

Mask of the Macabre

Macabre Collection, #1

by David Haynes,

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For Sarah and George.

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„To the Opera Macabre.“ I leapt into the Hansom and gathered my frock coat to my legs. The night was chill and an endless fall of snow had dusted my top hat entirely. The snow was a welcome sight though, for it kept the masses from the

street, and in my need for haste gave the driver cause to move swiftly and without delay.

I could not remember being quite so much in anticipation, not since... Not since I had first witnessed his show in fact. When I had first observed the magician so darkly, yet beautifully enthral, beguile and with equal measure, appall me. There was a sombre grace to his act; the likes of which had never been witnessed in London before. I believed in those moments I would have done battle with Satan himself just to be in his company; to be part of the magic itself.

The cab moved quickly over the snow covered cobbles; too quickly. With every bump or turn in the road I was thrown this way and that. I thumped my cane into the roof of the cab and knocked three times; I was anxious to arrive, but to arrive in one piece I must. Tonight I was to be given the rare opportunity to meet the man himself; the magician.

I am no detective, and I am no amateur sleuth bent on revealing tricks, but it was a dark curiosity which brought me back to the theatre this night. The grim oddity of his act was as perversely captivating as spending two pennies observing the demented souls in Bethlem.

We crossed the river and entered the city. The filth, grime and toil of the working man would not be quietened even though the snow fell thick on the befouled cobbles. I looked through the window and under the smoky embrace of the gas-lit street I saw the faces of bitter men. These were the men who roared against the fell fate of their circumstance and piled their woes on our city. These were the men who would take a cut-throat to your neck for the price of a gin. One day their deeds would be accounted for, in this world or the next.

A fouler beast than those stalked the street these nights though, or so *The Times* reported. Some believed the devil himself was abroad and walked freely amongst our citizens. Six men had been murdered so far and all had been flayed. That is to say facially flayed and were identifiable only through their pocket watches, walking canes or trinkets of affection.

A shriek came from beyond my view and pierced the already savagely primed air. The sound, such a vile and base sound, was no doubt made during the throes of a corrupt act. I turned away. Not tonight would I debase myself and consider their blight on this city. Not tonight; tonight was for magic.

At the theatre, I alighted the cab and paid the driver, a surly man whose driving was clearly in keeping with his brusque manner. I sent him away with a reminder to be back at midnight.

„Would you kindly, sir, give me two-pence? I can get a bed to lie upon if you do, sir.“ I turned to see who had spoken and was greeted with a human wreck. „I shall die if I stay out another night.“

She bore the traces of a past respectability in her dishevelled garments but that respectability had long since departed leaving only horrifying decay.

„I have been the victim of a terrible libertine, sir. One who sought to ruin me from the very day we met.“

Her eyes were sunken wells of despair where torment swam happily among her tears. On any particular day I would have sent her away; back to the shadows where she lurked with so many others. There was something of my wife in her eyes though, my poor dead Emily, as she lay in anguish in our bed. Snatched by King

Cholera himself and taken as his morbid bride. So, tonight, my spirits being what they were, I pressed four pence into her palm. With the sound of her thanks resounding through my soul I passed into *The Opera Macabre* once again.

Gas-lit lamps with their wine coloured shades gently illuminated the path to my box. I wanted no company tonight and would gladly have covered the cost of the theatre to sit in solitary awe. Below, in the stalls, where only last week empty seats waited for bustle and bow; barely a seat was spare. It appeared the great and the good of our society had discovered what I had already found.

The orchestra rumbled and scratched their preparation, the instruments as impatient as I for the show to commence.

Then the violin began. It was as bewitchingly haunting as I recalled. The piece had remained with me all this week, weaving its tortured notes around my mind. The gas-lit chandeliers, hung high above, were faded to a hint and in the ghostly half-light cast from the wings the vivid crimson curtains became a bloody blush of velvet. The melancholy notes from the violin writhed through the theatre. They danced on the gowns of the ladies and whispered dark, dangerous thoughts into the minds of the men beside them.

A noxious miasma from the gentlemen's cigars clung to the stage and I knew what was beyond that haze was equally grotesque.

Abruptly, the bass drum sounded out its deep, doom laden threat and there were gasps from several ladies as the curtains drew back.

Onto the stage he walked; the black dress tails licking at his feet like a diseased serpent's tongue. There was silence as he looked out onto the audience and folded his arms.

„Tonight ladies and gentlemen, I shall show to you the dark and duplicitous nature of man. This I will make through the many faces of the darkest magic.“

His words resounded loud and clear over the crowd. They were at once, as I had been one week previously, under his thrall.

His face was as white as an alabaster trinket box and his eyes as lifeless as a memento mori photograph. As the violin played adagio, his flourishing hands gave forth a solitary crow to the void above our heads. All looked to the chandeliers as the crow circled higher and higher into the abyss. Then, when it could climb no more, it fell downwards in a sickening, screeching spiral. A bearded gentleman reached up and took the poor creature as it dropped. I smiled; as he opened his meaty fist a black silken kerchief fell to the floor and the crow was no more.

I watched the audience momentarily before averting my stare back to the magician. I believe his eyes were on me at that instant and only on me. I felt for one moment there was recognition in those inert eyes, but I must have been mistaken, for we had not yet met.

I had carefully chosen the box from which to watch him for it afforded the best vantage. His porcelain features were troubling and in his eyes nothing more than the glass beads of a doll. On his face there existed a soulless countenance, so perfectly bland and disturbing. The magician was like no man I had seen before.

The first face of duplicity he showed to the audience was that of his own mien. The transience of his eyes shone briefly as he uttered a strange incantation in a guttural voice. The crow, once again summoned from the smoky air, appeared and circled the magician before it dropped on him with a shrill call. Its talons scraped

at his skin and ripped at his flesh until he screamed at the utter and all-encompassing agony of it. The bird flew away on glossy feathered wings and left nothing but the bloody pulp of his visage. I'd heard screams from the audience a week prior, but from my vantage, they were indecently amplified to the point of being sickening. The magician fell to his knees and clutched at his bloody face before the orchestra struck up a dirge to lament his misery.

Yet in a moment, as he stood once again, his face was repaired. Nothing but the implacable visage of an unscarred magician remained to gather the tormented applause. Where the crow had flown I could not say for the bird was of the least interest to me. Seemingly not a single talon had pulled at his flesh or marked him in any way.

For a brief moment the magician looked up and once again and I held his gaze for as long as was comfortable. His face was as porcelain pure as it had been a few moments before. Yet something slight and almost imperceptible had occurred to his features. I could not say exactly what that change was for he looked away before I could examine him further.

He took his bow and allowed the crowd to quieten before he continued.

„Our one true face is revealed in the moment of our death. Tonight I will expose my own.“

The drum beat out a resounding boom. The rhythm grew faster and faster in a deafening crescendo. The magician grabbed at his chest before dropping silently to the stage. A stifled murmur rose through the crowd and the drum sounded the diminishing rhythm of his ruined heart. Then it was still. Then there was silence.

Almost unnoticed from the wings, crept the very vista of death. Dressed in a hooded cloak as black as midnight, and carrying his long handled scythe, he approached the supine magician.

Although I had witnessed this before, my palms were leaden with a nervous sweat which betrayed my fear. The reaper swung his great scythe down onto the magician's face sending a fountain of blood into the air. His second and third stroke finished the task and left a tattered ruin of flesh to behold. Yet the magician uttered no sound at all, not even a plea for his life. It was impossible for a man to live through such an ordeal.

The drum sounded out a beat; once, twice. Then in a steady rhythm of life it pounded the audience once again. The magician rocked upright and gazed at the spectators; his face nothing more than the rancid window of a butcher. He cried, shrieked and pleaded with the reaper beseeching him for mercy. „Give me back my life,“ he appeared to ask. Silence greeted his request before the weapon swept over his face and the bloody carcass fell away.

Behind it, the sickening face of Lucifer stared malevolently at the crowd. His tongue was lean, long and forked as it flicked and licked in the air and his eyes were the deepest wells of darkest ink. His mouth, in an ugly snarl, opened to speak but the reaper's scythe fell across him before he could utter a sound. In this moment his façade was renewed and he was perfect once again.

In my fervour I gripped the rail to the box and hung perilously over the balustrade. How could this be? How could a man recover from such vital injuries, not once but twice on the same night? It was not possible.

A solitary clap sounded from the shadows at the rear of the stalls. Then it was joined by another and another, until all were united together in an overture of applause. I had no doubt, many of those present felt revolted by what they had seen, as I had. As I did; but as hideous as it was something made us want more.

The magician rose to his feet and took his bow, the reaper slipped silently into the shadows.

Opera Macabre was for good reason known as the „Gloomy Boy“ to those who frequented the theatres of London. The tunnels used to transport the audience to their seats were ill lit and always filled with cigar induced smog. They were, at the best of times, avoided. However on this night I was led by the usher through the tunnels to the dressing room of the magician. The usher knocked on the door and left me to wait.

I began to think the knock had gone unheard but after a few moments the door opened. I was greeted, most surprisingly, by a cheerful looking fellow. He offered his hand. „A pleasure to meet you Mr Lovett, you are most welcome.“ He stepped aside and beckoned me into the room.

The room was neat, tidy and although cold, felt comfortable. Two paraffin lamps lit the room and filled the air with their familiar and pleasant smell. I quickly took in my surroundings before addressing him. „It is my pleasure I can assure you Mr...?“ Although he was known simply as The Magician, I did not feel it appropriate in the circumstances to address him thus.

„Sir, you may address me, Fettiplace.“ He tipped an ungentlemanly wink. „I should like to retain some mystery.“

„As you wish sir. Your show...“ I began with no real thought on how to continue. „Your show is quite remarkable. Quite, quite remarkable.“ Fettiplace was dressed smartly in shirt sleeves and waistcoat, although his bow tie hung carelessly around his neck. His stature, I estimated was in keeping with my own. His hair, a wild morass of silver, was the most remarkable aspect of his otherwise plain appearance.

„Thank you sir.“ He indicated a pair of threadbare chairs in the corner of the room. „Would you sit? I have rather a good port to drink?“

„Thank you Fettiplace. I should like that.“

We sat and talked at length regarding the show and his act. He was utterly charming and quite so unlike his stage character that I had cause to question whether it was indeed, the same gentleman.

„Sir, it is my intention to create an illusion; to beguile, confuse and haunt the audience. Then of course, I endeavour to entertain them.“ He laughed. „These days they clamour for their amusement to be shocking.“

„But Fettiplace, you are perfectly demonic on that stage, quite frightening. There is a fine line between fear and amusement sir.“

„Yes, Mr Lovett there is but there is also illusion. How many of us can really say our faces are an honest and truthful representation of who we really are? We slip on our mask without thought and when circumstance demands. That is all.“ Fettiplace leaned forward and put me under his gaze. „You, Mr Lovett, wear a mask every day. You are wearing a mask tonight yet somewhere deep in your soul

exists the real Mr Lovett. The man who would rage at what life has taken from him; yet has not the will to do so.“

I looked away. For all his charm Fettiplace made me uncomfortable. Behind his head was a small door and across it lay a heavy chain and lock. It was curious and clearly too small for a man to enter. „What do you keep in there Fettiplace?“

For the first time his countenance slipped and something of the masked Lucifer re-appeared.

He half turned in his chair. „This is where my secrets are kept Mr Lovett.“ He turned back and smiled; his charming self once again returned. „And no, Mr Lovett, you may not peer inside.“

I handed the empty port glass to Fettiplace and took my hat from his dresser. A lady's brooch of polished jet lay discarded on the table. The design was vaguely familiar somehow. The portrait of a beautiful young lady in profile was exquisitely crafted. Fettiplace pushed it quickly to one side, dismissively. „It has been a pleasure to talk with a gentleman such as yourself, Mr Lovett. Although I cannot guarantee any marked changes to my act, you are most welcome to visit me again, at a time of your choosing.“ I gave him my hand and he shook it most enthusiastically.

I bade him goodnight and walked the distance through the tunnels and out once again into the chill night. The snow had fallen thick and heavy and I began to wonder if the cab would be able, or willing to make the perilous journey. I looked about and gripped my cane tightly. Shadows moved silently in the night, especially in this district. If any footpads should chance upon me tonight they would be sorely sorry for their trouble. My cane would split their skulls as easily as a spoon cracks an egg.

To my relief, a test of strength was not needed, and as my pocket watch struck the hour, the Hansom appeared like a hearse through the mist.

I lay in my bed that night and wondered about the curious magician, Mr Fettiplace. A man, so demonic and abominable on stage, was a jolly and sociable fellow with scarce a bad word for any man. A strange juxtaposition, make no mistake. But his cheery manner had been disrupted at the mention of the strange little doorway. What manner of secrets did he keep locked away in there? I suppose, if I were a man of magic, and someone tried to reveal my secrets, I too might become irritable.

I took breakfast promptly at nine. I had a great number of visits planned for the morning and would benefit from the early start. The front page of *The Times* was once again filled with the night's grisly atrocities. Another three bodies had been found and each one suffered the same facial disfigurement. There was speculation about the motive for such an act. The editor clearly apportioned the deeds to a vigilante group of prostitutes cutting through their brutal customers. I could not align myself with this thinking. Women were simply not capable of such barbarous acts, not even the filthy creatures in their brothels.

My first visit of the day was to be to the offices of *The Athenaeum*. The journal frequently published my reviews of the latest literary works and I was keen to show them my most recent examination. I found Lewis Carroll's book *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* to be almost without rival in its preaching of nonsense.

The book so infuriated me that, should it not have cost such a princely sum, I would happily have seen it on the bed of The Thames.

With high spirits I left my home. The heavy snow fall of the previous evening should have left the streets clean and sparkling in the winter sun. Instead a mist clung to the street and draped the gas lights in an ill-fitting robe. Finding a Hansom would be problematic and I decided it would be a perfect morning to walk the short distance.

My spirits were disturbed shortly after leaving though, for with an odious sensation I began to feel watched. Pausing and gazing about, I could see no obvious signs of this, but the feeling was with me and it left me uncomfortable. With each step I felt scrutinised and examined. I imagined I could hear the crisp sound of a footfall landing in step with mine. I had all but convinced myself it was nothing more than an uneasy mood which had taken grip, most probably caused by the gruesome show of the night before. Then I saw her. Across the street, in the arboretum, I glanced upon a lady looking over at me with something in her hand. Her crimson dress was as startling as a droplet of freshly spilled blood against the snow. I stopped and our eyes met. For a second she seemed oblivious to our role reversal, but when she realised, she slipped the article into her purse. What was it? A pencil, some paper perhaps?

She turned and walked quickly away; nothing more than a crimson spectre against the threadbare, frosted trees. You would ask; why did Lovett not follow and enquire into the lady's purpose? I would ask that too but in the moment I felt shaken. I suspected I knew the lady and our paths had crossed before.

I had been a little too fond of the Limehouse district and the tincture of opium in my early years. Something my father had been keen to suppress. My dear wife had finally driven it from my system once we were married but not before scandal had threatened. A great deal of my father's money had been spent to assuage the furore. Yet, like the tendrils of some long forgotten opium induced dream, the threads of a memory twisted amid my wits. Was this apparition someone from the past?

Following a brief but satisfactory conversation with the editor of *The Athenaeum*, I decided my nerves required a little help to settle. Unable to conduct my remaining business I took lunch at the club. The chill atmosphere of the street was at once removed as I stepped inside the welcoming and warm interior. My usual comrades had not yet arrived; their business was clearly greater than my own. I settled at my usual place beside the fire and once again picked up a copy of *The Times*. Aside from the price of stock and Lord Derby's proposed political reforms, there was little of note. This only served to bring me back to the ghoulish events of the last few nights.

The deceased men had all been scalped; their faces removed exposing the sinew beneath. What diseased state of mind would drive a man to commit such an act? To take another man's face and... and do what exactly?

I left the club a little before four, having discussed the matter at length with acquaintances both familiar and unfamiliar. Whatever theoretical nonsense they expounded upon always brought me back to the same resolve. I did not reveal my thoughts to them for fear of ridicule but they remained to the forefront of my

theory. Although Fettiplace had, by all standards, appeared as unremarkable as any other man; I was convinced his macabre masks had a part to play.

The snow had fallen heavily again and finding the relative warmth of a Hansom would be difficult not to say dangerous on such an evening.

„...you are most welcome to visit me again, at a time of your choosing.“ Fettiplace’s words rang in my ears. I was some distance from both home and Opera Macabre but it seemed certain that I would find answers in the Gloomy Boy and not beside the warm fireside at home.

Through the ragged gas-lit streets of London I trudged, feeling the cold stares of the depraved beasts as I passed their lairs. Twice I was accosted by haunted creatures imploring me for money. I gave the first woman two pennies for a bed and sent her away with little hope she would not use it for gin. The second, a man of stout build, coughed his way through a declaration of imminent death. The foul stench of gin was already on his breath and I sent him away with a bruise from my cane.

Eventually I found myself at the very point where the Hansom had delivered me the night before. I dared not think that Fettiplace would be here, for it was too early, and for this I was thankful. I had already decided on a course of action and judging by his reaction when I mentioned his secret locker; that course would not be at all welcome.

Dressed as I was, it was of little concern to the usher that I be allowed access to the tunnels and to the dressing room of the magician. I was after all a gentleman, beyond reproach.

The Gloomy Boy was, if at all possible, gloomier than when heaving with the bodies of Victorian society. The inadequate gas lights threw my shadow like a twisted monster along the curved walls. As I walked those dark passageways towards the magician’s room I felt as a collier must feel on his way to the face; depressed and alone.

Thankfully, for my legs were unaccustomed to the exertions of such lengthy exercise, the distance was short. Before many minutes had passed I was outside his room again.

I rapped on the door with my cane and waited. I rapped again before entering.

„Fettiplace?“ I called, expecting no reply.

As I had hoped the room was empty save for stage attire, which lay inside his portmanteau. A single paraffin lamp had been lit in preparation for his arrival.

I checked my pocket watch. It was approaching six and the show was due to begin at seven. There would not be much time to complete my task.

His secret door in the corner was once again secured with a chain. Rattle it as I could, it could not to be opened. I searched his dressing table for keys but there were none and just as I began to feel at a loss a voice came from behind.

„Sir, may I enquire as to your purpose?“

I froze, excuses already racing through my head. Slowly, I turned and opened my mouth to speak. A fear took hold as soon as I saw who had addressed me.

„Sir, I ask again, why are you here?“

It was the foul creature I had given pennies to the previous night. Her vapid expression had gone, replaced with a determined mien I had not expected.

I quickly gathered my thoughts. „I may ask of you, the same madam, are we not both out of place here?“ I reached into my waistcoat for a penny to send her away.

„You may not buy me with a penny sir, not today.“ She toyed with the brooch at her breast, the black contrasted against the bright crimson of the silk...

„I have seen you before, in the arboretum today. You were watching me.“

She smiled; an unpleasant sight in the gloom. „Do you not recognise me Jonathan? Have you forgotten these eyes? You once told me they were your opium. Your laudanum and all the dreams you ever wished for.“

At once, a distant opium filled revelation came swirling into my mind. It was of a woman of beauty and of grace who I had beguiled and defiled. She was that woman.

„My father paid you.“ I uttered.

„But the child lived on, Jonathan. It lived on in my belly and grew twisted and bent like a fiend in a nightmare. Then when they dragged it screaming from my womb it was thrown on the pyre like a dead cat.“ Her words were uttered with spiteful vengeance.

„I will pay, Susanna. I will pay to put things straight. I have changed.“

She held up her hand, to quieten my offer. „It is not your money we want Jonathan. It is your life.“

„We?“ I asked. Who was she in league with?

Susanna smiled and removed a scrap of paper from her purse. „My brother and I.“ She turned the paper and showed me a sketch. „Do you recognise this man, Jonathan?“

I stepped closer. The sketch was of me. „It appears to be me.“

„Yes it is and you have the deceitful face of a murderer.“ She tucked the paper back into her purse.

This conversation had gone on for too long and was as distasteful as it was unexpected. I did not understand the purpose of the sketch other than to taunt me. „I shall leave now but you know where to find me if my offer is to your taste.“ I made to walk past her, all thoughts of Fettiplace and his dark magic behind me. Susanna, it appeared, was not quite finished.

„You ruined me!“ she shrieked and raised her hand to strike me. It was neither with intention nor force that I struck her with the ivory handle of my cane. But strike her I did and she fell clumsily to the floor.

This was an unfortunate accident and one which was beyond my expertise to repair. I knelt and checked her pulse. It beat strongly like the thump of a drum in an orchestra. She had been so beautiful once; so young and beautiful and it was my cowardice that had ruined her. I ran my fingers softly across her cheek. In different times Susanna.

The black brooch had fallen from her breast onto the floor and I picked it up to look at the work; but something in the brooch was wrong. For all the dark beauty it possessed, it was too heavy for its size. I turned it in my fingers and a small clasp dropped from the back releasing a small silver key.

In an instant I forgot about poor Susanna and unlocked the chain from Fettiplace's secret store. I could not enter the room for the malevolent stench which immediately pervaded the air was as vile as death itself. I could not see in either for the blanket of darkness which filled the space was complete.

I grabbed the lamp and thrust it into the unending darkness. For a moment the shadows were unyielding, crowding the light and forcing it back. But the light grew in strength and forced the shadows away until the room was illuminated in a flickering gloom.

On the walls were the faces of slaughtered men. Their cadaverous masks hung like hunting prizes on a country estate, but these trophies were not to be admired. These were made to be worn. Where once lived eyes were vapid orbs of loss and despair. I turned away, already feeling the acid bile rising in my throat. Fettiplace was as debauched as his show suggested and his true face had been revealed in hideous clarity. His stage masks were indeed the real flesh of butchered men. I needed to be free of this morbid mausoleum and bring a constable to witness this atrocity.

„Sir, there’s nothing in here, bar a pig’s head. It’s pretty ripe though I’ll give you that.“ The constable had been difficult to find but had come immediately seeing my distress.

„That cannot be. I saw the men’s faces carved and hung like trophies.“

„Have a look for yourself, sir.“ The constable handed me the lamp and I peered inside. It was an empty space, no sign of the macabre masks.

A crowd had gathered about the theatre, the show had been cancelled and no sign of Fettiplace or Susanna could be found.

The constable accompanied me home, fearing I was deluded and liable to cause injury to another. His intentions were kindly enough but I did not doubt what I had seen. One does not easily forget the spectacle of what was in that room. I took a bottle of brandy to my room and lay clothed on the bed. I knew that sleep would not come and the chimes of a bell from a distant church counted out a tortuous route to dawn. A cold depression had gripped me during the night hours but I resolved to speak with the police again and implore them to investigate.

The bell chimed eight times and I rose from the bed. The first of the grey morning light staggered through the bedroom window barely illuminating my steps. I peered outside and looked to the street below.

A cab was parked beneath my window. I was not expecting visitors, least of all at this hour. The door to the cab opened and out flowed a river of crimson silk. Susanna looked up and waved happily. It was a curiously friendly gesture and for a moment I was in a mind to wave back. Fettiplace appeared at her side and bowed before tipping his top hat and returning to the warmth of the cab. Had this all been a cruel joke? Was I the source for his amusement?

I would have my answers this day. Taking two steps at a time I descended the stairs at a dangerous speed and out onto the street. The cab had gone from view but I ran in the direction it must have taken. The snow lay underfoot and my feet were bare sending me sprawling into the snow. Finally, cursing I got to my feet, and stepped back inside. My resolve, had it not been firmly set was now cast in stone. I would find Fettiplace and wring his putrid neck.

I picked up *The Times* from beneath the door and observed the headline.

„Four Men Slain.“

So the killer had been busy again, slicing his way through the city. If Fettiplace was indeed responsible then they would see him hang, of that there could be no doubt. It was my desire to see him treated so.

„Killer identified.“

My heart stopped beating. Beneath the headline was a picture of me, an artist had sketched my face on the front of the paper.

„Killer identified.“

I staggered into the dining room, gasping for air. I had killed no man and yet here I was. „Killer witnessed in the act.“

The floor beneath my feet seemed to swell with each step and threatened to trip me. I grasped for the table and where my hands expected wood they found something else. With a sickening dread I looked to my fingers. Beneath my hand was a bloody mask cut from the flesh of men. My fingers slipped through the voids where once lived eyes and lifted it to my face. The mask had been cut seamlessly, flawlessly and with the touch of an artist. Between them they had created the perfect countenance of Jonathan Lovett; and in doing so had made me the murderer.

Special Thanks to Kath Middleton.

