

WEIRD TALES *The Unique Magazine*

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The Finale

By WM. MERRIT

THORNTON STOWE was always a puzzle to me. Very methodical in everything from early childhood, he always seemed utterly devoid of impulsive emotion. The only thing he ever did that really surprised me was to suddenly declare, one evening, that he loved Josephine Thralton and was betrothed to her.

Soon, vague rumors about Stowe's private life were breathed around town, and his fiancé married Lakeland; the thick lipped, pock marked, red nosed political boss of the town, whose character was known and unquestioned, and about which each citizen held a private, unvoiced opinion.

I left town shortly after the wedding, and all that I heard of Stowe after that was a newspaper account of his killing Lakeland. I then wrote him the only letter since my departure; but knew him too well to expect an answer.

I returned, unannounced, one dreary afternoon in November. Quickening my steps as I left the depot, I turned toward the roller mill, which to the world was Stowe's sole vocation, but to me, only his avocation for the purpose of defraying expenses of the work in his private chemical laboratory.

I had left him experimenting with an explosive gas which was more powerful and much cheaper than the most modern gunpowder. But it corroded every metal known, except gold. If he could only find some means of eliminating this fault, his fortune would be made.

As I hurried through the heart of town, a lone pedestrian, who seemed to shudder at the doleful dirge of the bare tree limbs overhead, and to shrink from looking at the gloomy, leaden skies beyond, approached with stooped shoulders and bowed head. It was Thornton Stowe; but he had so changed since I had seen him last that, had he not spoken, I would have passed him by. On the instant of recognition I was about to greet him cheerfully, but there was such an air of pathos in his whole bearing that I merely walked up and gripped his hand. It was as listless as his spirits, and he looked into my eyes with a silent appeal that sickened my soul to think of the emotions that impelled it.

Finally I ventured, "How's business in the old town now, Thornt?" I had almost asked: "What's the trouble?" but remembered that he had killed Lakeland in July and, although he had been cleared on the plea of "self defense" I felt a delicacy in arousing such reminiscences in a man of his temperament.

His reply puzzled me:

"Let's go on home to dinner. I've got to tell it to somebody."

He left me to my conjectures the rest of the way to his home, a large gray brick house, a mansion for that little town, where he lived alone with a faithful old negro man, an ex-slave, who prepared his meals and kept the house in order. The untrimmed ivy on the walls of the old antibellum home was in keeping with the neglected condition of the house, which looked now like an old deserted castle. There was no light in the front windows, although it was long after sundown. As we approached, my spirits were damped with awe at the weird aspect. A premonition of horror haunted me and it was only by a tremendous effort that I refrained from making some excuse to go immediately to the hotel.

THE door swung open noiselessly and easily and Stowe switched on the lights in the hall. Everything was green, the sickly, poisonous green of a stagnant tarn. The grim monotony of the hideous color, and the suddenness with which the horrible aspect was revealed was appalling. The curtains were green, the walls were green, the woodwork and furniture were all green. With each turn of my head I was confronted by nothing but that nauseating hue. My head swam. The ghastly invariable color seemed to be pressing my eyeballs back into their sockets and irresistibly closing ever closer and closer around me with its overwhelming and unbroken density. The dull light from the green globe that hung in the center of the hall seemed to stifle me. I was on the point of rushing back to the street in frantic terror.

We disposed of our coats and hats without a word and walked back to the library. Again everything was the same ghastly green. The impelling terror of

aggravated claustrophobia rushed back upon me with redoubled fury. I could not by force of will power, nor by artifice of reason, shake off the uncanny dread that haunted me; but was now determined to stay.

Drinks were served, and my host then addressed me for the first time since we had started home from the street; merely:

"Help yourself."

He reached eagerly for a green bottle on the tray, drank two glasses of absinthe from it, then rested his elbows on the table and stared steadily at me for a few moments.

The real specter now rose before me: had he killed Lakeland for self defense or was it merely the diabolic fancy of a lunatic? If, with the precise cunning of a maniac, he had devised a scheme so intricate and flawless that it had baffled even the eye witnesses, then I was at the mercy of a man, known to have the power of thought impelled by passions and emotions and not controlled by reason.

He began in an even hollow voice:

"I guess you know why I killed Lakeland."

"I heard they found 'self defense,'" I admitted.

He swallowed a glass of wine at a gulp, then sneered with a note of irony: "Unquestionable evidence. Lakeland is the only man who has ever even suspected that I intended to kill him when I shook hands with him.

"You can guess the first thing he did; but he was Josephine's husband before I learned who started those stories. I felt that she hadn't given me a fair chance to disprove all he had said and I resolved to forget her; but when I saw her getting paler and thinner because of the life she had to live, I couldn't help feeling a sympathy for her. When Lakeland wanted to buy back the mill I had bought from his father because he had found it to be the best paying business in town, I was fool enough to tell him I'd trade with him if he would stop drinking. Of course he just told me to go to hell with my morals and threw all his money into an effort to kill my business.

"I played the game with him until all my men suddenly refused to work

longer, and refused to explain why. That was too much; I shoved a pistol into my pocket and went in search of him that very afternoon. When I found him, he was, as usual, beastly drunk. To shoot him then would convict me of murder in the first degree. Besides, I couldn't snuff his life out that way if my revenge was to be sweet. He must know about it, for half the delight of revenge would be in knowing that I had made him suffer without its costing me a thing."

I was amazed at the mad man's logic; for mad he certainly was.

"Of course," he went on, "I thought first of my chemistry. He would some to liquor like a hog to slop. A little potassium cyanide in it and he would simply drop dead. There would be no symptoms of poison and the coroner's verdict would be 'heart failure.' But I never drank with him and could not afford to make a special occasion for poisoning him. I merely walked by.

"'Hello,' he grunted. 'Looks like I'll have to run you clear out of town to get that mill. It isn't half as easy to take away as your girl was.'

"Several heard it; and I wouldn't have changed a word he said if I had had the power.

"The very next day Lewis Dalton came into the mill and told me that Lakeland was inquiring for me down in town. 'And he's sober today,' he added. What better could I ask? I shoved a wrench into my pocket—that would be easily enough explained—and started immediately to town. I met him just as I turned the corner on to Main Street. There were several people in sight, but none within a hundred feet of us."

STOWE'S expression had been gradually changing ever since he had begun his story. Now he was completely transformed. He leaned far over the table toward me, every muscle tense, his eyes snapping with a steely glint that made me shudder to see. I took another drink of wine, but, for the first time, he seemed to forget his completely. His lips drew in a thin, straight, colorless line as he hissed with diabolic vehemence:

"I held out my hand to him civilly enough, but spoke before he took it. I didn't call him Lakeland that time either, I called him by his right name, the name he's deserved ever since this world has been cursed with his damned green-eyed face. His hand went straight into his coat under his arm, but I was ready for him. I grabbed his wrist and shoved him back against the wall. As soon as he saw the wrench in

my other hand he realized that I was going to kill him, and the damned coward got so weak in the legs that he didn't even try to get away. He groaned like a calf when I hit him right over the temple. But his eyes; they still had enough of the devil in them to look at me even while he was falling, and say: 'You're not ahead yet, even with this.'"

He reached again for the green bottle and I offered no protest. Although he had already had enough for two men, anything would be better than his present condition.

"I didn't even know that she was sick when I killed him," he continued. "When they told me, I went straight to the house. She was dying—dying, and that brute was down in town just walking around the streets while she was calling for him and begging him to come to her! She recognized me as soon as I got into the room and seemed to know all.

"'Where is Jim?' she begged me to tell her.

"I didn't answer her. I couldn't.

"'Will I have to go to him?' she cried; and she never spoke again, and never took her eyes from mine. She is still looking straight into my eyes. And since she died," he groaned, "her eyes have gotten as green as his."

"Then why, in the name of Heaven, have you made everything in the house green?" I asked, reminded once more of our hideous surroundings.

"So that I couldn't see them here. But every way I turn they are looking straight at me. Sometimes they almost blaze when I try to look away."

There was but one chance for him now: he must have some diversion. I forgot that I had come to stay this time.

"Say, Thornt," I suggested, "come with me for a few weeks hunting in the mountains. It's been two years since you and I were together on a trip."

He sat for a moment in deep thought, his face twitching convulsively, his eyes staring into vacancy.

"I am going to get out of this town," he finally asserted.

I reached my hand across the table to him. He hesitated as though he didn't understand, but finally took it with the same grasp he had given me on the street when he recognized my sympathy for him, and with the same pathetic appeal in his eye, gripped it until I winced.

While I still pondered over the situation he straightened up resolutely, as though he had finally reached a determination. With a desperate effort to control the emotion that now convulsed his whole being, he addressed me in a dry, husky voice:

"Frank, excuse me for a moment; and as we have always been friends, don't think hard of me tonight."

I nodded an assent and he walked slowly to a door at the far side of the room, passed through and closed it.

As soon as I found myself alone, the grim horror of my surroundings attacked me with reinforced fury. The dread of my wretched host's insanity became more intense with him in the next room on a mysterious mission, at which he had asked me not to be offended. Not even the slightest sound proceeded now from the room he had entered. The changeless monotony of the omnipresent green was enhanced by the oppressive silence that reigned throughout the house, save for the intolerable tick of the old clock that stood on the floor in the corner, and seemed to pause indefinitely after each stroke, measuring eternity instead of time.

I had never seen inside that room more than half a dozen times in my whole life. There was nothing in there to go for. It had been used as a store room for old furniture ever since I could remember. Finally the suspense grew unbearable. I rose impulsively, went hastily to the door through which he had passed and flung it open.

The room had been cleared of its junk and remodeled into a neat little laboratory. Thornton stood at the far side of a table in the center of the floor, pouring absinthe into a glass that was sitting perilously near the edge. With the glass half full he placed the bottle on the table. It tilted and rolled off; but he paid it no heed. Supporting himself with one hand and raising the glass in the other, he seemed aware of my presence for the first time.

"Frank," he gasped huskily, "no one but you knows; and they will never guess."

I remembered in a flash, what he had said of his abandoned plan to poison Lakeland, and realized; but before I could reach him he had drained the glass. It slipped from his fingers and shattered on the floor. He stood for a moment, staring on past me into space.

I grasped the edge of the table for support and felt the cold sweat start on my brow and weakening limbs.

"Green as hell!" he muttered; and flinging his arms across his fixed eyes, crumpled to the floor; then stiffened, stark and dead.

For minutes I stood motionless, powerless to move.

Finally, tossing a burning match into the spilt liquor, I answered his last and only plea:

"No, Thornt, they shall never know."