

The Lure of the Mask

By HAROLD MAC GRATH

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CHAPTER II. OBJECT, MATRIMONY.

WINTER fogs in New York are never quite so intolerable as their counterparts in London, and while their frequency is a matter of complaint, their duration is seldom of any length. So by the morrow a strong wind from the west had winnowed the skies and cleared the sun. There were an exhilarating tingle of frost in the air and a visible ring on the windows. Hillard, having breakfasted lightly, was standing with his back to the grate in the cozy breakfast room. He was in boots and breeches and otherwise warmly clad and freshly shaven. He rocked on his heels and toes and ran his palm over his blue white chin in search of a possible slip of the razor.

Giovanni came in to announce that he had telephoned and that the signor's brown mare would be at the park entrance precisely at half after 8. Giovanni still marveled over this wonderful voice which came out of nowhere, but he was no longer afraid of it. The curiosity which is innate and childlike in all Latins soon overcame his dark superstitions. He was an ardent Catholic and believed that a few miracles should be left in the hands of God. The telephone had now become a kind of plaything, and Hillard often found him in front of it patiently waiting for the bell to ring.

The facility with which Giovanni had mastered English amazed his teacher and master. But now he needed no more lessons. The two when alone together spoke Giovanni's tongue. Hillard because he loved it and Giovanni because the cook spoke it badly and the English butler not at all.

"You have made up your mind to go, then, amico?" said Hillard.

"Yes, signor."
"Well, I shall miss you. To whom shall I talk the tongue I love so well when Giovanni is gone?" with a lightness which he did not feel. Hillard had grown very fond of the old Roman in these seven years.

"Whenever the signor goes to Italia he shall find me. It needs but a word to bring me to him. The signor will pardon me, but he is like a son."

"Thanks, Giovanni. By the way, did you hear a woman singing in the street last night?"

"Yes, at first—Giovanni hesitated. "Ah, but that could not be, Giovanni; that could not be."

"No; it could not be. But she sang well," the old servant ventured.

"So thought I. I even ran out into the street to find out who she was, but she vanished like the lady in the conjurer's trick. But it seemed to me that, while she sang in Italian, she herself was not wholly of that race."

"Buonissima!" Giovanni struck a noiseless brava with his hands. "Have I not always said that the signor's ears are as sharp as my own? No; the voice was very beautiful, but it was not truly Roman. It was more like they talk in Venice. And yet the sound of the voice decided me. The hills have always been calling to me, and I must answer."

"And the unforgetting carabinieri?"

"Oh, I must take my chance," with the air of a fatalist.

"What shall you do?"

"I have my two hands, signor. Besides, the signor has said it—I am rich." Giovanni permitted a smile to stir his thin lips. "Yes, I must go back. Your people have been good to me and have legally made me one of them, but my heart is never here. It is always so cold, and every one moves so quickly. You cannot lie down in the sun. Your police, bah! They beat you on the feet. You remember when I fell asleep on the steps of the cathedral? They thought I was drunk and would have arrested me!"

"Everybody must keep moving here. It is the penalty of being rich."

"And I am lonesome for my kind. I have nothing in common with these herds of Sicilians and Neapolitans who pour into the streets from the wharfs." Giovanni spoke scornfully. "Yet in wartime the Neapolitans sheltered your pope."

"Vanity! They wished to make an impression on the rest of the world. It is dull here besides. There is no joy in the shops. I am lost in these great palaces. The festa is lacking. Nobody bargains; nobody sees the proprietor. You find your way to the streets alone. The butcher says that his meat is so and so, and you pay. The grocer marks his tins such and such, and you do not question, and the baker says that, and you pay, pay, pay! What? I need a collar; it is quindici—fifteen you say! I offer quattordici. I would give interest to the sale. But, no! The collar goes back into the box. I pay quindici or I go without. It is the same everywhere—very dull, dead, lifeless."

Hillard was moved to laughter. He very well understood the old man's lament. In Italy if there is one thing more than another that pleases the native it is to make believe to himself that he has got the better of a bargain. A shrewd purchase entitles the whole day. It is talked about, laughed over and becomes the history of the day.

Hillard presently left the house and hailed a Fifth Avenue omnibus. He looked with negative interest at the advertisements, at the people in the streets, at his fellow travelers. One of these was hidden behind his morning paper. Personal! Hillard squirmed a little. The world never holds very much romance in the sober morning. What a stupid piece of folly! The idea of his sending that personal inquiry to the paper! Tomorrow he would see it sandwiched in between samples of shopgirl romance, questionable intrigues and divers search warrants. Ye gods! "Will the blond who smiled at gentleman in blue serge, elevated train, Tuesday, meet same in park? Object, matrimony." Hillard fidgeted. "Young man known as Adonis would adore stout elderly lady independently situated. Object, matrimony." Fish! "Girlie. Can't keep appointment tonight. Willie." Tush! "A French widow of eighteen, unincumbered, and so forth and so on. Rot, bally rot, and here he was on the way to join them! "Will the lady who sang from 'Mme. Angot' communicate with gentleman who leaned out of the window? J. H., Burgomaster Club." Positively asinine!

There was scarce one chance in a thousand of the mysterious singer's seeing the inquiry, not one in ten thousand of her answering it. And the folly of giving his club address! That would look very dignified in yonder agony column. He would cancel the thing.

He dropped from the omnibus at the park entrance, where he found his restive mare. He gave her a lump of sugar and climbed into the saddle. He directed the groom to return for the horse at 10 o'clock, then headed for the stable. It was heavy, but the air was so keen and bracing that neither the man nor the horse worried about the going. Only one party attracted him, a riding master and a trio of brokers who were verging on embonpoint and were desperate and looked it. Hillard went on. The park was not lovely; the trees were barren, the grass yellow and sodden.

"She is so innocent, so youthful!"

He found himself humming the refrain over and over. She had sung it with abandon, tenderness, lightness. For one glimpse of her face! He took the rise and dip that followed. Yards ahead a solitary woman cantered easily along. Hillard had not seen her before. He spurred forward, faintly curious. There was nothing familiar to his eye in her charming figure. She rode well. As he drew nearer he saw that she wore a heavy gray veil. And this veil hid everything but the single flash of a pair of eyes the color of which defied him. Then he looked at her mount. Ha! There was only one rangy black with a white throat—from the Sandford stables, he was positive. But the Sandfords were at this moment in Cairo, so it signified nothing. There is always some one ready to exercise your horses. He looked again at the rider. The flash of the eyes was not repeated, so his interest vanished, and he urged the mare into a sharp run.

So he went back to his tentative romance. She had passed his window and disappeared into the fog, and there was a reasonable doubt of her ever returning from it. The singer in the fog—thus he would write it down in his book of memories and sensibly turn the page. At length he came back to the entrance and surrendered

around stage entrances and buying wine and diamonds I might be reckless enough to buy a bunch of roses when I'm not broke. But I like 'em—the bright ones. They keep a fellow amused. Most of 'em speak good English and come from better families than you would suppose. Just good fellowship, you know. Maybe a rabbit and a bottle of beer after the performance or a little quarter limit at the apartment, singing and good stories. What you've in mind is the chorus lady. Not for mine!"

Hillard laughed, recalling his conversation with the policeman. "Go on," he said. "Get it all out of your system now that you're started." "And then it tickles a fellow's vanity to be seen with them at the restaurants. That's the way it begins, you know. I'll be perfectly frank with you. If it wasn't for what the other fellows say most of the chorus ladies would go hungry. And the girls that you and I know think I'm a devil of a fellow—wicked, but interesting, and all that."

Hillard's laughter broke forth again, and he leaned back. Merrihew would always be twenty-six; he would always be youthful. "And this Kitty Killigrew? I believe I've seen posters of her in the windows now that you speak of it."

"Well, Jack, I've got it bad this trip. I offered to marry her last night and was refused."

"It seems to me that your Kitty is not half bad. What would you have done had she accepted you?"

"Married her within twenty-four hours."

"Come, Dan; be sensible. You are not such an ass as all that."

"Yes, I am," moodily. "I told you that I was a jackass half the time. This is the half."

"But she won't have you?"

"Not for love or money."

"Are you sure about the money?" asked Hillard shrewdly.

"Seven hundred or seven thousand. It wouldn't matter to Kitty if she made up her mind to marry a fellow. What's the matter with me anyhow? I'm not so badly set up. I can whip any man in the club at my weight. I can tell a story well, and I'm not afraid of anything."

"Not even of the future!" added Hillard.

"Do you really think it's my money?" pathetically.

"Well, seven thousand doesn't go far, and that's all you have. If it were seventy, now, I'm sure Kitty wouldn't reconsider. What's she like?" asked Hillard, with more sympathy than curiosity.

Merrihew drew out his watch and opened the case. It was a pretty face. More than that, it was a refined prettiness. The eyes were merry; the brow was intelligent; the nose and chin were good. Altogether it was the face of a merry, kindly little soul, one such as would be most likely to trap the wandering fancy of a young man like Merrihew.

"And she won't have you?" Hillard repeated, this time with more curiosity than sympathy.

"Oh, she's no fool, I suppose. And now she's going to Europe! Some manager has the idea in his head that there is money to be made in Italy and Germany during the spring and summer. American comic opera in those countries—can you imagine it? He has an angel, and I suppose money is no object."

"This angel, then, has cut out a fine time for his bank account, and he'll never get back to heaven once he gets tangled up in foreign red tape. Every large city in Italy and Germany has practically its own opera troupe. Poor

angel! Tell your Kitty to strike for a return ticket to America before she leaves."

"You think it's as bad as that?"

"Look on me as a prophet of evil, if you like, but truthful."

"I'll see that Kitty gets her ticket." Merrihew snapped the case of his watch and drew his legs from under the table. "I lost a hundred last night too."

"After that I suppose nothing worse can happen," said Hillard cheerily. "You will play, for all my advice."

"It's better to give than receive—that," replied Merrihew philosophically. "I've a good mind to follow the company. I've always had a hanker for to beat it up at Monte Carlo. A last throw, eh? Win or lose and quit. I might win."

"And then again you mightn't. But the next time I go to Italy I want you to go with me. You're good company and for the pleasure of listening to your jokes I'll kindly foot the bills, and you may gamble your letter of credit to your heart's content. I must be off. Who is riding the Sandfords' black?"

"Haven't noticed. What do you think of Kitty?"

"And the photo isn't a marker." "Possibly not." "Lord, if I could only hibernate for three months like a bear! My capital might then readjust itself if left alone that length of time."

"See you at the club tonight," laughed Hillard.

They nodded pleasantly and took their separate ways. Merrihew stood very high in Hillard's regard. He was a lovable fellow, and there was something kindred in his soul and Hillard's, possibly the spirit of romance. What drew them together perhaps more than anything else was their mutual love of outdoor pleasures. Take two men and put them on good horses, send them forth into the wilds to face all inconveniences, and if they are not fast friends at the end of the journey they never will be.

For all his aversion to cards there was a bit of the gamester in Hillard, as once in his office he decided on the fall of a coin not to withdraw his personal from the paper. He was quite positive that he would never hear that voice again; but, having thrown his dice, he would let them lie.

Now, at 11 o'clock that same morning two distinguished Italians sat down to breakfast in one of the fashionable hotels. The one nor the other had ever heard of Hillard. They did not even know that such a person existed, and yet serenely unconscious one was casting his life line, as the palmist would say, across Hillard's The knots and tangles were to come later.

"The coffee in this country is abominable!" growled one.

The waiter smiled covertly behind his hand. These Italians and these Germans! Why, there is only one place in the world where both the aroma and the flavor of coffee are preserved, and it is not, decidedly not, in Italy or Germany. And if his tip exceeded 10 cents he would be vastly surprised. The Italian never wastes on necessities a penny which can be applied to the gaming tables. And these two were talking about Monte Carlo and Ostend.

The younger of the two was a very handsome man, tall, slender and nervous, the Venetian type, his black eyes, keen and roving, suggesting a hasty temper. The mouth, partly hidden under a graceful military mustache, was thin lipped, the mouth of a man who was always master of his vices. From his right cheek bone to the corner of his mouth ran a scar, very well healed. And the American imagination might readily have pictured villas, maids in durandue vile and sword thrusts under the moonlight. But the waiter, who had served his time in a foreign army, knew no foll or rapier could have made such a scar; more probably the saber.

His companion was equally picturesque. With white head and iron gray beard, he wore in his buttonhole a tiny bow of ribbon, the badge of foreign service.

"I'm afraid, Enrico, that you have brought me to America on a useless adventure," said the diplomat.

"She is here in New York, and I shall find her. I must have money—must! I owe you the incredible amount of 100,000 lire. There are millions under my hand, and I cannot touch a penny."

"Do not let your debt to me worry you."

"You are so very good, Giuseppe!"

"Have we not grown up together? Sometimes I think I am partly to blame for your extravagance. But a friend is a friend or he is not."

"But he who borrows from his friend loses him. Observe how I am placed. It is maddening. I have had a dozen opportunities to marry riches. This millstone is eternally round my neck. I have gone through my part of the fortune which was left us independently. She has all of hers, and that is why she is so strong. I am absolutely helpless."

"Poor friend! These American women! They all believe that a man must have no peccadillo once he has signed the marriage contract. Body of Bacchus! The sacrament does not make a man less human than he was before. But this one is clever. She might be Italian born."

"Her mother was Italian. It is the schooling in this country that has made her so clever. The only thing Italian about her is her hatred. She is my countrywoman there. Without her consent I can touch nothing, and if I divorce her—pouff!—all goes to the state. Sometimes I long to get my two hands round her white throat. One mistake, one little mistake! I am willing to swear that she loved me in the beginning. And I was a fool not to profit by this sentiment. Give me patience, patience. If I say to her, 'So much and you may have your freedom, there is always that cursed will. The crown of Italy will never withdraw its hand. No. With his wife's family on his hands, especially her brother, the king will never waive his rights.'"

"And, remember, we have but ten days."

"We shall not find time heavy. I know a few rich butchers and grocers who call themselves the aristocracy. And some of them play bridge and ecarte."

The diplomat smiled in anticipation.

"I have followed her step by step to the boat at Naples. She is here. She will not be hard to find. She has wealthy friends."

"You say she is beautiful?"

"Yes, and a beautiful woman cannot hide. Think of it! Chateaux and villas and splendid rents, all waiting to be gormalized by the state! Let us get out into the air before I become excited and forget where I am."

The waiter stepped forward with the coats and hats.

(To be continued.)

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The flash of a pair of eyes.

the mare. He was about to cross the square when he was hailed.

Hillard wheeled and saw Merrihew. He, too, was in riding breeches.

"Why, Dan, glad to see you. Were you in the park?"

"Riverside. Beastly cold too. Come join me in a cup of good coffee."

The two entered the cafe.

"How are you behaving yourself these days?" asked Merrihew.

"My habits are always exemplary," answered Hillard. "But yours?"

Merrihew gulped his coffee.

"Kitty Killigrew leaves in two weeks for Europe."

"And who the deuce is Kitty Killigrew?" demanded Hillard.

"What?" reproachfully. "You haven't heard of Kitty Killigrew in 'The Modern Maid'?"

"Where have you been? Pippin! Prettiest soubrette that's hit the town in a dog's age."

"I say, Dan, don't you ever tire of that sort? I can't recall when there wasn't a Kitty Killigrew. What's the attraction?" Hillard waved aside the big black cigar. "What's the attraction?"

"The truth is, Jack, I'm a jackass half the time. I can't get away from the glamour of the footlights. I'm no Johnny. You know that. No, he had



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