

THE GLASS FLOOR

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INTRODUCTION

In the novel *Deliverance*, by James Dickey, there is a scene where a country fellow who lives way up in the back of beyond whangs his hand with a tool while repairing a car. One of the city men who are looking for a couple of guys to drive their cars downriver asks this fellow, Griner by name, if he's hurt himself. Griner looks at his bloody hand, then mutters: "Naw - it ain't as bad as I thought."

That's the way I felt after re-reading "The Glass Floor," the first story for which I was ever paid, after all these years. Darrell Schweitzer, the editor of *Weird Tales* invited me to make changes if I wanted to, but I decided that would probably be a bad idea. Except for two or three word-changes and the addition of a paragraph break (which was probably a typographical error in the first place), I've left the tale just as it was. If I really did start making changes, the result would be an entirely new story.

"The Glass Floor" was written, to the best of my recollection, in the summer of 1967, when I was about two months shy of my twentieth birthday. I had been trying for about two years to sell a story to Robert A.W. Lowndes, who edited two horror/fantasy magazines for *Health Knowledge* (*The Magazine of Horror and Startling Mystery Stories*) as well as a vastly more popular digest called *Sexology*. He had rejected several submissions kindly (one of them, marginally better than "The Glass Floor," was finally published in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* under the title "Night of the Tiger"), then accepted this one when I finally got around to submitting it. That first check was for thirty-five dollars. I've cashed many bigger ones since then, but none gave me more satisfaction; someone had finally paid me some real money for something I had found in my head!

The first few pages of the story are clumsy and badly written - clearly the product of an unformed story-teller's mind - but the last bit pays off better than I remembered; there is a genuine frisson in what Mr.

Wharton finds waiting for him in the East Room. I suppose that's at least part of the reason I agreed to allow this mostly unremarkable work to be reprinted after all these years. And there is at least a token effort to create characters which are more than paper-doll cutouts; Wharton and Reynard are antagonists, but neither is "the good guy" or "the bad guy." The real villain is behind that plastered-over door. And I also see an odd echo of "The Glass Floor" in a very recent work called "The Library Policeman." That work, a short novel, will be published as part of a collection of short novels called *Four Past Midnight* this fall, and if you read it, I think you'll see what I mean. It was fascinating to see the same image coming around again after all this time.

Mostly I'm allowing the story to be republished to send a message to young writers who are out there right now, trying to be published, and collecting rejection slips from such magazines as *F&SF Midnight Graffiti*, and, of course, *Weird Tales*, which is the granddaddy of them all. The message is simple: you can learn, you can get better, and you can get published.

If that Little spark is there, someone will probably see it sooner or later, gleaming faintly in the dark. And, if you tend the spark nestled in the kindling, it really can grow into a large, blazing fire. It happened to me, and it started here.

I remember getting the idea for the story, and it just came as the ideas come now - casually, with no flourish of trumpets. I was walking down a dirt road to see a friend, and for no reason at all I began to wonder what it would be like to stand in a room whose floor was a mirror. The image was so intriguing that writing the story became a necessity. It wasn't written for money; it was written so I could see better. Of course I did not see it as well as I had hoped; there is still that shortfall between what I hope I will accomplish and what I actually manage. Still, I came away from it with two valuable things: a salable story after five years of rejection slips, and a bit of experience. So here it is, and as that fellow Griner says in Dickey's novel, it ain't really as bad as I thought.

- Stephen King

Wharton moved slowly up the wide steps, hat in hand, craning his neck to get a better look at the Victorian monstrosity that his sister had died in. It wasn't a house at all, he reflected, but a mausoleum - a huge, sprawling mausoleum. It seemed to grow out of the top of the hill like an outsized, perverted toadstool, all gambrels and gables and jutting, blank-windowed cupolas. A brass weathervane surmounted the eighty degree slant of shake-shingled roof, the tarnished effigy of a leering little boy with one hand shading eyes. Wharton was just as glad he could not see.

Then he was on the porch, and the house as a whole was cut off from him. He twisted the old-fashioned bell, and listened to it echo hollowly through the dim recesses within. There was a rose-tinted fanlight over the door, and Wharton could barely make out the date 1770 chiseled into the glass. Tomb is right, he thought.

The door suddenly swung open. "Yes, sir?" The housekeeper stared out at him. She was old, hideously old. Her face hung like limp dough on her skull, and the hand on the door above the chain was grotesquely twisted by arthritis.

"I've come to see Anthony Reynard," Wharton said. He fancied he could even smell the sweetish odor of decay emanating from the rumpled silk of the shapeless black dress she wore.

"Mr Reynard isn't seein' anyone. He's mournin'."

"He'll see me," Wharton said. "I'm Charles Wharton. Janine's brother."

"Oh." Her eyes widened a little, and the loose bow of her mouth worked around the empty ridges of her gums. "Just a minute." She disappeared, leaving the door ajar.

Wharton stared into the dim mahogany shadows, making out high-backed easy chairs, horse-hair upholstered divans, tall narrow-

shelved bookcases, curlicued, floridly carven wainscoting.

Janine, he thought. Janine, Janine, Janine. How could you live here? How in hell could you stand it?

A tall figure materialized suddenly out of the gloom, slope-shouldered, head thrust forward, eyes deeply sunken and downcast.

Anthony Reynard reached out and unhooked the door-chain. "Come in, Mr. Wharton, " he said heavily.

Wharton stepped into the vague dimness of the house, looking up curiously at the man who had married his sister. There were rings beneath the hollows of his eyes, blue and bruised-looking. The suit he wore was wrinkled and hung limp on him, as if he had lost a great deal of weight. He looks tired, Wharton thought. Tired and old.

"My sister has already been buried?" Wharton asked.

"Yes." He shut the door slowly, imprisoning Wharton in the decaying gloom of the house. "My deepest sorrow, sir. Wharton. I loved your sister dearly." He made a vague gesture. "I'm sorry."

He seemed about to add more, then shut his mouth with an abrupt snap. When he spoke again, it was obvious he had bypassed whatever had been on his lips. "Would you care to sit down? I'm sure you have questions.

"I do. Somehow it came out more curtly than he had intended.

Reynard sighed and nodded slowly. He led the Way deeper into the living room and gestured at a chair. Wharton sank deeply into it, and it seemed to gobble him up rather than give beneath him. Reynard sat next to the fireplace and dug for cigarettes. He offered them wordlessly to Wharton, and he shook his head.

He waited until Reynard lit his cigarette, then asked, "Just how did she die? Your letter didn't say much.

Reynard blew out the match and threw it into the fireplace. It landed on one of the ebony iron fire-dogs, a carved gargoyle that stared at Wharton with toad's eyes.

"She fell," he said. "She was dusting in one of the other rooms, up along the eaves. We were planning to paint, and she said it would have to be well-dusted before we could begin. She had the ladder. It slipped. Her neck was broken." There was a clicking sound in his throat as he swallowed.

"She died - instantly?"

"Yes." He lowered his head and placed a hand against his brow. "I was heartbroken.

The gargoyle leered at him, squat torso and flattened, sooty head. Its mouth was twisted upward in a weird, gleeful grin, and its eyes seemed turned inward at some private joke. Wharton looked away from it with an effort. "I want to see where it happened.

Reynard stubbed out his cigarette half-smoked. "You can't.

"I'm afraid I must," Wharton said coldly. "After all, she was my...

"It's not that," Reynard said. "The room has been partitioned off. That should have been done a long time ago.

"If it's just a matter of prising a few boards off a door...

"You don't understand. The room has been plastered off completely. There's nothing but a wall there.

Wharton felt his gaze being pulled inexorably back to the fire-dog. Damn the thing, what did it have to grin about?

"I can't help it. I want to see the room."

Reynard stood suddenly, towering over him. "Impossible."

Wharton also stood. "I'm beginning to wonder if you don't have something to hide in there," he said quietly.

"Just what are you implying?"

Wharton shook his head a little dazedly. What was he implying? That perhaps Anthony Reynard had murdered his Sister in this Revolutionary War-vintage crypt? That there might be Something more sinister here than shadowy corners and hideous iron fire-dogs?

"I don't know what I'm implying, " he said slowly, "except that Janine was shoved under in a hell of a hurry, and that you're acting damn strange now."

For moment the anger blazed brighter, and then it died away, leaving only hopelessness and dumb sorrow. "Leave me alone," he mumbled. "Please leave me alone, Mr. Wharton."

"I can't. I've got to know..."

The aged housekeeper appeared, her face thrusting from the shadowy cavern of the hall. "Supper's ready, Mr. Reynard."

"Thank you, Louise, but I'm not hungry. Perhaps Mr. Wharton ... ?" Wharton shook his head.

"Very well, then. Perhaps we'll have a bite later."

"As you say, sir." She turned to go. "Louise?" "Yes, sir?"

"Come here a moment.

Louise shuffled slowly back into the room, her loose tongue slopping wetly over her lips for a moment and then disappearing. "Sir?"

"Mr. Wharton seems to have some questions about his sister's death. Would you tell him all you know about it?"

“Yes, sir.” Her eyes glittered with alacrity. “She was dustin’, she was. Dustin’ the East Room. Hot on paintin’ it, she was. Mr. Reynard here, I guess he wasn’t much interested, because ...

“Just get to the point, Louise,” Reynard said impatiently.

“No,” Wharton said. “Why wasn’t he much interested?”

Louise looked doubtfully from one to the other.

“Go ahead,” Reynard said tiredly. “He’ll find out in the village if he doesn’t up here.

“Yes, sir.” Again he saw the glitter, caught the greedy purse of the loose flesh of her mouth as she prepared to impart the precious story. “Mr. Reynard didn’t like no one goin’ in the East Room. Said it was dangerous.”

“Dangerous?”

“The floor,” she said. “The floor’s glass. It’s a mirror. The whole floor’s a mirror. “

Wharton turned to Reynard, feeling dark blood suffuse his face. “You mean to tell me you let her go up on a ladder in a room with a glass floor?”

“The ladder had rubber grips,” Reynard began. “That wasn’t why ... “You damned fool,” Wharton whispered. “You damned, bloody fool.

“I tell you that wasn’t the reason!” Reynard shouted suddenly. “I loved your sister! No one is sorrier than I that she is dead! But I warned her! God knows I warned her about that floor!”

Wharton was dimly aware of Louise staring greedily at them, storing up gossip like a squirrel stores up nuts. “Get her out of here,” he said thickly.

“Yes,” Reynard said. “Go see to supper. “

“Yes, sir.” Louise moved reluctantly toward the hall, and the shadows swallowed her.

“Now,” Wharton said quietly. “It seems to me that you have some explaining to do, Reynard. This whole thing sounds funny to me. Wasn’t there even an inquest?”

“No,” Reynard said. He slumped back into his chair suddenly, and he looked blindly into the darkness of the vaulted overhead ceiling. “They know around here about the - East Room.”

“And just what is there to know?” Wharton asked tightly

“The East Room is bad luck,” Reynard said. “Some people might even say it’s cursed.

“Now listen,” Wharton said, his ill temper and unladen grief building up like steam in a teakettle, “I’m not going to be put off, Reynard. Every word that comes out of your mouth makes me more determined to see that room. Now are you going to agree to it or do I have to go down to that village and ... ?”

“Please.” Something in the quiet hopelessness of the word made Wharton look up. Reynard looked directly into his eyes for the first time and they were haunted, haggard eyes. “Please, Mr. Wharton. Take my word that your sister died naturally and go away. I don’t want to see you die!” His voice rose to a wail. “I didn’t want to see anybody die!”

Wharton felt a quiet chill steal over him. His gaze skipped from the grinning fireplace gargoyle to the dusty, empty-eyed bust of Cicero in the corner to the strange wainscoting carvings. And a voice came from within him: Go away from here. A thousand living yet insentient eyes seemed to stare at him from the darkness, and again the voice spoke... “Go away from here.”

Only this time it was Reynard.

“Go away from here,” he repeated. “Your sister is beyond caring and beyond revenge. I give you my word...”

“Damn your word!” Wharton said harshly. “I’m going down to the sheriff, Reynard. And if the sheriff won’t help me, I’ll go to the county commissioner. And if the county commissioner won’t help me ...

“Very well.” The words were like the faraway tolling of a churchyard bell.

“Come.”

Reynard led the way into the hall, down past the kitchen, the empty dining room with the chandelier catching and reflecting the last light of day, past the pantry, toward the blind plaster of the corridor’s end.

This is it, he thought, and suddenly there was a strange crawling in the pit of his stomach.

“I...” he began involuntarily.

“What?” Reynard asked, hope glittering in his eyes.

“Nothing. “

They stopped at the end of the hall, stopped in the twilight gloom. There seemed to be no electric light. On the floor Wharton could see the still-damp plasterer’s trowel Reynard had used to wall up the doorway, and a straggling remnant of Poe’s “Black Cat” clanged through his mind:

“I had walled the monster up within the tomb...”

Reynard handed the trowel to him blindly. “Do whatever you have to do, Wharton. I won’t be party to it. I wash my hands of it.

Wharton watched him move off down the hall with misgivings, his hand opening and closing on the handle of the trowel. The faces of the Little-boy weathervane, the fire-dog gargoyle, the wizened

housemaid all seemed to mix and mingle before him, all grinning at something he could not understand. Go away from here ...

With a sudden bitter curse he attacked the wall, hacking into the soft, new plaster until the trowel scraped across the door of the East Room. He dug away plaster until he could reach the doorknob. He twisted, then yanked on it until the veins stood out in his temples .

The plaster cracked, schismed, and finally split. The door swung ponderously open, shedding plaster like a dead skin.

Wharton stared into the shimmering quicksilver pool.

It seemed to glow with a light of its own in the darkness, ethereal and fairy-like. Wharton stepped in, half-expecting to sink into warm, pliant fluid.

But the floor was solid.

His own reflection hung suspended below him, attached only by the feet, seeming to stand on its head in thin air. It made him dizzy just to look at it.

Slowly his gaze shifted around the room. The ladder was still there, stretching up into the glimmering depths of the mirror. The room was high, he saw. High enough for a fall to he winced - to kill.

It was ringed with empty bookcases, all seeming to lean over him on the very threshold of imbalance. They added to the room's strange, distorting effect.

He went over to the ladder and stared down at the feet. They were rubbershod, as Reynard had said, and seemed solid enough. But if the ladder had not slid, how had Janine fallen?

Somehow he found himself staring through the floor again. No, he corrected himself. Not through the floor. At the mirror; into the mirror

...

He wasn't standing on the floor at all he fancied. He Was poised in thin air halfway between the identical ceiling and floor, held up only by the stupid idea that he was on the floor. That was silly, as anyone could see, for there was the floor, way down there....

Snap out of it!' he yelled at himself suddenly. He was on the floor, and that was nothing but a harmless reflection of the ceiling. It would only be the floor if I was standing on my head, and I'm not; the other me is the one standing on his head... .

He began to feel vertigo, and a sudden lump of nausea rose in his throat. He tried to look away from the glittering quicksilver depths of the mirror, but he couldn't.

The door.. where was the door? He suddenly wanted out very badly.

Wharton turned around clumsily, but there were only crazily-tilted bookcases and the jutting ladder and the horrible chasm beneath his feet.

"Reynard!" He screamed. "I'm falling! "

Reynard came running, the sickness already a gray lesion on his heart. It was done; it had happened again.

He stopped at the door's threshold, Staring in at the Siamese twins staring at each other in the middle of the two-roofed, no-floored room.

"Louise," he croaked around the dry ball of sickness in his throat.

"Bring the pole."

Louise came shuffling out of the darkness and handed the hook-ended pole to Reynard. He slid it out across the shining quicksilver pond and caught the body sprawled on the glass. He dragged it slowly toward the door, and when he could reach it, he pulled it out.

He stared down into the contorted face and gently shut the staring eyes.

“I’ll want the plaster,” he said quietly.

“Yes, sir.”

She turned to go, and Reynard stared somberly into the room. Not for the first time he wondered if there was really a mirror there at all. In the room, a small pool of blood showed on the floor and ceiling, seeming to meet in the center, blood which hung there quietly and one could wait forever for it to drip.