

BLOCK ISLAND LEGENDS

FOLK LORE OF THE "LAZY MAN'S PARADISE."

THE PHANTOM CAPT. KIDD AND HIS CREW— A STRANGLER'S CRY—THE PALATINE AND THE DANCING MORTAR.

NORWICH, Sept. 30.—Block Island is the quaintest and most interesting ocean resort on the American coast. It is a miniature world in which the habits and customs are those of 150 years ago. Nearly 15 miles off the Rhode Island shore, almost directly south of stormy Point Judith, it appears from the mainland a dark, purple cloud on the southern horizon. As you approach it on the deck of a Summer steamer the cloud changes in hue to a living green and its misty prominences multiply into a hundred conical hills, their smooth flanks scored with little stone-walled farms, that are sprinkled with white farmhouses, and animated with flocks of sheep, cattle, and fowls. Landing on the inside of the giant granite breakwater, which cost the Government several hundred thousand dollars, and provides the only haven on the island, you pass for one or two hundred feet along a level wall of quarried stone, whose base, 20 feet below the green waves, rests on white, shining sea sand, amid festoons of waving kelp. On the right is a square walled basin, with narrow ocean outlet, in which rock numbers of the queer double-end Block Island fishing boats and Summer pleasure craft.

As soon as the shore is reached you are practically out of the world. Following one of the many narrow, gravelly, stone-walled roads that wind up and down hill into the interior, the silence of the fields grows impressive at almost every step. The friction and bustle of workday life are wanting. There is no sound of singing birds in the deep, gloomy hollows, or on the wind-blown treeless hillocks; the note of a cricket is rarely heard, and the only interruption of the quiet is the regular swash of the surf on the distant rocks. The drowsy landscape and unruffled flow of life invite the visitor to repose and reverie. Block Island is called the "lazy man's paradise." It is a healthful place. The income of a resident physician in 1881, from medical attendance on the 1,400 inhabitants, was \$2 25. Before quitting the island at the end of the year, he told an islander that he had lost his own health in trying to work up a practice. The Block Island fields are of miniature dimensions, about an acre to a lot. There is hardly land enough to go around, each resident being a farmer as well as a fisherman, and the island is only about seven and a half miles long by two and a half miles broad. Every knoll is capped with a small, old-fashioned, one-story farmhouse, whose shingled walls are thickly coated with whitewash, the only wash that will withstand the intensely vaporous salty air which melts the salt in the glass cellars on the family table into a thick lumpy mass. Some of the dwellings are 150 years old, and the "old windmill" was built of lumber from trees that grew on the island early in the last century. There is not a tree on Block Island except a few pinched and starveling poplars that were set out around a few of the dwellings as an experiment. Trees do not get a foothold on the bleak farms. The front door of almost every house opens into an orderly kitchen garden, a pebbly walk leading through it to a white paling that opens into the street. On the high hills inland the brown sails of windmills, the spires of two modest churches and white turrets of five school-houses, stand out against the sky. All the families are members of the Baptist church. There is not an acknowledged "sinner" on the island, the entire population having been converted in one Winter revival several years ago. Every voter of native birth is a Democrat. The people are industrious and thrifty; there are no paupers. They cultivate their little farms for home produce, and assiduously plow the ocean for their income. Isolated from the rest of the world they take little interest in any except their own concerns; a Bible, a few books of sea stories, a weekly newspaper, and Daboll's Almanac furnish all the reading they wish, and stories of hobgoblins and sea wraiths are the gossip of fire-side and fore-castle.

No other nook in the country so abounds in legendary lore; nowhere else has superstition retained its hold so late and so tenaciously. Each stormy point of the island is invested with traditions of pirates or mythical shipwrecks, and each gloomy valley associated with grisly spectres of witchcraft. The native Block Islanders, who are 90 per cent. of all the inhabitants, are exceedingly suspicious of strangers and recoil in taciturn displeasure from fippant curiosity that seeks to investigate their folk lore. Only to those who have inspired confidence do they speak of such things. They have no familiar relations with the Summer visitors on the island, regarding them as intruders whom it is mercenary policy to entertain. It is going back to the spinning and apple-roasting circles of 150 and 200 years ago, to listen to white-haired farmers' wives or grizzled fishermen reciting in low, earnest tones the witchcraft of the island. In their fancy and belief Capt. Kidd and his phantom crew still pay regular visits to wind-swept Sandy Point, where they buried treasures, coming under the full moon in a spectral boat impelled by broken surf billows. Goblins tenant the black, rush-bordered sides of inland pools, and from his latticed window the awe-struck cottager and his family discern in the deepening twilight the "Phantom Ship," the ghost of the Palatine, rushing in spectral flames eastward over Block Island Sound. In the Winter the isolation of the bleak little island is almost complete, and the islander is more than ever restricted to his legendary store for mental delectation and nourishment. The mail comes from Newport only once or twice a week by steamer. A few years ago it was brought across the turbulent waves in one of the open Block Island boats once a week; sometimes in continued heavy weather there was no communication with the mainland for a month or six weeks. On mail days the whole island gathers to help the Postmaster sort the letters and papers. Every one is alert with excitement and expectation; outstretched hands clutch at missives which are greedily read, after which each islander communicates to all his neighbors the contents of his letters. Then all go home to talk over the news.

On a sultry night in August a party of islanders and one visitor were gathered on the veranda of a small hotel on the high land above the village of New-Shoreham. Below, and on either side, the island twinkled with the fire-fly lights of a hundred farmhouses; along the horizon northward glowed the beacons of a score of lighthouses; to the south the great eye of "Southeast Light," on the island, blazed a white path for nearly 40 miles through the murky night.

"A few years ago," said Mrs. Rose, mistress of the house, "my uncle and a party of neighbors went to Sandy Point to dig up the pot of gold which Kidd buried there. It was a fine, still night, late in the Fall, and not very cold. The full moon was shining across Block Island Sound, which was unusually calm, and the air was so clear that the men could dimly see the dark rim of the mainland in the north. They walked swiftly 'cross lots to Indian Neck and ascended a knoll not far from Clay Head, overlooking the ocean. By the aid of a divining rod they had previously located the place where they were to dig. It was understood that to be successful not a word must be spoken until the pot had been unearthed and removed. Silently the men fell to work with spades and pickaxes, and the sand and gravel flew at each skillful stroke. At the end of a quarter of an hour a deep, round hole had been opened, and the ridge of displaced earth had grown entirely around the diggers. They paused a moment to rest, after which the stalwart leader picked up a bar and drove it vigorously into the ground. The steel-pointed instrument rang sharply against iron. With redoubled zeal the money diggers fell to work, and a few thrusts of the spade disclosed a large, rusted iron pot solidly wedged into the hard soil. With half-smothered exclamations the men dropped on their knees, and, digging the earth away from the rim with their fingers, strained every muscle to lift the treasure from its resting place. Gradually the packed earth yielded to the mighty pressure; slowly, though with stubborn resistance, the pot was twisted a few inches in the cavity, and the men braced their feet to lift it. It was very heavy. It had risen barely an inch or two when a low cry from the guard, who stood a few yards away peering seaward, directed all eyes from the work to an apparition advancing from the ocean. It was that of a large ship's boat, manned with armed sailors, whose glistening oars as it glided easily through the surf waves rose and fell with the rhythmic swing of practiced oarsmanship. The crew were a ghostly one, in conical peaked hats, with shining buckles and trappings, and carrying long-barreled flint locks. In the bow was a figure with drawn sword, unmistakably that of the pirate Captain, Robert Kidd. What most astonished the spell-bound group was that the boat and its occupants seemed to be of gray, impalpable mist, like one of the erratic ocean vapors that suddenly and at unexpected times sweep down on the island and trail their cold, filmy swathes along the valleys and headlands. The party were given little time for speculation or action. The phantom boat swept over the tumbling surf waves in the strand, the crew leaped on the shore, and in an instant a gray-white mist rushed up the slope, enveloping the hill and the money diggers. There was a vivid flash of lightning, followed by a peal of thunder. The aghast gold seekers hesitated no longer. They dropped their tools, and, without turning a backward glance, fled through the wet sea grass, not pausing until they were a quarter of a mile from the hill. Then they glanced back. There was nothing unnatural in the appearance of the knoll, and its scanty herbage vanished in the light sea breeze. The mist had waned. Cautiously the party revisited the scene of their digging. They found their tools scattered about the summit as they had dropped them; there was a deep excavation in the earth, but no signs of an iron pot or of a smooth cavity at the bottom of the hole in which a pot might have rested. Since then no one has hunted for Kidd's treasure on Block Island."

It is a matter of history that Block Island was a favorite resort of Kidd in the closing years of his career, the island being the northern, and the capes of Delaware the southern, limits of his cruises.

Another island legend is the "Phantom Child,"

which is related by "Aunt Betsy Dodge" and "Aunt Caroline Willis," pleasant-faced ladies over 90 years of age, who have not been off the island in a quarter of a century. The story is briefly: A young woman returning from a ball at Sandy Point on a crisp Fall evening 100 years ago gave birth to a child on the way and strangled it, hiding its body in an empty hay crib by the roadside. Its doleful cry is still heard in the gray afternoons when the east wind whistles across the lonely headland of Clay Head. As the wind pipes up, low at first and growing shriller, the infant's wail increases in intensity, ending in a shriek a little wilder and higher than the blast. "When I was a child," said Aunt Betsy Dodge, "I used to go over there often when the wind was high and listen to it for hours. I have not been there for many years, but they say you can hear it as plain as ever when a storm is rising."

The story of the "Palatine, the Phantom Ship," which was lured on the rocky coast early in the last century by false beacons hung out by the islanders, and afterward pillaged and fired, is familiar to readers of Dana and Whittier, though probably not a score of persons off the island are aware that the ghost of the ship is still seen at irregular intervals, portending disaster to those who were suspected of wrecking and pillaging her. The lines of Whittier are true, and not a native islander disputes the legend:

"Nor looks nor tones a doubt betray,
'Tis known to us all,' they quietly say,
'We too have seen it in our day.'

"For still on many a moonless night,
From Kingston Head and from Montauk Light,
The spectre kindles and burns in sight."

Mrs. Rose, a descendant of the early wreckers, narrates this tale also. The last time the Phantom Ship was seen was on Feb. 9, 1880. The evening twilight was setting in, and the wintry flush on the Western sky was fading in gray and purple lines. The sea as far eastward as the eye could glance was glassy and unruffled. It was almost a dead calm on Block Island Sound. "I was on my veranda, which faces the north," said Mrs. Rose one evening recently, "when I noticed the house windows shining as though a great bonfire was reflected on them. I turned toward the ocean, and right in line with Rose cottage, near the basin, I saw a great ship comesailing out from behind Clay Head to the north, and glide swiftly over the sea in the direction of Newport. I was surprised to see that she had every sail set, and was bending under her canvas as though driven before a strong wind, while there was apparently no wind elsewhere on the sound. I was still more astonished that she appeared to be all on fire from the water's edge to her highest sail, and that the flames seemed to leap upward toward the gray sky. The sea around her was lit up with the radiance, and it was the reflection from the burning ship that shone on the windows of my house and on the roofs of the village at the basin. The strangest thing was that the flames appeared to have no effect on the ship, and though she was in sight for nearly 15 minutes her sails were not consumed. The vessel glided swiftly eastward and disappeared. First the flames died slowly out, the hull became gray and misty, and finally she vanished or dissolved into the air. The Phantom Ship was seen this time by over 50 people on different parts of the island; all of them were descendants of the old wreckers. Among them were Uncle Isaac Church, Nathan F. Dixon, the Dodges, and Capt. Dickens, his family, and all his relatives. As soon as I saw the Palatine I knew that something dreadful was going to happen, and I told all my neighbors so. And, sure enough, only four days later a party of young Block Islanders, descendants of those who wrecked the old ship, were drowned in Newport harbor. The Phantom Ship never appears except when the wind is in the east. Until February, 1880, it had not been seen for nearly 50 years." So well accredited are the accounts of a flaming phenomenon seen occasionally off the north shore of the island that scientific men were at pains a few years ago to investigate it. They gathered evidence from scores of islanders, consulted together, and then offered a natural explanation that was so much more absurd than the supernatural one that it was not entertaining even to themselves.

The "Dancing Mortar" is another Block Island tradition. It is a common mortar for grinding corn which was taken from the wrecked Palatine and kept for many years in the old Dickens house at Sandy Point. When in mood for dancing it hopped from the shelf on which it lay in the kitchen, skipped and whirled to the broad stone hearth before the blazing peat fire, and piquetted on one beveled side for a moment, then tipped on the other side and began to dance. Whirling and skipping, it raced up and down the room, and warming up, leaped nimbly back and forth from the floor to the rafters, beating an unearthly tattoo on the hard oak plank. The Dickens family often invited their neighbors in to witness its mad pranks. After its evening antics had been concluded the mortar retired soberly to its place on the upper shelf. For half a century, until a few years ago, the dancing mortar was used to stop up a hole in a stone wall at the door of the Dickens house. It was at length lodged in the Brown University Museum at Providence. It is a hollow block of lignum vitae, 14 inches high by 10 inches in diameter, and holds four quarts of corn. It shows no disposition to dance in Providence.