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The Haunted Light at Newport By-the-Sea

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THE HAUNTED LIGHT AT NEWPORT BY-THE-SEA

The Yaquina Bay Lighthouse first shed its light over the harbor entrance to Newport in 1871. It was used until 1874, after a more visible lighthouse was built at Yaquina Head. The Yaquina Bay Lighthouse was a residence for the Lightkeeper, his wife and his family of 10 children, aged up to 21.

by Lischen M. Miller as published in Pacific Monthly Magazine August 1899

Situated at Yaquina, on the coast of Oregon, is an old, deserted lighthouse. It stands upon a promontory that juts out dividing the bay from the ocean, and is exposed to every wind that blows. Its weather-beaten walls are wrapped in mystery. Of an afternoon when the fog comes drifting in from the sea and completely envelopes the lighthouse, and then stops in its course as if its object had been attained, it is the loneliest place in the world. At such times those who chance to be in the vicinity hear a moaning sound like the cry of one in pain, and sometimes a frenzied call for help pierces the death-like stillness of the waning day. Far out at sea, ships passing in the night are often guided in their course by a light that gleams from the lantern tower where no lamp is ever trimmed.

In the days when Newport was but a handful of cabins, roughly built, and flanked by an Indian camp, across the bar there sailed a sloop, grotesquely rigged and without a name. The arrival of a vessel was a rare event, and by the time the stranger had dropped anchor abreast the village the whole population were gathered on the strip of sandy beach to welcome her. She was manned by a swarthy crew, and her skipper was a beetle-browed ruffian with a scar across his cheek from mouth to ear.

A boat was lowered, and in it a man about 40 years of age, accompanied by a young girl, were rowed ashore. The man was tall and dark, and his manner and speech indicated gentle breeding. He explained that the sloop's water casks were empty, and was directed to the spring that poured down the face of the yellow sandstone cliff a few yards up the beach. Issuing instructions in some heathenish, unfamiliar tongue to the boatmen, he devoted himself to asking and answering questions. The sloop was bound down the coast to Coos Bay. She had encountered rough weather off the Columbia river bar, and had been driven far out of her course. To the young lady, his daughter, the voyage proved most trying. She was not a good sailor. If, therefore, accommodations could be secured, he wished to leave her ashore until the return of the sloop a fortnight later.

The landlady of the "——" had a room to spare, and by the time the water casks were filled, arrangements had been completed which resulted in the transfer of the fair traveler's luggage from the sloop to the "hotel." The father bade his daughter an affectionate adieu, and was rowed back to the vessel, which at once weighed anchor and sailed away in the golden dusk of the summer evening.

Muriel, that was the name she gave, Muriel Trevenard, was a delicate-looking, fair-haired girl still in her teens, very sweet and sunny tempered. She seemed to take kindly to her new environment, accepting its rude inconveniences as a matter of course, though all her own belongings testified to the fact that she was accustomed to the refinements and even luxuries of civilization. She spent many hours each day idling with a sketch block and pencil in that grassy hollow in the hill, seaward from the town, or strolled upon the beach or over the wind-swept uplands. The fortnight lengthened to a month and yet no sign of the sloop, or any sail rose above the horizon to southward.

"You've no cause to worry," said the landlady. "Your father's safe enough. No rough weather since he sailed, and as for time – a ship's time is as uncertain as a woman's temper, I've heard my own father say."

"Oh I am not anxious," replied Muriel, "not in the least."

It was in August that a party of pleasure seekers came over the Coast Range and pitched their tents in the grassy hollow. They were a merry company, and they were not long in discovering Muriel.

"Such a pretty girl," exclaimed Cora May, who was herself so fair that she could afford to be generous. "I am sure she does not belong to anybody about here. We must coax her to come to our camp."

But the girl needed little coaxing. She found these light-hearted young people a pleasant interruption, and she was enthusiastically welcomed by all, young and old alike. She joined them in their ceaseless excursions, and made one of the group that gathered nightly around the camp fire. There was one, a rather serious-minded youth, who speedily constituted himself her cavalier. He was always at hand to help her into the boat, to bait her hook when they went fishing, and to carry her shawl, or book or sketch block, and she accepted these attentions as she seemed to accept all else, naturally and sweetly.

The Cape Foulweather light had just been completed, and the house upon the bluff above Newport was deserted. Some member of the camping party proposed one Sunday afternoon that they pay it a visit.

"We have seen everything else there is to see," remarked Cora May.

"It is just an ordinary house with a lantern on top," objected Muriel. "You can get a good view of it from the bay. Besides it is probably locked up."

"Somebody has the key. We can soon find out who," said Harold Welch. "And we haven't anything else to do."

Accordingly they set out in a body to find the key. It was in the possession of the landlady's husband who had been appointed to look after the premises. He said he had not been up there lately, and seemed surprised after a mild fashion that anyone should feel an interest in an empty house, but he directed them how to reach it.

"You go up that trail to the top of the hill and you'll strike the road, but you won't find anything worth seeing after you get there. It ain't anywhere like the new light."

With much merry talk and laughter they climbed the hill and found the road, a smooth and narrow avenue overshadowed by dark young pines, winding along the hill-top to the rear of the house.

It stood in a small enclosure bare of vegetation. The sand was piled in little wind-swept heaps against the board fence. There was a walk paved with brick, leading from the gate around to the front where two or three steps went up to a square porch with seats on either side. Harold Welch unlocked the door, and they went into the empty hall that echoed dismally to the sound of human voices. Rooms opened from this hallway on either hand and in the L at the back were the kitchen, storerooms and pantry, a door that gave egress to a narrow veranda, and another shutting off the cellar.

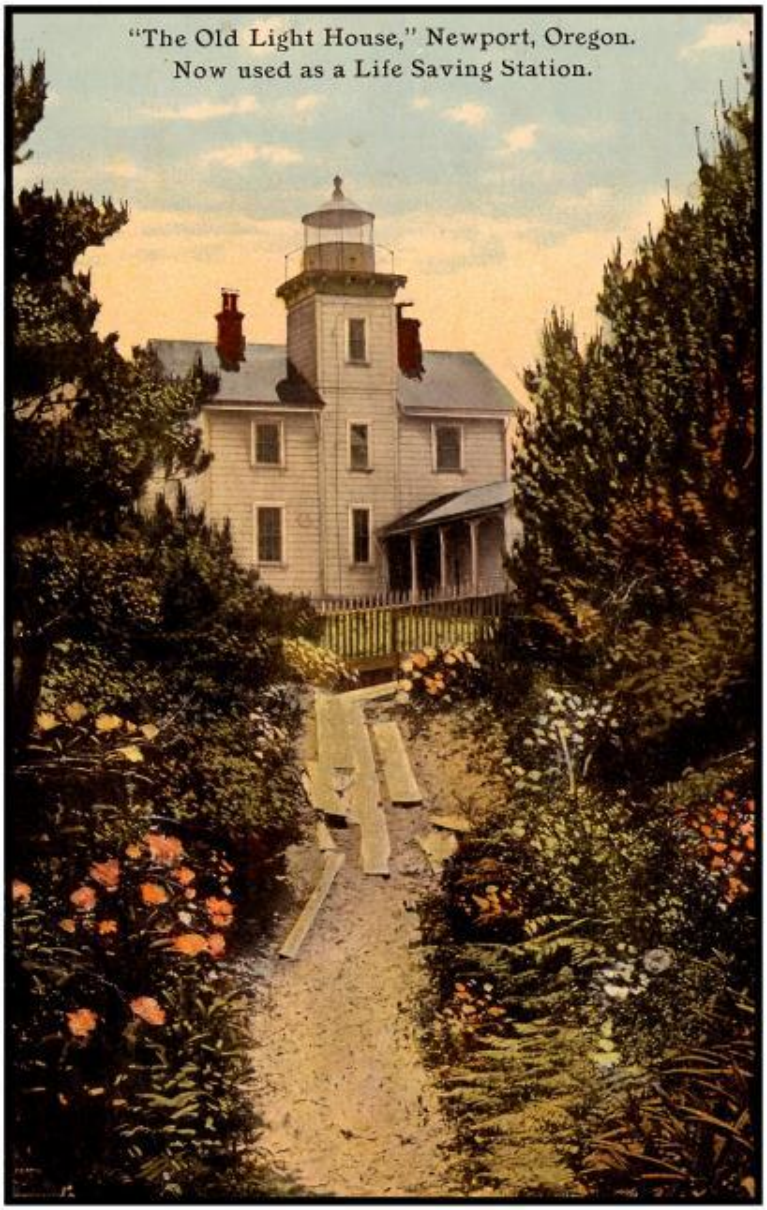
At the rear of the hall the stairs led up to the second floor which was divided like the first into plain, square rooms. But the stairway went on, winding up to a small landing where a window looked out to northward, and from which a little room, evidently a linen closet, opened opposite the window. There was nothing extraordinary about this closet at the first glance. It was well furnished with shelves and drawers, and its only unoccupied wall space was finished with a simple wainscoting.

"Why," cried one, as they crowded the landing and overflowed into the closet, "this house seems to be failing to pieces." He pulled at a section of the wainscoting and it came away in his hand. "Hello! what's this? Iron walls?"

"It's hollow," said another, tapping the smooth black surface disclosed by the removal of the panel.

"So it is," cried the first speaker. "I wonder what's behind it? Why it opens! "

It was a heavy piece of sheet iron about three feet square. He moved it to one side, set it against the wall, and peered into the aperture.



"How mysterious!" exclaimed Muriel, leaning forward to look into the dark closet, whose height and depth exactly corresponded to the dimensions of the panel. It went straight back some six or eight feet and then dropped abruptly into what seemed a soundless well. One, more curious than the rest, crawled in and threw down lighted bits of paper.

"It goes to the bottom of the sea," he declared, as he backed out and brushed the dust from his clothes. "Who knows what it is, or why it was built?"

"Smugglers," suggested some-body and they all laughed, though there was nothing particularly humorous in the remark. But they were strangely nervous and excited. There was something uncanny in the atmosphere of this deserted dwelling that oppressed them with an unaccountable sense of dread. They hurried out leaving the dark closet open, and climbed up into the lantern tower where no lamp has been lighted these many years. The afternoon, which had been flooded with sunshine, was waning in a mist that swept in from the sea and muffled the world in dull grey.

"Let us go home," cried Cora May. "If it were clear we might see almost to China from this tower, but the fog makes me lonesome."

So they clambered down the iron ladder and descending the stairs, passed out through the lower hall into the grey fog. Harold Welch stopped to lock the door, and Muriel waited for him at the foot of the steps. The lock was rusty, and he had trouble with the key. By the time he joined her, the rest of the party had disappeared around the house.

"You are kind to wait for me," said he, as they caught step on the brick pavement and moved forward. But Muriel laid her hand upon his arm.

"I must go back," she said. "I--I--dropped my handkerchief in--the--hall upstairs, I must go back and get it."

They remounted the steps, and Welch unlocked the door and let her pass in. But when he would have followed, she stopped him imperiously.

"I am going alone," she said. "You are not to wait. Lock the door and go on. I will come out through the kitchen." He objected, but she was obstinate, and, perhaps because her lightest wish was beginning to be his law of life, he reluctantly obeyed her. Again the key hung in the lock. This time it took him several minutes to release it. When he reached the rear of the house Muriel was nowhere to be seen. He called her two or three times and waited, but, receiving no reply, concluded that she had hurried out and joined the rest whose voices came back to him from the avenue of pines. She had been nervous and irritable all the afternoon, so unlike herself that he had wondered more than once if she were ill, or weary of his close attendance. It occurred to him now that possibly she had taken this means to rid herself of his company.

He hurried on, for it was growing cold and the fog was thickening to a rain. He had just caught up with the stragglers of the party, and they were beginning to chafe him at being alone, when the somber stillness of the darkening day was rent by a shriek so wild and weird that they who heard it felt the blood freeze suddenly in their veins. They shrank involuntarily closer and looked at each other with blanched cheeks and startled eyes. Before anyone found voice it came again. This time it was a cry for help, thrice repeated in quick succession.

"Muriel! Where is Muriel?" demanded Welch, his heart leaping in sudden fear.

"Why you ought to know," cried Cora May. "We left her with you." They hurried toward the deserted house.

"She went back to get her handkerchief," explained Welch. "She told me not to wait, and I locked the door and came on."

"Locked her in that horrid place! Why did you do it?" exclaimed Cora, indignantly.

"She said she would come out by way of the kitchen," replied he.

"She could not. The door is locked, and the key is broken off in the lock," said another. "I noticed it when we were rummaging around in there."

They began to call encouragingly, "Muriel, we are coming. Don't be afraid." But they got no reply.

"Oh let us hurry, " urged Cora, "perhaps she has fainted with fright."

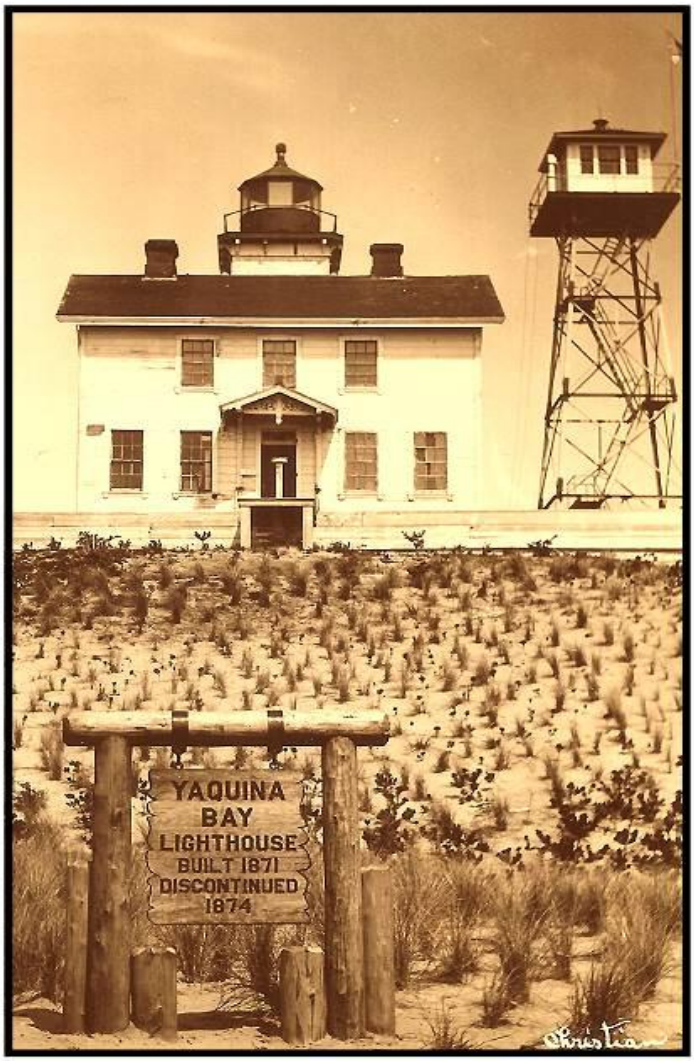
In a very few minutes they were pouring into the house and looking and calling through the lower rooms. Then up stairs, and there, upon the floor in the upper chamber, where the grey light came in through the curtain-less windows, they found a pool of warm, red blood.

There were blood drops in the hall and on the stairs that led up to the landing, and in the linen closet they picked up a bloodstained handkerchief. But there was nothing else. The iron door had been replaced, and the panel in the wainscoting closed, and try as they might, they could not open it. They were confronted by an apparent tragedy, appalled by a fearful mystery, and they could do nothing, nothing.

They returned to the village and gave the alarm, and reinforced, came back and renewed the hopeless search with lanterns. They ransacked the house again and again from tower to cellar. They scoured the hills in the vain delusion that she might have escaped from the house and wandered off in the fog. But they found nothing, nor ever did, save the blood drops on the stairs and the little handkerchief.

"It will be a dreadful blow to her father," remarked the landlady of the "——," "I don't want to be the one to break it to him." And she had her wish, for the sloop nor any of its crew ever again sailed into Yaquina Bay. As time went by, the story was forgotten by all but those who joined in that weary search for the missing girl.

But to this day it is said the blood-stains are dark upon the floor in that upper chamber. And one there was who carried the little handkerchief next to his heart till the hour of his own tragic death. --The End--



After the Yaquina Bay Lighthouse was discontinued in 1874, it was used to house members of the U.S. Life Saving Service (later Coast Guard) until 1933.

The building fell into disrepair and it was slated for demolition in 1946. It was saved by the vigilant efforts of the Lincoln County Historical Society.

The building still stands today and it is open for tours.

Editor's Note: This document is in the public domain because it was first published before January 31, 1923. The story is a famous work of fiction that many people mistakenly think is a true story and it was published in a West Coast literary magazine called Pacific Monthly which was based in Portland. The author never represented her story as anything other than fiction and she was the sister-in-law of famous Oregon writer Joachin Miller.

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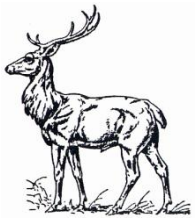

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