

# The Lure of the Mask

By  
**HAROLD  
MAC GRATH**

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(Continued.)

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

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

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

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

"I saw Kitty tonight," he said. To Merrilow it seemed that all the clatter about him had died away suddenly. He breathed deeply. "Where is she?"

"I'll explain what has happened," Merrilow 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 Merrilow. "And why did he run after your prima donna?"

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

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



He swept up the gold by the handful. 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. Or, thing, if I come across our friend with the scar!"

"You will wisely cross to the oppo-

site 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."

Hillard 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," Merrilow 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."

In the meantime the lamps in the casino had been extinguished. In the harbor the yachts stood out white and spectral. The tram for Nice shrieked down the incline toward the promontory. At the foot of the road which winds up to the palaces the car was signaled, and two women boarded. Both were veiled. They maintained a singular silence. At Villefranche they got out. The women stopped before the gates of a villa and rang the porter's bell. Once in the room above, the silence between the two women came to an end.

"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. Hillard. 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 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. Hillard. 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."

La Signorina still lingered by the window.

Merrilow was pocketing currency in exchange for his gold when Hillard passed an open letter to him:

My Dear Mr. Hillard—Do not seek us. It will be useless. If Mr. Merrilow is with you, tell him that some day I will explain away the mystery. But this please make plain to him—if he insists upon searching for me he will only double my unhappiness.

KITTY KILLGORE.

Merrilow roberly tucked the letter away. "I knew it," he said simply. "She is in some trouble or other, some tangle, and fears to drag us into it. Who left a letter here this morning?" he asked of the concierge.

"A small boy from Villefranche." "Just my luck," said Merrilow. "I said that it would be of no use to hunt in the smaller towns. Well, we had better take the luggage back to the rooms. I am going to Villefranche."

"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 Hillard, with an enigmatical smile. "Make up your mind—we have only twenty minutes."

"Oh, divine afflatus! And you lay down the chase so readily as this?" Merrilow 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 Merrilow. "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."

"Perhaps your knowledge of women is more extensive than mine," said Hillard.

But this flattery did not appeal to Merrilow. "Bosh! There's something you haven't told me about that makes you so indifferent."

This was a shrewd guess, but Hillard had his reasons for not letting his friend see how close he had shot. "A lady? Grace of Mary, that is droll!" He could not cast this out of his



Hillard espied a beggar leaning over the parapet.

thought. He floated between this phrase and Mrs. Sandford's frank defense of her girlhood friend.

"Time flies," he warned. "Which is it to be?"

"We'll go on to Venice. It would be folly for me to continue the hunt alone."

At 7 that evening they stepped out of the station in Venice—the blue twilight of Venice that curves down from the hollow heavens, softening a bit of ugliness here, accentuating a bit of loveliness there. Here Merrilow found one of his dreams come true, and his first vision of the Grand canal, with its gondolas and barges and queer little bobtailed skiffs, was never to leave him. Hillard hunted for his old gondolier, but could not find him. So he chose one Achille, No. 154. With their trunks, which they had picked up at Genoa, and small luggage in the hotel barge they had the gondola all to themselves.

Instead of following the Grand canal Achille took the short cut through the Ruga di San Giovanni and the Rio di San Polo.

Out into the Grand canal again. As they swept under the last bridge before coming out into the hotel district Hillard espied a beggar leaning over the parapet. The moonlight shone full in his face.

"Stop!" cried Hillard to Achille. The beggar took to his heels, and when Hillard stepped out of the gondola the beggar had disappeared.

"Who was it?" asked Merrilow indifferently.

"Giovanni!"

(To be continued.)

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