

# The Lure of the Mask

By HAROLD MAC GRATH

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(CONTINUED FROM LAST WEEK)

## CHAPTER XIII. MANY NAPOLEONS.

MERRIHEW sighed with perfect content. The pretty woman sitting opposite smiled at him tenderly, and he smiled back abstractedly, as a man sometimes will when his mind tries to gather in comprehensively a thought and a picture which are totally different. Before him in neat little lustrous stacks stood 7,000 francs in gold, 350 effigies of "Napoleon the Little"—7,000 francs, \$1,400, more than half the sum of his letter of credit!

He counted off ten coins and placed them on the second dozen. The ball rolled into No. 23. He leaned back again with a second sigh, and the pretty woman smiled a second smile, and the wooden rake pushed the beautiful gold over to him. He was playing a system, one bet in every three turns of the wheel in stakes of \$40 and \$80. To be sure, he lost now and then, but the next play he doubled and retrieved. Oh, the American Comic Opera company should be well taken care of! Two more bets and then he would pocket his winnings and go. He laid 40 francs on No. 20 and 400 on black, leaned upon his elbows and studied the pretty woman, who smiled. If she spoke English—he scribbled the question on a scrap of paper and pushed it across the table, blushing a little as he did so. She read it, or at least she tried to read it, and shook her head with the air of one deeply puzzled. He sighed again, reflecting that there might have been a pleasant adventure had he only understood French!

Twenty-six, black and even! Merrihew slid back his chair and rose. He swept up the gold by the handful and poured it into his pockets, casually and unconcernedly, as if this was an everyday affair and of minor importance. But as a matter of fact his heart was beating fast, and there was a wild desire in his throat to yell with delight. Eighteen hundred dollars, 9,000 francs! A merry music they made in his pockets—jingle, jingle, jingle! And then he saw Hilliard coming across the hall. Instantly he forced the joy from his face and eyes and dropped his chin in his collar. He became in that moment the picture of desolation.

"Is it all over?" asked Hilliard gravely.

"All over!" monotonously.

"Come over to the cafe, then. I've something important to tell you."

"Found them?" with rousing interest.

"I shall tell you only when we get out of this place. Come."

Hilliard put out a friendly hand.

"I am sorry, boy. I wanted you to win something. Cheer up! We'll shake the dust of this place in the morning."

"Oh, for a vacant lot and a good old whooper-up! Feel!" cried Merrihew, touching his side pockets.

"What is it?" asked Hilliard.

"What is it? It is 450 napoleons!"

"What?" sharply, even doubtfully.

"That's what! Eighteen hundred dollars! My system will have no funeral tonight!"

He caught Hilliard by the sleeve and fairly ran him over to the cafe.

"Nearly two thousand!" murmured Hilliard. "Well, of all the luck!"

"It does seem too good to be true. I say, what's the matter with your cravat?"

Hilliard looked down at the fluttering end and reknotted it carelessly.

"I saw Kitty tonight," he said.

To Merrihew it seemed that all the clatter about him had died away suddenly. He breathed deeply. "Where is she?"

"I'll explain what has happened."

Merrihew listened eagerly.

"And why did you bother about the Italian?" he interrupted. "Why didn't you hold on to Kitty?"

"I confess it was stupid of me, but the gentleman with the scar was an unknown quantity. Besides, why should Kitty run away from me of all persons? And why, when I spoke to them in the casino, did they ignore me completely?"

"It's your confounded prima donna. She's at the bottom of all this, take

my word for it. Something's desperately wrong. Persons do not wear masks and hide in this manner just for a lark. Why didn't you knock him down?"

"I wanted to, but it wasn't the psychological moment. You can't knock a man down when he practically surrenders."

"You're too particular. But what's the matter with Kitty? I don't understand. To see you was to know that I was round somewhere. She ran away from me as well as from you. What shall we do?"

"Start the hunt again or give it up entirely. There are some villages between here and Nice. It must be in that direction. They were about to board the car for Nice. If you hadn't been gambling, if you had been sensible and stayed with me—"

"Come, now, that won't wash. You know very well that you urged me to play."

"You would have played without any urging."

"And who is this Italian anyhow?" asked Merrihew. "And why did he run after your prima donna?"

"That is precisely what I wish to find out," answered Hilliard.

"I'm afraid that Kitty has fallen among a bad lot. I'll wager it is

one. But on my side they will tell you that I have been terribly wronged. And all I wish is to be left alone, alone. It was cruel of me to forbid you to speak to Mr. Hilliard. But I wish him to recollect me pleasantly, as a whimsical being who came into his life one night and vanished out of it in two hours."

"But supposing the memory cuts deeply," ventured Kitty. "Men fall in love with less excuse than this."

"Nonsense!" La Signorina opened the window to air the room. She lingered, musing. "You are very good to me, Kitty."

"I can't help being good to you, you strange, lovely woman, for your sake as well as for mine. Now I am going to write a letter."

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"You will be wasting time. After what happened last night I am certain they will be gone. Let us respect their plans, hard as it may seem to you."

"But you?"

"Oh, don't bother about me. I have relegated my little romance to the garret of no account things, at least for the present," said Hilliard, with an enigmatical smile. "Make up your mind—we have only twenty minutes."

"Oh, divine affatus! And you lay down the chase so readily as this!" Merrihew was scornfully indignant.

"I would travel the breadth of the continent were I sure of meeting this woman. But she has become a will-o'-the-wisp, and I am too old and like comfort too well to pursue impossibilities."

"But why did she leave you that mask?" demanded Merrihew. "She must have meant something by that."

"True, but for the life of me I can't figure out what."

"But I don't like the idea of leaving Kitty this way without a final effort to rescue her from the clutches of this fascinating adventuress."

"I admit nothing, my boy, save that the keenness of the chase is gone. As for Kitty, she's a worldly little woman and can take good care of herself. Her letter should be sufficient."

"But it isn't. A woman's 'don't' often means 'do.' If Kitty really expects me to search for her and I do not she will never believe in me again."

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"Safe! I am so tired. What a night!" the elder of the two women sighed.

"What a night truly! I should like to know what it has all been about, to run through dark streets and alleys, to hide for hours, as if I were a thief or a fugitive from justice, is neither to my taste nor to my liking."

"Kitty," she began sadly, "in this world no one trusts us wholly. We must know why. Loyalty must have reasons; chivalry must have facts. You have vowed your love and loyalty a hundred times, and still when a great crisis confronts me you question, you grow angry, you complain, because my reasons are unknown to you. It was blind terror which made me run. I counted not the consequences. I shall tell you why I am lonely, why the world, bright to you, is dark. I am proud, but I shall bend my pride."

With a quick movement she lifted her head high, and her eyes burned into Kitty's very heart. "I am!"

"Stop! No, no! I forbid you!" Kitty put her hands over her ears. She might gain the secret, but she knew that she would lose the heart of the woman it concerned. "I am wrong, wrong. I have promised to follow you loyally, without question. I will keep that promise. I am only angry because you would not let me speak to Mr. Hilliard. He is very handsome." Kitty added thoughtfully. "He is strong too."

"Strong and cruel as a tiger. How I hate him! But thank you, Kitty; thank you. Sooner or later, if we stay together, I must tell you. The confidence will do me good." Kitty approached, and La Signorina drew her close. "I have wrought harm to no

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some anarchist business. They are always plotting the assassination of kings over here, and this mysterious woman is just the sort to rope in a confiding girl like Kitty. One thing, if I come across our friend with the scar—

"You will wisely cross to the opposite side of the street. To find out what this tangle is it is not necessary to jump head first into it."

"A bad lot."

"That may be, but no anarchists, my boy."

Hilliard was a bit sore at heart. That phrase recurred and recurred: "A lady? Grace of Mary, that is droll!"

The shadow of disillusion crept into his bright dream and clouded it—to build so beautiful a castle and to see it tumble at a word! The Italian had spoken with a contempt based on more than suspicion.

"Kitty doesn't wish to meet us," Merrihew bitterly observed. So we'll light out for Venice in the morning. I'm not going to be made a fool of for the best woman alive."

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