

The Lure of the Mask

By HAROLD MAC GRATH

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(CONTINUED FROM LAST WEEK)

CHAPTER VI INTO THE FOG AGAIN.

PRESENTLY she spoke, still playing softly.

"My father was an American, my mother Italian. But I have lived in Europe nearly all my life. There! You have more of my history than I intended telling you." The music went dreamily.

"I knew it! Who but an American woman would have the courage to do what you are doing tonight? Who but one of mine own countrywomen would trust me so wholly and accept me so frankly for what I am—an American gentleman?"

"Softly" she warned. "You will dig a pit for your vanity."

"No. I am an American gentleman, and I am proud of it, though this statement in your ears may have a school-boy ring."

"A nobility in this country? Impossible!"

"Not the kind you find in the Almanach de Gotha. I speak of the nobility of the heart and the mind." He was very much in earnest now.

"Indeed!" The music stopped, and

she turned. She regarded his earnestness with favor. He continued:

"I have traveled much. I have found noblemen everywhere, in all climes, and also I have found beasts. Oh, I confess that my country is not wholly free from the beast! But the beast here is a beast—shunned, discredited, outcast. On the other side, if he be mentioned in the Almanach, they give him sashes and decorations. And they credit us with being money mad! It is not true."

"But, if you are not money mad, why these great fortunes?" she queried.

"At a certain age a fortune in this country doubles itself without any effort on the part of the owner. Few of us marry for money, and when we do we at least have the manhood to keep the letter of our bargain."

"And when you marry?" she queried.

"Well, it is generally the woman we love. Dowries are not considered. There is no social law which forbids a dowryless girl to marry a dowryless man," laughing. "But over there it is always and eternally a business contract simply. You know that."

"Yes, a business contract," listlessly.

"But they talk of nobility on the other side. That is it; they talk, talk—Italy, France, Germany! Why, I had rather be the son of an English farmer than a prince on the continent. And I had rather be what I am than the greatest nobleman in England."

"Go on, go on! I like it. What do you call it—Jingo?" she laughed.

"Call it what you will. Look at the men we produce. Three or four hundred years ago Europe gave us great poets, great artists, great soldiers, great churchmen and great rascals. I admire a great rascal when he is a Napoleon, a Talleyrand, a Machiavelli. But a petty one! We have no art, no music, no antiquity, but we have a race of gentlemen. The old country is not breeding them nowadays."

"Signora, dinner is served," the maid announced.

"Signora!" thought Hillard.

"After you, Mr. Hillard," she said.

He bowed and passed on before her, but not till he had passed did he understand the maneuver. To follow her would have been nothing less than the temptation to pluck at the strings of her mask. Would he have touched it? He could not say.

That dinner! Was he in New York? Was it not Bagdad, the bottle and the genii? Had he ever, even in his most romantic dreams, expected to turn a page so charming, so enchanting or so dangerous to his peace of mind, a game of magical hide and seek?

And she? A whim, a fantastic, unaccountable whim—the whim of a woman seeking forgetfulness, not counting the cost nor caring, simply a whim.

On the little table was a Tuscan brass lamp of three wicks, fed by olive oil. It was sufficient to light the table, but the rest of the room was sunk in darkness. He half understood that there was a definite purpose in this semi-illumination. She had no wish that he should by chance recognize anything familiar in this house.

"May I ask you one question?" he asked.

"No," promptly. There was something in his eyes that made her grow wary of a sudden.

"Then I shan't ask it. I shall not ask you if you are married."

"And I shall not say one way or the other."

She smiled, and he laughed quietly.

A running conversation; a fencing match with words and phrases; time after time she touched him, but with all his skill he could not break through her guard.

"And that interesting dissertation on the American gentleman?" she said kelly.

"That's the trouble with posing as a moralist. One must live up to the

"Come, that is not brave. You can retreat till your shoulders touch the mat, but I must stand this side of the line, unable to reach you. And you have the advantage of the mask besides. You are not a fair fencer."

"The odds should be in my favor. I am a woman. My wrist is not so strong as yours."

"Physically, of course, I may pass the line, to reach the salt, for instance. Will that be against the rules? You have put temptation in my path."

"Bid Satan get behind thee."

"I wish I knew the color of your eyes. Behind those holes I see nothing but points of fire, no color."

"They are blue. But supposing I wear this mask because my face is dreadfully scarred?"

"Vanity, yes; but scars, never. At least never so deep as you yourself can make. You wear that mask but out of mercy to me."

Once she rose and approached the window, slyly raising the mask and breathing deeply of the cold air which rushed in through the crevices. When she turned she found that he, too, had risen. He was looking at the steins, one of which he held in his hand. Moreover, he returned and set the stein down beside his plate.

"Tell me, why do you do that?"

There was an anxious note in her voice.

"I have an idea. But let us proceed with the dinner. This said—"

"I am more interested in the idea." She pushed aside the salad and took a sip of the ruby burgundy. Had he discovered something?

"May I smoke?" he asked.

"By all means."

He lighted a cigarette and put the case near the line.

"Do you enjoy a cigarette?"

"Sometimes," she answered. "But the idea—"

"Will you not have one?" He moved the case still nearer to the line.

She reached out a firm round white arm.

"One moment," he said. "Let us understand each other thoroughly."

"What do you mean?" her arm poised in midair.

"To touch a cigarette you must cross the line to this side."

She withdrew her arm slowly.

"I shall not smoke. If I crossed the line I should establish a dangerous precedent. And I must have that idea."

"The mirror over the piano confused me. I have seen it somewhere before. Then there is that old copy of Botticelli. The frame is familiar, but I could not place it. This stein, however!" He laughed. The laughter was boyish, even triumphant.

"Well, that stein?" She was now leaning across the table, her fingers tense on the cloth.

"I bought that stein two seasons ago. This is the Sandford's place, and you are the veiled lady who has been riding Mrs. Sandford's favorite hunter in the park."

They stood up simultaneously. In a matter of this sort he was by far the quicker. In an instant he had caught her by the wrist, at the same time drawing her irresistibly round the table toward him.

"I must kiss your face. I shall never be at peace if I do not."

"Certainly you will never know any peace if you do. Be careful."

His free hand stole toward the strings of her mask. She moved not. His face was very close to hers now. If only she would struggle! He released her wrist.

"No; I haven't the courage. If I take that mask from your face it will be the end. And I do not want this ever to end. If you will not let me see your face of your own free will, so be it. I shall see it some day, mark me. Fate does not cross two paths in this manner without a purpose." He stepped back slowly. "You do not understand the lure of that mask."

"Perhaps I do. I am beginning to admire your self control, Mr. Hillard. But I am tired now, and I must ask you to go."

"Once more, will you let me see your face?"

"No. If, as you say, fate intends for us to meet again you will see it. But I have my doubts. So it is my will to pass out of your life as completely as though I had never entered it—from one fog into another. No, I am not a happy woman. I am not happy in my friendships. Listen to me," and her voice grew low and sweet. "Let me appeal to your imagination. This light adventure shall be a souvenir for your old age. One night romance stepped into your life and out of it. Think! There will always be the same charm, the same mystery, the same enchantment. I shall always be Cinderella or the sleeping beauty or what your fancy wills. Do you understand me?"

"Nothing," she proceeded, "nothing lasts so long in the recollection as a pleasant mystery—in other days, in other times. Well, on my side I shall recall this night pleasantly. Without knowing it you have given me a new foothold in life. I did not believe that there lived a single man who could keep to the letter of his bargain. Good night! And do not lean out of any more windows," she added lightly.

"You are right," he said reluctantly, "something to dream over in my old age. And certainly I shall dream of it—a flash of sunlight in the window."

Then slowly he reached down toward her wingglass. She understood his purpose and essayed to stop him.

"Do not deny me this little thing," he said.

She let her hand fall. He took the glass, held it against the light to see where her lips had touched it. Carefully he poured out the wine from the opposite side and kissed the rim.

"I shall keep this glass. I must have some visible object to make sure that this hasn't been a dream."

"You may kiss my hand, Mr. Hillard."

He bent quickly and kissed not the hand, but the wrist where the marks of his fingers still remained faintly. He squared himself and gazed long and steadfastly into her eyes. There was a flutter in her heart that she was unable to define. On his part he realized the sooner he was gone the better. There was a limit to his self control. He gained the street somehow. There he stopped and turned. Did the curtain move? He wasn't sure, but he raised his hat, settled it firmly on his head and walked rapidly away.

There was little sleep for him that night, and in the morning the first thing he did was to pick up the wingglass. It was all true. And then his good resolutions melted and vanished. He must have one more word with her, happen what might. So at 10 o'clock he called a cab and drove rapidly to the Sandford place. Snow had fallen during the night, and many of the steps were still spotless white. Impossible! He leaned from the cab and rubbed his eyes. Absolutely impossible! For what did he see? Wooden shutters over all the lower windows and the iron gates closed before the doors! And not a footprint anywhere. This was extraordinary. He jumped from the cab, ran up the steps and rang the bell—rang it ten times with minute intervals. And no one answered. Then he heard a call from



"Be careful!"

across the street. A man stood in one of the areaways.

"Nobody home!" he shouted. "Gone to Egypt."

"But there was some one here last night," Hillard shouted back.

"Dreaming. That house has been empty since November. I happen to be the caretaker."

Hillard went back to his cab dazed. No one there last night? Come, come; there was a mistake somewhere. He would soon find out whether or not he had dined there the night before.

"A cable office!" he cried to the cabbie. "Hurry!"

Once there he telephoned downtown and secured Sandford's cable address. Then he filled out a blank, which cost him \$10. Late that night at the club he received his reply. It was terse—

You are crazy. House absolutely empty.

SANDFORD.

(TO BE CONTINUED)

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TIME TABLE

Effective Sunday, Sept. 12, trains will arrive and depart at Hood River, Oregon, on the following schedule:

WEST BOUND

No. 5. Oregon & Washington Limited	5:50 A. M.
No. 9. Portland Express	6:00 "
No. 3. Soo-Spokane-Portland	6:45 "
No. 11. Pacific Express	8:20 P. M.
No. 7. Portland Special	8:45 "

Train No. 11 makes all stops between Hood River and Portland.

Train No. 9 will stop only at Wyeth, Cascade Locks, Bonneville, Bridal Veil, Troutdale, Fairview, Columbia Beach, Latourelle and Corbett.

Trains No. 3, No. 5 and No. 7 will make no stops between Hood River and Portland.

EAST BOUND

No. 12. Atlantic Express	10:25 A. M.
No. 8. Chicago Special	11:55 "
No. 6. Oregon & Washington Limited	8:55 P. M.
No. 4. Soo-Spokane-Portland	9:00 "
No. 10. Salt Lake Express	10:25 "

No. 12 stops at all stations east of Hood River. No. 10 stops at Mosier, The Dalles, Celilo, Deschutes, Rufus, Arlington, Umatilla, Hermiston, Stanfield, Echo and other way stations.

No. 6 and No. 8 stop only at The Dalles, Umatilla, Pendleton, Gibbon, LaGrande and Baker City. No. 8 will only handle passengers for Nampa, Idaho, and points east thereof.

Passengers for local points east of Hood River must take train No. 12 or train No. 10 to points at which they stop.

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She deliberately drew a line across the center of the table.

precepts. Would you believe me if I told you that at the age of three and thirty I am still heart whole?"

She parried, "I trust you will not spoil that excellent record by making love to me." She reached for the matches, touched off one, watched it burn for a moment, extinguished it and then deliberately drew a line across the center of the tablecloth.

"Now, what might that represent?" he asked curiously.

"A line, Mr. Hillard. The moment you cross that line that moment you leave this house. On guard!"