

The Storyteller.

THE HERO OF THE LIGHTHOUSE.

EARLY in the eighties, of all the lights along the Florida Reef that at Rebecca Shoals was held as least attractive. A shoal beacon, it stood up from the water; under it and on each side was ocean. The keepers were estranged from their families. No woman is allowed to stay overnight in a lighthouse such as this; and at its base was no point, however small, where shelter could be erected.

Nineteen miles away was the Dry Tortugas, with Garden Key, old Fort Jefferson and the quarantine station. The surgeon, assistant and a few pilots with their wives and children were the nearest neighbours of Rebecca Shoals.

At this time the keepers in the lighthouse were Matthew Welsh, John Fordyce and Andrew Buckley. In storm and calm, as soon as the sun dropped from sight behind a glorious west, the cyclops eye of the light opened, showing red over the shoals and white over the channels. Through the night the three men watched, through the day they tidied the room, cleaned the lamp mechanism, and in other ways lived up to the government regulations. Monotony reigned, for a programme of recreation in the shape of fishing, the perusal of old periodicals and an occasional trip to Key West, eventually palled. To John Fordyce the one bright spot in his existence was Helen Welsh.

When duty would permit he sailed in the lighthouse dingey to Garden Key, where was the girl of his heart. On the Key, grateful for even the infrequent visits of their husbands, lived the wives of the two married keepers. At intervals Helen, alone or with her mother, spent the day at the light, speeding across the miles of ocean to see her father. To her the ocean was a foster parent, for her father and her grandfathers had been sailors, and the waves treated her as one akin. No pilot, no fisherman, on all the Keys could manage a boat better than she. She was as fearless as a gull and could swim like a dolphin.

The courtship of Fordyce, pursued openly, yet diffidently, as is apt to be the case with a man little accustomed to women, met with favour from all concerned. Helen bridled and blushed at good-natured quips and jests aimed at her romance. Mrs. Welsh, hearty and wholesome, ruddy with rich red blood purified by the oxygen of the sea breeze, saw in John Fordyce 'a right proper lad for any lass, even my own.' Mr. Welsh broke through the reserve engendered by years of lonely communion with the storm and billow, and admitted that 'Jack's an honest lad ez lads go.'

The remainder of the Key population smiled on the growing intimacy of the young couple, and on the broad sea-wall encircling the moat of the ruined fort were silhouetted, time and again, the strolling figures of Helen and Jack.

One night a gale swept the Florida Reef. The wind whistled and swirled around Rebecca Shoals light, hurling the spray against the windows many feet above the water. The stout framework trembled, but the men felt no uneasiness, trusting in the staunchness of the structure, and having passed through scores of similar attacks. Matthew and Jack were on watch together, seeing that the lamp was in perfect condition. Seabirds, bewildered by the tempest and blinded by the beams from the powerful reflector, dashed against the thick glass, to die.

'I allus pity the pore things,' remarked the elder man. 'I hev set out hundreds o' storms, an' I never kin git ust to the sight o' them birds breakin' their necks against the glass.'

'Pears like it can't be helped, though,' returned the other. 'An' I reckon they never know what ails 'em.'

A violent gust, and right against the northern glass of the room was flung a gull. The wind pressed it flat on the pane, and fluttering helplessly it hung there, with one wing useless, and the single pinion beating in vain endeavours. The red-rimmed eyes seemed to appeal to the men, who were just below.

'Association with the sea softens the heart.'

'Look at that, will you?' exclaimed old Matthew. 'By George, I can't stan' it, to see a dumb critter suffer so.'

'Yes, but I dunno ez we kin do anything,' responded Jack. 'When the storm lulls a little I'll go out an' pick it up. Guess it hez a busted wing.'

'Wait fer the storm to lull, and let that bird heng ther all that time? I'd be shamed! I'm goin' ter fetch it in now.'

'Matt, you're crazy. The wind'll blow you over the railin'. Hold a little, an' I'll go out. That's no use riskin' life fer a bird.'

Matthew, rising gave him a look of contempt, and strode to the narrow door.

'I never thought it o' you, John Fordyce. Ef you're a coward, I'm not.'

With an effort he pulled open the door. The roar of the gale sounded loudly. The door slammed shut, and he was gone. Jack sprang hastily from his seat and gazed at the window where was pressed the bird. Suddenly the gull vanished. Fordyce opened the door, and Matthew, wet and breathless, his white hair and beard dripping, plunged in, the bird in his hand.

He did not notice the younger keeper, but seating himself examined carefully his feathered charge. Whittling some splints and procuring some cord he gently bound the fractured wing and placed the patient in a corner of a basket, where it crouched fearfully.

'Hed a hard time, didn't you?' queried Jack.

Matthew did not answer.

'Spec the wind is blowin' forty or fifty knots, 'bout'?

Still no reply.

'What's the matter of you, Matt?'

Welsh turned and gazed sorrowfully at the speaker. 'Jack,' he said earnestly, 'I allus thought you wuz a man not afeared o' anything, sea or lan'. But when you let an ol' man like me go whar you wouldn't go, even ef fer sake o' only a bird, why, I know I've been mistook in my opinion o' you. Jack, you hev been a-courtin' my lass, an' a right likely pair you hav' 'peared to me. Marthy is proud o' you, and so was I. You might hev married the girl, fer I guess she's willin'. She thinks you the bes' man on the Keys. But we've all misjudged you. You're a coward!'

Fordyce flushed through his coat of tan and started with surprise.

'Why, Matt!' he exclaimed. 'You don't mean what you're sayin', do you? I'd jest ez lief hev went out after the bird. I didn't heng back 'cause I was afeared. I thought to wait till a lull come. An' I didn't count on you goin'. You know that. You went out afore I could stop you.'

'No ust wastin' words, Jack. You showed the white feather—an' I dunno where you got it, either. Your blood's good. What'll Helen say?'

'Looky here, Matt Welsh. You've called me a coward, an' the only man in the world I'd 'low to do it an' not eat his words. You're older 'n I be, an' you're the father o' the girl I love, an' I wouldn't lay han's on you. But some day you'll take back what you've said. I'm no coward. It is ridic'ulous to stir up all this fuss 'bout a gull, anyway.'

'That's jest it, Jack. A man oughter be tender to bird an' beast. An' ef you wouldn't risk a little for a pore, crippled thing ez couldn't help it self I hol' it's a purty good test. I reckon you might not be a man to suit my lass.'

'God knows, Mathew Welsh, Helen would never come to harm ef my arm could protect her. Why, don't you 'member the time I hauled her out o' the sea off East Key, in the capsiz? Why, I swum a mile with her.'

'Yes, I 'member that, o' course. But it's the little things that a woman counts on. Piles o' men show up well on big trials, but when it comes to savin' a bird, or givin' a woman a tender, lovin' pat, they forgit. No, Jack, you don't understan' what I mean.'

'Reckon there's no gain in arguin'. But you've hurt me, Matt, an' until I hear you say, "Jack, I was wrong," I can't get over it. You ain't no objection to my seein' Helen, I s'pose?'

'Certainly not.' 'I've nothin' agin you, aside from what I've spoke of, an' I'm not sayin' you're not a good lad. But I want you to think before you ask me for Helen. That's all.'

'I tell you right hear, Matt, I'll never ask you for Helen until you take back what you've called me to night. You can depen' on that.'

'Well, enough, lad. We'll not talk of it any more. It's time to rouse Andy.'

Confined together in a lighthouse, men grow uncommunicative. Feelings are stifled. After the events of this night, and the unusual outburst by Matthew, affairs at Rebecca Shoals moved on in the monotonous routine. Apparently Welsh and Fordyce were on the same footing as before. But the distrust expressed so bluntly by the rugged keeper had cut deep into the heart of the younger man. He venerated Matthew for his sterling worth, his many kindnesses and for the daughter's sake. He did not entertain resentment.

'Pears to me I ain't mad, only jes' hurt,' said Jack to himself. But he burned to clear his character of the imputations directed against it by Matthew.

'Durn you,' Jack addressed the gull, now rapidly recovering. 'You've got me into a heap o' trouble. I've a notion to throw you out the window. Me a coward! I'll show 'im.'

He continued to meet Helen at Garden Key or at the light and at the first opportunity told her of his conversation with her father. Not that he was afraid Matthew would influence the girl against him—old Matthew was not one to work under-handed—but he wanted Helen's opinion.

'Jack,' she said, 'I know you aren't a coward. 'You'd 'a' got the bird willin', I doubt not, if you'd 'a' thought father was so bent on it. An' I know you aren't afraid to go any place. But father was ahead of you that time. He's so queer about animals sufferin'. An' gulls—I guess he's been with 'em so much he holds 'em for humans. But you wait, an' it'll come out right.'

They were sailing back to Garden Key, Helen in the stern and Jack farther forward.

'Ma thinks you're a fine fellow, anyhow,' continued the girl, hesitatingly, in an attempt to soothe the smart in her lover's heart.

'An' what do you think, Helen,' said Jack boldly.

'Oh! I don't go with a man I don't respect,' she returned, tossing her head.

'Respec'—is that all, Helen?' inquired Jack eagerly.

Helen coloured like a rose, and with face gazing off over the end of the beam replied softly:

'You ought to know, Jack.'

The dingey yawed sharply and the sail flapped in a most slovenly fashion. When the course was again laid the boat was trimmed differently. Two figures, instead of one sat in the stern.

A month after this, on a February evening, black clouds rolled from the northeast up towards the zenith, pursuing the setting sun, and shadowing the ocean. The edges of the masses were torn and tattered. Through and between the advancing vapors flashed the lightning. After a day at the light Helen was on the point of leaving for Garden Key. Matthew had been ill a week, and either Mrs. Welsh or the daughter had hovered at his bedside continually during the daytime. Now the girl and Jack stood on the platform of the tower, surveying the approaching storm.

'We're goin' to hev a blow, sure 'nough, Helen,' said the man.

'It looks like a bad un, too. You can't start. It'd ketch you afore you'd went a mile.'

'But, Jack, I mus' go. It's against rules for me to stay here, and then motho'r'll get crazy when I don't appear on time.'

'She'll know you're here. An' it's better to hev her scared an' you turn up safe an' soun' than to hev you drowned. No mortal