

STORY

THE FACE ON THE WALL



I had a tingling experience at Dabney's house last evening. We were talking of the supernatural theme and most of us had cited an instance, without, however, producing much effect.

Among the strangers to me was a little man with an anxious white face, whom Rudson-Wayte had brought, and he watched each speaker with the closest attention, but said nothing. Then Dabney, wishing to include him in the talk, turned to him and asked if he had no experience to relate, no story that contained any element that couldn't be explained.

He thought for a moment. "Well," he said, "not a story in the ordinary sense or an hearsay, like most of your examples. Truth, I always hold, is not only vastly stranger than fiction, but also more interesting. I could tell you an occurrence which happened to me personally and which oddly enough completed itself only this afternoon."

We begged him to begin.



"A year or two ago," he said, "I was in rooms in Great Ormond Street - an old house on the Holborn side. The bedroom walls had been distempered by a previous tenant, but the place was damp and great patches had formed. One of these - as indeed often happens - was exactly like a human face. Lying in the bed in the morning before getting off the bed, I used to watch it and gradually I came to think of it as real - as my roommate, in fact. The odd thing was that while the patches on the walls grew larger and changed their contours, this never did. It remained identically the same.

"While there, I had a very bad attack of influenza, with complications, and all day long I had nothing to do but read or meditate and it was then that this face began to get a firmer hold of me. It grew more and more real and remarkable. It dominated my thoughts day and night. The face was full of individuality. It was the face of a man.



"Well, I got better, but the face still controlled me. I found myself searching the streets for one like it. Somewhere, I was convinced, the real man must be somewhere and I must meet him. Why? I had no idea. I only knew that he and I were in some way linked by fate. I frequently went to places where men assembled in large number - political meetings, football matches, the railway stations where the suburban trains run packed in the morning and in the evening.



"The search became a mania with me. I neglected everything else. I stood at busy corners watching the crowd until people thought me crazy, and the police began to suspect me. I never glanced at women. I watched men, all the time."

"And then," he continued, "at last I saw him. He was in a taxi. I turned and ran beside the taxi for a little way and then saw an empty one coming. 'Follow that taxi,' I hurried, and leapt in. The driver managed to keep it in sight and it took us to Charing Cross. I rushed on to the platform and found my man with two ladies and a little girl. They were going to France by the 2.20 train. I hung about to try and get a word with him, but in vain. They moved to the train.

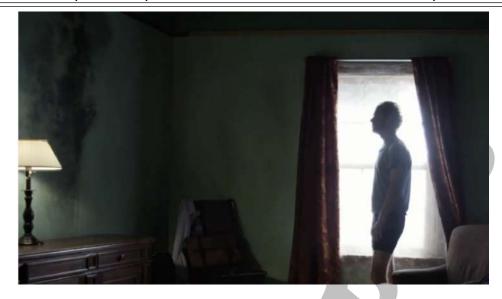
"I hastily purchased a ticket to Folkestone, hoping that I should catch him on the boat before it sailed but at Folkestone he got on board before me and he disappeared into a large private saloon of several cabins. Evidently he was a man of wealth.

"Again I missed but I was determined to meet him, feeling certain that when the voyage began he would leave the ladies and come out for a stroll on the deck. I had only just enough fare to Boulogne, but nothing could stop me now. I took up my position opposite the saloon door and waited. After half an hour the door opened and he came out, but with the little girl. My heart was pounding against my chest. There was no mistake. The same face - every line was the same. He glanced at me and moved towards the upper deck. "It was now or never", I felt.

"Excuse me," I stammered, "but do you mind giving me your card? I have a very important reason for wishing to communicate with you."

"He seemed to be astonished, but he complied. He took out his case and handed me his card and hurried on with the little girl. It was clear that he considered me insane and felt that it was wiser to avoid me.





"I held the card and then I hurried to a deserted corner of the ship and read it. My eyes dimmed; my head swam; for the words: Mr. Ormond Wall with an address at Pittsburg, U.S.A. I remember no more until I found myself at Boulogne. There I lay in a broken condition for some weeks, and I returned just a month ago."

He was silent.

We looked at him and at one another and waited. All the other talk of the evening was nothing compared with the story of the little pale man.

"I went back," he resumed after a moment or so, "to Great Ormond Street and set to work to discover all I could about this American in whose life I had so mysteriously interfered. I wrote to Pittsburg; I wrote to American editors but all that I could find out was that he was a millionaire with English parents who had resided in London. But where? To that question I received no answer.

"And so the time went on until yesterday morning. I had gone to bed more than usually tired and slept till late. When I woke, the sun was streaming into the room. As I always do, I looked at once at the wall on which the face was to be seen. I rubbed my eyes and sprang up in alarm. It was only faintly visible. Last night it had been as clear as ever and now it was almost invisible.

"I got up dazed and dejected and went out. The early editions of the newspapers were already out, and on the headlines I saw 'American millionaire's Motor Accident'. You must all of you have seen it. I bought it and read the news



at once. Mr. Ormond Wall, the Pittsburg millionaire, and party, motoring from Spezzia to Pisa, came into collision with a wagon and overturned. Mr. Wall's condition was critical.

"I went back to my room still dazed, and sat on the bed looking with unseeing eyes at the face on the wall. And even as I looked, suddenly it completely disappeared.

"Later I found that Mr. Wall had succumbed to his injuries at what I take to be that very moment."

Again he was silent.

"Most remarkable," we said; "most extraordinary," and so forth, and we meant it too.

"Yes," said the stranger. "There are three extraordinary, three most remarkable things about my story. One is that is it possible for the discolouration in a lodging-house in London not only to form the features of a gentleman in America, but to have this intimate association with his existence? It will take Science some time to explain that. Another is that the gentleman's name bore relation with the spot on which his features were so precisely reproduced by some mysterious agency. Is it not so?"

We agreed with him, and our original discussion on supernatural manifestations set in again with increased excitement, during which the narrator of the amazing experience rose and said good-night. Just as he was at the door, one of us- I think, it was Spanton -recalled us to the cause of our excited debate by asking him, before he left, what he considered the third extraordinary thing in connection with his deeply interesting story. "You said three things" Spanton reminded him.

"Oh, the third thing," he said, as he opened the door, "I was forgetting that. The third extraordinary thing about the story is that I made it up about half an hour ago; Good-night, again."

After coming to our senses we looked round for Rudson-Wayte, who had brought this snake to bite our bosoms, but he too had disappeared.