

The Million Dollar Mystery.

(CONTINUED FROM LAST WEEK—LOOK FOR NEXT ISSUE.)

to naught. She knew a little about motors. She threw on the cover and headed straight toward the rowboat. The men shouted at her, but she did not alter her course. The rowboat had its sides crushed in and the men went piling into the water. "Jim," she cried.

Norton suddenly flung off Braine and began to swim madly for the motorboat, which Florence had brought about. Even then it was only by the barest luck in the world that Norton managed to catch the gunwale. The rest of it was simple. When they finally reached a haven, Florence, oddly enough, thought of the horse she had left tethered nine miles from the stables. She laughed hysterically. "I guess he won't die. We can send someone out for him. Now, for heaven's sake, how did you get into this?"



The Magic Paper Was Here.

Where were you? What have you been up to?" with tender brusqueness. "I wanted to do a little detective work of my own," she faltered.

"It looks as if you had done it. You infant! Will you never learn to keep outside this middle? It's a man's work."

Florence, thoroughly weakened by her long immersion in the water, began to weep silently.

"You poor child. I'm a brute!" And he comforted her.

Later that day, at home, she remembered the blank paper.

"I stole this from one of the men in the cave. He said this blank paper would probably save father."

Jim took it. "Him! Invisible ink, and it's had a fine washing."

"But maybe it is waterproof."

"Maybe it is. Anyhow, Miss Sherlock, we'll show it to Jones and see what he says."

CHAPTER XX.

Braine Tries Another Weapon.

"What I want now," said Braine, as he paced the living room of the apartment of the countess, "is revenge. I've been checkmated enough, Olga; they're playing with us."

"That is nothing new," she replied, shrugging. "At the beginning I warned you. I never liked this affair after the first two or three failures. But you would have your way. You wanted revenge at that early date; but I cannot see that you've gone forward. Has it ever occurred to you that the organization may be getting tired, too? They depend solely upon your invention, and each time your invention has resulted in touching nothing but zero."

"Thanks!"

"O, I'm not chiding you. I've failed, too."

"Are you turning against me?" he demanded bitterly.

"Do my actions point that way?" she countered. "No. But the more I view what has passed, the more disheartened I grow. It has been a series of blind alleys, and all we have succeeded in doing is knocking our heads. I can see now that all our failures are due to one mistake."

"And what the devil is that?" he asked, irritably.

"We were in too much of a hurry at the beginning. Hargrave prepared himself for quick action on your part."

"And if I had not acted quickly he would have started successfully on one of his world tours again, and that would have been the last of him, and we should never have learned of the girl's existence. So there's your argument."

"Perhaps you are right. But for all that we have not played the game with any degree of finesse."

"Bah!" Braine lit a cigarette and smoked nervously. "I can't even get rid of that meddling reporter. He has been as much to blame for our failures as either Jones or Hargrave. I admit that in his case I judged hastily. I believed him to be just an ordinary newspaper man, and he was clever enough to lull my suspicions. But I'm going to get him, Olga, even if I have to resort to ordinary gunman tricks. If there's any final reckoning, by the Lord Harry, he shan't get a chance in the witness stand."

"And I begin to think that that little child of a girl has been hoodwinking me all along. By the way, did you find out what that letter said?" she asked after a pause.

"Letter? What letter?"

She sprang from her chair. "Do you mean to say that they have not told you about that?" Olga became greatly excited.

"Explain," he said.

"Why, I was at the garden day before yesterday, and a man approached

and asked if I was Miss Hargrave. Becoming at once suspicious that something very important was about to happen, I signified that I was Miss Hargrave. The man slipped a paper into my hand and hurried off. I took a quick glance at it and was dumfounded to find it utterly blank of writing. At first I thought some joke had been played on me, then I chanced to remember the invisible ink letters you always wrote me. Under- standing that you were to visit the cave in the morning, I had one man call at the garden take the note. And you never got it!"

"Some one shall pay for this carelessness. I'll call up Vron and Jackson at once. Wait just a moment."

He went to the telephone. A low muttering conversation took place. Olga could hear little or none of it. When Braine put the receiver back on the hook his face was not pleasant to see.

"That girl!"

"What now?"

"It seems she had been out horse-back riding that morning. She had seen one of the boys cross the field and suddenly disappear; and she was curious to learn what had become of him. With her usual luck she stumbled on the method of opening the door of the cave and went in. She must have been nosing about. She didn't have much time, though, as the boys came up to await me. Evidently she crawled into that old chest and in some inexplicable manner purloined the letter from Jackson's pocket. They left to reconnoiter; and it was then that Jackson discovered his loss. When Florence heard them returning she jumped into the well. And lived through that tunnel! The devil is in it!"

"Or out of it, since we consider him our friend."

"And I had her in my hands, note and all!"

"But with all that water there will not be any writing left on the letter."

"Invisible ink is generally indelible and impervious to the action of water; at least the kind I use is. I'd give a thousand for a sight of that letter."

"And it might be worth a million," Olga suggested.

"No, the least doubt of it in my mind. Olga, old girl, it does look as if my star was growing dim. We'll never get our hands on that million. I feel it in my bones. So let's settle down to a campaign of revenge, without any furbelows. I want to twist Hargrave's heart before the game winds up."

"You wish really to injure her?"

"I do not wish to injure her. Far from it," he replied, smiling evilly.

"You want her . . . dead?"

whispered Olga, paling.

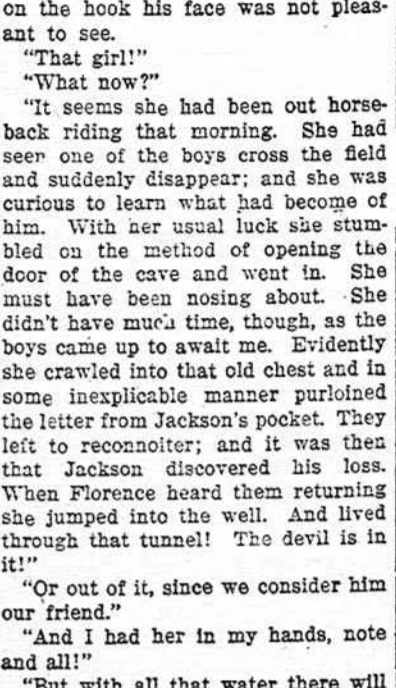
"Exactly. I want her dead. And so if all my efforts here come to nothing, so shall Hargrave's. His millions will become waste paper to him. That's revenge. The Persian peach method."

"Poison? You shall not! You shall not kill her!" vehemently.

"Nonsense! I hearted!"

"No. If I must in the end go to prison, so be it; but I refuse to die in the chair."

"Very well, then. We shan't kill her, but we'll make her wish she was dead. I was only trying to see how far you would go. The basket of peaches is in the hallway. Every peach is poisoned. No man in the



He Went to the Telephone.

room, intending to go upstairs. At that moment the maid was admitting a messenger with a basket of fruit.

"For Miss Hargrave," said he. He gave the basket to the maid, touched his cap awkwardly, and swung on his heel, closing the door behind him. He was in a hurry to deliver another message.

"O, what lovely fruit!" cried Susan, pausing. "I'm going to steal one," she laughed. She selected a peach and began eating it on the way up to her room.

The maid passed on into the library. "What's this?" inquired Florence, as the maid held out the basket. She selected a peach and was about to set her white teeth into it when Jim interposed.

"Wait a moment, dear," Florence lowered the peach. Jim turned to the maid. "Who sent it?"

"I don't know, sir. A messenger brought it, saying it was for Miss Hargrave."

"Let me see if there is a card."

But Jim searched in vain for the card of the donor. At once all his suspicions arose. "Don't touch them. Better let the maid throw them out. Fruit from unknown persons might not be the healthiest thing in the world."

"What do you think?"

"That in all probability they are poisoned. But there's no need trying to prove my theory right or wrong. Ask Jones. He'll tell you to throw them away."

"Horrible!" Florence shuddered. "I'm too valuable. They want me alive."

"Who can say?" returned Jim gloomily. "They may have learned that they cannot beat us, no matter what card they turn up. I may be wrong, but take my advice and throw them away. . . . Good Lord, what's that?" started.

"Some one cried!"

"O, Miss Florence!" exclaimed the maid, terror-stricken as she recalled Susan's act. "Miss Susan took a peach from the basket and was eating it on the way to her room!"

"Good heavens!" gasped Jim. "That was right. The fruit was poisoned." Jim had had enough to send for a specialist he knew. The specialist arrived about twenty minutes after Susan's first cry. To his keen eye it looked like a certain poison which had for its basis the venom of the cobra. "Will she live?"

"O, yes. But she'll be a wreck for some months. Send her to the hospital where I can visit her frequently. And I'll take that peach along for analysis. No police affair?"

"No. We dare not call them in," said Jim.

"That's your affair. I'll send down the ambulance. Keep her quiet. She'll have a species of paralysis; but that'll work off under the treatment. A strange business."

"So it is," agreed Jim grimly.

Florence knelt beside her friend's bed and cried softly.

"You called me just in time. An hour later, nothing would have saved her. She would have been paralyzed for life."

Jim accompanied the doctor to the door and went in search of Jones. He found the tactful butler eyeing the fruit basket, his face gray and drawn, though his eyes blazed with fury.

"Poison!"

"A pretty bad poison, too," said Jim. "We can't do anything. We've just



Just Power Enough to Keep Herself Afloat.

explicit orders to the chef, orders which did not in any way refer to cooking. Then Jones and the reporter left the house, each quite aware that they were being followed. Near the Blank hotel they separated in order to confuse the stalker. He might order and follow the wrong man. But it was evident that this time he had been directed to follow Jones; for he entered the hotel a minute after Jones.

Meantime a second spy, whom Jones had not seen, had observed the transfer of the invisible writing and had immediately informed Braine, who was not far away. That his poisoned fruit had stricken down an outsider troubled him none at all. But that mysterious message he meant to have; it might be a life and death affair; it might be a clue to the treasure, or the whereabouts of Hargrave.

Thus, while only one man followed Jones, several kept a far eye on him. Jones scribbled his name on a blank card. The page eyed that card curiously. It was different from anything he had ever seen before. In one corner were written three or four words which resembled a cross between Hebrew and Greek.

"Humph!" muttered the boy. "Whadda 'y know about that? Chickens scratches; but I guess the bell



Letters Began to Form on the Blank Sheet.

rings Russian. On your way, Hargrave," he cried to the hall maid, who wanted a look at the card. "Up to the room, sir. He'll see you!" The boy kept the silver salver extended expectantly, but Jones went past without apparently noticing the hint.

The Russian was standing by a window when Jones knocked and was bidden to enter.

"You are not Hargrave."

"Neither are you the Russian minister of police," urbanely.

"Who are you?"

"I am Hargrave's confidential man, sir."

The two men eyed each other cautiously.

"You speak Russian?"

"No. I am able to scribble a few words; that is all."

The Russian lit a cigarette and smoked leisurely. He was in no hurry.

"No, I am not the minister; but I am his accredited agent. I am empowered to bring back to Russia a man who is known here by the name of Braine, another by the name of

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Jones Paused by a Window.

Vron, and a woman who calls herself a countess and unfortunately is one. All I desire is some damaging proof against them that they are outlaws in this country. The rest will be simple."

"They have all three taken out naturalization papers."

The Russian waved his hand airily. "Once they are in Russia those documents will never come to light. This man Braine, it has been learned, has long been in the pay of Prussia, and has given the general staff of that country many plans of our frontier fortifications. I do not know what any one of the three looks like. That is why I sought Hargrave."

"I will gladly point them out to you," said Jones, rubbing his hands together, a sign that he was greatly pleased.

"That will be very good of you, I'm sure," in a rumbling but perfectly intelligible English.

"And suddenly they all three will disappear?"

"Suddenly; and you may believe me that from that time on they'll be heard of never more."

"All this sounds extremely agreeable to me. Mr. Hargrave will be happy to hear that his long enforced hiding will soon come to an end."

"All you have to do, sir, is to point them out to me."

"It may take a week or ten days."

"My government has waited for ten years to gather in this deleterious trio. A month, if you like."

"The sooner the better. I shall call this evening after dinner. We shall begin with Mr. Braine; and generally where he is is the woman. Vron will be the most difficult."

"After dinner, then, since you know some of his haunts. There is a reward."

Jones laughed shortly. "Keep it yourself, sir. Mr. Hargrave would willingly double whatever this reward is to eliminate these despicable creatures from his affairs."

"Thanks."

While this conversation was taking place Norton idled about; and feeling the cravings for a cigarette, prepared to roll one, only to find that he hadn't the "makings." So fate urged him to step into the nearest tobacconist's. He asked for his favorite brand and passed over the silver.

Braine and his companions saw Norton enter the shop. It agreed with their plans perfectly. The tobacconist happened to be affiliated with the order. So they hurried into the shop. Jim instantly realized that he was in a trap.

"How can I get out of here?" he whispered to the tobacconist.

The latter smiled. "I have to obey these gentlemen. I don't know what they want you for; but if I made a move to help you, I should find my own throat cut without saving yours."

"The devil!"

Jim made a dash for the rear door, to find it locked. Even as he fumbled with the key, Braine and his companions flung themselves upon the reporter and overpowered him.

"Ah, my friend Braine!" he said.

"My friend Norton!" jeered the victor.

"And what do you want; some peaches?"

"A paper, my friend, a little scrap of paper with invisible writing on it

We promise to give you something in exchange for it."

"What?" asked Jim with as much nonchalance as he could assume.

"Life."

"Search," said Jim. "You won't object to my smoking?" He began to roll a cigarette while they passed over him. He struck a match; the pleasant aroma of tobacco floated about his head.

"He's got it on him somewhere. I saw him take it. He's got his nerve with him."

The cigarette glowed. Jim smoked hurriedly.

Through every pocket they went. The contents of his wallet lay scattered at his feet; his watch dangled from the chain. The cigarette grew shorter and shorter. Suddenly one of the men stretched out a hand and whisked the cigarette from Jim's lips. He threw it to the floor and stamped out the coal.

"I thought so!" he exclaimed, holding out the scrap of burnt paper towards Braine.

The words "Dear Hargrave" were all that remained of the message. With a snarl of rage Braine whipped out his revolver.

"I will give you one minute to tell me what that paper contained."

"And after that minute is up?"

"A bullet in your stomach."

Quick as a flash Jim's hand shot out, caught the loosely held revolver, gave it a wrench, and brought it down savagely upon Braine's head. Then he reversed it and backed toward the front entrance.

"Au revoir, till we meet again, gentlemen!"

CHAPTER XXI.

A Packet of Papers.

Jim said nothing at first about his adventure to Jones, whom he met half an hour later.

"Was it necessary to keep that invisible letter?" he asked.

"No," said Jones.

"Would it have given our affairs a serious turn if it had fallen into alien hands?"

"Decidedly," answered Jones. "It would mean fight for the Black Hundred or a long time under cover, if our friend Braine learned that Russia was now taking an active interest in the doings of the Black Hundred. And eventually all our work would have to be done over again."

"Ah!"

"You look a bit mused up. Anything happened?" asked the keen-eyed butler.

"Nothing much. I made a cigarette out of the letter and smoked it."

Jones chuckled. "I see that you have had an adventure of some sort; but it can wait."

"It can."

"Because I want you to pack off to Washington."

"Washington?"

"Yes. I want you to interview those officials who are most familiar with the extradition laws."

"A new kink?"

"What I wish to learn is this: Can a man, formerly undesirable, take out naturalization papers and hold to the protection of the United States government? That is to say, a poisoner, manacled by Siberia, becomes an American citizen. He is abducted and carried back to Russia. Could he look to this government for protection? That is what I want you to find out."

"That will be easy. When shall I start?"

"As soon as you can pack your grip."

"That's always packed," replied the reporter. "You see, I'm eternally shunted hither and yon, at a moment's notice, so I always have an extra grip packed for quick travel."

"The Russian agent wants Braine, Vron, and the countess; and tonight I'm going to try to point them out to him. It would satisfy me more than anything I know to eliminate this precious trio in Russian fashion. It's thorough; and once accomplished, good-day to the Black Hundred in America. The organization in Russia has still some political significance, but on this side of the water it is merely an aggregation of merciless thugs."

"I'll take the first train out. But you will tell Florence?"

"Surely."

"And take care of your own heels. You were watched at the hotel."

"I know it; but the watcher could learn nothing. Henri Servan as a name will suggest nothing to the fool who followed me. Besides, we both knew that he was trying to peek through the keyhole. That hotel, you know, still retains the old-fashioned keyholes."

"To keep the maids in good humor, I suppose," laughed Jim. "Well, I must be on my way to make that flyer."

The two shook hands and Jim hurried off. The butler watched him till he disappeared down the subway.

"He's a good lad," he murmured, "and a brave lad; and money is only an incident in human affairs after all. I'll be a good angel and let the two be happy, since they love each other and have proved it in a thousand ways."

Meanwhile the Russian agent settled down before his writing portfolio; and once or twice as he wrote he thought he heard a sound outside the door. No doubt this butler of Hargrave's had been watched and followed. By and by he rose, drew his revolver, and tiptoed to the door obliquely so that the watcher outside might not become aware of his approach. Swiftly he swung back the door and the member of the Black Hundred stumbled into the room. Almost instantly the Russian caught him by the collar and held him up.

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