

# The Shipwrecked Sailors of Start Point



## The Marana retold

- rough words from the story written by Sara Hurley and told by Mrs Perry

I come here every March, down to Chivelstone Church, and I lay spring flowers on this grave. Nine men of the sea are buried here. Strangers who lost their lives during the Great Blizzard of 1891. Some of the men are from Sweden: Rasmussen, Neilson; and with their families and loved ones so far away, well, it falls to us locals to honour the dead. It's the fisherman's way. To do our best by the sea farers that arrive on our shore, be they living or be they dead. Chivelstone graveyard is just like the other churches dotted along this coastline. Places where beloved locals lie side by side with the dead and drowned from overseas.

I forgot to introduce myself. There's me going in at the deep end as usual. I'm Mrs Perry the coastguard's wife. Mr Perry is the signalman and coastguard up at Prawle Point. We live down in the coastguard's cottage over there. From Slapton to Prawle we look out for each other along this stretch of coastline - which is as dangerous as it is beautiful.

It looks lovely doesn't it. Spring is here, the snowdrops are nodding their pretty, white heads, yellow daffodils brighten up the roadside verges. If there's one thing we know living here by the sea, it's that signs of spring don't mean that winter has packed up his bags and gone away. Being sea faring folk, we know to guard ourselves against the hope that Spring tries so hard to bring.

None of us here in Chivelstone, down to Start Point and all the coves between, could have predicted the horror of the storm that battered our shores on 9th of March 1891. Three treacherous days of freezing gale force winds, endless blinding snowfall and to top it off thunder and lightning too. A Great Blizzard that wreaked havoc with the lives of the families, farmers and seafarers of South Devon.

The post mistress from Malborough told me later on that the blizzard had blocked the Kingsbridge road in a matter of hours. That not far south of Loddiswell, a passenger coach and horses had got stuck in a snowdrift as high as a man. The Western Morning News, Great Western Trains and the Totnes post all came to a standstill. Even important telegrams couldn't get through.

No-one in their right mind would have been out in weather like that. The poor sailors already at sea found themselves at the mercy of the most powerful storm in living memory. Between Hallsands and Prawle Point there were four shipwrecks that night and over fifty people lost their lives. That's the most people drowned at sea in one night along this stretch of coast.

The men buried here were from a steamship called The Marana. They could not have foreseen their fate when they left London at 11 o'clock that morning bound for Colombo with a cargo of railway sleepers. I'm going to tell you the story of what happened to the crew of 28 men aboard The Marana. There are some things we know and so many things that we may never know.

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It came out of nowhere. Snow started falling thick and fast on the Monday afternoon. I'd done my weekly clothes wash and hung it on the line to dry when I saw the sky turning black. 'That's my fault for putting the clothes out,' I thought to myself. By the time I'd brought in the laundry and folded it up the snow was falling so heavily that all I could see through the window was a sheet of white weather. It was no Christmas scene. The wind was bitterly cold and it made me glad the children had brought in plenty of wood for the fire.

It was my dear friend Mrs Briggs, the lighthouse keeper's wife from Start Point, who first noticed The Marana getting in to trouble around half five in the afternoon. She told me that from her living room window she could see the steamship sailing too close to the rocks, it looked to her like it was going off course. How anything could steer straight in that almighty wind, I don't know.

She's got a much better view from her dining room so she rushed in there. Looking out of the rain streaked windows she could see the steamer was stranded, broad-side, against the Blackstone Rocks just below the lighthouse. The heavy seas battering against it's iron belly.

Mrs Briggs grabbed her shawl and hat and ran to raise the alarm in the lighthouse. The rain was turning to snow, it was hard to see and she felt lost even though she'd walked that path a thousand times.

As soon as Mr Jones, the head lighthouse keeper, heard the news he sent a messenger to go and alert the officer of the coastguards down at Hallsands, a whole mile and a half away. That's where my Mr Perry comes in. Because that started off a signalling system between coastguards, lighthouse keepers, fishermen and their wives all along this stretch of coast, and the call was raised to bring down the life saving apparatus from Prawle.

Mr Jones first thought was for the sailors. Looking out from the lighthouse he could see the steamship beginning to break up in the violent waves. With the sea dashing over the rocks in fury and the wind in a frenzy he feared for their lives. The Marana was being torn in two by the tide. Mr Jones imagined them all drowned in moments, swallowed by the sea.

As the wind fought with the snow so the sea gods battled the storm giants. There were two forces at play that evening. Humans fighting to save lives and the wild seas desperate to devour souls.

It all happened so quick, Mrs Briggs told me later. Just before The Marana broke up she spotted two life boats being released from it's side "It was heartbreaking" she said, "to see the boats being let down but no sign of a human being inside of them."

But there were people inside the life boats, it's just that Mrs Briggs couldn't see them.

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“Land right ahead” the shout rang out across the boat with its engines going full steam ahead. The freezing wind howled through the metal work and huge waves crashed over the side of the ship. Some of the seamen were working down below but most were above deck. The captain stood on the bridge. After the shout went out it was a matter of moments before the ship struck the Blackstone rocks. Propeller and rudder immediately knocked off, sinking like boulders to the seabed.

The Lighthouse stood like a stone angel on top of the cliff, it’s lamps lit despite the daylight. What was happening in the hearts and minds of those 28 men we may never know. Each soul knew that to survive in these treacherous conditions would take a miracle.

The Marana had 4 boats attached to it’s sides, 2 lifeboats and 2 smaller boats. Above the pounding of the sea the captain gave his orders. “Put on your lifebelts and prepare the lifeboats for launching, starboard first.” Able seaman Anders Johnsen found he had no life belt where every other man did. Lips blue with cold, he told the captain that he had no lifebelt. A captain has a duty to his crew and he gave his lifebelt to Anders Johnsen.

With no choice but to do all they could to help each other, twenty-two men wearing lifebelts climbed aboard the lifeboat and pushed away from the wounded ship. They could barely handle the boat; their hands and feet were numbed by the freezing temperature. One man had no shoes on. The snowfall was so heavy they could not see where they were going.

Sailors from around the world: eight from Sweden, one Russian-Finn and the rest British, Londoner’s mostly. All men of the world, travellers to far flung countries to buy blue-gemmed jewellery for their sweethearts and golden snake rings for themselves. With families and fiancées back home who longed to see a foreign stamp on a hand written letter drop through the letter box.

Twenty-two men sailed out into the perilous night heeding the captains advice to, “be careful lads, and keep off the shore. I’m afraid you will all be drowned.”

Back on board the fast sinking Marana were left: the Captain, the three mates, the chief engineer and the mess room steward. With salt spray lashing their shivering bodies they climbed into one of the small boats on the leeward side. The side where the devilish seas smashed against the steamship. Into the darkness the small boat sailed in grave danger of being swamped by the swelling seas.

Over on the starboard side the men sailed westward towards Prawle Point and away from the shipwreck. They tried to come ashore at Lannacombe cove and then again at Horseley Cove, only to be beaten back by tumultuous surf with the power to capsize the boat. They had escaped the shipwreck, navigated through a snow storm and found themselves so close to the land yet unable to reach it.

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I know this because Mr Perry told me. He met Anders Johnsen later that night, about 11 o'clock. In a state of exhaustion and extreme cold, he'd made it to the shore and knocked on the door of a cottage near Prawle. My husband went down there immediately with brandy and blankets, but with Anders Johnsen being Swedish they could not understand what had happened to everyone or where they might be found.

The lighthouse-men, coastguards and fishermen worked in relay up and down the coast to try and find and rescue the men. Blue flares were sent up in the sky and the life saving apparatus was ready for use. Mrs Briggs and I kept the home fires burning, made soup and gathered up all the warm clothes we could find.

Me and Mr Perry know of 3 survivors, including Anders Johnsen. There are nine men buried here in this church and that is all we know. Before I go let me tell you this. The villagers of Chivelstone and everyone who helped with the rescue on the 9th March 1891 attended the funeral of these nine poor souls.

It's the fisherman's way to take care of strangers washed up on the shore, as they would want strangers to take care of their loved ones, in life and in death, in far distant lands over the seas.

So there is my tale and it is all true  
Tell me what happened next, it's over to you?

Mrs Perry  
AKA Sara Hurley

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