

The Mirror

BY MILDRED JOHNSON



*The old man
had an obsession
for locks. . . .*

WHILE Richard was locking the car, Margaret stood in the driveway looking up the ascending lawn to the house, sprawling, heavy with piazzas, ornamented with gingerbread and a dominant cupola, and thought how little

it had changed in twenty-five years. Had it ever been painted? Undoubtedly so, she mused, but in the same dun yellow characteristic of the dignity and sombre respectability of the Thornbers, from Robert Thornber who built it in 1855 down the roll of

generations to Richard himself. Not to her, though, she thought. She was sure she at least had escaped that ponderous solemnity bordering on arrogance which meant, in the factory town which bore their name, the Thornbers.

Richard, for instance—was he conscious of his cold pride? Watching him stride down the drive she saw in his sharp, pale face and full lips and pompous bearing a distillation of conceit. It was as if old Robert himself, whose stern-eyed picture commanded the upper hallway in the house she remembered, were living again. How unpleasant, she thought, to think so treacherously of her own brother.

Displaying a massive bunch of keys, he said contemptuously, "Look at this mess. The old boy was as bad as his mother apparently. She never threw away a thing in her life you know. But our dear Uncle Edward added to her whimsies by his obsession for locks. Do you know that he has every single shelf in the library locked separately? And wait until you see where the will is. I wanted to take it and put it in the firm safe deposit box, but he trusted no locks but his own, and so it's tucked away in a wooden box which in turn is locked in his strong box and the whole thing concealed in the wall safe in his room. And to cap it all Mrs. Foulkes couldn't find these keys until yesterday. I've had her looking for days. At one time we thought he might have tossed them out of the window, because he couldn't leave the bed."

"Where were they?"

"In the mattress. The old bird had managed somehow to make a hole and stuff them in."

"The poor old man, he must have become very confused at the end."

They were at the door and Richard began trying various keys.

"Between you and me, Meg, he was more than confused, but of course that's off the record. We'll have enough trouble as it is probating the will. Those old women aren't going to let it go through without a contest. They told me so when we were at the cemetery. I saw Aggie bending your ear. Why is it that woman always reminds

me of a rat—must be those rodent teeth—what was she saying?"

"I didn't listen closely, because I felt too depressed, but she said something about undue influence and how I was too sensible a person to be a party to fraud. She seemed very bitter, but somehow a funeral isn't the place to air one's animosity. But why should the old ladies contest the will? You said they're getting their share, didn't you?"

He found the key and opened the door as he answered her. "They are—and a very good share too. The part they object to is my getting the library. That's going to be the bone of contention. You see Tom Bryce, who'll probably represent them, has put some very active bees in their bonnets about it."

"Do they want the books?"

"No, my dear, not the books themselves. They want them sold at auction so that they can share proportionately in the proceeds."

"I didn't know they were valuable."

THEY stepped into the hall and all other ideas were wiped from her mind as she stared about, awe, dread, all the nervousness of childhood, rolling over her. Was it something about the hall itself—the ghastly light sifting through the green panes above the door, the fungus smell of the walls, the high, vaulted ceiling—or was it only the memory of fear that made her think of a sepulchre? In the center the staircase, carpeted thickly in maroon, wound upward into shadow; at the left was the dining room, dark, the blinds drawn, the heavy walnut furniture looming indistinctly. She recalled being afraid of it, especially the sideboard, the front of it being carved in patterns which, in her childish fancy, had resembled devils. Even before the final day of terror so long ago she had been afraid in the house.

Richard walked to the right, to the living room, and she followed. Perhaps because it alone, of all the rooms, had been spared the colored window glass, it was bright, almost cheerful by contrast, although it could have been transferred intact to a museum as an example of Victorian atrocity

in decor with its convoluted whatnots, its tables draped with green baize cloths as heavy as rugs, its wax flowers under glass, its chairs buried under embroidered satin cushions. She noticed the same old dusty grasses were still dangling over the mantelpiece, the examples of Samoan flora a remote Thornber ancestor had brought back from a clipper voyage.

"It's exactly the same," she said. "Exactly. Nothing has been added or taken away, or moved even an inch as far as I can see. And it all belongs to me. Great Scott—what am I going to do with it?"

"You'll be able to sell it. There are people who'll buy anything so long as it's old. But come into the library. I want to show you the books."

That, too, was as stark as ever; the glass-enclosed shelves covering the walls to the ceiling, a baronial table in the center, leather chairs before the fireplace, ugly busts—she recognized Dante, Shakespeare, Socrates—in the corners.

"It looks like a branch of a public library," she said.

"You wouldn't find anything like this in a public library," he said, selecting a small brass key from the ring and unlocking one of the cases from which he took out a book bound in green morocco. He held it reverently, as if weighing it, felt the edges and stroked the binding before opening it. "*The Faerie Queene*," he pointed out. "First edition—think of it! And here's a Kilmarnock Burns and a first Beaumont and Fletcher, in boards, with nineteen errors in pagination. And it's only a part of it. Say what you want about old Robert's taste—in books it was impeccable. You know he had a standing *carte blanche* order at Quaritch's. Here, in this architectural monstrosity, in this crummy mill town, are some of the finest volumes in the country—in the world I dare say, and for over three-quarters of a century they've been buried here, never appearing in the auction rooms. And as far as I'm concerned they never will. I hope you'll start your boy early on the joys of book collecting, because I'll leave them to him."

He returned the book to the shelf, locked the case, and stood fingering the key, a half-

smile on his lips. "I was in law school before I learned the meaning of fine books," he said. "But as soon as I had acquired the taste I appropriated this library. Since then I've considered it mine. When I think of all the weekends I've spent out here playing endless games of cribbage with the old bag of bones and listening to his idiocies, with all these priceless volumes waiting, like me, for the technicality of his death—and they call that undue influence!"

"I don't. I think you deserved them, Dick," she said. "But I'm afraid it would have taken more than a libraryful of rare books to get me out here. I'm thankful I was far enough away so that it was never expected of me. As it is I can't understand why he left me the furniture and silver. The last time I saw him was at my wedding."

"He always liked Mother—although I do think you carried the thing a bit too far not coming here at all. I can understand it when you were little, but not later on."

"Truly, Dick, it's only within the past few years that I've recovered from the shock. I still had nightmares after I was grown up. That must have been what they call a traumatic experience."

"You made too much fuss about it. You knew Grandmother was crazy. Well, we'd better get the will and go on before it gets dark."

"I'll stay down here if you don't mind. Seeing that room again isn't to my liking."

"You're a fool, Meg."

HE LEFT her and she sat in a straight chair near the window and felt the memories of the house stirring about her. Once it stood majestic on this hill, crowning it nobly, thick woods in the valley screening the factory chimneys, but now the little jerry-built houses were encroaching—she could see them at the foot of the hill—the rabble smothering the king. And now the aunts would probably sell the house and let them swallow it up entirely. She thought of it with mingled regret and pleasure.

She tried to hold her thoughts away from that day; she cast around for subjects. She even thought of her great-uncle and his pitiful, parchment face in the casket, but that

picture led inevitably to others—and to the mirror. . . .

SHE had been seven, Richard twelve. Their mother, newly-married, had taken them to say good-bye to their great-grandmother and great-uncle Edward. They were leaving for Seattle, the home of their stepfather, the next day. She remembered how their uncle led them in a group up the stairs to see his mother; she recalled the unnatural quietness and awe which fell upon them all as they walked softly up the stairs. There were Aunts Aggie and Grace, their mother and Mr. Barclay, their stepfather, and Dick and Margaret in solemn procession behind Uncle Edward who, even then, seemed of immense age and walked with difficulty.

They turned to the right at the head of the stairs and waited while Edward rapped lightly at the door. Their faces had looked strange and drawn in the aqueous light from the window in the upper hall.

"May we come in, Mother?" Edward had called.

"Wait!" a cracked voice answered. They waited, and Mr. Barclay smiled a little as if he thought it all very amusing.

At last the queer voice told them to come in. Margaret hung back, so that it was some time before she saw her great-grandmother. Instead she looked about the room. Facing the door, on the left, was a tester bed covered by a patchwork quilt. At the right of the bed, against the wall, was a large dark dresser with an adjustable mirror. Then the adults opened their ranks to allow the children to come forward and she saw Gran sitting in a rocking chair in the cupola, her tiny feet swinging above the floor, her back straight, her face wrinkled and brown like a walnut and her black eyes glittering like jet beads. She looked at Richard brightly.

"Come here, Mark, and let your Granny kiss you," she said.

"This isn't Mark," Edward explained. "It's his son, Richard."

"Where's Mark?"

"Mark is dead, Mother," Edward said gently.

The little feet touched the floor and the old woman began to rock. "Yes, that is so,"

she said. "Mark is dead. He has a good grave, a dry grave, like my sons'. One can bear to look at them in dry graves. They put my husband in a wet grave and he became swollen and dreadful to see before the flesh fell away. It is all the same then—all the same—"

Aunt Aggie gasped and Edward said quickly, "Mother, Mark's children are here. They're going far away and they want to say good-bye."

"Come and kiss me," she ordered. Dick, very red in the face, stepped up and kissed her cheek. She whispered something in his ear and chuckled to herself. "Don't be afraid," she said to Margaret. "I'm not dead yet." Trembling, Margaret kissed her quickly at the corner of the mouth. She was warm and dry and smelled of sour bread.

After dinner Edward showed the adults around the garden while the children looked at stereopticon views in the library. When the voices of the grownups could be heard in the distance, Richard checked their whereabouts from the window and then said to Margaret, "Come on. Let's go upstairs to Gran."

"No. I don't want to."

"Oh come on. Don't be a baby. You know what she told me? She said if we'd go up there alone she'd show us something nobody else in the whole world except her has ever seen."

"I don't want to see it. I don't like her. She's so *old*, and she smells funny."

"Come along. Maybe she'll give us something. She's very rich. She has pots of money. Everybody knows that."

And so Margaret had gone upstairs with Richard, sidling into the room behind him after the ritual of the tap and the call to enter. When she saw them their grandmother rocked in pleasure and grinned toothlessly. "You came," she said. "You didn't forget."

"You said you'd show us something nobody else has ever seen," Richard said doggedly.

"That I will. You're Mark's children and he would want you to see it because he is dead. Edward mustn't see it. His father wouldn't want him to see it. He has said so."

She went on in that confused fashion for a few minutes and then darted forward like a bird, felt under the red plush cushion of the window seat next to her and took out a bronze object, rectangular in shape and ornately molded. She laid it flat on her lap, rested their mottled, veined hands on it and looked at the carpet as if praying. Then she said, "Here is my mirror, my own mirror."

"That doesn't look like a mirror," Richard said.

"It is closed. It is closed, like eyes that do not see. But when this mirror is open, we can see our dead. My husband whom I hated and my sons whom I loved—they're all here—and your father is here too, if you want to see him. He looks very well, because they embalmed him and his coffin is strong—my husband is clean and smooth now—a skull at last—you won't see him—I won't let you see him—"

Margaret couldn't breathe. Tighter and tighter she gripped Richard's hand.

"That's crazy!" he said angrily. "How can you see a person after he's dead?"

Cackling in excitement, the old woman fumbled for a catch at the top of the object—but Margaret could stand no more. She began to scream and Mrs. Foulkes, the servant, rushed in at once.

"What are you doing?" she demanded. "What are you saying to these children?"

Mrs. Foulkes took them away, Margaret clinging to her, still screaming.

"Silly little girl!" sneered the old woman.

THE memory of her own cries mingled with the actuality of Richard calling her name from the landing. "For heaven's sake hurry up!" he said, when she reached the hall. His face was flushed. "Look, will you telephone Mrs. Foulkes and ask her what the devil happened to the will?"

"Isn't it in the safe?"

"Why do you think I'm asking you to call her?"

"Is the phone connected?"

"Of course it is—Meg, please! Will you stop asking foolish questions? While you're calling her I'll look around the room. I'll look in the mattress."

Margaret went to the telephone at the end of the hall, and, hesitant about questioning Richard about Mrs. Foulkes' number, searched through the drawer of the little table until she found an address book. It had Mrs. Foulkes' name in it and a telephone number listed, her daughter's. Margaret remembered then that Mrs. Foulkes had mentioned that she was going to take off her shoes and go out to pasture for the rest of her life. After thirty-five years of service to the Thornbers she deserved it, Margaret thought, as she gave the number to the girl at the exchange. The annuity Edward had arranged for her in the last year of his life could be only a token payment for such loyalty.

Mrs. Foulkes asked Margaret's question, "Isn't it in the safe?"

"Apparently not."

"That's funny. He didn't ask me to get it for him. I wonder if he could have got out of bed and got it for himself? One thing I'm positive of—it never left the room. I'd have seen it if it did. It certainly must be there."

"We'll look around. As you say, he probably found the strength to hop out of bed for a few minutes."

"If you don't find it, I'll come over and help you look."

"Oh, no, we wouldn't want you to do that. It must be somewhere in the room. We'll find it."

Margaret thanked her and promised to let her know the outcome of the search. Then she went to the foot of the stairs to tell Richard, but he appeared before she could call him. Bits of lint and feathers were all over his hair and coat. "Well?" he said.

"It never left the room. She's sure about that."

"She's sure about it, is she? She's sure about nothing now except that she's got hers. Little she cares about anything else."

"You didn't find it, then?"

"No, I didn't. Come up here and help me."

She stopped in the upper hall, unsure of the room until she heard grating sounds from the front chamber, as if Richard were smashing the furniture. "So he moved into

Gran's room?" she murmured, at the door, but her brother was too busy to reply.

The bed was covered with feathers and strips of the mattress. He had torn it to ribbons and disembowled it. And now he was pulling clothing from the drawers, tossing it right and left, and when the drawer was empty, he kicked the bottom until it caved in. "Got to make sure about secret compartments," he muttered, and, seeing Meg, shouted, "Come on—get going! Look in the closet. Take everything out, look in every pocket, go through the linings of the coats and look in the trouser cuffs. It isn't a heavy document. He might have hidden it anywhere."

The wall safe was swung back and its contents, boxes, jewelry, papers, scattered over the table. "I assume you went through everything carefully," she remarked.

He fairly hissed in irritation. "Think I'm blind? I've been through every scrap of paper three times. The old fool was bound he was going to read that will!"

"Why—didn't he read it before he executed it?"

"Read it? It took me six months to satisfy him with it! It went through twenty drafts at least, each one radically different from the others. At one time the whole library was bequeathed to the Thornber Historical Society. Thank God that was changed! On the day he signed it I had to rush out and haul in some neighbors for witnesses before he changed his mind again." He made a gesture of annoyance. "But I don't want to stand here talking about it. Let's find it first."

She took the suits out one by one and felt through them carefully, feeling pangs of pity for their smallness and the blobs of food on the front and the lapels. "You'd think someone would have cleaned these," she said.

"It would have been a waste of time having them cleaned every time he wore them. In the last few years he got more of his meals on his coat than in his stomach. And he wouldn't let anyone touch his things until they reeked. What are you doing? Here—that's no way to do it." He took one of the coats from her, flourished his pocket-

knife again and ripped out the lining completely. She felt sad, unaccountably close to tears. So soon to take the old man's private, cherished possessions and destroy them!

"Is that necessary?" she said.

He sighed heavily. She saw that his face was becoming bloated with anger. "All right. Let me do it. You look under the cushions and around the chair edges."

When she had finished the chairs she looked behind the pictures and by that time all Edward's garments were in a heap on the floor and Richard was standing near the window pounding his palm with his fist. "It's got to be found," he said. "If I appear in court with my carbon copy, my chances drop 50 per cent. Those old women have their hooks in me too deeply to let me try to probate a copy, even though I can prove the execution of the original. Rather than see me get the library they'd give it away. Well, I'll find it, that's all there is to it. It's in here somewhere. It's got to be in here! No, it's not under the carpets. I looked there first. Now let's reconstruct the scene. Here's the old fellow in bed, presumably too sick to move. He'd go over to the safe, four steps at the most, get out the will—and then he'd have to sit down. He'd sit here in the rocking chair I imagine. Perhaps he'd read it, and then he'd get up—or perhaps not. Meg—the window seats!"

He leaped into the cupola and lifted the cushions from the seats. "Is it there?" Margaret said.

"No. I was sure it would be. But here's that plate thing of Gran's."

He came out holding it in both hands. As she came up, half fearfully, to see it, he set it on the dresser and switched on the bracket light. She looked down and started.

"Dick, that's the mirror!" she whispered, staring at it in sickening fascination. In dimming twilight, with their shadows flickering on the wall, and a physical part of the memory before her eyes, she was seven again, feeling the giddiness of fear, her heart moving up—up—"I feel frightened," she said.

"Of what? Of a copper plate? That's all it is." He ran his hand through his hair and looked about. "I'm stumped," he said.

"Perhaps we ought to come back tomorrow, when it's light."

"If you're getting tired you can go," he burst out. "But I'll stay here and find that will if it takes me all night. *Where* can it be—where—where?"

She was looking at the motif of the decoration on the object. There were six heads, in sequence, the first of a young woman with flowing hair, her eyes closed; the second of another woman, or perhaps the same, with tangled hair and sunken cheeks; the third—"Dick!" she cried Look! Isn't that horrible?" The faces changed, became fleshless, and the last was a grinning skull. "Can you see what it mean? It shows the disintegration of a corpse!"

He barely looked at it. "Well, you can see now where the old woman got her ideas." Suddenly he jumped forward and began to paw it eagerly. "Remember, didn't she say it opens? We've found it—we've found the will, Meg! Damn this thing, how does it open? Here try it. Your fingers are more sensitive."

With her hands shaking she felt the rim, as she recalled Gran had done. Without realizing it she touched a pin and the bronze doors divided with a snap, opening into a mirrored triptych. The action was so unexpected that she screamed a little, and, at the same time, Richard cried out, but his cry was of pleasure, for there, pressed crosswise across the base mirror, was a blue-backed document.

"Meg, darling—we've found it!" he shouted, taking her arms and shaking her.

He opened it and moved under the lamp to read it. She looked down at the mirror. Nothing was reflected except her own white face, her hat on one side, wisps of hair protruding. She straightened her hat and pushed back her hair. Her fingers were cold. Richard was still reading, turning to the last page. Then a scrap of paper fluttered to the floor. He picked it up, gaped at it—then handed

it to Margaret, who took it in wonder. It was a signature, "Edward Thornber," followed by a red seal; above it, on the jagged edge, were some lines of typewriting: "... hand and seal this 12th day of. . . ."

She looked back at Richard. The veins on his forehead were distended, his eyes bloodshot. Fury rose into his face and erupted at last in a bellow: "See what he's done? He's torn out his signature—he's invalidated the will!"

Pounding his flat hand on the dresser he shouted his stupendous rage to the house. Margaret touched his arms, tried to speak, but he shook her off.

"So you think you've beaten me, you sniveling, whining hypocrite?" he cried. He closed his eyes and cursed his uncle slowly, savagely. Margaret stepped backward, shaking her head.

"Don't," she entreated. "It's not right—"

"What do you know about it? You've never wanted anything the way I wanted that library! And I'll have it—I'll have it—I'll do more than substitute a will—I'll forge one! I can do it, I can trace the signatures, nobody will ever know—"

Gibbering, he bent over the dresser, outlining the witnesses' signatures with his fingers. Suddenly he straightened, and pointed to the left of the will—and a piercing scream shook the walls, filled the room—and before it died there was another and another. And Margaret looked about blinded with terror for a second before realizing it was Richard screaming, shrieking like a soul gone mad. Before she could reach him he picked up the mirror and flung it at the wall. It shattered and crashed to the floor.

Richard was not screaming now. His head lolled and his eyes were vague and his hands groped. "It was *he*," he whispered. "He was there, in his coffin, in the mirror—laughing—"

Sobbing he leaned heavily against his sister.

Was it not odd, Jules de Grandin asked himself, that two people should have the same delusions at approximately the same time?

"The Body Snatchers" . . . by . . . SEABURY QUINN
 . . . in the next WEIRD TALES . . .

UNKNOWN LADY



BY HAROLD LAWLOR

NOW that I suspect the whole truth, I don't know what to tell Greg Leyden, and the suspicion occurs to me that perhaps the kindest thing I can do for him is keep my mouth shut. I know I'm responsible in a way for what has befallen him, for I was at least the innocent motivation of the whole thing. On the other hand, he has never been any

No one, absolutely no one, was to sit on the left-hand side of the love seat.

real friend of mine. As someone once immortally said, I never liked him and I always will.

You see, I write fantastic stories, stories