

**THE  
Blizzard in the West:  
BEING  
A Record and Story of the Disastrous Storm  
WHICH RAGED THROUGHOUT  
Devon and Cornwall, and West Somerset,  
On the Night of March 9th, 1891.**

Start Point was on Monday night and again on the succeeding Tuesday a scene of some heartrending disasters. Many vessels, including the iron steamer Marana, 1,682 tons register, belonging to Messrs. George Bell and Co. of Liverpool; and the full-rigged ship Dryad, 1,035 tons register, owned by J. B. Walmsley, of Water Street, Liverpool, were totally wrecked within a short distance of each other, resulting, it is calculated, in an aggregate loss of over fifty lives. The Marana left Victoria Dock, London, at 11 A.M. on Sunday, March 1st, with a crew of twenty-eight. She was bound for Colombo with a cargo of sleepers, but was proceeding first to Swansea for coal. Whilst going down Channel on Monday night she encountered the gale which, charged with blinding snow, was blowing heavily from the S.E., and struck on the Blackstone Rock, at Start Point. Seeing that the vessel must go to pieces very shortly, the officers and crew took to the boats, most of them having life-belts on. The starboard lifeboat, in charge of the boatswain and with twenty-two men on board, proceeded in the direction of Prawle Point, and was almost immediately followed by a smaller boat in which were the captain, the chief engineer, the mess-room steward, and three seamen. The latter boat was soon separated from the lifeboat, and was never seen again. The lifeboat got under the coastguard station at Prawle, but the appearance of the coast was

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threatening, and the crew pushed off again. Almost immediately a sea struck the boat and capsized her. A bitter struggle for life on the part of the twenty immersed seamen succeeded, and those who had clung to the boat managed to get her righted, and clambered on board, but soon after she was again turned over. Once more she righted, and eventually drifted on to the Mal Rock to the east of Prawle Point, where the four occupants—all that remained of the crew of the vessel—contrived to get on to the rocks. After a while they climbed the cliff, three of them carrying the fourth survivor, who was suffering from exhaustion and injuries, and after heavy toil they managed to get near to Prawle. Here two of the men agreed to remain with the shipmate, who to all appearance was fast succumbing to exhaustion, while the other went into the village for help. The man, like his three surviving comrades, was a Swede, and consequently unable to make himself understood, but Mr. Perry, Lloyd's signalman at Prawle, and the coastguardsman on duty, supplied him with food and clothing, and then went to search for traces of the wreck which had clearly taken place not far off. It was not until long past midnight that the mates of the Swede were discovered, and then it was too late to save the exhausted man, who died almost immediately after their arrival. The remaining survivors were taken into Prawle, and under kind treatment soon recovered.

Mrs. Briggs, wife of one of the lighthouse keepers at the Start, says that she was looking out of her window a little after half-past five o'clock on Monday evening,

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when she saw the steamer pass very close to the east side of Start Point as if she had come out from the bay. Seeing her great danger, and thinking it was impossible for her to clear the rocks running off from the Point, she hastened to another window, from which she had a view of the Blackstone Rocks. She then saw the steamer broadside on to the rocks. She at once gave an alarm to Mr. Jones, the head-keeper, who hurried out to give any assistance in his power, but within a very few minutes the vessel parted in two, the stern part sinking near the rocks, while the fore part washed away and sank a short distance to the west of the Start.

Mr. Crickett, chief officer of Coastguards at Hallsands, has stated that he received intelligence of the casualty at 6·40 P.M. by a messenger sent by Mr. Jones, of the Start Lighthouse, who said the vessel had struck the rocks about 500 yards south-east of the Start. He immediately despatched a messenger to Prawle, a distance of nearly five miles, for the life-saving apparatus. Another messenger he sent to Torcross to Mr. Ridge, the chief officer of Coastguards there, and Mr. Crickett then proceeded to the scene of the wreck, but on arriving, nothing could be seen of the vessel, as she had totally disappeared, and she was supposed to have gone to pieces five minutes after she struck. The coastguard at Hallsands say that they saw the Marana fully an hour before she struck, and she was then near the Skerries Bank, off the Start, acting in such a manner that they considered her steering gear was out of order. They saw her come into the bay and afterwards go out again, and watched her very closely, but they thought she had gone clear of the

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Start until they heard otherwise from the lighthouse-keepers.

John Nelson, one of the survivors, said in the course of his evidence at the inquest held on the first eight bodies recovered from the wreck:—"On Monday, 9th inst., I had tea at five o'clock, and went to my bunk. It was the first mate's watch. As I was turning into my bunk I heard someone shout out, 'Land right ahead.' It was blowing a bit stiff in the afternoon at three o'clock, and as the gale increased the canvas was taken in. The vessel struck almost immediately after I heard the shout, and the engines were going full-speed at the time. I came out and stood in the forecastle door. The captain was then on the bridge. The vessel struck first at the bow. When I came on deck she struck aft as well, knocking her propeller and rudder away. The captain then gave the order to get the starboard lifeboat ready for launching. All the three officers were on the bridge. The wind was blowing hard, and the waves were dashing all over the ship. It was daylight, but the Start light was lit. We could see the land plainly enough, although it was thick with heavy rain. There were two lifeboats, one on each side of the ship, and two smaller boats. We lowered the lifeboat and got into it, some 20 or 22 being in it, and got away from the ship on the starboard side. The boat was in charge of the boatswain, and the second and third engineers and the chief steward were in the boat. We left on board the captain, the three mates, the chief engineer, and the mess-room steward. Just as we were turning to get clear of the rocks, we looked at the ship, and saw the captain and the others leave in the other boat on the

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starboard side. They got safely away from the ship. After the vessel struck we hoisted a red pennant with a white ball as a signal of distress. When we got away it was getting dark, and we saw nothing of the other boat afterwards, but supposed they were following us.

*Dear Teacher, this is the place that our storyteller, Mrs Perry pauses the story for the children to make up their own imaginative ending. You may find it interesting to read on to the end, although it is a tragic story.*

*Please don't share beyond this point with the children. Thankyou. Mrs P.  
X*

We pulled in shore to a kind of bay, but not thinking it safe to land, we went out of that. We could see nothing but rocks on our coming down, and in getting out of the bay our boat capsized. There was a very heavy sea running up against the rocks. We got hold of the keel of the boat, some twelve or fourteen of us that remained, and then the boat turned over again. After that only four or five of us remained sticking to the boat. We stuck to the boat until she broke up on the rocks. When I let go the boat I could feel the rocks with my feet, and I then walked on shore. There were four of us that came on shore, but I could see nothing of any others. When we got on shore we walked to a brake and got shelter. We had to help Rasmussen up, as he had no boots on. He was living half an hour before the coastguards found us, but we had been on shore a long time before they found us—about five or six hours."

Many of the bodies of the unfortunate men were washed ashore within a few days, and not far from the spot where the vessel went down. All of them were not identified, as the survivors had joined the ship too recently to be acquainted with all the officers and crew. Another serious calamity in Start Bay occurred during Monday night, and not many hours later than the wreck of the Marana, when the ship Dryad, bound for Valparaiso,

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with a crew of 22 hands all told, went ashore about a mile to the eastward of Start Point. When the ship went on shore Mr. Hewett, with the life-saving apparatus, had left Hallsands for Prawle, from whence rumours of disaster had been brought, and he had got as far as Chevilstone Cross when he was overtaken by a mounted messenger despatched by the chief officer of the coastguard at Torcross, who desired him to return to the Start to the assistance of the Dryad. He got to the scene of the wreck at half-past two in the morning. By that time the vessel had broken up, all her masts having gone overboard, and but little of her could be discerned in the darkness. The place where she struck was right under the high land of the Start where the cliffs are very precipitous. With regard to this vessel, the coastguardsmen say that they saw no signals of distress whatever, and it has been considered probable that she was proceeding with a fair wind down Channel, and no land being visible in the snow-filled gloom of the night, those on board were unconscious of their proximity to the land until they found themselves on the rocks. In this case there was, perhaps, no time to show distress signals, and the ship may have been some time ashore before she was discovered by the coastguards.

About midnight on the ninth, the storm was at its height, and all men of Start Bay agree that they never remember such a violent storm, the water of the bay being one mass of foam, it being almost impossible to look to the windward. Mr. Jones, the head keeper of the Start Lighthouse, says he was standing in the yard by his home a little after midnight, looking in the direction

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of the Bay, when he saw right under the headland, and close to the Start, what he considered to be a ship's lights. He called the other keepers, and as well as they were able they got down to the place where they saw the lights. It was at the risk of their lives that

they went down the cliffs, and it was only by holding on to each other they were prevented from being blown away. When they got down they could not discover a vestige of anything, neither did they hear a cry of any sort. The coastguards at Hallsands also saw lights, and fired off a rocket and burned a blue light to warn the ship of her danger, but the vessel's lights were only seen a few minutes before they disappeared.

In spite of all the efforts of those on shore no trace of a ship could be seen, and it was not until daybreak the next morning that a man was discovered lying on a low rock, known as John Hatherley's Nose, some 500 yards from the spot where the Dryad ultimately proved to have struck. Help was at once sought for, and Mr. Briggs, one of the keepers, and Mr. Pollyblank, the coastguard, then returned to the rock with ropes. They threw the rope on to the rocks, which fell only about a foot away from the sailor. He saw it and then slid down, evidently with the intention to secure the rope, but he seemed to be afraid, and instead of slipping on the lower ledge of the rock where the rope was, he climbed on the top of the rock again, and laid himself flat on it on his face and hands. He then seemed to lose his hold, and slid down, holding on to the rocks for several seconds, when he fell head over heels, and was washed away and drowned. Those trying to rescue him, seeing how

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exhausted he was, had fetched a ladder to get to him, and Mr. Briggs fastened a rope to himself to swim out to him, but in the meantime he was washed away. He was a young man. Grave doubts were expressed as to what vessel he came from, for it seems almost impossible he could have got to the rocks from the Dryad; and there was some wreckage visible near the rocks that did not appear to have belonged to the Dryad. The coastguards at Hallsands said distinctly that the lights they saw were a steamer's lights, whilst there is no doubt that the lights the lighthouse-keepers saw were those of the Dryad. Only a piece of the bow of the Dryad was discovered in the morning, but a large mass of broken wreckage was discovered along the coast, and tons of it were washed out to sea by the next tide. Eight bodies were recovered, and friends of those composing the crew of the Dryad journeyed to Hallsands for the purpose of identifying their friends or relatives. There were no survivors, and consequently no details are known, but a statement has been made that the channel pilot had warned the captain that the ship's compass was two points out.

Whilst Mr. Crickett and some of the coastguards under his charge at Hallsands were at the Start Point on the night of the 9th, trying to render assistance to the stranded steamship Marana, they saw a light in the bay, and they answered it by burning a blue light, and one of the coastguards was sent back to try and discover the place the light proceeded from. On the remainder of the coastguards returning to Hallsands shortly after, a light was seen near Beesands, and on reaching that place they found the schooner Lunesdale stranded. Mr. Ridge,

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the chief officer of coastguards stationed at Torcross, had arrived with some of his men, and they, with the assistance of the Beesands fishermen, were trying to effect a communication with the vessel. The captain was in the fore starboard rigging, and the remainder of the crew, four in number, were in the starboard mizen rigging. All these men were thus on the weather side of the ship, and the captain not being so exposed from his position as the others, succeeded with the utmost difficulty in getting round to the other, or shore side of the vessel. A fisherman named Roper, of Beesands, then at the risk of his own life, made a desperate effort to save the captain. He got a line with a lead attached to it, and threw it close to the captain's feet, the latter succeeding, after a frantic effort, to fasten the line to a lifebuoy, and attached himself to it, and was then safely hauled on shore. The other seamen were not so successful in changing their positions, and in their

endeavours they were washed away and drowned. All this time the seas were breaking right over the vessel. The coastguards and fishermen remained by the vessel for nearly an hour afterwards, shouting to see if they could get any response from the crew, but getting none, all hope of saving them was given up. When it was found that the Prawle life-saving apparatus, in charge of Mr. Hewett, could be of no service to the Marana, a message was left at Start farm for it to be brought on to Beesands to the help of the Lunesdale, but it arrived too late to be of any service. The Lunesdale was a three-masted schooner of 141 tons register, owned by Messrs. James Fisher &

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Sons, of Barrow, and was bound from London to a Lancashire port.

While efforts were being made at Beesands to save the crew of the Lunesdale, a schooner named Lizzie Ellen, 73 tons register, and belonging to Mr. Samuel Coppack, of Chester, with a cargo of clay from Charlestown for London, went on shore just opposite Hallsands. In spite of the tremendous force of the wind and the blinding spray and snow six fishermen, named T. Trout, George Stone, Robert Trout, James Lynn, William Mitchell, and John Patey, at the imminent peril of their lives, made a gallant effort to rescue the crew of the vessel, which consisted of four hands. With great difficulty, and by the aid of ropes, these men succeeded in lowering themselves to the bottom of the cliff. By throwing lines on board the schooner the mate and the third hand were saved, but the captain and the boy were lost. The captain, Robert Dood, urged the boy, who was crying bitterly, to jump over into the sea, with the chance of being drawn on shore, but he could not persuade him to take the leap. At length the captain jumped himself, but at the wrong time, and he was carried out by a receding wave. The boy, Frank Davis, also perished.

For some time after this week of tempest, all along the coast from Prawle to the Start, could be seen broken wreckage. Such was the fury of the gale that everything seemed split to matchwood. It is supposed that other wrecks than those of which some knowledge has been obtained occurred on this eventful night. Mr. Crickett, a coastguardsman, picked up on the following Saturday

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a board bearing the words "Nymph of T— —," it being broken off at the letter T, and it is conjectured that this may belong to one of the vessels referred to. A painful sequel to the wreck of the Marana occurred on Wednesday, March 18th, nine days after the catastrophe. A molecatcher of Prawle found at about half-past eleven, in a field half a mile from a village named Furze Brake, and about a quarter of a mile from the sea, the body of a man. The corpse was lying flat upon its face, and was clothed in an oil-skin coat in addition to the ordinary kind of seaman's dress. A life-belt was lying close by, and the locality was not more than a hundred yards from the spot where the two survivors from the Marana had been found supporting to the best of their power their dying comrade. Unknown to the other survivors this man must have succeeded in reaching the shore, but only to die. Undoubtedly he walked in search of help and shelter until he sank from exhaustion, and was covered with a fall of snow thick enough to screen his body from view until a thaw had set in.

The inquests held on the bodies of those unfortunate seamen who lost their lives in the vicinity of the Start have had the effect of a communication being made to the Board of Trade as to the necessity of life-saving apparatus being placed at Hallsands. In the face of a hurricane of almost unprecedented force, many gallant and eager attempts were made to save life, but with only a very limited measure of success, owing as much to the want of suitable appliances as to the rugged character of the coast, and the merciless fury of the gale.