

A. G. Macdonell

*The Factory
on the Cliff*

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Chapter I. The Golfing Holiday

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GEORGE TEMPLETON'S car refused to start on the self-starter. He jumped out impatiently and gave the handle a mighty twist. The engine back-fired and dislocated his thumb and he found himself unable to play golf for the remainder of his holiday.

He had taken rooms in a small hotel in the North-East of Scotland, intending to play golf twice or even three times a day throughout the three weeks of his leave. The accident happened at the end of the first week, and left him in a very bad temper, with a fortnight to spend as best he could. Like so many men who are prepared to walk seven or ten miles so long as they are hitting a golf ball, Templeton intensely disliked walking even one mile along a country road. However, there was no other available exercise, and he therefore set out every morning for a daily plod of several miles in order to pass the time.

On the third morning after the unfortunate back-fire, Templeton chanced to stroll northwards along the sea-coast, a part of the country which he had hitherto not explored. He was in a sulky frame of mind as he reflected on the wonderful golf which he might have been playing at that moment, and on the callous cheerfulness of his friends in the hotel who had set off for the first tee as he was finishing his breakfast.

It was a beautiful, sunny morning, but the good weather only annoyed him. If it had been pouring with rain, things would not have been so bad, but it was just like his luck that

the weather should improve as soon as he was out of action. He was, in fact, in a nasty temper.

He had gone some three or four miles along the lonely stretch of rocky coast when he was aroused from his meditations by the approach of a large motor-lorry which almost blocked the entire width of the narrow country road, so that Templeton had to shrink back against the stone wall in order to avoid being hit. This only served to increase his annoyance, and he pursued his walk, grumbling about the inconsiderateness of motor-drivers and cursing in general the men who had invented motor-cars.

A little further on, he came to the top of a long, gradual hill, and could see the road sloping away to the north for a considerable distance. He sat down and began to fill a pipe when the same lorry came back up the hill and clattered past him at a much faster rate than it had previously been going. Templeton growled at it as it went past but the driver paid no attention and Templeton had a glimpse of a man who looked distinctly frightened; the next minute it had disappeared out of sight in the direction from which it had originally come.

When the pipe was lit, George Templeton proceeded at a leisurely pace. On reaching the bend at the foot of the hill, he saw, a few hundred yards away, three or four men walking slowly towards him and obviously searching for something in the long grass at each side of the road. The lorry was standing a little distance beyond them. As the searchers came nearer, he saw to his surprise that he knew one of them by sight. It was one Griffin, who had been at Cambridge with him. Although he had been merely a bowing

acquaintance in undergraduate days nevertheless he stepped up to him and said cordially, "Hullo, Griffin! Whoever would have thought of seeing you here?"

The other started and replied, "My name is not Griffin and I don't know who you are." Templeton looked at him for a second, and then said stiffly, "I beg your pardon. A stupid mistake."

The other pushed past him and resumed his search.

Templeton was puzzled, as he knew perfectly well that the man was Griffin, and he was fairly certain that Griffin had recognized him. He decided not to be put off by rudeness.

"Lost something, I observe," he said, more in order to annoy the other man than to prolong the conversation. "Can I help you?"

Griffin paid no attention, and at last one of the other men looked up and said, "No, thanks," and accompanied his words with such a scowl that Templeton began to feel amused.

"Do tell me what you are looking for," he went on. "I have spent so many years of my life looking for golf balls that I am quite certain I could help you."

None of the four replied and Templeton's spirits began to rise. He ostentatiously took up a position behind the searchers and began to prod in the grass with his stick. The man who had refused his offer of help turned and said, "What are you doing there? We don't want your help."

"Nor do I want yours," said Templeton blandly. "This is a public road and I am looking for a collar-stud which I dropped here last Tuesday week."

The man who had denied that his name was Griffin interposed sharply and said, "Come on, Tom! Don't hang about here;" and without another word the party made their way up the hill, with bent backs and slow steps. Templeton followed them for a minute or two and then, quickening his steps, he passed the searchers and began to search on his own in front of them.

In less than a minute he had found what they were looking for. Templeton, who had been an infantry officer in the war, instantly recognized that the small dark object lying in a thick bed of nettles was first cousin to a Mills bomb. The pattern was different and the shape different, but the pin was there and it was obviously the same kind of weapon.

"Here you are, Griffin!" he shouted. "What prize do I get for finding the thimble?"

He took up the bomb and was surprised to find how light it was. The four men ran forward and Griffin made a snatch at it.

"Manners, manners," said Templeton reprovingly. "On trust, there's a good dog. When I say 'Paid for,' out comes the pin and you get the doughnut." He made a motion as if to pull out the pin. The other started back and his face went white. "Good God, man," he exclaimed. "Don't do that. It'll go off."

Templeton started. "Is it charged?" he asked.

"Yes," said Griffin.

"Then it's yours," was the prompt reply. "Free, gratis and for nothing."

Griffin seized it eagerly from him, and then the four men turned without a word of thanks and ran down the hill and round the corner.

"Well, I'm blowed," said Templeton aloud. "There's manners for you," and he sat down on the dyke and watched the proceedings.

In a short time the lorry once more appeared and began to climb the hill. The driver was alone on the front seat and there was no room for anyone to sit among the closely packed wooden boxes which formed the cargo. Templeton, therefore, assumed that the three others were still on the road or near it, and he set off at a swinging pace down the hill in pursuit. On rounding the corner, he saw no sign of his quarry and he concluded that they had taken a side road which led down towards the cliffs.

At first he thought that the cart-track, for it was little more, was simply a path used by fishermen going down to their nets, when his eye happened to notice that it emerged again from under cover of the rocks some little distance up the coast, and appeared to end at a cluster of buildings situated almost on the edge of the cliffs.

As he stood speculating on the nature of these buildings and wondering what sort of person chose to live in a place so exposed to all the winds of heaven, he saw a large motor-car moving slowly from the cluster of buildings along the cart track. He watched while it disappeared below the level of the cliffs and emerged again to join the road on which he was standing. As it passed him, he saw that the only occupant besides the driver was a man of exceptionally swarthy complexion. He was quite clearly not a citizen of

the British Isles, and Templeton judged that he must be an Arab or something akin to an Arab. The car rapidly accelerated when it reached the better road, and vanished over the top of the hill.

Greatly puzzled by the curious happenings of the morning, Templeton retraced his steps to the hotel and arrived just in time to see the golfers trooping back from their morning round. At lunch he was compelled to listen to innumerable stories of how one had holed a long putt at the crucial moment, and how another would have won if it had not been for some unparalleled stroke of misfortune.



Chapter II. The Plans Made in the Smoking Room

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THAT evening in the small smoking-room of the Links Hotel, Templeton related the happenings of the morning to one of his golfing acquaintances who had also been up at Cambridge at the same period. His name was Snell, and he remembered Griffin distinctly.

"He was a brilliant fellow," he said, "so far as I can remember. Tall, with a pale face and spectacles, always running about with big books under his arm. He had a beastly sarcastic grin and a sharp tongue."

"That's the man," said Templeton. "I didn't know him much myself."

"Nobody ever did," said Snell. "It was the same when he went into the Army."

"Do you mean to say that creature was a soldier?" said Templeton in surprise.

"Well, not exactly a soldier," said the other. "He did something with gas at G.H.Q.; either that or making skins for airships. I don't remember which it was, but it was something confoundedly technical. He came a cropper, though, towards the end of the war. I don't know what happened, but someone told me that the Armistice came in the nick of time and they demobilized him instead of firing him out."

The conversation was interrupted by the entrance of a stranger, a tall, very broad-shouldered man with a dark,

gloomy face, who sat down and called for a whisky and water. His voice instantly proclaimed him an Irishman.

Templeton said "Good evening" to him, and added that it had been a fine day; but the new-comer was disinclined for conversation and after finishing his drink, he retired from the room.

"Not a very sociable bird," said Snell. "Well, what about Griffin? Shall we run out and have a look at the place before dinner?"

"Let's find out first if the landlord knows anything about it," Templeton said.

In a few minutes they had learned all that the proprietor of the hotel knew about the little colony of strangers who had settled down on the coast shortly after the war. They were scientists engaged on some intricate inquiry into the movements of fishes. No one, so far as the landlord knew, had ever been inside their laboratories, or, indeed, into the house itself, but it was generally believed that they had an enormous tank below the level of the cliffs in which they put the fish which they caught. The idea was that they marked the fish in some way with brass rings or the like and released them on the chance of their being caught again by someone else in some other part of the world. In this way valuable information would be obtained on fish-migration. Whatever was the truth about the tank, at any rate it was true that they had offered a reward of £5 to anyone who would bring back one of the fish which they had marked, and it was rumoured that the skipper of a Grimsby trawler had brought one back and had been given a note for it.

It was all very vague. Even the fortunate skipper from Grimsby had not actually been seen by anyone, so far as the landlord knew. In fact, information about the place, which was generally called the Gulls' Cove or the Gulls' Farm, was very meagre. The strangers had their own housekeeper, and most of their supplies came from London by train. It was obvious that there was a grievance against them for bringing so little custom to the countryside.

"Well, that's that," said Snell, as the landlord left the room. "That is just the sort of thing Griffin would be doing."

"But you don't conduct scientific inquiries into the movements of fishes with the help of a Mills bomb," protested Templeton.

"That's true," said Snell; "but are you sure it was a bomb?"

"If it wasn't, it was the best imitation I've ever seen."

"Well, let's get the car and have a look."

"It will have to be yours," said Templeton. "I'm sick of cars at the moment."

The two acquaintances surveyed the cluster of buildings through field-glasses from the point at which Templeton had seen the swarthy gentleman in the motor-car, but they learned little except that the buildings were encircled by a strong, high, barbed wire fence in which there was only one apparent entrance.

"They are pretty secretive about their fishes," said Snell. "Let's get a bit closer."

They drove down the cart-track, halted at the bend where it dipped below the level, and proceeded on foot until they reached a point from which a good view could be

obtained. The buildings inhabited by the mysterious scientists consisted of a house, solidly built of Aberdeen granite and roofed with slate, which stood on the edge of the cliff. Behind the house three long barns had been built at some later period. They formed three sides of a square, the farmhouse itself being the fourth side. One peculiarity struck the two observers at once. The barns, which were made of brick, were actually built on to the farm, so that there was no way of getting inside the square except through the farm. For the long low barns had neither door nor window with the exception of an occasional slit, high up from the ground, which added to the fortress-like appearance of the whole cluster of buildings. There was a small side-door in the farm, but the main entrance was obviously in the front, facing the sea. Between the wire entanglement and the barns were the tracks of many motor wheels. In spite of the defensive look of the place nothing could have been more peaceful. A thin curl of smoke was rising slowly from the chimney of the house, and the complete stillness was only broken by the murmur of the waves against the rocks below, and the occasional cry of a gull.

"What's the next move?" said Snell at last. "Do we go and ring the bell and say we have seen a haddock with a gold ring on its tail, or do we wait till midnight and break into the house?"

"What about that bomb?" said Templeton, ignoring the question.

"That's the thing that puzzles me; and why did Griffin say he was not Griffin? I suppose we are not doing any good

hanging about here anyway. We'll hire a boat tomorrow and have a look at the place from the sea."

"You can do that by yourself," retorted Snell. "I'm going to play golf."

At that moment the small door at the side of the house opened and a girl came out. She walked straight to the gate in the wire entanglement, opened it, and came down the path towards them. She was not dressed as a girl in the country dresses, but as a London girl dresses when she is in the country. She wore neat but strong brogues, stockings of the latest "sports" pattern, a short tweed skirt and a silk jumper. She was small and slight, with blue eyes and fair hair. She would have appeared to be a typical damsel of the "fair and fluffy" school, if her face had not been so white that there was not a vestige of colour in her cheeks, and if her mouth had not been closed tightly, indicating a young lady of considerable character and determination.

The two men stood rather sheepishly while this small vision walked up to them and said without any hesitation, "It's a fine evening." They took their hats off and mumbled something. They were both completely taken by surprise by the girl's direct approach. There was a momentary silence and then she went on, "This is a lovely part of the coast."

Snell was the first to recover his composure, and he said, "It is now." The girl smiled for the fraction of a second and then her lips came together again with almost the snap of a mouse-trap. Templeton turned on his friend and said, "Don't be an ass." The girl narrowed her blue eyes a little and stared calmly first at Snell and then at Templeton. Both young men were slightly embarrassed at the scrutiny. "It is

not very kind," she said at last, "to call your friend an ass for making such a handsome speech," and then without another word she turned and walked back to the wire fence, let herself through, and vanished into the house.

The two friends watched her movements in silence, and when she disappeared they turned and simultaneously said to each other: "Well, what do you know about that!" They stared at the house, at the sea, at the rocks, at the wire fence, at the country round and at the sky as if some possible explanation might be found in any one of these places. At last Snell observed in a dreamy tone: "I suppose it's consorting with fish that makes people so eccentric, but she certainly was a remarkably pretty girl. I think I'll come with you tomorrow in the boat after all, Templeton."

"You stick to your golf, Snell, my lad," replied Templeton. "This is no place for you. I am sorry I let you in this. Hallo, here's another motor-car. No, it's the same one," he added, as a limousine came jolting over the cart-ruts. This time the passenger in the back was not the swarthy-faced gentleman, but the big, morose Irishman from the smoking-room in the hotel. He was evidently expected, as a man came out and unlocked the gate to let him in. The limousine jolted round the inside of the wire fence and vanished behind the buildings at the other side.

The two friends retraced their steps to their two-seater and returned to the hotel. A broad-shouldered, muscular youth was standing on the steps of the Links Hotel. He had a red complexion and a cheerful, not particularly intelligent face. He came to meet them. "I've fixed up a four-ball match for the afternoon tomorrow, Harry," he said to Snell.

"Count me out," said Snell. "I'm not playing golf tomorrow."

The newcomer stared incredulously at him, a deep, puzzled frown gradually extinguishing his cheerfulness. He was too taken aback at the unprecedented nature of the crisis to say a word. Snell took advantage of the pause to murmur, "Let me introduce—Mr. Templeton—Mr. Armstrong." A huge red hand shot out and Templeton had only just time to save his dislocated thumb from being seized in a bear-like grip.

"What's the matter with Harry?" said Mr. Armstrong, slowly recovering.

"I'm going out rowing," replied Snell.

"The man's mad," said the muscular youth sadly. "He thinks he's at Shepperton or Sonning in a punt with a lovely charmer."

Snell slipped his arm through that of his friend and said, "Come and have a drink while I tell you about it."

They took him into the smoking-room and rapidly outlined all that had happened. When they had finished the story, Armstrong solemnly rose and said, "Henry Snell, if you are going to abandon two first-class games of golf tomorrow for a cock-and-bull story about bombs and foreigners and wire entanglements, you are not the man I took you for. What was the girl like? Was she pretty?"

"I wonder who the Irishman is," said Templeton, pointedly changing the subject. "And what he is doing out there."

"Let's ask the landlord," said Snell; but they learned little from him about their fellow guest. The landlord had never seen him before. He had telegraphed from Belfast reserving

a room. "If you ask me," said the man indignantly, "there are too many queer foreigners in these parts. There was a Chinaman up here two or three months ago. I have nothing against him and he paid his bill in good money, and a Chinaman's money is as good as anybody else's, but all the same I don't like having them about, nor black folks either. It puts people against a house."

"Do you get many black visitors?" put in Templeton quickly.

"I have not had one now for nearly a year," said the landlord. "But I had two about this time last year, and then there was a Spanish sort of gentleman, Italian or Portuguese or what not. I don't know exactly what he was, but he came up for a day or two. I like English visitors up here, and not any of these fancy foreigners. None of the others stayed very long either. It's not as if they took a room for a month or two; just a couple of days and then away again. It is something to do with these fishes, I expect. It isn't good for business, gentlemen, as you can readily understand."

After dinner Templeton discussed with Snell the events of the day all over again from the beginning, while Armstrong slept on a sofa, and they finally agreed that there was nothing in the least suspicious except the bomb by the roadside. The fact that Griffin had denied his identity was thoroughly in keeping with what they remembered of Griffin's character. They simply put it down to the eccentricity of genius. The barbed wire entanglements and the seclusion of the house could be ascribed to the precautions of scientists on the verge of some great discovery. The behaviour of the girl was dismissed as

inexplicable, but no more inexplicable than the behaviour of any other girl. But all three of them admitted that the bomb was difficult to explain.

"It may have been a scientific apparatus," said Templeton, "but it looked too much like the other thing, and you ought to have seen their faces when I pretended that I was going to pull out the pin."

"Well," said Snell finally, "I move that we give up golf tomorrow and all go and have a look at the place from the sea."

"And I," said Armstrong, waking up at that moment, "I oppose the motion. You can do what you like. I'm going to play golf."

With that the three men went to bed.

Next morning Templeton was out early examining the weather. The glass was high and there was every prospect of another sunny, windless day. The landlord of the hotel arranged for the hire of a large, heavy, rowing boat, the type in which the local fishermen examine their nets during the salmon fishing season.

"It is a heavy boat," said the landlord, "but I'm afraid it is the best I can do. Pleasure boats are not very common in these parts."

"That's all right," said Templeton. "I shan't have to row because of my finger, so I don't mind how heavy it is. Snell will grouse, though."

Snell did grouse. He gave one look at the boat and then turned to Templeton. "What's the great idea?" he asked coldly. "Are you going to cox this racing skiff while I scull it along the top of the waves? What do you take me for?"

Templeton grinned. "I was afraid you might make a fuss about it. It isn't really very heavy. You mustn't judge it by its looks."

Snell kicked the boat. "What's its name? The Ocean Greyhound or the Silver Arrow? I'm not going to pull my arms out of their sockets over that hulk."

"All right. You needn't come. I told you before you'd be much better playing golf."

"And leave that lovely fairy to you? Not likely."

"You're not much of a cavalier if you won't take the trouble to row a little boat a few hundred yards to see the girl," said Templeton.

"I don't mind rowing," said Snell. "What I object to is dislocating my arms for the benefit of a rival cavalier who sits quietly and steers."

At that moment Snell's muscular friend, Armstrong, loomed up on the skyline and came rolling down towards them.

"Well, young man," began Snell sternly. "And why aren't you playing golf?" Armstrong laughed. "I couldn't help thinking about you two going off by yourselves. Might have a nasty accident."

"Liar," said his friend calmly. "You were thinking about the Gaiety-chorus peach we saw yesterday." He stopped and stared at his friend and then at the boat and then at his friend again. "A rugger international and a heavy-weight boxer," he said thoughtfully. "Come on, Bill. You can have a front-row seat in the stalls if you'll do a little rowing. Here's the boat. That sportsman there is the cox because he swears he's hurt his hand. You can stroke and I'll take bow."

Armstrong looked at the boat and said simply, "All right. Have you got anything to eat?"

"Sandwiches and flasks; enough for three."

"Good."

The day turned out as fine as they could possibly have expected and there was only the slightest of breezes. The boat moved a good deal better than Snell had anticipated and by noon they had reached the first of the two rocky headlands which sheltered the Gulls' Cove. They tied up their boat to a boulder and advanced round the headland on foot, creeping cautiously from rock to rock, until they had reached a point from which they could see the whole cove.

The house was silhouetted against the western sky. Immediately in front of it a steep grassy slope fell away to the level of the sea. It would have been possible but very laborious to ascend the slope and therefore a narrow winding path had been made, leading from the front door of the farm down to the small sandy beach at the foot. The two rocky headlands which jutted out into the sea on each side made a perfect shelter and the cove was visible only from the sea and from the farmhouse itself.

A couple of rowing boats were drawn up on the little beach and a small motor-boat lay at anchor. There was as little sign of life as there had been on the land side the previous day. The three men sat down in an angle formed by the rocks and surveyed the whole establishment again with field-glasses.

For at least an hour nothing happened, and Armstrong began to grumble about his lost game of golf. Then at last a little diversion occurred when the motor lorry which

Templeton had passed and repassed on the previous day backed out of the end of one of the barns. It stood for a moment and then a man came out on foot and opened a large gate in the wire entanglements. The lorry drove through, made the circuit of the entanglements and disappeared in a southerly direction.

"I can't see any sign of the famous tank," said Snell, "where they teach the kippers to jump through hoops. It looks to me as if all the work is done up above. What about going up the path and having a look?"

"Too dangerous, I should think," said Templeton. "How would you explain what you were doing when you get there? There's the girl again," he added. Armstrong looked up eagerly.

The girl looked out of the door of the house and stood for a moment looking out to sea. The three spies huddled back under cover of the rocks. The girl went into the house and came out the next minute with a pair of field-glasses with which she swept the horizon.

"Looking for fish, I suppose," muttered Snell. At last she put down the glasses and came slowly down the path to the sea.

"We shall look pretty silly if she spots us again," said Templeton. "Can you get round the corner, Armstrong, without being seen?"

Armstrong moved cautiously on hands and knees backwards towards their boat, but he was unfortunately wearing his golfing shoes and the nails slid on a smooth slab of rock, bringing him down with a clatter and a loud exclamation.

In an instant the girl had stopped and was scanning the rocks with her field-glasses. Then she turned towards the house and called out something. Next moment a couple of men came running round the corner of the farm-house and began to descend the path. The three friends, seeing that concealment was useless, tumbled back into their boat with the utmost rapidity and began pulling for home.

"Here's a state of things," said Snell, tugging at the heavy oar. "If they get that motor-boat after us, they will come along and say all kinds of rude things."

They had hardly gone a hundred yards when his fears were realized and the little motor-boat shot out round the corner of the headland.

"Well, we can take it easy," said Snell, resting on his oar, "and prepare to repel boarders." But the motor-boat had apparently no intention of following them. It came to a halt and there was a long pause while both sides surveyed each other through field-glasses. Then the motor-boat turned and slipped back into the little harbour.

"Thank Heaven there were no bombs about," said Snell. "I wished for one moment that I was playing golf. I suggest we get back and not meddle any more in other people's affairs."

"I haven't had a chance of seeing the girl," grumbled Armstrong, taking up his oar.

They returned to the inn and found the silent Irishman consuming whisky after whisky in the smoking-room. He was as uncommunicative as before.

Late that evening a note was handed into the hotel addressed to G. Templeton, Esq. Templeton opened it and