

# Weird Tales



MAY, 1953

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(Copyright 1923 by Rural Publishing Company)
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(Copyright 1936 by Popular Fiction Publishing Company)

**THE EYRIE**

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D. McILWRAITH, Editor

# I'll Be Back

BY DAVID EYNON

*... she'll be waiting for me,  
even if she is dead.*



I suppose the castle is still back there in Lorraine, if the shellfire didn't batter it to pieces that night after I left. Maybe the hollyhocks have pushed up among the blackened beams and perhaps the birds are nesting again in the crack over the doorway. At least Redine is there, that's for sure. And she's waiting for me, even if she is dead.

Why don't I go back, you wonder? Well, what is there, in a pile of broken stones and shattered timbers, that would give me back a blue eyed girl who spoke so softly? And on the hill that overlooks Metz the yellow gorse might be in bloom. It would remind me too much of her hair. No, I'm not quite ready to return yet, I think. And besides, it doesn't really matter. She'll wait for me. She's already waited nine hundred years, you see.

It seems as if I graduated from High School centuries ago, and yet it was only 1944. I never finished, really. In the middle of February I went into the army and mother collected my diploma that May. I was in England by that time, and the army had taught me a lot that high school had overlooked.

We didn't know it then, but the invasion was only a few weeks away. The most I could wangle was a three-day pass from duty, so I decided to look up an old aunt of my father's who lived in the Welsh mountains north of Cardiff. Aunt Elizabeth, her name was, and I hadn't seen her since she came to America in 1936.

She lived in an old barn of a place, so isolated that I needed a whole day to get back to it. First I went to Cardiff, then the

train to Merthyr-Tydwel and finally a bus up into the hills. It was nearly dark when I climbed the steep street that led to Auntie's house.

The maid who opened the door was a little woman, well beyond fifty, I guess. She looked frightened when she saw me standing in the darkness. Finally she spoke to me in Welsh, but I didn't understand so she left me standing at the door and went to get my Aunt.

Auntie didn't recognize me at first. Not until I spoke. Then she realized who I was and took me into the living room and sat me before the fire. It was one of those old-fashioned places, like a setting from Dickens, with the firelight splashing over the family portraits on the wall and a large, gray cat curled up on the hearth watching a singing teapot.

My Aunt sat down in her chair by the fire and poured me a cup of tea. Her face hadn't changed much with the years and her eyes, lighted by the fire, were brighter than ever. Only her gray hair showed she was past eighty.

For at least an hour I was forced to answer questions about the family in America. When Auntie's eager questions were exhausted she settled back in her chair and started to ramble on about the past. What with most of the family spread about the world I suppose she got used to living here, quietly going over the past in her mind, stopping occasionally to digest some bit of information from a relative in India or the States.

Her talk didn't interest me much. The warmth of the fire and the strong tea almost put me to sleep. When the clock struck midnight in doleful tones I came to with a start. The fire had died and the cat, seeking warmth, was curled up in Auntie's lap.

"You're waiting for the invasion, I suppose," she said, as if it were a foregone fact. She startled me, for the topic was secret and we weren't supposed to even discuss it with civilians. She noticed my surprise and chuckled.

"You forget, we've been waiting for it a long time here," she said. There was resignation in her voice and she stroked the cat as she spoke.

"It isn't the first invasion, you know. As a matter of fact, our family came to England in an invasion."

"Normans?" I asked, putting the cup and saucer down on the hearth.

"Yes," she said. "Not many of the Normans penetrated this far into Wales. That's how I am sure of our ancestry. Our family rather stands out on the record, as it were."

"Where were they from in France, Auntie?"

"I don't know, exactly. Someplace in the north, I think," she said, refilling the tea cups. "There's an interesting story connected with it, if you'd care to listen," she said, moving gingerly to avoid disturbing the cat.

"Sure," I said.

"Well," Auntie said, "it seems the first of our family to arrive in England—he had the same name as you do, incidentally—left his fiancée behind. He never went back for her, apparently, and the story goes that she moved into the family chateau and kept it waiting for him until she died." Auntie paused for a moment to stir up the fire.

"That's not the first time a girl has been jilted, I guess," I said.

"No, I suppose not," Auntie replied. "Still, if you get to France soon," she said with a faint smile, "you might keep an eye open for the old place."

"How on earth could I recognize it?" I asked.

AUNTIE pointed to the bookshelf beside the hearth. "If you'll just hand me the family bible," she said, "I can show you our coat of arms. It's the only clue, unfortunately, but I do wish you'd let me know if you run across it anywhere. Genealogy has become rather a hobby with me."

I took the old leather bound volume from the shelf and Auntie found the arms inscribed in the front of it. They were very simple—a chevron on a silver shield with three ravens across the top. It seemed foolish to imagine that I would run across any trace of such a chateau. But it was Auntie's hobby, so I assured her I'd let her know if anything turned up.

It took me all the next day to get back to my base, and there were no more passes after that. We hit the beaches early in June

and from there through to Paris I thought only of keeping in one piece. Nobody's luck lasts forever, though, and just outside Metz I got a knee load of mortar fragments.

It couldn't have been more than a mile from the hospital, where it happened. When I woke up the worst of it was over. I had a million dollar wound—enough to break the mathematical curve of mortality that governed life and death in the infantry. By the time I would have to go back to the front I could start fresh on the law of averages.

The hospital wasn't bad at all, just dull. There was no way to kill time but gambling, and I wasn't a good loser, besides which I was almost broke. A doctor in the outfit was from my home town, luckily, and when my knee was a little bit better he loaned me his jeep so I could drive around the area and take in the sights.

Metz is an old town, fortified in the middle ages and still full of ancient houses and taverns. The Jerries had it fortified in modern style and it was hell to take away from them. Inside the city was mostly filth and wreckage so I stuck to the outside roads, exploring through the hills and thick woods behind the town.

It was on one of those mud filled ruts—which the French call class B highways—that I met Redine. In the distance, at first sight, she looked like a child. She was slogging along in oversized sabots. A wisp of blonde hair had slipped out from under the shawl over her head.

When I drew up beside her the jeep threw mud on her stockings and she looked around at me and I saw she was eighteen or so. I apologized, in high school French, for splashing her and she nodded. I couldn't think of the French word for "Ride" so I just gave her the hitch hike signal. She was pretty cool in replying, even if I had splattered mud on her, but finally she did get into the jeep.

At intervals she gave me brief directions until we were way back in the thickets. The road had become almost a trail and I began to wonder if she might not be lost herself when we drew up before a cottage.

It was an odd sort of place, made of stones which were far too large for a peasant's hut. The windows were high, nar-

row affairs, vast slits in the wall. The heavy oak door, laced with wrought iron, didn't give the house a friendly tone. Only the thatch roof looked like what you'd expect to find a farm girl living under.

She didn't really want to ask me in, I think, but *Noblesse Oblige* apparently forced her to. She suggested, grudgingly, that I might feel like a cup of coffee and so would I care to park my jeep and visit awhile?

I accepted her invitation more from devilishness than desire. She shrugged and, turning quickly from the jeep, led me into the house. Like I said, it was no castle, but she behaved as if it were. When I got inside I slumped down in the largest chair I could find, just to be irritating. I didn't get any reaction from her, though. She just took off her shawl and called out something in a brand of French I couldn't make out.

An old peasant woman, who obviously wasn't a relative, but also not too much of a servant, ambled out from the back room and mumbled with Redine. After a few sentences of that weird French, which seemed almost archaic, the old woman went and got us some coffee.

"*Je regrette que nous n'avons pas encore du sucre,*" Redine said, handing me the cup and saucer.

"S'ok," I said. "I can do without the sugar all right."

We sat and drank the coffee slowly. Even unsweetened it was pretty good stuff. We stared at each other a bit, then drank awhile, then sat holding our empty cups and wondered what to say. It was pleasant to relax in home-like surroundings with a girl my own age. That's what made me behave so quickly, I suppose, in the manner Redine seemed to expect. Then, too, her eyes had turned to cornflower blue since we came into the cottage, and the firelight suddenly shimmered from her hair.

"You are in France a long time?" she asked, trying to be frostily formal.

"Eight months," I said. "We landed in June." Her coolness prompted me to keep talking about myself and I found her charming. It was midnight before I knew it. She yawned daintily so I picked up my trenchcoat and prepared to shove off. When

she saw me to the door her irritating "Noblesse Oblige" attitude showed up again.

"One hopes to see you again," she said in charmingly accented English.

"Sure thing," I said, and delighted in the frown it brought to her face. The lights went out in her house as I turned the jeep into the path back to the main road. When I finally reached the highway I stopped and dropped an empty gas-can as a landmark. Then I drove back to the hospital whistling.

THE next morning I was up earlier than I had been in weeks. There was a letter from Auntie waiting at the office which I didn't take time to read but just stuffed in my jacket pocket as I walked over to the garage.

It took me half the morning, nosing around the back roads in the jeep, to find the empty gas-can lying by the road. When I got to the end of the path I could see Redine with a bundle of sticks in front of the cottage.

As the brakes squealed she looked up, surprised. I cut the ignition and got out.

"One hopes to see me again—*Alors*, I return," I said brightly.

"How did you find your way back here?"

"I can smell coffee cooking for miles."

"Would you like some coffee?" she asked, turning toward the door.

"Be right with you," I said. I stopped and took some cans of fruit juice from the back of the jeep. When I got inside the cottage she had two places set on the large table before the fireplace. The old woman was nowhere in sight but a gray cat stalked out of the back room and stared at me.

I slumped down at the table—a bit more respectfully this time—and took Auntie's letter from my pocket. It was six months old and had gone through a half dozen stops before it reached the hospital. There wasn't much in it, except a reminder not to forget about the family chateau, and a sketch of our coat of arms.

I crumpled the letter and tossed it into the fireplace that took up most of the far wall of the front room.

"What do you burn?" Redine asked.

"Love letter," I said. It got no reaction so I quit and turned to the light meal she

had put on the table. I opened a can of orange juice with my pocket knife and shoved it over to Redine.

"*Qu'est-ce que c'est?*" she asked.

"Today we live," I said. "The PX just got in a batch of the stuff. Orange juice. *Jus de fruit.*"

She tasted it testily and poured some into a glass. Breakfast was as silent as most of the meals I had there after that. Not necessarily a cold, sullen silence. Neither was it a silence of familiarity. Just a sort of neutral quiet. When we did talk it was with an odd intimacy—unrevealing of feelings yet with a certain companionship. There was never any lightness in the relationship between Redine and myself. If there was humor, it was sardonic. The sombre setting of our association seemed to keep the tone of our acquaintance quiet.

The huge, dark livingroom was frequently lighted only by the fire and the winter sun penetrating the narrow windows. The walls of the room were infinitely distant in the shadows. Only the heavy table, with Redine sitting at the far end, seemed within reach physically or mentally.

This kept up for almost a month. At times I tried to penetrate her reserve, but she fended me off lightly, without effort. To Redine I was like a huge dog, that meant well but was always underfoot. A dog that had to be treated firmly, but gently enough not to have its feelings hurt. I don't think she realized that I saw this, either. I imagine she just figured all GI's for slob—and me for slob number one.

If she ever took anything from me, for instance, she always did it to spare my feelings, rather than insult me by refusing my gifts. She couldn't have gotten much food anywhere else and she looked as if she could stand a square meal or two, but pride was stronger than hunger with her. She was kind of ethereal, like they say in books.

No matter what type she was, I'd have missed her anyway on that morning when I left for the front again. My knee was working swell by then and I just had enough time left for a brief goodbye before starting up the road across Luxembourg.

Redine rode with me down to the end of the lane from her house. While she was

still sitting in the jeep I gathered up my nerve and kissed her lightly on the cheek. She just sat stiffly and said nothing. When it was time to go she got out of the jeep and stood staring down at her sabots.

"I'll be back sometime," I said, like any GI who ever left any girl. She looked up at me sharply and when I saw her eyes I really did want to come back. There was interest in her look, as if maybe I wasn't a slob any longer. There was also a touch of ruefulness.

"You won't be back," she said, and it made me kind of cold to hear her say it. I'm not superstitious but I assured her, vehemently, that I would be back.

She just smiled slightly, the first smile of hers that I had ever seen, and waved as I started the jeep off.

**A**ND I did come back, too. That was the only satisfaction I had on that awful night—the night when the Jerries first turned the tide on us in the Bulge. All the way back on the road from Luxembourg I kept telling myself she was wrong, I was coming back. The same day I left, too.

Driving along the shell pocked road my only thought was to get to the cottage. As the jeep lurched along a wheel would occasionally plunge into a hole and send a shower of freezing water up into the headlight beams. The shell fire was getting louder now. The low, sharp whine of the 88's, fired point blank, flat trajectory, could be picked out clearly against the background of the longer range German artillery. By morning they would be across Luxembourg and sweeping further—God knew how much further. There was little enough to stop them, at the beginning of the Bulge.

But I couldn't get much further, in any case. My gas was nearly gone or I'd probably have missed the turn off from the main road, down the lane that led to Redine's cottage. The low hanging branches caught at my jeep as it tore through the narrow path. When it shot into the clearing before the house I hit the brakes and it slithered to a stop in the new fallen snow.

The building was dark and forbidding in the moonless night, but it was the only place in the world with which I had any

associations left. After my flight across Lorraine it was almost home.

My boots crunched in the snow as I walked around to the front door. The echo of my knock gave the impression that the house was empty. No one was up to let me in, for sure, so rather than wake Redine I tried the door. It was open and I stumbled through into the darkness.

With the light from my cigarette lighter I checked the drapes, and when they were closed I felt for the fireplace and lighted a candle that was sitting on the mantel. The yellow light sprang up and fought its way towards the outer edges of the room.

The two cups were still on the table—the remains of the breakfast I'd had with Redine that morning. The pewter pot was half-full of coffee so I lighted a small fire in the hearth and put it on to warm. The sound of the wood sputtering cut into the sombre silence and the pot started gurgling.

I took the pot off the fire and went back to the two cups on the table. As I sat down in the oversize chair and lighted my last cigarette the past and future came back into focus again.

As I said before, this cottage was the closest thing to a home that Europe had to offer me. Even here I felt strange, in spite of the past month in which I had spent most of my time here—in fact, in the chair in which I was sitting. The chair seemed to claim me, almost, and I settled down deeper into it and wondered how soon Redine would be awake.

I waited for the dawn, more to be able to prove Redine's prediction was wrong, I guess, than anything else. When the light started creeping feebly through the crack under the door I leaned over to snuff out the candle. I had just finished the last of the coffee when I heard the plane's hum.

One of the jerries must have broken through our remaining air cover and spotted the house. With the many jeep tracks running into the clearing it would look just like a command post from where the German was sitting.

Before I could get out to hide the jeep I heard the plane's machine guns rattle and the gas tank of my vehicle went up with a dull boom.

By the time the kraut had his plane turned round I was through the cellar door and half-way down the steps. I thought of Redine, but the back room was empty, and there was no place else she could have been.

I knew that the German would drop something heavier on his second pass, so I groped through the darkness of the cellar as fast as I could, using my cigarette lighter as a torch. The Kraut must have made a slow, leisurely turn for his second run. Otherwise I couldn't have gotten through the long expanse of passages under the cottage. It seemed like there were more rooms below ground than above.

As I look back, it's easy to see that the cottage was only the remaining two rooms of an old chateau. But at the time the only thing I noticed were the coffins stacked in the last room into which I stumbled.

The Zippo didn't throw much light, but my eyes were dilated by fear. When I turned towards the coffin in the center of the vault the arms engraved on it leaped out at me. Of all things to remember at that time Auntie's was the craziest, I guess, but the arms I saw were identical with those

she had shown me in the family bible.

I had only just noticed the three ravens on the coffin when the Jerry came in again. He overshot the cottage slightly—probably one of their younger pilots—and the bomb skipped along the ground until it exploded just on top of the family vault I was in.

Imagine all the people in the world screaming in your ear at once and you'll know what it was like. No noise at first, only a sea of pressure sweeping over you, then the yelling followed by blackness.

When I came out of it the ceiling was cracked wide open and I was looking up at the morning sky through the clouds of dust that swirled in the underground room. I remember grabbing the edge of the coffin to pull myself up and then I leaned over to shake my head clear again.

By the time the dust had settled I was sure that nothing in my body was broken and I felt that I had got off easy. Then I looked down into the coffin whose lid had been blown off. There, in a remarkable state of preservation after what must have been centuries of interment, lay the body of Redine in the rags of a wedding dress.