

First Place (Joint) Deirdre Parkes

“The Mirror at Harwood Hall”

A fire crackled in the drawing room, where guests had gathered for Christmas Eve, all rosy from mulled wine and good cheer. Only one figure sat apart: Eleanor Harwood, the Hall's mistress, upright and slender as a candle flame, her dark eyes reflecting the firelight and something beyond it.

‘Tell us a ghost story, Aunt!’ cried her nephew, Henry. Eleanor smiled faintly.

‘A ghost story? My dear boy, I should hardly know where to begin. This house has ghosts enough already.’

They laughed, thinking it a joke. Yet her voice had a peculiar stillness. She rose, moving to a corner where an object stood swathed in a heavy velvet cover.

‘Perhaps,’ she murmured, ‘I might tell you a true story.’

And with a slow, deliberate motion, she drew back the cloth. A tall mirror stood there, framed in black walnut.

‘Good heavens, I had forgotten that thing was here,’ said Colonel Harwood, her brother. ‘I thought you had it locked away after...’

‘After my husband’s death,’ Eleanor finished quietly. ‘Yes. But tonight, it seemed... appropriate.’

A cool breeze crept through the room, though the doors were shut. One of the guests stirred the fire uneasily.

‘It was brought from Venice,’ she went on, ‘by my late husband, Arthur. ‘A mirror that shows not what is, but what may be’ they told him. Arthur laughed, of course. He had no patience with superstition. Yet he insisted it hang here, opposite the hearth, so that one might see both flame and reflection together.’

She paused, her hand resting on the frame.

‘On Christmas Eve five years ago, Arthur stood just here, admiring it. We had quarrelled that morning. I came in to make amends and found him transfixed, staring into the glass.

‘Eleanor,’ he said, without turning, ‘come and look. Do you see what I see?’

'I joined him, and there, in the mirror, I saw a dreadful thing. The drawing room lay as now, but the fire was out, the curtains drawn, and a man lay upon the rug. His face was turned away, but his blood was staining the hearth.'

A shiver ran through the company. Outside, the wind sighed along the eaves. 'Arthur laughed, though his face was pale. "A trick of the light!" he said. Yet that very night, when the storm rose, he went to fetch more logs from the yard. The servant later found him lying there dead, struck by a brick that the storm had loosened. When they carried him in... he lay exactly as we had seen in the glass.'

Eleanor's voice faltered, but she went on.

'Since then, I have kept the mirror covered. But lately,' she hesitated, 'I have dreamt of it uncovered, as though it wished to be looked into again.'

A silence followed, heavy as snowfall. Then young Henry, emboldened by wine and curiosity, leapt up.

'Let me see if it shows anything!'

Eleanor started forward.

'No, Henry'

But the boy had already placed himself before the mirror. The firelight gilded his hair as he leaned in, grinning.

'I see nothing but myself, Aunt.'

'Step away,' she said sharply.

Yet even as she spoke, his expression changed. He looked closer, his breath fogging the glass.

'Wait... what's that?' he whispered.

In the mirror, the room still shone warm and bright, yet there was an odd distortion. The fire seemed smaller, the shadows longer. In the far corner of that reflected room, a figure stood half in shadow, its features blurred. Henry gasped.

'There's someone there. By the window!'

Colonel Harwood strode to the window, but nothing was there. He turned back, frowning.

'Nonsense. Trick of the light.'

But Eleanor's face had gone white.

'Cover it,' she whispered. 'Cover it now.'

Her brother obeyed, flinging the velvet cloth across the mirror. The room exhaled, as if a held breath had been released. Conversation resumed in nervous bursts, and soon the company sought their beds, declaring it a night for strange dreams.

Only Eleanor remained awake. She could not shake the image of that dim figure. Something about its stance, the tilt of the head, had seemed horribly familiar. She took up a candle and went down to the drawing room once more. The mirror stood veiled, mute and still. Yet behind the velvet, she thought she could hear something.

‘I will face you,’ she said aloud. ‘Show me what you mean to show.’

The glass gleamed faintly in the firelight. For a moment, she saw only her own face. Then the scene deepened. There was the drawing room again; darker now, the fire burning low. Upon the rug lay a woman in a nightgown. Eleanor gasped: it was herself. Behind her stood a man. He was shadowed, indistinct, but as he moved, she recognised him. Arthur. He raised a hand, beckoning.

‘No,’ she whispered. ‘I will not come!’

She turned to flee, but her sleeve caught on the mantel, toppling the candle that stood there. Flames leapt greedily to the sleeves of her gown. She tried to beat them out, but the mirror’s glass seemed to shimmer and pulse, and from within it came the faintest echo of laughter.

By the time the servants broke in, the fire had burnt itself out, but Eleanor lay upon the hearth, lifeless. Her reflection, some swore, lingered in the mirror long after her body was carried away.

Years later, when Harwood Hall stood empty, a housemaid told how she once crept in at dusk and lifted the cloth to dust the glass.

‘I saw them both,’ she whispered, ‘the lady and the gentleman. Standing together as if the quarrel were mended at last.’

And still, on Christmas Eve, when the snow lies thick and the fire burns low, it’s said that if you dare uncover the mirror at Harwood Hall, you may glimpse what waits behind your own reflection; not what is, but what shall be.