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CHAPTER VIII—Continued.

—12—

"Ah, here are Fell and Ansley!" exclaimed Maillard, almost with relief. "I—ah—my friends. I don't suppose you've seen Bob recently?"

Ansley was silent. Jachin Fell, however, responded with a cold nod of assent.

"Yes," he said in his peculiarly toneless manner. "Yes, we have. At least, I believe it was he——"

"I'm worried," said Maillard, anxiously, hurriedly. He made an expressive gesture of despair. "He's in costume, of course. I've been given to understand that—well, that he has been—well, drinking."

"He has," said Jachin Fell, without any trace of compassion. "A number of the Krewe are occupying one of the rooms in the building, and they must have been visiting it frequently. I trust for your sake that the fact hasn't become generally known inside?"

Maillard nodded. Shame and anger lay heavily in his eyes.

Judge Forester, in his kindly way, laid his hand on the banker's arm.

"Tut, tut, Joseph," he said, gently, a fund of sympathy in his voice. "Boys will be boys, you know; really, this is no great matter! Don't let it hit you so hard. I'll go with you to find the room, of course. Where is it, Jachin?"

"We'll all go," put in Ansley. "We'll have a little party of our own, gentlemen. Come on. I believe we'll be able to discover the place."

The four men left the foyer and started through the corridors.

"I hear," said Judge Forester to Doctor Ansley, as they followed the other two, "that there has been astonishing news today from the Midnight Masquer. It seems that a number of people have received back property this afternoon—loot the bandit had taken. It appears to have been some sort of a carnival joke, after all."

"A poor one, then," responded Ansley, "and in doubtful taste. I've heard nothing of it. I wouldn't mind getting back the little cash I lost, though I must say I'll believe the story when I see the money——"

He broke off quickly.

As they turned a corner of the corridor to the four men came realization that they had attained their goal. From one of the rooms ahead there sounded snatches of a boisterous chorus, being roared forth lustily. As they halted, to distinguish from which door the singing proceeded, the chorus was broken off by an abrupt and sudden silence. This silence was accentuated by the preceding noise, as though the singers had checked their maudlin song in mid-career.

"D—n it!" muttered Maillard. "Did they hear us coming? No, that wouldn't matter a bang to them—but what checked them so quickly?"

"This door," said Fell, indicating one to their right. He paused at it, listening, and over his features came a singular expression. As the others joined him, they caught a low murmur of voices, a hushed sound of talk, a rattle as a number of chips fell from a table.

"Cursed queer!" observed Jachin Fell, frowning. "I wonder what happened to them so abruptly? Perhaps the deal was finished—they're having a game. Well, go ahead, Joseph! We'll back you up as a deputation from the blackcoats, and if you need any moral support, call on Judge Forester."

That gentleman flung open the door, and Maillard entered at his side. They then came to a startled halt, at view of the scene which greeted them.

The room was large and well lighted, windows and transom darkened for the occasion. Tobacco smoke made a bluish haze in the air. In the center of the room stood a large table, littered with glasses and bottles, with scattered cards, with chips and money.

About this table had been sitting half a dozen members of the Krewe of Comus. Now, however, they were standing, their various identities completely concealed by the grotesque costumes which cloaked them. Their hands were in the air.

Standing at another doorway, midway between their group and that of the four unexpected intruders, was the Midnight Masquer—holding them up at the point of his automatic!

Maillard was the first to break the silence of stupefaction.

"By heavens!" he cried, furiously. "Here's that d—d villain again—hold him, you! at him, everybody!"

In a blind rage, transported out of himself by his sudden access of passion, the banker hurled himself forward. From the bandit burst a cry of futile warning; the pistol in his hand veered toward his assailant.

This action precipitated the event. Perhaps because the Masquer did not fire instantly, and perhaps because Maillard's mad action shamed them, the nearer members of the drinking party hurled themselves at the bandit. The threat of the weapon was forgotten, unheeded in the sweeping lust of the man-hunt. It seemed that the fellow feared to fire; and about him closed the party in a surging mass, with a burst of sudden shouts, striking and clutching to pull him down and put him under foot.

Then, when it seemed that they had him without a struggle, the masquer broke from them, swept them apart and threw them off, hurled them clear away. He moved as though to leap through the side doorway whence he had come.

With an oath, Maillard hurled himself forward, struck blindly and furiously at the bandit, and fastened upon him about the waist. There was a surge forward of bodies as the others crowded in to pull down the Masquer before he could escape. It looked then as though he were indeed lost—until the automatic flamed and roared in his hand, its choking fume bursting at them. The report thundered in the room; a second report thundered, deafeningly, as a second bullet sought its mark.

Like a faint echo to those shots came the slam of a door. The Masquer was gone!

After him, into the farther room, rushed some of the party; but he had vanished utterly. There was no trace of him. His complete disappearance

The Threat of the Weapon Was Forgotten, Unheeded in the Sweeping Lust of the Man-Hunt.

confused the searchers. After a moment, however, they returned to the lighted room. The Masquer had gone, but behind him had remained a more grim and terrible masquer.

In the room which he had just left, however, there had fallen a dread silence and consternation. One of the masqued drinkers held an arm that hung helpless, dripping blood; but his hurt passed unseen and uncared for, even by himself.

Doctor Ansley was kneeling above a motionless figure, prone on the dirty floor; and it was the figure of Joseph Maillard. The physician glanced up, then rose slowly to his feet. He made a terribly significant gesture, and his crisp voice broke in upon the appalled silence.

"Dead," he said, curtly. "Shot twice—each bullet through the heart. Judge Forester, I'm afraid there is no alternative but to call in the police. Gentlemen, you will kindly unmask—which one of you is Robert Maillard?"

Amid a stunned and horrified silence the members of the Krewe one by one removed their grotesque headgear, staring at the dead man whose white face looked up at them with an air of grim accusation. But none of them came forward to claim kinship with the dead man. Bob Maillard was not in the room.

"I think," said the toneless, even voice of Jachin Fell, "that all of you gentlemen had better be very careful to say only what you have seen—and know. You will kindly remain here until I have summoned the police."

He left the room, and if there were any dark implication hidden in his words, no one seemed to observe it.

CHAPTER IX.

On the Bayou.

At three o'clock on the morning of Ash Wednesday the great white Mansion Blanche building was deserted and desolate, so far as its offices were concerned. The cleaners and scrub-women had long since finished their tasks and departed. Out in the streets the tag-ends of carnival were running on a swiftly ebbing tide. A single elevator in the building was, however, in use. A single suite of offices, with carefully drawn blinds, was lighted and occupied.

They were not ornate, these offices. They consisted of two rooms, a small reception room and a large private office, both lined to the ceiling with books, chiefly law books. In the larger room were sitting three men. One of the three, Ben Chacherre, sat in a chair tipped back against the wall, his eyes closed. From time to time he opened those sparkling black eyes of his, and through narrow slitted lids directed keen glances at the other two men.

One of the men was the chief of police. The second was Jachin Fell, whose offices these were.

"Even if things are as you say, which I don't doubt at all," said the chief, slowly, "I can't believe the boy did it! And darn it, if I pinch him there's going to be a—a—of a scandal!"

Fell shrugged his shoulders, and made response in his metallic voice.

"Chief, you're up against facts. Those facts are bound to come out and the newspapers will tan your hide to the wall in a minute. You've a bare chance to save yourself by taking young Maillard at once."

The chief chewed hard on his cigar. "I don't want to save myself by putting the wrong man behind the bars," he returned. "It sure looks like he was the Masquer all the while, but you say that he wasn't. You say this was his only job—a joke that turned out bad."

"Those are the facts," said Fell. "I don't want to accuse a man of crimes I know he did not commit. We have the best of evidence that he did commit this crime. If our newspapers fasten the entire Mardi Gras Masquer business on him, as they're sure to do, we can't very well help him. I have no sympathy for the boy."

"Of course he did!" put in Ben Chacherre, sleepily. "We can't be caught with the goods!"

The others paid no heed. The chief indicated two early editions of the morning papers, which lay on the desk in front of Fell. The papers carried full accounts of the return of the Midnight Masquer' loot, explaining his robberies as part of a carnival jest.

"The later editions, comin' out now," said the chief, "will prove all that stuff off the front page with the Maillard murder. Darn it, Fell! Whether I believe it or not, I'll have to arrest the young fool."

Chacherre chuckled. Jachin Fell smiled faintly.

"Nothing could be plainer, chief," he responded. "First, Bob Maillard comes to us in front of the opera house, and talks about a great joke that he's going to spring on his friends across the way——"

"How'd you know what it was?" interjected the chief, sharply.

"Gramont recognized him; Ansley and I confirmed the recognition. He was more or less intoxicated—chiefly more. Now, young Maillard was not in the room at the moment of the murder—unless he was the Masquer. Five minutes afterward he was found in a nearby room, hastily changing out of an aviator's uniform into a masquerade costume. Obviously, he had assumed the guise of the Masquer as a joke on his friends, and the joke had a tragic ending. Further, he was in the aviation service during the war, and so had the uniform ready to hand. You couldn't make anybody believe that he hasn't been the Masquer all the time!"

"Of course," and the chief nodded perplexedly. "It'd be a clear case—only you call me in and say that he wasn't the Masquer! D—n it, Fell, this thing has my goat!"

"What's Maillard's story?" struck in Ben Chacherre.

"He denies the whole thing," said the worried chief. "According to his story, which sound straight the way he tells it, he meant to play off the joke on his friends as he was dressing in the Masquer's costume when he heard the shots. He claim that the masqued thieves made him change back. He swears that he did not enter the other room at all, except in his masquerade clothes. He says the murderer must have been the real Masquer. It's illogical enough, because all young Maillard's crowd knew about the party that was to be held in that room during the Comus ball—"

"No matter," said Fell, coldly. "Chief, this is an open and shut case; the boy was bound to lie. That he killed his father was an accident, of course, but none the less it did take place."

"The boy's a wreck this minute." The chief held a match to his unlighted cigar. "But you say that he ain't the original Masquer?"

"No!" Fell spoke quietly. "The original Masquer was another person, and had nothing to do with the present case. This information is confidential and between ourselves."

"Oh, of course," assented the chief. "Well, I suppose I got to pull Maillard, but I hate to do it. I got a bunch that he ain't the right party."

"Virtuous man!" Fell smiled thinly. "According to all the rules, the chief of police is only too glad to fasten the crime on anybody."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Goes on Forever.

Netley—Has Bo'sesom still talking when you left the club?

Miller—Really, I don't know. His conversation is so unimportant that when he stops talking I always fail to notice it."—Answers.

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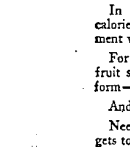

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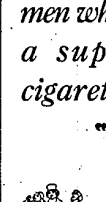

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