



HEARTS AND MASKS

By HAROLD MacGRATH
Author of "The Man on the Box," etc.
With Drawings by Harrison Fisher

CHAPTER I.—Continued.

"You will pardon my niece," interpolated the old gentleman, coughing a bit nervously. "If she annoys you—"

"Uncle!"—reproachfully.

"Heaven forbid!" I exclaimed eagerly. "There is a charm in doing unconventional things; and most people do not realize it, and are stupid."

"Thank you, sir," said the girl, smiling. She was evidently enjoying herself; so was I, for that matter. "Do a trick for me," she commanded presently.

I smiled weakly. I couldn't have done a trick with the cards,—not if my life had depended upon it. But I rather neatly extricated myself from the trap.

"I never do any tricks out of business hours."

"Uncle, give the gentleman ten cents; I want to see him do a sleight-of-hand trick."

Her uncle, readily entering into the spirit of the affair, dived into a pocket and produced the piece of silver. It looked as if I were caught.

"There! this may make it worth your while," the girl said, shoving the coin in my direction.

But again I managed to slide under; I was not to be caught.

"It is my regret to say,"—frowning slightly, "that regularity in my business is everything. It wants half an hour for my turn to come on. If I tried a trick out of turn, I might fizzle and lose prestige. And besides, I depend so much upon the professor and his introductory note: 'Ladies and gents, permit me to introduce the world-renowned Signor Fantocchini, whose marvelous tricks have long puzzled all the crowned heads of Europe—'

"Fantocchini,"—musingly. "That's Italian for puppet show."

"I know it, but the dime museum visitors do not. It makes a fine impression."

She laughed and slid the dime back to her uncle.

"I'm afraid you are an impostor," she said.

"I'm afraid so, too," I confessed, laughing.

Then the comedy came to an end by the appearance of our separate orders. I threw aside the cards and proceeded to attack my dinner, for I was hungry. From time to time I caught vague fragments of conversation between the girl and her uncle.

"It's a fool idea," mumbled the old gentleman; "you will get into some trouble or other."

"That doesn't matter. It will be like a vacation,—a flash of old Rome, where I wish I were at this very moment. I am determined."

"This is what comes of reading romantic novels,"—with a kind of grumble.

"I admit there never was a particle of romance on your side of the family," the girl retorted.

"Happily. There is peace in the house where I live."

"Do not argue with me."

"I am not arguing with you; I should be only wasting my time. I am simply warning you that you are about to commit a folly."

"I have made up my mind."

"Ah! in that case I have hopes," he returned. "When a woman makes up her mind to do one thing, she generally does another. Why can't you put aside this fool idea and go to the opera with me?"

"I have seen Carmen in Paris, Rome, London and New York," she replied.

(Evidently a traveled young person.)

"Carmen is your favorite opera, besides."

"Not to-night,"—whimsically.

"Go, then; but please recollect that if anything serious comes of your folly, I did my best to prevent it. It's a scatter-brained idea, and no good will come of it, mark me."

"I can take care of myself,"—traculently.

"So I have often been forced to observe,"—dryly.

(I wondered what it was all about.)

"But, uncle dear, I am becoming so dreadfully bored!"

"That sounds final," sighed the old man, helping himself to the haricots verts. (The girl ate positively nothing.) "But it seems odd that you can't go about your affairs after my own reasonable manner."

"I am only twenty."

The old man's shoulders rose and fell resignedly.

"No man has an answer for that."

"I promise to tell you everything that happens; by telegraph."

"That's small comfort. Imagine receiving a telegram early in the morning, when a man's brain is without invention or coherency of thought! I

would that you were back home with your father. I might sleep o' nights, then."

"I have so little amusement!"

"You work three hours a day and earn more in a week than your father and I do in a month. Yours is a very unhappy lot."

"I hate the smell of paints; I hate the studio."

"And I suppose you hate your fame?" acridly.

"Bah! that is my card to a living. The people I meet bore me."

"Not satisfied with common folks, eh? Must have kings and queens to talk to?"

"I only want to live abroad, and you and father will not let me,"—petulantly.

The music started up and I heard no more. Occasionally the girl glanced at me and smiled in a friendly fashion. She was evidently an artist's model; and when they have hair and color like this girl's, the pay is good. I found myself wondering why she was bored and why Carmen had so suddenly lost its charms.

It was seven o'clock when I pushed aside my plate and paid my check. I calculated that by hustling I could reach Blankshire either at ten or thirty. That would be early enough for my needs. And now to rout out a costume. All I needed was a gray mask. I had in my apartments a Capuchin's robe and cowl. I rose, lighting a cigarette.

The girl looked up from her coffee.

"Back to the dime museum?"—banteringly.

"I have a few minutes to spare," said I.

"By the way, I forgot to ask you what card you drew."

I recalled the paragraph relative to Mrs. Hyphen-Bonds. By this time she was being very well tossed about in mid-ocean. As the old order of yarn-spinners used to say, little did I dream what was in store for me, or the influence the magic name of Hyphen-Bonds was to have upon my destiny.

Bismillah! (Whatever that means!)

CHAPTER II.

After half an hour's wandering about I stumbled across a curio-shop, a weird, dim and dusty, musty old curio-shop, with stuffed peacocks hanging from the ceiling, and skulls and bronzes and marbles, paintings, tarnished jewelry and ancient armor, rare books of vellum, small arms, tapestry, pastimes, plaster masks, and musical instruments. I recalled to mind the shop of the dealer in antiquities in Balzac's *La Peau de Chagrin*, and glanced about (not without a shiver) for the fatal ass's skin. (I forgot that I was wearing it myself that night!) I was something of a collector of antiquities, of the inanimate kind, and for a time I became lost in speculation—speculation rather agreeable of its kind. I liked to conjure up in fancy the various scenes through which these curiosities had drifted in their descent to this demi-pawnshop; the brave men and beautiful women, the clangor of tocsins, the haze of battles, the glitter of ball rooms, epochs and ages. What romances lay behind yon satin slipper? What grande dame had smiled behind that ivory fan? What meant that tarnished silver mask?

The old French proprietor was evidently all things from a pawnbroker to an art collector; for most of the

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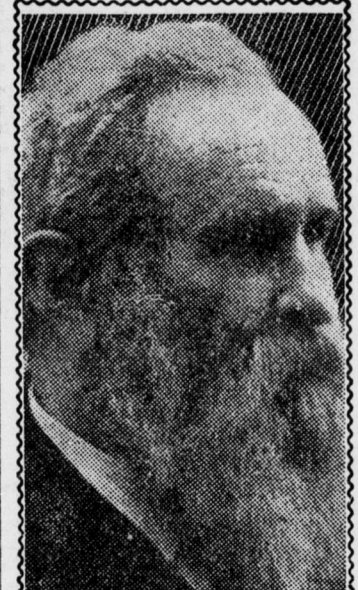
Disease and Injustice.

The sin which is termed dishonesty is the same evil as that which is called disease in living bodies or blight in the seasons; and in cities and governments has another name, which is injustice.—Plato.

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"This is What I Want."

"It was the ten of hearts."

"The ten of hearts?" Her amazement was not understandable.

"Yes, the ten of hearts; Cupid and all that."

She recovered her composure quickly.

"Then you will not blow up the postoffice to-night?"

"No," I replied, "not to-night."

"You have really and truly aroused my curiosity. Tell me, what does the ten of hearts mean to you?"

I gazed thoughtfully down at her. Had I truly mystified her? There was some doubt in my mind.

"Frankly, I wish I might tell you. All I am at liberty to say is that I am about to set forth upon a desperate adventure, and I shall be very fortunate if I do not spend the night in the lock-up."

"You do not look desperate."

"Oh, I am not desperate; it is only the adventure that is desperate."

"Some princess in durandee vile! Some villain to smite? Catechists to storm?" Her smile was enchantment itself.

I hesitated a moment. "What would you say if I told you that this adventure was merely to prove to myself what a consummate ass the average man can be upon occasions?"

"Why go to the trouble of proving it?"—drolly.

"I am conceited enough to have some doubts as to the degree."

"Consider it positive."

I laughed. "I am in hopes that I am neither a positive ass nor a superlative one, only comparative."

"But the adventure; that is the thing that mainly interests me."

"Oh, that is a secret which I should hesitate to tell even to the Sphinx."

"I see you are determined not to illuminate the darkness,"—and she turned carelessly toward her uncle, who was serenely contemplating the glowing end of a fat perfecto.

I bowed and passed out into Sixth avenue, rather regretting that I had not the pleasure of the charming young person's acquaintance.

The ten-spot of hearts seemed to have startled her for some reason. I wondered why.

The snow blew about me, whirled, and swirled, and stung. Oddly enough

jewelry was in excellent order and the pictures possessed value far beyond the intrinsic.

From the shining metal of the small arms, my glance traveled to the face of the prospective buyer. It was an interesting face, clean-cut, beardless, energetic, but the mouth impressed me as being rather hard. Doubtless he felt the magnetism of my scrutiny, for he suddenly looked around. The expression on his face was not one to induce me to throw my arms around his neck and declare I should be glad to make his acquaintance. It was a scowl. He was in evening dress, and I could see that he knew very well how to wear it. All this was but momentary. He took up a revolver and balanced it on his palm.

By and by the proprietor came sliding along behind the cases, the slipshod fashion of his approach informing me that he wore slippers.

"Do you keep costumes?" I asked.

"Anything you like, sir, from a crusader to a modern gentleman,"—with grim and appropriate irony.

"What is it you are in search of—a masquerade costume?"

"Only a gray mask," I answered.

"I am to go to a masked ball to-night as a Gray Capuchin, and I want a mask that will match my robe."

"Your wants are simple."

From a shelf he brought down a box, took off the cover, and left me to make my selection. Soon I found what I desired, and laid it aside, waiting for M. Friard to return. Again I observed the other customer.

There is always a mystery to be solved and a story to be told, when a man makes the purchase of a pistol in a pawnshop. A man who buys a pistol for the sake of protection does so in the light of day, and in the proper place, a gun-shop. He does not haunt the pawnbrokers in the dusk of evening. Well, it was none of my business. Doubtless, he knew what he was doing. I caught suggestively, and Friard came slipping in my direction again.

"This is what I want. How much?" I inquired.

"Fifty cents; it has never been worn."

To be Continued.

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