

A Quicksilver Cassandra

By John Kendrick Bangs

It was altogether queer, and Jingleberry to this day does not entirely understand it. He had examined his heart as carefully as he knew how, and had arrived at the entirely reasonable conclusion that he was in love. He had every symptom of that malady. When Miss Marian Chapman was within range of his vision there was room for no one else there. He suffered from that peculiar optical condition which enabled him to see but one thing at a time when she was present, and she was that one thing, which was probably the reason why in his mind's eye she was the only woman in the world, for Marian was ever present before Jingleberry's mental optic. He had also examined as thoroughly as he could in hypothesis the heart of this "only woman," and he had—or thought he had, which amounts to the same thing—reason to believe that she reciprocated his affection. She certainly seemed glad always when he was about; she called him by his first name, and sometimes quarrelled with him as she quarrelled with no one else, and if that wasn't a sign of love in woman, then Jingleberry had studied the sex all his years—and they were thirty-two—for nothing. In short, Marian behaved so like a sister to him that Jingleberry, knowing how dreams and women go by contraries, was absolutely sure that a sister was just the reverse from that relationship which in her heart of hearts she was willing to assume towards him, and he was happy in consequence. Believing this, it was not at all strange that he should make up his mind to propose marriage to her, though, like many other men, he was somewhat chicken-hearted in coming to the point. Four times had he called upon Marian for the sole purpose of asking her to become his wife, and four times had he led up to the point and then talked about something else. What quality it is in man that makes a coward of him in the presence of one he considers his dearest friend is not within the province of this narrative to determine, but Jingleberry had it in its most virulent form. He had often got so far along in his proposal as "Marian—er—will you—will you—," and there he had as often stopped, contenting himself with such common-place conclusions as "go to the matinee with me to-morrow?" or "ask your father for me if he thinks the stock market is likely to strengthen soon?" and other amazing substitutes for the words he so ardently desired, yet feared, to utter. But this afternoon—the one upon which the extraordinary events about to be narrated took place—Jingleberry had called resolved not to be balked in his determination to learn his fate. He had come to propose, and propose he would, *ruat cælum*. His confidence in a successful termination to his suit had been reinforced that very morning by the receipt of a note from Miss Chapman asking him to dine with her parents and herself that evening, and to accompany them after dinner to the opera. Surely that meant a great deal, and Jingleberry conceived that the time was ripe for a blushing "yes" to his long-deferred question. So he was here in the Chapman parlor waiting for the young lady to come down and become the recipient of the "interesting interrogatory," as it is called in some sections of Massachusetts.

"I'll ask her the first thing," said Jingleberry, buttoning up his Prince Albert, as though to impart a possibly needed stiffening to his backbone. "She will say yes, and then I shall enjoy the dinner and the opera so much the more. Ahem! I wonder if I am pale—I feel sort of—um— There's a mirror. That will tell." Jingleberry walked to the mirror—an oval, gilt-framed mirror, such as was very much the vogue fifty years ago, for which reason alone, no doubt, it was now admitted to the gold-and-white parlor of the house of Chapman.

“Blessed things these mirrors,” said Jingleberry, gazing at the reflection of his face. “So reassuring. I’m not at all pale. Quite the contrary. I’m red as a sunset. Good omen that! The sun is setting on my bachelor days—and my scarf is crooked. Ah!”

The ejaculation was one of pleasure, for pictured in the mirror Jingleberry saw the form of Marian entering the room through the portières.

“How do you do, Marian? been admiring myself in the glass,” he said, turning to greet her. “I—er—”

Here he stopped, as well he might, for he addressed no one. Miss Chapman was nowhere to be seen.

“Dear me!” said Jingleberry, rubbing his eyes in astonishment. “How extraordinary! I surely thought I saw her—why, I did see her—that is, I saw her reflection in the gla— Ha! ha! She caught me gazing at myself there and has hidden.”

He walked to the door and drew the portière aside and looked into the hail. There was no one there. He searched every corner of the hall and of the dining-room at its end, and then returned to the parlor, but it was still empty. And then occurred the most strangely unaccountable event in his life.

As he looked about the parlor, he for the second time found himself before the mirror, but the reflection therein, though it was of himself, was of himself with his back turned to his real self, as he stood gazing amazedly into the glass; and besides this, although Jingleberry was alone in the real parlor, the reflection of the dainty room showed that there he was not so, for seated in her accustomed graceful attitude in the reflected arm-chair was nothing less than the counterfeit presentment of Marian Chapman herself.

It was a wonder Jingleberry’s eyes did not fall out of his head, he stared so. What a situation it was, to be sure, to stand there and see in the glass a scene which, as far as he could observe, had no basis in reality; and how interesting it was for Jingleberry to watch himself going through the form of chatting pleasantly there in the mirror’s depths with the woman he loved! It almost made him jealous, though, the reflected Jingleberry was so entirely independent of the real Jingleberry. The jealousy soon gave way to consternation, for, to the wondering suitor, the independent reflection was beginning to do that for which he himself had come. In other words, there was a proposal going on there in the glass, and Jingleberry enjoyed the novel sensation of seeing how he himself would look when passing through a similar ordeal. Altogether, however, it was not as pleasing as most novelties are, for there were distinct signs in the face of the mirrored Marian that the mirrored Jingleberry’s words were distasteful to her, and that the proposition he was making was not one she could entertain under any circumstances. She kept shaking her head, and the more she shook it, the more the glazed Jingleberry seemed to implore her to be his. Finally, Jingleberry saw his quicksilver counterpart fall upon his knees before Marian of the glass, and hold out his arms and hands towards her in an attitude of prayerful despair, whereupon the girl sprang to her feet, stamped her left foot furiously upon the floor, and pointed the unwelcome lover to the door.

Jingleberry was fairly staggered. What could be the meaning of so extraordinary a freak of nature? Surely it must be prophetic. Fate was kind enough to warn him in advance, no doubt; otherwise it was a trick. And why should she stoop to play so paltry a trick as that upon him? Surely fate would not be so petty. No. It was a warning. The mirror had been so affected by some supernatural agency that it divined and reflected that which was to be instead of confining itself to what Jingleberry called “simultaneity.” It led instead of following or acting coincidentally with

the reality, and it was the part of wisdom, he thought, for him to yield to its suggestion and retreat; and as he thought this, he heard a soft sweet voice behind him.

“I hope you haven’t got tired of waiting. Tom,” it said; and, turning, Jingleberry saw the unquestionably real Marian standing in the doorway.

“No,” he answered, shortly. “I—I have had a pleasant—very entertaining ten minutes; but I—I must hurry along, Marian,” he added. “I only came to tell you that I have a frightful headache, and—er—I can’t very well manage to come to dinner or go to the opera with you to-night.”

“Why, Tom,” pouted Marian, “I am awfully disappointed I had counted on you, and now my whole evening will be spoiled. Don’t you think you can rest a little while, and then come?”

“Well, I—I want to, Marian,” said Jingleberry; “but, to tell the truth, I—I really am afraid I am going to be ill; I’ve had such a strange experience this afternoon. I—”

“Tell me what it was,” suggested Marian, sympathetically; and Jingleberry did tell her what it was, he told her the whole story from beginning to end—what he had come for, how he had happened to look in the mirror, and what he saw there; and Marian listened attentively to every word he said. She laughed once or twice, and when he had done she reminded him that mirrors have a habit of reversing everything; and somehow or other Jingleberry’s headache went, and— and— well, everything went!