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**IDA LEWIS**

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**Providence, R. I.**

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## Ida Lewis

**O**F all the Rhode Island women who have achieved fame in one way or another . . . . . and there have been many . . . . . none attained the world renown of a modest little woman who was born and lived most of her life in Newport. In fact, it would hardly be exaggeration to say that she was more famous, particularly during the latter half of her life, than any American woman of the past or present. She became popularly known as the "Grace Darling of America," but her real name was Ida Lewis.

Her father was Captain Hosea Lewis who was born in Hingham, Massachusetts. Like so many of his day who were born and brought up in seaside towns he followed the sea for a living. For a number of years he was a coastal and marine pilot and was employed on a Newport revenue cutter at the time he courted Ida's mother, the daughter of Dr. Aaron C. Willey of Block Island.

About a dozen years after they had been married, Captain Lewis was appointed by the government to the position of keeper of Lime Rock Light in Newport Harbor. At that time Lime Rock had only a small sentry box for the keeper in addition to the light, and Captain Lewis had to establish a home



for himself and his family on shore. He took a house at the corner of Spring and Brewer Streets in Newport and rowed out to the light twice every day for three years. Then, in 1857, the government built him a house on the island, a stone structure white-washed on the interior. To this building he immediately moved his family and set up house-keeping on the island.

But within six months, after the family had become nicely settled in its new quarters, Captain Lewis was the victim of a sudden paralytic stroke which left him a complete invalid. Ida, the second of his four children, was then fifteen years old, but, young as she was, she gave up the schooling which she had begun in Newport and joined her mother in taking care of the house, the other children, and the light. It was a difficult undertaking for the two women (one of whom was only a girl) but their determination would not let them give up, and they mastered the situation as it stood.

Ida had had no previous experience in handling any sort of a boat, but she learned to row very quickly for upon her fell the task of getting the other children to and from school and procuring provisions for the household. In the morning she set out with the children for the mainland and in the evening or late afternoon came to row

them back to the light. The very necessity that forced her to the hard task of rowing toughened her young muscles and gave her a skill in handling a boat that became invaluable to her in later life. No kind of weather ever prevented her from making these trips. Short as they were, they were often extremely dangerous, and many a hardier boatman would not have attempted them. When a fierce storm was blowing, Captain Hosea, crippled and helpless, would sit in the window of the house on the rock and peer through the flying rain toward the shore where his daughter with her precious boatload was setting out to begin her fight with the waves. Sometimes he would lose sight of the boat altogether as it sank low into the trough between great rollers, and would wonder for the hundredth time how his frail little daughter was able to keep afloat in such heavy seas. Often he did not dare to watch the progress she was making and would ask his wife to tell him when the boat reached the island. But Ida was not frail. The children trusted her courage and skill, and even her father, in moments of pride, would say that she could hold a boat in the teeth of a gale better than most men. That there were gales in truth is evident by the fact that Ida more than once had to cut off her frozen stockings at the knee once she reached her warm home.



The efforts of Mrs. Lewis and Ida enabled Captain Hosea to keep his appointment until his death in 1872. After that the former was appointed keeper of the light and Ida was made her assistant by a special act of Congress. Five years later, she succeeded her mother as keeper, and held the position for the rest of her life.

Her famous rescues began in 1859, and there are eighteen of them recorded. The first was of four young men from Newport's summer colony who overturned their small sailboat near the light. They could not hang on to the slippery hull and were being swept out to sea by a strong tide when Ida saw them. She set out in her rowboat at once, but reached them just in time. Wisely avoiding them as a group, she approached one at a time taking him into her small boat over the stern. Then she rowed them back to the light and provided them with hot food and warm dry clothing. Neither she nor the four young men mentioned the rescue to others, and it was not known until years later.

Six years later she rescued a drunken soldier who had thrust his foot through the bottom of her brother's skiff, after having stolen it for a trip to Fort Adams. The next year she rescued another man who also had appropriated her brother's boat and had

got caught in the tide. Within two more weeks after this she went to the aid of a man whose sailboat had struck on Little Lime Rock. Yet for this she received no thanks.

Probably her most noted rescue was made in 1869, when she set out in a bitter storm to aid two men whose cries she had heard. They proved to be Sergeant Adams and Private McLaughlin, two soldiers who were returning to Fort Adams when their boat upset in a sudden squall. She needed all her months and years of exercise and rowing experience then. The waves broke over her boat threatening to swamp her again and again, but she finally reached the light with the two half-drowned men.

This rescue was immediately heralded around the world, and Ida became famous overnight. Newport basked in the greatness of its heroine. Newspapers printed long articles about her; photographers came in droves to get her picture; theatrical managers offered her vaudeville engagements; and the tiresome stream of curious visitors began. Yet in the midst of all the honors that were suddenly bestowed upon her, she maintained a calm poise and modesty that was both unusual and admirable.

The name "Grace Darling of America" was given to her at once, but in reality she was a greater heroine than the English girl,



Grace Darling. The latter made one great rescue, aiding her father to get five persons off some rocks in the ocean near the Farne Islands, but Ida Lewis performed her daring deeds unaided. Both of these women were small and underweight yet they seemed to have the strength to meet any emergency.

In 1870, Ida married William H. Wilson of Black Rock, Connecticut, and went to the mainland to live with her husband. But the marriage did not turn out happily, and very shortly she was once more attending to duties at the light.

As time went on, she made more rescues (just how many only she knew and she would never tell). But her fame was already widespread. She was made a member of the American Legion of Honor and was given the special distinction of being elected to the American Cross of Honor and awarded the first gold cross of that organization. The New York Humane Society presented her with a medal, and the Massachusetts Humane Society soon followed suit. Congress awarded her a special gold medal, and Andrew Carnegie gave her a pension of \$30 a month from his private fund. Finally the Sorosis Society made her an honorary member.

Of course in addition to all this she was deluged with visitors and mail from ad-

mirers (in the latter receiving everything from congratulations to offers of marriage). Prominent men and women came to Newport especially to see her, among them President Grant, Vice-President Colfax, Admiral Porter, Admiral Dewey, General Sherman, Jay Gould, Mrs. William Astor, and Susan B. Anthony. However her attitude was always the same, modest and unassuming. Even when the visitors became inquisitive beyond all limits of courtesy, she herself was quietly courteous (and just as un-talkative). These visitors tired her more than her daily tasks, for they came at all hours without warning. Soon they averaged one hundred a day, and in one summer, her father counted a total of 9000. Truly she suffered upon the rack of American inquisitiveness.

She lost but one person among all those whom she set out to save, and that because she arrived on the scene too late. Even in her later years she was a consummate master of her boat and could man it with ease. She was presented with a new boat, named the "Rescue," but preferred to use her old one. The "Rescue" is now in the Newport Historical Society.

Up to her death in 1911 she remained keeper of Lime Rock Light, and when she died not only Rhode Island but the whole



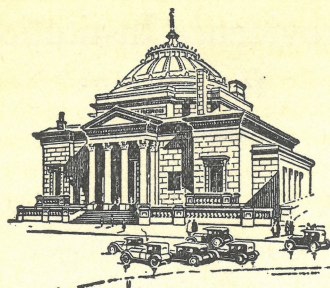
world mourned a courageous woman, one who had been a rare model of sincere modesty and simplicity.

Lime Rock Light has since been honored with her name and is now connected to the mainland by a long wharf. The island is at present the home of the Ida Lewis Yacht Club, but the rock itself is a lasting monument to its former mistress.

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