

The Man in the Yellow Mask



by Lucien Verval

At the door of the Dissolver of Mysteries, two mirrors faced each other, each intertwined with bronze ornament, the one with flames like serpents' tongues, the other whose wrought flowers had the mouths of ancient hautboys. I saw myself reflected many times and, when I adjusted the opal on my cravat, its gleaming light was conveyed through an eternity of images.

The Dissolver sat in shadow in an alcove of his bookcases, wearing a scarlet skull-cap that for a moment, upon his wan and waxy flesh, made him look like a poisonous toadstool. A hand the hue of old hidden pages gestured me to a chair.

'The mystery is this,' I said, after some time of silence between us. 'A young man from Brooklyn studies art in Paris for four or five years. Not long after his return to his native city he writes an immortal book, a book of terror and wonder. It is called *The King in Yellow*.'

The figure in front of me rustled. His parchment fingers placed a golden monocle upon his left eye, and it flashed sharp rays at me.

'I have heard of it,' he said.

'Yet,' I continued, 'he can never write its like again. Oh, he becomes a versatile, a popular tale-monger: the bookstalls sag

with his romances. But even when he tries to evoke once more the strange and the supernatural, there is no inspiration. The books might as well have been written by a different man.'

The Dissolver adjusted a soiled oil lamp, its glass encrusted with a coat of darkness from the caress of many sputtering wicks, and it emitted a dull ochreous sheen. Where its sullen illumination lapped, his fingers felt for a volume in a tall column of shelves in gnarled walnut. A book slipped into his grasp so swiftly that for a moment it was as if its bindings and his fingers were a single form. The book's boards were mustard-coloured: the old mustard that is made only in the citadel towns in the deepest regions of the country, where it is seeded by the centuries and congealed in great vats.

'The mystery you bring is no mystery,' said the Dissolver. 'But perhaps there is a greater mystery you do not yet see.'

'What is the book?' I asked.

There was a hunching gesture where the Dissolver sat.

He did not at first reply.

'This young man, he left Paris exactly when?'

'In 1893.'

'And his book was published—?'

'Two years later, in 1895.'

'It is as I thought. Before he left, there was a volume that was a whispered watchword in the studios and salons of the city, known to all the artists and bohemians: a book, it was said, that gained its effect through *the arrangement and harmonising of an infinite number of precise and correct details*. A book, moreover, that causes careful meditations upon its words, its very letters.'

The amber pallor from the tainted glass of the Dissolver's oil lamp lay upon the walls and shelves of his chamber, even upon its windows, and upon him.

'What is the book?' I asked again.

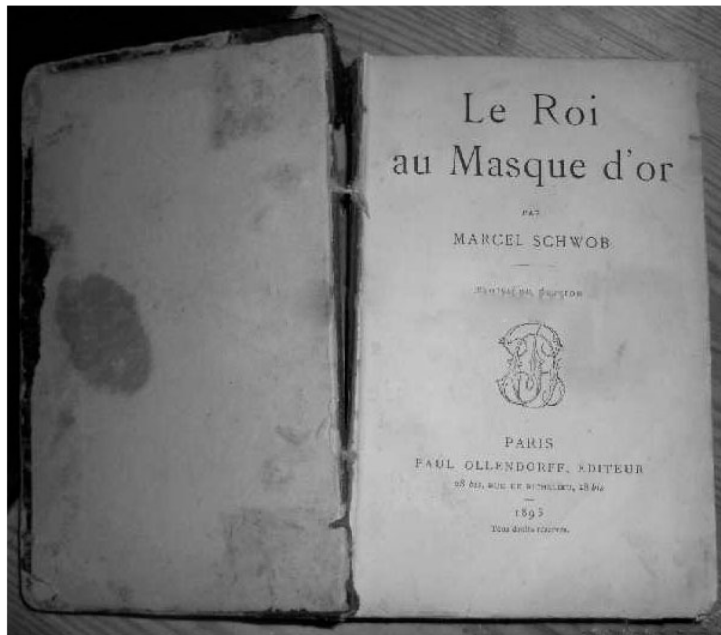
More glints from the golden monocle.

'*Le roi au masque d'or*.'

There was a reaching out, and the book passed from his hand to mine. In the drawn yellow light, I examined it as closely as I could.

'Author: Marcel Schwob. Publisher: Ollendorff. Date: 1892.'

I read those aloud because I wanted to hold on to hard facts. For already the book I now held was beginning to insinuate curious thoughts into my mind.



‘It is in half-morocco,’ I announced, but even as I said the words they seemed less the description of a binding and more the evocation of some strange Saracen spell in which one might be partly in this world and yet partly wandering in a far Moorish domain.

‘Decorations: gilded nets.’

And indeed the delicate golden meshes that embellished the book seemed also to extend their filigree onto my fingers.

‘Pages, pages,’—my netted fingers flicked at the skeins caught in the book, leaves the colour of long-buried fossils—‘three hundred and twenty two.’

‘Are you sure?’ asked the Dissolver.

I looked again. The dim light obscured the dark numbers.

‘No. Three hundred and thirty two.’

But I hesitated and peered again.

‘Perhaps three hundred and thirty three.’

The golden monacle flashed its scintillant signals once more.

‘Or three hundred and twenty three,’ the dry voice said.

With a great effort I shut the book and did not look again upon its exquisite binding.

‘Tell me about the book.’

'I cannot. But Edmond de Goncourt said it had the evocative magic of Antiquity. Within was the 'declines and end of lifetimes and of worlds, in scenes mysteriously perverse and macabre' Others remarked the influence of the author's uncle, Dr Leon Cahun, a librarian, a deep scholar of dead and of only half-living languages: and, it was said, a cabbalist. M. Schwob learned much from him, I am sure.'

'And the young man from Brooklyn—his book is like this one?'

There was a scornful laugh.

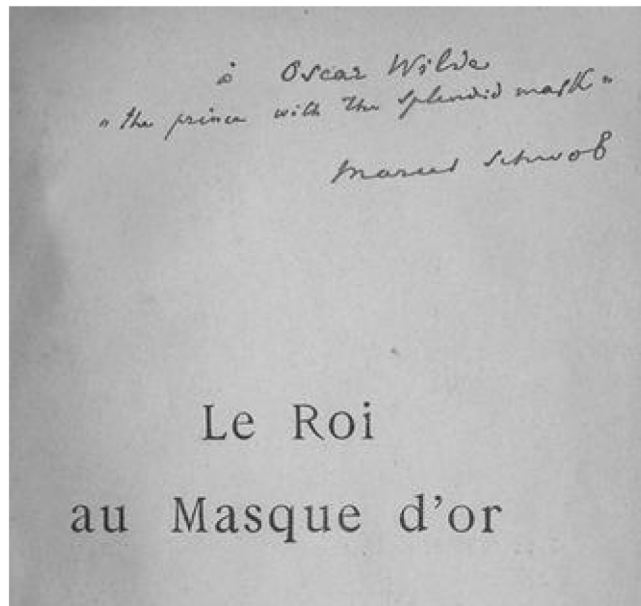
'Is the door like the threshold? Is the grate like the fire? Is the mask like the face?'

'But do you think he *stole* from this book?' I persisted.

'It has a king in yellow, it has many pale masks, it has jesters, priests, courtesans, it has secrets, conspiracies, it has influences that enter into every story: and it has a hidden terror at its very heart. Stole? No, he did not steal. No, I am afraid he did not steal.'

'Then?'

The red biretta that the Dissolver of Mysteries wore drooped its toadstool head. Silence stole across his room like the last old dull coughing surges of sunset.



‘Perhaps . . . ’ he began, then faltered.

‘Perhaps it will be easiest if we say this. That this young man, this artist, this haunter of the ateliers, encountered *Le roi au masque d’or*, as all who moved in those circles did. That he was unable to get it out of his mind. And when he returned to his country, his city, he wrote what he thought was his own book. It became a book that would haunt him all his life, and in his after-life, his posthumous reputation. No matter what else he wrote or drew, and he tried his hand at many things, he was always known as The Man Who Wrote The King in Yellow. Even though he did not really write The King in Yellow.’

‘He did not—’

‘No. For—surely you must see?—The King in Yellow wrote him.’

When I found myself outside the doors of the Dissolver of Mysteries I saw that I still held in my hand the copy of the mustard-coloured book with its tracery of gilt netting.

I gazed at myself, arrayed in the two mirrors. The brazen writhings of their frames seemed to cast a curious lustre, the colour of orpiment, into the glass: and this tint cast a light gilded veil upon my face, or faces.

