

The DARK MIRROR

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"The Lone Wolf," Etc.

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CHAPTER NINE

The Changeling.

I. TRANSLATION.

As on that first occasion when sleep had stolen upon and overcome her unawares in the studio, her unclosing eyes comprehended only darkness absolute.

Unlike that time, when she had roused instantaneously, self-consciousness springing suddenly, full witted, full powered, clear, out of nightmare thrall, now she awoke slowly and at expense of effort almost painful: senses and perceptions struggling long and arduously to break the embrace of a lethargy so deep and undisturbed that the self-sense had lain in it benumbed and stifled, like a seed that slumbers in the pent darkness of the earth against the coming of the spring.

In the confusion of those first waking moments she believed herself to be at home, in bed.

But the darkness of her bedchamber had never been sheer; there was always a diffused glow from the lights in the street to temper it.

Then she remembered, dully, the studio and the weariness that had weighed upon her in the afternoon.

She must have slept several hours at the least reckoning, for it had been broad daylight when she lay down, the evenings were long, and it was now, judging by the blackness of it and the silence, dead of night.

But she looked in vain for the violet-tinted rectangle of the north-light.

And mysteriously the windows were shut which had been open when she stretched out to rest. For there was not only an utter absence of light but a smothering lack of fresh air. Her lungs starving, she lay for some time stupidly contemplating the exertion that would be needed to rise and open one of the windows. Somehow she could not seem to nerve herself to it.

She was feeling actually ill, squeamish. Her limbs were stiff and heavy, her hands hot, her cheeks and forehead aflame, a prickling sensation afflicted her body, she was athirst and the taste in her mouth was evil; and when she moved her head upon the pillow, pain like a brutal blow crashed from temple to temple and back again and again, forcing feeble groans past her lips.

Nevertheless conditions such as these were unendurable. At whatever cost, she must have water and fresh air.

She steeled herself and presently, by a supreme exertion of will power, forced herself to sit up. For the time being she could do no more. The pain rocked and smashed about like a mad thing, till she wondered would it break her skull. And as by degrees those transports subsided, she was taken with qualms of nausea.

She must have kicked off her shoes in her sleep. At least, she could not remember removing them before lying down. At all events—whatever had become of them—they were gone. Beneath her stockinged feet the floor was bare and rough, of unfinished wood. Now, there was a rug beside the divan in the studio. And even had it been spirited away like her shoes, the studio floor was of hardwood neatly joined and polished till its surface was like glass.

Then a hand that she dropped to the edge of her couch encountered the coarse ticking of an uncovered mattress, instead of the silken rug that clothed the divan.

Slowly it was borne in upon her that she was neither in her bedchamber nor in her studio.

This conviction struck home to her understanding with a shock that brought her to her feet. What had happened? Where was she—and who?

Was she Priscilla Maine, delirious? Or was she Leonora—yet once again that puppet of her life in dreams, embarked upon some new and still more terrible adventure?

But Leonora was no more . . . She took a blind step into obscurity, and another, blundered into a chair and knocked it over with a clatter.

While she waited, dashed, hands clutching wildly at vacant blackness, a key turned in a reluctant lock, a door opened, closed, and was relocked.

Priscilla failed to elicit more than a harsh, inarticulate whisper from a swollen throat.

A match rasped and spluttered in the murk, a gas-jet hissed from a wall-bracket, spreading a fan-like flame

with a body of ghastly blue and a border of tawny yellow.

It revealed a mean and ugly cubicle, perhaps six feet by eight, with dingy walls to whose crumbling plaster clung a few dismal rags of ancient paper. The single window was stoutly boarded on the inside. The begrimed floor was a stranger alike to carpeting and soap and water, had apparently been so since time out of memory. For furnishing there was a small table of painted wood, the overturned chair, and a scorbutic iron bedstead with sway-backed springs, a lumpy mattress and one enucleated pillow.

Silent beneath the wheezing gaslight, the woman Inez bent upon Priscilla a lowering regard.

II. INEZ.

"Well," Inez drawled in overcolored surprise, "would you look who's here! As I live 'tis none other than the Duplex Kid—Little Nora of the Double Life—and Face!"

Arms akimbo, with feering mouth and hostile eyes, she waited hopefully for her gibe to draw the spirited response which might have been expected of Leonora, and so provide excuse for further insolence.

She was disappointed. Her victim was too far gone in wretchedness to know or care whether she were the butt of ill-natured derision. Added to the misery of her body, she had now to cope with an intellectual confusion that seemed past raveling.

She had fallen asleep in the tranquil spaciousness of her studio: she was awake in this confined place of unspeakable squalor. She had been free and alone; she was now in a manner jailed, at the mercy of this truculent vixen. No later than this afternoon she had been Priscilla Maine; tonight she was cast for the role of Leonora. Both hands clasping her tortured head, as if to prevent its splitting asunder, the girl stared at Inez with distraught eyes in a haggard countenance.

"Thought you'd pay the old place a visit, did you? Found Flit' avenue and all too rich for your stummick, I presume. How's it feel to be back on the farm? Like old home week, I guess."

Again Priscilla tried to speak; but her tongue clove to the roof of her mouth. The sounds, when at length they came, were unrecognizable as her own voice.

"Water!" she croaked—"in pity's name—water!"

Momentarily the other seemed of a mind to refuse her. Then, perhaps because she saw she would get no satisfaction from her prey otherwise, she decided to indulge her.

"All right, dearie; I'll fetch you a nice long drink. Back in a minute. Just make yourself perfectly at home."

Defly unfastening the door, Inez slipped out.

Priscilla was kept waiting a cruel time . . .

Whether prompted by need for stealth or by common hatefulness seeking to prolong her torments, Inez chose to return noiselessly. Priscilla, sitting with drooping head, had no warning till she heard the door close softly. Then, seeing Inez posed with her back to it, a large goblet of thick glass held high, the girl lurched to her feet and toward her.

"Please!" Priscilla begged huskily. With a quick movement Inez placed the glass on the little table and met Priscilla with a straight-arm blow on the bosom that drove her reeling back to the bed, whose uprights she grasped to save herself a fall.

"Don't be in such a sweat. You'll get your drink, all right—when you've done what I want you to."

"What—what do you want me to do?"

Inez tossed toward her a bundle of garments she had brought under her arm. "I want that suit you've got on—it's too d—n' good for you—and your rings and that brooch and everything. Hand 'em over and you can have your drink."

"I don't understand. You can't—it can't be possible you mean to rob me?"

"Say, sis'n!" With the stride of an infuriated animal Inez crossed to her and stopped with her shrewish face thrust forward pugnaciously, not six inches from Priscilla's. "I'm goin' to have them swell duds and jools 'f I have to rip 'em off your back with my own hands—and the skin off your face, too. Get me? I mean every word of it. You're goin' to come down to where you belong this minute, and you're goin' to look the part, too, or my name ain't Inez. You've come the haughty over me for the last time."

It's my innins now, and when I'm finished with you everythin' 'll be perfectly even between you and Inez, forever and ever—a-men!"

With trembling, awkward fingers Priscilla began to pluck at the buttons of her blouse.

Inez retreated to the table, picked up the glass and rattled the ice musically within it.

"Hurry, dear heart!"

Priscilla removed coat and blouse and stepped out of her skirt, then lifted her hands for the glass. Her tormenter warned her off.

"Wait—a—min-ute! You're forgettin' them rings."

Silently the girl stripped her fingers, dropping their jewels into the greedy palm. Nothing mattered, so that she earned that drink of water.

But yet once again was she put off.

"Don't crowd me so! I might get nervous and spill somethin' . . . Climb into them clothes I brought you first—and if I was you I wouldn't waste no time, neither. Can't tell when Harry or someone 'll bump in here and catch you with nothin' on but your pretties. And be thankful I let you keep them . . ."

For an instant, indeed, the woman seemed disposed to repent of that generosity, eyeing Priscilla's undergarments of lace and filmy silk. In fumbling haste Priscilla covered them with the cheap and none too clean cotton blouse, the shoddy and ill-fashioned coat and skirt which Inez had brought her.

At long last she had her reward. At first in frantic gulps, then more slowly if with no less avidity, she drained



"As I Live, 'Tis None Other Than the Duplex Kid—Little Nora of the Double Life."

the glass; while Inez at the bed snatched up and packed under her arm the spoils of this her first victory over her rival.

"Well, how about it, Nora? Feelin' chirpier?" she inquired with magnanimity when Priscilla put down the empty glass.

"I don't know," Priscilla's feet wove uncertainly toward the bed. Too late she was realizing that the glass had held something more than mere water. She sat down suddenly and began again to nurse her head. "I'm ill," she murmured—"very ill. How did I get here?"

"I guess maybe that's somethin' you don't know." Inez laughed spitefully. "And I don't mind tellin' Harry followed you down Flit' avenue 'safternoon and seen where you stopped, up in McDougall alley. Then he got Charlie and left him to watch you while he 'phoned for the rest of the bunch. When it got dark and everythin' was quiet, they picked the lock, found you doin' a Rip van Winkle that looked good for twenty year, give you a shot of the hop to make sure you wouldn't wake up at the wrong time, and brought you down here in a taxi. That's your history up to date. Cheer up: the worst is yet to come. And when it comes—grab this from me—innocent 'll Inez is goin' to have a ringside seat."

"I don't understand . . ."

The words were barely audible; but the terragant heard. Her sneer darkened.

"Well, if you gotta know, the

bunch's outside makin' up their minds what to do with you. I haven't got no ideoar what they'll fine'y settle on, but it'll be plenty, whatever it is. If it was anybody else I'd feel sorry for them; but you—!"

Her laugh was harsh and jeering. For sole response the cringing figure on the bed suddenly sank in upon itself, then over upon one side, where it lay sprawling, inert, whites of eyes showing under half closed lids.

Startled, the woman bent over Priscilla. But her breathing went on monotonously. She had merely fainted.

III. THE TRAP.

The blinding prismatic glare that filled all space dwindled slowly to a hand's breadth of particolored flame, its thunderous roar to a sustained snore; overhead the sertorous gas jet by fits and starts hissed and spat angrily.

She had no means of knowing how long it had been burning; that is to say, how long she had been insensible; but it was long enough, at all events, for the atmosphere of that stuffy hole to have grown sickening with heat and its aggravation of the native stench.

Her mouth and throat once more were parched. The drink brought her by Inez had served only to render her thirst more intense: a matter of spiteful calculation, in all likelihood: even though diluted, alcohol in any form is no quencher of thirst, rather the contrary. Inez had not, however, reckoned with its stimulating properties; Priscilla was no less unhappy in body and mind, on recovering from her swoon, but she felt stronger, better able to think and to work out thought in action.

At present, however, two considerations dominated all others: her need of water; the necessity somehow to escape from that place of terror and abomination.

She got up, unsteadily enough, padded to the door, and listened there with an ear to the joint between door and jamb.

Hearing what she believed to be a rumor of distant voices, nothing else, she laid hold of the knob and turned it cautiously. A thrill shot through her heart when the door opened: Whether by design or inadvertence, Inez had neglected to lock it!

A peering reconnaissance showed nothing but gloom immediately beyond the door. Trembling, the girl opened it wide. The light from the gas jet then revealed a length of malodorous hallway, broken by two more doors, both closed. At its far end it turned off at a right angle. What lay beyond was unguessable; there was no light.

The air of the hallway was heavy with that subtle, sickly smell, alluring and appalling . . . the breath of death. . . . She had smelt it before, somewhere, at some time indefinite. . . . At length she knew it: the reek of opium smoke in the der of Sing Ho, to which she—or Leonora—had gone that night (so long ago!) to meet Charlie the Coke.

She advanced one unshod, timid foot across the threshold, faltered, took another step and closed the door behind her, shutting herself out into untempered darkness, and stole fearfully on, feeling her way with hands that brushed the walls.

She drew near to the farther door. The voices became more definite. Seemingly several persons were closeted in that room, all talking at once, in discordant dissenstion. The notion came to her, was entertained and established as an idea fixed, that if she could only win past that door, the rest would be easy, an unhindered way of escape would open out to her. . . .

She was within two paces of success when an especially violent wrangle ended in a harsh rasping of chair legs on a bare, rough floor; and in a sudden lull heavy heels thumped toward the door. The girl shrank back, instinctively flattening herself to the wall to one side of the door. This last was thrown open, letting out a flood of gaslight and a choking gust of air heavy laden with tobacco smoke. A man came out, turning toward Priscilla's recent prison. Blinded by the transition from light to darkness, he stopped and, cursing, put out a hand toward the wall. It touched Priscilla's shoulder. She winced with a stifled cry of fright. Instantly the hand closed cruelly on her shoulder; its owner uttered an exclamation of mingled wrath and satisfaction, and with one ruffianly swing sent her staggering into the room.

Somehow she escaped a tumble, righted herself, stood cringing, blinking, trembling.

The door closed with a bang. The time of all pretensions to polish, accents of the Nut, destitute for the nounced:

"Here she is now! Caught her just in time—tryin' to do a sneak. Who left the door unlocked on her? You, Inez!"

Coolly the voice of Inez replied: "Maybe I did—I don't remember."

"D—n' careless of you—"

"Ah, shut up. What difference does it make? She didn't get away, did she? She couldn't, not in a thousand years, without we let her."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

MRS. NANCY SHARP, of Los Angeles, who says she received the greatest surprise of her life when Tanlac completely restored her health after she had almost lost hope of ever getting well. Suffered twelve years.



"After seeing the wonderful results my husband obtained from Tanlac I began taking the medicine myself, and now we both agree that it is the grandest medicine on earth," said Mrs. Nancy Sharp, a prominent and highly esteemed resident of Los Angeles, Calif., living at 921 Canulus street, whose husband is proprietor of the Merchants' Express Co.

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"I just wish it was so everybody troubled like I was knew about this wonderful medicine."

Tanlac is sold by leading druggists everywhere.—Adv.

A Mistake.

"Our pretty neighbor must be very much in love with her husband. I heard her the other day say she was going to do her best to make her Billy's life happy."

"Billy's not her husband; he's her poodle."

Constipation, indigestion, sick-headache and bilious conditions are overcome by a course of Garfield Tea. Drink before retiring.—Adv.

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