

***The Hermit of
Dark Harbor***

**Louis Arthur
Cunningham**

Illustrated by

H. W. McCrea

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The Hermit of Dark Harbor

In which Soothsayer Simon, of Grand Manan, demonstrates that converse with the spirits is an exceedingly risky business

By LOUIS ARTHUR CUNNINGHAM

ILLUSTRATED BY H. W. McCREA

No,” said Cap’n Hallan apropos of nothing much. “The hermit business ain’t what it used to be years ago. What with airships an’ autos an’ the scarcity of whiskers. I dare say you’d have to visit all the Florida keys an’ maybe part of the May-lay Archipelago afore ye could list a half-dozen on ’em—maybe not that many. But in the days of sail, when men was more philosophic an’ deliberate-like, there was scarce an island in the Bay o’ Fundy, from Chignecto even to Mount Desert, that didn’t have a hermit or two.”

Grand Manan—said Cap’n Hallan—bein’ a good big island with plenty o’ cliffs, ledges an’ caves an’ similar places ideal for a man as wants to turn to solitude, was well sprinkled with hermits. Lots of wrecks down around the North Head—wreckin’ was the chief industry there once—an’ each wreck usually cast up a hermit. There was one at Swallow Tail, another at Grand Harbor, and two, supposed to be twins, at the Southern Cross; but the hermit I have in mind is one who called himself Simon an’ was sole survivor the time the four-masted barque *Eurypides* drove ashore on the rocks by North Head. Such a gale was a-blowin’ that night that when this Simon managed to reach the cliff—it’s as sheer as a wall right there an’ high as Mount Everest—the wind got under his oilskins an’ blew him right up to the top.

Now that was a nat’ral phenomenon, for that gale’d ’a’ blowed an elephant up pervided he had a petticoat on, but just the same the natives think it’s pretty miraculous, an’ when this man Simon sets hisself up as a hermit at a place called Dark Harbor, he’s already more or less famous up an’ down the lee shore as the man that clumb the North Head.



“Mum,” says the Hermit in his whispering voice, “your husband lives!”

Even so, he might 'a' lived that down an' made a grand career for hisself there at Dark Harbor, but instead o' keepin' his mouth shut and tendin' strictly to the hermit business, what does this here Simon up and do but branch out into a side line—he turns prophet, no less. Now hermitin' is one thing an' bein' a prophet is another. Hermiting makes ye think of a man who don't have much to say, while propheting gives ye a picter of someone away up on a mountain makin' speeches an' generally drawin' attention to hisself, as, for instance, Moses when he up an' broke the Ten Commandments.

Where Simon made his big mistake was in prophesyin' the Saxby Gale. As long as he'd limited hisself to ordinary soothsayin' an' foretellin', maybe a sou'east blow or a hard winter, he didn't draw very much attention except from the natives o' Grand Manan, but when it became generally known that the Hermit of Dark Harbor had foretold the Saxby Gale, Simon's fame spread like a forest fire, from the Quoddy Islands up to Minas Basin, for the Saxby Gale was somethin' only a major prophet could have had any advance word on. In that gale, the waves o' Fundy rose so high that they rang the bells in the church steeples along the coast, and things was washed so far inland that you're still likely to find codfish swimmin' around in lakes that are forty mile from shore.

Well, when Simon's fame got around, folks began makin' pilgrimages to the cave where he hung out, an' it got so that the fishermen around Dipper Harbor an' Mace's Bay turned their boats into excursion packets on Sundays an' holidays, an' made a small fortun' for themselves a-ferryin' the faithful across to Grand Manan.

There, at Dark Harbor, Simon sat in the cave that was his summer quarters, behind a barricade of rocks an' long whiskers, an' accepted like a king all the gifts an' offerings as was made to him. Old ladies brought him camomile tea an' comforters, jam an' pickles, an' the more credulous among the menfolk made offerin's o' Jamaica rum an' Irish twist; and, since Simon was smart enough to rest for a while on the laurels won by the Saxby Gale an' didn't go gettin' hisself in deep water by any more major prophecies, things went along all smooth an' shipshape, till Sophie Wilbur an' Cap'n Gus Lavers arrived one afternoon in Dark Harbor, havin' v'yaged over from Mace's Bay in the cap'n's schooner, the *Alma B*.

It's a dark an' dismal day of early autumn when they come, with big black clouds a-scurryin' across the sky an' the Bay o' Fundy beginnin' to kick up a sea that makes Cap'n Gus wish he'd stayed safe on shore an' never consented to come on this here excursion. Cap'n Gus is an unbeliever, him bein' cross-eyed an' somethin' of a weather prophet hisself. He'd scoffed at hermits all his life an' claimed that the time Simon prophesied the Saxby Gale, he was full o' Jamaica rum an' every squall looked like a cyclone. Howsumever, the cap'n had boarded with Sophie Wilbur these five years an' more, since her husband, Luke, disappeared, an' as the first week's board, along with all the others, was still owin', Gus couldn't very well refuse when Sophie demanded he take her over to consult the hermit.

"I've had a feelin' of late," she told Gus, "that poor dear Luke is still alive somewheres. Yes, even after all these years I still believe that he walks the earth, an' the only reason he don't come back is that maybe a fallin' spar hit him on the head an' made him lose his memory."

Cap'n Gus can think of a number of other reasons an' knows that if Luke Wilbur did get hit on the head it was more likely a bottle than a spar, but bein' so much in Sophie's debt an' weighin' only 120 pounds to her 200 even, he keeps his mouth shut on that point and merely sneers a bit at hermits in general an' this Simon in partickler.

"You'll find he's a humbug. Sophie, my gel," says Cap'n Gus, steerin' the *Alma B*. into the lee o' Dark Harbor bar. "I never yet see one o' these so-called hermits as could foretell what they was a-goin' to have for breakfast, let alone what's happened to a man who ain't been seen sight or sign of in many years.

Most likely this here prophet'll give ye a lot of guff about Luke's bein' a king on some cannibal island or livin' in a tree up the Amazon an' eatin' cocoanuts. How can you conterdick him, Sophie, no matter what he says? Now I want to caution ye, me dear, if he tries to get money outen ye, stand firm. If he once gets a sniff o' the fact that ye have a bit o' money saved up, why he's like as not to try an' scheme it outen ye."

"I'll pay him no money," says Sophie firm-like—an' she could be pretty firm too—"unless he's got proof positive an' absolute of what he tells me. Be sure o' that, Gus Lavers."

"Then yer money's safe," says Gus. "for all this hermit or any hermit is, is a bag o' wind, an' they can't prove nothin'."

Simon the Hermit is settin' in the door of his cave when Sophie an' Gus come toilin' up the cliff. The wind is blowin' stiff an' cool, an' the season bein' well advanced, business is pretty much at a standstill, so Simon is thinkin' of the long winter ahead an' wishin' he could get the signs right to do a bit o' prophet work for his ownself. Then he sees this big woman with the lilacs in her bonnet, an' the little skinny figger o' Cap'n Gus Lavers, like a tug a-followin' a liner, an' he strokes his whiskers very reflective an' mutters an incantation or two.

"Good day, mum," he says when Sophie has puffed up onto the ledge. "An' good day to you, sir." He speaks in a kind o' hoarse whisper, an' as he sits in the shadow o' the arch that is the door of his cavern, an' as he's a wild an' fearful-lookin' specimen, he makes a deep impression on Sophie an' gets a curtesy from her an' a very humble. "Good day, sir."

Not so from Gus Lavers. Gus just snorts an' mutters somethin' about fakers an' gullible women, and when Simon says, "What can I do for you?" Gus snarls. "Ye can't do nothin' for me, ye sanguinary swindler, I don't hold wi' the likes of ye a-tall. It's this here susceptible an' deluded woman who's fool enough to think ye can tell her the whereabouts of a man who ain't been seen this five years an' more, an' who is most likely at the bottom o' Davy Jones' locker. Now what d' ye make o' that, Sinbad the Sailor?"

The hermit glowers at him. He's got professional pride, has Simon, an' Gus Lavers' words, as well as the sneerin' way they're uttered, has stung him pretty badly. So he turns from Gus, mutterin' a little charm, in which is the words "sea cook" an' "swab," an' says to Sophie:

"Tell me the facks, mum."

"Ye'd think a smart aleck hermit like you," says Gus, "would know the facks already."

"Maybe I do," says Simon.

“Liar!” says Gus.

The hermit puts the evil eye on him then an’ so does Sophie, so he pipes down, an’ Sophie tells the hermit how Luke Wilbur, after ten years o’ happy wedded life, walked outen the house one day an’ never did come back. “That,” says she, “is now five years gone, come next October Twelfth. Some says Luke was drowned or murdered an’ that I might as well give him up for dead, but I have a feelin’ that he is alive, an’ if he is an’ I find him . . .”

Both Gus an’ the hermit squirm a little at the look in Sophie’s eyes. “Yea,” says the hermit, “after five years o’ longin’ an’ pinin’ for him I can see how ye will welcome him, mum.”

“Yes,” says Sophie, “how I’ll welcome him! Now, sir, I’ve heerd how you can tell the future an’ look into the past, can you tell me anything about Luke Wilbur?”

There’s silence then, an’ the wind moans in an’ out the hermit’s cave an’ maybe a gull screams away off, and far below the ledge the waves o’ Fundy come tumblin’ in an’ breakin’ on the rocks with a deep surge an’ sigh. It’s a prophetic moment, that, let me tell ye, an’ even the infidel Gus feels somethin’ funny run up and down his spine, an’ to drive such foolishness away an’ bolster up his courage, he says: “That old chump couldn’t tell ye for sure if Christmas is on the twenty-fifth o’ December.”

Simon the Hermit just looks at him once, turns to Sophie Wilbur, makes a pass through his whiskers an’ says in his whispering voice: “Mum, yer husband lives.”

“What!” says Sophie.

“Prove it!” yells Gus. “Prove it, ye blasted, lyin’ swab, ye! Prove it!”

“Oh, I can prove it.” says Simon, “but afore I can give ye directions for that proof. I got to retire into me cave an’ consult the sperrits. I got to go into a trance. That’s a very serious thing, mum, an’ the fee for it is one hundred dollars.”

“O’ course!” says Gus Lavers, “I knowed that was comin’, Sophie, an’ so might you ’a’ knowed it. He’s tryin’ to swindle ye outen yer money, an’ all on account of a no-good loafer like Luke Wilbur as would be better dead, an’ if not dead, better thought to be dead.”

“Who shall say?” whispers the hermit. “If not dead, o’ course, he stands in the way of any designin’ scoundrel as is tryin’ to marry his widda for her money.”

At this, Gus turns the color o' fresh-gathered dulse, a deep purple blue, an' looks as if he'd like to strangle the hermit. For a long time he's had his eye on Sophie's bank book, and he's been tryin' hard to persuade her Luke is dead and that maybe she needs a man to look arter her an' her money an' her little house at Mace's Bay. But Sophie is impressed by the hermit's wisdom an' says:

"If ye tell true, why, then I'll pay ye, sir."

"That's agreeable." says Simon. "Now it may take a day or two for me to get in tech with the sperrits, so maybe you an' this here gentleman. Mrs. Wilbur, mum, had better go back to the mainland an' return day after tomorrow."

"Oh, why can't ye tell us now?" asks Sophie.

"Because he can't think up a good lie fast enough." says Gus Lavers. "Or because he wants ye to bring the money."

"Ye're a scoffer an' a sceptic," says the hermit, "an' a schemer an' a scamp, an' ye'll be confounded in yer evil hatchings, oh, ye will."

"Not by a ruddy old retired sea lawyer like you," growls Gus. "Any more o' your bilge, my man, an' I'll yank them whiskers out by the roots."

Sophie restores peace an' promises to come back at the time arranged. Her an' Gus climb down the path then to where the *Alma B.*'s dinghy is pulled up on the shingle. The hermit sits there, a lone an' solitary figure on his ledge, an' looks arter them with one o' those sardine-ic grins an' strokes his whiskers an' chuckles.

Next afternoon, the *Alma B.* is back in Dark Harbor, but this time the only one as steps ashore from her dinghy is Cap'n Gus Lavers. He marches up to the hermit's cave where Simon is a-settin' in the warm sun, an' says, "I ain't a man to beat about the bush—not me. I still think ye're a cheat an' a swindler, an' I don't take stock in any o' yer kind. At the same time I know what fools women can be at times, an' how they'll believe a fortun' teller quicker'n an affadavit any day o' the week. So what I want of you, my man, is proof that Luke Wilbur is dead. It ought to be as easy for you to prove he's dead as to prove he's alive."

"Oh, ought it!" says Simon, scowlin' something fierce. "Well, I'll have ye know, ye leery old baboon, that no man, hermit or prophet or anything else, can prove what ain't so. If Luke Wilbur's alive, alive he is an' nothin' can make him otherwise."

"Ye're a humbug," growls Gus. "Ye can't prove nothin' anyway."

“We’ll see,” says Simon. “You’re nowt but a schemer, that’s what you are, wantin’ to prove a man dead so’s ye can marry his widda an’ more especially the house she has an’ the bit of money.”

“Now that’s a dirty lie,” yells Gus. “I’m in love with that lady, an’ any more remarks from a dried-up old cuttlefish like you—”

“Loves her, he says!” laughs Simon. “Ho, yes! Loves her enough to marry her while her own husband’s still alive.”

“Prove it!” yells Gus. “Prove it, ye whiskery old ape!”

“Oh, I’ll prove it to the lady tomorrow,” says the hermit, “pervidin’ the sperrits is willin’.”

“An’ the lies come fast enough,” snarls Gus. “Well, my man, let me catch ye at any monkeyshines with that unsuspectin’ female an’ I’ll tumble ye right often this here cliff. Let me find ye tellin’ one lie—”

“Sperrits don’t lie,” says Simon. “Sperrits never lie. An’ I can hear ’em a-whisperin’ now. Be off wi’ ye!”

Gus goes away with mayhem in his heart, an’ it’s still there, only growed a little, when he ferries Sophie over to Dark Harbor next day.

Simon greets her very grave-like an’ sits her down an’ then perches hisself on a kind o’ throne behind a smoky fire o’ driftwood an’ begins in a hollow voice—“Sperrits o’ the sea, sperrits o’ the departed, sperrits o’ them lost upon the earth, speak to Simon.” Then he groans a bit and shuts his eyes and, keepin’ them shut, he says in a awful whisper: “I see a man an’ he’s in bed in a big white room where they is many beds. He has a bandage on his head, but it don’t disguise the fack that he’s a handsome upstandin’ feller an’—”

“That ain’t Luke,” sneers Gus Lavers. “He looked like a weasel.”

“Silence!” growls the hermit, and Sophie prods Gus with her gamp an’ scowls at him.

“It’s a ’ospital he’s in,” says the hermit. “Doctors an’ nusses around him. ‘He’s comin’ to, poor feller,’ says one. ‘Now we’ll find out who he is. We know he’s a sailor from them snakes tattooed on his arm an’ them women’s pitchers on his back, an’ we know he’s a married man from this locket with a lady’s pitcher in it an’ Beloved Wife carved under it.’ He opens the locket an’ I can see, I can see the pitcher of a beautiful woman an’—an’ why it’s you, mum! It’s you, Mrs. Wilbur.”

Sophie screams. “It’s Luke!” she says. “It’s him!”

The hermit goes on: "His eyes is open now. He says, 'Where am I?' An' a doctor says, 'Boston. You got hit on the head with a bot—with a fallin' brick from a buildin' as was condemned, an' you've been unconscious for days—'"

"For years," mutters Gus. "Ever sinct he was born."

Simon pays him no heed. "I see the sick man rub his brow an' look wild around him. He sits up. 'I remember now,' he says. 'It all comes back to me. I been without me memory these many years. The brick brought it back. I'm Luke Wilbur an' somewhere I got a lovin' wife waitin' an' grievin' for me. Mace's Bay—that's where. I must write to her. I must—'"

Simon groans again an' covers his eyes with his hands. "That's all, Mrs. Wilbur, mum, that's all the sperrits will show. But that letter will come to ye, mum. The sperrits never lies."

Sophie is overcome. She gazes at the hermit like he was someone just dropped outen the gates o' heaven. "You are a great an' inspired man." says she. "An' I'd never doubt ye. Here's yer fee an' ye've earned every bit of it. Will Luke ever come back to me?"

The hermit shakes his head. "That I can't tell ye, mum. Maybe in time. If ever it is revealed to me, I'll let ye know."

"Fer another hunderd," growls Gus, but no one pays him any heed. Sophie pays over the money, says a touchin' good-by to the hermit an' sails home with Gus.

Well, sure enough. Sophie gets a letter from Boston a few weeks later. It tells the very things the hermit seen in his vision, how Luke got hit on the head by a block an' for five years remembered nothin' not even his name till the brick hit him and undid what the block had done. "Now," he wrote. "I'd like to come home, Sophie dear, an' be a good an' faithful husband to ye in the declinin' years o' our lives, but I have no money to pay the 'ospital bill or buy me passage. I need two hunderd dollars an' it's more'n I'd ever ask ye for, even though I know ye'd gladly send it. If you are writin' me, write me in care o' Asaph Phillips, Rouse's Wharf, Boston." An' he signs hisself her lovin' husband, an' she knows his writin' because he prints.

She goes then to the hermit an' asks his advice. For another twenty-five dollars fee he gives it, which is to by all means send Luke the money, and in spite of Gus Lavers' rage and all his prophecies of evil and swindlin', an' pointin' out that Asaph Phillips is an old friend of Luke's and a scamp to boot, Sophie sends the money.

few weeks pass an' there's no sign o' Luke Wilbur, an' Sophie, gettin' anxious, sends Gus Lavers over to Dark Harbor to see if the sperrits have sent in any late reports. The hermit, Gus finds, has gone into winter quarters in a little cabin at the foot o' the cliff that belonged to a lobsterman who went crazy an' got caught in one of his own traps.

The hermit is drinkin' grog an' smokin' his pipe, an' he greets Gus Lavers with a lot more affability than usual. In fact, he's quite pleasant to Gus an' gives him some grog an' says, "I've often thought, Mr. Lavers, that you're the man for the Widda Wilbur. At first, I jedged ye wrong, but on thinkin' it over an' givin' the whole matter my matchoor deliberation, I come to the conclusion that she'd be better off with a good man like you rayther than takin' up with this Luke Wilbur who, by all accounts of the sperrits, was somethin' of a scallywag. And, mark ye, Mr. Lavers, I said 'was.'"

"Whadda ye mean?" says Gus. "Have the sperrits been revealin' more things to ye? If so—"

Simon the Hermit leans forward then an' rakes his whiskers with one hand while he thumps Gus Lavers' knee wi' the fist of the other.

"Suppose, Mr. Lavers," says he; "just suppose some great revelation had come from the sperrits—a revelation that would make everything different, an' once more an' for all smooth the way for you. Suppose that, eh? What would it be worth to ye?"

Gus Lavers looks cunnin'. "I got nigh onto fifty dollars," says he. "If it were bona fido it might be worth that much—if it's what I think it is."

"Done!" says Simon, an' he closes his eyes an' moans an awful moan that sends cold shudders down Gus Lavers' back. "Luke Wilbur," says he, "is dead."

"Prove it!" says Gus. "Prove it an' the fifty is yours along o' my undyin' gratitood. Seems as if I misjudged you too—thought you was a swindler an' a liar, an' now I find ye know yer business well."

"None better," says the hermit, modest-like. "None better, Mr. Lavers. Bring the widda over tomorrow an' I'll invoke the sperrits—an' bring the fifty."

Gus Lavers brings both. Simon goes into a trance that beats the other one all to shucks. "Woe!" says he. "Woe has come. Mrs. Wilbur, mum. I see the same white bed in the white room o' the 'ospital. I see them doctors an' nusses gathered around the bed an' their faces is grave an' some o' the nusses is cryin'. A doctor says, 'He's gone, pore chap, pore Luke Wilbur, askin' for his Sophie with his dyin' breath an' beggin' us to send on the locket with her pitcher an' a notice o' his death. Well, we'll send them, an' when we hear from her we'll send on the money that he had for his passage home, that now he'll never use.

He's gone, pore chap, on a v'yage that requires no passage money.' An' he wipes away a tear. Luke Wilbur, mum, is no more."

Sophie faints dead away, an' it takes a lot of the hermit's bottled inspiration to revive her. But she comes to finally an' hangs onto Simon's hand, quite ignorin' Gus Lavers. "Noble man," says she. "It lessens the shock o' poor Luke's death to have it told on by a man like you. It must be a divine inspiration that comes to ye. How happy I could be if I allus had the benefit o' your consolin' prophecies! An' how comfortable I could make ye—away from this lonely life o' yourn. Why don't ye come to Mace's Bay an' board with me for the winter? I'd be glad to have ye, Mr. Simon."

"The sperrits wills it otherwise, mum," says Simon sadly. "This very gift that has come to me from livin' in solitude an' meditation, depends for its life on solitude an' meditation. I'd lose it if I began to look for comfort an' beauty such as I'd find with you. No, mum, thankee kindly, but it cannot be. An' here's Mr. Lavers who loves ye, and who the sperrits say, an' Luke Wilbur's sperrit says, is the man to take his place. God bless you an' him, mum, an' may ye be happy."

He gets the widda away with some difficulty, for she's takin' quite a shine to him. She even gives him another fifty when the locket comes along with a newspaper notice of the death in Boston o' one Luke Wilbur. She puts on mournin' for Luke an', at the same time, listens more attentive-like to Gus Lavers' words of love.

Meanwhile at Dark Harbor, Simon the Hermit, havin' collected his last fee, puts on his shore-goin' clothes, takes passage on a fishin' schooner that's goin' to Saint John with a load o' smoked herrin', goes ashore, gets drunk an' wakes up in a white room with white beds all around him an' doctors an' nusses lookin' down at him. He lifts a hand an' feels his face an' lets out a howl. "Holy jumpin' catfish!" he yells. "Where's my whiskers! What's all this! Let me outen here!" Then, behind the doctors an' nusses he sees Sophie with murder in her eyes an' Gus Lavers with the same in his, an' he shuts his own eyes tight an' turns his face to the wall.

"What—what happened to me anyway?" he mutters. "I—I can't remember nothin'."

"A brick fell on ye," says Gus. "Right off the top of a high buildin' as ye was comin' outen a bar. We read in the paper where the Hermit o' Dark Harbor got hurt, an' nothin' would do Sophie but she'd come up to console ye. Imagine her surprise when she saw ye without the beard. Funny—yer gettin' hit with a brick. One o' them coincidences, ain't it? Just like in the visions ye had. Tsch-

tsch! An' o' coorse it makes ye remember that yer name is Luke Wilbur and that ye ain't dead after all."

"I might as well be," muttered Luke. "An' me with the world before me. An' Asaph Phillips playin' go-between fer me an' that old clippin' about the death of a seaman o' the same name, an' the locket, an' the money I got from Sophie an'—"

"Never mind, old chap," says a doctor kindly-like. "Ye will soon be out o' here."

"Yes." mutters Luke. "An' I'll soon be in again."

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Illustrations have been relocated due to using a non-page layout.

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[The end of *The Hermit of Dark Harbor* by Louis Arthur Cunningham]