

CHAPTER 8

The Thief and the Mask

There once lived a wise king with a beautiful daughter. The time came for her to be married and he wanted her to have a variety of choices. So he advertised for prospective suitors to present themselves at the palace for selection. There were just two requirements: to have a good character (the king's preference) and to be good looking (the princess' choice).

Among the people who saw the advertisement was a thief. His life of robbery and deception had marked his face, though he had once been handsome. Lines of deceit and untrustworthiness had disfigured his looks. But his natural cunning was aroused by the idea of competing for the princess' hand. "I can find a way," he thought "to do better than the others." So he secretly visited a famous mask-maker and had a mask made that transformed him back to the innocence of his youth.

With the help of the mask, the thief progressed rapidly through the early rounds of selection. At first, he would come home and laugh at how easily he had deceived the king's advisers. "How foolish they are!" he told himself as he looked at his real face in the mirror each night.

After a few weeks, however, he realized that matters were getting out of hand. He had become one of the twenty final candidates, all of whom had their pictures published in the newspapers. Reporters stood outside his door and asked him questions about his private life, which, of course, he was most reluctant to disclose! He feigned humility, saying that he expected to be eliminated and that his personal life was unimportant. He could no longer take off his mask but lived in terror that his true identity would be revealed.

The time came when he was notified that he had been selected as one of the three final candidates. Realizing that if his true identity were discovered he surely would be executed, he decided to leave the country the following morning. But as he came out of his house, he was greeted by two soldiers sent by the king to be his bodyguards. It was too late!

On the final day of the contest the thief walked to the castle for what he was sure was the last time. He hoped desperately that he would lose to one of the other candidates, but it was of no use. The princess had already made up her mind. She talked to the other candidates just long enough to be polite. Then she took him by the arm and told her father, "This is the one!"

In a last attempt to avoid disclosure, the thief took the king aside. "Your Majesty," he said, "I am honored, but I need time to prepare. Can the wedding be delayed by one year?"



The king was happy to oblige. Of course, the thief's real intent was to run away as soon as he could. However, this proved to be impossible. He was now the second most famous man in the kingdom. Crowds surrounded his house hoping for a glimpse of the future king. He was invited to give speeches, attend parties and, worst of all, to kiss babies. He hated babies! And while doing all these things, he had to keep up the pretense of virtue and honor, living the lie that was the mask, which he wished he had never bought. For a whole year he lived as a noble person on the surface, all the time squirming within at his own corruption.

Finally the day came for the Royal Wedding. Certain that he would be exposed and would have to face death, the thief went to the palace with a heavy heart. When the princess came to greet him, he asked to be with her for a short time alone. As they retired to a small room, she thought, "Maybe now he will kiss me!" Instead, he threw himself at her feet.

"Your Royal Highness," he cried, "I have a terrible confession to make. Can you forgive me!" And he told her the whole story of his deception; how he was not a handsome prince at all, but an ugly thief. When he had finished there was a long moment of silence. Finally the princess spoke.

"I'll forgive you," she said, "but only on one condition. Take off your mask and show me who you really are!"

It was the most he could do to bring his hands to his face. Trembling with shame and fear, he pulled the mask off and turned to face the princess.

"You monster!" she shouted, and slapped him in the face.

"Yes, yes, I know," he mumbled. "I—"

"What kind of stupid trick is this?" shouted the princess again. "What are you trying to do to me?"

"What do you mean?"

"Take this!" she said, and gave him a mirror. He looked. And looked again. Then he looked at the mask and into the mirror again. They were identical!

By living as a good and righteous man for an entire year, he had changed. Since his actions had been good, he had become good without noticing it. But there was no doubt: he *had* changed.

Fortunately, the princess was now beginning to see the funny side of the whole affair. "Come on!" she said "Let's pretend this never happened." And the new couple went off to see the king. In future years, when they became the new rulers, people considered the former thief the wisest and most compassionate king they had ever had.

That is the end of the story. So, what is this tale about? Why is it in this book?

Obviously, the main idea of the story is that even a vicious person, who tries to live in accordance with the demands of a noble life, can step-by-step, without noticing it, become noble himself. What do you think? Is this possible?

The reason we may object to this idea is our negative attitude to adaptation. Usually we call it hypocrisy or *conformism*. Yet, perhaps there are some situations worthy of us conforming to and others which are not.

In daily life we experience different manifestations of adaptation that seem very natural. For example, if we are discussing a subject that our friends find unpleasant, we may decide to agree with their point of view that we don't necessarily hold for the sake of the friendship. Sometimes we may be called to publicly support a person with whom we privately disagree. We often find ourselves in situations that require tact and maturity so that we do not offend others or cause a negative result in some way. Adaptation or conformity is a fact of life that can lead to either good or bad results depending on the circumstances.

Questions for Discussion



1. Find examples from life and literature that show both the good and bad aspects of people adapting to their environment and to people.
2. Why is it that some people seem to change their character through trying to live up to certain expectations while others do not?
3. What do you think are the positive and negative aspects of conformity on one's character?
4. How does a person feel when he is trying to conform to certain norms of behavior that feel unnatural to him?