

The Black Wolf's Breed

Copyright 1899

By Harris Dickson

I listened closely to the name "Yvard."

"Well, now so far so good. And the question of finance? That is of more importance."

"And of more difficulty. The madame often dabbles herself in these dealings involving money, and she is harder to deceive. However she is not accurate at figures, clever though she be otherwise. Look over this; this calculation. See, there is a simple assumption of an item, which results in a difference of near 1000 livres. It appears there to have been made by the money lender for his greater gain."

"He has lost the Louisiana dispatches, and I know not what they contained."

"What?" exclaimed the woman, as if genuinely alarmed, and learning the bad news at first hand.

"Yes, the cursed fool lost them in some drunken brawl in the city. We have had the place thoroughly searched but—"

"He will be quite prepared to point out this error and make the correction. Here is his copy which he will sign."

"All good," she said looking over the memorandum he had given her of the amounts, with the correct calculations all neatly carried out.

"Well, that is enough for this morning; you may go; these things weary me."

"Celeste, how long is this to continue? Will you never—"

"Madame," she corrected positively, ruffling and smoothing out again the paper in her lap.

"As you will," with an air of hopeless protest. "Do you mean always to send me away when our business is completed?—"

"Was it not our agreement?"

"Yes, but I thought—"

"You had no right to think."

"A man must needs think whether he will or not what is of life itself. Are you a woman of ice? Do you not realize I sell all I hold most dear, the confidence born of a life-time's honest service to my king, my own honor, only to serve you, to be with you?"

"I am weary. It is time for you to go."

"Yes, but is there nothing else? You agreed—"

"Oh, I know, why remind me?" She turned upon him fiercely. "Do you wish to make me hate you? Now you are only an object of indifference, objectionable to me as are all men who make love, and sigh, and worry me. Do you wish me to hate and despise you more than the rest?"

"God forbid!"

"You still insist?"

"Yes, I must have my thirty pieces of silver, the price of my treachery," de Valence returned bitterly; "men die in the bastile for lesser offenses than mine."

"That is your affair," the woman replied, without a shade of concern.

I thought I could perceive a growing embarrassment in her manner as de Valence came closer to her, remembering, for so she must, that we could hear every word through the portiere. She collected herself bravely; de Valence must not suspect.

"Come, I'll pay you," and she put her lips upward so coolly I wondered he should care to touch them. Jerome raged silently, for I confess we were both guilty of looking as well as listening. De Valence leaned over her, but lifted his head again.

"Celeste—Madam, so cold. I'd as lief kiss the marble lips of Diana in the park."

"Oh, as you please; you may kiss them, too, if you like," she shrugged her shoulders, and was not pretty for the instant. "I pay as I promise; it is a mere barter of commodities. You may take or leave it, as you choose."

The man's attitude of detection touched even me, but the woman gave no sign of feeling or compassion, only intense impatience.

"Well, Monsieur, am I to sit waiting an hour? Are you come to be a sordid huckster to wrangle over your price?"

De Valence bent over her again, touched the lips lightly, and strode away, gathering up his papers from the table as he went. Two only were left, and those Madame held listlessly in her hand.

We felt thoroughly conscious of our guilt, Jerome and I, when we put aside the screen and re-entered the room. There was a certain air of resentment in this manner, if it would call her to account, and I heartily wished myself elsewhere. Perhaps it was all for the best; my presence prevented, for the time, explanations, and I fancied the woman was grateful for the respite. Her lassitude, an effort to overcome it, smote me to the quick, and right willingly I would have aided her had I but the power. To Jerome she spoke:

"You heard—all?"

He nodded.

"And saw?" Less resolutely this question came. The words conveyed a wish, unexpressed, that he had not heard. To me she gave no thought. Again Jerome nodded and looked away.

"It is the penalty and the price of power. Oh, Jerome, how fervently I have prayed that this all had not been," she went on oblivious of my presence.

Jerome's resentment faded away at her mute appeal for sympathy, and I am very sure he would not have me chronicle all that then occurred. Suffice it, that I employed myself by the window, some minutes perhaps, until a hasty rap on the door, and the maid bore a message which she delivered to her mistress in secret.

"Did him come in at once if it please him."

"He is already here, madame," the girl replied.

We had barely time to gain our former hiding place before a man richly dressed, and limping, entered; the same I had seen in the gardens of Versailles. I was now intensely interested in this little drama, which, as it were, was being played for my own benefit, and gave closer study to the Duke of Maine who hurried in.

The weak, irresolute face bore no trace of the dignity and power which made his royal father at times truly great; it showed, too, but little inheritance from the proud beauty of de Montespan. Vastly inferior to both, and to his ambitious wife whose schemes he adopted when they failed, the duke trembled now upon the verge of a mighty intrigue which perchance would make him master of an empire, perchance consign him to the Bastille or to the block. Well he knew that the abandoned Philip of Orleans, though he sometimes forgot his friends, never spared an enemy. With these thoughts haunting him, his timid mind shrank from putting his fortunes to a decisive test, and he looked forward, dreading to see the increasing feebleness of the king hasten that day when a quick stroke must win or lose.

He approached Madame at the table with a semblance of that swagger affected by the weakling in presence of women, yet permitting the wandering

eyes, the marble Venus at his elbow. Beside her table, alone, and abstracted as Jerome, the woman toyed with a dainty fan; her impassive beauty, born of rigid training, betrayed not the inner desolation. Her face was calm and serious enough, the skin lay smooth and glowed with all those delicate tints that women love.

Her quietude reminded me of the slumbering ocean, glassy and tranquil, whose unmarrred surface conveyed no hint of sunken ships beneath, of cold dumb faces tossing in the brine, of death-abysse where wrecks abandoned lie.

I slipped away without rousing a protest from Jerome, and closing the door softly left them to their meditations and to each other.

CHAPTER XV.

NEW HOPES.

Now, that I was well out of their way, it came to me to wonder what I should do with myself until Jerome might please to seek me again, but accidentally favored me with occupation. Passing through the hall I heard a woman's shrill voice, lifted in anger, berating some unfortunate attendant.

"You wretched hussy, to speak rudely to a guest of mine, who did but make to you a pretty speech. I'd have you be most charming to Monsieur Viard. Remember, you are only a hireling, and need give yourself no such fine unseemly airs."

The door just ahead of me was thrown violently open, and out strutted a tiny lady in a most disproportionate figure. She was beautiful neither in face nor figure; she was diminutive, and petulant of manner, but bore herself with an air of almost regal pride. It was she whom I came to know as Madame du Maine, a daughter of the proud and princely Condes. Following her, weeping bitterly, came the sweet maid who had spilled the tray of flowers on me at the door. I stepped back into an alcove, lest, perchance, she look behind, and aimlessly I strayed out into the gardens as best I might.

The villa being a strange ground, it frettet me to be alone therein, with nothing to think of but this trouble of my friends. And Madame de Chartres, did I blame her? Blame Jerome? Yes—no. I hardly knew. Viewed at a distance and impartially, such things strike us with aversion, and we are quick to condemn. But the more I thought the nearer I came to concluding it took something more than a mere mummery to make a wife. All the ceremonials and benedictions and lighted candles and high-sounding phrases could not bind a woman's heart, where that heart was free, or called some other man its lord. Yet the bare fact remained, this woman was a wife, and to me, at least, that name had always been a sacred and holy one.

To what vain or wise conclusions my cogitations may have led me, I cannot say, for another small matter now quite absorbed my whole attention.

It was the beginning of that one dear hope which speedily banished all others. It is said the trippant tread of fate doth leave no print upon the sand to mark its passage, nor doth she sound a note of warning that the waiting hand may grasp her garments as she flies.

Gleanings of white in one of the summer houses caught my roving eye, and quite aimlessly I passed the door. A chit of a child crouched upon the floor, and leaned forward on the benches, weeping as though each sob were like to burst her little heart. I grant it was no affair of mine, yet my tears were ever wont to start, and eyes play traitor to mine arm at sight of woman's trouble. Without thinking one whit, I stepped in beside her, and laying my hand gently upon the lassie's shoulder, implored that she sleep no more.

Up she sprang to face me, flushed and indignant. Verily was I abashed. Yet there was that of sympathy and similarity in my voice and mien—or so said to me after—which turned her wrath aside.

"You, monsieur; I thought it was old Monsieur Viard, he pursues me so."

It was the same little maid I had seen in the hall, and that was why I trembled. She wept now for the scolding she had got. I caught my breath to inquire why she wept.

"Oh, madame, madame—it is the humor of madame to humiliate me oft; she reminds me ever of my dependent position. And monsieur," the child straightened up proudly till she was quite a woman. "Monsieur, I come of a race as old as our own—and as honored." "Charles is poor—the Chevalier de la Mora, you know. But now he goes to the colonies, and will take me with him."

It was a silly thing to do, but about here I stalked most unceremoniously off, leaving her to her sorrow and her husband.

Since that day I have often smiled to think how foolishly do the wisest men deport themselves when they first begin to love. Their little starts of passion, their petty angers and their sweet repents—all were unexpected by me, for love to me was yet an unread book.

At the door of the house M. Leroux hailed me graciously:

(Continued Next Week.)

An Invention to Aid in Prayer.

New Haven Palladium: Thomas Sault enjoys the unique distinction of having secured a patent on an article to be employed by worshippers.

The invention is described in the letters patent as "The Chaplet and Shrine of the Holy Rosary."

The chaplet and shrine of the holy rosary consists of a case, in which is a set of rollers, on which is rolled a web which may be rolled or unrolled. Upon the face of the web is a series of pictures appropriate to the prayers of which the several beads on the rosary are reminders.

The case is so arranged that a light can be set behind the picture. Arrangements for burning a pair of candles are provided in front of the shrine.

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