

The Excise Officer

Leslie Gordon
Barnard

fadedpage.com

*** A Distributed Proofreaders Canada eBook ***

This eBook is made available at no cost and with very few restrictions. These restrictions apply only if (1) you make a change in the eBook (other than alteration for different display devices), or (2) you are making commercial use of the eBook. If either of these conditions applies, please contact a <https://www.fadedpage.com> administrator before proceeding. Thousands more FREE eBooks are available at <https://www.fadedpage.com>.

This work is in the Canadian public domain, but may be under copyright in some countries. If you live outside Canada, check your country's copyright laws. IF THE BOOK IS UNDER COPYRIGHT IN YOUR COUNTRY, DO NOT DOWNLOAD OR REDISTRIBUTE THIS FILE.

Title: The Excise Officer

Date of first publication: 1911

Author: Leslie Gordon Barnard (1890-1961)

Date first posted: December 22, 2023

Date last updated: December 22, 2023

Faded Page eBook #20231244

This eBook was produced by: Mardi Desjardins, John Routh & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <https://www.pgdpCanada.net>

This file was produced from images generously made available by Canadiana.ca

THE EXCISE OFFICER

Story of Love which did not run Smooth

BY LESLIE GORDON BARNARD

Lieutenant George Burton, Excise Officer in His Majesty's service, paced restlessly up and down the brow of the cliff. Far beneath him he could hear the roar of the breakers as they rolled unceasingly in, their white crests reared proudly in the air, then dashed in a smother of foam upon the great granite rocks that for years had withstood their force. Even where he stood an occasional extra boisterous gust of wind drove flying particles of salt spray into his ruddy, weather-beaten countenance.

The night was cold and cheerless, with a wind that chilled one to the marrow; and his very manner betrayed the fact that the young officer's mood was correspondingly unpleasant. Truth to tell his was a most unenviable frame of mind.

For several nights successively cargoes had been run "right under his very nose," to borrow the phrase that he made use of with considerable vehemence, and not a little disgust. He had been censured by the authorities for lack of vigilance, and a great, all-consuming bitterness filled his soul—a bitterness against the exceptionally bold and clever gang of smugglers with whom he had to deal, and whom he not unnaturally held directly responsible for his troubles; a bitterness, most of all, against the authorities for censuring where no blame was due. Never had a man striven harder to discharge his duty in a manner that would commend itself to his superiors; never had an official displayed greater zeal; or made more enemies—for in the days of George the Third public sympathy was not always on the side of the law—in the fulfilment of the duties his position entailed, than he. And this was his reward.

"Just the kind of night to run a cargo," he muttered, with lowered brow, and lips tightly compressed. "I'll wager one will be run, too; and what can a man do on an inky night like this, when one can scarce see a yard in front of him.

"Gad! if I could only lay my hands on the rascals and vindicate myself."

Lieutenant Burton buttoned up his coat more tightly, as a protection against the cold autumnal wind, and the wet, drizzling rain. Surely the world never saw a blacker night! a night conducive, indeed, to smuggling, provided, of course, the enterprise were in the hands of men familiar with the dangerous intricacies of the bleak, rocky coast.

But what was that?

The lieutenant caught his breath sharply. For the fraction of a second a light had flashed out not fifty yards to the left—then vanished suddenly. With bated breath the young exciseman stood, and watched intently.

Twice more in quick succession it shone out—then all was darkness again, but the eager watcher on the cliff fancied that far out at sea an answering point of fire flickered, and disappeared.

Possessed with a sudden grim determination not to allow this unexpected and doubly-welcome opportunity of proving his mettle to slip by, the lieutenant wasted no time in getting into action. With utmost caution he made his way along the cliff in the direction whence the signal light had so fleetingly, yet distinctly, broken the darkness. It was at best a perilous proceeding, and to a man not knowing every inch of the ground, as Burton did, would have meant almost certain death. A single false step and—but the consequences were too dire to dwell upon with equanimity. It was no time to hesitate, however, and the lieutenant did not falter. His only fear was that some unkind trick of Fate might dash from his lips the cup of triumph he believed he was about to drink; might wrest from him those sweets of ultimate victory, for a taste of which his very soul craved.



Yet it seemed for once that good luck was his companion. After what, in his impatient ardor, seemed an interminable age, but which in reality was but a few moments, of tripping over rocks and tufts of coarse grass, of tumbling into miniature crevasses, and of sliding awkwardly on the bare, slippery rock, the young man heard a faint rustle close at hand. An instant later a dark, cloaked figure brushed past him.

Trembling with excitement and jubilation at what he considered his miraculous good fortune, and with his heart beating like a trip-hammer at the suddenness of the encounter, the exciseman squared his shoulders. Then he sprang forward.

“Surrender, in the King’s name!” In the stress of the moment his voice sounded hoarse and unnatural to his ears.

A smothered shriek was the response. Lieutenant Burton sprang back in sheer amazement, and released his hold. It was some moments ere he could control his voice sufficiently to articulate the words that trembled on his lips.

“Jean!” he cried, dumbfounded, brain awl with the suddenness of the shock; vaguely fearful, with a premonition of impending evil. “Jean! Is it you?”

The girl made no reply, but finding herself free, sought refuge in flight. Springing hastily forward, he laid a detaining hand on her arm. A strange pallor overspread his features; into his face there came the hard, set expression of the man who sees trouble looming up ahead, and steels himself against its coming.

“Let me go, George. Let me go, please,” the girl pleaded in stifled, frightened tones.

The other paid no heed.

“Jean,” he questioned, tremulously, “was it you who signalled just now?”

“Signalled?” repeated the girl, her pitiful attempt at an affectation of composure and wonderment in itself betraying her. “Signalled? Why, George, what do you mean?”

“How can you deceive me so?” he exclaimed sorrowfully, a world of reproach in his tone; taking hold, as he spoke, of the now extinguished lantern she was endeavoring to conceal.

She burst into tears, and every sob gave to the sorely tried young man a torturing twinge of anguish.

“Give me the lantern, George, and let me go. Oh, please, please do!”

For a moment he did not answer. When finally he spoke it was in even tones, grave, yet gentle; decisive, yet kindly.

“No, Jean, I cannot. To do so would be to thwart myself in the carrying out of my plain duty. You must not, shall not, warn—your friends.”

“If—if you love me; if you care for me at all, let me go,” she pleaded again, wringing her hands, piteously.

“You know that I love you, Jean. If your eyes were not blinded just now by other considerations you would know that my heart is going out to you with the deepest affection, the greatest, truest love of which I am capable. But you have asked me one thing, Jean, that, even for you, dear, I cannot grant. The matter is not in my hands. I cannot choose my path.”

Her tone changed with her mood.

“You do not love me,” she accused, passionately, a strange quiver in her voice. She strove to break away from his grasp; gently, but firmly, he restrained her.

“You do not love me!” the girl cried again. “If you did you would not treat me thus. Choose now between me and—your ambitions!”

The moaning of the wind, the ponderous voice of the surging ocean, combined to produce a strange, weird harmony, and it sounded to the young officer like the wailing of his dying hopes. Like a condemned man awaiting sentence he stood, hopeless, disconsolate, yet inflexible in his decision.

“In that case, Lieutenant Burton, I am at your disposal to do with as you see fit.” Her tears were gone now, and the words fell from her lips distinctly, icily; there had come to her a degree of composure which even she could scarce have understood.

The young man flinched under her cutting, uncompromising tones. If anything, his face was a shade more ashy than hers; but, compressing his lips tightly, he struggled manfully to subdue his emotions. There was work for him to do—and that without delay.

“Come,” he said tersely to the girl, and led her unresistingly away.



The strained situation precluded the possibility of conversation, and in preoccupied silence, their senses dulled by the suddenness of the estrangement, the ten minutes' walk to the coastguard station was taken.

“Jim,” said the lieutenant sharply to a stalwart, uniformed coastguardsman, “see that this young lady is well treated, but keep her in custody until I order otherwise. I want the rest of you,” to a number of men making an effort not to appear too interested in the speaker's companion, “to come with me—and look to it, lads, that you are well armed.”

Five minutes later, with the tramp of heavy boots and the clash of metal against metal, the little party of men filed out into the darkness and the storm.

It was well on past midnight when the lieutenant and his men returned. Heavy-eyed but sleepless, Jean Meredith was lying on a couch.

“Jean,” said the young officer quietly, going over to her and regarding her with tender compassion, “I am glad to say that we have captured practically the whole gang of smugglers red-handed, but am sorry, very sorry, Jean, to have to inform you that we were obliged to arrest your uncle and your two cousins on a charge of aiding and abetting the King’s enemies by receiving the goods.”

The girl received the news with no outward sign of emotion save a slight blanching of the cheek.

“Lieutenant Burton,” she replied frigidly, and with formal politeness, “if you will be good enough to permit one of your men to accompany me, with your permission, I shall return home.”

The lieutenant hesitated for a fraction of a minute, then plunged.

“That is a duty and a pleasure I could not think of entrusting to a subordinate,” he said hastily, buttoning up his heavy coat, and preparing to accompany her.

A flush of anger mantled her brow.

“Then, sir,” she flared, “I shall not leave this place.”

In the midst of his embarrassment and the poignancy of his grief at the ever-widening gulf between them, his admiration gained the ascendancy over his other emotions, as she stood before him, eyes flashing, bosom heaving, red lips trembling in wrathful defiance, and injured pride. For a moment they stood thus face to face; one, unconsciously in an attitude of mute appeal, motionless under the spell of her intoxicating beauty; the other flushed, outraged, defiant. Then the lieutenant turned sharply on his heel.

“Jim, see this young lady home,” came the curt command.

“Right, sir!” The coastguardsman saluted stiffly.

A few moments later Lieutenant Burton was left alone with his moody reflections.

Followed long days and weeks of bleak autumn weather; followed the dreary winter months; and through it all Jean Meredith was to the young

man but as a dream of a bright halcyon past; the sweet, tormenting memory of a happy, intimate relationship irrevocably broken; the constant companion of his thoughts.

With the advent of spring came the return of the three men involved in the smuggling episode, from serving a comparatively light sentence. Menacing threats reached the exciseman's ears; rumors of drunken boastings made by the younger men when under the influence of the good cheer dispensed at the local taverns, threats of all manner of reprisals. These he outwardly scorned; yet he knew enough of the characters of the young men to keep constantly on his guard.

Time went on—but nothing new developed, until one day when winter had finally given way under the benign influence of spring sunshine.

The day was bright, with that glorious brightness peculiar to the springtide of the year. The ocean, as if desiring to accord with the radiant sunshine and blue heavens, was in its most charming mood. A fresh, salt, invigorating breeze was blowing in landwards, and the water, reflecting the clearness of the sky, was a wonderful blue, while the crests of the billows and the foam of the creaming breakers as they swirled and dashed against the rocks that rudely checked their onward course, were as snow-white by contrast as the few fleecy clouds that dotted the western horizon.

Lieutenant Burton, as he made his way meditatively along the rough rocky beach at the foot of the granite cliffs (for the tide was low and still receding) now clambering over barnacle-covered and seaweed-draped rocks, again crossing a strip of sand beaten hard by the action of the water, was too much preoccupied with his own affairs to take more than a very passive interest in the glorious freshness and entrancing beauty of the day. A seabird uttered its plaintive cry as it soared above the cliffs, but he scarcely heard it.

Yet not even nature, awakening after her winter's slumber, was more joyous than he. Perchance the weather had something to do with his mood, but primarily it was not responsible for his singularly exalted frame of mind. For it seemed to the young man as though a dreary winter season in his own life and experience was opening out into the springtime in a marvellous way. A simple bit of paper with a few words indited thereon in somewhat shaky handwriting—nothing more; but it was sufficient to infuse new life into his blood, to lift him up to a wonderful altitude, from which the world assumed a new and better form, and life became a thing of sweet and beautiful possibilities.

“Dear George,” ran the note, “will you meet me to-morrow as usual at low tide at The Cove? I cannot stand this any longer—Jean.”

Hence the lieutenant’s happy frame of mind, hence his stroll along the beach in the direction of The Cove, a place of hallowed memories—a former favorite place of tryst, now unfrequented by any but the sea gulls.

Arrived at this trysting-place (a sandy nook snugly nestled among the rocks), and finding the spot still unoccupied, the young man seated himself on a ledge; and, staring out dreamily at two fishing smacks, their sails glinting in the sunshine, gave himself up to pleasant meditation.

Five minutes—ten minutes passed, and still he had not moved, and as he sat and dreamed day dreams, and built bright “castles in the air,” he failed to hear the sound of stealthy footsteps approaching from behind.

A sudden cry of alarm and surprise; a desperate struggle; a rough oath; and Lieutenant Burton lay upon the sand, gagged, and bound hand and foot. He looked up and recognized his captors. Jean’s cousins! A horrible thought flashed across his mind. That note was Jean’s writing; surely—? Next instant he was filled with bitter self-reproach for permitting such a thought to find expression.

“Here with the rope, Joe,” said the elder of his captors.

The man thus addressed handed his brother a coil of stout hempen rope. Unwinding it, the latter tied it around his victim’s waist, then lashed the other end securely to a projecting rock. He worked in silence, and no inkling of their plan entered the lieutenant’s head, until a jeering remark made as they were quitting the spot, enlightened him.

“He’ll find the water nice to-day!”

Only then did their horrible plan dawn upon his comprehension, and he shuddered at the cold-bloodedness of the scheme. They were going to drown him—by degrees. Already the tide was on the turn; inside of half an hour it would reach him, and then—brave as he was, the young officer shivered as his imagination conjured up the probabilities. Accustomed to face death in the pursuance of his vocation, for many of those oldtime smugglers were desperate men—men who held human life in light esteem, yet the thought of dying in this way, helpless, unable to lift a hand, powerless to struggle, fairly unnerved him. It was so diabolical, so inhuman—the work not of men, but fiends in human guise.



Burton struggled desperately with his bonds, but only exhausted his strength to no avail. The rope was good, and vindictive hatred had made sure of the knots. With something like a groan the unfortunate man lay back on the sand, and closed his eyes to keep out the sight of the ever oncoming tide.

The cries of the birds as they swirled merrily above the water, ever and anon darting down to prey upon some unwary creature of the deep, again soaring aloft, lost their music in his ears, and were but as mockery now.

Presently the lieutenant could feel the wavelets gently lapping against his lower limbs, each succeeding wave a little more boisterous than the last, each one leaving its mark a little higher on the sand.

They had reached his head now, and were lightly caressing his face. He made an endeavor to sit upright, but his bonds were too tightly secured to admit of that. He attempted to roll a little further away, if only to prolong the precious spark of life a few brief moments longer; but no, the rope merely tautened and held him fast. There was no way of escape—no hope.

The waters rose higher—became more and more menacing as the moments flew by.

Born and bred by the sea, every wavelet, every billow had hitherto seemed to the young man like a friend; now each one assumed the guise of a deadly enemy, springing forward as though eager to hasten his inevitable doom. The tide rushed on, on, in! The water entered his ears, it soaked into the cloth that gagged him, and choked him; it trickled into his eyes until they smarted, and fairly blinded him.

His head reeled—he was suffocating. In an agony of desperation he struggled fiercely, insanelly, with the stout cords that held him, knowing all the time that he was but hastening his doom. Then he abandoned hope—and prayed that death might swiftly come.

The waters closed above his head; a brief moment which seemed an eternity of strange, whirling retrospection, then merciful unconsciousness brought cessation from pain—and peace.

* * * * *

The lieutenant opened his eyes slowly. A cool sea breeze was fanning his brow; a peculiar, not unpleasant, sensation of extreme lethargy caused him to lie back in grateful semi-consciousness.

Five minutes later he again attempted to sit up and look about him. Then his heart gave a great bound.

“Jean!” he cried in drowsy, blissful surprise.

* * * * *

“Yes, they came across the note I had written you—and used it, as you know,” explained the girl, as with vigorous strokes she rowed homewards, ignoring his protest that he was strong enough to take the oars.

“Then you really wrote it?” he interposed quickly.

Jean Meredith blushed a trifle.

“Yes,” she replied softly, eyelids drooping. “But oh, George, I was so fearful lest I should not be in time to save you. It was too far to run for help to the station when I chanced to learn of the evil plot against you; so I had to come myself, you see, but,” with a smile upon the lips that trembled somewhat, “it has turned out all right in the end.”

“Thank God, yes,” responded Lieutenant Burton, fervently. “You’re a brave girl, Jean.”

A warm glow suffused her face, as she hastened to change the subject.

“I—I’ve had a wretched time this winter,” she said, hesitatingly, gazing out to sea.

“That wasn’t my fault,” began the excise officer, absently, then checked himself, and bit his lip with vexation. He had involuntarily trespassed upon sacred ground—her pride.

The girl did not answer, but with somewhat heightened color, lengthened her stroke.

“I beg your pardon, Jean,” he apologized humbly.

There was no response.

The young man glanced up quickly in some alarm, but she averted her eyes. They rowed in silence for some minutes. The waves swished gently against the sides of the boat. Overhead a sea gull circled gaily.

“Jean,” said the lieutenant presently, in a quiet voice, “there is one question we must settle very soon. Under the circumstances you cannot go

home to your uncle. The question is what you had better do.”

Jean raised her eyes, and he was surprised to see tears lurking in their liquid depths.

“Oh, George,” she said, with a little sob, her reserve all gone now, “I don’t want to go. I want—to go—with you!”

It was surely only a merciful Providence that intervened on their behalf and prevented a shipwreck at that moment. But then there was no one to witness the strange scene—except the sea gull.

And even he, after circling above the boat once or twice, uttered a plaintive cry, and flew out to sea.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

A cover was created for this ebook which is placed in the public domain.

[End of *The Excise Officer* by Leslie Gordon Barnard]