

Murder Mask

By EDGAR DANIEL KRAMER

A brief tale about the homicidal effect of wearing a medieval mask

WITH conflicting emotions in his faded eyes, the stooped and wrinkled butler bowed Colletti into the sun-flooded drawing-room.

"I will tell the master and mistress you are here, sir," the old servitor's cracked voice quavered, as he backed away. "I would as soon meet the Devil!" he spat and crossed himself hastily as soon as he was out of the visitor's sight. "With his hypocrite's smile and his cruel, green eyes!" He shuddered. "Ugh!"

Colletti, tall, dark, slender, prematurely graying at the temples, set his hat, gloves and stick on the nearest chair and with the lithe, slinking movements of a velvet-footed jungle beast advanced to the center table. His inscrutable gaze fastened on the gardenia in his lapel, he drew a bit of silk from the inside pocket of his coat. For a clock-tick or two he scrutinized it. Then, sucking in his breath with a reptilian hiss, he let it slip from his tapering fingers to the sun-splashed table top. It lay like a clot of blood on the polished mahogany. From a vest pocket he thumbed a rectangle of pasteboard, dog-eared and time-yellowed, which bore the badly faded, delicately penned legend:

*Who wears this mask
Is doomed to slay
Whom he loves best,
Ere break of day!*

As Colletti stood, holding the worn card between his thumb and forefinger, a hideous change crept over him. The ghost of a smile playing about the corners

of his thin-lipped mouth grew sardonic. His whole bearing became as deadly, as sinister, as a rattler ready to strike. Like a miasma lifting from a fen, he exuded an aura of evil that polluted the atmosphere around him and took the warmth from the sunlight.

His features grew wolfish and hardened into olive granite, while his eyes blazed feverishly, as he thought of his dead grandfather's will, that left all the eccentric importer's estate to his ward, Nita Tosca, in trust for her children, if she married either of his nephews, Antonio Colletti or Tomaso Romani, but divided the income equally among the trio if the girl remained single or married somebody else. In such a contingency, upon the demise of the last of the three, the principal was to be distributed to stipulated charities.

Nita had rejected Colletti's passionate suit and married Romani. Hiding his real feelings, Colletti had contrived to act as his cousin's best man. After the wedding, feeling cheated, nursing his wounded vanity, with hatred of the newly-weds festering in his veins, he fled to Europe. That was six months ago. Now he was back in his dead grandfather's house with a handful of silk, a frayed card, an all-consuming hate, an inexorable determination to get Nita and her husband out of the picture and —

"Tony!" A voice like the tinkling of silver bells roused Colletti from his devilish introspection.

Thrusting the card away, a quick smile

driving the satanic expression from his face, he jerked around like an automaton, as a slip of a woman, blue-eyed, golden-haired, ivory-skinned, came fluttering toward him. Behind her, in the doorway, her husband paused. At first glance and to the superficial observer, he was strikingly like Colletti. Closer study of the cousins, however, brought out subtle differences. Whereas Colletti was soft, hinting of unclean, forbidden things, with the unhealthy pallor of a plant too long away from the sun, Romani was as hard as a shining rapier, as clean as the salt tang of the sea, as frank as the day itself.

"Nita!" Colletti's suave voice was a caress, as he seized the young woman's impulsively outstretched hands. "It is good to see you again. You are lovelier than ever."

She laughed musically.

"You're looking splendid, Tom." Colletti shook hands with his cousin.

"I've never felt better," Romani answered. "When did you get back?"

"Yesterday," Colletti told him. "On the *Normandie*."

"You'll be coming to our masque tonight, Tony?" Nita queried.

"Just try to keep me away!" Colletti chuckled. He didn't deem it necessary to explain that he had deliberately timed his return so that he would not miss the masque. "In fact," he went on, "I've just arranged for my costume. By the way," he turned back to the table, "here's a mask I thought one of you might want to wear tonight. I happened to find it, when I was unpacking this morning. It's unique, I think."

Nita caught up the mask and shook out its deep crimson, almost black, folds.

"I'd wear it myself," Colletti added hastily, "but I'm coming as Death and it wouldn't go very well with my costume."

"It's lovely!" Nita breathed, her eyes enigmatic. "So rich! So lustrous! So soft to the touch! Why, it's actually warm! Like living flesh!"

Colletti eyed her narrowly.

"It's been lying in the sunlight, my dear," her husband reminded her.

"I'd wear it, Tony," Nita spoke dreamily, "but I'm attending the masque as a Watteau shepherdess and I'm afraid it won't fit into the picture at all."

"I'll wear it." Romani relieved his wife of the mask. "As a Florentine dandy in the days of the Medici I couldn't ask for anything better. It's just the thing to go with my black outfit."

THE late-afternoon sunlight vanished. The room became a place of whispering shadows. Nita shivered.

"What's the matter?" her husband asked anxiously.

"I'm getting jittery, I guess," she laughed nervously. "I've been going too fast a pace lately. I'll be glad when tonight's over. We won't unmask till we have breakfast at dawn." There was something akin to fear in her shifting glances. "After tonight I'll be taking a long rest."

Colletti unconsciously tautened.

"Where'd you get this, Tony?" Romani wanted to know, as his long fingers stroked the silk.

"In Padua," Colletti replied. "In a little cubbyhole of a shop off the beaten track. I figuratively fell into it." He chuckled at the recollection. "The mask struck my fancy as soon as I saw it." He fingered the card in his vest pocket. "I'll run along now. No need to ring for Benito. I'll see you tonight."

They were not hearing him. As though fascinated, hypnotized, metamorphosed into stone like those who looked upon the Gorgons, they appeared completely absorbed in the mask. Colletti gathered

up his hat and gloves and stick and silently let himself out.

"After tonight," he chortled his satisfaction, as he strolled down Park Avenue, "the house and all the income from the old man's estate will be mine. I'll live like a lord and throw some parties that'll knock the town's eyes out." He gloated in anticipation. "The poor, blind fools! If the mask doesn't work, this will."

He brought a tiny vial to view and cuddled it in his palm.

"If the necessity arises, I will drop this into their wine. It is odorless, colorless, tasteless and leaves no traces. Nita and Tom will never see another dawn."

"**Y**OU'RE beautiful tonight, my dear!" Romani rapturously murmured his adoration. "Divinely lovely, Nita mine!"

"You're handsome yourself, Tom!" Her eyes glowed like summer stars.

"I'm mad about you, darling!"

She adjusted her domino. He caught her in his arms and clasped her close. Their lips met and clung.

"I couldn't," he muttered thickly, "I wouldn't live without you, dear!"

"Be careful!" She struggled for breath and reluctantly shoved him away. "You're crushing me, Tom! You're mussing me, too! Let me go now! Please!"

Unwillingly he released her. From below there floated up to them the dulcet strains of a stringed ensemble mingled with shrill feminine laughter, the hoarser mirth of men, the rustling of garments, the shuffling of feet. The air was heady with intoxicating perfumes.

"We must be going down!" she panted through Cupid-bow lips. "Are you ready?"

"Just about." He slipped on the mask Colletti had brought. "All set! Let's go!"

She started and gasped, while her tiny hands flew to her slender throat.

"What are you staring at?" he demanded, cold steel suddenly in his voice. "What's the matter, anyway?"

"Your eyes, Tom!" she choked. "They're — they're — they're —" She couldn't go on.

"You have a bad case of nerves!" he sneered, as he pulled the lower part of the mask away from his face. "This thing persists in pressing against my mouth. You'd think it was alive."

"Your eyes are wild!" she managed to gulp. "You never looked at me like this, Tom. Oh! Your eyes are hot and cruel! Like Tony's at times!"

"Like Tony's, eh?" he jeered in a voice that had lost all its tenderness. "I wish he had stayed on the other side," he continued vehemently. "I wish he had broken his neck, when he fell into that shop in Padua. If I never saw the beggar again, it would be too soon."

Blinking her amazement, she seemed on the point of saying something, changed her mind and turned to the door.

"Listen, lady!" He seized her arm and roughly yanked her back. "Don't be too nice to Tony. Don't encourage him. The rotter has a way with women."

"Tom!" She fought vainly to break his hold. "You're bruising my arm! Let me go! You're hurting me! Let me go! Please!"

"Not too many dances with Tony!" He glared at her. "Mind, Nita! I don't like the way he looked at you this afternoon. Nor the way he held your hands. I felt like slamming him."

"What in the world has got into you, Tom?" she almost wailed, as she wriggled free. "You never —" Her strained voice broke. "Why—why," she stammered her bewilderment, "I actually believe you're jealous of Tony!"

"Jealous of Tony and every other man!" he confessed throatily. "I'd kill you, Nita, before I'd let Tony or anybody

else have you." His hand dropped to the haft of the slender dagger at his waist. "I swear it!"

There was no doubting his sincerity. His eyes blazed at her challengingly through the thin slits in the mask.

"This thing seems to be blending with my skin." He tugged impatiently at the silk that rippled to his agitated breathing like a thing alive. "It seems to work convulsively against my mouth."

With a stifled cry, Nita staggered from the room like a stricken thing. For a split second her husband stood glowering after her, fighting for breath like a spent runner. Then he came to life and darted in her wake. He reached the top of the broad stairway, as his wife poised at the bottom like a bird on the point of trying out its wings.

The next instant, what appeared to be a skeleton, shrouded from head to foot in the habiliments of the grave and wearing a mask in the form of a grinning skull, detached itself from the swirling phantasmagoria of nymphs, priests, satyrs, ballet dancers, monks, pirates, harlequins, tramps, pierrettes, sailors, imps and other bizarre creatures, to bow over Nita's hand and whirl her away in a dreamy Strauss waltz.

"Dancing with him already!" Romani growled, as he leisurely descended the stairs. "They'd better not drive me too far!" All the while his fingers were fondling the hilt of his dagger. "They——" He broke off abruptly, while his angry gaze searched the hilarious throng for the dainty shepherdess and her gruesome partner.

ON A flood of delirious revelry Nita catapulted through the heavy draperies into the dimly lit alcove. Her husband came bursting in after her. The curtains trembled into place and the

sounds of the frenzied merrymaking came to them as though from far away.

"How dare you!" Nita expostulated furiously with a stamp of her foot. "How dare you, Tom!"

He stood glaring at her fixedly, breathing hard, his slim hands clenched until the knuckles showed like chalk. Her eyes were pools of fire. Her breasts heaved tumultuously.

"You have been hateful tonight, Tom!" She dabbed frantically at her eyes with a lacy handkerchief. "You have humiliated me terribly!"

He remained silent.

"You actually tore me out of Tony's arms just now!" she went on scathingly. "You actually flung me in here!"

Romani swallowed hard.

"You'll have to apologize to Tony."

He dismissed the suggestion with a shrug.

"You'll have to!" she insisted.

"You've been dancing with Tony all night!" he rasped savagely. "Every time I looked up, it seemed, he was holding you in his arms with his dirty eyes undressing you."

"Tom!"

"I asked you not to dance with him so often."

"You're being ridiculous!"

"You've been acting deliberately contrary to my wishes." He didn't hear her. "I pleaded with you but you persisted. It made my blood boil. I saw red, while Tony exulted. Finally, I commanded you to dance no more with him. After all, you are my wife, you know. You laughed in my face."

She tossed her head like a spoiled child.

"Hear it, Nita!" He eagerly took a step toward her. "The last dance! Shall we waltz it together?"

"No!" She meant to punish him for his show of jealousy.

Romani recoiled as though from a slap in the face.

"I shall dance it with Tony," she told him airily. "Let me pass!"

She started to brush past her husband, as the draperies parted and Colletti appeared.

"Nita," he began, "you——"

With a nerve-tearing snarl, Romani flashed his slender-bladed dagger and lunged.

"Oh!" Nita started to scream. "Tom, you——"

Her strangled shriek ended in a gurgling gasp, as the dagger sheathed itself to the hilt in her bosom. Blood gushed and bubbled around the buried blade. An expression of mingled bewilderment, surprise and incredulity flitted over her ghastly, painted face, as Romani caught his crumpling wife in his arms.

"Nita!" he croaked, his red rage dropping from him like a discarded cloak. "Speak to me, sweet! Nita! Nita! Nita! Good God! What have I done?"

"You've killed her, Tom!" Colletti could not keep the oily satisfaction from his voice. "You have murdered her!"

"Nita!" Romani was beside himself with grief. "Speak to me, dear! I wouldn't hurt you! I wouldn't! I'd die first!"

He covered her face with kisses.

"Nita! Nita! Nita!"

She hung limp in his embrace.

"Speak to me, darling!" he beseeched, as he tore off his mask and flung it across the shadowy alcove. "I love you! I love you! Speak to me, Nita!"

"It's no use, Tom!" Colletti mocked him. "She's dead!"

Romani seemed to become aware of the other man's presence.

"This means the electric chair for you, Tom," Colletti cruelly reminded his cousin. "You have murdered her."

For clock-ticks that seemed eternities Romani stared hard at the speaker. Gently he lowered his dead wife to the thick-piled rug. Carefully he pulled the dagger from her breast. Tenderly he closed her eyes, crossed her hands on her bloody bosom and straightened her limbs.

"Thanks to the mask," Colletti pointed, "you have murdered your wife, Tom." He handed the anguished man the time-yellowed card. "Soon you'll be walking through that little green door."

"I can't live without you, Nita!" Romani declared brokenly, as he deciphered the faded legend. "I won't!"

"The state will attend to that, Tom," Colletti jeered. "You need have no worries on that score."

ROMANI retrieved the discarded mask and, whirling on Colletti, thrust it at him.

"Put it on!" he ordered brusquely and tickled his cousin's ribs with his blood-smeared dagger. "Put it on or I'll drive this steel into your devil's heart!"

Colletti paled and gulped and hesitated.

"Put it on!" Romani reiterated huskily, increasing the pressure of the dagger, while with his free hand he tore the death mask from his cousin's face. "Hurry!"

With trembling fingers Colletti adjusted the red silk mask over his twitching features.

"*Who wears this mask!*" Romani growled, as through the muted strains of the waltz the weary revelers chorused *Good-night, Ladies*. "It's your turn now, Tony! *Is doomed to slay!* Murder, Tony! *Whom he loves best!* That's yourself, Tony! You're going to kill yourself! You've never loved anybody but yourself! *Ere break of day!* Which isn't far off! You'll have to hurry, Tony! You haven't much time!"

Like a man suffering the tortures of the damned, Colletti's whole body was writhing horribly. His palsied hands clawed at his throat. He appeared to be wrestling with an invisible antagonist.

"*Whom he loves best!*" Romani repeated hoarsely. "You're taking your own worthless life, Tony! Hurry!"

The crimson mask moving to his labored breathing, Colletti fumbled inside the hideous grave garments he was wearing. His groping hands brought a tiny vial to light.

"*Is doomed to slay!*" Romani hissed, stepping back, for the coercion of the dagger was no longer needed. "*Whom he loves best!*"

While Romani watched him balefully, Colletti slowly lifted the fluttering mask with his left hand, while with his right he tilted the bottle on his mouth. With a hollow gulp he drained its contents. His

hands dropped like leaden plummets. For a split second he steadied. Then a tremor shook him from heels to crown. He swung half-way around, recovered, his knees buckled and he collapsed on his face. Romani rolled him over, nudged him callously with his foot, stooped and listened to his heart.

"Dead!" he mumbled and straightened. "Gone to the hell where he belongs!"

He sank on his knees beside his dead wife. Tenderly he kissed her cold eyes, her carmined lips, the little hollow at the base of her throat.

"Coming, Nita!" he spoke as though replying to an urgent summons and plunged the dagger into his own heart. "Com——"

He pitched forward over the dead woman. The music and the singing ceased. The gray dawning peered in at the window.