

That a successful bank executive should also achieve success as a writer of fiction, not to mention of fantasy, seems at first glance an incongruous mixture of images—rather like having a professional sanitary engineer doing double duty as a cotillion leader or a professional football player winning kudos as a high fashion designer.

Positively schizophrenic . . .

Yet Kenneth Grahame, author of the immortal *The Wind in the Willows*, doubled as one of the three governors of the Bank of England. Ed Sreeter, who attained huge popular successes with *Dere Mabel* and *Father of the Bride*, was also a respected vice president of the ultra-conservative Fifth Avenue Bank of New York. Charles Brackett, another important Manhattan banking executive wrote telling stories for the early *New Yorker* Magazine and ultimately gave up the money business to become half of a hugely successful Hollywood writer-director team with the ubiquitous Billy Wilder.

Gustav Meyrink, author of *The Man in the Bottle*, may well be the most important of all author-bankers, for this austere Viennese-born Prague investment master, in that year of European carnage 1915, wrote a novel called *Der Golem*. This unique story of horror and guilt and of hideous haunting by a non-human creature whose existence remains as shadowy, as its impact on the living is hideously real, was an important work on this Jewish theme.

Nor was Gustav Meyrink any one-shot author. His fantasies, once described by H. P. Lovecraft as being laden with "haunting shadowy suggestions of marvels and horrors just beyond reach," appeared over a span of several decades. One, entitled *The Violent Death*, appeared in the July, 1935, issue of this magazine, another, *Bal Macabre*, in STRANGE TALES for October, 1932.

The following story was culled from a collection of German short stories published by *The Lock and Key Library* in 1912. The anthologist? Julian Hawthorne, whose father won a certain reputation for himself as an author of stories with a supernatural flavor.

The Man On The Bottle

By GUSTAV MEYRINK

MELANCHTHON was dancing with the Bat, whose costume represented her in an inverted position. The wings were folded close to the body, and in the claws she held a large gold hoop upright, which gave the impression that she was hanging, suspended from some imaginary point. The effect was grotesque, and it amused Melanchthon very much, for he had to peep through this gold hoop, which was exactly on a level with his face, while dancing with the Bat.

She was one of the most original masks—and at the same time one of

the most repelling ones—at the fete of the Persian prince. She had even impressed his highness, Mohammed Darasche-Koh, the host.

"I know you, pretty one," he had nodded to her, much to the amusement of the bystanders.

"It is certainly the little marquise, the intimate friend of the princess," declared a Dutch councilor in a Rembrandt costume.

He surmised this because she knew every turn and corner of the palace, to judge by her conversation. And but a few moments ago, when some cavalier

had ordered felt boots and torches so that they might go down into the courtyard and indulge in snowballing, the Bat joined them and participated wildly in the game. It was then—and the Dutchman was quite ready to back it with a wager—that he had seen a well-known bracelet on her wrist.

“Oh, how interesting,” exclaimed a Blue Butterfly. “Couldn’t Melancthon discover whether or not Count Faast is a slave of the princess?”

“Don’t speak so loud,” interrupted the Dutch councillor. “It is a mighty good thing that the orchestra played the close of that waltz *fortissimo*, for the prince was standing here only a moment since.”

“Better not speak of such things,” whispered an Egyptian, “for the jealousy of this Asiatic prince knows no bounds, and there are probably more explosives in the palace than we dream. Count de Faast has been playing with fire too long, and if Darasche-Koh suspects—”

A rough figure representing a huge knot dashed by them in wild flight to escape a Hellenic warrior in shimmering armor.

“If you were the Gordian knot, Mynherr, and were pursued by Alexander the Great, wouldn’t you be frightened?” teased the inverted Bat, tapping the Dutchman coquettishly on the end of the nose with her fan.

“The sharp wit of the pretty Marquise Bat betrays her,” smiled a lanky Satan with tail and cloven foot. “What a pity that only as a Bat are you to be seen with your feet in the air.”

The dull sound of a gong filled the room as an executioner appeared, draped in a crimson robe. He tapped a bronze gong, and then, resting his

weight on his glittering cudgel, posed himself in the center of the big hall.

Out of every niche and lobby the maskers streamed toward him—harlequins, cannibals, an ibis, and some Chinese, Don Quixotes, Columbines, bayaderes and dominoes of all colors.

The crimson executioner distributed tablets of ivory inscribed with gold letters.

“Oh, programmes for the entertainment!” chorused the crowd.*

“What! The prince is the author of this marionette play?”

“Probably a scene out of the ‘Thousand and One Nights.’”

“But who will play the part of the Lady in the Sedan Chair?”

“Oh, there is a great surprise in store for us,” twittered a seductive Incroyable, leaning on the arm of an Abbé. “Do you know, the Pierrot with whom I danced the tarantelle was the Count de Faast, who is going to play *The Man in the Bottle*; and he confided a lot of things to me: the marionettes will be very greswome—that is, for those who appreciate the spirit of the thing—and the prince had an elephant sent down from Hamburg—but you are not listening to me at all!” And the little one dropped the arm of her escort and bolted into the swirling crowd.

New groups of masks constantly poured out of the adjoining rooms through the wide doorways into the big hall, making a kaleidoscopic play of colors, while files of costumed guests stood admiring the wonderful mural frescoes that rose to the blue, star-dotted ceiling. Attendants served refreshments, sorbets and wines in the window niches.

With a rolling sound the walls of the narrow end of the hall separated

*THE MAN IN THE BOTTLE

Marionette Comedy in the Spirit of Aubrey Beardsley

BY PRINCE MOHAMMED DARASCHE-KOH

Characters:

THE MAN IN THE BOTTLE MIGUEL, COUNT DE FAAST
THE MAN ON THE BOTTLE PRINCE MOHAMMED DARASCHE-KOH
THE LADY IN THE SEDAN CHAIR

VAMPIRES, MARIONETTES, HUNCHBACKS, APES, MUSICIANS

Scene of Action: A Tiger’s Maw

and a stage was pushed slowly into view. Its setting, in red brown and a flaming yellow proscenium, was a yawning tiger's maw, the white teeth glittering above and below.

In the middle of the scene stood a huge glass bottle in the form of a globe, with walls at least a foot thick. It was about twice the height of an average man and very roomy. The back of the scene was draped with pink silk hangings.

Then the colossal ebony doors of the hall opened and admitted a richly caparisoned elephant, which advanced with majestic tread. On its head sat the crimson executioner guiding the beast with the butt of his cudgel. Chains of amethysts dangled from the elephant's tusks, and plumes of peacock feathers nodded from its head. Heavily embroidered gold cloths streamed down from the back of the beast, skirting the floor; across its enormous forehead there was a network of sparkling jewels.

The maskers floated around the advancing beast, shouting greetings to the gay group of actors seated in the palanquin; Prince Darasche-Koh with turban and aigrette, Count de Faast as Pierrot, marionettes and musicians, stiff as wooden puppets. The elephant reached the stage, and with its trunk lifted one man after another from its back. There was much applause and a yell of delight as the beast seized the Pierrot and sliding him into the neck of the bottle, closed the metal top. Then the Persian prince was placed on top of the bottle.

The musicians seated themselves in a semicircle, drawing forth strange, slender instruments. The elephant gazed at them a moment, then turned about and strode toward the door. Like a lot of happy children the maskers clung to its trunk, ears, and tusks and tried to hold it back; but the animal seemed not to feel their weight at all.

The performance began, and somewhere, as if out of the ground, there arose weird music. The puppet orchestra of marionettes remained lifeless and waxen; the flute player stared with glassy, idiotic eyes at the ceiling; the features of the rococo conductor in peruke and plumed hat, holding the baton aloft and pressing a

pointed finger mysteriously to his lips, were distorted by a shrewd, uncanny smile.

In the foreground posed the marionettes. Here were grouped a humpbacked dwarf with chalky face, a gray, grinning devil, and a sallow, rouged actress with carmine lips. The three seemed possessed of some satanic secret that had paralyzed their movements. The semblance of death brooded over the entire motionless group.

The Pierrot in the bottle now began to move restlessly. He doffed his white felt hat, bowed and occasionally greeted the Persian prince, who with crossed legs sat on the cap of the bottle. His antics amused the audience. The thick walls of glass distorted his appearance curiously; sometimes his eyes seemed to pop out of his head; then again they disappeared, and one saw only forehead and chin; sometimes he was fat and bloated, then again slender, with long legs like a spider's.

In the midst of a motionless pause the red silk hangings of the background parted, and a closed sedan chair was carried on by two Moors, who placed it near the bottle. A ray of pale light from above now illuminated the scene. The spectators had formed themselves into two camps. The one was speechless under the spell of this vampiric, enigmatic marionette play that seemed to exhale an atmosphere of poisoned merriment; the other group, not sensitive enough to appreciate such a scene, laughed immoderately at the comical capering of the man in the bottle.

He had given up his merry dancing and was trying by every possible means to impart some information or other to the prince sitting on the cap. He pounded the walls of the bottle as though he would smash them; and to all appearances he was screaming at the top of his voice, although not the slightest sound penetrated the thick glass.

The Persian prince acknowledged the movements of the Pierrot with a smile, pointing with his finger at the sedan chair.

The curiosity of the audience reached its climax when it saw that the Pierrot had pressed his face against

the glass and was staring at something in the window of the sedan chair. Then suddenly, like one gone mad, he beat his face with his hands, sank on his knees and tore his hair. Then he sprang furiously up and raced around the bottle at such speed that the audience saw only a fluttering cloth in his wake.

The secret of the Lady in the Sedan Chair puzzled the audience considerably—they could only see that a white face was pressed against the window of the chair and was staring over at the bottle. Shadows cut off all further view.

Laughter and applause rose to a tumult. Pierrot had crouched on the bottom of the bottle, his fingers clutching his throat. Then he opened his mouth wide and pointed in wild frenzy to his chest and then to the one sitting above. He folded his hands in supplication, as though he were begging something from the audience.

"He wants something to drink! Such a large bottle and no wine in it? I say, you marionettes, give him a drink," cried one of the maskers.

Everybody laughed and applauded.

Then the Pierrot jumped up once more, tore his garments from his chest and staggered about until he measured his length on the bottom of the bottle.

"Bravo, bravo, Pierrot! Wonderfully acted! *Da capo, da capo!*" yelled the maskers.

When the man in the bottle did not stir again and made no effort to repeat his scene, the applause gradually subsided and the attention of the spectators was drawn to the marionettes. They still remained motionless in the poses they had assumed, but in their miens there was now a sense of expectancy that had not been there before. It seemed as if they were waiting for a cue.

The humpbacked dwarf, with the chalked face, turned his eyes carefully

and gazed at the Prince Darasche-Koh. The Persian did not stir.

Finally two figures advanced from the background, and one of the Moors haltingly approached the sedan chair and opened the door.

And then something very remarkable occurred—the body of a woman fell stiffly out on the stage. There was a moment of deathly silence and then a thousand voices arose: "What has happened?"

Marionettes, apes, musicians—all leaped forward; maskers climbed up on the stage.

The princess, wife of Darasche-Koh, lay there strapped to a steel frame. Where the ropes had cut into her flesh were blue bruises, and in her mouth there was a silk gag.

A nameless horror took possession of the audience.

"Pierrot!" a voice suddenly shrieked. "Pierrot!" Like a dagger, indescribable fear penetrated every heart.

"Where is the prince?"

During the tumult the Persian had disappeared.

Melanchthon stood on the shoulders of Mephisto, but he could not lift the cap of the bottle, and the air valve was screwed tightly shut.

"Break the walls of the bottle! Quick!"

The Dutch councilor tore the cudgel from the hand of the crimson executioner and with a leap landed on the stage.

A grewsome sound arose, like the tolling of a cracked bell. Like streaks of white lightning the cracks leaped across the surface of the glass. Finally the bottle was splintered into bits. And within lay, suffocated, the corpse of the Count de Faast, his fingers clawing his breast.

The bright hall seemed to darken.

Silently and with invisible pinions the gigantic ebon birds of terror streaked through the hall of the fête.