

The Mackintosh Masque

BY
W. BERT FOSTER

At least it was an honest occupation and one which a gentleman could assume. Yet I was grateful to Fate, having been set down in a strange city where no soul knew me. If one is obliged to be penniless it is better so, and Mr. Moe Levy was enthusiastic regarding his scheme, and it did, I must confess, show an inventive turn of mind. Mr. Levy racked his brain daily for new and startling advertising displays, and the mackintosh masque certainly kept a throng in front of his huge display window. It was arranged in this way: At the rear of the window was a square booth, six feet high, and enclosed in brown curtains. This was divided in the middle with a curtain, and in the rear part was a chair in which I could sit to rest myself between my appearances in the front compartment of the booth as the "animated dummy."

The real dummy was a figure of just my height, with a waxen face which was made lifelike and sufficiently like my own to be a startling resemblance. Each morning at half past 8, when I went to work, I "made up" with grease paint and rouge until I was the exact counterpart of the wax dummy. On the dummy was a fine brown mackintosh; I wore a black one. There was a clock arrangement in the back of the dummy's head which, when wound up, made the figure walk and roll its eyes in a most natural manner. And not regularly, either, but with sufficient lapses between to make the thing seem wonderfully human.

I would display the dummy for a while, keeping out of sight myself behind the dividing curtain; then the front curtains of the booth would be drawn, I rolled the dummy back into the rear compartment, and carefully assumed its attitude in the front, the curtains of which were then drawn aside again. The change took about the length of time it would have demanded to have exchanged the mackintoshes. A big sign offered a pair of rubber overalls to every customer who, during the month, guessed which was the man and which was the dummy. And I flatter myself that I filled the dummy's part most excellently. The guesses piled up in Moe Levy's safe, and the old man rubbed his hands delightedly to see that far more guessed that I was the dummy than vice versa.

I never stood in the dummy's place more than half an hour at a time, and for that stretch I could keep a perfectly impassive expression and sometimes even winked or rolled my eyes with the precision of clockwork. Once a man stood out in front with his watch, timing these eye movements, for the purpose of discovering, I suppose, if the movements were really mechanical. I could hear my own watch ticking in my vest pocket, and I rolled my eyes every sixty seconds exactly during the half hour. Then I made the change, and as coqs on the wheel of the dummy's mechanism were broken off at uneven intervals the dummy's eye rollings actually seemed more like life than my own. The man with the watch walked in and wrote down his guess that I was the mechanical figure. I grew interested in my daily audience; one could not help that. Many of the same people passed Moe Levy's corner daily, and it was seldom that the unhurried person did not halt to watch either the dummy or me. Small boys tried to make me laugh by cutting up antics in front of the window. One youth made believe to throw a cobble stone through the window at my head, but I had long since learned to control my features. Occasionally a fly buzzing about my head gave me some trouble and once a desire to sneeze possessed me so strongly that had I not had under my foot a spring by which the curtains of the booth were dropped instantly I would have given the street an exhibition of a dummy shouting "ahoo!" with most human vehemence.

It was when the month was almost completed, and I was wondering where my next job was to rise from, that I began to notice a young man standing before the window of the rubber goods store, sometimes for half an hour at a stretch, and several times a day. He evidently was as

At least I was told that if the work did not suit me I might drop it at any point. I thought much about it that night and the next day. When I left Moe Levy's at last with the balance of the small sum which was coming to me, and allowed myself to contemplate how short a time that sum would keep me in shelter and from starvation, I read the address on the card with renewed interest. It took me to a part of the town I had not been in before—a shabby neighborhood, but not at all threatening. One of those streets, merely, that display the tarnish of departed grandeur. It was once a fashionable avenue.

Ellis was the name on the card. I found that he was merely a boarder here, and his room was as shabby as the house itself. It did not look like the abode of a man who could afford to pay \$10 an hour for any kind of labor. "What do you wish me to do?" I asked him, after our brief greeting.

"That you are not to ask. That is, I shall refuse to tell you any of the details. It is—er—shen!—a family matter."

I have heard that expression before. It usually masks a deal of scandal or devilry. I told him so bluntly enough, for I found myself unable to respect the man. His was not an attractive personality.

"What matters it, as long as your neck is not in the noose?" he growled. "I'll tell you this much. I hinted at it before. You are to act the spy."

"Not alone," I said.

"But the money is nice." He drew a crisp \$10 note from his pocket and shoved it toward me across the table. "A retainer," he said. "All you need to do tonight is to let me fit you for your part."

"Fit me?"

"You see, I was attracted to you because of your ability to control the muscles of your face so well and—for another reason. Yours is a wonderful power. Do you think you could remain impassive—as to your face, I mean—for an hour or so?"

"I believe so."

"That will be all your work, then."

"But low?"

"That you shall not know until tomorrow night," he returned, shaking his head and scowling. "Remember, I tell you that you can drop the matter at any point you like. But I won't explain any further now."

"O, go ahead," I grunted, pocketing the bill.

What he then did explained nothing whatsoever to me, although it kept me awake half the night trying to solve the mystery. He brought forth a large sheet of heavy drafting paper, took measurements of the size of my face and head with the aid of a pair of compasses, and from these measurements drew on the paper an outline of my face. This he neatly cut out and then fitted the aperture more nicely to the contour of my visage. My face was thrust through the hole in the paper to the roots of my hair and the point of my chin.

"You seem good at making up," he observed. "There is a make-up box yonder. Heighten your color, especially under the eyes. Give your face a hard, mask-like appearance."

I obeyed. Again he had me thrust my face through the hole in the paper, backed me up against the wall, and went to the end of the room to observe the effect.

"I am satisfied," he remarked at last. "That will be all tonight. Come here tomorrow afternoon at 8."

Did ever a man earn \$10 so easily? But, as I say, I laid awake long trying to solve the problem he had set me. The uncertainty, if nothing else, would have brought me promptly to time the following day. Ellis was no more communicative than before. He ordered me to make up my face again, and when I had done so to his satisfaction I was obliged to muffle up so as to hide the face paint and go out with him. We walked several blocks, and toward the open country. At last coming in sight of a big dark house, which set back some distance from the road, he gave me final instructions.

"I am due in yonder to dinner," he said, briefly.

"Hang about here within hearing. I shall whistle sharply when I want you. Enter by a side gate you will find around on the other street."

"And what then?"

"That I shall not tell you. Remember our bargain," and he walked off before I could argue the point.

I saw him enter by the front door, after ringing. As I made a circuit of the house I saw that there was a light in the kitchen, and likewise in what I supposed was the dining room on the first floor. All the remainder of the house was darkened. It was an almost deserted neighborhood. The only soul I saw was a policeman who passed the corner. Fortunately I was walking steadily at the time and he favored me with but a single glance. It was two hours, or more, however, before I heard Ellis' whistle. I had not heard him leave the house, nor did I see him; but I obeyed his mandate and opened the side gate.

The path before me was weedgrown and led to a porch upon which I stepped doubtfully. It was not until I had stood there in uncertainty a minute or two that I made out a door ajar just in front of me.

"Enter!" growled a voice which I recognized as my employer's.

Curiosity, as well as a desire to earn another ten dollars, impelled me forward. When I had stepped within he closed the door softly and, taking my hand, led me with a warning "Sh!" up a flight of stairs.

On what seemed, in the dark, to be a landing, we halted. The wall by my right was paneled and, after some fumbling, Ellis removed a board and set it carefully to

"Fool! What do I know? Did I know, would I pay you to discover?"

"You will first see an old man whom I shall accompany into the room before I bid him good-night. He will remain. I want you to see and remember everything he does—everything, mind—while he remains alone there. Now, will you obey, or do you drop the matter here?"

"I obey."

He thrust me down upon my knees and I put my face carefully through the hole in the paneled wall. I heard a voice calling below stairs.

"I must go," Ellis whispered. "Remain as you are. Remember everything you see. When the old man retires with the light, you may come downstairs and open the doors. I shall wait upon the porch for you and will return and put back the paneled wall."

He sped away and left me kneeling in the dark, my body on the stair landing, my eyes seeking to explore the fathomless darkness of the room in which the paneled wall hung.

Almost immediately a door opened and light streamed into the place. Then I saw why it had been so dark. Every window was shuttered, and draped as well by heavy portières. The room was a library, although the glass doors of the old bookcase were thick with dust and seemed not to have been opened in months.

At one end of the room was a yawning black fireplace, with a mantel above and tiling around it. At the opposite end of the room was a table covered with a white cloth, as he came in, set down the lamp he carried. Behind him walked a bent old figure—a man in shabby clothing, whose yellow, clawlike hands and wrinkled face made him no more prepossessing than my employer.

"Well, uncle, I'll bid you good-night," Ellis said, cheerfully, turning toward the door again. "Hope you'll sleep well."

"O, yes! O, yes!" croaked the old man, standing at one side, wringing his hands nervously, and watching the other slyly.

"Nothing more I can do for you, uncle?"

"Nothing more I'll tell you," snarled the old fellow.

I saw Ellis glance once in my direction. His gloomy face seemed to express satisfaction at my pose. He said good-night again and left the room. When the outer door of the gloomy house had closed loudly, the old man double locked the library door. Then he trotted up and down the room, examined all the casements to see that no ray of light could get out, nor an eye peer in. Then he sat down at the table,

facing the fireplace at the farther end of the room. I found that I had to roll my eyes sideways to see what he was about. Had my face not been thrust through the picture I could not have seen him at all. And what he did was no remarkable thing. He drew from a drawer a pack of greasy, well worn cards. So often had they been used they were almost oval in shape. These he shuffled and began laying out in one of the commoner games of solitaire. There was not a sound in the room but the slight rustle of the greasy cards and the sucking of the old man's toothless gums. Minute after minute passed, and never had I suffered so tedious a waiting. My month's experience in the mackintosh masque had prepared me for this ordeal, and I braver myself that had the old man glanced up and seen my face, he would not have discovered any more life in it than he might in the paneled portrait. He did glance at me occasionally. It was when he seemed to have tired of his lonely game and replaced the cards in the drawer. Then he slowly rose, hobbled down the room, and stood for a moment peering up at me. I was suddenly smitten with the thought that, despite the half darkness in the room unless my face was much like that of the portrait, he would discover the deception. But his bleared old eyes seemed to see no change, and, after a moment, and with shaking head, he moved on to the fireplace. There he stood as if hesitating, and finally ran his hand over the rows of small square tiles which filled the space between the opening of the chimney and the mantel. Suddenly one of these tiles swung outward. He thrust in his hand and

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