

# ALL-STORY WEEKLY

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# The Man in the Mirror

by Lillian B. Hunt

## A "DIFFERENT" STORY

**I**N the twinkling of an eye he shot past me.

The reception-hall was shaded, but the massive gilt mirror at the far end, scintillating under twin clusters of light, caught his image and held it for an instant.

A clean-cut fellow he was, an artist in appearance, slender and agile—a young man with a face at once fascinating and repellent. The features showed the ravages of dissipation, of poverty, and unfulfilled ambition. The cheeks were hollow and of a bluish pallor; the eyes wildly startled, like those of the hunted deer.

Under the rembrandt, banded with black, hung straight, wet wisps of hair whose tawny glint harmonized well with the stains of modeling clay on hands and sculptor's apron. But what startled me most in that brief glimpse of him was a great wound in the center of his forehead, seared and livid, like the brand of a murderer.

For a quarter hour at least I had been pacing the open conservatory in the right wing of the reception-hall which, in the

form of a broad balcony, overlooks the boxwood shrubbery and terrace-gardens. The heavy fragrance of blossoms with the drowsy damp of the river air had gone to my head like a drug.

I felt unsteady, uncertain. The studio garments I wore actually burdened my brain and clogged my steps, for I seemed to be searching, searching everywhere—for what? Well, I hardly knew. For some time my memory had played the knave with me. It was simply that nature had turned *Shylock* and was exacting from the prodigal even more than her rightful pound.

There were times of late when, without warning, my head would spin and seethe, and my body quiver in a frenzy. Such attacks invariably left my nerves in shreds, and made the dread of the future unspeakably terrifying. To-night I seemed both unnerved and fearful. The perfumed air of the balcony oppressed me, the shrubbery below haunted me.

Thus, in striding up and down, I felt that something extraordinary had happened. The very atmosphere in its heavi-

ness breathed mystery. I peered over the trim lawns set with flower-beds and conecut bays, and back again at the dense wall of shrubbery barely distinguishable in the wan starlight.

I stared inside the reception-hall, shadowed save for the clusters of light over the mirror at the far end, and, staring, I stumbled; something crackled and shivered under my feet.

Perhaps you know the shock of stumbling when the nerves are keyed to a certain tension. Perhaps you have heard that sharp, crunching sound that tingles through your tense body like a sword-thrust, and leaves you weak and trembling!

Well, I found myself tottering in a mass of broken porcelain, and, looking down, noticed hundreds of fragments scattered about the tiled pavement. At first I was puzzled, and yet I should have known.

With no feeling other than sadness, I bent and gathered a few of the fragments in my shaking hands. They startled me with a fiendish suggestion. Even as I handled them, they flashed in my eyes wicked as witch-fires, they darted serpents' fangs at me and glowed a vivid scarlet. I flung them over the balustrade in a quick revulsion of feeling, and they fell, sparkling and clinking, on the concrete path below.

At that very instant there came to me the muffled sound of voices and the slow tramp of feet. I counted five silhouettes in the group, and the foremost carried a large-sized pocket flash-light which revolved persistently at every step.

Naturally I was curious to learn their errand, and in my eagerness groped my way over heaps of broken plants, earth, and pottery to a long gap in the floral ranks where I could lean over the balustrade with ease.

The men paused directly beneath me and, as I had surmised, pounced headlong on the brilliant bits of porcelain, jabbering and gesticulating like true natives of the jungle. Of course, I laughed aloud—it was so absurd, so contemptible,

their clawing over those atoms in their puny efforts at deduction. And as I laughed the glare of the electric lantern shot upward—full in my face.

The smile froze on my lips. I was blinded, alarmed, too; but what of that? I merely dropped to my knees and huddled there in the darkness.

This incident happened directly before I saw the strange man in the mirror—I rushed quickly back into the house just in time to see him pass. He startled me, too, because he was so close to me, not more than an arm's length away.

I sprang back from him in momentary fright—and suddenly he was gone. There wasn't the faintest trace of him anywhere; yet his image was still clear and distinct in my mind—the wild, protruding eyes, the haggard face, the scarlet mark on the forehead.

For ten minutes, perhaps, I moved about that portion of the hall where he had been, watching and listening for another sign of his presence. Then, impelled by the wariness of his footfall and the weird terror in his face, I began to explore the adjoining parlors and library.

But he had vanished.

Certainly, then, he was the criminal! Why did I think so? I didn't know. All that concerned me was that a suspicious young man lurked beneath my brother's roof.

I leaned against the newel-post and considered. It still lacked two hours of midnight, and Harmon had hosts of friends whom I had never met and who would be likely to drop in after dinner for a round of cards or billiards. Yet, I felt this visitor was no ordinary one, and decided to lose no time in rallying the servants and running him down.

I whirled around toward the nearest push-bell, but before I could place a finger upon it there came to my ears the noise of loud thumping and the prolonged buzzing of an electric bell. By intent listening I concluded that the well-spring of sound was the main front door which opened upon the verandas. Evi-

dently, then, my visitors of the terrace had decided to go further into the heart of things.

I stood quiet for a moment. I hardly knew where to go or what to do. If the refugee was to be caught in my brother's house, should not the glory of the capture be mine? I had found him first; to me belonged the praise and the reward.

However, as I shifted from one foot to the other in nervous uncertainty, I was again amazed. In the midst of the ringing and rapping the parlor portières swayed violently, and the man of the mirror stood before me. He was ghastly, and when he saw me he shivered and raised his hand to hide the scar on his forehead.

"What is it?" I shrilled at him. "What have you done?"

He said nothing; his dry lips moved, but made no sound. I was quick to see the mockery of his attitude, and I reached for him in a fury. But hardly had my fist swung out than he vanished as before, even as a specter might have dissolved in air.

All I remember is that I crashed into a great gilt frame, and that the mirror went swaying and straining like a thing bewitched. When I regained my footing there was nothing for me to see save the portières still swinging in his wake.

This time I did not even try to follow him. My one impulse was to compose myself and tidy my person before opening the door. I rushed into the coat-room, tore off my outer garments, and threw them on the floor. Then, quietly and with a dignity befitting my Vaughan ancestors, I opened the door, which by this time was well-nigh parted from its hinges.

"'Diana' is not here!" I explained hastily to the five men without. "She is gone! A strange man with a strange scar stole her. I tried to catch him, but failed. He is still here. Search every room! Guard every door!"

After that my memory is a blank. But it seems I must have remained in the

reception-room to await developments. On a leather couch I huddled, sick and very weak. My brain was throbbing, and my fingers plucked the cushions in a semidelirium.

Finally I heard the tramp of returning feet, and felt a strong hand on my shoulder. Raising my head, I instantly encountered the searching eyes of Detective Robesart, a man of high standing in the profession. I bowed socially, and while doing so, recognized in his four associates the servants of the house, including Dombey, the chauffeur.

"Have you found him?" I questioned feverishly.

"Not yet," answered Robesart. "At least, no one answering his description. Were you alone when you saw him?"

I nodded. Robesart fastened his magnetic gaze upon me, examining me from head to heel. He was a short man and stout, with eyes like ebony pin-points and a jaw of grim power. He was a man to be feared, and I feared him.

Quietly he swung about and stepped outside on the veranda, the four attendants and myself in close file behind him. Once there, he paused abruptly and turned to me.

"Go first, Mr. Vaughan," he said.

I asked no questions, but in a dim way understood his request. I took the flashlight from his hand and walked a straight course to the shrubbery. Then, as the servants crowded breathlessly about me, my courage failed, and I slipped behind, hoping they might be the first to make the discovery.

But they carried me with them, every step, and forced me to level my light full at the piteous object. I shrieked at the bare glimpse of it, and tried to beat my way back through the shrubbery. Failing in this, I stood quietly aside and looked at it, timidly at first, then boldly, then sorrowfully.

It was the white marble torso of Harmon's masterpiece — "Diana in Flight," valued at a hundred thousand — the "Diana" I had always worshiped and

coveted, had tried for years to imitate in my humble attic workshop. It was crushed to atoms.

Robesart knelt for examination. And as I dropped beside him and placed my hand on a portion of the fair young head, so piteously mutilated, a sudden, sharp grief convulsed me, and I moaned and wept uncontrollably.

Who—oh, who could have done this damnable act?

But Robesart cut short my ravings. With kindly patience and stern practicability, he drew my attention to the exquisite hands twined with the roots and foliage of rare plants, the crumbled hair, and the enfolding studio-curtain of sea-green velvet glittering with flecks of rain-bow porcelain.

Beyond all question, she had been thrown from a height—from the balcony—after first being stolen from the drawing-room!

Again I screamed, and lurched forward. Two of the servants lifted me to a standing position and stood on either side for support.

“How did this happen?” Robesart asked abruptly. “Tell us, Mr. Vaughan.”

Thus suddenly addressed, I must have swooned. The shock had completely wrecked my nerves. My tongue was stiff; my head seemed to pound with a sledge-hammer’s precision.

“I do not know,” I heard myself saying in an unfamiliar voice. “This is the first I have seen her since my brother Harmon left for New York at four o’clock.”

“How, then, did you know of her destruction and the place?” Robesart continued.

His eyes were gleaming at me with an intensity that roused my fury. I felt in his glance and in the tone of his blunt questioning all the shafts and spear-points of accusation.

I glanced at him with stubborn defiance, but said nothing.

“When you opened the door to us, a half-hour ago, you stated that ‘Diana’

was gone,’ and you brought us here where she lies,” the detective explained patiently. “Therefore, the natural question to ask you is, how did you learn of all this?”

“I surmised it!” I replied, cautioned by the brutal menace in his tone. “I didn’t *know* positively!”

Robesart turned to Lunston, the butler.

“When did you last see this statue in its accustomed place, Lunston?”

“Directly after tea, sir!” was the answer. “I was carrying the silver tray, sir, and I saw she had been moved to the conservatory.”

“Was there any one else in the house beside the servants?”

“No one, sir!”

“Certainly no enemy, no suspicious stranger?”

Lunston denied such a possibility.

“But there *was* a strange man!” I shouted, enraged. “I know there was, for I saw him. I met him face to face—I talked with him. If these hirelings here had tended their duties and taken charge of the house instead of crying ‘Thief!’ and racing away four strong, they might have caught him easily.”

“I assure you, Mr. Vaughan,” Robesart declared earnestly, “if any human being besides yourself was inside the house when these men left it, he has not yet escaped. Every door, every window from roof to cellar was locked, and locked on the inside—excepting the front door which has been constantly guarded; every door, every window is still locked on the inside according to last investigation. The chef, Pierre, had the presence of mind to order all this done before giving the alarm—

“Perhaps you’d care to hear their version of the affair, Mr. Vaughan,” he continued. “According to their joint testimony, the four servants were gathered in the kitchen at dusk previous to the serving of dinner. While there they were terrified by a series of crashes that came from the open conservatory where they had last seen you at work on a small clay model of the ‘Diana.’”

"Pierre and Lunston ventured immediately into the reception-hall. The front door stood wide open, and as they passed they heard a heavy thud outside as of a mass of stone falling from a height. Together they examined the conservatory. There was no sign of human presence, though they had every reason to believe you were hiding there."

"They lie!" I screamed, but the detective raised his hand imperatively and I held my breath.

"They found the conservatory much disturbed. Plants had been knocked down and trampled upon; jardinières and flower-pots lay crushed among heaps of black earth. There had been a struggle, a fight to a finish, but the principals were missing. 'Diana' was gone from her pedestal; even the velvet draperies of her niche were gone. They searched every room and as they went along closed every door and window.

"Lunston hastened to the telephone and Dombey to the garage that he might run out the car and pick up the first policeman he met. The car, however, had gone wrong. It could not be started till a quarter-hour later when, with the greatest possible despatch, they brought me here. And," he added, rising, "here I stay till I find my man."

"He *was* in the house!" I exclaimed in shrill treble. "I saw him, studio-togs and all!"

Robesart stared at my blanched face.

"You're not well, Mr. Vaughan!" he said with sudden concern.

Immediately the terrific pains in my forehead returned. They were carrying her in from the terrace—reverently as though she were human dead, and I shrieked like a maniac and tore the air with clawlike fingers.

However, they grappled with me and poured a stimulant down my throat, and in time the agony passed. I recognized Robesart beside me.

"The man in the mirror!" I cried. "Have you found him?"

He shook his head thoughtfully.

"No person, strange or otherwise, has been in the house, save ourselves," he replied. "The place has been thoroughly searched. However, I wish you to describe the fellow in detail. You say he wore studio-clothes?"

"Yes, yes," I replied in eager haste, and then I frankly met his gaze and told him all I remembered. During the recital Robesart stood motionless, staring at me till I was fully conscious of the great, silent question in his piercing gaze.

"But there *was* no mysterious vandal!" he blurted out. "There was no strange man in the whole affair from start to finish! He is merely a creature of your imagination."

"What?" I roared, leaping to my feet, snarling with anger. "Do you mean—"

"Candidly now, Mr. Vaughan, *why* did you steal and destroy the famous 'Diana'?" Robesart asked forcefully.

"Destroy the 'Diana'!" I howled. "How dare you—"

"Your forehead—the brand on your forehead!" he cried dramatically. "Your victim was marble, but she put the murderer's mark upon you that all men may see and beware!"

I clapped my hand to my head, bewildered, fearful. A wound! A great wound where the flesh had been broken! I could actually feel it. The pain of it was almost intolerable—how odd that I had not noticed it before. Small wonder that Robesart suspected me—

Again I lost consciousness and for a long time lay like one dead. At last Robesart roused me.

"Mr. Vaughan," he said with great solemnity, "while you were sleeping I phoned your brother and physician in New York. Dr. Rossmore has known your family for generations and your own personal history from the day of your birth, and I may add that neither are surprised at to-night's affair!"

"You mean," I raved, "that they have been expecting this thing of *me*?"

"They have imagined such an outcome!"

"What would be my motive?"

"Jealousy." His lips were rigid. "You have failed in your chosen art—failed miserably. What more natural than you should be jealous of your brother Harmon's success, and resenting his most valuable work—"

"Just so!" I exclaimed, shifting easily into the thread of the argument. "Why shouldn't Harmon divide with me? He has fame and money and I'm a—a nobody!"

"That's exactly the motive!" was the quiet answer. "Are you ready to make your confession?"

"I have no confession!" I told him fiercely. "I deny the charge. I know you believe me insane—you believe my story of the real criminal in the mirror a fabrication. Of course the strange mark on my head is damning evidence, but—"

Robesart smiled whimsically. My teeth began chattering and my shoulders shook.

"Lunston," he called to one of the men, "Go to the coat-closet and bring Mr. Vaughan's wraps!"

I grasped his sleeve and he turned toward me expectantly.

"You must find that man in the mirror!" I chattered. "There *is* a man and you must be convinced of it! You must insist upon his being found!"

The detective nodded earnestly. As the servant stepped forward with my belongings, Robesart took the long, full, sculptor's apron in his hand.

"This is yours, Mr. Vaughan?"

"It is mine!" I answered, ramming my arms in the sleeves.

"And this?" He held a brown rembrandt in his hand which I recognized at once by the shabby black velvet stretched around its band.

"Yes, mine!" I exclaimed.

I put on the cap and apron, not that I felt the need of them, but because I firmly believed I could convince him of my innocence and make him my friend for life—if only we might find the man—

Suddenly a subtle change swept over his stern face and manner.

"I have news for you, Vaughan," his great voice boomed. "Our investigation is now ended! We have found the criminal—the man of the mirror! Come inside! We need you for identification!"

I tried to cry out my relief, my joy. But I couldn't.

"Come inside with us," Robesart whispered. "Show us the man in the mirror!"

I could only babble incoherent words of delight. But even before I reached the threshold the wound on my forehead seethed and agonies unspeakable crashed through my brain.

The columns of the veranda spun about me and I clung to both men for support. But through it all I was conscious only that my innocence and veracity were proved at last beyond all question, and that I was about to see my brother's enemy again face to face.

"Your story is a plausible one, after all!" Robesart was saying in a cool, monotonous tone as we stumbled into the vestibule.

The electrolier had been turned out, the reception-hall was shaded save for the twin clusters of light twinkling over the great gilt mirror at the far end. As Robesart walked beside me, his face showed a perceptible triumph, his eyes glittered suspiciously.

We traversed the hallway in silence, and then I paused directly in front of the mirror, and my heart ceased its beat.

I simply stared straight ahead, and there he stood—the vandal—the same haunted face, the same bulging eyes, heavy cap, black band, tawny hair, and apron with its stains of modeling clay, the brand in the center of the forehead.

"Yes, yes, it's he!" I screamed. "It's he! It's he!"

The torments of the inferno fairly ridled me. I threw out my arms and sprang forward to throttle him. Before the men could interfere, I had crashed into the mirror, reeled, and fallen with the unwieldy mass of it upon me.

And then—at last—I knew—it was I—I— But I can say no more.