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BEHIND THE MASK

By Frances Guerin

My fingers go numb as I turn the page, and read the news of your death. "Emmanuel François Blanchard of the 6th arrondissement, found dead on 27 August 1914, circumstances unknown." Our encounter was fleeting, but the memory has stayed with me in the twenty years since. I have wondered what became of you, and as I sit here in the house of another man, I recall the relationship I once hoped would develop between us.

Paris, November 1894

You arrived alone at the top of the stairs and removed the black glove from your right hand. I disregarded the fresh scar made visible on the inside of your left wrist as you loosened the other glove, deliberately, one finger at a time. I chose to fix my eye on the long sensuous fingers of your ungloved hand as it reached for a glass of champagne. Such self-assuredness displayed in the intensity of your hands, I told myself. I was inexplicably overtaken by a feeling I mistook for love at first sight.

"Who is that man?" I asked my childhood friend, Isabelle de Noailles, standing beside me. She was distracted by the entrance of a man with a wooden prosthesis in place of his left leg. I recognized him as Monsieur Le Monnier on account of his awkward limp. He attracted the attention of a gaggle of servants in

blue and gold costume; they were assisting him with his coat, hat, and gloves. Le Monnier was the botanist whose name was on everyone's lips on account of his recent return from the Americas. His leg had been bitten by a venomous spider, just above the knee, leaving no alternative to amputation.

Either Isabelle did not hear or she chose to ignore my question.

More guests arrived, and masked figures began to swirl around me. They behaved as though they recognized each other; kissing, shaking hands, smiling, giving and receiving compliments. My eyes did not move from your slender figure in a black satin cape. Your daring to arrive without a hat turned heads, but it was your youth that drew my attention and ignited my imagination.

I had been searching for a husband for months, only to find aging men I had known for a lifetime. When I ventured outside of my immediate circles, I was disappointed time and time again. Monsieur Pierre Brénard with his factory in Amiens was suitably wealthy and his interest in me could not be surpassed, but his ignorance of culture and the literary tradition made him quite vulgar. And then there was Hippolyte d'Orléans whom I met at a dinner arranged for the purpose of our introduction. He had the bloodlines, but was without the spark of revolutionary passion that had animated his ancestors. It took a matter of minutes before I settled on his unsuitability as a husband. Sadly, the most promising

of all my suitors, Jean-Gilbert Filanin, a cavalry man-cum-politician, fell off his horse and was crippled for life. I couldn't possibly marry half a man.

And then you appeared, a sudden shiver of excitement filling the air. Together with your poise, the youthful tenderness I saw in your outstretched hand kindled thoughts of a relationship between us long before you even knew of my existence. I clutched the champagne flute to my corseted waist to hide the emotions your entrance had stirred in my stomach. In that instant, the crowd filling the room evaporated to my eyes; you and I were alone inside the sumptuously decorated ballroom of Count and Countess Le Planchier. The gold embossed walls were covered in distant circles of light cast by newly-fitted electric lamps. Mirrors on the walls sparkled with reflections from the ornate ceiling chandelier, and vases on pedestals brimmed with exotic flowers in a rainbow of reds. The orchestra played Mozart sonatas to welcome the guests.

Your fully-masked face revealed nothing. Anxious to know your identity, I turned to my friend.

"Isabelle?" I said, gently touching her elbow.

"Yes, my dear Marie, what is it?"

"The man by the waiter at the door, who is he?" I asked with practiced indifference.

"Emmanuel François Blanchard," Isabelle pronounced each word with precision. "His grandfather's invention of the hot air balloon is his only achievement," she whispered curtly. I interpreted her tone as contempt for the presence of a man who was not aristocracy.

"How do you know? His disguise protects his anonymity." I questioned.

"His face is hidden, yes, but look at the braid trim on his cape. He wears the same Venetian outfit to every formal occasion."

"Then who *is* he, this Emmanuel François Blanchard? He must have a story of his own?" I cloaked my desire in light repartee.

"He is a violinist, of some repute, but not enough to warrant your affections Marie," Isabelle exclaimed, fluttering her fan and raising her chin to cast a look beyond the crowd gathering in front of us.

Could Isabelle see the mayhem of emotions you were arousing in my body, even though I was trapped beneath layers of petticoats and corsets?

"His fingers are supple and sensuous, I can see them in vibrato on the neck of a Stradivarius," I imagined out loud.

"Come now, Marie, that's enough." Isabelle moved her hourglass figure to block my view of the ballroom and all its guests, including you. I bowed my head to hide my shame, and all

I could see were her breasts swelling above the heart shaped neckline of a cream satin dress.

The hood of your cape covered all but a whisper of flesh on the side of your neck, leaving a hint of vulnerability underneath your otherwise fully-masked face. Your mask was exquisitely gilded, giving you characteristics I likened to those of ancient gods. I saw in you an inner strength that differentiated you from every other man in the ballroom. The expression on the mask was pensive, making you wistful, ageless, and without concern for the world in which the rest of us live. I suspected you wore a mask because your face was too beautiful. Of course I knew that was the dress code on the invitation: Count Vladimir and Countess Camille Le Planchier cordially invite you to a masquerade ball.

My invitation arrived in an ebony box inscribed in silver lettering on the underside of the lid, and inside, a silver mask lay on a bed of black velvet. I received dozens of such invitations, but this one had a peculiar charge. At the moment you entered the ballroom, my body remembered the rush of excitement, and my mind was thrown back to the anticipation I had felt on opening the invitation. The sight of your elegant figure at the top of the stairs was a realization; the news of you, my future husband, must have been written on the air inside the ebony box.

The silver mask that arrived with the invitation did no more than decorate the eyes. Preferring to guard my anonymity on such

occasions, I chose to wear a porcelain white mask that ended at the curve of my nose. More than one man had told me my lips were my most alluring feature, so I left them exposed and glowing. A butterfly was painted on my mask in gold, its trembling wing was interrupted by the hole through which my right eye looked, its feelers extending across the raised nose of the mask. I had chosen the design in memory of my late mother's onetime insistence that a butterfly's antennae brushing the cheek of a woman was sure to arouse the interest of men.

You started walking towards me. My stomach tightened, my pulse quickened, and I felt my body flush with delight. Though your gaze was in my direction, I couldn't be sure if your eye was on me, or if you were watching yourself in the ornate, gold-framed mirror at my back. I waved my feathered fan across my face, hoping to break the spell you had cast on my body and mind.

I looked around to see if anyone was watching, anxious that my bearing did not betray the confusion coursing through my body. Had the blush of my cheeks escaped the edges of my mask and fallen down my neck?

You approached me, I am sure of it. You came so close, all alone, looking for someone to seduce.

"Marie, I have heard it said that he has a taste for both men and women," Isabelle's voice pierced my reverie. "He is quite

undiscerning and brash in his flirtations, and indiscriminate in his choices. I implore you Marie, stay away."

I ignored Isabelle's warning and kept my eyes fixed on you.

Mystery and magic encircled your body in motion, leaving a glittering mass of guests at your back.

The moment is ripe in my mind as I sit here at my breakfast table, a middle-aged woman surrounded by the comforts afforded by my husband's family and fortune.

You stopped in front of a woman I believed to be young. Her body was sharply defined and her posture correct. She raised a glass to her full red lips that were made more luscious by a painted mole perfectly placed at the base of her right cheek, just below the line of her mask. I decided without reason that there was no need to be jealous. If I could have moved closer without being seen, I would have looked into the eyes behind the almond-shaped orifices of her mask. Instead, I stood with my back to the mirror, frozen with fear that it might not be me you were walking towards.

I stepped forward against my will and my better judgment. I came close enough to inhale the scent of your skin.

"Marie, can I introduce you to Monsieur Aloyse de Beauharnais, he's an escapologist," I heard Isabelle's voice reaching for me. She placed a hand on my shoulder and guided me back two steps to my place by the mirror.

"Yes of course," I turned, leaving the fantasy behind. Isabelle was standing beside a person no taller than myself. I appreciated her not so subtle attempt to distract me from you, the grandson of the man who invented the hot air balloon, but I preferred men a head taller than me.

An abundance of brown curls fell around the white mask that covered the face of this Monsieur Aloyse de Beauharnais. I surmised him to be young and a dreamer on account of the curls. I was enchanted, but held back a smile when met by the eyes on his mask. They were inverted to incite confusion, or perhaps it was fear in the observer. The painted mouth was turned up at the edges, a gesture in which I nevertheless read Monsieur de Beauharnais's pleasure at my introduction. He then lifted the thumb and forefinger of his right hand and peeled the lips from the face of his mask, turned away, and when he turned back to me the lips were frowning.

Isabelle let out a delicate gasp in response to this rudeness, and the two men with whom she conversed stepped back awkwardly in what I interpreted as their disapproval.

I was furious at Monsieur de Beauharnais' deception and felt the anger well up inside me. My response was disproportionate to his silly trick, but your presence had set my emotions raging. I was glad of my mask as a protection against Monsieur de Beauharnais's game and my heightened emotions. Catching the

inappropriateness of my response, and filled with confidence by the responses of others, I slid into a performance.

"Good evening, what does an escapologist do?" I asked with a tone of fascination for the man, just as my socially-conscious mother had taught me.

"I escape from handcuffs in prison, and straitjackets underwater. I break out of chests hung from the bottom of flying machines," he said with pride, standing upright and taking my hand.

He was trying to impress me, but I was not interested. I looked over my shoulder. Yes, you were still there, in conversation with a red-headed man; without care for reality, I told myself that no one had taken you from me.

"Oh, how fascinating," I responded to Monsieur de Beauharnais in the sweetest voice I could find. It was one of my better displays of enthusiasm; my body was outwardly composed, my mask was a veneer for the coarseness of my feelings.

"I will be on stage tomorrow. Please come? Seeing your delicate features in the audience will energize my escape from the gallows," he said with self-assurance.

'What a hideous stunt,' I thought, and stared vacantly at the face drawn on his mask. With my very next thought, I remembered, 'I am an unmarried woman of an enviable age, I must show interest in this perfectly eligible man and his trade.' But I

was not convinced by my own thinking, and so, I allowed my lip to quiver. Monsieur de Beauharnais could make of the gesture as he pleased.

I was rescued from my charade by an effete, lithe figure in a black body stocking wearing a mask in the shape of a teardrop. The acrobat swept through glass doors that gave onto the terrace, to the right of the mirror I was now facing. Its body moved like a feather floating into the room, and as the guests turned to watch in amazement, I realized it was part of the night's entertainment. The frosting on the glass mask in the shape of a teardrop could have been mistaken for the condensation of breath as its wearer moved from the ice cold night into the heat of the ballroom. The facial features of the mask were soft in color; translucent orange circles marked cheeks I imagined might melt in daylight, and painted blue eyes seemed to follow the look of each spectator. The figure's hands were white and ethereal, though it was impossible to tell if they belonged to a man or a woman. One hand held a small golden scepter, and the other, a single red rose.

The crowd parted as the acrobat picked up speed and leapt onto the long cedar table, running its length, sending rose petals flying up and away. The guests cried in a mixture of excitement and disapproval, scattering out of apprehension rather than any risk of danger as the figure swept along the table.

I looked in the mirror in search of your face, and it was there, turned to the theatre before us. I couldn't gauge your response to this breath of fresh air in a room full of ambiguity and disingenuous performance. Not wanting you to see me looking, I pretended my attention was caught by something above your head; all I could see were the enormous chandeliers cascading from high ceilings. In the moment of wonder at the sparkle of lights above, I felt your eyes rest on me. I was proud, drunk on your admiration as it touched the side of my face. My body trembled.

I lifted my chin and looked over the shoulder furthest from you where my eye fell on another man. I was under the illusion this would make you want me more.

It was a young man who sat sulking with his head in his hand and his elbow resting on the table left in disarray by the acrobat. The man was dressed entirely in azure blue, and his mask was made of leather to cover only the left side of his face. At first glance, I mistook the leather to extend across the whole face, but in time I realized that the right half was painted—not masked—in the same azure blue. The leather was woven with threads and buttons of silver, creating a detailed web that disintegrated where leather met paint on the flat of his nose. He sensed me watching him, and his musing broken, gathered his scattered confidence, and looked up. He stood cautiously and walked towards me with a poise that

expressed privilege and money. Perhaps he was not so sad after all? It is difficult to see the truth when it is covered by a mask.

“Madame, you are breathtaking,” he took my hand, bowed for a minute longer than I deemed proper, and his lips touched my hand.

I surreptitiously looked for the blue imprint of his lips on my hand.

“Enchantée,” I said with my lips while my mind and heart resented the confidence with which he presented himself. It was your fault. It was your attention I was seeking through flirtation with this spider.

“Shall we dance?” he asked.

“It’s too early, I would rather not.” I had taken this game too far. You might lose interest in me if I spent too long with the blue-masked man.

“Then I mistook your regard, please accept my apologies,” he said, bowing quickly and retreating.

“Marie, what are you doing, still here by the mirror?” Isabelle appeared out of nowhere.

“Where is he? Monsieur, le violiniste?” I whispered in her ear, my fan covering my lips for fear they could be read.

“Really Marie, this is not a good idea,” Isabelle took my arm and led me towards the library.

I was convinced that to protest would have turned the head of every guest; I would be judged for my craving to be by your side. As Isabelle led me into the library away from you and the air that you breathed, it was as though my heart was dragged from my chest. I wanted to scream, but my mother had told me to show no emotion in public. ‘Emotion is the luxury of the lower classes, my beautiful one,’ her reminder rang loud in my mind.

In the library, the stockinged figure with a teardrop mask was lying with one leg splayed on the sofa. Meanwhile a cat sat and swept its tail over the floor around the other silver-slipped foot. The two, human and cat, were surrounded by guests dressed as birds.

My line of sight was filled with a bird I called Owl. He wore a long cape covered with brown and white feathers, highlighted with spots of near black. The feathers looked so soft that my arm involuntarily reached towards them. I wanted to run my fingers down the plumage of this cape. Owl sat at the other end of the sofa, his long legs extended across a finely woven oriental carpet. His face was made of the same fluffy feathers, a circle of gold leaf defined the eyes, and delicate spikes of bone took the place of a crown. His translucent honey-colored irises dramatically encircled black pupils that fixed on me as I followed Isabelle through the double doors. A hooked beak dragged owl’s face downwards, giving him a forlorn look, even though his sparkling

eyes insisted on the opposite. Owl leaned forward to stand up from the sofa, never taking his eyes from me. Suddenly, our eyes were locked together.

Was I seized by the precious gold encircling the eye sockets on the mask? Or was it the man's own eyes that caught the glint of the light as it entered the room with Isabelle and me in tow? I can't say what it was about the creature or his mask that held me, but it was clear, the unrelenting gaze would not let me go: I figured that Owl was trying to tell me something.

My nerves already on edge, I assumed that Owl's regard was laced with a foreboding that had something to do with you. But then again, you were the subject of everything that night.

At that moment, a magician entered the library hurling metal rings into the air, and we all turned to watch. I felt relief from the enchantment – or was it the curse? – of Owl. I didn't want to know what he was telling me about you. While Isabelle was in the trance of the magician's metal rings, I slipped back to the ballroom unnoticed.

There you were, square in front of me, awaiting my reappearance. Or so I told myself.

"Would you like to dance, Madame?" Your voice didn't waver, but a slight twist of your shoulders gave away your nervousness.

"How lovely," I replied and held out my hand.

I felt the warmth of your hand underneath mine as you gently led me by the fingertips to the dance floor. When you put your arm around my waist, I thought my legs would collapse beneath me. I had been waiting all night for this sublime feeling of being next to you. The orchestra began to play, and your breath caressed my cheek as we took up the waltz. I fell into your step and felt my whole body give way to yours. I told myself I had the arms of the best-looking man in the room at my waist, but in reality, I had never seen your face.

Only you existed for me as we danced past the mirror before which I had stood watching you earlier. You had changed me into the woman I saw in the mirror; alive, joyous, and free. The self-conscious woman I had been when you entered the ballroom was nowhere to be seen.

We danced in perfect harmony, appropriating the entire dance floor, ignoring the other guests. 'We were made for each other,' I heard myself thinking. I had never before experienced such connection to a man, which explains why I did not know this thought was the disguise worn by lust. I began to plan our escape back to Paris. In my imagination we climbed into a motor car—as awkward as that was in 1894—and there, in the back seat you removed your mask and I mine. All expectation and anticipation were met. I inadvertently placed my hand on the seat of the car, and your agile fingers found it and then slowly undid the buttons

on my thin leather glove. The touch of your skin on the back of my hand set my body aflame. In Paris, we spent languorous mornings in bed at my house in the 17th arrondissement. In the afternoon, we moved to the living room where you played the violin while I painted your portrait. I dismissed the servants to ensure complete privacy. The two of us, alone, cocooned within the promise of our endless love for each other. And when society discovered and deigned to object to our liaison, we eloped to Italy, to the northern town of Trieste where no one thought to look for us amid the Austrian aristocracy. All social differences between us would eventually be erased by our marriage.

The orchestra began a mazurka and the change of tempo brought me back from my plan for our future. I looked up and your eyes were elsewhere. I wanted to say something, but I could not think of anything profound enough to match your perfection. In truth, I did not know how to win back your attention.

“Why do you insist on wearing masks and feathers to conceal your identity?” The coolness of your tone broke the silence between us.

“We are at a masquerade ball, what do you expect?” I responded without pausing to think. I flushed and wanted to take back my words, but the truth had been told. I chose to ignore your gaucheness and tried to erase my candidness with a smile.

Your eyes gave no indication of any pain I might have inflicted. They revealed nothing. All I saw were the gilded cheekbones, and that glimmer of flesh on your neck that I wanted to touch with my tongue.

“Who are you?” You asked as if I had deceived you. I imagined a grimace of displeasure now forming behind your mask.

In that same instant, Owl shimmied past, saving me from having to respond. I felt the breeze of his long, feathered cloak on a loose strand of hair and smiled beneath my mask. ‘What is he trying to tell me?’ I wondered. Owl was gone as unexpectedly as he had appeared. And then in the distance at the edge of the dance floor, I watched him swivel his head, all the time keeping his eyes on me. A chill swept over me, stilling my head and numbing my legs. I stepped out of your arms momentarily, dizzy with confusion.

‘What is that Owl doing to me? Did he cast a spell on me?’ I examined the palms of my hands and then held them to my temples to steady myself. My nerves were on edge; I no longer knew reality from fantasy.

I saw Isabelle’s face in the mirror, fluttering her fan in front of a man in a cape, a hat and goodness knows what over his face.

“Madame, what happened? Are you alright? Let me get you some water,” I felt your hand high on my back, and heard your detached voice.

"Yes, yes, I am fine, please leave me," I didn't want you to see me in this state, so I picked up my skirts and darted towards the glass doors, hoping for air.

I was convinced you had followed me when I wanted to be left alone. But I could be wrong; my intuition had fallen into a mire.

The crowd cleared as I rushed past the long cedar table now laid with flowers, cut glass and freshly opened bottles of champagne.

Through the glass doors, I slumped onto the rail of the wrought iron balcony, and felt relief as the cold air filled my confused body. When I turned around, you were nowhere in sight. My mouth involuntarily filled with saliva, and I turned back to the balcony, knowing I was going to vomit. Doubled over, I emptied my stomach of all that was churning inside it. With it, the hairpins holding my mask came loose, and before I could react, my mask slid up and over my face.

"Marie, my poor darling, what is going on out here?" Isabelle was at my side, fanning my face. She held out a hand behind her to stop the approach of spectators, and whispered sternly in my ear, "pull yourself together, we don't want them to see you."

The music stopped for supper, it was past midnight. I slipped back inside, past the guests who had gathered around the table, and into the bathroom.

I lifted my head from the basin, and my face revived by water looked into the plain, white framed mirror. The dark purple stain stretching across the left side of my face was staring at me. The thick, raised skin with its welts, like clumps of dried wine on a silken carpet were a brutal reminder that I was not eligible for the pleasures given to other women.

Why did I dare to imagine that you were the invisible man in whose heart I could place the promise of happiness?

And now you are dead.

"Circumstances unknown?" I repeat out loud, *Le Petit Journal* falling into my lap. There is no photograph to accompany the announcement, no mention of family to grieve your death, and no details of a musical bequest to the next generation. Were you even the man behind the mask? What difference does it make now? It was me who was hiding all those years ago, so impulsively in search of a face that wasn't mine, rashly deciding I had found it behind the mask of an unknown man.

About the Author

Frances Guerin is a writer, scholar, critic, and pianist, who lives in Paris works in the UK and carries an Australian passport. Her creative writing brings together her lifelong love of still and moving images, and her ongoing commitment to speaking about issues that concern women in the 21st century. She has published five books on film, photography, and visual culture and many articles, essays, and reviews.

THE ETERNAL MASQUERADE

By Zoey Xolton

My laughter escapes me in a rush of maddened giggles and my cheeks flare red, though I am too drunk on expensive, vintage wine to care. Around and around we spin, the world a whirling kaleidoscope of jewel-toned gowns, blurred candlelight and glittering chandeliers. Out of the ballroom and into the gardens we spill like a storm of lace and silk. We dance through mazes of white perfumed roses and glades of weeping willows, stepping on fairy circles and lush green carpets of moss as we go. I have never felt more alive and more free.

Far too soon the world comes to a dizzying halt and I find myself breathless. The Lord of Westerly Castle guides me with his body against a great tree trunk in the darkness. Obscured by shadows, far from the merriment and din of the Midnight Masquerade, his knowing hands trail their way up my cinched waist and over my blossoming bust to cup my face. "You are far too beautiful and far too bright a soul to see wasted to the ravages of time, my dear one." He purrs, as his open mouth envelopes mine.

I sigh, coming up for air. Relaxing into his form I allow my head to tip back and rest against the ancient oak as his kisses forge a hot path from my glittering ear lobe, down my neck and to the confluence of my bare throat and shoulder.