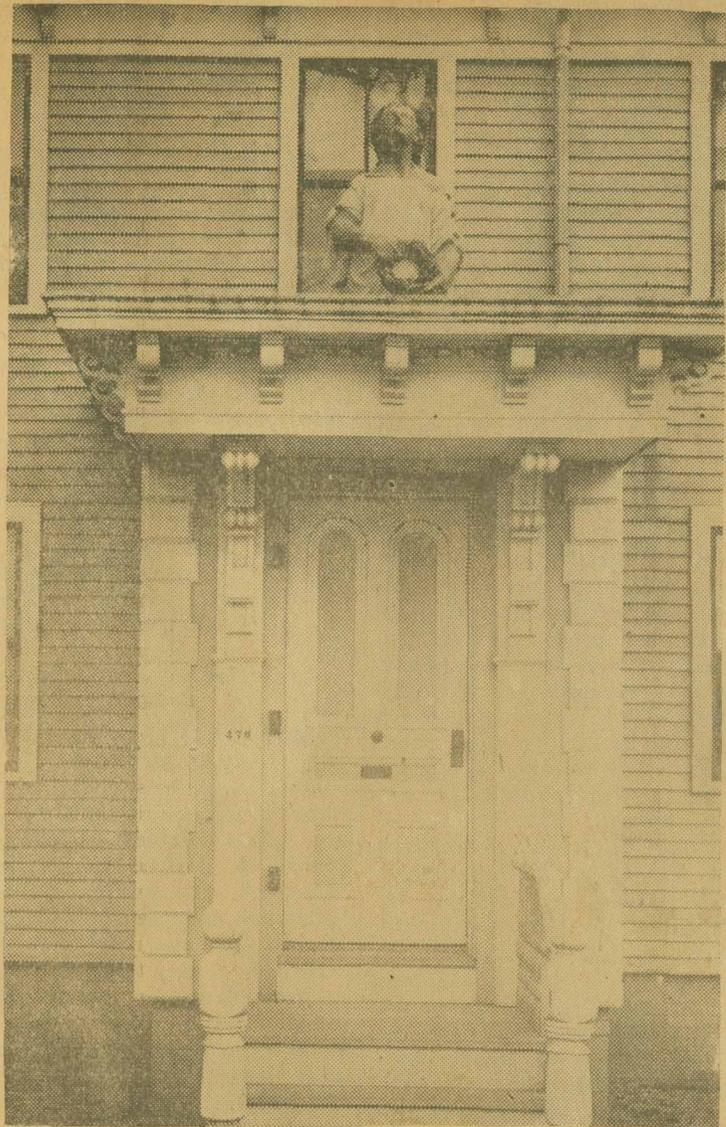


# Lady of Sea Keeps Long, Lonely Vigil

## For Her Ship to Return Across the Bay

*P'town Advocate August 1938*

### What Proud Vessel She Once Graced As A Figurehead, What Distant Oceans, What Strange People She Has Known Are Shrouded in Mystery, Her Own Secret



One of the interesting sights seen along Commercial Street is that of the Figurehead Lady on what has come to be known as the Figurehead House. By request, an account of this mysterious lady is reprinted today from a former issue of The Provincetown Advocate.

Someday our Commercial Street—that road of now well-nigh forgotten dissension—will be discovered and its story written. If the tale is told by one whose ear can hear its whispered memories and see its ghosts of ancient mariners who still walk its narrow way with printless step, we will come to know our "Front Street" for what it really is—one of the romantic roads of the world.

Walled within every old little house along its way is a book-shelf

of tales of travel, adventure, love and tragedy, of patience, devotion and labor, of hardy men, brave women and courageous lads.

The seed of this tree may have germinated in a cargo from Australia and the last soil it met may have come as ballast from the Orient. And buried beneath the surface are the stumps and swamp land of a once mighty forest of oaks, pines, birch, ash and walnut.

#### Muted Mouth

But the whole story will never be told. Too much of it was "lost at sea" or buried in the sandy graves of the Cape. Like the lady whose image looks out to the harbor over the porch of the Putnam house on Commercial. She has her story to tell but can never tell it. She, too, was "lost at sea", from what vessel none will probably ever know, nor

will we know what seas have lither her, what strange people she looked upon as her great ship was loaded in foreign ports.

But the "rescue" of the "Figurehead Lady" for whom collectors have offered large sums is typical of the Yankee humor and adventure of the whaling days. Thirty-three years ago an unnamed scribe wrote the tale for the Boston Globe. Only a part of it can be retold here.

"Without a ripple or feather of foam the sunlit ocean waters came rolling to the coppered bends of the A. L. Putnam, ten months out from the home port, Provincetown, in quest of 'sparm'."

"Ben' Handy, master, stumped the starboard quarter, spy glass under arm, in readiness for use at the first welcome call of 'ere sh blo-ows!' from the 'masthead' man in his dizzily swinging 'crows nest' ninety feet above the deck.

"Mind your eye aloft there!' the skipper shouted.

#### Woman Adrift

"Immediately—so soon in truth that it seemed at first but the echo of the master's admonition—the hail 'Woman—all adrift; two points off the weather bow; cable's length away,' was trumpeted from aloft, the unwonted nature of the communication, together with the evident excitement of the communicator, serving to send the captain over to the lee rail on a run.

"Quickly, the object which the keen eyes of the whale men on deck identified as the form of a woman of truly magnificent physique, with a crown of glossy black hair, loosed and clinging to the ivory tinted nape and shoulders exposed by a low-cut white gown, appeared for an instant on the front of a glassy, up-shouldering swell, then was overridden and hidden by the faster moving element that rocked it.

"'Tis a drowned woman!' some one of the waist loungers cried.

"Stand by there—stand by to lower away the larboard quarter boat!' Captain Handy called excitedly.

"'Jib sheets to windward!' he continued, the craft having been brought to the wind, 'Lower away!' and the boat having been let run into the sea and tackles unhooked, away went the little craft, dancing off astern, to recover the body, which was seen occasionally as some undulation of the sea threw it into partial relief against the pale blue of the sky just to leeward of the vessel's dissolving wake.

"The Putnam rose and fell, pendulum-like, to the pulsing of the ocean's breast, and the whaleboat disappeared for a space behind the lope of an intervening roller.

"Soon, a voice sounding faint and reed-like in the distance, was heard. 'We've got 'er,' was the cry; and,

boat and schooner being thrown aloft simultaneously upon the very brows of their respective, though widely separated, seas, the men on the latter beheld the boatmen in the act of rolling something inward above the gunwale, which was much inclined, as if supporting a heavy burden.

"A couple of minutes later, the whaleboat, swinging circling inward

alongside ship, hooked on below the open port gangway; and the second mate, standing in the stern sheets, grinned sheepishly upward at the master on the quarter as he called to the bare-footed sailors clustered in the waist, bidding them to pass down a strap and tackle.

#### A Graven Image

"'God Lord!' one of the group exclaimed in a tone that betokened surprise and disappointment, as his gaze rested upon something that reclined in the boat's bottom, 'Tis nuthin' but a gol-darned figurehead, arter all.' And, sure enough, twas a graven image—not a bit of human flotsam—that had been rescued from the deep.

"A splendidly fashioned figurehead it was, however, one that must have graced the prow of some great clipper ship employed in the East Indies passenger-cargo carrying trade—a colossal full-length presentment of womankind, modeled with great beauty and vigor and measuring fully eight feet from the placid brow to the underside of the sandaled feet.

"The figurehead was too bulky to be kept on deck; the limited space offering between casks in hold and hatch combings precluded bestowal

of the full figure below deck, and, in the end, all that portion below the hips was sawed away and used for firewood, when the upper part was, with ease, gotten down the main hatchway.

#### Gone Are The Vessels

"Of all the forty-six whaling vessels that sailed from Provincetown at that period not one remains: the mass of their crews, too, have sailed outward upon the sea of death during the intervening years. The A. L. Putnam, with all her crew, went into the maw of the insatiable sea years ago, and Captain Handy died long since on his fruit farm in Southern California. But the magnificent figurehead (sole reminder, perhaps, of a sunken ship and crew) that topped the Indian Ocean waters that fifth of April in 1867, still exists.

"Perched over the front porch of the tasty dwelling of its Provincetown owner—A. Louis Putnam (in whose honor the rescuing schooner was named) with secret fast locked within its wooden heart, and gaze riveted upon the distant waters, as if in retrospection, it proves a veritable theory inciter, and thing of mystery to the curious thousands that annually view it."

#### The picture below:

The weeping willow tree over the dump cart (opposite Freeman's General Store) is said to have been brought, as a slip, from Napoleon's grave in St. Helena, by some whaler



FIGURE HEAD TEA ROOM.  
COMMERCIAL STREET, PROVINCETOWN, MASS.

1916