

The Million Dollar Mystery

By HAROLD MAC GRATH

Illustrated from Scenes in the Photo Drama of the Same Name by the Thanhouser Film Company

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CHAPTER XIX.

A Blank Sheet of Paper.

Florence was a fortnight in recovering from the shock of her experience at the masked ball of the Princess Parlova, who, by the way, disappeared from New York shortly after the fire, no doubt because of her fear of the Black Hundred. The fire did not destroy the house, but most of the furnishings were so thoroughly drenched by water that they were practically ruined. Her coming and going were a nine days' wonder, and then the public found something else to talk about.

Norton was a constant visitor at the Hargreave place. There was to him a new interest in that mysterious house, with its hidden panels, its false floors, its secret tunnels; but he treated Jones upon the same basis as hitherto. One thing, however: He felt a sense of security in regard to Florence such as he had not felt before. So, between assignments he ran out to Riverdale and did what he could to amuse his sweetheart. Later, they took short rides in the runabout, and at length she became as lively as she had ever been.

But often she would catch Norton brooding.

"What makes you frown like that?"

"Was I frowning?" innocently enough.

"I find you this way a dozen times in an afternoon. What is the matter? Are they after you again?"

"Heavens, no! I'm only a vague issue. They will not bother me so long as I do not bother them. It has dwindled into a game of truce."

"Do you think so?" eying him curiously.

"Why, yes."

"What's the use of trying to fool me, Jim? If they haven't been after you, you are sensing a presage of evil. I'm not a child any longer. Haven't I been through enough to make me a woman? Sometimes I feel very old."

"To me you are the most charming in all this wide world. No, you're not a child any longer. You are a woman, brave and patient; and I know that I could trust you with any secret I have or own. But sometimes a person may have a secret which is not his and which he hasn't any right to disclose."

She became silent for awhile. "I hate money," she said. "I hate it, hate it!"

"It's mighty comfortable to have it around sometimes," he countered.

"As in my case, for instance. If I were poor and had to work no one would bother me."

"I would!" he declared, laughing.

"Come; let's throw off moods and go into town for tea at the Rose Garden; and if you feel strong enough we'll trip the light fantastic."

They had been gone from the house less than an hour when a man ran up the steps of the veranda and rang the bell. Jones being busy at the rear of the house, the maid came to the door.

"Is Miss Hargreave in?" the stranger asked.

"No," abruptly. The door began to close ever so slowly.

"Do you know where I can find her?"

The maid eyed him with covert keenness; then, remembering that the reporter was with Florence, said: "I believe she is at the Rose Garden this afternoon."

"That is in town?"

"Yes."

"Thanks." The man turned abruptly and ran down the steps.

The maid ran back to Jones.

"Why didn't you call me?" he demanded impatiently.

"There wasn't time."

"Did you tell him where she was?"

"Yes. But I shouldn't have told him if Mr. Norton had not been with Miss Florence."

Jones ran to the front, dashed out, eyed the back of the man hastening down the street, smiled, and returned to his work, or, rather, to the maid. He took her by the shoulder, whirled her about, and shot a look into her eyes that quailed her.

"Always call me hereafter, no matter what I'm doing. That man has never laid eyes on Florence and has no idea what she looks like. Why did you drug my coffee the night of that ball?"

She stepped back.

"And how much did they pay you for letting that doctor send Florence to Atlantic City? I know everything. Hereafter walk straight. If you play another trick I'll kill you with these

two hands. And listen and tell this to your confederates; I always know every move they make; that is why no one is missing from this house. There is a traitor. Let them find him if they can. Will you walk straight, or will you leave?"

"I—I will walk straight," she faltered. "The money was too big a temptation."

"Did they give it to you?"

"Yes. And more to stay here. But

this is the first bit of dishonest work I ever did."

"Well, remember what I have said. Another misstep and I'll make an end to you. Don't think I'm trying to scare you. You've witnessed enough to know that it's life and death in this house. Now run along."

At the Garden Jim and Florence sauntered among the crowd, not hav-



Princess Parlova Attired for the Ball. Noting any particular objective point in view.

"Sh!" whispered Jim.

"Olga Perloff is yonder in a box."

"Very well; let us go and sit with her. Is she alone?"

"Apparently. But don't you think we'd better go elsewhere?"

"My dear young man," said Florence with mock loftiness, "Olga Perloff has written me down as a simple young fool, and that is why, sooner or later, I'm going to put the shoe on the other foot. You and Jones have coddled me long enough. Inasmuch as I am the stake they are playing for, I intend to have something more than a speaking part in the play."

"All right; you're the admiral," he said with pretended lightness.

So the two of them joined their subtle enemy, conscious of a tinge of zest as they did so. On her part, the countess was always suspicious of this sleepy-eyed reporter. She never could tell how much he knew. But of Florence she was reasonably certain; and so long as she could fool the pretty infant the suspicions of the reporter were a negligible quantity.

Very deftly Florence raised the lid just enough to peep out. The man who had been talking was putting the note in his hip pocket. As he turned toward the chest he sat down on the soapbox immediately in front of the chest. An inspiration came to the girl, an exceedingly daring one. She took her liberty in her hands as she executed the deed. But the dimness of the cave aided her. When she crouched down again the magic paper was hers.

It seemed hours to her before the men left the cave. As she heard the hidden door jar in closing she raised the lid and stepped out, breathing deeply. The paper she had purloined was indeed blank, but Jones or Jim would know what to do with it. And wouldn't they be surprised when she told them what she had accomplished all alone? Her exultation was of short duration. She heard the whine of the door on its hinges. The men were returning. Why?

They were returning because they had discovered a woman's shoeprint outside. It pointed toward the cave, freshly, and there was none coming away. To reenter the chest would be foolhardy. It would be the first place the men would look. She glanced about desperately. She saw but one chance, the well. And even while the door was swinging inward, letting the brilliant sunshine enter, she summoned up the courage and let herself down into the well, which proved to be nothing more nor less than an underground river!

The men came in with a rush. They upset boxes, looked into the chest, and the man who was evidently in command gazed down the well, shaking his head. Their search was thorough, but they found no one. And at length they began to reason that perhaps a woman had got as far as the door and then turned away, walking on the turf.

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world again. On, on she was carried. Even though she was half dead, she could hear the roar of a falls somewhere in advance.

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When she was sure that he was beyond range, she came out from the place of concealment, crept up to the knoll, and searched about for the magic handle of this strange door. Diligence rewarded her, and she soon found herself in a large, musty, earth-smelling cave. Loot was scattered about, and there were boxes and chairs and a large chest. Men evidently met here, possibly after some desperate adventure against society. She found nothing to reward her hardihood, and as she was in the act of moving toward the cave's door she beheld with terror that it was moving!

She was near the chest at that moment. The cave was not a deep one. There was no tunnel, only a wall. Resolutely she raised the lid of the chest, stepped inside, and drew the lid down. She was just in time. The door opened and three men entered, talking volubly. They felt perfectly secure in talking as loudly as they pleased. To Florence it seemed almost impossible that they did not hear the thunder of her heart? Strain her ears as she might, she could gather but little of what they said, except:

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alive; this letter settled all doubt in her mind on this question. Alive! And not only that, but the girl and Jones were evidently in communication with him. She summoned a waiter, made a secret sign, and he bowed and approached. She slipped the letter into his hand and whispered: "Show that at the cave tomorrow. It is in invisible ink and meant for Hargreave."

"He's alive?"

"Positively."

"Very well." The waiter bowed and strolled away nonchalantly.

Braine was in Boston over night, otherwise the countess would have taken the mysterious note at once to him. She remained for perhaps a quarter of an hour longer and then left the garden. She would have taken the letter to her own apartment but for the fact that the chemicals needed were hidden in the cave.

Now it happened that Florence went out for her early ride the next morning, and crossing a field she saw a man with a bundle under his arm. The sun struck his profile and limned it plainly, and Florence uttered a low cry. The man had not observed her. So, very quietly, she slipped from the horse, tethered it to a tree, and started after the man to learn what he was doing so far from the city. She would never forget that face. She had seen it that dreadful night when the note had lured her into the hands of her enemies. The face belonged to the man who had impersonated her father.

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