Carbon

SOMETHING FRESH, IF POSSIBLE

Helen Forbes

Until she came upon the photograph in Laura's bookroom Salome Parham did not know that the Vikings' Cove was in reality a sinister spot. Alone, that afternoon, waiting for Laura to come downstairs, she caught sight of this new picture that made an interesting and familiar place so beautiful that she crossed the room to look at it more closely. She leaned towards it, fascinated. And then she shivered. While she had never gone there without feeling that the Cove was eerie, the thought had been merely casual. It was the photograph that showed the truth.

It had been taken from high on the cliff path, where one came to the edge and looked down upon the lonely crescent of pebble beach bordered by its ruffle of milky-white spume, with black threads of stranded seaweed parallel to the foam, and the two lines of smooth grey rock running out into the sea, as if the keels of two Viking ships had rested there and turned to stone before the beginning of history. The photograph had some of the qualities of an etching as well as characteristics of its own; it was wonderfully clear, it was brilliant, startling, in its greys and whites and blacks. It looked as if it had been taken by the light of the moon. And it showed more than the human eye could see. That must have been how the people in it were tricked into letting themselves be visible. There they were, two little figures in peaked hats, a man and a woman. They were walking towards the

pines on the Point that made the farther boundary of the Cove.

Salome stared. It was impossible to miss their complete lack of relationship to human beings of today, and one thing else was sure; they were not Vikings. They were nothing as simple and straightforward as that race and its descendants. And as she studied the photograph, astonished and almost fearful, another distinctly weird feature became evident to her senses; it brought the fragrance of the pines, not of a hot day but a cold one, and the salty sharpness of an icy sea bit her nostrils until she had to open her mouth to let in softer air. And yet the leaves on the wild roses and the huckleberry bushes in the foreground showed that the photograph had been taken lately, in the summer.

Laura came into the room before Salome was ready to leave the picture. Usually everything else stopped for Salome when Laura Richardson came on the scene but now she turned to her impulsively and exclaimed, "Those people----who do you think they are?"

"Oh, you're looking at that photograph. It's good, isn't it? But what people do you mean?"

"Those on the beach."

"What are you talking about?" asked Laura. "You are seeing things. I always said that you were mad." She laughed, but Salome heard affection in her voice and did not mind. What reasons Laura had for liking her, Salome had never fathomed. The fact that they were cousins and had grown up together in Longport had nothing to do with it. There were plenty of other Parham cousins that Laura did not care for especially.

"You're the one who can't see," said Salome, and then she

stopped. She leaned closer, but there was nothing on the beach, not so much as a shadow.

She looked into Laura's amused eyes, bewildered.

"Tea is what you want," said Laura. "Tea and scones. How does it happen that you are free today?"

"Miss Curtain wants to go somewhere to-morrow, so we exchanged free days this week."

"Again, so soon? Did it inconvenience you?" demanded Laura. "That tiresome old betty! Are you giving up something for her?"

"Not at all. I hadn't planned a thing. The change has turned out very well for me, as it happens, because you are at home, and I am sure you wouldn't have been here to-morrow; you were never known to be at home two afternoons in succession."

Laura was on the Board, Salome was on the Staff, of the Longport Historical Society. Salome was one of the two lecturers-----Miss Curtain called herself a hostess, Salome preferred to be a guide---- in the old brick building that housed the Society's collection. There she stayed from ten o'clock in the morning until dusk for five days out of the seven, shepherding groups of miscellaneous people at twenty-five cents a head as they passed through the years from earliest Colonial to the middle of the nineteenth century. During the tourist season the Society was so popular that Miss Curtain often wished she had the courage to suggest that the Board should provide the hostesses with shoe leather.

At her job Miss Parham was perfection itself. She knew all there was to know about Early American furniture, glass, silver, pewter, hand wrought iron and habits. Also, because Longport was famous in sea-faring days, she was an authority on clipper

s ships, brigs and barques and barkentines and everything that went with them. And, as unique as ~~such an~~ her vast accumulation of knowledge, was the fact that she never was known to use a stereotyped phrase. Everything she said was fresh and seemed important and newly-discovered. This reserved New England woman answered stupid questions with the same consideration that she gave to a visiting Antiquarian, in a voice so rare and satisfying that discriminating persons had been known to go around with her a second time for the sake of listening to her, not to what she said.

Salome Parham was tall, with a general aspect of russet, or perhaps of that walnut with which the curtains in the Society's Queen Anne room were dyed. That period suited a woman who was not modern but who had nothing of the heavy utilitarian quality of the earliest days. She was tall and spare, but hardly as thin as might have been expected of someone who had few chances to sit down during the season between the Nineteenth of April and the end of September. Because it was not her will to take strangers into her confidence when she was bored and tired, they always thought that the thin lady at the Historical Society was remarkably good-matured. As usual, the public was mistaken; Salome was a little on the acid side in private life, an existence that was very quiet, alone with her mother. Laura Richardson was practically the only person for whom she cared two snaps.

Her colleague, Miss Curtain, was dumpy, a placid nonentity who revelled in bringing to the Visitors the sweetness and the message of life in the olden times. She was a lover of her fellow-man and particula ly partial to fat little blond girls with

corkscrew curls. Salome Parham was not sentimental about children although Laura once caught her being extraordinarily kind to two dirty small boys who had walked all the way over from West Longport because they were interested in history. Much to her surprise Laura had found herself driving them home and stopping for ice cream with them. She had five children of her own and knew what to expect, intellectually, of any given age, and before she dropped the boys on their doorsteps she recognized Salome as an accurate judge of form in the young.

After she saw the photograph Salome could think of nothing but going to the Cove to see the place again and draw her own conclusions. Were those people ever to be observed by the naked eye? Did they often walk along the beach? If they were not seen, could they be heard? She had been there so often without really seeing anything strange that it seemed impossible to find out much, but in the light of what she knew from the photograph surely a little bit might be learned.

As her free day for the week had been spent and all her daylight hours were fully occupied, Salome could not hope to go to the Vikings' Cove before Sunday. Nothing else seemed of any importance in her life. And yet it was not the Cove but the photograph that was always before her eyes. The place no longer appeared life-size when she thought of it. It had dwindled to miniature, precisely as it looked in that vivid scene, and always there were tiny figures on the beach. They entered between the keels of the Viking ships, and sometimes there were two or three of them, but just as often there were many, [redacted], a whole community out taking the air.

ships, brigs and barques and barkentines andeverything that went with them. Andm

Part of the time Salome was obsessed with the idea of going to Laura's to look at the photograph again, but she hated to expose herself to jibes, although she ~~xxxx~~ dallied with the possibility of arriving when she could be sure that her cousin was not at home. But her days were not her own and it would be at a very odd hour that she could present herself at the house. ~~xxx~~ She knew that Laura would hear of it. One or more of the children might be on hand, or the maid who let her in would be certain to say, "Miss Parham came, to see something in the bookroom." No, that would never do, and Salome had practiced patiehce before now. Besides, seeing the photograph would settle nothing; once there had been people in it, once there had not.

The most peculiar part of all this was her belief that those two little figures knew she had seen them. That was why they disappeared. Until she saw them they must have supposed that they were invisible in a photograph , just as in real life; that is, if they knew what a camera was. And now that they had been seen, knew that one person was acquainted with their secret, what were they going to do about it?

Salome thought that she must wait until Sunday, but something happened before then. On Saturday morning she had started with a fresh group, the usual assortment of anonymous human beings on vacation, some burblers and gushers, some taciturn, some given to wise-cracks, some of them fathers and mothers who felt that their young must be instructed even on holiday. Salome looked them over impartially and began the rounds of the house for the third time that morning. Together they entered the old kitchen, and after that they came to the Seventeenth Century room.

She found
There were the man and woman out of the photograph, sitting

on either side of the fireplace, the woman primly upright on the settle, the man in the rocking-chair opposite her. Luckily, Salome had never made a practice of gabbling continually, her talk could never be called chatter, and therefore nobody noticed that their guide did not begin to explain before they had had a chance to look.

She stood in the doorway, not venturing any closer. How stern they were, with their narrow, bitter mouths. They looked past the tourists to stare at her with hatefully insolent appraisal. They studied her as if she, not they, were the monstrosity.

Salome could not take her eyes off of them. Shuddering, she watched them, and of course the first word that came to her was robot. But they were more than that implied, for they were thinking creatures. To her, they seemed specimens miraculously preserved in a state of animation; perhaps a preservative, a fluid akin to denatured alcohol, ran in their veins instead of blood, and that was why they could live forever. They seemed pale and cold, cruel, and incapable of being touched by the kinder human emotions.

What did they want of her? Why had they come to see her? And were the sight-seers aware of their presence? That was the only question that could be answered; a little boy, a busy inquisitive small pest of the variety that Salome hated to see coming into the building, dashed forward and lifted the lid of the Dutch oven on the hearth. As the child bent over, the man in the chair lifted his foot and the boy spread himself over the interior of the fireplace. His head banged against the heavy iron kettle on the crane, one arm was pushed down to the kindling wood under the white birch logs, the other grasped the tongs as he fell. The tin Dutch oven scraped the bricks, the tongs and shovel clattered to

the floor, and the boy began to bellow. Between roars he shouted, "Somebody kicked me! Somebody pushed me down!" His father, dusting him off, tried to shush him. "Nonsense! There was nobody anywhere near you. If you are going to be so clumsy you'll have to stay at home."

The noise gave Salome another moment's leeway for it was impossible to talk against it. She looked into the faces of the flesh and blood beings around her and wondered whether any one of them was concealing a consciousness like hers. And was she managing to hide her fear, and her interest and excitement? By the time the boy was quiet Salome could answer questions normally and so far as it was possible to tell no one was watching her with curiosity.

People were wandering towards the next room. There was no excuse for not moving on. With one last look Salome turned away and heard the man and woman speak.

It was not the English language that they used but it was understandable, as if it were some speech so ancient that it was universal still, spoken in dreams or when the mind was unconscious of the living world around him. And just as might have been expected, the woman's voice was hoarse, hardly to be distinguished from the man's. She said, "You were wanting something fresh, and now you have it."

"If possible," answered the man.

When Salome came around with the next group the creatures from the beach had gone. They had not merely disappeared, the room was empty. Salome went to the fireplace, put a hand on the rocking-chair, but there was not a trace of them. It was not until she was quite

sure they were gone that she realized she had expected to find the room cold, like the beach in the photograph.

It was impossible to decide whether fear or curiosity was uppermost in her mind; these people could go where they liked, evidently, and having seen them seemed to put her in their power. She was sure now that to-morrow something definite would be discovered. They thought that she was fresh? At her age? It would be pleasant to have one's charms appreciated even though it took occult and superhuman powers to do it. Salome laughed, and then she shuddered; perhaps if she could remember an existence over countless ages thirty-eight would seem young. Did she wish to be able to live that long? How she spent the rest of Saturday Salome never knew although habit and a strong will gave her a surface calm. If her manner was abstracted, at least she was not enough different from usual to make Miss Curtain sit up and take notice.

Sunday was a pleasant day and Salome would have given anything to be able to go to the Cove immediately after breakfast instead of starting for church. But she always went with her mother and church it had to be today. Such was the rebellion in her soul as she entered the square white pew with sober face and sat discreetly quiet that any deity but the dispassionate God of the Unitarians would have mowed her down.

It was hot, after dinner, no sensible temperature for walking along the cliff path, and Salome made herself wait until five o'clock. It was only four by the sun's time, and "they" who probably did not keep earthly time, would not be out until it was cooler. Slowly, for she must not be too eager, she walked between her mother's garden rows of phlox down to the Parham gate on the Sea Road, and

then along it towards the ferry. On the right flowed the river, bordered with low buildings; sail-lofts, and paint-shops spattered as if every color had been tried on their wide doors, and fish-houses, silvery-walled with weathered pine. She wondered whether all this was being seen for the last time.

The ferry was crowded with summer people on their way to the only sand beach in the neighborhood, but although she sat among them her secret hid them from her. She was thinking of another world, for that was what the Vikings' Cove amounted to, and there she had determined to go, whether or not it seemed best to stay there.

Along a path baked by the sun and pounded hard as iron by hundreds of flat-heeled summer shoes, between the bayberry bushes and the sweetfern, pulled at by dodder and scratched by wild roses, Salome came at last to where rough steps in the cliff side led down to water level and the Cove. She paused at the top and examined the length of the beach but there was nothing unusual to be seen. And yet to make the descent seemed tremendously daring. Why? She had been down there a hundred times and the photograph was no more than confirmation of what she always felt in that remote and quiet little bay. Why was she so sure that knowing the truth would make so much difference? Were those two lines of grey rock the two jambes of a door opening into a fourth dimensional sort of place? Was she willing to enter it, with the possibility of never coming back? Her decision must be made before she set foot on the pebbles. There certainly was a choice that she could make, now, at least, for yesterday the man had said, "If possible." But once down there perhaps there could be no drawing back.

There was Laura to be thought of. A dweller in the fourth

dimension, invisible, could never play around with that brisk and practical woman. She could come and watch her, as those others ~~did~~ came yesterday ~~at~~ to the Historical Society, but Laura was too completely normal to be reached by the occult. She was too unconscious of herself, had too lively an interest in many things, ~~xxx~~ listened too lovingly to the voices of her children; never, as long as she lived, could she see the people in the photograph.

As for Salome's mother, that domineering old woman, irascible, hateful, their incompatible life together would be ended. Her mother could bully someone else for a change.

Salome took the first steps downward. And suddenly she saw the man and woman coming to meet her. There was no mistaking them; when they were in the photograph their backs were turned, but she recognized them, today and yesterday. And she asked herself why she could imagine that it would be good to be with them. Was mere change worth such a risk? Was it adventure? She never had been adventurous. Perhaps it was despair; she was so alone and they ~~seemed to want~~ wanted her.

They seemed to have taken her coming for granted and Salome had time to wonder what pleasure there could be in a life where one knew everything, past and present. Other interests, incomprehensible to a human being, must take the place of humble questionings and excitements. She went down the steps steadily, now that the journey was ending. And they stood at the bottom, looking up. It seemed to Salome that she was going down a Jacob's ladder, an interminable descent.

They did not speak, when she came to them, but the man took her by the arm on her right, the woman on her left, and between them she hurried forward. All she could think of was a picture

seen in childhood, Lot and his wife and family fleeing from the cities of the plain. Lot's face had been austere, like these.

Suddenly she was aware that all around them was a crowd, watching, and making way for them to come through untouched. And surely they were taking her to the space between the Viking keels. As though the entrance were open already she could feel the chill of that unknown world.

What plans had they for her? All at once Salome was terribly afraid. She tried to pull away. She could feel her life escaping, pouring out of her through their cold hands. Instantly the expressions changed on the faces around her. They were sneering, as if They believed she was too weak to make any effective protest. That, and the tighter, numbing grip on her arms, increased her fears to panic. She tried to fight off the man and the woman but they kept her going forward. It was true that she was not strong enough but she must make what effort she could; she was too terrified to accept the end quietly.

"Salome! Stop!"

She felt warm human hands on her arm, Laura's, and at her belt a childish tug pulled her back from the water. That was Horatio, Laura's youngest boy. Laura had brought him, risked her darling baby, for the sake of a person like Salome Parham? Love and gratitude swept through her and she was warm, alive, again. All at once the creatures were gone.

"Laura! How did you happen to be here?"

"You were so interested in that photograph that you made me want to come and look at the real place. I wanted you, too,

but when I telephoned Aunt Elsie said that you had gone to walk. I knew you must have come here----you did see something, didn't you? Are you all right? Tell me."

Salome had no words to relate the greatness of the disaster from which Laura had saved her. She put her hands before her face and knew that she was trembling, swaying as if she were going to faint.

"Sit down," commanded Laura, and under her guardianship Salome knew the beach was safe.

They all three sat down. The pebbles, spread so smoothly and evenly by the tide, were soft as sand.

As she recovered, Salome saw that young Horatio was looking at her with as much curiosity as she had felt towards the man and woman. "Cousin Sal," he said. "You were acting very strange. You were pushing against nothing! Why did you do that? We looked over the edge of the cliff and saw you. Mother said that there was something funny going on down there, and I knew she meant funny queer, not funny ha, ha."