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The Mardi Gras Mystery

H. BEDFORD-JONES

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CHAPTER VII.—Continued.

"Very well. Do not plan to wear any jewels, Lucie. I have a set to lend you for the occasion—no, not a gift, merely a loan for the sake of Comus. They are very nice pearls; a little old-fashioned, because they were mounted for the Princess de Lamballe, but you will find that they fit in excellently with your gown. I'll bring them with me when I call for you."

"And I'll wear nothing but black then?"

One thing more: Henry Gramont is going to see you after luncheon. I think—on business. And I want you to be nice to him. Quite plain."

"Most assuredly," said the other, dryly. "I should like to be associated in business with that young man. The firm would prosper."

Smiling, she hung up the receiver. Ten minutes later, when Gramont and Miss Ledanos entered the waiting car, Hammond saw the boxes that they carried. He stood beside the open door, paralyzed, his eyes fastened on the boxes, his mouth agape.

"To the post office, sergeant," said Gramont, then affected to observe his stupefaction. "Why, what's the matter?"

Hammond met his twinkling eyes, saw the laughter of Lucie, and swallowed hard.

"—nothing at all, cap'n," he answered, hoarsely. "A—little chokin' spell, that's all. Post office? Yes, sir."

CHAPTER VIII.

Comus.

From the time they left the Ledanos house with Lucie, Gramont had no opportunity of seeing his chauffeur in private until, later in the afternoon, he left the Madison Avenue building. He had enjoyed a thoroughly satisfactory interview with Jacob Fell. The car was waiting for him in Royal street, not far from the Montpelier, and Gramont approached it with a Hammond in deep worry over the outcome of the interview with Fell.

"Well, cap'n," he exclaimed, anxiously, as Gramont drew up. "You're smiling, so I guess it's all a peach."

"Don't worry. The stuff is returned, and the matter is now closed. We can forget all about the Midnight Masquerade. Now, there's another and more important thing that I want to speak with you about, a matter of business."

"Hold on, cap'n!" interrupted Hammond, quietly, his eye on a spot behind Gramont. "One of your friends is headed over this way, and if I know anything about it, he's got blood in his eye."

Gramont turned, to see Bob Mallard approaching. The latter addressed him without any response to his greeting.

"Have you a moment to spare, Gramont?"

"All afternoon," answered Gramont, cheerfully. He affected not to observe Mallard's air of heavy business, nor the frowning suspicion that lurked half-hidden in the other's gloowering features.

The two were standing a bit apart, and Hammond was fastening with one of the headlights, but Gramont suspected that the chauffeur was listening avidly. "I've just come from a talk with dad. How did it happen that you sold him that stock of yours in the company?"

Gramont smiled a little. "I happened to need the money. Why?"

"But why the devil didn't you hang on to that stock? Or if you needed the money, why didn't you come to me?" exploded the other, angrily.

"Heavens!" drawled Gramont, who was quite willing to exasperate young men in to this habit. "You seem frightfully concerned about it! What's the big idea, anyway? I offered the stock to your father at a discount. He realized that it was a good buy, and took it. What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing wrong, if you put it that way," snapped Mallard, eagerly. "But it's a confoundedly why at doing things—"

"Now, just wait right there!" said Gramont, smiling. "I don't take that kind of talk, Mallard. I'm off in the morning to start with a report I was engaged to make. When the report comes in, my reputation comes with it."

"All right. Let it come here and now then," Mallard's tone was ugly.

"If you're so blamed anxious to get out of the company, get out!"

"Thank you, I'll be glad to be relieved of the job," Gramont turned and addressed his chauffeur. "Hammond, you'll kindly remember this conversation, to make your future testimony is needed."

"Confound you, what d'you mean talking that way?" broke out Mallard.

"Do you suppose I'll deny being your?"

"I don't intend to hang you off any more," replied on his actions. Mallard, said Gramont, evenly. "My course in this matter is perfectly open and above board, which is more than you can say for your doings."

"What?" Mallard clenched his stick and took a forward step, anger working in his face. "What the devil d'you mean?"

"Exactly what I say—and perhaps I can prove it. Remember the oil com-

pany in which you persuaded your punctious father to sell some of Miss Ledanos' Bayou land? Remember the real estate company to which you persuaded him to sell her St. Landry parish property?"

Now had interest in both companies. I don't imagine you care to have your share in those transactions exposed. Further, I entirely understand your fulguration over my getting rid of the stock before the crash, and it'll be some time to shake any such attitude."

Mallard glared at him for a long moment, a red tinge of rage deepening and ebbing from his dusky complexion. Then, mastering himself, he turned away without further comment. Leaving Hammond to take his car home, Gramont headed for Canal street to mingle with the carnival crowd with revel in his new-found sense of freedom. Now that he was his own master, he felt like a new man. With a boyish abandon he tramped the streets merrily, expounding jests and comfort, shoves and bladder-blow, laughs and kisses. Mad-dness and reckless gaiety were in the very air, and Gramont drank deep of these youthful tones. When at last he wandered hand in his pocket, he was footsore, weary, disarranged and tumbled—very happily. The wind of human comradeship is a good pipe.

That evening the Comus ball, the most exclusive event of the most exclusive aristocracy of the southland, crowded the edifice in which it was held to capacity. These evening dress was prescribed for all the guests! The Krewe (Comus alone were masked and costumed, in grotesque and magnificent costumes which had been in the making for months. The Krewe is to the South what the Bohemian Club is to the western coast, with the added enhancement of mystery.

Despite the revels of the Krewe, however—despite the glittering lights, the barbaric costumes, the music, the excitement—an indelible air of mystery, almost of sadness, pervaded the entire gathering. This feeling was something to be sensed, rather than

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"What the Devil D'You Mean?"

observed, definitely. Some said, indeed, that it was a premonition of the terrible event that was to happen this night. Wrong! It was because, for the first time in many generations, the Comus ball was held in one of the newer public buildings instead of in its accustomed place. Everyone was speaking of it. Even Mallard, the banker, that cold man of dollars, spoke unreservedly of the Comus ball as the most interesting in the smoking room.

"It doesn't seem like Comus," said Mallard, with a vexed frown. "And to think that we had just finished redecorating the opera house when it was burned down! Comus will never be the same again."

"I didn't know you could feel such emotion for a ruined building, Mallard," said Gramont, lightly. "The banker blushed a trifle."

"Emotion? No, Regret! Not of us, who has been brought up in the traditions of the city, but regret for the French Opera house as the center of the city's life. You can't understand it, Gramont; no outsider can. By the way, you haven't seen Bob? He's in trouble, but he's not been spoken to yet."

Gramont answered in the negative, with a slight surprise at the question.

It was not long before he began to comprehend more fully just what the loss of the old French Opera house meant to the city's life. He heard comparisons made on every hand, regretful allusions, sighs for the days that were no more.

This present building, to be sure, was built on the city's chest, up to date in every way, with an abundance of room—had, yet everyone said that Comus would never be the same. About the opera house had hung the romance of many generations. About it, too, had clung the affections of the people with a fierceness beyond reason. More famous buildings had been allowed to go to ruin, like the Hotel Royal, but the opera house had been kept in re-

pair for Mardi Gras. It was itself a landmark. Nothing else could ever be like it.

From his seat in the last row box Gramont contented himself with the early evening with the moon-folk of all the "blackfinks"—the, of looking on. More than on he saw Lucie Ledanos called out among others of the fair sex, as a dancing partner for some member of the Krewe. No one of the male guests, however, was allowed to participate in it, festivity until nine and his queen would arrive at midnight; thus, Gramont saw almost nothing of Lucie during the evening.

While he searched for smoking companions, Gramont encountered many of his acquaintances, and among them Doctor Ansley and Alvin Bell. The three strolled off together into one of the upper passages leading to other parts of the building. They opened a window and stood watching the crowd steadily increasing as the hour grew later, for the procession of Reg would be well worth seeing and nobody meant to miss anything upon this night of nights.

Suddenly, at the sound of an approaching footstep, the three men turned. The electric lights were going in all of the hallways, and they perceived that the individual approaching was a member of the Krewe of Comus. He was also, it became evident, giving a share of his allegiance to Lucie, for his feet were obviously unsteady. He was clad in a parti-colored costume, which was crowned by an exaggerated head of Mephisto. "Wonderful who I am, aren't you?" he muttered. "Well, don't wonder, 'sall between of friends tonight, but what, my friends—come with me and I'll show you a 'l' drink, eh? Real old Boche pinchneck—got it from some boys in Louisville, been sayin' 'it up for tonight."

He waved his hand at them, and pursued his subject in a half-mad burst of confidential assurance.

"Havin' a little party in one of the rooms," he continued. "All of us (Mephisto) are sure fun, eh? I dancin'! And say, I'm going pull something great, positively great, 'on don't want to miss it, gentlemen! You come along with me and I'll fix it for you, Comus, that's good for you! You'll find a dis'gustment to-day—don't matter tonight, nothing matters tonight, nothing at all! March Grrs only comes once a year, eh? Come along, now."

Jacin Fell very civilly refused the invitation, as did the others. Gramont, who now recognized their accoster, was less civil in his refusal. Mephisto regarded them with vinous regret.

"No joy in it for any more! Better come along, tell you, I've got the biggest joke of the season ready to pull off—something rich! Gramont, come on!"

"Thanks, no," responded Gramont, dryly.

The masquer gave up the struggle and moved on down the empty hall.

"I wonder if that was now?" mused Doctor Ansley, frowning. "Everybody someone who knew us; at least, he recognized you, Gramont."

"So it seemed," put it Jacin Fell. His tone, like his eyes, had a somber look.

"A party of them drinking, eh? That will make trouble. The Krewe don't like it. Who was he, Gramont?"

"I judged like."

"Young Mallard?" At Gramont's response a white-flicker from Doctor Ansley. Jacin Fell nodded assent.

"To took the words out of my mouth! So Bob's drinking again, eh? Hello, Gramont—where to?"

Gramont tossed his cigar through the open window.

"I think I'll make my adieu. Fell, I intend to be up early in the morning and get off to work."

"What?" protested Ansley in astonishment. "You must stay until Reg comes, at least! Why, then, the eve of the carnival! The eve of the carnival!"

"I'm growing old and sober, doctor," Gramont checked. "W. at 8 o'clock, was drifting with the crowd all afternoon, and I've just begun to realize that I'm dead tired. Reg or no Reg, I'm afraid I'll best say goodnight, gentlemen."

Returning to the auditorium, Gramont sought out his hosts and made his farewells, although not without encountering some opposition. At length he was free, he had obtained his hat and coat, and as he passed out of the building he again met Fell and Ansley, who were finishing their cigars at the entrance. He bade them a good night and plunged into the crowd.

It lacked half an hour of midnight. For a little, Fell and Doctor Ansley stood talking, then tossed away their cigars and turned into a building.

Fell was kind in the foyer before the appearance of two men—Joseph Mallard, looking extremely agitated, and behind him old Judge Forester, who wore a distinctly worried expression.

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