

The Girl in the Mirror

By ELIZABETH JORDAN

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WNU Service

CHAPTER IX—Continued

She went across the room to a small closet. Even in the strain of the movement he observed the extraordinary grace and swiftness of her movements. She was very slender, very lithe, and she moved like a flash of light.

"Fancy my being caught without a lemon!" she scoffed, as she returned with the fruit. "Your brain-work stops abruptly sometimes, doesn't it?"

She handed him the lemons with a little gesture expressing amusement, triumph and a dash of coquetry. Laurie's eyes glowed as he looked at her. For the second time, in her actual presence, a sharp thrill shot through him. Oh, if she were always like this!—gay, happy, without that incredible, unbelievable background of tragedy and mystery! He turned his mind resolutely from the intruding thought. This hour at least was hers and his. It should be prolonged to the last moment.

What he longed for was to hear her talk, but that way, he knew, lay disaster to the little supper in swift-returning memory. If she began to talk, the forbidden topic, now dormant, would uncoil its hideous length and hiss. He must hold her attention to other things.

He plunged at random into chatter. For the first time he told her about Bangs, his chum, and about Epstein, their manager; about their plays and their experiences in rehearsals and on the road. Being very young and slightly spoiled, he experienced some chagrin in the discovery that she seemed alike ignorant of the men and the plays. Worse yet, she seemed not even aware that she should have known who Bangs and Epstein were. She did not recall having heard the title of "The Black Pearl." She was not only unaware that "The Man Above" had broken all box-office records; she seemed unconscious that it had ever been written. Observing his artless surprise, she gravely explained. "I have been interested in other things," she reminded him.

The forbidden topic was stirring, stretching. To quiet it, Laurie leaped into the comedy scenes of "The Man Above." They delighted her. Her soft, delicious laughter moved him to give her bits from "The Black Pearl," and, following these, the big scenes from the latter play. This last effort followed the supper; and Laurie, now in his highest spirits, added to his effects by the use of a brilliant afghan, and by much raising and lowering of the light of the reading lamp.

He was a fine mimic. He became by turns the star, the leading lady, the comedian and the "heavy" of the big play. It was only when he had stopped for a moment's rest, and Doris demanded a description of the leading lady's gowns, now represented by the afghan, that his ingenuity failed.

"They're so beautiful that most people think I made them," he said, serenely. "But I didn't, really, so I can't give you any details, except that they're very close-fitting around the feet."

He was folding up the afghan as he spoke, and he stopped in the act, leaving one end dangling on the floor. From the street below the sound of a whistle came up to him, sharp and penetrating, repeating over and over the same musical phrase, the opening notes of the Fifth Symphony. At first he thought the notes were whistled by some casual passer by. Then, glancing at the girl's face, he knew better. The sharp, recurrent phrase was a signal.

He finished folding the afghan, and carefully replaced it on the divan from which he had borrowed it. As he did so, he rattled on. He had suddenly decided not to hear that signal. Doris, sitting transfixed and staring at him, slowly became convinced that he had not heard it.

He glanced at his watch. "A shocking hour!" he ejaculated. "Ten o'clock. If I go now, may I come back for breakfast?"

"You may not." She made an effort to speak lightly.

"To take you to luncheon, then, at one?"

"No, please."

He shook his head at her. "This is not the atmosphere of hospitality I am used to, but I shall come anyway. I'll be here at one. In the meantime, I suddenly realize that we are not using all our opportunities. We must change that."

He looked around as he spoke, and, finding what he sought, picked it up. It was a small scarf, a narrow bit of Roman silk carrying a vivid stripe. He held this before her.

"Something may happen some day, and you may want me in a hurry," he said. "I have observed with regret that you have no telephone in this room, but we can get on without one. My mirror reflects your window, you know," he added a little self-consciously. "If you need me, hang up this scarf. Just drape it over this big window catch. If I ever see it, I'll come prancing across the square like a knight to your rescue."

"Thank you."

She gave him her hand and the enigmatic smile that always subtly but intensely annoyed him. There was something in that smile which he did not understand, but he suspected that it held an element of amused understanding. So might Doris, years hence, smile at her little son.

"She thinks I'm a reed," Laurie reflected as he waited in the outer hall

for the elevator. "I don't blame her. I've been a perfectly good reed ever since I met her friend Bert."

His thoughts, thus drawn to Shaw, dwelt on that ophidian personality. When the elevator arrived he was glad to recognize the familiar face of Sam.

"Yaas, sah," that youth affably explained, with a radiant exhibition of teeth, "it's Henry's night off, so I has to be on."

They were alone in the car. Laurie, lighting a cigarette, asked a casual question.

"There's a plump person in blue serge who hangs around here a good deal," he remarked, indifferently. "Does he live in the building?"

"The one wid eyes what sticks out?"

"That's the one."

Sam's jaw set.

"No, sah, dat party don't live yere. An' ef he don't stop hangin' 'round yere, somethin's gwine t' happen to dat man," he robustly asserted.

"What's he after?"

"I dunno. I only seen him twicet. Last time he was sneakin' fum de top flo'. But I cert'n'y don't like dat man's looks!"

Nothing more was to be learned from Sam. Laurie thoughtfully walked out into the square. He had taken not more than a dozen steps when a voice, strange yet unpleasantly familiar, accosted him.

"Good evening, Mr. Devon," it said. Laurie turned sharply. Herbert Ransome Shaw was walking at his side, which was as it should be. It

was to meet and talk with Herbert Ransome Shaw that he had so abruptly ended his call.

"Look here," he said at once, "I want a few words with you."

"Exactly," Shaw spoke with suave affability. "It is to have a few words that I am here."

"Where can we go?"

Shaw appeared to reflect.

"Do you mind coming to my rooms?"

Laurie hesitated. "I live quite near, and my quarters, though plain, are comfortable."

Anger surged up in the young man beside him. There was something almost insulting as he uttered the harmless words, and in the reassuring yet doubtful intonation of his voice.

"Confound him!" Laurie told himself. "The hound is actually hinting that I'm afraid to go!" Aloud, he said brusquely, "All right."

"You have five minutes to spare? That's capital!"

Shaw was clearly both surprised and pleased. He strode forward with short steps, rapid yet poised, and Laurie adapted his longer stride to his companion's. He, too, was content. Now, at last, he reflected, he was through with mysteries, and was coming to a grip with something tangible.

The walk was not the brief excursion Herbert Ransome Shaw had promised. It was fifteen minutes before he stopped in front of a tall building, which looked like an out-of-date storehouse, and thrust a latchkey into a dingy door. The bolt was old and rusty. Shaw fumbled with it for half a minute before it yielded. Then it grudgingly slipped back, and Laurie followed his guide into a dark hall, which was cold and damp.

"They don't heat this building," the voice of Shaw came out of the darkness. He had closed the door and was standing by Laurie's side, fumbling in his pocket for something which proved to be a matchbox. "They don't light it, either," he explained, unnecessarily, as the blaze of his match made a momentary break in the gloom. "But it's quite comfortable in my room."

He added reassuringly. "I have an open fire there."

As he spoke he led the way down the long hall with his noiseless, gliding steps. Laurie, following close behind him, reflected that the place was exactly the sort the ophidian Shaw would choose for a lair, a long, black hole, ending in—what?

The match had gone out and he could see nothing. He kept close to his guide. He almost expected to hear the creature's scales rattle as it slid

along. But snakes like warmth, and this place—Laurie shivered in the chill and dampness of it. The next instant Shaw pushed open a door and, standing back, waved his guest into a lighted room.

On first inspection it was a wholly reassuring room, originally intended for an office and now turned into a combination of office and living apartment. A big reading lamp with an amber shade, standing on a flat writing desk, made a pleasant point of illumination. Real logs, large and well seasoned, burned with an agreeable crackle in the old-fashioned fireplace. Before this stood two easy chairs, comfortably shabby; and at the arm of one of them a small table held a decanter, glasses, a siphon and a box of cigars.

As he took in these familiar details, Devon's features unconsciously relaxed. He was very young, and rather cold, and the quick reaction from the emotions he had experienced in the outer hall was a relief. Also, Shaw's manner was as reassuring as his homely room. He dropped the visitor's coat and hat on a worn leather couch, which seemingly served him as a bed, and waved a hospitable hand toward an easy chair. Simultaneously he casually indicated a figure bending over a table on the opposite side of the room.

"My secretary," he murmured. The figure at the table rose and bowed, then sat down again and continued its apparent occupation of sorting squares of paper into a long, narrow box.

Laurie mentally classified the "secretary" as a big but meek blond person, who changed his collars and cuffs every Wednesday and Sunday, and took a long walk in the country on Sunday afternoons.

However, the fellow had pursuing eyes. Evidently his work did not need his whole attention, for his pale blue eyes kept returning to the guest. Once Laurie met them straight, and coolly stared them down. After this they pursued him more stealthily. He soon forgot them and their owner.

Despite Shaw's hospitable gestures, Laurie was still standing. He had chosen a place by the mantel, with one elbow resting upon it; and from this point of vantage his black eyes slowly swept the room, taking in now all its details—a typewriter, a letter file, a waste-paper basket that needed emptying, a man's worn bedroom slipper coyly projecting from under the leather couch, a litter of newspapers.

It was all so reassuringly ordinary that he grinned to himself. Whatever hold this little worm had on Doris—Shaw had even ceased to be a snake at this point in Laurie's reflections—would be loosed after tonight; and then she could forget the episode that had troubled her, whatever it was.

At precisely this point in his meditations Laurie's eyes, having completed a tour of the room and returned to the fireplace, made two discoveries. The first was that the room had no windows. The second, and startling one, was that it contained Doris's photograph. The photograph stood on the mantel, in a heavy silver frame. It was a large print and a good one. The girl's eyes looked straight into his. Her wonderful upper lip was curved in the half-smile that was so familiar and so baffling.

"Well," the smile asked, "what do you think of it all, now that you are here? Still a bit confusing, isn't it? For you didn't expect to find me here, seemingly so much at home; did you?"

In the instant when his eyes had found the photograph Laurie had been about to light the inevitable cigarette. The discovery arrested his hand and held for an instant, motionless. Then, with fingers that trembled, he completed the interrupted action, threw the match into the fire, and with blind eyes stared down into the flames.

In that instant he dared not look at Shaw. He was shaken by an emotion that left him breathless and almost trembling. What was Doris's photograph doing in this man's room? In

the momentary amazement and fury that overwhelmed him at the discovery he told himself that it would not have been much worse to find her real presence here.

All this had taken but a moment. Shaw, hospitably busy with his decanter and siphon, had used the interval to fill two glasses, and was now offering one to his guest.

"No, thanks," Laurie spoke with abrupt decision.

"No?" Shaw looked pained. Then he smiled a wide smile, and Laurie, seeing it and the man's pointed teeth, mentally changed him again from the worm to the serpent. He understood Shaw's mental process. The fellow thought he was afraid to drink the mixture. But what did it matter what the fellow thought?

"Perhaps, then, you will have a cigar and sit down comfortably for our chat?"

Shaw himself set the example by dropping into one of the easy chairs and lighting a perfecto. His smooth brown head rested in what seemed an accustomed hollow of the chair back. His wide, thin lips were pursed in sardonic enjoyment of his cigar. He stretched himself in the warmth of the fire, sleek, torpid and loathsome.

"Mr. Shaw."

"E-s."

Still standing, with his elbow braced against the mantel, the visitor tossed his cigarette into the fire and looked down into his host's projecting eyes. It appeared that Shaw roused himself with difficulty from the gorged comfort of the moment. There was a perceptible interval before he gave his guest his whole attention. Then he straightened in his chair, and the projecting eyes took on their velleled but watchful look.

"Yes," he repeated, more briskly.

In the brief interval Laurie had planned his little campaign. He would address this creature as man to man; for perhaps, after all, there was more of the man in him than he revealed.

"I am going to ask you to be frank with me."

"Yes?" Shaw let it go at that.

"When we met on the street it appeared that you were as anxious as I am for this interview. Will you tell me at once why you brought me here, and what you wish to say?"

"Willingly." Shaw flicked the ash off his cigar, and kept his eyes on its lighted end as he went on: "I brought you here because I want you out of the way."

"Why?"

"Because, my temperamental young friend, you are a nuisance. You are interfering with my plans. I can't be bothered with you."

The sudden spark that in the old days would have warned Devon's friends of an impending outburst appeared now in his black eyes, but he kept his temper.

"Would you mind confiding these plans to me?" he suggested. "They would interest me, profoundly."

Shaw shook his brown head.

"Oh, I couldn't do that," he said, with an indulgent smile. "But I have a proposition to make to you. Perhaps you will listen to it, instead."

"I'll listen to it," Laurie promised.

"It is short and to the point. Give me your word that you will stop meddling in Miss Mayo's affairs, which are also my affairs," he added parenthetically, "and that you will never make an effort to see her again. As soon as you have given me this promise I will escort you to the front door and bid you an eternal farewell, with great pleasure."

"I'm looking forward to that pleasure, myself," confessed the visitor. "But before we throw ourselves into the delights of it, suppose you outline the other side of your proposition. I suppose it has another side."

Shaw frowned at his cigar.

"It doesn't sound pretty," he confessed, with regret.

"I'll judge of that. Let's have it."

"Well"—Shaw sighed, dropped the cigar into the tray at his elbow and sat up to face the young man with an entire change of manner—"the rest of it," he said calmly, "is this. Unless you make that promise we can't have the farewell scene we are both looking forward to so eagerly."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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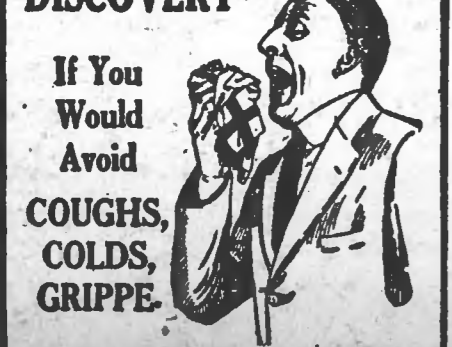
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