

Mirror, Mirror

by Robert Mirnik

(from CRYSTAL CAVERN TWELVE)

Lightning sheared through the hissing blackness of the night sky, and for an instant, lit up the storm-driven countryside. It showed, in that flickering second, a shrub-lined driveway leading from the main road to a gaunt old house, that stood like a brooding sentinel over the surrounding hills and coppices.

A young Catherine Chandler drove down the pebbled drive past two weathered stone pillars, pondering how much one can observe in the fractional instant of a lightning flash - an entire landscape sometimes, every detail etched on your memory, to be seen and studied in your mind long afterwards. The last time she had visited Mrs. Sharp's house, in fine weather, it had presented the fanciful picture of a giant's castle, wrestled from a storybook, setting and transplanted to modern times.

The heavy shower turned into a torrential downpour as she parked beside the front steps. Pulling her coat over her head, Catherine dashed up the steps to the shelter of the portico above the double door and pounded the big brass knocker.

The door was opened by a stout woman, large, not in height but in width. She had a shaggy hat of white hair, and long time lines arguing between scowls and smiles etched into her roundish face.

"Hello Cathy. Please, come in. It's dreadful out here."

Mrs. Sharp ushered Catherine through a high-ceilinged foyer where even footfalls were hushed. Everything was old, from the antique light brackets that cast a dull glow on the oak-panelled walls, to the gilt-framed portraits that adorned them. The gallery of pictured faces became real faces in the uncertain light, each surveying the dripping newcomer with an air of disapproval. As Catherine was ushered through an arched doorway, she looked back and had the uncanny feeling that she had caught a parting glance from the last portrait in the line.

Catherine followed Mrs. Sharp through the shadowy rooms of the mansion, trying to ignore the sensation that there was motion all about her - motion on every side, as if the old house pulsed with a secret life of its own. They entered the library, where two walls were lined solidly with books. Shadows leapt and danced in strange patterns cast by the crackling, spitting fire in the open grate to one side of the vast room. Overhead, a tarnished brass and crystal chandelier merged its token illumination with that of the fire. Deep, velvet-covered windows held several statues. One statue, carved from stone, was a representation of Anubis, Egypt's jackel-headed God of embalming.

In the corner next to the statues was an oval mirror in a molded, gilt frame. It reached almost from the floor to the ceiling, and much of the room was reflected in its shining glass. Catherine's eyebrows puckered into a question.

"The mirror wasn't here before," she remarked.

"I only bought it last week, from an antique dealer," replied Mrs. Sharp. "It's supposed to have belonged to Tezcatlipoca, the Aztec God of night and all material things. He carried a smaller magic mirror that gave off smoke and killed enemies, and so he was called *God of Smoking Mirror*. This larger mirror can give those who are deemed worthy a glimpse of their future."

"You don't really believe all that?" Catherine inquired incredulously.

"Well to quote Shakespeare; '*There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of*'

in your philosophy'.

"Well, here's the Aztec book I borrowed from the Dean's library," proffered Catherine. She handed Mrs. Sharp a tome of such antiquity that the leather that bound it was cracked and musty. "It is a very interesting culture."

"Thank you, my dear. I do appreciate you dropping it off to me on your way home from law school. As far as I'm concerned, all books are divisible into two classes - the books of the hour and the books of the time. I prefer the latter."

"I couldn't agree more," concurred Catherine. "Reading those books is like having a conversation with people of past centuries."

"I'll make some tea, and then we'll chat some more. Please, make yourself comfortable. I won't be long."

When Mrs. Sharp left the room Catherine's attention again focused on the mirror. She found herself drawn like iron to its silent magnet. With her hands clasped at the small of her back, Catherine stared at herself in its polished depths. The projecting glass, with a bevelled edge, had the magnificent reflecting power that only seemed to be found in a very old mirror.

Catherine pushed a stray strand of hair back from her forehead. Surrounded by books, she wistfully recalled sitting under her favourite tree as a little girl, clutching a book as though it was Excalibur. The trunk soared upwards until it vanished into a canopy of shaggy green leave, which left the ground in an intimate greenish twilight. In front of her was a pond, the water clear and clean, with only a few patches of fallen leaves and floating twigs dotting its shimmering emerald surface.

The glade in which she had sat was ringed with vividly coloured flowers that nodded their heads drowsily in the soft, warm breeze. The breeze also stroked the surface of the pond, making it ripple and gleam in the sunlight. The only sound had been the buzz and whine of insects, and the occasional squawking of birds flying overhead ...

Suddenly, thunder exploded across the storm front with a roar like the rending of heaven, breaking her reverie. It seemed to shake the old mansion to its foundations. The lights flickered, and then went off, leaving only the fire's subdued illumination. Catherine froze in fascinated shock, detachedly aware that her heart was thumping. There, in the mirror appeared a startling apparition.

It looked like some kind of animal. A lion? No, it was a ... man. No, it was both - yet neither. Incongruous as this was, it accounted for something regal in his appearance. His eyes held her, encompassed her, drew her. He seemed to look through her into her mind, into her heart, into that place that held the thing that made her what she was. Some subliminal part of her mind felt a butterfly's brush, the fluttering beginnings of something.

Catherine heard Mrs. Sharp's disembodied voice. "Don't be alarmed, the power will be back on in a moment. This often happens during storms."

The lights suddenly came on. Catherine whirled around and saw Mrs. Sharp standing in the doorway. She was holding a statue of a man with a lion's head. Realization then hit her, and she let loose a tortured sigh of relief. It was the statue's reflection that she saw in the mirror.

"Seeing that statue in the mirror gave me quite a fright," Catherine admitted sheepishly.

"This is a statue of the somewhat obscure leonine God, Maahes, whose name has been translated to mean *True before her*," explained Mrs. Sharp. "The Greeks pronounced his name as either Mihos or Miysis. Maahes, also called *Lord of Massacre*, was invoked to protect the innocent and to punish the transgressors of Ma'al, an Egyptian goddess who personified the concepts of truth, cosmic order and justice. Maahes was represented as either a lion or a man with a lion's head and a knife," she smiled wryly as she held up the statue. "I guess you were right about the mirror. After all, there's no way that you will ever meet anyone like that."

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