

Weird Tales

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The Look

By MAURICE LEVEL

The dark shadow of a dead man came between the doctor and his wife—a new story by the author of "Cruel Tales"

THE log fire was dying in the grate. About the whole room, lighted by a too heavily shaded lamp, there was something vaguely menacing that chilled my blood the moment I entered it.

My friend came forward. "I am glad to see you, very glad," he said, holding out his hand.

He had aged and altered so that I should hardly have recognized him. Extending his hand in the direction of the fireplace, he said in a low voice, "My friend Janville . . . my wife."

I discerned a very pale face and a slender form that bowed slightly, while a subdued voice, a melancholy, weary voice, murmured, "We are pleased to see you here, *Monsieur*."

My friend offered me a chair. The white form relapsed into immobility; and silence, a deadened silence through which flitted indefinable thoughts, fell upon us.

I could think of nothing to say. These two had been man and wife for some months. They had been in love for years before they were free to marry. And this was how I found them now!

My friend broke the silence with a hesitating inquiry as to my health, and his thought seemed far from the words that fell from his lips.

"Fine," I replied, and speaking lower, I added, "You are happy?"

"Yes," he muttered.

His wife coughed slightly, and rose.

"Forgive me, *Monsieur*, but I am a little tired. You will excuse me, I am sure. . . . Please do not go."

She crossed the dining-room, presented her forehead to her husband, and left us.

My friend got up and paced the floor with long strides, gnawing his mustache, then, stopping abruptly before me, put his hand on my shoulder.

"I said I was happy. That's a lie!"

I looked at him in mute astonishment.

"No doubt you think I am out of my mind," he continued. "Not yet, but I'm likely to be before long. . . . Don't you feel some sinister influence brooding over this house?"

"Your wife and you appear to be under some cloud, certainly. Some worry, no doubt, the importance of which you exaggerate."

"No! No! No! There's a horror hanging to these walls . . . there's a terror creeping about these floors. Between my wife and me there's the shadow of Crime . . . of Crime!"

"As you know, she who today is my wife was for long months my mistress. You know how desperately I loved her . . . or rather you do *not* know . . . no one *can* know. . . . I worshipped her, that creature, worshipped her to the point of devotion . . . of frenzy. From the day she came into my life, there was no other life for me. She became a need in my nature, a flaw in my sanity, a vice in my blood.

"I thought of running away with her, of challenging the voice of scandal. But neither of us had any means. I had only my profession to support me. And our being together openly in Paris was not to be thought of . . . so I put aside honor, every moral scruple. To see her more

frequently, I obtained an introduction to the husband. I cultivated his acquaintance. I came to be his constant guest, his intimate friend.

"I made that despicable third in a household who, under the shelter of its welcome, steals in cold blood from its master his peace and happiness.

"I spent my holidays with them. He was a great sportsman; while he was out in the woods and fields I passed my time with her.

"ONE day we two were startled by loud cries. I ran downstairs, and found the terrified servants gathered around the husband.

"Stretched upon a couch, he was fighting for breath with quick, short gasps, as he clutched at a wound in his abdomen.

"'Ah, *Monsieur*,' faltered the man who carried his game-bag, 'how suddenly it happened! *Monsieur* had just shot a woodcock . . . it fell in the rushes, he ran toward the spot, and all in a moment, I don't know how it happened, but I heard a report—a cry—and I saw *Monsieur* fall forward. . . . I brought him here.'

"I cut away the clothes and examined his injuries. The charge had plowed through his side. Blood flowed in jets from a terrible wound extending from above the hip to the thigh.

"Years of training made me regard him solely as a patient. I examined him as if it had been a hospital case. I even gave a sigh of satisfaction as I learned that his injuries were really superficial. The intestines did not appear to be involved, but on the wound's internal surface a small artery was spurting freely.

"Hearing footsteps, I looked up, and saw Her standing in the doorway. A strange and unaccountable agony gripped

my heart. It was with a great effort that I said, 'Don't come here. . . . Go away.'

"'No,' she said, and drew nearer.

"I could not take my eyes from hers—she had fascinated them. My finger still pressing upon the artery, the sufferer full in her view, I watched that look of hers as a man watches a dagger pointed at his throat, a wavering dagger, the gleam of which hypnotizes him.

She drew still nearer, and a cloudy impotence fell upon my will. That look spoke things of terrible import. It seized upon my soul, that look; it spoke—no need of words to make me understand what it asked of me. It said:

"'You can have me for your own. . . . You can take me and keep me. . . . I shall thrill to no other joy, faint under no other fondness . . . if only you will——'

"Once more I faltered: 'You must not stay here. . . . Go away.'

"But the look spoke again:

"'Soul without resolution . . . heart that dares not . . . what have you always longed for? . . . Look! . . . Chance changes your dream to reality.'

"The artery pulsed under my finger and, little by little, strive as I would to maintain it, the pressure diminished.

"She was close to me. She bent above me. Her breath played in my hair; the emanation from her body stole into every fiber of my being, impregnated my hands, my Lips—that exhalation of love which was madness to me.

"All conception of time, of danger, of duty, fled from my mind.

"Suddenly the door opened, and a servant appeared with my surgical case. The stupor was dispelled.

"'Quick! Give it to me!' I shouted rather than called.

"But then . . . I saw that my finger had

deserted its post . . . that there was now no pulsation under it . . . that the stricken man's lip was drawn upward into the mocking semblance of a smile . . . and . . . that it was all over.

"Our eyes met. And in that moment a shadow fell between us, a shadow with a mocking smile—the shadow of the dead man. . . .

I THOUGHT at first that this nightmare would fade away. I strove to assure myself that the fatal issue was an accident, unavoidable. But since she became my wife, that shadow is between us, always, everywhere. Neither speaks of it, but it comes between our meeting eyes.

"I—I see once more her eyes, the look, saying, 'Take me. Let us be free.' She—she sees once more my hand, as, by slow degrees, it lets the life of her husband ebb away. And hatred has come, a silent hatred, the hatred of two murderers who are in the bonds of a mutual fear.

"We remain for hours as you have seen us tonight. Words rush up within us, smite asunder the clenched teeth, half open the lips—and we keep silence."

He took a dagger from the table, tried the edge with his finger.

"Cowards . . . both of us!"

He flung the weapon, clanging, to the table, and burying his face in his hands, burst into tears.