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The Lure of the Mask

HAROLD MACGRATH



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About MacGrath:

Harold MacGrath (September 4, 1871 - October 30, 1932) was a bestselling American novelist, short story writer, and screenwriter. Also known occasionally as Harold McGrath, he was born in Syracuse, New York. As a young man, he worked as a reporter and columnist on the Syracuse Herald newspaper until the late 1890s when he published his first novel, a romance titled *Arms and the Woman*. According to the *New York Times*, his next book, *The Puppet Crown*, was the No.7 bestselling book in the United States for all of 1901. From that point on, MacGrath never looked back, writing novels for the mass market about love, adventure, mystery, spies, and the like at an average rate of more than one a year. He would have three more of his books that were among the top ten bestselling books of the year. At the same time, he penned a number of short stories for major American magazines such as *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Ladies Home Journal*, and *Red Book* magazine. Several of MacGrath's novels were serialized in these magazines and contributing to them was something he would continue to do until his death in 1932. In 1912, Harold MacGrath became one of the first nationally-known authors to write directly for the movies when he was hired by the American Film Company to do the screenplay for a short film in the Western genre titled *The Vengeance That Failed*. MacGrath had eighteen of his forty novels and three of his short stories made into films plus he wrote the story for another four motion pictures. And, three of his books were also made into Broadway plays. One of the many films made from MacGrath's writings was the 1913 serial *The Adventures of Kathlyn* starring Kathlyn Williams. While writing the thirteen episodes he simultaneously wrote the book that was published immediately after the December 29, 1913, premiere of the first episode of the serial so as to be in book stores during the screening of the entire thirteen episodes. Among MacGrath's short stories made into film was the 1920 Douglas Fairbanks Production Company's feature-length adventure film *The Mollycoddle* based on MacGrath's short story with the same title that appeared in *The Saturday Evening Post* in 1913. Directed by Victor Fleming, it starred Fairbanks, Ruth Renick, and Wallace Beery and was distributed through the newly created United Artists. It is said that during this same time, a young Boris Karloff, who previously had a few uncredited film roles, chose his stage name for his first screen credit in 1920 from the MacGrath novel *The Drums of Jeopardy*, which had also been published by *The Saturday Evening Post* in January of that year and which featured a Russian mad scientist character named Boris Karlov. The name Boris Karlov was used from MacGrath's book for the 1922 Broadway play, but by 1923 with actor Boris Karloff using the similar sounding variation, the film version renamed the character Gregor Karlov. Harold MacGrath's success made him a wealthy man and, although he traveled the world extensively, Syracuse, New York, was his home, and it was there in 1912 that he built an English country-style mansion renowned for its landscaped gardens. In an article in the April 23, 1932, issue of *The Saturday Evening Post* written under the title "The Short Autobiography of a Deaf Man", MacGrath told the public how he had struggled early in life as a result of a hearing impairment. At a time in history when deaf people were almost automatically considered as lacking intellectual acuity, he had hid this from his employer and others. Harold MacGrath died at his home in Syracuse a few months after the article was published.

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- *The Voice in the Fog* (1915)
- *A Splendid Hazard* (1910)
- *Arms and the Woman* (1899)
- *Man on the Box* (1904)
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- *The Puppet Crown* (1901)
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Chapter 1

THE VOICE IN THE FOG

Out of the unromantic night, out of the somber blurring January fog, came a voice lifted in song, a soprano, rich, full and round, young, yet matured, sweet and mysterious as a night-bird's, haunting and elusive as the murmur of the sea in a shell: a lilt from *La Fille de Madame Angot*, a light opera long since forgotten in New York. Hillard, genuinely astonished, lowered his pipe and listened. To sit dreaming by an open window, even in this unlovely first month of the year, in that grim unhandsome city which boasts of its riches and still accepts with smug content its rows upon rows of ugly architecture, to sit dreaming, then, of red-tiled roofs, of cloud-caressed hills, of terraced vineyards, of cypresses in their dark aloofness, is not out of the natural order of things; but that into this idle and pleasant dream there should enter so divine a voice, living, feeling, pulsing, this was not ordinary at all.

And Hillard was glad that the room was in darkness. He rose eagerly and peered out. But he saw no one. Across the street the arc-lamp burned dimly, like an opal in the matrix, while of architectural outlines not one remained, the fog having kindly obliterated them.

The Voice rose and sank and soared again, drawing nearer and nearer. It was joyous and unrestrained, and there was youth in it, the touch of spring and the breath of flowers. The music was Lecocq's, that is to say, French; but the tongue was of a country which Hillard knew to be the garden of the world. Presently he observed a shadow emerge from the yellow mist, to come within the circle of light, which, faint as it was, limned in against the nothingness beyond the form of a woman. She walked directly under his window.

As the invisible comes suddenly out of the future to assume distinct proportions which either make or mar us, so did this unknown cantatrice come out of the fog that night and enter into Hillard's life, to readjust its ambitions, to divert its aimless course, to give impetus to it, and a directness which hitherto it had not known.

"Ah!"

He leaned over the sill at a perilous angle, the bright coal of his pipe spilling comet-wise to the area-way below. He was only subconscious of having spoken; but this syllable was sufficient to spoil the enchantment. The Voice ceased abruptly, with an odd break. The singer looked up. Possibly her astonishment surpassed even that of her audience. For a few minutes she had forgotten that she was in New York, where romance may be found only in the book-shops; she had forgotten that it was night, a damp and chill forlorn night; she had forgotten the pain in her heart; there had been only a great and irresistible longing to sing.

Though she raised her face, he could distinguish no feature, for the light was behind. However, he was a man who made up his mind quickly. Brunette or blond,

beautiful or otherwise, it needed but a moment to find out. Even as this decision was made he was in the upper hall, taking the stairs two at a bound. He ran out into the night, bareheaded. Up the street he saw a flying shadow. Plainly she had anticipated his impulse and the curiosity behind it. Even as he gave chase the shadow melted in the fog, as ice melts in running waters, as flame dissolves in sunshine. She was gone. He cupped his ear with his hand; in vain, there came no sound as of pattering feet; there was nothing but fog and silence.

"Well, if this doesn't beat the Dutch!" he murmured.

He laughed disappointedly. It did not matter that he was three and thirty; he still retained youth enough to feel chagrined at such a trivial defeat. Here had been something like a genuine adventure, and it had slipped like water through his clumsy fingers.

"Deuce take the fog! But for that I'd have caught her."

But reason promptly asked him what he should have done had he caught the singer. Yes, supposing he had, what excuse would he have had to offer? Denial on her part would have been simple, and righteous indignation at being accosted on the street simpler still. He had not seen her face, and doubtless she was aware of this fact. Thus, she would have had all the weapons for defense and he not one for attack. But though reason argued well, it did not dislodge his longing. He would have been perfectly happy to have braved her indignation for a single glance at her face. He walked back, lighting his pipe. Who could she be? What peculiar whimsical freak had sent her singing past his window at one o'clock of the morning? A grand opera singer, returning home from a late supper? But he dismissed this opinion even as he advanced it. He knew something about grand opera singers. They attend late suppers, it is true, but they ride home in luxurious carriages and never risk their golden voices in this careless if romantic fashion. And in New York nobody took the trouble to serenade anybody else, unless paid in advance and armed with a police permit. As for being a comic-opera star, he refused to admit the possibility; and he relegated this well-satisfied constellation to the darks of limbo. He had heard a Voice.

A vast, shadow loomed up in the middle of the street, presently to take upon itself the solid outlines of a policeman who came lumbering over to add or subtract his quota of interest in the affair. Hillard wisely stopped and waited for him, pulling up the collar of his jacket, as he began to note that there was a winter's tang to the fog.

"Hi, what's all this?" the policeman called out roughly.

"To what do you refer?" Hillard counter-questioned, puffing. He slipped his hands into the pockets of his jacket.

"I heard a woman singin', that's what!" explained the guardian of the law.

"So did I."

"Oh, you did, huh?"

"Certainly. It is patent that my ears are as good as yours."

"Huh! See her?"

"For a moment," Hillard admitted.

"Well, we can't have none o' this in the streets. It's disorderly."

"My friend," said Hillard, rather annoyed at the policeman's tone, "you don't think for an instant that I was directing this operetta?"

"Think? Where's your hat?"

Hillard ran his hand over his head. The policeman had him here. "I did not bring it out."

"Too warm and summery; huh? It don't look good. I've been watchin' these parts fer a leddy. They call her Leddy Lightfinger; an' she has some O' the gents done to a pulp when it comes to liftin' jools an' trinkets. Somebody fergits to lock the front door, an' she finds it out. Why did you come out without yer lid?"

"Just forgot it, that's all."

"Which way'd she go?"

"You'll need a map and a search-light. I started to run after her myself. I heard a voice from my window; I saw a woman; I made for the street; *niente!*"

"Huh?"

"*Niente*, nothing!"

"Oh! I see; Dago. Seems to me now that this woman was singin' I-taly-an, too." They were nearing the light, and the policeman gazed intently at the hatless young man. "Why, it's Mr. Hillard! I'm surprised. Well, well! Some day I'll run in a bunch o' these chorus leddies, jes' fer a lesson. They git lively at the restaurants over on Broadway, an' thin they raise the dead with their singin', which, often as not, is anythin' but singin'. An' here it is, after one."

"But this was not a chorus lady," replied Hillard, thoughtfully reaching into his vest for a cigar.

"Sure, an' how do you know?" with renewed suspicions.

"The lady had a singing voice."

"Huh! They all think alike about that. But mebbe she wasn't bad at the business. Annyhow... ."

"It was rather out of time and place, eh?" helpfully.

"That's about the size of it. This Leddy Lightfinger is a case. She has us all thinkin' on our nights off. Clever an' edjicated, an' jabbers in half a dozen tongues. It's a thousan' to the man who jugs her. But she don't sing; at least, they ain't any report to that effect. Perhaps your leddy was jes' larkin' a bit. But it's got to be stopped."

Hillard passed over the cigar, and the policeman bit off the end, nodding with approval at such foresight. The young man then proffered the coal of his pipe and the policeman took his light therefrom, realizing that after such a peace-offering there was nothing for him to do but move on. Yet on dismal lonesome nights, like this one, it is a godsend and a comfort to hear one's own voice against the darkness. So he lingered.

"Didn't get a peep at her face?"

"Not a single feature. The light was behind her." Hillard tapped one toe and then the other.

"An' how was she dressed?"

"In fog, for all I could see."

"On the level now, didn't you know who she was?" The policeman gave Hillard a sly dig in the ribs with his club.

"On my word!"

"Some swell, mebbe."

"Undoubtedly a lady. That's why it looks odd, why it brought me into the street. She sang in classic Italian. And what's more, for the privilege of hearing that voice again, I should not mind sitting on this cold curb till the milkman comes around in the

morning."

"That wouldn't be fer long," laughed the policeman, taking out his watch and holding it close to the end of his cigar. "Twenty minutes after one. Well, I must be gittin' back to me beat. An' you'd better be goin' in; it's cold. Good night."

"Good night," Hillard responded cheerfully.

"Say, what's I-taly-an fer good night?" still reluctant to go on.

"*Buona notte.*"

"Bony notty; huh, sounds like Chinese fer rheumatism. Been to Italy?"

"I was born there," patiently.

"No! Why, you're no Dago!"

"Not so much as an eyelash. The stork happened to drop the basket there, that's all."

"Ha! I see. Well, Ameriky is good enough fer me an' mine," complacently.

"I dare say!"

"An' if this stogy continues t' behave, we'll say no more about the vanishin' leddy." And with this the policeman strolled off into the fog, his suspicions in nowise removed. He knew many rich young bachelors like Hillard. If it wasn't a chorus lady, it was a prima donna, which was not far in these degenerate days from being the same thing.

Hillard regained his room and leaned with his back to the radiator. He had an idea. It was rather green and salad, but as soon as his hands were warm he determined to put this idea into immediate use. The Voice had stirred him deeply, stirred him with the longing to hear it again, to see the singer's face, to learn what extraordinary impulse had loosed the song. Perhaps it was his unspoken loneliness striving to call out against this self-imposed isolation; for he was secretly lonely, as all bachelors must be who have passed the Rubicon of thirty. He made no analysis of this new desire, or rather this old desire, newly awakened. He embraced it gratefully. Such is the mystery and power of the human voice: this one, passing casually under his window, had awakened him.

Never the winter came with its weary round of rain and fog and snow that his heart and mind did not fly over the tideless southern sea to the land of his birth if not of his blood. Sorrento, that jewel of the ruddy cliffs! There was fog outside his window, and yet how easy it was to picture the turquoise bay of Naples shimmering in the morning light! There was Naples itself, like a string of its own pink coral, lying crescent-wise on the distant strand; there were the snowcaps fading on the far horizon; the bronzed fishermen and their wives, a sheer two hundred feet below him, pulling in their glistening nets; the amethyst isles of Capri and Ischia eternally hanging midway between the blue of the sky and the blue of the sea; and there, towering menacingly above all this melting beauty, the dark, grim pipe of Vulcan. How easily, indeed, he could see all these things!

With a quick gesture of both hands, Latin, always Latin, he crossed the room to a small writing-desk, turned on the lights and sat down. He smiled as he took up the pen to begin his composition. Not one chance in a thousand. And after several attempts he realized that the letter he had in mind was not the simplest to compose. There were a dozen futile efforts before he produced anything like satisfaction. Then he filled out a small check. A little later he stole down-stairs, round the corner to the local branch of the post-office, and returned. It was only a blind throw, such as dicers sometimes make

in the dark. But chance loves her true gamester, and to him she makes a faithful servant.

"I should be sorely tempted," he mused, picking up a novel and selecting a comfortable angle in the Morris, "I should be sorely tempted to call any other man a silly ass. Leddy Lightfinger—it would be a fine joke if my singer turned out to be that irregular person."

He fell to reading, but it was not long before he yawned. He shied the book into a corner, drew off his boots and cast them into the hall. A moment after his valet appeared, gathered up the boots, tucked them under his arm, and waited.

"I want nothing, Giovanni. I have only been around to the post-office."

"I heard the door open and close four times, signore."

"It was I each time. If this fog does not change into rain, I shall want my riding-breeches to-morrow morning."

"It is always raining here," Giovanni remarked sadly.

"Not always; there are pleasant days in the spring and summer. It is because this is not Italy. The Hollander wonders how any reasonable being can dwell in a country where they do not drink gin. It's home, Giovanni; rain pelts you from a different angle here. There is nothing more; you may go. It is two o'clock, and you are dead for sleep."

But Giovanni only bowed; he did not stir.

"Well?" inquired his master.

"It is seven years now, signore."

"So it is; seven this coming April."

"I am now a citizen of this country; I obey its laws; I vote."

"Yes, Giovanni, you are an American citizen, and you should be proud of it."

Giovanni smiled. "I may return to my good Italia without danger."

"That depends. If you do not run across any official who recognizes you."

Giovanni spread his hands. "Official memory seldom lasts so long as seven years. The signore has crossed four times in this period."

"I would gladly have taken you each time, as you know."

"Oh, yes! But in two or three years the police do not forget. In seven it is different."

"Ah!" Hillard was beginning to understand the trend of this conversation. "So, then, you wish to return?"

"Yes, signore. I have saved a little money," modestly.

"A little?" Hillard laughed. "For seven years you have received fifty American dollars every month, and out of it you do not spend as many copper centesimi. I am certain that you have twenty thousand lire tucked away in your stocking; a fortune!"

"I buy the blacking for the signore's boots," gravely.

Hillard saw the twinkle in the black eyes. "I have never," he said truthfully, "asked you to black my boots."

"Penance, signore, penance for my sins; and I am not without gratitude. There was a time when I had rather cut off a hand than black a boot; but all that is changed. We of the Sabine Hills are proud, as the signore knows. We are Romans out there; we despise the cities; and we do not hold out our palms for the traveler's pennies. I am a peasant, but always remember the blood of the Cæsars. Who can say? Besides, I have held a sword for the church. I owe no allegiance to the puny House of Savoy!" There was no

twinkle in the black eyes now; there was a ferocious gleam. It died away quickly, however; the squared shoulders drooped, and there was a deprecating shrug. "Pardon, signore; this is far away from the matter of boots. I grow boastful; I am an old man and should know better. But does the signore return to Italy in the spring?"

"I don't know, Giovanni, I don't know. But what's on your mind?"

"Nothing new, signore," with eyes cast down to hide the returning lights.

"You are a bloodthirsty ruffian!" said Hillard shortly. "Will time never soften the murder in your heart?"

"I am as the good God made me. I have seen through blood, and time can not change that. Besides, the Holy Father will do something for one who fought for the cause."

"He will certainly not countenance bloodshed, Giovanni."

"He can absolve it. And as you say, I am rich, as riches go in the Sabine Hills."

"I was in hopes you had forgotten."

"Forgotten? The signore will never understand; it is his father's blood. She was so pretty and youthful, eye of my eye, heart of my heart! And innocent! She sang like the nightingale. She was always happy. Up with the dawn, to sleep with the stars. We were alone, she and I. The sheep supported me and she sold her roses and dried lavender. It was all so beautiful ... till he came. Ah, had he loved her! But a plaything, a pastime! The signore never had a daughter. What is she now? A nameless thing in the streets!" Giovanni raised his arms tragically; the hoots clattered to the floor. "Seven years! It is a long time for one of my blood to wait."

"Enough!" cried Hillard; but there was a hardness in his throat at the sight of the old man's tears. Where was the proud and stately man, the black-bearded shepherd in faded blue linen, in picturesque garters, with his reed-like pipe, that he, Hillard, had known in his boyhood days? Surely not here. Giovanni had known the great wrong, but Hillard could not in conscience's name foster the spirit which demanded an eye for an eye. So he said: "I can give you only my sympathy for your loss, but I abhor the spirit of revenge which can not find satisfaction in anything save murder."

Giovanni once more picked up the boots. "I shall leave the signore in the spring."

"As you please," said Hillard gently.

Giovanni bowed gravely and made off with his boots. Hillard remained staring thoughtfully at the many-colored squares in the rug under his feet. It would be lonesome with Giovanni gone. The old man had evidently made up his mind... . But the Woman with the Voice, would she see the notice in the paper? And if she did, would she reply to it? What a foundation for a romance!... Bah! He prepared for bed.

To those who reckon earthly treasures as the only thing worth having, John Hillard was a fortunate young man. That he was without kith or kin was considered by many as an additional piece of good fortune. Born in Sorrento, in one of the charming villas which sweep down to the very brow of the cliffs, educated in Rome up to his fifteenth year; taken at that age from the dreamy, drifting land and thrust into the noisy, bustling life which was his inheritance; fatherless and motherless at twenty; a college youth who was for ever mixing his Italian with his English and being laughed at; hating tumult and loving quiet; warm-hearted and impulsive, yet meeting only habitual reserve from his compatriots whichever way he turned; it is not to be wondered at that he preferred the land of his birth to that of his blood.