The Crystal Spider

To Jules Renard

Madame Rachilde
CHARACTERS:

Mother, 45 years old, bright eyes, tender mouth; she has a young face framed by gray hair. She wears an elegant black house dress and a white lace mantilla. Sensual voice.
Terror-Stricken, 20 years old. He is thin, almost wispy in his casual outfit made of pure white poplin. His face is ashen, his eyes have a vacant expression. His straight black hair glistens on his brow. He has regular features recalling his mother's beauty, much the way a dead man resembles his own portrait. Voice hollow and dull.

A large drawing room, one of whose three windows opens on a terrace filled with honeysuckle. Very bright summer night. The moon illuminates the entire part of the stage where the characters are found. The back of the stage remains engulfed in darkness. One gets a glimpse of furniture with heavy, old-fashioned shapes. In the midst of this demi-obscurity, a tall psyche mirror in the empire style, supported on each side by slender swan necks with brass beaks. A faint reflection of light on the mirror, but, seen from the lighted terrace, this reflection seems not to come from the moon, but rather appears to emanate from the psyche itself, as though the light were intrinsic to it.

The two characters are seated in front of the open door.

MOTHER: Come now, little boy, tell me what you're thinking of?
TERROR-STRICEN: But... nothing, mother.
MOTHER: (Stretching out in her armchair.) What a fragrance that honeysuckle has! Do you smell it? It makes you tipsy. You might say it's one of those delicate liqueurs of her ladyship... (She licks her lips.)
TERROR-STRICEN: That honeysuckle, a liqueur? Ah!... Yes, mother.
MOTHER: You're not cold, I hope, in weather like this? And you don't have a headache, do you?
TERROR-STRICEN: No, thank you, mother.
MOTHER: Thank you for what? (She leans over and looks at him closely.) My poor little Sylvia! Now admit it, it is not amusing to keep an old woman company. (Inhaling the breeze.) What a mild night! There is no need to have the lamps brought in, is there? I told François that he could go for a walk and I wager he's carrying on with the maids. We shall stay here until the moon starts down... (A moment of silence. She begins again in a serious tone.) Sylvia, it is no use denying it, you are unsuccessful in love. The longer you go on like this, the thinner you get...
TERROR-STRICEN: I have already assured you, mother, that I have never loved anyone but you!

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with Lugné-Poe as Terror-Stricken
Translated by Daniel Gerould
MOTHER: (Touched.) What foolishness! Come now, if she is royally born, we could afford to treat ourselves to her, now couldn't we? And if she is a scullery maid, just as long as you don't marry her . . .

TERROR-STRIKEN: Mother, your teasing drives needles through my ear-drums.

MOTHER: And if you've run into debt, into serious debt, well, what of it? You know I can pay it off.

TERROR-STRIKEN: That debt again! But I have more money than I know how to spend.

MOTHER: (Lowering her voice and drawing her chair closer.) Now then, you won't get angry, will you Sylvius? Why, to be sure! You men have secrets that are more shameful than wicked passions or debts. . . . I have made up my mind to take charge of everything. . . . Do you understand what I mean? If my own flesh and blood took sick . . . well, then (delicately), we would look after our health until we were cured . . .

TERROR-STRIKEN: (With a gesture of disgust.) You have gone mad, mother.

MOTHER: (Carried away.) Yes, I am actually beginning to believe that I am losing my mind every time I set eyes on you. (She gets up.) Haven't you noticed how the sight of you inspires me with fear?

TERROR-STRIKEN: (Trembling.) With fear!

MOTHER: (Coming back and leaning over him, full of caresses.) I didn't mean to cause you pain, Sylvius! (A pause, then she straightens up, and speaks with vehemence.) Oh! What little slut has taken my Sylvius away from me? Because there is a slut at the bottom of this, I'm sure of that . . .

TERROR-STRIKEN: (Shrugging his shoulders.) Why not make it several sluts, if that's what you want to hear, mother.

MOTHER: (Remaining on her feet and seeming to talk to herself.) Or perhaps a dreadful vice, one of those vices of which we respectable women do not have even the slightest inkling. (She speaks directly to him.) Since this happened to you, I've started reading novels in an attempt to understand you, and I haven't yet discovered anything I didn't already know.

TERROR-STRIKEN: Oh! I can well imagine.

MOTHER: It's settled! Tomorrow we shall invite guests, women, young ladies.

You'll see your cousin Sylvia again. There was a time when you used to follow her about like a little doggie, and now she has grown quite charming; a bit of a flirt, I grant you, but so captivating with her imitations of all the popular singers in vogue! . . . Oh! My dear, woman should be the sole preoccupation of man. Then love makes you beautiful! (She caresses his chin.)

You will be able to question the mirror in your dressing room! . . .

TERROR-STRIKEN: (Starting up with a gesture of dread.) The mirror in my dressing room! . . . Dear God! Women, young ladies, creatures who all have mirror reflections in the depths of their eyes . . . Mother! Mother! Do you want to kill me . . .

MOTHER: (Astonished.) What! Still harboring ideas on the subject of mirrors! So it is serious, that mania of yours! My word, he has ended up imagining he's ugly. (She laughs.)

TERROR-STRIKEN: (Casting a furtive look behind him, in the direction of the psyche which the moon distantly illumines.) Mamma, I beg you, let's drop this topic. No, my physical well-being is not at issue . . . There are psychic reasons . . . Dear God! You can see that I am stifling! . . . Won't you ever understand! Oh! It's been incessant persecution for the past week! You are crushing me! No, I'm not ill! . . . I need to be alone, that's all it is. Invite all the mirrors that you like and hang from the walls all the women on earth, but don't tickle me in order to make me laugh . . . Ah! It's more than I can stand, more than I can stand! . . . (He sinks back into his armchair.)

MOTHER: (Clutching him in her arms.) You are stifling, Sylvius, who are you saying that to? As if I weren't consumed with anxiety when I see that sullen look on your face! Make an effort, I am capable of understanding you, you'll see . . . since I adore you! . . . (She kisses him.)

TERROR-STRIKEN: (Suddenly bursting out.) Well, all right then! Yes, that's it, I am afraid of mirrors, have me put away if you wish! (Moment of silence.)

MOTHER: (Gently.) We'll put the mirrors away, Sylvius.

TERROR-STRIKEN: (Holding out his hands to her.) Forgive me, mother, I am a brute. In all likelihood, I should have spoken sooner, but it is sheer torture to think that one will be ridiculed. And this can scarcely be said in a word or two . . . (He passes his hands over his forehead.) Mother, what do you see when you look at yourself? (He breathes with difficulty.)

MOTHER: I see myself, my dear Sylvius. (She sits down again and shakes her head.) I see an old woman. Alas! . . .

TERROR-STRIKEN: (Giving her a look of commiseration.) Ah! Have you never seen anything there except yourself! I pity you! (Growing animated.) Now I have the impression that the inventor of the first mirror must have gone mad with fear in the presence of his own creation! So, for you, a woman of intelligence, there's nothing in a mirror but the simplest things! In that atmosphere of the unknown, have you never seen a host of phantoms suddenly rise up! At the threshold of those dream gates, have you never felt the magic spell of the infinite keeping you under surveillance? But a mirror is something so dreadful that I am amazed, each morning, to find you still alive, all of you women and young ladies who spend your days admiring yourselves endlessly! . . . Mother, listen to me, it is a long story, and I must go far back to uncover the cause of my hatred of mirrors, for I am one of the predestined, I was forewarned early in my childhood . . . I was ten years old, I was down there in the pavilion of our park, all alone, and, in view of a huge, huge mirror—which has not been there for ages—I was leafing through my school notebooks, I had a make-up assignment to write out. The enclosed room, with its drawn curtains, struck me as being like a poor man's dwelling; it was furnished with garden chairs quite eaten away by the damp, and with
a table covered by a dirty cloth full of holes. The ceiling leaked, you could hear the rain beating against the half-demolished zinc roof. The only touch of luxury was suggested by that huge mirror, oh! such a huge mirror, that stood as tall as a man! Instinctively, I looked at myself. Beneath the limpidity of its glass, it was flecked with lugubrious spots. They could have been water lilies swelling on the surface of a standing pool, and further down, in a shadowy recess, there rose up indistinct forms that resembled specters moving up through the coils of their slimy hair. I remember, as I stood there staring at myself, that I had the strange sensation of plunging up to my neck into that looking glass, as though it were a muddy lake. I had been locked in, I was doing penance and thus I was compelled, like it or not, to remain immersed in that stagnant water. By dint of fixing my eyes on the eyes of my image, I made out a small dot shining in the thick of those mists, and at the same time I discerned a faint insect sound coming from the place where I saw the dot. Almost imperceptibly this dot spread out into a star. It crackled like darting streaks of lightning in the depths of that somnolent atmosphere, it buzzed the way a fly does against a window-pane. Mother! That is what I saw and heard! I was not dreaming, I was wide awake. No possible way for a ten year old to explain it, nor could a grown-up do any better, I assure you! I was aware that the pavilion had a shed attached to it where the garden tools were kept; but it was unoccupied. I told myself that, in all probability, some spider of an unknown species was about to leap at my face, and, paralyzed, I remained rooted to the spot, my arms frozen at my side. When the spider kept coming at me, it turned into a young crab with a silver shell, its head became a constellation of dazzling arcs, its claws stretched over closer to my reflected head, it penetrated my forehead, split my temples, devoured my pupils, slowly effaced my image, decapitated me. For a moment I saw myself standing there bolt upright, arms twisted in horror, bearing upon my shoulders a monstrous beast that had the sinister look of a cuttlefish! I tried to cry out; but, as invariably happens in nightmares, I was unable to utter a sound. From that moment on I felt myself at the mercy of the crystal spider who was sucking my brains out! And it kept on buzzing, with the dull drone of a beast who has decided to finish off its enemy once and for all... Then all of a sudden, the huge looking-glass shattered under the enormous pressure of the monster's tentacles, and this entire fictional vision crumbled in glittering fragments, one of which slightly cut my hand. I let out harrowing cries and fainted... When I was in a state to comprehend, our gardener, who had made his way into my prison to reassure me, showed me the brace and bit that he had been using, on the other side of the wall, with the sole intent of driving in an immense nail! In piercing the wall, he had also pierced the looking glass, without suspecting anything, as he went about his work to the accompaniment of the grinding sound made by the tool. My wound was not serious... The good man was afraid that there might be a fuss... and I promised to keep quiet about the whole thing... From that day on, I have been inordinately preoccupied with mirrors, despite the nervous revulsion I felt for them. My brief existence has been deeply marked by their satanic reflections. And since the first physical contact, I have suffered many other spiritual blows... At one point, I am haunted by the grotesque memory of the way I looked in my schoolboy laurels. At another, I am forced to view the photographic negative of my carnal sins... A mystery lies at the heart of this pursuit by the mirror, this hunt for the guilty one aimed at me alone!—(He becomes lost in dreams for a moment, then begins again, growing more and more animated.) At me alone!... But no! Believe me, mother, those who see clearly are as terror-stricken as I am. After all, does any one know why this piece of glass that we coat with quicksilver suddenly acquires the depths of an abyss and makes the world double? The mirror contains the problem of life perpetually confronting man! Does any one know precisely what Narcissus saw in the fountain or what it was that killed him?

MOTHER: (Shuddering.) Oh! Sylvius! Now you terrify me. So you are not merely telling me far-fetched stories? Is it really true... that you think about such things?

TERROR-STRICKEN: Mother, would you dare, right at this very moment, go and look at yourself in a mirror?

MOTHER: (Turning around towards the back of the drawing room, very disturbed.) No! No! I would not dare to... If we lighted a lamp...

TERROR-STRICKEN: (Forcing her to sit down again and sneering.) There... I knew that you too would be afraid! In just a few moments you will see in there very clearly! Woman, why do you insist upon peopling our apartments with those cynical blunders that ensure I can never, never be alone? Why do you throw in my face this master-spy who has the power to weep my tears? One evening when I was draping a fur pelisse over your shoulders as we were leaving a ball, I saw in a mirror smiling voluptuously a lady who resembled you, mother!... One morning while I was waiting for my cousin Sylvie, cooling my heels at her door, a bouquet of orchids in my hand, I saw the door swing partly open on an immense looking-glass where there was reflected a beautiful naked girl in a provocative pose!... Mother, looking-glasses are deep pits where women's virtue and men's peace of mind founder together.

MOTHER: Shut your mouth! I do not wish to hear any more from you.

TERROR-STRICKEN: (Seizing her arm and rising to his feet.) Mother, have you ever come across those soliciting mirrors that grab you by the sleeve in the streets of great cities? Or those that drop down on you suddenly like cloudbursts? Or the mirrors in shop windows encased in frames which are disgustingly shorn, as creatures for sale are enveloped in rouge and tinsel? Have you seen them offer you the resplendent flanks where each and every passer-by has slept in quick succession? Infernal mirrors! But they accost us on all sides.
They spring up from oceans, rivers, streams! By drinking out of my glass, I confirm my own hideousness. Our neighbor who thinks he has only one ulcer always has two! ... Mirrors personify the art of the informer, and they transmute a slight annoyance into infinite despair. They lurk in the dewdrop changing the heart of a flower into a heart swollen with sobs. By turn, full of lying promises of joy or replete with secrets shameful (and sterile as prostitutes), they retain neither impress nor color. If she has slipped into the arms of another in front of the mirror which I contemplate, I always see myself in the place of the other! (Furious.) They are infamous torturers who remain insensible, and yet, endowed with Satan's power, if they saw God, mother, they would look just like him! ...

MOTHER: (In a supplicant tone.) Sylvius! The moon has reached the corner of the wall. Go fetch a lamp, I want to look in there...

TERROR-STRICKEN: (In a voice grown once again sepulchral.) Oh! I tell you these things because you force me to! I truly lack all qualities to become the fatal voice of revelation, but it is fitting that blind women, quite by chance, discover the terrifying situation they create for men who see, even in the shadows. Sumptuously you install those relentless jailors in our quarters; for love of you we must endure them. And in return for our patience they strike us in the face with our own image, our own wileness, our own absurd gestures. Ah! Cursed be your doubles, at least this once! Cursed be our rivals! Between you and them there exist a diabolical pact. (In a desolate tone of voice.) Have you ever noticed, on a snowy winter morning, those birds circling above the trap that glitters and leads them to believe it is a miraculous pile of silvery oats or golden wheat? Have you seen them, as they fall, fall, one by one, from the heights of heaven, wings shattered, beck bloody, their eyes all the while still dazzled by the splendors of their delusion? There is the mirror to catch skylarks and there is the mirror to catch men, the one that lies in wait at the dangerous turn in their obscure existence, the one that will watch them die, forehead pressed against the glazed crystal of its enigma...

MOTHER: (Clinging desperately to him.) No! I can bear no more! I am already suffering too much! Your voice is killing me! Anxiety grips me by the throat! Have you no pity left for your mother, Sylvius? I wanted to know, I was wrong. Pardon me! Go fetch the lamps, I beg you! (She goes down on her knees, clasps her hands together.) I feel as though I am paralyzed.

TERROR-STRICKEN: (Staggering.) And I am afraid of the mirror concealed in the dark, your huge psyche-mirror, mother.....

MOTHER: (Exasperated.) Coward! Don't you think I am even more terrified than you? Will you do as I tell you or not!

TERROR-STRICKEN: (Getting to his feet, beside himself.) Very well, so be it! I am going to get the light for you!

(He rushes furiously in the direction of the psyche, behind which the living room door is located. For an instant, he races through a deep night... All of a sudden, the terrible overturning of a huge piece of furniture, the ringing sound of shattering glass and the pitiful howling of a man whose throat has been cut...)