

*Dove Shadow, Nitrate Star*

The room was dry and dusty, but with a lingering smell (that tickled the nostrils) as if this had not always been so: a faint effluvium of dry rot, of desiccated must. It had been used for the storage of apples and other dried or drying things, bacon and leather, cinnamon curling against the absence of its wounded branch, cloves plucked from living hives. There were ancient wooden shelves and benches, worn hard against the groove. In the middle of the room, now, stood a tall mirror. By “now,” I mean the frame in which the tale I am relating is said to have taken place. By “mirror,” I mean a hat that has been stretched to the height of a natural man and frozen there by the application of quicksilver. Which is why, in that country and at that time, the phrase we so blithely utter (“to put on one’s thinking cap”) came out “to place the mirror on top of one’s head.” This mirror, being full-length, was too tall to place on top of anyone’s head. It stood in the dry and dusty room because the mistress of that house said it disturbed her. It did not, she maintained, afford accurate reflections of her hall, her guests, herself. When pressed on this point, she refused to say more. Only her daughter and the daughter of a servant in that household ever ventured into the room to look in the mirror, and only the servant girl’s mother knew they played there. When asked, by the servant woman, what they saw in the mirror, her own daughter replied “music,” while the daughter of the mistress replied, “shadow.” From that day forth, the two little girls, formerly such fast friends, became enemies.

Soon enough, as “soon” goes (and “enough”), the daughter of the mistress died. One evening she told her mother she had a headache, and the next morning her body was borne from the parlor by six priests, according to the custom of that district. The servant woman, fearing the worst for herself and for her own daughter, saw to it that henceforth the old storage room was kept tightly locked. Only sometimes, late at night, she would leave her sleeping quarters beneath the steep eaves of that great house and, taking her ring of brass keys, let herself into the room. She felt that because she

went at night, she was immune from whatever baleful influence the mirror exercised. Or perhaps because she went alone. Or both. Much later, at the inquisition preceding her death, the authorities found occasion to ask her just what she had seen in that mirror, when she went alone, in the night. At first, she said, "a horse." Under moderate torture, she answered, "a wolf," or, when the question was phrased differently and the apparatus adjusted, "snow." At length, and prompted by the most severe interrogation techniques the authorities of that district had up to that time devised, she insisted she had seen "a lamb." Was it a black lamb, they asked her. (Silence.) Was it a white lamb, they asked her. (Silence.) Was it a red lamb, they asked her. (Silence.) Was it green or was it violet, was it blue. Did she not know what power lay in the hands of her inquisitors, did she not fear for her soul. (Silence.) At that moment a dove flew through a high open window into the council chambers, and then back out again. "A lamb," she repeated.