

The Haunted Vault

A Well-Authenticated West Indian Story

By Jessie Adelaide Middleton

Of the many curious authentic stories I have come across during my years of research among the strange and occult, none, I think, has interested me more than what is sometimes called "The Barbadoes Coffin Story." The mystery is so gruesome and unfathomable, and such appalling possibilities are suggested that one can only form one's own conclusion from the overwhelming evidence at hand. That conclusion points clearly to the fact that some kind of supernatural agency was at work, and, having made a long and careful investigation from every available source, I will now give the facts as I have been able to glean them.

The idea that there was any humbug or trickery in the matter is clearly dispelled, and so many names of the highest repute are involved that the most sceptical cannot doubt the horrible and repulsive state of things revealed when the vault was opened. The story is vouched for by several eye-witnesses and the main details are these—

In *Once a Week*, of March 11, 1865, Mr. R. Reece writes as follows—

"In the parish church of Christchurch, Barbadoes, there is a mysterious vault in which no one dares to deposit the dead. It is in a churchyard near and at an elevation of one hundred feet above the level of the sea. The following details concerning the remarkable disturbances in this vault are taken verbatim from the original document in the writer's possession, under the hand of his esteemed friend, the late rector, the Rev. Thomas Harrison Orderson, D.D., who was an eyewitness (with many others whose names will be mentioned in their proper place) of the occurrences to be related.

"*July 31, 1807.*—Mrs. Thomasin Goddard was buried in the vault, which, when opened to receive her, was quite empty.

"*February 22, 1808.*—Mary Anna Maria Chase, daughter of the Honourable Thomas Chase, was buried in the same vault in a leaden coffin. When the vault was opened for the infant, the coffin of Mrs. Goddard was in its proper place..

"*July 6, 1812.*—Dorcas Chase was buried in the same vault, and the two first coffins were in their proper places.

"*August 9.*—The Honourable Thomas Chase was buried in the same vault. Upon its being opened, the two leaden coffins were dislodged from their situation, particularly that of the infant, which appeared to have been thrown from the corner where it was first placed, to the opposite angle.

"*September 25, 1816.*—Samuel Brewster Ames, an infant, was buried, and when the vault was opened the leaden coffins were found to have been thrown from their positions and were in much disorder.

"November 17, 1816 body of Samuel Brewster was removed from the parish of St. Philip and was buried in the vault, and great confusion was discovered among the leaden coffins.

"*July 7, 1819.*—Thomas Clarke was buried, and there was much disorder among the coffins.

“N.B.—Each time the vault was opened the coffins were placed in their proper order and position, and the mouth of the vault was regularly closed by masons.

“The vault is twelve feet long and six and a half feet wide, and is partially hewn through a flinty rock. The entrance to it was secured by a massive stone, which it required six or seven men to remove.

“April 18, 1820.—The vault was opened in the presence and at the request of His Excellency, the Governor, Lord Combermere. The Hon. N. Lucas, R. B. Clarke (now Sir R. Bowcher Clarke, Chief Justice of Barbadoes), and R. Cotton, Esquires, were attending.

“The condition of the coffins on this occasion can best be appreciated by a reference to the engraving below, which exhibits on one side the position in which the coffins were left on July 7, 1819, and on the other side the disorder that was presented on April 18, 1820, the day on which Lord Combermere inspected the vault.

“These are the simple facts of the case. Nor can the writer venture to make any suggestion that might give a clue to the cause of these amazing occurrences. The approaches of the vault render it virtually impossible for any ingenious or mischievous person to tamper with its contents. Further than this, had it been practicable for any one to have entered the rock, the achievement of dislodging the coffins single-handed would have been superhuman, and it is not easily to be credited that a piece of mischief of such a character would have been entrusted to many hands to carry out.”

Mr. Reeve goes on to relate that the suggestion of volcanic disturbance was out of the question, as only the coffins themselves and not the vault showed the least trace of shock or violence, but he suggests the possibility of the material of which the coffins were composed having something to do with it, as in a similar case at Staunton, in Suffolk, to which I will refer presently.

“Of course,” he adds, “the negro-mind attributed these mysterious results to supernatural causes. Colonel Chase, it seems, was a man of evil disposition, violent and intemperate. He died by his own hand. His daughter, owing to his cruelty to her, starved herself to death, and the negroes affirmed that the other coffins would not endure the company of the Chase family and had endeavoured to expel them. It certainly assisted this superstition to know that no disturbance occurred till Colonel Chase was deposited in the vault. No negro would approach the churchyard after nightfall (at least without whistling very loudly, to scare away the ‘duppies,’ as- ghosts are called in Barbadoes), and such consternation, alarm and disquiet were created by the mysterious proceedings in the vault that the coffins were removed and buried in the earth elsewhere, and the vault was closed as it now remains. A relative of the writer is the present rector of Christchurch, and he has confirmed this. The sketches from which the engraving is taken were executed on the spot by another relative of the writer; and his father, some years since, had two models constructed, exhibiting the various displacements to which the coffins were subjected. One of these models he presented to the late Bishop Blomfield, who took a great interest in this mysterious matter of the vault; the other is, I believe, in the British Museum.”

In *Once a Week*, of the April following, Mr. J. Arnold writes to suggest that a probable cause of the mystery was an influx of water. In the following May Mr. Reece replied by another letter, in which he pointed out the improbability of water rising to the height of 100 feet through the flint rock, adding that, from the nature of the spot and its distance inland from the sea, he thought it unlikely that the vault was affected by inundation.

Turning to page 385 of the *Memoirs of Piscout Combermere*, by his widow, one reads as follows—

“In the spring of this year (1820) an event occurred which was so inexplicable—we may almost say supernatural—as to merit a place in these pages.

“For some years previous to Lord Combermere’s arrival in Barbadoes, the inhabitants had been startled by reports of mysterious occurrences in a family vault of Christchurch, where, it is said, some supernatural agency always upset or displaced the coffins deposited there. No negro would approach the burying-ground after nightfall. Women whispered wonderful stories of apparitions, and children were threatened with its horrors to ensure their good behaviour. Lord Combermere, hearing of the terror occasioned by these rumours, and ascertaining that the coffins had actually been several times displaced, resolved on investigating the matter personally. The family to whom the vault belonged were anxious to have it examined, and as an interment was immediately to take place, he determined to be present at the ceremony.

“Barbadoes is formed of calcareous rock, over which lies a very inconsiderable depth of earth, but that portion of the island immediately connected with our story, viz. Christchurch and the adjacent burying-ground, stands upon a shelf of coral which rises to an eminence of one hundred feet above the level of the sea. The church, dedicated to our Saviour, is one of eleven founded two centuries since, when various members of the district erected family vaults in the burying-grounds appointed to each church. From the nature of the foundation these tombs were formed partially above, partially below the surface, a circumstance which may have served to protect them from the fury of the hurricanes that from time to time have devastated the island.”

Lady Combermere goes on to give a detailed description of the vault, laying stress on its solid construction out of a native sandstone resembling Portland cement, which had hardened to the solidity of stone, and the large slab of stone fastened round with cement that formed the door. She next details the three various occasions on which the vault had been opened, and the coffins found mysteriously displaced, and says that by this time every one of the whole island was interested. Thousands visited the spot, and the news having reached Government House, Lord Combermere resolved to take the matter up personally.

Accordingly,” she goes on, “attended by his aides-de-camp, he visited the vault. In his presence every part of the floor was sounded to ascertain that no subterranean passage or entrance was concealed. It was found to be perfectly firm and solid; no crack was even apparent. The walls, when examined, proved to be thoroughly secure. No fracture was visible, and the three sides, together with the roof and flooring, presented a structure as solid as if formed of entire slabs of stone. The displaced coffins were re-arranged, the new tenant of that dreary abode was deposited, and when the mourners retired, with the funeral procession, the floor was carefully sanded with fine white sand in the presence of Lord Combermere and the assembled crowd. The door was slid into its wonted position and, with the utmost care, the new cement was laid on so as to secure it. When the masons had completed their task, the Governor made several impressions in the cement with his own seal, and many of those attending added various private marks.”

Having thus made assurance doubly sure, the spectators departed, but Lady Combermere goes on to say that the mystery of the vault was a constant topic of conversation. Some’ suggested volcanic agency, others superhuman, while many

attributed the mischief to the cunning of the negroes. So great a commotion was caused, in fact, that Lord Combermere, who shared the general curiosity, consented to have the tomb reopened on April 18, 1820—just nine months after it had been publicly closed.

“Barbadoes has seldom witnessed such a gathering as that assembled in Christchurch district on that day. The towns were deserted and thousands hastened to the scene; every spot, every avenue, every foot of ground was crowded in and around the churchyard. The scorching rays of the sun blazed forth in tropical splendour upon that sea of living forms. Europeans and negroes all crowded together in their varied attires, and scarcely less varied complexions, upon the brow of a hill, with the massive stone tombs rising here and there above them, and the old church standing forth in sombre relief, as if a connecting link between the living and the dead, made the scene altogether one which beggared description, while perhaps its peculiar interest was in the death-like silence that reigned over it—the silence of mute anxiety and superstitious awe.

“Lord Combermere now arrived, and if his own interest in the mystery could have failed in inducing him to seek the reopening of the vault, the assembled masses gave ample testimony of the universal gratification caused by his intervention.

“He at once proceeded to examine the structure. All was secure, and the vault appeared exactly as when he had left it after being closed. The cement was unbroken, and the large impressions of the Governor’s seal were as sharp and as perfect as when made, but now hardened into stone. Each person present who had before made private marks, satisfied himself that they were untouched and unaltered, and, the command being given, the masons proceeded to break the cement and slide off the door. The cement yielded as usual to their instruments, but when they endeavoured to remove the stone, it resisted with unwonted weight. Increased force was applied, but still it remained immovable. For a moment all hands were paralysed, and a look of wondering dismay passed from each to each, but it was only for a moment. The next, excitement lent a powerful energy to their efforts, and the stone yielded half-an-inch—enough to afford a glimpse inside.

“Increased force was tried to remove the stone, and inch by inch it yielded till it was slid sufficiently aside to admit of a person’s entering, when it was discovered that a huge leaden coffin was standing upon its head, with the end resting against the middle of the stone door. Though this coffin, which it required seven or eight men to move, was thrown from its central place and left in this remarkable position, yet the sand on the floor bore no trace of footprints, or of being in any way disturbed. The coffin of an infant had been hurled with such force against the opposite wall, near which it was lying, that a deep indentation had been made in the stonework by the corner which struck it.

“The Chase family immediately ordered the coffins to be removed and buried in separate graves, after which the vault was abandoned and has never since been used.”

Lady Combermere adds, in a footnote, “These details have been collected from a pamphlet printed for private circulation by an inhabitant of Barbadoes.”

I have, however, come across them, in almost identical words, in a book on Barbadoes, by James H. Stark, published in Boston, in which they are said to be taken from a pamphlet called *Death Deeds*, published in London by C. J. Skeet in 1860. I can find no trace of this pamphlet in the library of the British Museum, and have therefore come to the conclusion that the details are from the source mentioned by Lady Combermere. She was not present herself at the opening, but must, of course, have heard the main facts

from Lord Combermere's own lips. She was his third wife, whom he married in 1838—eighteen years after the occurrence.

Some interesting correspondence on the subject of the mysterious tomb in *Notes and Queries* (1867) throws more light on the story.

Lady Combermere's account was quoted by a correspondent, who very naturally wrote to ask what steps were being taken towards ascertaining the cause of the phenomenon. To this other correspondents replied, referring the writer to an account of the occurrence in the *Spiritualistic Magazine*, the *Dublin University Magazine* and *Once a Week*, but suggesting no other cause than an influx of water. One correspondent adds: "The builder and first owner of the vault was a Mr. Elliott. After a lapse of many years, there being no representative of the Elliott family in the island, Colonel Thomas Chase took possession of the vault, and then commenced the phenomena in question."

In answer to the suggestion that the coffins were moved by an influx of water, a correspondent writes as follows in *Notes and Queries* of August 3: "An influx of water, considering the locale of the tomb, would be as extraordinary a phenomenon as the one it has been put forward to account for." Mr. William Bates, who on a former occasion, when writing on "Premature Burials" in *Notes and Queries*, had added a newspaper account of the affair at Barbadoes, writes again in September 1867, enclosing a letter from Dr. W. T. Iliff, of Newington Butts, in which the writer says: "Your remarks in *Notes and Queries* of the 9th lead me to suppose that you may not have seen the sketch of the Barbadoes vault when closed in 1819 and again opened 1820. I, therefore, send you a copy of mine, which was furnished me by Dr. Baird, who was staff-surgeon and private secretary to Sir James Lygon, who was Governor of Barbadoes. . . . My friend, Dr. Baird, is alive and in London . . . and if you are interested in the matter, I will communicate with you again."

Mr. Bates did not, he says, follow up the matter, but prints the statements contained in Dr. Iliff's letter as corroborative of other statements which had been made, as no doubt they were.

But stronger testimony is still to follow. Mr. Algernon E. Aspinall, who in 1910 published a second edition of a most comprehensive *Pocket Guide to the West Indies* (Duckworth), gives in it an authentic account of the haunted vault, compiled by the Hon. Forster M. Alleyne, who says— "I myself had the story from the lips of Sir Robert Boucher Clarke, who was present at the opening of the vault, and my own father, though not present at the opening, was in the island at the time and made mention of it to his sister in England, as is evidenced by a letter from her to him, which is still in my possession. .

Mr. Alleyne determined, he says, to obtain firsthand authentic proof, so he went to Christchurch, where the vault is situated, and examined the Burial Register, and had the parochial treasurer's accounts examined and also the files of contemporary papers. Some time after, when' he was almost in despair, having only some old copies of lists of the interments, with comments on the disturbances, by Dr. Orderson, the rector, he heard accidentally that the Hon. Nathan Lucas, M.L.C., who was present at the opening of the vault by Lord Combermere, had left a number of manuscript volumes, all written with his own hand.

In one of these is an absolutely authentic account of the whole affair, attested by the then Rector of Christchurch, the Rev. Thomas D. Orderson, D.D., and containing

drawings of the vault and of the position of the coffins, made on the spot by the Hon. Major Finch, Lord Combermere's A.D.C.

For the account in, full detail I refer the reader to Mr. Aspinall's interesting book. In substance it is the same as those already quoted here. As Mr. Alleyne says: "It is stamped with truth in every word, and the original of it is still extant. It was always believed," he adds, "that Lord Combermere sent home to England an official account of the occurrence, duly certified, but a careful search at the Record Office has hitherto produced no results."

In Mr. Nathan Lucas's account, we read that Lord Combermere was on a visit to Sir Robert Bowcher Clarke when he first opened the vault, and that both of them were present, as well as Mr. Roland Catton and the writer.

"Thieves certainly had no hand in it," he concludes, "and as for any practical wit or hoax, so many were requisite to be trusted with the secret of it to remain unknown; and as for negroes having anything to do with it, their superstitious fear of the dead and everything belonging to them preclude any idea of the kind. All I know is that it happened, and that I was an eyewitness of the fact! "

With regard to the parallel occurrences at Staunton in Suffolk, mentioned by Mr. Reece in *Once a Week*, it is also referred to by Mr. Nathan Lucas, who quotes the brief account given in the *European Magazine* for September 1815, which is as follows—

THE CURIOUS VAULT AT STAUNTON, IN SUFFOLK

On opening it some years since, several leaden coffins, with wooden cases, that had been fixed in biers, were found displaced, to the great astonishment of many inhabitants of the village. The coffins were placed as before and properly closed when, some time ago, another of the family dying, they were a second time found displaced; and two years after they were not only found all off the biers, but one coffin, so heavy as to require eight men to raise it, was found on the fourth step that leads into the vault.

Whence arose this operation, in which it is certain no one had a hand?

N.B.—It was occasioned by water, as is imagined, though no sign of it appeared at the different periods of time that the vault was opened.

Mr. Reece, in *Once a Week*, remarks that an account of the Staunton occurrence is given by Captain Alexander in his *Transatlantic Sketches*. To this book I have referred, and find the account substantially the same as that given in the *European Magazine*. To my mind the Staunton wonder has no comparison whatever with the affair at Barbadoes, for in the former case it is quite probable that an influx of water *may* have been the cause. In the happenings at Barbadoes it has been very clearly shown that water could not possibly have been the agent, owing to the elevated position of the vault, and the fact that although the floor was well sanded no trace of water could be found.

With regard to the model of the famous vault was supposed by Mr. Reece to have been sent to the British Museum, I find, on inquiry, that no model of the kind has ever been exhibited there; if it was sent to the Museum at all, it was not accepted, but the present keeper has no remembrance of any record of such a model.

The strange affair at Barbadoes attracted such general notice at the time that it was very much discussed in England, and Mrs. G. Linnaeus Banks made it the subject of a story in the *Selgravia Annual*, called "The Pride of the Corbyns," the scene of which is laid in far-

off Barbadoes. The haunted vault is minutely described, as well as the horrible compound of blows, shrieks and howls that issued from it from time to time, to the terror of the listeners.

Sir Robert Schomburgk, who wrote the standard history of Barbadoes, gives in it a version of the story quite in accordance with the others related here. In fact, it is impossible to explain away or disbelieve any detail of the extraordinary affair.

My own conclusion is that the natives, whose superstition is, of course, always put down to ignorance, were quite correct in thinking that supernatural forces were at work. The coffins were flung about as if they had been toys in the hands of some gargantuan child, and no human agency could have possibly contrived the disturbance. Nothing extraordinary took place until Colonel Chase's body was about to be buried, and he had died by his own hand.