

The House on the Cliff

By W. J. Wintle, F.Z.S.

It all came about through Cyril being too clever by half. He fell into the common mistake of supposing that a mysterious something in his inner consciousness which he called intuition was a sounder guide to conduct than the general common sense of the race. He fancied that the best way to get away from the worries of life was to get away somewhere by himself: and this is just where he made the mistake. The greatest of all worries is oneself—at any rate it was so in Cyril's case. And just then he really believed that he had ground for worry.

What it was does not concern our story; so we need not stay to speculate about it. But it was something that required treatment, according to Cyril: and the treatment that it required was to get away from things. He had tried the British Museum reading-room in the off season, when everyone is away except the lady who writes the Riviera news for the *Upper Ten*, and the man who has found out how to square the circle. He had tried a course of University Extension lectures on the Multiplication of the Ego: and he had tried salmon fishing in the lower reaches of the Thames. But he couldn't get away from his worry.

Then a brilliant idea struck him. He was half inclined to resent the abruptness with which it struck him; for anything that savoured of familiarity was especially offensive in his present mood. But the idea did not mean to be shook off: it meant to stick. And he was bound to admit that the idea was not such a bad one after all. It was worth thinking about: and to think about it was to act on it.

It was this. A friend of his had built a kind of cottage on a lonely cliff as a sort of retreat for writing his novels. It was in a very retired spot, far away from everything except the sea; it was in private grounds; and its occupant could be as free from visitors as he wished. As it happened, he had seen in that morning's *Post* that his friend was passing through town and was stopping at the "Langham." Cyril took up the telephone receiver.

"That you, Howard? Ah; how d'ye do? No; feeling a bit limp, you know; nerves a bit jumpy. Want a rest, I suppose. I say, old man, if you are not doing anything with that shanty of yours on the cliff, may I roost there for a week or two? What's that? Going to pull it down? Haunted? Rats! I'm not afraid of spooks. Yes, thanks; I'll order in a supply of stuff and do for myself, thanks. No need to trouble your people at all. Thanks awfully, old chap; it's really very good of you."

So the thing was settled; and next day a long railway trip, followed by what seemed an even longer journey by road, took Cyril to the house on the cliff. It was certainly as lonely as could well be wished. Five miles from the nearest town, or rather village; a good mile from the high road; within a private estate whose house was rarely occupied; and hidden away behind masses of furze and bramble, with bracken more than knee-deep; it was an ideal place for the man who wanted to get away from things.

The situation, apart from its loneliness, was simply gorgeous. The house stood almost on the edge of a lofty limestone cliff which fell a sheer hundred feet without a break to the waves that beat about its base. The cliff stood out like a miniature headland beside a little bay bestrewn with vast boulders round which the long oar-weed clung and twined like ever-writhing water snakes as the tides ebbed and flowed. All around, the cliffs were pierced by caves that the waves had

worn out of the ancient rocks by their ceaseless surging, while overhead hung clinging masses of samphire and other green things.

Looking out to sea, an endless waste of waters met the eye; broken for a moment by a rocky island that showed upon the horizon on clear days, and nearer in by some jagged rocks that rose above the surface in all but the highest tides and threatened the unwary mariner with swift destruction. On three sides lay the sea, while the fourth looked landwards and—as we have seen—showed a tangle of wild growth closed in behind by dense trees and rising hills. No house could be seen, nor any sign of human life; and the path that led to the cliff was hard to find, so closely was it overgrown and encroached upon by the bushes and bracken.

Cyril stood on the edge of the cliff and congratulated himself. He had managed to get away from things at last. There would be no interruption here. By dint of vigorous and persistent telegraphing the day before, an adequate supply of foodstuffs and other needful things had been sent up to the cliff from the town and left in heaped confusion in the little porch. He liked roughing it; he could do simple cooking; he was not likely to find the need of servants. So he looked around him with unmixed satisfaction.

The house on the cliff could hardly be called a house in any strict sense of the term. Nor was it exactly a summer-house or arbour. It was a simple wooden structure of one storey, consisting of two small rooms for living and sleeping, and a sort of ante-chamber containing an oil-stove and a few cooking utensils. The entrance porch was at the back; and the front faced the sea, the two windows looking out from a shallow veranda. The furniture too was of the simplest; the floors were innocent of carpet and the walls of pictures; and the absence of anyone to intrude made blinds and window-curtains unnecessary.

Cyril stood there as the sun sank down in a bed of opal grey flushed with purple sapphire; and long flashing feathers of ruby played across the drowsy waves. A passing boatman saw him from the distance outlined against the sky, and wondered who it could be: and that was the last time that any human eye saw him alive.

What happened at the house on the cliff, and how the horror came and grew until it ended in appalling disaster, no man knows with any certainty now. Cyril's lips are silent for ever: and the Thing that watched and waited has done its ruthless will and perhaps has ceased from troubling. All that we have is a disconnected collection of brief notes, written on loose half sheets of note-paper. They were no doubt written in the order of the occurrences; but when found the wind had blown them about the floor, and it was impossible to do more than guess at the intended sequence. We can only put them together in what seems the most probable order and weave a consequent story as best we may.

It would appear that as Cyril stood there and watched the sunset, his thoughts went back to his telephone conversation with the owner of the place, who had said something about intending to pull the place down because it was haunted. Cyril prided himself on the possession of sound common sense. Without being particularly sceptical, he was by no means credulous. He required evidence before he believed anything improbable; and the evidence for the occult struck him as weak in the extreme. Nor was he at all imaginative or fanciful: he had good control over his nerves, although he had admitted to Howard that they were a bit jumpy at the moment.

So his features deepened into a broad smile as he remembered the conversation. Spooks, indeed; queer thing that a sensible fellow like Howard should take any notice of such tales. Rats, no doubt; or perhaps other wild things creeping about the place when all is quiet and making small ghostly noises; but to put the thing down to spooks was a trifle too absurd. And Cyril laughed aloud.

Then he started suddenly and looked behind him. What a curious echo! He could have sworn that someone laughed. But among rocks and cliffs one expects echoes; so it was only natural that there should be one. But, somehow, there was something queer about this echo. In an ordinary echo one gets a repetition of the sound, a little modified—either sharpened or softened—by the nature of the reflecting surface from which the sound is thrown back; but it is the same sound. There is no originality about an echo. And that is where Cyril was puzzled and a trifle startled. This echo was different. There was a suggestion of malignancy about it that had certainly not been in his laughter.

It made him pause for a moment and frown. Then sanity reasserted itself, and he brushed the thought aside as absurd. But, as he did so, surely someone laughed! It was less audible this time, but more unpleasant. It resembled the low chuckling of an ignoble mind that scores over a higher one. It was distinctly curious, and a little annoying. Cyril hoped his nerves were not going to play him tricks.

Then he deliberately put the thing out of his mind and refused to think about it. He sat down on the short turf and gazed out to sea for some minutes. The sunset grey was now deepening into purple, and a long bank of cloud was gathering to the southwards. A slight breeze was rising, and the bushes behind him were whispering the secrets of the falling night. Then Cyril again looked behind him with a vague sense of disquiet.

Nothing had happened, but he had that curious suspicion of being watched that sometimes comes to one in a crowded room or street. He turned and looked fixedly at the bushes and bracken for some minutes. There was nothing to be seen, though he knew that probably many eyes of furtive wild things were watching him curiously and timidly. But it was not of these that he thought. He was vaguely aware of a Thing that was watching and biding its time—a Thing that meant mischief of a sort that would not stand thinking about. Cyril found himself waiting for the Thing to reveal its presence.

A moment later he took himself firmly in hand. This sort of thing would not do. He had read all about it in books of so-called ghost stories: and he understood the psychology of the nonsense. He pulled himself together and went into the house. Here he found occupation for the next hour in unpacking the supply of food-stuffs that lay in the porch and stowing them away. Then his small supply of books had to be looked out, writing materials arranged on one of the tables, the bedroom put in order for the night. By this time his odd nervousness had passed off; and he turned in to bed at an unusually early hour and in the best of spirits.

He slept well, as he generally did, and was only once disturbed by something that sounded like scratching around the walls of the house. No doubt a rat, or possibly a rabbit. He had noticed that there were plenty of them about. But, just as he was going to sleep again, an odd thing happened. The moon was shining in through the window, to which his back was turned, and he noticed that while part of the room was in bright light, part seemed to be in shadow. It was as if a blind were partly drawn across the window. He turned drowsily in bed to look at the window, when the shadow suddenly vanished! This was rather startling, for it certainly seemed as if someone had been looking in through the window.

Cyril sprang out of bed and ran to the window. There was no one there; nor could anyone be seen when he went to the door immediately afterwards. Not a soul was stirring, except a few rabbits that bolted at the sight of him. He could only put the whole thing down to fancy when half awake: or it was just possible—but hardly probable—that some wandering tramp had found his way to the place. Anyway it was of no use to think any more about it; and Cyril went back to bed and slept soundly till morning.

Next morning he rose in high spirits, and had evidently forgotten the small disquieting incidents of the previous evening. But among his notes is an entry that seems to belong to this day, and is significant in view of what happened afterwards. He bathed in the bay, climbing down the steep cliffs with the aid of a rope that had evidently been fixed there by Howard for that purpose. He was a fairly strong swimmer, but did not go far out as the currents were a little puzzling. He was doing some quiet breast strokes in the deep channel that lay close in under the cliff opposite the house when it happened. He suddenly sank some inches. It was exactly as if someone had laid a heavy hand between his shoulders and pushed him down. He righted himself instantly and turned on his back; and, just as he did so, a shadow seemed to vanish from above him. It did not float away as a cloud might have done; nor did it melt away; but it just ceased to be there. And at the same time he seemed to hear someone laughing in the distance. It certainly was very odd.

The rest of the day seems to have passed without event until the evening. It must have been very soon after sunset when Cyril, who had been sitting in the shade of a rock and reading a book, rose to go in. As he did so, he happened to glance up, and was just in time to see something vanish behind the rock. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that he was just too late to see it. He had that strange impression that something certainly was there but was gone before his eyes had time to focus themselves on it. Cyril dashed round the rock—and found nothing. Yet the distance to the nearest bushes was sufficient to have prevented the intruder from taking cover in the short space of time. And then he was conscious of the faintest possible echo of laughter somewhere close at hand; and once more came the strong impression of being watched by something that was hostile.

But when he went into the house he encountered a distinctly unpleasant shock. Before going out, he had been writing at a table placed before the window; and he distinctly remembered leaving a copy of Montaigne open on it. The table was now pushed back to the wall, and the book was lying on the floor. But the thing that most alarmed him was the discovery of a sheet of paper on which he had been making a few notes. This was also lying on the floor; but the sinister thing was the presence of a footprint on it. The print was very faint, and rather suggested in appearance a slight burn or scorching than soiling. It was not easy to make out, for it was incomplete; the sheet being too small to take it all. At a glance it could be seen that it was not made by human foot or hand: neither was it at all like the footprint of a dog or any other familiar animal. It exactly resembled one half of the impression that would be made by the foot of a bird, such as a barndoor fowl. But what bird could have a foot quite eight inches across? And what kind of bird would scorch rather than soil the paper on which it happened to step?

Cyril did not lose hold of himself. He saw that everything depended on self-control if he was to rid himself of this pestilent obsession. He brought common sense to bear on the situation and demonstrated to himself that the evidence was faulty at all points, and clearly showed that the phenomena were purely subjective. It was a little difficult to get over the footprint; but he pointed out to himself that the marks were very vague and might be caused in various ways apart from the impression of any foot at all. As to the removal of the table, his memory must have played a trick with him. Clearly he must have moved it before he went out, but forgotten about it afterwards. Anything was better than an explanation that would not bear thinking about.

But the events of the night did not tend to reassure him. Three times he was roused by a sound close beside his bed, which could only be described as a sound of beating of wings against the walls, alternated by sharp raps and a sound of scratching. And on one of these occasions, when the moon was shining through the window, he was conscious of a Thing that watched but

vanished when he looked up. In the morning he found that the door, which he was sure that he had bolted when going to bed, was standing slightly ajar.

The worst thing of all was an increasing sense that the Thing that watched was somehow getting closer. The net of evil seemed to be gathering round him; and it was only a question of time how soon it would enfold him. And then what would happen?

When he went out to bathe before breakfast, he had a narrow escape. He was about to descend the cliff as before with the aid of the rope when he noticed just in time that this had been partly untied, so that when he put his weight on it the knot would run through and he would be sent whirling down to break his bones on the rocks far below. It was with a grim face that Cyril retied the knot before climbing down. But he looked still more grim a moment later, when a mass of rock that had been nicely poised on a ledge fell and missed him by a few inches.

This time he took care not to go out of his depth; and he kept clear of the overhanging cliffs. But again he thought he caught sight of something peering over a rock at him, which vanished when he looked that way.

Several times during the day he was haunted by this threatening danger: and the Thing that was biding its time was evidently gathering strength. He had an idea that the final attack was not very far off now. In fact he made up his mind to leave the place next day. But it was waiting for the next day that was to cost him his life.

The last thing that his notes record seems to have happened during the afternoon of this day. He was sitting in a deck chair, reading a book, when he saw out of the corner of his eye something like a great wing rise above a rock on the left at a little distance. It seemed to stretch itself and then sink down, as if the bird were resting behind the rock. It had just the appearance of a raven's wing: but no bird of such size was ever seen by human eye. Cyril did not see it quite clearly. He was looking at his book without paying any great attention to it; and he saw the wing indirectly and as it were slightly out of focus. When he looked directly at the rock, there was nothing unusual to be seen.

He got up and went to the place. No trace of anything like a bird was to be seen; but behind the rock was a cave which opened on a rock platform facing the sea. He remembered having heard that human remains had been found there, and that the cave was supposed to have been a rock shelter in prehistoric days. Then he noticed that in one place the earth seemed to have been disturbed very recently—apparently only a few days before. There was a strong musky smell about the place—quite unlike anything that he had ever smelt before—and again came that strange sense of something that was watching and waiting its chance. The gloom of the cave seemed to be something not merely unnatural but even immoral.

That is all that we shall ever know of the horror through which Cyril was doomed to pass. He evidently scribbled his note about the cave on his return—and the rest is silence.

Late in the afternoon of the next day a fisherman passing in his boat noticed something unusual on the rocks below the cliff, and put in to see what it was. There he found all that was left of poor Cyril, horribly mangled and broken. There was not a whole bone in his body; and the mangling could not be accounted for by a fall from the cliff. His clothes were torn into ribbons; and on his chest and back were fearful rents that appeared to have been made by the claws of a gigantic bird of prey. But what bird has feet eight inches across?—and only feet of those dimensions could have made such wounds.

When they came to examine the house, they found evidence of a mighty struggle. Most of the furniture was overturned, and some of it was smashed to splinters. A bag of flour had been thrown down and burst open; and thus several footprints were recorded. Those of Cyril were

easily recognised, for he was wearing boots of peculiar shape: and the other footprints were those of a bird! And the bird's footprints were eight inches across.