

The MARDI GRAS MYSTERY

by H. Bedford Jones

Illustrations by Irwin Myers

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SYNOPSIS

CHAPTER I—During the height of the New Orleans carnival season Jachin Fell, wealthy though somewhat nervous, and Lucie, his wife, are discussing a series of robberies by an individual known as the Midnight Masquer, who invariably dressed as an aviator, has long defied the police. Joseph Maillard, wealthy banker, is giving a ball that night at which the Masquer has threatened to appear and rob the guests. Fell and Lucie, on their way to the affair, meet a girl dressed as Columbine, seemingly known to Fell, but masked, who accompanies them to the ball.

CHAPTER II—Lucie Ledanois, recently the ward of her uncle, Joseph Maillard, is in the Columbian.

CHAPTER III—In his library Joseph Maillard and a group of friends are held up and robbed by the Midnight Masquer.

CHAPTER IV—Lucie Ledanois, the last of an old family, is in straitened circumstances. Joseph Maillard's handling of her funds has been unfortunate. Fell is an old friend of her parents and deeply interested in the girl. Henry Gramont, wealthy prince, Gramont's mother, a French father and an American mother, but who assumes the title of prince, is enamored of Lucie and believes himself a not unfavored suitor.

CHAPTER V—Gramont's chauffeur, Hammond, sergeant in the American army in France, is the driver of the Gramont limousine. He is a man of great energy and is now engaged in operating a lottery, and has engaged in detaining a confession. Just a moment, chief! I prefer to do the talking at present.

CHAPTER VI—Ben Chachere, an individual of unusual character, appears to be associated with Jachin Fell. He has a peculiar interview with one Memphis Izzy Gumberts, a member of the underworld, in which there is significant reference to a mysterious "boss."

CHAPTER VII—Lucie summons Gramont to her home and shows him the packages from his auto. He admits he is the Midnight Masquer, but convinces her that he had no thought of robbery. He refuses, however, to explain his purpose. The packages are returned to their owners.

CHAPTER VIII—That evening Fell, Gramont, and Dr. Ansley discuss the case of the masked individual who they recognize as Ben Chachere. He invites them to a convivial party in a private room. They refuse, and Gramont leaves the building. Joseph Maillard seeks his son, fearing the Masquer is a result of Bob's condition. With Fell and Ansley they find the room where the reveals are made. The Masquer is seen in the act of robbing the intoxicated youths. He strikes the Masquer, and he is shot and killed. The "Masquer" escapes.

CHAPTER IX—Gramont, with Hammond, visits Terrebonne, a wild section of the country, to inspect Lucie Ledanois' farm, which he believes contains valuable indications of apparently almost unbelievable quantities of the stuff. While exploring over the property, he notices clearly signs of oil on its surface. Gramont hears his name spoken.

CHAPTER X—He cannot see the speaker, but the conversation ends abruptly. Gramont is told to investigate. Hammond finds a dead man in some woods and is charged by Ben Chachere and two other men to kill Gramont. He does not do the thing. He takes Hammond to the town of Houma. Later Gramont finds a bloodstain on the floor. He had heard the voice. He then realizes that Chachere was one of the men talking, and in the murder.

CHAPTER XI—Believing himself alone, Gramont investigates buildings on the adjoining farm, which he knows belong to Memphis Izzy Gumberts. He finds evidence of automobile stealing on a stupendous scale and learns from a man who discovers him and whom he outwits, that the place is also the headquarters of the underground lottery rams and that Jachin Fell is the mysterious "boss."

CHAPTER XII—Back in the city, Gramont learns of the killing of Joseph Maillard. He seeks further information about Fell, Gramont, and Lucie Ledanois from a company to bore for oil on the Ledanois place. Fell tells Gramont he "blatantly" the evidence of oil there and unfolds a scheme to make a fortune for the project. Gramont is convinced to join the project. Fell threatens to prove him the murderer of Maillard, which he seems able to do, although Gramont reluctantly agrees to join him.

CHAPTER XIII—Gramont realizes he must act quickly if he is to secure the members of the robber gang. Chachere brings him a note Gramont will outwit, and binds the messenger, finding in his pocket evidence he believes of value. Lucie, however, having been informed out for Terrebonne, knowing that Memphis Izzy Gumberts is to be there that afternoon.

CHAPTER XIV—At Terrebonne Gramont surprises an arrested party and a crowd of about a dozen, breaking in on them. Gramont kills him, but is about to be overpowered when members of his post of the American Legion, whom he had instructed to follow him, arrive and take charge of Gramont. He is taken to the charge of Gramont, and the rest of the gang. In Chachere's auto they find a bloodstained aviator's costume and an automatic revolver. Gramont is convinced that Chachere is the slayer of Joseph Maillard.

CHAPTER XV

When the Heavens Fall.

The chief of police entered the office of Jachin Fell, high in the Malson Blanche building, at eight o'clock on Friday evening. Mr. Fell glanced up at him in surprise.

"Hello, chief! What's up?"

The officer gazed at him in astonishment.

"What's up? Why, I came around to see you, of course."

Jachin Fell smiled whimsically. "To see you? Well, chief, that's good of you; sit down and have a cigar, eh? What's the matter? You look rather thin about."

"I am," said the other, bluntly.

"Didn't you expect me?"

"No," said Jachin Fell, halting suddenly in the act of reaching for a cigar, and turning his keen gaze upon the chief. "Expect you? No?"

"Nary a sign of him, chief."

The door opened, and Henry Gramont appeared, his right hand bandaged and in a sling.

"Good evening, gentlemen!" he said, smiling.

"Here's Gramont, now!" exclaimed Fell. "Did you call the chief over here?"

"I sure did," and Gramont came forward. "I wanted to see you two gentlemen together, and so arranged it, Miss Ledanois is to be here at nine, Fell?"

The little man nodded, his eyes intent upon Gramont. He noticed the bandaged arm.

"Yes. Have you been hurt?"

"Slightly," Gramont brought up a chair across the desk from Fell, and sat down. He put his left hand in his pocket and brought forth a document which he handed to the chief of police.

"Cast your eye over that, chief, and say nothing. You're here to listen for the present. Here's something to cover your case, Mr. Fell."

Gramont produced his automatic from the pocket of his coat, and laid it on the desk before him. There was a moment of startled silence. The officer, looking over the paper which Gramont had handed him, seemed to find it of sudden, intense interest.

"What means all this mystery and melodramatic action, Gramont?" demanded Jachin Fell, a slight sneer in his eyes, his voice quite toneless.

"It means," said Gramont, regarding him steadily, "that you're under arrest. I went out to the Gumberts place on Bayou Terrebonne this morning, arrested Memphis Izzy Gumberts and four other men engaged in operating a lottery, and also arrested two mechanics who were engaged in working on stolen cars. We took in, further, a gentleman by the name of Dick Hearnie; a lesser member of the gang, who is now engaged in detaining a confession. Just a moment, chief! I prefer to do the talking at present."

Gramont smiled into the steady, unflinching eyes of Fell.

"You are next on the program," he said, evenly. "We know that you are at the head of an organized gang, which is not only operating a lottery through its and adjacent states, but also, is conducting an immense business in stolen automobiles. Therefore—"

"Just one minute, please," said Jachin Fell. "Do you forget, Mr. Gramont, the affair of the Midnight Masquer? You are a very zealous citizen, I have no doubt, but—"

"I was about to add," struck in Gramont, "that your pleasant friend Ben Chachere is charged with the murder of the sheriff of Terrebonne parish, in which I have clear evidence against him, having been present at the scene of the crime. He is also charged with the murder of Joseph Maillard—"

"My heavens!" said Fell, staring. "I never dreamed that Chachere—"

"Perhaps you didn't," Gramont shrugged his shoulders. "Neither did anyone else. I imagine that Ben learned of this room and drinking party, and rightly decided that he could make a rich haul off a small crowd of drunken young sports. He had the costume stolen from my car, as you know; also the automatic which went with it. Two shots were missing from the automatic when we found it in Ben's possession; and you remember the Masquer fired twice at the time Maillard was killed."

Fell's keen eyes sparkled angrily.

"You're a very zealous citizen, young man," he said, softly. "I see that you've been hurt. I trust your little game did not result in casualties?"

Gramont nodded. "Charlie the Goog went west. He was desperate, I fancy; at all events he got me in the arm, and I had to shoot him. Memphis Izzy hardly justified his tremendous reputation, for he yielded like a lamb."

"So you killed the Goog, eh?" said Fell. "Very zealous, Mr. Gramont! And I suppose that the exigencies of the case justified you—a private citizen, in carrying arms and using them? Who aided you in this marvelous affair?"

"A number of friends from my post of the American Legion," said Gramont, evenly.

"Ah! This organization is going in for politics, then?"

"Not for politics, Fell; for justice. I deputized them to assist me."

"Deputized!" repeated Fell, slowly.

"Certainly," Gramont smiled. "You see, this lottery business has been going on for a year or more. Some time ago, before I came to New Orleans, the governor of this state appointed me a special officer to investigate the matter. There is my commission, which the chief has been reading. It gives me a good deal of power, Fell; quite enough power to gather in you and your bunch."

The chief of police looked very uneasily from Gramont to Jachin Fell, and back again. Fell sat erect in his chair, staring at Gramont.

"You were the original Midnight Masquer," said Fell in his toneless voice. "At this direct charge, and at Gramont's assent, the chief started in surprise.

"Yes, one reason was that I suspected some one in society, some one high up in New Orleans, to be connected

with the gang; but I never dreamed that you were the man, Fell. I rather suspected young Maillard. I am now glad to say that I was entirely wrong. You were the big boss, Fell, and you're going to serve time for it."

Fell glanced at the chief, who cleared his throat as if about to speak. At this moment, however, a sharp knock sounded at the door.

"Come!" called Gramont.

A man entered. It was one of Gramont's deputies, who happened also to be a reporter from one of the morning papers of the city. He carried several sheets of paper which he laid before

Gramont. He glanced at Fell, who recognized him and exchanged a nod of greeting, then returned his attention to Gramont.

"Ah!" said the latter with satisfaction, as he examined the papers. "So Hearnie has given up everything, has he? Does this confession implicate Mr. Fell, here?"

"Well, rather," drawled the other, cheerfully. "And see here, cap! There are two more of us in the crowd and we've arranged to split the story. We'd like to rush the stuff to our papers the minute you give the word, because—"

"I know," Gramont returned the papers that bore the confession of Hearnie. "You've made copies of this, of course? All right. Shoot the stuff in to your papers right away, if you wish."

Fell raised a hand to check the other.

"One moment, please!" he said, his eyes boring into the newspaper man. "Will you also take a message from me to the editor of your newspaper—and see that it goes to the others as well?"

"If Mr. Gramont permits, yes."

"Go ahead," said Gramont, wondering what Fell would try now. He soon learned.

"Don't arrest him, Gramont."

"What?" Gramont gasped.

"Don't touch him, I said! Get in all the others, no matter who they are, but leave Fell alone."

"You d-d coward!" shouted Gramont, in a heat of fury. "So this is the way you keep your promises, is it? And I thought you were above all influences—real American! You're a h— of a governor—oh, I don't want to hear any more from you."

He jerked up the receiver.

There was a moment of dead silence in the room. The chief mopped his brow, in evident relief. Jachin Fell sat back in his chair and scrutinized Gramont with his thin-lipped smile.

Gramont sat helpless, wrung by chagrin, rage and impotency. There was nothing he could say, nothing he could do. The man behind him had failed him. The entire power of the state, which had been behind him, had failed him. There was no higher power to which he could appeal, except the power of the federal government. His head jerked up sharply.

"Fell, I've got evidence on you, and I've got the evidence to put this lottery business into federal hands. Boys! come in here!"

At his shout the door opened and two of his men entered. Gramont looked at the chief.

"You're willing to take care of all the rest of the gang, chief?"

"Sure," assented the officer.

"All right. Boys, turn over the whole crowd to the chief, and I'll trust you to see that they're properly booked and jailed. Turn over all the evidence likewise, except that mail sack. Have that brought up here, to this room, and see that the corridor outside is kept guarded. Get me?"

The two saluted. "Yes, sir."

"Good. Send to the federal building, find out where there's an agent of the Department of Justice, and get him here. Have him here inside of fifteen minutes."

"My dear Gramont, your devotion to duty is Roman in spirit," said Jachin Fell, lightly. "I really regret that circumstances so conspire to defeat you! Why can't you be satisfied with bagging so many other victims? You can't bag me—"

"Can't I?" said Gramont, taking a cigar and biting at it. He was cooler now. "By heavens, Fell, there's one thing in this country that you and no other man can reach with any influence, political bribery or crooked connections—and that's the government of the United States! You can reach judges and senators and governors, but you can't reach the unknown and humble men who carry the badge of the Department of Justice!"

Fell made a slight gesture.

"Human nature, my dear Gramont. It is quite true that I have not established this gang of criminals, as you call them, without taking proper precautions. Memphis Izzy, for instance, has influence that reaches far and wide. So have I. So have others in the party. I give you my assurance that your Department of Justice man will not arrest me."

Gramont smiled.

Jachin Fell glanced at his watch.

"Lucie will be here at any minute now," he observed. "I suppose your sense of duty will force you to disclose everything to her?"

Gramont merely nodded, tight-lipped. A knock at the door, and one of his men entered with the sack of mail they had taken as evidence.

"A lady is coming here at any moment," said Gramont. "Allow her to enter."

The other saluted and departed.

"A sense of duty is a terrible thing," and Jachin Fell sighed. "What about the oil company? Are you going to let Miss Ledanois' fortunes go to wrack and ruin?"

"Better that," said Gramont, "than to have her profit come through criminal first to say so, herself. She'd be the limit whoever is behind this criminal gang—and he keeps his word! Don't think that if your friend the senator is with him, you will be saved. I'll call him, if only to show the chief, here, that influence is not going to count in this game."

Gramont took down the receiver, called long distance, and put in a hurried call for the executive mansion, asking for the governor in person.

"So you think that he's immune from influence, do you?" Jachin Fell smiled patronizingly and lighted a fresh cigar. The chief of police was mopping his brow.

"My dear Gramont, you exhibit a youthful confidence in human nature! Let me topple your clay-footed idol from its pedestal in a hurry. Mention to the governor that you have me under arrest, and that I have asked him to speak with Judge Forester and Senator Flaxman before confirming the arrest. I'll wager you five hundred dollars—"

The telephone rang sharply. Taunted almost beyond endurance, Gramont seized the instrument and made answer. In a moment he had the governor on the wire. His gaze went excitedly to Fell.

"Governor, this is Henry Gramont speaking," he said. "I've just succeeded in my work, as I wired you this afternoon—no, hold on a minute! This is important."

"The head of the entire gang is a man here in New Orleans by the name of Jachin Fell. Yes, Fell. I find it very hard to get him arrested. Fell boasts that his influence is superior to any that I can bring to bear. He asks that you speak with Judge Forester and Senator Flaxman before confirming the arrest, and boasts that you will order me to keep my hands off."

"Speak with them, governor! If they're in the gang, too, don't you worry. You confirm this arrest, and I'll put Fell behind the bars if I have to turn all New Orleans inside out. Go ahead! I know you can't be reached by any of these crooks—I'm merely calling Fell's bluff. We have the chief of police here, and he's sweating. Eh? Sure. Take as long as you like, governor."

He smiled grimly at Jachin Fell as he waited. Two minutes passed—three—four. Then he heard the voice of the governor again.

"Yes?"

"Don't arrest him, Gramont."

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as he sat. Did he have the baseness to try and save himself through Lucie? Something of his stifled anger must have shown in his eyes, for Jachin Fell laid down his cigar and continued quickly:

"Don't misunderstand. I say that I think she cares for you; it is merely surmise on my part. Lucie is one person for whom I'd do anything. I stand and have stood in the place of a parent to her. She is very dear to me. I have a special reason for intruding on your personal affairs in this manner, and some right to ask you in regard to your intentions."

"I don't recognize any right whatever on your part," said Gramont, steadily.

Fell smiled. "Ah! Then you are in love. Well, youth must be served!"

"To like to know one thing," struck in Gramont. "That is, why you were so cursed anxious to get something on my man Hammond? And why you held the Midnight Masquer affair over me as a threat. Did you suspect my business?"

Fell threw back his head and laughed in a hearty amusement that was quite unrestrained.

"That," he responded, "is really humorous! Do you know, I honestly thought you a fortune-hunter from Europe? There, I confess, I made a grave error."

Without a knock the door opened and Lucie Ledanois entered.

"Good evening, stockholders!" she exclaimed. "Do you know there's a crowd down in the street—police men and automobiles and a lot of excitement?"

"Allow me," said Gramont, taking her coat and placing a chair for her. "Will you sit down, please? You remember that I warned you regarding a shock that would come; and now I must explain." Gramont gravely handed her his commission from the governor, and resumed his seat. "When I say that I have come here, not to attend a meeting of our oil company, but to arrest Mr. Fell, you will understand. I am very sorry, Lucie, to have to tell you all this for I know your attachment to him."

"Arrest—you, Uncle Jachin!" The girl glanced from the paper to Fell, who nodded. "Why—this isn't a joke of some kind?"

"None whatever, my dear," said Fell, quietly. "Mr. Gramont is to be congratulated. He has discovered that I was the head of a large organization of criminals. Here, if I mistake not, are your Department of Justice friends, Gramont."

A knock at the door, and it opened to admit one of Gramont's men.

"Here they are, sir—the chief agent and a deputy. Shall I let them in?"

Gramont nodded. Two men entered the room, and Gramont dismissed his own man with a gesture. He saw that the agents both nodded to Fell.

"Do you gentlemen know this man?" he demanded, rising.

"Yes," said one of them, regarding him keenly. "Who sent for us?"

"I did," Gramont gave his name, and handed them his commission. "I have been investigating a lottery which has been conducted in this state for a long time by an organization of very clever criminals. Jachin Fell is the man at the head of this organization. The lesser members of the gang are in custody. The police department will not arrest this man Fell; his influence and that of his gang is extensive in political fields and elsewhere. I have called up the governor, and have been told not to arrest him. I now call upon you to hold him in custody as a federal prisoner. Now go to it."

The chief agent laid Gramont's commission on the table and looked at Jachin Fell. For an instant there was a dead silence. Then, when the federal man spoke, Gramont was paralyzed.

"I'm very sorry, Mr. Gramont, to have to refuse—"

"What!" cried Gramont, incredulously. "Do you dare stand there and—"

"One moment, please," said Fell, his quiet voice breaking in. "It is quite true that I have organized all the criminals possible, Mr. Gramont, and have put the underground lottery into a systematized form. I have done this by the authority of the United States, in order to apprehend Memphis Izzy Gumberts and other men at one crack. These gentlemen will tell you that I am a special agent of the Department of Justice, employed in that capacity through the efforts of Judge Forester and Senator Flaxman. I regret that this had to be held so secret that not even the governor himself was aware of it until this evening. The conflict was quite unavoidable. Not a member of that gang must become aware of my real identity."

Gramont sank into his chair, the automatic dropping from his hand. He was suddenly dazed, thunderstruck. Yet he had to believe. He was dimly aware that Lucie had gone to Jachin Fell, her arms about his neck. He stared from unseeing eyes.

Realization smote him like a blow, numbing his brain. He saw now why the governor had conferred with Judge Forester and the senator, why he had been ordered off the trail. He saw now why Fell had preserved secrecy so great that even to the chief of police his impregnable position was supposedly due to influence higher up.

He saw how Fell must have been working month after month, silently and terribly, to form one compact organization of the most talented criminals within reach—headed by Memphis Izzy, the man who had laughed at the government for years! And he saw himself furious, raging like a madman—

Gramont dropped his head into his hands. The pain of his forgotten wounded arm stabbed him like a knife. He jerked his head sharply up, and was aware that the agents had departed. He was alone with Lucie and Fell, and the latter was rising and holding out his hand smiling.

"Gramont, you got ahead of me in this deal, and I congratulate you with all my heart!" said Fell, earnestly. "Neither of us suspected the part

played by the other man! but you've done the work and done it well. Will you shake hands?"

Gramont confusedly took the hand extended to him.

"I've been a fool," he said, slowly. "I might have guessed that something unusual was—"

"No; how could you guess?" said Fell. "There are three men in Baton Rouge who know the truth, and three persons in this room. That's all, outside of the regular government men. I had not told even Lucie, here! I dared not. And I dare say nothing even now. To the underworld at large I will be known as the crook whom not even the government could touch; in days to come I may be of untold service to my country."

"If you will excuse me one moment," he went on, "I shall speak with your men who are on guard, Gramont. I shall be back in a moment, and we may then discuss business. If you agree, I think that your company may proceed upon the original lines, and we shall set to work drilling for oil without delay."

Gramont scarcely heard the words, nor did he hear the door close. He

was still looking into the eyes of Lucie Ledanois.

He was still looking into the eyes of Lucie Ledanois, and wondering if the message they held was really meant for him.

CHAPTER XVI