

The Mardi Gras Mystery

CHAPTER IX—Continued.

By H. BEDFORD-JONES

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"It can't be possible!" he muttered, bending farther over. "Such a thing happens too rarely!"

His heart pounded violently; excitement sent the blood rushing to his brain in blinding swirls. He was gripped by the gold fever that comes upon a man when he makes the astounding discovery of untold wealth lying at his feet, passed over and disregarded by other and less-discerning men for days and years!

It was oil, no question about it. An extremely slight quantity, true; so slight a quantity that there was no film on the water, no discernible taste to the water. Gramont brought it to his mouth and rose, shaking his head.

Where did it come from? It had no connection with the gas bubbles—at least, it did not come from the dome of water and gas. How long he stood there staring Gramont did not know. His brain was afever with the possibilities. At length he stirred into action and started up the bayou bank, from time to time halting to search the water below him, to make sure that he could still discern the faint iridescence.

He followed it rod by rod, and found that it rapidly increased in strength. It must come from some very tiny surface seepage close at hand, that was lost in the bayou almost as rapidly as it came from the earth's depths. Only accidentally would a man see it—no unless he were searching the water close to the bank, and even then only by the grace of chance.

Suddenly Gramont saw that he had lost the sign. He halted.

No, not lost, either! Just ahead of him was a patch of reeds, and a recession of the shore. He advanced again. Inside the reeds he found the oily smear, still so faint that he could only detect it at certain angles. Glancing up, he could see affluence at a little distance, evidently the boundary fence of the Ledanos land; the bushes and trees thinned out here, and on ahead was cleared ground. He saw through the bushes, glimpses of buildings.

Violent disappointment seized him. Was he to lose this discovery, after all? Was he to find that the seepage came from ground belonging to some one else? No—he stepped back hastily, barely in time to avoid stumbling into a tiny trickle of water, a rivulet that ran down into the bayou, a tributary so insignificant that it was invisible ten feet distant! And on the surface a faint iridescence.

Excitement rising anew within him, Gramont turned and followed this rivulet, his eyes aflame with eagerness. It led him for twenty feet, and ceased abruptly, in a bubbling spring that welled from a patch of low tree-enclosed land. Gramont felt his feet sinking in grass, and saw that there was a dip in the ground hereabouts, a swampy little section all to itself. He picked a dry spot and lay down on his face, searching the water with his eyes.

Moment after moment he lay there, watching. Presently he found the slight trickle of oil again—a trickle so faint and slim that even here on the surface of the tiny rivulet, it could be discerned only with great difficulty. A very thin seepage, concluded Gramont; a thin oil, of course. So faint a little thing, to mean so much!

It came from the Ledanos land, no doubt of it. What did that matter, though? His eyes widened with flaming thoughts as he gazed down at the slender thread of water. No matter at all where this came from—the main point was proven by it! There was oil here for the finding, oil down in the thousands of feet below, oil so thick and abundant that it forced itself up through the earth fissures to find an outlet!

"Instead of going down five or six thousand feet," he thought, exultantly, "we may have to go down only as many hundred. But first we must get an option or a lease on all the land roundabout—all we can secure! There will be a tremendous boom the minute this news breaks. If we get those options, we can sell them over again at a million per cent profit, and even if we don't strike oil in paying quantities, we'll regain the cost of our drilling! And to think of the years this has been here, waiting for some one!"

Suddenly he started violently. An abrupt crashing of feet among the bushes, an outbreak of voices, had sounded not far away—just the other side of the boundary fence. He was awakened from his dreams, and started to rise. Then he relaxed his muscles and lay quiet, astonishment seizing him; for he heard his own name mentioned in a voice that was strange to him.

CHAPTER X.

The voice was strange to Gramont, yet he had a vague recollection of having at some time heard it before. It was a jaunty and impudent voice, very self-assured—yet it bore a startled and uneasy note, as though the speaker had just come unaware upon the man whom he addressed.

"Howdy, sheriff!" it said. "Didn't see you in there—what you doin' so far away from Houma, eh?"

"Why, I've been looking over the place around here," responded another voice, which was dry and grim. "I know you, Ben Chacherre, and I think I'll take you along with me. Just come from New Orleans, did you?"

"Me? Take me?" The voice of Chacherre shrilled up suddenly in

alarm. "Look here, sheriff, it wasn't me done it! It was Gramont!"

There came silence. Not a sound broke the stillness of the late afternoon.

Gramont, listening, lay bewildered and breathless. Ben Chacherre came here? Gramont knew nothing of any tie between Jachin Fell and Chacherre; he could only lie in the grass and wonder at the man's presence. What "place" was it that the sheriff of Houma had been looking over? And what was it that he, Gramont, was supposed to have done?

Confused and wondering, Gramont waited. And, as he waited, he caught a soft sound from the marshy ground beside him—a faint "plop" as though some object had fallen close by on the wet grass. At the moment he paid no heed to this sound, for again the uncanny silence had fallen.

Listening, Gramont fancied that he caught slow, stealthy footsteps amid the undergrowth, but decided the fancy as sheer imagination. His brain was busy with this new problem. Houma, he knew, was the seat of the parish or county. This Ben Chacherre appeared to have suddenly and unexpectedly encountered the sheriff, to his obvious alarm, and the sheriff had for some reason decided to arrest him; so much was clear.

Chacherre had nothing to do with the "place"—did that mean the adjacent property, or the Ledanos farm? In his puzzled bewilderment over this imbriclio Gramont for the moment quite forgot the trickle of oil at his feet.

But now the deep silence became unnatural and sinister. What had happened? Surely, Ben Chacherre had not been arrested and taken away in such silence! Why had the voices so abruptly ceased? Vaguely uneasy, startled by the prolongation of that intense stillness, Gramont rose to his feet and peered among the trees.

The two speakers seemed to have departed; he could discern nobody in sight. A step to one side gave Gramont a view of the land adjoining the Ledanos place. This was cleared of all brush, and under some immense oaks to the far left he had a glimpse of a large summer cottage, boarded



An Abrupt Crashing of Feet Among the Bushes, an Outbreak of Voices, Had Sounded Not Far Away.

up and apparently deserted. Nearer at hand, however, he saw other buildings, and these drew his attention. He heard the throbbing pound of a motor at work, and as there was no power line along here, the place evidently had its own electrical plant. He scrutinized the scene before him appraisingly.

There were two large buildings here. One seemed to be a large barn, closed, the other was a long, low shed which was too large to be a garage. The door of this was open, and before the opening Gramont saw three men standing in talk; he recognized none of them. Two of the talkers were clad in greasy overalls, and the third figure showed the flash of a collar. The sheriff, Ben Chacherre, and some other man, thought Gramont. He would not have known Chacherre had he encountered him face to face. To him, the man was a name only.

The mention of his own name by Chacherre impelled him to go forward and demand some explanation. Then it occurred to him that perhaps he had made a mistake; it would have been very easy, for he was not certain that Chacherre had referred to him. There could be other Gramonts, or other men whose name would have been the same sound in a Creole mouth.

"I'd better attend to my own business," thought Gramont, and turned away. He noticed that the motor had ceased its work. "Wonder what rich chap can be down here at his summer cottage this time of year? May be only a caretaker, though. I'd better give all my attention to this oil, and let other things go."

He retraced his steps to the bayou bank and turned back toward the house. As he did so, Hammond appeared coming toward him, knife in hand.

"I'm going to cut me a pole and land

a couple o' fish for supper," announced the chauffeur, grinning. "Oot things cleaned up fine, cap'n! You won't know the old shack!"

"Good enough," said Gramont. "Here, step over this way! I want to show you something."

He led Hammond to the rivulet and pointed out the thin film of oil on the surface.

"There's our golden fortune, sergeant! Oil actually coming out of the ground! It doesn't happen very often, but it does happen and this is one of the times. I'll not bother to look around any farther."

"Glory be!" said Hammond, staring at the rivulet. "Want to hit back for town?"

"No; we couldn't get back until some time tonight, and the roads aren't very good for night work. I'm going to get some leaves around here—perhaps I can do it right away, and we'll start back in the morning. Go ahead and get your fish."

Regaining the house, he saw that Hammond had indeed cleaned up in great style, and had the main room looking clean as a pin, with a fire popping on the hearth. He did not pause here, but went to the car, got in, and started it. He drove back to the road and followed this toward town for a few rods, turning in at a large and very decent-looking farmhouse that he had observed while passing it on the way out.

He found the owner, an intelligent-looking Creole, driving in some cows for milking, and was a little startled to realize that the afternoon was so late. When he addressed the farmer in French, he received a cordial reply, and discovered that this man owned the land across the road from the Ledanos place—that his farm, in fact, covered several hundred acres.

"Who owns the land next to the Ledanos place?" inquired Gramont.

"I sold that off me land a couple of years ago," replied the other. "A man from New Orleans wanted it for a summer place—a business man there, Isidore Gumberts."

Gumberts—"Memphis larry" Gumberts! The name flashed to Gramont's mind, and brought the recollection of a conversation with Hammond. Why, Gumberts was the famous crook of whom Hammond had spoken.

"I saw the sheriff a while ago, heading up the road," observed the Creole. "Did you meet him?"

Gramont shook his head. "No, but I saw several men at the Gumberts place. Perhaps he was there."

"Not there, I guess," and the farmer laughed. "Those fellows have rented the place from Gumberts, I hear; they're inventors, and quiet enough men. You're a stranger here?"

Gramont introduced himself as a friend of Miss Ledanos and stated frankly that he was looking for oil and hoped to drill on her land.

"I'd like a lease option from you," he went on. "I don't want to buy your land at all; what I want is a right to drill for oil on it. In case any shows up on Miss Ledanos' land, I'll give you a gamble, you know. I'll give you a hundred dollars for the lease, and the usual eighth interest in any oil that's found. I've no lease blanks with me, but if you'll give me the option, a signed memorandum will be entirely sufficient."

The farmer regarded all as a joke, and said so. The hundred dollars, however, and the prospective eighth interest, were sufficient to induce him to part with the option without any delay. He was only too glad to get the thing done with at once, and to pocket Gramont's money.

Gramont drove away and was just coming to the Ledanos drive when he suddenly threw on the brakes and halted the car, listening. From somewhere ahead of him—the Gumberts place, he thought instantly—echoed a shot, and several faint shouts. Then silence again.

Gramont paused, indecisive. The sheriff was making an arrest, he thought. A hundred possibilities flitted through his brain, suggested by the sinister combination of Memphis larry, known even to Hammond as a prince among crooks, with this secluded place leased by "inventors." Bootlegging? Counterfeiting?

As he paused, thus, he suddenly started; he was certain that he had caught the tones of Hammond, as though in a sudden uplifted oath of anger. Gramont threw in his clutch and sent the car jumping forward—he remembered that he had left Hammond beside the rivulet, close to the Gumberts property. What had happened?

He came, after a moment of impotence, to an open gate whose drive led to the Gumberts place. Before him, as he turned in, unfolded a startling scene. Three men, the same three whom he had seen from the bushes, were standing in front of the low shed; two of them held rifles, the third, one of the "inventors" in overalls, was winding a bandage about a bleeding hand. The two rifles were loosely leveled at Hammond, who stood in the center of the group with his arms in the air.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Don't Fill It.

A hot-water bottle should never be really filled. If it is to be put in a bed to warm it have it only about three-quarters full.

Forty-six miles of shelving are required for the collection of 2,000,000 books in the British Museum.

HAPPENINGS in the BIG CITIES

Movies Awaken Town From Long Sleep



SPRINGFIELD, ILL.—Bernadote, a hip Van Winkle town, is awakened from a century of sleep.

Without telephones, automobiles, railroads or any modern conveniences, this town had gone on in its undisturbed way for a hundred years, sleeping quietly in a busy world, until a few days ago, when it was "discovered" by a motion picture director, and the next morning awoke to fame with a column of type in a blooming newspaper.

C. L. Varnard, looking for a "location" to film a country town scene, ran across the village. It has no railroads and half the inhabitants claim never to have seen a train. It has no picture shows, and of course had never seen a motion picture camera. The

old village grist mill is still grinding away every day with water from the same spillway that supplied the mill a century ago.

But now strange things are happening in Bernadote. Big automobiles whirl through the village. There is the unusual smell of oil and gasoline. The swirling dust from many pneumatic tires distresses the bewildered inhabitants. Old ladies in calico dresses no longer go their quiet way to the village store and long-whiskered old men no longer calmly whistle the hours away under the village trees. Their nerves twitch and the day is no longer calm.

About the town go unusual looking men with cameras and stage apparatus. They are the moving picture people who are going to put Bernadote in the films. Bernadote is sleep-walking. Some of the oldest inhabitants think it's a nightmare.

There are two small wooden buildings in the village that serve as stores, where the simple wants of the people are supplied. The houses are quaint and old-fashioned, of the old colonial and English type. Picket fences separate the yards. Old-fashioned flower gardens bloom in the doorways.

Declares Aphrodite Was "Hard Boiled"

CHICAGO.—The mail order romance of a rather aged and bald Hermes and his f. o. b. Aphrodite came to a snafu in Judge Harry B. Miller's courtroom.

Hermes, it may be remembered, was the winged messenger of the immortal gods of Mount Olympus, the youth of Mercurial charm and swiftness. Aphrodite was the perfect divinity, the ideal of maidenly charm and beauty.

Therefore, it was a shock when John H. Finley, sixty-one, hobbled into Judge Miller's courtroom and announced himself as the Hermes in the "hard-boiled" myth spun in correspondence, once by Aphrodite, otherwise Miss Sarah Hawkins of Greenville, Miss., who carried a six-shooter and backed him up against a wall when he developed an antipathy to matrimony.

He met her through a matrimonial ad in a country journal, he testified. He wrote, and Sarah sent him a photo of a "movie" Aphrodite as her own.

The romance grew. "It was she who called me Hermes," Finley testified, reaching for his cane. "She said he was about the swiftest fellow in history, and I should copy his speed in getting her heart."

"I hurried down to Greenville and met her. That was the blow. She looked as much like Aphrodite as an old, spavined horse looks like Man o' War."

Long-Sought Contented Man Discovered?



LITTLE ROCK, ARK.—A characteristic letter from Wood Rainwater, president of the Rainwater bank of Morrilton and one of the best-known members of the Arkansas Banking association, is published by Commerce and Finance, a banking publication of New York. The letter declines an offer of Mr. Rainwater to become a member of the staff and sets out fully the reasons for rejecting the offer.

Mr. Rainwater's letter follows: "Dear Mr. Price: You request my services to help edit Commerce and Finance. I couldn't think of it. I live in a little town in Arkansas with



"After I explained I expected to find a sweet little girl who looked and acted differently than she did, she drew her gun and backed me up against the wall of the railroad station."

"Then she told me not to think I could get away with that stuff, and that I'd have to go to her home and marry her."

"We were married there twenty-four hours later by a parson. But even at the ceremony she wouldn't kiss me, but gave me a push in the face when I started to."

"She sure was a hard-boiled woman."

Finley said he escaped from the powerful arms of the Mississippi Aphrodite the first chance he got and came home. That was in March, and he hasn't seen her since, nor has he missed her.

Wife No. 2 to Share Riches With No. 1

CHICAGO.—Wife No. 1—deserted years ago—and wife No. 2, present partaker of the riches John Rock, formerly of Chicago and now of California, won in the gold fields of Alaska, met here and arranged legally that the deserted wife should have financial help. This was the announcement of Attorney John T. Duffy, who says they conferred in his office.

When Mrs. Eleanor Rock, wife of Rock's golden years, arrived here several days ago in her role as "good angel," seeking to repay the wife who stood staunchly by Rock in his drab years, she embraced publicly eagerly—until the first wife was located in Dresser Junction, Wis.

The idea of seeking out Mrs. Lottie Rock was the second wife's, according to the story she told when she arrived here. Years after their marriage her rich husband confessed that he had deserted a wife in Chicago. He promptly acceded to her plan that wife No. 1 should be sought out at once and taken care of financially for the



rest of her days. News of the strange search penetrated to Dresser Junction, it was said, and there Mrs. Lottie Rock was found living quietly and earning her own living in the obscurity of the little town.

The second wife hastened immediately to the Wisconsin village and met wife No. 1. They came to Chicago together, according to Mr. Duffy, and in a conference arranged to complete the method by which the original wife will be recompensed for her lean years.

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