

# The Lure of the Mask

By  
**HAROLD  
MAC GRATH**

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(Continued.)

## CHAPTER XIV.

O'MALLY SUGGESTS.

IN a bedroom in one of the cheap little pensiones which shoulder one another along the Riva degli Schiavoni sat three men. All three were smoking execrable tobacco. The castaways of the American Comic Opera troupe were on the anxious seat. "O'Mally, what's your opinion of La Signorina?" said Worth.

"What about her?" "What do you think of her? She's not one of us; she belongs to another class, and the stage is only an incident."

"Well, I don't know what to think. I've pumped Killigrew, but she seems to be in the dark with the rest of us. That ring and the careless way she offered it as security convince me that she doesn't belong. But what a voice!"

"She is without exception one of the most beautiful women I ever saw or care to see," rejoined Worth. "Smith and O'Mally exchanged a swift, comprehensive look."

Worth rose to go to Cook's office for possible letters, but abruptly returned to announce that the two ladies had returned from Monte Carlo. The actors proceeded to the parlor and greeted the prima donna and Kitty.

"We lost," explained the latter. "I was very foolish," said the erstwhile prima donna. "I might have known that when one is unlucky one may become still more unlucky. But I did so wish to win. I wanted to bring back enough gold to send you all to America."

"But what was to become of you," asked Worth.

"The question was not expected. Oh, Italy is my home. I shall find a way somehow. Put me out of your thoughts entirely. But I am sorry to bring you this bitter disappointment, for it must be bitter."

"There is one thing I wish to understand thoroughly," put in Worth slowly.

"You have guaranteed our credit at this hotel. By what means?" Worth held her eye with courage.

"With my word," she answered.

"I know something of these foreign hotel managers. Words must be backed by values." Worth's eye was still steady and unwavering. "If, as I believe, you guaranteed our credit with jewels we must know."

"Is it from a sense—a misguided sense—of chivalry?" she asked, her lips suggesting a smile.

"You are evading us," went on Worth.

"You insist, then?" coldly.

"Positively insist. If you do not tell us we shall be forced to take our chances elsewhere." Worth pressed a button. A servant appeared. "The manager at once."

La Signorina dropped her veil and sat stilly in her chair. Kitty moved uneasily. The manager appeared. He bowed.

"Madame here," began Worth, indicating La Signorina, "has guaranteed our credit at your hotel."

"Yes. Is not everything satisfactory?" asked the manager eagerly.

"What security did madame advance?"

"Security?" The manager looked at La Signorina, but she rendered him not the least assistance. "I have given my word to madame not to tell."

"It is mine," said La Signorina. She was very angry, but her sense of justice admitted that Worth was perfectly right. "Once more I ask you not to make me miserable by forcing this trinket back upon me. Will you do me the honor to wait till tomorrow morning?"

The three men exchanged looks. "Till tomorrow morning, then," said Worth. The manager was glad to escape.

La Signorina raised her veil. From her girdle bag she took a letter. "This letter is from a friend I have always known. Has any one of you ever heard of the Principessa di Monte Bianca?"

Her audience leaned forward attentively as she read the letter:

My Dear—I was very glad indeed to hear from you, and I shall be only too happy to offer you the temporary assistance you desire. You will recollect that I possess a villa just outside of Florence, a mile or so north of Fiesole. The villa is furnished and kept in repair by an ancient gardener and his wife. You and your friends are welcome to occupy the Villa Ariadne as long as you please. Of course you will find all the chests, bureaus, sideboards and closets under seal, for I have not been there since the death of my father. None of the seals may be removed till I occupy the villa legally. However, the gardener and his wife have silver and linen and china, and with these you will be able to get along nicely. LA PRINCIPESSA DI MONTE BIANCA.

"The question is, Shall we accept this offer?" She refolded the letter. "This was the plan I had in mind when we went to Monte Carlo, and a much better plan too."

"Of course we shall accept it," said Worth.

"But what's the matter with your playing the princess to the neighbors?" suggested O'Mally, his eyes laughing.

"I'll be the concierge, Smith the steward and Kitty your maid."

"And I?" asked Worth.

"Oh, you can be her highness' private secretary and attend to the correspondence."

The laughter which followed this was light hearted and careless. Only La Signorina did not join the merriment. She rose with a determined air.

"Mr. O'Mally makes a very good suggestion. It will be an adventure worth

prison."

"I am sufficiently armed for any event. It all depends upon your courage."

"Oh, if you take that tone," said O'Mally, coloring, "why, the thing is done. No one can call me a coward."

"I shan't desert you in a strait like this," remarked Worth quietly. "Only I think La Signorina rather cruel to force such a situation upon us when it was entirely unnecessary."

"It is agreed, then," continued La Signorina, "that tomorrow we depart for Florence as the Principessa di Monte Bianca and suit?"

It is in early morning that one should discover the Piazza San Marco. Few travelers, always excepting the Teutonic pilgrims, are up and about. The doves are hungry then, and they alight on your hands, your arms, your shoulders and even your hat. In a moment they are fluttering about you like an autumn storm of leaves, subsiding quickly.

It was such a picture Merrilow and Hillard, his guide, came upon the morning following their arrival. They had not visited it during the night. They had, with the usual impatience of men, gone directly to the Campo Santa Maria Formosa for the great reward. They had watched and waited till near midnight, but in vain.

Suddenly Hillard stopped. He gave a sharp exclamation and darted to one side to grasp the arm of a neat little woman who was buying corn. It was Bettina. But the maid refused absolutely to reveal the hiding place of her mistress, La Signorina, and Kitty.

Hillard offered her a hundred lira note (\$20).

Bettina, strongly tempted, finally refused the bribe. She threatened to call the carabinieri, moreover, if Hillard followed her.

Hillard rejoined Merrilow, discouraged.

As they passed out of the quadrangle a man accosted them. It was Giovanni, with a week's growth of beard on his face, his shoes out at the toes.

"Follow me," he said softly.

He led them through tortuous streets, over canal after canal, toward the Campo San Angelo. He came to a stop before a dilapidated tenement. The three mounted the dusty, worn stairs of stone to the third landing. Giovanni opened a door and bade them enter.

Seated by the window which overlooked the little canal was a young woman. Her hands lay passively in her lap, and her head was lowered.

"You have found her!" whispered Hillard, a great pity swelling his heart.

At the sound she turned her head. Her face, thin and waxy, was still beautiful, ethereally beautiful, but without color. She was perhaps three and twenty.

"I have brought an old friend to see you," said Giovanni.

She stood up.

"We are going back to the Sabine hills, Enrichetta and I." The old man rubbed his hands joyously. "Eh, carissimo?"

"Yes, father," with a faint smile.

Giovanni pushed his friends into another room, closing the door.

"I found her," he said in English, the chords in his throat standing out. "And, mother of Christ, how I have suffered! She was dancing. She had to sit at tables and drink with the men—that or the Seine. When she saw me she gave a great cry and fell. She has not been like herself, but that will pass away in time. Now she sits in silence and broods. I went to the Italian ambassador. He heard my story in full. He wrote personally to the king. Today I am free. I have had to walk from Milan almost. I had little money. That letter of credit—so you call it—is with my cousin in Sorrento."

"And the man?" Hillard could not refrain from putting this question.

Giovanni looked down. "The signor told me never to speak of that again."

"So I did," replied Hillard. "But all is changed now."

"Go back to your hills with your daughter and leave vengeance in the hands of God. Forget this man who has wronged you. Forget."

"If he does not cross my path and if she lives, I have suffered too greatly to forgive and forget. I promise not to seek him."

The old man went down to the street with them. They were so kind. He hated the thought of losing them. They waved their hands cheerily and vanished from sight. They never saw Giovanni again, yet his hand was to work out the great epoch in Hillard's destiny.

(To be continued.)

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The manager brought forth a wallet, recounting, I shall go as the princess. Her highness commands! Will it not be delightful?"

Worth looked at O'Mally, who looked at Smith, who looked at Kitty; then all four looked at La Signorina.

"Are you not lightening our trials by joking?" asked Worth dubiously.

"Call it madness, if you like. I shall go as the princess."

"But the authorities! It will be

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