."

"I advise you not to go," said the mother.

"But why?"

"Because you will be lonely and homesick."

"Is that the only reason?"

"Yes."

"Then I shall go."

"Very well. If you do, you will be obliged to stay two months."

"Oh, of course, I know that."

"So it came about that Kate Devins stepped from the Government light-supply boat to the shore of Anticosti Island one day in early summer."

She was alone. She had her satchel in her hand, and as she walked along the shore her slight, gray-clad figure stood out strange and solitary on the waste against the blue sky. As the sound of the oars of the sailors in the departing boat grew fainter and fainter, a sensation something like fear came over her. In a moment however, she was herself again. About her was silence and desolation, that harmonized well with the belief the Acadians have that God gave up this island to gloom and despair and bestowed it as a heritage upon Cain. Stretches of marsh land or acres of rock lie barren beneath the summer sun and the winter clouds.

Seldom is there any communication with the island from the mainland, which, for hundreds of miles, is nearly as desolate as the island itself. Once or twice in the summer a sailing boat may call. No pleasure-seeker ever comes a second time. The capricious currents, the fogs, the shoals, call for lighthouses here and there on the coast, and here many heroic deeds are done which are never sung or told; and here was done one heroic deed about which I will now tell you.

A small white house on the slight rise of land, a dozen rods from the water, had at one corner of it a tower running up many feet, on the top of which was the light-chamber, or lantern, of the lighthouse. There was no other habitation in sight.

Kate, ashamed of her sudden feeling of terror and homesickness, now walked quickly toward the little house. A door was thrown open, and the stooped and worn form of a woman appeared in the opening. She looked at the girl a moment or two with an expression of wonder. Had some brilliant bird of the tropics lighted there, she would have been less surprised.

"The land sake!" she cried. "Who be ye? Did ye come on the Gov'ment steamer?"

"Yes, ma'am," said Kate. "Don't you know me?"

The woman's poor, faded face still had something in it that reminded Kate of her mother and warmed her heart at the same time that it made her eyes dim. She put out her hand.

"I'm your sister Mary's child," she said.

"So you be! So you be! And I ain't seen you since you was fifteen months old. You'd lost yer father then. Come in! Now ain't this a treat? But you never can stand it here in this lonely place; ye've got to mortal can stand it! Come!"

The woman kissed Kate on both cheeks and drew her into the small room, which was evidently kitchen, dining and sitting-room. She then bustled about, putting on the tea-kettle and blowing up the fire in the old stove.

"Did ye come from Quebec? Be ye goin' back in the steamer?"

"No, I'm not going back in the steamer," answered Kate. "The men will bring my trunk here before dark. Mayn't I stay?"

"Stay!" The woman stood an instant and looked at her visitor.

"I shall be wonderful glad to have ye, but ye never can stand it. Sister Mary never could. How is she?"

"Mother is well. She said I couldn't possibly be contented here, and perhaps that is the reason I determined I would."

"But ye can't," earnestly.

"Ye do, aunt."

"It's my home and I must stay here. You are dearly welcome, anyway."

Later, Kate watched the Government steamer gliding away on what seemed a sea of glass. It would be at least two months before she would come again. Kate was standing on the beach looking at the vessel, when a loud scream sounded close behind her. She jumped, angry and startled, and turning, saw, a rod or two away, a boy of eight or nine years, who was dressed in a checked blue shirt, with trousers of the same, held up by knotted cord that was used as a suspender. On his head was a round glazed cap, with no rim or visor.

He had shrewd gray eyes and no front teeth except one, that was just showing itself, and looked like an infant tusk. The two figures stood and gazed at each other in silence. At last Kate asked, severely,—"Why do you yell in such a horrid way as that?"

"'Cause I wanted to see if you could move. I've been watchin' of ye for a long spell. Who be ye, anyway?"

"Kate Devins."

"Come on Gov'ment steamer?"

"Yes, I came on that steamer. Who are you?"

"Oh, I'm Benny Shafte."

"I'm your cousin, come to make you a visit." She extended a hand, and received a grimy hand in it.

"You never can stand it here, cousin Kate Devins," he said, and after looking at her in silence a moment, they started to walk back to the house.

Kate saw that he was shrewd and bright beyond his years. But she thought his father and mother rather simple people. She lay that night in her bit of a room under the roof, watching for the glint of the lamps in the lighthouse when it turned so that its light shone on the water, which was visible from her pillow.

The next day her aunt complained of a severe headache and feverish pains in her back. Kate, if a trifle headstrong, was really a good sort of a girl, as you will see. She at once insisted that Mrs. Shafte should lie in bed, while she "did the work." This was not the first time she had done housework, for she had often shared with her mother the work of their cosy little home. But here it was very different, she found. There were so few utensils, and no one to give any directions. So when she sat down by her aunt's bedside, late in the afternoon, she was very tired.

Even her ignorant eyes saw that Mrs. Shafte was no better. In a few minutes Mr. Shafte came in, looking so tired and worried that his wife gazed at him anxiously. He sat down heavily in the wooden chair near the bed-room door, and leaned his head on his hands.

"David, what is it?" asked Mrs. Shafte, feebly.

"The revolvin' apparatus is broke," he said, in such a leaden way that Kate gazed at him in surprise.

She knew partially what his word meant, but did not comprehend why they should cause the sick woman to start up in bed, and then sink back with a groan.

"And the steamer gone yesterday!" she cried out. "What shall you do?"

"The worst of it is," the man said, "unless it flashes, the craft will think it's the stationary light on the west side, and I'm sure there'll be terrible loss of life."

Mrs. Shafte now sat upright in bed, in spite of her severe headache.

"And there's no way by which to send word to the Marine Department!" she said, despairingly.

Her husband shook his head. "There ain't no way, as ye know. I can't let 'em know till the next steamer comes, and then it'll be a long time before they can get back with the machinery. But how be ye now?" getting up and approaching the bed.

"I only want a little rest," she replied hastily; and added, "O David! what shall you do 'bout the light? I can't sleep if the sailors are goin' to be decoyed by it. Think of their vessels crashing on the rocks because of that light!"

"Now, Catharine," said Mr. Shafte, "don't you go and worry. I shall stay up there. I think I can turn the light by hand. But it's goin' to be a tedious business. You needn't think I shall let the ships be deceived. You get a good sleep. That's all you've got to do."

Then, turning to Kate, he said, "when you can leave yer aunt, come up into the tower and see the light."

Soon Mrs. Shafte was sleeping uneasily. Benny had come in, and was eating bread and molasses with audible gusto at the kitchen table.

"If your mother wants anything, you wait upon her," she said, as she passed through the room on her way to the light. Benny nodded, and Kate entered the cool, gloomy and narrow stairway that wound up through the tower. As she emerged into the small room where the great lamps were, she was greatly startled by her uncle on his knees, with his arms out on the single chair the place contained, and by hearing him say, in a low, strained voice,—

"O Lord, help us! The remaining steps, her face pale with excitement, and fear of she knew not what."

"Uncle David!" she exclaimed; "what is the matter? Surely you and I can manage to turn the light! I'm strong and well, and I've been brought up to work. I can do almost anything if you'll teach me."

There was courage and conviction in the clear, pleasant voice, and the man was a trifle cheered. He rose to his feet and turned toward her. His face was haggard, and his eyes looked dull and heavy.

"Taint turbin' for a night; it's for weeks," he said solemnly. "And the question is, can we hold out? We are responsible for men's lives. I wanted to see ye and tell ye how to do it, because my head has such a feeling in it, and my back, and I think I may be taken down. What my mind is clear I want to make sure, you know. Somehow, you have a look as if ye could be trusted. Benny's too young, I'm afraid."

"Now you jest watch. I'm goin' through the whole operation of filin' and trimmin', and then turbin'."

Kate did not answer. It was not necessary. The man saw she was as eager as he could desire. When he had oiled the oil, trimmed the wicks and polished the reflectors, he took out his watch and sat down. Kate bent over him.

"It must flash every minute and a half," he said, "and this is the way. It ain't very easy, nor very hard, just for a time or two, set down here and lay the watch there."

Kate did as he bade her.

"Now turn."

She bent forward, turned the wheels, and had the satisfaction of seeing the set of lights slowly revolve.

"There, ye see they stop now," he said, "do it again."

He was satisfied.

"You must light up at seven at night, and put 'em out at seven in the morning."

"But can't you send for some one?" she asked.

"There ain't nobody within miles an' miles," was the answer; "and when ye do come to somebody, he couldn't leave, for he's a light-keeper too. You don't know this island. I must git down stairs now. I wish I could siddy myself on your shoulder. There are bad stairs for a head like mine."

Kate went one step ahead of him down the stairway, and he leaned his hand heavily upon her. When they reached the living-room, the man, whose force of will had kept him up, sank in a faint upon the floor.

Mrs. Shafte was greatly alarmed, but she was able to give directions to Kate, and in half an hour, with Benny's help, Kate had brought down her own bed and bedstead from the little chamber, and Mr. Shafte had recovered consciousness enough to rise and die down upon it, where it was placed at one side of the kitchen. As his head touched the pillow, he caught the girl's hand and said,—

"It's my opinion we've both got typhoid. We'll see to ourselves. You tend to the light—tend to the light!" he repeated with pathetic emphasis.

He did not speak a coherent sentence after that for many days.

"You may trust me," said Kate; but he did not hear her.

Now was a time to prove of what stuff Kate was made. She passed the next hour in making her two patients as comfortable as she could, and then it was six o'clock. Then she made a basin of gruel, and ate some bread and molasses with Benny. After supper she took the boy out of doors.

"Benny," she said, "your father and mother may be ill many days. Can I depend on you?"

He leaned his back against the house, looked at her a moment and then said with emphasis,—

"Yes, sir!"

"I want you to wrap yourself in a comforter and sleep on the kitchen-floor to-night, and every night. If you want anything you must get it forthem. To-morrow I shall try to give them a sweat. That's all I can do. Oh, it's horrible! It is horrible to be here alone at such a time!" The girl trembled for an instant, but directly had herself well in hand again.

"I've got to be up in the tower until morning," she went on. "Something about the machinery is broken, and I must turn the light."

"Broken! Got to turn the light!" interrupted Benny. Then his face lengthened, and he stood as if utterly confounded.

"Yes," hurriedly said Kate, "you see how much we have to do, and how we must help each other. You'll have to take care of your father and mother while I'm in the lantern."

"I'll do my best," he said earnestly.

She went up into the tower at a quarter to seven, and by the time her uncle's watch pointed to the hour, the lamps were lighted, although at this time of the year it was still daylight. She glanced out of the window, and saw Benny struggling to plant his fish-rod close to the water. From its top waved three long streamers. This was in accordance with an agreement the two had made just before she left him for the night.

"Who will think it means anything?" she asked herself. Still, the sight of it gave a bit of comfort.

Then began her work. For the first few times she fancied it would be quite easy to turn the machine. But in half an hour she began to tire and soon every muscle ached, and a binding glare was in her brain; for, unconsciously, she had kept her eyes fixed on the flames of the lamps.

Then she grew anxious. "Oh, cannot I hold out even one night!" she thought.

She hurried to the window and put her head into the cool air. But she was nervously afraid the time would pass, and she should miss her duty.

The night then grew cloudy and very dark. When it was ten she thought it was after midnight. There was no cessation, no rest. It was like the drop of water falling regularly on the head, the old, dreadful torture.

By twelve the girl thought she would have given countless treasures to be able to throw herself on the floor, and stay there half an hour. Once when she thrust her head out of the window she saw a beautiful burst of purple and green wild duck suddenly dart into the glow of the light, coming straight toward her. In the next breath he had dashed his head against the close wire screen. He curled over and fell dead on the ground. The sight of this poor creature's fate turned her cold. It was like a premonition.

"If I give up for one minute, I shall be hysterical!" she said to herself, and she turned resolutely back to the lantern. In half a minute she revolved the light. So the night went on, until it was half past two.

Then there was a little sound behind her. She looked and saw Benny's head just above the threshold of the door. He was standing on the stairs, and had a cup and saucer in his hand.

"Mother's awake," he said. "She told me how to make some tea. She thought you'd need it."

"Oh, thank you! Thank you!" cried the girl, and she drank the tea eagerly.

"How does it go here?" he asked.

"It has gone somehow. I suppose it will come morning sometime! How are your mother and father?"

"I think mother's better. But father's bad." And he hurried away.

The tea was strong, and stimulated her for three hours. It was daylight then, but there was a fog. All at once the watcher was so sleepy that her eyelids would drop as she turned at her work. Then she would grow frightened at herself, and for five minutes thereafter she would be wide awake, and thinking of the sailors who might be watching for the flash of the light.

The moments now were terrible. Should she live to see the hand of that watch point to seven? Was it only one night that she had passed, and there were so many, many more to come. "Can I endure it?" she thought.