

PRAYERS GO FROM SEA-SWEPT ISLE OF RELIGION TO SUCCOR SAILORS BATTLING ON RAGING DEEP

Tiny Shrine on Star Island Off New Hampshire Coast Is Scene of Striking Simple Ceremony by Women Folk of Mariners

CHURCH WAS TORN DOWN TO PROVIDE NEEDED FUEL FOR FREEZING RESIDENTS

Wave-Battered and Wind-Lashed Land Has Been Scene of Inspiration for Cecilia Thaxter, Mrs. Burnett and Other Poets and Novelists

PRAYERS for loved ones at sea—

They rise from the hopeful hearts of mothers, sisters and sweethearts in the little shrine on Star Island, ten miles off the coast of New Hampshire.

They rise to mingle with the gales that sweep over the bleak and rocky shores, in the dark of the nighttime, bearing courage and love to the lonely fishermen fathers, and brothers and lovers, somewhere out on the black deep.

On calm nights, flickering candles of the procession of faithful women wind like slow stars up the dark slopes of the rocky island to the shrine on the peak—and prayers and hymns of hope sound to the very gates of the sky, down the long lanes of the sea.

Whatever one's creed, one understands the sorrow of long waiting, the pain in the heart of a mother or a sister or a sweetheart for her man gone out upon the treacherous waters.

Whatever one's creed, the abiding faith, the fervent prayer of any woman heart must become a noble thing.

Tiny Shrine Is Symbol of Faith in Prayer

Star Island, one of the Isles of Shoals, is the only island in America dedicated to worship and to the prayers of women for their sailing fishermen-folk.

For 120 years this drear island has been illuminated by the hope and the prayers of the faithful; for 120 years a little shrine has stood on its peak—it has been torn by the elements, razed by fire—but something of it has always remained and with brave hearts the faithful have always built it up again.

For it stands a symbol of their trust; it is their rock of ages to which they cling; it is the beacon that shines in the hearts of the storm-tossed seamen, giving them the will and the fortitude to fight staunchly against the driving winds,

dreary, dangerous night, joy will come and peace in the morning. And they will soon be home, clasped close to their loved ones.

They know all this, for don't they remember that at this hour there is prayer and solemn hymning at the church on the hill? Can't they even hear in the depths of them something of the very singing itself?

After the hymns there is another prayer, and the columns wind slowly away from the shrine. The simplicity of the ceremony and the stark grandeur of the setting are themselves an inspiration, which the worshippers must feel along with the joy of their spiritual communion.

Each night is this ceremony repeated. And each night its power is realized. One ship may go down, many men may be lost—it's the way the sea has with its people. But all the ships do not go down and all the men are not lost—and there is profound thanksgiving in the hearts of the faithful for that.

Long before the Mayflower sailed into Plymouth harbor fishing fleets made regular trips to the Isles of Shoals. These fishermen named the islands. And in 1614, fifteen years before Boston was settled, Captain John Smith and his men went ashore on the island

of strange new caves and crags, the visitor is poignantly attracted. No where else on the coast is there a better place to study the varying moods of the ocean, its gentleness during days of calm and its majesty when the tempest stirs the black water and shatters great mountains of white foam against the bold rocky headlands.

During the seventeenth century Star Island was used by the French as a fishing station, and in the eighteenth century the industry grew so three or four vessels were loaded annually for Spain. But after the Revolution the industry died.

Timbers from a wrecked Spanish galleon were used for the construction of the first Star Island church on the peak. This church, ironically enough,

the old man who walked the long plank and whose body was washed up by the waves.

Ghost of Blackbeard Seeks Buried Treasure

It is even said that sometimes at midnight Blackbeard himself walks up and down the tortuous coastland, hunting, hunting . . . because he forgot where his buried treasure lies.

In 1720 the old church was rebuilt. It was again built of drifted timber—from ships men had forgotten. For years the pastor of the little shrine ministered to his flock. He preached, he married, he buried among these hard-working fisher-folk; he went out and helped them man their craft; he built

A Sailor's Mother's Eternal Question

"HO, SAILOR of the sea!
How's my boy—my boy?"
"What's your boy's name, good wife,
And in what ship sailed he?"

"My boy John—
He that went to sea—
What care I for the ship, sailor?
My boy's my boy to me."

"You come back from the sea,
And not know my John?
I might well have asked some lands-
man,
Yonder down in town.
There's not an ass in all the parish
But he knows my John."

"How's my boy—my boy?
And unless you let me know—
I'll swear you are no sailor,
Blue jacket or no,
Brass buttons or no, sailor,
Anchor and crown or no!
Sure his ship was the 'Jolly
Briton'—"
"Speak low, woman, speak low!"

"And why should I speak low, sailor?
About my own boy John?
If I was loud as I am proud
I'd sing him over the town!
Why should I speak low, sailor?
That good ship went down."

"How's my boy—my boy?
What care I for the ship, sailor?
I was never aboard her,
Be she afloat or be she aground,
Sinking or swimming, I'll be bound
Her owners can afford her!
I say, how's my John?"
"Every man on board went down,
Every man aboard her."

"How's my boy—my boy?
What care I for the men, sailor?
I'm not their mother—
How's my boy—my boy?
Tell me of him and no other!
How's my boy—my boy?"
—Sydney Dobell.



Line of worshipers wending its way to the little Star Island church to pray for the welfare of their relatives and friends at sea

little church on the hill. The church is even darker than the night. There are no lights there.

In the dim light of the many candles the women go into the church, as many as can—for it is a very small church, smaller than the usual country meeting house—and the others wait outside.

There is a long interval when heads are bowed in prayer. Old heads, white and bent—heads which have bowed submissively under the unutterable tragedies of death and life—heads, weather-beaten like the ancient island itself; young heads,



Cecilia Thaxter, the poetess, who did some of her best-known works on the island, where many noted in the field of letters visited her



"Uncle Oscar" Thaxter, brother of the poetess and patriarch of the island

Each worshiper brings his own lantern or lamp

carved initial"; its quaint little chairs and pulpit; its ancient bell, cracked and fire scorched; the silent though eloquent spiritual presence of reverent and solemn worshippers, long since buried beneath sea and sod—all convey a hallowed influence, once felt, never forgotten.

One of the best-known characters of the island is the late Cecilia Thaxter, author of many books of poems and many novels. She is best known by "Good-bye, Sweet Day"—a poem still sung by Unitarian congregations. Her cottage, on Appledore, is now a pile of blackened boards. Years ago the gardens in front of the present ruins were known the world over to botanists and lovers of flowers.

She was a friend of James Russell Lowell and John Greenleaf Whittier, the poets; John Knowles Paine and Arthur Whiting, musicians, and the painters J. Appleton Brown, William Morris Hunt, Rose Turner and Childs Hassam. They often visited her in her beautiful retreat, sea-bound.

Browning Wrote Epitaph for Poetess' Husband

She married Levi Lincoln Thaxter, of Watertown, Mass., in 1852. It was her family which was responsible for popularizing the islands as the gathering place for Unitarians and Congregationalists. Mrs. Thaxter was a friend of Robert Browning, though neither of them had ever seen each other. And when her husband died in 1884 she asked Mr. Browning to write an epitaph for her husband.

He wrote the following inscription, which is leaven in the side of a great rock over Mr. Thaxter's grave:
"Thou whom these eyes saw never; say friend true
Who say my soul, helped onward by my song,
Though all unwittingly, has helped thee too,
I gave but the little that I knew;
How were the gift requited, while along Life's path I paced, couldst thou make weakness strong;
Help me with knowledge—for Life's Old—Death's New."
—R. B. to L. L. T., April, 1885.

Mrs. Thaxter's brother, now eighty-four years old, who never saw a horse or a tree until he was sixteen years old, still lives on the island. He is affectionately called "Uncle Oscar," and for years carried the sobriquet "King of the Isles of Shoals."

"Cecilia's husband," says the old man, "was a great lover of Browning's poetry. I recall about twenty years ago when Browning was on every dining table of the more or less cultivated folk.

"I remember once trying to read himself, but he was over my head entirely, as he is today. I'm sorry to have to say that. I envy people who can read and love poetry. They say my sister wrote very well." The old man raised a gaunt hand toward Appledore. "She lies buried over there," he said.

Island Was Birthplace of "Little Lord Fauntleroy"

It was on Appledore Island that for a time lived Thomas Bailey Aldrich, Lowell, Hawthorne and Frances Hodgson Burnett. Mrs. Burnett began her book "Little Lord Fauntleroy" there, plotting her titular character after a small brother of Mrs. Thaxter. Henry Ward Beecher and his sister, Harriet Beecher Stowe, were numbered also among the many celebrities who have visited the isles.

The first Unitarian meeting there was held in 1807. The meetings have been continued regularly. Pilgrims of both the Unitarian and the Congregational churches who come to the island each summer for inspiration have joined the natives in their solemn watch-night services.

And now the activity of the summer visitors centers about the little shrine on the hill. Since it is on the highest point of the island, it can be seen not only from far out at sea but from all the other islands in the group.

It is an interesting contrast to note that this island of religion was mentioned in a little pamphlet prepared by three English mariners in 1611. And it was called, along with its group, "The Isles of Devils." And it is believed by authorities that the strange island described in Shakespeare's "The Tempest" is none other than Star Island.

Without any question about it, this island never seemed prepossessing to many of its earliest visitors. An account written by Christopher Lovett in 1621 has this to say about it:

"The first place I set foot upon in New England was the Isles of Shoals, being islands in the sea about two leagues from the mainland. Upon these islands neither could we see one good timber tree nor so much good ground as to make a garden."

Of course, the island's chief beauty lies in its simple ceremony, which in one sense transcends physical beauty. Its beauty transcends the fierce beauty of the storms which beat over the island. In 1851 a storm came up so violent that waves swept over Appledore and cut the island into three. And Uncle Oscar insists he has never seen anything so "beautiful as that tearing tempest."

The beauty of the service transcends the beauty of calm days. As a matter of fact, the ceremony holds something of that quiet nobility which adorns a calm, clear day, more especially at sunset. Though the storms are slashing about, here in this little shrine is a peace that passeth understanding, a peace that is given out of the very hand of the God of these reverent pleading women.

Farewell to Tiny Shrine Has Many Solemn Aspects

As the shadows of an afternoon fall and the visitor steams out of the harbor with a sad farewell for Star Island, for Appledore, for the bold rock of Longdons, for Smuttynose, for the drooping little lighthouse tower—which stands against the roughened sea like a miniature Don Quixote against a very ogre in truth—for the little shrine shining on the hill, he carries with him haunting memories of a haunting peace.

The rolling sea pours softly in among the crags, the vast waste of ocean that incloses the tiny circle of islands with a sense of infinite might tosses ceaselessly. The islands themselves begin to lose their familiar outline, merging slowly into one, and as that one dimly lined island fades eventually into the distance, "sunset purple comes to meet the waste."



Services at the church are simple—but are marked by deepest reverence and consist of a few prayers and one or two hymns

the heaving waters, the instinctive fear of the thunder, of the blinding lightning.

For the last twenty-six years the little gray stone church, with its quaint pine pews, its cracked and unmusical bell, its metal codfish on the belfry, has been in the care of the Unitarian and Congregationalist Churches.

At 10 o'clock each night, when all is hushed but the winds and the pounding breakers, worshippers assemble in the hollows below the church. They all bear lighted candles, encased in glass shades and swung from handles like lanterns.

They form into columns, speaking no word, and the columns wind slowly up the slopes to the sturdy,

cheerful, hopeful of life, unfamiliar with all the bitterness it can hold. And they all bow their heads with a quiet faith.

Prayers Wafted Out to Sea to Aid Ships in Storm

Somewhere, a small ship is tumbling in the troughs of great seas; and men scurry over the rolling deck. They work like harried creatures. They haven't much time to think of womenfolk back in the shelter of shore—but when they do think of them they see their lovely faces, they see their lips moving in soft low pleading. And they take heart again for their grueling tasks; there is a safe harbor in the bosom of the world for them, and their hearts and lips fight for them as they are fighting with their own thick, weary backs and arms. Whatever the

known as Smuttynose. Captain Smith built a cairn of rocks there to commemorate his landing—and it is still there.

Today the islands are the favorite idling places for artists and writers. Pilgrimages are made yearly to the islands—especially to Star Island—to those "heaps of tumbling granite in the wide and lonely sea."

Barrenness of Island Has Its Own Poignancy

The sea is everything at the Isles of Shoals, for no trees nor green valleys are there. "Wave-cradled and wind-caressed," the islands at first repel the visitor by their barrenness. But after days spent in scrambling among the rocks on Star Island or Appledore, after days significant for the discovery

of the demolished vessel which once ran with the blood of many victims, upon whose decks pattered the feet of hard, cruel men with rings in their ears and blades between their teeth, stood until 1720—for thirty-five years ministering to the troubled souls of its little congregation. Pirates and smugglers used the convenient caves of the island to store their treasure; a Spanish ship with its gold and jewels lies sunken somewhere on its craggy coast. Ghosts, it is whispered by the simpler folk on the island, stalk in the middle of night—some of them dragging silent chains—ghost of the woman who defied the black-headed pirate when he snatched away her baby, ghost of the maiden with the streaming hair and the long thin dagger who fought side by side with her lover against the overwhelming robber-seamen, ghost-

of wooden coffins; he was the nearest approach to a physician the island had. Years passed, with its seasons of summer warmth and biting cold. In the winter driftwood was scarce—it meant that children shivered and suffered, and fond mothers saw them slowly wasting away. It happened almost every winter—and the little flock looked with joy to see the spring come again and the few flowers which colored their barren shores. In the winter of 1799, however, the weather was worse than ever. No one had wood, and children and old people fell ill, and some were dying. They needed their driftwood homes. Although there were no fires, the leaky walls of their roughly patched houses kept the most unbearable chill of the wind out, and the mothers and their children could huddle close together with some protection. Some of the mothers used pieces of furniture for firewood—but there is a limit to furniture in poor homes.

In the end there was nothing else to do but tear down the church. It was the only building they could spare—though they tore it down with aching

hearts. They promised themselves to worship out of doors, no matter how the icy winds cut them, no matter how the sleety snows whirled.

The wood of the church was apportioned among the inhabitants. It seemed somehow, after all, a gift from their God—blessing their prayers brought them.

In October, 1800, Jedediah Morse, of Charlestown, Mass., and Dudley A. Tye, of Newburyport, rebuilt the meeting house. This time it was built of stone. Fire destroyed part of the interior in 1826, but four years later the church was restored to its original state, and has so remained to this day. The congregation in 1820 contributed the weather vane and a star, which still rise from the stunted tower.

The shrine stands today, as solid and substantial as the mighty ledges that encircle it—unique and historic. Its well-proportioned solid stone walls, time scarred and moss grown; its tower, surmounted with double cupola, spire and weather vane; its antique pine pews, adorned with frescoes of vessels under full sail and the "Jack-knife's