



The Lover's Eye



by J.H. Jones

“Thomas, stop. Not now.” Marion Schermerhorn mustered every ounce of her strength to grab the young man’s tailcoat lapels and push him back. She didn’t want to—her entire being longed to breathe in his scent of sandalwood, press her mouth against his, and feel his powerful arms around her shoulders, which were barely concealed by her silk ball gown. Yet, the marble patio that jutted out along Nob’s Row was too public and the December moonlight too bright—any Bowling Green passerby could see them.

Besides, what about the promise I made to Jonathan?

Thomas’ eyes, brown as mahogany, darkened to black. “Marion, in a few hours it will be 1823. Your engagement with Jonathan ended with his death more than a year ago.”

She chewed her lip, embarrassed. Thomas knew exactly what she was thinking. “I gave my word.” Her fingers strayed to the chain around her neck.

“He’s gone and you’re free to make your own future and choose whoever you want.”

With a surge of surprise, Marion lifted her eyes to meet his. Jonathan would never have said that. Instead, he would have told her he would decide for her, just like he decided about their engagement and just like the promise he extracted from her. He made her swear to remain true forever.

“You are always free to make your own decisions,” Thomas continued, then, shuffling his feet, he added in a low tone, “I hope whatever you decide will include me.” He reached for her again.

Marion shivered, not because of the touch of his hand or even the chill winter air but with confusion. The way he believed in her made him difficult to resist.

Didn’t I give my word to Jonathan? But wasn’t he angry, and it was the only thing that satisfied him? Then he died a few days later.

She pulled the pendant from the hollow between her breasts. It was a miniature, a lover's eye, in a gold frame encrusted with pearls that she had added to memorialize her grief. The details were magnificent, and her finger traced the lifelike arch of what was once his brow, then circled his staring gray eye.

"I...I want to think about what you said, Thomas." She slid the miniature back, comforted by the familiar sensation against her skin—it seemed to pulse with warmth, as if Jonathan were with her even now, reminding her from beyond that she needed his protection. Yet, as she faced Thomas, with his gentle smile and eyes bright with hope, she felt like she didn't need any safeguarding.

Through the open French doors behind her, jaunty notes from a fiddle floated on the air, and calls for a quadrille echoed from the ballroom.

"Why, Thomas, what are you doing out here?" Nelly Frobisher sashayed onto the patio. The diamond circlet atop her ringlets dazzled, and her gown of iridescent gold glowed in the moonlight.

Thomas stared open-mouthed. "Hello, Nelly."

"You asked for a dance, but I really don't know if I can squeeze you in." She studied her dance card as a trill from the flute called the dancers to the floor, then lifted her heart-shaped face and gave him a sly wink. "Unless..."

Marion's stomach knotted, and she grabbed Thomas' hand. "I think you promised this one to me." With a skip, she pulled him into the ballroom, and they melted into the nearest square of couples, just as the orchestra struck up a merry tune. Her dress of pink silk and chiffon swirled as she weaved in the dance's intricate chain across the polished parquet.

With each turn, she concentrated on Thomas, making sure his eyes stayed on her as they danced. She even ignored the faint tickle of the pendant as it shifted against her skin.



Elise pirouetted, her cotton nightgown billowing. The thick Turkish rug that covered the floor of their little bedroom muffled the sound of her dancing feet. “Then, Henry held me in his arms...” She squeezed her eyes tight, puckered her lips and kissed the air.

“He didn’t.” Marion, in front of her vanity mirror and getting ready for bed, slid her necklace under her gown’s high neck, primped the flounces, then frowned at her younger sister. “I know for a fact mother didn’t let you out of her sight the whole evening. Besides, Henry is too nice a young man to do such a thing.”

Elise smirked. “Are you saying that Thomas Townsend isn’t a nice man?” She giggled and crept close behind her sister. “I saw you two on the patio with my own eyes. You were positively drowning in him!”

“If you tell anyone!” Marion leveled her hairbrush at Elise.

The young girl laughed and escaped to the bed, where she pulled the blue satin coverlet around her shoulders. “Seriously, Thomas Townsend is so nice, compared to stick-in-the-mud Jonathan.”

Marion huffed, “How many times has mother told you? Don’t speak ill of the dead.”

“I’m only saying what all the girls think.” She fluttered her eyelashes and let out a sigh.

Marion turned back to the mirror to brush out her chestnut waves, then paused. There was truth in what Elise had said. Jonathan hadn’t enjoyed parties or balls, calling them common, whereas Thomas...

With a smile, she toyed with the tresses of her long dark hair, then touched her cheeks, which still held a rosy flush from the dancing.

Stop. I’m disloyal.

“You don’t understand. Jonathan was very high minded.” She explained to her sister, who rolled her eyes. “He said ordinary things were beneath us.”

“Really? What does Thomas say about that?”

Marion leaned on her elbows, cupping her chin and staring at her reflection. “He says I can make up my own mind.”

Outside the door, their mother's voice commanded them to bed, and Marion blew out the candle, then slipped under the coverlet next to her sister.

Goodnight, Tho—. Goodnight, Jonathan.

The pendant felt warm against her skin.



“A visitor already? Before at-home hours?” Mrs. Schermerhorn read the calling card, then issued instructions to the butler. “What an eager young man.” Her face, beaming with triumph, turned to her eldest daughter, who was staring thoughtfully into the fire.

“What did you say, mother?”

“Last night's ball worked, my dear, and he has forgotten completely about Nelly Frobisher.”

Mrs. Schermerhorn bustled to her daughter's side, tidying her puffed sleeves and the lace ruff around her throat, then her brows suddenly furrowed. “You're not wearing that old—” As she folded her arms across her chest, she muttered, “It's high time you took off that trinket. And what will Mr. Townsend think if he sees—”

The door swung open, revealing Thomas. Marion caught her breath. He looked as if he had stepped straight from Broadway, in a finely tailored coat, rich brocade vest and fashionable Cassock pants. Elise, who was lounging on the window seat, jumped up with a squeal and bounded at him.

“Elise, be careful!” Mrs. Schermerhorn warned.

Thomas caught the girl with a carefree laugh and whirled her around to her delight.

Marion's lips parted in wonder, remembering how Jonathan held himself aloof from her sister. She turned back to the fire, deep in thought.

Mrs. Schermerhorn exchanged polite greetings, then shook her finger at Elise. “That will be quite enough. Upstairs. Now.”

“Now? Aw.” The girl side-eyed her sister, hoping for a reprieve, but Marion remained distracted.

As she herded Elise out the door, Mrs. Schermerhorn explained, “Forgive me, Mr. Townsend, I must see that Elise returns to her, uh, studies. After that, I’ll arrange for some refreshments. In the meantime, Marion will entertain you.” She flashed a knowing smile as the door snicked closed behind her.

“Marion.” Thomas moved toward the fireplace.

She dragged her eyes from the dancing flames to study his face. He was pale, but his eyes twinkled as if he were bursting with a secret.

“My dearest Marion, I think you know why I’ve come.”

Her breath came in short rasps. Her fingers drifted to the pendant underneath her dress.

“Last night, holding you in my arms, then dancing with you—you must have felt it, too. Afterwards, I knew there was only one woman for me.”

“Go on.” She scratched at the spot on her chest.

“You, Marion. You and I can make a future together. Are you listening?”

Marion tried to pay attention. Yet, an irritation kept intruding. Underneath the pendant, her skin felt feverish and prickly. She rubbed her chest, with as much calm indifference as she could pretend, but it only seemed to heighten the sensation of heat.

Thomas pressed her hand. “Last night, what I saw in your eyes gave me hope, and I know you were thinking about the past, but I want to talk about the future. Dare I hope, our future? I need to be sure what is in your--”

“My heart!” With a wrench, she freed her hand and flattened it against her chest, where the pendant burned. Scorched. Seared. “My...my...”

Words continued to tumble out of Thomas’ mouth. “Marion, I want to speak with your father this very day. Before I do, I need to confirm how you feel.”

She gasped, retreating. “I feel...I feel.”

“Are you saying I may speak with your father?”

Her fingers fumbled with the buttons at her neck. “Thomas, I must think. Give me a moment.” She staggered backwards toward the door.

“Punch? Or tea?” Mrs. Schermerhorn led in a parade of servants, who immediately flooded the room, arranging chairs and the punchbowl, teapot, cups and dainties.

Marion stifled a moan of pain and fled upstairs.



After unbuttoning her bodice, Marion plopped herself in front of her mirror. Underneath the jeweled pendant, her skin blistered and oozed.

Elise, hovering at her shoulder, sucked in her breath. “You’ll need a poultice for that.”

“How did this happen? Why?” Marion gently probed the unblemished area around the wound. “I was talking to Thomas...”

“Talking? Or?” Elise quirked an eyebrow.

“Talking,” Marion said in a firm voice, then she chewed her lip and added in a whisper, “I believe he was going to ask me to marry him.”

Elise clapped her hands and jumped up and down. “Thomas will be my big brother!”

“Stop.” Marion cupped the pendant. “Shh. It’s tingling again.” She held her breath as the sensation rose, then slowly released when it ebbed.

An ugly suspicion took shape in her mind. She recalled Jonathan’s expression when he told her to wear the necklace—the wolfish grin, the threatening look in his eyes. He had said it was an extraordinary piece of jewelry, specially made for her and painted with powers she could not understand. When she hesitated, she remembered how his face purpled with rage, how he wrenched her wrist. Frightened, she agreed and slipped it on, promising to wear it always. He let out a triumphant laugh. The memory of the sound still made her blood run cold.

What did he mean by painted with powers?

She quickly thought back to each time the pendant had made its presence felt. Dancing. When Thomas came into the morning room. She swallowed hard. Tingling had given way to sharp stinging.

The lover's eye is trying to control me.

The thought was bizarre. But there was no mistake. Even a passing thought of Thomas sent the miniature fluttering against her breastbone, reminding her she had made a promise.

But Jonathan is dead, and now I can make my own choices.

There was only one thing to do: take it off. A pang of sadness squeezed her heart because it meant saying goodbye to Jonathan, yet she felt her decision was the right thing to do if she wanted to live her own life. Gently, she fingered the chain to draw it over her head. With a sharp intake of breath, she dropped it back in place. "I can't."

Her eyes flicked to her sister, who made a face that seemed to say Marion was hopeless. With a grunt, she yanked. "Ow!" She dropped the chain too, shook her fingers in the air and hopped from one foot to the other. "It's on fire or something. Let's tell mother. Maybe Thomas can help."

"Stop!" Marion gasped. Stinging had become burning, and a thin wisp of smoke snaked upwards from behind the eye.

Elise gulped as sobs choked her throat. "It's hurting you. I didn't mean to."

"There has to be a way to take this off, and I will find it." She racked her brain and softly repeated Jonathan's words, painted with powers.

The miniaturist!

She snatched up the candle and leaned into the mirror, confirming the silver backing faced up. "Help me. Can you make out what's inscribed?"

"To my forever love, Mar—"

"Not that part. Along the edge."

Elise gripped her sister's trembling hand and drew the candle closer. She stumbled over the unfamiliar name. "House...of...Wer...lo...gus. South Street." She made a face. "What's a Wer...Wer—"

“Werlogus is the name of the painter.”

Jonathan believed in extraordinary things. Magical things. Could he have found an artist claiming magical powers? It seemed incredible, yet even as she thought it, the pendant brushed against her chest.

With slow deliberation, she reasoned that if the miniaturist could imbue powers, maybe he could take them away. She had to find out. One thing was for sure: if she did nothing, she remained a slave to the pendant. Forever. The thought drove her to her feet, and she re-buttoned her bodice. “Get my wool cape.”

“What are you doing?”

“Don’t ask questions. Do it.”

Elise scampered to the wardrobe. “You’re not going there, are you? Alone? You can’t go alone! And to the docks? That’s where they say the Yellow Fever started. Even I know that!”

Marion moved quickly, tying her bonnet under her chin and tugging on her gloves. “There’s hasn’t been a case since, well, around the time that Jonathan died of it.” With a swoop, she grabbed her sister by the arm and shook her hard. “If anyone asks, tell them I’m feeling ill and can’t see anyone. If you breathe a word of what I’m doing, so help me...”

“Pinky, pinky,” blurted Elise.

Marion released her sister and flung her cape on. “The sooner I go; the sooner I return. I’ve got to try.”

My life depends on it.

She slipped out of the bedroom and hurried down the back stairs.



A few minutes later, South Street, bathed in gray mist and purple shadows, stretched out before her. Even in the afternoon, the streetlamps flickered and filled the air with the scent of sulfur.

Marion tossed a longing look in the direction she had come, where the streets glowed in the midday sun and bustled with people busy with their ordinary lives. Her memory flashed back to Jonathan and the way he lifted his high-bridged nose, as if he smelled something foul, when he proclaimed his contempt of the ordinary. He had promised that once they were married, he would share some remarkable things.

Had he found something remarkable here?

She peered down the street and noticed nothing special about the crumbling buildings and sinister doorways. Nonetheless, she sensed she was in the right place—the lover’s eye stirred as if it knew where she was.

As she hurried forward, her boot heels rang on the icy cobbles. To her right, the piers. On her left, she passed rows of windows, some patched and broken, and she caught fleeting glimpses of eyes following her as she made her way down the street. Part of her understood she should expect no less. She made an unusual sight on this thoroughfare, the home of rough sailors and down-on-their-luck merchants, yet the feeling of their watchful eyes dogging her every step made her shiver, and she pulled her thick cape closer around her.

At last, one dark doorway seemed to beckon, with a large brass plate dominating the center of the door. Marion studied the spidery script, proclaiming the House of Werlogus. She noted the bellpull hanging to the right, and when the pendant quivered, she took a deep breath and tugged.

The door squealed open by itself, revealing a dark passageway. At the far end of the corridor, thick curtains scraped to one side and a wizened man, in old-fashioned knee breeches and with his wig askew, seemed to materialize. Behind him, a large fire burned brightly, obscuring his features. Yet, Marion saw he wielded an artist’s brush, which he sliced through the air as he beckoned her forward. “A customer! Come in, child. Come in! My fire is always ready.”

Marion wanted to run away as fast as she could. But the memory of the lover’s eye, claiming her for Jonathan, strengthened her resolve. She forced her feet forward, even as her wool skirt seemed to claw at her legs, slowing every step. At last, she moved into the studio, and breathed in the pungent tang of solvents she couldn’t name with an earthy smell like walnuts burned in oil.

The little man grinned at her, bowing and introducing himself as Mr. Werlogus. He waved her to a chair by the fireplace. “To what do I owe this pleasure?”

Settled, she pushed back her cape, and her fingers flew to her chest, where the pendant seemed to vibrate against the fabric. “A lover’s eye,” she murmured.

“Ah! An affair of the heart! You’ve come to the right place. I am a painter like no other. I create art with many powers.” With an unctuous bow, he flourished his brush toward the fire. Sparks surged into the room, filling the air with color and light.

If she had any doubts before, his show convinced her that his work was unique. She could well imagine that it must have appealed to Jonathan. “I don’t understand it, but your painting has a magical power, and that’s why I’m here.”

His nose twitched, and Marion thought he resembled a little brown mouse—and the way he looked at her, she felt like a morsel of cheese. She pushed the image from her mind, then pulled out her pendant from where it hung behind her bodice and opened her gloved hand to reveal it. “I think you put a magical power in this, and I want you to take it away.”

A log cracked and flames blazed blue in the fireplace, and she was sure the eye blinked.

It can’t be. A trick of the light.

He hunched over the necklace and cackled. “Ah, yes. I remember the gentleman. He was most particular. He wanted something extraordinary. Is the course of true love not running smoothly?”

The tone of his voice sounded sympathetic, but Marion had the impression he was mocking her. “Let me explain. Jonathan died more than a year ago.”

“I guessed as much. You’ve added pearls to the frame. How sweet.”

“The eye is forcing me to remain true to Jonathan, and I want to move on.”

The old man lifted his brows, then snatched the pendant with his stubby fingers and flipped it over. “To my forever love, Marion.” He shook his head. “I’m afraid it’s quite explicit. Forever.” He dropped it, and she thought it had grown heavier. The weight cut into her neck.

“But he’s dead,” She felt tears prick behind her eyelids.

“It says forever, and you know what that means, don’t you? Otherwise, you wouldn’t be here.” He raised his arms, taking in the entire studio. “I told you, I paint with powers.”

Marion scanned the gloomy walls. She hadn’t noticed before, but painted eyes hung from the floor to the ceiling—large, small and all sizes in between. Brown. Blue. Gray. Green. Some with arching brows, others with thick lashes. Yet, they all seemed to stare, as if they knew why she had come.

She heard the merest breath in the far corner. Or did she? Was it a whisper telling her to run? Something stirred on the opposite side of the room, and she shifted her eyes the other way. Was that a sigh? Did a hiss behind her beg her to go?

With her hands covering her face, she groaned, “You don’t understand, I can’t live with this pendant. I’ve met someone else.”

“Ah! You wish me to paint your eye.”

“No, he said he loves me.”

“But young men can be so fickle.”

Nelly Frobisher, radiant in her ball gown, appeared in Marion’s mind. She felt afraid and clutched the lover’s eye. “What can I do?”

“We come to the point. There is a way to be certain of your young man, and you’ll break Jonathan’s bond, too,” the miniaturist hissed in her ear. “Let me paint your eye for your new beloved. A moment’s discomfort and then I’ll use my special powers to paint with fire, the medium of passion. With a bit of your hair and blood, a wave of my brush, and a few words, soon you’ll be the one who watches, the one who keeps him close. When he slips your lover’s eye over his head, he’ll be yours forever.”

Marion’s stomach knotted with a myriad of sensations. She wanted to be free of Jonathan’s hold on her, and equally strong, she wanted to be sure of Thomas. She remembered Nelly Frobisher’s sly smile, and the way Thomas had stared, open-mouthed. How could she trust him to remain true?

Yet, Mr. Werlogus says there is a way. A lover’s eye.

She lowered her head to the pendant hanging down her front, sensing how great the burden had become. With effort, she hefted the chain over her head, but the pendant felt even more substantial, and she could barely lift it.

“I’ll help you, child.” He closed his fingers around her hand. She blinked. His nails seemed to have thickened and grown points. They looked more like claws than she remembered.

“All it takes is a little paint and power, child.” Along the wall, Mr. Werlogus’ shadow moved. At least she thought it was his shadow, yet the shape seemed wrong somehow. The limbs were long, and there was a thin black line trailing behind him like a tail.

But the shadow evaporated as her mind flooded with a lovely image of Thomas by her side, his eyes meeting hers with complete devotion.

Thomas will be mine always. He’ll never stray, never choose another. I’ll never feel the ache of uncertainty again.

She imagined herself in Thomas’ arms. He would dance with her alone. They would spin across ballrooms, up and down Nob’s Row, forever.

Isn’t that what love is supposed to be? Safety? Certainty? Forever?

She shivered. Did someone cry? Was that a whisper? A familiar voice?

“You want it, child. An eye for an eye.”

It makes sense. I won’t have to think. I won’t have to worry. An eye for an eye.

Then, she heard Jonathan’s voice breathe one word: Forever, and Mr. Werlogus, only moments before as small as a mouse, suddenly loomed above her, his wild beady eyes boring into hers. He seemed like a giant rat, and when he smiled, his front teeth lengthened into what looked like rusty chisels over his lip, and they clicked as he bit toward one of her eyes, while Jonathan’s cold, harsh laugh echoed through the air.

Marion screamed, shoving the miniaturist aside, then she froze because the pendant burned like a lump of white-hot coal and even her glove was no protection. Yet, the pain cut through all her imaginings and made one thing clear. This pact with the lover’s eye was not love. It was evil, and she wouldn’t force Thomas into it. What if he chose Nelly Frobisher? He was free, and so was she. Yes, free!

From his sprawl on the floor, Mr. Werlogus twitched and squeaked, scrabbling to get onto his feet. She realized he’d be after her in seconds.

What did he say? He painted with fire, then fire could destroy, too.

“Good-bye, Jonathan!”

With all her might, she threw the lover’s eye into the fireplace. With a faint chink, it landed on the fire irons, then slipped into the embers, and all at once, blood-red flames blazed up, and black smoke reeking of fetid decay and rotten eggs billowed into the room. She choked and careened backwards, rushing down the corridor to tumble into the street, where she nearly collapsed on the cobblestones.

“Marion? You’re as pale as a sheet,” Thomas said in greeting, holding her up by her shoulders.

“Oh, Thomas.” Marion sagged against him, then fought to control a wave of giggles bubbling up in her chest. “I’m free! There’s so much to tell you.” She exploded in peals of laughter. “But you won’t believe any of it!” She took a breath. “Wait a minute. What are you doing here?”

He threw up his hands. “You’ve caught me.” With a sigh, he shuffled his feet. “Don’t be angry, but I asked Elise about your necklace.” He slipped off his top hat and scratched his head. “She talked a lot of nonsense and swore me to secrecy, saying something about you visiting a miniaturist in one of these buildings. That’s when I got the idea of commissioning a lover’s eye of my own to give to you. Besides, I didn’t like you being here all by yourself.” He craned his neck, looking up and down the street. “For the life of me, I couldn’t find any artist’s studio and thought Elise was mistaken. Then you came running out that door.”

With a sharp pivot, she turned around to face the House of Werlogus. There was no fire, no smoke, and even the brass plate had vanished. Only a closed door remained, which resembled all the other dreary portals along South Street—except for a fat rat that scuttled in front of it, twitching its whiskers.

Marion threw her arms around Thomas. “Never mind. I came here to return Jonathan’s pendant to the artist. I don’t want it anymore. In fact, I don’t want any lovers’ eyes.”

“You don’t? But I want you to know how I feel: I love you, Marion.”

She reached to grab Thomas’ fingers. “And I love—” She bit her lip.

“You’ve burned your hand, right through the glove.” His brow drew together with concern. “May I take you home? You need to have that looked after.”

“An accident. I’ll explain on the way.”

Marion steered him in the opposite direction of the docks, toward the bustling streets. They turned the corner, and before them, streams of people hurried before the afternoon sun melted into twilight. Marion sighed with pleasure and leaned into Thomas to tell him how happy she felt, when her gaze fell on a young woman and what looked like her elder companion at her side.

Although the young woman was obviously wealthy, wearing the latest bonnet and a fur mantelet, shadows circled her eyes, and her mouth turned down. Marion glimpsed a lover's eye hanging from her neck. The woman seemed unaware that her hand drifted to it, twiddling, toying, worrying—as her sight fixed on some grim point in the distance.

A fresh wave of horror washed over Marion as if someone had doused her with a bucket of ice water.

That would have been me.

She snuggled close to Thomas. “As soon as we get home, let’s tell my parents our good news.”

 *The End* 