

At the Turn of the Tide

BY LESLIE COVERT

AS the *Mary Maria* slipped out from under her dingy little wharf at Eastport she met the Fundy north-caster, and keeled to the dipping seas till her gunwale was awash.

"Old Fundy's pretty well stirred up to-day, Captain John," said the girl, from the cuddy hatchway.

The old man's weather-beaten face glowed in the yellow sunlight. His keen eyes grew soft with pride in his smack as the brown sail bellied and tugged with the wind.

"Oh, this ain't no gale, Mis' Cronk," said the old captain, leisurely. "Fundy's only spittin' to-day, I cal'late." Then, after a moment's pause, "W'at's b'come o' that there sawbones as perfessed t' want th' *Maria* an' me t' carry him acrost to-day?"

"He had to go to a patient, Captain John. He will follow, more comfortably, in the mail-packet."

The captain grunted. The girl felt that her last speech had been unfortunate, but she looked frankly at her old friend and went on: "Town folks never know this feeling, Captain John, of flyin' before the wind in an open boat!"

"No; th' blamed landlubbers, they'd ruther be cooped up like a lobster in a dump-car!"

He shyly cleared the taffrail-seat of its burden of rope, and looked hesitatingly at the girl. She felt it was a mute invitation to come aft, and stepping lightly over the thwart, slipped down beside him.

"I cal'late y' don't mind them slathers o' times you've bin line-fishin' with me in th' Rips?" he ventured, looking at her dubiously out of the tail of his eye.

For four long years Caroline Cronk and the open sea had been strangers. It had been the *Mary Maria* itself that had carried her away from Grand Manan and its homely island folk, and it had been Captain John who had been the last of

the home people to say good-by to her as she had started resolutely forth for the then alien and unknown city of Boston.

"I'll bait y' hain't seen a heap o' fishin'-smacks onto thet there Bosting hospit'l?" The old captain noted, as he spoke, the changed appearance of the girl. Then he added, suggestively, "It's goin' roun' your cousin Libby ain't long for this world, Mis' Cronk!"

"Perhaps, Captain John, with careful nursing—"

"Laurie Ann's bin a-tellin' me you're kind o' carryin' a cargo o' newfangled notions 'bout keepin' winders open an' sech? Us island folks ain't much took with defyin' Prov'dence an' a-dosin' up sick folks w'at th' Lord 's a'ready cast out His net for!"

The girl remained discreetly silent.

"I'm kind o' scart you're gittin' y'r-self in a fix comin' down here to nuss Libby. Hull slew o' her folks was tellin' me afore I sot out as they ain't altogether believin' in this female doctorin' an' nussin' business. An' folks do say, Mis' Cronk, as how *you* oughtn't to be so sot on havin' Libby last out."

The girl drew back, startled and indignant.

"Becky Gubtill thinks as how you'd ought t' have another chance at Jethro; seein' as you an' him used t' sit up nights together b'fore Libby clim' in b'tween you!"

The girl looked over the tumbling waters. The full consciousness of the task that lay before her crept into her mind for the first time. The breach that four years had placed between her and what had once been her own people appalled her. They were now of another world, living other lives, thinking strangely different thoughts.

It had cost her not a little to sacrifice her many city interests, but when word had first come to her of her cousin's

illness she had not hesitated before what seemed her most obvious duty. The attitude of the islander toward all illness she knew only too well. The person who took to a bed on Grand Manan was held to have taken to his coffin. Medicine and nursing were useless and wrong. What was to be, must be.

Remembering this, the girl had felt that if in this one case, of all others, she might save this young woman, on whom the shadow of death had already fallen, in the eyes of the superstitious islanders, it would bring home to her people some cogent and palpable lesson of the actual power of medical treatment.

But the attitude of Captain John, for all his gruff affection, had already foreshadowed for the girl her future position in the eyes of the islanders. It disheartened, but did not altogether discourage her. In a passing determined moment of exaltation a touch of the fire of the prophet, of the liberator, of the savior, swept over her. And for the rest of the voyage she was strangely reserved and silent. It was not until the purple cliffs of Grand Manan crept up in the distance that she turned towards the captain with any of the old feeling.

"Home—is always home, isn't it, Captain John!" said the girl, with a tearful little shake of the head.

Slowly across the tumbling waters of the bay loomed up the long, wall-like mass, softened by the afternoon sea-haze that, summer long, day by day, clings about it. As the sloop pitched along the dipping seas, the ruggedness of the coastline became more marked, and they could clearly make out its great red cliffs, with jagged gullies torn by the fierce northeastern storms. Then the girl could discern even the scraggy-topped evergreens against the sky, and to her impatient heart the *Mary Maria* seemed scarcely to move. As she leaned eagerly forward to catch the first glimpse of the dulse-pickers' cabins that hugged the hills at Dark Harbor, she caught sight of the familiar bent and twisted figures that fought with the hurrying tides for scraps of sea-weed among the scattered beach boulders. Above the roar of the surf pounding on the bar she could hear the faint and mournful notes of the old whistle that had called through

the fogs of Whale Cove for twenty changing years. Soon the whistle-house itself came into view. There the tides unceasingly battered the cliffs, which raised stubborn faces four hundred feet straight up from the water. Round a head of land appeared The Seven Days' Work.

"I s'pose y've clean forgot th' name o' most o' them p'int's?"

Yet the old captain felt that she had not. The girl herself knew that she never would and never could forget.

"Now ther's th' Seven Days' Work! I allus felt as how th' Lord worked mighty hard t' git that job done clost onto Sunday mornin'; an', after all, th' Ol' Nick had t' take an' put on th' top layer!"

The girl remembered the island tradition that the devilish hands had laid the last of the seven layers, and laughed her appreciation.

"'Bout here's where the *Lord Ashburton* butted into th' rocks an' found 'em harder'n she was," went on the old man. "I got ol' Doggett—him as was th' only soul saved off'n her—a-tellin' me 'bout it t'other day. He did have a tussle, a-shinnin' up that icy cliff!" And then he added, meditatively, "I ain't one as questions th' Almighty's doin's, but it do seem 's if it 'd been a blessin' if he'd drapped back into th' water, same as Lish Fry, as clim' nigh to th' top along uv him!"

The scene of the *Lord Ashburton's* disaster slowly faded away, and rugged Swallow Tail, with its glowing light-house, slipped past.

"Rick's lit up early t'-night. Guess he's expectin' a blow. But I ain't so sure but them gatherin' clouds is only scud-ders, anyhow."

Out from under the dusk of the cliff the boat tacked straight toward the south. Every wave was aglow with the late afternoon sun. It glamed on the girl's wind-blown hair, on the captain's storm-tried face, on the brown sails. It fell peacefully on the dozens of little wood-grown islands that gemmed the bay between Swallow Tail and Grand Harbor, the home of the sick woman. Past Low and High Duck islands, past the seething breakers and sandy bars of Castalia, they ran lightly on before the wind.

The girl noticed that the captain was heading for Ross's Island, and looked up with surprise. She had already told him of their need for haste. It troubled her to think that he was not to try the shorter route of "The Thoroughfare," where the inrushing, eddying tide had already hidden the hundred rock-fangs of that narrow channel.

The girl looked anxiously at old John. "Couldn't we try the Thoroughfare to-night?" she asked. "It saves an hour."

The captain stared hard at her for a few seconds.

"By cracky! the *Maria* 'll go through there singin', 'f you 'ain't forgot how t' steer!"

The girl reached for the tiller and took a firm stand.

"It's a-goin' to be ticklish a-jibbin' her! Cal'late I'll have to keep th' tacklin' clear an' mind th' sheet. Now!" he shouted. "Hold hard!"

The *Mary Maria* eddied and reeled and tossed with the churning tides. Hurrily the captain pulled up the little centreboard. Then he shot an admiring glance at the girl.

"Bin t' th' States four years an' 'ain't had her head turned! Well, I'm struck!"

Then, "Into the wind, now, till th' minnit I sez th' word," he called to the girl. "Hard down!" he bellowed a moment later. "Hard down!"

The sail shot out, and the *Mary Maria* swung round into the middle stream. No word was spoken except when Captain John called out his sharp, quick orders. For a helpless moment or two the little craft was caught in the dizzy fingers of a whirlpool, and then, as if hurled from a contemptuous hand, plunged out into the smoother waters of the harbor.

"There ain't 'nother female on this yere stone-pile 's would 'a' dared it! I vum, if this craft wasn't a'ready baptized, her name 'd be *Caddy*!"

Caroline Cronk's face lighted up at the sound of the unfamiliar old name, and gazed landward as the harbor lights glowed through the dusk and burned deep into the placid waters of the Creek.

A group of men and women stood beside piles of fish-tubs and herring-horses on the shore. The lantern threw their

careworn faces into relief against the dark; something in their intense silence foretold their distrust of the trained nurse. The heart of the returning island girl grew indeterminately heavy. She had hoped for a different reception.

She surrendered the tiller to Captain John, and then stood for a moment at the water's edge, longing to call or wave a hand back at him, but afraid. The islanders were not a demonstrative people.

"I've fatched her!" was all the old captain said aloud, but under his breath he added, "An', by cracky! she ain't no worsen she used t' wuz, t' my mind."

Captain John's white-haired brother was the first to break the silence.

"Quite a stranger, Mis' Cronk!" was the most emotional greeting his flurried mind was capable of.

Caroline went toward the women. They allowed her to shake their passive hands. There was none of the expected "My! you're a-lookin' wholesome!" or the traditional "How you're fattenin' up!"

Instead, she heard cold voices say, "We 'ain't seen you for some time," and, "How'd you leave y'r friends t' Bosting?" Laurie Ann's tone was friendlier, but her words cut deeper:

"Lands! You must be tired with them tight stays on since you left Eastport! Don't you feel kind o' cramped?"

The girl glanced quickly at her snugly fitting suit of brown, then at the unshapely loose frocks of the four women, and her face grew hot. Across the marsh and up the hill shone the light from the sick woman's cottage.

"How's Libby?" Caroline asked, anxiously.

The four women looked from one to the other as they followed the girl's quick steps toward the cottage, and it was several seconds before their astounded tongues became loosened.

"Makin' herself t' hum!" muttered the youngest, under her breath, and then added aloud, "You got here in good time, Miss Cronk, t' see Libby drawin' her last breath, I cal'late!"

"She's jest alive, Miss Cronk," added another. "She can't spend out more'n a day!"

Then Laurie Ann added: "I cautioned her from th' first 'twas her las' sickness, an' nothin' could be done f' her!"

Jethro, he takes on ter'ble. I was kind o' taken aback, Car'line, knowin' how much you were sot on him 'fore y' ever went t' th' States!"

Then watching the girl's face, she added: "But Libby was al'ays a good-tempered, clingin' kind of a girl! She's on th' Lord's side, too, now, an' it's a-helpin' her out amazin'. I used t' feel as 'f you influenced her, but she's got grace in her heart, an' all we're hopin' for is that Elder Babcock will git down from Th' Head t' immerse her 'fore th' breath o' life leaves her."

"Laurie Ann, she must not be immersed!"

Three of the women were so stunned by this outrageous statement that they forgot the necessity of walking with rapid lightness in a bog, and stood stock-still, with the black mud oozing up in bubbles about their rough boots. Only Laurie Ann, the religious, was composed.

"Was you speakin', Miss Cronk?" she said, sweetly. "Guess we'd best git 'long to th' house. There ain't too much time for y' to try your conjurin' an' stuff!"

Caroline's face was white, and she realized the futility of words. The three other women, standing like Lot's wife, looked at her and laughed at the wit of Laurie Ann's sally.

The girl hurried on, and said nothing. At the door through which Laurie Ann had already passed stood Libby's mother. Her mouth was drawn and thin-lipped from her years of care and trouble. But behind that sterner mask lurked a spirit of unsuspected kindness, and the look she bent on Caroline was more of mute sorrow than resentment.

"Ther' ain't no help for my girl, Car'line!"

Caroline looked on the mother pityingly, and choked back the rebellious tears. "But with proper care—" she began.

"I've seen 'em come, an' I've seen 'em go, Car'line, come an' go like th' tides, an' it ain't no use."

The old woman looked out into the night. "They're a-beginnin' t' make th' death-cake a'ready," she said, feebly.

When the shadow of death falls across the doorway of a Grand Manan home, the islanders, from time immemorial, have solemnly prepared for the unbidden guest

by the making and careful distributing of a death-cake; and Caroline remembered that it was a custom which neither latter-day enlightenment nor religion had driven from the islands.

"An' now we're a-waitin'," went on the mother, quietly, "fr' th' elder, so's t' begin th' immersion."

Caroline caught up her hand-bag and flung on her nurse's apron. "There shall be no immersion, Aunt Susan," she cried, defiantly; "and now I must see Libby! There's been too much of this neglect already! Do you hear, Aunt Susan?—I *must* go to Libby."

The sick woman's mother looked at the nurse reprovingly.

"Y're forgittin', Car'line, as you're a-blasphemin' th' Almighty in th' house o' death!"

Caroline did not wait to answer. She turned and left the room. On her way to the sick-bed she passed through the little low-ceilinged kitchen. In one corner, she noticed, still stood the carefully polished cooking-stove, quaint and small-doored. The old familiar hand-drawn mats were still studiously scattered about the well-scrubbed floor. Even the wood-box occupied its old corner in the chimney-place, and the almanac hung on the same nail above it.

But the thing that held the girl spell-bound was the group of shadowy, whispering figures clustered about the white deal table. Before this group of busy women dressed in black stood a huge crockery bowl, and beside this bowl stood flour and spices. The subdued notes and the solemn joy on those rough faces told Caroline only too well just what was taking place. She looked at them for one shuddering moment, and then hurried on.

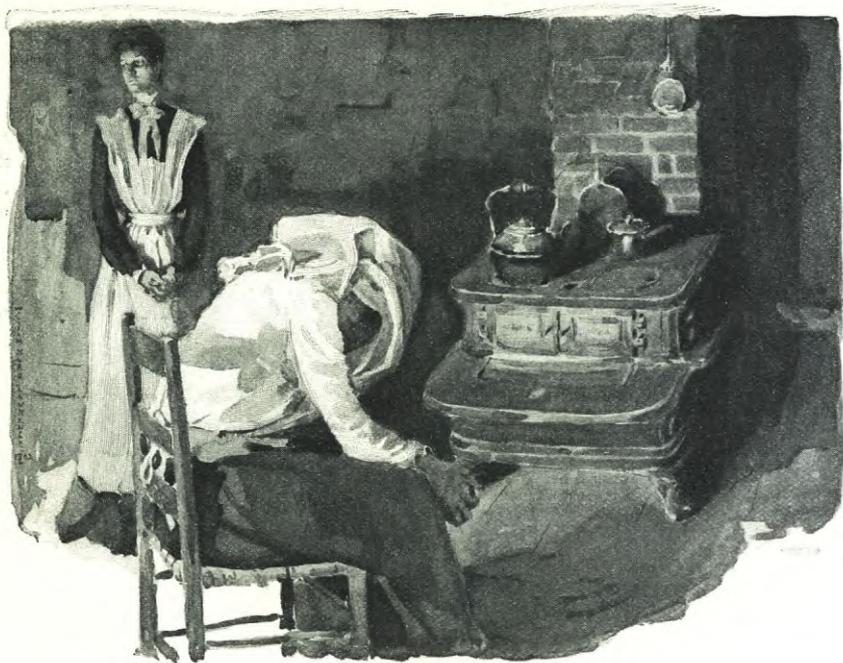
A moment later she reappeared where the whispering figures still clustered about the wide table. Her face was white, and the lines of her girlish mouth had taken on a new determination.

"Somebody, quickly, bring me some hot water!"

Half a dozen cold and passionless faces gazed at her.

"Call'late ther' ain't none handy, Mis' Cronk."

With her own hand the girl hurriedly filled the old iron kettle and put it on the shining stove.



THE SICK WOMAN'S MOTHER SAT WITH HER APRON OVER HER HEAD

"Kind o' dirty an' common-lookin' kitchen for swell city folks!"

"W'at's th' sense o' your sayin' that, Widow Brown? Land knows y've done nothin' but scour this house since Jed Brown was drowned. But o' course y' done it with your own ord'nary hands, an' mebbe that ain't like havin' it licked up with one o' them newfangled Bosting mops!"

The girl beside the stove wrung her hands in silence.

"'F th' sky was to fall," said Mattie Guthrie, "guess you'd keep on a-scrubbin' same 's ever, Widow Brown!"

The sick woman's mother crept into the room, watched the group for a silent moment, and then rocked back and forth on a kitchen chair, with her apron flung over her head.

"We cal'l'ate as we might jes 's well git these things bet up," said the Widow Brown, "f'r I mus' say I wuddn't like t' see another dyin' on this yere island, like ol' Lem Sterner's, with th' cake clean spoiled for lack o' decent mixin'."

"I mus' say Jeth's takin' it hard," con-

tinued one of the women. "Been goin' on worse 'n a woman with her boy drowned."

The Widow Brown went to the kitchen door, softly beating the whites of a number of eggs as she did so.

"I cal'l'ate thet's th' elder an' some o' th' men folks come up for th' immer-sin'. I was gittin' some—"

"I must have a jug, Mrs. Brown, to fill and put at Libby's feet," Caroline interrupted, distraught. The Widow Brown calmly went on beating her eggs.

It was then that Laurie Ann stepped forward, with a strange fire burning in her eyes. "Will y' step this way, Mis' Car'line?" she said, opening the door of the dark passage that led from the kitchen to the cellarway. Once in that darkness, Laurie Ann gave a sudden lurch. She seemed to fall, as if by accident, against the girl. The force of that blow sent Caroline reeling into the trap-door, where she lay a moment half stunned on the cellar floor. A moment later the door itself swung shut and the bolt was slipped back, holding the nurse a prisoner.

Laurie Ann, with glowing eyes, gave a deep sigh of religious satisfaction: "Won't be immersed, won't she! Blaspheme 's much 's you please, Car'line Cronk, if you ain't a-scared t' in the dark!"

The imprisoned girl's bruised hands felt desperately for the wall, and she started through the cobwebs for the spot where she remembered a window used to be. Something touched her face. She reached up quickly, and her fingers went through an old fish-net. Then she heard low voices singing mournfully, "Sister, Thou wast Mild and Lovely." Then came the sound of many shuffling feet on the floor above, and she knew the men were carrying the heavy dory, lined with sail-cloth, for the immersion. Then once more the laborious voices struck up, this time slowly chanting "Whiter than the Snow." Then there was silence once more, and the listening girl thought she heard a little shivering cry. A moment later it was swallowed up by an outburst of ecstatic clapping of hands.

Upstairs the sick woman lay shaking forlornly on the high straw tick, and the group of men and women standing about the bed sang vigorously "Gather them in, One by One." A bit of dried and stretched fish-skin had been stuck in the one oil-lamp to shade the sick-bed. In the stronger light on the other side of the lamp limply sat a wide-shouldered seaman, just in from the Grand Banks. Three years before, on the eve of Libby's marriage, he had taken himself off with the Gloucester fishing-fleet, for in those days he himself had loved her well. And now his anguish did not escape the ever-hungry eyes of Laurie Ann, who jealously shifted the light to the other side of its rude shelf.

At the head of the bed sat Jethro Guthrie, with his great arm awkwardly about his wife's shaking shoulders. Her tangled, thin hair lay against his sunburnt cheek, now paled to the color of bronze, and her gently appealing eyes looked up at him, tearing his heart.

Two of the women whispered officiously together, and crept silently and even more officiously from the room. Elder Babcock—a gaunt, whiskered man, who stood near the table—took the huge bowl

from the women and held it solemnly before him, while one by one each of the company stirred its contents once round the bowl. Then he turned to the bed. Jethro, silently straightening from his cramped position, took his wife's helplessly frail hand in his great fingers, and closing it upon the spoon, slowly stirred the mixture three times, one for each year of their wedded life. Elder Babcock whispered hoarsely for Mattie Guthrie to give the key-note, and once more the strange company sang together. Before the hymn was finished two women hurriedly carried the bowl and its contents from the room to the kitchen, where a hot fire was already burning in the little old-fashioned stove. For clearly there was no time to be lost.

The woman on the bed was seized with a sudden more violent chill, and a blue look came into her half-conscious face as she lay quivering in her lover's arms like a shred of foam blown high on a windy day.

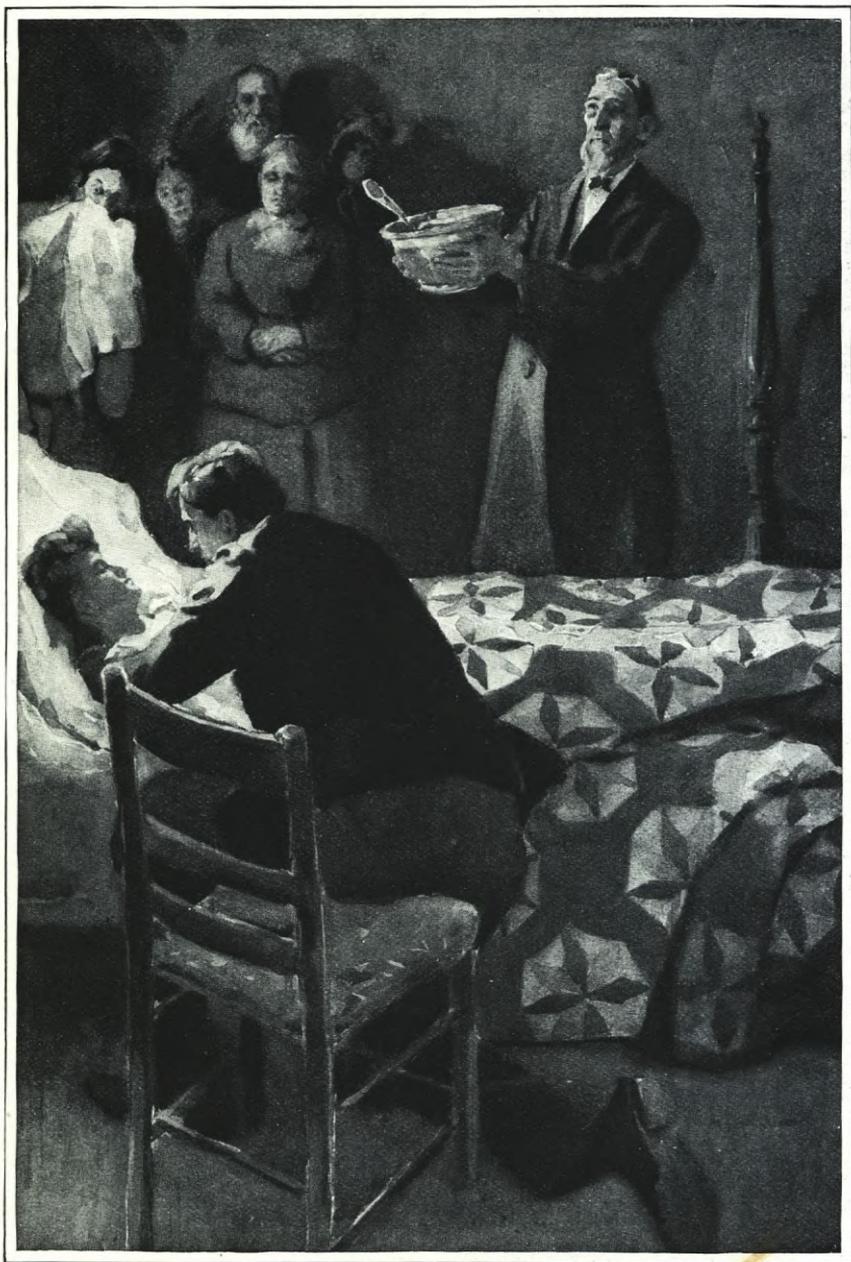
In the kitchen old Captain John stood among the others watching the baking of the death-cake.

"I hearn tell up t' th' P'int how 's th' packet's in, an' this yere Eastport doctor 'll be heavin' in sight soon." Then he gave a mournful shake of his shaggy head. "Seems a shame 's Caddy didn't have more time t' try dosin' Libby. Arter all, ther' may be somethin' in these yere high-soundin' names."

No one answered him, for above the silence that had fallen upon the sick-room rose the sudden wailing of a woman's voice. It was the high droning cry of Libby's mother, crying over and over again: "She's a-goin'! She's a-goin' out with th' tide! She's a-goin' out with th' tide!"

The Widow Brown was trying the cake with a broom wisp, when Laurie Ann rushed into the kitchen, her eyes streaming. "Quick, Widow Brown, quick, or she'll be gone afore it's done!" she cried, hysterically. But before Widow Brown could even reply voices sounded outside in the gloom, and a number of lanterns swung up to the open door, through which the sea mist sucked into the lighted house.

"What does all this mean?" an authoritative voice asked, through the dark-



ELDER BABCOCK HELD THE HUGE BOWL SOLEMNLY BEFORE HIM



"WHERE IS THE PATIENT," DEMANDED THE INTRUDER

ness. Without waiting for an answer the speaker strode into the warm kitchen and flung off his overcoat. Something in his manner frightened Laurie Ann. Even the imperturbable Widow Brown for a moment forgot the cake, and looked about her timidly.

"The patient? Where is the patient?" demanded the intruder, still more sternly, catching up his handbag. "And Miss Cronk? She was to be here!"

He caught sight of the high bedstead and the black-robed group standing about it, and pushed in through them. For one tense moment he bent over the passive blue-gray face, and then stood up and caught his breath quickly. His eye fell on the dory, on the dripping floor, on the clusters of pine boughs hung about the dank little room.

The circle of watchers shuffled uneasily away from him. Something in his eye overawed them. From the kitchen doorway Laurie Ann saw that strange expression on his face, and she slipped tremulously back.

"My nurse!" gasped the doctor, fitting a needle into his hypodermic syringe, and flinging off his coat. "I must have my nurse, at once, to help!"

A dozen people turned to go for her, but Laurie Ann had been before them.

The doctor did not even look at Caroline Cronk's bruised and pallid face; he did not even look at the widening circle of open-eyed watchers standing about him. All he saw was that there was work to be done quickly.

It was a battle the islanders did not understand, and one by one they crept away. The darkness grew into twilight, and the twilight into open day. And it was then that the doctor sighed deeply, and felt the feeble pulse swing and waver and flutter back into existence.

And an hour later Laurie Ann, watching jealously from the outer doorway, heard him cry.

"Thank the Lord, Miss Cronk, I believe we've got her through!"