

# Behind the Mask

Jeffery Farnol

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# Behind the Mask

By Jeffery Farnol

She had come into their dingy office like a beam of spring sunshine, a slim, graceful creature, all fragrant youth from dainty feet to lovely face aglow in the depths of her bonnet; and now as she rose to go they each proffered her an arm—these two dry, sedate, middle-aged lawyers, to wit: Mr. Titus Page, tall, saturnine and aggressive, and Mr. Arthur Loveday, small, cherubic and mild.

Having thus conducted her to the waiting carriage:

"Penelope Ann," quoth Mr. Page, stooping his long, angular person to kiss her slim white hand, "believe us not only your attorneys but very loving friends also."

"Dear child," sighed little Mr. Loveday, kissing her other hand, "we are Page & Loveday, your ... hum ... friends-at-law, ever most devotedly at your service."

"Oh, I know it," she murmured, smiling up at them through gleam of sudden tears, "and 'tis great comfort to me for ... my lord frights me ... sometimes. And I so soon to be his wife ... so very soon! And then Aunt Ursula is so cold ... so remote and ... and ... Oh, goodby, dear, kind friends—"

"Ha, damnation!" snarled Mr. Page as the ponderous vehicle bore her away. "Damn her aunt Ursula!"

"So say I, Titus!" sighed Mr. Loveday, trotting back to their dingy sanctum after his long-legged partner.

"It's a sin, Arthur, this marriage!"

"Ay, Titus—"

"Lord Ravenham's a walking corruption! And to think o' Penelope Ann, this sweet innocence, in his foul clutches—"

"Have done, Titus, I beg!" sighed Mr. Loveday in weeping voice while one chubby hand fluttered at his trim wig in nervous futility. "I find such a possibility revolting, horrible—extremely."

"Well, this accursed marriage should be stopped."

"Ay, but how? As you know the Lady Ursula is determined on—"

"Damn the woman!" groaned Mr. Page. "And Ravenham! The wonder is a just Providence don't strike him dead to save the child from such abomination! Ruin, Arthur, body and soul! Who's to protect this innocent—our client, man; our sweet client ... such a babe. Ha, let God save her since we cannot!"

"I ... I dare to think ... He will, Titus."

"Eh? Now what d'ye mean by that, Arthur? Tush, man, your God sees innocence shamed every day ... permits sin to stalk unchallenged—nay, to thrive and flourish! I say—what d'ye mean?"

"Only this," answered Mr. Loveday meekly, fluttering hand at wig again, "that God ... moves in mysterious ways." Mr. Page snorted and began pacing heavily to and fro again while his small partner, sinking into armchair, seemed lost in thought.

"Damme, Arthur, why so silent? What are ye pondering, hey?"

"P-pondering?" he repeated, jumping at the sudden question. "Well, the ... the number of highway robberies of late, Titus. I saw in yesterday's Gazette an unfortunate traveler was shot by a footpad on Blackheath."

"Blackheath, hey—and Ravenham has a house there! These damned rogues shoot an innocent traveler and Ravenham will be a doting bridegroom this day week. And

your God's in heaven, Arthur—an all-seeing, omnipotent Providence, hey?"

"So I humbly believe, Titus," answered the little gentleman so meekly and looking up with blue eyes so very mild that the big man stooped to set large but gentle hands upon his shoulder, saying:

"Forgive my sneers, Arthur, man, but I ... I'm so distressed. Being a solitary old bachelor like yourself, I ... egad, I love our Penelope Ann better than I guessed, and knowing the horror that awaits her I'm desperate ... so helpless ... wretched—"

"Only because you lack faith in the abiding mercy of Providence," answered Mr. Loveday, gently.

My Lord Ravenham, standing in the light of a chaise lantern, glared up at the postilion.

"I must be in London by ten o'clock. Drive fast!"

"Ay, m'lud," answered the postboy, saluting, whereupon his lordship clambered into the vehicle, slammed the door and was whirled away through the gathering dusk. But they had gone scarce a mile when my lord cursed pettishly as the chaise lurched to sudden stop; breathless with fury he let down the window and thrust out his head to see the postboy with both arms upraised and a masked man standing in the road with a pistol in each hand.

"What—rogue," cried my lord, fumbling as for his purse, "if ye want money take it and be damned!" But, speaking, he leveled the pistol he had kept hidden, and fired point blank. The masked man reeled, steadied himself and advanced with a dreadful deliberation ... my lord's sight was blinded by sudden glare, his dying scream lost in the bellowing report.... And presently the chaise turned and went galloping back, the postboy flogging his horses madly.

Thus next morning Mr. Page, coat-skirts flying, hat and wig awry, strode heavily into the office, flourishing the Gazette, then halted in surprise to see his little partner's chair was empty, whereupon he instantly summoned Perks, their confidential clerk.

"Mr. Loveday not here yet, Perks?"

"Not yet, sir."

"Astonishing! Never known him late before. Have ye seen today's Gazette? No? Then hearkee to this, Perks!" and forthwith he read aloud as follows:

"Last night upon Blackheath, Lord Ravenham was shot and murdered by a masked highwayman. Having perpetrated which bloody deed the villain made off and has not as yet been taken. But the postboy who witnessed this horrid fact, affirms the noble lord wounded the miscreant so desperately that he actually fled without his booty, wherefore it is hoped the dastardly rogue may soon be apprehended to pay for this dreadful outrage with his life—"



"Hum!" murmured Mr. Page, "which God forbid, says I." Then, turning to sound of footsteps in the outer office, "Oh, Arthur!" he called, jubilantly. "Come you and hear this, Arthur man."

But instead came Mr. Loveday's man Thomas, a demure person, with swollen, red-rimmed eyes, who bowed and silently presented a letter. Wondering and silent also, Mr. Page took this missive and, breaking the seal, saw these words written in his partner's precise script:

MY DEAR TITUS: Rejoice, for here is, I dare to think, a crowning and abiding mercy and very Providential Saving Grace. My Lord Ravenham being so perfectly dead, our Penelope Ann goeth free, to live, I pray, to nobler, happier purpose; the which sure knowledge is for me great solace and comfort in this dark hour of my departure, since I go, Titus, to the tribunal of that all-knowing and therefore all-merciful Judge.

Re the matter of that disputed Right of Way, you shall find all necessary papers in the top left-hand drawer of my desk (keys herewith) and so until that Day of Final Reunion, know me, now and hereafter,

Yr. ever devoted friend and partner,  
ARTHUR LOVEDAY

"And your ... your master—" stammered Mr. Page at last.  
"Mr. ... Loveday ... what...?"

"Dead, sir, at precisely half past twelve last night." Mr. Page folded up the letter very carefully and thereafter stood staring blankly before him, rigid and motionless until, presently finding himself alone, he sank down feebly into his little partner's vacant chair. Unfolding the letter with that same careful deliberation, he smoothed it out very tenderly on the desk before him and having read it again through a painful, gathering mist, hid his saturnine face in clutching hands, muttering to himself brokenly:

"Rejoice ... a crowning mercy ... the saving grace ... Page & Loveday, attorneys-at-law ... very diligent in service ... Oh, Penelope Ann..."

[The end of *Behind the Mask* by Jeffery Farnol]