

James Cowan

THE MASK

THERE WAS a Witch Doctor who came to our village, and he was very young. He wore a gentle mask made of a white pasty substance and tinted with dyes. It was a plain mask, not ugly and not beautiful. Sometimes when the sun shone on it, it seemed to smile with heavenly warmth, as if the wearer were some strange new god, kind and infinitely tender. But on dark and stormy days, it seemed to scowl with mute and immovable power, as if the wearer were the more terrible successor to all the stern old gods of force and fear. No one knew what accounted for the seeming changes in the expression; no one ever saw the face behind the mask; and no one could say which, if either, image reflected its true identity.

While the people pondered on these things, the young Witch Doctor went among them casting out devils and evil spirits. Those from whom the demons had been cast out told strange and conflicting tales about how it had been done. Some said that the Witch Doctor had done it by a soft touch of the hand; others said that he had spoken in a quiet voice; and still others said that he had done nothing but sit calmly by while the spirits raged, until, at last, they grew weary and came out. All were agreed, however, that his manner had been as gentle as his mask. This remained a source of wonder to all the people.

A Priest in a neighboring village, hearing of the Witch Doctor's magic, brought to him his young disciple, Gnumi. Though intelligent, the boy was possessed of devils that kept him always laughing and crying, for his parents had not loved him. They had passed their days in anguish over him, mortifying their flesh and chanting incantations to appease the angry gods who had sent them such a son. Finally they had shut him out of their house, and they had died sorrowfully. While the Priest spoke with the Witch Doctor, Gnumi stood idly by at a distance, regarding them silently with sidelong glances, laughing and crying to himself while the demons raved. The Witch Doctor's mask was too plain, thought Gnumi, for it was not ugly and not beautiful. But when the Witch Doctor spoke to him, Gnumi

thought that the mask looked gentle. The Priest who had brought him returned to his own people, but Gnumi stayed from that day in our village, helping the Old Woman who cooked the meat and sleeping on a straw mat in her hut at night.

By and by, Gnumi told the Witch Doctor many things: of the years he had walked alone as a child in the village of his parents, of the months he had sat at the feet of the Wise Men and the Priests, and of his days of anger and his nights of fear. The Witch Doctor only listened and said nothing.

But the elders of the tribe shook their heads.

"It was not so in the old days," said Tonti the Chieftain, squatting on his skinny haunches under the banyan tree. "The old Witch Doctors danced, and shook gourds with pebbles inside, and made fierce cries, and called aloud for the devils to come out. This young one does nothing but sit in the noonday sun."

"That is true," said Jazwa the Wise Man. "And none of the old Witch Doctors wore such an ordinary mask."

"They wore the grave and terrifying masks befitting men of their art," said Khaffa the Priest. "This young one, with his plain and childlike mask, could not frighten even a baby, much less an evil spirit that lodges himself in a man."

So the elders shook their heads and fell silent, fearing the dissolution of the tribe in the days to come. The Witch Doctor who wore the gentle mask remained a mystery to everyone, the sick and the well, those possessed of evil spirits and those not possessed of them, the young and foolish and the old and wise.

But Gnumi told the Witch Doctor everything: how he had left the distant village of his parents and had gone to the Wise Men and the Priests, who could teach him the wisdom of the generations and lead him to the secret river of life; how he had looked on men and how he had looked on women; and how, after many months of instruction at the hands of the Wise Men and the Priests, he had still known neither men nor women and had not learned the wisdom of the generations nor found the secret river of life. So laughing and crying in his strange way, Gnumi told the young Witch Doctor his heart and Gnumi loved the young Witch Doctor, and some of the devils that tormented Gnumi came out of him.

Then Gnumi said to the Witch Doctor, "Behold! I have loved you well. Even more than I loved my parents have I loved you, for, in truth, I did not love them, because they were ashamed to own me. I have loved you more than the Wise Men and the Priests, for they could not teach me the Wisdom of the generations nor lead me to the secret river of life. And I have loved you more than the men and the women whom I have looked on, for I never knew them."

"Why do you love me, Gnumi?"

"Because you are casting out my evil spirits, and because you wear a gentle mask."

Then Gnumi felt very strange again, for the remaining demons suddenly raged within him.

"But you do not love me," he said bitterly, "for, after all, a mask is a mask, and you have never let me see your face. You treat me only as one possessed of devils. I know that, at last, you too will shut me out, and I will be like the jackal who moves alone without companions and whom anyone may kill."

The Witch Doctor said nothing.

Looking at the mask, Gnumi wondered whether it changed from light to darkness or only seemed to change. Then he bowed his head and wept, crying, "Forgive me! You are casting out my devils; yet I would doubt you! I do not know how to love! Oh, there is no good in me!"

Still the Witch Doctor said nothing.

When Gnumi ceased crying, he sat studying the mask. In the ordinary daylight, it seemed no more than a plain mask made of a white pasty substance and tinted with the common dyes of berries. Then Gnumi thought that the light itself caused the seeming changes in the expression and that the mask did not change. But the evil spirits whispered within Gnumi so that he departed sorrowfully, fearful that his words had wounded the Witch Doctor and fearful that the Witch Doctor cared not at all for the words of one so worthless as he.

Meanwhile, the elders of the tribe, who squatted under the banyan tree, still shook their heads. Now they spoke in low tones as they grumbled to each other, for they were afraid. And Gnumi, his own fear mounting, crept silently near to hear them.

"This young Witch Doctor would supplant us in the tribe," said Jazwa. "He would make himself wiser than we."

"The young people follow him," said Khaffa. "The old religion will die, and the angry gods will smite us all for his evil doings."

"He wears a gentle mask," said Tonti the Chieftain, "but beware! That is to deceive us."

"We are not deceived," said Jazwa.

"We are not like the young people," said Khaffa, "to be deceived by one who wears a gentle mask to hide his fierceness."

"It is said by some that his face is more horrible to look upon than Death's," said Jazwa. "Yet I have heard also that it is truly beautiful and more shining than the sun."

"He has cast out some devils," said Khaffa grudgingly, "but we do not know what he is really like."

"Nor can we know," said Tonti the Chieftain. "Yet while he lives we are in danger."

"Still—" said Jazwa.

So no decision was made, and the elders squatted, helpless and afraid, under the banyan tree, shaking their heads and foreseeing their own doom. And Gnumi, in a silence more terrible than the raging of devils, went away neither laughing nor crying but full of fear. Loving and hating at the same time, he went to his hut and lay on his mat and gazed up at the roof of straw.

Then the Old Woman who cooked the meat said to Gnumi, "You have heard the elders, how they speak against him, but the Witch Doctor is a strong and gentle man."

"How do you know this?" said Gnumi.

"I knew him in his village long ago," the Old Woman said in her ancient trembling voice. "His mother was a simple woman, and she had many children whom she loved. But his father was a fierce and angry man who scolded and beat him without reason and finally shut him out of his house. So while he was yet a boy, he came to me. He stayed in my hut and helped me tend my fires and worked beside me as I cooked the meat."

Gnumi listened, still and silent, while love and pain moved terribly within him.

"He had his devils," the Old Woman said, "but he grew strong and knew within himself the gentle power to cast out devils. Though I am nothing in the tribe, I tell you this, Old Woman that I am, because I know it to be true."

But Gnumi lay awake all night, laughing and crying to himself while the demons raged.

The next day, unseen, Gnumi followed the young Witch Doctor. He hid himself behind a berry bush and watched as the Witch Doctor descended the bank of the river. His back was toward Gnumi as he walked to the edge of the stream, but Gnumi saw that he knelt and removed his mask and scooped up water in his hands and splashed it on his face. When he turned to put on his mask, Gnumi saw, through the foliage of fine leaves, his face. In that moment, Gnumi closed his eyes and turned away, because he had seen the Witch Doctor without his mask. The elders were all wrong, he said to himself. It was just an ordinary face, not ugly and not beautiful, but plain like the mask. And the Witch Doctor was just

an ordinary man. Opening his eyes, he saw that the young Witch Doctor, with his mask replaced, was returning up the bank of the river toward the village.

The elders of the tribe, squatting under the banyan tree, watched silently as the Witch Doctor passed by on the way to his hut. Then Tonti the Chieftain arose.

"The young Witch Doctor must die," he said sternly. "If he does not die, he will destroy us."

And Jazwa the Wise Man and Khaffa the Priest nodded gravely in silent agreement.

When he came that evening to the young Witch Doctor, Gnumi spoke of common things: of clay for making earthenware, of wood for carving out canoes, of straw for thatching huts and making mats. Then he fell silent, and the Witch Doctor, too, was silent.

Then Gnumi said, "I saw you."

"Where?"

"By the river. I watched you from behind a berry bush."

"Oh?"

"The Old Woman who cooks the meat told me about you. She said that you were possessed of devils once but that you are strong and gentle now. I followed you to see for myself what you are like."

"You saw?"

"I saw your face. You have an ordinary face, but I do not need to see it anymore. It is enough that you are casting out my devils."

The young Witch Doctor said nothing, but his mask seemed to glow with a certain light.

But as Gnumi and the Witch Doctor sat together in the quiet dusk, the elders of the tribe left their places under the banyan tree and even then approached them. When they had entered the hut, Tonti the Chieftain, himself, tore the mask from the Witch Doctor's face.

"Look! Look! He is only a man and he is afraid!" he shouted to Gnumi. "He cannot cast our your devils when he is possessed of them himself. We will see now who is Chieftain of the tribe!"

And the ordinary face of the Witch Doctor was indeed darkened in pain.

"It does not matter!" cried Gnumi. "I will stay with him anyway!"

But the young Witch Doctor trembled in anger and fear. "You must never come to me again!" he said fiercely to Gnumi. "You doubted me from the first. You listened to the gossip of the elders. You sought knowledge of me

from the Old Woman who cooks the meat. You spied on me at the river. You see me now without my mask, and you see that I am angry and afraid. Why, then, do you want to stay with me?"

Gnumi listened, cold and numb, unable to move or speak. He saw that the Witch Doctor was still possessed of devils, the same evil spirits that had raged within Gnumi himself. But as the elders seized him, Gnumi turned to the Witch Doctor.

"Forgive me," he whispered, "and remember me."

They looked at each other silently, holding their breaths; there was an ancient truth and a secret flowing. Then the Witch Doctor smiled sadly. "I will see you again," he said gently. "Someday."

The elders put a gag in Gnumi's mouth, and pulled his arms behind him, and bound him fast. He saw the warriors as they came, and held the young Witch Doctor to the ground, and cut off his ears and his lips and his genitals, and gouged his eyes out with their spears. He saw them as they broke his legs and his arms and his ribs and his neck. He saw them as they pierced his body and cut his heart out and drank his blood. Then the elders took Gnumi to the edge of the village and drove him out.

"Go back to the Wise Men," said Jazwa, "and learn the wisdom of the generations."

"Go back to the Priests," said Khaffa, "and seek the secret river of life."

"Go back to your own village," said Tonti the Chieftain, "where there are men and women whom you can love."

Gnumi stared at them in silence. Then he turned slowly and went across the plains and into the jungle alone.