

The American Magazine

PUBLISHED MONTHLY BY THE PHILLIPS PUBLISHING CO.

President, George H. Hanes
Vice-President, John S. Phillips

38: FOURTH AVENUE, NEW YORK CITY

Secretary, Henry J. Fisher
Treasurer, Robert M. Donaldson

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Western Advertising Offices:
Tribune Bldg., Chicago, Ill.

15 CENTS A COPY; \$1.50 A YEAR

London Office: 5 Henrietta St.
Covent Garden, London, W. C.

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Entered as Second-class Matter at the New York Post Office, N. Y. Entered as Second-class Matter at the Post Office Dept., Canada

MESSENGERS AT THE WINDOW

By

HENRY VAN DYKE

ILLUSTRATED BY FRANK E. SCHOONOVER

THE lighthouse on the Isle of the Wise Virgin—formerly called the Isle of Birds—still looks out over the blue waters of the Gulf of St. Lawrence; its white tower motionless through the day, like a sea-gull sleeping on the rock; its great yellow eye wide-open and winking, winking steadily once a minute, all through the night. And the birds visit the island—not in great flocks as formerly, but still plenty of them—long-winged waterbirds in the summer, and in the spring and fall short-winged landbirds passing in their migrations—the grandchildren and great-grand-children, no doubt, of the same flying families that used to come there fifty years ago, in the days when Nataline Fortin was “The Keeper of the Light.” And she herself, that brave girl who said that the light was her “law of God,” and who kept it, though it nearly broke her heart—Nataline is still guardian of the island and its flashing beacon of safety.

Not in her own person, you understand, for her dark curly hair long since turned white, and her brown eyes were closed, and she rests beside her father in the little graveyard behind the chapel at Dead Men’s Point. But her spirit still inhabits the island and keeps the



At last it came loose in his hand

light. The son whom she bore to Marcel Thibault was called Baptiste, after her father, and he is now the lighthouse-keeper; and her granddaughter, Nataline, is her living image; a brown darling of a girl, merry and fearless, who plays the fife bravely all along the march of life.

It is good to have some duties in the world which do not change, and some spirits who meet them with a proud cheerfulness, and some families who pass on the duty and the cheer from generation to generation—aristocrats, first families, the best blood.

Nataline the second was bustling about the kitchen of the lighthouse, humming a little song, as I sat there with my friend Baptiste, snugly sheltered from the night fury of the first September storm. The sticks of spruce-wood snapped and crackled in the range; the kettle purred a soft accompaniment to the girl's low voice; the wind and the rain beat against the seaward window. I was glad that I had given up the trout fishing, and left my camp on the *Stc. Marguerite-en-bas*, and come to pass a couple of days with the Thibaults at the lighthouse.

Suddenly there was a quick blow on the window behind me, as if someone had thrown a ball of wet seaweed or sand against it. I leaped to my feet and turned quickly, but saw nothing in the darkness.

"It is a bird, m'sieu," said Baptiste, "only a little bird. The light draws them, and then it blinds them. Most of them fly against the big lantern above. But now and then one comes to this window. In the morning sometimes after a big storm we find a hundred dead ones around the tower."

"But, oh," cried Nataline, "the pity of it! I can't get over the pity of it. The poor little one—how it must be deceived—to seek light and to find death! Let me go out and look for it. Perhaps it is not dead."

She came back in a minute, the raindrops



"I will tell you," he replied gravely, laying down his pipe and leaning forward with his knotted hands on his knees

shining on her cheeks and in her hair. In the hollow of her firm hands she held a feathery brown little body, limp and warm. We examined it carefully. It was stunned, but not killed, and apparently neither leg nor wing was broken.

"It is a white-throat sparrow," I said to Nataline, "you know the tiny bird that sings all day in the bushes, *sweet-sweet-Canada, Canada, Canada?*"

"But yes!" she cried, "he is the dearest of them all. He seems to speak to you,—to say, 'be happy.' We call him the *ros-signal*. Perhaps if we take care of him, he will get well, and be

able to fly to-morrow—and to sing again.

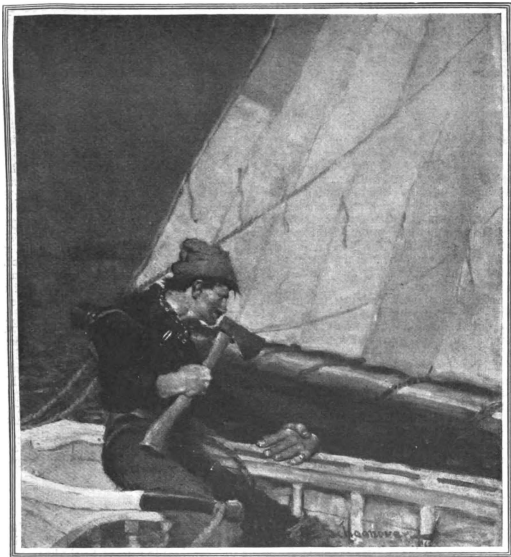
So we made a nest in a box for the little creature, which breathed lightly, and covered him over with a cloth so that he should not fly about and hurt himself. Then Nataline went singing up to bed, for she must rise at two in the morning to take her watch with the light. Baptiste and I drew our chairs up to the range, and lit our pipes for a good talk.

"Those small birds, m'sieu," he began, puffing slowly at his pipe, "you think, without doubt, that it is all an affair of chance, the way they come—that it means nothing—that it serves no purpose for them to die?"

Certain words in an old book, about a sparrow falling to the ground, came into my mind, and I answered him carefully, hoping, perhaps, that he might be led on into one of those mystical legends which still linger among the exiled children of Brittany in the new world.

"From our side, my friend, it looks like chance—and from the birds' side, certainly, like a very bad chance. But we do not know all. Perhaps there is some meaning or purpose beyond us. Who can tell?"

"I will tell you," he replied gravely, laying down his pipe, and leaning forward with his



He laid the hand across the gunwale of the boat, and, taking up the axe that lay beside him, with a single blow he chopped the little finger from the hand

knotted hands on his knees. "I will tell you that those little birds are sometimes the messengers of God. They can bring a word or a warning from Him. That is what we Bretons have believed for many centuries at home in France. Why should it not be true here? Is He not here also? Those birds are God's *coureurs des bois*. They do His errands. Would you like to hear a thing that happened in this house?"

This is what he told me: and of course he did not tell it in that broken English which scores of the writers of Canadian stories always make their people use, but in that quaint

rustic old French which still lingers in the province of Quebec.

I

My father, Marcel Thibault, was an honest man, strong in the heart, strong in the arms, but, in the conscience,—well, he had his little weaknesses, like the rest of us. You see his father, the old Marcel, lived in the days when there was no lighthouse here, and wrecking was the chief trade of this coast.

It is a cruel trade, m'sieu'—to live by the misfortune of others. No one can be really

happy who lives by such a trade as that. But my father—he was born under that influence; and all the time he was a boy he heard always people talking of what the sea might bring to them, clothes and furniture, and all kinds of precious things—and never a thought of what the sea might take away from the other people who were shipwrecked and drowned. So what wonder is it that my father grew up with weak places and holes in his conscience?

But my mother, Nataline Fortin—ah, m'sieu', she was a straight soul, for sure—clean white, like a wild swan! I suppose she was not a saint. She was too fond of singing and dancing for that. But she was a good woman, and nothing could make her happy that came from the misery of another person. Her idea of goodness was like this light in the lantern above us—something faithful and steady that warns people away from shipwreck and danger.

Well, it happened one day, about this time forty-eight years ago, just before I was ready to be born, my father had to go up to the village of *La Trinité* on a matter of business. He was coming back in his boat at evening, with his sail up, and perfectly easy in his mind—though it was after sunset—because he knew that my mother was entirely capable of kindling the light and taking care of it in his absence. The wind was moderate, and the sea gentle. He had passed the *Point du Caribou* about two miles, when suddenly he felt his boat strike against something in the shadow.

He knew it could not be a rock. There was no hardness, no grating sound. He supposed it might be a tree floating in the water. But when he looked over the side of the boat, he saw it was the body of a dead man.

The face was bloated and blue, as if the man had been drowned for some days. The clothing was fine, showing that he must have been a person of quality; but it was disarranged and torn, as if he had passed through a struggle to his death. The hands, puffed and shapeless, floated on the water, as if to balance the body. They seemed almost to move in an effort to keep the body afloat. And on the little finger of the left hand there was a great ring of gold with a red stone set in it, like a live coal of fire.

When my father saw this ring a passion of covetousness leaped upon him.

"It is a thing of price," he said, "and the sea has brought it to me for the heritage of my unborn child. What good is a ring to a dead man? But for my baby it will be a fortune."

So he luffed the boat, and reached out with his oar, and pulled the body near to him, and took the cold, stiff hand into his own. He tugged at the ring, but it would not come off. The finger was swollen and hard, and no effort that he could make served to dislodge the ring.

Then my father grew angry, because the dead man seemed to withhold from him the bounty of the sea. He laid the hand across the gunwale of the boat, and, taking up the axe that lay beside him, with a single blow he chopped the little finger from the hand.

The body of the dead man swung away from the boat, turned on its side, lifting its crippled left hand into the air, and sank beneath the water. My father laid the finger with the ring upon it under the thwart, and sailed on, wishing that the boat would go faster. But the wind was light, and before he came to the island it was already dark, and a white creeping fog, very thin and full of moonlight, was spread over the sea like a shroud.

As he went up the path to the house he was trying to pull off the ring. At last it came loose in his hand; and the red stone was as bright as a big star on the edge of the sky, and the gold was heavy in his palm. So he hid the ring in his vest.

But the finger he dropped in a cluster of blueberry bushes not far from the path. And he came into the house with a load of joy and trouble on his soul; for he knew that it is wicked to maim the dead, but he thought also of the value of the ring.

II

My mother Nataline was able to tell when people's souls had changed; without needing to wait for them to speak. So she knew that something great had happened to my father. And the first word she said when she brought him his supper was this.

"How did it happen?"

"What has happened?" said he, a little surprised, and putting down his head over his cup of tea to hide his face.

"Well," she said in her joking way, "that is just what you haven't told me, so how can I tell you? But it was something very bad or very good, I know. Now which was it?"

"It was good," said he, reaching out his hand to cut a piece from the loaf, "it was as good—as good as bread."

"Was it by land," said she, "or was it by sea?"

He was sitting at the table just opposite

that window, so that he looked straight into it as he lifted his head to answer her.

"It was by sea," he said smiling, "a true treasure of the deep."

Just then there came a sharp stroke and a splash on the window, and something struggled and scrambled there against the darkness. He saw a hand with the little finger cut off spread out against the pane.

"My God," he cried, "what is that?"

But my mother, when she turned, saw only a splotch of wet on the outside of the glass.

"It is only a bird," she said, "one of God's messengers. What are you afraid of? I will go out and get it."

She came back with a cedar-bird in her hand—one of those brown birds that we call *recollets* because they look like a monk with a hood. Her face was very grave.

"Look," she cried, "it is a *recollet*. He is only shocked a little. Look, he flutters his wings, we will let him go—like that! But he was sent to this house because there is something here to be confessed. What is it?"

By this time my father was disturbed, and the trouble was getting on top of the joy in his soul. So he pulled the ring out of his vest and laid it on the table under the lamp. The gold glittered, and the stone sparkled, and he saw that her eyes grew large as she looked at it.

"See," he said, "this is the good fortune that the waves brought me on the way home from *La Trinité*. It is a heritage for our baby that is coming."

"The waves!" she cried, shrinking back a little. "How could the waves bring a heavy thing like that? It would sink."

"It was floating," he answered, casting about in his mind for a good lie: "it was floating—about two miles this side of the *Point du Caribou*—it was floating on a piece of—"

At that moment there was another blow on the window, and something pounded and scratched against the glass. Both of them were looking this time, and again my father saw the hand without the little finger—but my mother could see only a blur and a movement.

He was terrified, and fell on his knees praying. She trembled a little, but stood over him brave and stern.



"What is it that you have seen," said she: "tell me, what has made you afraid?"

"A hand," he answered, very low, "a hand on the window."

"A hand!" she cried, "then there

must be some one waiting outside. You must go and let him in."

"Not I," whispered he, "I dare not."

Then she looked at him hard, and waited a minute. She opened the door, peered out, trembled again, crossed the threshold, and returned with the body of a blackbird.

"Look," she cried, "another messenger of God—his heart is beating a little. I will put him here where it is warm—perhaps he will get well again. But this messenger is black,—there is a curse coming upon this house. Confess. What is this about hands?"

So he was moved and terrified to open his secret half-way.

"On the rocks this side of the point," he stammered, "as I was sailing very slowly—there was something white—the arm and hand of a man—this ring on one of the fingers—where was the man?—drowned and lost—what did he want of the ring?—it was easy to pull it—"

As he said this, there was a crash at the window. The broken pane tinkled upon the floor. In the opening they both saw, for a moment, a hand with the little finger cut off and the blood dripping from it.

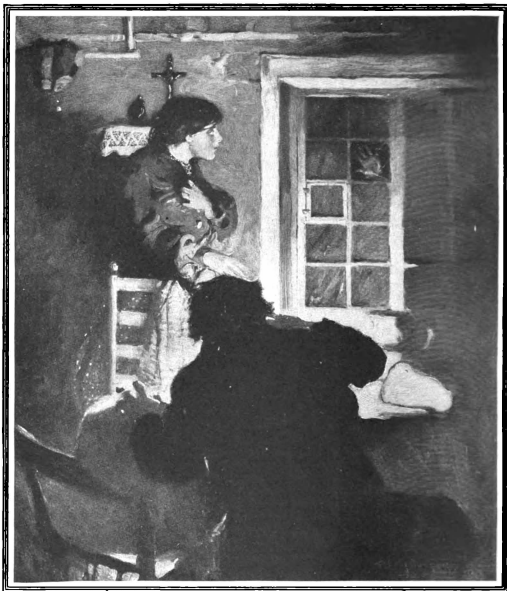
But when it faded, my mother Natalie went to the window, and there on the floor, in a little red pool, she found the body of a dead crossbill, all torn and wounded by the glass through which it had crashed.

She took it up and fondled it. Then she gave a great sigh, and went to my father Marcel and knelt beside him.

(You understand, m'sieu', it was he who narrated all this to me. He said he never should forget a word or a look of it until he died—and perhaps not even then.)

So she knelt beside him and put one hand over his shoulder, the dead crossbill in the other.

"Marcel," she said, "thou and I love each other so much that we must always go together—whether to heaven or to hell—and very soon our little baby is to be born. Wilt thou keep a secret from me now? Look, this is the last messenger at the window—the blessed bird whose bill is twisted because he



"My God," he cried, "what is that?"

tried to pull out the nail from the Saviour's hand on the cross, and whose feathers are always red because the blood of Jesus fell upon them. It is a message of pardon that he brings us, if we repent. Come, tell the whole of the sin."

At this the heart of my father Marcel was melted within him, as a block of ice is melted when it floats into the warmer sea, and he told her all that he had done.

"It is an evil thing, Marcel," she said, "a great wickedness that thou hast done. It is

not good to meddle with the dead. If the ring had lain upon the shore,—but thou hast maimed and robbed a stranger when he could not resist thee. Who knows for what reason of love or faith he held fast to his ring? When we stand before God, darest thou meet this man with the wounded hand?"

She stood up and took the ring from the table with the ends of her fingers, as if she did not like to touch it.

"Where hast thou put it," she asked, "the

finger of the hand from which this thing was stolen?"

"It is among the bushes," he answered, "beside the path to the landing."

"Thou canst find it," said she, "as we go to the boat, for the moon is shining and the night is still. Then thou shalt put the ring where it belongs, and we will row to the place where the hand is—dost thou remember it?"

So they did as she commanded. The sea was very quiet and the moon was full. They rowed together until they came about two miles from the *Point du Caribou*, at a place which Marcel remembered because there was a broken cliff on the shore.

When he dropped the finger, with the great

ring glittering upon it, over the edge of the boat, he groaned. But the water received the jewel in silence, with smooth ripples, and a circle of light spread away from it under the moon, and my mother Nataline smiled like one who is well content.

"Now," she said, "we have done what the messengers at the window told us. We have given back what the poor man wanted. God is not angry with us now. But I am very tired—row me home quickly, for I think my time is near at hand."

The next day, just before sunset, was the day of my birth. My mother Nataline told me, when I was a little boy, that I was born to good fortune. And, you see, m'sieu', it was true, for I am the keeper of her light.