

THE RULING PASSION

BY HENRY VAN DYKE.

THE KEEPER OF THE LIGHT.

At long distance, looking over the blue waters of the Gulf of St. Lawrence in clear weather, you might think that you saw a lonely sea gull, snow-white, perching motionless on a cobbly bank of gray rock. Then, as your boat drifted in, following the languid tide and the soft southern breeze, you would perceive that the cobbly rock was a rugged hill with a few bushes and stunted trees growing in the crevices, and that the gleaming speck near the summit must be some kind of building— if you were on the coast of Italy or Spain you would say a villa or a farmhouse. Then, as you floated still farther north and drew nearer to the coast, the desolate hill would detach itself from the mainland and become a little mountain isle, with a flock of smaller islets clustering around it as a brood of wild ducks keep close to their mother, and with deep water, nearly two miles wide, flowing between it and the shore; while the shining speck on the seaward side stood clearly as a low, white washed dwelling with a sturdy round tower at one end, crowned with a big eight-sided lantern—a solitary lighthouse.

That is the Isle of the Wise Virgin. Behind it the long blue Laurentian Mountains, clothed with unbroken forest, rise in sombre ranges toward the Height of Land. In front of it the waters of the gulf heave and sparkle far away where the dim peaks of St. Annes Mountains are traced along the southern horizon. Sheltered a little, but not completely, by the island breaker of granite, lies the rocky beach of Dead Men's Point, where an English navy was wrecked in a night of storm a hundred years ago.

There are a score of wooden houses, a tiny, weather-beaten chapel, a Hudson Bay Company's store, a row of platforms for drying fish, and a varied assortment of boats and nets, strung along the beach now. Dead Men's Point has developed into a centre of industry, with a life, a tradition, a social character of its own. And in one of those houses, as you sit at the door in the lingering June twilight, looking out across the deep channel to the lantern of the tower is just beginning to glow with orange radiance above the shadow of the island—in that far away place, in that mystical hour, you should hear the story of the light and its keeper.

When the lighthouse was built, many years ago, the island had another name. It was called the Isle of Birds. Thou sands of sea-fowl nested there. The handful of people who lived on the shore robbed the nests and slaughtered the birds, with considerable profit. It was perceived in advance that the building of the lighthouse would interfere with this, and with other things. Hence it was not altogether a popular improvement. Marcel Thibault, the oldest inhabitant, was the leader of the opposition.

"That lighthouse!" said he, "what good will it be for us? We know the way in and out when it makes clear weather, by day or by night. But when the sky gets swamy, when it makes fog, or when we stay with ourselves at home, or we run into La Trinité, or Pentecote, we know the way. What? The stranger boats? Ben! the stranger boats need not to come here, if they know not the way. The more fish, the more seals, the more every thing will there be left for us. Just because of the stranger boats, to build something that makes all the birds wild and spoils the hunting—that is a fool's work. The good God makes no stupid light on the Isle of Birds. He saw no necessity of it."

"Besides," continued Thibault, puffing slowly at his pipe, "besides—those stranger boats, sometimes they are lost, they come ashore. It is sad! But who got the things that are saved, all sorts of things, good to put into our houses, good to eat, or to sell, some times a boat that is not patched up almost like new—who gets these things, eh? Doubtless those for whom the good God intended them. But who shall get them when this scree lighthouse is built, eh? Tell me that, you Baptiste Fortin."

Fortin represented the party of progress in the little parliament of the beach. He had come with his wife and two little daughters, and a good many new notions about life. He had good luck at the cod fishing, and built a house with windows at the side as well as in front. When his third girl, Natalie, was born, he went so far as to paint the house red, and put on a kitchen, and enclose a bit of ground for a yard. This marked him as a radical, an innovator. He was so sure of himself, he would defend the building of the lighthouse. And he did.

"Monsieur Thibault," he said, "you talk well, but you talk too late. It is of a past age, your talk. A new time comes to the Côte Nord. We begin to civilize ourselves. To hold back against the light would be our shame. Tell me this, Marcel Thibault, what men are they that love darkness?"

"Toujours!" growled Thibault, "that is a little strong. You say my deeds are evil?"

"No, no," answered Fortin; "I say not that, my friend, but I say this light house means good: good for us, and good for all who come to this coast. It will bring more trade to us. It will bring a boat with the mail, with newspapers, perhaps once, perhaps twice a month, all through the summer. It will bring us into the great world. To lose that for the sake of a few birds—ou sera ben de valeur! Besides, it is impossible. The lighthouse is coming, certain."

Fortin was right, of course. But Thibault's position was not altogether unnatural, nor unfamiliar. All over the world, for the past hundred years, people have been kicking against the sharpness of the pricks that drove them forward out of the old life, the wild life, the free life, grown dear to them because it was so easy. There

has been a terrible interference with bird nesting and other things. All over the world the great something that bridges rivers, and tunnels mountains, and fells forests, and populates deserts, and opens up the hidden corners of the earth, has been pushing steadily on; and the people who like things to remain as they are have had to give up a great deal. There was no exception made in favor of Dead Men's Point. The Isle of Birds lay in the line of progress. The lighthouse arrived.

It was a very good house for that day. The keeper's dwelling had three rooms and was solidly built. The tower was thirty feet high. The lantern held a revolving light, with a four-wick Fresnel lamp, burning sperm oil. There was one of Stevenson's new cages of dioptric prisms around the flames, and once every minute it was turned by flashing a broad belt of radiance fifteen miles across the sea. All night long that big bright eye was opening and shutting. "Bouquet!" said Thibault, "it winks like a one-eyed Windigo."

The Department of Marine and Fisheries sent down an expert from Quebec to see the light in order and run it for the first summer. He took Fortin as his assistant. By the end of August he reported to headquarters that the light was all right, and that Fortin was qualified to be appointed keeper. Before October was out the certificate of appointment came back, and the expert packed his bag to go up the river.

"Now look here, Fortin," said he, "this is no fishing job. Do you think you are up to this job?"

"I suppose," said Fortin, "we do you remember all this business about the machinery that turns the lenses? That's the main thing. The bearings must be kept well oiled, and the weight must never get out of order. The clock-face will tell you when it is running right. If anything gets hitched up here's the crank to keep it going until you can straighten the machine again. It is easy enough to turn it. But you must never let it stop between dark and daylight. The regular turn once a minute—that's the mark of this light. If it shines steady it might as well be out. Yes, better! Any vessel coming along here in a dirty night and seeing a fixed light would take it for the Cap Loup-Marin and run ashore. This particular light has got to revolve once a minute every night from April 1 to December 10, certain. Can you do it?"

"Certain," said Fortin. "That's the way I like to hear a man talk! Now, you've got oil enough to last you through till the 10th of December, when you close the light, and to run on for a month in the spring after you open again. The ice may be late in going out and perhaps the supply boat can't get down before the middle of April, or thereabouts. But she'll bring plenty of oil when she comes, so you'll be all right."

"All right," said Fortin. "Well, I've said it all, I guess. You understand what you've got to do? Good-bye and good luck. You're the keeper of the light now."

"Good-luck," said Fortin, "I'm going to keep it."

The same day he shut up the red house on the beach and moved to the white house on the island with Marie-Anne, his wife, and the three girls, Alma, aged seventeen, Azilda, aged fifteen, and Natalie, aged thirteen. He was the captain, and Marie-Anne was the mate, and the three girls were the crew. They were all as full of happy pride as if they had come into possession of a great fortune.

It was the 31st day of October. A snow shower had silvered the island. The afternoon was clear and beautiful. As the sun sloped toward the rose-colored hills of the mainland the whole family stood out in front of the lighthouse looking up at the tower.

"Regard him well, my children," said Baptiste; "God has given him to us to keep, and to keep us. Thibault says he is a Windigo. Ben! We shall see that he is a friendly Windigo. Every minute all the night he shall wink, just for kindness and good luck to all the world, till the daylight."

On the 9th of November, at 3 o'clock in the afternoon, Baptiste went into the tower to see that the clockwork was in order for the night. He set the dial on the machine, put a few drops of oil on the bearings, gave the dial, and started to wind up the weight. It rose a few inches, gave a little click and then stopped dead. He tugged a little harder, but it would not move. Then he tried to let it down. He pushed at the lever that set the clockwork in motion.

That could wait. The question now was whether the light would fall or not. And that he answered within a quarter of an hour.

That red ray of the vanishing sun was like a blow in the face to Baptiste. It stopped him short, dazed and bewildered. Then he came to himself, wheeled, and ran up the rocks faster than he had come down.

"Marie-Anne! Alma!" he shouted, as he dashed past the door of the house, "all of you! To me, in the tower!" He was up in the lantern when they came running in, full of curiosity, excited, asking twenty questions at once. Natalie climbed up the ladder and put her head through the trap door.

"What is it?" she panted. "What has happened?"

"Go down," answered her father, "go down all at once. Wait for me. I am coming. I will explain." The explanation was not altogether lucid and scientific. There were some bad words mixed up with it.

Baptiste was still hot with anger and the unsatisfied desire to whip somebody, he did not know whom, for something, he did not know what. But angry as he was, he was still sane enough to hold his mind hard and close to the main point. The crank must be adjusted; the clockwork must be ready to turn before dark. While he worked he hastily made the situation clear to his listeners.

That crank must be turned by hand, round and round all night, not too slow, not too fast. The dial on the machine must mark time with the clock on the wall. The light must flash once every minute until daylight. He would do as much of the labor as he could, but the wife and the two older girls must help him, and Natalie could go to bed.

At this Natalie's little upper lip trembled. She rubbed her eyes with the sleeve of her dress, and began to weep silently.

"What is the matter with you?" said her mother, "had child, have you fear to sleep alone? A big girl like you!"

"No," she sobbed, "I have no fear, but I want some of the fun." "Fun?" "Fun!" "What fun?" "Nom d'un chien! She calls this fun!" He looked at her for a moment, as she stood there, half defiant, half despondent, with her red mouth quivering and her big brown eyes sparkling fire; then he burst into a hearty laugh.

"Come here, my little wild-cat," he said, drawing her to him and kissing her; "you are a good girl, after all. I suppose you think this light is part yours, eh?"

The girl nodded. "Ben! You shall have your share, fun and all. You shall make the tea for us and bring us something to eat. Perhaps when Alma and Azilda fatigue themselves they will permit a few turns of the crank to you. Are you content? Run now and boil the kettle."

It was a very long night. No matter how easily a hand turns, after a certain number of revolutions there is a stiffness about it. The stiffness is not in the handle, but in the hand that pushes it.

Round and round, evenly, steadily, minute after minute, hour after hour, shifting out, drawing in, circle after circle, no swerving, no stopping, no varying the motion, turn after turn—fifty-five, fifty-six, fifty-seven—what's the use of counting? Watch the dial; go to sleep—no! For God's sake, no sleep! But how hard it is to keep awake! How heavy the arm grows, how stiffly the muscles move, how the will creeps and groans. *Datison!* It is not easy for a human being to become part of a machine.

Fortin himself took the longest spell at the crank, of course. He went to his work with a rigid courage. His red hot anger had cooled down into a shape that was like a bar of forged steel. He meant to make that light revolve if it killed him to do it. He was the captain of a company that had run into an ambush. He was going to fight his way through if he had to fight alone.

The wife and the two older girls followed him blindly and bravely, in the habit of obedience. They did not quite understand the meaning of the task, the honor of victory, the shame of defeat. But Fortin said it must be done, and he knew best. So they took their places in turn, as he grew weary, and kept the light flashing.

And Natalie—well, there is no way of describing what Natalie did, except to say that she played the life. The red hot anger had cooled down into a shape that was like a bar of forged steel. He meant to make that light revolve if it killed him to do it. He was the captain of a company that had run into an ambush. He was going to fight his way through if he had to fight alone.

When the time arrived to kindle the light again in the spring, Fortin could have had anyone that he wanted to help him. But no; he chose the little Marcel again; the boy wanted to go, and he had earned the right. Besides, to send Natalie had struck up a close friendship with the island, and during the winter by various hunting excursions after hares and ptarmigan. Marcel was a skillful setter of snares. But Natalie was not content until she had won consent to borrow her father's carbine. They hunted in partnership. One day they had shot a fox. That is, Natalie had shot it, though Marcel had seen it first and tracked it. Now they were to try for a seal on the point of the island when the ice went out. It was quite essential that Marcel should go.

"Besides," said Baptiste to his wife, confidentially, "a boy costs less than a man. Why should we waste money? Marcel is best."

A peasant-hero is seldom averse to economy in small things, like money. But there was not much play in the spring season with the light on the island. It was a bitter job. December had been lamb like compared with April. First, the southeast wind kept the ice driving in along the shore. Then the northwest wind came hurtling down from the Arctic wilderness like a pack of wolves. There was a snow-storm of four days and nights that made the whole world—earth and sky and sea—look like a wazy white chaos. And through it all, the weary, dogged crank must be kept turning—turning from dark to daylight.

It seemed as if the supply-boat would never come. At last they saw it, one fair afternoon, April 29th, creeping slowly down the coast. They were just getting ready for another night's work.

Fortin ran out of the tower, took off his hat, and began to say his prayers. The wife and the two elder girls stood in the kitchen door, crossing themselves, with tears in their eyes. Marcel and Natalie were coming up from the point of the island, where they had been watching for their seal. She was singing—

"Mon pere n'avait fille que moi, Encore sur la mer il m'envoie-eh!"

When she saw the boat she stopped short for a minute.

"Well," she said, "they find us awake, n'est-ce pas? And if they don't come faster than that we'll have another chance to show them how we make the light wink, eh?"

Then she went on with her song—

"There is sperm oil on the island of Birds," said he, "in the lighthouse, plenty of it, gallons of it. It is not very good to taste, perhaps, but what of that? It will keep life in the body. The Esquimaux drink it in the north, often. We must take the oil of the lighthouse to keep us from starving until the supply-boat comes down."

"But how shall we get it?" asked the others. "It is locked up. Natalie Fortin has the key. Will she give it?"

"Give it?" growled Thibault, "Name of a name! of course she will give it. She must. Is not a life, the life of all of us, more than a light?"

A self-appointed committee of three, with Thibault at the head, waited upon Natalie without delay, told her their plan, and asked for the key. She thought it over silently for a few minutes, and then refused point blank.

"No," she said, "I will not give the key. That oil is for the lamp. If you take it, the lamp will not be lighted on the 1st April; it will not be burning when the supply-boat comes. For me, that would be shame, disgrace, worse than death. I am the keeper of the light. You shall not have the oil."

They argued with her, pleaded with her, tried to browbeat her. She was a rock. Her round under jaw was set like a steel trap. Her lips straightened into a white line. Her eyebrows drew together, and her eyes grew black.

"No," she cried, "I tell you, no, a thousand times no. All in this house I will share with you. But not one drop of what belongs to the light! Never!"

Later in the afternoon the priest came to see her; a thin, pale young man, bent with the hardships of his life, and with sad dreams in his sunken eyes. He talked with her very gently and kindly.

"Think well, my daughter; think seriously what you do. Is it not our first duty to save human life? Surely that must be according to the will of God. Will you refuse to obey it?"

Natalie was trembling a little now. Her brows were unlocked. The tears stood in her eyes and ran down her cheeks. She was twisting her hands together.

"My Father," she answered, "I desire to do the will of God. But how shall I know it? Is it not His first command that we should love and serve Him faithfully in the duty which He has given us? He gave me this light to keep. My father kept it. He is dead. If I am unfaithful what will he say to me? Besides, the supply boat is coming soon—I have thought of this—when it comes it will bring food. But if the light is out, the boat may be lost. That would be the punishment for my sins. No, mon pere, we must trust God. He will keep the people. I will keep the light."

The priest looked at her long and steadily. A glow came into his face. He put his hand on her shoulder. "You shall follow your conscience," he said quietly. "Peace be with you, Natalie."

That evening just at dark Marcel came. She let him take her in his arms and kiss her. She felt like a little child, tired and weak.

and oil enough to keep them from starvation. But this hope failed, too. The winds blew strong from the north and west, driving the ice far out into the gulf. The chase was long and perilous. The seals were few and wild. Less than a dozen were killed in all. By the last week in March Dead Men's Point stood face to face with famine.

Then it was that old Thibault had an idea.

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