

Bitter Reflections

by Ty Drago

Trophies of wealth, thought Loretta Capinelli.

The butler, a thin, elderly man who looked snobbish even in gray pajamas, led her along the wide, elaborately furnished corridor. Despite the hour, the weather, and the consuming curiosity that had drawn her here, she found herself fascinated by the flagrant display of wealth evident in even this remote hallway inside this massive mansion. An oriental rug cushioned her feet. Small, decorative tables of cherrywood and mahogany accompanied oils and etchings boasting the hands of masters. The vases atop the table were each works of art, far too precious to soil with flowers. All of the doors she passed vaunted brass knobs and hinges polished to a mirror's shine."

As I said," the butler continued. "I am quite relieved to see you, Doctor. Master Lawrence's condition has become increasingly worrisome over these past few days."

"How long have you been in Mr. Benedict's employ?" Loretta asked.

"Twenty-two years," the servant replied. "Ever since the death of his parents."

She nodded. "Yes. I understand he was quite young when they died."

"Nineteen."

"A tragedy," Loretta offered.

The butler nodded. "He took control of the family business the next day, using his authority as the only child and heir of Mr. Samuel Benedict. I hired on some weeks later, after several interviews."

Loretta listened, intrigued. "It sounds as if the young Mr. Benedict was a capable man."

The butler smiled. "Oh yes. He was always very capable, very much in control. I suppose that's why I find his recent... illness... so unnerving. It's so unlike him."

The corridor ended at a set of double doors. They were made of the same heavy wood used for the other doors all along the corridor. Unlike the rest, however, these sported dull, black metalware. As the butler knocked, however, Loretta realized that she'd been mistaken. It looked as if the brass knob and hinges had not been replaced, but rather coated with thick, lusterless black paint.

A nervous voice responded to the butler's gentle knock: "Yes?"

"It's Dickerson, sir," the butler announced. "I have Dr. Capinelli here."

"Yes... yes!" the voice replied quickly, sounding deeply relieved. "Send her in... and don't forget the mirrors."

"Yes, Master Lawrence."

The butler turned toward her, his face slightly flushed with embarrassment. "Doctor, I'm afraid I must ask you to open your purse."

"Excuse me?" Loretta asked.

"I'm very sorry, but Master Lawrence instructed me that when you arrived I should... confiscate any... mirrors you have on your person." Then, after an uncomfortable swallow, he added: "Mr. Benedict suffers from a phobia concerning mirrors. Didn't he tell you about it when you called?"

"No, he didn't," Loretta muttered. She opened her purse and placed her make-up mirror in the butler's wrinkled palm.

"Thank you, Doctor. This will be returned to you when you leave." He opened the door for her with a professional flourish.

Within was a bed-chamber. A large, unmade bed occupied the back wall. To the left stood a cherrywood grandfather clock, its brass pendulum painted black and the glass over its column and face removed. Along the opposite wall, to Loretta's right, was a row of high windows, blocked off with heavy, red velvet curtains. In the near corner stood a hearth, with an inviting blaze roaring in its fireplace. Two high-back chairs faced the fire, both flanking a small table, atop which stood a wooden pitcher and modest stack of plastic cups. From the left-most chair a man stood and turned to face her.

"Mr. Benedict?" she asked.

Lawrence Benedict came forward. She recognized him, of course. How could she not? His face had appeared on hundreds of national magazines. Yet, this man bore only a superficial resemblance to the one whose visage had graced those photographs. This Lawrence Benedict was pale, his eyes, usually dark with power and strangely cold, now seemed sunken and tragic. Several days' growth of beard covered his cheeks and chin. His hands were thrust deep in the pockets of his white, monogrammed robe. He withdrew one and offered it to her. He wore a signet ring on his third finger.

"Welcome, Dr. Capinelli," he said, his voice raspy. "Please sit down. Would you care for some brandy? It's excellent and I confess I've been fairly living off of it these past few days."

She shook his hand. His grip was surprisingly weak. "Yes, please."

Benedict led Loretta to the second of the matched chairs at the hearth. She settled herself into it comfortably, watching him as he filled two cups with brandy from the pitcher. "You'll have to excuse the plasticware, Doctor," he muttered. "My usual brandy service was silver and it proved to be... reflective."

This was Lawrence Benedict? she thought, incredulous. The mastermind behind Benedict Industries, the largest weapons manufacturer in the world? Though they'd never met, she'd lived in New York too long not to have heard the stories about him. He was considered brilliant and ruthless. He ruled his empire savagely; one of the most successful and brutally opportunistic players on Wall Street. He'd come into his inheritance after the death of his parents in an auto accident, and had managed to take Benedict Sportsman, Inc., a medium-sized rifle manufacturer, and turn it into an internationally recognized conglomerate with ties into everything from small arms to nuclear weapons design.

Benedict's hands trembled as he passed her the brandy. "Thank you," she said, then adding: "When was the last time you slept, Mr. Benedict?"

He shrugged and took a long swallow. "I've lost track. I don't like to sleep."

Loretta sipped the brandy. It was excellent. "I have to tell you, Mr. Benedict. I don't appreciate the lateness of this visit. I don't make house calls, especially at this hour."

Benedict's face was expressionless. "Then why did you come?"

"Because you promised to ruin me if I didn't. And I know enough of your resources and reputation to believe you would do it. I didn't care to be ruined."

"I'm desperate, Doctor," he said sharply. "It's a condition I'm not accustomed to and one that I don't enjoy. I've checked you out. You're the best psychiatrist in your field, at least in this part of the country. I need you. So you're here."

"You might have asked me to come, rather than immediately turn to threats."

Benedict fixed her with a harsh look. For a moment, Loretta recognized the brilliant, financial predator hidden within this pale, emaciated form. "I do not 'ask' for anything Dr. Capinelli. I never have. I never will."

Loretta shrugged and sipped her brandy. She hadn't been completely honest with him when she'd said her being here was a reaction to his threats. She feared him, yes, but there was second reason for her agreement to come out to this Long Island mansion at three o'clock on a stormy night.

She'd come because his phone call had piqued her professional curiosity. She wanted to find out what could have terrified such a man; what could have driven him to call her home and demand her services in a strained, almost childlike voice. Loretta knew that tone. She'd heard it a thousand times in her fifteen-year practice. It was the voice of cold, pure panic; something to which everyone responded differently. Benedict, being a predator, reacted to his horror as a cornered animal might, lashing out in savage desperation toward any avenue of rescue.

"Very well, then," she said, slipping into her professional role. "You were rather vague on the phone. What exactly is it that's troubling you?"

Benedict looked at her, a curious expression on his face. He looked like a schoolyard bully who'd finally met his match and now found himself forced to beg for mercy. "I need you... to tell me... that I'm insane."

Loretta raised her eyebrows. "I don't understand."

Benedict nodded. "I'm sure having a... patient... who wants desperately to be told he's crazy must be one for the books. But that's my situation." He took another long swallow of brandy and met her gaze with eyes that spoke of deep and profound dread. "You see, Doctor. If I am not insane, then what has been happening to me is real. I can't have that." His voice cracked and rose. "I CAN'T HAVE THAT!"

He lowered his head, suddenly seeming small and vulnerable. Loretta leaned forward, astonished and intensely curious. "Mr. Benedict," she said gently. "I'm a psychiatrist and, as you've said, I'm rather good at what I do. I can tell you with a high degree of certainty that you are not insane. The insane rarely question their sanity. So why don't you just tell me what IS happening to you, and we'll take it from there."

Benedict drew several breaths, and then he nodded and raised his head. "I'm going to grant you a supreme privilege, Doctor," he said. "I'm going to tell you the truth... the whole truth... and nothing but the truth. That's also something I'm not accustomed to."

"But before I begin, I want to make something crystal clear to you." He turned toward her, a cold expression on his face. "What I will tell you, you will not reveal to anyone."

"Of course," Loretta said quickly. "The doctor-patient privilege..."

"Spare me your ethics!" Benedict snapped. "I have no use for them. What I'm telling you is simpler than that. If you talk, I will kill you. Is that clear?"

Loretta blinked. "Mr. Benedict..."

"IS THAT CLEAR?"

"Yes," she said.

Benedict nodded, the plastic cup shaking in his hands. He leaned back in the chair and closed his eyes. "I remember little of my youth," he said softly. "I don't really consider that my life began until I was eighteen, when I joined my father's company. Despite my age, I exhibited a... proficiency for matters of business. My talents and enthusiasm were such that after six months I took over the brunt of the day-to-day management duties, with my father rendering the final decisions. Soon after, I began to understand what a poor tradesman my father made. His... style of business was naive, incorporating a sense of fair play that, even at the age of eighteen, I recognized as tragic and dangerous to the company's future. I promised myself that, when I took over, things would change. Then, of course, a year later I did take over."

Loretta looked up. "Yes, the accident. You were nineteen."

Benedict nodded, meeting her sympathetic gaze flatly. "There was no time for grief. I had a business to run.

"Benedict Sportsman was only a small rifle factory back then. It took me ten years to build the company up into a national competitor. It was another five before we received our first defense contract. I let no one stand in my way. You do what you have to do in corporate America, Dr. Capinelli. No retreat. No compromise. That's the philosophy upon which Benedict Industries was built.

"And, until a couple of weeks ago, that philosophy had served me tirelessly. My position was secure, untouchable. My control over my company and my world was absolute."

Benedict frowned and swallowed dryly.

"Then... ten days ago, everything changed. That morning, I awoke feeling elated, having just completed the leveraged buy-out of a sporting goods chain. It was a small triumph, but its former owner had put up a tremendous fight. It had been a satisfying victory.

"Anyway, I went into my bathroom to shower. A few minutes later I stood over the sink, running a razor over my lathered face. It was part of my morning regiment, and I hardly thought about it. Just shave and rinse the blade... shave and rinse the blade. Then, while my thoughts were on the future of my new acquisition, I lowered my razor to rinse it. But when I looked up at the mirror, there was something... wrong... with my reflection.

"I was still holding the razor under the running water, but the man in the mirror had brought his up to his face. I stared at the image, astonished, but still it was several moments before I really comprehended what I saw. In the meantime, the man in the mirror cut a path down his cheek with the razor. Then, quite suddenly he stopped, and I recognized a terrible... awareness in his eyes... my eyes. My reflection was no longer simply mirroring my gaze, but

returning it!

"Well, Larry,' my reflection said. Its voice was my voice, but when it spoke, the surface of the mirror trembled slightly, as though reacting to the vibration. It used my childhood name. 'Guess I got a little ahead of you that time!'

"Aghast, I retreated back against the wall. In the mirror, my reflection gently placed his razor on the countertop and leaned closer. I stared, unable to speak. I'm not even sure I was breathing. The man in the mirror's eyes turned harsh... accusatory. And when he spoke, there was unmistakable disdain in his words.

"You know what old man Dunstreet did last night?'

"Dunstreet was the name of the man whose business I now owned; the man who'd fought my takeover bid with such veracity.

"He killed himself, Larry. He put a pistol in his mouth and pulled the trigger. There were tears in his eyes when he did it, and he was holding his daughter's picture in his hand.'

"I shook my head, refusing to believe what I saw and heard. Not that I especially cared about Dunstreet's death. No, it was the messenger of that news who terrified me. My heart was pounding fiercely.

"Dear God! I remember thinking. What is this?'

"I turned my head toward the bathroom door. It stood open not four feet away from me, but at the moment the distance looked more like a mile.

"He was a good man, Larry. A better man than you. But then, that's not so great a feat. Is it?'

"I found my tongue and my feet together. 'What are you?' I shrieked, and raced for the door. 'Leave me alone!'

"As I fled from the bathroom, my face still half-smothered with shaving cream, I heard harsh laughter. Then the man in the mirror spoke, calling after me. 'You ARE alone, Larry! Don't you know that?'

"I called for Dickerson, and he came. I told him... or tried to tell him what had happened, but I suspect it sounded more like meaningless babble than anything else. I'm not a man familiar with fear, Doctor, and I consider myself very self-reliant. But at that moment I threw my arms around Dickerson as if he were my... my father. After several minutes, I convinced him to look in the bathroom... in the mirror. Of course, he saw nothing strange."

Benedict lowered his head over his drink, and closed his eyes. Loretta watched him, fascinated, theories already racing through her mind. Don't rush it, she reminded herself. Let him tell his story... his entire story, and then draw your conclusions. After more than a minute, her host straightened in his chair, gave her a quick, defensive glance, and continued:

"I recovered quickly after that. I told Dickerson to forget it, annoyed at the look of concern I saw on his face. Then I dressed and went to the office. Even after I discovered that Dunstreet had, in fact, committed suicide, I still managed to corral my fear. I told myself it had been part of a particularly vivid dream that had confused me after I'd awakened... that Dunstreet's death was perfectly predictable, given the way he'd lost his company. At any rate, by evening the incident was all but forgotten.

"Then, two days later, it happened again.

"This time I was at my New York office, on break from a board meeting called to discuss the Dunstreet takeover. I'd gone to the men's room. My reflection was right where it should have been, doing just what it should have been doing, and once again I laughed off the strange, waking dream.

"Then as I dried my hands and prepared to leave the restroom, I saw my reflection return a smile I hadn't offered.

"Who you going to ruin today, Larry?' the mirror man said.

"I glanced around the room. I was alone. I turned back to the mirror, retreating a couple of steps. I squeezed my eyes shut, shaking my head vigorously, determined to chase away this impossible apparition. When I looked again, my reflection was leaning over 'his' sink, his nose pressed close to the surface of the glass.

"Peek-a-boo!"

"What are you?' I spat.

"My reflection grinned nastily. 'I'm you, Larry. The REAL you!"

"What... what do you want?"

"The smile faded. 'I want what's mine, Mr. Benedict.'

"I turned and fled the room, again hearing that harsh, inhuman laughter spill out of the mirror. In the hall, my back pressed against the shut restroom door, I ran a hand through my hair, horrified at the way my fingers shook. I wracked my brain for a 'rational' explanation. I could come up with only one. I was insane.

"After a couple of minutes one of the board members came around the corner looking for me. His name was Brown, and from the curious look on the clown's face I knew he'd recognized my discomfort.

"Brown,' I said sharply, stepping away from the wall, trying to make my voice as steady as possible.

"Yes, sir?"

"After the meeting, I want you to call the police. Find out the EXACT circumstances of Dunstreet's suicide. I want to know how they found him... what he was holding. I want the answers by the end of the day. You got that?"

"Brown regarded me quizzically. 'Is everything all right, Mr. Benedict?"

"YOU GOT THAT?"

"He straightened right up. 'Yes sir.'

"Good,' I muttered. And then I went back to the meeting, and pretended to listen."

Benedict poured himself another brandy, and downed it in two swallows. "Brown gave me his report. Dunstreet shot himself in the mouth while holding a picture of his daughter. I hadn't dreamt that one, Doctor. The reflection had KNOWN."

He laughed without humor. "Are you aware that some South American cultures believe that a mirror can steal a person's soul?"

"I've heard that," Loretta replied softly. "Is that what you think is happening to you?"

"I... don't know," he whispered hoarsely. "But wait... there's more."

"When I returned home, he was there again, waiting for me in the bathroom mirror. I froze the moment I saw him, staring at the image that no longer bothered to even pretend to mimic me. He was sitting on his sink, hands folded in his lap.

"You can't get rid of me, Larry. Wherever you go, I'm there.'

"What are you?' I said softly, fighting a growing sense of despair. 'You're not real!'

"Oh yes. I'm real.'

"What do you want?'

"I want what's mine, Larry. All of it!'

"No!' I snatched up the ashtray on the sink and hurled it against the glass. The mirror shattered, casting shards about the room like snowflakes. I fell back against the wall, my breath coming in fevered gasps. The voice had been silenced, and I felt triumphant. 'Nobody...' I remember saying out loud. 'Nobody gets what's mine.'

"Then I heard the echo of repetitive laughter. I glanced around the room. But the noise seemed to be coming from everywhere. Then I looked down at my feet, at the jagged shards that covered my shoes and the surrounding rug. In each, and there were hundreds, I saw images of myself; bits and pieces: an eye here, a bit of lip there. All were alert with that same unnatural independence. A thousand partial reflections, each with the impossible self-awareness of the whole.

"What I was hearing was choral laughter.

"Then there were words, spoken in unison from a hundred sources. 'Very soon, Larry...'

"I fled, screaming at the top of my lungs. I was out of the bathroom room and halfway to my chamber door, the laughter echoing in my ears, when I fainted."

Benedict placed his plastic cup on the table. His hand shook badly, and he grimaced when he looked at it. "Dickerson found me and put me to bed. When I came to, he was sweeping up the broken glass in the bathroom. 'Don't stop there,' I told him. 'I want you to pull every mirror out of this room.'

"Mirrors? sir?'

"Yes, Dickerson. No mirrors! Do you understand me?'

"Yes, Master Lawrence.'

"I nodded, exhausted, and lay my head back down on the pillow. As he worked about the room, collecting the small mirror from my desk, and the long dressing mirror that hung inside the closet door, he glanced over at me. What I saw in his eyes both sickened me and filled me with new purpose. I saw pity, Doctor, and that is something I CANNOT abide! So from that moment, I looked at my predicament freshly. This was war. How it had started and what the nature of my enemy was, I could not know. But it was war nevertheless.

"It took almost a week to secure my fortress. No mirrors were permitted in my bed chamber. Heavy curtains were hung over the windows. I even had area rugs spread over every square

inch of floor, in case I might catch sight of myself in the smooth marble.

"It seemed to work. I saw nothing of my reflection. Of course, I could no longer leave the safety of my bed chamber, having instead to conduct business over the phone. It was a temporary, imperfect solution. But it worked... for a while.

"Then, this evening, as I worked at my desk, I heard a voice... that voice... for the first time in almost two weeks. 'Larry....'

"I spun around in my chair, cursing madly. Of course, I was alone in the room. I stood, glancing all around, trying to convince myself that I was hearing things.

"'It's time, Larry.'

"Against the far wall, I spotted the grandfather clock, its swinging brass pendulum counting off the moments. Glass covered its ornate face and narrower counter-weights box. I thought I saw movement, reflected in the light from the desk top lamp. I took a heavy marble paperweight from the desk and approached it, ready to smash the offending glass to ribbons at the first sign of 'life'.

"'I've waited SO long.'

"There it was! That face... my face, grinning out at me in the glass, the dark hands of the clock visible through its features. I wailed and hurled the paperweight at the image.

"But as the projectile reached its target, a hand, bearing a signet ring... MY signet ring, reached out of the smooth glass of the pendulum case and caught the paperweight, snatching it neatly from the air. I staggered back, my eyes locked on those of my reflection.

"'Not this time, Larry.'

"'Go away!' I screamed. But the mirror man only grinned, his hand still holding the paperweight. Then he pressed forward against his side of glass, and began to step through, his skin solidifying as it crossed some unimaginable threshold.

"I retreated until my back was against the desk, my hands scrambling for a weapon. There was none. 'Dickerson!' I screamed, uncertain if the old man could even hear me. Usually his evenings were spent in the kitchen, supervising dinner.

"I glanced quickly toward the closed chamber door. As I did, out of the corner of my eye, I saw the mirror man's face go slack. An instant later he seemed to be sucked back into the surface of the glass, as though whatever force was powering his freedom had been suddenly cut off. The paperweight clattered to the floor.

"Then I finally understood. It was eye contact. Without that, his power waned. With tremendous effort, I pulled my attention completely from the clock and ran toward the chamber door, my hand closing around the knob. 'Dickerson!' I called again.

"From somewhere beyond the door, down the hall, I heard his voice; distant and yet as welcome as salvation itself. 'Yes sir! I'm coming!'

"I tried to turn the knob, but as I did, I felt something move beneath my hand. I glanced down, and instantly five fingers burst forth from the smooth, polished brass, intertwining with my own. I screamed and pulled away, but that bizarre, bodiless hand held me firm. From somewhere inside the knob I heard laughter.

"It's time, Larry! It's finally time!"

"No!"

"Don't be afraid. You know me! Don't you remember?"

"No! No, I don't!"

"I remember. I remember lots of things. I remember Mom and Dad."

"Please..."

"You shouldn't have done it, Larry. You shouldn't have killed them."

In her chair, Loretta gasped out loud. If he heard her, Benedict gave no sign. His eyes were distant, wide with remembered horror. His hand worked ceaselessly, wringing the air between them.

"I tried to pull away again. But each time I did, he seemed to come... further out. I could see the signet ring again, and then a wrist, enclosed in the same dark sweater I was wearing. I seized that wrist with my free hand, trying to pull it off me. The skin the warm and alive. I thought I could feel a pulse beneath my fingers.

"You fixed their car just a week after your nineteenth birthday, didn't you? Made a present of their deaths to yourself!"

"I heard Dickerson on the other side of the door, his key working in the lock. As the door opened, the hand released me. I staggered two or three steps and then collapsed onto the floor."

Benedict fell silent, and filled his cup with the last of the brandy. Loretta sat back in her chair, her own drink forgotten, her eyes locked on the frightened, broken man before her. After several moments, she found her voice. "Is it true? Did you kill them?"

Benedict took a long final swallow and nodded slowly. Then he shrugged, the noncommittal, disinterested shrug of a youth guilty of an offense but unconcerned about his punishment. "It was... nothing personal. My father was running a good business into the ground. I needed that business, and I couldn't waste my time playing the attentive son to my widowed mother. So I resolved to remove them both."

Loretta blinked, slowly digesting the confession, uncertain which horrified her more: the admission, or the almost casual way it was offered. A sociopath, she thought; a man totally uninterested in anyone's welfare but his own. Was his malevolent reflection some sort of imaginative representation of his long-overdue guilt?

"Dickerson found me on the floor... in tears. I had him remove all the glass in the room and paint the brassware black. It was hours before I slept, only to awake in the night, shaking with terror. I'd... already had your name and number by then, Doctor. I'd had them for more than a week. It... just seemed too much a show of... weakness to call you. But after this evening..." He straightened up, trying to recapture his vanished dignity. "So, Doctor. Am I insane, or is it real?"

Loretta rubbed her face in her hands and regarded the man, caught between her revulsion of him and his crimes, and her fascination with his case. Slowly, she rose from the chair and stood before him, the fire casting her shadow across his slumped form. "I'm happy to tell you

that the answer to your question is 'neither', Mr. Benedict. You're not insane, though its obvious to me you have serious problems to resolve. But your reflection isn't engaged in an attack upon your soul either. I can't give you a pat diagnosis after only one informal session. That wouldn't be fair to you."

Benedict laughed humorlessly. "Then what can you do?"

"Do you trust me?"

He looked up at her, his expression cold. "I trust no one."

"Do you trust my skills, then?"

He frowned for a moment, and then nodded. Loretta offered him her hand. "Then come with me to the window. It's dark outside. Even the moon is hidden behind the clouds. You should cast an excellent reflection."

"No!"

Loretta leaned over him, placing her hands on the arms of his chair, and bringing her face within inches of his. "A reflection is only that, Mr. Benedict. No depth, no spirit. Just an optical image on glass. Take my hand, look at it with me. Prove to yourself that what you've seen is a product of your mind. Once we've established that, then I can help you. Otherwise, there's nothing I can do, and I'm afraid you're just going to have to ruin me."

Benedict stared at her for several moments, nervously chewing his lip. When he spoke, his voice cracked, like a child's. "You'll hold my hand?"

"The entire time."

Loretta straightened. Slowly, Benedict placed his trembling fingers in hers and climbed unsteadily to his feet. She smiled at him, still repulsed but at the same time fascinated by this twisted, tragic man. Then she led him across the hearth to a pair of heavy velvet drapes. Benedict looked like a man on death row. His steps were small and nervous. His lips moved constantly, though no sound came out. His right hand dug deep into the pocket of his robe.

"I'm just going to pull one of the drapes aside," Loretta explained. "At the first sign of trouble I'll drop them again. Fair enough?"

He nodded mutely.

Her free hand went to the split in the drapes. "Ready?"

He nodded again.

She drew the curtain aside.

The storm had reached a fevered pitch, its gusting wind splashing the rain against the high, wide panes of glass. Loretta saw her reflection, and that of the man whose hand she held. "Just relax," she soothed.

Then Benedict's reflection smiled wide.

"Hello, Larry."

Benedict pulled away, breaking Loretta's grip. His reflection however, did not retreat, but came forward, hands outstretched. As Loretta stared, astonished, the figure emerged from

the glass, charging his counterpart. She spun toward Benedict who, screaming wildly, suddenly pulled a small revolver from the pocket of his robe.

"No!" she cried.

Benedict fired repeatedly, the shells passing through the apparition's body and shattering the window pane behind him. Loretta recoiled as wind-driven rain buffeted the room, sending the drapes into a wild dance. She stumbled backward and slipped on the wet floor, her hand grabbing at the drapes for support. Out of the corner of her eye she caught a glimpse of the two Lawrence Benedicts rolling on the floor like battling animals. Then the drape she clutched at tore away from its rod and dropped over her like a shroud.

She screamed, struggling wildly. She heard a pounding on the bedroom door. And when she finally freed herself, she saw Dickerson standing in the doorway; a tall, thin silhouette against the lights in the hall.

"Master Lawrence, sir," the old servant asked worriedly. "Are you all right?"

Loretta turned.

Lawrence Benedict was rising to his feet. He seemed different somehow, healthier, stronger. He still wore his robe and slippers, and a red swelling on his chin marked the beginnings of bruise, but a new light was shining in his eyes, and on his face was a look of profound relief. He returned Loretta's stare with a pleasant smile, and then regarded Dickerson and said: "Yes... Dickerson... hello. No, I'm fine. Just a broken window."

The servant looked about the room, obviously confused and dismayed. Then he nodded and left, shutting the door behind him.

Benedict turned and approached Loretta, who stared up at him, speechless. "A good man," he said, motioning to the chamber door. "I never really knew him, but he obviously cared more about me than I deserved."

"Mr. Benedict..."

He nodded, and smiled again. It was a cheerful smile, and for the first time Loretta noticed how attractive a man he was. "In the flesh."

"N...No..." Loretta stammered, retreating a step. "You came out... out of the mirror. You've... stolen his soul."

"I AM his soul..." Benedict replied calmly. "...captured into the mirror when I was seventeen years old."

Loretta put a hand on the back of one of the chairs to steady herself. Her head was spinning, and she couldn't convince herself it was from the fall she'd taken. "Wha... what?"

Benedict smiled patiently. "All through my childhood, Doctor, I was fascinated by mirrors. It began at an early age. I would gaze at my... reflection, enthralled by the "falseness" of it. A mirror, you see, seemed to show only the physical image and over the years I became intrigued with seeing... deeper than that. I liked to stare at the light in my eyes, trying to see past the limits of the glass, trying to see 'inside' myself."

He laughed softly; a grim chuckle. "By the time I was in my teens, mirrors had become my obsession. Every free moment was spent in my room, seated on a stool by a mirror on my wall, staring at my reflection, trying to understand it. My mother considered the whole thing

shamefully narcissistic. My father saw it merely as a waste of time. They lectured me constantly, and on several occasions emptied my room of mirrors. But each time they did, I would secretly collect them again."

Benedict's face darkened and he squeezed his eyes shut, as if to drive away a terrible memory. "Then one day, alone in my room, I finally found the 'inside' of my reflection. Only, to my horror, it was not a prize but a prison. It... stole me... the REAL me... away from my body and trapped it in my reflection. What was left was pure intellect, without pity, without guilt... without conscience."

He shook his head miserably.

"I can't tell you how many years I watched what 'he' did in my absence, this shell of a man I'd left behind: the death of my parents, the ruining of countless people. For years I struggled to get back to the surface of the mirror. Each time 'he' looked at his reflection... at me... I came a little closer. It took years... years... but I finally made it."

His pressed his palm against his chest.

"Whole again," he said, his voice a whisper. "Finally."

Loretta listened, and tried to tell herself that she didn't believe. "What... happens now?"

A look of grim determination spread across Benedict's face. "Now there will be changes. I... can never make full restitution for the crimes that were committed in my absence. But I have money and I have time. I'll do what I can."

He looked back to Loretta. "I'm happy to say that I'm no longer in need of your services, Doctor. Please forgive my previous threats. I have every confidence in your professional ethics and your promise to keep this matter confidential."

"Yes..." she said hesitantly. "Yes... thank you."

"Please bill me for your time." He escorted her to the door. "You'll forgive me if I don't show you out, but quite frankly I don't know this house very well. If you call for Dickerson, I'm sure he'll help you."

He offered her his hand and she took it, noticing right away that something had changed about his handshake. At first she took it to be his grip, which was suddenly firm and confident. "I- I'm not sure I understand what's happened." she said.

He grinned. "Do you really want to?"

She blinked and then said: "No. Not really."

"Good night, Dr. Capinelli. Thank you."

"Good night, Mr. Benedict."

He winked; a quick, conspiratorial gesture. "Call me Larry."

Then she left him.

Dickerson returned her make-up mirror and showed her out. She had to dash through the rain across the driveway to her car. It wasn't until she was maneuvering her way down the dark, slick roads, that it dawned on her what had been so odd about Benedict's last handshake. The signet ring hadn't been there. It had somehow changed places, moving

from his right hand to his left.

Loretta Capinelli drove carefully that night, respecting the storm. Sometimes she even glanced in her rearview mirror, just in case there was another car behind her. Sometimes.

But not much.

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