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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

The Black Monk

By G. G. PENDARVES

*Woe be to the luckless man who encounters the Black Monk of
Ch aard Island!*

YES. It's true that I'm dictating this, but don't picture to yourself a famous author, a luxurious study, and a highly paid secretary. No! I'm dictating this for publication because I promised the Abbot of Ch aard that I would. I can't go against his wishes. Not again.

ALL LIES and rubbish! Don't you believe a word of it, sir. It suits them," the gamekeeper jerked a thumb in the direction of the monastery behind him, "to keep such fairy-tales alive. Gives them a hold on the people. Everyone on this island believes in the Black Monk, swears they've caught sight of him on the prowl. I never have—and why? Because I'm not afraid. It's all rubbish, so I tell you straight, damned rubbish."

I looked at Morton. His brown deep-set eyes, his wrinkled face, his long lean body in its ancient brown tweeds, even his old leggings and the way he carried his gun and wore his cap expressed contempt. He'd no use for the monks or for anyone else on the island. Stayed because he'd no chance of work elsewhere. Owed everything to the Abbot and hated him in proportion to his debt.

"They give chapter and verse for it at the monastery," I ventured. "Got old documents. Supposed to be treasure buried here in the Fifth Century when Britain was conquered by the English. Brought by a faithful monk who came up the Thames from Kent. Got across here, buried his treasure, and died on the island,

keeping guard to the end. And he's still on duty, it appears."

"Treasure and guardian! Tale for children and the bloody fools that spend their days gabbling prayers when they'd be a sight better digging and planting and weeding on this blamed island of theirs. I'm the only man does a decent day's work here. And what do I get for it? A damp cottage, wages that don't even run to a twist of baccy, and a lecture from his reverence when the monastery kitchen isn't stocked with game to suit him."

"And so you've never caught a glimpse of the Black Monk?" I persisted. "Never seen him by the old fish pond, or pacing the cliffs, or going down the Long Lane after sundown?"

"No, nor never will! The only Black Monk on the island is up at the monastery—that colored fellow from the West Indies. They don't want anyone blacker than Brother Ignatius. Looks a proper crow with his black habit and black face and all. Not but what I think he's a deal better in black than in white like these here Benedictines on Ch aard."

"Of course," I suggested, "you've got to remember that some people aren't able to see things like—well, like the Black Monk. Just as some people don't take certain diseases."

"No one's ever seen the Black Monk and no one's ever going to see him. Why? Because he don't happen to be on Ch aard Island! The monks keep the old tale going to frighten the people into go-

ing regular to mass and confession. And visitors like it. They go round with eyes popping out of their silly heads. They talk and write things to the papers—see! That's all advertisement and helps to bring money in. It's a put-up game and a pack of damned nonsense, I says."

I left him glooming at his gate and turned down the Long Lane. Morton versus the monks amused me. An idea struck me, result of the recent talk and a most perfect night: A big golden harvest moon was rising. No wind. Mild, almost warm for late October. I'd stay out, all night if necessary, and follow the legendary track of the Black Monk from Pirates' Bay, where he was said to have landed, to a certain wood where he was popularly supposed to have buried his treasure. No one seemed to have tried to stalk him with any method. No one wanted to follow him. His cowed figure had been glimpsed at various points of his route—dark on the pale sands of the landing-beach—melting into shadows cast by Long Lane's steep hedges—a hurrying figure on the skyline of high plowed fields—a tall sentinel by the old neglected green-scummed fish pond—or vanishing into the fir wood.

My brief holiday was almost over. I'd got what I came for—an account of the annual Passion Play the monks gave. It would pay my expenses here. A night's ramble over the romantic island might inspire another article. I lighted a cigarette and made for the beach.

Chard was settling down for sleep already. The revolving brilliance of its lighthouse grew brighter as lamps went out in cottage windows. Down the Long Lane where nut-trees rustled withered leaves, down past the postoffice *cum* store that served the island's needs, down under the walls of the big white monastery with its towers and turrets, its balconies and chime of bells, its red roofs and steep

gables, down to the sand-dunes where tall rushes dipped and whispered in the moonlight, down to the crescent of Pirates' Bay—its fine pale sand ground by thundering surf that now was a mere murmurous line of white edging distant sea.

There I go . . . there I go! I apologize. I'll restrain myself. You'll understand later why the enchanted background of the island on a supremely lovely night is so difficult for me to keep out of this account. You may forgive a poor devil then for looking back on a lost paradise.

I SAT on an upturned boat, smoked and dreamed, let the long strange history of Chard Island float across my mind like weed on a shallow pool. An hour—two hours—I don't know how long I sat there. My lighter ran dry at last, I had no matches, and the search for them shook me out of dreams. I felt stiff and rather cold.

"Well, you're late if you mean to land tonight, old man!"

I spoke aloud, and glanced back across broken rocks that formed one curving horn of my crescent shore. For a moment, actual funk paralyzed me. For a moment I really believed the absurd legend was true. A dark cowed figure was skirting the rocks—moving toward me.

I confess that I didn't move because literally I couldn't. When I saw at last who it was, relief was so overwhelming that I fairly went off like a rocket.

"Brother Ignatius! Upon my word, d'you know I took you for the Black Monk himself! You loomed up there in the moonlight as big and black as a nursery boggy."

The West Indian's gentle liquid speech was the friendliest sound I'd ever heard.

"You ought not to be here," he reproved. "The Father-Abbot would not

like it. You are, in a sense, a guest of the monastery since it governs the whole island and its affairs."

"I'm only a heretic." I laughed loudly. The sound jarred on that quiet lonely shore. "My soul's more or less lost anyhow in the Abbot's eyes, I expect."

"Yes," agreed Brother Ignatius.

I was irrationally annoyed. "Oh, well, live and let live!" I babbled. My nerves still quivered. My tongue clacked like a toy bell.

"It is difficult, sometimes, to know what that means. It is difficult, sometimes, to say what is life and what is—death."

I'd never realized what a bore the fellow was. I'd rather liked the gentle simple creature before. Now I was irritated. His prosings had broken the magic spell of the night for me.

"On your way to the monastery, I suppose? I'm going to dawdle about another hour, or-so. Good-night."

"Not alone! No, really, it is not safe for you alone here. The Black Monk——"

"That's why I'm here," I interrupted the serious quiet voice. "I'm waiting for him. When and if he shows up I'm going to follow him, discover the long-lost secret of his treasure."

"You don't understand." Brother Ignatius was now genuinely perturbed. "It is very dangerous for you."

I made an impatient movement, and half turned to leave him.

"If you wish it so much," his words came slow and hesitant, "if you have made up your mind—perhaps—it would be better that I should——"

"Well?"

I looked up and caught the faint glimmer of white teeth as his lips parted in a smile under his cowl's dark shadow.

"I think the Father-Abbot would forgive me, since you are, in a sense, his guest. Yes, I will show you. I will lead

you to the place where the treasure lies buried."

"What?"

"Yes. I will take you," murmured the monk.

"But—there isn't any treasure! It's only a wild old tale. What d'you mean?"

"There *is* treasure—golden glorious treasure," softly affirmed the other. "And rather than leave you here, alone, I will show you."

I began to doubt my companion's sanity. I'd no idea what he was talking about. My journalist's imagination began to weave a new story. Well, why not go with him? My mood for solitude and a night's wandering under the moon was gone. I'd humor Brother Ignatius. He was stooping toward me, apparently very keen on his idea.

"Have it your own way," I agreed. "It may save me from a chill, if not from your friend the Black Monk. By the way, suppose you find him on his job—guarding the treasure!"

"No. You won't see him there. Not if you are with me."

The grave reply and the air with which he turned to cross the sandhills rather took my fancy. Long cloak swaying and billowing in the rising wind, Brother Ignatius strode a few paces ahead. Given the right clothes, I thought, the colored man does redeem movement from the commonplace.

I could see myself, in plus-fours and cap, a discord, an alien figure on that lonely, lovely silvered shore. I could see the monk as a tree whose dark boughs swept the ground or as a wave rising—falling. Part of the earth, possessed by it and possessing it.

"Must be getting a temperature," I told myself. "If I work any little stunt of that sort into my article they'll give me the comic-strip to do."

A new idea struck me.

"I've never met any of you before at this hour. Aren't there rules? I thought the monastery bolted and barred you in your cells long before this."

WE'D reached the high heathery cliffs above Pirates' Bay. Brother Ignatius kept the lead. His answer came back on the wind, his cowed head turned to me, and again I caught a flashing glimpse of his gentle smile.

"You forget the weeks for retreat."

He gestured toward a solitary wooden building not a hundred yards distant.

"Of course. I had forgotten. But—if you're in retreat—surely you're breaking your rule now in being here with me."

"The Father-Abbot would put your safety before a rule of this sort. It means, of course, that the month's solitude must begin again. It was necessary. Nothing else would have taken you from that dangerous shore—nothing except my promise to take you to the treasure."

I felt uncomfortable. The Abbot had been extremely courteous to me, given me a good many little privileges, allowed me to go where most visitors are forbidden. To interfere with the religious observance of his order was a poor way of acknowledging his consideration.

Then I shrugged off my qualms. I didn't believe the legend. I didn't think the Abbot believed it. Brother Ignatius had broken his retreat to save me from a non-existent danger, had insisted on this fantastic expedition, and was, in fact, a little mad. I absolved myself from blame and followed on.

At last we came to a small dense wood in a fissure between Hawk's Point and Shark's Fin—two cruel masses of rock jutting out to sea where many ships had piled up in old days. The monk waited.

"Take hold of my cloak," he advised.

"The path is narrow, but I know every

inch of the way. You won't fall if you follow my lead exactly."

His cloak, between my fingers, was rough and dry as bark. We plunged into the wood. Dark as a shaft here. Fairly, smooth underfoot but an endless, endless way. I protested at last.

"We must be going in circles. The wood's small enough to cross in five minutes."

Brother Ignatius stopped as I spoke.

"We are here now. Sit down. Sit down on the soft mossy earth and rest."

I sank down, feeling as if I'd walked to the other end of the earth. Something, immensely heavy, cold, and round was put into my hands.

"What's this? Feels like a crown. What a weight! But I can't see a thing. How do I know if this is gold or lead?"

"Gold, pure gold." Brother Ignatius spoke with awe. "And here are plates and goblets and scepters. Here are candlesticks. This is a great jeweled cross that took a lifetime to fashion. This, too, is set with jewels, a little altar lamp, a most precious relic though so small."

One after another, these things were put into my hands while the monk's quiet voice expatiated on their beauty. I fingered the small heavy lamp. Exasperation seized me.

"But what's the use!" I burst out. "It's absurd to be fumbling away in the dark like this. I want to see them!"

I stood up suddenly, felt the ground slippery underfoot, reached out for support. I called sharply. The monk's cloak brushed my outstretched hands. I tried to grasp it, slipped again, plunged forward, hit my forehead a smashing blow against a tree-trunk and fell heavily.

MY SENSES returned slowly. Darkness, like walls of black velvet, shut me in—darkness and warmth. The wood had seemed damp and cold before. I felt hor-

ribly confused. On all sides my hands encountered brush and thorn. Impossible to take any direction in such complete darkness.

"Where are you?" I shouted. "Where are you? Hello! Hello! *Helloooo!* Brother Ignatius, where are you?"

I went on shouting. Anger and increasing warmth in the dark wood served at least to heat my stiff chilled body. I grew more and more furious. The monk must be mad as a hatter. Why hadn't anyone warned me about him? Perhaps they hadn't wanted to discredit their precious monastery.

Exhausted, hungry and thirsty, pricked and scratched with thorns, I sat still and yelled until I was hoarse. When a voice hailed me at last I was in pretty bad shape. I felt like bursting into tears instead of answering. It was the gamekeeper, Morton.

"Have you hurt yourself, sir?"

His strong wiry arm was about my shoulders, raising me to my feet.

"Get me out of this confounded wood, Morton!" I demanded. "I've been hours here. That crazy monk, Brother Ignatius, brought me. I was a fool to follow him, of course, but I'd no idea he was mad."

Morton made no response save by a sudden stiffening of his arm about me.

"Get me out of this wood, d'you hear!" The darkness was becoming a torture now. "Get me out and I'll explain afterward. I don't want to spend the rest of the night here."

"You're not in any wood." Morton's voice seemed choked and indistinct. "You're in a gorse-patch on a headland right over at the back of the island. I came after rabbits and heard you yelling."

"But it's dark! You're drunk, man, you're drunk! It's dark. It's the middle of the night."

"It's eight o'clock in the morning, sir. And the sun's shining full and early."

"You're drunk. You're lying. It's perfectly dark. Pitch-black night."

Then I heard the larks, chimes from the monastery tower for eight o'clock service, chirrup of insects in the grass, lowing of cattle. I knew the truth at last.

I was blind.

"Sir!" Morton's voice came to me from some remote distance. "It couldn't ha' been Brother Ignatius you saw last night. He left the island day before yesterday along with Brother Stephen and the Prior. I rowed 'em all three to the mainland. No one comes or goes from here without I takes 'em. They won't none of them be back for a month."

"You *are* drunk, after all, disgracefully drunk!" I talked now to fight back my thoughts. "No other monk here wears a black habit except Brother Ignatius. How could I possibly mistake a Benedictine's white habit for a black one? I tell you I was with Brother Ignatius for hours. I recognized him—his voice, his smile! It was Brother Ignatius."

Morton didn't argue. He took me to the monastery. The Abbot heard me out.

"Treasure is buried on this island, I believe." His slow solemn tone chilled me. "But it was not Brother Ignatius whom you met on Pirates' Beach."

"But—but——" I stuttered, "I tell you I saw him, talked, walked with him for an hour at least."

"The monk you met was one who has guarded the treasure through centuries. An ancient and cunning guardian."

"No! No! No! I heard myself; whispering. "There is no such one! I met a man—an ordinary man."

"You met the Black Monk of Chaard Island, for whose tormented weary soul I pray. And for you in darkness and despair, for you, too, I ask deliverance, my son."