

Samantha and Betsy Save the Day and the Sailor



Grassy Island
Lighthouse

Kathy Warnes



Samantha lived in the lighthouse on Grassy Island in the Detroit River near Ecorse, Michigan. Her Papa was the light keeper and her Mama helped him and took care of Samantha and her brother Herbie.





Samantha and Herbie rowed to Ecorse every weekday to go to school and on Sundays Mama and Papa and Samantha and Herbie rowed to Ecorse to go to Mass at St. Francis Xavier Church. Samantha liked living in the lighthouse. Sometimes Samantha's friend Betsy came home with her on Fridays to spend the weekend. They helped Papa tend the light and Mama bake and clean. They took the row boat out and rowed to Grassy Island. Samantha wore slacks that Mama made for her when she rowed.

One day in spring Samantha said to Betsy, “ Mama wants you to come and help us with the spring cleaning Then we can gather duck eggs in the marsh and collect feathers for feather pillows.”

“That’s little kid stuff,” Betsy said. “My mother is helping me sew a dress for the church social. It will take us all weekend to finish it.”

Samantha was so quiet while she did her homework that Mama asked her,

“What’s wrong, Samantha?”

“Betsy’s acting funny. When I asked her to help us clean, she said she would have to let us know. She said she had to sew her dress for the church social. How can a church social be more fun than rowing in the marshes?”

Mama smiled. “Everything happens in its own time,” she said. “Be patient with Betsy.”





Samantha was patient for two weeks, but then she lost her patience and asked Betsy to come for the weekend. She asked four times and finally Betsy said she would come. She came, but she brought her almost finished dress with her. “I have to do the buttonholes,” she said. “Your Mama said she would help me with them.”

Saturday morning dawned sunny, but cold and waves rode up and down and around Grassy Island. Samantha and Betsy helped Papa turn off the light for the day. Betsy peered at the lamps. “You’re low on lamp oil, Mr. Sherman,” she said. “Do you have more in the supply shed?”

Papa looked worried. “I don’t think I do,” he said.

Papa hurried downstairs and out to the supply shed. He came back looking more worried. “I must go to the hardware store in Ecorse and get some more lamp oil,” he told Mama.

Mama looked worried too. “I was going to take the boat and visit Mrs. Johnson. She has been ill and could use some tending.”

“We can go together,” Papa told her. “We will only be gone for the day. The children will be fine.”

Mama told them to be careful twelve times and waved goodbye at least fourteen times. Papa rowed as quickly as he could toward shore.



After they had finished waving goodbye for the thirteenth time, Samantha said, “Let’s go hunt duck eggs.”

“I want to sew on my dress,” Betsy said.

“Come on Herbie, you’re not a fraidy cat like Betsy,” Samantha said. “Let her stay here and do her nicey, nicey sewing.”

Betsy stamped her foot. “I am not a fraidy cat! I just want to finish my dress in time for the social.”

Samantha stuck her tongue out at Betsy. “Fraidy cat!”

Betsy put down her dress and got into the rowboat with Samantha and Herbie. “I don’t know why your Papa didn’t take both of the boats,” Betsy grumbled.

“He took the skiff because it’s a sturdier boat,” Herbie said. “Everybody knows that.”





Betsy didn't answer him. She sat on the rowboat seat looking straight ahead, pulling her shawl tightly around her.

Herbie had brought his fishing pole and before long he caught three fish.

Samantha rowed in and out of the coves and inlets on the other side of Grassy Island from the lighthouse, but they didn't see any ducks. Betsy jumped away from the fish as Herbie unhooked them and put them in a bucket on the floor of the boat.

"It's getting colder on here and the wind's picking up," she said. "We'd better go back." "Fraidy cat," Samantha said. She kept rowing.

As the waves climbed higher and higher, Samantha turned the rowboat around and headed back for the lighthouse. They had just rounded the southern point of the island when Betsy dropped her hands from holding her shawl so she could point at something in the water. “There’s a man floating out there,” she said.

“A man! What would a man be doing in the middle of the Detroit River?” Herbie asked, not looking up from his fish.

“It is a man and he needs help,” Samantha shouted.

“How can we help him? We don’t have any extra room in the boat,” Betsy said.

“We can’t leave him out here in the middle of the Detroit River in a storm,” Samantha said. She reached under the seat and pulled out a length of rope. “I’ll throw it out to him and Betsy, you and Herbie can help me pull him in.”



Samantha threw the rope to the man struggling in the water. He grabbed it and Samantha, Herbie, and Betsy pulled him into the rowboat. They tugged and pulled at the man to get him into the boat and finally, he climbed in and collapsed on the seat.

“T-thank you,” he said weakly. The man shivered so hard that Herbie took off his coat and put it over the shivering man.

“Don’t worry, Mama and Papa will take care of you when we get back to the lighthouse,” Samantha assured the man.





The sun was setting as they beached the boat in front of the lighthouse.

Samantha and Betsy helped the man stumble up the path to the lighthouse while Herbie ran ahead. “Papa! Papa!” he shouted. “Come and see what we found!”

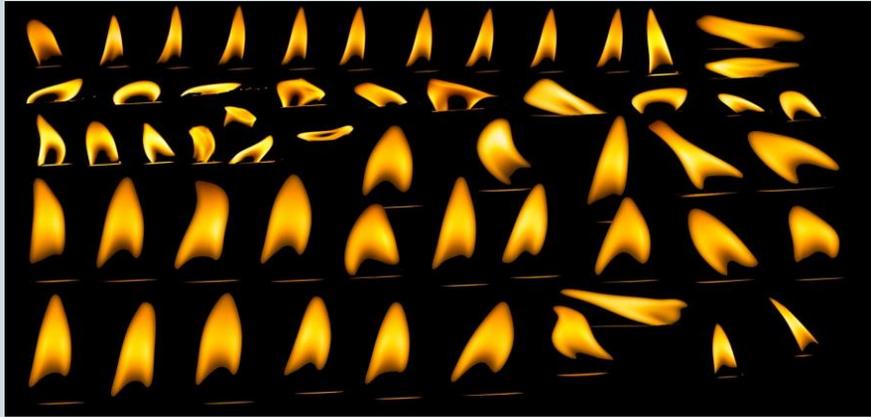
“Papa will be up in the tower lighting the lamps. You know that, Herbie.”

“All right. Mama! Mama! Come and see what we found!”

They finally reached the lighthouse and guided the man into the kitchen. “Mama, we need your help,” Samantha called.

The kitchen and the rest of the lighthouse living quarters were dark and silent. Mama and Papa hadn’t come back from the mainland yet.

“Betsy, build a fire in the stove so we can give him some hot tea,” Samantha said. “Herbie, go upstairs and get him some of Papa’s clothes.”



“How will anyone in a boat know where they are going without the light?”
Betsy asked.

“Then we need to light the light,” Samantha said.

“How can we light the light without lamp oil?” Betsy said.

“That’s why Papa went to town,” Herbie reminded them. “We’ll have to burn something else until Papa and mama get back.”

“There’s some candles in the cupboard in the bedroom,” Samantha said.

“Let’s see how many we can collect,” Betsy said.

“Herbie, you stay here and keep the man company.”

By the time the man was sitting by the kitchen stove wearing Papa's dry clothes and drinking hot tea, darkness covered the lighthouse. Little streams of light from Ecorse lamplight darted out over the river, but the lighthouse was dark.

"Mama and Papa must have been delayed because of the storm. They're probably on their way home now," Samantha said.

"But how can they see without the light shining out over the water to guide them?" Herbie asked, his eyes frightened. "How will they know where they're going without the light?"



Samantha turned to the man who had finally stopped shivering. “What is your name, sir?”

The man smiled at her. “I’m Jack Kelly from the schooner Argon. I fell overboard. Sure thought I was a goner until you people came along and rescued me.”

“Excuse us please. We have to rescue Mama and Papa next,” Samantha said.

Let me know if I can help you,” Jack Kelly said.

“Sit by the stove unless you have a candle,” Samantha said.

Jack and Herbie sat by the stove while Betsy and Samantha searched for candles. They managed to find a candle holder with seven candles in it in the cupboard and two more candles in the desk drawer.





“We don’t have enough to make a strong light,” Betsy said.

“We have to do the best we can with what we have,” Samantha said. “Let’s go up to the tower room!”

Grabbing the candles and some wooden matches from the kitchen, the two girls raced up the stairs to the tower room. They put some of the candles inside of the lantern and some beside the lens so that it could reflect their light. They lit the candles and peered out the window to see if the light made a path over the water to guide Mama and Papa home.

“Herbie!” Samantha yelled down the stairs. “Run outside and see if the candles are shining over the water.”

Herbie ran outside and after a few minutes his voice floated up the stairs. “I can see light crossing the water! Mama and Papa should be able to see it too.”

Samantha and Betsy watched the candles burn. Once in awhile they turned the candles so the brightest light would shine out of the window. The candles burned for two hours but Mama and Papa still hadn’t come home.

The candles started to burn out.





Samantha paced up and down in front of the flickering candles. “Where can they be? What are we going to do when the candles burn out? We don’t have any more.” Samantha put her head in her hands. Then she lifted it. “We’ll have to think of something else.”

Betsy put her arm around Samantha. “I have an idea! ”We can use my dress. We’ll start with the left sleeves. I’ll do downstairs and get my dress, Samantha and you bring up all of the cooking oil your Mama has in the kitchen and ten of her mason jars!”



Samantha raced downstairs and grabbed Betsy's dress. Then she ran to the kitchen, put the cups and the cooking oil in a box and ran back upstairs. "How are we going to do this, Betsy?"

"Here's how we're going to do this, Samantha. "We're going to use the thread I used to sew my dress to twist into a wick. Then we're going to use some strips of cloth from the sleeves and then the skirt to draw the burning oil into the wick. And we use a button to hold the thing together. We'll make our own candles!"



Samantha, Herbie, and Betsy made candles from the cooking oil, wicks from the thread, threaded them up through the buttons, and set them in the mason jars of oil. They put them in the lantern and in front of the lens. The mason jar candles didn't shine as brightly as the wax candles, but they gave enough light to send a dim path across the water.

“The light has to be bright enough to guide Mama and Papa home. It just has to be!” Samantha said, finishing another mason jar candle.

“Watch for them through the window,” Betsy said.

Samantha went to the window and stared out at the dim path over the water. Suddenly, she saw two figures in a rowboat rowing up the candle lit path. Samantha hugged Betsy and ran down the tower stairs. “Herbie, Mama and Papa are home!”

Herbie ran to meet Mama and Papa’s boat. He shouted, “Mama, Papa, we rescued a man from the River!”



Papa hurried up to the lighthouse tower with a large can of lamp oil. Mama hurried to the kitchen to meet Jack, the rescued man. Samantha ran back upstairs to find Betsy. She hugged Betsy again. Then she pointed to the light shining over the water.

“You’re going to teach me to sew the first thing in the morning,” Samantha said. Betsy hugged Samantha back. “You’re going to teach me to row the first thing in the morning,” she said.

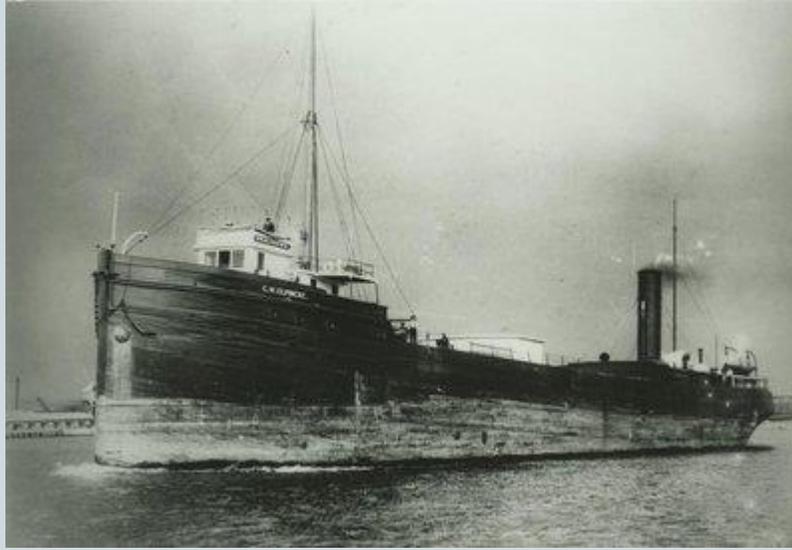


Some of This Story Really Happened

Samantha, Betsy, Herbie, Jack, and Mama and Papa are fictional people, but a similar rescue happened on the morning of May 11, 1890 off Mamajuda Island Light in the lower Detroit River across from Wyandotte, Michigan.

Maebelle Mason was the teenage daughter of Captain and Mrs. Orlo J. Mason, the keeper of the Mamajuda Island light. That morning the Captain went to the mainland for supplies, taking the main boat, but leaving a small, flat bottomed skiff on the island beach.





Shortly after the captain left, the freighter C.W. Elphicke which had been built in Trenton, Michigan in 1889, approached Mamajuda Island. With megaphone in hand the captain leaned over the bridge rail and shouted a message. A man struggled in the water beside an overturned and sinking row boat about a mile upstream.

The heavily loaded Elphicke could not stop to attempt a rescue in the strong current. Would the ladies be good enough to inform Captain Mason so the man could be rescued?

The Elphicke steamed on and Maebelle and her mother dragged the skiff into the water. Maebelle rowed the skiff out into the river and rescued the man. She rowed the nearly unconscious man back to the island and she and her mother revived him.





Word of Maebelle's daring rescue spread throughout the lakes and the marine magazines and Detroit and Cleveland newspapers told her story. At a gala celebration in Detroit, she was awarded a United States Life Saving Medal and the Shipmaster's Association gave her a gold life-saving medal.

For years, it was a nautical ritual for skippers to salute Maebelle with their horns and whistles while steaming past Mamajuda Light.



Hello, History!

