

Weird Tales



SEPTEMBER, 1952

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D. McILWRAITH, Editor

A HABIT OUT OF HISTORY

by David Eynon



“I SAY, John, *that's* an odd looking tower,” said Henry Parkinson to his host, as they traversed the edge of the moor. “Why, it’s positively Druid. Whatever is it for?” It was twilight in the north of Wales and the two men worked slowly through the gorse until the shadow of the crude relic fell across their path.

“Ah? Ah, yes. Quite,” said John, leading his guest from the path, stepping around the edge of the tower’s deepening shadow. A last burst of sunlight etched the silhouette sharply on the rocky ground. “Druid. Definitely Druid.”

“But it’s in such excellent condition,” marvelled Henry, with persistence. He al-

most thought he heard voices coming from the top of the tower, but the Welsh wind plays tricks on strangers oftentimes.

"Hmnn," said John, glancing back over his shoulder. "I . . . ah . . . expect it's been kept up—or something." The two men had started down the hill, the shadowed side. Behind them the tower rose up against the evening sky like a scarred giant, its little slit eyes following their progress towards the valley below.

"Kept up? You don't say," Henry mused. "By whom?"

"A dozen monks," said John, halting at the end of their decline, breathing heavily.

"Really?" puffed Henry. "What in the world are they doing in a Druid tower?"

"Why, they're guarding the skull of a mad man," said John, quickening his steps as the manor lights came on one by one. They were soon inside the hall, with the butler taking their sticks and jackets. John led the way to the living room and port. The two men sat before a crackling fire. Henry waited until he could broach the subject again. His host beat him to the punch.

"I EXPECT you'll want to know more about it," John said, offering his cigar case. "One always prefers a warm living room and a glass of something, before starting off on a story of that sort—don't you agree?"

"Rather," said Henry, drawing on the cigar to get it well-started. "Of course, if it's something awkward—something you'd rather not discuss?"

"Oh no, not at all," said his host, waving out the match. "I'd have explained more back on the hill, but the darkness comes quickly here. Frightful mists—nasty for the lungs."

"Ummm," said Henry, partially in agreement about the mist, partially in accord with the quality of the port in his raised glass.

"I don't know the whole story, of course," John said, "but I gather it goes back no little time. I don't imagine you're familiar with Owen Glendowyn, are you?"

"The mad king?" asked Henry. "A Welsh

old wives tale, isn't it? Didn't ever exist, did he?"

"It's sometimes hard to say just who *did* exist, a thousand years ago," said John, peering into the fire. "You remember those expeditions from school," he said, referring to a series of archeological explorations which emanate so frequently from Cambridge. "Pemberton went on one, the year we took the bump from St. Kit's."

"Pity he ever came back," said Henry, remembering that Pemberton still owed him a fiver from boat night.

"Well," said John, "they were always discovering people who weren't, or hadn't been, or shouldn't have been. They rarely found traces of people who were supposed to be, don't you know."

"Pemberton found my fiver," said Henry, disgruntled by the memory. "He was devilish quick about that."

"I am not receiving the attention to which I am accustomed," said John with mock hauteur.

"Sorry," said Henry. He remembered the quality of the port, took another sip and was quite prepared to give up all hope-of the lost money.

"Well, if you remember, Glendowyn—even though a royal personage—was condemned as a sorcerer. Even now one can see any number of oddly shaped rocks around here that countrymen will assure you are people turned into stone.

"At any rate, he was beheaded—with due ceremony, of course—and the superstition arose that if his head ever managed to rejoin his body, all jolly hell will break loose." John stopped talking and reached over to pour his guest some more wine.

"Where's this body, then?" Henry asked.

"As a matter of fact, it's supposed to've been in the churchyard here. Not in Holy ground, exactly, but somewhere—no one knew where—on the premises."

"Your family chapel?" asked Henry, raising both eyebrows. "Not a relative?" he asked suddenly.

"Nothing like that," said John, smiling

at the thought. "Our madness stems from quite a different source. No, actually, my people came with William. The story goes that this house—and the chapel as well—were built by an ancestor, who was nothing much more than a tribal chief, I expect. He was also the central religious figure hereabouts."

HENRY looked at the thick walls and dark paneling of a later period, while his host poked in the fire.

"This whole place," said John, indicating the room with a flick of the poker, "was a monastery at that time. Which is one of the reasons, I fancy," he said candidly, "that we've had so little trouble."

"Owen's pursuers finally caught up with him here, at the upper edge of the county. My collateral ancestor was called upon to exorcise the body, I believe, after the beheading. Not a pleasant job, you can imagine. Those old boys believed in witches and what not—hardly pleasant for them."

"I should say," said Henry. "What happened then?"

"No one knows, quite. The family seated here," he said, waving his hand to indicate their present premises, "seems to have died out, for no especial reason. A century or two later people of my branch took over by default, as it were. The monks, I believe, were here when they came."

"The monks in the tower?" asked Henry.

"Exactly. The house was no longer being used as a monastery," John explained, "Again, for no good reason that I know of. The tower's guardians were imported straight from Rome, I believe. Members of a rather small order—can't think of the name, offhand, but no matter, you'd never have heard of them before anyway."

"And they're still there—the order, I mean—at the tower?" Henry asked.

"Hmnm," said John, reaching for the decanter. "Care for another?"

"Don't mind a bit," Henry said, quickly thrusting his glass forward. "Henry the Eighth must have mucked up that arrangement somewhat, I expect. The monks coming direct from Rome, I mean. Thanks," Henry added, settling back in his chair with a renewed glass.

"Welcome," said John, filling his own glass and stoppering the decanter. "As a matter of fact, he didn't. Quite likely the only thing he didn't muck up, though. This seems to have been a hands off proposition for as long as anyone can trace back. They still come direct from Rome, you know."

"Really?" said Henry. "Then the church must think there's something genuinely in need of watching there, mustn't they?"

"Possibly," said John dubiously. "I expect it's more a habit that hasn't been stopped. Some fluke or other. Orders probably taken care of in an obscure department of the Vatican that's not been looked into for five centuries or so."

"Like that chap who spends every weekend in the *Times* building with a suitcase of bullion, you mean?"

"Exactly," said John. "A habit out of history. After all, London's full of them. The Temple trumpeter, the guardsmen of Threadneedle Street—why shouldn't Rome have a few also?"

"I say, John," said Henry softly, looking up at his host with an earnest glance, "what do *you* think of the whole business?"

"Well, I mean to say . . . that is," John was taken off guard and struggled awkwardly to find a foothold. He stopped groping for a second and stared into the fire. The yellow glow splashed across his face, accentuating the lines around the mouth and making the eyes glow ever so little, giving him the look of madness.

JOHN flicked a glance at Henry Parkinson to make sure he was watching, then turned to the fire and spoke.

"Suppose, Henry, suppose I told you that the skull escaped—broke loose every time it wasn't watched—and that all hell *did* break loose on those occasions?"

"I see," said Henry quietly. "Then there is something to it, after all."

"Quite possibly," said John. "One's never sure of those things, of course. I've never even seen the skull, myself. Still, incidents have occurred."

"Has it . . . ah . . . ventured out recently?" asked Henry, studying the deeps of his port.

"I don't know," said John. "In my father's time it was said to have got loose once—

one of the monks fell asleep. They each spend an hour on guard, you see. That's why they have twelve—one for each hour of the night. Daytime doesn't seem to worry them."

"Tell me, was it possible that I heard voices as we passed the tower this evening?" asked Henry.

"Oh, that," said John, nodding. "At sunset and dawn they've got some sort of incantation. A ritual they took over from the Druids, I believe."

"And when the skull got out?" asked Henry.

"Oh, the monk was only asleep fifteen minutes or so when his relief came. The thing didn't get far—it was stopped in the road before the house, here."

"Tell me, was that in 1906, John?"

The host looked up, eyebrow lifted. "What makes you—?"

"I remember when we were poking around the churchyard. Those five stones—all the same date—May 5, wasn't it? Seemed rather a large number to have passed on in any *one* day in a sparsely settled country like this."

"Yes," said John, "it was May 5th. Poor devils. No one knows exactly what happened. I can guess why it happened, though. Their family went back to Glendorthwyn's time, too, you see. I wouldn't doubt but what one of their ancestors had been the headsman in the affair."

"Good Lord!" said Henry. "Vengeance delayed a thousand years. Staggers the imagination, what?"

"Hmmm," said John. "Grandfather often spoke of the time when one of the monks slept a full half hour. The vicar found the skull at the door of the church. He never liked to speak of it, but I gather that they decided its body must be somewhere in the crypts beneath the building. The chapel's built on a Roman foundation, you know. We dug up some rather well-preserved pottery once, when the floor had to be reinforced. Also the head of some idol or other—Juno perhaps. It's in the Bodleian now, and I can't say I'm sorry at all."

"What happened then—in your grandfather's time, I mean. If it had a full half hour—and did so much in fifteen minutes—I mean, it must have been fearful, what?"

"No, oddly enough," said John, offering a fresh cigar to his guest. "At least, nothing we'd call fearful. It seems merely to have despoiled a grave of some sort. Not its own grave, to be sure. Possibly the central figure in the original trouble—a person with no descendants."

"Someone connected with the house?" asked Henry, looking around the darkened room which had begun to creak as the dampness of the fall night seeped into its timbers.

"I don't know," said John. "It was all hushed up. A bishop arrived suddenly the next week, Grandfather said, and lots of religious mumbo-jumbo. I suspect they tried to improve somewhat on the Druid's remedy."

"And you've had no trouble since then," said Henry. "I should be glad of that, if I were you."

"Unfortunately," said John earnestly. "that's not quite the case."

"Really," said Henry. "Something on a national scale, I imagine, eh? I mean, he's rather run out of local enemies by now, what? Expect he'd take a crack at the English in general."

"One can't be awfully certain in those matters," said John, "but the time I'm thinking of was early in the war. The monks couldn't get 'replacements,' as it were, because of the blockade. I've no doubt the Church of England would have lent them a hand, but you know how touchy these religious johnnies are."

"One of the monks—probably in his dotage, poor fellow—died at the start of his hour. At least, his body was cold when the relief came."

"They had a devil of a time finding the skull, that time. Finally, though, some one with his head screwed on right led a party into the underground part of the church—when daylight came. They dug about for a bit until they found a skeleton back in the corner."

"Could they be sure it was his?" asked Henry.

"There was a ring worn around the edge of the skull—as if it'd been wearing a crown even after death. Oh, not positive evidence, mind. Still, the average skull, I dare say, doesn't have a groove around the crown."

"Then too, the skeleton was short several vertebrae. The last one in line—where it met the skull—was split neatly in two. Quite likely the work of the headsman's sword, I think.

"They took the skull back to the tower immediately—a party of local citizens—and deposited the remainder of the skeleton in the upper reaches of the Severn."

"Ah, then you must have seen the skull yourself, after all," said Henry.

"No, as a matter of fact I didn't," said John. "I was quite busy elsewhere that night."

"Elsewhere?" said Henry.

"Dunkirk," said John. "And he couldn't have done a better job of it, even if he'd had twice twelve hundred years to brood."
