

THE RETURN

Jeffrey Arnold let himself into his apartment and closed the door behind him with a careless bang.

As he walked into the cool, darkened sitting-room, where the shrouded furniture stood about like a silent company of patient ghosts, he was quite sure that he heard a furtive stir from somewhere along the quiet hallway. He turned his head and waited, but the stillness, fraught with that suffocating oppressiveness which is always in closed-up places, smote his ears like a muffled blow.

When, following her critical illness, Margaret had departed for her parents' country estate in New Hampshire, he had been the last one to leave the apartment. He and George Bradley were to camp in the mountains until he joined Margaret at the end of September. When he had tucked her carefully into her father's automobile and personally inspected every lock and fastening in the apartment, he had telephoned Bradley that he would meet him at the Grand Central at 5 o'clock. Yes, that was the last thing he did, and when he had concluded the conversation he placed the receiver upon the hook with the wired end down. Arnold remembered this with a distinctness which was but characteristic of his peculiar propensity for mentally registering infinitesimal and seemingly trifling things. And now the telephone stood before him like a witness who lingers mutely in a deserted courtroom, waiting to give unexpected testimony. Who had taken up the receiver since and reversed the position in which he had left it.

Suddenly Arnold turned his head again. This time the furtive stirring from somewhere in the other rooms was distinctly audible. Very quietly he opened a drawer at his elbow and took out a revolver. Then he arose and walked quickly down the shadowy hallway. He searched his own bedroom and, finding nothing disturbed, stepped through the connecting door into his wife's boudoir, wondering, as he did so, if Margaret, in the lassitude of her ill health, had neglected to take her jewelry. He glanced swiftly around the room, with the cold fearlessness of one who shrinks from no living thing. A faint perfume drifted in the still air. It did not seem the woman who loved had not been in the room for over two months; it bespoke her presence vaguely, as if indeed the lacy negligee tossed upon a linen swathed chair might still retain the living warmth of her, and Arnold touched it lightly as he passed. He came to a mirrored door and, flinging it wide, pressed a button which illumined the shimmering things hanging here and there and transformed the dusky interior into a picture as radiantly colorful as a shop window at night. As he thrust aside each garment his fingers thrilled sensitively—the fragrance of her slim body seemed to emanate from every soft-textured robe that had covered it. Then Arnold's hand encountered a form—a woman's form. Startled, he loosened his rough grip and, pulling down an opera

sk which hung between them, gazed into the face of his wife—a strange, unfamiliar face, scared by some nameless terror and staring up at him like a rigid mask.

"My poor girl!" he exclaimed tenderly. "I must have frightened you to the verge of insensibility! Why didn't you let me know that you wanted something from the apartment—or send your father in for it?"

The woman's haggard loveliness seemed to sharpen suddenly. She pushed Arnold from her and, faltering weakly across the room, sat down upon her bed, staring at him with a sort of wavering horror.

Margaret suffered Arnold to lead her down the hallway and place her upon a

couch in the sitting-room. She watched him all the while as if in the clutches of some numbing fear which had frozen her senses beyond the power of speech.

An electric bell, flinging its whirling summons out of the remote shadows of the hallway, clamored noisily.

Arnold stood upright. "What the dev—?" he began wonderingly. "I thought everyone knew we were away." He sat down the bottle again and started towards the door, but Margaret was in front of him, her eyes glazed with a strange confusion.

"No, no! Don't open the door, Jeffrey!"

She thrust her hands against his breast and the glass which she had been holding fell with a crash to the floor.

A puzzled frown knotted Arnold's forehead as he loosened her clutching fingers.

The woman sat quiescent. She looked ghastly ahead, as if into the depths of an inevitable chasm. Even when she heard her husband's voice she did not move.

"Oh, hello, Bob! Thought you knew we were officially out of town for over two months. But I'm glad to see you. Come in and hear about the thrilling experience Margaret and I have just had."

Robert McAllister entered the room with an air of commonplace nonchalance, but his brain was a seething tangle of fear-distorted questions and surmises, which revolved dazedly and dizzily without apparently reaching any lucid point of ending or beginning.

Margaret gave him her hand as if, with an effort and their eyes met confusedly, her brief look charged with a dumb terror and appeal.

Arnold lifted the drooping body of his wife as the gardener might pick up a crushed flower, and carried her to a couch. He laughed compassionately as he laid her down and arranged the pillows about her.

"Look at her, Bob—struck dumb! Wait until I tell you what happened."

McAllister's eyes flashed a poignant query at Margaret as Arnold turned to draw up a chair, but she met it with stare of utter blankness; it was as if she lived in a trance which had reared a vacant white wall around her intellect.

"I came in to get a certain paper," Arnold was saying, as he leaned forward to offer McAllister a cigarette, "and, by an uncanny coincidence Margaret had also made a trip to town. She was here ahead of me, and when she heard me walk calmly in and proceed to rummage around she concluded that I was a daring burglar. Meanwhile I too, became aware of inexplicable and stealthy noises, and forthwith started upon a tour of investigation. When the poor girl realized that the intruder was proceeding to inspect the premises, she hid herself in the closet, where I came upon her with no gentle grasp—and flourished a revolver, to boot! Rather a disconcerting experience for an convalescent, eh?" Arnold bent above Margaret impulsively, his hand straying out to her with the awkward hesitation of a man who was not given to prodigal demonstrativeness. But the woman sat up suddenly, brushing the disordered hair back from her hot forehead.

"I can't stand it!" she muttered desperately. A wave of dull red flooded her face and throat and, ebbing, left her ghastly. Arnold watched her with a puzzled anxiety. Could this be a relapse, occasioned by her fright—the fever returning?

Then, as he gazed, something struck sharply across his subconscious mind—a silent, dust-linged telephone, with the receiver trailing a looped green wire from its steel-plugged top. And with a

titanic rush of horror, like that which must have paralyzed the hearts of those in the Temple when blind Sampson broke the foundations with his mighty arms, suspicion crashed down upon his brain. For a moment he sat there mutely, his heart growing cold and the strain of the fight for control sapping the blood from his tightened lips. The woman read his eyes and cowered back, covering her face with shaking hands. McAllister stood up, groping behind him as if he would grasp his chair as a weapon.

But Arnold did not move; he continued to look at the woman who bore his name as though seeking to read through her shielding hands. Finally he arose and, moving with the alert aggressiveness with which he might enter a crowded courtroom, went to the telephone and placed the receiver to his ear. He looked straight ahead of him, impersonally, as if he were alone in his private office.

"Hello! This is Arnold. It is imperative that I know the last number called on this wire." He waited composedly, his eyes still fixed upon the opposite wall. "Yes?" he said presently. "Very well, thank you." He stood the telephone carefully upon the reading table and looked up, at McAllister.

"You had not counted on my ability to discover that your number was called from here within the last three hours, had you? Were it not for my habit of seeing the dust grains in every mountain side, as a certain judge once put it, I might not have noticed that this telephone had been used since I set it down over two months ago—though I must say that, despite the astuteness for which I am famed, I seem to belong at the foot of the class." Arnold's upper lip twisted oddly.

"Don't cringe like a hound before the whip, McAllister; there will be no blood spilled." The man seated opposite moistened his lips; he essayed a deprecativo smile.

"Oh, I see," Arnold picked up the weapon and, removing several cartridges, tossed them into the drawer. "Wronged husband—helpless villain—blood and thunder, eh? No, McAllister, I am not a devotee of melodrama. I simply put this in my pocket when I thought that I might encounter a housebreaker—but met, instead, a homebreaker. However, no—guest beneath my roof has ever had just cause to complain of the slightest discomfort. Allow me to place the cause of uneasiness upon your side of the table." Arnold bent forward and showed the pistol away from him with elaborate precision, then settled back in his chair again, regarding McAllister with gravely impersonal eyes.

McAllister arose and with hands locked behind him, as if to keep them from going out to the woman who crouched weeping upon the couch, or to the throat of the man who sat inscrutably at the other side of the table, stood silent for a moment, his labored breathing striking across the turmoil of Margaret's sobs. Finally he turned.

"God!" he cried passionately, "must all women be leaving Eves in the paradise of a man's faith?"

Margaret left the couch. Her knees sagging, she faltered across the room and sank dumbly at Arnold's feet. He looked down at her disheveled hair and then across the table at McAllister.

"You might have been more original!" he continued bitterly. "Both of you are endowed with highly cultivated mentalities—yet you would have trodden the path of my valet, his wife and the neighboring grocer! Oh, it is all too cheap! It's like a jawdry Punch and Judy show that the comely bumpkins may gaze upon for a ha'penny." He laughed tonelessly and bent above Margaret. "What do you want?"

The woman raised her face, the disheveled hair slipping down across her shoulders.

"You," she whispered, distractedly, "you

—you!" She had forgotten McAllister. Arnold smiled with satirical weariness.

"Even unto the end," he said. "The erring wife, recognizing her mistakes, falls at the irreproachable feet of her estimable husband, ready to earn her return ticket by typewriting all of his letters to Dame Ambition! No, Margaret, this is real life." He raised her gently and placed her in a chair. For an instant, as he bent above her, a chaos of suffering sharpened his features, but when he stood erect and faced McAllister he wore his customary inscrutable mask.

"As this is neither a book nor a play," he said quietly, "we cannot whip the incident to its close in a burst of hysteria. I am going to give you as fair a chance as if I had not happened to return today; you shall have a full opportunity to decide whether you are as necessary to one another as it seemed when you first planned to take this step. Three months from today we will meet here again. You shall not see me until that time—"

With a wordless cry the woman stumbled again to Arnold's feet, but, as a jaded parent might handle an unreasonable child, he put her once more in the chair. She crumpled into the depths of it.

"Jeffrey, I was mad! I love you—you!"

Arnold took up his hat. For an instant he paused irresolute, as if the clamor of Margaret's weak sobbing was like so many hands dragging him back to her. Then he met McAllister's skeptical eyes. He straightened abruptly and his mouth grew hard again.

"I trust," he said coldly, "that you will do the sensible thing."

Then he turned and went out, closing the door very gently behind him.—Helen Hamilton Dudley, in Town Topics.

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