



# PHANTOM FITTINGS.

BY FRANK RICHARDSON.

**I**T was an evil face. Beyond all possibility of doubt, it was an evil face.

The eyes—black, birdlike, and shifty—gleamed from beneath heavy, jutting eyebrows. The man's skin was coarse and dry, yellow in texture. Deep, firm lines were graven round his thin, colourless lips. Though completely bald, save for a fringe of dull grey hair, he did not appear more than fifty years old—but for his whiskers. His whiskers—of inordinate length, woolly, cotton-woolly—sprang from his cheek-bones in the form of two huge, snow-white triangles. Benevolent, almost imbecile in suggestion, very much older than their proprietor's evident age—they were clearly misfit whiskers. Also, their proprietor wore a red tie, out of all harmony with his whiskers.

The extraordinarily inappropriate nature of his face and fittings attracted my attention to the man as I walked through the smoking-room of the Northumberland Club. It was August, and the club was deserted. As the Consolidated Club had closed for repairs, the Northumberland extended its hospitality to the Consolidated.

Being on the committee of the Northumberland, I knew most of its members—at any rate, by sight. The man with the white whiskers and the red tie must be a member of the Consolidated. As I turned over the illustrated papers on the table in the middle of the room, I looked curiously at him. The whiskers worried me. Not

simply because they were whiskers—in sanitary trappings—but because they seemed to me to be somebody else's whiskers.

But whose? I racked my brain. Suddenly—Beaver-Boyd's!

Poor old Beaver-Boyd had worn a precisely similar set—worn them in that very seat. He had been celebrated (were he not dead, I should say notorious) for his wonderful crop of natural ivy and his kindness of heart. I had always liked old man Beaver-Boyd, in spite of the fact—perhaps by reason of the fact—that I knew him but slightly. He was a miscellaneous financier. One day, it was a patent unrefillable bottle; the next, a zinc mine in North Borneo; and so forth and so on. He always gave his friends the opportunity of sharing in the riches that should one day, of a surety, be his. Every club contains half-a-dozen members such as he—Heaven rest his soul! But I had been too little of a friend to him, too much of a financial featherweight to have been invited, it must be said, to lose any of my hardly earned stock. When the news of his death—somewhere in Australia, a couple of years ago, in quest of a mine—reached me, I felt that I owed the kindly old fellow a deep debt of gratitude—for the money I hadn't lost. But—the man with the evil face was wearing his whiskers.

Curious! very curious!

I could have sworn to them.

I walked up the main room, turned the corner into the back room, and sat down to write a letter.

Hardly had I begun, when I received a hearty blow on the shoulder—

"Hullo! my staunch companion! Back in town?"

"Le Touquet! And you?"

"Ends of the earth—Mexico, Pekin, Bayswater. I've been away a year."

"Good Heavens! My dear chap, I'm awfully glad to see you."

"But you haven't missed me?"

I looked at Gilbert Burness, the eminent



"Burness put up his hand in a deprecatory manner."

traveller, sportsman, and special correspondent, and answered—

"No. Frankly, no. I only miss you when I see you. When the ordinary man is away, one makes inquiries about him. But when a man like you is visible in the four-mile radius, one suspects that he has lost his berth. Nothing the matter, I hope?"

"Yes."

The strongly built but loose-limbed man, with his deep bronze face and crisp, close, yellow beard, hesitated.

"There is something devilish bad with me. I've seen most things; I've gone through most things; but I've never felt like—this before."

"How do you mean?"

"I don't know. This is an August afternoon. This is St. James's Street. This is the twentieth century."

"I don't understand."

"Neither do I."

Then I noticed a look of sheer, cold horror in his face as he whispered—

"Have you seen the clean-shaven man in the other room—the man with the red tie?"

"Yes, but he's not clean-shaven; he wears a full set of cotton-wool fittings."

"There is only one man in the next room."

"I know. He wears a red tie."

Burness interrupted—

"There is hell in his face."

"He is not clean-shaven; he wears whiskers—immense whiskers—whiskers like Beaver-Boyd's."

"I don't know Beaver-Boyd. This—man is clean-shaven."

"Nonsense!"

"Go and look!"

He followed me.

As I turned the corner, I saw the man in the red tie. He was still reading his paper.

"Look!" I said. "Did you, who did not know Beaver-Boyd, ever see whiskers so large?"

He turned on me petulantly for so big a man.

"You're mad! stark, staring mad! Do you mean to say that this man wears whiskers?"

"Obviously. A huge crop."

"You're insane about whiskers. You think they are funny."

"Beyond doubt."

"This is not the moment for merriment."

His eyes gleamed angrily at me.

"You are so interested in whiskers that you see them where none exist."

His strong hand gripped my shoulder, and he spun me round. "Can't you ever be serious? This is not the time to talk about whiskers."

The look of terror in his eyes alarmed me. I was anxious for his sanity. I scarcely knew how to deal with the matter. Deliberately, however, I put this question—

"My dear Burness, don't you *see* the man's whiskers—large, white ones?"

"Do you?"

"Of course."

"Which of us is mad? You or I—or that devil?"

"We can ask."

"Are you serious?" he hissed.

"Certainly. The matter must be cleared up."

"You will speak to him—to that—seated in that chair—hunched up—horrible?"

"My poor friend, I will certainly ask him whether he wears whiskers or not. The question will appear strange to him, perhaps. Beyond doubt it will appear strange to him. Because, my dear Burness, his whiskers are the most noticeable thing about him—except, perhaps, the extraordinary wickedness of his face."

"Ah, you notice—that!"

"I do. It is a—shocking face. It is a face like—a previous conviction."

Burness brought his face close to mine. His wild eyes burnt into my brain. "What do you think the conviction was for—murder?"

"Nonsense!" I laughed—or, rather, I tried to laugh. "What do I know about him? I'm going to inquire—tactfully, of

course—as to whether or not he wears whiskers. Irritably I added: "I hope that, after all this tomfoolery, you'll take his word for it."

Then I approached the sinister man.

"I trust, sir, that you will excuse me. I intend no impertinence."

But my friend here has been travelling a good deal lately, and his health is not, perhaps, quite as he would wish it to be.

His brows knitted. They met over his eyes. Very sternly, in a harsh voice, he answered—

"Your friend is nothing to me, sir. I can give no opinion as to his health. I am not a medical man."

Burness sat down by his side.

"I accept your plea," I continued, standing above him. "But I want your opinion on a matter that is of great interest to my friend and myself."

"Look here, sir!" he thundered, his eyes flashing evilly, "I don't know you, I don't want to know you, and I won't give you my opinion on any subject except yourself! You're a nuisance, sir, an infernal nuisance!"

Then I became annoyed.

"Confound it, sir, I am on the committee of this club!"

At that instant an incredible thing happened.

Burness put up his hand in a deprecatory manner, repressive of my indignation.

His hand passed clear through the centre of the man's whisker. Right through the middle it passed—leaving two inches, as it were, severed in mid-air.



"We left the porters to decide the matter."

Horror-stricken, mystified, I shrank away, muttering—Heaven knows what.

To my thinking, the man was wearing ghosts of whiskers. But such a thing was not possible. Still, provided I was not insane, what other conclusion could I draw from the evidence before me?

Burness's demeanour, also, seemed strange. He continued to sit, gazing aghast at the man in the—red tie. The man in the red tie continued to read his paper.

An idea struck me.

Hastily I went to the hall-porter's box.

Brostell, the excellent, the invaluable, all things to all men, was at his post.

I took him to the glass doors.

"Who is the gentleman over there?"

"With Mr. Burness, sir?"

"Yes."

"He's not a member here. He belongs to the Consolidated. But he's very like Mr. Beaver-Boyd, who died a little while ago."

Panting, I asked—

"In what way is he like Mr. Beaver-Boyd?"

"Why, sir, he wears the same whiskers."

"The—same—whiskers!" A thrill of horror went through me. "Ask the Consolidated porter what his name is."

While he beckoned to the porter of the Consolidated, I beckoned to Burness.

Burness came out into the hall.

The two porters looked through the doors.

"What's the name of the gentleman with the white whiskers sitting over there?" asked Brostell.

"There ain't no gentleman with whiskers. There's a clean-shaven gentleman."

Burness nudged me in an aggressive manner.

"There's only one gentleman in the room," snapped Brostell, "him with the red tie and the white whiskers."

"There's a red tie right enough. But there ain't no white whiskers," replied the other.

"Well, what do *you* call whiskers at the Consolidated? I've never seen bigger whiskers in my life, except on Mr. Beaver-Boyd. And they—were the same size."

"But, Mr. Brostell, this gent is clean-



"The supernatural is a *cul de sac* of the intellect,"  
 "Go on. I will try to follow."

shaven. Mr. Cummidge was clean-shaven when he joined the Consolidated, and he was clean-shaven when he came back from Australia, and he's clean-shaven now. You've got something the matter with your eyes, Mr. Brostell."

That was enough.

We left the porters to decide the matter—if they could.

Burness and I returned to the smoking-room—and to the man with the red tie.

No, not to the man with the red tie. Instinctively we passed by him into the back room, and threw ourselves down on a sofa. It was not the moment to drink a brandy-and-soda or to smoke a cigar. Each stared at the other.

At last Burness spoke, nervously.

"Thank you."

"For what?"

"For not saying: 'There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio.'"

"Oh, naturally not."

Then I lighted a cigarette.

"Do you make anything of it—anything, however absurd?"

"Nothing. Let us consider the facts," said I.

"Facts?" Burness's tanned hands trembled.

"Can you use the word 'fact' in connection with a—thing—like this?"

"We have undoubtedly certain facts in connection with it."

"And they are?"

"Firstly, Burness, neither of us is mad. That is something—to begin with, though the evidence is against us—against one of us."

"Either against you—and Brostell, or against me—and the porter of the Consolidated."

"Precisely. Brostell and I see whiskers. You and the Consolidated porter see none. What does that point to?"

"Nothing."

"On the contrary, Burness, it points to something—possibly to a *cul de sac*. Possibly we may find the conclusion in that

*cul de sac*. The supernatural is a *cul de sac* of the intellect."

"Go on. I will try to follow."

"Without being snobbish or unnecessarily puffed up with pride," I continued, "it seems to me that Brostell and I have nothing in common—I don't bet—except in this matter, the acquaintance of Beaver-Boyd."

"What's he got to do with it?"

"Possibly much, Burness. You noticed that Brostell stated that the man over there—round the corner out of sight, happily—wore—the same—whiskers as Beaver-Boyd."

"I noticed that."

"Good," I answered: "and now I will put this question to you. Isn't it possible that the whiskers which Brostell and I saw on the face of the man in the red tie are only visible

to us because we knew Beaver-Boyd?"

"Then," he snapped, "you mean to suggest that the whiskers you see are ghosts of whiskers: the phantom fittings of Beaver-Boyd. Absurd!" he cried.

"Not so absurd as all that," I answered; "there are numbers of sane people who believe in ghosts. If you can believe in a whole ghost—head, body, and legs—

surely, surely, it is much easier to believe in a small and insignificant portion of a ghost. If you can believe in a whole, no matter with what difficulty, it is a comparatively simple thing to believe in parts."

Burness pooh-poohed the possibility of believing anything of the sort.

Irritated, I continued: "Beaver-Boyd died in Australia a year or two ago. We have just heard from the porter of the Consolidated Club that this man Cummidge—this man with the sinister face—has returned from Australia. Mind you, I am



"Just imagine the position of the man."

putting forward no definite theory, but it seems to me perfectly possible that the man in the red tie may have been instrumental in bringing about the death of poor Beaver-Boyd. I don't even know that Beaver-Boyd was murdered. I have no reason for suspecting that he was murdered. But conceive the terrible tragedy of the thing if there is *anything* in my theory at all! Just imagine the position of the man Cummidge, supposing him to be actually guilty of the murder! According to the story of the porter of the Consolidated Club, Cummidge has been and still is a clean-shaven man.

Yet in the eyes of people like Brostell and myself he wears a full set of snow-white fittings, the snow-white fittings of—his victim. Figure to yourself the position of Cummidge! He has murdered a man with whiskers, and whenever—whether it is in the street, in a theatre, in a club—he is in the presence of a friend of Beaver-Boyd's, the phantom fittings of the murdered man are visible upon his face."

Nervously Burness laughed.

"That is but a slight penalty for such a crime—presuming him to have committed it."

"By no means," I replied. "It is a penalty so astounding, so incredible, that it must drive the man well-nigh to lunacy."

Burness reflected for a moment.

"Of course, your theory is perfectly absurd. But I have never seen a man with so hideous, so hell-haunted a countenance."

At that moment young Harry Beaver-Boyd, a spruce young man of about twenty-four, in half-mourning, turned the corner

from the main room. On his wan, white face was a look of sheer terror.

Without noticing my presence, he ordered a brandy-and-soda. When he had gulped it down, he caught sight of me.

"Great Scott!" he said. "I've just had such a shock. When I came into the club, I thought I saw my father sitting in a chair. You know, my father had the most extraordinary whiskers—they were unique."

"Sit down, Harry," said I, "I've something to tell you."

I introduced him to Burness and I told him the story of our strange experience.

His white lips were tense with agony, his eyes were starting from his head. In a hoarse voice, almost in a whisper, he said—

"The man's name is Cummidge! Is it Anthony Cummidge?"

"I don't know," I answered. "I don't know what his first name is. Did you ever see him, Harry?"

"No," he answered; "he was a great business friend of my father's. The two went out to Australia together. Cummidge,

I've heard, came back with a fortune. As you know, my unfortunate father never came back at all."

"You've never seen a photograph of this man, Harry?"

"Yes, I have. I remember thinking that he had a most villainous face, and I was sorry that my father had any dealings with him."

"Was he clean-shaven?"

"He was clean-shaven."

Automatically, for we had no settled plan, the three of us moved round the corner into



"Whenever he is in the presence of a friend of Beaver-Boyd's."

the main room. Harry, with slow, firm steps, walked up to the man in the red tie. I sat down on a sofa a few yards distant. By my side was Burness. Each of us strained our ears to hear what should ensue.

"My name," said Harry, "is Beaver-Bord."

With a start the man in the red tie looked up from his paper.

"Your name is Anthony Cummidge?"

The lower jaw of the man dropped; his eyes seemed to be starting from his head.

"By Jove!" cried Harry, "there is blood on your whiskers!"

And there was.

Dead silence reigned in the room. It seemed to me that I could hear only the sound of a gurgle in the man's throat. This was an August afternoon; this was St. James's Street; in the twentieth century; a

gentle rain was falling on the mackintoshes of the cabmen as they passed by the window.

Slowly the stains on the man's white whiskers spread. How long it took I don't know. Time didn't seem to pass. It stood still. The face of Cummidge was petrified, mesmerised. There was no symptom of any expression that I had ever seen in a face before, and the stains on the whiskers increased; blood-red they became, like tongues of flame burning from his cheeks.

"Great Heavens!" whispered Burness, "the man's dying!"

Suddenly there was a rattling sound; a spasmodic upheaval of Cummidge's frame. For an instant he stood erect, with tight-clasped bony hands. Then he tottered forward.

The body of a clean-shaven man fell heavily to the floor.



"The body of a clean-shaven man."