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### Freeman's Foods, Limited, England.

## "Love in the Wilds"

—OR—

### The Romance of a South African Trading Station.

CHAPTER XXVIII.  
A Page From a Romance.

The countess seated herself on a fauteuil placed beside it and laid her hand on his right arm.

All eyes were turned toward the count.

He rose and in a musical voice, deepened with a tone of command, said:

"Brethren and sisters of the cause, I bring you to-night a new brother."

All eyes were turned toward the stalwart figure in the center of the room.

Reginald Dartmouth stood the sharp scrutiny with unchanged impassability.

"It is unnecessary to enumerate the advantages that must accrue to us from his admission to our order, and I will only say that he is wealthy, courageous, and a soldier. Am I stating correctly?" he asked, turning to Reginald Dartmouth.

He bowed in silence.

"Good!" continued the count. "We want gold and valor—our new brother brings us both—nay, more, he can give us, for I have spoken with him, and he will be our counsellor. Brethren and sisters, will we put him to the usual trial?"

The whole assemblage bowed in silence.

"Good!" said the count. Then, turning to Reginald Dartmouth, he said: "It is usual to prove the assertions of those who wish to join our order. Rules shall have no exceptions. We will that there shall be none in your case. If you are honorable and true you must prove yourself to be so by three tests—that of fire, of blood, and of steel. Are you willing to be so proved?"

All eyes were bent upon the neophyte and all ears were strained to catch the answer.

"I am," he said, gravely.

"It is well," said the count.

And with a solemnity that was reflected in the lovely face at his elbow and in those of the circle around him, he said:

"Bring forth the fire!"

Instantly three men, dressed in somber black and wearing crepe over their faces, came from behind the chair and lifted the tripod into the center of the circle.

CHAPTER XXIX.  
A MARVELLOUS SKILL.

But wild ambition loves to slide, not stand. And Fortune's foe prefers to Virtue's hand.—DRYDEN.

Reginald Dartmouth glanced at the tongues of flame rising from the small grate and waited.

Count Vitzarelli rose from his armchair and approached the tripod with solemn face.

"This," said he, addressing the neophyte with slow distinctness, "is the first test—that of fire. Before the oath can be administered you must prove your sincerity by holding your left hand in those flames."

"Why the left?" asked Reginald Dartmouth, with a calm smile.

"It is nearest the heart," replied the count, significantly.

There was a dead silence, broken by Reginald's footsteps as he strode toward the tripod, and baring his arm thrust his hand up to the wrist into the flames.

As they curled round it like fiery serpents his eyes met the dark ones of the countess and she shot a look of devotion, which she almost seemed to understand, for she turned toward the count and, in a low voice, said:

"It is enough—the test of fire is past!"

The count clasped his hands, and at the summons the two attendants came forward bearing a skull polished and made into a drinking cup, together with a silver flagon and a snowy napkin.

Reginald Dartmouth fastened his diamond-studded wrist-bands and turned to receive them.

"This is the second test—that of blood," said the count, who seemed delighted at the quiet and suppressed courage with which the candidate had borne the first trial. "Fill the skull!"

One of the attendants poured the liquid from the flagon into the death's-head.

The count took it in his hand and turned to Reginald Dartmouth.

"This is filled with human blood," he said. "Does your courage fail or will you drain it as a proof that you pledge yourself in good faith and loyalty?"

"I am prepared to comply with all the necessary ceremonies," replied Reginald Dartmouth, gravely.

"Good!" said the count.

And he held out the ghastly cup.

Reginald Dartmouth took it and, again glancing toward the beautiful

countess, murmured:

"To thee!" and he raised the cup to his lips.

One of the attendants came forward with a napkin, but with a look of astonishment Reginald Dartmouth started at the skull and changed color, refusing the cloth.

Before he could speak the count took from his vest a shining dagger.

It was unsheathed and glittered in the candle-light with a sinister and deadly shimmer.

"The second test is passed," he said, with a slight flush. "The last is the most terrible of all. We hold life as a trifle weighed against our cause. Show that you consider your valueless in its service to Italy and freedom by plunging this dagger to the hilt within your heart."

And he held out the weapon.

Reginald Dartmouth turned pale.

"Is it necessary—" he murmured, but before he could finish the sentence a cry of rage rose from the spectators.

"Coward!" "Traitor!" "Treason!" they hissed, and closed in with an ominous narrowing of the circle.

Reginald Dartmouth was no coward, though a very bad man, and he turned with a look of defiance.

Instantly, as if the gesture had served as a preconcerted signal, a score of daggers glittered above his head.

Before they could pierce him, however, a voice cried:

"Hold!"

"You see there is no escape," he said. "We have no mercy for falterers. Every one who enters here must leave as a member of our order or a corpse. If you would be spared stand the test with courage and without hesitation."

There was a significance in the tone with which the last two words were uttered that conveyed some hidden meaning to Reginald's ears, and with a quick gesture he turned and snatched the dagger from the count's hand.

"I fear nothing!" he cried, sternly, raising the dagger above his head. "So much for the last test!"

And he drove the weapon, apparently, up to its very hilt in his broad breast.

A murmur of approbation came from the spectators, and the count, with a smile of congratulation, held out his hand.

Reginald Dartmouth stared first at it, then at the dagger lying on the floor, then at the wound he could not but believe he had made in his bosom, and uttered an exclamation of amazement.

"Is this magic?" he cried.

"Nearly; for slight-of-hand is half-sister to the black art," replied the count, glancing round the circle with a smile.

"But"—retorted Reginald Dartmouth, in vain trying to recover his usual calm insouciance.

"But nothing, or very little, my brother, for you are one of us now," said the count, with a gratified expression. "It is very simple, though it might have ended fatally, for we are playing too fearful a game to stand at trifles. Shall I explain? The fire is heatless. The flame is produced by a wonderful chemical, of which I alone hold the secret. This skull is a marvel of mechanical construction. In the act of grasping it you touched a spring and lo! its contents fell into a hollow place prepared for it behind the ear. The dagger is a similar illusion. As the point touches your clothing the blade flew back into the handle and the hilt alone met your breast."

Reginald Dartmouth smiled quietly.

"And such child's play does not lower your cause in the eyes of sensible men, Count Vitzarelli?"

"No," retorted the count, sternly. "They are tests, harmless if understood, but fatal if refused. Had you hesitated one moment longer ere you plunged the dagger to your heart a score of poniards—true and with no secret contrivance—would have let the life's blood from the score of wounds. That they are not useless you yourself have proved, for, knowing nothing of their harmlessness you tried them all, thereby proving to us that we should gain a man of honor and courage."

Reginald Dartmouth bowed low.

"I stand corrected, count," he replied, respectfully. "And I thank you for your good opinion."

"Which you yourself have won by the very sham you denounce," retorted the count, with a smile. "But enough. Now for the oath."

And he took from the hands of the countess a small, wooden crucifix.

It was a rough, worm-eaten relic, and as the count held it up respectfully every man and woman made the sign of the cross devoutly.

Reginald Dartmouth folded his arms and waited.

The count approached and, holding the crucifix above his head, said in low, stern tones:

"I, Reginald Dartmouth, swear by this sacred portion of the true cross to be faithful and loyal to the Secret Society of Carbonari; to keep secret the names of the members, the deeds thereof, the places and times of their congregation and all matters pertaining to them. I also swear to divulge nothing, however great, however trivial, that may come to my knowledge, in any way, belonging to the working and acts of the society. And this I swear by the true cross; in token whereof I kiss it, and do pledge my life and hope of eternal welfare thereto."

Repeating this after the count with distinct and solemn earnestness, he took the crucifix in his hand and pressed it reverentially to his lips.

No sooner had he done so than the whole assemblage made the sign of the cross upon their hearts and repeated, solemnly:

"He swears!"

"You have sworn," said the count, "and nothing now remains of form and ceremony but to tell you the penalty exacted of those who break their oaths and turn traitors."

Reginald Dartmouth smiled.

"Senior," he said, coolly, "it needs no telling. A glance at these gentlemen's weapons"—and he ran his eyes with a significant smile along the daggers which the council still grasped—"is sufficient assurance that the penalty is—death."

The count smiled.

"You have conjectured rightly. It is death—certain and inevitable death."

(To be continued.)

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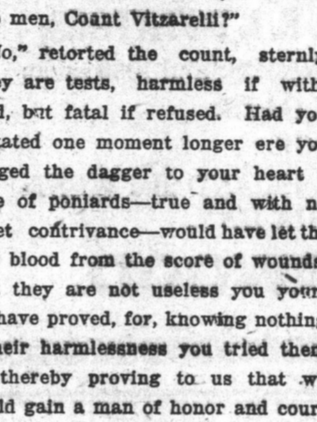
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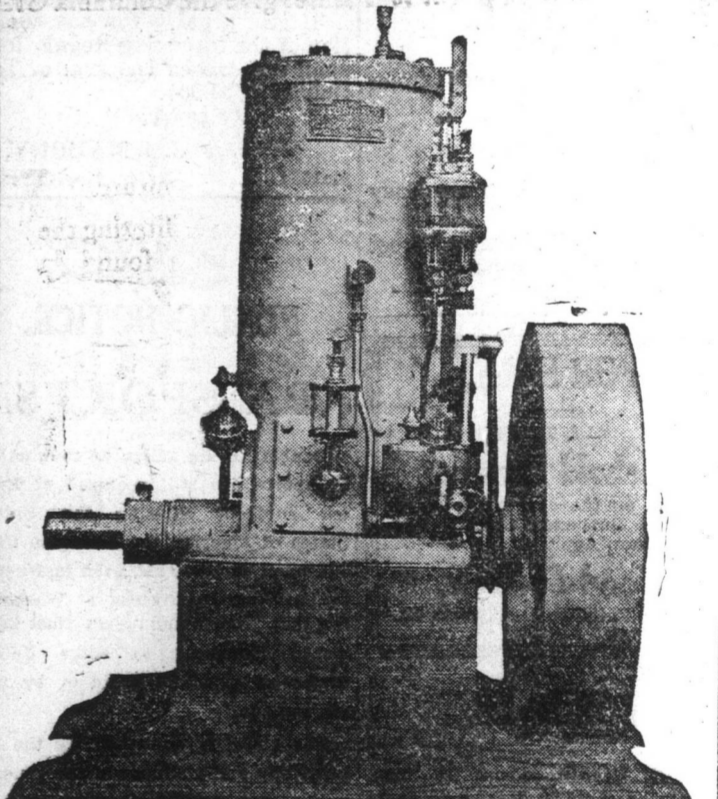
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(To be continued.)

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