

A Dark Mirror

By Quiller-Couch

In the room of one of my friends hangs a mirror. It is an oblong sheet of glass, set in a frame of dark, highly varnished wood, carved in the worst taste of the Regency period, and relieved with faded gilt. Glancing at it from a distance, you would guess the thing a relic from some “genteel” drawing-room of Miss Austen’s time. But go nearer and look into the glass itself. By some malformation or mere freak of make, all the images it throws back are livid. Flood the room with sunshine; stand before this glass with youth and hot blood tingling on your cheeks; and the glass will give back neither sun nor colour; but your own face, blue and dead, and behind it a horror of inscrutable shadow.

Since I heard this mirror’s history, I have stood more than once and twice before it, and peered into this shadow. And these are the simulacra I seem to have seen there darkly.

I have seen a bleak stone parsonage, hemmed in on two sides by a grave-yard; and behind for many miles nothing but sombre moors climbing and stretching away. I have heard the winds moaning and wuthering night and morning, among the gravestones, and around the angles of the house; and crossing the threshold, I know by instinct that this mirror will stand over the mantelpiece in the bare room to the left. I know also to whom those four suppressed voices will belong that greet me while yet my hand is on the latch. Four children are within—three girls and a boy—and they are disputing over a box of wooden soldiers. The eldest girl, a plain child with reddish-brown eyes, and the most wonderfully small hands, snatches up one of the wooden soldiers, crying, “This is the Duke of Wellington! This shall be the Duke!” and her soldier is the gayest of all, and the tallest, and the most perfect in every part. The second girl makes her choice, and they call him “Gravey” because of the solemnity of his painted features. And then all laugh at the youngest girl, for she has chosen a queer little warrior, much like herself; but she smiles at their laughter, and smiles again when they christen him “Waiting Boy.” Lastly the boy chooses. He is handsomer than his sisters, and is their hope and pride; and has a massive brow and a mouth well formed though a trifle loose. His soldier shall be called Bonaparte.

Though the door is closed between us, I can see these motherless children under this same blue mirror—the glass that had helped to pale the blood on their mother’s face after she left the warm Cornish sea that was her home, and came to settle and die in this bleak exile. Some of her books are in the little bookcase here. They were sent round from the West by sea, and met with shipwreck. For the most part they are Methodist Magazines—for, like most Cornish folk, her parents were followers of Wesley—and the stains of the salt water are still on their pages.

I know also that the father will be sitting in the room to my right—sitting at his solitary meal, for his digestion is queer, and he prefers to dine alone: a strange, small, purblind man, full of sorrow and strong will. He is a clergyman, but carries a revolver always in his pocket by day, and by night sleeps with it under his pillow. He has done so ever since some one told him that the moors above were unsafe for a person with his opinions.

All this the glass shows me, and more. I see the children growing up. I see the girls droop and pine in this dreary parsonage, where the winds nip, and the miasma from the churchyard chokes them. I see the handsome promising boy going to the devil—slowly at first, then by strides. As their hope fades from his sisters’ faces, he drinks and takes to opium-eating—and worse. He comes home from a short absence, wrecked in body and soul. After this there is no rest in the

house. He sleeps in the room with that small, persistent father of his, and often there are sounds of horrible strugglings within it. And the girls lie awake, sick with fear, listening, till their ears grow heavy and dull, for the report of their father's pistol. At morning, the drunkard will stagger out, and look perhaps into this glass, that gives him back more than all his despair. "The poor old man and I have had a terrible night of it," he stammers; "he does his best—the poor old man! but it's all over with me."

I see him go headlong at last and meet his end in the room above after twenty minutes' struggle, with a curious desire at the last to play the man and face his death standing. I see the second sister fight with a swiftly wasting disease; and, because she is a solitary Titanic spirit, refuse all help and solace. She gets up one morning, insists on dressing herself, and dies; and the youngest sister follows her but more slowly and tranquilly, as beseems her gentler nature.

Two only are left now—the queer father and the eldest of the four children, the reddish-eyed girl with the small hands, the girl who "never talked hopefully." Fame has come to her and to her dead sisters. For looking from childhood into this livid glass that reflected their world, they have peopled it with strange spirits. Men and women in the real world recognise the awful power of these spirits, without understanding them, not having been brought up themselves in front of this mirror. But the survivor knows the mirror too well.

"Mademoiselle, vous êtes triste."

"Monsieur, j'en ai bien le droit."

With a last look I see into the small, commonplace church that lies just below the parsonage: and on a tablet by the altar I read a list of many names. . . .

And the last is that of Charlotte Brontë.