



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 IV. BLINDFOLDED.

FOR two days the club steward only nodded when Hilliard came in. He had no letters to present.

"I am thirty-three years old," Hilliard mused as he sought the reading room. "Downtown I am looked upon as a man of affairs, a business man, with the care of half a dozen fortunes on my hands. Now, what's the matter with me? I begin to tremble when I look that sober old steward in the face. If he had handed me a letter tonight I should have had to lean against the wall for support. This will never do at all. I have not seen her face; I do not know her name. For all I know she may be this Leddy Lightfinger. No; that would be impossible. Leddy Lightfinger would have made an appointment. What possesses me to dwell in this realm of fancy, which is less tangible than a cloud of smoke?" He smoked thoughtfully.

"Or am I romantic? To create romance out of nothing—I used to do that when I was a boy. But I'm a boy no longer. Or am I a boy thirty-three years old? She does not answer my letter. Sensible woman. Well, well," reaching for the London Illustrated News, "let's see what the society folks have been doing."

He dropped the paper. There was really nothing new in the world. If Giovanni returned to Italy in the spring he was of a mind to go with him. He looked up and was glad to see Merrihew in the doorway.

"Been looking for you, Jack. Want your company tonight. Kitty Killigrew is giving a little bite to eat after the performance and has asked me to bring you along. Will you come?"

"With pleasure, Dan. Are you dining with any one tonight?" Hilliard was lonesome.

"Yes. A little bridge till 11."

"You're hopeless. I can see you in limbo, matching coffin plates with Charon. I'll hunt you up at 11."

"Heard the talk?"

"About what?"

"Why, some one in the club has been using the agony column. The J. H.'s are being geyed unmercifully, and you'll come in for it presently. It's a case of wine on the man who did it."

Hilliard felt of his collar and drew down his cuffs. "Probably some joke," he ventured tentatively.

"If it isn't the man who would stoop to such tommyrot and tack the name of his club to it must be an ass."

"No doubt about that. Odd that this is the first time I have heard about it." But silently Hilliard was swearing at his folly.

"I may depend upon you tonight, then?" said Merrihew.

"I shall be pleased to meet Miss Killigrew," which was a white one. Hilliard would have paid court to a laundress rather than offended Merrihew.

And promptly at 11 he went up to the card room and dragged Merrihew away. Merrihew gave up his chair reluctantly. He was winning. The amateur gambler never wants to stop.

On the way to the Killigrew apartment Merrihew's moods varied. At one moment he was on the heights, at the next in the depths. He simply could not live without Kitty. Perhaps if this trip abroad turned out badly she might change her mind. Seven thousand could be made to muster. Twice Hilliard came very near making his friend a confidant of his own affair, but he realized that, while Merrihew was to be trusted in all things, it was not yet time.

He found a pleasing and diverting company. There was Mere Killigrew, a quaint little old lady who deplored her daughter's occupation, but admitted that without her success heaven only knew how they would have got along. There was the genial Thomas O'Mally, a low comedian of genuine ability, whom Hilliard knew casually; Smith, a light comedian, and Worth, a moderately successful baritone, to whom Hilliard took one of those instant and unaccountable dislikes. These three and Kitty were going abroad.

Kitty fancied Hilliard from the start, and he on his side found her well educated, witty and unaffected. She was even prettier than her photograph. Merrihew's face beamed upon them both in a kind of benediction. He had known all along that once Jack saw Kitty he would become a good ally in fighting down her objections.

"Think of singing in Italy!" cried Kitty. "Isn't it just wonderful?"

"And has Merrihew told you to get a return ticket before you sail?" with half a jest.

"Don't you think it will be successful?" a shade of disappointment.

"There will be thousands of lonesome Americans over there. Out of patriotism, if for nothing else, they ought to come to see us."

"They certainly ought to. But I'm an old kill-joy."

"No, no; go on and tell me all your doubts. You have been over there so many times."

"Well, supposing your tourists are tired after having walked all day through the churches and galleries, they may want to go to bed early. But you never can tell till you try. You may become the rage on the continent. Yet you go into the enemy's country. It isn't the same as going to London, among tolerant cousins, in Italy."



She was prettier than her photograph.

Italy and in Germany there is always so much red tape—blundering, confusing red tape, custom duties, excessive charges. But your manager must know what he is doing."

"He has everything in black and white, I believe. But your advice is sensible."

"Do you know anything about Italy or Germany?"

"Only what I learned in my geographies," laughing—"Rome, Florence, Genoa, Venice, Nice, Milan, Strassburg, Cologne and on to Berlin. It is like a fairy story come true."

"Who is your prima donna?" he asked.

"Ah!" Kitty's face became eager with excitement. "Now you have put your finger on the mystery that is bothering us all. Not one of us has seen her or knows her name. She has not rehearsed with us and will not till we reach Naples, where we rest a week. When we speak of her the manager smiles and says nothing, and as none of us has seen the backer Mr. Worth thinks that she herself is the prima donna and backer in one. We think that she is some rich young woman who wishes to exploit her voice."

size, and the less said the better. As we can't walk back, I must learn to swim. Lunch is ready, every one!"

The mummies and the outsiders flocked into the small dining room. There was plenty to eat; beer, soda, whisky and two magnums of champagne. Merrihew's contribution to the feast. Hilliard listened with increasing amusement to the shop talk. It was after 1 when they returned to the sitting room, where the piano stood. The wine was now opened, and toasts were drunk. O'Mally told inimitable stories. There was something exceedingly droll in that expressive Irish face of his.

Worth did not drink, but Hilliard did not like his handsome face any the more for this virtue. He sang remarkably well, however, and with a willingness Hilliard had not believed he possessed. He wondered vaguely why he disliked the man. Otherwise Hilliard enjoyed himself vastly.

"Mr. Merrihew has been telling me all about you," said Kitty.

"You mean, of course, my good qualities," replied Hilliard.

"To hear him talk one would think that you possessed nothing else. But I am sure that you have glaring faults such as a man might pass over and a woman go round."

"I believed that Merrihew had a serious fault till tonight," he said.

She looked at him quickly and colored.

"Has the foolish boy been telling you that I refused to marry him? I like him very much," she added gravely, "but I shall never marry any man till I have ceased to love the stage. I am not a whit less extravagant than he is. How could the two of us live on an income which he himself admits that he cannot live without? A month after I am gone he will forget all about me."

"Merrihew is the most loyal man I know," Hilliard declared.

"Of course he is loyal! And he is always in earnest—for the moment."

And then they both laughed.

It was outrageously late, nearly 4, when the revelers took leave. Merrihew was happy with that evanescent happiness which goes hand in glove with late suppers and magnums.

"Isn't she a little wonder, Jack?"

"Yes, she is, Dan. It might be a good thing for you to marry a sensible little woman like that. But she won't have you."

"No, she won't," Merrihew reached for his watch. "Four a. m."

"Say, what do you think of that man Worth?"

"Very good voice, but he's too handsome."

"Oh, go on! You're as fine a looking chap as there is in New York. But this man Worth has the looks of a lady killer. He's been eying Kitty, but it doesn't go. Hang it, I can't see why she won't marry me now."

"You must have patience."

"Or more money. Can't O'Mally tell a good story, though?"

"Yes, but I should hate to turn him loose in my wine cellars. I imagine he will praise anything good to drink but water."

Merrihew roared.

"Well, here's your station, Dan. Shall I see you tomorrow?"

"Eight-thirty in the park. Nothing like a horse for a headache."

Hilliard arrived, home tired and sleepy, but as he saw a letter on the stand in the hall his drowsiness passed quickly. There was no other blue envelope like it. She now had his house address; she was interested enough to look it up. She did not follow his lead and write in Italian; she wrote in English—crisp English too. Again there was neither beginning nor ending. But this was a letter. There was something here of the woman, something to read and read again:

I had told the maid to burn your letter, but she left it on the floor where I had thrown it, and I came across it this morning. It looked rather pathetic. So I am writing you against my better judgment. Yes, I know your name. I find that I am well acquainted with people you know. I am a woman who often surrenders to the impulse of the moment. I may or may not answer any future letter from you. You write very good Italian, but it will surprise you to learn that I detest all things that are Italian. Once I loved them well. Why should you wish to know me? Our ways are as divergent as the two poles. Happy because I sing? There are some things over which we can sing or laugh, but of which we cannot speak without crying. Happy or unhappy, what can this matter to you? To you I shall always remain the lady in the fog. Are you rich, young, talented? I care not in the least. Perhaps it amuses me to add to your confusion. Find me? I think not. Misguided energy!

Hilliard put the letter away, extinguished the lights and passed up to his room. This was a direct challenge. He would accept it. This time he would use no personal to tell her that a letter awaited her. She should make the inquiries herself. And from the mail clerk he would obtain a description of the elusive Mme. Angot. Next morning he rode in the park with Merrihew. Again he saw the veiled lady on the Sandford black. Out of normal curiosity he telephoned the stables and made inquiries. The reply was short. No one at the stables knew the lady, but she rode the horse on proper authority.

I have no desire to alleviate your confessed boredom. Your persistence would be praiseworthy if well directed. Waters wear away stone, the wind crumbles the marble, but a woman is not moved till she wishes to be. I never thought that I should dabble in an intrigue of this sort, and I am surprised at the amusement it affords me. I really owe you some gratitude. The few I have met who know you tell me that you are a "nice young man."

Every man has some portion of self love. So his next effort was a passionate denial that he was "nice." When should he meet her? The postman brought him a letter which contained one word—Nimmer! He sent her four pages, a frank and witty description of himself and his friends.

On the day she received this letter a cablegram came to her from the far Mediterranean. Whatever it contained had the effect to cause all restraint to disappear from the tone of her letters. They became charming, and more and more Hilliard found himself loving a voice. All his watching, all his traps, came to no successful end. She was too clever for him. He sought the mail department of the great newspaper; the clerk couldn't remember, there were so many calling for mail. Letters passed to and fro dully now, but always she declared that it was impossible for them to meet. No, it was out of the question to dine with him in a restaurant. It was equally out of the question to cook a dinner where she lived, as she and her maid dined at a small restaurant near by. Finally he proposed to bring the dinner all cooked from the club. Two days went by without a sign; then the blue letter came.

I surrender. The most fatal thing in life is curiosity. It has the power to lead us into all manner of trouble. And I have my share of curiosity. Remember, you never would have found me. I may dwell in a garret; I may be hideous; perhaps nothing remains to me but my voice. And now the terms. And if you do not follow them conscientiously and blindly your dinner will grow cold in the carriage. Dinner will be at 8, Feb. 1. At 1 a carriage will call for you. The messenger will blindfold you. He will then proceed to the club and take the dinner and bring you here. Be warned! If you so much as lift the corner of the bandage, the romance will end then and there. I realize that I am doing something very foolish and unwise, but, as you say, I am a woman who has seen much of the world. Thus I have my worldly side. I shall use it as a buffer.

"Blindfolded!" Hilliard scrubbed his chin. All these precautions! Who was she? What was she? Since there was no escape, blindfolded he would go.

At half after 6 on the night of the 1st of February, then, he began to dress. It was some time since he had taken such particular care.

"The signor seems in high spirits tonight," observed Giovanni as he laid out the linen.

"Man, I'm happy and greatly excited. Do you recollect the lady who sang under my window? I am going to meet her tonight. The mystery will be a mystery no longer."

"Ah!" Giovanni stroked his lips doubtfully. "It is not like the signor to plunge blindly into adventures like this."

"The very word, blindly. I go blindfolded, amico. What do you think of that?"

"Blindfolded?" Giovanni was horrified. "It is a trap!" he cried. "They will assassinate you! No; you shall not go! In Rome, at the carnivals, it is an old game. They will rob you."

"Take the number of the cab as I get in. If anything should happen, give the number to the police."

Giovanni, with a sharp movement of the hands, expressed his resignation to the worst. He knew the futility of arguing with his master. But he followed him down to the hall and tied on the bandage himself. He was honest about it, too, for Hilliard could see nothing. Then the messenger boy took him by the hand and led him to the carriage. As the two were climbing in Giovanni spoke rapidly in his native tongue.

"There is no number on the carriage!"

"Too late to bother now."

The carriage rolled off toward the club, where the dinner, hot and smoking, was taken on.

(To be continued.)

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