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The Heroine of Moodyville

AN EPIC OF BURRARD INLET

1883

MRS. JOHN PEABODY PATTERSON, *nee* Emily Susan Branscombe, a beloved and practical woman who reached Hastings Sawmill, April, 1873, Moodyville Sawmill, 1874; a "Lady of Grace of St. John" in a wilderness of verdure (Burrard Inlet); a "Dame Hospitaller" alike to Indians and Whites prior to hospitals and resident doctors; mother of the first white child born, 26 February, 1864, at (Stamp's Sawmill), Alberni, B. C. Obit. at Vancouver, 12 November, 1909, 74 years.

"THE HEROINE OF MOODYVILLE"

AN EPIC OF BURRARD INLET, 1883

NORA M. DUNCAN

1936

Mrs. John Peabody Patterson, a beloved and practical woman, came to Burrard Inlet in 1873; was mother of the first white child born at Stamp's Mill, Alberni, B. C., 1864. She was a "Lady of Grace of St. John of Jerusalem" to injured and ailing, Indians and whites alike, in a wilderness as yet without established hospitals or resident doctors. Word came to Moodyville that Mrs. Erwin, keeper's wife at Point Atkinson lighthouse, ten miles distant and inaccessible by land, was dangerously ill.

In 1883 the north shore of Burrard Inlet, now North and West Vancouver, was a rocky terrain of trail-less forest, an impenetrable tangle of undergrowth, impassable swamp, and unfordable stream; access to the lighthouse was by water only. A gale was raging in English Bay; the masters of the paddlewheel tugboats counselled delay, the risk was great, and dusk was falling. The Squamish Indian Chinalset offered his dugout canoe, and together they paddled into the blackness of the storm and night, reaching the lighthouse as dawn broke.

Auth.: City Archives, City Hall.

When forests crowned Pacific slopes where now Vancouver stands,
The moccasin trod hidden trails through dense unbroken lands
And swift canoes cleft silent seas along the lonely strands.

In Moodyville where sawmill hummed and barques at anchor lay,
Of bravery a tale is told—its glory lives today
And lights historic memories with torch of golden ray.

Around this dauntless deed thoughts weave and burning words unfold
To tell of one who courted death a lonely tryst to hold,
When hope waxed dim and dark despair hovered in aspect cold.

From Atkinson's[1] far point had come two Indians with the news:
"The lighthouse keeper's wife[2] is ill—there is no time to lose!
A doctor send, or else a nurse, who swiftly cometh. Choose!"

The word goes forth, the jetty throngs with settlers come to hear,
Their weathered faces grave concern in feeling tribute wear—
Alas, no doctor—he has gone on urgent case afar!

The mill grows silent, pike poles lie neglected by the flume;
The peavy waits a practised hand its cunning to resume
As loggers, caulked and mackinawed, desert the floating boom.

And while they speak the waters heave and thunder's muttering word
Forbids a passage o'er the Bay, to sudden frenzy stirred,
While driven gulls seek inland rest, their startled cries unheard.

Now as wild gusts with shrouding mists the fading landscape veil,
And sombre night her mantle casts on dying daylight pale—
The gentle Mistress Patterson hears of the tragic tale.

The wife of sawmill master she, forever by his side,
On horse or foot, in staunch canoe, had travelled far and wide,
And pioneer vicissitudes her presence dignified.

Beloved was she in rancherie[3] and scattered settlement,
Her touch akin to miracle, her life a kindness spent,
A refuge in the wilderness, a foster-mother lent!

So thus the people, knowing well her fortitude of yore,
Turn hastily with troubled step to knock upon her door,
And of her understanding aid they earnestly implore.

As sadly visions pleading rise of one who suffers there
In isolated rocky keep, far from physician's care,
Her spirit yearns, compassionate, that fight with death to share.

The darkness falls, the wind blows wet, heavy with sheets of rain,
Against the lighthouse on the Point where keeper's wife has lain
In fevered sickness, without hand to soothe the burning pain.

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"Oh, God," deliriously she prays, "must I in torment be?
Dear Lord, is no one brave enough to cross through storm to me?"
Laden her weak and wailing cry with mournful misery.

Black is the Inlet, seething seas fling hungry arms on high!
The gale sweeps through the Narrows and lightning rips the sky!
While under lee of sawmill wharf the paddle tug boats lie.

Their captains scan the frowning heav'ns, " 'Tis fools push off tonight!
We cannot face those surging seas that beat in monstrous might
Upon the cliffs and rockbound coast of Atkinson's great light!"

"Oh, pity! pity! Who will go with me on errand blest?"
Ah, daughter of a valiant race, thy life to good confessed!
Wouldst dare the tumult of the winds that suffering find rest?

"No! No!" the hoary captains said; but up spake Indian brave:
"With me you go, most merciful, a dying one to save—
Chinalset strong, a Squamish[4] son, fears not the leaping wave!"

And as they pass from foaming crest to foaming crest tossed high,
A tiny speck upon the sea, revealed by fork-ripped sky,
The hours to those upon the shore are slowly creeping by.

The paddles swing and dipping meet the lift of swelling tide,
Then lost to sight, engulfed between black billows brimming wide,
Until it seems no earthly hope their little craft can guide.

Drenched with the clinging salted spray, frozen with icy wind,
Rising and falling in the gloom that swathes of darkness bind,
They bravely battle with the storm the gleaming lamp to find.

On land the watchers, huddled, wait and offer fervent prayer—
But in the dugout[5], tossed like cork, the woman shows no fear,
And searches strange abysmal dusk to see SKAY-witsut[6] near.

Lo, now red Phoebus heralds day across the eastern sky,
And silently the mighty waves in still submission lie—
To sink into the ocean's depth as morning cometh nigh.

And in the birth of rosy dawn, thro' rift of parting cloud,
In sudden white proximity, the lighthouse looming proud
Reveals to nerve-wracked voyagers its noble form unbowed.

And then unfolded through the haze of quickly breaking day
A nestling cove[7] with shining sands in golden welcome lay,
That drew them to its sheltered beach beneath rock bastions gray.

The keeper waits with fearful heart to guide them carefully
O'er roughened trail; by thicket deep, by darkling forest tree—
Until with weary gratefulness the lighthouse door they see.

Thus soon our Mistress Patterson above the sufferer bends
And by her touch and healing grace soft, restful slumber lends,
As from her heart Doxology unto her God ascends!

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[1]Point Atkinson lighthouse. [2]Mrs. Walter Erwin. [3]Indian village. [4]Indian aborigines of Vancouver. [5]Cedar canoe hollowed by stone implements and fire. [6]SKAY-witsut. Indian name for Point Atkinson. [7]Formerly Skunk Cove, now Caulfeild.

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