

## The Grey Cloak - Harold Macgrath



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A man enveloped in a handsome grey cloak groped through a dark alley which led into the fashionable district of the Rue de Bœhème. From time to time he paused, with a hand to his ear, as if listening. Satisfied that the alley was deserted save for his own presence, he would proceed, hugging the walls. The cobbles were icy, and scarce a moment passed in which he did not have to struggle to maintain his balance. The door of a low tavern opened suddenly, sending a golden shaft of light across the glistening pavement and casting a brilliant patch on the opposite wall. With the light came sounds of laughter and quarreling and ringing glasses. The man laid his hand on his sword, swore softly, and stepped back out of the blinding glare. The flash of light revealed a mask which left visible only the lower half of his face. Men wearing masks were frequently subjected to embarrassing questions; and this man was determined that no one should question him to-night. He waited, hiding in the shadow. Half a dozen guardsmen and musketeers reeled out. The host reviled them for a pack of rogues. They cursed him, laughing, and went on, to be swallowed up in the darkness beyond. The tavern door closed, and once more the alley was hued with melting greys and purples. The man in the cloak examined the strings of his mask, tilted his hat

still farther down over his eyes, and tested the looseness of his sword. "The drunken fools!" he muttered, continuing. "Well for them they came not this way." When he entered the Rue de Bâty, he stopped, searched up and down the thoroughfare. Far away to his right he saw wavering torches, but these receded and abruptly vanished round a corner of the Rue des Fossés St-Germain l'Auxerrois. He was alone. A hundred yards to his left, on the opposite side of the street, stood a gloomy but magnificent hôtel, one of the few in this quarter that was surrounded by a walled court. The hôtel was dark. So far as the man in the grey cloak could see, not a light filled any window. There were two gates. Toward the smaller of the two the man cautiously directed his steps. He tried the latch. The gate opened noiselessly, signifying frequent use. "So far, so good!" An indecisive moment passed, as though the man were nerving himself for an ordeal of courage and cunning. With a gesture resigning himself to whatever might befall, he entered the court, careful to observe that the way out was no more intricate than the way in. "Now for the ladder. If that is missing, it's horse and away to Spain, or feel the edge of Monsieur Caboche. Will the lackey be true? False or true, I must trust him. Bernouin would sell Mazarin for twenty louis, and that is what I have paid. Monsieur le Comte's lackey. It will be a clever trick. Mazarin will pay as many as ten thousand livres for that paper. That fat fool of a Gaston, to conspire at his age! Bah; what a muddled ass I was, in faith! I, to sign my name in writing to a cabal! Only the devil knows what yonder old fool will do with the paper. Let him become frightened, let that painted play-woman coddle him; and it's the block for us all, all save Gaston and Condé and Beaufort. Ah, Madame, Madame, loveliest in all France, 'twas your beautiful eyes. For the joy of looking into them, I have soiled a fresh quill, tumbled into a pit, played the fool! And a silver crown against a golden louis, you know nothing about politics or intrigue, nor that that old fool of a husband is making a decoy of your beauty. But my head cleared this morning. That paper must be mine. First, because it is a guaranty for my head, and second, because it is likely to fatten my purse. It will be simple to erase my name and substitute another's. And this cloak! My faith, it is a stroke. To the devil with Gaston and Condé and Beaufort; their ambitions are nothing to me, since my head is everything." He tiptoed across the stone flags.

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