

The Lure of the Mask

By HAROLD MAC GRATH

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(CONTINUED FROM LAST WEEK)

CHAPTER XVIII.
MEASURE FOR MEASURE.

SILENCE invested the Villa Ariadne, yet a warm and mellow light illumined many a window or marked short pathways on the blackness of the lawn. A solitary saddle horse rattled his bit, pawed restively and tossed his head worriedly from side to side, as if presence had touched him with foretelling.

On the other side of the wall, lurking in the dark niches, was a tall, lean, gray haired old man, who watched and listened and waited. He was watching and listening and waiting for the horse. Seven years! It was a long time. He had not hunted for this man. He was breaking no promise. Their paths had recrossed. It was destiny.

The leaving of the guests had been hurried and noisy. In truth, it resembled a disorderly retreat more than anything else. The denouement was evidently sufficient. They had no desire to witness the anticlimax, however interesting and instructive it might be. His highness the Principi di Monte Bianca, Enrico by name, strode up and down the floor, his spurs tinkling and his saber rattling harshly. Occasionally he glanced at the group on the opposite side of the room. He laughed silently. Oh, he would enjoy himself tonight. He would extract every drop of pleasure from this unexpected moment. Had she been mad, he wondered, to give him this longed for opportunity? A month longer and this scene would have been impossible. At last he came to a stand in front of La Signorina, who was white and weary.

"So," he said, "after five years I find you, my beautiful wife! What a devil of a time you have given me—across oceans and continents! A hundred times I have passed you without knowing it till too late. And here, at

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the very moment when I believed it was all over, you fling yourself into the loving arms of your adoring husband! I do not understand."

"Be brief," she replied, the chill of snows in her voice. Her hate for this man had no empty corners. "Say what you will and be gone."

"I shall telegraph the attorneys in Rome to partition the estates, my heart!" he mocked her. "The king will not add to his private purse the riches of Colonel Grosvenor and the Principi di Monte Bianca, your father and mine—old fools! To tell the truth, I am badly in need of money, and, head of Bacchus, your appearance here is life to me, my dear Sonia. Life! I am a rich man. But," with a sudden scowl, "what position in my household does this gentleman occupy?" indicating Hillard and smiling evilly.

"So it is all true, then?" Hillard exclaimed. "You are his wife?"

"Well?" cried the prince impatiently. "I inquire again, what position does he hold?"

"This villa is mine," she answered, her tone giving hint to the volcano burning in her heart. "However the estates may be partitioned, this will be mine. I command you to leave it at once. I loathe you."

The prince laughed. She was simply a sack of gold. But this was his hour of triumph, and he proposed to make the most of it.

"I could have let the carabinieri take you to prison," he said urbanely. "A night in a damp cell would have chastened your spirit."

"Is it possible?" returned Hillard. "Your highness has but to say the word and I will undertake the pleasure of relieving you of this man's presence."

"Be still," she said. "Will you go?" to the prince.

"Presently. First I wish to add that your dear friend is both thick skulled and cowardly. I offered to slap his face a few nights ago, but he discreetly declined."

"I am calm," replied Hillard, gently releasing his arm from her grasp. He approached the prince, smiling, but there were murder and despair in his heart. "Had I known you that night one of us would not be here now."

"It is not too late," suggested the prince. "Come, are you in love with my wife?"

"Yes."

The bluntness of this assertion rather staggered the prince. "You admit it, then?" his throat swelling with rage. "There is no reason to deny it."

"She is your?"

But the word died with a cough. Hillard, a wild joy in his heart, caught the prince by the throat and jammed him back against the rose satin panel. Hillard seized his sword arm and pinned it to the panel above his head. Again and again the prince made desperate attempts to free himself. He was soon falling in a bad way. He gasped, his lips grew blue and the whites of his eyes bloodshot. This man was killing him! And so he was, for Hillard, realizing that he had lost everything in the world worth living for, was mad for killing.

La Signorina was first to recover. She sprang toward the combatants and grasped Hillard's hand, the one buried in the prince's throat, and pulled. She was not strong enough.

"Merrithew! O'Mally! Quick! He is killing him!" she cried wildly. The two finally succeeded in separating the men, and none too soon. A moment more and the prince had been a dead man.

La Signorina turned upon Hillard. "And you would have done this thing before my very eyes?"

"I was mad," he panted, ashamed. "I love you better than anything else in God's world, and this man means that I shall lose you."

The prince lurched toward Hillard, but fortunately Merrithew heard the slithering sound of the saber as it left its scabbard. Merrithew with a desperate lunge stopped the blow. He flung the saber at O'Mally's feet.

"You speak English," said Merrithew in an ugly temper. "You may send your orderly to the Hotel Italie tomorrow morning, and your saber will be given to him. We can get along without you nicely."

The prince tore at his mustaches. Meddlers! To return to Florence without his saber was dishonor. He cursed them all roundly and turned to La Signorina.

"I am in the way here," he cried. "But listen. You shall remain my wife so long as both of us live. I had intended arranging your freedom once the estate and moneys were divided, but not now. You shall read my wife till the end of the book, for unless I meet you halfway the marriage contract cannot be broken. In the old days it was your conscience. The still small voice seems no longer to trouble you," turning suggestively to Hillard.

"You are stopping at the Hotel Italie?"

"I am. You will find me there," returned Hillard, with good understanding.

"Good! Your highness, tomorrow night I shall have the extreme pleasure of running your lover through the throat." He picked up his cap and took his princely presence out of their immediate vicinity.

"It will do my soul good to stand before that scoundrel," said Hillard, stretching out his hands and closing them with crushing force.

La Signorina laid a protesting hand on his arm.

"I love you," he murmured as he bent to kiss her hand. "And it is not dishonorable for you to hear me say so."

girls marrying these blamed foreigners," growled the tender hearted O'Mally. "Why did you do it?"

"I am almost Italian, Mr. O'Mally. I had no choice in the matter. The affair was prearranged by our parents, after the continental fashion."

When Hillard and La Signorina were at length alone he asked, "When shall I see you again?"

"Who knows? Some day, perhaps, when time has softened the sharp edges of this moment. Tomorrow I shall write, or very soon."

"You will send for me?" with eagerness and hope.

"Why not? There is nothing wrong in our friendship, and I prize it. Promise."

"I promise. Goodby! For a little while I have lived in paradise. Wherever I may be, at the world's end, you have but to call me. In a month, in a year, a decade, I shall come. Goodby!" Without looking at her again he rushed away.

She remained standing there as motionless as a statue. He had not asked her if she loved him, and that was well. But there was not at that moment in all the length and breadth of Italy a lonelier woman than her highness the Princess di Monte Bianca.

Meanwhile the prince, raging, mounted his horse. Eh, well! This time tomorrow night the American should pay dearly for it all.

And the woman—he could never understand her. But for her fool's conscience he would not have been riding the beggar's horse today. She was now too self reliant, too intelligent. She was her father over again, soldier and diplomat.

He was riding past the confines of the villa when a man darted out suddenly from the shadows and seized the bride.

"At last, my prince!"

"Giovanni?"

Instinctively the prince reached for his saber, knowing that he had need of it, but the scabbard was empty. He cursed the folly which had made him lose it. Oddly enough, his thought ran swiftly back to the little casa in the Sabine hills. Bah! Full of courage, knowing that one or the other would not leave this spot alive, he struck his horse, with purpose this time, to run his man down. But Giovanni did not lose his hold. Hate and the nearness of revenge made him strong.

"No, no!" he laughed. "She is dead, my prince. And I—was not going to seek you. I was going to let hell claim you in its own time. But you rode by me tonight. This is the end."

The prince unhooked his scabbard and swung it aloft. But Giovanni was fully prepared. He released the blade, his arm went back, and his knife spun through the air. Yet in that instant in which Giovanni's arm was poised for the cast the prince lifted his horse on its haunches. The knife gashed the animal deeply in the neck. Still on its haunches, it backed, wild with the unaccustomed pain. The lip of the road, at this spot rotten and unprotected, gave way. The prince tried to urge the horse forward. The hind quarters sank, and the prince tried in vain to slip from the saddle. There came a crash, a cry, and horse and rider went plunging down the gorge.

Giovanni trembled, and the sweat on his body grew cold. For several minutes he waited, dreading, but there was no further sound. He searched mechanically for his knife, recovered it and then crept down the abrupt side of the gorge till he found them. They were both dead.

"Holy Father, thou hast waited seven years too long!" Giovanni crossed himself.

He gazed up at the ledge where the tragedy had begun. The cloud passed and revealed the shining muskets of two carabinieri, doubtless attracted by the untoward sounds. Giovanni stole



This man was killing him!

over the stream and disappeared into the blackness beyond.

It was Merrithew who woke the sleeping cabby, pushed Hillard into a seat and gave the final orders which were to take them out of the Villa Ariadne forever. He was genuinely moved over the visible misery of his friend. When they arrived at the white hotel in the Borgognissanti Merrithew was glad.

At 9 in the morning Hillard heard a fist banging on the panels of the door. "Open, Jack! Hurry!" cried Merrithew outside.

Hillard opened the door. "What's the trouble, Dan?" he asked. Merrithew whispered, "Dead!"

"Who?" Hillard's heart contracted. "The prince. They found him and

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