

The Mask

By Richard Marsh

I. WHAT HAPPENED IN THE TRAIN

“Wigmakers have brought their art to such perfection that it is difficult to detect false hair from real. Why should not the same skill be shown in the manufacture of a mask? Our faces, in one sense, are nothing but masks. Why should not the imitation be as good as the reality? Why, for instance, should not this face of mine, as you see it, be nothing but a mask—a something which I can take off and on?”

She laid her two hands softly against her cheeks. There was a ring of laughter in her voice.

“Such a mask would not only be, in the highest sense, a work of art, but it would also be a thing of beauty—a joy for ever.”

“You think that I am beautiful?”

I could not doubt it—with her velvet skin just tinted with the bloom of health, her little dimpled chin, her ripe red lips, her flashing teeth, her great, inscrutable dark eyes, her wealth of hair which gleamed in the sunlight. I told her so.

“So you think that I am beautiful? How odd—how very odd!”

I could not tell if she was in jest or earnest. Her lips were parted by a smile. But it did not seem to me that it was laughter which was in her eyes.

“And you have only seen me, for the first time, a few hours ago?”

Such has been my ill-fortune.

She rose. She stood for a moment looking down at me.

“And you think there is nothing in my theory about—a mask?”

“On the contrary, I think there is a great deal in any theory you may advance.”

A waiter brought me a card on a salver.

“Gentleman wishes to see you, sir.”

I glanced at the card. On it was printed, “George Davis, Scotland Yard.” As I was looking at the piece of pasteboard she passed behind me.

“Perhaps I shall see you again, when we will continue our discussion about—a mask.”

I rose and bowed. She went from the verandah down the steps into the garden.

I turned to the waiter. “Who is that lady?”

“I don’t know her name, sir. She came in last night. She has a private sitting-room at No. 22.” He hesitated. Then he added, “I’m not sure, sir, but I think the lady’s name is Jaynes—Mrs. Jaynes.”

“Where is Mr. Davis? Show him into my room.”

I went to my room and awaited him. Mr. Davis proved to be a short, spare man, with iron-grey whiskers and a quiet, unassuming manner.

“You had my telegram, ‘Mr. Davis?’”

“We had, sir.”

“I believe you are not unacquainted with my name?”

“Know it very well, sir.”

“The circumstances of my case are so peculiar, Mr. Davis, that, instead of going to the local police, I thought it better to at once place myself in communication with headquarters.” Mr.

Davis bowed. "I came down yesterday afternoon by the express from Paddington. I was alone in a first-class carriage. At Swindon a young gentleman got in. He seemed to me to be about twenty-three or four years of age, and unmistakably a gentleman. We had some conversation together. At Bath he offered me a drink out of his flask. It was getting evening then. I have been hard at it for the last few weeks. I was tired. I suppose I fell asleep. In my sleep I dreamed."

"You dreamed?"

"I dreamed that I was being robbed." The detective smiled. "As you surmise, I woke up to find that my dream was real. But the curious part of the matter is that I am unable to tell you where my dream ended, and where my wakefulness began. I dreamed that something was leaning over me, rifling my person—some hideous, gasping thing which, in its eagerness, kept emitting short cries which were of the nature of barks. Although I say I dreamed this, I am not at all sure I did not actually see it taking place. The purse was drawn from my trousers pocket; something was taken out of it. I distinctly heard the chink of money, and then the purse was returned to where it was before. My watch and chain were taken, the studs out of my shirt, the links out of my wristbands. My pocketbook was treated as my purse had been—something was taken out of it and the book returned. My keys were taken. My dressing bag was taken from the rack, opened, and articles were taken out of it, though I could not see what articles they were. The bag was replaced on the rack, the keys in my pocket."

"Didn't you see the face of the person who did all this?"

"That was the curious part of it. I tried to, but I failed. It seemed to me that the face was hidden by a veil."

"The thing was simple enough. We shall have to look for your young gentleman friend."

"Wait till I have finished. The thing—I say the thing because, in my dream, I was strongly, nay, horribly under the impression that I was at the mercy of some sort of animal, some creature of the ape or monkey tribe."

"There, certainly, you dreamed."

"You think so? Still, wait a moment. The thing, whatever it was, when it had robbed me, opened my shirt at the breast, and, deliberately tearing my skin with what seemed to me to be talons, put its mouth to the wound, and, gathering my flesh between its teeth, bit me to the bone. Here is sufficient evidence to prove that then, at least, I did not dream."

Unbuttoning my shirt I showed Mr. Davis the open cicatrice.

"The pain was so intense that it awoke me. I sprang to my feet. I saw the thing."

"You saw it?"

"I saw it. It was crouching at the other end of the carriage. The door was open. I saw it for an instant as it leaped into the night."

"At what rate do you suppose the train was travelling?"

"The carriage blinds were drawn. The train had just left Newton Abbot. The creature must have been biting me when the train was actually drawn up at the platform. It leaped out of the carriage as the train was restarting."

"And did you see the face?"

"I did. It was the face of a devil."

"Excuse me, Mr. Fountain, but you're not trying on me the plot of your next novel—just to see how it goes?"

"I wish I were, my lad, but I am not. It was the face of a devil—so hideous a face that the only detail I was able to grasp was that it had a pair of eyes which gleamed at me like burning coals."

"Where was the young gentleman?"

“He had disappeared.”

“Precisely. And I suppose you did not only dream you had been robbed?”

“I had been robbed of everything which was of the slightest value, except eighteen shillings. Exactly that sum had been left in my purse.”

“Now perhaps you will give me a description of the young gentleman and his flask.”

“I swear it was not he who robbed me.”

The possibility is that he was disguised. To my eye it seems unreasonable to suppose that he should have removed his disguise while engaged in the very act of robbing you. Anyhow, you give me his description, and I shouldn't be surprised if I was able to lay my finger on him on the spot.”

I described him—the well-knit young man, with his merry eyes, his slight moustache, his graceful manners.

“If he was a thief, then I am no judge of character. There was something about him which, to my eyes, marked him as emphatically a gentleman.”

The detective only smiled,

“The first thing I shall have to do will be to telegraph all over the country a list of the stolen property. Then I may possibly treat myself to a little private think. Your story is rather a curious one, Mr. Fountain. And then later in the day I may want to say a word or two with you again. I shall find you here?”

I said that he would. When he had gone I sat down and wrote a letter. When I had finished the letter I went along the corridor towards the front door of the hotel. As I was going I saw in front of me a figure—the figure of a man. He was standing still, and his back was turned my way. But something about him struck me with such a sudden force of recognition that, stopping short, I stared. I suppose I must, unconsciously, have uttered some sort of exclamation, because the instant I stopped short, with a quick movement, he wheeled right round. We faced each other.

“You!” I exclaimed.

I hurried forward with a cry of recognition. He advanced, as I thought, to greet me. But he had only taken a step or two in my direction when he turned into a room upon his right, and, shutting the door behind him, disappeared.

“The man in the train!” I told myself.

If I had had any doubt upon the subject his sudden disappearance would have cleared my doubt away. If he was anxious to avoid a meeting with me, all the more reason why I should seek an interview with him. I went to the door of the room which he had entered and, without the slightest hesitation, I turned the handle. The room was empty—there could be no doubt of that. It was an ordinary hotel sitting-room, own brother to the one which I occupied myself, and, as I saw at a glance, contained no article of furniture behind which a person could be concealed. But at the other side of the room was another door.

“My gentleman,” I said, “has gone through that.”

Crossing the room again I turned the handle. This time without result—the door was locked. I rapped against the panels. Instantly someone addressed me from within.

“Who's that?”

The voice, to my surprise, and also somewhat to my discomfiture, was a woman's.

“Excuse me, but might I say one word to the gentleman who has just entered the room?”

“What's that? Who are you?”

“I'm the gentleman who came down with him in the train.”

“What?”

The door opened. A woman appeared—the lady whom the waiter had said he believed was a Mrs. Jaynes, and who had advanced that curious story about a mask being made to imitate the human face. She had a dressing jacket on, and her glorious hair was flowing loose over her shoulders. I was so surprised to see her that for a moment I was tongue-tied. The surprise seemed to be mutual, for, with a pretty air of bewilderment, stepping back into the room she partially closed the door.

“I thought it was the waiter. May I ask, sir, what it is you want?”

“I beg ten thousand pardons; but might I just have one word with your husband?”

“With whom, sir?”

“Your husband.”

“My husband?”

Again throwing the door wide open she stood and stared at me.

“I refer, madam, to the gentleman whom I just saw enter the room.”

“I don’t know if you intend an impertinence, sir, or merely a jest.”

Her lip curled, her eyes flashed—it was plain she was offended.

“I just saw, madam, in the corridor a gentleman with whom I travelled yesterday from London. I advanced to meet him. As I did so he turned into your sitting-room. When I followed him I found it empty, so I took it for granted he had come in here.”

“You are mistaken, sir. I know no gentleman in the hotel. As for my husband, my husband has been dead three years.”

I could not contradict her, yet it was certain I had seen the stranger turn into the outer room. I told her so.

“If any man entered my sitting-room—which was an unwarrantable liberty to take—he must be in it now. Except yourself, no one has come near my bedroom. I have had the door locked, and, as you see, I have been dressing. Are you sure you have not been dreaming?”

If I had been dreaming I had been dreaming with my eyes open; and yet, if I had seen the man enter the room—and I could have sworn I had—where was he now? She offered, with scathing irony, to let me examine her own apartment. Indeed, she opened the door so wide that I could see all over it from where I stood. It was plain enough that, with the exception of herself, it had no occupant.

And yet, I asked myself, as I retreated with my tail a little between my legs, how could I have been mistaken? The only hypothesis I could hit upon was, that my thoughts had been so deeply engaged upon the matter that they had made me the victim of hallucination. Perhaps my nervous system had temporarily been disorganised by my misadventures of the day before. And yet—and this was the final conclusion to which I came upon the matter—if I had not seen my fellow-passenger standing in front of me, a creature of flesh and blood, I would never trust the evidence of my eyes again. The most ardent ghost-seer never saw a ghost in the middle of the day.

I went for a walk towards Babbicombe. My nerves might be a little out of order— though not to the extent of seeing things which were non-existent, and it was quite possible that fresh air and exercise might do them good. I lunched at Babbicombe, spending the afternoon, as the weather was so fine, upon the seashore, in company With my thoughts, my pipe, and a book. But as the day wore on a sea mist stole over the land, and as I returned Torquaywards it was already growing dusk. I went back by way of the sea-front. As I was passing Hesketh Crescent I stood for a moment looking out into the gloom which was gathering over the sea. As I looked I heard, or I thought that I heard, a sound just behind me. As I heard it the blood seemed to run cold in my veins, and I had to clutch at the coping of the sea-wall to prevent my knees from giving way

under me. It was the sound which I had heard in my dream in the train, and which had seemed to come from the creature which was robbing me: the cry or bark of some wild beast. It came once, one short, quick, gasping bark, then all was still. I looked round, fearing to see I know not what. Nothing was in sight. Yet, although nothing could be seen, I felt that there was something there. But, as the silence continued, I began to laugh at myself beneath my breath. I had not supposed that I was such a coward as to be frightened at less than a shadow! Moving away from the walk, I was about to resume my walk, when it came again—the choking, breathless bark—so close to me that I seemed to feel the warm breath upon my cheek. Looking swiftly round, I saw, almost touching mine, the face of the creature which I had seen, but only for an instant, in the train.

II. MARY BROOKER

“Are you ill?”

“I am a little tired.”

“You look as though you had seen a ghost. I am sure you are not well.”

I did not feel well. I felt as though I had seen a ghost, and something worse than a ghost! I had found my way back to the hotel—how, I scarcely knew. The first person I met was Mrs. Jaynes. She was in the garden, which ran all round the building. My appearance seemed to occasion her anxiety.

“I am sure you are not well! Do sit down! Let me get you something to drink.”

“Thanks; I will go to my own room. I have not been very well lately. A little upsets me.”

She seemed reluctant to let me go. Her solicitude was flattering; though if there had been a little less of it I should have been equally content. She even offered me her arm. That I laughingly declined. I was not quite in such a piteous plight as to be in need of that. At last I escaped her. As I entered my sitting-room someone rose to greet me. It was Mr. Davis.

“Mr. Fountain, are you not well?”

My appearance seemed to strike him as it had struck the lady.

“I have had a shock. Will you ring the bell and order me some brandy?”

“A shock?” He looked at me curiously. “What sort of a shock?”

“I will tell you when you have ordered the brandy. I really am in need of something to revive me. I fancy my nervous system must be altogether out of order.”

He rang the bell. I sank into an easy-chair, really grateful for the support which it afforded me. Although he sat still I was conscious that his eyes were on me all the time. When the waiter had brought the brandy Mr. Davis gave rein to his curiosity.

“I hope that nothing serious has happened.”

“It depends upon what you call serious. I paused to allow the spirit to take effect. It did me good. “You remember what I told you about the strange sound which was uttered by the creature which robbed me in the train? I have heard that sound again.”

“Indeed!” He observed me attentively. I had thought he would be sceptical; he was not. “Can you describe the sound?”

“It is difficult to describe, though when it is once heard it is impossible not to recognise it when it is heard again.” I shuddered as I thought of it. “It is like the cry of some wild beast when in a state of frenzy—just a short, jerky, half-strangled yelp.”

“May I ask what were the circumstances under which you heard it?”

“I was looking at the sea in front of Hesketh Crescent. I heard it close behind me, not once, but twice; and the second time I—I saw the face which I saw in the train.”

I took another drink of brandy. I fancy that Mr. Davis saw how even the mere recollection affected me.

“Do you think that your assailant could by any possibility have been a woman?”

“A woman!”

“Was the face you saw anything like that?”

He produced from his pocket a pocketbook, and from the pocket-book a photograph. ‘He handed it to me. I regarded it intently. It was not a good photograph, but it was a strange one. The more I looked at it the more it grew upon me that there was a likeness—a dim and fugitive likeness, but still a likeness, to the face which had glared at me only half an hour before.

“But surely this is not a woman?”

“Tell me, first of all, if you trace in it any resemblance.”

“I do, and I don’t. In the portrait the face, as I know it, is grossly flattered; and yet in the portrait it is sufficiently hideous.”

Mr. Davis stood up. He seemed a little excited.

“I believe I have hit it!”

“You have hit it?”

“The portrait which you hold in your hand is the portrait of a criminal lunatic who escaped last week from Broadmoor.”

“A criminal lunatic!”

As I looked at the portrait I perceived that it was the face of a lunatic.

“The woman—for it is a woman—is a perfect devil—as artful as she is wicked. She was there during Her Majesty’s pleasure for a murder which was attended with details of horrible cruelty. She was more than suspected of having had a hand in other crimes. Since that portrait was taken she has deliberately burnt her face with a red-hot poker, disfiguring herself almost beyond recognition.”

“There is another circumstance which I should mention, Mr. Davis. Do you know that this morning I saw the young gentleman too?”

The detective stared.

“What young gentleman?”

“The young fellow who got into the train at Swindon, and who offered me his flask.”

“You saw him! Where?”

“Here, in the hotel.”

“The devil you did! And you spoke to him?”

“I tried to.”

“And he hooked it?”

“That is the odd part of the thing. You will say there is something odd about everything I tell you; and I must confess there is. When you left me this morning I wrote a letter; when I had written it I left the room. As I was going along the corridor I saw, in front of me, the young man who was with me in the train.”

“You are sure it was he?”

“Certain. When first I saw him he had his back to me. I suppose he heard me coming. Anyhow, he turned, and we were face to face. The recognition, I believe, was mutual, because as I advanced—”

“He cut his lucky?”

“He turned into a room upon his right.”

“Of course you followed him?”

“I did. I made no bones about it. I was not three seconds after him, but when I entered, the room was empty.”

“Empty!”

“It was an ordinary sitting-room like this, but on the other side of it there was a door. I tried that door. It was locked. I rapped with my knuckles. A woman answered.”

“A woman?”

“A woman. She not only answered, she came out.”

“Was she anything like that portrait?”

I laughed. The idea of instituting any comparison between the horror in the portrait and that vision of health and loveliness was too ludicrous.

“She was a lady who is stopping in the hotel, with whom I already had had some conversation, and who is about as unlike that portrait as anything could possibly be—a Mrs. Jaynes.”

“Jaynes? A Mrs. Jaynes?” The detective bit his finger-nails. He seemed to be turning something over in his mind. “And did you see the man?”

“That is where the oddness of the thing comes in. She declared that there was no man.”

“What do you mean?”

“She declared that no one had been near her bedroom while she had been in it. That there was no one in it at that particular moment is beyond a doubt, because she opened the door to let me see. I am inclined to think, upon reflection, that, after all, the man may have been concealed in the outer room, that I overlooked him in my haste, and that he made good his escape while I was knocking at the lady’s door.”

“But if he had a finger in the pie, that knocks the other theory upon the head.” He nodded towards the portrait which I still was holding in my hand. “A man like that would scarcely have such a pal as Mary Brooker.”

“I confess, Mr. Davis, that the whole affair is a mystery to me. I suppose that your theory is that the flask out of which I drank was drugged?”

“I should say upon the face of it that there can’t be two doubts about that.” The detective stood reflecting. “I should like to have a look at this Mrs. Jaynes. I will have a look at her. I’ll go down to the office here, and I think it’s just possible that I may be treated to a peep at her room.”

When he had gone I was haunted by the thought of that criminal lunatic, who was at least so far sane that she had been able to make good her escape from Broadmoor. It was only when Mr. Davis had left me that I discovered that he had left the portrait behind him. I looked at it. What a face it was!

“Think,” I said to myself, “of being left at the mercy of such a woman as that!”

The words had scarcely left my lips when, without any warning, the door of my room opened, and, just as I was taking it for granted that it was Mr. Davis come back for the portrait, in walked the young man with whom I had travelled in the train! He was dressed exactly as he had been yesterday, and wore the same indefinable but unmistakable something which denotes good breeding.

“Excuse me,” he observed, as he stood with the handle of the door in one hand and his hat in the other, “but I believe you are the gentleman with whom I travelled yesterday from Swindon?” In my surprise I was for a moment tongue-tied. “I do not think I have made a mistake.”

“No,” I said, or rather stammered, “you have not made a mistake.”

“It is only by a fortunate accident that I have just learnt that you are staying in the hotel. Pardon my intrusion, but when I changed carriages at Exeter I left behind me a cigar-case.”

“A cigar-case?”

“Did you notice it? I thought it might have caught your eye. It was a present to me, and one I greatly valued. It matched this flask.”

Coming a step or two towards me he held out a flask—the identical flask from which I had drunk! I stared alternately at him and at his flask.

“I was not aware that you changed carriages at Exeter.”

“I wondered if you noticed it. I fancy you were asleep.”

“A singular thing happened to me before I reached my journey’s end—a singular and a disagreeable thing.”

“How do you mean?”

“I was robbed.”

“Robbed?”

“Did you notice anybody get into the carriage when you, as you say, got out?”

“Not that I am aware of. You know it was pretty dark. Why, good gracious! is it possible that after all it wasn’t my imagination?”

“What wasn’t your imagination?”

He came closer to me—so close that he touched my sleeve with his gloved hand.

“Do you know why I left the carriage when I did? I left it because I was bothered by the thought that there was someone in it besides us two.”

“Someone in it besides us two?”

“Someone underneath the seat. I was dozing off as you were doing. More than once I woke ‘up under the impression that someone was twitching my legs beneath the seat; pinching them—even pricking them.”

“Did you not look to see if anyone was there?”

“You will laugh at me, but—I suppose I was silly—something restrained me. I preferred to make a bolt of it, and become the victim of my own imagination.”

“You left me to become the victim of something besides your imagination, if what you say is correct.”

All at once the stranger made a dart at the table. I suppose he had seen the portrait lying there, because, without any sort of ceremony, he picked it up and stared at it. As I observed him, commenting inwardly about the fellow’s coolness, I distinctly saw a shudder pass all over him. Possibly it was a shudder of aversion, because, when he had stared his fill, he turned to me and asked—“Who, may I ask, is this hideous-looking creature?”

“That is a criminal lunatic who has escaped from Broadmoor—one Mary Brooker.”

“Mary Brooker! Mary Brooker! Mary Brooker’s face will haunt me for many a day.”

He laid the portrait down hesitatingly, as if it had for him some dreadful fascination which made him reluctant to let it go. Wholly at a loss what to say or do, whether to detain the man or to permit him to depart, I turned away and moved across the room. The instant I did so I heard behind me the sharp, frenzied yelp which I had heard in the train, and which I had heard again when I had been looking at the sea in front of Hesketh Crescent. I turned as on a pivot. The young man was staring at me.

“Did you hear that?” he said.

“Hear it! Of course I heard it.”

“Good God!” He was shuddering so that it seemed to me that he could scarcely stand. “Do you know that it was that sound, coming from underneath the seat in the carriage, which made me make a bolt of it? I—I’m afraid you must excuse me. There—there’s my card. I’m staying at the ‘Royal.’ I will perhaps look you up again to-morrow.”

Before I had recovered my presence of mind sufficiently to interfere he had moved to the door and was out of the room. As he went out Mr. Davis entered; they must have brushed each other as they passed.

"I forgot the portrait of that Brooker woman," Mr. Davis began.

"Why didn't you stop him?" I exclaimed.

"Stop whom?"

"Didn't you see him—the man who just went out?"

"Why should I stop him? Isn't he a friend of yours?"

"He's the man who travelled in the carriage with me from Swindon."

Davis was out of the room like a flash of lightning. When he returned he returned alone.

"Where is he?" I demanded.

"That's what I should like to know." Mr. Davis wiped his brow. "He must have travelled at the rate of about sixty miles an hour—he's nowhere to be seen. Whatever made you let him go?"

"He has left his card." I took it up. It was inscribed "George Etherege, Coliseum Club." "He says he is staying at the 'Royal Hotel.' I don't believe he had anything to do with the robbery. He came to me in the most natural manner possible to inquire for a cigar-case which he left behind him in the carriage. He says that while I was sleeping he changed carriages at Exeter because he suspected that someone was underneath the seat."

"Did he, indeed?"

"He says that he did not look to see if anybody was actually there because—well, something restrained him."

"I should like to have a little conversation with that young gentleman."

"I believe he speaks the truth, for this reason. While he was talking there came the sound which I have described to you before."

"The sort of bark?"

"The sort of bark. There was nothing to show from whence it came. I declare to you that it seemed to me that it came out of space. I never saw a man so frightened as he was. As he stood trembling, just where you are standing now, he stammered out that it was because he had heard that sound come from underneath the seat in the carriage that he had decided that discretion was the better part of valour, and, instead of gratifying his curiosity, had chosen to retreat."

III. THE SECRET OF THE MASK

Table d'hôte had commenced when I sat down. My right-hand neighbour was Mrs. Jaynes. She asked me if I still suffered any ill effects from my fatigue.

"I suppose," she said, when I assured her that all ill effects had passed away, "that you have not thought anything of what I said to you this morning—about my theory of the mask?"

I confessed that I had not.

"You should. It is a subject which is a crotchet of mine, and to which I have devoted many years—many curious years of my life."

"I own that, personally, I do not see exactly where the interest comes in."

"No? Do me a favour. Come to my sitting-room after dinner, and I will show you where the interest comes in."

"How do you mean?"

"Come and see."

She amused me. I went and saw. Dinner being finished, her proceedings, when together we entered her apartment—that apartment which in the morning I thought I had seen entered by my fellow-passenger—took me a little by surprise.

“Now I am going to make you my confidant—you, an entire stranger—you, whom I never saw in my life before this morning. I am a judge of character, and in you I feel that I may place implicit confidence. I am going to show you all my secrets; I am going to induct you into the hidden mysteries; I am going to lay bare before you the mind of an inventor. But it doesn’t follow because I have confidence in you that I have confidence in all the world besides, so, before we begin, if you please, I will lock the door.”

As she was suiting the action to the word I ventured to remonstrate.

“But, my dear madam, don’t you think——”

“I think nothing. I know that I don’t wish to be taken unawares, and to have published what I have devoted the better portion of my life to keeping secret.”

“But if these matters are of such a confidential nature I assure you——”

“My good sir, I lock the door.”

She did. I was sorry that I had accepted so hastily her invitation, but I yielded. The door was locked. Going to the fireplace she leaned her arm upon the mantel-shelf.

“Did it ever occur to you,” she asked, “what possibilities might be open to us if, for instance, Smith could temporarily become Jones?”

“I don’t quite follow you,” I said. I did not.

“Suppose that you could at will become another person, and in the character of that other person could move about unrecognised among your friends, what lessons you might learn!”

“I suspect,” I murmured, “that they would for the most part be lessons of a decidedly unpleasant kind.”

“Carry the idea a step further. Think of the possibilities of a dual existence. Think of living two distinct and separate lives. Think of doing as Robinson what you condemn as Brown. Think of doubling the parts and hiding within your own breast the secret of the double; think of leading a triple life; think of leading many lives in one—of being the old man and the young, the husband and the wife, the father and the son.”

“Think, in other words, of the unattainable.”

“Not unattainable!” Moving away from the mantel-shelf she raised her hand above her head with a gesture which was all at once dramatic. “I have attained!”

“You have attained? To what?”

“To the multiple existence. It is the secret of the mask. I told myself some years ago that it ought to be possible to make a mask which should in every respect so closely resemble the human countenance that it would be difficult, if not impossible, even under the most trying conditions, to tell the false face from the real. I made experiments. I succeeded. I learnt the secret of the mask. Look at, that.”

She took a leather case from her pocket. Abstracting its contents, she handed them to me. I was holding in my hand what seemed to me to be a preparation of some sort of skin—gold-beater’s skin, it might have been. On one side it was curiously, and even delicately, painted. On the other side there were fastened to the skin some oddly-shaped bosses or pads. The whole affair, I suppose, did not weigh half an ounce. While I was examining it Mrs. Jaynes stood looking down at me.

“You hold in your hand,” she said, “the secret of the mask. Give it to me.”

I gave it to her. With it in her hand she disappeared into the room beyond. Hardly had she vanished than the bedroom door reopened, and an old lady came out.

“My daughter begs you will excuse her.” She was a quaint old lady, about sixty years of age, with silver hair, and the corkscrew ringlets of a bygone day. “My daughter is not very ceremonious, and is so wrapt up in what she calls her experiments that I sometimes tell her she is wanting in consideration. While she is making her preparations, perhaps you will allow me to offer you a cup of tea.”

The old lady carried a canister in her hand, which, apparently, contained tea. A tea-service was standing on a little side-table; a kettle was singing on the hob. The old lady began to measure out the tea into the teapot.

“We always carry our tea with us. Neither my daughter nor I care for the tea which they give you in hotels.”

I meekly acquiesced. To tell the truth, I was a trifle bewildered. I had had no idea that Mrs. Jaynes was accompanied by her mother. Had not the old lady come out of the room immediately after the young one had gone into it I should have suspected a trick—that I was being made the subject of experiment with the mysterious “mask.” As it was, I was more than half inclined to ask her if she was really what she seemed to be. But I decided—as it turned out most unfortunately—to keep my own counsel and to watch the sequence of events. Pouring me out a cup of tea, the old lady seated herself on a low chair in front of the fire.

“My daughter thinks a great deal of her experiments. I hope you will not encourage her. She quite frightens me at times; she says such dreadful things.”

I sipped my tea and smiled.

“I don’t think there is much cause for fear.”

“No cause for fear when she tells one that she might commit a murder; that a hundred thousand people might see her do it, and that not by any possibility could the crime be brought home to her!”

“Perhaps she exaggerates a little.”

“Do you think that she can hear?”

The old lady glanced round in the direction of the bedroom door.

“You should know better than I. Perhaps it would be as well to say nothing which you would not like her to hear.”

“But I must tell someone. It frightens me. She says it is a dream she had.”

“I don’t think, if I were you, I would pay much attention to a dream.”

The old lady rose from her seat. I did not altogether like her manner. She came and stood in front of me, rubbing her hands, nervously, one over the other. She certainly seemed considerably disturbed.

“She came down yesterday from London, and she says she dreamed that she tried one of her experiments—in the train.

“In the train!”

“And in order that her experiment might be thorough she robbed a man.”

“She robbed a man!”

“And in her pocket I found this.”

The old lady held out my watch and chain! It was unmistakable. The watch was a hunter. I could see that my crest and monogram were engraved upon the case. I stood up. The strangest part of the affair was that when I gained my feet it seemed as though something had happened to

my legs—I could not move them. Probably something in my demeanour struck the old lady as strange. She smiled at me.

“What is the matter with you? Why do you look so funny?” she exclaimed.

“That is my watch and chain.”

“Your watch and chain—yours! Then why don’t you take them?”

She held them out to me in her extended palm. She was not six feet from where I stood, yet I could not reach them. My feet seemed glued to the floor.

“I—I cannot move. Something has happened to my legs.”

“Perhaps it is the tea. I will go and tell my daughter.”

Before I could say a word to stop her she was gone. I was fastened like a post to the ground. What had happened to me was more than I could say. It had all come in an instant. I felt as I had felt in the railway carriage the day before—as though I were in a dream. I looked around me. I saw the teacup on the little table at my side, I saw the flickering fire, I saw the shaded lamps; I was conscious of the presence of all these things, but I saw them as if I saw them in a dream. A sense of nausea was stealing over me—a sense of horror. I was afraid of I knew not what. I was unable to ward off or to control my fear.

I cannot say how long I stood there—certainly some minutes—helpless, struggling against the pressure which seemed to weigh upon my brain. Suddenly, without any sort of warning, the bedroom door opened, and there walked into the room the young man who, before dinner, had visited me in my own apartment, and who yesterday had travelled with me in the train. He came straight across the room, and, with the most perfect coolness, stood right in front of me. I could see that in his shirt-front were my studs. When he raised his hands I could see that in his wristbands were my links. I could see that he was wearing my watch and chain. He was actually holding my watch in his hand when he addressed me.

“I have only half a minute to spare, but I wanted to speak to you about—Mary Brooker. I saw her portrait in your room—you remember? She’s what is called a criminal lunatic, and she’s escaped from Broadmoor. Let me see, I think it was a week to-day, and just about this time— no, it’s now a quarter to nine; it was just after nine.” He slipped my watch into his waistcoat-pocket. “She’s still at large, you know. They’re on the look-out for her all over England, but she’s still at large. They say she’s a lunatic. There are lunatics at Broadmoor, but she’s not one. She’s no more a lunatic than you or I.”

He touched me lightly on the chest; such was my extreme disgust at being brought into physical contact with him that even before the slight pressure of his fingers my legs gave way under me, and I sank back into my chair.

“You’re not asleep?”

“No,” I said, “I’m not asleep.”

Even in my stupefied condition I was conscious of a desire to leap up and take him by the throat. Nothing of this, however, was portrayed upon my face, or, at any rate, he showed no sign of being struck by it.

“She’s a misunderstood genius, that’s what Mary Brooker is. She has her tastes and people do not understand them; she likes to kill—to kill! One of these days she means to kill herself, but in the meantime she takes pleasure in killing others.”

Seating himself on a corner of the table at my side, allowing one foot to rest upon the ground, he swung the other in the air.

“She’s a bit of an actress too. She wanted to go upon the stage, but they said that she was mad. They were jealous, that’s what it was. She’s the finest actress in the world. Her acting would

deceive the devil himself—they allowed that even at Broad-moor—but she only uses her powers for acting to gratify her taste—for killing. It was only the other day she bought this knife.”

He took, apparently out of the bosom of his vest, a long, glittering, cruel-looking knife.

“It’s sharp. Feel the point—and the edge.”

He held it out towards me. I did not attempt to touch it; it is probable that I should not have succeeded even if I had attempted.

“You won’t? Well, perhaps you’re right. It’s not much fun killing people with a knife. A knife’s all very well for cutting them up afterwards, but she likes to do the actual killing with her own hands and nails. I shouldn’t be surprised if, one of these days, she were to kill you—perhaps to-night. It is a long time since she killed anyone, and she is hungry. Sorry I can’t stay; but this day week she escaped from Broadmoor as the clock had finished striking nine, and it only wants ten minutes, you see.”

He looked at my watch, even holding it out for me to see.

“Good-night.”

With a careless nod he moved across the room, holding the glittering knife in his hand. When he reached the bedroom door he turned and smiled. Raising the knife he waved it towards me in the air; then he disappeared into the inner room.

I was again alone—possibly for a minute or more; but this time it seemed to me that my solitude continued only for a few fleeting seconds. Perhaps the time went faster because I felt, or thought I felt, that the pressure on my brain was giving way, that I only had to make an effort of sufficient force to be myself again and free. The power of making such an effort was temporarily absent, but something within seemed to tell me that at any moment it might return. The bedroom door—that door which, even as I look back, seems to have been really and truly a door in some unpleasant dream—reopened. Mrs. Jaynes came in; with rapid strides she swept across the room; she had something in her right hand, which she threw upon the table.

“Well,” she cried, “what do you think of the secret of the mask?”

“The secret of the mask?”

Although my limbs were powerless throughout it all I retained, to a certain extent, the control of my own voice.

“See here, it is such a little thing,” She picked up the two objects which she had thrown upon the table. One of them was the preparation of some sort of skin which she had shown to me before. “These are the masks. You would not think that they were perfect representations of the human face—that masterpiece of creative art—and yet they are. All the world would be deceived by them as you have been. This is an old woman’s face, this is the face of a young man.” As she held them up I could see, though still a little dimly, that the objects which she dangled before my eyes were, as she said, veritable masks. “So perfect are they, they might have been skinned from the fronts of living creatures. They are such little things, yet I have made them with what toil! They have been the work of years, these two, and just one other. You see nothing satisfied me but perfection; I have made hundreds to make these two. People could not make out what I was doing; they thought that I was making toys; I told them that I was. They smiled at me; they thought that it was a new phase of madness. If that be so, then in madness there is more cool, enduring, unconquerable resolution than in all your sanity. I meant to conquer, and I did, Failure did not dishearten me; I went straight on. I had a purpose to fulfil; I would have fulfilled it even though I should have had first to die. Well, it is fulfilled.”

Turning, she flung the masks into the fire; they were immediately in flames. She pointed to them as they burned.

“The labour of years is soon consumed. But I should not have triumphed had I not been endowed with genius—the genius of the actor’s art. I told myself that I would play certain parts—parts which would fit the masks—and that I would be the parts I played. Not only across the footlights, not only with a certain amount of space between my audience and me, not only for the passing hour, but, if I chose, for ever and for aye. So all through the years I rehearsed these parts when I was not engaged upon the masks. That, they thought, was madness in another phase. One of the parts”— she came closer to me; her voice became shriller —“one of the parts was that of an old woman. Have you seen her? She is in the fire.” She jerked her thumb in the direction of the fireplace. “Her part is played—she had to see that the tea was drunk. Another of the parts was that of a young gentleman. Think of my playing the man! Absurd. For there is that about a woman which is not to be disguised. She always reveals her sex when she puts on men’s clothes. You noticed it, did you not—when, before dinner, he came to you; when you saw him in the corridor this morning; when yesterday he spent an hour with you in the train? I know you noticed it because of these.”

She drew out of her pocket a handful of things. There were my links, my studs, my watch and chain, and other properties of mine. Although the influence of the drug which had been administered to me in the tea was passing off, I felt, even more than ever, as though I were an actor in a dream.

“The third part which I chose to play was the part of—Mrs. Jaynes!”

Clasping her hands behind her back, she posed in front of me in an attitude which was essentially dramatic.

“Look at me well. Scan all my points. Appraise me. You say that I am beautiful. I saw that you admired my hair, which flows loose upon my shoulders”—she unloosed the fastenings of her hair so that it did flow loose upon her shoulders—“the bloom upon my cheeks, the dimple in my chin, my face in its entirety. It is the secret of the mask, my friend, the secret of the mask! You ask me why I have watched, and toiled, and schemed to make the secret mine.” She stretched out her hand with an uncanny gesture. “Because I wished to gratify my taste for killing. Yesterday I might have killed you; to-night I will.”

She did something to her head and dress. There was a rustle of drapery. It was like a conjurer’s change. Mrs. Jaynes had gone, and instead there stood before me the creature with, as I had described it to Davis, the face of a devil—the face I had seen in the train. The transformation in its entirety was wonderful. Mrs. Jaynes was a fine, stately woman with a swelling bust and in the prime of life. This was a lank, scraggy creature, with short, grey hair—fifty if a day. The change extended even to the voice. Mrs. Jaynes had the soft, cultivated accents of a lady. This creature shrieked rather than spoke.

“I,” she screamed, “am Mary Brooker. It is a week to-day since I won freedom. The bloodhounds are everywhere upon my track. They are drawing near. But they shall not have me till I have first of all had you.”

She came closer, crouching forward, glaring at me with a maniac’s eyes. From her lips there came that hideous cry, half gasp, half yelp, which had haunted me since the day before, when I heard it in my stupor in the train.

“I scratched you yesterday. I bit you. I sucked your blood. Now I will suck it dry, for you are mine.”

She reckoned without her host. I had only sipped the tea. I had not, as I had doubtless been intended to do, emptied the cup. I was again master of myself; I was only awaiting a favourable opportunity to close. I meant to fight for life.

She came nearer to me and nearer, uttering all the time that blood-curdling sound which was so like the frenzied cry of some maddened animal. When her extended hands were all but touching me I rose up and took her by the throat. She had evidently supposed that I was still under the influence of the drug, because when I seized her she gave a shriek of astonished rage. I had taken her unawares. I had her over on her back. But I soon found that I had undertaken more than I could carry through. She had not only the face of a devil, she had the strength of one. She flung me off as easily as though I were a child. In her turn she had me down upon my back. Her fingers closed about my neck. I could not shake her off She was strangling me.

She would have strangled me—she nearly did. When, attracted by the creature's hideous cries, which were heard from without, they forced their way into the room, they found me lying unconscious, and, as they thought, dead, upon the floor. For days I hung between life and death. When life did come back again Mary Brooker was once more an inmate of Her Majesty's house of detention at Broadmoor.