



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.

III, IV, V, and VI—He visits the mysterious singer, but she wears a mask. He falls desperately in love with her, but he has not seen her face. The unknown woman gives her name as Mme. Angot, which is assumed. They have dinner. She refuses to see him again.

VII—Hilliard and Dan Merryhew decide to go to Italy. Merryhew loves Kitty Killigrew, a comic opera singer, who has gone to Italy. Hilliard receives a black mask in an envelope.

CHAPTER IX. A TANGLED SKIN.

SANFORD knew how to order a dinner, and so by the time that Merryhew had emptied his second glass of Burgundy and his first of champagne he was in the haze of golden confidence. He would find Kitty, and when he found her he would find her heart as well.

"Say, Jack," said Sanford, "what did you mean by that fool cable anyhow?"

Hilliard had been patiently waiting for an opening of this sort. "And what did you mean by hoaxing me?"

"Hoaxing you?"

"That's the word. I was in your house that night. I was there as surely as I am here tonight."

"Well, am I crazy or is it Jack?"

"Sometimes," said Mrs. Sanford, "when you put the chauffeur in the tonneau I'm inclined to think that it is you."

Hilliard looked straight into the placid gray eyes of his hostess. Very slowly one of the white lids drooped. His heart bounded.

"But really," continued Sanford seriously, "unless you bribed the caretaker you could not possibly have entered the house. You have been dreaming."

"Very, well, then. It begins to look as if I had." It was apparent to Hilliard that Sanford was not in his wife's confidence in all things. He also saw the wisdom of dropping the subject while at the table.

They took coffee and liqueur in the glass enclosed balcony. Hilliard found a quiet nook not far from the lift. He saw that Mrs. Sanford's chair was placed so that she could get a good view of the superb night. He sat down himself, sipped his liqueur meditatively, drank his coffee and as she nodded lighted a cigarette.

"Well?" she said, smiling into his brown eyes. She was rather fond of Hilliard, a gentleman always and one of excellent taste. There was never any wearisome innuendo in his wit nor suggestion in his stories.

"You deliberately winked at me," he began.

"I deliberately did."

"Sandford is in the dark. I suspect as much."

"Regarding the wink?"

"Regarding the mysterious woman who occupied your house by your express authority and who rode the hunter in the park?"

"Was there ever a more beautiful picture?" sweeping her hands toward the city.

"The beauty of it will last several hours yet. Who and what was she?"

"I wish I could find you a wife. You would make a good husband."

"Thank you. I am even willing, with your assistance, to prove it. Who was she, and how came she in your house?"

"She wished that favor and that her presence in New York should not be known. Now describe to me exactly

what happened. I am worrying about the plate and the silver."

He laughed. "And you will meet me halfway?"

"I promise to tell you all I dare."

"There is a mystery?"

"Yes. So begin with your side of it."

He was a capital story teller. He recounted the adventure in all its color—the voice under his window, the personals in the paper, the interchange of letters, the extraordinary dinner, the mask in the envelope. She followed him with breathless interest.

"Charming, charming!" She clasped her hands. "And how well you tell it! You have told it just as it happened."

"Just as it happened!" confounded for a moment.

"Exactly. I have had a letter—two, in fact. You did not see her face?"

"Only the chin and mouth. But if I ever meet her again I shall know her by her teeth."

"Heavens! And how?"

"Two lower ones are gone. Otherwise they would be beautiful."

"Poor man! You have builded your house upon the sands. Her teeth are perfect. She has fooled you."

"But I saw with these two eyes!"

"There is a preparation which theatrical people use—a kind of gum. She mentioned the trick. Isn't she clever?"

"Yet I shall know her hair," doggedly.

She put her hands swiftly to her head. "Now, you have known me for years. What is the color of my hair?"

"Why, it is blond."

"Nothing of the kind. It is auburn. If you cannot tell mine, how will you tell hers?"

"I shall probably run after every red headed woman in Europe till I find her," humorously.

"Our ears never deceive half so often as our eyes."

"Her face is not scarred, is it?"

"Scarred?" indignantly. "She is as beautiful as a Raphael, as lovely as a Bouguereau. If I were a man I should gladly journey round the world for the sight of her."

"I am willing, even anxious."

"I should fall in love with her."

"I believe I have."

"Come, Mr. Hilliard. I am just fooling. You are too sensible a man to fall in love with a shadow—a mask. One does not fall in love that way."

"She is married?"

"Certainly I have not said so." He flicked the ash from his cigarette.

"Have you those letters?"

"One of them I'll show you."

"Why not the other?"

"It would be wasting time. It merely relates to your adventure. She called the day after you dined with her."

"That accounts for the shutters. The police and the caretaker were bribed."

"I suspect they were."

"If I were a vain man, and you know I am not, I might ask you if she spoke well of me in this letter. Understand I am not inquiring."

"But you put the question as adroitly as a woman. We are sure of vanity always. Yes, she spoke of you. She found you to be an agreeable gentleman. But," with gentle malice, "she did not say that she wished she had met you years ago under more favorable circumstances."

"Come, give me the death stroke and have done with it. Tell me what you dare, and I'll be content with it."

She opened her handkerchief purse and delved among the various articles therein.

"I expected that you would be asking questions, so I am prepared. I did not tell my husband for that very reason. He would have insisted upon knowing everything. Here, read this. It is only a glimpse."

He searched eagerly for the signature.

"O Cara Mia—if only you knew how sorry I am to miss you! Why must you sell at once? Why did you come to my beautiful Venice? I had so much to say that cannot be written. You ask about the adventure. Puff good my little dream of a vacation. It was a thing of the past. The details put unloved of obstacles in our path. The countess was utterly disreputable. In the first place, we had not purchased our costumes and scenery in Italy."

"Costumes and scenery?" Hilliard caught the signature again.

The base of all the trouble was a clerk in the consulate at Naples. He wrote us that there would be no duties on costumes and scenery. Alas, the manager and his backers are on the way to America, sadder and wiser men! We surrendered our return tickets to the chorus and sent them home. The rest of us are stranded—is not that the word?—here in Venice, waiting for money from home. If I were alone, it would be highly amusing, but these poor people with me! There is only one way I can help them, but that—never! You recollect that my personal income is quarterly, and it will be two months before I shall have funds. There are persons moving heaven and earth to find me. My companions haven't the least idea who I am. So here we all are, wandering about the Piazza San Marco, calling at Cook's every day in hopes of money. I am staying with my maid in the Campo Santa Maria Formosa, near our beloved Santa Barbara. I have guaranteed the credit of my companions, and they believe that Venetians are generous people. Generous! Perhaps you will wonder how I dared appear on the stage in Italy. A black wig and a theatrical make-up—these were sufficient. A duke sent me an invitation to take supper with him, as if I were a ballerina! I sent one of the American chorus girls, a little mix for mischief. She ate his supper and then ran away. I understand that he was furious. Only a few months more, Nell, and then I may come and go as I please. Come to Venice."

Hilliard did not stir. Another labyrinth to this mystery! Capriciosa—Kitty Killigrew's unknown prima donna, and all he had to do was to take the morning train for Venice, and twenty-four hours later he would be prowling through the Campo Santa Maria Formosa.

Mrs. Sanford observed him curiously, even sadly. Why couldn't his fancy have been charmed by an every-day, sensible girl and not by this whimsical, extraordinary woman who fooled diplomats, faunted dukes and kept a king at arm's length as a pastime? And yet—

"Capriciosa," he mused aloud. "That is not her name."

"And I shall not tell it you."

"But her given name? Just a straw, something to hold on. I'm a drowning man."

"It is Hilda."

"That is German."

"She prefers it to Sonia."

"Sonia Hilda. It begins well. May I keep this letter?"

"Certainly not. With that cara mia? Give it to me."

He did so. "Shall I seek her?"

"This is my advice—don't think of her after tonight. If you ever see or recognize her, avoid her. It may sound theatrical, but she is the innocent cause of two deaths. These men sought her openly too."

"What has she done?"

"She made a great though common mistake."

"Political?"

"Don't be foolish. I am sorry I let you see the letter. I forgot that she told me her hiding place."

"Her hiding place?"

"Mr. Hilliard, she is as far removed from your orbit as Mars is from Jupiter's. Forget her."

"My orbit is not limited. I shall seek her. When I find her I shall marry her."

"I like you too much, Mr. Hilliard, to stand by and see you break your heart

against a stone wall."

"Don't you see, the deeper the mystery is the more powerful the attraction becomes?"

The door to the lift opened and closed noisily, and Hilliard turned negligently. A man sauntered through the room. The moment he came into the light Hilliard's interest became lively enough. It was the handsome Italian with the scar.

"Who is that man?" he whispered. "Only a few weeks ago I bumped into him on coming out of the club."

"Do not attract his attention," she answered.

"Who is he?" he repeated.

"A Venetian officer and a profligate. I entertained him once, but I learned from him that I had been ill advised."

Hilliard saw that this subject would admit of no further questions. The man with the scar had committed some inexcusable offense, and Mrs. Sanford had crossed him off the list.

It was after 10 when Hilliard and his friend took their leave.

"We shall leave in the morning for Venice," said Hilliard.

"Venice? How about Rome and Florence?"

"Which would you prefer, Rome and the antiquities or Venice and—Kitty Killigrew?"

"Kitty in Venice? Are you sure?"

"She is there with La Signorina Capriciosa. Oh, this is a fine world, after all, and I was wrong to speak ill of it this morning."

"If Kitty's in Venice I'm an ungrateful beggar too. But I do not see why Kitty's being in Venice excites you."

"No? Well, fate writes that Kitty's mysterious prima donna and my lady of the mask are one and the same person."

"No?"

The two without further words marched along the middle of the Corso to the hotel. The concierge started toward them, but suddenly reconsidered and retreated to his box of an office. The strangeness of his movements passed unnoticed by the two men, who continued on through the lobby into the first corridor. Hilliard inserted his key in the door of his room and swung it inward. He paused on the threshold with good cause.

Two dignified carabinieri rose quickly and approached Hilliard. There was something in the flashing eyes and set jaws that made him realize that the safest thing for him to do at that moment was to stand perfectly still.

(To be continued.)

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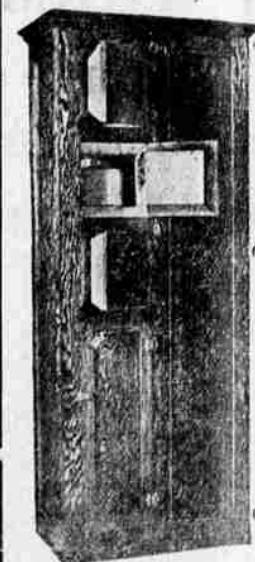
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