

The Million Dollar Mystery

By HAROLD MAC GRATH

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CHAPTER VI.

"Did you get the range?" asked the countess, when late that night Brains recounted his adventure.

"Range!" he snarled. "My girl, haven't I just told you that I had to fight for my life? My boat was in flames. We had to swim for it till we were picked up by a Long Island barge tug. I don't know what became of the motorman. He must have headed straight for shore. And I'm glad he did. Otherwise he'd be howling for the price of another boat. Olga, for the first time I've had to let one of the boys have a look at my face. Doesn't know the name; but one of those days he'll stumble across it, and the result will be black-mail, unless I push him off into the dark. It was accidental."

The countess leaned forward, her hands tightly clinched.

"But the box!"

Brains made a gesture of despair.

"Leo, are you using any drug these days?"

"Don't make fun of me, Olga," impatiently. "Did you ever see me drink more than a pint of wine or smoke more than two cigars in an evening? Poor fool! What! let my brain go into the wastebasket for the sake of an hour or so of exhilaration? No, and never will I! I'm keen about the gray matter I've got, and by the Lord Harry, I'm going to keep it. There's only one dope I've had in the Hundred, and he's one of the best decoys we have; so we let him have his coko whenever he really needs it. But this man Filton has seen my face. Some day he'll see it again, ask questions, and then—"

"Then what?"

"A burial at sea," he laughed. The laughter died swiftly as it came. "Threw it into eight hundred feet of water, on a bar where the sands are always shifting. He'll never find it, even if he took the range. He could not have got a decent one. The sun was dropping and the shadows were long. He threw the chest into the water and then began pegging away at us, cool as you please, and fired our tank."

"It looks to me as if he had wasted his time."

"That depends. Between you and me and the gate-post, I've a sneaking idea that this man Jones, whom nobody has given any particular attention, is a deep, clever man. He may have been honestly attempting to find a new hiding place; the advertisement in the newspaper may have drawn him. He may have thrown the box over in pure rage at seeing himself checkmated. Again, the whole thing may have been worked up for our benefit, a blind. But if that's the case, Jones has us on the hip, for we can't tell. But we can do what in all probability he expects we'll cease to do—watch him just as shrewdly as before."

Olga caught his hand and drew him down beside her. "I wasn't going to bother you tonight, but it may mean something vital."

"What?" alertly.

For reply she rose and walked over to the light button. She pressed it and the apartment became dark.

"Come over to the window, quick!" She dragged him across the room.

"Over the way, the house with the marble frontage."

A man emerged, lit a cigarette, and walked leisurely down the street.

"No!" she cried, as Elaine turned to make for the door, doubtless with the intention of finding out who this man was. "Every night after you leave he appears."

"Does he follow me?"

"No. And that's what bothered me at first. I believed he was watching some apartment above. But regularly when I turn out the lights he comes forth. So there's no doubt that he watches you enter and takes note of your departure."

"But doesn't follow me. That's odd. What the devil is his idea?"

"I'd give a good deal to learn."

The shadow and the glowing cigarette disappeared around the corner, and the lights in the apartment were turned on again.

"He's gone. You really think he's watching me?"

"He is watching this apartment, I know that much."

And even at that moment the watcher was watching from his vantage behind the corner.

"Suspicious!" he murmured, tossing the cigarette into the gutter. They were watching me for a change. I'll keep out. I know what I know. It's a great world. It's got to be alive and kicking on top of it. He went on without haste and took the subway train for downtown.

"Is there any way I could get near him?" asked Brains.

"Tomorrow night you might leave by the janitor's entrance. I'll keep the lights on till you're outside. Then I'll turn them off and you can follow and learn who he is."

"It's mighty important."

"Don't scowl. At your age a wrinkle is apt to remain if you once get it started."

He laughed. "Wrinkles!" She could talk of wrinkles!

"They are more important than you think. Every morning I rub out the wrinkle I go to bed with."

"I wish you could rub out the general stupidity which is wrinkling my brain. I've made three moves and failed in each. What's come over me?"

"Perhaps you've had too many successes. The wheel of chance is always turning around."

"May I smoke?"

"Thanks. At least it proves you still have some consideration for me. You would smoke whether it was agreeable or not. But I like the odor of a good cigar. And it always helps you to think."

Brains lit the cigar and began his customary pacing. At length he paused.

"Suppose we have a real old-fashioned coaching party out to the old mansion we know about?"

"And what shall we do there?"

"Make the mansion an enchanted castle where sometimes people who enter can't get out. Do you think you could get her to go?"

"I can try."

"Olga, I must have that girl; and I must have her soon. Sometimes I find myself mightily puzzled over the whole thing. If Hargreave is alive, why doesn't he turn up now that it's practically known that his daughter presides over his household? I might understand it if I didn't know that Hargreave is really afraid of nothing. Where is the man with the five thousand, picked up at sea? What was the reason for Jones carrying that box out in broad daylight? Who is the chap watching across the street? Sometimes I believe in my soul—if I have one!—that Hargreave is playing with us, playing! Well," flinging the half consumed cigar into the grate, "the Black Hundred always goes forward, win or lose, and never forgets."

"We are a fine pair!" said the woman bitterly.

"We are exactly what fate intended us to be. They wrote you down in the book as a beautiful body with a crooked mind. They wrote me down as the devil, doomed to roam earth's top till I'm killed."

"Killed?"

"Why, yes. I'm not the kind of chap who dies in bed, surrounded by the weeping members of the family, doctor, nurse, and priest. I'm a scoundrel; but it has this saving grace, I enjoy being a scoundrel. Now, I'm going up to the club. There's nothing like a game of billiards or chess to smooth that wrinkle which seems to worry you."

In the great newspaper office there was a mighty racket. Midnight always means pandemonium in the city room of a metropolitan daily. Copy boys were rushing to and fro, messengers and printers with sticky galleys in their hands; reporters were banging away at their typewriters, and intermingling you could hear the ceaseless clickety-click from the telegraph room.

The managing editor came out of his office and approached the desk of the night city editor.

"Editorial page gone down?"

"Twenty minutes ago," said the night city editor.

"I wanted a stick on that Panama rumpus."

"Too late."

"Who's Jim Norton?"

"At the chamber of commerce banquet. The major is going to throw a bomb into the enemy's camp."

"Nothing on the Hargreave stuff?"

"No. Guess I'd better put that in the cubbyhole. He's dead."

"No will found yet?"

"Not a piece as big as a postage stamp."

"That will leave the girl in a tough place. No will, no birth certificate; and, worst of all, no photograph of the old man; himself. I don't see why Jim sidestepped this affair. He's the only man in town who knew anything about Hargreave."

"He hasn't given it up; yet he wants to cover it on his own, turn the yarn over when he's got it, no false alarms."

"Ah! So that's the game?"

"Yes; and Jim is the sort every paper needs. When the time comes the story turns up, if there is one. Here he is now. Looks like an actor in the fourth act of a drama. Good-looking chap, though."

Norton came in through the outer gates. He was in evening clothes, top hat. A dead cigarette dangled between his lips.

"How much do you want?" asked the night city editor.

"Column and a half."

"OK with your old rag!"

"Anything good?" asked the managing editor.

"The lid has been jammed on tight. No wine in any restaurant after one o'clock. There'll be a roundup of every guman in town."

"Good work! Go to it."

It was one o'clock when Norton turned in his last sheet of copy and started for home. Just outside the entrance to the building a man with a slouch hat drawn down over his eyes stepped forward.

"Mr. Norton?"

"Yes," Norton stepped back suspiciously.

The other chuckled, raised and lowered his hat swiftly.

"Good Lord!" murmured the reporter.

"Will you take a ride with me in a taxi?"

"All the way to Syracuse, if you say so. Well, I'll be tinker d—d!"

"No names, please!"

What took place in that taxicab was never generally known. But at ten o'clock the next morning Norton surprised the elevator boy by going out. Norton proceeded downtown to the national bank, where he deposited \$5,000 in bills of large denominations. The teller had some difficulty in counting them. They stuck together and retained the sodden appearance of money recently submerged in water.

Florence was delighted at the idea of a coaching party. Often during her school days she had seen the fashionable coaches go careening along the road, with the sharp, clear note of the bugle rising about the thunder of hoofs and rattling of wheels. Jones was not enthusiastic; neither was he a killjoy.

"But you are to go along, too," said Florence.

"I, Miss Florence?"

"The countess invited you especially. You will go with a hamper."

"Ah, in my capacity as butler; very good, Miss Florence." To her he gave no sign of his secret satisfaction.

The hour arrived, and the gay party bowed away. They wound in and out of the streets toward the country to the crack of the whip and the blare of the horn. Florence's enjoyment would

have been perfect had it not been for the absence of Norton. Why hadn't he been invited? She did not ask because she did not care to disclose to the countess her interest in the reporter. They were nearing the limits of the city, when the coach was forced to take a sharp turn to avoid an automobile in trouble. The man puttering at the engine raised his head. It was Norton, and Florence waved her hand vigorously.

"A coaching party," he murmured; "and your Uncle James was not invited! Oh, very well!" He laughed, and suddenly grew serious. It would not hurt to find out where that coach was going.

He set to work savagely, located the trouble, righted it, and set off for the Hargreave home. He found Susan and bombarded her with questions which to Susan came with the rapidity of rain upon the roof.

"So Jones went along?"

"In his capacity of butler only."

Norton smiled. "Well, I'll take a jaunt out there myself. You are sure of the location?"

"Yes."

"Well, good-by. I'll go as a waiter, since they wouldn't invite me. I'm one of the best little waiters you ever heard of; and all things come to him who waits."

What a pleasant, affable young man he was! thought Susan as she watched him jump into the car and go flying up the street.

Jones was a good deal surprised when Norton turned up at the old Clinton mansion.

"What made you come here dressed like this?" the butler demanded.

"I'm a suspicious Jaffer; maybe that's the reason."

"Do you know anything?"

"Well, no; I can't say that I do. But, hang it, I just had to come out here."

"Maybe it's just as well you did," said Jones moodily.

"I know this place. The housekeeper used to be my nurse, and if she is still on the job she may be of service to us. You don't think they'll question or recognize me?"

"Hardly. I'll put in a word for you. I'll say I sent for you, not knowing if we had enough servants to take care of the luncheon."

"And now I'll go and hunt up Meg."

Soon enough, his old nurse was still in charge of the kitchen, and when her "help" discovered his identity she

all but fell upon his neck.

"But what are you doing here, dressed up as a waiter?"

"It's a little secret, Meg. I wasn't invited, and the truth is I'm very desperately in love with the young lady in whose honor this coaching party is being given. And . . . maybe she's in danger."

"Danger? What about?"

"The Lord only knows. But show me about the house. I've not been here in so long I've forgotten the run of it. I remember one room with the secret panel and another with a painting that turned. Have they changed them?"

"No; it is just the same here as it used to be. Come along and I'll show you."

Norton inspected the rooms carefully, stowing away in his mind every detail. He might be worrying about nothing; but so many strange things had happened that it was better to be on the side of caution than on the side of carelessness. He left the house and ran across Jones carrying a basket of wine.

"Here, Norton; take this to the party. I want to reconnoiter."

"All right, m'ud! Say, Jones, how much do you think I'll earn at this job?" comically.

"Get along with you, Mr. Norton. It may be the time to laugh, and then it may not."

"I'm going back into the house and hide behind a secret panel. I've got my revolver. You go to the stables and take a try at my car; see if she works smoothly. We may have to do some hitching. Where is the countess in this?"

"Leave that to me, Mr. Norton," said the butler with his grim smile. "Be off; they are moving back toward the house."

So Norton carried the basket around to the lawn, where it was taken from his hands by the regular servant. He sighed as he saw Florence, laughing and chatting with a man who was a stranger and whom he heard addressed as count. Some friend of the countess, no doubt. Where was all this tangle going to end? He wished he knew. And what a yarn he was going to write some day! It would be read like one of Gabriel's tales. He turned away to wander idly about the grounds, when beyond a clump of cedars he saw three or four men conversing slowly. He got as near as possible, for when three or four men put their heads together and whisper animatedly, it usually means a poker game or something worse. He caught a phrase or two as it came down the wind, and then he knew that the vague suspicion that had brought him out here had been set in motion by fate. He heard "Florence" and "the old drawing room"; and that was enough.

He scurried about for Jones. It was pure luck that he had had old Meg show him through the house, otherwise he would have forgotten all about the secret panel in the wall and the painting. Jones shrugged resignedly. Were these men of the countess' party? Norton couldn't say.

Norton made his hiding place in safety; and by and by he could hear the guests moving about in the room. Then all sounds ceased for a while. A door closed sharply.

"No; here you must stay, young lady," said a man's voice.

"What do you mean, sir?" demanded the beloved voice.

"It means that no one will return to this room and that you will not be missed until it is too late."

The sound of voices stopped abruptly, and something like scuffling ensued. Later Norton heard the back of a chair strike the panel and someone sat heavily upon it. He waited perhaps five minutes; then he gently slid back the panel. Florence: "I bound and gagged under his very eyes. It was but the work of a moment to liberate her."

"It is I, Jim. Do not speak or make the least noise. Follow me."

Greatly astonished, Florence obeyed; and the panel slipped back into place. The room behind the secret panel had barred windows. To Florence it appeared to be a real prison.

"How did you get here?" she asked breathlessly.

"Something told me to follow you. And something is always going to tell me to follow you, Florence."

She pressed his hand. It was to her as if one of those book heroes had stepped out of a book; only book heroes always had tremendous fortunes and did not have to work for a living. Oddly enough, she was not afraid.

"Who was the man?" she asked.

"The Count Norfeldt. Some one has imposed upon the countess."

"Do you think so?" with a strange look in his eyes.

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing just now. The idea is to get out of here just as quickly as we can. See this painting?" He touched a spot in the wall and the painting slowly swung out like a door. "Come; we make our escape to the side lawn from here."

At the stable they were confronted with the knowledge that Norton's car was out of commission; Jones could do nothing with it. Then Norton suggested that he make a short cut to command the limousine of the countess; but there were two men about, so the limousine was out of the question.

"Horrible!" whispered Jones. "There are several noble horses, already saddled. How about these people, the countess?"

"Oh, they are beyond approach. They have doubtless been imposed upon. But let us get aboard first. There will be time to talk later. I'll have to do some explaining, taking the boys as like this. We won't have to ride out in front where the picknetters are.

There's a lane back of the stable, and a slight detour brings us back into the main road."

The three mounted and clattered away. To Florence it had the air of a prank. She was beginning to have such confidence in these two inventive men that she felt as if she was never going to be afraid any more.

When the Countess Olga saw the three horses it was an effort not to fly into a rage. But secretly she warned her people, who presently gave chase in the limousine, while she prattled and jested and laughed with her company, who were quite unaware

that a drama was being enacted right under their very noses. The countess, while she acted superbly, tore her handkerchief into shreds. There was something sinister in the way all their plans fell through at the very moment of consummation; and that night she determined to ask Brains to withdraw from this warfare, which gradually decimated their numbers without getting anywhere toward the goal.

Jones shouted that the limousine was tearing down the road. Something must be done to stop it. He suggested that he drop behind, leave his horse, and take a chance at putting a tire from the shrubbery at the roadside.

"Keep going. Don't stop, Norton, till you are back in town. I'll manage to take good care of myself."

(To be continued)

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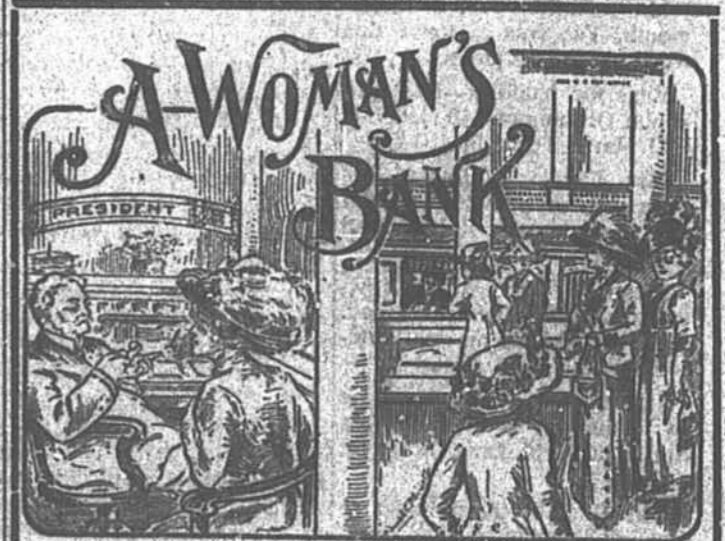


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