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THE RETURN

By G. G. PENDARVES

"H-M-M! Might spend a night in many worse places than this!" said Arnold Drysdale to himself, as his host disappeared; leaving him alone in the great vaulted room, lit by the dancing flicker of a log-fire.

The portraits on the paneled walls were veiled by the shadowy darkness, but beyond the circle of radiance within which Drysdale sat could be seen the dim outline of the Bechstein grand, the huddle of chairs at the far end of the music room, the pale glimmer of flowers in tall vases, and the clouded splendor of the gold brocade curtains drawn across the windows.

"Yes! It's a very easy way of earning five pounds!" went on Drysdale reflectively, lounging back in his chair and lighting a cigarette. "And what's more—I believe it's done the trick with Millicent," he chuckled complacently; "she thinks I'm no end of a hero to take on the wager and spend a night in the haunted room!" His lazy brown eyes half closed as he thought of Millicent Fayne—her youth, her loveliness, her dawning love for himself, and above all her wealth. "Nothing like a misspent youth for teaching a man the sort of woman he ought to marry," he concluded; "discrimination is better than innocence, and experience than much fine love!"

He looked round sharply as the far door of the room opened, and a man's tall figure showed for an instant against the lighted corridor without, before the door was closed again and the intruder approached.

"That you, Holbrook?" said Drysdale, thinking his host had returned to add a word of warning or advice. "Come back to see me hobnobbing with your spectral friend—eh?"

"It's not Holbrook! It's I Jim McCurdie!"

"Wha-a-a-t?" Drysdale sprang to his feet. "Why, where . . . how?"

"I wasn't sure if I could get here tonight, so I did not let Holbrook know I was coming—thought I'd just give you a surprize!"

"Surprize!" echoed Drysdale faintly, his hands clenched so that the knuckles gleamed, his cigarette dropping from suddenly relaxed lips to the rug at his feet.

Jim McCurdie sat down at the table, and looked across at his companion with a grin. "I heard you were at your old game of playing hero," he said, "and I thought it was a good opportunity of finding you alone. I've wanted this little chat with you for the last eight years!"

"Then you weren't you didn't you came back after all from that expedition?"

"Yes—I came back after all. We're pretty tough—we McCurdies—and there were several good reasons for my getting back. It's a bit too late for doing all I meant to do—but there's still one thing!"

A silence fell. The shadows in the big room seemed to thrust forward to peer and listen, as Drysdale sank into his chair and looked at his old rival opposite him—incredibly aged and altered from the gay, carefree youth

whom Drysdale had sent on that deadly mission eight years ago.

"Then the ambush——?" Drysdale bit back the words too late; against his will the fatal question had shaped itself into words.

"Ah yes—the ambush! You knew all about the ambush, didn't you? You urged me and my men to take that particular route across the desert, knowing that Ibn Said and his ruffians waited by the Well of Tiz for us! You cowardly—lying—thief!"

The last deliberately spoken words bit like ice into Drysdale's consciousness, and partly steadied his whirling thoughts.

"Thief!" he stuttered; "thief!"

"Thief—one who steals what belongs to another man," explained McCurdie, leaning forward until his eyes blazed like points of blue flame into those of his companion. Drysdale's gaze fell before them and he half rose from his seat.

"Sit still," ordered McCurdie. "I've come a long way for the pleasure of meeting you once more; and now you're going to listen!"

"Don't make a fool of yourself," sneered Drysdale, his confidence returning as he began to adjust himself to the situation. "Thief—you call me!" He shrugged his shoulders. "Jean Kennedy was quite ready to be stolen, if that's what you mean."

"You tricked her and lied to her and deceived her! You left her to die miserably—as you left me."

"That's your own rotten imagination at work," answered Drysdale. "She went abroad the year after you—er—disappeared; no one ever heard what became of her."

"She went to Bruges—she lived at a mean little inn called *Le Chat Gris*—and died there when her son—and yours—was born!"

Drysdale started back, his nonchalance again stripped from him. "How the devil did you——?"

McCurdie's lean brown hands toyed with the match box on the table. "I know where she lies buried in the paupers' graveyard down by the river—she and her nameless son. I know that you stopped her allowance when her reproaches annoyed you; and that she became a wretched, half-starved slave to the innkeeper, Père Grossart, and his drunken wife."

"Damn you—you paid them to tell you this fairy-tale!" blustered Drysdale.

"I have never spoken to them in my life," was the answer.

"Liar! No one else in the world could know that she—that I——"

"So—you corroborate the story."

"No, curse you, I don't!" shouted Drysdale, getting to his feet. "You've found them out by accident and concocted this tale to try to ruin me."

"Before you ruin Millicent Fayne—as a climax to your varied career."

Drysdale's angry face changed, the red faded, and ugly unexpected lines appeared round his mouth. His brown eyes were suddenly hard and calculating.

"So *that's* your little game!" he said at last. "We're rivals once more! I did not know you had ever met Millicent," he went on. "You're going to try to use my 'guilty past' as a weapon! Very neat—I see—I see!" And turning to the whisky and soda which stood on the table, he began to fill his glass.

FOR a moment the other man sat very still, looking steadily at Drysdale; then, pushing back his chair, he got up and stood with his back to the glowing fire, his thin brown hands clasped behind him.

"I thought that even you would see such an obvious thing," McCurdie rejoined at last. "You'll leave here tonight—now, in fact!"

All the baffling, violent emotions that had possessed Drysdale during the last few minutes boiled up suddenly within him, his interlocutor's words of easy command setting a match to his fury. With a swift, uncontrolled movement he hurled the glass he held, striking McCurdie full in the face.

There was a sharp hissing sound as the liquid splashed on the hot tiles of the hearth, and the glass shivered against the mantelpiece a few feet behind McCurdie's head.

"Good God!" Drysdale's voice was a mere thread of sound, as the eyes of the other man continued to look stedfastly into his own. "Who—what are you?"

"I am Jim McCurdie, whom you sent to death eight years ago in the Desert of Tlat."

Drysdale gasped and held on to the back of a chair, while the familiar surroundings of the music room receded to vast distances and a swimming darkness enveloped him. Then, slowly, reason asserted itself. How absurd of him to think, even for a moment, that the glass had passed through McCurdie's head! It was merely an effect of the firelight and his own jangled nerves.

"It appears you did not die—in spite of my efforts," he answered, with a barely perceptible tremor in his voice.

"I was buried by the Well of Tiz, with six spear-wounds through my body."

Drysdale looked stunned for a moment, but a lifelong habit of disbelieving what he did not understand conquered his rising fear.

"Either you're Jim McCurdie or his double! In any case you're making a nuisance of yourself," he said finally, and drawing an automatic from his pocket he leveled it at his companion, who had moved until he stood with his back to the paneled wall at the right of the fireplace. "I

am going to shoot you. If you did not die in the desert, you'll die here and now! I shall say I thought you were the ghost that haunts this room!"

"I *am* the ghost!" replied McCurdie. "I have waited eight years to get back again; and tonight gave me my entrance to the world of humans once more. In this room there is power I could adapt to my needs—power to materialize—to borrow for a brief time a visible human garment for my soul."

"Splendid!" answered Drysdale, with a sneering laugh. "You always had a powerful imagination, McCurdie. Well, I am going to deprive you of your garment once and for all."

He raised his arm and a shot rang out—but the tall figure stood motionless before him, the blue eyes steady on his own.

"Curse it!" muttered Drysdale, "This light——" he fired again and yet again. "Die, can't you!" he shrieked, stumbling up close to that quiet figure, and putting the muzzle of his weapon to its breast he fired one shot after another in rapid succession; then fell with a wild yell of laughter to the ground, the smoking revolver clenched in his fingers.

HOLBROOK was the first to find him lying there, and hastily dropped his handkerchief over that agonized, grinning face, before the startled guests and servants poured into the room.

The paneled wall to the right of the fireplace was riddled with bullets; but no sign of blood—no foot nor fingerprint of any assailant did the keenest man from Scotland Yard ever discover.

What or whom Drysdale had tried to shoot was never known—for the dead can not speak; or if they do, they are not believed.