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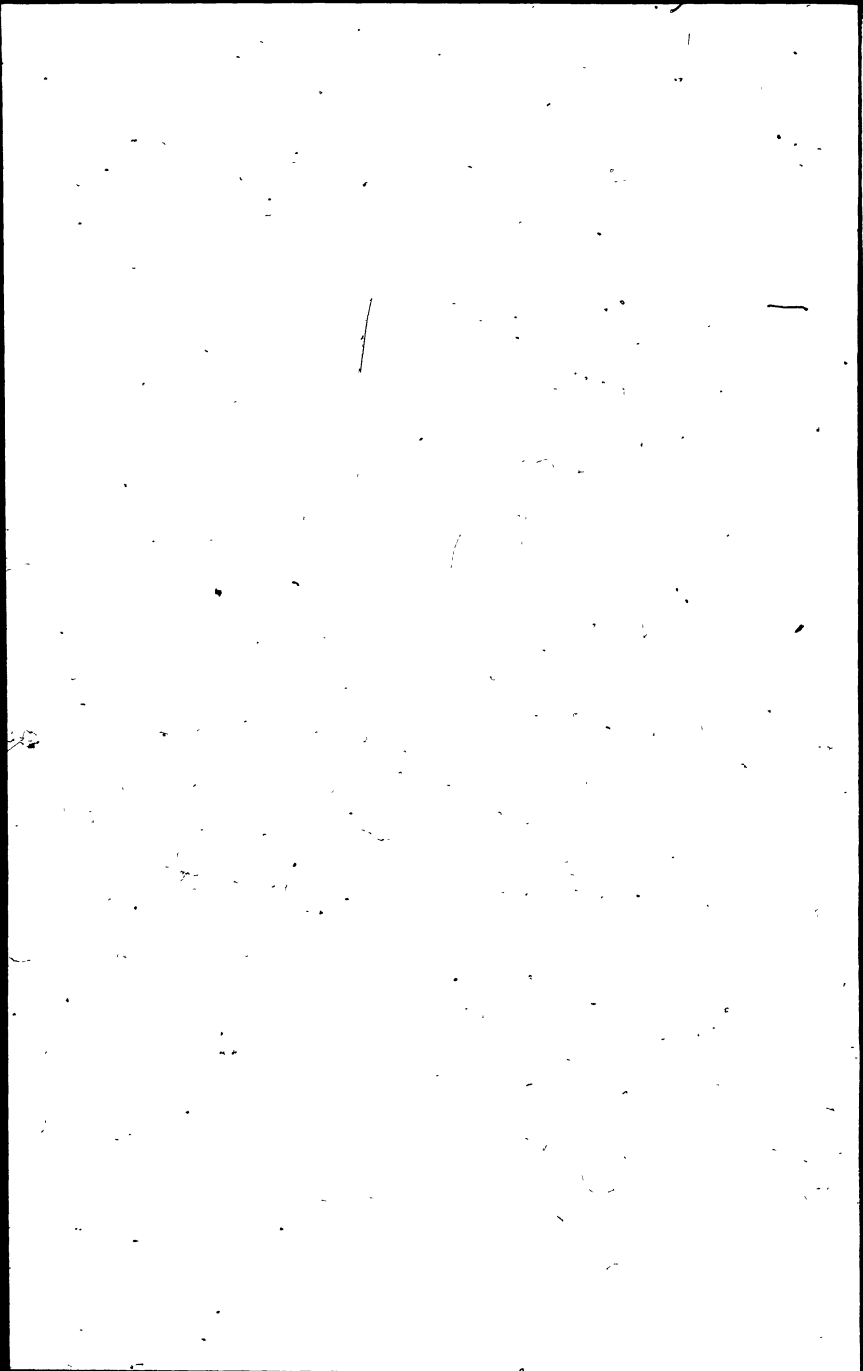
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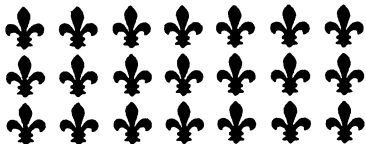


THE
STORY
OF
ABIGAIL
BECKER



THE HEROINE OF LONG POINT

AS TOLD BY HER
STEP-DAUGHTER
MRS. HENRY WHEELER



Abigail
Becker

(Signature of)

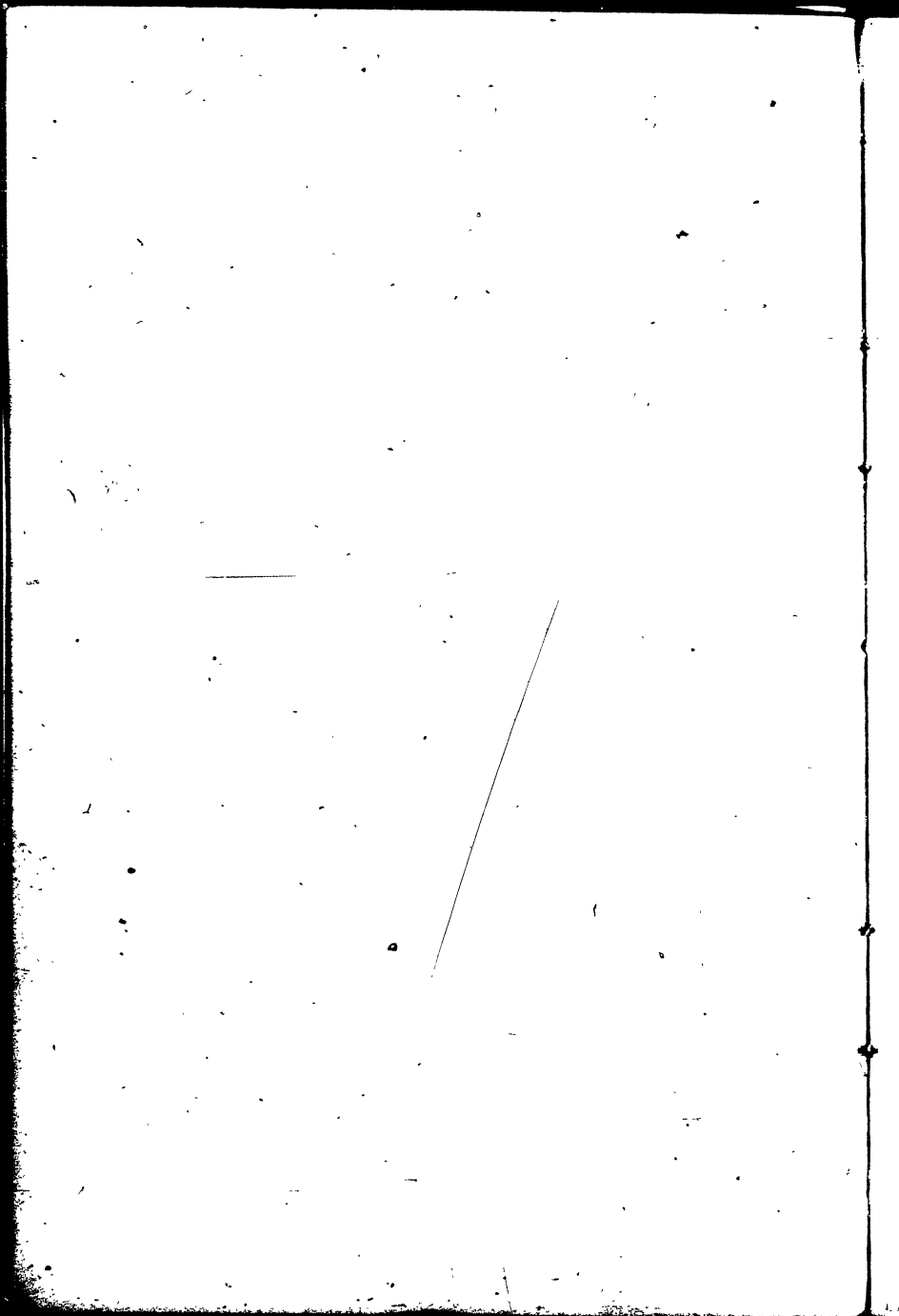
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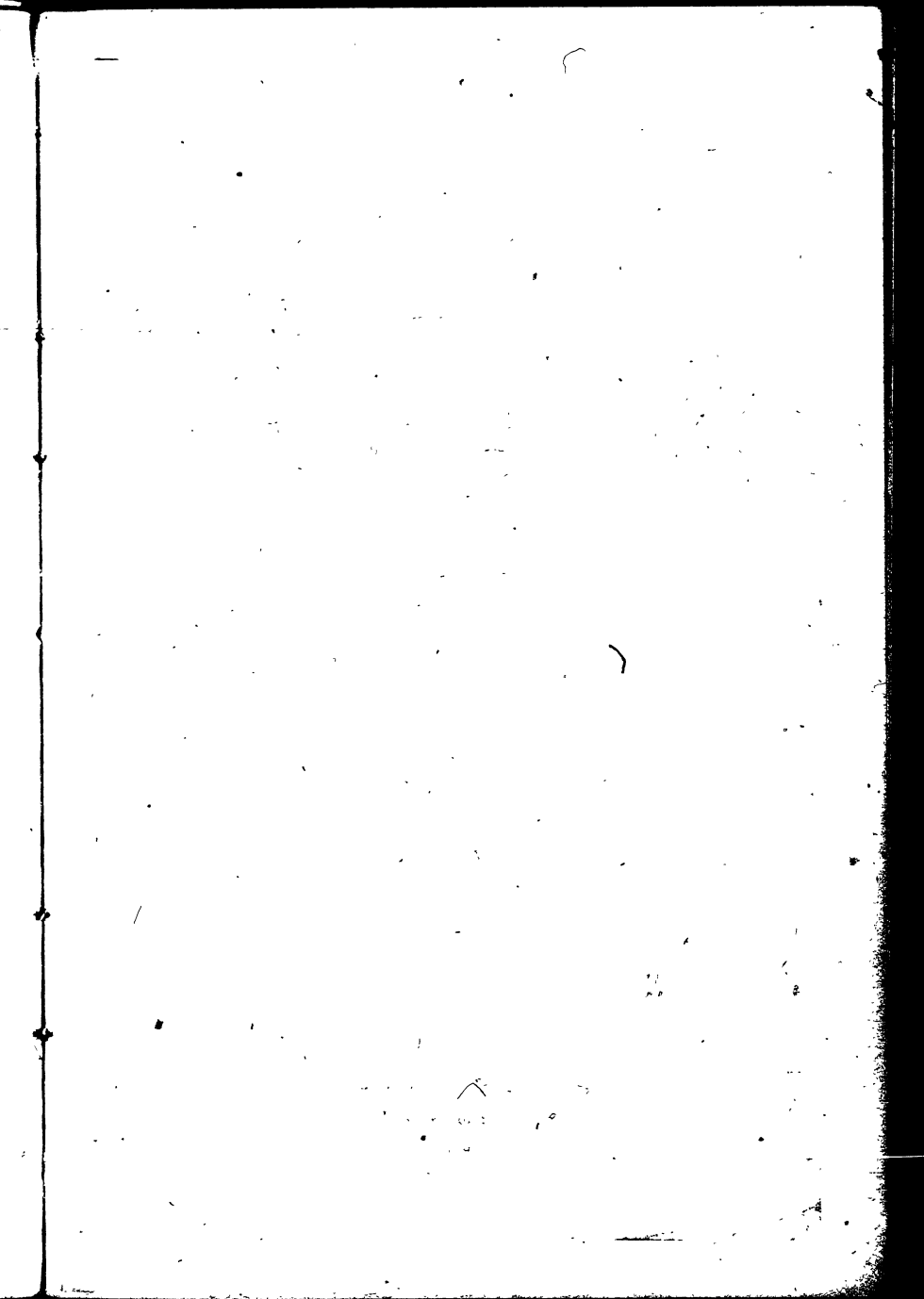
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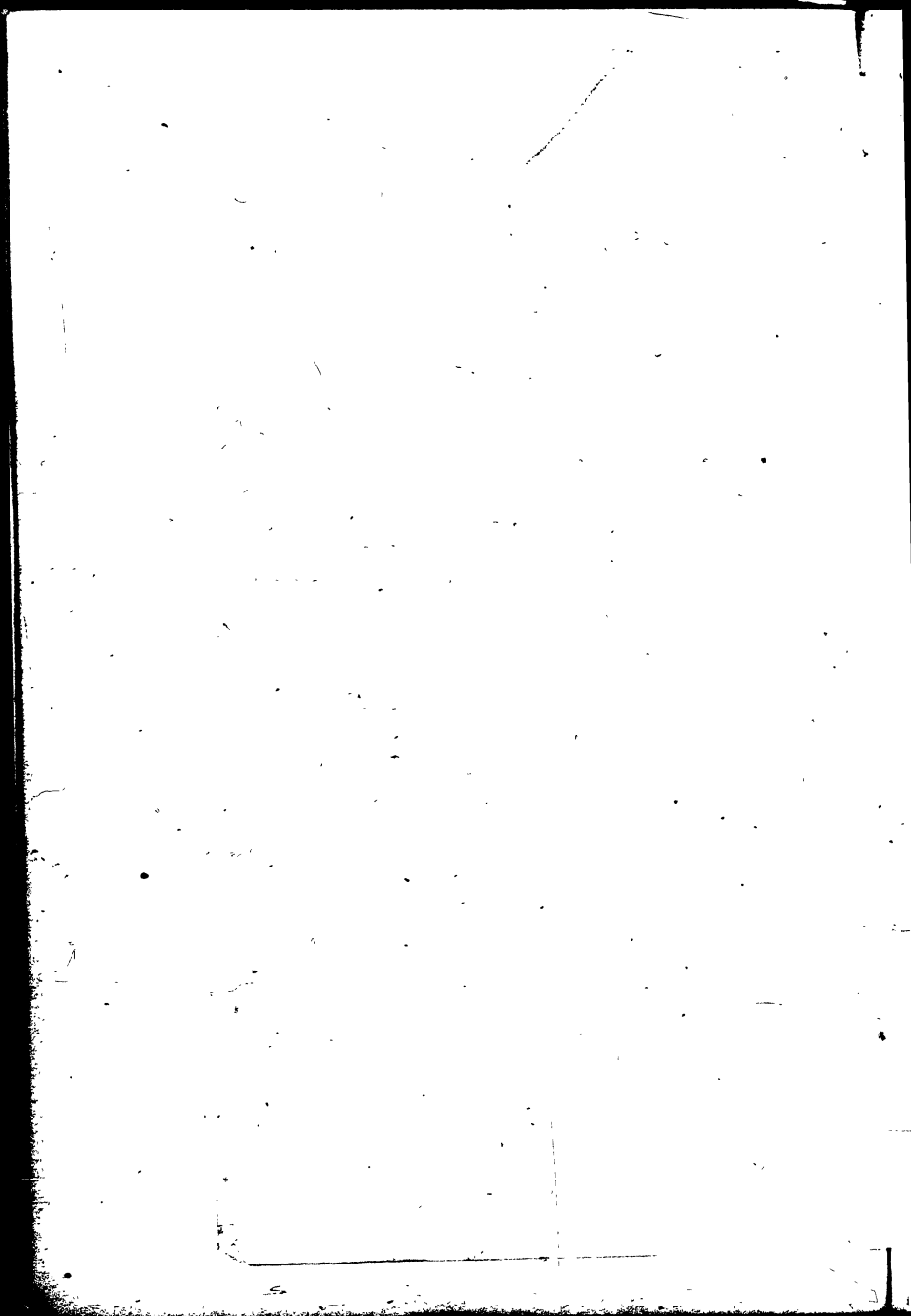
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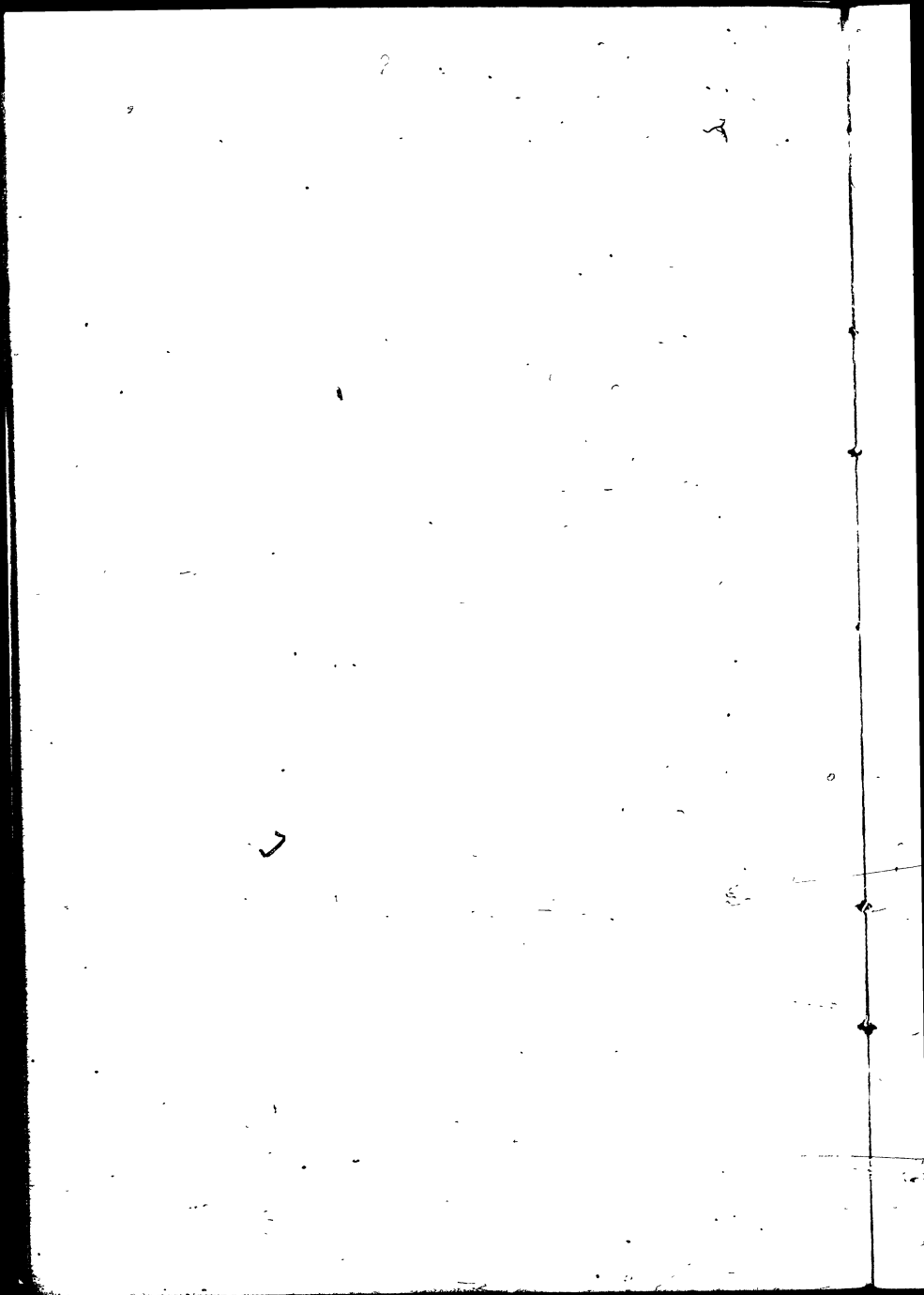
THE STORY
OF
ABIGAIL BECKER

THE HEROINE OF LONG POINT, AS
TOLD BY HER STEP-DAUGHTER,
MRS. HENRY WHEELER.

BY
REV. R. CALVERT, B.D.

TORONTO:
WILLIAM BRIGGS,
WESLEY BUILDINGS.

1899



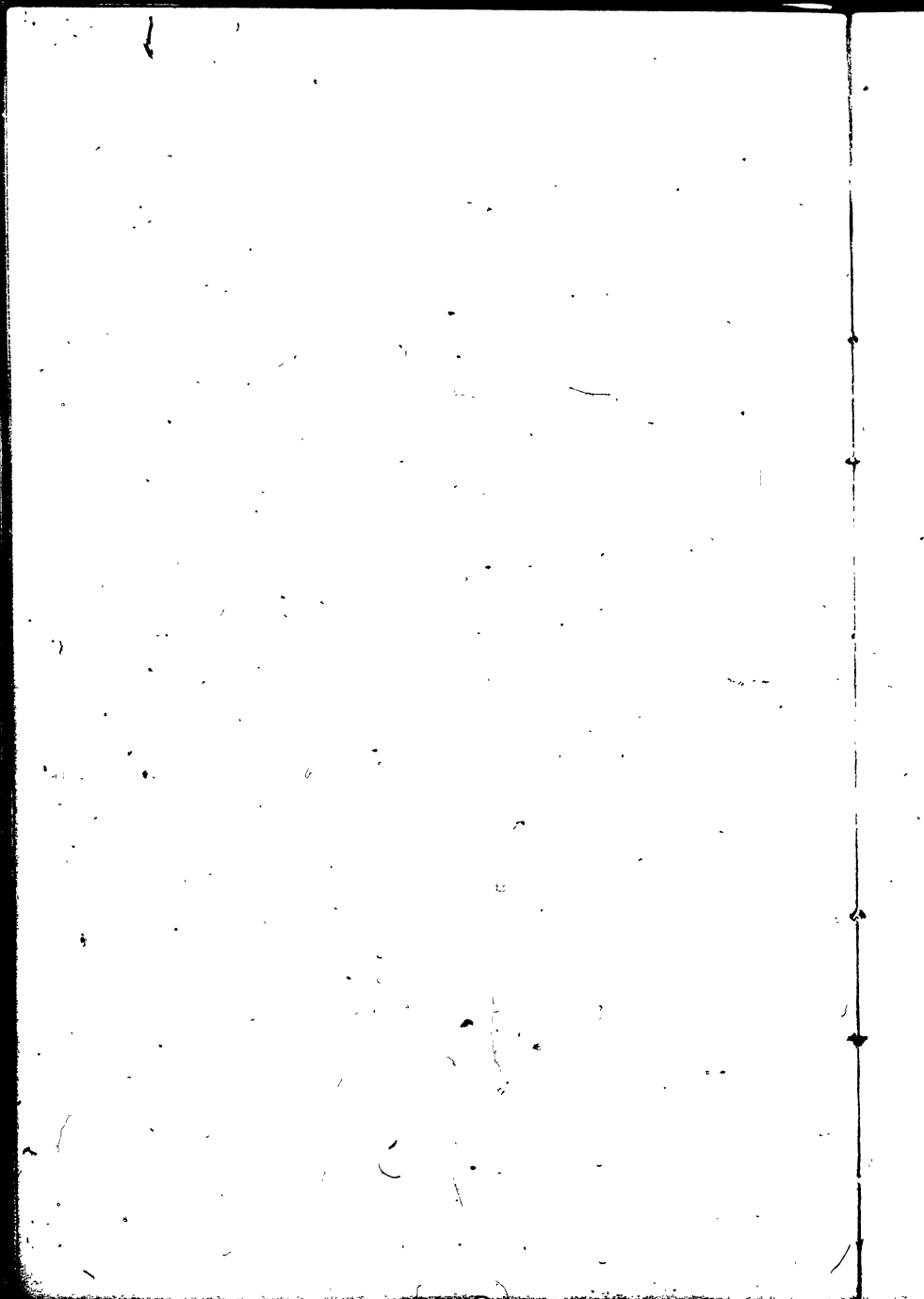
THE STORY OF ABIGAIL BECKER

AS TOLD BY HER STEP-DAUGHTER.

MRS. Henry Wheeler, of Walsingham Centre, whose maiden name was Margaret Becker, is the daughter of Jeremiah Becker, the trapper, and step-daughter of Abigail Becker, the heroine of Long Point. She was present on the Island at the time of the wreck of the *Conductor*, taking charge of the home and younger children, and afterwards assisting in the care of the men. She bears the highest testimony to the kindness of heart and the noble self-sacrifice of Abigail Becker as a step-mother. She is able to tell some things of too private a nature to be published, of the unselfish mother and step-mother that would prove to her many admirers how far an unselfish nature can forget itself in devotion to others. The following facts from Mrs. Wheeler's lips will be of interest to many.

R. CALVERT.

Riceville, Ont., June, 1899.



ABIGAIL BECKER.

I WAS not aware that the life story of my step-mother had been written until I read it in the *Port Rowan News* some time ago. I remember the time of the wreck of the *Conductor* well. I was then fourteen years of age. I will try and tell the story and correct the mistakes regarding it that have been made, as far as I am able.

Father was away from home at the time. The north-west wind had been blowing very high all night. Early in the morning mother went down to the lake to get a pail of water. Her attention was first called to a vessel ashore by the noise of the sails flapping in the wind.

She came back to the house at once and said, "Children, there is a vessel ashore about a mile up the beach. Edward, you go and see if we can help them."

He went, and on returning said, "If they cannot get to shore they will all perish."

She said, "I will go up behind the sand hills and see what condition they are in."

When she got opposite them she went to the top of the hill. There were eight men in a suffering condition, clinging to the rigging.

Returning she said, "We will go down on the beach at once and see if they will come ashore."

The sailors saw her coming down the hill and gave a cheer, and said to one another, "If we can get to shore we shall be all right, for there must be a family living on the island."

She and the little boys built a fire on the beach and put water to heat for making tea. She beckoned for them to come ashore and signalled that she would help them out. The men were stiffened and half helpless with the cold.

The captain said, "If we stay here we shall be lost. I will go first; if I get to shore safely the rest can follow."

He pulled off his coat and shoes and plunged into the water. The waves carried him down the beach quite a distance. He was becoming exhausted and mother, who was tall, waded in and caught him by the hand. She dragged him to the fire and gave him some hot tea, and then beckoned for the rest to come.

The mate was the second to make the attempt. Edward, my brother, who was lame and walking with crutches, wanted to help, and he tried to go in to his mother's assistance, but the sea was so heavy he could not stand; and she had to get them both out of the water.

One by one they came ashore, but some of them not so easily as the first ones. Some were nearly perished and had to be dragged helplessly to the fire, being unconscious for some time. She took off her shawl and shoes and put them on the men one at a time till she got them all to the house, where I and my younger brothers had a good fire in the large, old-fashioned fireplace. I remember being interested in the men standing around the fire drying their clothes and their paper money. But the poor cook of the *Conductor* had to hang in the rigging all night as he could not swim. Mother, who had scarcely been able to sleep all night for thinking of the poor fellow, called the men early in the morning to see if they could not get out to the boat and save the man if he had not been swept away by the waves.

They went to the beach and saw that he was still in the rigging. The sea had gone down somewhat. The men made a raft out of the boards that were about, and put out to the wreck. There still were evidences of life in him. The poor fellow had lashed himself to the rigging; otherwise the waves would have washed him away. He was able afterwards to tell of the awfulness of his feelings when he saw his seven comrades rescued and himself left to pass another night in his position of helplessness and apparently to die. He said that while hanging there he thought he saw a boat coming to his rescue. It was probably the raft he saw.

He was brought to the house, and mother put his frozen feet in cold water to draw out the frost. It was some weeks before he could get around.

The men were very grateful for what had been done for them. The captain remarked to mother that it was a good work she had done that day, for not one of them was prepared to die.

The Buffalo merchants and sailors made up a sum of money—\$550—and put it in the hands of the customs' officer of Port Rowan at the time. She wished with the money to buy herself a little home. She decided on fifty acres (not one hundred) where she now resides on the seventh concession, east of the centre road of North Walsingham. The place is cut up with Big Creek and a number of large gullies.

I see from the papers it is stated she received \$1,000 with which to stock the farm. If any such sum was ever raised she never got it. When she wanted the \$550 with which to buy the fifty acres, she had to go to law in order to get it, and then only received \$535. The remainder of the money for the purchase she had to furnish herself.

When we moved on the farm we had two cows and a yoke of oxen. One of the cows drank sour sap and died, and the other was killed by a tree falling upon it while browsing in the woods. Mother wove and spun to get money for another cow. She always worked very hard to get

clothes for the children. She was always very anxious for me to go to church, and for this I am thankful. I saw she had others to clothe, so went out to work, though this was against her wish. No mother was ever more truly good to her children than our step-mother was to myself and the others.

Father, having nothing to farm with, got discouraged and thought he could earn more at hunting on the Point. He went over there and was there only a few days when a heavy storm came up. He was obliged to leave his shanty. He seems to have hoisted his trunk upon the roof where it was found, and a part of his clothing frozen to it, as if he had been sitting upon it. Afterwards he had apparently tried to make his way to another shanty some three miles distant. He had gone about two miles when he seems to have sat down on a log and frozen to death. His body was not found for nearly three months.

One of her sons, my half-brother, was believed to have been drowned in Port Rowan Bay. His body was never found. It has always seemed sad to me that she saved others but her own were lost.

She and her small boys had to do the farm work—yoke the oxen, get ready the year's wood, plant and dig potatoes, and do other things about a farm. One time she tended ten acres of corn for a neighbor, besides doing washing and other

hard work. As was stated in the paper concerning her, she was at one time unloading a load of wheat in the barn, and as she was pitching the sheaves in the mow the horses took fright and ran out of the barn, throwing her to the floor, breaking her toes and her arm, which she afterwards set herself. At another time while hunting eggs she fell from the mow upon her head and shoulders. Her arms have been broken four times.

At one time, just after we moved to the Point, father and two of the boys took the sail boat and went over to Port Rowan. There was a heavy storm came up and they could not get away for a number of days. I never knew mother to get so uneasy as at this time. She feared they had sunk to the bottom of the bay. They had gone to obtain provisions for we were nearly out of eatables. There was a row-boat in the water about half a mile out in the marsh. She said, "I will wade out and get that boat." This she did, wading until the water came up to her arms. She got the boat and tied it to the landing. She intended the next morning to row to Port Rowan, a distance of seven miles; but fortunately, just as the sun was setting we saw them coming.

As already told, before the Long Point incident, she saved a child from drowning in a well, and a man from a similar fate at Nanticoke, by throwing him a plank and holding him up till assistance came.

There was an iron-laden vessel wrecked on Long Point Island, near the lower lighthouse, the crew of six escaping to land. On reaching the lighthouse they found the keeper had gone for the winter to the mainland. As they were starving they broke into the kitchen, and finding a few frozen potatoes they devoured them and searched for more food, but found none until they reached our place. Only four of the six succeeded in walking to our place; the other two gave out about a mile and a half away. Mother sent the boys with food and raiment for them. A little later they were able to get to the house. This makes twelve lives in all she succeeded in saving.

My brothers, O. C. Becker and Edward Becker, who helped mother attend to the fires and the men of the *Conductor*, are still living, the former in Saginaw, Michigan, and the latter, who is still lame, lives in Clair, Michigan. As a memento of this incident I have the trunk mother gave to me which she received from the mate at the time of his rescue. He claimed to have been wrecked three times, and each time this trunk had followed him ashore.

When my father married Abigail Jackson, she was a slender young girl. She worked hard and devotedly to make us comfortable, and has often since expressed her pleasure in us. We are, you may be sure, proud of her. She really raised three families, seventeen children in all. It is her boast that she raised her eight boys

and not one of them uses tobacco or liquor.

Mother is proud of the gold medal she received from the American Humane Association; and also of a letter received not very long ago from our last Governor-General, Lord Aberdeen; and Queen Victoria's letter.

She is in her sixty-ninth year. Some have believed her dead for some time, but we are thankful to be able to say she is still with us. Last summer we almost despaired of her life through a poisonous spider bite. She is well again and this spring has made her own garden. She is a woman of large build and weighs two hundred and fifteen pounds.

"A HEROINE OF '54."

The following is the corrected form of the poem by Miss Amanda T. Jones on pp. 447-448 of the "Ontario High School Reader." On one point Miss Jones was wrongly informed, and the error does an injustice to one who still lives. This injustice is here righted, and we trust it does no injustice to Miss Jones's poem. Mrs. Rohrer (Abigail Becker) desires verse thirteen to be left out.

Miss Jones was a native of Bloomfield, Ontario County, New York, and was born in October, 1835. She was of old Puritan stock, and her great grandfather was one of the officers who was with Wolfe, on the plains of Abraham. In early childhood she resided at Glen Elgin, near Jordan Village, a short distance from St. Catharines. She wrote the poem of "Glen Elgin" and other pieces. The verses here given first appeared in the *Century Magazine*.

As long as man shall love to read of the heroism of Ida Lewis and Grace Darling, so long

shall all Canadians love to dwell on a heroism
far greater than theirs—the unparalleled exploit
of good, strong-bodied, simple-minded, warm-
hearted Abigail Becker.

R. C.

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.

Long Point—a swampy island-slant,
Where busy in their grassy homes,
Woodcock and snipe the hollows haunt,
And musk-rats build their domes.

Where gulls and eagles rest at need,
Where either side, by lake or sound,
Kingfishers, cranes, and divers feed,
And mallard ducks abound.

The lowering night shut out the sight :
Careen'd the vessel, pitched, and veer'd ;
Raved, raved the wind with main and might ;
The sunken reef she near'd.

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

Into the rigging, quick as thought,
Captain and mate and sailors sprung ;
Clamber'd for life, some vantage caught,
And there all night they swung.

And it was cold—oh, it was cold !
The pinching cold was like a vise ;
Spoon-drift flew freezing—fold on fold
It coated them with ice.

Now, when the dawn began to break,
Light up the sand-path drench'd and brown,
To fill her bucket from the lake,
Came Mother Becker down.

From where her cabin crown'd the bank
Came Abigail Becker tall and strong ;
She dipped, and lo ! a broken plank
Came rocking close along !

She pois'd her glass with anxious ken ;
The schooner's top she spied from far,
And eight she counted of the men
That clung to mast and spar.

And oh, the gale ! the rout and roar !
The blinding drift, the mounting wave ;
A good half-mile from wreck to shore ;
Eight human lives to save !

Sped Mother Becker ; " Children wake !
A ship's gone down ! they're needing me !
Your father's off on shore ; the lake
Is just a raging sea ! "

Through sinking sands, through quaggy lands,
And nearer, nearer, full in view ;
Went shouting through her hollowed hands,
"Courage ! we'll get you through !"

Ran to and fro, made cheery signs,
Her bonfire lighted, steeped her tea,
Brought drift-wood, watch'd Canadian lines
Her husband's boat to see.

Cold, cold, it was — oh, it was cold !
The bitter cold made watching vain ;
With ice the channel laboring roll'd, —
No skiff could stand the strain.

On all that isle from outer swell
To straight between the landings shut,
Was never place where men might dwell,
Save trapper Becker's hut.

And it was twelve, and one, and two,
And it was three o'clock and more ;
She called ; "Come on ! there's naught to do,
But leap and swim ashore."

Blew, blew the gale ; they did not hear ;
She waded in the shallow sea ;
She waved her hands, made signals clear,
"Swim ! swim, and trust to me !"

"My men," the captain cried, "I'll try ;
The woman's judgment may be right ;
For sink or swim, eight men must die
If here we swing to-night."

Far out he marked the gathering surge ;
 Across the bar he watched it pour ;
 Let go, and on its topmost verge
 Came riding in to shore.

It struck the breaker's foamy track,
 Majestic wave on wave uphurl'd,
 Went grandly, toppling, tumbling back,
 As loath to flood the world.

There blindly whirling, shorn of strength,
 The captain drifted, sure to drown ;
 Dragg'd seaward half a cable's length,
 Like sinking lead went down.

Ah, well for him that on the strand
 Had Mother Becker waited long ;
 And well for him her grasping hand
 And grappling arm were strong.

For what to do but plunge and swim ?
 Out on the sinking billows cast,
 She toiled, she dived, she groped for him.
 She found and clutched him fast.

She climbed the reef, she brought him up,
 She laid him gasping on the sands ;
 Built high the fire and filled the cup,—
 Stood up and waved her hands.

Oh, life is dear ! The mate leaped in ;
 Himself he tries to save.
 The goal seemed more than he could win
 For he was weak though brave.

*What will you do
 had daily toil for twenty years
 that man's work done, find down
 William such power as never.*

*Oh life is dear, the mate leaped in
 I know the captain said right well
 not twice can any man win
 at such price your life.*

Her crippled step-son now comes down,
 To mother's help he wants to go.
 And heeding not his mother's frown,
 He tries what he can do.

"I'll start to meet him in the wave."
 "Keep back!" she bade. "What strength have
 "And I shall have you both to save, [you?
 Must work to pull you through!"

But out he went. Up shallow sweeps
 Raced the long white-caps, comb on comb;
 The wind, the wind that lashed the deeps,
 Far, far it blew the foam.

The frozen foam went scudding by,—
 Before the wind, the seething throng,
 The waves, the waves tame towering high
 They flung the mate along.

The waves came towering high and white,
 They burst in clouds of angry spray.
 There mate and cripple sank from sight,
 And, clinching, roll'd away.

Captain

Oh, Mother Becker, seas are dread,
 Their treacherous paths are deep and blind.
 But widows soon may mourn their dead
 If thou art slow to find.

She sought them near, she sought them far.
 Three fathoms down she gripp'd them tight.
 With both together up the bar
 She stagger'd into sight.

Beside the fire her burdens fell :
She paused the cheering draught to pour,
Then waved her hands : " All's well, all's well !
Come on ! Swim ! swim ashore ! "

Sure, life is dear, and men are brave :
They came, — they dropped from mast and spar ;
And who but she could brave the wave,
And dive beyond the bar ?

Dark grew the sky from east to west ;
And darker, darker grew the world ;
Each man from off the breaker's crest
To gloomier depths was hurl'd :

And still the gale went shrieking on,
And still the wrecking fury grew ;
And still the woman, worn and wan,
Those gates of death went through

As Christ were walking on the waves,
And heavenly radiance shone about, —
All fearless trod that gulf of graves
And bore the sailors out.

Down came the night, but far and bright,
Despite the wind and flying foam,
The bonfire flamed to give them light
To trapper Becker's home.

Oh, safety after wreck is sweet !
And sweet is rest in hut or hall ;
One story life and death repeat, —
God's mercy over all.

* * * *

Next day men heard, put out from shore,
Crossed channel-ice, burst in to find
Seven gallant fellows sick and sore,
A tender nurse and kind.

Shook hands, wept, laugh'd, were crazy glad ;
Cried : " Never yet, on land or sea,
Poor dying, drowning sailors had
A better friend than she."

" Billows may tumble, winds may roar,
Strong hands the wreck'd from death may snatch ;
But never, never, nevermore
This deed shall mortal match !"

Dear Mother Becker dropped her head,
She blushed as girls when lovers woo ;
" I have not done a thing," she said,
" More than I ought to do."

