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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

The Closed Door

By HAROLD WARD

The hate of a dying man lingered in the room of death for years before it manifested itself—a brief story of a terrible retribution

DYING, Obie Marsh cursed his wife as he had cursed her every day of their wedded life.

"You've poisoned me!" he gasped, writhing in agony. "Yes, you've poisoned me, you she-devil!"

Lucinda, his wife, nodded dully.

"Yes, I poisoned you," she answered without emotion. "You are going to die, anyway; the doctor said so. It's just a matter of time — maybe years, maybe months. And I can't stand this fightin' any longer. Fifteen years of it! Fifteen years of hell!"

"Damn you!" Marsh snarled through his clenched teeth, his bearded face twitching as a spasm of pain shot through his vitals.

"We should have never got married," the woman went on quietly. "I never loved you and you never loved me. 'T was a case of your folks and my folks stickin' in between us and the ones we loved. You've always hated me 'cause of Lizzie Roper, an' God knows I wanted t' marry Al Sides. Just 'cause they wanted the farms joined, they made us get married, me an' you. Now we can't get a divorce 'cause of the church and I've just got sick of it all, Obie—sick of it all."

"You hellion!" he gasped, his body twitching spasmodically.

"I got the idee of poisoning you when you first took sick," she went on in the same even tone. "Old Doc Plummer said that you might linger along for years. And I just couldn't stand it, Obie—I just couldn't stand it any longer, your constant bullyin' an' runnin' over me."

"You'll hang for it," Marsh said huskily. "I hope they torture you in hell——"

"Probably they will," Lucinda Marsh answered without emotion. "But it's worth it t' have a little peace here on

earth. It hasn't been any heaven livin' with you."

Marsh twisted convulsively, his gnarled fingers closing and unclosing, his thick lips drooling. He pulled himself together with a mighty effort. He was a hard man and strong; hard men are difficult to kill.

"I'll come back . . . from th' grave, you hussy!" he gasped.

"'T would be like you," his wife answered.

". . . Waitin' for . . . you——" he went on, trying to shake his fist in the woman's face.

The effort was too great. He dropped back upon the pillow again, the sweat standing out on his forehead in beads, his body shaking with spasms.

"God, it hurts!" he whispered. "Just like a . . . knife."

The woman suddenly lifted her head. She was listening.

"Somebody coming," she muttered, moving swiftly to the window.

A roadster was entering the lane.

"It's old Doc Plummer," she said, half to herself, half to the dying man. "Th' old fool's earlier'n usual. An' you c'n still talk."

The man on the bed quivered. His fists clenched and his muscles tensed as he tried to drag himself back from the yawning pit that awaited him.

". . . Getting . . . dark——"

"Doc's liable to rec'nize th' symptoms," the woman went on as she heard the car come to a stop in the front yard. A sheet had been thrown carelessly across the foot of the bed. Seizing it, she wadded it into a bundle and pressed it against the face of the dying man. He fought against the stoppage of his breath with a feeble effort. She threw her whole strength against him. Suddenly his limbs straightened jerkily. She knew that he was dead. She sat up with a sigh of relief.

THE outside screen door slammed shut. Leaping to her feet, she threw the sheet across the back of a chair and turned to meet the doctor.

"He just passed away in one of those spells," she said without emotion. "Come on him all of a sudden. Both th' kids are at school and I didn't have nobody to send for you. 'Tain't no use to say I'm sorry, for I'm not. I'm glad he's dead."

The physician shook his head sympathetically. Like all country practitioners, he was conversant with the family affairs of his patients. For a moment he stood looking down at the still form of Obie Marsh. Then he pulled a sheet over it and turned to the woman.

"Better sit down and take things easy, Mrs. Marsh," he said, following her into the other room. "I'll notify the undertaker and stop at the school and have the teacher send Mary and Jimmy home. Anybody else you want?"

She shook her head negatively.

"Tell Bill Reynolds to come prepared t' take th' body back with him," she said slowly. "This is my house, now—mine. That's th' way my pap and his pap fixed up th' deeds. An' the quicker I get him outen my sight, th' better it'll suit me. I never want t' see him again 'till th' day of th' funeral, an' I wouldn't 'tend that if it wasn't that people'd talk.

"He made life hell for me," she went on bitterly. "I've hated him from th' day I married him. It's my house now and I'm goin' t' lock that room as soon's they take him away. I never want t' see th' inside of it again. There's too many mem'ries hovering around it. I'd burn it to th' ground if it wasn't for burnin' th' rest of th' house."

She dropped into a rocking-chair and gazed at the doctor, her gaunt body quivering with unshed tears. The physician patted her on the shoulder sympathetically.

"You're overwrought, Lucinda," he said kindly, "overwrought and nervous. I'll fix up a tonic and bring it over tonight."

"I don't need no tonic," she responded. "Knowin' he's dead'll be tonic enough for me."

The physician wagged his head solemnly.

"Let's not speak ill of the dead," he said. "Everybody knows how he treated you. If there's nothing else I can do, I'll be getting along."

In due time the undertaker and his assistant came with their narrow wicker basket. Lucinda Marsh stood beside the door and waited for them as they carried their burden out. They looked at her queerly as she turned the key in the lock, then, removing it, placed it in her pocket.

"I hope t' God I never see th' inside of that room till my dyin' day," she said.

Bill Reynolds, the undertaker, shook his head in agreement. He, too, knew the life that she had led with Obie Marsh.

THE passing years brought little change in the outward appearance of Lucinda Marsh. Gaunt, hard-featured, tight-lipped and unemotional, she moved about the farm as of yore, doing a man's work in the field, adding to the dollars that were already in the bank, conducting her business along the lines to which she had been trained. She had never had friends; Obie Marsh had seen to that. She made none now.

Her children grew to manhood and womanhood. Little Mary married and moved to the adjoining township. Lucinda made no complaint and no comment. Jimmy took the place of the hired man, lifting a bit of the burden of labor from his mother's shoulders. But she still held the reins of management. Then he, too, married and brought his wife to the big, gloomy old house at the end of the lane. Children came, six in quick succession. If their happy laughter wrought any change in the heart of the grim, silent old woman, she never showed it. Emma, Jimmy's wife, busy rearing her brood, was content to remain in the background; Lucinda Marsh was still mistress of the house.

Through all the years that one room just off from the parlor—Father's room, they called it—remained closed, the key hidden away in Lucinda's bureau drawer. It was never mentioned in the family circle. The children knew that there was something — some horrible taboo — that kept it from being talked about. Their childish imaginations did the rest. They passed it with baited breath; when darkness fell and shadows hovered outside the circle made by the big kerosene lamp on the center table, they always played on the other side of the room, casting furtive glances toward the dark panels behind which lurked they knew not what.

Then, with the passing of the years, came the hard times. First the grasshoppers destroyed the crops. Then came the drought. Prices went up; wages dropped. Factories closed.

Mary was the first to feel the blow. The bank foreclosed on her husband's farm. Then came illness and another baby. Finally she was forced to come home with her sick husband and her little brood. Lucinda Marsh, as unemotional as ever, made room for them. Jimmy's wife's brother lost his place in the city. Destitute, he appealed to his sister. She told her troubles to Lucinda Marsh.

"Four more won't make no difference at th' table," the old woman said grimly. "Write an' tell 'em we'll make room for 'em somehow. Goodness knows, though, where we'll sleep 'em."

They were sitting at the supper table

when this conversation took place. It was Mary who, with a quick glance at her brother, ventured to speak that which was in all of their minds.

"Father's room," she said timidly. "Couldn't we open that up and air it before they come and let 'em sleep in there?"

For a moment there was an awed silence. Lucinda Marsh turned her sunken eyes on her daughter, then glanced at the faces of the others.

"I vowed that I'd never set foot in that room 'till my dyin' day," she said finally.

"But they — they wouldn't be you, Mother," Mary argued. "And we're cramped for room right now. Where else can we sleep 'em?"

Lucinda Marsh quietly laid down her knife and fork, her thin lips set in a straight, grim line.

"If anybody sleeps in that room, 't will be me," she said finally. "I lived with your father for fifteen years, hatin' him every day more'n more. And he hated me worse'n I hated him—if such a thing is possible. The room's filled with our hatred—it's locked up in there smolderin' an' ready t' be fanned into flame again."

"But, Mother——"

Lucinda Marsh straightened her bent old shoulders with a gesture of finality.

"I'll move into it," she said grimly.

"I wish that I hadn't mentioned it," Mary said regretfully. "I knew that there was some sort of sentiment attached to it, but——"

The old woman cut her off.

"Sentiment! Hate, you mean," she snapped. "But maybe it's for th' best. I'm an old woman—'way past seventy. I'm about due to die, anyway."

She stopped, her aged eyes taking on a far-away look.

"Maybe it's foreordained," she said, half to herself. "He said that he'd be . . . waitin' for me. Maybe he is. Who knows?"

She rose from the table and took a step toward the door.

"I'll open it up in the mornin' and let it air out," she said.

She moved up the stairway to the upper floor, her lips straight and tight.

FOR a long time Lucinda Marsh sat in the straight-backed chair beside her bed, her weary eyes gazing into vacancy while the panorama of the years unfolded itself. To her had come a great urge, a desire which she had kept in leash for close to half a century—the longing that comes to all murderers—a yearning to visit the scene of her crime.

A thousand times before, the same desire had swept over her and she had always fought it off. Now, however, with the fulfilment of her wish only a few hours away there had come to her a seeming need for haste. The closed room was calling to her. Within her brain a voice was shrieking: *"Now! Now!"* To her aged mind it was the voice of the man she hated—the man she had killed.

Getting up, she went to the bureau and, opening the drawer, found the key where she had hidden it so many years before. She held it in her gnarled fingers, fondling it, crooning over it.

Her room was at the head of the stairs. One by one, she heard the members of the household go to their rooms. Finally the gloomy old house was filled with an indescribable quietness.

Rising, she opened the door a tiny crack and peered out into the dark hallway. Satisfied that all were asleep, she picked up the small hand-lamp and tiptoed furtively down the creaking stairs.

A storm was in the air. She could hear the wind rising and shrieking through the

branches of the trees. There was something reminiscent about the mournful wail. She stopped a moment, her head bent forward. Then remembrance swept over her.

" 'T was like this th' night before—before he died," she muttered to herself.

Her heart was beating a trifle faster as she reached the dark, grim door. She hesitated an instant. Then, transferring the lamp to her left hand, she inserted the key in the lock. It turned hard, as if reluctant to reveal the mysteries it hid. Then the tumbler shot back. For a moment she waited, her fingers on the knob. She was trembling now—shaking with an emotion she did not understand.

"He said that . . . he'd be . . . waitin' for me," she murmured. "I wonder . . . if he is."

She turned the knob and pushed against the panel. The aged hinges squeaked protestingly. Then the door swung open. A wave of malignancy and hatred surged over her.

She stepped inside, her lips closed in a tight, grim line. Just inside the door she waited, the lamp held high above her head, her eyes taking in every detail. There was the bed, unmade, where he had died. The thought came to her that Bill Reynolds, the undertaker, the last person to step foot in the room, was gone, too. At the head of the bed was the little stand; on top of it was the glass in which she had administered the poison. Beside it was a bottle of medicine, half empty; the label, covered with old Doc Plummer's crabbed hieroglyphics, was yellow and faded. Doc Plummer . . . he, too, had been festering in his grave for years. There was the pillow where Obie's head had rested when he died; one corner was twisted where he had held it when the last spasm of agony had knifed its way through his vitals. Nothing was changed.

"He said that he'd . . . be waitin' for me," she said again.

The room was musty and mildewed, the dust of years over everything. She closed the door and set the lamp upon the little stand. Going to the window, she pushed it up to its full length. The wind swept in, howling and shrieking.

The lamp sputtered, causing queer, grotesque shadows to dance in the distant corners. Across the back of the chair where she had thrown it years before was the yellowed sheet with which she had smothered the dying breath out of her husband. There was a darker spot upon its mildewed surface; she knew it for the spittle that had drooled from his mouth.

She moved to the center of the room, still peering furtively into the shadows.

"He said that he'd come . . . back from th' grave an' be . . . waitin' for me," she said again and again.

A fresh gust of wind howled through the window. The lamp sputtered, smoked, flared up, then went out.

With the sudden darkness came a feeling of dread. For the first time in her life Lucinda Marsh was afraid.

Out of the darkness came a thing—a shapeless thing of white. For a moment it hung suspended in midair. It hovered over her, its long, shapeless arms reaching out for her. The wind shrieked with merry gusto.

". . . said that he'd be waitin'——" she murmured.

It swept over her, holding her in its folds, twisting about her, smothering her. . . .

"God!" she shrieked, clawing at the enveloping tentacles. "He kept his word! He was . . . waitin'——"

In the morning they found her. Twisted about her head and throat was a yellowed sheet—the sheet with which she had smothered her husband.