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The DARK MIRROR

By **LOUIS JOSEPH VANCE**

Author of "The False Faces," "The Lone Wolf," Etc.

Illustrated by **IRWIN MYERS**

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VI. RESCUED.

The reminiscent feeling was now more than ever strong, more insistent. The old saw failed: for once history was retelling a familiar chapter. All that she was apprehending, emotionally or through sensory perception, was mere repetition—all this she had known before.

Precisely as now had Mario carried her down the stairs of the burning tenement. Once more Mario lifted her into a waiting motor-car, shut the door and, as the driver jockeyed a way through the mob, gathered her tenderly into his arms.

Or was it Leonora to whom these things had one time happened and now was happening again?

Was this too a dream? Without one regret she resigned herself to the dominion of dream; and ability to discriminate between illusion and actuality lapsed into unalamented abeyance. So with sense of personal-



"Dear Heart of Mine," He Murred—"Dear Wife."

ity; there was confusion, but it was of no consequence; whether Leonora or Priscilla, she was safe with her beloved, and at rest.

Streets mean and grim dissolved as by magic into a jeweled perspective of Fifth avenue, bare and still. Hours later (or perhaps years—or minutes) the car was roaring up a forest road like a tunnel, roofed and walled with leaves whose silhouettes in the swinging headlight glare had the look of patterns cut from cardboard and painted an earthly green. . . . Then in the ghostly crepuscle of early dawn their way wound through wilderness hills that reared desolate heads to a wan, cold sky. . . . And the world was aflame with the red blaze of sunrise when she was lifted up, borne across a veranda, through a living room to a bedchamber, and there put down upon a bed.

Mario, standing over her, had a face worn and gray with weariness. Near by a maid waited, a comely creature of middle age whose countenance of kindly cast was blurred with the stupidity of slumbers untimely broken.

The man instructed this one in a flat, dull voice: "You will undress madame, please, and put her to bed. She will sleep late, I think; she has had a terrible adventure and is quite worn out; but should she awaken before I do, tell Hamanaka to call me instantly."

He knelt and pressed his lips to Priscilla's, to her forehead, her leaden eyelids, her languid hands.

"Dear heart of mine," he murmured, "dear wife . . ."

He rose. Like one walking in sleep he left the room.

CHAPTER TEN

The Day of Reckoning.

I. THE BUNGALOW.

On entering the living room she heard a clock strike. Immediately she paused, counting.

Eight chimes died singing in the scented evening hush; but she did not stir, her pose remained that of one arrested sharply in some act of charming stealth, so delicately poised in apprehensiveness she seemed scarcely to touch the floor. The room was quiet, dim with shadows, but for herself unattended.

A slight sound drew her attention. She discovered a dining room beyond the living room. Soft-footed, a Japanese boy in white linen appeared, carrying two candelabra of three branches each, and vanished after placing them upon the round dining table, where their rich light fell softly on lustrous napery, burnished silver, an iridescent bowl of cut glass filled with burning roses.

She remarked that there were places set for two.

Her regard reverted to the living room. She thought it delightful in every detail of its unpretentious luxury. Riches alone could never have created it. The wood fire ready laid in the fieldstone fireplace would presently be grateful; already there was a hint of chill in the aromatic, rare air of the hills.

She moved aimlessly to the middle of the room and paused again. A long breath sighed on her lips. As she turned uneasily toward the veranda a duplication of the gesture made her aware of a mirror on the wall opposite. She inspected herself gravely.

She had waked up without a shadow of doubt upon her understanding; she recalled without a break every link in the chain of events which had brought her to this place; she was acutely conscious of her anomalous position in this household, profoundly disturbed. . . .

A remote droning noise crept into the stillness of the evening so gradually that she noted it without any astonishment; but when, gaining in volume, it became recognizable as the sustained growl of a motorcar rapidly climbing the mountain road, she began to tremble.

The car swept swiftly across the far side of the clearing, swung into the drive that led to the garage, and disappeared. The throbbing of its motor was stilled. Impatient footsteps sounded on the gravel walk.

Her body was vibrating now like a reed. Almost the impulse was more strong than her will, to fly back to her bedchamber, lock herself in, refuse to see or speak to him. . . .

How could she face him and tell him the truth? How break his heart? And not his alone. . . .

Running up the steps to the veranda he saw her waiting in the shadows and cried out to her in the name of Leonora. She could not reply. Mental rehearsal of what her attitude at this meeting should be proved valueless. She had meant to guard against his arms with a respect, an authority, which must command respect and win her time enough to tell him; she was captive and powerless before she could lift a hand or articulate one syllable of protest. The passion of his kisses, the murmuring of his voice were overpowering. The quickened tumult of her pulses was like the storming of a strong surf. She loved him. . . .

Stunned, breathless, quivering, humiliated, she found that she had somehow contrived to put him from her. The pained perplexity in his gaze cut like a knife. She turned aside, that she might not see. . . .

"Forgive me," he begged. "I have been inconsiderate, thoughtless, in the joy of having you restored to me! Forgive—"

"There is nothing to forgive," she interrupted. "You've done nothing that wasn't right and natural. Only . . . Oh! How can I make you understand?"

He gave a helpless gesture. "Tell me what you wish me to understand. I will try. I love you so. . . ."

Touched, she sought to smile kindly through her tears. "Give me a moment," she pleaded tremulous hands busy with the disarray of her hair—"give me a little time, Mario—"

The mellow booming of a tubular gong sounded. Mario turned impatiently. Bowing and smiling, the Japanese boy stood in the entrance to the dining room.

"Dinner is served."

By a resolute effort she succeeded in composing face and manner. Mario maintained an inquiring attitude, deferential, puzzled, hurt. Somehow she mustered a smile that only mystified him the more.

"Do something for me, Mario. . . ."

"You know you need but ask."

"Let us have dinner. I think—I'm sure I'm hungry. And let us not talk during dinner; let's pretend nothing has happened. Afterward, I promise you. . . ."

"But it shall be as you wish—of course!"

II. THE IMPOSSIBLE.

She thought: never was there a meal more difficult, consumed under stranger circumstances in an atmosphere of greater constraint, never had two people broken bread together having more to say to each other and leaving more unsaid.

Opposite her, Mario barely tasted the dishes set before him. The careworn eyes in that dark, asseptic face watched her constantly if covertly. If she looked up from her plate, he dissembled studiously, his smile flashed eagerly. She was none the less conscious of his anxious expression when she was not looking—aware and distressed.

"You slept well?" he inquired.

She smiled: "Famously!"

"I am glad. You show the benefit. I think you are even more beautiful than you were, more pale, perhaps, but—how does one say it?—spirituelle. But it may be I am not a fair judge; tonight I am so happy, I see all things couleur de rose."

His lean brown hand stole across the cloth to cover hers for a moment. "And you—are you not glad, dear, to be home with me once more?"

She said, with difficulty, in a low voice, looking down at her plate: "I am glad to be with you, Mario."

It was true: in spite of everything, she was strangely glad. But it was wrong of her to say so. . . .

"I myself slept till noon," he volunteered. "Then I waited and waited for you to wake up, but you were sleeping like a child, you never stirred; one had not the heart to disturb you. Then, when it got so late, and I could no longer put off going down into the valley, I gave Martha instructions not to leave your bedside till I returned or you awakened."

She wondered: "Why?"

"I was afraid, I dared not leave anything to chance. One could not foretell in what condition you would wake up. If anything had happened. . . . I think another disappearance would have driven me insane!"

She avoided his eyes, and asked, rather mechanically, more to say something than out of desire to know: "Why did you have to go down into the valley?"

"To telegraph New York and call off the detectives I had employed to look for you. Also to tell the villagers you were safely found, and thank them. They were most kind, those good people; fully half a hundred of them stayed up all night with me, while we searched the woods; and though many had not had a wink of sleep, they were still searching yesterday afternoon when I despaired and determined to seek you in New York."

Thus reminded of the sad futility of that search, she was too deeply disturbed to wonder why he could not have telephoned to the village. . . .

The Japanese served their coffee in the living room. It was now quite dark, and the air though sweet was keen. The fire was burning but the windows and door were not closed; and the faintly acrid smell of wood smoke blended pleasantly with the pungent perfume of the pines.

Mario placed an easy chair for Priscilla, made it easier with cushions for her back and head, offered her cigarettes—and showed surprise when she refused them—lighted one for himself and threw it away half smoked, and knelt down beside her chair, resting his elbows on its arm and capturing one of her hands.

She tried to steel herself against the weakness of the flesh, the protests of her affections, the enervation of her sympathies, reminding herself she must be cruel to be kind. But it was terribly hard to hurt him as she must. It wasn't as if she didn't care. . . .

The mere contact of his hand thrilled her heart to a faster tempo, quickening breath and pulses, affected all her being with tremors of fear and gladness, made her infirm and weak of purpose. She had for him only a pathetic apology for a smile, a forlorn little shake of her head.

A deeper concern shadowed his face. He asked tenderly: "What is it, dear? You must tell me. . . ."

"It's going to be so hard," she said reluctantly, "to say what I must. I can't think how to begin, except in the bluntest way."

"Do not be afraid. Tell me frankly how I have failed you, in what respect I have fallen short—"

"But you haven't!"

"Then what it was I did to make you run away from me."

"I'm sure you could have done nothing—"

"Still, you ran away!"

"No—I didn't."

He remonstrated sharply: "Leonora!"

"I'm not," she declared desperately—"I'm not Leonora."

"What?"

"I am not your wife, Mario."

"One moment. . . ." Clouded with doubt, his eyes challenged the candor of hers, but found it flawless. At a loss—"What are you saying?" he muttered.

"The truth," she affirmed. "Oh, I'm sorry, Mario, so sorry—"

"But I don't understand. . . ."

She sat up, closing his hand within her own.

"I'm so sorry," she iterated—"but I must tell you, I can't avoid telling you: Leonora is dead."

He disengaged his hand and stood up sharply.

"Leonora!"

"Is dead. She was killed day before yesterday—"

"Are you out of your mind? Or am I?"

"Please listen—don't make it any harder than it is. Carnehan murdered Leonora while you were away, in town. You see, he wasn't killed in the fire, after all—he's alive. The identification of the body as his was a mistake—or a ruse to further his escape. I saw him last night. He was in that place—"

"I know Carnehan is not dead. But what is this nonsense you are trying to tell me?"

He repeated: "He killed Leonora. He met her—"

The man gave a gesture of exasperation.

"But one of us is mad!"

"No, Mario," she said gently—"neither of us—"

"But I see you—with my own eyes"

I see you sitting there, telling me this atrocious thing, that you are dead!"

"Not I, but Leonora—"

"But you are Leonora!"

"I tried, to begin with, to tell you I wasn't."

"But I see you—I tell you, I see you—"

"It's true, I believe, I look like Leonora—"

"Look like her." He laughed shortly. "You are her!"

"But I am not," she persisted patiently. "Please, Mario, please listen to me before you question my sanity."

He was briefly silent, in a dazed stare, then made a sign of impatient deference to her wish. "Go on," he bade her thickly.

With what calm she could, but with resolution, she sought to win credulity from him by dint of repetition: "Leonora is dead. While you were away, day before yesterday, Carnehan found her here and killed her."

"How could that be, and the servants not know?"

"I only tell you what I know. I don't imagine Carnehan came to the house, I think he must have waylaid her, or met her by some accident, in the woods. I think Leonora was restless and lonely, unhappy without you, and wandered away during the afternoon, perhaps walked down the road toward evening, to meet you. If you remember, you promised to be home before dinner. And that gave Carnehan his opportunity for revenge. He trapped her and killed her—I don't know how—threw her body into a lake—"

"Enough!" Mario silenced her savagely. "It is not your sanity I question, but your good faith. How can you lie to me so abominably?"

"Ah, Mario!" she uttered sadly—"if I could only make you believe!"

"But why should you wish to? My God! what have I done, how injured you; that you should wish to break my heart!"

"I would rather mine broke, if it would save you this suffering."

He rounded on her in a fury which subsided as he perceived anew the unimpeachable honesty of her countenance.

"Your voice is sincere," he protested in amazement, "your look is kind. . . . But how can I accept the testimony of my senses when I hear you lie? You do not love me."

She was mute in fear lest she betray herself if she attempted to answer that.

"You no longer love me," he insisted, nodding morosely. "You thought you did for a time, no doubt; but it was not so, you had deceived yourself, you wearied of my love. . . . Then, at the first opportunity, you ran away from me, ran back to lose yourself from me in that life from which—in my vanity, I thought—my love had saved you."

Melancholy yielded to a surge of indignation. "And when I find you there, in that vile den, in peril of your life, and rescue you and bring you back, you thank me by making up this pre-

posterous tale, with your own tongue you tell me to my face you are dead, you attempt to deny the fact of your own existence! What am I to believe, then? That you are a vision, a creature of my imagination, a ghost? Ah, have done! A child would not attempt a deception so transparent."

"Oh, I am sorry, so sorry, Mario!"

The artlessness of that reiterated cry brought him back.

"If that is so, if you wish me to believe you are sorry—then let us have an end of this madness; admit you are my wife."

She could only shake her head. . . .

He brooded with a fixed and sullen gaze.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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Strolling around the exhibit room of the Canadian government office in St. Paul, studying the grain, and picking up an odd piece or two of literature describing farming and its results in Western Canada, a dapper, well-built, strapping six-footer said to the manager, "I've been having a grand whirl of living for the past few years. I used to work on my uncle's farm in Iowa. I heard of the big fat pay envelopes that the city chaps were getting every week. I went to the city, and I began getting them, too. I had all the excitement they would bring—theaters, dinners, swell clothes and taxis. I surely saw a lot of that life that in days gone by I had anxiously gazed upon and secretly wanted to try."

"But I'm driven to earth now. I'm still working, but the pay envelope is thinner. Not working steadily, you know, and I sort of miss those silk-shirt times. I went to Western Canada once, and I think I'll make another trip."

"I was up there five years ago. I want money, and lots of it; I want to be my own boss, but I haven't much coin to start with. I want to get into that class that don't have to worry about a 'buck' or so. I know fellows out there in Canada who went there, a few years ago, got a quarter section—some homesteaded and some bought on easy payments—and they are well off today. A number of the boys from my own state paid for their lands from a single crop. I may not be as successful as they were, but I want to try."

He wanted to talk, and the manager was a good listener. He continued: "I want to have my own home, and raise my own cattle; I want hogs and poultry, and milk and eggs to sell. Can I get a market?"

He was assured that he could, and that he could get a decent-sized crop to thrash every fall.

"You know," he said, "if the farmers on five-hundred-dollar-an-acre land can make money, my reasoning leads me to believe that I can grow as many dollars an acre from that cheaper land in Western Canada."

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