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The Battle for the Cedars.

BY PRESSLY W. MORRIS.

CONTINUED.

ONCE THERE, HE will claim my inheritance.

And how well he will succeed! Who on shipboard knows aught of the history of him or me? No one! In my baggage he will find every proof that he is Lionel Cashel! In my country there will be no one to dispute his claims.

And I? Alas! I have but my diary, and a bill of exchange for a thousand dollars. These I had in an oiled-skin covering, else they had been destroyed by the water of the ocean.

How great the change! Liverpool, and not Baltimore! A struggle with poverty perhaps, not the master of a great estate! The matchless villainy of that man may cheat me forever out of my inheritance.

MARCH 9, 1855.—I am in Baltimore at last. After my arrival in England I was ill for months in a hospital. But at length I recovered my health, and now I am stout and hearty.

And how well has Henri Valasquez succeeded in his plot! He holds the great Cashel estate. How he has triumphed in his grand villainy!

What can I do? It seems as though I, who am so bitterly wronged, am helpless. If I should attempt to arrest Valasquez, would my story be believed? I fear not. I am poor. I should be denounced as the impostor. My story would be called improbable, declared beyond belief. He has every advantage; and for me to battle against him would work nothing but disaster for me, I fear. He, rich in stolen wealth, powerful in a borrowed name, seems unassailable.

I must devise means to obtain money, more money than my paltry hundred of dollars. Then perhaps I can successfully contend against him.

How strange it all appears.

JUNE 22, 1855.—It is nearly three years since my father's death. I have had a hard struggle, but my thousand dollars has grown to ten thousand. After all, there is pleasure in the struggle.

How my father would have mourned had he dreamed that his petted son was destined to be merely a cotton buyer in the Southern States of his own America. Yet I could continue to labor for myself.

Were Valasquez justly entitled to the Cashel estate, I would never envy him. As it is, the villain must be driven out.

I am almost ready for the battle.

Already had Henri Valasquez decided upon the manner of disposing of his victim. In fact, he had arranged that before entering the crimson room.

He unfastened the door of the apartment, and returning to the side of Lionel Cashel, lifted him in his arms. But after taking a step or two he placed him down again.

"Curse it!" muttered Valasquez, "I had nearly forgotten his clothing. I shall not leave them behind to betray me."

He seized Lionel's clothing, and bound it to the helpless form, and then, raising the powerless man in his arms once more, carried him from the crimson room.

The burden of Valasquez was a heavy one, but excitement gave him strength, and he bore it easily enough. He had no light, but knew the course that he wished to pursue, and felt that he could find his way whither he wished.

At length the halls echoed hollowly to his tread. He was far in the west wing of the great mansion. He ascended a stairway, and at the top was compelled to stop, breathing with fatigue.

"This is not so much of a farce to you, Mr. Lionel Cashel," he muttered, "as was the performance of a few hours ago."

He continued on again. But presently he stopped, and placed Lionel Cashel on the floor.

For a moment he groped about, then his hand came in contact with a large key in a door. He turned it, and the door swung open, creaking on its hinges.

A lamp placed on the floor lighted a bare, unfurnished apartment. Valasquez lifted it, and looked around. The room must certainly have been constructed for a prison. There was no other opening to it than the door by which Valasquez had entered, not even a grating in the walls. They seemed as solid and firm as adamant.

Valasquez chuckled wickedly. He placed the lamp upon the floor again, and, seizing Lionel, dragged him into the apartment. Again he lifted the lamp, and stood looking down upon the pale, handsome face of his victim.

"I believe he is dead already," Valasquez muttered, with a laugh of devilish malignity and triumph.

He went out of the prison, shutting the heavy door behind him. It closed with a dull clang. Valasquez locked it, and put the rusty key in his pocket. The rays of the lamp fell on the wall. The door seemed almost as solid as iron. It was set far in the stone walls which jutted out beyond it, a foot on each side.

Had the bullder of that prison intended it for any such purpose as this?

"Lionel Cashel, I swear that door shall never be opened on you more," muttered Valasquez, as he walked slowly away. "You will never trouble me again."

Suddenly he turned and went back to the door of the prison. He stood by it, and for a moment the intense, baleful glare of his eye was as bright as the light of the lamp.

"Yes, I will have it done!" he said aloud in a tone low and hoarse. "Solid walls of stone shall shut him in. Ha! ha! fools should beware how they trifle with Henri Valasquez. Henri Valasquez! No! By heaven! I think I am entitled to that other name by this time!"

A few minutes later he was in the crimson room again.

"There is nothing to excite suspicion here," he muttered, after he had closed the secret entrance, and taken a survey of the apartment.

He returned to the library. Extinguishing the lights there, he retired to his sleeping-room.

He slept till the sun was far up in the heavens. Valasquez had no conscience, so that no pangs for crime committed could disturb his slumbers.

Arising, and going to the library, he was summoned to breakfast immediately. "Sant," he said carelessly to his servant, "you can go to the crimson room, and see if that strange gentleman is ready for breakfast."

"He am gone, Massa Cashel," said Sant. "I was up to his room an hour ago, and he was n't dar."

"Hump!" said Valasquez, "he takes an unceremonious leave, not even returning thanks for his lodging."

"I suppose, Massa Cashel, he am just some straggler," Sant said. "Pears kind ob strange, though, dat he would n't wait fer his breakfast?"

"Yes," muttered Valasquez.

To Sant, as Valasquez had supposed it would be, there was nothing mysterious in the disappearance of the stranger.—That the man should rise early and depart was nothing very peculiar,—and of course that was the most natural way of accounting for his absence.

"Sant, is there a brick-mason about the place?" the false master of The Cedars asked, as Sant waited on him at breakfast.

"Spect ole yaller Varcor is de man," Sant answered. "He knows how to work in brick, and stone and mortar."

"Send him to the library after breakfast," ordered Valasquez.

"Yes, sah."

Half an hour later, "ole yaller Varcor" shuffled into the library. He was not as

aged as might be inferred from Sant's words, probably not much beyond forty years of age. He was stout in build, and his face was a wicked one. He looked as though he might have inherited the evil traits of both the races from which he was evidently descended. But Varcor had never had any opportunity to distinguish himself in the line for which his face showed forth tokens of such eminent qualifications,—that of cunning villainy,—for he had been a slave all his life.

"Sant tells me that you are a mason," said Valasquez to him.

"Yes, sah, I is," Varcor returned.

"I want you to prepare some brick and mortar to close up a hole up-stairs. Afterwards, you can plaster it over."

"Yes, massa Cashel."

"That is all, for the present. You can go now and prepare. When you are ready, let me know."

"Yes, sah."

While the slave was gone on his errand, Valasquez crept up to the room where he had placed Lionel Cashel. He bent his ear to the door, but no sound came to him. He pounded it with his fist, but only hollow echoes rang out.

Then he stood in silence for many minutes.

Not a sound, but his own breathing, broke the stillness.

Valasquez had sworn that the door should never open upon Lionel Cashel. He, assassin, villain of the deepest dye, meant to keep his word in this respect! Yet he would not have hesitated at a thousand false oaths to further his ends!

It was simply a deep, diabolical sense of triumph in keeping his vow, that restrained him from opening the door and looking in.

When he returned to the library he had no great time to wait till Varcor came back.

"De brick and de mortar am ready," said the slave. "De mortar I finds already mixed."

"Load yourself with brick, and I will show you where to take them," said Valasquez.

Strong physically as Varcor was, he was panting under his burden when he and Valasquez reached the fatal doorway.

"I have taken a notion to have this place closed," said the false master of The Cedars, pointing to the door set in stone. "Bring your mortar and the rest of your brick."

It was but the slave's place to obey unquestioningly. His cruel face displayed no signs of suspicion. Probably he had none. If the false master of The Cedars had felt that he was suspicious of some iniquitous transaction, he would have given himself no uneasiness, for in the first place he knew that the quality of mercy was lacking in the mulatto's breast, and he would not trouble himself to inquire into any wrong; and, further, his slaves knew better than to talk about him.

Valasquez stood by until the last brick was laid and the wall plastered over.

Not a single sound to betray that the prison had a human occupant had been heard.

"Its mystery would never be revealed," was the exulting thought of the demon, whose base soul had conceived the plan.

Ay, it was a dark secret that the prison-room held. Who would ever dream of it?

What suspicion could fall upon the rich master of The Cedars?

It was only the next day that Henri Valasquez was riding toward the De Vere residence with the intention of calling upon Barbara Lindsley. As has been stated, he had no conscience, so that no guilty pangs could serve to restrain him from any plan that he wished to complete.

Galloping along, he met a colored boy, riding horseback also. Valasquez was about to pass, when the boy called to him.

"Massa Cashel, here am sumpfin fer you," he said.

The man reined in his horse, and the boy gave him a white envelope. It bore these words:—

MR. LIONEL CASHEL,
THE CEDARS,
VIRGINIA.

The false master of The Cedars opened

the dainty affair, and comprehended immediately what was enclosed. It was the wedding card of Victoria De Vere and Vincent Sherwood.

"October 4, at five o'clock P. M.," said Valasquez to himself. "Only a few days off. Somewhat sudden, upon my word! It will be necessary for me to return home, I suppose, and write my acknowledgments of their favor, for this messenger."

Valasquez turned back toward The Cedars, bidding the colored boy follow him. Once there it took but a short time to write a reply to the invitation he had received. This he gave to the messenger, and let him depart.

"I believe I will defer my visit till this evening," was the conclusion at which Valasquez arrived. "It will answer my purpose as well to go then as to go now."

As usual, Valasquez ate his dinner in solitude. He partook but slightly, however, for he had no appetite. His deep, strong passion for Barbara Lindsley was working upon him. Perhaps it is not strange that such men as he, can love with powerful, passionate impulse, with a love that can be satisfied only by making a slave of its object.

Valasquez had decided to ask Barbara once more to be his wife. The hope that hung on this question took away his appetite, unnerved him, and made him tremble.

It was three o'clock when he finished his dinner. Rising from the table, he ordered Sant to have his horse brought out again.

Reaching De Vere's, his ring brought a servant to the door.

"Tell Miss Lindsley that a gentleman wishes to see her," he said.

His message reached Barbara exactly as he had sent it, and her thoughts at once flew to Victor. She came down stairs with pleasurable anticipations at her heart.

At the parlor door she beheld who was waiting for her, and she paused for a moment, while a chill of disappointment fell upon her. It was not Victor, not her hero, but the man, whom, of all the world, she dreaded most. She entered the parlor, and bowed coldly. There was a brief pause, and then a few remarks that interested neither. Then Valasquez unceremoniously plunged headlong into that for which he had come.

"Miss Lindsley," he cried, "I am here to tell you again that I love you! I love you so madly that I must speak." The girl grew pale, but uttered not a word.

"Miss Lindsley," the false master of The Cedars continued, "will you be my wife? I entreat you, by my love, to answer that question differently from what you did before!"

Barbara turned away her face.

"Speak," cried Valasquez.

"I answered you once," spoke the girl at last, in a low, firm tone.

"But, Miss Lindsley, is your answer the same?"

"Yes."

"Is it final?"

"Yes."

"Miss Lindsley, bethink yourself," expostulated Valasquez. "I am the wealthiest man in the country, and, as you are aware, there is now no doubt but that I will continue to be so."

Barbara sprang to her feet, losing her fears in her anger.

"When I wed, if ever I do," she cried, "I will marry a man that I love, and not an estate."

And with a haughty bow she left Valasquez alone.

So much for the estimate he had placed upon Barbara Lindsley's character. His grand argument had fallen dead, having the opposite effect to what he had anticipated.

Valasquez rushed from the house.

"Curse her! curse her! curse her!" was the angry cry of his raging soul, as he mounted and rode away.

"She shall never marry any other man! If she loves any other I shall slay him. And if my love turns to hate, let her beware!"

When he reached The Cedars, he sped swiftly past.

"I believe I should suffocate now, without motion to give me breath," he ejaculated, as he continued on.

And truly the soul of Valasquez was in a whirl of disappointment, rage, and

jealousy. Yet of whom should he be jealous? Only of a shadow, as yet.

"She must love somebody," was his thought. "If she does, woe to him!"

It was after dark when he returned to The Cedars, and entered the library.

As he sat with the firelight gleaming out upon him, he kept muttering over those words,—

"Curse her! curse her! curse her! If my love turns to hate, let her beware!"

At last a wild plan took shape in his brain. He clasped his hands till his own grip pained him.

"It is possible," he ejaculated wildly; "yes, possible. I should never be suspected. She shall be mine yet."

"Signor," said a voice, "could you give a poor woman lodging?"

Valasquez started, and turned toward the door. It had opened softly, and a woman was standing there. She was tall, having her face muffled. She advanced a step, and closed the door.

"Ha! ha! Signor Valasquez, you need not answer my query," she exclaimed. "It was meant for a jest, nothing more."

The man sprang to his feet in astonishment at hearing his own name spoken. But he became calm instantly.

"Woman, you are strangely mistaken," he said coldly. "My name is not Valasquez, but Cashel."

"You lie!" cried the creature passionately.

Valasquez moved toward her, anger swelling in his heart. But instantly the gleaming barrel of a pistol looked him in the face.

"Back, or die in your tracks," hissed the woman. "I would as quickly slay you as I would kill a serpent!"

Valasquez drew back. The woman let the cloak that muffled her face fall away.

"Signora Foscar! burst involuntarily from the lips of Valasquez.

"You know me now, monster, I see," said the signora. "You have not forgotten Eloisa, nor Eloisa's mother."

"Well, what do you want?" he cried harshly.

"What do I want? I have come, Henri Valasquez, to let you know that the avenger is on your track. Ha! ha! my vengeance will be as sweet as your doom is terrible."

Valasquez paled, and sank into a seat, trembling.

"Woman, I tell you again that you are mistaken in my identity," he said.

"And I say again, Henri Valasquez, that you lie! You have condemned yourself. How knew you my name? But I needed not that to convince me, though you call yourself Lionel Cashel, the wealthy gentleman of this great property. You could never deceive my heart, the heart of Eloisa's mother. It has been a weary search I have had, but I have found you at last, and I know you."

"Ay, monster, it has been a weary search, but had it taken a score of years, had it taken my lifetime, I would never have ceased, and you unfound. And had I died, and Eloisa unavenged, my soul would have sought out yours in the spirit-world, and blasted it with its hate!"

"I might slay you now," the woman continued, after a moment's silence, "but I have not come for that. Instead, I have come to tell you that you are doomed; that a more hideous fate than any of which you can dream is to be yours. I might expose you to the world, but, bah! that would be no punishment compared with the end prepared for you. O Henri Valasquez, villain, assassin, demon, betrayer of innocence, your doom is fixed! I swear by all the wrongs of my dead child that you shall die a death terrible as my hatred for you is deep and strong and eternal!"

The woman opened the door of the library, and slowly stepped back till she disappeared.

The last thing that Henri Valasquez beheld was the gleam of the pistol barrel.

"I must conquer her," was his thought. "I shall have to slay her, or she will destroy me. Fate has favored me thus far, and will permit me to outwit her. She must die!"

But many times during the night he awoke with a shudder from dreams in which a woman with wild, fierce face bent over him, announcing a dreadful doom, from which there was no way of escape.—To be continued.