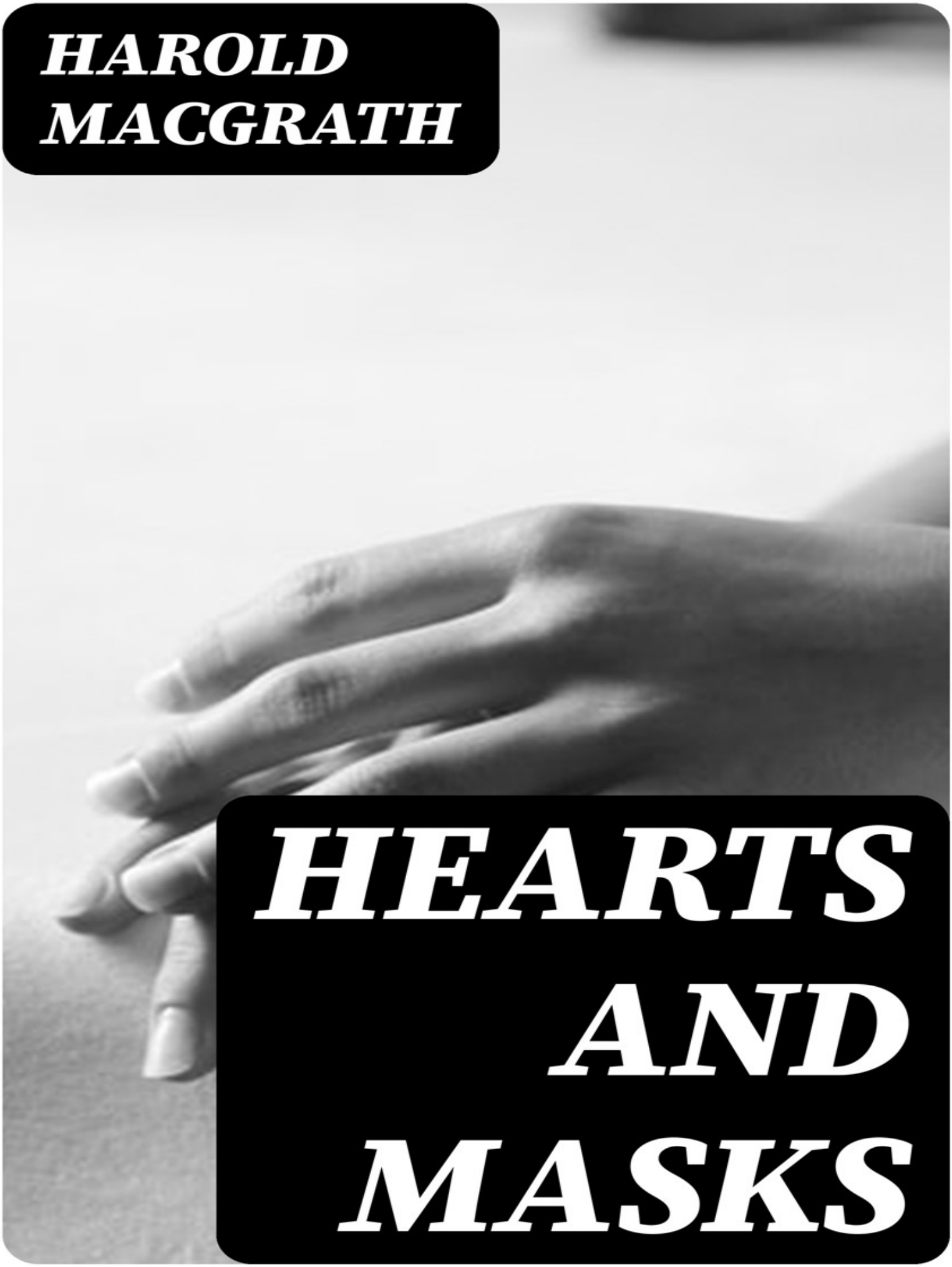
HAROLD MACGRATH



HEARTS AND MASKS

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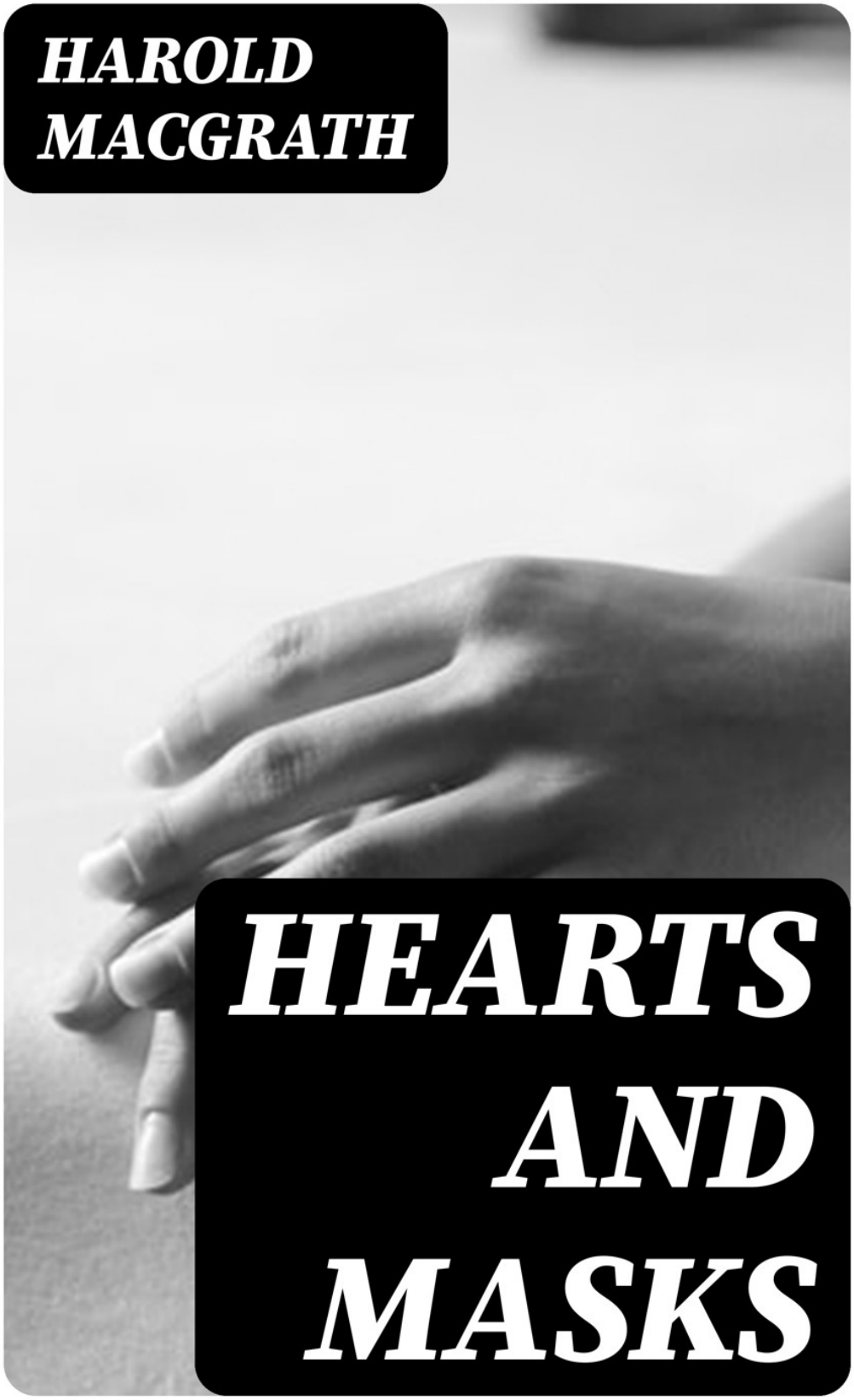

HEARTS AND MASKS

Harold MacGrath

Hearts and Masks

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It all depends upon the manner of your entrance to the Castle of Adventure. One does not have to scale its beetling parapets or assault its scarps and frowning bastions; neither is one obliged to force with clamor and blaring trumpets and glittering gorgets the drawbridge and portcullis. Rather the pathway lies through one of those many little doors, obscure, yet easily accessible, latchless and boltless, to which the average person gives no particular attention, and yet which invariably lead to the very heart of this Castle Delectable. The whimsical chatelaine of this enchanted keep is a shy goddess. Circumspection has no part in her affairs, nor caution, nor practicality; nor does her eye linger upon the dullard and the blunderer. Imagination solves the secret riddle, and wit is the guide that leads the seeker through the winding, bewildering labyrinths.

And there is something in being idle, too!

If I had not gone idly into Mouquin's cellar for dinner that night, I should have missed the most engaging adventure that ever fell to my lot. It is second nature for me to be guided by impulse rather than by reason; reason is always so square-toed and impulse is always so alluring. You will find that nearly all the great captains were and are creatures of impulse; nothing brilliant is ever achieved by calculation. All this is not to say that I am a great captain; it is offered only to inform you that I am often impulsive.

A *Times*, four days old; and if I hadn't fallen upon it to pass the twenty-odd minutes between my order and the

service of it, I shouldn't have made the acquaintance of the police in that pretty little suburb over in New Jersey; nor should I have met the enchanting Blue Domino; nor would fate have written Kismet. The clairvoyant never has any fun in this cycle; he has no surprises.

I had been away from New York for several weeks, and had returned only that afternoon. Thus, the spirit of unrest acquired by travel was still upon me. It was nearing holiday week, and those congenial friends I might have called upon, to while away the evening, were either busily occupied with shopping or were out of town; and I determined not to go to the club and be bored by some indifferent billiard player. I would dine quietly, listen to some light music, and then go to the theater. I was searching the theatrical amusements, when the society column indifferently attacked my eye. I do not know why it is, but I have a wholesome contempt for the so-called society columns of the daily newspaper in New York. Mayhap, it is because I do not belong.

I read this paragraph with a shrug, and that one with a smirk. I was in no manner surprised at the announcement that Miss High-Culture was going to wed the Duke of Impecune; I had always been certain this girl would do some such fool thing. That Mrs. Hyphen-Bonds was giving a farewell dinner at the Waldorf, prior to her departure to Europe, interested my curiosity not in the least degree. It would be all the same to me if she never came back. None of the wishy-washy tittle-tattle interested me, in fact. There was only one little six-line paragraph that really caught me. On Friday night (that is to say, the night of my adventures in Blankshire), the Hunt Club was to give a charity masquerade

dance. This grasped my adventurous spirit by the throat and refused to let go.

The atmosphere surrounding the paragraph was spirituous with enchantment. There was a genuine novelty about this dance. Two packs of playing-cards had been sent out as tickets; one pack to the ladies and one to the gentlemen. Charming idea, wasn't it? These cards were to be shown at the door, together with ten dollars, but were to be retained by the recipients till two o'clock (supper-time), at which moment everybody was to unmask and take his partner, who held the corresponding card, in to supper. Its newness strongly appealed to me. I found myself reading the paragraph over and over.

By Jove, what an inspiration!

I knew the Blankshire Hunt Club, with its colonial architecture, its great ball-room, its quaint fireplaces, its stables and sheds, and the fame of its chef. It was one of those great country clubs that keep open house the year round. It stood back from the sea about four miles and was within five miles of the village. There was a fine course inland, a cross-country going of not less than twenty miles, a shooting-box, and excellent golf-links. In the winter it was cozy; in the summer it was ideal.

I was intimately acquainted with the club's M. F. H., Teddy Hamilton. We had done the Paris-Berlin run in my racing-car the summer before. If I hadn't known him so well, I might still have been in durance vile, next door to jail, or securely inside. I had frequently dined with him at the club during the summer, and he had offered to put me up; but as I knew no one intimately but himself, I explained the futility of such

action. Besides, my horse wasn't a hunter; and I was riding him less and less. It is no pleasure to go "parking" along the bridle-paths of Central Park. For myself, I want a hill country and something like forty miles, straight away; that's riding.

The fact that I knew no one but Teddy added zest to the inspiration which had seized me. For I determined to attend that dance, happen what might. It would be vastly more entertaining than a possibly dull theatrical performance. (It was!)

I called for a messenger and despatched him to the nearest drug store for a pack of playing-cards; and while I waited for his return I casually glanced at the other diners. At my table—one of those long marble-topped affairs by the wall—there was an old man reading a paper, and the handsomest girl I had set eyes upon in a month of moons. Sometimes the word handsome seems an inferior adjective. She was beautiful, and her half-lidded eyes told me that she was anywhere but at Mouquin's. What a head of hair! Fine as a spider's web, and the dazzling yellow of a wheat-field in a sun-shower! The irregularity of her features made them all the more interesting. I was an artist in an amateur way, and I mentally painted in that head against a Rubens background. The return of the messenger brought me back to earth; for I confess that my imagination had already leaped far into the future, and this girl across the way was nebulously connected with it.

I took the pack of cards, ripped off the covering, tossed aside the joker (though, really, I ought to have retained it!) and began shuffling the shiny pasteboards. I dare say that those around me sat up and took notice. It was by no means

a common sight to see a man gravely shuffling a pack of cards in a public restaurant. Nobody interfered, doubtless because nobody knew exactly what to do in the face of such an act, for which no adequate laws had been provided. A waiter stood solemnly at the end of the table, scratching his chin thoughtfully, wondering whether he should report this peculiarity of constitution and susceptibility occasioning certain peculiarities of effect from impress of extraneous influences (*vide* Webster), synonymous with idiocrasy and known as idiosyncrasy. It was quite possible that I was the first man to establish such a precedent in Monsieur Mouquin's restaurant. Thus, I aroused only passive curiosity.

From the corner of my eye I observed the old gentleman opposite. He was peering over the top of his paper, and I could see by the glitter in his eye that he was a confirmed player of solitaire. The girl, however, still appeared to be in a dreaming state. I have no doubt every one who saw me thought that anarchy was abroad again, or that Sherlock Holmes had entered into his third incarnation.

Finally I squared the pack, took a long-breath, and cut. I turned up the card. It was the ten-spot of hearts. I considered this most propitious; hearts being my long suit in everything but love,—love having not yet crossed my path. I put the card in my wallet, and was about to toss the rest of the pack under the table, when, a woman's voice stayed my hand.

"Don't throw them away. Tell my fortune first."

I looked up, not a little surprised. It was the beautiful young girl who had spoken. She was leaning on her elbows, her chin propped in her palms, and the light in her grey

chatoyant eyes was wholly innocent and mischievous. In Monsieur Mouquin's cellar people are rather Bohemian, not to say friendly; for it is the rendezvous of artists, literary men and journalists,—a clan that holds formality in contempt.

"Tell your fortune?" I repeated parrot-like.

"Yes."

"Your mirror can tell you that more accurately than I can," I replied with a frank glance of admiration.

She drew her shoulders together and dropped them. "I spoke to you, sir, because I believed you wouldn't say anything so commonplace as that. When one sees a man soberly shuffling a pack of cards in a place like this, one naturally expects originality."

"Well, perhaps you caught me off my guard,"—humbly.

"I am original. Did you ever before witness this performance in a public restaurant?"—making the cards purr.

"I can not say I have,"—amused.

"Well, no more have I!"

"Why, then, do you do it?"—with renewed interest.

"Shall I tell your fortune?"

"Not now. I had much rather you would tell me the meaning of this play."

I leaned toward her and whispered mysteriously: "The truth is, I belong to a secret society, and I was cutting the cards to see whether or not I should blow up the post-office to-night or the police-station. You mustn't tell anybody."

"Oh!" She started back from the table. "You do not look it," she added suddenly.