

Making a Life Mask.

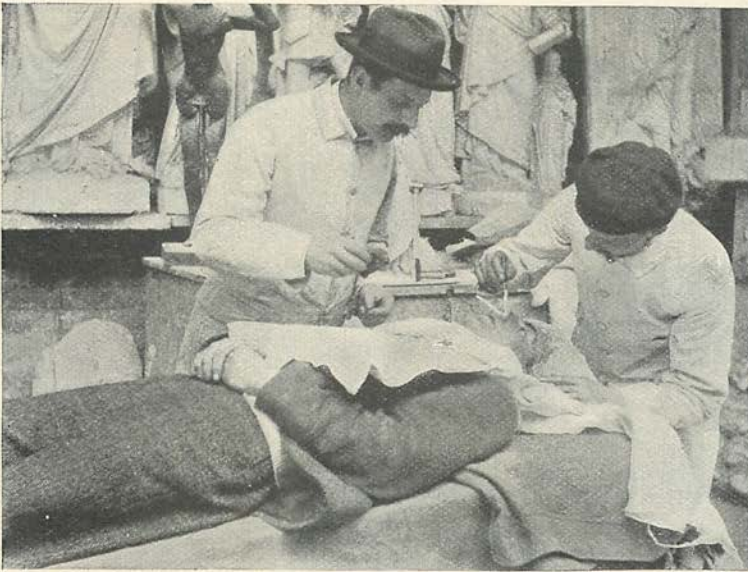
BY HARRY TURNER HEMS, JUN.



THE taking of masks from the dead by any but a skilled operator accustomed to such work is distinctly disagreeable and difficult, and perhaps particulars of the *modus operandi* upon such occasions would somewhat disturb the nerves of our more sensitive readers. In the accompanying interesting photographs we are able to illustrate the process of obtaining a mask of the face during life, the subject operated on being very far from dead. Death masks are usually taken for the purpose of securing an exact reproduction of the features, so that any artist or sculptor who intends to execute a painting or statue of the deceased may have something definite to work upon.

One often observes when reading of the

A mask from life is taken almost precisely in the same way as after death, save that much greater care has to be used, as the subject's life hangs but on a very thin thread, or, to be more precise, two small quills. It requires a great deal of nerve and patience to undergo, the sensation being most disagreeable. When a mask from life is about to be secured, the subject reclines on a long table, and towels are placed around his neck and forehead to prevent the plaster going where not intended. The face is slightly greased, but not enough to fill the pores of the skin. Care has to be especially taken with the eyelashes, as otherwise, in the subsequent operations, these are likely to be pulled off, which would not be exactly pleasant. A small quill is now inserted in either nostril (No. 1) to allow the subject presently to breathe



From a]

I.—INSERTING THE QUILLS.

[Photo.

demise of a celebrity that a mask was taken by Mr. So-and-so, the celebrated sculptor, soon after the death, but really very few people know how this is carried out. They might have some idea that plaster of Paris is put over the dead man's face, but there the idea ends.

through, and cotton wool lightly pressed around the base to keep the liquid plaster from intruding. A pair of scissors is always kept handy, so as to be able to cut off the tops of the quills, should by any chance the plaster splash up and cover them,



From a]

2.—APPLYING THE PLASTER.

[Photo.

All being ready, a few cheering words are spoken to the unhappy victim and the plaster is mixed. This is carefully poured or sprinkled over the features (No. 2). The following operations have then to be performed with skill and celerity: Directly the plaster lightly covers the face, a small but

in thickness. Ere this has quite set, the before-mentioned threads are pulled up through the mould, so as to cut the plaster, otherwise it would be impossible to remove it from the face.

The subject whose mask is being taken is now having a lively time. The plaster presses and burns his cheeks. He thinks of all the horrible things that *might* happen should those two little quills get choked. Not a sound of the outer world can he hear, save some indistinct rumbling, and the thud, thud, of his beating heart almost

deafens him. Hours seem to pass, and he is powerless to know what is going on. He lays helplessly there, and, perhaps out of curiosity, tries to raise an eyelid. That settles him, as by this time the plaster has hardened, and holds the lid in an immovable grip. A sickly sensa-



From a]

3.—THE SIGNAL—"ALL'S WELL."

[Photo.

strong thread is laid on either cheek, running from the top of the head down to the neck, and is pressed into the plaster until it almost touches the skin. Additional plaster is now placed on, until the whole is about an inch

tion comes over him—he feels paralyzed, and unconsciously gives a long groan. This, by the way, can only come through the quills in his nostrils, and it naturally alarms the operator, who immediately shouts as loudly



From a] 4.—HOW THE MOULD IS CUT. [Photo.

as he can to know if anything is the matter. The subject is just able to hear his voice, and so raises his hand, a prearranged signal that "all's well" (No. 3).

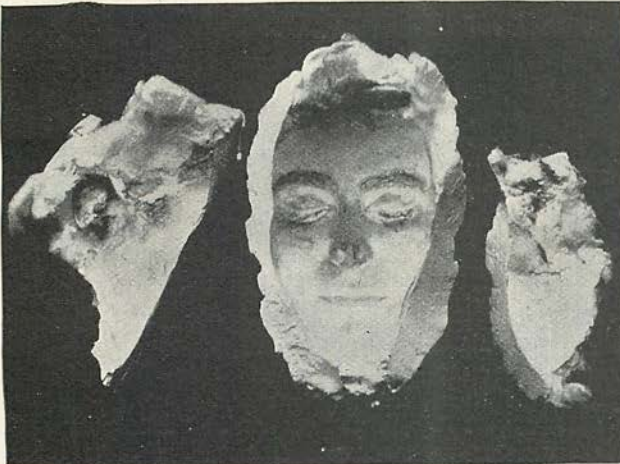
The plaster, through being mixed with warm water, quickly hardens, and in the course of about five minutes the mould is strong enough to be taken off. It has to be carefully done, as the subject is generally so very eager to get a mouthful of fresh air once again. A slight tap with the hand is given to the

two side pieces, which relieves the joints made by the thread. The top or central piece is then lifted up and pulled slightly downwards, so as to withdraw the quills from the nose as they come out with the mould (No. 4.). The sides are then taken off. Probably some of the hair may hold the mould, but with a little coaxing, or by the insertion of the scissors, it can soon be removed. Care must be used to get the ears out without breaking either the subject or the mould. The ears are only taken on the front sides, cotton wool being placed at the back to prevent the plaster going around. When removed the three pieces are put together and plaster placed on the exterior to hold and strengthen them.

In No. 5 we see the mould directly it came from the face, but by a peculiarity in the light, the centre piece almost appears to



6.—THE MOULD READY FOR FILLING.
From a Photograph.



From a] 5.—THE MOULD IN PIECES. [Photo.

give the face in the round. But this is not so; it simply shows it as a negative, all prominent parts, such as the nose, being darker. The ends of the two breathing quills and the cotton wool supporting them may be seen in the nostrils.

The mould (No. 6) is now well washed and soaped, and then filled with freshly mixed plaster. It is best to take it in the hands and give it a slow rotary motion so that the plaster may lay evenly on



From a] 7.—CHIPPING OFF. [Photo.

every side. When this has quite set, the mould is chipped off with a mallet and chisel (No. 7). Through being soaped, it easily comes away from the mask, and leaves an exact replica of the face. As a rule, the mould is taken from the top of the forehead to the neck and reaches outwardly to the ears. When taken from life a great deal depends on the quickness and dexterity of the operator, as many unpleasant if not serious results may occur through any laxity or carelessness on his part.

It is curious to relate that, in connection with this series of photos., the subject on issuing from the mould being asked as to what his feelings were, remarked that he felt as if under the influence of drink. This coming from a *lifelong* abstainer is somewhat surprising, and suggests the query as to how he recognised that condition.



From a] 9.—THE MASK IN PROFILE. [Photo.

In the photographs numbered 8 and 9 we give two views of the finished mask, one taken from the front and the other in profile.

The mask, of course, shows the face in repose, with the eyes closed, but any artist with a little skill would have no difficulty in afterwards working up the eyes, so as to make them appear as if opened. When the subject has a beard or heavy moustache, it has to be made into a solid mass, by the aid of vaseline or soft soap. An easier way in the case of a beard is to cover it with tissue paper. This prevents the plaster from going into the beard, and it comes away easily with the mould. The whole process is most interesting,



From a] 8.—THE MASK—FRONT VIEW. [Photo.

and the amateur, although hardly able to take a mask of the human face, may most certainly cast a hand or foot, or the head of a dog, or any other animal after death, and get some very curious and practical results.

The photographs illustrating this article were taken especially for THE STRAND MAGAZINE, in the studio of Messrs. Harry Hems and Sons, of Exeter.