

## THE HAPPY HYPOCRITE (1896)

by Max Beerbohm

Lord George's eye travelled along the rows of framed letters from great personages, which lined the walls. He did not see them, though, for he was calculating the chances that La Gamboji had not observed him as he entered the mask-shop. He had come down so early that he had thought she would be still abed. The sinister old proverb, *La jalouse se lève de bonne heure*, rose in his memory. His eye fell unconsciously on a large, round mask made of dull silver, with features of a human face traced over its surface in faint filigree.

"Your lordship wonders what mask that is?" chirped Mr. Aeneas, tapping the thing with one of his little finger nails.

"What is that mask?" Lord George murmured.

"I ought not to divulge, my lord," said the mask-maker. "But I know your lordship would respect a professional secret, a secret of which I am pardonable proud. This," he said, "is a mask for the sun-god, Apollo, whom heaven bless!"

"You astound me," said Lord George.

"Of no less a person, I do assure you. When Jupiter, his father,

made him lord of the day, Apollo craved that he might sometimes see the doings of mankind in the hours of the night time. But," Mr. Aeneas added, with a smile, "his bright countenance made light all the darkness. Men rose from their couches or from their revels, wondering that the day was so soon come, and went to their work. And Apollo sank weeping into the sea. 'Surely,' he cried, 'it is a bitter thing that I alone, of all the gods, may not watch the world in the hours of night time. For in those hours, as I am told, men are even as gods are. They spill the wine and are wreathed with roses. Their daughters dance in the light of torches. They laugh to the sound of flutes. On their long couches they lie down at last, and sleep comes to kiss their eyelids. None of these things may I see. Wherefore the brightness of my beauty is even a curse to me and I would put it from me.' And as he wept, Vulcan said to him, 'I am not the least cunning of the gods, nor the least pitiful. Do not weep, for I will give you that which shall end your sorrow. Nor need you put from you the brightness of your beauty.' And Vulcan made a mask of dull silver

and fastened it across his brother's face. And that night, thus masked, the sun-god rose from the sea and watched the doings of mankind in the night time. Nor any longer were men abashed by his bright beauty, for it was hidden by the mask of silver. Those whom he had so often seen haggard over their daily tasks, he saw feasting now and wreathed with red roses. He heard them laugh to the sound of flutes, as their daughters danced in the red light of torches. And when at length they lay upon their soft couches, and sleep kissed their eyelids, he sank back into the sea and hid his mask under a little rock in the bed of the sea. Not have men ever known that Apollo watches them often in the night time, but fancied it to be some pale goddess.

"I myself have always thought it was Diana," said Lord George Hell.

"An error, my lord!" said Mr. Aeneas, with a smile. "*Ecce signum!*" And he tapped the mask of dull silver.

"Strange!" said his lordship. "And pray how comes it that Apollo has ordered of you this new mask?"

"He has always worn twelve new masks every year, inasmuch as no mask can endure for many

nights the near brightness of his face, before which even a mask of the best and purest silver soon tarnishes, and wears away. Centuries ago, Vulcan tired of making so very many masks. And so Apollo sent Mercury down to Athens, to the shop of Phoron, a Phœnician mask-maker of great skill. Phoron made Apollo's masks for many years, and every month Mercury came to his shop for a new once. When Phoron died, another artist was chosen, and when he died, another, and so on through all the ages of the world. Conceive, my lord, my pride and pleasure when Mercury flew into my shop, one night last year, and made me Apollo's warrant-holder. It is the highest privilege that any mask-maker can desire. And when I die," said Mr. Aeneas, with some emotion, "Mercury will confer my post upon another."

"And do they pay you for your labour?" Lord George asked. Mr. Aeneas drew himself up to his full height, such as it was.

"In Olympus, my lord," he said, "they have no currency. For any mask-maker, so high a privilege is its own reward. Yet the sun-god is generous. He shines more brightly into my shop than into any other. Nor does he suffer his rays to melt



any waxen mask made by me, until its wearer doff it and be done with." At this moment, Julius came in with the Ripsby mask. "I must ask your lordship's pardon for having kept you so long," pleaded Mr. Aeneas. "But I have a large store of old masks and they are imperfectly catalogued."

It certainly was a beautiful mask, with its smooth, pink cheeks and devotional brow. It was made of the finest wax. Lord George took it gingerly in his hands and tried it on his face. It fitted à merveille.

"Is the expression exactly as your lordship would wish?" Said Mr. Aeneas.

Lord George laid it on the table and studied it intently. "I wish it were more as a perfect mirror of true love," he said at length. "It is too calm, too contemplative."

"Easily remedied!" Said Mr. Aeneas. Selecting a fine pencil, deftly he drew the eyebrows closer to each other. With a brush steeped in some scarlet pigment, he put a fuller curve upon the lips. And, behold! it was the mask of a saint who loves dearly. Lord George's heart throbbed with pleasure.

"And for how long does your lordship wish to wear it?" asked Mr. Aeneas.

"I must wear it until I die," replied Lord George.

"Kindly be seated then, I pray," rejoined the little man. "For I must apply the mask with great care. Julius, you will assist me!"

So, while Julius heated the inner side of the waxen mask over a little lamp, Mr. Aeneas stood over Lord George, gently smearing his features with some sweet-scented pomade. Then he took the mask and powdered its inner side, all soft and warm now, with a fluffy puff. "Keep quite still, for one instant," he said, and clapped the mask firmly on his lordship's upturned face. So soon as he was sure of its perfect adhesion, he took from his assistant's hand a silver file and a little wooden spatula, with which he proceeded to pare down the edge of the mask, where it joined the neck and ears. At length, all traces of the "join" were obliterated. It remained only to arrange the curls of the lordly wig over the waxen brow.

The disguise was done. When Lord George looked through the eyelets of his mask into the mirror that was placed in his hand, he saw a face that was saintly, itself a mirror of true love. How wonderful it was! He felt his past was a dream. He felt he was a new man indeed. His voice went strange through the mask's parted lips, as he thanked Mr. Aeneas.