

Weird Tales

January
1954

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COVER BY W. H. SILVEY

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D. McILWRAITH, *Editor*



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Radar and ghosts—cannot they both work miracles?



Atlantic Isle of Mystery

BY CYRUS MACMILLAN

FAR out in the Atlantic Ocean, many miles south-east of Canada and east of Maine is Sable Island, the Isle of Mys-

teries. It is one of the enchanted islands of the sea. Strange shapes are said to wander along its bleak lonely shores; doleful

sounds are heard among its sand dunes; and weird voices come from it by night across the water, bringing fear and warning to seamen who chance to be near its coast. Long ago it was the hiding place of pirates and wreckers. Because of its sunken sand-bars, it has always been the menace and the terror of sailors, who call it the grave-yard of the Atlantic. It is the scene of many disasters; around its shores many deeds of wickedness and cruelty have been done; and there is small wonder that it is still haunted by phantom forms and sounds.

This lonely enchanted island is a low treeless waste twenty miles long, and little more than a mile wide. It is a succession of long gray sand dunes, from twenty to eighty feet high, the color of the sea on a day of clouds, and by night and on dull hazy days when the horizon is fringed with mist, you cannot see it until you are close upon it. It lies in the form of a crescent, the inner side to the north. From each horn of the crescent, a long sand-bar or reef runs seventeen miles out to sea, one to the north-east, the other to the north-west. At low tide a third of each bar is bare, but because of its gray color you cannot mark it from the water around it if you are many yards away; over another third of the reef there is always

a strong 'cross-sea which breaks in times of storm into angry white surf; over the remainder of the reef, the water, except in great gales, gives little sign of the deadly trap beneath, so that without warning great ships have often run hard upon it, to be hopelessly stranded.

HERE when a ship strikes there is little chance of rescue. The reefs rise steep and straight almost like a wall; on one side the water is thirty fathoms deep and on the other side it reaches in places to five times that depth. Close in upon the reef a seaman in a great ocean-going ship finds no soundings; he has almost bottomless water for his craft; but in a moment his ship may strike hard upon the bar; if the wind is blowing strong from the sea, the helpless ship pounds over the reef to be engulfed in the deep water on the other side. Here are rapid cross-currents. Nearby, the Gulf Stream comes up from the south, and the great Arctic current flows down from the north, and a cask, when thrown into the sea, is carried around the island many times, as if tossed about in a whirlpool. At times, fogs of great density hang about the barren land. At night phosphorescent lights appear upon the water in all their splendor, until the ocean is in a blaze; and when

the storms beat and the surf breaks high on the dunes, the fire rises many feet in a strange, weird light. It is a place of mystery and wonder; behind you as you stand upon the beach is the dead waste of sand; before you the restless ocean and the mocking, fugitive horizon. Modern aids to navigation have greatly reduced the dangers of the treacherous reefs.

IN TIMES of storm the island, with its hidden shoals and ledges, gives no shelter nor harbor to vessels near its coast. Even in days of calm, seamen who know its dangers keep far away, well out of reach of its sunken reefs.

Sometimes when the wind blows hard from the south, and storms sweep the Atlantic, great ships caught here in the tempest venture to seek shelter in the hollow of the crescent. They safely ride at anchor where the force of the gale is broken by the long dunes. But let the wind show signs of changing to the north, at once they slip their cables and put far out-to sea, for here the stoutest ships that float cannot long survive or beat against the wind that blows in upon the coast. The rotting skeletons of great craft lying in the sand tell sad tales of past attempts to ride out the storms at anchor in the offing.

THIS Isle of Mystery is bleak and barren except for coarse grass and a few hardy plants. Here and there grow great flowering rushes; wild roses and asters and white lilacs bloom at times upon its hills; and berries of various kinds ripen under its sun. Over it, screaming wild fowl constantly hover, ducks and gulls and divers, plover and curlew and pigeons, and you can gather their eggs in boatloads from the crevices in the dunes. It is the home of countless seals, and here in summer you may see the gray Greenland seal and the Harbor seal lying lazily on the hot sands or playing like children in the shallows. The Harbor seals are always here but the Greenland seals are transient visitors, arriving from the north in December, and leaving in the late summer for their home. The waters around the island abound in fish, for the taking of which men daily risk their lives. But the place is most famous for its wonderful ponies—sturdy little horses not much bigger than a large Labrador dog, which are exported to carry children on their backs and in light wicker carriages over distant streets.

The island is said by sailors to be the haunt of goblins but also to be the home of good spirits which guide mariners on their way in days and nights of storm. These storm spirits are

frequent visitors, for in this weird island tempests quickly spring to life and as quickly die. Often the sun rises clear out of the sea, giving promise of a day of peace, and except for the swell dashing high on the reef and the low moan of the surf as it breaks on the dunes, there is no sign of a coming storm. But suddenly as if by a magic wand, mist appears upon the surface of the hills; the sun is blotted out by a dull leaden haze; darkness settles upon the deep, and for a time there is an uncomfortable silence. Then the wind blows in from the cloud-banked sky in fitful gusts; the storm breaks with a strange and terrible fury, carrying disaster to ships within its zone. Darkness adds to the terror of the storm as the driven sand, like drifting snow, shuts out all objects. For an instant the lightning shows the landward-racing seas with their wild, white surf. No human voice can be heard above the tempest; not even the thunder rises above the roar of the storm. The gale dies as quickly as it came, and soon all is still. But seldom does a ship that chances to be near to the island's coast when the storm bursts survive its fury; it usually adds its bones to the "Graveyard of the Atlantic."

IT IS just before such storms that the good spirits of the

island are said to warn seamen of the approaching danger. In the calm period before the gale bursts they appear upon the desolate beach. If you are French, sailors say, you may still see a strange figure with a pointed beard, and in ancient French attire, pacing up and down near to the water's edge and frequently waving his arms about. He is a gentleman of Paris, and he appears only to Frenchmen. He complains that hundreds of years ago in the days of Louis the fourteenth his wife was falsely accused, and unjustly imprisoned. She was later sent to the island as an exile with the first band of colonists. There she died in great misery; and since her death he has always paced the island beach before and after a storm, searching for her and uttering his strange complaints.

THERE is also another figure in old fashioned clothes often seen by fishermen. He is an Englishman who had a prominent part in the execution of an English king more than three hundred years ago. Fearing for his life, he fled in despair to the Island of Mystery, for he knew that in that desolate spot his enemies would be least likely to find him. There he remained until his death, suffering much from cold and hunger. He is said to appear now to sailors before

a storm to warn them of their danger; and always on the twenty-ninth of May—why, on that date, no one knows—he walks around the island, wearing the broad-brimmed hat of the vanished Puritan age; he sings psalms through his nose so loudly that his weird voice is heard even above the roar of the wind and the thunder of the surf—and fishermen still see and hear him among the mists and vapors of the gray sand hills.

THE two strange shapes most frequently seen by sailors and fishermen are said to be those of the Franciscan monk and the White-robed Lady, the best-known "phantoms" of the island. About them cluster many strange and sad old tales. Long ago the first group of colonists was brought to the island by a nobleman of France. The colonists were largely from the prisons of France, for no others cared to throw away their lives in the unknown and desolate land. With the group came a Franciscan monk,—a wise and handsome but sad man. His life held a tragic secret. In his early youth he loved a girl in his native village and was loved by her in return. She died before either had grown to maturity. The youth could abide no longer in his native place for with her death the joy of his life was ex-

tinguished. He joined the Franciscan order. When he heard that a band of colonists was going to the New World, that he might forget his grief and his bewildered hopes, he joined them and sailed with them to the remote Atlantic island. He undertook the spiritual care of the exiled flock and shared their hardship and solitude and dangers. He erected a cross, and built a little hut of wattled reeds and drift-wood that served him as a chapel and a home. For a time all went well. But soon great hardships were endured from cold and hunger and disease—even from strife among the colonists themselves. The majority of the colonists soon perished, and after a vain attempt to live on fish and berries, at the end of five years, those of the band who still survived were taken home by the French Government. The Monk had himself been wasted by the ravages of the Island, but when the time came for the colonists to go home, he refused to embark with them.

"I have no long time to live," he said, "perhaps only a few weeks. While I live, I will stay here to give the shipwrecked what little help I can and to relieve the sufferings of the unfortunate. And I shall die in the little hut which I have built and in which I have prayed for five years like the anchorite of the

desert. The winds and the sands will charge themselves with my burial." The people to whom he had ministered sailed away sorrowful, leaving him alone behind them.

FOR many years he lived on the Island, and many a shipwrecked mariner shared his hut and scanty fare and owed his life to his kindness. He planted a little garden, and tended it with care; he lived upon its products and upon the shell fish with which the waters abounded. Daily he paced the beach, looking far out to sea for ships, and watching always for shipwrecked sailors. He remained true to his vows and to the memory of the girl of his youth, buried far away among the Brittany hills; and he waited in prayer and contemplation for his own call. When he died and where his dust lies, no man knows. But before a storm, seamen still see him against the background of the gray sand dunes, walking slowly along the shore, reciting his rosary. Sometimes they see him upon the cliffs on his knees in prayer; at other times they see him gliding through the air, his figure clear against the sky, the girdle of St. Francis bound about him, his arms raised in the shape of a cross. And as the strange apparition passes over them, the wild fowl fly in fear

from the pools and the fish dart from the shallows.

When he appears, the fishermen know that a storm is on the way, and they stay on shore in the shelter of their huts, and draw their boats far up on the sand out of reach of the surf, and sailors in ships that have anchored in the offing put out to sea far from the treacherous reefs; and they bless the phantom Monk of the vanished century who warned them of their danger.

ABOUT the White-robed Lady there is also a strange sailor's story. In the closing years of the eighteenth century, a British regiment was stationed in a garrisoned sea-coast city in the New World. In the late autumn of the year a large ship left Portsmouth, England, for this garrisoned city with a number of recruits, and several officers with their wives. The ship carried in her cargo much furniture and costly plate and books and jewels, the whole valued at many thousands of pounds sterling. Accompanying this ship as convoys were two other craft. They had not been out many days when there came a great storm from the fury of which they narrowly escaped. One of the ships was dismasted and with difficulty struggled back to her home port; another of the ships leaking badly, reached

Lisbon for repairs. One ship alone weathered the storm without mishap and continued on her way. But she too was doomed to disaster. Just as she had nearly completed her long voyage, another great gale came up from the south. For many hours the ship battled with wind and sea, until in the darkness of the night she was driven on the long reef of the Island of Mystery, where she was broken in pieces in the raging surf. All the people perished. One alone was washed ashore, unconscious but still living. She was the wife of the ship's surgeon.

IT HAPPENED that at that time the Island was the hiding place of pirates and wreckers who thrived by plundering the valuable cargoes that were washed ashore from shattered ships and by killing and robbing the surviving sailors and passengers. Two of these cruel sea-robbers found the woman lying unconscious on the sand where the landward-racing seas had cast her. On the third finger of her left hand she wore a valuable ring, which, believing her dead, they tried to remove. But her hand was so swollen by the salt-water that the ring would not come off. Thereupon, in their stealthy haste, the wreckers cut off the finger on which the ring was bound. But while they were

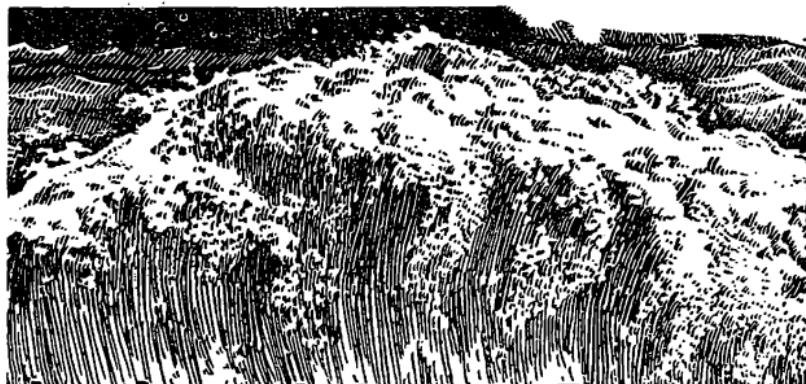
about it, the woman's senses returned, and the robbers, after the usual fashion of pirates, believing that "the dead tell no tales" killed her where she lay, and buried her body in the dunes, her loose white gown being her only shroud. Some months later, a ship was sent to the Island to try to find traces of the lost craft and to recover what they could find of her valuable cargo. But this investigating ship was wrecked and nearly all on board were drowned on the treacherous sand-bars of the Island. The survivors buried in one grave in the dunes the bodies of the dead that floated ashore from the broken ship.

TRADITION says that one day a surviving sailor, leaving his comrades behind in their rude shelter, went out alone to explore the Island. At twilight he came to a hut that had rockets in it, and some food, and furniture saved from wrecked ships. These had been placed there by the Government to aid distressed people, and there were printed instructions telling shipwrecked people what to do to keep themselves alive until they could be rescued. He made a fire and cooked a frugal meal; then after making up a cot he went out to walk in the moonlight on the fringe of the desolate sea before going to sleep. When he opened the

door on his return to the hut, he saw inside sitting by the fire, a lady clad in a long white robe; her long hair hung over her shoulders; her hair and gown were dripping wet, as if she had just come out of the sea, "Who are you," asked the sailor, "and why are you here?" But the woman made no reply. She held up her left hand from which, he saw, one of the fingers had been cut off; he noticed too that the wound was still bleeding. He opened the medicine case, with which the hut was equipped, to find a bandage for the wound, but while he was about it, the woman went out into the night. He followed, calling to her to stop, but she went on, so fast that he could not keep up with her—until she reached the water's edge and disappeared like mist in the sea.

Wondering much at the strange sight, the sailor return-

ed to the hut, and there, to his surprise, was the woman again by the fire. Again she held up her mutilated hand with its missing finger. Looking at her closely, he thought he recognized her features. "Are you not the wife of the surgeon on the ship the wreck of which we are investigating?" he asked. She nodded in reply, and again held up her left hand, showing the bloody stump of her severed finger. He understood what she meant, and he asked, "Were you murdered here by wreckers for your ring?" She bowed her head again, but did not speak. The sailor promised to try to find her ring and to restore it to her family, and if possible to find and punish her murderers. She bowed her head again, and motioning him to move aside, she slipped away. He went behind her to the door, but she held up both hands as if to push him back. He fol-



lowed her no farther, but from the doorway of the hut he watched her glide to the reef as she had done before and disappear in the mist. During the remainder of his stay on the Island she appeared to him no more.

True to his vow, the sailor learned the identity of three of the leading wreckers, and when he returned home to Canada he tried to find them. After much effort he tracked one of them to his home but the man was away in the far north. For some days the sailor remained in the wrecker's home, awaiting his return. One day the man's daughter spoke with admiration of the ring the sailor was wearing, but she said it was not so valuable as one that her father had found on the hand of a drowned woman on a far-distant island, and that he had left for sale with a jeweller in a nearby city. The sailor went to the city, and there in a jeweller's shop he found the ring. He bought it for a trifling sum. It was identified by the dead woman's friends as the ring she had long worn, and it was returned to her family in her old English home. A few days later, the wandering sailor went back to duty on his ship. The wrecker who had slain the woman was never brought to justice.

BUT the White-robed Lady with the missing finger did not entirely vanish. She is still seen by sailors on the Island of Mystery. Always before a storm, —perhaps as a reward or in gratitude for the shipwrecked sailor's fidelity to his promise to recover her ring—she appears upon the beach. There, in the calm before the tempest, against the gray sand dunes, sailors still see the phantom of the pale lady in her loose white gown, her long hair waving in the wind, one hand extended as if claiming her ring, the other hand pointing to the sea. Then they know that a storm is not far away and that her presence is a warning of its terrors.

FOR safety purposes, the Island is now equipped with the best protective appliances known to man. These make the possibility of disaster almost negligible: But with all these scientific devices that guard against wreckage on the reefs, old-time sailors speak with mingled awe and gratitude and respect of the weird phantoms of the past that warned them of danger and in those warnings they had unswerving faith. And they believe that the wraiths of olden days still linger in the Isle of Mystery.
