

Who?

By Maurice Level

That day I had worked very late, so late that when at length I raised my eyes from my desk, I found twilight had invaded my study. For some minutes I sat perfectly still, my brain in the dull condition that follows a big mental effort, and looked round mechanically. Everything was gray and formless in the half-light, except where reflections from the last rays of the setting sun made little patches of brightness on table or mirror or picture. One must have fallen with particular strength on a skull placed on the top of a bookcase, for, looking up, I saw it clearly enough to distinguish every detail from the point of the cheek-bones to the brutal angle of the jaw. As everything else became swallowed up in the fast-deepening shadow, it seemed to me that slowly but surely this head quickened into life and became covered with flesh; lips came down over the teeth, eyes filled the orbits, and soon, by some strange illusion, I had before me, as if suspended in the darkness, a face that was looking at me.

It was watching me fixedly, the mouth set in a mocking smile. It was not one of those vague floating images one sees in hallucinations: this face appeared so real that for a second I was tempted to stretch out my hand to touch it. Immediately the cheeks dissolved, the orbits emptied, a slight mist enveloped it and I saw nothing but a skull like all other skulls.

I lit my lamp and went on with my writing. Twice or thrice I raised my eyes to the place where I had seen the apparition; then the momentary excitement it had caused died away, and my head bent over my desk, I forgot all about it.

Now, a few days later, as I was going out of my house, near my door I passed a young man who drew aside to allow me to cross the road. I bowed. He did the same and went on. But the face was familiar, and believing it was someone I knew, I turned to look after him, imagining he might have stopped. He had not, but I stood watching him till he disappeared among the passers-by. "A mistake on my part," I thought, but to my surprise, I kept on asking myself: "Where the devil have I seen him! . . . In the drawing-room! . . . At the hospital? . . . In my consulting-room!" . . . No . . . I concluded that he must resemble someone else and dismissed him from my thoughts. Or tried to—for in spite of myself I continued to endeavor to place him. I certainly knew the head well: its deeply-set eyes, hard, steady gaze, clean-shaven lip, straight mouth and square jaw made it too characteristic to be either forgotten or mistaken for that of another person. Where on earth had I seen it? During the whole evening it obsessed me, coming between me and what I looked at, giving me that feeling of irritation caused by not being able to remember a name or some melody that haunts you. And this persisted for a long time, for weeks.

One day I saw my Unknown again in the street. As I approached I almost stared at him. On his part he looked at me with the same frigid expression, *with the cold look I knew so well*; but he betrayed no sign of knowing me, did not hesitate a second, and avoided me by turning sharply to the right. My conclusion was the inevitable one. If I really knew him he must also know me, and meeting me face to face for the second time, would have shown it by a glance or movement as if to stop: there had been nothing of this: I was therefore the victim of an illusion.

And I forgot all about him.

Some time after this, late one afternoon, a man was shown into my consulting room. He was hardly over the threshold when, much surprised, I rose to greet him: it was my Unknown. And once again the likeness that had so obsessed me was so striking that, mechanically, I walked

towards him with outstretched hand as to an acquaintance. He showed surprise, and I almost stammered as I pointed to a chair, saying:

“Excuse me, but you are so extraordinarily like . . .”

Under his cold, intent gaze, I left my sentence unfinished, saying instead:

“What can I do for you!”

Sitting quietly with his two hands stretched on the arm of his chair, he did not reply immediately. I was beginning once more to cudgel my brains: “Where have I seen him?” when suddenly a thought, or rather an extraordinary vision flashed into my mind, a vision amazing enough almost to surprise me into crying aloud: “I know.” At last I had succeeded in locating him—I had recognized on the shoulders of this living man the head that had appeared to me one evening in the darkness above my bookcase! It was not a resemblance: it was identically the same face. The coincidence was sufficiently curious to distract my attention from what he was saying, and he had been talking for some moments before I began to follow his case:

. . . “I don’t think I was ever normal. When I was quite young I began to feel different from other boys, to have sudden desires to rush away, to hide myself, to be alone; while at other times I longed passionately for society, for wild excitements that would make me forget myself. Sometimes, for little or no reason, I had sudden fits of temper that almost choked me . . . They sent me to the sea, to the mountains nothing did me any good. At the present time I start at the slightest sound; a very bright light hurts me like a pain; and though all my organs are sound—I have been to several doctors—the whole of my body aches. Even if I sleep, I wake in the morning as tired as if I had been dissipating all night. Frequently a feeling of agony of mind for which there is no real cause makes my brain giddy; I can’t sleep, or if I do, I have horrible nightmares . . .”

“Do you drink!”

“I have a horror of wine, of every kind of alcohol; I drink nothing but water. But I haven’t yet told you the worst . . .” (he hesitated) . . . “what it is that is really grave in my condition . . . If anyone contradicts me even about a trifle, for a look, a gesture, a nothing, a sort of fury takes possession of me. I am careful never to carry any weapon in case I might be unable to resist using it. It seems to me that at these times my own will leaves me, as if that of someone else takes its place; it drives me on, I cease to be my own master, and when I come back to myself I can’t remember anything—except that I wanted to murder someone! If one of these crises takes me when I am at home, I can shut myself up safely in my own room, but if, as sometimes happens, I am out, I know nothing more till I find myself perhaps sitting on a bench alone at night in some strange place. Then, remembering the fury I felt and coupling it with the lassitude that has followed and the impossibility of recollecting what I have done, I begin to wonder if I have committed some crime. I rush home and shut myself up, my heart beats violently whenever the bell rings, and I have no peace of mind till some days have gone by and I feel sure that once again I have been saved from myself. You will understand, Doctor, that this state of things can’t go on. I shall lose not only my health, but my reason . . . What am I to do!”

“There’s nothing to be really alarmed about,” I replied. “These are only the symptoms of a nervous condition that will yield to treatment. Let us try to find its cause. Do you work very hard?—No—Is there anything in your life that is likely to cause great nerve-strain!—No—Any excesses!—None—You can tell a doctor anything . . .”

His tone was convincing as he replied:

“I have told you the truth.”

“Let us look for other reasons. Have you any brothers or sisters!—No—Your mother is alive!—Yes—She is probably very highly-strung?—Not at all—And your father?—Is he strong, too?”

In a very low voice he replied:

“My father is dead.”

“He died young!”

“Yes, I was just two years old.”

“Do you know what he died of?”

This question seemed to affect him deeply, for he grew very pale. At this moment more than at any other I was struck by the extraordinary resemblance between him and the apparition. After a pause, he replied:

“Yes . . . and that is why my condition terrifies me. I know what my father died of: my father was guillotined.”

Ah, how I regretted having pushed my investigations so far! I tried to glide off to something else; but we now understood each other. Endeavoring to speak naturally and hopefully, I gave him some general advice and some kind of prescription; then I told him that he must have confidence in himself, and be sure to come back to me soon. After I had gone to the door with him I said to my servant:

“I will not see any one else to-day.”

I was not in a state to listen to or examine a sick person. My mind was confused: the apparition . . . the resemblance . . . this confession . . . I sat down and tried to collect my thoughts, but in spite of myself my eyes kept fixing themselves on the skull. I looked in vain for the strange resemblance that had for so long puzzled me I saw nothing but its mysterious mask. But I was unable to keep my gaze from it; the head drew me towards it . . . I ended by leaving my chair and going to lift it down.

Then it was that, raising it in my hands, I became aware of an extraordinary thing that had till now escaped my notice. The lower part of the back of the head was marked by a broad and sharp groove, an unmistakeable gash such as would be made by the violent stroke of an axe, such as is made on the necks of those who are executed by the instinctive retreat of the body at the supreme moment from the knife of the guillotine.

It may have been nothing but coincidence. Perhaps it could be explained by saying that I had already seen, without noticing, my consultant in the street, and that, unknowingly, the face thus subconsciously registered in my memory had come before me when I was looking at the skull the night of the apparition. . . Perhaps . . . perhaps? . . . But there are mysteries, you know, that it is wiser not to try to solve.