

The Lure of the Mask

By HAROLD MAC GRATH

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What humans are chiefly hunting for nowadays is inspiration in one form or another. This story cannot fail to give its reader inspiration, and therefore its value can hardly be overestimated. The magic of the love of man for woman, that, aroused simply by the sound of a voice, causes a young millionaire to cross oceans and traverse foreign lands to find his fate was never better pictured. The story is intensely romantic and alluringly mysterious. The insidious evils of unwise marriage with foreign "noblemen" are cleverly shown, and the familiar Italian brand of intrigue is laid bare. The author shows that the reward of patience and purity is happiness and that the wages of sin is death. He makes you laugh when he pictures the adventures of an American comic opera troupe stranded in foreign lands. He makes you thrill with the wanderlust when he describes La Bella Napoli and the vine covered slopes that rim the Mediterranean.

CHAPTER I. THE VOICE IN THE FOG.

OUT of the unromantic night out of the somber blurring January fog, came a voice lifted in song, a soprano, rich, full and round, young, yet matured, sweet and mysterious as a night bird's, haunting and elusive as the murmur of the sea in a shell—a lilt from "La Fille de Mme. Angot," a light opera long since forgotten in New York. Hilliard, genuinely astonished, lowered his pipe and listened. The voice rose and sank and soared again, drawing nearer and nearer. It was joyous and unrestrained, and there was youth in it, the touch of spring and the breath of flowers. The music was Lecocq's—that is to say, French—but the tongue was of a country which Hilliard knew to be the garden of the world. Presently he observed a shadow emerge from the yellow mist, to come within the circle of light, which, faint as it was, limned against the nothingness beyond the form of a woman. She walked directly under his window.

As the invisible comes suddenly out of the future to assume distinct proportions which either make or mar us, so did this unknown cantatrice come out of the fog that night and enter into Hilliard's life, to readjust its ambitions, to divert its aimless course, to give impetus to it and a directness which hitherto it had not known.

"Ah!" He leaned over the sill at a perilous angle, the bright coal of his pipe spilling comet-wise to the areaway below. He was only subconscious of having spoken, but this syllable was sufficient to spoil the enchantment. The voice ceased abruptly, with an odd break. The singer looked up. Possibly her astonishment surpassed even that of her audience. For a few minutes she had forgotten that she was in New York; she had forgotten the pain in her heart; there had been only an irresistible longing to sing.

Though she raised her face, he could distinguish no feature, for the light was behind. However, he was a man who made up his mind quickly. Brunette or blond, beautiful or otherwise, it needed but a moment to find out. Even as this decision was made he was in the upper hall, taking the stairs two at a bound. He ran out into the night bareheaded. Up the street he saw a flying shadow. Plainly she had anticipated his impulse. She was gone. He cupped his ear with his hand in vain. There was nothing but fog and silence.

"Well, if this doesn't beat the Dutch!" he murmured.

He laughed disappointedly. It did not matter that he was three and thirty. He still retained youth enough to feel chagrined at such a trivial defeat. Here had been something like a genuine adventure, and it had slipped like water through his clumsy fingers.

"Duce take the fog! But for that I'd have caught her."

But reason promptly asked him what he should have done had he caught the singer. Yes, supposing he had, what excuse would he have had to offer? Who could she be? What

peculiar whimsical freak had sent her singing past his window at 1 o'clock of the morning? A grand opera singer returning home from a late supper? But he dismissed this opinion even as he advanced it. He knew something about grand opera singers. They attend late suppers, it is true, but they ride home in luxurious carriages and never risk their golden voices in this careless if romantic fashion. As for being a comic opera star, he refused to admit the possibility, and he relegated this well satisfied constellation to the darks of limbo. He had heard a voice.

A policeman came lumbering over to add or subtract his quota of interest in the affair. Hilliard wisely stopped and waited for him.

"I heard a woman singin'," the guard said of the law said roughly.

"So did I."

"Huh! See her?"

"For a moment," Hilliard admitted.

"Well, we can't have none o' this in the streets. It's disorderly."

"My friend," said Hilliard, rather annoyed at the policeman's tone, "you don't think for an instant that I was directing this operetta?"

"Think? Where's your hat?"

Hilliard ran his hand over his head. The policeman had him here. "I did not bring it out."

"Too warm and summery, huh? It don't look good. I've been watchin' these parts for a leddy. They call her Liddy Lightfinger, an' she has some o' the gents done to a pulp when it comes to liftin' jools an' trinkets. Somebody fergets to lock the front door, an' she finds it out. Why did you come out without yer lid?"

"Just forgot it, that's all."

"Which way'd she go?"

"You'll need a map and a searchlight. I started to run after her myself. I heard a voice from my window; I saw a woman; I made for the street; niente!"

"Huh?"

"Niente, nothing!"

"Oh, I see—dago. Seems to me now that this woman was singin' I-taly-an too." They were nearing the light, and the policeman gazed intently at the hatless young man. "Why, it's Mr. Hilliard! I'm surprised. Well, well! Some day I'll run in a bunch o' these chorus leddies, jes' fer a lesson. They git lively at the restaurants over on Broadway, an' thin they raise the dead with their singin', which often as not is anything but singin'. An' here it is after 1."

"But this was not a chorus lady," replied Hilliard, thoughtfully reaching

into his vest for a cigar. "The lady had a singing voice."

"Huh! They all think alike about that. But maybe she wasn't bad at the business, Annyhow—"

"It was rather out of time and place, eh?" helpfully.

"That's about the size of it. This Liddy Lightfinger is a case. She has us all thinkin' on our nights off. Clever an' edicated an' jabbers in half a dozen tongues. It's a thousand to the man who jugs her. But she don't sing; at least they ain't any report to that effect. Perhaps your leddy was jes' larkin' a bit. But it's got to be stopped."

Hilliard passed over the cigar, and

the policeman bit off the end, nodding with approval at such foresight. "Didn't get a peep at her face?"

"Not a single feature. The light was behind her."

"An' how was she dressed?"

"In fog, for all I could see."

"On the level now, didn't you know who she was?" The policeman gave Hilliard a sly dig in the ribs with his club.

"On my word?"

"Some swell, mebbe."

"Undoubtedly a lady. That's why it looks odd—why it brought me into the street. She sang in classic Italian. And, what's more, for the privilege of hearing that voice again I should not mind sitting on this cold curb till the milkman comes around in the morning."

"That wouldn't be fer long," laughed the policeman, taking out his watch and holding it close to the end of his cigar. "Twenty minutes after 1. Well, I must be gittin' back to me beat. Been to Italy?"

"I was born there," patiently.

"No! Why, you're no dago!"

"Not so much as an eyelash. The stork happened to drop the basket there, that's all."

"Ha, I see! Well, Ameriky is good enough fer me an' mine," complacently.

"I dare say!"

"An' if this story continues to be have we'll say no more about the vanishin' leddy." The policeman strolled off, his suspicions in nowise removed. He knew many rich young bachelors like Hilliard. If it wasn't a chorus lady it was a prima donna, which was not far from being the same thing.

Hilliard regained his room and leaned with his back to the radiator. He had an idea. It was rather green and salad, but as soon as his hands were warm he determined to put this idea into immediate use. The voice had stirred him deeply, stirred him with the longing to hear it again, to learn what extraordinary impulse had loosed the song.

Never the winter came with its weary round of rain and fog and snow that his heart and mind did not fly over the tideless southern sea to the land of his birth if not of his blood—Sorrento, that jewel of the sun bathed cliffs!

With a quick gesture of both hands—Latin, always Latin—he crossed the room to a small writing desk, turned on the lights and sat down. After several attempts he realized that the letter he had in mind was not the simplest to compose. There were a dozen futile efforts before he produced anything like satisfaction. Then he filled out a small check. A little later he stole downstairs, around the corner to the local branch of the postoffice and returned. It was only a blind throw, such as dice sometimes make in the dark. But chance loves her true gamester, and to him she makes a faithful servant.

He picked up a novel. "I should be sorely tempted to call any other man a silly ass. Liddy Lightfinger—it would be a fine joke if my singer turned out to be that irregular person."

He fell to reading, but soon yawned. He shied the book into a corner, drew off his boots and cast them into the hall. A moment after his valet appeared, gathered up the boots and waited.

"I want nothing, Giovanni. I have only been around to the postoffice."

"I heard the door open and close four times, signor."

"It was I. If this fog does not change I shall want my riding breeches to-morrow morning."

"It always rains here," Giovanni remarked.

"Not always. There are pleasant days in the spring and summer. It is because this is not Italy. The Highlander wonders how any reasonable being can dwell in a country where they do not drink gin. It's home, Giovanni. Rain pelts you from a different angle here. There is nothing more. You may go. It is 2 o'clock, and you are dead for sleep."

But Giovanni only bowed. He did not stir.

"It is seven years now, signor."

"So it is—seven this coming April."

"I am now an American citizen and may return to my good Italia without danger."

"That depends. If you do not run across any official who recognizes you."

Giovanni spread his hands. "Official memory seldom lasts so long as seven years. The signor has crossed four times in this period."

"I would gladly have taken you each time, as you know."

"Oh, yes! But in two or three years the police do not forget. In seven it is different."

"Ah!" Hilliard was beginning to understand the trend of this conversation. "So, then, you wish to return?"

"Yes, signor. I have saved a little money," modestly.

"A little?" Hilliard laughed. "For seven years you have received fifty American dollars every month, and out of it you do not spend as many copper centesimi. I am certain that you have 20,000 lire tucked away in your stocking—a fortune!"

"I buy the blacking for the signor's boots," gravely.

Hilliard saw the twinkle in the black eyes. "I have never," he said truthfully, "asked you to black my boots."

"Penance, signor, penance for my sins, and I am not without gratitude. There was a time when I had rather cut off a hand than black a boot. But all that is changed. We of the Sabine hills are proud, as the signor knows. We are Romans out there. We despise the cities, and we do not hold out our palms for the traveler's pennies. I am a peasant, but always remember the blood of the Caesars. Who can say?

Besides, I have held a sword for the church. I owe no allegiance to the puny house of Savoy!" There was no twinkle in the black eyes now. There was a ferocious gleam. "Pardon, signor. I grow boastful. I am old and should know better. But does the signor return to Italy in the spring?"

"I don't know, Giovanni! I don't know. But what's on your mind?"

"Nothing new, signor," with eyes cast down to hide the returning lights.

"You are a bloodthirsty ruffian!" said Hilliard shortly.

"I am as the good God made me. Besides, the holy father will do something for one who fought for the cause."

"He will certainly not countenance bloodshed, Giovanni."

"He can absolve it."

"I was in hopes you had forgotten."

"Forgotten! The signor will never understand. She was so pretty and youthful and innocent! She sang like the nightingale. Up with the dawn, to sleep with the stars. We

way into the United States. After due time he applied for citizenship, and through Hilliard's influence it was accorded him. He solemnly voted when elections came round and boarded his wages, like the thrifty man he was. Some day he would return to Rome or Naples or Venice or Florence, as the case might be, and then!

When the boots shone flawlessly he carried them to Hilliard's door and softly tiptoed back. He put his face against the cold window. He, too, had heard the voice. How his heart hurt him with its wild hope! But only for a moment. It was not the voice he hungered for. The words were Italian, but he knew that the woman who sang them was not.

(To be continued.)

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