

AN UNFORGETTABLE CHARACTER

by

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and of course the lady of Seal Island herself, separated from the others by half a mile of gnarled spruce-woods.

Let me tell you something of Winifred Hamilton and her family. It is a continuous story of courage and endurance in the service of humanity. In the year 1816 a young English sea-captain named Richard Hichens was wrecked near Cape Sable. The weather was bitter. Hichens and his crew made their way to shore and were glad to find shelter in the village of Barrington, where the young skipper was taken into the home of the Reverend Thomas Crowell. The parson's teen-age daughter Mary, a slender girl with blue eyes and blond hair, had heard a good deal about shipwreck on this rugged coast. Especially about shipwreck on Seal Island, then uninhabited, where every spring certain good souls used to sail from the mainland just to bury the dead cast up by winter storms. Often they found the bodies of sailors who had got ashore alive and then perished of exposure and starvation. Whenever she heard these tales Mary Crowell's heart was filled with pity and with something else, a restless feeling that something should be done about it -- something more than just burying the dead.

She heard Richard Hichens' tale as Desdemona heard Othello's, and she fell in love with him. She persuaded him to stay, and in the year 1820 she married him. A determined young woman as you see. Then she revealed to him the other wish of her warm heart -- that they make their home on lonely Seal Island, where they could do something to save life and at least prevent some of that frightful suffering. Richard was dubious but the girl-wife pleaded ~~km~~ hard, and so they went. With them went her brother Edmund and his wife.

Upon arrival on the island Hichens built a small house of wreck timber on the slope above East Cove, where you can see the old foundation stones today. Crowell built his on the slope above West Cove. The island is so narrow at this part that they could see each other's chimney smoke, a comfort in their loneliness, while at the same time they could watch both sides of the island

for castaways. They supported themselves by fishing, taking their dried catch to Cape Sable and trading it for flour and other simple necessities. To vary the diet they hunted seals and shot wild duck. Thus they lived; and year after year, in every sort of weather, as in the hymn they rescued the perishing, ~~and~~ cared for the dying.

But Mary Hichens was not content with that. If only there was a lighthouse ! With a good light, far above the sea, ships could be warned away from this terror at the mouth of Fundy. So she and Richard composed a letter to the Governor of Nova Scotia, a stout old Waterloo veteran, Sir James Kempt. Tales of the little group of <sup>a</sup>Smuritans on Seal Island had reached Halifax by way of sailors who owed their lives to them. So Sir James came down the coast in a man-o'-war, landed on the island, and saw what the Hichens and Crowells were doing. Mary didn't have to argue with him. The need, and the courage of these people, moved the old soldier to action. In 1827 the lighthouse was built, a tall and sturdy tower of timber, braced inside with heavy ships' knees. The first lamp was fed with seal oil, which the Hichens and Crowells obtained by hunting seals and trying-out the Blubber. Today that structure is still in good use, <sup>and</sup> ~~although~~ the Canadian government has since placed a modern powerful light on the top.

But after 1827 Mary Hichens was still not satisfied. The light could not be seen in fog or snow, and then ships went aground on the island or the surrounding reefs and shoals -- Blonde Rock, Scratch All, Mother Owen's Rock, Loch Sloy Shoal, the Devil's Limb, the Limb's Limb, Division Head, Race Point. So they built a lifeboat. And who manned it? Who else but Richard and Edmund and their tall strong sons?

Time went by. Time and wrecks -- and the continuing tale of human courage and compassion on Seal Island. The government improved the light, provided a proper lifeboat. The Royal Humane Society, far away in England, heard about the good work on Seal Island and sent a set of lifepreservers for the crew.

Richard and Mary died. Edmund Crowell and his wife Jerusha died. But their sons and daughters carried on the work -- and their grandsons and grand-daughters did the same. Eventually the Hichens name died out -- the sons mostly lost at sea. The Crowells remained, and so did the tradition and the task. With the passing of the sailing ship and the advent of wireless the wrecks became fewer and the task lighter. But the responsibility remained. Somebody had to be ~~there~~ there.

Winifred Crowell, herself the daughter of a Seal Island lightkeeper, married her father's assistant, ~~JAM~~ Ellsworth Hamilton. A few years later he died of tuberculosis, leaving her with two children to support. She had inherited the island, for she has in her veins the blood of both the Hichens and the Crowells. From them, too, she inherited the sense of belonging, and of a responsibility, not only for human life but for the sea-birds and the migrating flocks of other birds which have used Seal Island as a resting place from time immemorial. She guards the birds carefully, as her father taught her to do. He also taught her a deep sense of religion, a love of the great poets, and amongst other things the art of taxidermy, so that in the big glass-fronted case in her diningroom she has twenty or thirty beautifully-mounted specimens of the birds that visit the island.

After a time her boy died of tuberculosis. Her daughter married and went ~~to~~ to live on the mainland. From that time she was alone. Today her income is small. It consists of the rentals paid by the fishermen, and the proceeds of the wool she clips from her flock of sheep, which she sells to the little old-fashioned carding mill at Barrington. The sheep roam all over the island, sheltering at night in the thickets. The island shores are steep. Now and then a sheep ventures too near the edge and tumbles down to the foreshore, where it is sure to perish with the rise of the Fundy tide. So every day Winifred Hamilton makes a complete tour of the shore, almost six miles, watching for ~~lost sheep~~ <sup>lost sheep</sup>. Not once but many times she has ventured down the sheer face of

Seal Island to rescue one of her flock.

Gone are the days when two or three hundred Cape Sable men women and children came to Seal Island every Fall and stayed throughout the lobster ~~xxxx~~ season. Nowadays there are less than thirty, and even these go home to the Cape for week-ends. The little church built in her father's time stand<sup>S</sup> empty and forlorn, although she keeps it tidy. Many of the sailors' graves along the ~~xxx~~ sea-bank have been washed away since Mary Hichens' time. Most of the others are now overgrown by the tangle of stunted spruce. Some are still visible, and Winifred Hamilton pointed them out to me as we walked about her island. She tends these graves with care, especially three sad little mounds on the south point. These are marked with small white wooden head-boards, which she renews from time to time. Each bears the same inscription in small black letters:

WOMAN  
NAME UNKNOWN  
WASHED ASHORE FROM  
BRIG TRIUMPH  
MAY 8, 1861

And beneath, the familiar and always poignant:

Sunset and evening star  
And one clear call for me,  
And may there be no moaning of the bar  
When I put out to sea.

The lady of Seal Island has planted daffodils on the graves; and they were in bloom when we sat beside them, she and I, looking over the pebble bar that runs out to Mother Owen's Rock, where the ill-fated Triumph struck. "You see," she said, "the men must have gone down with the ship. They had tried to save the women by lashing them to gratings, and so these bodies washed ashore. My grandfather and his men buried them and put the first head-boards on the graves. I've had to make a rough driftwood fence about them, to keep the sheep from eating the flowers."

Simply, unconsciously, Winifred Hamilton had told me something of herself. The fishermen had told me much more. I thought of the lonely house in the

wood, the winter snows and ice, the foolish sheep wandering about the shore, the driftwood that must be gathered and sawn and split for fuel, the care of the church, of the graves, of the sea-birds nesting in their careless colonies. I thought of her little medicine chest, and how the women and children of the fishermen came to her with their worries and their hurts. I thought how she ~~MI~~ had helped her father to paint the lighthouse when she was a young and active girl; and how last year, at the age of fifty-nine, she had done it again, and alone, dangling in a bosun's chair lowered from the lighthouse cat-walk, all because the lightkeeper, a man from "outside", had begun to suffer dizzy ~~XXXX~~ spells . And how, when the lightkeeper finally went off his head, he took a gun and shot her cow, which had strayed to the grass plot before his house. And how she came and sat there with the dying creature's head across her lap, stroking its nose, conscious of her tears, for this was her pet, and oblivious of the demented man still holding the gun a few yards away.

The daffodils were swaying in the sea breeze before the little grave-boards. "Look here," I said. "Why do you stay here? ~~XXXXXX~~ After all, you're no longer young, and this life is hard. Why don't you go and stay in some village on the mainland?"

Winifred Hamilton shook her head. She put out a hand and touched one of the flowers with her work-called fingers. "I couldn't go and leave all these things with no one to care for them. You see, I'm the last of my people here. Mary Hichens, Jerusha Crowell, all those other women, including my mother -- they didn't quit. Not till they died. Why should I?"

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