

# THE MASK

## *A Story*

By RAY IRVING

PRINT turned his car into the road-stand beside the swimming pool and asked for a bottle of orange, "If the fizz is in it."

"Haven't had too much trouble with it this summer," said the big, aproned man with the straying left eye, "although it's hard to get this year."

Print took his orange and the evening paper into the room at the back of the stand. There was a blue oilcloth on the table. It was in squares of two designs, endlessly repeated. In one was a girl with a bonnet swinging from her wrist and in the other a bed of geometric tulips behind a precise white picket fence.

"Hello."

Print looked up. "Yes," he said, blankly.

The voice came from a tall,

tanned girl in a bra and swimming trunks. They were wet and blue and made of some affectionate material which in no way altered her form. Print felt a dryness in his throat.

"Don't you remember me?" she said disappointedly. She was neither bold nor timid. "You dropped in at the lodge last year for a sandwich before that golf match you won. I didn't know then who you were but the next day I saw your picture in the paper. I felt kind of famous myself. I thought, I gave him his lunch the day he won the cup."

"Why, yes," said Print, "but you're changed, older somehow."

"A whole year."

She sat down, still eating the double-dip cone, biting it like an adult, not licking. A girl in a dress-

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maker suit tripped in and asked for a taste. "Why'd you get chocolate?"

The new girl kept glancing at Print, then at her friend, waiting. "Aren't you going for a dip?"

"Yes, later." There was dismissal in her tone. The girl left, an angry swish in her walk.

"Would you like a part of the paper?" Print asked, shoving the first section toward her across the tacky oilcloth squares.

"Please," she said. Her eyes were blue, not smoky blue but clear blue. They seemed unusually bright, probably because the sun had made her face the shade of dark honey. Her hair was the color of new rope.

"Aren't there any boys around?"

"No, they've gone. There are a few down at Lake Holly but we can't crash the place."

"Exclusive are they?"

"Very. . . . But we don't care." She seemed to mean it.

The fat man with the undisciplined eye left the stand and passed through the room on his way to the lodge across the street.

"Call me if there are any customers," he said.

Funny what she's doing to me, thought Print. I'm like some college kid all over again. He bent over his paper.

"Going to stay long?" Marge asked.

"Two weeks," Print replied, looking up. "Kay and the boys have been up all summer."

"I know," she said, "I've seen them at the stand, although I've missed them lately."

"They went up to Syracuse last week. Kay's father is very sick. I'm staying with the Rankins until they return. Their cottage is next to ours."

Marge returned to her paper, leaning over it, her breasts firm and young and mature against the tight bra. She was reading the article about the Danes blowing up their warships. Lot like a Dane herself, big and direct and that cool north light in her face — like Ingrid Bergman.

"It's been dull this year," Marge said, "not like last year at all."

"The war has changed everything."

"That's why I'm taking up nursing next month," she added.

"I thought you were in college."

"I ought to be but I was delayed two years, working. Father died suddenly. . . . I don't regret working, teaches you a lot about life. Lets you see it with the mask off. You grow up fast."

"That's so, I guess," said Print, wondering just what mask she had torn from the face of life. The statement seemed to create a bond

between them. He wondered if she knew how candid and intimate her glance was as she said it. She seemed to forget her beauty as she talked, as though she had laid it aside and was meeting him without it; but remembering it too and would give it to him if he asked or signalled that he cared.

"How about your gas?" she shifted the subject. "Has it been hard to get?"

"I've enough for this trip and maybe a little more."

"Ever go for rides?" She said it as though cars and rides were part of the vast wealth of life; but Print seemed to feel something more beneath the question, a delicacy of feeling, or a door through which he might walk if he wanted to. It seemed to hold possibilities. Words were beginning to stand for more than what they were.

"No," said Print, "not unless I have a legitimate errand."

Marge was very still. She had the gift of a natural quietness, almost a physical resignation. Just the type that always bothered me, he thought. The type of person to rest in, always meeting things slowly. Slowness is beauty. Who said that? My glass is empty and I ought to be at dinner now. The Rankins always eat early at the cottage.

## II

He looked out the window, first at the dark ring of burned grass and ashes around a blackened drum where the garbage was destroyed. His dark eyes lifted toward a distant wooded ridge. Sussex county is as beautiful as anything in the east. His glance came back and rested on her head which was still bent over the paper. Her hair was parted tightly up the middle as though it had been painted in place. He almost reached out to touch it.

"Maybe," Print said, the words not pushed by himself out of his dry throat but pulled out of him by her quietness. "Maybe I'd go for one ride more."

"You would?" Marge said. There was color in her tone, the tint of interest but firmly controlled. But her body seemed to say more than her voice. There was a suspended physical delight in her lassitude. Print could see that now. Her arms had slipped into her lap and her shoulders sagged gently. Yet she was rested and waiting. The sun and water had prepared her for passion. And she knows what it means.

The conviction seemed to burn a hole in his brain.

"When?" she asked.

"Oh, probably tonight."

Marge said nothing but her head came up, poised, and she seemed to stiffen. Print stood up and she rose. He saw her suit now was dry but her figure seemed even more beautiful. She was very tall. He was glad that he could look straight across the top of her exquisite head. She seemed to be waiting, or was she just hesitating? Ophelia's words rang in his burning brain:

The expectancy and rose of the fair state,

The glass of fashion and the mould of form.

Absurd. I'm building fantastic ideas out of nothing. That's not about a woman. That's a description of Hamlet. Come to think of it, he was a Dane but there was no cool north light in his spirit. What would be a description of me? Something in terms of decay, of dallying with decadence, perhaps Mann's Gustav Aschenbach. He felt a fatal lure. But this is not *Death in Venice*; this is Life in a cool country night — the quest for meaning behind a torn mask.

Print started for the car. "Good-bye," he said.

"Good-bye." She held the final vowel and let it dip in tone, not caressingly but with an inflection which said: you need not explain, I understand, and if you decide I'll be waiting.

He drove quickly to the Rankins, his practiced hand steering the car with a concentrated clarity and added skill over the narrow, gravelled road. Dinner passed quickly but over him was the pale cast of thought mingled with desire. The mask of life? What did she mean? He formulated his regrets against the moment when he would need them. He would leave after dinner. Laura would understand. She was always understanding. Too understanding. He was astonished to find his voice so level, so matter of fact.

"Say, Laura," he began, "this has been splendid but sorry to say I simply must . . ."

The maid came in. "Telephone for you, Mr. Saunders."

Print lifted the receiver.

"Print? Is this you Print? This is Kay." There was a flutter in her voice. It always surprised him. Almost he had forgotten it. He had not heard it for a month. It was one of the first things about her he had fallen in love with. "Dad's better, much better. We're at Dover. Can you get us?"

Print shifted the car into second as he climbed the hill beside the road-stand. On a high stool outside in front of the counter sat a tall girl with tawny hair. Her dress was blue. She did not move as she saw the car pass by.

► *The White Paper spells  
black despair for Jews.*

## PALESTINE AND BRITISH POLICY

BY ELIAHU BEN-HORIN

SEVERAL times in the course of the war, the Middle East — the area stretching from the Eastern Mediterranean to the Persian Gulf — was in mortal danger. But today it is one of the safest regions on earth. Only a sudden collapse of the Allies in Europe or a disastrous reversal on the Russian front could again menace the Middle East. Despite the end of external dangers, however, the Middle East continues to be a most troublesome area. The disappearance of direct war threats, indeed, serves to accentuate the internal rivalries, hatreds and cross-ambitions. For there is no doubt that the pattern of Middle Eastern politics is about the most complex in the world.

Had the region been permanently conquered by the Axis, it would have been a death blow to the British Empire. No other single defeat, except the fall of the British Isles, could equal in effect

the loss of the Middle East. One can visualize the survival and even the flourishing of the Empire without its Far Eastern possessions, without Canada or some other Dominion, but it is almost impossible to picture Britain as a world empire without the Middle East. Geographically and strategically, the section is the "Grand Central" of the universe. No empire based on sea power, as Great Britain is, could maintain its ascendancy with that crucial hub in unfriendly hands.

This must be kept in mind for a better understanding of recent events in the Middle East and of Britain's policy in relation to Palestine. After the first World War, Britain succeeded in strengthening considerably her predominance in the Middle East. Through protectorates and mandates, or by treaties and subsidies, it secured outright control or dominating influence over Egypt, Palestine and Trans-

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