

IT was a horrible thing, really. Jack Trelawney picked it up in some old curiosity shop near the Strand, and carried it home in triumph—now it sat tilted up against the inkstand in Trelawney's study, its narrow eye-holes squinting sideways at the firelight, the round red cap on its head a little askew. One wisp of coarse black hair hung straight each side of the long thin face, dull yellow-brown in colour, creased with a thousand lines and wrinkles; a huge gilt tassel swung from the cap's crown, and the thin-lipped mouth was bitterly sardonic. Maisie Trelawney, bride of a year, stood with her pretty brows wrinkled in obvious disfavour, regarding it with a doubtful finger at her lip, the bright light shining on her curly hair.

"Jack! Another horror—what a beastly old face!"

Trelawney laughed uproariously as he slipped an arm round her shoulders, rising white and round above her black velvet dinner-gown.

"Horror! Oh, Maisie, you're incorrigible! Will you never have any sympathy with my craze for oddities?"

She turned a bright face up to him, and tip-toed for a kiss. The fire crackled and flared suddenly, and threw an odd shadow across the pale sardonic face of the mask, almost like a sudden smile, fleeting and cruel. Maisie slipped an arm inside her husband's as she turned again to look at the new purchase.

"Sympathy? Jack, you know I love some of your oddments, but this is, somehow, not very appealing—to me at any rate! Sorry, dearest! As long as you like it, it doesn't really matter, and certainly, as a piece of work, it's frightfully clever. An unpleasant face, I think, but immensely well done. Is it Chinese?"

"I don't know," Trelawney admitted. "The old villain who sold it to me didn't seem to know much about it—or wasn't in a communicative mood. I got it absurdly cheap, too, only a fiver, and it's obviously worth much more. As a matter of fact, I fancy it's stolen goods, at any rate the old chap seemed deuced anxious to get rid of it, and jumped at my offer. Wish now I'd offered three quid!"

Maisie shook her head.

"I'm not—it was cheap, I admit, but anyway he seemed satisfied. If you'd beaten him down I shouldn't have liked it. But somehow I don't think . . ."

"What don't you think, you funny shrimp?" Trelawney's tone was very tender as he kissed the tiny frown between her eyebrows.

"I don't quite know," she said, doubtfully, "but anyway, I rather wish you hadn't bought it, dear. I have a rather funny feeling about it—I don't like the look on its face when the firelight catches it sometimes."

The flame flared again, and Trelawney released his wife with a rather irritated little shrug.

"Really, Maisie! I never thought you were superstitious—anyway, I'm sorry I ever got the thing, since it seems to get on your nerves so. I can sell it again if you like."

His tone was edgy, and Maisie looked a trifle hurt.

"Of course not, Jack—what nonsense! But you always like to hear just what I think—or you always said so. . . ."

There was an edge in her tone, too, and Trelawney hastily changed the subject.

"I like your frock, Maisie. Anyone coming to-night?"

She nodded, sinking into a big leather chair and lighting a cigarette.

"Only Miles. He rang up to say he'd got the Staff appointment he wanted, and was only waiting orders to go abroad now, so might he come and talk it over with us to-night."

"Miles—good scheme! I haven't seen the old chap for weeks. All right; I'll go and change."

The door slammed, and the room was silent, save for the occasional leap and purr of the flames flickering up the chimney. It was a charming room, cosy and well furnished, lined with books, an antlered head or two over the door and fireplace, heavy velvet curtains shutting out the cold wind that whistled outside, and a thick Persian carpet, wonderfully coloured, on the polished floor. A regular man's room, the room of a well-bred Englishman of rather bookish

tastes, the only incongruous note struck by the mask that now rested on the table facing the fire, its lined sallow face oddly and unpleasantly alive in the dancing lights and shadows. Maisie glanced at it again over her shoulder and shivered a little.

A horrible thing—she loathed it—and Jack was sure to insist upon its being put up in the drawing-room, a lovely room stacked with curious and beautiful things, mostly Oriental, from Trelawney's many wanderings.

Many were presents from Miles, too—her cousin, a burly, shy soldier to whom she had always been a second sister. The bell rang sharply, and Miles himself was shown into the room, his square, good-humoured face still red from the sharp wind. Maisie sprang from her seat and held up her charming face for the usual kiss. At the same moment, as he bent towards her, the man's eyes caught the mask, and with a sudden exclamation he raised his head, without kissing her.

"By Jove—what an extraordinary thing!"

He picked up the mask, studying it intently, regardless of Maisie's pout—then, as she flounced into a chair again, put it down with a half-embarrassed little laugh.

"Sorry, May! That wasn't very polite, I admit, but all of a sudden I saw this thing, and it almost looked as if—well, as if it was laughing. . . ."

His tone turned suddenly shy, and his honest blue eyes, always so completely frank and open about his affection for her, looked oddly troubled; looking away, he sat down opposite her and fumbled for his tobacco pouch, awkward and embarrassed. Maisie herself fell silent—how

often and often, before Jack, before anybody, had she not kissed Miles, with the same frank, happy affection that she would have shown towards a real and only brother—now suddenly, this one kiss not kissed seemed to have changed the whole position. Extraordinary—why had she never felt this consciousness of sex before towards Miles? She was no child, in this her radiant twenty-sixth year, and he an experienced soldier of thirty-two. The silence grew heavy between them till, resolutely shaking his broad shoulders, the man laughed and turned the old smile of frank good-fellowship upon her, his white teeth gleaming in the firelight.

"Tell me, May, where did old Jack pick up this recent horror?"

"I'm so thankful you think it's a horror, too!" The girl laughed in return as she answered. "He got it in some old shop in the Strand—you know, the same he got the Algerian knife and those Chinese coffee cups from. Coffee cups, now, they're nice, useful, charming things—but this!"

Miles' thick fair brows were knitted.

"Strand? Not near the corner of Southampton Street?"

"Yes. Why?" Maisie was alert at his tone. Miles reached out a hand behind him and fished up an evening paper. Rustling over the pages, he turned to a paragraph, and folding the paper up, passed it over, a brown thumb marking the place. The two heads were bent over the paper, close together, brown short hair against a tangle of fair curls, and Jack Trelawney, entering quietly at the door, stood silent, suddenly struck by a thought that had never entered his happy, straightforward head before. It was an unworthy thought, and he scouted it on the moment, hot with anger at himself, and strode into the circle of the firelight, a cheery greeting on his lips. But the thought had been there—and was to come again. Miles turned a delighted grin to him, and Maisie sprang up and caught him by the arm, waving the crumpled paper.

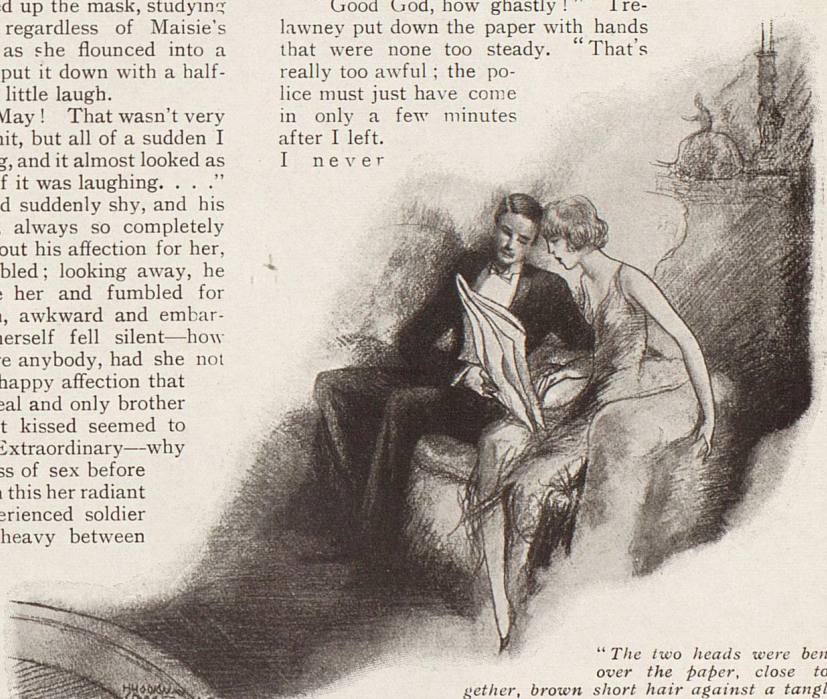
"Jack! Isn't this your old man—this thing, I mean?"

The paragraph was headed "Shocking Murder," and Trelawney's brows went up as he read. The police, hearing groans, had forced their entrance into the back room of the little antique shop where he had purchased the mask, barely half-an-hour after he left it, and found the wife of Schroeder, the old proprietor, dying from a dozen knife-thrusts from an old Moorish dagger.

According to the doctor, she must have been dying at the moment he purchased the mask. With a faint feeling of sickness, Trelawney remembered that he had subconsciously noted the old man's hasty and furtive glances at his hands once or twice during the transaction. He must have come to attend Trelawney straight from the awful deed—no reason given, except that the neighbours said that recently the old couple, once devoted, seemed to have done nothing but quarrel. Old Schroeder was dazed, vague, seemed scarcely to realise what he had done. "Committed for trial"

"Good God, how ghastly!" Trelawney put down the paper with hands that were none too steady. "That's really too awful; the police must just have come in only a few minutes after I left."

I never



"The two heads were bent over the paper, close together, brown short hair against a tangle of fair curls"

heard anything—she must have been—oh, Lord, it's ghastly. The old brute! I wish I'd known! And he must have come straight out to serve me with this thing."

"Oh, throw it away; throw it away!" shuddered

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Maisie. "It's awful! Fancy what it may have seen! He brought it out from the room behind, didn't he?"

Trelawney nodded.

"I went in to ask about a carved screen they had in the window—he knows I like oddities, and he said he'd like to show me this. . . . No, I won't get rid of it, May. It's an ugly story, but in a sense it adds to the dramatic value of the thing; that's nothing to what it must have seen in the old days, if it is, as I suspect, a sacrificial mask."

Maisie turned away with a shrug, and led the way to the dining-room.

"Well," she said over her pretty shoulder, "do as you like, of course, but, personally, I can't congratulate you on your taste, Jack. Come on, Miles."

Dinner was a rather constrained meal. Maisie, presumably by way of marking her displeasure with her husband, talked mainly to Miles, who, unconscious of the strain, ate hugely, laughed bluffly, and talked cheerfully all through the courses, to Trelawney's increasing annoyance; he and Miles had always before been inseparable chums, and the younger man's cheery, good-tempered humour, one of the joys of life—now that same humour was getting steadily and slowly on his nerves; and, heavens, how that perpetual "ha! ha!" maddened one! Trelawney wished to goodness Maisie wouldn't laugh at all his futile jokes—damn it, she was looking amazingly pretty in that black velvet thing; it was his frock—he'd given it to her—she was his wife—and she should know it, should be made to know it if necessary. Why should he pay for frocks that were palpably being used to attract other men?—why should Maisie sit tilting her face up towards Miles in that fashion that always drove men mad?—oh, well, women were all alike, jades every one—never mind—we should see! With a sudden shock of nausea and anger at himself, Trelawney pulled himself sternly together and joined in the talk; but Maisie was still annoyed, and was so frigid that he relapsed into silence again, and played moodily with his bread till she gave the welcome signal for release.

Afterwards, in the drawing-room, a return of the ugly mood seized Trelawney, and he insisted on bringing the mask into the drawing-room. Miles was genuinely interested, and the two men sat studying the thing and discussing it for a long time, but Maisie chose to consider it—as indeed it was!—a deliberate "slap back" for her behaviour at dinner, and was correspondingly aloof and disagreeable.

At last the suppressed acrimony of the situation reached even Miles' none too perceptive brain, and he relapsed into awkward silences, until the most uncomfortable evening ever spent in the Trelawneys' cheerful house drew to a close, and with a barely suppressed sigh of relief Miles Burnaby rose to his feet and held out a large hand to his host.

"Well, must be getting along, old man. Thanks for another awfully cheery evening"—the lie fell like a plummet into the waiting silence, and Miles hurried on. "Hope this priceless old chap you've got here isn't going to bring you the rotten luck he seemed to land on old Schroeder and Co.!"

"I sometimes wish, Miles," said Trelawney very distinctly, "that you would learn to talk a little sense for a change."

Miles' open mouth of astonishment was a study, but Maisie intervened.

"Jack's got the black dog on his back to-night—all because I hate his ugly old mask," she said

sweetly. "I'm afraid you've had a rotten time, Miles, you poor dear, with us two in a state of suppressed hostility all the evening! Never mind—next time we'll choose an evening when Jack's away! Kiss me, Miles!"

Her charming face lifted towards the soldier's in the firelight, and Trelawney turned suddenly away, sick with the wave of red fury that surged up—and this was sure enough. The kiss that passed between the two who had loved each other so long and well, as brother and sister love, was no longer the frank and innocent thing it had been till this night, when they kissed under the baleful shadow of the mask. . . .

Standing at the table, his head bent, Trelawney heard Miles cross the room, say "good-night," and slam the door. Turning, he surveyed his wife, her slim satin-shod foot on the kerb, humming a contented little tune as she staired into the fire.

"Maisie." His voice had an odd harshness, carefully controlled.

"Maisie. I won't have you kiss Miles again. D'you hear?"

The toss of her head was unmistakable, and there was a hint of steel in her voice as she answered:

"My dear Jack! Isn't it rather late in the day to try and come the early Victorian husband over me? I've always kissed dear old Miles—I should not dream of hurting his feelings by stopping now for no reason!"

"You don't seem to mind hurting mine by doing it!" retorted the man.

"Nor you mine by refusing to throw away things I hate, like this old mask!"

Maisie responded swiftly. "It doesn't matter now, though—as a matter of fact, I've changed my mind. I rather admire the thing; in its horrible way it's rather decorative. I'm going to hang it over the fireplace in

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"With a great effort he opened his eyes"

THE MASK—cont.

the drawing-room. Now you ought to be contented—anyway, stop talking nonsense about Miles and me, and what I'm to do or not to do about him. See?"

The door closed after her, and Trelawney, vanquished, stared moodily into the fire. He did not look up to where the mask was resting, or he might have seen again the odd effect of the flickering flames upon it—almost, again, one might have said it smiled.

Jack Trelawney's brow was clouded as he left home for his office next morning; things seemed no better between Maisie and himself, despite his tentative efforts at reconciliation. True to her word, Maisie had with her own hands hung the mask above the fireplace in the drawing-room, and with the sunlight dancing on her pretty hair and smart serge frock, pronounced it "odd, as I said, but rather decorative, after all!" She was nonchalantly charming to him, bidding him good-bye with a dutiful kiss on the cheek, but Jack's sensitive heart ached for the old Maisie again, full of instructions as to how he was to take care of himself this cold day, and running after him for another kiss, her warm lips pursed to meet his. With a frowning brow he read through his letters, dictated several answers to his secretary, and at last by dint of savage work managed to deaden a little the pain at his heart: Lunch-time was almost in sight when a messenger knocked at the door.

Trelawney looked up with a brusque "Come in," and jumped, for the blue helmet of a stalwart constable loomed over the glass half-door.

"What on earth . . ." The door closed, and the policeman saluted, moving heavily into the room. Trelawney's face was blank with astonishment and consternation, not lessened when the man in blue fished out a note-book and pencil.

"Excuse me, sir. Only called to ask a few questions about the murder and suicide at Schroeder's yesterday; from the h'entry in the old man's books, sir, you was the last person served, and it's thought you might be able to help us with a little information, sir?"

"Suicide? I only know there had been a murder," interrupted Trelawney, suddenly remembering he had been so preoccupied that he had never seen a morning paper. The constable nodded.

"Old man committed suicide late last night in the cell at the station—strangled himself with his braces. Now what we want to know, sir, do you know anything about a marsk?"

Trelawney jumped—the question was so unexpected. "Mask? Yes, of course I do. I bought a mask from him that day—a sort of Chinese thing, I think. Why?" "Don't know where he got it—anything of its hist'ry, like?"

The constable was ponderously ploughing on his official way, regardless of Trelawney's question. The latter shrugged his shoulders.

"No—I don't know a thing. He professed ignorance as to where it came from, even. Why do you ask?"

"Why? Because he was calling and screaming out about the thing like a lunatic all the way to the station—and all the time he was locked up, too. Going on awful, he was—telling it to keep away, or close its eyes, because he'd done all it wanted. Awful it was, I give you my word, sir. So you're quite sure you can't throw any light on this here matter, sir?"

Trelawney's decided negative closed the interview, and the constable creaked slowly out. Alone, Trelawney stood frowning, his head on the mantelpiece, thinking. Pretty horrible, what? Telling it to keep away or close its eyes. Come to think of the thing, those eyes, or rather eye-holes, were rather unpleasant—narrow, and almost with a

beastly sort of laugh in them. Where *did* the thing come from, anyway? . . . Perhaps Maisie had been right, as she often was, and he would have been better advised to re-sell the head.

Poor little Maisie! By Jove, she had been upset last night; he had been a bad-tempered brute anyway, and she deserved a treat to make up.

There was the new

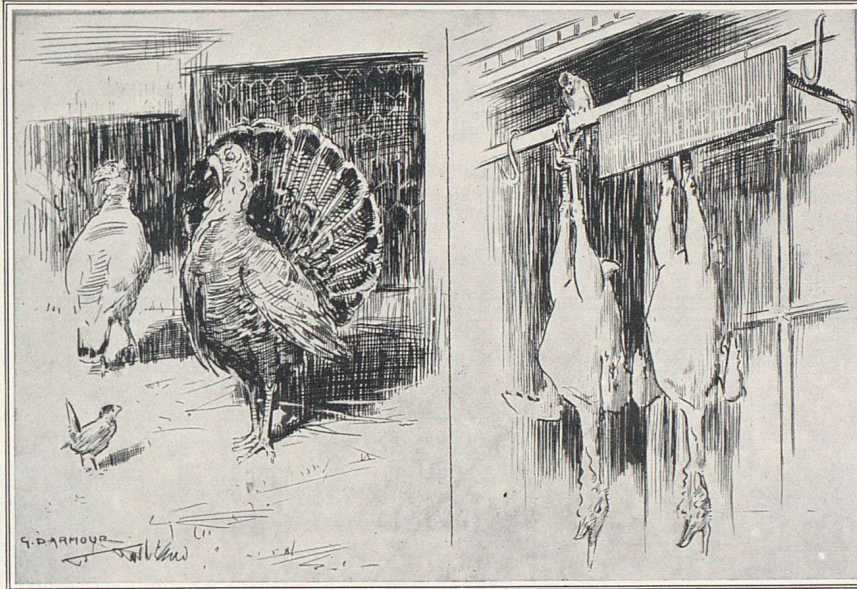
show at the Lyric—what about going to-night?

Acting on impulse, Trelawney took up the receiver and rang up his home number. The answer came promptly—the maid speaking. Trelawney's face darkened suddenly as he listened, and with a curse he slammed the receiver home. His square-chinned face was not good to look upon as he flung on his hat and went out to lunch, muttering viciously to himself.

"Out motoring with Miles, eh? Not likely to be back till late, so don't bother about waiting dinner! My God, Maisie, you're playing a dangerous game with me! . . ."

Business suffered badly during the rest of the day, for Trelawney was quite incapable of diverting his mind from its growing obsession of jealousy, and he snapped furiously at his clerks, till they wisely put away any further important business matters till the following day, when "the boss" might have recovered his usual genial temper. Twice he rang up his home, to discover that no further news had been received of Maisie. Going home through the driving rain in a taxi, he sat glowering out at the wet streets and hurrying crowds, with the black mood riding his shoulders, like the veritable black dog of Maisie's

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DIGNITY AND IMPUDENCE

IMPUDENCE AND DIGNITY

Drawn by G. D. Armour

THE MASK—continued.

laughing remark, and ate his solitary dinner in a silence that grew grimmer and more grim as the hours wore on and Maisie did not return. Stretched at full length in a huge chair before the fire, the mask above his bent head staring out into the gloom of the big room, only lighted by the flaming heaped coals in the wide grate, the man brooded, chin on hand, seeing in the red heart of the fire endless pictures of the two, Maisie and Miles, each of which added fuel to the fire that was slowly rising in his jealous heart. Pictures, too, of the past, that had been so entirely happy and blessed till last night—now such untold ages ago—till their quarrel, the quarrel over that mask. Everything seemed to have gone wrong since he bought the wretched thing! How Maisie had hated it at first; now she didn't seem to mind it—had hung it there above the mantelpiece with her own pretty hands. Now he seemed to have started a dislike for it—funny how the firelight leaping up then seemed to give the thing a horrible look of life! Almost as if it smiled, and the eye-slits looked down at him oddly, obliquely; whoever it was taken from, he must have

been a horrible old devil, with a taste for blood. . . . Trelawney jumped suddenly, startled at his own thought, unconsciously uttered aloud. Getting up from his seat, he stood staring at the head, hung on a level with his own, to the left of the tall mirror that occupied the centre of the space above the mantelpiece.

"Now what put that into my head, I wonder?" he muttered, as his troubled grey eyes wandered over the sinister, fine-drawn face etched clearly in the leaping firelight. "I suppose it's that murder business. What did the old man say—'turn your eyes away,' or something of the sort? 'I've done what you wanted'—extraordinary idea! . . . I suppose it was a mask worn by some priest for sacrifices—perhaps human—who knows? Anyway, you old brute, I suppose one of those psychic asses would get a fine yarn out of your 'thirst for blood' still fulfilling itself.

The words died away, and Trelawney's gaze was fixed on the curious, dreadful hollows where eyes should be—his jaw was dropped, a little slack, and his eyes were dull and fixed. Holes in a mask, blank hollows where human eyes had once looked out—on what horrors, what unspeakable orgies of blood and evil! Who could say? Holes, blank and black and eyeless—yet were they eyeless in truth? In the leaping flicker of the firelight, how could one be sure that eyes no longer



Drawn by Norman Pett

Policeman (to man having trouble with his wife): 'Ere, I'll have to arrest you Husband (getting the worst of it): This isn't an arrest, it's a rescue

(Continued on p. xxii)

TO CURE AND PREVENT RHEUMATIC AND SERIOUS FUNCTIONAL AILMENTS.

By BOMBARDIER BILLY WELLS (in an interview).

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hid behind those long slits in the lean and terrible countenance, wreathing now into a faint but significant grin of knowledge and understanding as those dark holes, alight with horrible life, stared back into Trelawney's own? Gripping the edge of the mantel-piece hard with his trembling hands, the man tried dimly to pull himself together, to withdraw his gaze from those awful hollows, where his very soul seemed to be sinking, disappearing, being drawn into some wild and dark and horrible vortex, where sanity, decency, all that made him a man, must inevitably drown and vanish. Wider and wider wreathed the sardonic grin on the lean, leathern face, crossed and recrossed with lines of age-old evil, as the awful, blank black eyes glared into his; from them there seemed to flow a sort of spiritual miasma, a dark, slow flood of mental poison that was gradually, insidiously, flowing, trickling round and over Trelawney's soul, slowly but with ghastly sureness sucking down, drowning, extinguishing all that went to make a strong, sane, well-balanced man. Heavy shudders shook the man's body; his face was deathly white and shining with tiny beads of perspiration as he gripped the mantel-piece, the straining knuckles starting out white against his brown hand—staring, staring into the black hollows where surely flamed two dark and

terrible eyes, twin points of the magnet that was drawing out his soul!

The clock ticked slowly, distinctly, into the dead silence; the tiny flop of a breaking coal, the cheep and scutter of a mouse behind the wainscot—otherwise, not a sound broke the hush of the waiting-room where Jack Trelawney—clean, healthy Englishman—clung to the stone mantel, drawing little sobbing breaths that barely stirred the warm air, his eyes blank and fixed, his mind wandering at large in strange and dreadful lands. . . . Dim temples lit by pale torches, and strange masked figures that crouched, all silent, round an altar on which burnt a blue-green flame . . . the sound of faint chanting, a thin and awful laughter, and at last one high-pitched scream of shrill and ghastly agony, as the blue flame leapt high and showed in the flash of a moment a knife dripping blood above a writhing form. . . . Then swifter and more swiftly before the dulled eyes of the hypnotised man fled horror upon horror—dark glades where strange figures followed a faint flickering light to a distant hilltop, leaving the path behind them bloody; a whirl of cruel pale faces daubed with a crimson that stained more deeply than any dye; and again the blue flame rose thin into the midnight



Drawn by Norman Pett

Gentleman (describing holiday abroad): It's really marvellous the wonderful force Niagara has. Do you know, when we first saw it, for a full minute my wife couldn't speak!

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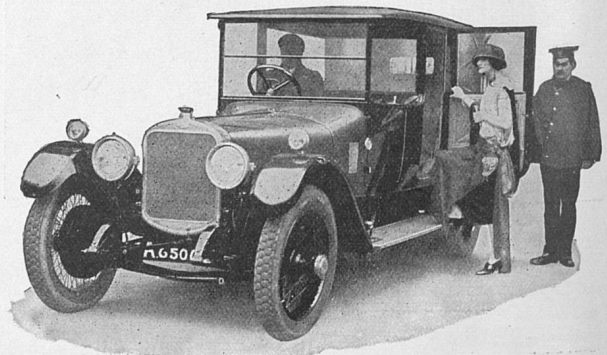
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skies, as the dance rose wilder and more terrible in that dread orgy where, naked and dreadful, man forgot he was man and made in the likeness of God, and returned, screaming and horribly glad, to his primeval filth. . . . Now into the inner meaning of "those that commit wickedness in high places"! Trelawney saw unspeakable obscenities, vileness beyond power of human imagination, sin at the mere sight of which his very soul sickened and shrank within him—cowered, shrivelled and whimpering, in the storm of blood and fire and evil unspeakable that swept it. The grind of a car stopping outside broke across the silence, and suddenly, completely, the spell broke, and a livid, shaking Trelawney released his grip of the mantelpiece, and, fumbling for his handkerchief, wiped his wet brow. Yet it was not the old Trelawney—genial, jolly, open-hearted—that peeped between the thick curtains at Miles and Maisie ascending the steps, and, after rummaging in a drawer in the writing table, crouched away behind the thick drapery, one furtive hand clenched about the butt of a revolver.

Laughing and chattering, Maisie came in, untying her grey veil from about her face. The old Trelawney?—Was it the old Maisie who, glancing hurriedly about her, said in a whisper, "It's all right, darling," and, turning, held out her arms to Miles?

Trelawney's fingers clenched tighter, but he forbore—no, let her hang herself completely, damn her, and the fellow, too. Wait—wait—and he'd got 'em both . . . Miles, his open brow creased by an anxious little frown, switched on the light and came half-hesitatingly forward.

"Maisie—I don't know whether I'd better stay. Where's Jack?"

Ill at ease, vaguely conscience-stricken, he stood, looking down at the girl on the hearthrug; above them the mask grinned as she reached up to put her arms round his neck.

"Jack—Jack—he's asleep, fed up with me for running away with you, Miles!" she laughed, drawing her slender length up against the soldier's stalwart frame. Still uneasy, he held her away, frowning, puzzled.

"Wait awhile, May. Look here, old thing, there's something wrong to-night. I swear there is! You—we never acted like this

before . . . and you know . . ." The lame sentence was drowned as she laid a slim hand across his mouth and laughed up into his troubled eyes.

"Silly—don't argue! Now you know you never kissed me yesterday—you stopped half way, you ungallant boy. . . . Kiss me now, Miles—oh, kiss me, kiss me, kiss me!"

A red flame darted before Trelawney's eyes as he saw their lips meet in a wildly passionate kiss; with a hoarse laugh of rage that, strangely enough, seemed to be echoed and surrounded by another and a more terrible laugh that seemed to fill and deafen the very air around him, he flung the curtain aside and stood revealed, the revolver levelled in his hand. Even as he pulled the trigger he saw the mask, sharply distinct in the light, its cruel mouth all awry with awful merriment, its blank eyes alight and blazing, watching him.

"Jack! Jack! Jack, dearest—look at me!" Surely it was Maisie's voice, her old loving, darling voice, shaking with tears and full of love; from a long way off, it seemed to Trelawney, that voice penetrated through a thickness of gloom and dark terror and anguish that had for untold ages hidden him.

With a great effort he opened his eyes, and, blinking up in the strong light, looked straight into his wife's anxious face and, above it, Miles' square, honest countenance, fixed in a portentous frown of anxiety. Feebly reaching after memory, Trelawney whispered,

"Maisie—Miles! Why—I thought you—what's happened? Have I dreamt everything?" He struggled into a sitting position, his head against Maisie's knees, and on doing so his foot knocked against something, and he glanced down with a sudden cry. The mask lay in pieces on the hearthrug, its evil face twisted and battered out of all recognition. He stretched out a curious hand, but Maisie stopped him with a cry of dismay.

"Don't, Jack—don't you touch it again! It's brought us all three to the brink of the most ghastly mess; leave it there till morning, and the maids shall throw it away, and we'll forget about it."

(Continued on p. xxvi)



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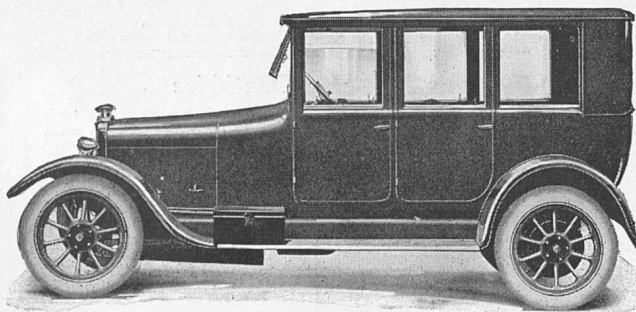
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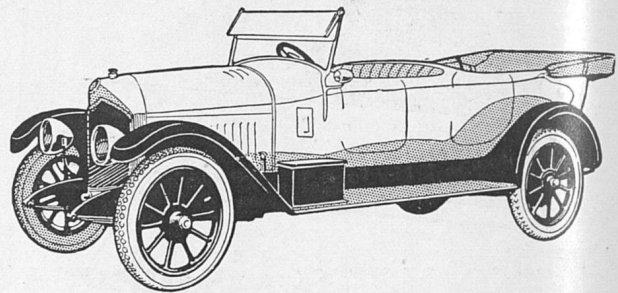
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Trelawney's eyes, rapidly regaining their old brightness and sanity, widened as he looked from Miles to her and back again. The soldier nodded frankly, and kicked a fragment of the mask away.

"Then it's not true — it didn't happen?" Flushing a dull scarlet, Miles nodded, and Maisie gripped her husband's hand.

"There's no use lying, Jack, old man. For a crazy hour or two—while this beastly horror was hanging there, only—something seemed to take us both by the throat. I swear that though I've always been awfully fond of May as a brother, I never had the remotest feeling for her any other way—nor she for me, I'll take my solemn oath. . . . But somehow, as I say, for a few hours something happened to us both, but it's gone now for ever, and everything's clear again. You do believe me, old man?"

Trelawney's old frankly affectionate glance met his as he held out his hand.

"You don't need to ask, my dear old chap. . . . Now things are coming back to me again. I remember now, faintly, some of the awful things I seemed to see when I was looking at the mask: I seemed to go off into a sort of dream of sacrifices and magic, and the Lord knows what sort of horrors. . . ."

Maisie suddenly broke in.

"I believe you were right all along, Jack. It must have been a thing somehow used to having blood sacrifices

before it, and tried to get them again. I believe old Schroeder's murdering his wife was just done under the same influence. It all seems like some impossible dream

Trelawney shuddered as he put his arms round his wife and buried his head in her soft shoulder.

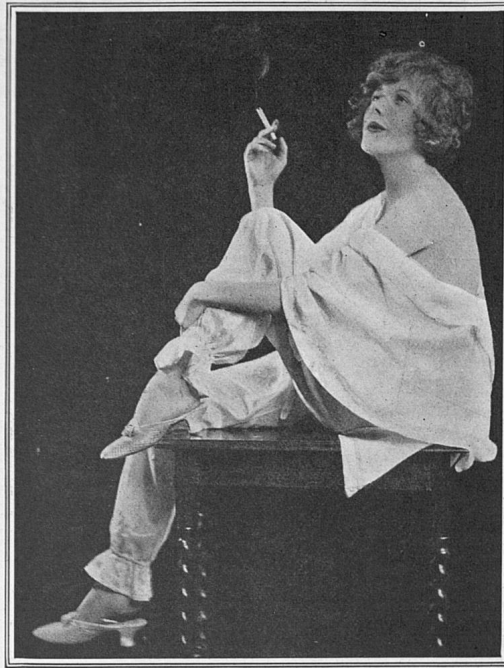
"Good God! To think I nearly fed the vile thing with a double sacrifice to-night; how I missed you I don't know —"

"You slipped a little on the polished floor," supplied Miles, "and that just saved us all, for your shot went wide and crashed full into the mask. It fell on the hearthrug, and you made for me, and we rolled about fighting each other; you were still mad, but the minute the mask smashed May and I got sane at once, and the one thing she was screaming about the whole time was for me not to hurt you! Well, that scrap of ours finally flattened the thing to smithereens, so all's well. And we're all three out of the most awful danger we're ever likely to meet this side of Hell, where I believe that devilish mask was made."

"How did you know it was the mask?" Trelawney asked.

"Because once in India I came across something the same sort of thing—and I had a funny feeling about the thing directly I saw it," said Miles, for once shedding his English dislike of admitting any belief in the supernatural. "And what made me bang certain was that the second the thing

(Continued on p. xxviii)



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was broken—the well, the sort of passion that May and I had for each other vanished as clean as a whistle, and the one thing we both wanted was to stop you hurting yourself till you came to your senses! . . . Took longer with you, I suppose, since you let the thing hypnotise you more or less, from what you say; anyway, thank heaven it's smashed and done for, and nobody else can suffer what we've been through. Now, with your permission, May, I'm going to gather up the bits of the thing and burn 'em."

Maisie shivered as she watched the shovelful of fragments, carefully collected, placed at the back of the fire, then gave a sudden cry of fright—with a crackle the electric lights fused as a lean blue flame leapt roaring up the chimney. For a brief second it seemed that a huge wind, fierce and savage, swept the cosy room with a hot breath like the sudden opening of a furnace door, and the ghastly blue of the dancing flame lit up their white faces with an awful radiance, livid and terrible. The roar of the wind and the flames seemed to soar and scream as if something in frenzied, impotent rage shook an invisible fist at them, shrieking



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fury and baffled evil as it fled; then in a flash it passed as the blue flame disappeared up the chimney, and through the windows came peeping in the light of the fresh and wholesome dawn.

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