

# The Lure of the Mask

By HAROLD MAC GRATH

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(Continued.)

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 pounding 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 Merrihew 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 Borgognesanti Merrihew was glad.

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

Hillard opened the door. "What's the trouble, Dan?" he asked.

Merrihew whispered, "Dead!"

"Who?" Hillard's heart contracted.

"The prince. They found him and his horse at the bottom of the gorge. The concierge says that there has been foul play—tracks in the dust, a strange cut in the neck of the horse and a scabbard minus its saber. Now, what the devil shall I do with the blamed sword?"

Dead! Hillard sat down on the edge of the bed. Dead! Then she was free, free!

"What shall I do with the sword?" demanded Merrihew a second time.

"Put it in the bottom of the trunk and leave it there till you land in New York. But the prince dead? You are sure?"

"Florence rings with the story." And then Merrihew noticed, Hillard wore his evening clothes and the sword was untouched.

"It's very foolish."

"Why, I couldn't have closed my eyes," replied Hillard.

"But won't she need you up there?" Merrihew was obviously troubled.

"If she needs me she'll send for me. I shall remain here and wait. She is free. Thank God!"

"Didn't Giovanni tell us that he had friends in Fiesole, near Florence, and that he was going to visit them?"

asked Merrihew.

"Giovanni! I had forgotten. But what had my old valet against the prince?"

"Giovanni had a daughter," said Merrihew. "His knife left a scar on the man. The prince carried a long scar on his cheek."

Hillard began dressing in his day clothes, stopping at times and frowning at the walls.

At night the last of the American Comic Opera company straggled into the hotel. O'Mally, verbose as ever, did all the talking.

"You wouldn't know her," he said, referring to La Signorina, for they would always call her that. "When she heard of that duffer's death I swear that she believed you had a hand in it. But when she heard that the accident had occurred before you left the villa she just collapsed. The police were hunting for the missing sabre. Of course we knew nothing about it," with a wink at Merrihew.

When the others were gone Hillard asked Kitty if she had any news.

"She said that she would write you and for you to remain here till you received the letter."

"Was that all?"

"Yes. Have you seen anything of that wretched man Worth, who is the cause of all this trouble?"

"No, nor do I care to."

Kitty and Merrihew went out together.

They were gone to America, and Hillard was alone. He missed them all sorely—Merrihew with his cheery laugh, Kitty with her bright eyes and O'Mally with his harmless drolleries. And no letter!

Daily he searched the newspapers for news of Giovanni. But to all appearances Giovanni had vanished, as indeed he had, forever out of Hillard's sight and knowledge.

The letter came one week after the departure of his friends. It was post-marked Venice. And the riddle was solved.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE LETTER.

MY father was Colonel Grosvener 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. Il Re 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 youngest 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 trans-

The impossible chances in the lot will read that if we two young people defined 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 thing kindly meant? We must marry; we must be happy. That our minds and hearts were totally different did not matter at all.

Thus 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 duchess 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 duchess 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 married 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, shabbily 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.

There! That is all. There is no more mystery concerning Signora Hilda Grosvener.

And so the letter ended. There was 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 torrid. 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 glistens 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 stumbrous 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 Zauberflote." 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."

She pressed her palms against him and stood away. She looked bravely into his eyes now.

"I sent the message because I wanted you, because I am tired of lying to my heart, because I have a right to be happy, because—because I love you! Take me and, oh, be good and kind to me, for I have been very lonely and unhappy. Kiss me!" with a touch of the old impetuosity.

She clasped him fondly to herself.

"See Naples and die," she whispered, "but the spirit will come to Bellaggio."

THE END.

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CITY NOTICES.

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ORDINANCE NO. 251.

An ordinance declaring the assessment on the property benefited for the cost of laying a water main on outer section of Clark street, West and corporation boundary line south to Jackson street, West, and directing the recorder to enter a statement thereof in the water main lien docket.

The city of Medford doth ordain as follows:

Section 1. Whereas, the city council did heretofore by resolution declare its intention to lay a 6-inch water main on outer section of Clark street, West, and corporation boundary line south to Jackson street, West, and to assess the cost thereof on the property fronting on said portion of said street in proportion to the frontage of said property, and did fix a time and place for hearing protests against the laying of said water main on said portion of said street and the assessment of the cost thereof as aforesaid.

Whereas, said resolution was duly posted and published as required by section 116 of the charter of said city; and

Whereas, a meeting of the council was held at the time and place fixed in said resolution for the purpose of considering any such protests, but no protests were at such time or at any time made or received by the council to the laying of said water main or the assessing of the cost thereof as aforesaid, and said council having considered the matter, and deeming that said water main was and is of material benefit to said city and that all property to be assessed therefor would be benefited thereby to the extent of the probable amount of the respective assessments to be levied against said property, did order said water main laid; and

Whereas, the cost of said water main has been and hereby is determined to be the sum of \$1236.50;

Now, therefore, it is hereby further

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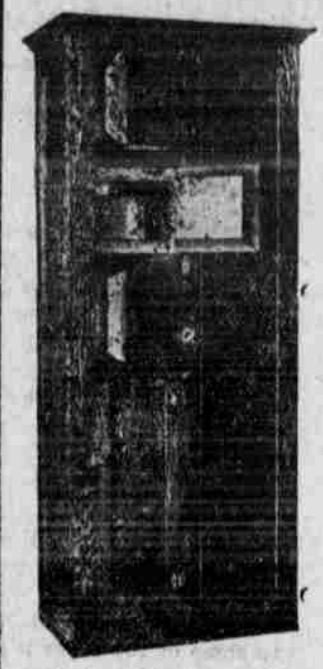
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