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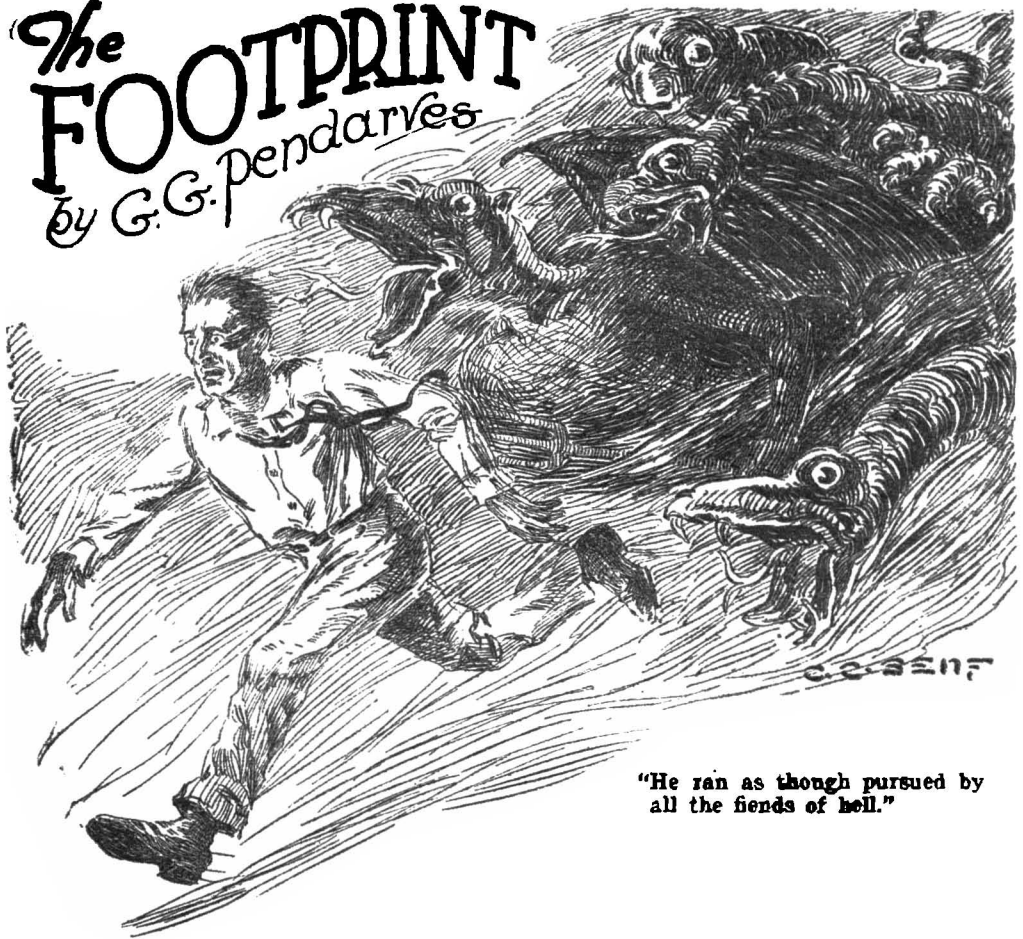
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# The FOOTPRINT

by G. G. Pendarves



"He ran as though pursued by all the fiends of hell."

**I** HAVE very little hope that you will understand, still less believe this incredible adventure that poor Jerry and I went through only a year ago. But if I write it all down perhaps the memory that haunts me, sleeping or waking, will fade from my tortured mind. They think here that I am mad! And I am afraid that I really shall go mad soon, if no one will believe this true and frightful story.

Jerry Nicholls and I were at Dawlish University together, as close pals as two young enthusiasts could be, and shared everything from our views on evolution to a teapot with a broken spout.

It was in our third year that Jerry's grandfather died; and, being

the last of the Nicholls and the sole heir to the old man's property, of course Jerry was bound to appear at the funeral.

I heard nothing from him until two weeks later, when this letter arrived on the last day of term:

For the Lord's sake, Frank, come down to this beastly hole! I can't start with you immediately for Switzerland, according to plan, because of all the business connected with this rotten old estate. Come at once. A few more nights alone in this howling wilderness will turn me gray.

JERRY.

That was enough for me. I stuffed a wet sponge and a few more pairs of socks into an already bursting suitcase, tied an extra bit of string

round it, and caught the next train going north.

Jerry was waiting at Doone station, and his face lit up with a grin of delight as he gripped my hand. We walked home across the marshland, and poor Jerry fairly babbled all the way. He had been so lonely that he couldn't talk fast enough.

Doone House was the center and soul of a gray, solitary world. Built of the dark ironstone peculiar to that dreary district, it stood at one entrance to a long, narrow ravine known as Blackstone Cut, whose frowning rocky walls opened out at the farther end on a limitless waste of moor and bog.

The first time I saw it, Blackstone Cut looked to me like a road to hell. It looked like a road to hell, and so it was . . . for Jerry and I trod that road, and Jerry still . . .

I can't tell this story as I should. The horror of it is too vivid, the hell of which I speak too near for me to write calmly and clearly. But try, *try* to believe me!

## 2

"YOU'VE noticed it too!" Jerry said a few days later. "Nasty atmosphere in this house, isn't there?" He hesitated, then went on abruptly. "I'm not proud of my progenitors, and Grandfather—well, dead or not, he was as near a devil as any human being could be, and still be human."

I laughed with some embarrassment and murmured something about the old man being gone now.

Jerry got up from the luncheon table and stared moodily, hands in his pockets, at the driving rain against the window-panes. "Grandfather may be gone, but he's not gone far!"

"What on earth——" I began.

"No, not on earth—in hell!" Jerry replied. "He's waiting there for his dutiful grandson to join him. It would spoil his pleasure completely

to know that I had escaped him in the end."

I stared dumfounded at this outburst from Jerry. The suppressed bitterness of years was in his voice, and his face was a mask of hate. He came back to the table and sat heavily down in his chair again, his dark eyes smoldering.

"You don't know—you can't understand what it has been all these years. On the one hand, Dawlish; on the other hand, Grandfather! The long fight to hold out against him! The knowledge deep down within me that some day, sooner or later, he would win."

"Win!" I echoed feebly.

"Win, yes, win out against the college and all that it stood for to me. He was forced to send me to Dawlish; my father's will provided for that, but he meant to win in the end."

"Your grandfather wanted you to be—to be—er——"

"To be the sort of beast he himself was," finished Jerry. "That's exactly what he wanted. I was destined to carry on his experiments, you see."

I didn't see in the least, and waited dumbly for Jerry to explain. However, he jumped up suddenly, his face lit with his old familiar grin.

"Come on, Frank! I've got the blues today, and you'll be pushing off on the next train if I'm not careful! I've got something to show you—come on!"

He hooked his arm in mine affectionately and steered me up dismal stairways and along endless corridors, whose closed doors made me shiver; I felt that each door opened as we passed and that leering faces peeped after us.

Jerry caught me looking back and tightened his grip on my arm.

"Horrid sensation, isn't it? That's an old trick of my grandfather's. He used to punish me when I was a youngster by making me walk up

and down these corridors at dusk. There's no one there, really! I'm used to it; the performance is for your benefit now."

"My benefit!" I gasped. "Look here, Jerry, what's come over you? What kind of tricks do you mean?"

"What kind of tricks? Oh, hypnotism partly, and partly—something else!" said Jerry. "I tell you he was a devil—a devil! And he's still here trying to get me."

"He's dead, Jerry!" I protested, "If you get to imagining things like this you'll be in a straitjacket before you know it! He's dead and gone now."

"He's not gone far," repeated Jerry obstinately.

"You're talking absolute rot," I answered hotly. "The sooner you get out of this damned hole the better! What do you suppose the fellows would say if they knew you believed such bunkum?"

"It may be rot," he said slowly. "I try to persuade myself that I think so too."

"Of course it is," I assured him heartily. "Wait till you're climbing the Alps next month! You'll laugh at all these nightmares."

His face cleared still more. "Two weeks more and we shall be in Switzerland! I shall have escaped once and for all from this old dungeon, and—him." His voice sank involuntarily, and he glanced round as if he expected to see a visible challenge to his words.

"Free!" he repeated in a defiant voice, and only the moan of the wind and the dripping rain answered him.

## 3

"THIS is what I wanted to show you." Jerry's voice was eager as he opened a door at the top of the house and led the way into a huge, dim room under the roof, where great rafters stretched overhead, and a shining wood floor mirrored them in its polished surface.

The walls, from ceiling to floor, were lined with books.

"My word, Jerry!" I said, in an awed voice. "What a stunning library!"

"Thought you'd appreciate it," he said, enjoying my surprise. "The Nicholls' were famous for their love of learning, among other less pleasing vices. This little lot has taken some hundreds of years to collect."

For some time I browsed among the shelves, bewildered at the immense choice they offered. Jerry left me to my own devices, and it was some hours later when I looked up to see him in a distant corner of the vast attic room.

"What's your latest fairy-tale?" I called out as I went over to him.

Poor old Jerry! I can see him now, as he looked up at me, his eyes blazing with excitement and interest. He was dangerously enthusiastic, and liable to get right off his track when anything gripped him really hard.

"I've never noticed this book before!" and his voice was queer and husky. "It's not even catalogued; but here it is cheek by jowl with good old Fabre!" He laughed on a high, excited note. "Bit of a contrast—what?"

I took the book from him. If I had known—oh, if I had only guessed what that harmless-looking book was going to mean to Jerry and me, I'd have cut off my hand before touching it. Instinct indeed! Why, our instincts simply lay down and went to sleep, while Jerry and I gambled light-heartedly across the threshold to hell.

The book was written by a certain Count von Gheist, and at first it appeared to be a sort of skit on various dreamers and mystics of past centuries.

That was the trap—the cynical baffling style in which von Gheist approached his subject. Jerry and I sat side by side in one of the deep window-seats and chuckled delight-

edly over the early chapters—the gay malicious way in which the author exposed the ignorance of famous charlatans of old.

Subtly and imperceptibly, by cunning, devious routes, von Gheist merged his style from the cynical to one of deadly earnestness, which finally gripped me as strongly as it had Jerry.

The book is burned to ashes now; I did that after Jerry—after Jerry— No, that comes later!

What a blind, ignorant fool I was! For him, with his grim childhood in that cursed house, there was a reason and excuse for weakness. For me there was no such excuse. I might have warned and guarded him from that seeking devil that reached up out of hell.

Jerry! Jerry! Where are you now?

#### 4

**I**T WAS Jerry who first put our thoughts into words, as we sat one evening before the red glow of a log fire, after a prolonged discussion of von Gheist's theories.

"It's a full moon on Friday, you know!"

I nodded; the same idea had been in my mind all day.

"It would be rather a joke, wouldn't it?" he went on, trying hard to camouflage his real earnestness.

Again I nodded; the same consuming desire burnt in my breast as in his. To try it out! To prove von Gheist's words—to test that final superb claim of his!

In cold blood, reading this, you will say we were fools, and worse than fools. But you have never lived at Doone House, never heard the voices that whisper and call when night falls on Blackstone Cut, never seen the faces in the dim corridors that vanish at a look or cry.

Above all, you have never imagined a creature as vile as Jerry's grandfather, or been caught in the

mesh of his deviltries. And here I warn you, as you value your immortal soul, never to enter Doone House, for you can not hope to escape him there.

He is dead and gone—but he is not gone far! Jerry was right, horribly right, when he said that.

"After all, there is no reason why such experiments should be out of reach," Jerry continued. "We can project sight and sound to vast distances, and these are purely human and physical attributes. Why not the intelligence which directs our bodies? If we could direct our minds as von Gheist did his, we could give a tremendous jolt to science!"

"It appears to be chiefly a matter of concentration."

"Yes," replied Jerry. "That more or less spectacular ceremony he mentions is merely a means von Gheist suggests to fix the will-power."

"I don't quite see——" I began.

"Of course not," interrupted Jerry. "That's why we ought to experiment! Von Gheist says plainly that his experiences may only serve to baffle other experimenters. Reaction varies according to the intelligence and will. Fear, he says, is the one great deterrent."

My mind went off suddenly at a tangent. "What kind of experiments did your grandfather make?" I asked.

Jerry frowned, and kicked a log into flame. "Why, he believed in all the people that von Gheist ridicules—Paracelsus, Lully, Count Raymond, Dr. Dee and all the rest. His experiments were all along their lines, more or less. I think——"

"Well, go on! What do you think?"

"I think he really did achieve unholy power by some means or other. But since reading this book I don't feel quite the same about Grandfather as I did. He seems farther away now; it's like a weight slipping from my neck."

As he spoke, my glance caught a very strange effect of light and shadow cast by the dancing flames of the log fire—a tall, wavering outline beside Jerry's chair, which swayed in a horrible semblance of mirth, while the rain and wind hissed savagely in the old chimney.

The dog saw something there too; for he got to his feet, growling, his teeth bared, as he stared at that moving shadow.

"Quiet!" said Jerry, lightly cuffing the animal's head. "There aren't any rats here, old fellow!" Then catching sight of my face, "Why, what's wrong, Frank? You're absolutely green!"

I blinked my eyes, feeling remarkably foolish as a great log broke and roared in an upward stream of flame and sparks, and the shadow I had seen vanished in the clear red light which bathed the hearth. Inwardly I cursed myself for an imaginative fool, and told Jerry I had a rather bad twinge of neuralgia.

"No wonder, in this damp old tomb of a house," he said. "Poor old chap, this is no picnic for you!"

"Oh, don't rot!" I answered gruffly, my nerves still jumping from the effect of that momentary terror I had experienced.

## 5

**WE SPENT** the next few days like two kids in expectation of Christmas. Looking back now, I see so clearly the warnings given me that we were on a dangerous road, but at the time I purposely ignored them; for I was dull and bored at Doone House, and our coming experiment promised relief from the monotony of the long wet days and quiet nights.

Friday night came at last. A high wind drove off the rain-clouds, and a full moon lit Blackstone Cut from end to end, as we climbed up the stairs to the library, shut out the terrier, locked all the doors, and pre-

pared to follow the directions given by von Gheist.

Jerry won the toss, and was therefore first to make the experiment.

I sat in a window-bay to watch. In the stillness of the great library every sound was exaggerated, and the howl of the wind and the whining of the dog outside the locked door got on my nerves at first. Then Jerry's preparations absorbed all my attention.

I laughed inwardly at his child-like absorption in drawing the circles and figures on the wood floor, referring with frowning intentness to von Gheist's diagrams, but nevertheless I was impressed when all was ready and Jerry stood, erect and triumphant, in the midst of his braziers and touched the alderwood in each to flame with the burning torch in his hand.

All this mummery, I reflected, was childish in itself, but, taken as a means to absorb and concentrate the faculties, it certainly worked well.

Jerry was as completely withdrawn from his physical surroundings as a Buddhist who has attained Nirvana. I heard his low muttering voice repeat the words:

Phlagus! Taram! Zoth!  
Founts of all knowledge, will, and power!  
By the Wandering Bull, and the Four  
Horns of the Altar,  
Pierce the veil of my darkness. . . .

The wind dropped outside, and a queer heat began to invade the room. My skin felt dry as parchment; and when I saw Jerry raise a great goblet to his lips and drink deep, my own thirst tortured me.

Then I forgot everything as fear gripped me, for the things that were happening in that brazier-lit circle were not things of which von Gheist had written in his book!

Hell and heaven were to him merely fabrications of primitive man! Ghosts and devils he derided as the sick fancies of the unintelligent!

What, then, was it that Jerry saw as he stood with face convulsed with terror, and blazing eyes fixed on something within the circle—something from which he retreated step by step to the very edge of the fiery barrier he had made, and halted there like a man with his back to a wall?

"No! no! no!" I heard his low, agonized voice. "Not that, Grandfather!—not that!"

Panic seized me as I watched the despairing fear and loathing on Jerry's face. What in the name of all that was evil did he see? Although I did not know what I feared, insensate terror shook the heart out of me and left me as helpless to move or speak as if I were paralyzed.

I tried to call out; my brain shrieked the words: "Jerry! Jerry! Hold on! hold on, I'm coming, Jerry!" But my cold, shaking lips refused to utter a syllable.

Dumb and powerless, I watched as he tried to beat off his enemy and escape from the maze of circles and pentacles he had drawn about himself, the net his own hands had made!

Within the glow of his fiery barrier, I saw his desperate eyes—his face wet with hideous effort, as he ran doubling here and there across his narrow prison, gasping, fighting, struggling blindly with the deadly Thing which pursued.

His eyes met mine, and from his twisted mouth came a hoarse, desperate appeal: "Break it! Break the circle!"

Something burst in my brain. I lurched forward and fell right across the outer circle of his prison, knocking over two braziers and smearing the diagrams in blind, clumsy haste.

The fires leaped up into sudden flame with a sound like crackling laughter, then died out completely, and Jerry and I found ourselves in a dark, silent room, our hands holding one another fast.

NEXT morning, after pacing restlessly up and down the long avenue to Doone House, Jerry came to sit beside me on a low, crumbling wall.

"You don't understand, even now, Frank," he said. "I can't escape because I have brought this on myself. It was all a trap—and I chose to enter the trap of my own free will; that's what puts me within his grasp! I called him back to me. I opened the gate between the dead and the living with my own hands, last night."

I rubbed my red hair fretfully and scowled.

"I don't believe it! You're letting the past hypnotize you. You'll soon forget all this when you get away from this cursed place."

"Can you forget?" he asked in a low, strange voice, his dark eyes burning into mine.

I hesitated for a moment and he took me up with passionate earnestness.

"You don't—you can't forget! You never will forget! It's no use, Frank, old chap, I'm done!"

"Rot—absolute rot, you priceless fool! I don't pretend to understand our experience last night, but I'm sure we worked ourselves up unnecessarily. There are some experiments one is wiser not to make, and apparently ours was one of them."

"Experiment!" echoed Jerry. "You realize, don't you, who von Gheist was—and why he wrote that book?"

"He's a most convincing rascal, at all events," I said. "And fooled us pretty thoroughly."

"My grandfather wrote that book! He left it as a last weapon for me to turn on myself!"

"Von Gheist—your grandfather!" "Of course," Jerry replied, staring out over the desolate wind-swept



garden. "That book was a trick after his own heart."

"I don't know what you mean," I said, feeling surly and baffled by my own new thoughts and fears. "But you'll go right off the deep end if you're not jolly careful. Come away with me today and let that damned old lawyer whistle for you."

"I can't." His voice was low and sullen.

"Meaning—?"

"I'm not allowed," he continued. "I'm not sure yet—if there's a way out for me—I'm trying to discover."

"Well, for heaven's sake let's do something, not mope about the place like a couple of wet owls!"

"You won't understand, I know," he answered reluctantly. "But I think—I feel pretty certain that I can't pass the gates."

I stared at him, then broke out impatiently.

"What's to prevent you walking out of your own gates? For the Lord's sake, Jerry, are you quite off your head? I'm not going to stay if you don't buck up. There is a limit, you know."

He looked as though I had struck him.

"Not stay with me!" He came close and stared wildly into my face. "I'm going mad, d'you hear? *Mad* with fear! You can't go! I won't be left alone!" Tears softened the wild glare of his eyes, and I stood like the embarrassed fool that I was, pretending not to notice his emotion.

"Oh, all right!" I managed to blurt out at last. "Don't lose your wool about it. I'll stay; but its pretty thick if you're going to moon round like this all the time."

"I know—oh, I *know* what a putrid time you're having! I'll make it up to you later—in Switzerland. If I can get there!" he added in an undertone.

Then he took my arm with a strange air of resolution, saying, "After all, now or later, it will be

all the same in the end. We'll go over to Hightown."

How little I guessed of the horror he was facing or of the ghastly effort it needed for him to leave that house and garden! I saw that he went white to the lips as we passed through the gates at the end of the long avenue, but I pretended not to notice his frequent glances over his shoulder.

He walked closer and closer to me, making no response to anything I said, edging me all the time against the wall on my other side. At last I offered to change places with him.

"You try the wall!" I laughed. "It's a good hard one."

Then I glanced at the muddy road and stood staring in bewilderment. Jerry saw it at the same moment, and with a choking cry he lurched up against the wall.

For long we stared in fascinated horror at the colossal footprint there before us. I was shaken and puzzled, but Jerry's fear was something beyond all words.

"He's winning . . . winning! You see it now!" His voice rose to a wild note of hysteria. "If I don't go back he'll torment me for hours. It's no use . . . no use."

He began slowly to drag himself back along the road, while I protested and argued hotly, until I turned to see that the impress of that infernal foot followed us back to the very gateway of Doone House.

My heart stood still as we walked up the gloomy avenue to see those awful footprints following—following to the hateful threshold of the house itself. And over the threshold they followed on. I saw how the dust of the neglected corridors rose and swirled in little eddies behind poor Jerry, as that vast Evil swept on in his wake.

He made for the library—that dim gorgeous antechamber to hell—and there, strangely enough, whatever it was that haunted Jerry withdrew.

For a long time the horror slid from his soul, leaving him cheerful and sanguine once more. Possibly certain hours were more favorable for the thing's manifestation than others; but Jerry put aside his fears, and even made light of the visible signs of his grandfather's power we had both witnessed so recently.

"It's another of his tricks! I hope he's exhausted himself this time. There is a limit to what he can do. I'll come away with you tomorrow, and not give him another chance to get me!"

**WE** WENT late to bed, and I was just dropping off to sleep when I heard Jerry's cry. Without stopping even for shoes, I dashed off along the corridor to his room. As I reached his door, he burst out with mad terror on his face, and ran past me like the wind.

I felt a suffocating sense of heat, and staggered back as from an open furnace door. Then, with no courage at all, but simply a blind instinct to follow, I went after Jerry.

As I ran, I saw that the carpet under my feet was scorched and blackened, and that the marks were identical in shape and size with those we had seen in the muddy road earlier that day.

On raced Jerry, a mad flying figure ahead! Down the big central staircase he went, across the tiled hall, and I heard the groan of bolts and bars as he tore open the great double-doors and fled out into the night.

And as I followed, I felt the burning heat under my bare feet—smelled the odor of charred wood as I stumbled over the threshold, and vaguely wondered if the house were on fire.

Outside, in the dark night, I saw Jerry running as though pursued by all the fiends of hell. And so he was . . . so he was! I know that now; but, then, I did not understand, and I ran after him, panting and cursing

because he would not stop, or listen to my assurance that he was running from his own fears and nothing else!

On and on through the darkness raced Jerry. On and on I stumbled behind him—farther and farther behind, as the road grew rougher and steeper.

He headed for Blackstone Cut, and rushed on between its somber walls, keeping up an incredible speed until he approached the head of the ravine, where its rocky walls rose to great frowning crags—two grim guardians at the portals of hell.

To my amazement, Jerry began to climb the rocky face of one of the crags. His speed and sureness of foot were nothing short of miraculous, and only the madness of overmastering fear could have lent him wings to take that terrible way.

He looked like some crazy little insect crawling over the bare face of the rock, blindly seeking safety where none was to be found, clinging—leaping—running—scrambling on hands and knees, until he stood at last on the topmost height, a tiny frenzied figure against the sky.

But whatever pursued him, had pursued him even to his giddy eyrie; for I was near enough to see his wild gestures—his frantic repulsion of something at his side.

Oh, Jerry, if I had only overtaken you!—if I had not left you to fight that last awful fight up there alone!—alone with *him!*—it would be easier for me to think of you now.

But you were alone—most awfully alone—and so you lost, Jerry! Had I been there, perhaps you would have won—perhaps you would have won! That thought is driving me mad—perhaps you would have won!

A high, thin scream of agony floated down to me from the heights. I saw Jerry leap out into the darkness and fall, turning and twisting with outflung limbs to the floor of the ravine.

**H**IS body was never found. The whole of Doone village turned out to hunt for him, but he was never found, and they said he had fallen into a bog and been swallowed up in the black ooze.

But I know better, for I found and followed the trail of those colossal footprints, and they led to a grassy hollow under the crag from which Jerry had flung himself down. The green of the hollow was charred and burned to the black earth itself, and there was no trace of Jerry—no trace of flesh or bone!

But there was something else which I recognized with terror. On the flat surface of a piece of granite,

lying in the hollow, was a peculiar and significant mark roughly cut in the stone. It was the mark of von Gheist—the key to von Gheist's great experiment with which poor Jerry had unlocked the door between the dead and the living.

The villagers of Doone shook their heads over me pityingly when I showed them the mark. They saw nothing in it, save the furrows caused by the fret of time and weather!

But I recognized it, and I remembered. I am going mad with remembering . . . and no one will believe me!

Jerry's grandfather had won!

---