

The Mask

By Bernard Capes

Le masque tombe, l'homme reste.

There are mental modes as there are sartorial, and, commercially, the successful publisher is like the successful tailor, a man who knows how timely to exploit the fashion. Is it for the moment realism, romance, the psychic, the analytic, the homely—he makes, with Rabelais, his soup according to his bread, and feeds the multitude, as it asks, either on turtle or pease-porridge.

It was on the crest of a big psychic wave that Hands and Cumberbatch launched their *Haunted Houses*—a commonplace but quite effective title. It was all projected and floated within the compass of a few months, and it proved a first success. The idea was, of course, authentic possessions, or manifestations, and the thing was to be done in convincing style, with photogravure illustrations. The letterpress was entrusted to Penn-Howard, and the camera business to an old college friend of his selection, J.B. Lamont. The two worked in double harness, and collected between them more material than could be used. But the cream of it was in the book, though not that particular skimming I am here to present, and for whose suppression at the time there were reasons.

I knew Penn-Howard pretty intimately, and should not have thought him an ideal hand for the task. He was a younger son of Lord Staveley, and carried an Honourable to his name. A brilliant fellow, cool, practical, modern, with infinite humour and aplomb, he would yet to my mind have lacked the first essential of an evangelist, a faith in the gospel he preached. He did not, in short, believe in spooks, and his dealings with the supernatural must all have been in the nature of an urbane pyrrhonism. But he was a fine, imaginative writer, who could raise terrors he did not feel; and that, no doubt, explained in part his publishers' choice. What chiefly influenced them, however, was unquestionably his social popularity; he was known and liked everywhere, and could count most countable people among his friends, actual or potential. Where he wanted to go he went, and where he went he was welcome—an invaluable factor in this somewhat delicate business of ghost-hunting. But fashion affects even spirits, and, when the supernatural is *en vogue*, doors long jealously shut upon family secrets will be found to open themselves in a quite wonderful way. Hence, the time and the man agreeing, the success of the book.

I met Penn-Howard at Lady Caroon's during the time he was collecting his material. There were a few other guests at Hawkesbury, among them, just arrived, a tall, serious young fellow called Howick. Mr Howick, I understood, had lately succeeded, from a collateral branch, to the Howick estates in Hampshire. His sister was to have come with him, but had excused herself at the last moment—or rather, had been excused by him. She was indefinitely 'ailing', it appeared, and unfit for society. He used the word, in my hearing, with a certain hard decisiveness, in which there seemed a hint of something painful. Others may have felt it too, for the subject of the absentee was at once and discreetly waived.

Hawkesbury has its ghost—a nebulous radiance with a face that floats before one in the gloom of corridors—and naturally at some time during the evening the talk turned upon visitations. Penn-Howard was very picturesque, but, to me, unconvincing on the subject. There was no feeling behind his imagination; and, when put to it, he admitted as much. Someone had

complimented him on the gruesome originality of a story of his which had recently appeared in one of the six-penny magazines, and, quite good-humouredly, he had repudiated the term.

‘No mortal being,’ he said, ‘may claim originality for his productions. There are the three primary colours, blue, red and yellow, and the three dimensions, length, breadth and thickness. They are original; it would be original to make a fourth; only *we* can’t do it. We can only exploit creation ready-made as we find it. Everything for us is comprised within those limits—even Lady Caroon’s ghost. It is a question of selection and chemical affinities, that is all. There is no such thing here as a supernature.’

He was cried out on for his heresy to his own art—for his confession of its soullessness.

‘Soul,’ he contended at that, ‘is not wanted in art, nor is religion; but only the five unperturbed and explorative senses. Pan, I think, would have made the ideal artist.’

I saw Howick, who was sitting silently apart, suddenly hug himself at these words, bending forward and stiffening his lips, as a man does who mutely traverses a sentiment he is too shy or too superior to discuss. I did not know which it was with him; but inclined to the latter. There was something bonily professorial in his aspect.

While we were talking Lamont came in. He had not appeared at dinner, and I had not yet seen him. He was a compact, stubby man, in astigmatic glasses, and very dark, with a cleft chin, and a resolute mouth under a moustache in keeping with his strong, thick eyebrows. He gave me somehow in the connection a feeling of much greater fitness than did Penn-Howard. There was no suggestion of the *esprit-fort* about *him*, and I got an idea that, though only the technical collaborator, the right atmosphere of the book, if and when it appeared, would be due more to him than to the other. He spoke little, but authoritatively; and I remember he told us that night some queer things about photography—such, for instance, as its mysterious relation to *something* in light-rays, which was not heat and was not light, and yet like light could reveal the hidden, as a mirror reveals to one the objects out of sight behind one’s back. Thence, touching upon astral charts and composite portraits by the way, he came to his illustration, which was creepy enough. He had once for some reason, it appeared, taken a postmortem photograph. The man, the subject, had cut in life a considerable figure in the parliamentary world as an advanced advocate of social and moral reform, and had died in the odour of political sanctity. In securing the negative, circumstances had necessitated a long exposure; but accident had contrived a longer and a deadlier, in the double sense. The searchlight of the lens, being left concentrated an undue time on the lifeless face, had discovered things hitherto impenetrable and unguessed-at. The nature of the real horror had been drawn through the super-imposing veil, and the revelation of what had been existing all the time under the surface was not pleasant. The photograph had not appeared in the illustrated paper for which it was intended, and Lamont had destroyed the negative.

So he told us, in a forcible, economic way which was more effective than much verbal adornment; and again my attention was caught by Howick, who seemed dwelling upon the speaker’s words with an expression quite arresting in its ungainly intensity. Later on I saw the two in earnest conversation together.

That was in October, and I left Hawkesbury on the following day. Full ten months passed before I saw Penn-Howard again; and then one hot evening towards dusk he walked into my chambers in Brick Court and asked for a cigarette.

He seemed distraught, withdrawn, like a man who, having something on his mind, was pondering an uncompromising way of relief from it. Quite undesignedly and inevitably I gave him his cue by asking how the book progressed. He heaved out a great, smoke-laden sigh at

once, stirred, drew up and dropped his shoulders, and looked at the fiery point of his cigarette before replacing the butt between his lips.

‘O, the book!’ he said. ‘It’s ready for the press, so far as I’m concerned.’

‘And Lamont?’

‘Yes, and J.B.’

He got up, paced the width of the room and back, and stood before me, alternately drawing at and withdrawing his cigarette.

‘There’s one thing that won’t go into it,’ he said, his eyes suggesting a rather forced evasion of mine.

‘O! What’s that?’

Again, as if doubtful of himself, he turned to tramp out his restlessness or agitation; thought better of it, and sat resolutely down in a chair against the dark end of the bookcase.

‘Would you care to know?’ he said. ‘Truth is, I came to tell you—if I could; to ask your opinion on the thing. There’s the comfort of the judicial brain about you: I can imagine, like a client, that simply to confide one’s case to such is to feel relieved of a load of responsibility. It won’t go into the book, I say; but I want it to go out of me. I’m too full of it for comfort.’

‘Of *it*? Of what?’

‘What?’ he said, as if in a sudden spasm of violence. ‘I wish to God you’d tell me.’

He sat moodily silent for some minutes, and I did nothing to help him out. A hot, sour air came in by the open window, and the heavy red curtains shrank and dilated languidly in it, as if they were the lungs of the stifling room. Outside the dusty roar of the traffic went on unceasingly, with a noise like that of overhead machinery I was feeling stale and tired, and wished, in the Rooseveltian phrase, that Penn-Howard would either get on or get out.

‘It’s a queer thing, isn’t it,’ he said suddenly, with an obvious effort, ‘that of all the stuff collected for that book you were speaking of, the only authentic instance for which I can personally vouch is the only instance to be excluded? All the rest was on hearsay’

‘Well, you surprise me,’ I said, quietly, after a pause. ‘Not because any authentic instance, about which I know nothing, is excluded, but because, by your own confession, there is one to exclude.’

‘I know what you mean, of course,’ he answered; and quoted: “But, spite of all the criticizing elves, those who would make us feel must feel themselves.” Quite right. I never really believed in supernatural influences. Do I now? That is what I want you to decide for me.’

He laughed slightly; sighed again, and seemed rather to shrink into his dusky corner.

‘I’m going to tell you at a run,’ he said. ‘Bear with me, like an angelic fellow. You remember that man Howick at Lady Caroon’s?’

‘Yes, quite well.’

‘It seemed, when he learnt our business, Lamont’s and mine, that there was something he wished to tell us. He pitched upon J.B. as the more responsible partner; and I’m not sure he wasn’t right.’

‘Nor am I.’

‘O! you aren’t, are you? Well, Jemmy was my choice, anyhow, and for the sake of the qualities you think I lack. He has a way of getting behind things—always had, even at Oxford. Some men seem to know the trick by instinct. He is a very queer sort, and the featest with the camera of any one I’ve ever seen or heard of. It was for that reason I asked him to come—to get the ghostliest possible out of ghostly buildings and haunted rooms. You remember what he told us that night?’

I've seen some of his spirit photographs, though without feeling convinced. But his description of that dead face! My God! I thought at the time he was just improvising to suit the occasion; but

He stopped abruptly. There was something odd here. It was evident that, for an unknown reason, the thought of *that* time was not the thought of this. I detected an obvious emotion, quite strange to it, in Penn-Howard's voice. His face, from our positions and the dusk, was almost hidden from me. I made no comment; and thenceforth he spoke on uninterruptedly, while the room slowly darkened about us as we sat.

'Howick wanted us, at the end of our visit, to go with him to his house. Something was happening there, he said, for which he was unable to account. We could not, however, consent, owing to our engagements; but we undertook to include him sooner or later in our ghostly itinerary. He was obliged; but, being so put off, would give us no clue to the nature of the mystery which was disturbing him. As it turned out, we had no choice but to take "Haggarts" the very last on our list.'

'That is the name of his place?'

'Yes. It sounds a bit thin and eerie, doesn't it? but in point of fact, I believe, Haggart is a local word for hawthorn. We went there last of all, and we went there intending to stay a night, and we stayed seven. It was a queer business; and I come to you fresh from it.

'The estate lies slap in the middle of Hampshire. To reach it you alight at a country station which might serve roughly on the map for the hub of the county wheel. The train slides from a tunnel into a ravine of chalk, deep and dazzling, and you have to get on a level with the top of that ravine; and there at once you find immeasurable silence and loneliness. Nothing in my home peregrinations has struck me more forcibly than the real insignificance of urban expansion in its relation to the country as a whole. Towns, however they grow and multiply, remain but inconsiderable freckles on that vast open countenance. Outside the City man's possible radius, and excepting the great manufacturing centres, two miles, one mile beyond the boundary of ninety-nine towns out of a hundred will find you in pastoral solitudes apparently limitless. Here, with Winchester lying but eight miles southward, it was so. From the top of the tunnel we had just penetrated came into view, first a wilderness of thorn-scattered downs, dipping steeply and ruggedly into the railway cutting, then an endlessly extended panorama of wood and waste and field, seemingly houseless and hamlet-less, and broken only by the white scars of roads, mounting few and far like the crests of waves on a desert sea. Howick had sent a car to meet us, and we switchbacked on monotonously, by unrailed pastures, by woody bottoms, by old hedges grey with dust and dragged with straw. We saw the house long before we headed for it—a strange, ill-designed structure standing out by itself in the fields. It was an antique moat-house, disproportionately tall for its area, and its front flanked by a couple of brick towers, one squat, one lofty. One wound about the lanes to reach it, having it now at this side, now at that, now fairly at one's back, until suddenly it came into close view, a building far more grandiose and imposing than one had surmised. There was the ancient moat surrounding it, and much water channelling the flats about. But there was evidence too, at close quarters, of what one had not guessed—rich, quiet gardens, substantial outbuildings, and a general atmosphere of prosperity.

'An odd, remote place, but in itself distinctly attractive. And Howick did us well. You remember him? A tall stick of a fellow, without a laugh to his whole anatomy, and the hair gone from his temples at thirty; but with the grand manner in entertaining. We had some '47 port that night—a treat—one of a few remaining bottles laid down by his grand-uncle, Roger Howick, of whom more in a little. And everything was in mellow keeping—pictures, furniture, old crusted anecdote. Only our host was, for all his gracious unbending, somehow out of tone with his

environments—in that connection of fruitiness, like the dry nodule on a juicy apple. Constitutionally reserved, I should think, circumstance at that time had drained him of the last capacity for spontaneity. The little fits of abstraction and the wincing starts from them; the forced conversation; the atmosphere of brooding trouble felt through his most hospitable efforts—all pointed to a state of mind which he could neither conceal nor as yet indulge. Often I detected him looking furtively at J.B., often, still more secretively, at his sister, who was the only other one present at the dinner-table.’

For a moment Penn-Howard ceased speaking; and I heard him shift his position, as if suddenly cramped, and slightly clear his throat.

‘I mention her now for the first time,’ he went on presently. ‘She came in after we were seated, and there was the briefest formal introduction, of which she took no notice. She was a slender, unprepossessing woman—her brother’s senior by some ten years, I judged—with a strange, unnatural complexion, rather long, pale eyes in red rims, and a sullen manner. Responding only after the curtest fashion to any commonplaces addressed to her, she left us, much to my relief, before dessert, and we saw her no more that evening.

‘“Unfit for society”? Most assuredly she was. I remembered her brother’s words spoken ten months before, and concluded that nothing had occurred since then to qualify his verdict. A most disagreeable person; unless, perhaps—

‘It came to me all at once: was she connected with the mystery, or the mystery with her? A ghost seer, perhaps—neurotic—a victim to hallucinations? Well, Howick had not spoken so far, and it was no good speculating. I turned to the pious discussion of the ’47.

‘After dinner we went into the gardens where, the night being hot and still, we lingered until the stars came out. During the whole time Howick spoke no word of our mission; but, about the hour the household turned in, he took us back to the hall—a spacious, panelled lounge between the towers—where we settled for a pipe and nightcap. And there silence, like a ghostly overture to the impending, entered our brains and we sat, as it were, listening to it.

‘Presently Howick got up. The strained look on his face was succeeded all at once by a sort of sombre light, odd and revealing. All sound in the house had long since ceased.

‘“I want you to come with me,” he said quietly

‘We rose at once; and he went before, but a few paces, and opened a door.

‘“Yes, here,” he said, in answer to a look of J.B.’s, “quite close, quite domestic; no bogey of rat-infested corridors or tumble-down attics—no bogey at all, perhaps. It lies under the east tower, this room. When we first came here I *thought* to make it my study.”

‘He seemed to me then, and always, like a man whose strait concepts of decency had suffered some startling offence, as it might be with one into whose perfectly planned tenement had crept the insidious poison of sewer-gas. Sliding his hand along the wall, he switched on the electric light (“Haggarts” had its own power station), and the room leapt into being. We entered, I leading a little. You must remember I was by then a hardened witchfinder, and inured to atmospheres concocted of the imagination.

‘It was not a large room, and it was quite comfortable. There was a heavily clothed table in the middle, a few brass-nailed, leather-backed and seated Jacobean chairs, a high white Adams mantelpiece surmounted by a portrait, a full chippendale bookcase to either side of it, and on the walls three or four pictures, including a second portrait, of a woman, half-length in an oval frame, which hung opposite the other.

‘“Miss Howick, I see,” I murmured, turning with a nod to our host. He heard me, as his eyes denoted: but he gave no answer. And then the portrait over the mantelpiece drew my attention. It

was in a very poor style of art; yet somehow, one felt, crudely truthful in an amateurish way. There is a class of peripatetic painters, a sort of pedlars in portraiture among country folk, which, having a gift for likenesses, often succeeds photographically in delineating what a higher art inclines to idealize—the obvious in character. Such a one, I concluded, had worked here, painting just what he saw, and only too faithfully. For the obvious was not pleasant—a dark, pitiless face, with a brutal underlip and challenging green eyes, that seemed for ever fixed on the face on the wall opposite. It was that of a middle-aged man, lean and thin-haired, and must have dated, by the cut of its black, brass-buttoned coat, from the late Georgian era.

‘I turned again questioningly to Howick. This time he enlightened me. “Roger Howick,” he said, “my great-uncle. It is said he painted that himself, looking in the glass. He had a small gift. Most of the pictures in this room are by him.”

‘Instinctively I glanced once more towards the oval frame, and thought: “Most—but not that one.” Unmistakably it was a portrait of our host’s sister—the odd complexion, the sullen, fixed expression, the very dress and coiffure, they were all the same. I wondered how the living subject could endure the thought of that day-long, night-long stare focused for ever on her painted presentment.

‘And then silence ensued. We were all in the room, and not a word was spoken. I don’t know how long it lasted; but suddenly Lamont addressed me, in a quick, sharp voice:

‘ “What’s the matter, Penn-Howard?”

‘The shock of the question took me like a blow out of sleep. I answered at once: “Something’s shut up here. Why don’t you let it out?”

‘Howick pushed us from the room, and closed the door. “That’s it,” he said, and that was all. I felt dazed and amazed. I wanted to explain, to protest. A most extraordinary sensation like suppressed tears kept me dumb. I felt humiliated to a degree, and inclined to ease all my conflict of emotions in hysterical laughter. Curse the thing now! It makes me go hot to think of it.

‘Howick showed me up to my bedroom. “We’ll talk of it tomorrow,” he said, and he left me. I was glad to be alone, to get, after a few moments, resolute command of myself. I had a good night after all, and awoke, refreshed and sane, in the clear morning.

‘I learned, when I came downstairs, that J.B. and our host were gone out together for an early stroll in the cool. Pending their return, I came to a resolution. I would go and face the room alone, in the bright daylight. Both my pride and my principles were at stake, and I owed the effort to myself. There was nothing to prevent me. I found the door unlocked, and I went in.

‘There was some sunlight in the room, penetrating through a thickish shrubbery outside the two windows. I thought the place peculiarly quiet, with an atmosphere of suspense in it which suggested the inaudible whisperings of some infernal inquisition. Nothing was watching me: the green eyes of the man were fixed eternally on the face opposite; and yet I was being watched by everything. It was indescribable, maddening. Determined not to succumb to what I still insisted to myself was a mere trick of the nerves, I walked manfully up to the oval portrait to examine it at close hand. A name and date near the lower margin caught my eye—*T. Lawrence, 1828*. I fairly gasped, reading it. A “Lawrence,” and of that remoteness? Then it was not our host’s sister! I turned sharply, hearing light breathing—and there she was behind me.

‘ “What are you doing here?” she said, in a small, cold voice. “Don’t you know it is my room?”

‘How can I convey the impression she made upon me by daylight? I can think only of one fantastic image to describe her complexion—the hands of a young laundress, puffed and mottled and mealily wrinkled after many hours’ work at the tub. So in this face was somehow spoilt and

slandered youth, subdued, like the dyer's hand, to "what it worked in". And yet it was the face of the portrait, even to the dusty gold of the hair.

'I made some lame apology. She stamped her foot to end it and dismiss me. But as I passed her to go, she spoke again: "*You* will never find it. It is only faith that can move such mountains."

'I encountered J.B. in the morning-room, and we breakfasted alone together. Howick did not appear—purposely, I think. I felt somehow depressed and uneasy, but resolved to hold fast to myself without too many words. Once I enlightened Lamont: "That portrait," I said, "is not Howick's sister." J.B. lifted his eyebrows. "O!" said he, "you have been paying it a morning visit, have you? No, it is a portrait of Maud Howick, daughter to Roger, the man who hangs opposite her." It was my turn to stare. "Howick has been giving you his family history?" I asked. J.B. did not answer for a minute; then he said: "I hope you won't take it in bad part, Penn-Howard; but—yes, he has been talking to me. I know, I think, all there is to know." I had some right to be offended; and he admitted it. "Howick *would* put it to me," he said. "He was struck, it seemed, by something I said that night at Lady Caroon's; and he thinks you at heart a polite sceptic." "Well," I said, "have you solved the mystery, whatever it is?" He answered no, but that he had a theory; and asked me if I had formed any "Not a ghost of one," I replied; "and so Howick was certainly right in confiding first in you—first and last, indeed, if I am to be kept in the dark." "On the contrary," said J.B.; "I am going to repeat every word of Howick's story to you—only in a quiet place."

'We found one presently, out in the fields in the shadow of a ruined byre. It stood up bare and lonely, like a tattered baldachin, and far away under the stoop of its roof we could see the walls of the moat-house rising lean and brown into a cloudless sky. Lamont began his narration with a question: "How old would you suppose this Miss Ruth Howick, the sister, to be?" I was about to answer promptly, recalled my perplexity, and hesitated. "Tell me, without more ado," I responded. "Nineteen," he said, and shut his lips like a trap. Something caught at me, and I at myself. "Go on," I said; "anything after that." And J.B. responded, speaking in his abrupt, incisive way:

' "This James Howick came into his own here some year and a half ago. There were only himself and his sister—to whom he was and is devoted—the sole survivors of a once considerable family. Their father, Gilbert Howick—son of Paul, who was younger brother to the Roger of the portrait—married one Margaret (a beautiful ward of Paul's, and brought up by him as a member of his own family) about whose origin attached some mystery, which was only made clear to her husband on the occasion of their marriage. Margaret, in brief, was then revealed to Gilbert for his own first cousin once removed, being the natural daughter of his cousin Maud, one of the two children of Roger. I know nothing about the liaison which necessitated this explanation, nor do we need to know. Its results are what concern us. Roger, it is certain, took his daughter's dereliction in a truly devilish spirit. He was an evil, dark man, it was said, pledged to the world and its pride, and once a notorious liver. There is none so extreme in fanaticism as a convert from irreligion; none so damnably righteous as a rake reformed. Having committed the fruits of her sin to the merciful custody of his younger brother—a very different soul, of a humane and pious disposition—Roger turned his attention to the moral and physical ruin of the sinner. He swore that she should forfeit the youth she had abused; and he was as good as his word. No one knows how it happened; no one knows what passed in that dark and haunted house. But Maud grew old in youth. She had been spoiled and petted for her beauty; now the spirit broke in her, and she seemed to shrink and disappear behind the wrinkled,

crumbling veil of what had been—like a snake, Penn-Howard, that struggles and cannot cast its dead skin. She grew old in youth. That portrait of her was painted when she was nineteen.”

‘I cried out. “It was impossible!” “It would seem so,” said Lamont. “By what infernal arts he held her to his will—holds her now—it is sickening to conjecture.” I turned to look at him. “Holds her now!” I repeated. “Then you mean—” “Yes,” he said; “it is imprisoned youth that is for ever trying to escape, to emerge, like the snake, from its dead self. That is the secret of the room. At least, such is my theory.”

‘I sat as in a dream, awed by, yet struggling to reject, a conclusion so fantastic. “Well, grant your theory,” I said at length, with a deep breath; “how does it affect this woman—or girl—this Ruth?”

““Think,” said Lamont. “She is actually that erring child’s granddaughter. It seems wonderfully pitiful to me. Her own mother died in that house, during a visit, in giving birth to her. At the time, the son, Roger’s son, was master of Haggarts. He was a poor-witted creature, Howick tells me; but he lived, as the imbecile often will, to a ripe old age. Ruth was born prematurely. Her mother, it was said, fell under the cursed influence of the place, and withered in her prime. Maud herself, according to the story, had already died in that very room—was found dead there, little more than a child still in years, a poor, worn ghost of womanhood in seeming. Since then, the room has always had an evil reputation—with what justice Howick never knew or regarded, until the death of his uncle put him, a year and a half ago, in possession of the place.”

‘ “But this Ruth—”

‘ “It came upon her, it seems, gradually at first, then more rapidly. She lost her health and vivacity; she was for ever haunting the room. When we first met Howick, she was already horribly changed. Ten months have passed since then. He has tried to hide it from the world; has made practically a hermit of himself. The servants of that date have been changed for others, and changed again. She feels, it must be supposed, what we felt—a ceaseless anguish to release something—nothing—a mere pent shadow of horror. And more than that: the sin of the mother is being visited on the child of the child—and through the same diabolical agency.” Lamont paused a moment, staring before him, and knotting his fingers together till they cracked. “Penn-Howard,” he said, “I believe—I do believe, on my soul, that the secret, whatever it is, lies at the hands of that devil portrait.”

‘ “Then why, in God’s name, not remove and burn the thing?”

‘ “He has offered to. It had a dreadful effect upon her. She cried that so the clue would be lost for ever. And so it affects her to be excluded from the room. He has had to give it all up as hopeless.”

‘He rose, and I rose with him, not in truth convinced, but oddly agitated.

‘ “Well,” I said, “what do you propose doing?”

‘He seemed deep in thought, and did not answer me. At the door we parted. Entering alone, I met Howick in the hall. He looked at me searchingly in his lank, haggard way, then suddenly took my hand. “You know?” he said. “He has told you? Mr Penn-Howard, she was such a bright and pretty child.” I saw tears in his eyes, and understood him better from that moment.

‘Lamont was absent all day, and returned late from a prolonged tramp over the hills. The poignant subject was tacitly shelved that night, and we went to bed early.

‘The next morning, after breakfast, J.B. turned upon our host. “I want, he said, “that room to myself, possibly for the whole morning, possibly for longer. Can you secure it to me?” Howick nodded. I could detect in his eyes some faint reflection of the strong spirit which faced him. Somehow one never despairs in J.B.’s presence. “I will say you are looking for it,” he said. “She

will not disturb you then.” “There is a closet,” said Lamont, “in my bedroom which will do very well for a dark-room.”

‘He disappeared soon after with his camera. It was his business and I seldom disturbed him at it. We left him alone, and tried to for get him, though I could see all the morning that Howick was in a state of painful nervous tension. Not till after lunch did we hear or see anything of my colleague, and then he came in, descending from his improvised dark-room. He held a negative in his hand, and he shut the door behind him like a man who had something to reveal. “Mr Howick,” he said, straight out and at once, “I am going to ask you to let me destroy that portrait of your great-uncle.”

‘The words took us like a smack; and, as we stood gaping, J.B. held out his negative. “Look at this,” he said, and beckoning us to the window, let the light slant upon the thing so as to disclose its subject. “The secret stands revealed, does it not?” said he, quiet and low. “A long, a very long exposure, and the devil is betrayed. O, a wonderful detective is the camera.”

‘I heard Howick breathing fast over my shoulder. For myself, I was as much perplexed as astonished. “It is the portrait,” I muttered, “and yet it is not. There is the ghost of something revealing itself through it.” “Exactly,” said J.B. drily—and went and put the negative behind the clock on the mantelpiece. “Well, shall we do it?” he asked, turning to our host. Howick’s face was ghastly He could hardly get out the words, “In God’s name, do what you will! Better to dare and end it all than live on like this.” J.B. stood looking at him earnestly “No,” he said. “You go to *her*. Penn-Howard and I will manage the business.

‘We left him, and went to the room and locked ourselves in. I confess my blood was tingling. So shut in with it, the unspeakable atmosphere of that place seemed to intensify to a degree quite infernal. I seemed to realize in it a battle of two wills, Lamont’s and another’s. My friend’s face was a little pale; but the set of its every feature spoke of an inexorable purpose. As we handled the portrait to lower it, it fell heavily and unaccountably forward, an edge of the massive frame just missing J.B.’s skull by an inch. “That miscarriage does for *you*, my friend,” he said, showing his teeth a little, like a dog. Portrait and frame lay apart on the floor; the shock had disunited them. Lamont knelt, and went over the former unflinchingly. The green eyes, caught from their age-long inquisition of the face on the wall opposite, seemed to glare up into his in hate and fury. “Get out your knife,” I cried irresistibly, “and slash the cursed thing to pieces.” “No,” he answered; “that is not at all my purpose.

‘What was his purpose? I knew in a moment. He fetched out his knife indeed, and, hunting over the surface of the thing, found a blister in the paint, cut into it, seized an edge between thumb and finger, and, flaying away a long strip, uttered a loud, jubilant exclamation. “Look at this, Penn-Howard.” I bent over—and then I understood in a flash. It was but a strip exposed; but it was like a chink of dazzling daylight let through. There was another portrait underneath.

‘Artists tell me that when one oil-painting is superimposed on another within a few years of the production of the first, only exceptional circumstances can render their successful separation possible. I know nothing about the technical difficulties; I know only that in this case we were able to remove the overlying skin, strip by strip, almost without a hitch, until the whole of the upper portrait lay in flakes of rubbish upon the floor—to be delivered within a few minutes to consuming fire. And the thing revealed! I cannot describe the beauty of that vision, bursting into flower out of its age-long cimmerian darkness. It was the personification of youth—a young girl (she might have been sixteen), laughing and lovely, the most wilful, bewitching face you could imagine—Maud Howick.’

Once more Penn-Howard fell silent. The room by now was dark; his figure was indistinguishable, and his voice, when he spoke again, seemed a shadow borne out of the shadows:

‘While we gazed, fascinated, there came a knock on the door. It was Howick. His face was transfigured—his eyes glowed. “She has fallen asleep,” he said; “and that is not all. My God, what has happened?” We took him in and showed him the portrait. He broke down before it. “The little grandmother!” he said, “the poor, erring child! And it was of that, and by that damnable method, that that fiend incarnate robbed her! To imprison her youth within his wicked soul, drawn by him out of the mirror to stand for ever at sentry over her lest she escape. And she pined and withered in that hideous bondage, until he could show her, in that other, what his hate had wrought of her. But she is free at last—her soul is free to fly for ever this dark house of its captivity”

‘J.B. looked at him searchingly. “And your sister?” he said. Howick did not answer; but he beckoned us to follow him, and he led us into the drawing-room where she lay Fast in dreamless slumber as the sleeping beauty. But the change! God in heaven; she was already a child again!’

The speaker halted for the last time. It was minutes before he took up the tale, in a constrained and hesitating way:

‘I saw all this, I tell you—saw it with these eyes. We stayed there yet a week longer; and I left her in the end a radiant, laughing child, a joyous, captivating little soul, who remembered, or seemed to remember, nothing of the fearful months preceding. And yet, now I am away, I doubt. It is the curse of my disposition. What, for instance, if one were to yield her one’s soul and discover, too late, that one had succumbed to some unreal glamour, to the arts of a veritable and most feminine Lamia. I believe it is not so; I know it is not so—and yet, the incredible—’

His voice died out. I saw how it was, and answered, I am afraid, brutally:

‘You aren’t really in love with her, of course. That is as clear as print.’

He rose at once. ‘That decides it,’ he said. ‘I shall go back and ask her to be my wife.’

But he did not do so. Two days later I met him in the street. His manner was quite breezy and insouciant. ‘O, by the by!’ he said, in a break of our conversation, ‘did I tell you that I had heard from J.B.? He and Miss Howick are engaged.’