

THE MASK

I went to see The Wise Man the other day. I visited him but rarely. There was something intimidating about his presence. But I had been troubled and I needed the illumination only he could supply.

“Wise Man,” I began, “I get no rest. My sleep is disturbed by strange visions.”

“Go on,” said The Wise Man, smiling complacently.

“Almost as soon as I close my eyes, my mind is invaded by scenes so vivid that I doubt what is reality and what is dream.”

“And what do you see?” asked The Wise Man, leaning forward, his eyes sympathetic but his smile remaining fixed.

“Faces,” I said. “Horrible, grotesque faces. Masks, really, set upon shadowy figures swooping backwards and forwards in the dark around me. Sometimes they are so far away I can barely see them but then they surge right up to me, mocking, threatening, humiliating – but always menacing. They fill me with fear but I do not know why they plague me every night. What hides behind the masks? What must I do to banish them? Help me understand.”

The Wise Man sat back and meditated in silence, smiling to himself as though he already knew the answer, relishing his great wisdom.

“You are right to be frightened of these images,” The Wise Man spoke at last.

“Masks, veils, disguises of any sort must always put us on our guard. Anything which needs to conceal its true self must invite our suspicion. It may be that your particular demons spring from inside you. I would need to know much more about their shapes and forms. But consider this,” he said abruptly, sitting bolt upright.

“How much more to be feared than the man wearing the mask is the mask wearing the man?”

And with that, The Wise Man’s smile froze on his face, then transformed into a scowl, a grimace, and finally a silent scream of agony. Then and only then, as if it had been waiting for a cue, was there any movement from the rest of his body. The Wise Man’s hand slid into the folds of his robes and withdrew a knife: a knife with a long, broad blade.

He held the dagger aloft, its point aiming straight at my petrified heart. Suddenly, his smile returned – but it was an arrogant, exultant, evil smile. And then his hand swung in the air and The Wise Man thrust the knife deep into his own chest.

It was a long time before I could move but, at length, I stood and made my way back into the daylight. The grief and despair were almost too much to bear but I knew it was time to go. My tread was heavy and my shoulders were hunched, but on my face I wore a mild, complacent smile.

© Brian Crooks, June 2010