

WINDS of CHANCE

by Rex Beach

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CHAPTER XXVI (Continued)

"Not yet. I'll tell you everything if you'll promise not to breathe a word, not to interfere until Henri has a chance to square himself. I think I've earned the right to demand that much. I told you the whole thing was counterfeited—the work of Joe McCaskey. I couldn't believe Henri was up to such villainy. He's dishonest, weak, vain—anything you choose—but he's not voluntarily criminal. Well, I went to work on him. I pretended to—'the Countess again shivered with disgust. 'Oh, you saw what I was doing. I hated myself, but there was no choice. Things came to a climax last night. I don't like to talk about it—but you're bound to hear. I consented to go out with him. He dragged me through the dance-halls and the saloons—made me drink with him, publicly, and with the scum of the town.' Noting the expression on her hearer's face, the Countess laughed shortly, mirthlessly. 'Shocking, wasn't it? Low, indecent, wretched? That's what everybody is saying. Dawson is humming with it. God! How he humiliated me! But I loosened his tongue. It got most of the details—not all, but enough. It was late, almost daylight, before I succeeded. He slept all day, stupefied, and so did I, when I wasn't too ill.

"He remembered something about it, he had some shadowy recollection of talking too much. When he woke up he sent for me. Then we had it. He denied everything, of course. I'm the stronger—always have been. I beat him down, as usual. I could have felt sorry for the poor wretch only for what he had put me through. He went out not long ago."

"Where to? Tell me—"

"To the police—to Colonel Cavendish. I gave him the chance to make a clean breast of everything and save his hide, if possible. If he weakens I'll take the bit in my teeth."

Rouletta stood motionless for a moment; then in deep emotion she exclaimed: "I'm so glad! And yet it must have been a terrible sacrifice. I think I understand how you must loathe yourself. It was a very generous thing to do, however. Not many women could have risen to it."

"I—hope he doesn't make me tell. I haven't much pride left, but I'd like to know what remains, for you can imagine what Cavendish will think. A wife betraying her husband for her—another man! What a story for those women on the hill!"

Impulsively, Rouletta bent forward and kissed the speaker. "Colonel Cavendish will understand. He's a man of honor. But, after all, when a woman really cares,

there's a satisfaction, a compensation, in sacrifice, no matter how great."

Hilda Courteau's eyes were moist, their dark-fringed lids trembled wearily shut. "Yes," she nodded. "I suppose so. Bitter and sweet! When a woman of my sort, my age and experience, lets herself really care, she tastes both. All I can hope is that Pierce never loving him. He wouldn't understand—yet." She opened her eyes again and met the earnest gaze bent upon her. "I dare say you think I feel the same toward him as you do, that I want him, that I'm hungry for him. Well, I'm not. I'm way past that. I've been through fire, and fire purifies. Now run along, child. I'm sure everything will come out right."

The earlier snowfall had diminished when Rouletta stepped out into the night, but a gusty, boisterous wind had risen and this filled the air with blinding clouds of fine, hard particles, whirled up from the streets, and the girl was forced to wade through sweetly formed drifts that rose over the sidewalks, in places nearly to her knees. The wind flapped her garments and cut her bare cheeks like a knife; when she pushed her way into the Rialto and stamped the snow from her feet her face was wet with tears; but they were frost tears. She dried them quick-

ly and with a song in her heart she hurried back to the lunch-counter and climbed upon her favorite stool. There it was that Doret and his two edlerly companions found her.

"Well, we sprung him," Tom announced.

"All we done was sign on the dotted line," Jerry explained. "But, say, if that boy hops out of town he'll cost us a lot of money."

"How's he going to hop out?" Tom demanded. "That's the hell of this country—there's no getting away."

Jerry snorted derisively. "No gettin' away? What are you talkin' about? Ain't no boundary within ninety miles? Ain't plenty of people made get-aways? All they need is a dog-team and a few hours' start of the police."

"Everyting all fix," Poleon told his sister. "I had talk wit' Pierce. He ain't comin' back here no more."

"Not coming back?" the girl exclaimed.

Doret met her startled gaze. "Not in dis kin' of place. He's out 'em out for good. I mak' him promise."

"A touch of jail ain't a bad thing for a harum-scarum kind." Tom volunteered, as he finished giving his supper order. "It's a cold compress—takes down the fever."

"Nothing of the sort," Jerry asserted. "Jails is a total waste of time. I don't believe in 'em. You think this boy's tamed, do you? Well, I talked with him, and all I got to say is this: keep Courteau away from him or there's one count you'll lose count of. The boy's got pizen in him an' I don't blame him none. If I was him I'd make that frog hop. You hear me?"

"Poleon met Rouletta's worried glance with a reassuring smile. "I been 'inkin' 'bout dat, too. What you say I go partners wit' him, eh? I got dog-team an' fine claim on hill-top. S'pose I give him half-interest. 'Go wit' me?"

"Will you?" eagerly queried the girl.

"Already I spoke it to him. He say mebbe so, but first he's got it's business here."

"Of course! His case. But that will be cleared up. Mark what I say. Yes!" Rouletta nodded happily—"take him with you, Poleon—out where things are clean and healthy and where he can get a new start. Oh, you make me very happy!"

The woodsman laid a big hand gently over hers. In a low voice he murmured: "Dat's all I want, ma soeur—to mak' you happy. If dat claim is wort' million dollar it ain't too much to pay, but—I'm scared" she's tender buzzed in Rouletta's heart when she sat down at the fare-table, and all through the evening it seemed to her that the revelry round about was but an echo of her gladness. Pierce was free, his name was clean. Probably ere this the whole truth was known to the Mounted Police and by tomorrow it would be made public.

Moreover, he and Poleon were to be partners. That generous woodsman, because of his affection for her, proposed to take the young fellow into his heart and make a man of him. That was like him—always giving much and taking little. Well, she was Poleon's sister. Who could tell what might result from this new union of interest? Of course, there was no pay out there on that mountain-crest, but hard work, honest poverty, an end of those demoralizing surroundings was bound to affect Pierce only for the better. Rouletta blessed the name of Hilda Courteau who had made this possible, and of Poleon Doret, too—Poleon of the great heart, who loved her so sincerely, so unselfishly. He never failed her; he was a brother, truly—the best, the cheeriest, the most loyal in the world. Rouletta was amazed to realize what a part in her life the French Canadian had played. His sincere affection was about the biggest thing that had come to her, so it seemed.

Occupied with such comforting thoughts, Rouletta failed to note that the evening had passed more quickly than usual and that it was after midnight. When she did realize that fact, she wondered what would have detained Lucky Broad. Promptness was a habit with him; he and Bridges usually reported at least a half-hour ahead of time.

She caught sight of the pair, finally, through the wide archway and saw that they were surrounded by an excited crowd, a crowd that grew swiftly as some whisper, some intelligence, spread with electric rapidity through the barroom. Yawning to a premonition that something was amiss, Rouletta asked the lookout to relieve her, and, rising, she hurried into the other hall. Even before she had come within sound of Lucky's voice the cause of the general excitement was made known to her. It came in the form of an exclamation a word or two snatched out of the air. "Courteau!" "Dead!" "Shot—back street—body just found!"

Thereby, Rouletta fought her way through the press, an unvoiced question trembling upon her lips. Broad turned at her first touch.

"Tough, ain't it?" said he. "Me and the Kid stumbled right over him—kicked him out of the snow. We thought he'd been frozen."

"We never dreamed he'd been shot till we got him clean down to the drug-store," Bridges supplemented. "Shot in the back, too."

Questions were flying back and forth now. Frothing by the confusion, Rouletta dragged Broad aside and queried, breathlessly: "Was he dead—quite dead?"

"Oh, sure!"

"Who—shot him?" The question came with difficulty. Lucky stared at his interrogator queerly, then he shrugged.

"Quen sab? Nobody seen or heard the shooting. He'd been crooked a long while when we found him."

For a moment the two eyed each other silently. "Do you think—?" Rouletta turned her white face toward the cashier's eyes.

"Ain't a likely. He was bitter-

ly made a lot of cracks around the barracks. The first thing the police said when we notified 'em was, 'Where's Phillips?' We didn't know the boy was out until that very minute or—'we'd 'a done different. 'We'd 'a left the Count in the drift and run Phillips down and framed an alibi. Think of us, his pals, turnin' up the evidence!" Lucky breathed an oath.

"Oh, why—" moaned the girl.

"He— It was so useless. Everyting was all right. Perhaps—after all, he didn't do it."

"You know he had better sense, but—his got a temper. He was always talking about the disgrace."

"Has he gone? Can't you help him? He might make the bounty-dary—"

Broad shook his head. "No use. It's too late for that. If he's still here 'n the Kid will do our best to swear him out of it."

Rouletta awayed, she groped blindly at the bar rail for support, whereupon her companion cried in a low voice:

"Here! Brace up, or you'll tip it all off! If he stands pat, how they going to prove anything? The Count's been dead for hours. He was all drifted—"

Broad was interrupted by the Mocha Kid, who entered out of the night at that instant with the announcement: "Well, they got him! Rock found him, and he denies it, but they've got him at the Barracks, puttin' him through the third degree. I don't mind sayin' that Frenchman needed croakin', bad, and they'd ought to give Phillips a vote of thanks and a bronx tablet."

Mocha's words added to Rouletta's terror, for it showed that other minds ran as did hers. Already, it seemed to her, Pierce Phillips had been adjudged guilty. Through the murk of fright, of apprehension in which her thoughts were racing there came a name—Poleon Doret. Here was deep trouble, grave peril, a threat to her new-found happiness. Poleon, her brother, would know what to do, for his head was clear, his judgment was unerring. He never failed her. Blindly she ran for her wraps, hurriedly she flung them on, then plunged out into the street, she scurried through the dark, panic-stricken, heedless, one man's name was in her thoughts, but another was upon her lips. Over and over she kept repeating: "Poleon! Oh, Poleon!"

CHAPTER XXVII

The news of Count Courteau's death traveled fast. Poleon Doret was not long in hearing of it, and

of course he went at once in search of Rouletta. By the time he found her the girl's momentary panic had been succeeded by a quite unnatural self-possession; her perturbation had changed to an intense but governable agitation, and her mind was working with a clarity and a rapidity more than inherited from her father. "One-armed" Kirby had been a man of resource, and so long as he remained sober, he had never lost his head. Swiftly the girl told of the instant suspicion that had attached to Phillips and of his prompt apprehension.

"Who done dat shootin' if he don't?" Doret inquired, quickly.

"Joe McCaskey—or Frank," Rouletta answered with positive assurance. "Poleon started. Through the gloom he stared incredulously at the speaker.

"I'm sure of it, now that I've had time to think," the girl declared. "That's why I ran for you. Now listen! I promised not to tell this, but—I must. Courteau confessed to his wife that he and the McCaskeys trumped up that charge against Pierce. They paid Courteau well for his part—or they promised to—and he perjured himself, as did they. Hilda got the truth out of him while he was drunk. Of course he denied it later, but she broke him down, and this evening just before we got home, he promised to go to Colonel Cavendish and make a clean breast of everything. He went out for that purpose, but—evidently he lacked courage to go through with it. Otherwise how did he come to be on the back street? The McCaskeys live somewhere back yonder, don't they?"

"Sure!" Poleon meditated, briefly. "Mebbe so you're right," he said finally.

"I know I'm right," Rouletta cried. "The first thing to do is find them. Where are they?"

"I don't see 'em no place."

"Then we must tell the colonel to look them up."

But Doret's brows remained puckered in thought. "Wait!" he exclaimed. "Got idea of my own. If dem teller kill Courteau dey ain't nowhere round here. Dey beat it, first thing."

"To Hunker? Perhaps—"

"No. For de Hountry," Poleon slapped his thigh in sudden enlightenment. "By golly! Dat's why I don't see 'em no place. You stay here. I make sure."

He turned and strode away but Rouletta followed at his heels.

"I'm going, too," she stoutly asserted. "Don't argue. I'll bet ten to one we find their cabin empty."

Together they made their way rapidly out of the town and into the maze of blank warehouses and snow-banked cabins which lay behind. At this hour of the night few lamps were burning even in private residences, and, inasmuch as these back streets were unlighted, the travelers had to feel their way. The wind was diminishing, but even yet the air was thick with swirling flakes, and new drifts swiftly impeded progress. Wading knee-deep in places stumbling in and out of cuts where the late snow had been removed, clambering over treacherous slopes where other snows lay hard packed and slippery, the two pursued their course.

"Poleon came to a pause at length in the shelter of a pole provision-cache and indistinctly took his bearings. Silently he pointed to the premises and vigorously nodded his head; then he craned his neck for a view of the stove-pipe over head. Neither sparks nor smoke nor heat was rising from it. After a cautious journey of exploration he returned to Rouletta and spoke aloud:

"They gone. Sted, dogs, ever'ting gone."

(To be continued)

dragging the plough along, but at other times puffs blew the implement to one side and spoiled a straight furrow which hindered the contestant's chance of winning first prize. Men as well as women participated in the contest, which the judges decided was a great success but thought there was little possibility of sales ever putting horses or motors out of business when it comes to ploughing.



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