

## *A Mystery Of Paris*

BY EMERSON BENNETT

It was during the season of the Carnival, and I was at a masked ball, at the French Opera House, in Paris. It was past three in the morning, and I was seriously thinking of retiring from that wild, boisterous scene—not to call it by any harsher name—in which I had been a participant for hours. I was weary—weary of the dance, the lights, the music, the crowd, the noise and confusion, the silly nothings that were being continually dinned in my ear by the flirting maskers—and I had withdrawn from the press and seated myself in the most quiet spot I could find.

While I was thus sitting apart from the throng, listlessly gazing upon that which no longer gave me pleasure, a mask, in the dress of a page, sauntered quietly past me, and said, in a low, guarded tone:

“Monsieur will not seem to see or hear, but will look for the blue domino with a single spot of red on the bosom, and follow so carelessly as not to attract notice!”

I was only sure this language was intended for me, by finding there was no other at the moment within hearing; but what it mean, if it had any meaning, I was at a loss to conjecture. I would have questioned the page, notwithstanding the caution not to seem to see or hear, but that individual had already passed on too far, and was about mingling with the noisy crowd.

As I sat thinking the matter over, it occurred to me that I had been mistaken for another person, and that what had been said to me had really been intended for some one else. If this was so indeed, it might lead to a novel adventure, and no one was ever more ready for a novel adventure than myself.

“Look for the blue domino with a single spot of red on the bosom, and follow so carelessly as not to attract notice,” I repeated to myself. “Very well—I think I will—if only to discover what it means.”

The next minute the object for which I was about to seek, slowly passed along, not very near me, but in plain view. I arose with a yawn, and quietly, with a sleepy, indifferent air, sauntered after the blue domino. I had no difficulty in keeping it in sight—for the masker, so disguised, moved very slowly through the crowd, seemingly with no particular purpose. If she intended leaving the house, it was not apparent to me then, nor for some time after; and being really very much fatigued, and not certain I was not the sport of a mischievous page, I was about to depart myself and finish my night’s adventures in my own bedroom, when I perceived my fair unknown coming toward me with a finger on her lips. She came so close beside me and stopped, apparently for the purpose of observing something in another part of the house; and then, to my surprise, I heard her say in English, in a low, sweet, musical voice:

“Listen my friend, but seem not to hear. In five minutes I shall leave the house by the entrance on the Rue Lepelletier, and will meet you at the Place Vendome—after which we will perfect our plan. Do not fail me this time, or we may not have another opportunity before the count’s return. Till then, adieu!”

As she ceased speaking, she moved away, and was soon lost in the crowd. What did it all mean? Unquestionably I had been mistaken for another person, and the words “do not fail me this time,” evidently proved. Who was the count alluded to? and what was the plan on foot to be perfected during his absence? My curiosity was excited, and I resolved to go forward in the part thus thrust upon me till I could ascertain something more definite. And then her words in English, so correctly spoken—plainly showing that either she was, or knew me to be, a foreigner, or perhaps both—made me still more eager to fathom the mystery. Perhaps some may blame me, knowing as I did there was a mistake, for seeking to find out that which did not concern me; and I have nothing to say in my defense, except that I saw before me the prospect of a novel adventure, the temptation of which I was not just then in the humor to resist.

The French Opera House had three main entrances, for three ranks, on as many streets—namely—one on Lepelletier for those who came in carriages, one on Pinon for those who came in fiacres, and one on Grange Batelière for those who came on foot. My fair unknown had stated that she would leave by the Rue Lepelletier—which went far to prove that she laid claim to the highest rank among those present, if not indeed among society in general—and I went out on the Rue Pinon, to order a fiacre and join her at the Place Vendome.

I reached the Place first, and dismissed my driver before her carriage appeared, which stopped near the triumphant pillar of Napoleon the Grand. As I hastened up to the carriage—which was plain black, without emblazonry of any kind—the door was opened by a small, gloved hand from the inside, while the driver sat still, neither turning his head to the right or left. I could just see that my fair unknown was its only occupant, and I quietly entered and took my seat beside her, feeling a little nervous and somewhat guilty I must confess. The door was then shut quickly, I heard the sharp snap of a spring, the blind was let down, and we were whirled away in almost total darkness.

For nearly an hour we rode in silence through the streets of the great city, I seeing nothing but the dim form of the fair unknown beside me, and having no idea of the direction we were going. I thought over some curious stories I had heard of strangers being by one means and another being decoyed into the dens of robbers, and began to feel rather uneasy. My pistol had been left at my hotel, and I had not a single weapon with me, unless a small pocket knife might be so called. I had not the feeling, moreover, of acting in a right and honorable manner, to give me manly courage; and I could not but admit to myself, that, should harm come to myself through this adventure, it would in great measure be owing to my own folly.

I had been thinking this matter over for some time, and had just come to the determination of declaring there had been some mistake and taking a hurried leave, when the carriage came to a sudden stop.

“Here we are at last,” said the sweet, musical voice of the fair masker—the silvery tones of which, coupled with my native language, tended much to reassure me.

The next moment the door was opened by the driver. As I descended the steps and offered the lady my hand, I glanced quickly around, and perceived that we were in an inner court, surrounded on all sides by lofty buildings. If I had really been entrapped, escape was now impossible, and a sudden feeling of alarm made even my hand tremble.

“Come, my friend!” pursued the lady, whose face was still concealed by the mask; and taking my arm as she spoke, she led me forward to a door, which she unlocked and threw open.

All was dark inside, and I fancied the air felt cold and damp. I hesitated, and even drew a step back.

“What!” she exclaimed, with a light laugh, “are you afraid to enter here tonight, Sir Richard, where you have so often been with me before?”

These words convinced me that I had indeed been mistaken for somebody else—no less, in fact, than an English baronet—and determined me to go forward and see the end of the strange affair.

“Of course I am not afraid of *you*,” I ventured to say; “but what if the count should have returned during your absence?”

This was the first time I had spoken in the lady’s hearing, and I was not a little curious to know what effect my voice might produce, notwithstanding her eyes had been deceived by my personal appearance, for I had at no time been masked myself. To my great relief she did not indicate in any way that there was anything wrong in either the sound or the words, but answered with assuring promptness:

“Oh, if that is all, have no fear, for he can not possibly reach Paris under three days. But how was it, Sir Richard, that you disappointed me before?”

“I must explain that some other time,” I evasively replied. “Here, madam, please give me your hand,” I added, as she was about to set forward through the dark passage in advance of me; “I can always walk better with such a sweet friend to guide me.”

She gave me her hand, though I fancied there was a slight hesitation. It might be only fancy, but somehow my suspicions were reawakened. Could it be that we were both playing a part? That the whole affair from the beginning was merely a plot to decoy me, a foreign stranger, into her meshes, for the purpose of robbery if not murder? that what I had supposed to be a mistake was merely a *ruse*, and that for her own wicked purpose she was permitting me to think I was deceiving her? The very idea, under the circumstances, was so startling that in a moment I felt a cold perspiration start from every pore, and I would have given half my fortune to have been safely at my hotel. It was now too late, however, to attempt a retreat; we were groping our way through a dark passage, with the door closed behind us; but her hand rested in mine, and I held it

in such a way that she could not withdraw it without my consent. Daylight, moreover, could not be far off, and there was some little consolation in that thought.

We presently came to a flight of stairs, ascended to another story, passed through a long, narrow corridor, with several sharp turnings, and at last stopped a door, which she unlocked and threw open. A blaze of light, from a large chandelier, almost dazzled me, and I saw at a glance that the apartment was luxuriously furnished. As soon as we had entered, the lady locked the door, and then removed her mask, disclosing a young and beautiful face, so animated and radiant with smiles that instantly I felt ashamed of my base suspicions.

“There now, Sir Richard,” she said, gaily, “you shall seat yourself in that *fauteuil*, we will have a glass of wine together, and then we will arrange our plan with what haste we may, so that you can depart before daylight if you wish.”

Could it be that even here, in this light, at such close quarters, she still mistook me for one who by her own showing was an intimate friend? The thing hardly seemed possible. If true, our resemblance to each other must be remarkable indeed; if not true, then had I been lured hither for some dreadful purpose. I seated myself as directed, and awaited the result with a good deal of nervous anxiety. She stepped out of the room for a minute, through an inner door that was slightly ajar, and returned without her domino, in a very rich dress, and with a decanter and two wine glasses on a silver waiter.

“Here is your favorite sherry, Sir Richard,” she said, with a very sweet smile, placing the waiter on a small table, pushing the latter up before me, and seating herself on the opposite side.

As I filled the two glasses, the thought occurred to me that the wine might be poisoned.

“If she drinks, however, I will,” I said, mentally, “but not otherwise.”

We touched glasses, and both carried the wine to our lips. My eye was upon her. She couched slightly, and removed hers untasted. In an instant I threw mine over my shoulder, unperceived, and remarked, as I replaced the glass, that I had never tasted anything better.

“Try another glass—one hardly gives you the flavor!” she said, with her sweetest smile.

I thanked her, refilled the glass, took it in my hand, and soon managed to get rid of it in the same manner as the other.

“Now, then,” she pursued, “let us arrange our plan about Marie, while we have an opportunity. You know the count opposes your marriage, for no other reason than—But, by-the-by, Sir Richard, you have neglected to drink her health!”

“True!” returned I; “how could I have been so thoughtless!” I refilled the glass. “To the health of my dear Marie, and our speedy union!” I continued, raising it to my lips. The eye of my fair hostess, gleaming with a peculiar light, was now watching me closely. “Hark!” said, suddenly, looking quickly around, “what sound is that?”

“Where? what, Sir Richard? what do you hear?” she exclaimed, with a startled glance around the apartment.

“I think I was mistaken,” I said, after a short pause, during which I had managed to get rid of the wine without drinking it.

When she turned to me again I was in the act of removing the empty glass from my lips. She saw this, and on the instant a strange expression of wicked triumph flitted across her beautiful features. It was momentary, but it was fiend like. I felt my blood curdle. My worst suspicions then were just! I was ensnared! How was I to escape? Instantly I resolved that she should not again quit my sight, and my hope lay only in threats upon her life, while alone with me and in my power. She now, without alluding to the plan which we had ostensibly come together to discuss, commenced an animated conversation about the masked ball—glancing furtively at me the while, as I fancied to note the effects of the wine. To be certain that I was right in my surmise, I thought it best to feign heavy drowsiness, and secretly watch her motions. I did so, and gradually appeared to fall asleep. As she perceived this, the mask of nature was also removed, and I saw her dark eyes gleam with a deadly light, and her proud lip curl in scornful triumph. At length she ceased speaking, and for a minute or two sat and watched me in silence. Then, as if to make sure, she approached me and shook me, saying:

“You pay me but a poor compliment, Sir Richard, to fall asleep in my presence!” And then, on finding I gave no sign of consciousness, she added, in a quite different tone: “Poor fool! It shall be my care you do not wake again! You have played your part to suit me, and now I will play mine to suit myself!”

She turned away as if to leave the room, probably to summon her accomplices to finish her wicked work; and at that moment I laid hold of her arm. As she looked around in alarm, she found me wide awake, and my eye fixed upon hers, with a severe, penetrating expression.

“Madam,” said I, in a low, stern, measured tone, “if you would save your guilty life, do not attempt to escape, or call for help! I am not the poor fool you suppose! You have played your part and I mine! Do not flatter yourself I have been ensnared! I know you, and boldly came here to detect you in your guilt! Not a single drop of your poisoned wine had passed my lips! Your whole establishment is under the surveillance of the police! and unless I return to my friends by daylight, your mansion will be entered by the dread officers of the law, and every living soul in it will be taken into custody! Now mark well what I say! You must instantly yourself conduct me clear of your premises! and if you dare to falter in the least or attempt to raise an alarm, that moment, so sure as there is a God in Heaven, you die! Now give me your hand and lead the way!”

White with terrified amazement, and trembling like as aspen, the guilty, wretched woman stood cowering before my stern, penetrating glance. For nearly a minute she seemed too much overpowered to move from the spot. I took her hand, grasped it like a vice, and silently pointed to the door. At length she went forward with tottering steps. In silence she led me through the dark corridor, down the stairs, through the passage, into the court, through another passage, and

opened the last door that admitted me to life and light. Morn was just breaking; and as I felt the cool air of heaven upon my fevered brow, and thought of my narrow escape from death, there came such a whirl of strange emotions that I reeled forward like a man intoxicated!

The mansion I had just quitted, stood on the banks of the Seine, about two miles below the old city; and I believe, if I had drunk the wine offered me, my rifled body would soon have been cast into the rushing waters. I believe, moreover, the mansion, grand as it appeared, was only a den of robbers and murderers—that woman was simply a beautiful decoy for strangers and foreigners—and that many a poor, unsuspecting soul had taken its flight from there to the eternal world! I did not communicate with the police, for the reason that, in the first place, I could bring no charge of crime against any; and, in the second place I did not wish to become involved with the French courts of law; but, thankful beyond expression for my own escape, I firmly resolved never to risk my life again in another mysterious adventure in Paris!

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