The Million Dollar Mystery

By HAROLD MAC GRATH

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CHAPTER XVIII.

The Masked Ball.

About this time—that is to say, about the time the Black Hundred was stretching out its powerful secret arms toward Norton—there arrived in New York city a personage. This personage was the Princess Parlova, a fabulously rich Polish Russian. She leased a fine house near Central park and set about to conquer social New York. This was not very difficult, for her title was perfectly genuine and she moved in the most exclusive diplomatic circles in Europe, which, as everybody knows, is the most brilliant in the world. When the new home was completely decorated, she gave an elaborate dinner, and that attracted the newspapers. They began to talk about her highness, printed portraits of her, and devoted a page occasionally in the Sunday editions. She became something of a rage. One morning it was announced that the Princess Parlova would give a masked ball to formally open her home to society; and it was this notice that first brought the Princess Parlova under Braine's eyes. He was at the Perigoff apartment at the time.

"Well, well!" he mused aloud.

"What is it?" asked Olga, turning away from the piano and ending one of Chopin's mazurkas brokenly.

"Here is the Princess Parlova in town."

"And who is she?"

"She is the real thing, Olga; a real princess with vast estates in Poland with which the greedy Slav next door has been very gentle."

"I haven't paid much attention to the social news lately. What about her?"

"She is giving a masked ball to formally open her house on the West side. And it's going to cost a pretty penny."

"Well, you're not telling me this to make me want to know the princess," said Olga, petulantly.

"No. But I'm going to give you a letter of introduction to her highness."

"Oh!"

"And you are going to ask her to invite two particular friends of yours to this wonderful ball of hers."

"Indeed," ironically. "That sounds all very easy."

"Easier than you think, my child."

"I will not have you call me child!"

"Well, then, Olga."

"That's better. Now, how will it be easier than I think?"

"Simply this, the Princess Parlova is an oath bound member, but has not been active for years."

"Oho!" Olga was all animation now. "Go on!"

"You will go to her with a letter of introduction—no! Better than that, you will make a formal call and show her this ring. You know the ring," he said, passing the talisman to the countess. "Show this to her and she will obey you in everything. She will have no alternative."

"Very good," replied Olga. "And then the program is to insist that she invite Florence and that fool of a reporter to this ball. Then what?"

"You can leave that to me."

"Haven't all these failures been a warning?"

"No, my dear. I was born optimistic; but there's a jinx somewhere in one of my pockets. Time after time I've had everything just where I wanted it, and then—poof! It's pure bald luck on their side, but sooner or later the wheel will turn. And any chance that offers I am bound to accept. Somehow or other we may be able to trap Florence and Norton. I want both of them. If I can get them snugly away, Jones will be forced to draw in Hargreave."

"Is there such a man?"

"You saw him that night at the restaurant."

"I have often thought that perhaps I just dreamed it." She turned again to the piano and began humming idly.

"Stop that and listen to me," said Braine, not in quite the best of tempers. "I'm in no mood for whims."

"Music does not sooth your soul, then?" cynically.

"If I had one it might. You will call on the Princess Parlova tomorrow afternoon. It depends upon you what my plans will be. I think you'll have little trouble in getting into the presence of her highness, and once there she will not be able to resist you."

"I'll go."

And go she did. The footman in green livery hesitated for a moment, but the title on the visiting card was quite sufficient. He bowed the countess into the reception room and went in search of his distinguished mistress.

The Princess Parlova was a handsome woman verging upon middle age. She was a patrician; Olga's keen eye discerned that instantly. She came into the reception room with that dignified serenity which would have impressed any one as genuine. She held the card in her fingers and smiled inquiringly toward her guest.

"I confess," she began, "that I recall neither your face nor your name. I am sorry. Where have I had the honor of meeting you before?"

"You have never met me before, your highness," answered Olga sweetly.

"You came on a charity errand, then?"

"That depends, your highness. Will you be so good as to glance at this?" Olga asked, holding out her palm upon which the talisman lay.

The princess shrank back, paling.

"Where did you get that?" she panted.

"From the head," was the answer.

"And you have followed me from Russia?" whispered the princess, her terror growing.

"Oh, no. The Black Hundred is as strongly organized here as in St. Petersburg. But we always keep track of old members, especially when they stand so high in the world as yourself."

"But I was deceived and betrayed!" exclaimed the princess. "They urged me to join on the ground that the organization was to attempt to bring about the freedom of Poland."

Olga shrugged. "You were rich, highness. The Black Hundred needed money."

"And you need it now?" eagerly, believing that she saw a loophole. "How much? Oh, I will give a hundred thousand rubles on your promise to leave me alone. Tell me!"

"I am sorry, your highness, but I have no authority to accept such an offer. Indeed, my errand is far from being expensive. All the Black Hundred desires is four invitations to this ball which you are soon to give. That should not cause you any alarm. We shall not interfere with your sojourn in America in any way whatsoever, provided these invitations are issued."

"You would rob my guests?" horrified.

"Positively no! Here is a list of four names. Invite them; that is all you have to do. Not so much as a silver spoon will be found missing. This is on my word of honor, and I never break that word, if you please."

"Give me the list," said the princess, wearily. "Who gave you that ring?"

"The head."

"In Russia?"

"No; here in America." Olga dipped into her handbag and produced a slip of paper. This she handed to the princess. "Here is the list, highness."

"Who is Florence Hargreave?"

"A friend of mine," evasively.

"Does she belong to the organization."

"No."

"Then you have some ulterior purpose in having me invite her?"

"I have," answered Olga sharply; "but that does not concern your highness in the least."

The princess bit her lips. "I see your name here also; a man named Braine, and another, Norton."

"Say at once that you do not care to execute the wishes—the commands—of the order," said Olga coldly.

"I will do as you wish. And I beg you now to excuse me. But if anything happens to any of my personal friends—"

"Well?" haughtily from Olga.

"Well, I will put the matter in the hands of the police."

"But so long as your personal friends are not concerned?"

"I shall then of necessity remain deaf and blind. It is one of the penalties I must pay for my folly. I wish you good-day."

"As you your friends" [illegible]

muttered Olga under her breath as she rose and started for the hallway.

Thus it was that when Norton went to the office the next afternoon he found a broad white envelope on his desk. Indifferently he opened the same and his eyes bulged. "Princess Parlova requests" and so forth and so on. Then he shrugged. The chief had probably asked for the invitation and he would have to write up the doings, a phase of reportorial work eminently distasteful to him. He went up to the city desk.

"Can't you find some one else to do this stuff?" he growled to the city editor.

The city editor glanced at the card and crested envelope. "Good Lord, man! Nobody in this office had anything to do with that. What luck! Our Miss Hayes tried all manner of schemes, but was rebuffed on all sides. How the deuce did you chance to get one?"

"Search me," said the bewildered Norton.

"If I were you I'd sit tight and take it all in," advised the editor. "It's going to be the biggest splurge of its kind we've had in years. We've been working every wire we know to get Miss Hayes inside, but it was no go. This princess is not onto the game yet. In this country you get into society or you don't through the Sundays."

"Hanged if I know who wished this thing on me."

"Take it philosophically," said the editor sarcastically. "The princess won't bite you. She may even have seen your picture—"

"Get out!" grumbled Norton, turning away.

He would go out and see Florence. On the way out to Riverdale he came to the conclusion that the list of the princess fell short and some friend of his who was helping the woman out suggested his name. It was the only way he could account for it.

But when he learned that Florence had an invitation exactly like his own and that she received it that morning he became suspicious.

"Jones, what do you think of it?" he questioned.

"I think it was very kind of the Countess Perigoff suggesting your name and that of Florence," said the butler urbanely.

"Olga?" cried Florence, disappointedly.

"It is the only logical deduction I can make," declared Jones. "They are both practically Russians."

"And what would you advise?" asked Norton.

"Why, go and enjoy yourselves. Forewarned is forearmed. The thing is, be very careful not to acquaint any one with the character of your disguise, least of all the Countess Perigoff. Besides," Jones added smiling, "perhaps I may go myself."

"Goody! I've read about masked balls and have always been crazy to go to one," said Florence with eagerness.

"Suppose we go at once and pick out some costumes?" suggested Norton.

"Just as soon as I can get my hat on," replied Florence, happy as a lark.

"But mind," warned Jones; "be sure that you see the costumer alone and that no one else is about."

"I'll take particular care," agreed Norton. "We've got to do some hustling to find something suitable. For

There Was a Secret Exit.

a big affair like this the town will be ransacked. All aboard! There's room for two in that car of mine; and we can have a spin besides. Hang work!"

Florence laughed, and even Jones permitted a smile (which was not grim this time) to stir his lips.

A happy person is generally unobservant. Two happy persons together are totally unobservant of what passes around them. In plainer terms this lack is called love. And being frankly in love with each other, neither Norton nor Florence observed that a taxicab followed them into town. Jones not being in love, was keenly observant; but the taxicab took up the trail two blocks away, so the matter wholly escaped Jones' eye.

The two went into several costumery, but eventually discovered a shop on a side street that had been overlooked by those [illegible] in the [illegible]. [illegible] costumes [illegible] the [illegible] Florence's [illegible] upon two modest ones that were evenly matched in color and design. Florence ordered them to be sent home. Then the two of them sallied up to the Ritz-Carleton and had tea.

The man from the taxicab entered the costumer's, displayed a detective's shield and demanded that the proprietor show him the costumes selected by the two young people who had just left. The man obeyed wonderingly.

"I want a pair exactly like these," said the detective. "How much?"

"Two dollars each, rental; seven apiece if you wish to buy them."

"I'll buy them."

The detective paid the bill, nodded curtly, and returned to his taxicab.

"Now, I wonder," mused the costumer, "what the dickens those innocent looking young people are up to?" He never found out.

On the night of the ball Norton dined with Florence for the first time; and for once in his life he experienced that petty disturbance of collective thought called embarrassment. To talk over war plans with Jones was one thing, but to have Jones serve soup was altogether another. All through dinner Jones replied to questions with no more and no less than "Yes, sir," and "No, sir." Norton was beginning to learn that this strange man could put on a dozen kinds of armor and always retain his individuality. And tonight there seemed something vaguely familiar about the impassive face of the butler, as if he had seen it somewhere in the past, but could not tell when or where. As he and Florence were leaving for the automobile which was to take them to the princess', the truth came home to him with the shock of a douche of ice cold water. Under his breath he murmured: "You're a wonderful man, Jones; and I take my hat off to you with the deepest admiration. Hang me!"

"What are you mumbling about?" asked the happy girl at his side.

"Was I mumbling? Perhaps I was going over my catechism. I haven't been out in society in so long that I've forgotten how to act."

"I believe that. We've been in here for five minutes and you haven't told me that you love me."

"Good heavens!" And his arms went around her so tightly that she begged for quarter.

"How strong you are!"

The splendor of the rooms, the dazzling array of jewels, the kaleidoscopic colors, the perfume of the banked flowers and the music all combined to put Florence into a pleasurable kind of trance. And it was only when the first waltz began that she became herself and surrendered to the arms of the man she loved.

And they were waltzing over a volcano. She knew and he knew it. From what direction would the blow come? Well, they were prepared for all manner of tricks.

In an alcove off the ballroom sat Braine and Olga, both dressed exactly like Newton and Florence. Another man and woman entered presently and Braine spoke to them for a moment, as if giving instructions, which was indeed the case.

The band crashed into another dance, and the masqueraders began swirling hither and thither and yon. A gay cavalier suddenly stopped in front of Florence.

"Enchantress, may I have the pleasure of this dance?"

Jim touched Florence's hand. But she turned laughingly toward the stranger. What difference did it make? The man would never know who she was nor would she know him. It was a lark, that was all; and despite Jim's warning touch she

"Invite Them In; That is All You Have to Do."

was up and away like the mischievous sprite that she was. Jim remained in his chair, twisting his fingers and wondering whether to laugh or grow angry. After all, he could not blame her. To him an affair like this was an ancient story; to her it was the door of fairyland swung open. Let her enjoy herself.

Florence was having a splendid time. Her partner was asking all sorts of questions and she was replying in kind, when out of the crowd came Norton (as she supposed); who touched her arm. The cavalier stopped, bowed and made off.

Norton whispered: "I have made an important discovery. We must be off at once. Come with me."

Florence, without the least suspicion in the world, followed him up the [illegible]. What with the many [illegible] it is to be wondered at [illegible] the quality of [illegible] Florence's [illegible] halls, opposite the dressing rooms, she was suddenly thrust into a room and made prisoner. When the light was turned up she recognized with horror the woman who had helped to kidnap her and take her away on the George Washington weeks ago. She could not have cried out for help if she had tried.

Meantime Jim got up and began to wander about in search of Florence.

Braine played a clever game that night. He and the Russian, still dominoed like Norton and Florence, ordered the Hargreave auto, by number, entered it and were driven up to the porte cochere of the Hargreave house. The two alighted, the chauffeur sent the car toward the garage, and Braine and his companion ran lightly down the path to the street where the cab which had followed picked them up.

It grew more and more evident to Jim that something untoward had taken place. He could not find Florence anywhere, in the alcoves, in the

They Agreed Upon Two Modest Ones

side rooms, the supper or card room. Later, to his utter amazement, he was informed that the Hargreave auto had some time since been called and its owner taken home. Some one had taken his place!

His first sensation was impotent fury against Jones, who had permitted them to play with fire. He flung out of the mansion unceremoniously, commandeered a cab, and flew out to Riverdale. And when Jones came to the door he was staggering with sleep.

"What's the matter with you?" demanded Jim roughly. "Where's Florence?"

"Isn't she with you?" cried Jones, making an effort to dispel the drowsiness. "What time is it?" suddenly.

"Midnight! Where is she?"

"Midnight? I've been drugged!"

Without a word Jones staggered off to the kitchens, Jim at his heels.

There was always hot water, and within five minutes Jones had drunk two cups of raw strong coffee.

"Drugged!" he murmured. "Some one in the house! I'll attend to that later. Now, the chauffeur!"

But the chauffeur swore on his oath that he had left Jim and Florence on the steps of the porte cochere.

"Get in!" said Jones to Norton, now fully alive. He could not get it out of his head that some one in the house had drugged him.

The events which followed were to both Jones and Norton something like a series of nightmares. In the new home of the Princess Parlova a bomb exploded and fire followed the explosion. From pleasure to terror is only a step. The wildest confusion imaginable ensued. Most of the guests were of the opinion that some anarchist had attempted to blow up the house of the rich Pole. Jones and Norton arrived just as the smoke began to pour out from the windows. A crowd had already collected.

Then Jim overheard a woman masquerader say: "The fool made the bomb too strong. She is in the room on the second floor. The game is up if she suffocates——" The voice trailed off and the woman became lost in the crowd. But it was enough for the reporter, who pushed his way roughly through the excited masqueraders and entered the house. The rescue was one of the most exciting to be found in the newspaper files of the day.

So Braine in his effort to scare everybody from the house had over reached himself once more.

(To be Continued.)

"WATCHFUL WAITING" AGAIN

Washington Officials Regard German Blockade of England as a Very Serious Matter.

Washington, February 6.—Germany's declaration of a naval blockade of great Britain is regarded here as one of the most serious developments of the war.

Until a specific case of destruction of an American ship in the new war zone develops it was regarded as most unlikely that any protest would be made by the United States although further inquiries as to the exact boundaries of the prohibited water are expected to be made.

New Move on Serbia.

Geneva, via Paris, Feb. 6.—Hostilities against Serbia have been suspended by the Austrians, according to reports received here from sources which usually have been well informed.

AMBROSE SWASEY

Ambrose Swasey of Cleveland, O., has given $200,000 to the United Engineering Society and the American Society of Civil Engineers for a foundation for engineering research work. By the deed of gift the income will be applied to the advancement of engineering arts and sciences in all branches for the greater good to the profession and the benefit of mankind.

LITTLE TROUBLE WITH LABOR

Once Carnegie's Men Struck and Got 30 Per Cent Wage Raise—Liquor Users Barred.

New York, Feb. 6.—Andrew Carnegie went on the witness stand today before the federal industrial relations committee and testified that up to the close of 1914 his gifts totaled $324,657,399.

"The work still goes bravely on," said the iron master. "I am indeed a most fortunate man and think of myself in nothing else so happy as in a soul remembering my dear friends to whom I owe so much."

Mr. Carnegie was asked what his business was.

"My business," he replied, "is to do all the good in the world I can."

His statement was, in part as follows:

"I never bought or sold shares on the exchange; all my earnings were from manufacturing. If it were necessary for me to return to that calling I should not consider the problem of labor as at all difficult. On the contrary, I enjoyed conferences with our men. We had one rule, come what may: We would never think of running our works with new men.

"Able, sober, well behaved workmen, such as ours were, are not to be picked upon the streets and we wished no others. We were very particular in regard to drinking: First offense, men were excluded thirty days; second offense, sixty days; third offense, we parted company."

Mr. Carnegie said he "had had only one serious disaster with labor." That was at the time of the riot at Homestead, Pa. Mr. Carnegie was abroad at the time and when he heard of it he wanted to return home, but his partners requested him not to do so.

"Some of the men at the works," Mr. Carnegie said, "cabled me 'Kind master, tell us what you want us to do and we will do it for you.' Wages were advanced 30 per cent, Mr. Carnegie said, after that incident. Labor and capital, he said, "will some day rank as one."

Iowa Prize Crop State.

Washington, Feb. 8.—Iowa has wrested from Texas the title of banner crop state, the thirteen principal crops grown there last year being valued at $351,450,000, according to the Agricultural Outlook, issued today.

CONDENSED NEWS ITEMS

—Masked robbers boarded the Palm Beach Limited on the Florida East Coast railroad and held up all the men passengers on the observation platform, but refused to take anything from the women. Most of the passengers were New Yorkers.

—At a giant mass meeting of the American Neutrality League in Chicago, the name of Secretary of State Bryan was hissed, England was denounced, America ridiculed, Germany lauded. The avowed purpose of the meeting was the promotion of peace.

—G. Hunter Raine, formerly president of the Mercantile Bank of Memphis, Tenn., pleaded guilty when arraigned in the federal court, charged with looting the institution. Raine's peculations are said to have totaled $1,056,000. The bank closed a year ago.

—Suitings of the [illegible] to be worn by the [illegible] fashion for [illegible] according to styles [illegible] annual convention of [illegible] chant Tailors' [illegible]

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