

The Face on the Wall



...that appears and disappears

CONNECT *How do you think storytelling would have begun? Share your favourite story in brief with the class.*

REFLECT *What are the stories that you like most and remember? Give reasons.*

IMAGINE *You have to create an interesting character for a story. Give your character a name, place of origin and a unique feature (it could be anything—special powers, language, appearance, etc.)*

BEFORE YOU READ

Edward Verrall Lucas (1868–1938) was a famous English essayist, poet, novelist and short story writer. He has written nearly 100 books. Some of his essays about cricket are still considered among the best instructional material. He is remembered best for his essays and books about London and travel abroad.

The Face on the Wall is mostly set in an old house in Great Ormond Street in London. Lucas spent most of his life in London which is the commercial hub of England. Many non-Londoners live in rented apartments in London. The youth in the story too takes a rented room where most of the events of the story take place.



READ

We were talking of events, at Dabney's, which could not be explained by natural causes. Most of us had related an instance each without producing much effect. Among the strangers, was a little man with an **anxious** face. He watched each speaker with the closest attention but said nothing. Then, Dabney, wishing to include him in the talk, turned to him and asked if he had no experience or story to be narrated or explained. He thought a moment.

'Well,' he said, 'not a story in the ordinary sense of the word. If I had one, I would tell you. Truth, I always believe, is not only stranger than fiction, but also more interesting. I could tell you an occurrence which happened to me personally and which, strangely enough, completed itself only this afternoon.'

We begged him to begin.

'A year or two ago, I took a room in an old house in Great Ormond Street.

The bedroom walls had been painted by the previous **tenant**, but the place was damp and there were great patches on the walls. One of these was exactly like a face. One morning, I came to think of it as real, as my fellow **lodger**. While other patches on the wall grew larger and changed shapes, this never did.



Brainstorm

Where had the narrator taken a room?

'While there, I fell ill with **influenza**, and all day long, I had nothing to do but read or think. It was then that the face began to get a firmer hold of me. It grew more and more real and remarkable. There was a curious curve of the nose and the forehead was remarkable, in fact the face of an uncommon man, a man in a thousand.

'Well, I got better, but the face still controlled me. I found myself searching

anxious: worried about something

tenant: one who lives in a house or room and pays rent to the person who owns it

lodger: guest; someone who pays rent for a room in someone's house

influenza: a contagious disease, a symptom of which is a bad cold



the streets for one like it. Somewhere, I was convinced, the real man must exist. I only knew that he and I were in some way linked by fate. In vain, I often went to places where people gather in large numbers—political meetings, football matches and railway stations.

'The search became madness with me. I stood at busy corners watching the crowd until people thought me mad, and the police began to know me and be suspicious.

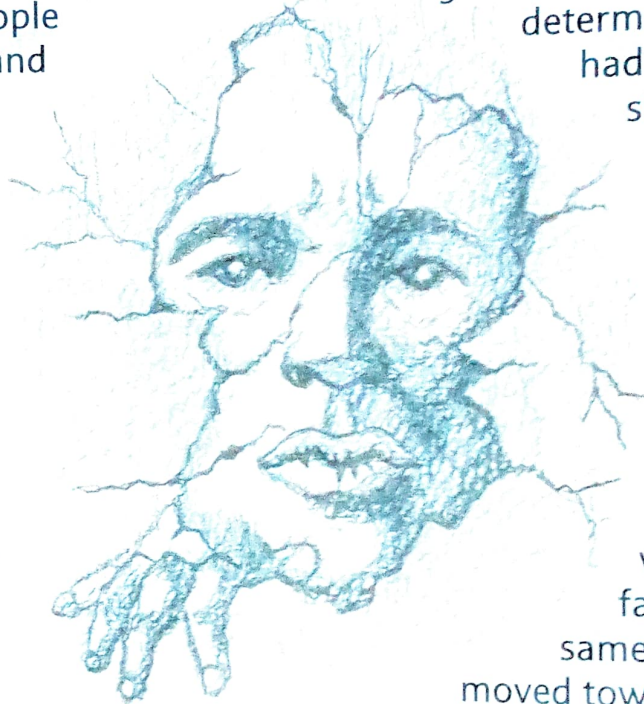
'I, at last, saw him. He was in a taxi, driving east along Piccadilly. I saw an empty taxi coming. "Follow that taxi," I said and leaped in. The driver managed to keep it in sight and it took us to Charing Cross. I rushed on to the platform and found my man with two ladies and a little girl. They were going to France. I stayed

there, trying to get a word with him, but in vain. They moved to the train in one group along with other friends.

'I hastily purchased a ticket to Folkstone, hoping to catch him on the boat before it sailed; but at Folkstone, he got on the ship before me with his friends, and they disappeared into a large private cabin.

'Again, I was defeated. But I was determined to go with him. I had only just enough for a single fare to Boulogne, but nothing could stop me now. I took up my position opposite his cabin door and waited. After half an hour, the door opened and he came out, with the little girl. My heart beat fast. There was no mistaking the face, every line was the same. He looked at me and moved towards the way to the upper deck. It was now or never, I felt.

"Excuse me," I **stammered**, "but do you mind giving me your card? I have a very important reason in asking it."



Brainstorm

What did the narrator tell the taxi driver to do?

stammered: (here) spoke with pauses due to nervousness, repeating words and letters of words





Brainstorm

What was a ghost of itself?

'He seemed to be greatly surprised, but he granted my request. Handing me his card, he hurried on with the girl. It was clear that he thought me mad and decided to please me.'

'Holding the card tight in my hand, I hurried to a lonely corner of the ship and read it. On it, were the words: Mr Ormond Wall, with an address at Pittsburgh, USA. I remember no more until I found myself in a hospital at Boulogne. There I lay in a broken condition for some weeks.'

He was silent.

'I went back,' he started once again after a moment or so, 'to Great Ormond Street to find out all I could about this American. And so, the time went on until yesterday morning. I had slept till late. When I woke up, the room was bright with sunlight. I looked at once at the wall on which the face was to be seen. I rubbed my eyes and sprang up. It was only faintly visible. Last night, it had been clear as ever—I could almost hear it speak. And now, it was a ghost of itself.'

'Confused and sad, I went out. The early editions of the papers were already out. I saw the headline, "American Millionaire's Motor Accident". It read, "Mr Ormond Wall, the Pittsburgh millionaire, and party, motoring in Italy, were hit by a wagon and the car overturned. Mr Wall's condition is critical".'

'I went back to my room staring at the face on the wall. And even as I looked, suddenly it completely disappeared.'

'Later, I found that Mr Wall died of his injuries at what I take it to be that very moment.'

Again, he was silent.

'Most remarkable,' we said, 'most extraordinary.' We meant it too.

'Yes,' said the stranger. 'There are three extraordinary, three most remarkable things about my story. One is that it should be possible for a patch on the wall of a house in London not only to form the features of a gentleman in America, but also to have a close association with his life.'

Another one is that the gentleman's name should bear any relation to the spot on which his features were being so curiously reproduced by some unknown agency. Is it not so?'

We agreed with him and our original discussion on **supernatural** occurrences

supernatural: something that cannot be explained through reason; not of this world





ended. Then, he rose up and said goodnight. Just as he was at the door, one of the company asked him, what he considered the third most exciting thing in connection with his interesting story.

'Oh, the third thing,' he said, as he opened the door, 'I was forgetting that. The third extraordinary thing about the story is that I made it up about half an hour ago. Goodnight again.'

CONSOLIDATE

A1. Answer these questions.

1. What was the topic of discussion at Dabney's?
2. What did the people at Dabney's ask the little man to do? What was his reply?
3. What did he find on the wall of his room?
4. Why and where all did the narrator look for the man?
5. What did the narrator ask the man? What happened after the narrator read the card?
6. What happened to the face on the wall?
7. There were three things that were extraordinary about the story. What were they?

A2. Answer these questions with reference to the context.

1. *Truth, I always believe, is not only stranger than fiction, but also more interesting.*
 - a. Who said this and to whom?
 - b. When did the speaker say this?
 - c. What was he talking about?
2. *It was then that the face began to get a firmer hold of me. It grew more and more real and remarkable.*
 - a. What is referred to as 'the face' here?
 - b. When did the face begin to get a firmer hold of the speaker?
 - c. Why did the speaker call the face 'remarkable'?

