

The man in the green car drove swiftly. On his right the Mediterranean sparkled in the afternoon sunshine, but he had no eyes for the beauty around him. At last he saw the little town with its white buildings and many trees.

Carefully he drove through the crowded market place, past the church with its squat tower, then turned along a street with many shops. He halted the car by the shoemaker's and after a moment's hesitation, stepped out. This is it, he thought, and wondered uneasily whether or not to go on. Perhaps it might be wise to drive back to the hotel.

Then he saw the alley beside the shoemaker's. As he picked his way over the cobbled stones he had a glimpse of the blue sea and on lowering his eyes the alley seemed darker than before. Half-way down was the shop that he wanted and he noticed that the door was slightly open. It was not easy to see what goods the shop sold, for the windows, were ill lit and dirty. He glanced quickly up and down the alley, then went into the gloomy shop.

He became aware of a tall man standing in the shadows.

'Good afternoon, sir.' The man had a neatly-trimmed grey beard and deep-set twinkling eyes. 'What may I have the pleasure of doing for you?'

His smooth manner and shopkeeper's jargon reassured the caller.

'I understand that you make masks.'

'That is so,' the tall man answered.

'We make masks. Our charges are high, but our work is extremely good. Our masks are so perfect that we defy anyone to distinguish between one of them and a human face.'

'This job must be done right,' said the caller uneasily. 'I don't mind what it costs. You see, I'm a business man—'

'Ah, yes,' the tall man said. 'We do a big trade with business men. Not many business men dare go through life with

their own faces. A mask is indispensable.'

'The mask I want is quite special. I must look kindly, sincere—yet determined and vigorous. I must look benevolent and yet strong — if you know what I mean—'

'I know exactly what you mean.' The man picked up a pencil and pad. 'May I have your name, sir?'

'Er—er—yes—John Smith.'

'We have many John Smiths on our books.' The tall man's eyes glimmered. He scribbled on the pad, then stood upright. 'If you will step into the laboratory—'

The laboratory was behind the shop, an untidy kitchen with bowls of molten wax bubbling and hissing on a primitive cooking range. John Smith sat in the only chair.

'You would be surprised if you knew the people who wear our masks.' The tall man stirred the seething wax.

'Business men, politicians, religious leaders, men at the top of their professions. Yet we do no business at all with some people. Miners, farm workers, fishermen — they never come here. Perhaps they are quite satisfied with their own faces. Who knows?'

'I suppose — I suppose no one will know I'm wearing it?'

'No one,' smiled the tall man. 'In a week you yourself will not realize you are wearing it. Our fit is perfect.'

The mask-maker had spoken truthfully. John Smith did forget that he was wearing a mask. Success came to him. He crept into the millionaire class, then dabbled in politics. He became a prominent social figure, was seen regularly at theatres and race meetings. His photograph was in glossy magazines and he was frequently on news reels and television screens.

When he was fifty-two, John Smith married the young and beautiful daughter of an impoverished earl. The wedding was a social highlight and the guests numbered the wealthy, the titled and the famous.

One afternoon when the Mediterranean sparkled in the sunshine, John Smith stopped his car outside the shoemaker's. He gave a quick glance round, then walked down the alley. He stepped into the shop with the open door. In the shadows stood the tall bearded man, untouched by age.

'Good afternoon,' John Smith said abruptly. 'I came to see you more than thirty years ago. I don't suppose you remember me.'

'On the contrary — we never forget our clients.'

'Look,' said John Smith, 'I'm finishing with business. I've made all the money I shall ever need. I've a wife and three children — I've decided to retire. After all, I've worked and fought for years — now I want to take things easy. I want to relax. So — I want you to take off this mask.'

'That is quite impossible.'

'Impossible! You mean I must keep this thing on for ever — as long as I live?'

'That is so, Mr Smith. Our masks are guaranteed to last a lifetime. I must say that this is a most unusual request. Most of our clients wouldn't dream of being without their masks. How could they face the world without them?'

'You mean — it will never come off?'

'Our masks come off only — after death,' the tall man said. 'Then they — well, they fall off.'

John Smith looked at him in silence. Then he turned and slowly walked out of the shop.

It was about a year later that a woman walked down the alley and into the shop with the partly-open door. The tall man bowed.

'Good afternoon, madam.'

'I want you to make me a mask. You can do that?'

'Yes, madam. We have many ladies among our clients.'

'This mask — how long will it last?'

'It will last — a lifetime,' said the tall man softly.

'That's what I want! Can you make me a mask of a perfectly happy wife and mother?'

'Nothing easier, madam. It is a request we often get.'

He picked up a pencil and pad.

'Your name, madam?'

'Must you know?' She hesitated. 'I am Mrs John Smith.'

He paused, pencil poised above the pad.

'Ah, yes. I have followed your husband's remarkable career very closely.'

'How soon can I have this mask?'

'It will be ready in an hour. Is it really urgent?'

'Yes. You see, I am afraid.'

The tall man's eyes gleamed in the dark caverns.

'Afraid, madam! Of what?'

'That my husband might look at me and see what I really think — of him — of our marriage. I am afraid that he will see the hatred in my face — the loathing that I feel when he touches me. I am afraid he will see what I really think — of myself.'

The tall man opened the inner door.

'Let us go into the laboratory,' he said softly.

*Cartwright Timms*