

The Lure of the Mask

By HAROLD MAC GRATH

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(CONTINUED FROM LAST WEEK)

CHAPTER XIX.

THE LETTER.

MY father was Colonel Grosvenor of the Confederate army during the civil war. On General Lee's staff was an Italian named the Principi di Monte Bianca. Rich, titled, a real noble, he was at heart an adventurer, a word greatly abused these inglorious days. My father was cut from the same pattern, a wild and reckless spirit in those crowded times. The two became friends such as you and Mr. Merrihew are. Their exploits became famous. My father was also rich and a man of foresight. His real wealth was in foreign securities, mines, oils, steel, steamships. When the war terminated the prince prevailed upon my father to return with him to Italy. Italy itself was in turmoil. He Galantuomo, that Piedmontese hunter, Vittorio Emanuele, wished to liberate Venice from the grasp of Austria, to wrest temporal power from the Vatican and to send the French troops back to France. Well, he accomplished all these things, and both my father and the prince were with him up to the time he entered the Quirinal. After victory, peace. My father invested in villas and palaces and settled down to end his days in the Venetian palace on the Grand canal.

Then my father, still young, remember, fell in love with the daughter of a Venetian noble. It was a happy union. Shortly after the prince also married. He was, with the exception of my father, the most lovable man I ever knew—brave, kindly, impetuous, honorable, witty and wise. It does not seem possible that such a father should have such a son.

There came a great day. A young prince was born, and the rough king stood as his godfather. Later I added my feeble protest, at the cost of my mother's life. As I grew up I became my father's constant companion. We were always out of doors. By and by he sent me to America to school. I returned from America to enter a convent out of Rome and later went to Milan and studied music.

One fatal day the old prince and my father put their heads together and determined that this great friendship of theirs should be perpetuated. The young prince should marry the young signorina. They drew up the strangest of wills. Both men were in full control of their properties. There was no entailed estate such as one finds in England. They could do as they pleased. And this was before Italy had passed the law requiring that no art treasures should be sold or transported. Fortunately for me, my mother's property was considerable.

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The impossible clauses in the joint will read that if we two young people declined the bargain the bulk of the estates should revert to the crown. Again, if we married and separated and were not reunited inside of five years the fortunes should become the crown's. If, having separated from my husband, either for just or unjust reasons, I should secretly or publicly occupy any villa or palace mentioned in the will it would be a tacit admission that I accepted my husband. Was there ever such an insane tangle kindly meant? We must marry; we must be happy. That our minds and hearts were totally different did not matter at all.

Time went on. The old prince died suddenly; his wife followed. And then my kind and loving father went the way. I was taken under the wing of a duchessa who was popular at court. At this period the young prince was one of the handsomest men in Europe. He was brave, clever and engaging.

On completing my education I decided to live in Rome. The old duchessa mothered the rich American girl gladly, for, though I was half Italian, they always considered me as the child of my father. I was presented at court. I was asked to dinners and receptions and balls. I was quite the rage because the dowager queen gave me singular attention.

The prince by this time seemed changed in some way. But I was blindly young. Often I noticed the long scar on his cheek. He had received it, he said, in some cavalry exercise.

Now, there was another clause in this will. It was the one thing which made the present life tolerable and possible to me. We were to be mar-

ried without pomp, quietly, first at the magistrate's and then at the church. At last the day came.

We passed through the streets to the magistrate's. I did not know then that I was not in love, that I was only young and curious. I threw roses to any who asked. The prince sat beside me in full dress uniform, looking very handsome and distinguished. The prince smiled, but he was nervous and not at ease. I thought nothing of this at the time. I believed his nervousness a part of my own.

The magistrate performed his part. Legally we were man and wife. We were leaving for the church when at the very doorway a handsome woman, sad eyed, weary, sabbily dressed, touched me on the arm.

"A rose, signora!" I gave it to her, smiling pityingly.

"God pray," she said, "that this man will make you happier than he made me!"

"Let us be on!" said the prince eagerly.

"Wait!" I turned to the woman.

"Signora, what do you mean by those words?"

"His highness knows," she pointed to the prince, whose face I now saw, strangely enough, for the first time. It was black with rage and ugliness.

"What has he been to you?" I demanded.

She answered. I understood. In that moment I became a woman without illusions. Without looking at the prince I entered the carriage and closed the door in his face. He stormed; he lied. I was of stone. He turned upon the poor woman and struck her in the face. Even had I loved him that would have been the end of the romance. I drove home. There would be no wedding at the church that day. There was a great scandal. Every one took up the prince's cause, with the exception of the king.

The prince was almost bankrupt. He had squandered his all. He had sold to usurers half of the fortune he expected to get after marrying me. He had not the slightest affection for me. He was desperate and wanted the money. How old and wise I became during that ride home from the magistrate's! I vowed he should never have a penny. It should all go to the crown.

When at length he found that I was really serious he became base in his tactics. He was the one who was wronged. He gave life to such rumors among those I knew that soon I found doors closed to me which had always been open. No Italian woman could see the matter from my point of view. I was an American for all that my mother was a Venetian, therefore I was wrong.

not a word regarding any future meeting. There was nothing to read between the lines. A great loneliness surged over Hillard. Was this, then, really the end? No! He would wait here in Florence till the day of doom. He would waste no time in seeking her, for he knew that if he sought he would not find.

Day after day dragged through the hours, and Florence grew thinner and forlorn. Sometimes he rode past the Villa Ariadne, but he never stopped.

It was in the middle of June that one afternoon the concierge handed him a telegram. It contained but three words:

"Villa Serbelloni, Bellaggio."

The Villa Serbelloni, now a hotel, stands on a wooded promontory among the Alps and between the lakes, at Bellaggio, and all day long the warm sunshine floods its walls and terraces and glances from the polished leaves of the tropical plants.

The 6 o'clock boat from Como puffed up noisily and smokily to the quay, churning her side paddles. Hillard stepped ashore impatiently. What a long day it had been! How white the Villa Serbelloni seemed up there on the little hilltop. He gave his luggage to the porter from the Grand and followed him on foot to the hotel. He dressed quickly, and in less than an hour he stepped forth from the gardens and took the path up to the villa.

Afar he saw a table spread under the great oak. A woman sat by it. It was still daylight, and he would have known that head of hair among the ten thousand hours of heaven. She did not rise, but she extended her hand, a grave inquiry in her slumberous eyes. With equal gravity he clasped the hand, but held back the impulse to kiss it. He sat down opposite her and, smiling, whimsically inquired:

"Now, where did we leave off?"

At first she did not understand. He enlightened her. "I refer to that Arabian Nights entertainment in New York. Where did we leave off that interesting discussion?"

She smiled brightly. "We shall take up the thread of that discourse with the coffee."

"Why not countermand the order for dinner? I am not hungry."

"But I am," she replied. She was wholly herself now. The tact with which he began his address disembarassed her. For two days since she dispatched the telegram she had lived in a kind of ecstatic terror. She had even regretted the message once it was beyond recall. "I am human enough to be hungry sometimes." She summoned the waiter.

The dinner was excellent, but Hillard scarcely knew what this or that plate was. And when the waiter brought the coffee and lingered for further orders it was Hillard who dismissed him rather curtly.

He said musingly: "We had agreed that it would be best never to meet again, that to keep the memory of that night fresh in our minds, a souvenir for old age, it were wisest to part then. Well, we can keep the memory of it for our old age. It will be a little secret between us, and we shall talk it over on just such nights as this."

He reached for her hand, which lay upon the cover, but without apparent notice of his movement she drew it back. A flash of pain crossed Hillard's face.

"I have waited patiently for weeks." She faced him with an enigmatical smile, lighted a match, blew it out and drew a line across the center of the table.

He laughed. "What! Again?"

"Observe."

As a rejoinder he smoothed out the telegram she had sent to him. "Why did you send this to me?"

Her lips had no answer ready.

"There can be but one reason," he pursued.

"Friendship."

The beginning of the night was cool, but the fire of the world's desire burned in her cheeks, and she was afraid. She stepped to the railing, faced the purpling mountains and sang "Die Zaubertote." Hillard dared not touch her till the last note was gone.

"I did not come here because of friendship," he said. "Only one thing brought me—love and the hope of love."

She stared at him, her hand at her throat.

Then he took her in his arms suddenly, hungrily, even roughly. "You are mine, mine, and nothing in the world shall take you from my arms again, Sonia."

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