

HEARTS and MASKS

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CHAPTER III.

When they give you a mask at a ball they also give you the key to all manner of folly and impudence. Even stupid people become witty, and the witty become correspondingly daring. For all I knew, the Blue Domino at my side might be Jones' wife, or Brown's or Smith's, or even Green's; but so long as I was not certain, it mattered not in what direction my whimsical fancy took me. (It is true that ordinarily Jones and Brown and Smith and Green do not receive invitations to attend masquerades at fashionable hunt clubs; but somehow they seem to worry along without these equivocal honors, and prosper. Still, there are persons in the swim named Jones and Smythe and Browne and Greene. Pardon this parenthesis!)

As I recollected the manner in which I had self-invited the pleasure of my company to this carnival at the Blankshire Hunt club, I smiled behind my mask. Nerves! I ought to have been a professor of clinics instead of an automobile agent. But the whole affair appealed to me so strongly I could not resist it. I was drawn into the tangle by the very fascination of the scheme. I was an interloper, but nobody knew it. The ten of hearts in my pocket did not match the backs of those cards regularly issued. But what of that? Everyone was ignorant of the fact. I was safe inside; and all that was romantic in my system was aroused. There are always some guests who cannot avail themselves of their invitations; and upon this vague chance I had staked my play. Besides, I was determined to disappear before the hour of unmasking. I wasn't going to take any unnecessary risks. I was, then, fairly secure under my Capuchin's robe.

Out of my mind slipped the previous adventures of the evening. I forgot, temporarily, the beautiful unknown at Mouquin's. I forgot the sardonic-lipped stranger I had met in Friard's. I forgot everything save the little ticket that had accidentally slipped into my package, and which announced that some one had rented a blue domino.

And here was a Blue Domino at my side, just simply dying to have me talk to her!

"I am madly in love with you," I began. "I have followed you often; I have seen you in your box at the opera; I have seen you whirl up Fifth avenue in your fine barouche; and here at last I meet you!" I clasped my hands passionately.

"My beautiful barouche! My box at the opera!" the girl mimicked. "What a cheerful Ananias you are!"

"Thou art the most enchanting creature in all the universe. Thou art even a turquoise, a patch of radiant summer sky, eyes of sapphire, lips—"

"Archais, very archais," she interrupted.

"Disillusioned in ten seconds!" I cried, dismally. "How could you?"

She laughed.

"Have you no romance? Can you not see the fitness of things? If you have not a box at the opera, you ought at least to make believe you have. History walks about us, and you call the old style archais! That hurts!"

"Methinks, Sir Monk—"

"There! That's more like it. By my haidiom, that's the style!"

"Odds bodkin, you don't tell me!" There was a second ripple of laughter from behind the mask. It was rare music.

"I could fall in love with you!"

"There once was a Frenchman who said that as nothing is impossible, let us believe in the absurd. I might be old enough to be your grandmother,"—lightly.

"Perish the thought!"

"Perish it, indeed!"

"The mask is the thing!" I cried, enthusiastically. "You can make love to another man's wife—"

"Or your own, and nobody is the wiser,"—cynically.

"Yes, we are getting on, both in years and in folly. What are you doing in a monk's robe? Where is your motley, gay fool?"

"I have laid it aside for the night. On such occasions as this, fools dress as wise men, and wise men as fools; everybody goes about in disguise."

"How would you go about to pick out the fools?"—curiously.

"Beginning with myself—"

"Thy name is also Candor!"

"Look at yonder Cavalier. He wabbles like a ship in distress, in the wild effort to keep his feet untangled from his rapier. I'll wager he's a wealthy plumber on week-days. Observe Anne of Austria! What arms! I'll lay odds that her great-grandmother took in washing. There's Romeo, now, with a pair of legs like an old apple tree. The freedom of criticism is mine to-night! Did you ever see such ridiculous ideas of costume? For my part, the robe and the domino for me. All lines are destroyed; nothing is recognizable. My, my! There's Harlequin, too, walking on parentheses."

The Blue Domino laughed again.

"You talk as if you had no friends here,"—shrewdly.

"But which is my friend and which

is the man to whom I owe money?"

"What! Is your tailor here, then?"

"Heaven forbid! Strange, isn't it, when a fellow starts in to pay up his bills, that the tailor and the undertaker have to wait till the last."

"The subject is outside my understanding."

"But you have dressmakers."

"I seldom pay dressmakers."

"Ah! Then you belong to the most exclusive set!"

"Or perhaps I make my own dresses—"

"Sh! Not so loud. Suppose some one should overhear you?"

"It was a slip of the tongue. And yet, you should be lenient to all."

"Kind heart! Ah, I wonder what all those interrogation points mean—the black domino there?"

"Possibly she represents Scandal."

"Scandal, then, is symbolized by the interrogation point?"

"Yes. Whoever heard of scandal coming to a full stop, that is to say, a period?"

"I learn something every minute. A hundred years ago you would have been a cousin to Mlle. de Necker."

"Or Mme. de Stael."

"Oh, if you are married—"

"I shall have ceased to interest you."

"On the contrary. Only marriage would account for the bitterness of your tone. What does the Blue Domino represent?"

"The needle of the compass." She stretched a sleeve out toward me and I observed for the first time the miniature compasses woven in the cloth. Surely, one does not rent a costume like this.

"I understand now why you attracted me. Whither will you guide me?"—sentimentally.

"Through dark channels and stormy seas, over tropic waters, 'into the haven under the hill.'"

"Oh, if you go to quoting Tennyson, it's all up with me. Are you married?"

"One can easily see that at any rate you are not."

"Explain."

"Your voice lacks the proper and requisite anxiety. It is always the married woman who enjoys the mask with thoroughness. She knows her husband will be watching her; and jealousy is a good sign."

"You are a philosopher. Certainly you must be married."

"Well, one does become philosophical—after marriage."

"But are you married?"

"I do not say so?"

"Would you like to be?"



"Look at Yon Cavalier, He Wabbles Like a Ship in Distress."

"I have my share of feminine curiosity. But I wonder—ruminatingly, 'why they do not give masquerades oftener?'"

"That is easily explained. Most of us live masquerading day by day, and there might be too much of a good thing."

"That is a bit of philosophy that goes well with your robe. Indeed, what better mask is there than the human countenance?"

"If we become serious, we shall put folly out of joint," said I, rising. "And besides, we shall miss the best part of this dance."

She did not hesitate an instant. I led her to the floor, and we joined the dancers. She was as light as a feather, a leaf, the down of the thistle; mysterious as the Cumæan Sibyl; and I wondered who she might be. The hand that lay on my sleeve was as white as milk, and the albert-shaped horn of the finger-tips was the tint of rose leaves. Was she connected with the ticket in my pocket? I tried to look into her eyes, but in vain; nothing could I see but that wisp of golden hair which occasionally brushed my chin as with a surreptitious caress. If only I dared remain till the unmasking! I pressed her hand. There was an answering pressure, but its tenderness was destroyed by the low laughter that accompanied it.

"Don't be silly," she whispered.

"How can I help it?"

"True; I forgot you were a fool

in disguise."

"What has Romance done to you that you should turn on her with the stuffed club, Practically?"

"She has never paid any particular attention to me; perhaps that is the reason."

As we neared the corner I saw the Honorable Julius again. He stretched forth his death-head mask.

"Beware the ten of hearts!" he croaked.

Hang his impudence! The Blue Domino turned her head with a jerk; and instantly I felt a shiver run through her body. For a moment she lost step. I was filled with wonder. In what manner could the ten of hearts disturb her? I made up my mind to seek out the noble Roman and learn just how much he knew about that disquieting card.

The music ceased.

"Now, run away with your benedictions," said the Blue Domino breathlessly.

"Shall I see you again?" eagerly.

"If you seek diligently." She paused for a moment, like a bird about to take flight. "Positive, fool; comparative, fooler; superlative, foolest!"

And I was left standing alone; What the deuce did she mean by that? After all, there might be any number of blue dominoes in the land, and it seemed scarcely credible that a guest at the Hunt Club would go to a costumer's for an outfit. (I had gone to a costumer's, but my case was altogether different. I was an impostor.) I hunted up Imperial Rex. It was not long ere we came face to face, or, to speak correctly, mask to mask.

"What do you know about the ten of hearts?" I began with directness.

"I am a shade; all things are known to me."

"You may be a lamp-shade, for all I care. What do you know about the ten of hearts?"

"Beware of it,"—hollowly. From under his toga he produced a ten of hearts!

My knees wobbled, and there was a sense of looseness about my collar. The fellow knew I was an impostor. Why didn't he denounce me?

"Is the back of your card anything like this one?"—Ironically. "I dare say it isn't. But have your good time, grave monk; doubtless you are willing that the fiddlers shall be paid." And wrapping his toga about him majestically, he stalked away, leaving me staring dumfoundedly after his receding form.

Discovered!

The deuce! Had I been attired like yon Romeo, I certainly should have taken to my heels; but a fellow not run in a Capuchin's gown retain any dignity. I would much rather be arrested than laughed at. I stood irresolute. What was to be done? How much did he know? Did he know who I was? And what was his object in letting me run my course? I was all at sea.

Hang the grisly old Roman! I shut my teeth; I would see the comedy to its end, no matter what befell. If worst came to worst, there was always Teddy Hamilton to fall back on.

I made off toward the smoking room, rumbling imprecations against the gods for having given me the idea of attending this masquerade, when it would have been cheaper and far more comfortable to go to the theater.

But as soon as I entered the smoking room, I laughed. It was a droll scene. Here we were, all of us, trying savagely to smoke a cigar or cigarette through the flabby aperture designated in a mask as the mouth. It was a hopeless job; for myself, I gave it up in disgust.

Nobody dared talk naturally for fear of being identified. When a man did open his mouth it was only to commit some banal idiosyncrasy, for which, during office hours, he would have been haled to the nearest insane asylum and labeled incurable. Added to this was heat matching Sahara's and the oppressive odor of waltering paint.

By Jove! Only one man knew that the back of my card was unlike the others; the man who had picked it up in old Friard's curio-shop, the man who had come to Blankshire with me; I knew now. He had been there buying a costume like myself. He had seen me on the train, and had guessed the secret. I elbowed my way out of the smoking room. It wouldn't do me a bit of harm to ask a few polite questions of Mr. Caesar of the sardonic laugh.

But I had lost the golden opportunity. Caesar had gone to join the shades of other noble Romans; in vain I searched high and low for him. Once I ran into Hamilton. His face was pale and disturbed and anxious.

"What's the trouble, Hamilton?" I asked, with forced gaiety.

He favored me with a penetrating glance.

"The very devil is the trouble," he growled. "Several of the ladies have begun to miss valuable jewels. Anne of Austria has lost her necklace and Queen Elizabeth is without a priceless comb; altogether, about ten thousand dollars."

"Robbery?" I looked at him aghast.

"That's the word. Curse the luck! There is always something of this sort happening to spoil the fun. But whoever has the jewels will not get away with them."

"What are you going to do?"

"I have already sent for the village police. Now I shall lock all the doors and make every man and woman produce cards for identification,"—absolutely leaving me.

Thunderbolts out of heavens! My knees and collar bothered me again; the first attack was trifling compared to this second seizure. How the devil was I to get out?

"Are you searching for me?" inquired a soft voice at my elbow.

I turned instantly. The Blue Domino had come back to me.

"I have been searching for you everywhere," I said gallantly.

"Oh! but that is a black one. Never mind; the fib was well meant."

"She has never paid any particular attention to me; perhaps that is the reason."

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But as soon as I entered the smoking room, I laughed. It was a droll scene. Here we were, all of us, trying savagely to smoke a cigar or cigarette through the flabby aperture designated in a mask as the mouth. It was a hopeless job; for myself, I gave it up in disgust.

Nobody dared talk naturally for fear of being identified. When a man did open his mouth it was only to commit some banal idiosyncrasy, for which, during office hours, he would have been haled to the nearest insane asylum and labeled incurable. Added to this was heat matching Sahara's and the oppressive odor of waltering paint.

By Jove! Only one man knew that the back of my card was unlike the others; the man who had picked it up in old Friard's curio-shop, the man who had come to Blankshire with me; I knew now. He had been there buying a costume like myself. He had seen me on the train, and had guessed the secret. I elbowed my way out of the smoking room. It wouldn't do me a bit of harm to ask a few polite questions of Mr. Caesar of the sardonic laugh.

But I had lost the golden opportunity. Caesar had gone to join the shades of other noble Romans; in vain I searched high and low for him. Once I ran into Hamilton. His face was pale and disturbed and anxious.

"What's the trouble, Hamilton?" I asked, with forced gaiety.

He favored me with a penetrating glance.

"The very devil is the trouble," he growled. "Several of the ladies have begun to miss valuable jewels. Anne of Austria has lost her necklace and Queen Elizabeth is without a priceless comb; altogether, about ten thousand dollars."

"Robbery?" I looked at him aghast.

"That's the word. Curse the luck! There is always something of this sort happening to spoil the fun. But whoever has the jewels will not get away with them."

"What are you going to do?"

"I have already sent for the village police. Now I shall lock all the doors and make every man and woman produce cards for identification,"—absolutely leaving me.

Thunderbolts out of heavens! My knees and collar bothered me again; the first attack was trifling compared to this second seizure. How the devil was I to get out?

"Are you searching for me?" inquired a soft voice at my elbow.

I turned instantly. The Blue Domino had come back to me.

"I have been searching for you everywhere," I said gallantly.

"Oh! but that is a black one. Never mind; the fib was well meant."

"She has never paid any particular attention to me; perhaps that is the reason."

As we neared the corner I saw the Honorable Julius again. He stretched forth his death-head mask.

"Beware the ten of hearts!" he croaked.

Hang his impudence! The Blue Domino turned her head with a jerk; and instantly I felt a shiver run through her body. For a moment she lost step. I was filled with wonder. In what manner could the ten of hearts disturb her? I made up my mind to seek out the noble Roman and learn just how much he knew about that disquieting card.

The music ceased.

"Now, run away with your benedictions," said the Blue Domino breathlessly.

"Shall I see you again?" eagerly.

"If you seek diligently." She paused for a moment, like a bird about to take flight. "Positive, fool; comparative, fooler; superlative, foolest!"

And I was left standing alone; What the deuce did she mean by that? After all, there might be any number of blue dominoes in the land, and it seemed scarcely credible that a guest at the Hunt Club would go to a costumer's for an outfit. (I had gone to a costumer's, but my case was altogether different. I was an impostor.) I hunted up Imperial Rex. It was not long ere we came face to face, or, to speak correctly, mask to mask.

"What do you know about the ten of hearts?" I began with directness.

"I am a shade; all things are known to me."

"You may be a lamp-shade, for all I care. What do you know about the ten of hearts?"

"Beware of it,"—hollowly. From under his toga he produced a ten of hearts!

My knees wobbled, and there was a sense of looseness about my collar. The fellow knew I was an impostor. Why didn't he denounce me?

"Is the back of your card anything like this one?"—Ironically. "I dare say it isn't. But have your good time, grave monk; doubtless you are willing that the fiddlers shall be paid." And wrapping his toga about him majestically, he stalked away, leaving me staring dumfoundedly after his receding form.

Discovered!

The deuce! Had I been attired like yon Romeo, I certainly should have taken to my heels; but a fellow not run in a Capuchin's gown retain any dignity. I would much rather be arrested than laughed at. I stood irresolute. What was to be done? How much did he know? Did he know who I was? And what was his object in letting me run my course? I was all at sea.

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