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# **The Monk of Hambleton**

Armstrong Livingston

# Imprint

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**THE MONK OF HAMBLETON  
THE MYSTERY OF THE TWIN RUBIES  
THE JU-JU MAN  
ON THE RIGHT WRISTS  
LIGHT-FINGERED LADIES  
THE GUILTY ACCUSER**



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## THE MONK OF HAMBLETON

### *I: Saying It With Fruit*

The weather-beaten buildings that comprised the plant of the Varr and Bolt tannery occupied a scant five acres of ground a short half-mile from the eastern edge of the village of Hambleton. They were of old-type brick construction, dingy without and gloomy within, and no one unacquainted with the facts could have guessed from their dilapidated and defected exteriors that they represented a sound and thriving business. It was typical of Simon Varr, that outward air of shabbiness and neglect; it was said of him that he knew how to exact the last ounce of efficiency from men and material without the expenditure of a single superfluous penny.

An eight-foot board fence surrounded the property on three sides, the fourth being bounded by a sluggish, disreputable creek whose fetid waters seemed to crawl onward even more slowly after receiving the noisome waste liquor from the tan-pits. At only one point, that nearest the village, did any of the buildings touch the encircling fence. There its sweep was broken by the facade of a squat two-story structure of yellow brick which contained the offices of the concern and the big bare room in which a few decrepit clerks pursued their uninspiring labors. Admission to this building, and through it to the yard, was by way of a stout oaken door on which the word *Private* was stencilled in white paint. Just above the lettering, at the height of a man's eyes, a small Judas had been cut—a comparatively recent innovation to judge from the freshness of its chiselled edges.

On the afternoon of a warm, late-summer day a number of men—twenty-five or thirty—were loitering outside this door in various attitudes of leisure and repose. They were a sorry, unkempt lot, poorly clothed and unshaven, sullen of face and weary-eyed. When they moved it was languidly, when they spoke it was with brevity, in tired, toneless voices. All of them looked hungry and many of them were, for it was the end of the third week of their strike.

The faintest flicker of animation stirred them as they were presently joined by a roughly-dressed man who sauntered up from the direction of the village, though it is safe to suppose that some of them were moved to interest less by the newcomer himself than by the fact that he was carrying a huge ripe tomato in one hand. He nodded a greeting that was returned by them in kind, and it was some moments before the most energetic of their number crystallized their listless curiosity in a single question.

"Any news, Charlie?"

"Nothin' to git excited about."

"I seen you talkin' to Graham a while ago."

"Uh-huh. Graham's a good sport even if he is standin' in with th' bosses."

"He's only lookin' out for himself," said the spokesman judicially, and tightened his belt by one hole. There was a murmur of assent from the others. "A man has to in this world."

"Uh-huh. And that's why we're strikin' now for a livin' wage and decent workin' conditions. We're just lookin' out for ourselves because no one else will."

"Don't see as we're gettin' 'em," ventured a pessimist mournfully. "Graham say anythin'?"

"Said we'd oughter give in. That's what we'd expect *him* to say, ain't it? But I was talkin' to one of the clerks, feller named Stevens, and *he* says that there's a lot of big orders on th' books that ain't goin' to be filled if we don't go back to work. Reckon that'll give old Varr somethin' to think about!"

They contemplated this hopeful scrap of information in a silence broken finally by the pessimist, who contributed a morsel of personal history by no means as irrelevant to the subject as it sounded.

"Wimpelheimer just shook his head when I went to him this noon for a bit of meat. He was nice enough about it, but he says three or four fellers left town last week owin' him money an' he can't figure noways how we're goin' to win this strike. He's lookin' out for himself, too!"

"Uh-huh." Charlie's favorite expression of agreement was slightly blurred by a mouthful of tomato. "Varr owns Wimpelheimer's store. If he catches Wimpy bein' too accommodatin' to us chaps he's fixed to make trouble for him." He nodded portentously. "Get it?"

"Seems as if Varr owns th' hull blame village of Hambleton, barrin' a few things he's only got a mortgage on," drawled another speaker. He went on musingly to quote a local aphorism. "What Varr says, goes!"

"That's right," concurred the pessimist glumly. "I reckon we took on a pretty big contract when we started to buck Simon Varr!" He wagged his head despondently. "Why—a man might as well try to buck *Gawd!*"

Charlie's face came out from behind the tomato and his eyes swept the other with fiery scorn. "Gettin' cold feet, huh? Mebbe you'd like to git down on your knees an' crawl back to th' old skin-flint? The rest of us started out to do somethin' an' I guess we'll stick. Ain't that so, boys?" There was a low murmur of assent. "We'll win, too—cry-baby!"

"You'd better hope so, Charlie Maxon!" flashed the object of his derision. "You talked us into this strike in the beginnin', more than any one else did, an' if we have to go back to work on th' old terms your name is goin' to be *mud!*"

"Talked you into it, did I? All right, then—I did! What of it? Afraid I'm goin' to quit on you, huh? Well, I'm not. If I talked you into it, I'll get you *out* of it—with more pay an' better conditions." His voice hardened to a threatening note. "What's more, we ain't goin' back on th' old terms or th' old conditions, neither. You heard tell of th' fire that started in C buildin' t'other night, didn't you? Said it was an accident, didn't they? Well, mebbe it was an' mebbe it wasn't. Mebbe there's others who wouldn't be sorry to see th' tannery go up in smoke! An' as for Simon Varr, before I'd go back to work for him at the old scale I'd catch him by himself some night an'—"

"Here he comes now!" broke in somebody abruptly.

Maxon, his harangue cut short, followed the gaze of all of them. Coming toward them some fifty yards away, not from the direction

of the village but from a short-cut through the woods that led from the tannery to his house on the hill, was the familiar, thickset, gray figure of the man they had been discussing. They watched him draw near for a moment, then quietly broke up into groups of two and three and drifted silently away. Maxon lingered to the last from a spirit of sullen bravado, but he had no wish to encounter his late employer face to face and he, in turn, followed his comrades in retreat.

Simon Varr watched them go from beneath his shaggy, scowling eyebrows, and his thin lips relaxed their usual tightness to curve in a contemptuous sneer. Jackals!

He marched steadily to his objective, the door of the offices, and was raising his hand to knock when there was the sound of an iron bar sliding back and the door opened. Since the fire to which Maxon had referred, it had been deemed advisable to employ a watchman by night and a guard by day to protect the property from either accident or sabotage. It was the day-man who had recognized his employer through the Judas and drew the bar.

"Good afternoon, sir," he ventured politely.

Simon Varr was not accustomed to respect any amenity of social intercourse and he paid no more attention now to the greeting than if it had never been uttered. He merely glanced sharply at the man and snapped a curt question.

"Well, Nelson—any trouble?"

"No, sir. There's been a bunch of them loungin' around outside and talkin' a lot, I was listenin' to them when you came along."

"Talking, eh? Who seemed to be doing the most of it?"

"Well, sir, I'd say that—"

He was not destined to say it at that moment, however, for his remarks were interrupted by an incident as annoying as it was unexpected. He and Varr were confronting each other in the open doorway while they spoke, and at this point some missile hurtled past their faces and thudded heavily against the planking of the door, where it burst with all the enthusiasm of a hand-grenade. Startled, they sprang back; then, recovering from the shock, they

discovered themselves quite uninjured in body if somewhat damaged in raiment. They were liberally bespattered from head to foot with the lifeblood of an overripe tomato.

Nelson vented his indignation in a mild oath, Varr relieved his feelings in an angry snarl. The tanner wheeled swiftly in an effort to detect the author of the outrage, but his eyes showed him only a small knot of men, their hands thrust ostentatiously in their pockets, whose snickers died away as he gazed at them grimly. He grunted disdainfully, motioned the guard to precede him, and closed the door behind them as they entered the building. They busied themselves briefly with handkerchiefs.

"I'd like to have the tannin' of their ugly hides!" muttered Nelson.

"Charlie Maxon was eating a tomato as I came across from the path," commented Varr, more to himself than to his companion. "He put his hands behind his back to hide it from me, but he was too slow. Umph! He'll wish he'd never seen that tomato, let alone thrown it at me, before I'm through with him!"

"Maxon, sir?" The mention of the name reminded Nelson of his unfinished report. "Why, it was him that was doin' all the talkin'!"

"It was, eh? Umph."

"More than that, sir, he was makin' threats."

"Threats! What sort of threats?"

"Nothing very definite, sir, but it sounded to me as if he'd be glad enough to set fire to this place if he got a good chance—and he said he wouldn't come back to work at the old wages, not if he had to catch you by yourself some night."

"Catch me by myself—! And *then* what?"

"That was as far as he got, sir. They saw you comin' then and he didn't say anything more."

"Ah!" There was derision in the monosyllable, but a thoughtful expression in the hard gray eyes indicated that Varr had found food for reflection in Nelson's story. What direction his thoughts were taking he did not choose to reveal at the moment, but shot another

question at the watchman instead. "Doesn't Maxon wear a dark-blue flannel shirt?"

"Usually, sir; he had on a gray one to-day."

"Ah!" It was a note of triumph this time. "Have you seen Steiner this afternoon?"

"Steiner, sir? The Chief of Police?"

"The Chief of Police—certainly! Not the Sultan of Turkey!"

"No, sir, I haven't. But this is about the time he turns up every day to see that things are quiet."

"Watch out for him. Tell him I want to speak to him. I'll be upstairs in my office."

"Yes, sir."

They parted with no further remarks. Nelson made a cautious preliminary survey of the outer world to satisfy himself that no more tomatoes were to be apprehended, then opened the door, placed a chair upon the threshold, and settled to the enjoyment of a freshly-filled pipe while waiting for Steiner to put in an appearance. Varr strode to the farther end of the hallway and climbed the flight of narrow, rickety stairs which led to the upper floor.

This was normally the scene of quiet and orderly activity, where the day's work was done to the clicking of typewriters and the hum of subdued voices, but now the rooms were empty and the only sound to be heard was the heavy tread of Varr himself as he walked through the main office to the small room where his own desk was located. He frowned at the difference, and sniffed discontentedly at the stale air which seemed already to have taken on the peculiar flat mustiness appropriate to closed and deserted habitations. He frowned again when he drew his finger along a desk and noted the depth of the furrow it had made in the dust.

A reasonable man—Simon emphatically was not—would have allocated to himself some share of the blame while scowling at the empty chairs and dusty furnishings of the office. It was he who was primarily responsible. It was he who had decreed that the clerical force should be laid off without pay for the duration of the strike.

"They'll have nothing to do—why should we pay 'em to do it?"

Jason Bolt, a minor partner in the business by virtue of some money he had put into it at a critical period in its early development, had protested mildly and ineffectually.

"It wasn't their fault, this strike. If we do that it's going to make them mighty sore."

"Sore at us—but it'll make 'em *hate* the strikers!"

"It will work a hardship on them—they need their salaries."

"If they don't like it let them find other jobs."

"They can't, Simon—there aren't any in Hambleton."

"Then let 'em move to another village—there isn't one of them who'd be a real loss to the community."

"They can't do that, either, they're all family men and they can't pull up stakes and shift at a minute's notice."

"Then they'll stay here and do the best they can until we're ready to whistle 'em to heel again. So much the better. Nothing breaks a strike quicker than adverse public opinion—and those clerks are going to provide a lot of that when they begin to feel the pinch. I'm giving you a lesson, Jason, not only in economy, but in strategy!"

"Just the same—I don't like it."

Simon Varr's eyebrows had gone up a full inch and dropped again.

"You don't like it?" he retorted ironically. "Well, I *do*—and what I say, *goes!*"

Which had ended the debate, since he spoke the simple truth.

He blew the dust from the finger that he had trailed along the desk and entered the small office that was his sanctum. Seated at his ancient roll-top, he opened and read a handful of letters that had come in the afternoon mail—and his ready frown was active again as he noted the tone of some of them. The clerk, Stevens, when he told Maxon that several orders were shortly due to be filled, had in nowise exaggerated the case. Two or three were already overdue, and irate gentlemen in distant cities were beginning to make inquir-

ies more pertinent than polite. Varr threw the letters on his desk and swore at the writers.

The light in the office suddenly became dim; Simon rose irritably and went to the single window, where he raised the green shade to its greatest height. Storm-clouds rolling up from the west had obscured the descending sun so that the countryside, with its rolling fields of grain and patches of thick woodland, which a moment since had been laved in a golden flood, now looked grim and gray beneath the deepening shadows. The tanner studied the gloomy prospect with angry eyes, finding in it some reflection of his own situation, and the face which he raised to the heavens was as black as the clouds themselves.

His was the startled, half-uncomprehending fury of the bull at the first stinging dart of the picador. Domineering and ever dominant, he had been accustomed throughout his life to impose his will upon others. Shrewd and capable in his chosen business, successful in the limited area of his activities, he had come perilously close to believing himself omnipotent, not only in all that pertained to his own destiny, but in the destinies of those about him. Never until the last few weeks had either men or events dared to march contrary to his wish, whereas now they appeared to have entered deliberately into a conspiracy to defy their master and defeat his plans.

Well—conspiracies can be crushed! His jaw set, his thin lips tightened and his powerful hands clenched until the nails on his stubby fingers sank deep into the flesh of his palms. Let 'em match their wits and their wills against his—he would show 'em!

He was so rapt in thought that he did not hear a heavy step in the outer office and was unaware that he had a visitor until a voice spoke respectfully from the threshold of his room.

"Mr. Varr—Nelson said you wished to see me."

The tanner started and turned from the window. "Oh—it's you, Steiner." He walked to his desk and seated himself solidly in his swivel chair. "Come in."

The Chief of Police—Chief by virtue of two subordinate constables—obeyed a command, rather than accepted an invitation. He was a tall man, slender of build but wiry, a little past middle-age,

with hair beginning to gray at the temples, pale blue eyes and lantern jaws. As a policeman he was a singularly unconvincing figure, yet he had served creditably enough for five years in the peaceful village of Hambleton, where an occasional speeding motorist or some native exalted by too much home-brew constituted the whole criminal calendar for a year. A quiet job for a quiet man.

Varr did not offer him a chair, so he stood patiently waiting, twirling in his hands the uniform cap that he had removed in deference to his surroundings.

"Last night," began the tanner abruptly, "some one trespassed on my property and committed material damage—or to put it more plainly, some one entered my kitchen garden, picked a considerable quantity of my best tomatoes, helped himself to a couple of dozen ears of sweet corn, and incidentally trampled down and destroyed quite a number of plants in the process. I strongly suspect that he did the last intentionally, out of pure malice."

"Why, sir, that's a singular thing to have happen," commented Steiner as the other seemed to pause. "I don't expect it was any one in Hambleton, sir. It might have been a tramp."

"It might have been, but it wasn't. It was Charlie Maxon, who used to work for me and never shall again. I want you to take the necessary steps to effect his arrest. I intend to prosecute him and hope he will be punished to the full extent of the law. It's time Charlie Maxon and a few of his friends were taught that I'm a bad man to play tricks on!"

"Maxon, sir?" Steiner seemed more thoughtful than surprised. "I think he has been one of the more active men in agitating this strike of yours. A bright enough chap with a queer streak running through him."

"Umph. Well, I'm going to put him where his queer streak can't get loose and run amuck in my garden." He caught an expression of hesitancy in the policeman's eyes. "Eh? What's the matter?"

"I was just thinking, sir—are we sure of proving it against him? Mebbe we'd better go slow. If I arrest him, like you say, and the case falls down, he'd have a cause for action—"

"Idiot!" snapped Varr. "Don't you suppose I know that?" He thrust his hand into his breast-pocket. "Of course I have plenty of proof."

He produced a heavy wallet and opened it. From one of its compartments he took a small, triangular bit of blue cloth and, with the habitual impatience that marked his every speech and gesture, he threw it at Steiner, who caught it deftly in his cap.

"The man who looted my garden was afraid to use the gate for fear he'd be seen from the house. He came and went through the barbed-wire fence and left that as a souvenir. It's a piece of a flannel shirt, like the one Maxon usually wears. Get his shirt and match this to the hole you'll find in it—see? Then take his everyday shoes and fit 'em to the footprints he left in my tomato patch—I've had two of 'em covered with glass bells so they won't be washed away if it rains. That will be all the evidence you need. Understand?"

"Y-yes, sir."

"Well—what is it now?"

"It's this, sir—I guess I ought to tell you that there's a lot of feeling in the village over this strike, and most of it favors the strikers. Maxon would get a bunch of sympathy. S'pose he comes out and says he took those tomatoes because he was hungry? It may be wrong to steal, but there's people who will say you're persecuting him and they'll set him up as a martyr. I—I'm looking at it from your interest, sir—"

"Indeed! Thank you, Steiner—thank you very much!" Varr was never more disagreeable than on the rare occasions when he chose to be studiously polite. "In return, let me suggest something that has to do with your own best interests. You are employed here to preserve law and order and this is decidedly a matter for your official attention—unless, indeed, you are thinking of resigning from the force on the chance that I may offer you a position as confidential adviser to myself. Eh?"

Cold gray eyes held and mastered pale blue ones. There was a brief silence—a silence that lasted just long enough for Steiner to reflect that he owed his job to the Board of Selectmen and that the

Selectmen pretty much owed theirs to Simon Varr. Then he cleared his throat nervously.

"Of course, you know best, sir. I'll act at once."

"Let me know when I'm to appear in the police court."

"Yes, sir. Is that all you want of me, sir?"

Varr did not answer, but there was dismissal in the abrupt way that he swivelled around to his desk and bent his head over his neglected correspondence.

## *II: The Head of the Trail*

The sound of the chief's subdued steps—in departing even his feet contrived to appear deferential—had barely died away when it was replaced by the noise of other and more determined ones ascending the stairs. The creaking of the ancient floor-boards heralded the approach of Jason Bolt, the junior partner, who passed by his own private office and entered Varr's.

He was a short, rotund little man of forty-five, smooth-shaven, somewhat sandy in complexion, with twinkling eyes that were friendly, and a light thatch of pinkish hair which was noticeably thinning on the top of his head. There was a general air of cheerfulness and content about him and his mouth, that was inclined to twitch at the corners, seemed continually on the point of smiling. In truth, the fairy godmother of Jason had presented him at birth with one of her choicest gifts, a sense of humor, and it had seldom failed him since. Beyond any possible doubt—as he had more than once pointed out to his wife Mary—he owed to this fine characteristic the fact that he had preserved his sanity of mind and body despite the twenty years of intimate association with his grim, self-centered partner.

He plopped down on a chair with a puffing sound of relief. He was panting a bit from the stairs, and his forehead was beaded with a moist tribute to the sultriness of the weather. He fanned himself gently with a stiff straw hat.

"Hello, Simon," he said presently, when returning breath permitted him to speak. He did not expect any reply and continued without waiting for one. "Gosh, I've just had quite a shock!"

"Did, eh? What was it?"

"The sight of our usually immaculate, if unpainted front door. I saw that rich crimson stain, then observed Steiner coming out looking very businesslike, and I made sure that some one had brained my noble partner against his own building."

"The shock coming when you stepped in here and discovered your mistake. Is that it?"

"No, Simon; Nelson told me that it was only Charlie Maxon saying it with catsup." His light voice grew more serious. "Just the same, a man who throws tomatoes to-day may throw bricks to-morrow."

"Not Maxon," cut in Varr. "Steiner has my orders to arrest him."

"Arrest him! On charges of assault with a tomato? It's hardly a deadly weapon unless it's green, and this one very obviously was not. A slap on the wrist and a reprimand is about all he will get for that."

Varr's chair revolved until he was facing his partner, at whom he directed a glance of angry impatience. "If you'd listen to me instead of chattering so much—! I'm charging him with trespass, theft and property damage." Curtly but clearly, he described the overnight raid on his garden and his reasons for believing Maxon the culprit. He noted the changing expression of Bolt's face as the story progressed, and when it was finished he asked, as he had asked the Chief of Police: "Well—what is it?"

"I'm thinking of the effect on public sentiment," answered the other gravely, his thoughts turning in the same direction that Steiner's had taken. "But of course that doesn't cut any ice with you—I know that. You'll do as you please regardless of consequences."

"I certainly will!"

"Do you know, Simon, that about twenty of our best men have left town in the last two weeks? I was talking to Billy Graham this afternoon and he'd been checking up."