

# The Lure of the Mask

By HAROLD MAC GRATH

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(CONTINUED FROM LAST WEEK)

### CHAPTER VII

#### THE TOSS OF A COIN.

HILLARD made an inexorably careless shot. He grounded his cue and stood back from the table. That was the way everything seemed to go—at tennis, at squash, at fencing, at billiards, it was all the same.

"I say, Jack, what's the matter with you anyhow?" asked Merrihew, out of patience.

"It was bad," Hillard agreed. "Perhaps I am not taking the interest in the game that I formerly took."

"And when I make a proposition," pursued Merrihew, "to ride to the Catskills and back, something you would have jumped at a year ago, you shake your head. Think of it! By George, you had a bully time last year! You swore it was the best trip we ever took on the horses. Where's your spirit of adventure?"

"I'm sure I don't know where it is. Shall we finish the game?"

"Not if you're going to throw it like this," declared Merrihew.

"Ten and a string against your half a string," said Hillard, studying the score. "I'll bet a bottle that I beat you."

"Done!" said Merrihew. Being on his little, he made a clean score of twenty-five to go. "I can see you paying for that check, Jack."

But the odds thinned Hillard's blood. He settled down to a brilliant play and turned sixty-one in beautiful form.

Later the two passed upstairs to the secluded alcove. Merrihew filled the glasses with the air of one who would like to pass the remainder of his days doing the same thing—not that he was overfond, but each bottle temporarily weeded out that crop of imperishable debts. To him the world grew roseate and kindly viewed through the press of the sparkling grape, and invariably he saw fortune beckoning to the card tables.

"Now, then, Jack, I've got you where I want you. Who is she?"

"On my word, I don't know."

"Then there is a woman!" cried Merrihew. "I know it. Nothing else would so demoralize you. Drink a health to her."

Hillard raised his glass and touched that of his comrade. For the peace of his mind he determined to tell Merrihew the whole adventure.

"To the lady in the fog?" he said.

"Fog?" blankly.

"Well, the lady in the mask."

"Fog, mask? Two of them?"

"No, only one. Once I met her in the fog, and then I met her in the mask."

"I'll drink to her, but I'm hanged if I don't believe you're kidding me," said Merrihew disappointedly. "This is New York."

"The whole story, Jack, details and all; no half portions."

Hillard told the yarn simply, omitting nothing essential. He even added that for three weeks he had been the author of the personal inquiry as to the whereabouts of one Mme. Angot.

"I don't know, Dan, but this has taken so strong a hold on me that I shan't forget it soon. Imagine it yourself. Oh, but she could sing! I am a man not to be held in the leash of an adventure like this, but she held me. How? By the hope that one day I might see her face with no veil of mystery to hold her off at arm's length."

Merrihew was greatly excited. He was for ordering a second bottle, but Hillard stayed him.

"By George! And you are sure that it was at the Sandfords'?"

"I am positive. But there is a puzzle that I have failed to solve—Sandford's cable and the caretaker's declaration. I know that I was in that house. The patrolman says that he has seen no light in the house since the family sailed for Africa. It is no dream, but it begins to look as if I were the victim of some fine hoax."

"It is more than a hoax. In my opinion, wait till Sandford returns and finds his silver gone."

Hillard started.

"And his gold plate," continued Merrihew, pleased with the idea. "My boy, that's what it is—the best dodge I ever heard of. It will make a good story for the Sunday papers. You won't be in it unless she ropes you in as an accomplice."

"I'm a romantic ass!" Hillard sighed. "Laddy Lightfinger! If this turned out to be the case he would never trust a human being again."

"Let's take that ride on the horses," Merrihew urged. "That'll clear your brain of this sentimental fog."

"No!" Hillard struck his hands together. "I've a better idea than that. I shall go to Italy, and you shall go with me."

"Impossible. Why, I'm all but broke."

"I'll take you as a companion. I'm a sick man, Dan. I'm likely to jump overboard if some one isn't watching me every minute."

"I'd like to go, Jack. Heaven and earth, but I should! But I can't possibly go to Italy with a letter of credit no more than twenty-five hundred, and that's all there is in the exchequer at present."

"Between such friends as we are"—

"That racket won't work. I could not take a moment's peace if I did not feel independent."

"But I'm not going to give it to you," Hillard protested. "I am going to lend it to you."

"And could I ever pay you back if I accepted the loan?" humorously.

"There's Monte Carlo. You might pull down a tidy sum," said the tempter.

"That's the way, you beggar. Hit me on the soft side." But Merrihew was still obdurate.

"Now, listen to reason, Dan. If you wait for the opportunity to go to Europe you'll wait in vain. You must make the opportunity. One must have youth to enjoy Italy thoroughly. The desire to go becomes less and less as one grows older. Besides, it completes every man's education. I'll put the

to a people who can't understand a word she's singing."

"Can it be done for twenty-five hundred?"

Merrihew chewed his cigar with subdued fierceness. He knew very well that he was destined to go to Europe. Kitty Killigrew, who had promised to mail the route they were to play and had!

"It is written, Dan, that you shall go with me."

"We'll settle this argument right here now," Merrihew drew out a coin. "Call it," he cried recklessly.

"Heads!"

The coin flickered in the light, fell and proved that all money is perverse by rolling under the davenport upon which they were sitting. An amusing hunt followed. They ran their hands over the floor, turned the rug, pulled out the davenport and looked behind, burned innumerable matches and finally rang for the attendant. The situation was explained, and he procured a candle. He was ultimately successful.

"Here it is, sir."

"What is it, head or tail?" asked Merrihew weakly.

"Head, sir," said the attendant.

"Keep it," said Merrihew generously, even sadly. He never got up a game of chance that he did not get the worst of it. And now, Italy! All that way from home! "Boy, bring up a bottle of '96."

"And the lady in the mask?" asked Merrihew as they at length stood up.

"I must relegate her to the fog she came out of. But it would be a frightful thing if—if— He hesitated to form the words.

But Merrihew had no such scruple. "If the silver and plate were missing when the Sandfords return?"

"Oh, bosh! It's all some joke, and I'm the butt of it. She was in that house by the same authority she rode the horse."

"A woman of that sort would have no difficulty in hoodwinking the stablemen," declared Merrihew.

"By the way," he continued, "received a postal from Kitty this morning from Gibraltar. Fine trip. Visited the gun galleries and the antique furniture shops. Says no sign of prima donna as yet, but believes her to be on board. O'Mally's on the water wagon. But Kitty aggravates me."

"What has she done now, refused you by marconigraph?"

"No, but she promised me her address."

"Address her care Cook's, Florence, Rome, Venice. It's the popular mail box of Europe, and if she has given them the address they will forward."

"That helps considerably. I'm glad there's one Cook which can be relied on."

"In the morning I'll arrange for passage. We'll try the Celtic."

"I'll leave the business end of the trip to you."

"The first Saturday in March, then, if we can get booking. That will be in less than two weeks."

In the lobby of the club as they were about to enter the coat room Hillard ran into one of several gentlemen issuing.

"Pardon me," he said, stepping aside. "Non importa," said the stranger, with a graceful wave of the hands.

Hillard looked quickly into the gentleman's face. "I am clumsy," he said in Italian.

Then the other stared at him and smiled. For a moment there was a brief tableau, in which each took the other's measure and noted the color of the eyes. The man was an exceedingly handsome Italian, for all that a scar ran from his cheek to his chin. It was all over in a moment, and Hillard and Merrihew proceeded to the street.

"Handsome duffer," was Merrihew's comment. "But you never can tell a man by his looks. Gaze on me, for instance."

"Go home!" Hillard slapped him jovially on the shoulder.

"Home! Ah, yes! But shall I have a home to go to when I get back? You have roped me in nicely. My poor little twenty-five hundred! But Swiss champagne at \$1.40 the quart! Well, every cloud has its lining."

As Hillard never received any answer to his personal, he discontinued it. Truly, she had returned to the fog out of which she had come. But it was no less difficult for him to take up the daily affairs again. What mystery veiled her? Whither had she gone?

Giovanni was delighted when he heard the news. He would go, too, and act as valet to the signor and his friend till they put out for Rome. Then, of course, he would be obliged to leave them. Occasionally Hillard would reason with him regarding his deadly projects. But when a Latin declares that he has seen through blood, persuasions, arguments, entreaties, threats do not prevail. He comforted himself with the opinion, however, that Giovanni's hunt would come to no successful end.

"You will surely fall into the hands of the police."

"What God wills comes true. But by this time they will have forgotten me."

"But your man might be dead."

"He is not dead. If he were something would tell me."

"It is a bad business, and I wish you no luck."

Giovanni smiled easily. Wishes seldom interfere with any one.

"I will double your wages," said Hillard, "if you will go where I go and return with me when I come back to America."

A deprecating movement. "Money? It is nothing. I am rich after my kind."

"Are you still in the church?"

"I confess regularly once a week. Oh, I am a good Catholic."

"Take yourself off. I am displeased with you."

It was a drizzling, foggy morning

when they drove down to the boat. But the atmospheric effects made no impression on the volatile Merrihew. And he had an eye for all things, from the baskets of fruit and flowers, messengers with late orders from the stores, repeated farewells, to the squalling babies in the steerage.

At 4 o'clock they were on the high seas, heading for the Azores. Hillard was dreaming, and Merrihew was studiously employed over a booklet on how to speak Italian in one day. Giovanni, who had been arranging the luggage, came up on deck. He had two packets of letters and telegrams. One he gave to Merrihew and the other to his master.

Hillard found among his a bulky envelope postmarked Naples, Naples!



A crumpled black silk mask. He sat up. It had been addressed to the house and the address typewritten. "Look at this!" he cried.

"Good Lord!" Dan gasped, his feet coming down to the deck.

Hillard was holding up for his inspection a crumpled black silk mask.

(TO BE CONTINUED)

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Effective Sunday, Sept. 13, 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. 3. Portland Express	6:00 "
No. 4. Soo-Spokane-Portland	6:45 "
No. 11. Pacific Express	3:20 P. M.
No. 7. Portland Special	5:45 "

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 River, Latouneville 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	11:25 "
No. 6. Oregon & Washington Limited	8:35 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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A scar ran from his cheek to his chin, proposition in a way you can't possibly get round. You will always have that thousand, so don't worry about that. You have twenty-five hundred on hand, you say. With that you can see Italy like a prince for three months."

"What's the proposition?" Merrihew drained the bottle.

"This—I'll agree to take not a penny more than twenty-five hundred myself. We'll go on equal terms. Why," confidently, "besides living like a prince you'll have four hundred to throw away at roulette. Boy, you have never seen Italy; therefore you do not know what beauty is. When we eventually land at Bellagio, on Lake Como, and I take your lily white hand in mine and lead you up to the terrace of Villa Serbelloni and order tea, then you will realize that you have only begun to live—gardens, towering Alps, the green Lecco on one side and the green Como on the other and Swiss champagne at \$1.40 the quart! Eh?"

"And then," Hillard added, "there's Kitty Killigrew singing her heart out