

THE PALIMPSEST

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Kate Shelley

Late in the afternoon of July 6, 1881, heavy, black clouds rolled up from the horizon and the gloom pre-saging a violent storm swept over the Des Moines Valley. Farmers hastened their evening chores while anxious housewives hurried to bring in their washing and see that the chickens had found shelter. As the dense cloud-veil spread over the sky, twilight deepened into the darkness of night which was made blacker in contrast to the vivid illumination of the lightning flashes. Nearer and nearer came the ominous rumble and crash of the thunder until it made the windows rattle. Then down came the rain in sheets.

In a little cottage up the valley of Honey Creek beside the Chicago and North Western Railroad about half a mile from the Des Moines River, the Shelley children watched the appalling storm until "fright took possession" and drove them from the

windows "through which the lightning flashed dreadful pictures of destruction." The creek became a raging torrent, and the turbulent waters rose until they threatened the stable half way down the slope where the stock had taken refuge. Something had to be done. Kate, who was fifteen, the oldest of the children, dashed out into the rain, waded through the water that was pouring down the hillside, let out the horses and cows to take care of themselves, and rescued some little pigs that had climbed on a pile of hay for safety.

The storm continued with unabated violence during the long evening and on into the night. At the Shelley home there was no inclination to retire. While the younger children dozed, Kate and her mother remained alert and vigilant — apprehensive of danger. Honey Creek, filled with fence posts and uprooted trees, was still rising. They feared that the railroad bridge across the creek a quarter of a mile up the track could not withstand the flood, and they knew the long wooden trestle across the Des Moines River must be under a terrific strain.

The spring and early summer had been unusually rainy, so that the river had stood for days at high-water mark. Railroad embankments had been undermined and bridge piling had loosened. M. J. Shelley, an emigrant from Tipperary, Ireland, had been section foreman before he died in 1878, and well his family knew the perils of the railroad on such a night as the sixth of July, 1881.

It must have been after eleven o'clock when Kate and her mother heard the rumble of a train crossing the Des Moines River bridge. It was the "pusher", an engine stationed at Moingona to serve as an auxiliary in pulling heavy trains up the grade on either side of the river. The crew, consisting of Ed Wood, George Olmstead, Adam Agar, and Patrick Donahue, had been ordered to "run to Boone and return to Moingona regardless of all trains." The engine came backing down the track with the brakeman and section foreman standing on the running board behind the tender looking for washouts. Past the Shelley house they went and onto the swaying Honey Creek bridge. Twice Kate heard the engine bell toll distinctly, "and then came the horrible crash and the fierce hissing of steam" as the engine plunged down with her crew into twenty-five feet of rapid, swirling water.

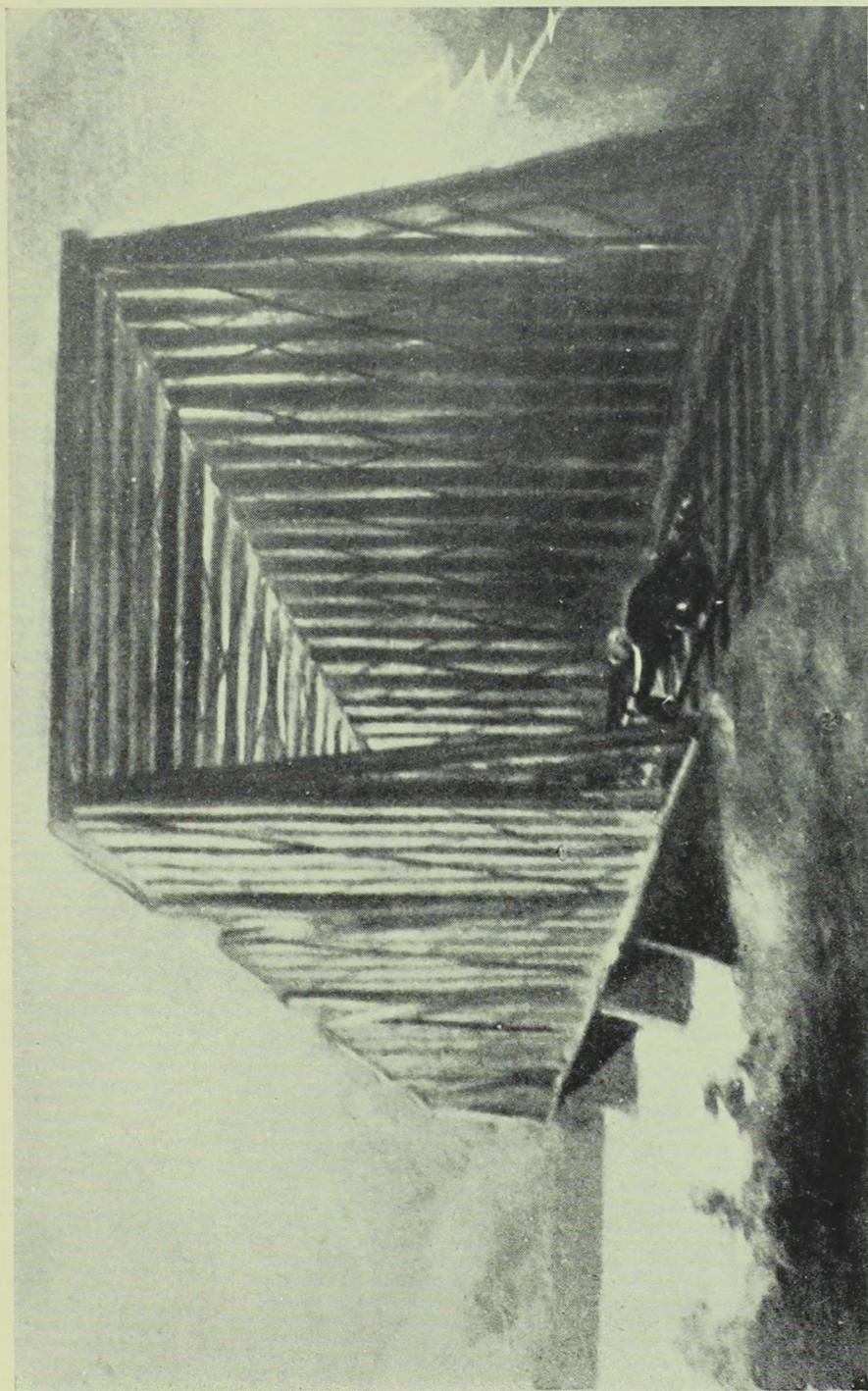
"Oh, mother", Kate exclaimed, "they have gone down." The storm and all else was forgotten. "It seemed as still as death; as silent as the grave." Kate decided that she must go to help the men and stop the passenger that would soon be due at Moingona — the midnight express from the west. Many lives were in her hands that night. The remonstrances of her mother were of no avail. She felt she simply had to go. Attired in an old skirt and jacket, she caught up a straw hat, improvised a lantern by hanging a little miner's lamp in an old lantern frame, and started out into the night and the

storm to do her duty as she saw it, knowing that mother and the children were praying God to keep her from harm.

The entire valley was flooded by that time, and the yard of the Shelley home resembled "the inside of a huge oval bowl" filled with water which extended to the railroad track. Unable to go directly to the railroad and thence up the track to the wreck at the bridge, Kate climbed the bluff back of the house, made a semi-circular detour to the southwest until she reached a place where the wagon road came through a cut in the bluffs and crossed the railroad. Once on the track she ran to the broken bridge.

Upon arriving at the scene of the wreck she saw by the lightning that two of the men, Wood and Agar, had chanced to clamber upon some convenient trees in the midst of the swelling flood and thus escape drowning for the time being. The other two were lost. One of the men called to her again and again but in the tumult she could not understand what he said.

Unable to render aid to the ill-fated crew and realizing that the midnight train would soon be due, she turned westward and hastened as fast as she could go toward Moingona in an effort to save the lives of the passengers on board the approaching train. Moingona was only a mile and a quarter away, but the Des Moines River with its long wooden bridge, trembling from the incessant rush of the high water, lay between her and the little village.



THE DES MOINES RIVER BRIDGE

After a temporary lull the storm had burst out anew. The thunder and lightning were frightful, while the rain came in gusts and torrents. To attempt to reach Moingona across the raging Des Moines seemed almost certain death: to hesitate might mean the death of hundreds of passengers on the train speeding to destruction. That was the thought that kept pounding at Kate's consciousness as she ran along the track. If she could only get there in time. What if the train should catch her on the bridge? What if the train should go thundering by in the darkness? She pictured the engine plunging into Honey Creek and the coaches piling up in the water. In imagination she could almost hear the screams of the people. She must hurry — hurry. How hard the wind blew! Sometimes it almost took her off her feet. There seemed to be no strength left in her. But she must go on!

Drenched to the skin, trembling, and breathless she reached the river. Never before had she seen the water so high. It was roaring by almost level with the track. The muddy river was filled with debris — even big trees uprooted by the wind and carried away by the water were sweeping headlong toward Des Moines. Across the seething flood stretched the long bridge that seemed just on the point of joining the general rush down stream.

Pedestrians had never been invited to use the bridge and as a method of discouraging such a practice some of the planking had been removed. The

ties were a full pace apart and studded thickly with twisted, rusty spikes. There was danger in crossing during fair weather and in daylight, but to attempt the feat in pitch darkness with the wind blowing a gale, rain pouring on the slippery ties, and a raging torrent below was an exploit to daunt the courage of any man.

Unchecked by the timbered bluffs of Honey Creek Valley, the wind swept the river bridge with terrific force. As Kate hesitated a moment to catch her breath and appraise the situation, a gust more violent than usual extinguished the feeble light of her lantern and left her in inky darkness relieved only by the lightning. A feeling of terror seized her, but at the thought of the drowning men back at the broken bridge and the oncoming express she dropped to her knees and began to crawl slowly, laboriously across the long, wind-swept trestle. Guided by the rails, she felt her way from tie to tie. Again and again her skirt caught on a nail and she all but lost her balance. Now and then a sharp pain shot through her hands and knees as a protruding spike or splinter gouged into her flesh. As each flash of lightning displayed the angry, swirling water only a few feet below, she almost fell between the ties from dizziness.

Halfway over a piercing flash of lightning revealed an enormous tree rushing down upon the very spot where she was clinging. In the instant of vision she noticed that the earth was still hanging to the

roots of the tree. Momentary panic brought her upright on her knees as she clasped her hands in terror and in prayer, for it seemed inevitable that the shock would carry out the bridge. But the monster glided between the piers with a rush, the branches scattering foam and water over the girl as they passed.

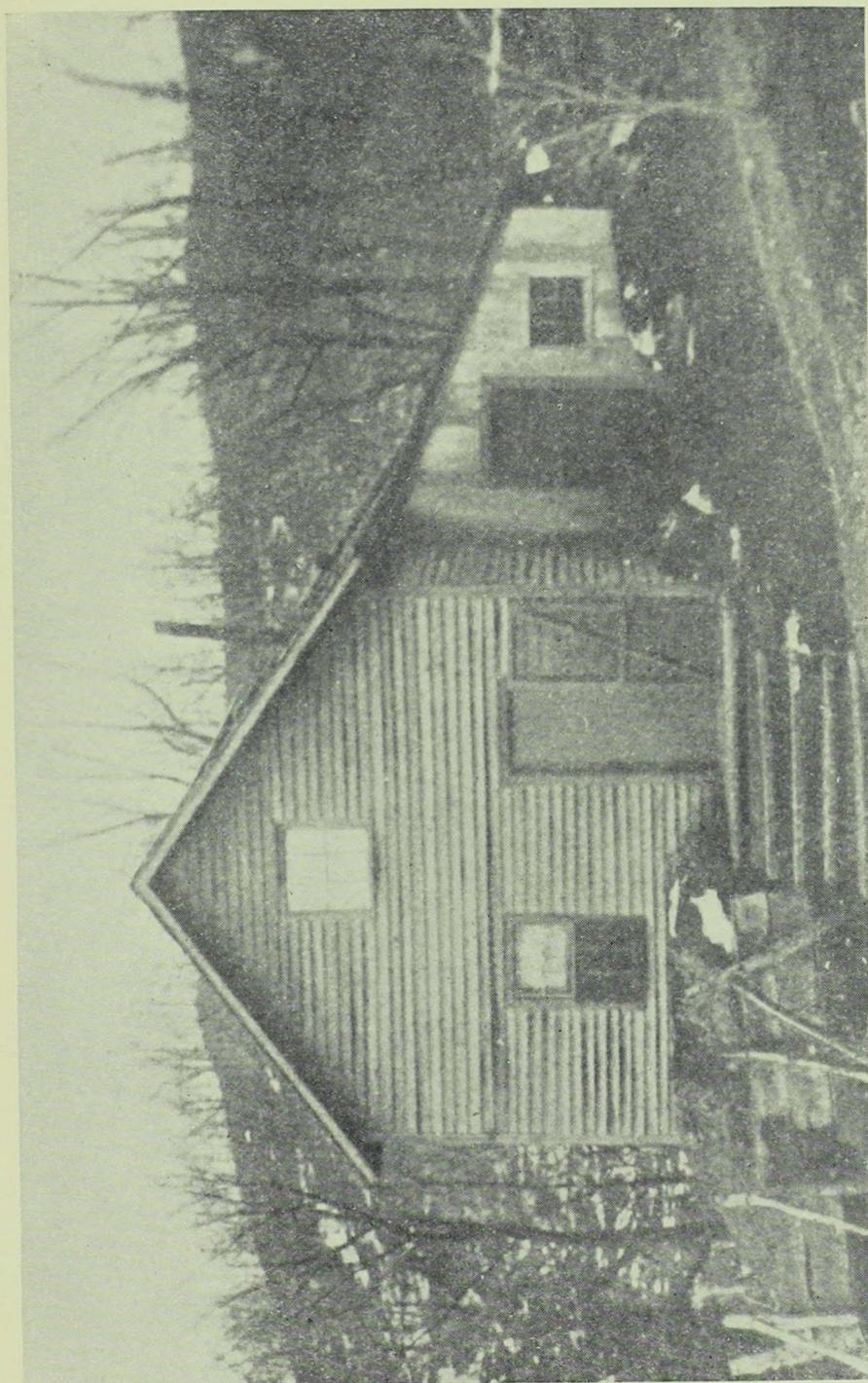
Finding herself still unharmed she resumed her painful progress. It seemed as though she had been on that bridge for hours. She could scarcely remember when she started, while the beginning of the storm and her rescue of the little pigs earlier in the evening seemed years ago. Each minute stretched out interminably, and the impression grew upon her that the end of the bridge was constantly receding. At last, however, she felt the solid ground beneath her. Standing erect, she stopped to breathe for a moment and then set out on the run to the station a quarter of a mile away. It was getting late and her strength was failing fast.

How she finally arrived and told her story Kate Shelley could never remember. She only recalled that someone said, "The girl is crazy." Then one of the railroad men recognized her and the dreadful import of her message was realized. The whistle of an engine in the yards aroused the town. In a few minutes men with ropes and other equipment were ready to go to the rescue of Wood and Agar at the Honey Creek bridge. Kate accompanied the rescue party across the river on the engine, guided them

along the bluff to the track above the washout, and thence back to the scene of the disaster on the east bank of the creek where the survivors of the wreck could be helped. After many efforts a rope was cast to Wood who made it fast to his tree and then came ashore hand over hand. Agar could not be reached until the water began to subside, when he too was taken from his refuge completely exhausted from his long exposure.

During the days that followed the sixth of July, rest or relaxation was not to be considered. On Thursday, eager crowds visited the scene of the tragedy and filled the Shelley house. Newspaper reporters arrived on the second day, burdened with questions and insistent upon exploring the whole neighborhood lest some dramatic detail should be overlooked. Saturday passed in much the same manner but on Sunday, when Donahue's body was found in a corn field, the excitement subsided. It was then that Kate Shelley's strength gave way. For three months she was confined to her bed, but at last her natural vitality triumphed.

Restored to health, Kate found that the sun shone on a brighter world for her. She was no longer the unknown girl dwelling in a poor little home beside the railroad. News of her heroism had been flashed abroad, and almost instantly she had become one of the famous women of her time. Press comments concerning her bravery were wide-spread. Poems were composed, dramatic readings produced, and



THE HOME OF KATE SHELLEY

editorials written — all presenting the story of her courage and character.

Probably the best known poem inspired by the daring act of the modest Irish girl was written by Eugene J. Hall. It closes with the following stanza:

Ah! noble Kate Shelley, your mission is done;
Your deed that dark night will not fade from our gaze.
An endless renown you have worthily won;
Let the Nation be just and accord you its praise.
Let your name, let your fame and your courage declare
What a *woman* can do and a *woman* can dare!

She was literally showered with letters filled with testimonials of gratitude and praise. Some contained verses in her honor, others eulogized her in prose, while there was no end of hair-raising, heart-throbbing descriptions of her adventure. There were letters of sympathy, letters requesting a photograph, a fragment of her dress, or a splinter from the bridge, and letters offering glowing opportunities for investing her fortune.

Numerous gifts and tokens of esteem were bestowed upon her. The school children of Dubuque gave her a medal. The *Chicago Tribune* raised a fund to help the Shelley family out of debt. As an emblem of appreciation of her "brave and humane action", and in recognition of her "efforts to save the lives of railway passengers and employes during the terrible storm of the night of July 6, 1881," the Nineteenth General Assembly of Iowa passed an act in 1882 authorizing the Senator and Representative

of Boone County, together with the Governor of the State, to procure and present her with a gold medal bearing an appropriate inscription. The legislature also appropriated two hundred dollars in cash to be given to Miss Shelley. A drinking fountain erected in a Dubuque park was dedicated to her. The employees of the North Western Railroad gave her a gold watch and chain, while the company issued her a life pass over the road.

The story of Kate Shelley appealed deeply to Miss Frances E. Willard. Soon after the event she wrote to her friend, Mrs. Isabella W. Parks, wife of the president of Simpson College, offering to contribute twenty-five dollars toward providing the means of a college education for such a deserving girl. Mrs. Parks raised enough money for the expenses of a year and Miss Shelley attended Simpson during the terms of 1883 and 1884. But she found college study very difficult and, being needed at home, she decided to give it up.

In 1903 she accepted employment as station agent at Moingona — a position which she held until a short time before her death on January 21, 1912. Twice each day during all those years she went from her home to the little depot, crossing the new iron bridge that had replaced the one over which she crawled on that fateful July night so many years before. Trains always stopped at her little cottage when she was on board. At the time of her funeral the company sent a special train to her home for the

convenience of the family and hundreds of friends.

On the main line of the North Western Railroad between Boone and Ogden and about four miles north of the village of Moingona, a fine new bridge now spans the Des Moines River. This structure, one of the longest and highest of its kind, is widely known as the Kate Shelley bridge — a fitting monument to perpetuate the memory of the famous Iowa heroine.

J. A. SWISHER