

The Lure of the Mask

By
**HAROLD
MAC GRATH**

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(Continued.)

SYNOPSIS

CHAPTER I—Jack Hilliard, a wealthy New York clubman, hears a mysterious voice singing in the night under his window.

II—He inserts an advertisement in a personal column to find the singer. He receives a reply.

CHAPTER III.

MME. ANGOT.

THREE nights later, as Hilliard and Merril were dining together at the club, the steward came into the grill room and swept his placid eye over the groups of diners. Singing out Hilliard, he came solemnly down to the corner table and laid a blue letter at the side of Hilliard's plate.

"I did not see you when you came in, sir," said the steward, his voice as solemn as his step. "The letter arrived yesterday."

"Thank you, Thomas." With no small difficulty Hilliard composed his face and repressed the eagerness in his eyes. She had seen; she had written; the letter lay under his hand! Who said that romance had taken flight? True, the reading of the letter might disillusion him, but always would there be that vision and the voice coming out of the fog. Nonchalantly he



He sat there staring.

turned the letter face downward and went on with the meal.

"I did not know that your mail came to the club," said Merril.

"It doesn't. Only rarely a letter drifts this way."

"Well, go on and read it. Don't let me keep you from it. Some charmer, I'll wager. Here I pour all my adventures into your ear, and I on my side never so much as get a hint of yours. Go on, read it."

"Adventures, fiddlesticks! The letter can wait. It is probably a bill."

"A bill in a fashionable envelope like that?"

Hilliard only smiled, tipped the cradle and refilled Merril's glass with some excellent Romance Conti. "When does Kitty sail?" he asked after a while of silence.

"A week from this Saturday, Feb. 2. What the deuce did you bring up that for? I've been trying to forget it."

"Where do they land?"

"Naples. They open in Rome the first week in March. All the arrangements are complete." After coffee Merril pushed back his chair. "I'll reserve a table in the billiard room while you read your letter."

"I'll be with you shortly," gratefully.

So with the inevitable black cigar between his teeth Merril sauntered off toward the billiard room, while Hilliard picked up his letter, and

the glistening street. The venetian red of her hair trapped the reflected sunlight from the opposite windows, and two little points of silver danced in her blue eyes. Ah, but her eyes were blue—blue as spring water in the morning, blue as the summer sky seen through a cleft in the mountains, blue as lapis lazuli, with the same fibers of gold. And every feature and contour of the face harmonized with the marvelous hair and the wonderful eyes; a beautiful face, warm, dreamy, engaging, mobile. It was not the face of a worldly woman; neither was it the face of a girl. It was too emotional for the second, and there was not enough control for the first.

But the prophecy of laughter did not come to pass. The little wrinkles faded, the mouth grew sad, and the silver points no longer danced in her eyes. The pain in her heart was always shadowing. She had seen her fairest dream beaten and crumpled upon the reef of disillusion.

Yet again the smile renewed itself. She was a creature of varying moods. She twisted and untwisted the newspaper. Should she? Ought she? Had she not always regretted these singular impulses? And yet what harm to read this letter and return it to the sender? She was so lonely here. It was like being among a strange people, so long ago was it that her foot had touched this soil. Was it possible that she was twenty-five? Was there not some miscount, and was it not fifteen instead? Would not this war of wisdom and folly be decided ere long?

She opened the paper and smoothed out the folds. "Mme. Angot—There is a letter for you in the mail department of this office." It was so dull. It was unlike anything she had ever heard of—a personal inquiry column, where Cupids and Psyche's billed and cooed. The merest chance had thrown the original inquiry under her notice. Her answer was an impulse to which she had given no second thought till too late. She ought to have ignored it. But she was lonely; the people she knew were out of town, and the jest might amuse her.

This man was in all probability a gentleman, since he was a member of a gentlemen's club. But second thought convinced her that this proved nothing. Men are often called gentlemen out of compliment to their ancestors. Still, if this man only saw the affair from her angle of vision, the grotesque humor of it and not the common vulgar intrigue! She hesitated, as well she might. Supposing that eventually he found out who she was? That would never, never do. No one must know that she was in America, about to step into the wildest of wild adventures. No; she must not be found out. The king, who had been kind to her, and the court must never know. From their viewpoint they would have declared that she was about to tarnish a distinguished name, to outrage the oldest aristocracy in Europe, the court of Italy. But she had her own opinion; what she proposed to do was in itself harmless and innocent. But this gentleman who leaned out of the window? She had seen the match flare in the young man's face. Was it the face she had seen in that flash of light that interested her sufficiently to risk the note? Against the dark of the night it had appeared, for an instant, clear, crisp, ruddy as a cameo. The face warranted confidence.

She had sung because she had been happy, happy with that transient happiness which at times was her portion. Could she ever judge another man by his looks? She believed not. How she had run! The man, bareheaded, giving chase and the burly policeman across the street!

She stepped down from the alcove, wound the gray veil round the riding crop and tossed them into a corner. Somehow in the daylight the magic was gone from his face, for she had recognized him that first day in the park. He rode well. She touched a bell. A maid appeared.

"Betina, you will go to the office of this newspaper and inquire for a letter addressed to Mme. Angot. And be quick, for I may change my mind."

The maid was back in a half hour. "There was a letter, then?" The points were dancing again in the blue eyes.

"You may go. Perhaps," and Bettina's mistress smiled—"perhaps I may let you read it and answer it after I am done with it. That would be rather neat."

The slight nod was a dismissal, and the maid went about her duties, which were not many in this house.

Meanwhile the lady with the venetian hair toyed with the letter. Club paper! Evidently he was not afraid to trust her. But would he amuse her? The contents gave her a genuine surprise. She ran to the window. Italian! It was written in Italian, with all the flourishes of an Italian born. She turned to the signature—Hilliard. So he had signed his name in full? She ruminated. How came such a name to belong to a man who wrote Italian so beautifully? She looked at the signature again. John—Giovanni. She would call him Giovanni. She had been rather clever. To have had the wit to look in the library for the blue book and the club list—not every woman would have

thought of that. Then a new inspiration came to her. She sent Bettina for the card basket. She scattered the contents upon the floor and sat down Turkish-wise. She sorted the cards carefully, and, lo, she was presently rewarded. She held up the card in triumph. He had called at this house on Thanksgiving day. He was known, then, to the master and mistress. Very good. She now gave her full attention to the letter, which she had not yet perused.

To the Lady in the Fog:
To begin with, let me say that I, too, have laughed. But there was some degree of chagrin in my laughter. On my word of honor, it was a distinct shock to my sense of dignity when I saw that idiotic personal of mine in the paper. It is my first offense of the kind, and I am really ashamed. But the situation was not ordinary. Ordinary women do not sing in the streets after midnight. As you could not possibly be ordinary, my offense has greater magnitude. To invite a personal to a gentleman! A thousand pardons! I doubted that it would come under your notice, and, even if it did, I was sure that you would ignore it. To find a woman with an appreciable sense of humor is rare. To find one who couples this with initiation is rarer still. How you found out my name confuses me.

"Indeed!" murmured the lady.
Doubtless you have the club list in your house. Do you know, when the letter was brought me I saw nothing unusual about the address. It was only when I began this letter that I comprehended how clever you were. There are half a dozen J. H.'s at the club. I tell you truthfully over my own name that your voice startled me.

I was startled because my thoughts were far away. I was dreaming of Italy, where I was born, though there is no more Italian blood in my veins than there is in yours.

"What made him think that, I wonder?"

I therefore write this in a language familiar to us both, certain you could not sing Loco's songs in Italian if you did not speak and understand it thoroughly. Signora or signorina, whichever it may be, have we no mutual friends? Are you not known to some one who knows me—some one who will speak for me, my character, my habits?

"It is rather a dull letter so far," said the lady.

You say you sang because at that moment you were happy. This implies that you are not always so. Surely with a voice like yours one cannot possibly be



She held up the card in triumph.

unhappy. If only I might meet you! Will you not do me that honor? Isn't there just a little pure, healthy romance waiting to be given life? Your voice haunts me. Out of every silence it comes to me—"She is so innocent, so youthful!" JOHN HILLIARD.

The letter fluttered into her lap. She leaned on her elbows. It was not a bad letter, and she rather liked the boyish tone of it. Nothing vulgar peered out from between the lines. Did he really love music? He must, for it was not every young man who could pick out the melody of an old, forgotten opera. Rather than tempt fate she decided not to answer this letter. It would be neither wise nor useful.

Romance! The word came back to her with an unmusical laugh she stood up, shaking the letter to the floor. Romance! She was no longer a girl. She was a woman of five and twenty, and what should a woman know of romance? Ah, there had been a time when all the world was romance—romance; when the night breeze had whispered it under her casement window, when the lattice climbing roses had breathed it, when the moon and the stars had spelled it. Romance! She hated the word not less than she hated the Italian language, the Italian people, the country itself. She spurned the letter with her foot and fed the newspaper to the fire.

She went downstairs to the piano and played with strong feeling. Presently she began to sing a haunting, melancholy song by Abt. She was mistress of every tone, every shade, every expression.

The door opened gradually. Crash! The music was over.

"Betina? Betina, are you listening?"

"I am always listening." Bettina squeezed into the room. "It is beautiful, beautiful! To sing like that! There will be kings and dukes at your feet!"

"Enough!"
"Pardon, signora, I forgot. But listen. I bring a message. A boy came to say that the rehearsal will be at 4

this afternoon. It is now after 12."
"So late? We must be off."
"And the letter upstairs on the floor?"
"Some day, Bettina, you will enter the forbidden chamber, and I shall have to play Bluebird. This time, however, I do not mind. Leave it there or burn it." Indifferently.
Betina knew her mistress. She thought best to leave the letter where it lay, forgotten for the time being.

(To be continued.)

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