

THE WAY WE WERE

By John Sedgwick

Princess of Wails



Let's just say that I don't understand it," says patrolman Wayne Nichols of the Metropolitan District Police. He is talking about a series of, well, call them "experiences" he's had out on MDC-run George's Island in Boston Harbor. There's a fort out there, a massive, star-shaped structure called Fort Warren, that was built in 1850. It's a creepy old place with glass-strewn dungeons and hidden subterranean passageways fifty feet down. They say there's an underground railway running through to another island somewhere down there, but nobody's ever found it. People aren't too keen to prowl around the lower levels because of the twenty-pound water rats with tails as thick as your little finger.

George's Island is Officer Nichols's beat, and after fifteen years on the island, Nichols knows more about the fort than anyone. "The sage of Fort Warren," he is called. Yet something strange has happened to him three times at the fort, something he just doesn't know about at all.

The first time was in the spring of 1964. Patrolling the island one evening, Nichols found several coils of expensive cable

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lying on the beach. (Wayne Nichols is not the man's real name; he feels he has been badgered enough about the incidents already.) Figuring they were stolen from the fort, Nichols decided to surprise the thieves when they came back for their loot. He holed himself up in a little nook at the fort overlooking the beach to wait for them.

"It was a quiet June night," Nichols remembers. "The moon was out, the sea was calm. A beautiful, peaceful night." It didn't stay that way. Around one in the morning, Nichols heard a scream, high-pitched, like a woman's. Thinking it might be the thieves, or someone stranded on the island, Nichols got up to look around. He couldn't find anyone. That was odd, he thought, as he returned to his hiding place.

Not long after, Nichols heard another scream, this one louder than before. It seemed to come from right over his head. "It was like a wild animal," Nichols remembers. Now he was getting scared. He searched the island thoroughly, but once again he found nothing. Nichols returned to his post.

Then the scream came again, louder than ever, an ear-splitting screech. "The sound made the hair curl all over my body," Nichols remembers. "Something

weird was happening." Now he'd had it. To hell with the thieves. Nichols went back to the sturdy brick administration building on the other side of the island.

As might be imagined, Nichols slept fitfully that night. The next morning he combed the island to find what had made that ghastly, high-pitched scream—a bird, maybe, or an animal. But he found nothing.

All that year Nichols searched for something that could have made the sound, but he didn't turn up a thing. The following May he heard the scream again. He was in the administration building at the time. Again he was alone. He rushed outside, looked everywhere, turned the whole island upside down. Nothing.

That's when he began to wonder if he was going out of his mind. No one else had heard the screams; maybe they were in his head? He didn't dare tell anybody about them because, as he says, "They'd think I'd flipped." He might lose his job. The MDC couldn't have a loony patrolling George's Island.

Several years passed without event. Then, in 1973, Officer Nichols was on duty one night when the state was holding an informer on the island for a few days for safekeeping. The informer, sev-



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eral guards, two Doberman pinscher guard dogs, and some people from the district attorney's office were all in a room directly above the kitchen where Nichols was busy washing some dishes. Suddenly, Nichols heard sounds of a terrific scuffle from the floor above. He dashed upstairs to find one of the huge dogs sprawled unconscious on the floor.

Melanie wanted to run off with her husband, but when the prisoners saw her short-handed pick, they had other ideas. Why not dig a tunnel out, take over the Union garrison, turn the fort's several hundred guns against Boston, and bring it to its knees?

the other pinned down by two guards. "Did you hear it?" one of the guards shouted.

"Hear what?"

"A goddamn scream so loud it could cut your heart out!"

The dogs had gone mad when they heard the shriek. One had to be knocked out, the other tied down.

It took some time for the visitors to pull themselves together, but for his part, Officer Nichols was relieved. Maybe he wasn't crazy after all.

The question was, who—or what—was responsible for those ghastly screams? Edward Rowe Snow thinks he has the answer: the Lady in Black.

The seventy-six-year-old Snow has written ninety-two books full of Atlantic seacoast lore. An authority on the history of Boston Harbor, Snow has paddled his canoe to each of the harbor's fifteen islands three times. He is no less an authority on the Lady in Black. He first learned of her years ago from some old-timers living on George's Island, and he has included an account of the Lady in eleven of his books (which may help explain his extraordinary productivity). And, by special arrangement with the ferry company, he recites the story twice a week to boatloads of tourists coming to visit Fort Warren. When Snow heard Officer Nichols's talk about high-pitched screams, he knew the Lady in Black had risen again.

According to Snow, the story of the Lady in Black goes back to the days of the Civil War, when Fort Warren was used as a prison for Confederate soldiers. One of the prisoners was a man named Samuel Lanier. Somehow Lanier man-

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aged to get word of his capture to the heroine of our tale, his young wife, Melanie. Snow thinks of her as "a pretty girl, around twenty, shapely." She must have been tough, too. She was not about to let her husband rot in a Yankee prison. Melanie Lanier vowed to set him free.

The young Mrs. Lanier cropped her hair, dressed herself in men's clothes, and stole north, armed with an old pepper gun. She made it to Cape Cod and then to Hull, the point on the mainland nearest to Fort Warren. There, after borrowing a rowboat and a short-handle pick, Melanie waited for the darkest and stormiest night of the year. Then she set out across the bay.

Melanie reached the island safely despite the fierce weather. She drew her skiff quietly up onshore and, slipping past the sentries posted by the fort, hid in some bushes at the foot of the granite wall.

How would she find her husband? She remembered an old tune she used to sing to him back home. She whistled it now, first softly, then louder and louder. But there was no answer. Sure that the sentries would be upon her any minute, Melanie whistled again, louder than ever. The sound echoed all around the fort. This time a whistle answered her and a rope of bedsheets dropped down to her out of a slit in the wall. She grabbed on and soon she was in her husband's arms.

More than anything Melanie wanted to run off with him the way she'd come. But the other prisoners, eyeing her short-handle pick, had other ideas. Why not dig a tunnel out of their dungeon so they could all sneak out and overcome the Union garrison? Then they would turn the fort's several hundred guns against Boston and bring the city—maybe even the whole damn Union—to its knees.

It was a bold and entrancing idea. Mrs. Lanier would not be so selfish as to put her private love before the greater cause of the Confederacy. So she gave in, throwing herself into the new project with vigor.

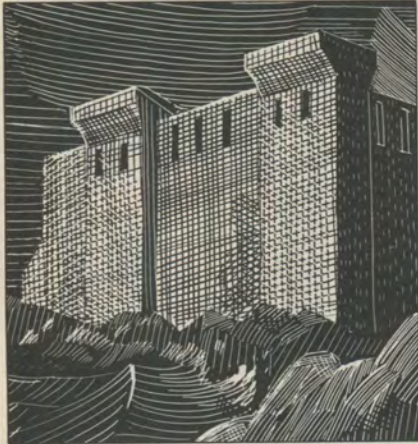
The prisoners, and their guest, set to work that night. For weeks they dug, stashed away the dirt, and dug some more. Finally they figured they were below the parade ground inside the fort. From there it would be a cinch to break out several hundred strong and ambush the guard. They tunneled up to the surface. The pick broke through the sod, but it struck granite. They'd come up short.

The Union guards jumped at the sound. All the prisoners were rounded out, the dungeon was searched, and the tunnel was found. In the tunnel, along with several others, were Melanie and Samuel Lanier. They were trapped, but Melanie wasn't about to give up. As she climbed out of the tunnel she pointed her flinty old pepper gun at the fort commander, Colonel Dimmick, and fired. The pistol burst into a hundred pieces.

One of them struck her husband just above the eye, killing him instantly.

Colonel Dimmick was reputed to be a man of compassion, but he had little compassion for Mrs. Lanier. He ordered her hanged as a spy. He did, however, grant her final request, which was to die in women's clothes. He procured for her a black gown left over from some recent theatricals. So, in death, the brave and hardy Melanie Lanier became the Lady in Black.

That wasn't the end of her, not by a long shot. Several weeks after the execution a Private Cassidy who was on sentry duty outside the fort came running into



the guardhouse screaming at the top of his lungs. Safely in the company of his fellow soldiers he explained that he had been mulling over the death of the Confederate's wife when suddenly he felt a pair of cold, damp hands fasten about his throat. He managed to fight off his attacker, and when he turned around to see who it was, he discovered a woman cloaked in black robes. That's when he took off screaming.

Later, one winter around the turn of the century, some soldiers at the fort found a short trail of footprints in the new-fallen snow. But there were no tracks leading up to them, nor did any lead away. Stranger still, from their size and shape they could only have been made by a woman. Yet there were no women on the island.

And there are other tales of gruesome apparitions and sentries going mad. And, of course, there is Officer Nichols's experience.

What's to be made of all this? Most people tend to be skeptical. "Those myth-stories," said one wary fisherman, "I don't put much stock in them." The captain of the *Bay State*, the boat that serves George's Island, was light-hearted. "Believe in the Lady in Black? Sure I do. I've been trying to get a date with her for years."

Wayne Nichols would like to scoff at the Lady in Black stuff too. He'd like to joke about her. But then he remembers those blood-curdling screams, and he just doesn't know. □

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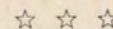
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