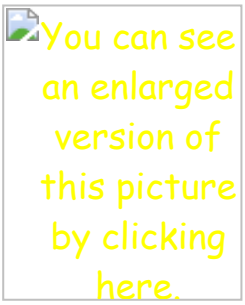
HORRORS OF A WINTER GALE AT BOON ISLAND LIGHT

By George S. Wasson

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The following story originally appeared in The Youth Companion Magazine on February 3, 1905 and is reprinted here in its entirety. Although it is written in a style we may no longer be accustomed to, we hope you enjoy this true account of what life was in Maine's Boon Island Lighthouse.

Lying low in the water and directly in the track of coastwise vessels, Boon Island has been the scene of many wrecks, and no doubt will be the scene of many more in spite of its lofty light tower and warning bell. It is but nine miles from Cape Neddick, the nearest bit of mainland; but Kittery Point, twelve miles away, lying at the mouth of the Piscataqua River, which here separates Maine from New Hampshire, is commonly the point of embarkation for Boon Island, because it has a good harbor.

Little lapstreak boats, carrying two spritsails, and so light that they can be immediately hauled out of water and secured on reaching the island, constitute a line of packets in which it behooves the mariner to watch his chances sharply, and the Boon Island mail is, in the winter especially, decidedly irregular.

Besides the light tower, there are the keeper's dwelling, a storehouse and an oil house, all built of massive granite blocks. On the oil house is a belfry of heavy timber, which supports the fog bell, and between them all extend thick plank walks, bridging the hollows among the rocks, to which they are bolted as securely as possible. Stout lines of Manila rope afford further aid to passage about the place in darkness and storm.

Each spring boxes of earth are brought in the boats from the mainland, and the tiny flowerbeds are arranged in convenient crevices about the house, only to be regularly washed away by the seas of the winter gales, which often sweep away also the plank walks and the fish flakes and lobster pots of the keepers.

At low tide Boon Island may perhaps cover an area of three acres, but at high water, even at common neap tides, the ocean overflows a great part of the island. At spring tides and in severe storms the water extends over the whole territory up to the very foundations of the tower and buildings. On one memorable night old Neptune knocked upon the front door of the keeper's dwelling with such vigor that it gave way before him, and the whole lower floor was flooded as the great seas made a complete breach over the island. In anticipation of another such visit, the door was replaced by a much more substantial one.

But against the most uncanny and dangerous feature of great storms it seems impossible to guard. Immense boulders many tons in weight are often rolled up from the ocean's depths by the onrushing seas, and although sometimes broken, are frequently hurled clear across the island, or left lodged in some gully among the rocks. There they remain, it may be, for years as monuments to the power of the waves, but sooner or later they are sure to be again seized by some more powerful sea, and thrown skipping over the ledges into the water. During the progress of this titanic game of marbles the concussions are at times terrific, and the paths of the hurled boulders are easily to be traced by scarred and splintered ledges.

A short time previous to the great gale of January 31, 1898, the assistant keeper of the light took to himself a young wife from an inland town, and having stowed his effects on a tugboat at Kittery Point, awaited a favorable chance for moving out and setting up housekeeping on this desolate bunch of low-lying rocks. The first attempt at landing was futile, on account of the undertow breaking round the island; but after

a few days of waiting, the young couple and their goods were safely deposited on the salt-incrusted ledges of their new home.

Scarcely were they comfortably "settled down" however, before the wind backed into the northeast, and with thick snow the now famous storm began. All day it steadily increased in fury, till, as night shut in, every cubic foot was quivering under the portentous blows of the sea. Urged down the coast by the furious northeaster, the flood tide quickly rose, and each great comber rushed with deafening roar a foot or two higher among the rocks than its predecessors. The tower and buildings were quickly encased in ice from the flying spray. Sharp, crackling reports and a peculiar jarring of the house gave warning than the terrible play of the boulders had begun in good earnest yet early in the night, sounds which, although familiar enough to the veteran keeper and his assistants, were appallingly strange to the plucky new bride.

Heavier and heavier grew the concussions as the ever-increasing seas tumbled upon the jagged shore; nearer and nearer came that close-following rush of roaring waters as their crests were hurled yet higher among the rocks, until, round the tightly fitting, barricaded door of the house, little by little, the icy brine began to work in, and to creep stealthily in long, glistening rivulets across the floors.

Soon amid the din was heard the splintering crash of breaking timbers, for the first section of the heavy plank walk had been reached by the breakers, and torn from its bolting rocks. Meantime the ice upon the buildings was increasing much more rapidly than the inmates knew.

Mopping up and sweeping away the constantly increasing streams of water which now squirted round and under the door at every thud of the sea against it, and looking after the safety of such household articles as might be most injured in case it gave way, as the old one had done, they suddenly became aware of an overpowering smell of gas from the stoves. Investigation soon convinced them that the icy coating outside had actually risen to the chimneys of the house, and that all three were effectually frozen up. It was necessary to put out the fires at once, and so to this night's misery and fear was added the hardship of a cold house filled with gas.

As the tide receded, the sea gradually ceased dashing against the building. Daylight revealed an astonishing scene. The light tower, from its base to the lantern, one hundred thirty three feet above sea level, was entirely covered with ice, as were also the other buildings to the depth of sixteen inches on their most exposed sides, excepting a fringe some three feet in width round the base of each where the rushing waters had prevented ice forming.

Scattered about the island in all directions lay a fresh crop of boulders, both great and small, and almost against the oil house were the fragments of a famous twenty-ton fellow that had, since his appearance from the sea eight years before, never been budged.

In the oil house belfry, twenty feet above the ground, was the great fog bell turned upside down, and filled with ice. Moreover, the whole belfry was so clogged with frozen brine that several hours' work with axes was necessary to get the bell again in ringing order. In the keepers house no fires were possible until noon.

Those on duty in the lighthouse reported that at times its oscillations were most alarming, and that a lantern suspended in their little "sky-parlor" swung to and fro continually.

Taken altogether, it is safe to surmise that heavy gales furnish excitement enough to offset many weeks of the ordinarily monotonous life at Boon Island.



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