

THE TRANSFER OF TOMPKINS'S GHOST

BY ALBERT LEE.*

I KNEW Tompkins well. That's why I believe this story. When I say I believe this story, I don't mean that I'm prepared to accept it as McCurdy tells it; for McCurdy has been on the road many long years, and he doesn't hesitate to make the Recording Angel work overtime. But I will stand by the facts, for these can be proved, and I'll let McCurdy be responsible for the trimmings. After all, it would seem that he exaggerates less on this yarn than on any he ever tells—and I've heard him tell many, and this one many times. Probably even he can see that this requires no embellishment. The cigarette incident may be true—for Tompkins was an inveterate cigarette smoker,—but I want to go on record right here as doubting it. I want to go on record as doubting it because I put perfect faith in all the rest; and I believe the rest—not because I can bring myself to believe anything McCurdy may say, but because I knew Tompkins, and I don't think Tompkins would lie, even after death.

Tompkins was a very promising young man. He and I started out from New York about the same time. His line was jewellery, and his territory was the middle west; I was trying to sell shirts and neckties to the same crowd, but they had not been educated up to cheviots and madrasses in those days, and after a year of it I switched to patent medicines, and now I don't have to work. Tompkins had good luck from the start, and he might have been following the Cup defender on a steam-yacht to-day if it had not been for poker; but his good luck there ruined him. Too much good luck is worse than none, because it amounts to about the same thing at the turn. Tompkins's turn was a sharp turn, and it was not to the right nor to the left, but straight down. I was with him just before it, and I got back to St. Jo. just in time for the funeral.

Tompkins used to do the cities and the big towns. I did, too; but I made buggy trips among the farmers, besides, so I used to lose track of Tompkins for weeks at a time.

When I found him again, he always had some big poker story to tell, and he never would listen to my warnings about what would happen if they got a line on him at headquarters. A man who sells jewels and carries a few thousands in samples around with him ought not to play poker. But Tompkins was a born gambler; and the more he played, the better he sold. That's a fact.

But one night, in St. Jo., a slick gentleman named Isaac Blumenstein, fresh from Denver, got into the game. McCurdy insists on calling him *Blumensteen*. "Ikey" is good enough for me; it's easier, too. But Ikey was not easy. He was the hardest proposition that ever struck the crowd, and in three nights he had made Tompkins look like thirty cents. As I said before, I was showing neckties to the farmers about that time, or McCurdy might never have had this story to tell. But McCurdy was in the game on the last night, and he says Tompkins, who had been dropping coin steadily for three nights, came in with a wad like a bolster. Ikey was there, too, and in four hours play Ikey had the wad. That's the last they ever saw of Ikey, and, what's worse, it's the last they ever saw of Tompkins.

He left suddenly the next day and went down to Castleton, about an hour out from St. Jo. He used to call there every other trip. He went to the Porter House, as usual, and they gave him a big room in the wing on the second floor. The windows look out on an orchard that belongs to the big man of the town—I forgot his name now. At any rate, the room was in the back of the house, and Tompkins could have practised on a cornet without waking the policeman out in front on the main street. I only mention this fact to show how easy it was for a burglar to get into Tompkins's room without being heard or seen, even in a town as big as Castleton. And that's just what happened. They found poor Tompkins lying across the bed with a broken head the next morning, and only a couple of hundred dollars'-worth of scarf-pins and sleeve-buttons left in the bottom of his sample-case. The window was open, a chair was upset, and they found a hat that did not belong to

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Tompkins. Of course, the papers were full of it. I got the story the next day in Cobville. McCurdy had heard of it at once and was in Castleton that afternoon. There was



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a lot of red tape with the coroner and the police, but finally McCurdy brought the body up to St. Jo. and we buried poor Tompkins there.

Now, up to this point of the story I'll answer for the details myself. From now on, for a short space, we've got to take

McCurdy's word for it. I would scarcely believe McCurdy under oath, but I believe this story—all except that part about the cigarettes—and I believe it because I can't see how McCurdy could have found out what he knew unless things happened as he says they happened. I don't believe in ghosts, either; but I make an exception in this case, because I can't dodge it.

McCurdy was in Castleton about four months after Tompkins's death. McCurdy's line was soap, and he is known all through that country as the worst—but that's different. McCurdy went to the Porter House, of course. We all used to go there. It was early fall, it was night, and the rain was coming down—well, they can manufacture about as nasty a line of weather in a small Missouri town as in any place I know. The hotel was jammed. They weren't going to take McCurdy. But it was a new clerk who tried to switch McCurdy to the other hotel, and he never would have tried it if he had known the wealth of McCurdy's vocabulary. Finally, they offered him a cot in the hall,

't just then the night clerk came on, and

knew McCurdy, and he said they'd give
n the haunted room. McCurdy gave them
a laugh; but when they told him it was
the room where poor Tompkins had been
killed, he leaned over the counter and asked
questions.

They told him that about a month after
the murder, a man who had been assigned
to that room came howling down the stairs
at three o'clock in the morning and said
he had seen a ghost. They could not get
him to go back; but the clerk put it all
down to the grape. A week later, there
was the same performance all over again,
with another man who had never heard
of Tompkins or Tompkins's ghost. Then
the Porter House people began to take
it seriously, and they waited for a good
customer to try that room on. The right
thing came along in the person of a Baptist
minister. They put him in the haunted
room, and they all sat up that night in the
bar awaiting developments—the clerk, the
bar-keep, old man Porter himself, and the
cop. But the parson was game, I guess,
because he never squealed. He came down
at six o'clock the next morning, though
looking pretty yellow, and paid his bill and
went to the dépôt lunch counter for breakfast.
Nobody had the nerve to ask him any
questions; but since then the Porter people
had not put anyone in that room until the
night McCurdy came along and used bad

language and said he had known Tompkins, and did not believe in ghosts, and was ready to pulverise the man that tried any masquerading on him during the night. So they gave him the key and a pitcher of ice-water, and McCurdy went upstairs to bed.

It was a good-sized room, with two windows facing the orchard in the rear of the house. There was a double bed, a bureau, a wash-stand, a table in the middle of the floor, a great easy-chair, and a few cane-bottom chairs scattered around to fill up space. McCurdy locked the door and put one of the chairs against it, because he had his suspicions about a joke. Then he looked out of the window into the orchard, where the trees were rocking and sputtering in the storm, and reflected that it would be a mighty enthusiastic ghost who would try to come in by that route that night. He put the water-pitcher on a chair near the head of the bed, and determined to baptise any joker who disturbed him in the night. Then he turned in.

He says he went to sleep right away, but awoke after a while with a queer sort of sensation, as if somebody was in the room. The storm had blown over by this time, and the moon was shining dimly through the half-drawn curtains, giving just light enough to distinguish the objects in the room. McCurdy turned over, and although he felt he was only about half awake, he plainly distinguished the form of a man sitting in the armchair. He admits he was startled at first; then he began to get angry, and he reached cautiously out towards the water-pitcher, intending to make a jump for the fellow in the chair. But he stopped half-way and raised himself on his elbow, because the thing in the chair was the weirdest thing he'd ever seen. It looked like a figure in a fog, and what's more, it looked like Tompkins. McCurdy stared and stared, and then he coughed and sat up straight in bed, just to be sure he was awake. The figure in the chair turned and said—

"Ah! you are awake at last. I have been waiting for you."

McCurdy gasped. No human voice ever sounded like that. It was like Tompkins speaking in another room; but the words were audible and distinct. McCurdy felt the cold chills going up and down his spine. He tried to say something, but he could not. Then the ghost spoke again.

"What time is it?" he asked.

McCurdy pulled his watch out from under the pillow and managed to answer—

"Almost two o'clock."

"You've kept me waiting just two hours," said the thing in the chair.

"Sorry," ventured McCurdy, for he did not have any words to waste.

"It's of no consequence," continued the ghost quietly. "I'm used to waiting. I have plenty of time. In fact, I have nothing else to do. If I had waked you up, you would probably have cut and run like the other fellows. You aren't going to run, are you?"

McCurdy could not have walked.

"I guess not," he said.

"Because I want to ask you a question," resumed the ghost, "and it is of the utmost importance to me that it should be answered. The first two fellows would not even wait for me to ask it, and the minister just pulled the clothes over his head and prayed."

"I'll wait," said McCurdy.

The ghost got up out of the armchair and moved across the room. As he passed in front of the window, McCurdy could see right through him—and then he was sure it was a ghost. He got a good look at the face, too, and he shouted—

"Billy Tompkins!"

The spectre paused and gazed at McCurdy. McCurdy said—

"I'm McCurdy."

"By Jove!" whispered the ghost, "I'm glad to see you, Mac. I knew some of you fellows would be along pretty soon. Have you got any cigarettes?"

"On the table," replied McCurdy, and then he knew it was Tompkins. The ghost found the cigarettes, lighted one, and sat down again in the big chair. He inhaled the smoke, and McCurdy could see it go down his throat into his body and down into his legs. He never blew it out again, so that the more he smoked, the more substantial and opaque he became. When he had finished about three cigarettes, McCurdy could no longer see through him. He was in the presence of a greyish white replica of Tompkins.

"How about that question?" he asked finally.

"Coming," said the ghost. "But you don't mind a little ancient history first, do you?"

McCurdy said he didn't.

"You know as well as I do about that last night in St. Jo., where Ikey got all there was coming to him. You remember the wad I had? You remember, too, that I'd been losing straight for three days?"

McCurdy remembered all these things.

"I banked on my luck," continued the ghost; "and the day of that game, I—I—I hypothesized practically the entire contents of my sample-case."

"Where?" cried McCurdy.

The ghost of Tompkins told him who his uncle was in St. Jo.

"I got three thousand," added the ghost, "and then Ikey got it. That settled me. I knew it was all up then. I was a thief, and there was no way out. I bought a little white powder that a travelling medico told me about once, and I came down here and swallowed it. I did not write any letters or send any farewells; I just took my medicine and went to bed. I was about getting unconscious—for it was one of these opium things that lets you off easy and takes a long time doing it—when that fellow crawled in at the window and made for the sample-case. I ought to have let him alone, but I did not. I got up, and we clinched, and the poor fool cracked me on the head with something hard. I fell across the bed with a gash in my forehead, and the burglar thought he had done for me. He lost his nerve and skipped without even taking a pin. The next morning I was found dead. Now, did I commit suicide or was I murdered?"

McCurdy has had a good many questions fired at him in his time, but he gives the championship to this one of Tompkins's ghost. He was so staggered by it that he got up out of bed and counted his fingers and toes to see if he was awake. Then he sat down again and just gazed vacantly at the smoky apparition.

The ghost did not seem to mind, because pretty soon he began talking again.

"You see," he said, "it is not very pleasant to be the ghost of a murdered man; for in the first place, you're visible, and that scares people; and in the second place, you have to roam about the spot where the crime was committed, and that gets tiresome. The spiritual remains of a suicide are invisible, and are bound by no such conventions."

"Strange," muttered McCurdy.

"Not at all," answered the ghost. "It is only natural, as you will learn when you become a ghost."

McCurdy shuddered, but he pulled himself together and asked—

"What do you want me to do? Hanged if I know who killed you!"

"But he's been arrested," said the ghost. "He's locked up in the gaol here now. If

you can find some way to prove in court that I killed myself, you'll release me from the Porter House and save the life of that poor devil of a burglar!"

"But don't you know whether you committed suicide or not?" asked McCurdy.

"That does not make any difference," replied the ghost impatiently. "It is not the facts in the case that affect my condition, it's what the living world believes to be the facts. So long as people think I was murdered, I'll have to haunt this room."

Well, to wind up McCurdy's end of the story—the two of them talked there for an hour or more, and the ghost gave McCurdy all the facts, and McCurdy promised to do what he could. Then the ghost said McCurdy had better get some sleep, and he wished him good-night and disappeared through the wall, leaving behind him, McCurdy says, nothing but a strong odour of stale cigarette smoke.

At this point of the story I can take up the thread of it myself, for everybody knows what McCurdy did the next day; and he could not have done it all if he had not seen Tompkins's ghost. Mind you, McCurdy did not know the burglar had been arrested until the ghost told him, and *nobody* knew that Tompkins had pawned his samples the day before he went to Castleton. I was in St. Jo., and I got a telegram from McCurdy telling me to go to a certain joint and find out if Tompkins's stuff was there. I did not understand at first; but I went, and sure enough, there it was. I thought, of course, the thief had owned up, but he had not. The poor fellow, ever since his arrest, had consistently maintained that he had not taken anything from Tompkins's room that night, and the Castleton police had been putting him through the thirty-third degree to make him give up. I telegraphed to McCurdy that I had found the things, and the date they were pawned, which was *two days before the burglary*. But I did not realise that at the time.

McCurdy saw the point, of course, and he was talking Dutch to that burglar's lawyer inside of half an hour. The lawyer wanted to know where McCurdy got his facts, but McCurdy would not tell. He was not going to be laughed at for seeing ghosts. The lawyer, however, said McCurdy had a good tip, and he came on to St. Jo. with him. They picked me up there, and McCurdy told me the story. I was going to drop the whole business then and there, because I thought it was too serious a matter for



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McCurdy to take the occasion to build a castle like that. But he was in dead earnest. He got two doctors and a Board of Health permit; they exhumed the body, and the post-mortem, or post-bury'em, or whatever you call it, showed that Tompkins had taken enough poison to kill a regiment.

When the case came up for trial, a few months later, that country lawyer just spread-eagled all over the court-room. He proved suicide, and the burglar was let off with six

months. The papers were full of it, but McCurdy kept dark, and that little six-by-nine farmer of an attorney got a reputation for astuteness and keen insight and shrewdness that put him at the head of the Missouri bar with a jump. Now he wears shirts with the cuffs sewed on to the sleeves, and spells "fee" with a capital F.

That's all there is to it. This is the only ghost story I ever believed, because it's the only one that can be proved; and I don't



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see what better proof is wanted. McCurdy told the Porter House people there was not any ghost in their haunted room, and that

there never would be; and there's never been any trouble there since. Poor Billy got his transfer, I guess.