

The Lure of the Mask

By HAROLD MAC GRATH



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(Continued.)

CHAPTER XV.

THE ARMA FROM "IL TROVATORE."

"SHALL we take a look into the Campo Formosa again to-night?" asked Merrihew, stepping into the gondola.

"It will be a waste of time. Bettina will have warned them. What's the Italian coming to, anyhow? She refused a hundred francs. But I can see that Mrs. Sandford had a hand in this latest event. She has probably written that we might look for them in the Campo."

"All right. We'll listen to the music," grumbled Merrihew. He wanted to find Kitty right away. Hillard's indifference annoyed him.

"To the barges of the troupes!" said Hillard to Achille.

In the great canal of San Marco the scene was like a water carnival. Hundreds of gondolas, with bobbing lights, swam slowly round the barges of the serenaders, who, for the most part, were fallen operatic stars or those who had failed to attain those dizzy heights.

What was that? Hillard was no longer lethargic.

From a gondola on the far side of the barge, standing out of the press and just beyond the radiance of the lanterns, came a voice which had a soul in it, a voice which broke into song for the pure joy of it—clear, thrilling—a voice before which the world bows down. The prima donna in the barge was clever; she stopped. The tenor went on, however, recognizing that he was playing opposite, as they say, to a great singer. Hillard's heart beat fast. That voice! There could not be another like it. And she was here in Venice!

"Quick, Achille!" for the far gondola was heading for the Grand canal.

Merrihew understood now.

"Follow!" commanded Hillard. "Ten lire if you can come up alongside that gondola. Can you see the number?"

"It is 152, signor—Pompeo. It will be a race."

At each stroke Merrihew swung forward his body. The end of the race came sooner than any one expected. A police barge nosed round an ell. By the time Pompeo was off again the ferrule of the pursuing gondola scraped past Pompeo's blade. Pompeo called, and Achille answered. There was a war of words, figure of a dog, name of a pig. Achille was in the wrong, but 10 lire were 10 lire.

Hillard caught the gondola by the rail and clung. The race was over.

"Signorina," said Pompeo, boiling with rage, "shall I call the police?"

"No, Pompeo," said his solitary passenger.

"To the Campo, Pompeo. Mr. Hillard, will you kindly follow? I would speak to you alone, since there is no escape."

The way to the Campo Formosa was made without further incident.

The gondolas became moored. Hillard jumped out and went to assist La Signorina, but she ignored his outstretched hand.

"What is it you wish?" she asked.

"One look at your face," he answered simply.

She slowly removed the veil. Then, for the first time, he looked upon the face of this woman who had burdened his dreams. The face was not like any he had conjured. It seemed to him that Vecchio's—Paola Vecchio's—Barbara had stepped down from her frame—beauty, tranquil, flawless beauty. A minute passed. He was incapable of speech; he could only look.

"Who is that man—the Italian with the scar?"

"I will not answer that."

"A lady? Grace of Mary, that is droll!"

"Why do you say that?"

"I am only quoting the man with the scar. Those were the words he used in regard to you."

"Perhaps he is right. Perhaps I am not a lady according to his lights." But she laughed.

"Do not laugh like that. What you are or have been or might have been to him is nothing to me. Only one fact remains clear, and that is I love you."

"No, Mr. Hillard, you are only excited. I may be a fugitive from the law."

"I do not believe it."

"There may be scars which do not show," she faltered—"in the heart, in the mind. I am sorry, terribly sorry. Heaven knows that I meant no harm. Forget me!"

"Forget you! Tell me what prevents friendship between us."

"You say you love me. Is that not answer enough? Give up all idea, all thought, of me. You will only waste your time. Come, is your love strong enough to offer a single sacrifice?"

"Not if it is to give you up. Oh, do not worry about persecution! I shall only seek to be near you."

"Good night," she said, "and good-by!" She wound the veil round her face, took half a dozen steps, halted and turned, then went on into the dark.

The Villa Ariadne rested upon a small knoll half a mile or more north of and above Fiesole, from which the panoramic beauty of Florence was to be seen at all times, glistening in the sun, glowing in the rain, sparkling in the night.

Life ran smoothly enough at the Villa Ariadne. La Signorina at the very last moment surrendered to the entreaties of Kitty. She agreed not to pass herself off as the princess. Among themselves each played the role originally assigned. La Signorina seemed to enjoy the farce as much as any one. It was a great temptation to steal a look into the marvelous chests and sideboards, bulging as they knew with priceless glass and silver and linen and lace. But La Signorina each day inspected the seals and uttered solemn warnings.

They had now lived in the Villa Ariadne for two weeks, a careless, thoughtless, happy-go-lucky family.

Today was warm and mellow. On the stone bench by the porter's lodge hard by the gate sat the old Florentine and O'Mally. From some unknown source O'Mally had produced a conch's hat and coat, a little moth eaten, a little tarnished, but serviceable.

"Pietro," said O'Mally, "I've got an idea. If any tourists come today I propose to show them around the place."

Pietro's eyes flashed angrily. "No, no! Mine, all mine!"

"Oh, I am not going to rob you! I'll give you the tip. What I want is the fun of the thing."

Pietro understood. That was different. If his excellency would pay over to him the receipts he could conduct the tourists as often as he pleased.

They shared a flask of wine.

The porter's bell rang loudly. "Tourists!" whispered O'Mally. He settled his cap on straight and went to the gates. A party of five Americans stood outside—two men, two women and a girl.

"Ten cents? Two lire fifty? Why, this is downright extortion!" declared the woman.

O'Mally gave vent to a perfect Italian shrug and put a hand out suggestively toward the gates.

"Oh, come, dear," protested one of the men wearily, "you've dragged us up here from Fiesole, and I'm not going back without seeing what's to be seen!"

Hollanly Pietro watched them pass, wondering what the terms were, O'Mally led the party to the fountain.

"This," O'Mally began, with a careless wave of the hand, "is the famous fountain by Donatello. It was originally owned by Catherine d'Medisy. The Borgias stole it from her, and Italy and France nearly came to war over it."

"The Borgias?" doubtfully. "Were those two families contemporaneous?"

"They were," scornfully.

The quintet consulted their guide-books, but before they had located the paragraph referring to this work O'Mally was cunningly leading them away. He passed on to the antique marbles, explaining how this one was Nero's, that one Caligula's, that one Tiberius'. He lied so gracefully that the tomb of Ananias must have rocked.

"Do you know," said the woman, who had not yet spoken, "you speak English with an accent I do not understand."

O'Mally shivered. Was she going to spring dago on him? "I am an Italian," he said solemnly, "I was born here, in County Clare. My father and mother were immigrants to Ireland."

"Ma," whispered the girl, "ask him for one of those buttons."

The stage whisper was overheard by O'Mally. "These buttons," he explained, "cost a lira each, but if the signorina really wishes one"—And thus another lira swelled the profits of the day.

At the gates O'Mally received his poubroire (tip of 20 centesimi) and returned to Pietro.

"Quando!" he cried.

O'Mally handed him the exact amount, minus the lira for the button.

"Santa Maria! All these? How? No more I take dem! You!"

O'Mally sat down on the bench and laughed. It was as good a part as he had ever had.

Early evening. La Signorina leaned over the terrace wall, her hand idly trailing over the soft cool grass stretched out on either hand, white and shadowy, lay the great road. She was dreaming. Presently upon the silence came the echo of galloping horses. Two horsemen came cantering toward the Villa Ariadne. She heard their voices.

"Jack, this has been the trip of my life. Verona, Padua, Bologna and now Florence! This is life. Nothing like it."

"It has been enjoyable, Dan. I only hope our luggage will be at the hotel."

La Signorina's hand closed convulsively over a rose and crushed it.

"A last canter to Fiesole!"

The two went clattering down the road.

La Signorina walked slowly back to the villa. It was fatality that this man should again cross her path.

(To be continued.)

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To the Editor: I notice in your issue of October 29 an article stating that a lady resident of Medford had recently brought some samples of apples from her old home in Chautauqua county, New York.

From the description given I should judge that the sample apples ought not to "go beyond the cider mill or pig trough."

I was born and have spent more than half my life in one of the best fruit countries of western New York, and have helped pick and pack thousands of barrels of as beautiful Rhode Island Greenings, Roxbury Russets, Kings and Baldwins as ever grew, and believe I am fairly competent to judge a good apple. For the past 15 or 20 years there have been exported, principally to Scotland, many thousand barrels of Baldwin apples from Niagara, Orleans and Monroe counties, New York and we all know that such apples as are described in the article referred to cannot be exported. The apple crop of western New York is very light this year, but with an average or full crop it is not unusual for the three counties mentioned to put on the market one half million barrels of apples. That means one and one-half million boxes, as we pack them in Rogue River valley.

Now the point to be noted is this: Western New York orchardists are awakening to the fact that their orchards must have better care than formerly, when they were permitted to "go to grass" year after year, and are using up-to-date methods in spraying, pruning and cultivating.

The most successful man in business is the one who is best posted on his competitors' methods, and so it is a help to the orchardists of Rogue River valley to know what fruitgrowers in other sections of the country are doing and, although we know that we can produce the best apples and pears in the world here in Rogue River valley, we must strive to raise the standard of our fruit still higher, and not be content with our effort, until it reaches absolute perfection.

C. W. POTTER. Prepaid Railroad Orders.

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