

The Mardi Gras Mystery

By
H. BEDFORD-JONES

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BEN CHACHERRE.

SYNOPSIS.—During the height of the New Orleans carnival season Jachin Fell, wealthy though somewhat mysterious citizen, and Dr. Ansley, are discussing a series of robberies by an individual known as the Midnight Masquer, who, invariably attired 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 Ansley, on their way to the affair, meet a girl dressed as Columbine, seemingly known to Fell, but masked, who accompanies them to the ball. Lucie Ledanois, recently the ward of her uncle, Joseph Maillard, is the Columbine. At the ball, Bob Maillard, son of the banker, again proposes to her and is refused. He offers to buy some of her property. A Franciscan monk interests her. He turns out to be Prince Gramont. In his library Joseph Maillard and a group of his friends are held up and robbed by the Midnight Masquer. 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, really the Prince de Gramont, is enamored of Lucie. Lucie talks with Fell about her affairs and the Masked Masquer. Gramont's chauffeur, Hammond, sergeant in the A. E. F., lives with him. He was the original Midnight Masquer, and Gramont had assumed the role. Where Hammond had been a robber for financial gain, Gramont, of course, is not. He arranges to return the "loot" to those whom he has robbed. Gramont and Hammond put the jewels and money in individual packages to be returned the next day.

CHAPTER V—Continued.

In the garage Hammond switched on the lights of the car. By the glow they disposed their burdens in the luggage compartment of the tonneau, which held them neatly. The compartment closed and locked, they returned into the house and dismissed the affair as settled.

Upon the following morning Gramont, who usually breakfasted on pension with his hostess, had barely sented himself at the table when he perceived the figure of Hammond at the rear entrance of the dining room. The chauffeur beckoned him hastily.

"Come out here, cap'n!" Hammond was breathing heavily, and seemed to be in some agitation. "Want to show you somethin'!"

Gramont rose and followed Hammond out to the garage, much to his amazement. The chauffeur halted beside the car and extended him a key, pointing to the luggage compartment.

"Here's the key—you open her!"

"What's the matter, man?"

"The stuff's gone!"

Gramont seized the key and opened the compartment. It proved empty indeed. He stared up into the face of Hammond, who was watching in dogged silence.

"I knew you'd suspect me," broke out the chauffeur, but Gramont interrupted him curtly.

"Don't be a fool; nothing of the sort. Was the garage looked?"

"Yes, and the compartment, too. I came out to look over that cut tire, and thought I'd make sure the stuff was safe."

"We're up against it, that's all. Someone must have been watching us last night, eh?"

"The guy that trailed you yesterday, most like," agreed Hammond, dourly. "You think they got us, cap'n? What can we do?"

"Do!" Gramont shrugged his shoulders and laughed. "Nothing except to wait and see what happens next! Don't touch that compartment door. I want to examine it later."

Hammond gazed admiringly after him as he crossed the garden. "If you ain't a cool hand, I'm a Dutchman!" he murmured, and followed his master.

CHAPTER VI.

Chacherre.

At ten o'clock that Monday morning Gramont's car approached Canal street, and halted a block distant. Gramont left the car, and turned to speak with Hammond.

"I've made out at least two fingerprints on the luggage compartment," he said, quietly. "Drive around to police headquarters and enter a complaint in my name to a robbery of the compartment; say that the thief got away with some valuable packages I had been about to mail. They have a process of transferring fingerprints such as these; get it done. Perhaps they can identify the thief, for it must have been some clever picklock to get into the compartment without leaving a scratch. It was someone sent by that devil Jachin Fell, and I'll land him if I can!"

"Then Fell will land us if he's got the stuff!"

"Let him! How can he prove anything, unless he had brought the police to open up that compartment? Get along with you!"

Hammond grinned, saluted, and drove away.

Slowly Gramont edged his way through the eddying crowds to Canal

street, and presently gained the imposing portals of the Exeter National bank. Entering the building, he sent his card to the private office of the president; a moment later he was ushered in, and was closeted with Joseph Maillard.

The interior of the Exeter National reflected the stern personality that ruled it. The bank was dark, old-fashioned, conservative, guarded with much frontistry of iron grills and bars against the evil door.

The window men greeted their customers with infrequent smiles, with caution and reserve so great that it was positively chilly. Suspicion seemed in the air. The bank's reputation for guarding the sanctity of wealth seemed to rest heavily upon each pair of bowed shoulders.

The business customers of this bank found their affairs handled coldly, efficiently, with an inhuman precision that was admirable. It was good for business, and they liked it. There were no mistakes.

People who were accustomed to dealing with bankers of cordial smile and courteous word, people who liked to walk into a bank and to be met with a personal greeting, did not come here, nor were they wanted here. Chance customers who entered the sacred portals were duly cowed and put in their proper place. Most of them were, that is, occasionally some intrepid soul appeared who seemed impervious to the gloomy chill, who seemed even to resent it.

One of these persons was now standing in the lobby and staring around with a cool impudence which drew unfavorable glances from the clerks.

He was a decently dressed fellow, obviously no customer of this sacrosanct place, obviously a stranger to its interior. Beneath a rakishly cocked soft hat beamed a countenance that bore a look of self-assured impertinent devilry. After one look at that countenance the assistant cashier crooked a hasty finger at the floor guard, who nodded and walked to the intruder with a polite query.

"Can I help you, sir?"

The intruder turned, favored the guard with a cool stare, then broke into a laugh and a flood of Creole dialect.

"Why, if it isn't old Lacroix from Carencro! And look at the brass but-

tons—diable! You must own this place, hein?—the cat's tall grows in time, I see! You remember me?"

"Ben Chacherre!" exclaimed the guard, losing his dignity for an instant. "Why—you vaurien, you!"

"So you turn up your sanctified nose at Ben Chacherre, do you?" exclaimed that person jauntily. "A vaurien, am I? Old peacock! Lead me to the man who cashes checks, lackey, brass buttons that you are! Come, obey me, or I'll have you thrown into the street!"

"You—you wish to cash a check? But you are not known here—"

"Bah, insolent one! Monkey in the calabash that you are! Do you not know me!"

"Heaven preserve me! I will not answer for your accused checks."

"Go to the devil, then," snapped Chacherre, and turned away.

His roving eyes had already found the correct window by means of the other persons seeking it, and now he stepped into the small queue that had formed. When it came his turn, he slid his check across the marble slab, tucked his thumbs into the armpits of his vest, and impudently stared into the questioning, coldly repellent eyes of the teller.

"Well?" he exclaimed, as the teller examined the check. "Do you wish to eat it, that you sniff so hard?"

The teller gave him a glance. "This is for a thousand dollars—"

"Can I not read?" said Chacherre, with an impudent gesture. "Am I an ignorant 'Cajun'? Have I not eyes in my head? If you wish to start an

argument, say that the check is for a hundred dollars. Then, by heaven, I will argue something with you!"

"You are Ben Chacherre, eh? Does anyone here know you?"

Chacherre exploded in a violent oath. "Dolt that you are, do I have to be known when the check is indorsed under my signature? Who taught you business, monkey?"

"True," answered the teller sulkily. "Yet the amount—"

"Oh, bah!" Chacherre snapped his fingers. "Go and telephone Jachin Fell, you old woman! Go and tell him you do not know his signature—well, who are you looking at? Am I a telephone, then? You are not hired to look but to act! Get about it!"

The enraged and scandalized teller beckoned a confrere. Jachin Fell was telephoned. Presumably his response was reassuring, for Chacherre was presently handed a thousand dollars in small bills, as he requested. He insisted upon counting over the money at the window with insolent assiduity, and swaggered across the lobby. He was still standing by the entrance when Henry Gramont left the private office of the president and passed him by without a look.

Toward noon Gramont arrived afoot at his pension. Behind the garage, in the alley, he discovered Hammond busily at work cleaning and polishing the engine of the car.

"Hello!" he exclaimed, cheerily. "What luck?"

"Pretty good, cap'n." Hammond glanced up, then paused.

A stranger was strolling toward them along the alleyway, a jaunty individual who was gayly whistling and who seemed entirely carefree and happy. He appeared to have no interest whatever in them, and Hammond concluded that he was innocuous.

"They got them prints fine, cap'n. What's more, they think they've located the fellow that made 'em."

"Ah, good work!" exclaimed Gramont. "Some criminal?"

Hammond frowned. The stranger had come to a halt a few feet distant, flung them a jerky, careless nod, and was beginning to roll a cigarette. He surveyed the car with a knowing and appreciative eye. Hammond turned his back on the man disdainfully.

"Yep—a sneaky thief they'd pinched a couple of years back; didn't know where he was, but the prints seemed to fit him. They'll come up and look things over sometime today, then go after him and land him."

Gramont gave the stranger a glance, but the other was still surveying the car with evident admiration. If he heard their words he gave them no attention.

"Who was the man, then?" asked Gramont.

"A guy with a queer name—Ben Chacherre." Hammond pronounced it as he deemed correct—as the name was spelled. "Only they didn't call him that. Here, I wrote it down."

He fished in his pocket and produced a paper. Gramont glanced at it and laughed.

"Oh, Chacherre!" He gave the name the Creole pronunciation.

"Yep, Sasherry. I expect they'll come any time now—said two bulls would drop in."

"All right," Gramont nodded and turned away, with another glance at the stranger. "I'll not want the car today nor tonight that I know of. I'm not going to the Proteus ball. So your time's your own until tomorrow; make the most of it!"

He disappeared, and Hammond returned to his work. Then he straightened up for the jaunty stranger was bearing down upon him with evident intent to speak.

"Some car you got there, brother!" Ben Chacherre, who had overheard most of the foregoing conversation, lighted his cigarette and grinned familiarly. "Some car, eh? All she needs is some good tires, a new coat of paint, a good steel chassis, and a new engine—"

"Huh?" snorted Hammond. "Say, you 'bo, who sold you chips in this game? Move along!"

Ben grinned anew and rested himself against a near-by telephone pole.

"Free country, ain't it?" he inquired lazily. "Or have you invested your winnings and bought this here alley?"

Hammond reddened with anger and took a step forward. The next words of Chacherre, however, jerked him sharply into self-control.

"Seen anything of an aviator's helmet around here?"

"Huh?" The chauffeur glared at his tormentor, yet with a sudden sick feeling inside his bosom. "Who you kiddin' now?"

"Nobody. I was asking a question, that's all. I was flyin' along here last night in my airplane, and I lost my helmet overboard. Thought maybe you'd seen it. So long, brother!"

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CHAPTER VI—Continued.

Hammond stood staring after the swaggering figure; for once he was speechless. The jaunty words had sent terror thrilling into him. He started impulsively to pursue that impudent accoster—then he checked himself. Had the man guessed something? Or had those words been only a bit of meaningless impertinence—a chance shaft which had accidentally flown home?

The last conjecture impressed itself on Hammond as being the truth, and his momentary fright died out. He concluded that the incident was not worth mentioning to Gramont, who surely had troubles enough of his own at this juncture.

As for Ben Chacherre, he sauntered from the alley, a careless whistle upon his lips. Once out of Hammond's sight, however, he quickened his pace. Turning into a side street, he directed his step toward that part of the old quarter which, in the days before prohibition, had been given over to low cabarets and dives of various sorts. Coming to one of them, which appeared more dirty and desolate than the rest, Chacherre opened a side door and vanished.

He entered what had once been the Red Cat cabaret. At a table in the half-darkened main room sat two men. One of them, who was the proprietor, jerked his chin in an invitation to join him.

A man famous in the underworld circles, a man whose renown rested on curious feats and facts, this proprietor; few crooks in the country had not heard the name of Memphis Izzy Gumberts. He was a grizzled old bear now, but in times past he had been the head of a far-flung organization which, on each pay day, covered every army post in the country and diverted into its own pockets about two-thirds of Uncle Sam's payroll—a feat still related in criminal circles as the ne plus ultra of success. Those palmy days were gone, but Memphis Izzy, who had never been "mugged" in any gallery, sat in his deserted cabaret and still did not lack for power and influence.

The man at his side was apparently not anxious to linger, for he rose and made his farewells as Chacherre approached.

"We have about eighteen cars left," he said to Gumberts. "Charley the Goog can attend to them, and the place is safe enough. They're up to you. I'm drifting back to Chi."

"Drift along," and Gumberts nodded, a leer in his eyes. His face was broad, heavy-jawed, filled with a keen and forceful craft. "It's a cinch that nobody in this state is goin' to interfere with us. About them cars from Texas—any news?"

"I've sent orders to bring 'em in next week."

Gumberts nodded again, and the man departed. Into the chair which he had vacated dropped Ben Chacherre, and took from his pocket the money he had obtained at the bank. He laid it on the table before Gumberts.

"There you are," he said. "Amounts you want and all. The boss says to gimme a receipt."

"Wouldn't trust you, eh?" jeered Gumberts. "Why wouldn't the boss leave the money come out of the takin's, hey?"

"Wanted to keep separate accounts," said Chacherre.

Gumberts nodded and produced two

large sealed envelopes, which he pushed across the table.

"There's a rakeoff for week before last," he announced. "Last week will be the big business, judgin' from early reports."

Chacherre pocketed the envelopes, lighted a cigarette, and leaned forward.

"Say, Izzy! You got to send a new man down to the Bayou Latouche right away. Lafarge was there, you know; a nigger shot him yesterday. The nigger threatened to squeal unless he got his money back—Lafarge was a foot and didn't know how to handle him. The boss says to shoot a new man down there. Also, he says, you'd better watch out about spreadin' the lottery into Texas and Alabama, account of the government rules."

The heavy features of Gumberts closed in a scowl.

"You tell your boss," he said, "that when it comes to steerin' clear of federal men, I don't want no instructions from nobody! I got every man in this state spotted. Every one that can be fixed is fixed—and that goes for the legislators and politicians clear up the line! Tell your boss to handle the local government as well as I handle other things, and he'll do all that's necessary. What he'd ought to attend to, for one thing, is this here guy who calls himself the Midnight Masquer. I've told him before that this guy was playin' h—l with my system! This Masquer gets no protection, see? The quicker Fell goes after him the better for all concerned—"

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"We've attended to all that, Izzy—we've dropped on him and settled

him! The guy was doin' it for a carnival joke, that's all. His loot is all goin' back to the owners today. It needn't worry you, anyhow! There was nothin' much to it—jewelry that couldn't be disposed of, for the most part. We couldn't take chances on that sort o' junk."

"I should say not." Gumberts regarded him with a scowl. "You've got the stuff?"

"The boss has. Look here, Izzy, I want you to use a little influence with headquarters on this deal—the boss doesn't want to show his hand there, and leaning forward, Ben Chacherre spoke in a low tone. Then, Gumberts heard him out, chuckled, and nodded assent.

At two that afternoon Henry Gramont was summoned to the telephone. He was greeted by a voice which he did not recognize, but which announced itself promptly.

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"Oh!" said Gramont. "Then there's nothing to be done?"

"Not yet. We're workin' on it, and maybe we'll have some news later, Goodby."

Gramont hung up the receiver, a puzzled frown creasing his brow. But, after a minute, he laughed softly—a trace of anger in the laugh.

"Ah!" he murmured. "I congratulate you on your efficiency, Mr. Fell! But now wait a little—and we'll meet again. I think I'm getting somewhere at last, and I'll have a surprise for you one of these days!"

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