

# A Shock for the Countess

## C. S- Montanye

CARLTON STEVENS MONTANYE (1892-1948), an active writer in the early years of pulpwood magazines, appears to have had an exceptional fondness for criminals as protagonists.

Although he wrote for many different periodicals, he achieved the peak of any pulp writer's career by selling numerous stories to *Black Mask*, beginning with the May 1920 issue and continuing through the issue of October 1939. Most were about various crooks, including an old-fashioned Monahan, a yegg, Rider Lott, inventor of the perfect crime, and the Countess d'Yls, an old-fashioned international jewel thief: wealthy, beautiful, brilliant, and laconic, the female equivalent of his most famous character, Captain Valentine, who made his *Black Mask* debut on September 1, 1923, with "The Suite on the Seventh Floor," and appeared nine more times in two years, concluding with "The Dice of Destiny" in the July 1925 issue. The gentleman rogue was also the protagonist of the novel *Moons in Gold*, published in 1936, in which the debonair Valentine, accompanied by his amazingly ingenious Chinese servant Tim, is in Paris, where he has his eye on the world's most magnificent collection of opals.

Montanye was also one of the writers of the Phantom Detective series under the house name Robert Wallace.

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# A Shock for the Countess

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*According to Joe Taylor, BLACK MASK'S own ex-bandit, the little unexpected things rather than the watchfulness of the authorities prevent a crook's success. The Countess never heard of Joe Taylor, but, after her adventures in this story, she is of the same opinion.*

FROM THE TERRACES of the Chateau d'Yls, the valley of Var was spread out below Gattiere, threaded with the broad bed of the River Var, swirling over its stony reaches from its cradle in the Hautes-Alpes. The snow-crowned mountains frowned ominously down but in the valley summertime warmth prevailed—quietude disturbed only by the song of birds and the voice of the river.

On the shaded promenade of the Chateau, the pretty Countess d'Yls stared thoughtfully at the unwinding river of the dust-powdered highway, twisting off into the dim distance. Beside her, a tall, well-built young man in tweeds absently flicked the ash from his cigarette and tinkled the ice in the thin glass he held.

Once or twice he surreptitiously considered the woman who reclined so indolently in the padded depths of a black wicker chair. The Countess seemed rarely lovely on this warm, lazy afternoon.

Her ash-blond hair caught what sunshine came in under the sand-colored awning above.

Her blue eyes were dreamy and introspective, her red lips meditatively pursed. Yet for all of her abstraction there was something regal and almost imperious in her bearing; a subtle charm and distinction that was entirely her own.

"I do believe," the Countess remarked at length, "we are about to entertain visitors."

She motioned casually with a white hand toward the dust-filled road. The man beside her leaned a little forward. A mile or less distant he observed an approaching motor car that crawled up the road between clouds of dust.

"Visitors?"

The Countess inclined her head.

"So it would appear. And visitors, *mon ami*, who have come a long way to see us. Observe that the machine is travel-stained, that it appears to be weighted down with luggage. Possibly it is our old friend Murgier," she added almost mischievously.

The face of the man in tweeds paled under its tan.

"Murgier!" he exclaimed under his breath.

The Countess smiled faintly.

"But it is probably only a motoring party up from Georges de Loup who have wandered off the main road, Armand."

The man in tweeds had torn the cigarette between his fingers into rags. As if held in the spell of some strange fascination he watched the motor grow larger and larger.

"There are men in it!" he muttered, when the dusty car was abreast the lower wall of the Chateau. "Four men!"

The woman in the wicker chair seemed suddenly to grow animated.

"*Mon Dieu!*" she said in a low voice. "If it is *he*, that devil!"

The man she addressed made no reply, only the weaving of his fingers betraying his suppressed nervousness. The hum of the sturdy motor was heard from the driveway among the terraces now.

There was an interlude—voices around a bend in the promenade—finally the appearance of a liveried automaton that was the butler.

"Monsieur Murgier, madame."

The man in tweeds stifled a groan. The Countess turned slowly in her chair.

"You may direct Monsieur Murgier here, Henri."

The butler bowed and turned away. The man in tweeds closed his hands until the nails of them bit into the palms.

"God!"

The Countess laid a tense hand on his arm.

"*Smile!*" she commanded.

The Monsieur Murgier who presently sauntered down the shaded promenade of the Chateau was a tall, loose-jointed individual with

a melancholy mustache and a deeply wrinkled face. A shabby, dusty suit hung loosely and voluminously about his spare figure. A soft straw hat was in one hand; he was gray at the temples.

When he bowed over the slender fingers of the Countess there was a hidden glow in his somber eyes.

"To be favored by the presence of the great!" the woman murmured softly. "Monsieur, this is an honor! May I make you acquainted with the Marquis de Remec?"

She introduced the visitor to the man in tweeds, who bowed stiffly. Somewhere back around the corner of the promenade the drone of the voices of those who had been in the car sounded faintly.

"A liqueur, m'sieu?" the Countess asked. "A cigar?"

Her visitor shook his head, gazed on the peaceful panorama of the valley of the Var.

"Thank you, no. My time is limited. My journey has been a long one and I must make a start for Paris with all due haste. You," he explained courteously, "and the Marquis will put yourselves in readiness with as much rapidity as possible. You are both my guests for the return journey!"

The man in tweeds whitened to the lips. His startled glance darted to the Countess. The woman had settled herself back in the black wicker chair again and had joined her fingers, tip to tip.

"Accompany you to Paris?" she drawled. "Are you quite serious?"

The wrinkled face of Monsieur Murgier grew inflexible, brass-like!

"Quite serious," he replied. "You are both under arrest—for the theft of the de Valois pearls!"

For a week, intermittently, Paris had known rain—the cold, chilly drizzle of early springtime. Because of the weather cafés and theatres were crowded, fiacres and taxis in constant demand, omnibuses jammed and the drenched boulevards deserted by their usual loungers.

From Montmartre to Montparnasse, scudding, gray clouds veiled the reluctant face of the sun by day and hid a knife-edged moon by night.

The steady, monotonous drizzle pattered against the boudoir windows in the house of the Countess d'Yls, mid-way down the Street of the First Shell. Within, all was snug, warm and comfortable. A coal fire burned in a filigree basket-grate, the radiance of a deeply shaded floor lamp near the toilette table, where a small maid hovered like a mother pigeon about the Countess, diffused a subdued, mellow glow.

The evening growl of Paris came as if from faraway, a lesser sound in the symphony of the rain.

"Madame will wear her jewels?"

The Countess turned and lifted her blue eyes.

"My rings only, Marie, if you please."

The maid brought the jewel casket, laid it beside her mistress, and at the wardrobe selected a luxurious Kolinsky cape which she draped over an arm. The Countess slipped on her rings, one by one—flashing, blue-white diamonds in carved, platinum settings, an odd Egyptian temple ring, a single ruby that burned like a small ball of crimson fire.

When the last ring glinted on her white fingers she dropped the lid of the casket, stood and turned to a full-length cheval mirror back of her.

The glass reflected the full perfection of her charms, the sheer wonder of her sequin-spangled evening gown, the creamy luster of her bare, powdered arms, shoulders and rounded, contralto throat. Standing there, the soft light on her hair, she was radiant, incomparable, a reincarnated Diana whose draperies came from the most expert needles of the Rue de la Paix.

"I think," the Countess said aloud, "those who go to fashionable affairs to witness and copy will have much to occupy their pencils on the morrow. My gown is clever, is it not, Marie?"

"It is beautiful!" the maid breathed.

With a little laugh the Countess took the Kolinsky cape.

"Now I must hasten below to the Marquis. Poor boy, it is an hour—or more—that I have kept him cooling his heels. Marie, suspense, they say, breeds appreciation but there is such a thing as wearing out the patience of a cavalier. The really intelligent woman knows when not to overdo it. You understand?"

"Perfectly, madame," the maid replied.

The Countess let herself out and sought the stairs. She moved lightly down steps that were made mute by the weight of their waterfall of gorgeous carpet. Murals looked down upon her progress to the lower floor, tapestries glittered with threads of flame, the very air seemed somnolent with the heaviness of sybaritic luxury.

Humming a snatch of a boulevard *chansonette*, the Countess turned into a lounge room that was to the right of the entry-hall below. The aroma of cigarette smoke drifted to her. When she crossed the threshold the Marquis de Remec stood, a well-made, immaculately groomed individual in his perfectly tailored evening clothes.

"Forgive me, Armand," the Countess pleaded. "Marie was so stupid tonight—all thumbs. I thought she would never finish with me."

The Marquis lifted her fingers to his lips.

"How lovely you are!" he cried softly. "Ah, dear one, will you never say the word that will make me the happiest man in all France? For two years we have worked together shoulder to shoulder, side by side—for two years you have been a star to me, earth-bound, beautiful beyond all words! Two years of—"

The Countess interrupted with a sigh.

"Of thrills and danger, Armand! Of plots and stratagems, plunder and wealth! I think, *mon ami*," she said seriously, "if we are successful tonight I will marry you before April ends. But wait, understand me. It will be a secret. I will still be the Countess d'Yls and you will remain the Marquis de Remec to all the world but me. Then, my friend, if either of us suffers disaster one will not drag the other down. You see?"

She seated herself beside the Marquis, considering him wistfully.

"But *tonight*?" he said in a stifled voice. "The de Valois affair is the hardest nut we have yet attempted to crack! Tonight we will need all of our cunning, all of our wits!"

The Countess lifted airy brows.

"Indeed?"

The Marquis leaned closer to her.

"There is not," he explained rapidly, "only Monsieur Murgier of the Sûreté to consider—the knowledge that he has been blundering after us for months—but the Wolf as well! An hour ago only, Francois picked up some gossip across the river, in some dive. The Wolf steals from his lair tonight *questing the de Valois pearls*! Do you understand? We must face double enemies—the net of Murgier, the fangs of the animal who sulks among the Apache brigands of the river front. And this is the task you give to set a crown upon my every hope!"

The Countess d'Yls touched his hand with her pretty fingers.

"Does the threat of Murgier and the presence of the Wolf pack dismay you?" she questioned lightly. "You, the undaunted! You who have been the hero of so many breathless adventures! Armand, you—you annoy me."

De Remec stood.

"But this is different!" he cried. "Here I have something at stake more precious than gold or jewels—your promise! I—I tremble—"

The Countess laughed at his melodrama.

"Silly boy! We shall not fail—we will snatch the famous pearls from under the very noses of those who would thwart and destroy us. *Voilà*! I snap my fingers at them all. Come now, it grows late. Had we not better start?"

The other glanced at his watch.

"Yes. Francois is waiting with the limousine—"

When they were side by side in the tonneau of the purring motor, the Countess glanced at the streaming windows and shivered.

"Soon it will be late spring," she said quietly. "Soon it will be our privilege to rest city-weary eyes on the valley of the Var. I intend to open the Chateau in six weeks, *mon ami*. It will seem like heaven after the miserable winter and the rain, the rain!"

The car shaped a course west, then south. Paris lifted a gaudy reflection to the canopy of the frowning clouds, flashing past in its nightly pursuit of pleasure. The Countess eyed the traffic tide idly. Her thoughts were like skeins of silk on a loom that was slowly being reversed. She thought of Yesterday—of the little heap of jewels in the boudoir of the villa at Trouville that had been the scene of that week-end party, of herself stealing through the gloom to purloin them—of the Marquis bound on the same errand—of their meeting—surprise—their pact and the bold, triumphant exploits they had both planned and carried out.

The red lips of the Countess were haunted by a smile.

It had all been so easy, so exciting, so simple. True, the dreaded Murgier of the Law had pursued them relentlessly but they had always outwitted him, had always laughed secretly at his discomfiture, rejoicing together over their spoils.

Now, tonight, it was the de Valois pearls—that famous coil the woman had had strung in Amsterdam by experts. Tomorrow Madame de Valois would be bewailing its loss and the necklace—the necklace would be speeding to some foreign port, safe in the possession of the agent who handled all their financial transactions.

"The Wolf!" the Countess thought.

Surely there was nothing to fear from the hulk of the Apache outlaw—a man whose cleverness lay in the curve of a knife, the slippery rope of the garroter, the sandbag of the desperado. How could the Wolf achieve something that required brains, delicate finesse? It was only the chance that Murgier might upturn some carefully hidden clew that was perilous—

"You are silent," the Marquis observed.

"I am thinking," the Countess d'Yls replied dreamily.

A dozen more streets and the motor was in the Rue de la Saint Vigne, stopping before a striped canopy that stretched from the door to the curb that fronted the Paris home of Madame de Valois. The windows of the building were brightly painted with light. The whisper of music crept out. Set in the little, unlighted park that surrounded it, the house was like a painted piece of scenery on a stage.

A footman laid a gloved hand on the silver knob of the limousine door and opened it. The Marquis de Remec assisted the Countess to alight. Safe from the rain under the protection of the awning, they went up the front steps and entered the house.

"You," the Countess instructed cautiously, "watch for Murgier and I will take care of the Wolf whelps! If the unexpected transpires we will meet tomorrow at noon in the basement of the Café of the Three Friends. Francois has been instructed?"

"He will keep the motor running—around the corner," the Marquis whispered.

Then, pressing her hand: "Courage, dear one, and a prayer for success!"

To the Countess d'Yls it seemed that all the wealth and beauty of the city had flocked to the ballroom which they entered together.

Under the flare of crystal chandeliers Fashion danced in the arms of Affluence. Everywhere jewels sparkled, eyes laughed back at lips that smiled. Perfumes were like the scents of Araby on a hot, desert breeze. Conversation blended with the swinging lilt of the orchestra on the balcony—the shuffle of feet and the whisper of silks and satins filled the room with a queer dissonance.

Separating from the Marquis, the Countess, greeting those who addressed her with a friendly word, a smile or bow, promptly lost herself in the crush. Murgier's assistants she left to the attention of de Remec. She decided, first, to mark the presence of Madame de Valois and the pearls—after that she would seek the Wolf or his agents in the throng.

After some manoeuvring the Countess discovered the location of Madame de Valois. The woman was dancing with a gray-bearded Senator—an ample, overdressed burden from whose fat neck the famous rope of pearls swayed with every step. The Countess watched the woman drift past and then turned to seek the footprints of the Wolf.

In and out among the crowd she circulated, disregarding those she knew, scanning anxiously the faces and appearance of those she had never before seen. An hour sped past before she believed she had at last discovered the man she sought. This was a beardless youth in shabby evening attire who lingered alone in a foyer that adjoined the south end of the ballroom.

Watching, the Countess touched the elbow of a woman she knew, discreetly indicated the youth and asked a question.

"That," her friend replied, "is a Monsieur Fernier. He is a young composer of music from the Latin Quarter. Madame de Valois invited him tonight so that he might hear the orchestra play one of his own dance compositions. He is so melancholy, do you not think?"

"From the Latin Quarter," the Countess told herself when she was alone again. "I will continue to watch you, Monsieur Fernier!"

A few minutes later the Marquis de Remec approached.

"Three agents of Murgier present!" he breathed, drifting past. "The doors are guarded. Be cautious, dear one!"

Another sixty minutes passed.

It was midnight precisely when the Countess saw the putative student from the Latin Quarter make his first move. The youth took a note from his pocket and handed it to a footman, with a word of instruction. The servant threaded a way among the crowd and delivered the message to Madame de Valois. The woman excused herself to those about her, opened the note, read it, and after several more minutes began to move slowly toward the ballroom doors. The Countess, tingling, tightened her lips. A glance over her shoulder showed her that Fernier had left the foyer.

*What was the game?*

A minute or two after Madame de Valois had disappeared through the doors of the ballroom the Countess had reached them. She looked out in time to behold the other woman crossing the entry-hall and disappearing through the portieres of the receptionroom beyond. There was no one in evidence. Certain she was on the right trail and filled with a growing anticipation, the Countess waited until the portieres opposite ceased to flutter before moving swiftly toward them.

The metallic jar of bolts being drawn, a scraping sound and then a damp, cool current of air told the Countess that without question the long, French windows in the receptionroom, opening out on a balcony that overlooked one side of the park, had been pushed wide. She parted the portieres cautiously and looked between them.

The chamber was in darkness—Madame de Valois was a bulky silhouette on the balcony outside—voices mingled faintly.

On noiseless feet the Countess picked a stealthy way down the room. Close to the open windows she drew back into a nest of shadows, leaned a little forward and strained her ears.

There came to her the perplexed query of Madame de Valois:

“But why do you ask me to come out here? Who are you? What is the secret you mention in your note?”

A pause—the suave, silky tones of a man:

“A thousand pardons, Madame. This was the only way possible under the circumstances. My secret is a warning—unscrupulous people are within who would prey upon you!”

“You mean?” Madame de Valois stammered.

“I mean,” the man replied, “your pearls!”

Another pause—plainly one of agitation for the woman on the balcony—then the man again:

“Madame, allow me to introduce myself. Possibly you have heard of me. Paris knows me as the Wolf! Madame will kindly make neither

outcry nor move—my revolver covers you steadily and my finger is on the trigger! I will take care of your pearls and see that no one takes them. Madame will be so kind as to remove the necklace immediately!”

Madame de Valois’s gasp of dismay followed hard on the heels of a throaty chuckle. Came unexplainable sounds, the words:

*“Thank you. Adieu!”*

--then the woman tottering in through the open windows, a quivering mountain of disconcerted flesh, making strange, whimpering sounds.

Madame de Valois had hardly reached the middle of the reception room before the Countess was out on the balcony and was over its rail. A single glance showed her the shadowy figure of the Wolf hastening toward the gates at the far end of the park that opened on the avenue beyond.

With all the speed at her command the Countess ran to the other door in the street wall that was to the right of the house. The door was unlocked. She flung it open and surged out onto the wet pavement, heading toward the avenue, running with all speed while her fingers found and gripped the tiny revolver she had hidden under the overskirt of her evening creation.

She reached the gates at the northern end of the park at the same minute footsteps sounded on the other side of them. They gave slowly, allowing a stout, bearded man to pass between them. The Countess drew back and waited until he turned to close the gates after him.

Then she took two steps forward and sank the muzzle of her weapon into the small of his back.



"Do not trouble yourself to move, Monsieur Wolf," she said sweetly. "Just keep facing the way you are and I will help myself to the pearls without bothering you."

She could feel the quiver of the man's back under the nose of the gun.

"You will die for this!" the Wolf vowed.

The Countess found the smooth, lustrous coil of Madame de Valois's necklace in his side pocket and stuffed it hastily into her bodice.

"Possibly," she agreed amiably. "But this is no time to discuss the question. Pay attention to what I say. If you move before two minutes elapse I will shoot you down in your tracks! Continue to keep your face glued to the gates—and—"

Dropping her weaponed hand, the Countess surged around the turn of the wall where the avenue joined the side street and raced across the petrol-polished asphalt toward Francois and the waiting limousine. Hazily aware of the growing tumult in the house itself, the Countess was stunned by the sudden crack of a revolver, the whistle of a bullet flying past her, the hoarse bellow of the Wolf's voice:

*"Police!... Police!... Thieves! There she goes!... In that car..."*

Pausing only to fire twice at the howling Apache, the Countess, sensitive to the fact that a machine was rolling down the street toward her, climbed into the limousine.

"Quick!" she cried breathlessly. "Off with you, Francois!"

Like a nervous thoroughbred, the car sprang toward the junction of the avenue beyond. The Countess pressed her face to the rear window. The other motor was a thousand

rods behind, a car with pale, yellow lamps—a police car—one of the machines of the Sûreté.

"Across the river!" the Countess directed through the open front glass of the limousine. "We will shake them off on the other side of the Seine!"

Across a bridge—over the night-painted river—past cafés and then into a district of gaunt, silent warehouses, the limousine panted. Twice more the Countess looked back. The pale, yellow lamps behind followed like an avenging nemesis.

"Round the next corner and slow down," the Countess commanded crisply. "The minute I swing off, speed up and head for the open country—"

On two wheels the limousine shot around into the black gully of a narrow, cobble-paved side street. Its brakes screamed as it slowed for a minute before lunging forward again. Shrinking back behind a pile of casks that fronted one of the warehouses, the Countess laughed as the second car whirled past.

"The long arm of Murgier!" she sneered. "What rubbish!"

Still laughing a little, she moved out from behind the casks—to stiffen suddenly and dart back behind them again. A motorcycle had wheeled into the silent street and a man was jumping off it.

The Countess, frantic fingers clutching the pearls of Madame de Valois, knew it was the Wolf even before his level tones came to her.

"Mademoiselle," the Apache said. "I know you are there. I saw the shimmer of your gown before you stepped back behind those casks. You cannot escape me. *Hand the necklace over!*"

"The theft of the de Valois pearls?" the Countess d'Yls cried softly. "Monsieur is joking!"

Murgier, on the shaded promenade of the Chateau, touched the tips of his disconsolate mustache.

"There is really," he said almost wearily, "no use in pretending surprise or indignation. Four days ago we bagged the Wolf—he made a full and complete confession..."

The sunlit quiet of the promenade was broken by the throaty cry of the Countess d'Yls. She jumped up, her blue eyes cold, blazing stars.

"Yes, you devil!" she said unsteadily. "Yes, Monsieur Ferret, we took the pearls—I took the pearls! The Wolf did not get them! No one else shall! I have hidden them well! Take me, take us both—jail us—you will never find the necklace—no one ever will!"

Murgier snapped his fingers twice. The men who had come up the dusty road in the travel-stained motor rounded the corner of the walk. The Countess laughed insolently at the man who faced her.

"In a measure," Murgier said quietly, "your statement is true. No one will ever reclaim the de Valois pearls. Let me tell you something. When the Wolf made his appearance that night at the warehouse, you saved the necklace from him by dropping it into the mouth of an open cask. Is that not correct? You marked this cask so you might distinguish it again. When you foiled the Wolf your agent began a search for the cask. It had been stored away in the warehouse—there were difficulties—so far your aid has not been able to locate it—but you have hopes. Madame Countess, it is my duty to disillusion both you and—" he nodded toward de Remec "—your husband. There was one thing you overlooked—the contents of the cask in question—"

The Countess drew a quick breath, leaning forward as if to read the meaning of the other's words.

"The contents?"

Murgier smiled.

"The cask," he explained, "we found to be half full of vinegar. The pearls are no more—eaten up like that! Pouf! Let us be going."