

The Haunted Cove

SIR GEORGE DOUGLAS

Table of Contents

<u>The Haunted Cove</u>	1
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COMMONPLACE in itself and showing positive vulgarity in the style in which its pleasure-grounds are laid out, Clyffe, near Berwick-on-Tweed, has yet one delightful feature of its own, to wit, a private bay to which access is obtained by a tunnel seventy or eighty yards long, cut through the soft formation of the cliff from the sloping gardens above. The result is that, if you are a visitor at Clyffe, you have your own private bathing ground, your own private beach where the children may play, without fear of being encroached upon, unless, indeed, a boat should be run in among the rocks from seaward. In the early nineties of the last century, the only daughter of the house of Clyffe was engaged to be married to a young officer quartered at the military depot at Berwick. They were a blameless but not particularly interesting couple, and one of their hobbies was to meet and promenade on the smooth sands of Clyffe bay in the brilliant autumn moonlight. In order to prevent possible intrusion from the sea, the seaward end of the tunnel was closed by a heavy iron gate, and upon the inner side of this gate the Lieutenant was to wait until his fiancee should steal forth bringing with her the key which should give access to the beach. It was all very foolish and romantic, no doubt, for they might have met just as conveniently in the conservatory of Clyffe House, where their privacy would have been equally respected, and where Miss Alix's satin shoes and diaphanous draperies would have exposed her to no risk of a chill. Lovers are like that, however, and had they not been so on this occasion, I should have had no story to tell.

Like the exemplary swain he was, Dick arrived early at the rendezvous, that is to say, early in respect to the time agreed upon, though, as a matter of fact, it was nearly eleven o'clock. There he lit a cigarette, and approaching the heavy iron bars of the locked gate, looked forth upon the peaceful scene beyond. It was a perfect night, the harvest moon riding through fleecy cloud aloft, whilst the breaking of the sea between the rocky points to right and left was soothing in its gentle iteration. Dick had been on parade extremely early that morning, and, tell it not in Gath! his eyes involuntarily closed. Starting awake again, he saw with surprise that, though Alix had not yet come forward, he was no longer alone. No! the sacred beach had been invaded, and a female figure clad in light draperies was pacing slowly in the moonlight betwixt himself and the distant rocks. Who on earth could she be, and how had she got there? were the questions he asked himself, his first sensation being one of annoyance at so unexpected and so ill-timed an intrusion. But as the moments passed and the figure came more clearly into view, impatience gave way to curiosity, and curiosity to something like awe.

What he saw was the tall and slender form of a young girl whose hands were clasped in front of her, and whose eyes were fixed on the ground in a pensive, not to say sorrowful, attitude. Clear as was the moonlight, at least in the intervals of the moon's passage through the broken clouds, her features were not plainly visible; but her every movement was instinct with grace. What could she be doing there? Under other circumstances, possibly Dick might have felt inclined to pass the gate and himself step forth on to the sands. But, besides that the gate was locked, he gradually became conscious of a singular delicacy or unwillingness to intrude upon the privacy of this solitary, inexplicable, and impressive figure. He was content, therefore, to watch her noiseless progress, and, as he did so, even his untrained masculine eye seemed to note something unusual out of date, it might be in the fashion of her garments. So perhaps might some old-world portrait have appeared, had it stepped down from its frame against the wall. This, however, stirred him little. What he was not prepared for was the gesture of anguish, nay, of positive despair, with which, when about opposite him, the figure threw her head back and her arms aloft, as if in mute and agonised appeal to Heaven. The action was heartrending even to look on; nor, to a male eye, did it lose aught from the fact that, as the moonlight now fell for the first time on her upturned face, it showed it to be

The Haunted Cove

deathly pale indeed, but also exquisitely lovely. Another moment or two, and the graceful and appealing form had passed beyond his field of vision, for, as the locked gate stood some little way back from the mouth of the tunnel, his view was restricted.

A short time only, though he knew not exactly how long, had passed when Alix stood beside him.

"I had some difficulty," she archly explained, "in eluding prying eyes."

For an ardent lover, Dick's greetings were perfunctory; after which, being still powerfully under the impression of what he had just seen, he told Alix all about it.

"We shall soon see who she is," replied that practical young lady, as she placed the heavy key in the cumbrous lock, "and I shall also take leave to inform her that this bit of coast is strictly private."

And strictly private it appeared to be when they emerged from the tunnel. For though their eyes swept the beach to right and left, and though the moon just then was unobscured, they saw no trace of any living form.

"She must have landed from a boat," said Alix; but as little trace of a boat could they discover.

Still it was quite possible that she might pass unobserved against the dark rocks, so they turned first to the right, then to the left, keeping a keen look-out for any sign of motion.

They detected nothing.

And by this time I am bound to confess that a slightly uncomplimentary suspicion had more than once crossed the brain of Alix. She knew that, as a rule, her Dick was a pattern of moderation. But even the most prudent may be liable to be occasionally overtaken. And she recalled his having mentioned that this was to be a guest-night at the mess. Indeed, it was chiefly upon that account that the assignation had been fixed so late. This present portentous solemnity was certainly most unlike him. Was it possible that the poor fellow had taken just one more whisky-and-soda than he could conveniently carry? Outspoken by nature, she blurted out her suspicion, which was strengthened rather than the reverse by the great earnestness with which he repelled it.

Less convinced than before, Alix then exclaimed: "Look here, Dick! If, as you say, the young woman passed this way, she must have left tracks on the smooth sand. Where do you say the place was?"

With some uncertainty, Dick then led her to what he took to be the place. No tracks were there. He then tried further back from the mouth of the tunnel, and with as little success. It was true the tide was coming up, but it could scarcely yet have reached footmarks which had been imprinted so far inshore as he supposed these to have been.

In a spirit of levity which jarred on him, Alix now recommended her lover to go back to his quarters and have a good sleep; and then, having again passed through the gate and pushed their way up the tunnel, the two young people parted in something very like a tiff.

Dick did not call at Clyffe House the next day, and when he called on the day following, Alix met him in a complaisant mood. After all, she had no wish to quarrel with him. And very soon she said, "Going back to what you told me you had seen the other night, Dick, it occurred to me, after you were gone, that it fits in rather curiously with an old story connected with this place." And then, at his request, she proceeded to tell him how, some thirty years ago, her grandmother had had a favourite maid, a friendless orphan girl named Barbara, to whom attached a mystery. Barbara was a very lovely creature of refinement and education above her station, and she had of course numerous admirers. Young as she was, her discretion was faultless, with the sole exception that

The Haunted Cove

her native amiability and desire to please sometimes betrayed her into conduct which meant less than her admirers wished to think it did. Well, at last Barbara became plighted to a respectable young fisherman, part-owner of a boat sailing from The Greenses, and, though details were vague, it was generally understood that, as a consequence, several hearts were severely damaged. As Barbara had no relatives, it was arranged by her employer that she should remain in her situation until the wedding-day and should be married from Clyffe House. Considerable preparations had also been made to do honour to the occasion, when judge of the consternation of the inmates of the house! upon the morning of the wedding-day Barbara was not to be found. She was believed to have retired to rest on the previous night as usual, yet her bed had not been slept in. Nor, although most of her clothes were packed in anticipation of her change of domicile, had she apparently taken anything with her. Nothing in the least unusual had been observed in her demeanour; nor could the unhappy bridegroom suggest any possible motive for her conduct. Exhaustive inquiries and exhaustive search were made; but, to cut the story short, nothing had ever again been seen or heard of the fair Barbara to that day. Her mistress, who had been sincerely attached to her, had long mourned for her, and in after times would often sing her praises. But, in order to be quite candid, it must be acknowledged that there were others, not a few, who declined to believe that the girl had come to an untimely end; and, who, knowing that she had several suitors, and had sometimes appeared uncertain which to favour, preferred to think that she had changed her mind at the last moment, and, deciding to throw over her fisherman, had made her escape from Clyffe House during the night to join some more eligible swain. This would have been a desperate step indeed; nor could her conduct in withholding subsequent explanations be absolved of heartlessness. But, after all, she was the sort of girl who, where no actual misconduct was involved, might easily allow herself to be over-persuaded. And certainly the tangled skein of love does sometimes present a knot which must be cut rather than untied.

The Lieutenant professed himself profoundly interested in this narrative, which he and Alix then proceeded to discuss in all its bearings, and more particularly, of course, in its relation to the figure seen by him in the cove. It is true that Alix never quite believed in the genuineness of the apparition; but, seeing that Dick really wished to have it taken seriously, she decided tactfully to humour him, and made quite a nine days' wonder of the mysterious occurrence. Their own wedding-day was, however, fast drawing on, so they soon found other things to talk and think of. To be brief, they were in due course married, and, amid the cares and pleasures of wedded life, the story, though not forgotten, came to be very seldom referred to. So twenty years passed; at the end of which time the Colonel (as he now was), accompanied by his wife and several youngsters, paid one of his not very frequent visits to his wife's parents at Clyffe House.

On the first night of the visit, after dinner, Alix's father had significantly recalled the story of the maid Barbara's disappearance, and, after stating that the mystery had now been finally cleared up, had gone on to relate the following particulars: A few days previously there had lain at the point of death in the infirmary at Berwick an aged fisherman, who had long been known in the seaport town for his solitary habits and morose and violent ways. As death drew near, it became evident that his mind was sorely troubled, and to one of the nurses or doctors who had sought to comfort him he had been led to make the acknowledgment that a guilty secret weighed upon his soul, making him fearful to confront his Maker. He then told how, as a young man, he had passionately loved a pretty servant-girl employed at Clyffe House. Misled by those smiles and that graciousness of manner which in the guileless amiability of her nature the girl lavished upon all alike, he had for a moment imagined himself her favoured suitor. How bitter, then, was the blow, and how rude the awakening when he learned that a younger brother of his own, a mere boy, was preferred before himself! Nor was it only unrequited love that grieved him. No, he believed, or managed to persuade himself, that an unfair advantage had been taken of him, by which he had been made the lovers' dupe. A silent man, he took no one into his confidence, but abode his time until the eve of the wedding-day. On that day he had accidentally intercepted a note from the girl Barbara, addressed to his brother, in which she had agreed to meet her bridegroom of the morrow in the cove below Clyffe House one hour before midnight, to spend a final hour together before the momentous crisis in their lives. Instantly it had occurred to the elder brother to use the knowledge gained from the note in order to make one last desperate appeal on his own account to the sweet girl he loved so madly. Accordingly he kept back the missive, and, to make assurance doubly sure, mixed a soporific drug with his brother's drink when the latter came in from fishing. Then, whilst the

The Haunted Cove

youngster slumbered heavily, he himself embarked in a cockle-boat and, unobserved, rowed quietly round the headland, into Clyffe cove, where he ran his boat into a safe creek he knew of, and jumped ashore. Poor Barbara had come down to the water's edge to meet the boat, and great was her consternation on finding herself confronted by the wrong brother.

Then an impassioned scene was enacted, in which the seaman used every means of persuasion known to him to get the girl to give up his brother and plight herself to him. But though alternately distressed and terrified, Barbara had stood her ground, and, gentle and yielding though she appeared to be, neither threats nor vows had had the slightest effect upon her constancy. And then, of a sudden, the reckless brother had "seen red." If he could not have this girl to wife, then neither should another, and a moment later her white form lay stretched upon the dark rocks at his feet.

The sight brought him to himself. There was no room for doubt that life was extinct; and if he was to escape suspicion, he must act at once, for the summer night was short and the dread interview had lasted long. He accordingly placed the body in the boat, and, having collected several heavy stones, proceeded to make use of his seacraft by binding them closely and firmly about the poor girl's body by means of her clothing. Then he rowed out to sea, some mile or more, and there quietly dropped the body overboard. Such, in essentials, was the story told by the dying fisherman, and so it had come about that the bride of that fatal morning was never seen or heard of more. Though possibly intended to be regarded as confidential, certain it is that the confession had leaked out, and very soon became public property. For a few days it attracted great attention; and then, like other more important things which had preceded it, it ceased, save very occasionally, to be alluded to at all. But the Colonel never forgot it, any more than he ever forgot the lovely and inexplicable vision which had appeared to him for so brief an interval, in the moonlight, on the shore below Clyffe House. It is true that he seldom referred to it. Nor did that stately dame, who had once been Miss Alix and who was now believed to command the regiment, encourage him to do so. For she had observed that he was always most ready to tell the story after an exceptionally good dinner. And, with her high sense of what was due to his rank, she fancied that it made him mildly ridiculous. Neither, it might be, had her earliest doubts been ever wholly laid to rest. But members of the fair sex, when they are practical, are apt to be very practical indeed.