

The Greed of Conquest

By J. B. HARRIS-BURLAND

CHAPTER XV.

THE letter dropped from the girl's nerveless fingers to the floor, and nearly a minute elapsed before she stooped to pick it up. Then she read it through again, and there was a look of fear in her eyes as she perused the message from the man she loved.

Ralph Lowick in England—in the neighbourhood! He must have escaped, then, from his captors. He was hiding from his own countrymen. There was a warrant out for his arrest, and he was afraid that it might go hard with him if he were caught. He wanted her help? What did that mean? How could she help him, except by her love and sympathy?

For two or three minutes she stood by the window, and looked across the marshland that lay between Easternhoe and the sea. It was nearly dark now, but she could see the black patch of trees in the twilight. Ralph Lowick was there, hiding among the trees, or perhaps in the house itself, and he wanted her help.

She flung herself upon her bed and burst into tears. She had parted from him in anger, but all that had passed into nothingness. It was as though they had quarrelled years and years ago about some trivial matter which had been forgotten. That terrible night, when death sprang out of the darkness on the sleeping inmates of Cransea Hall and destroyed those who had watched in vain, had placed countless ages between the present time and the date of the quarrel. The future of England, the future of the world, were nothing compared to the life of this one man whom she loved. She had given him back her ring, and he had taken it. But she knew why he had allowed the quarrel to end in separation, why he had been so hard, so unreasonable. He had realised that his life would be so encompassed with danger that he could not ask any woman to share it with him.

And now he had returned—had escaped from one peril, to encounter another. He was a fugitive from the laws of his own country, and he was in need of her help. What did that mean? Something more substantial than love and sympathy, without doubt. Perhaps it was money—yes, of course it was money. How foolish she had been not to think of that at once. He would be penniless.

She rose from the bed and went to her jewel-case. She had fifteen pounds left over from her last quarter's dress allowance, and her jewellery was worth over two hundred pounds. She put all the trinkets and the money into the leather bag she carried on her wrist, and placed the bag in a drawer, which she locked. Then she began to dress for dinner.

At half-past nine Joan Endermine, pleading a headache, went upstairs to bed, and at half-past ten she left the house, creeping softly down the back stairs, and making her way out into the garden through the kitchen.

Nothing but the fact of her lover's danger would have induced her to engage in such a secret and, as it seemed to her, such a disreputable enterprise. She felt like a criminal as she passed the smoking-room window, where a light was still burning, and her cheeks grew hot with shame as she thought of what would happen if anyone caught her stealing out of the house at this hour of the night. And if she were found talking to a man in the lonely grounds of Cransea Hall—she covered her face with her hands at the very thought of it. But as she made her way down the road across the marshland, thanking Heaven that it was a dark night and that no one could see her, she realised the ridiculous side

of her fears, and rejoiced that she had been strong enough to overcome them. The risk of being caught wandering about the countryside at eleven o'clock at night was nothing compared to the magnitude of the object she had in view. The man she loved was in danger, and she would give more than her reputation to save him.

It was so dark that at first she could hardly see the road, and, though it ran straight as a New York street, she blundered off the edge of it on to the grass more than once. But by degrees her eyes grew accustomed to the gloom, and she could distinguish a faint streak of grey against the blackness. On the eastern horizon there was a bar of dull yellow light. It marked the rising of the moon behind the thick canopy of clouds that covered the whole of the heavens.

When she reached the main entrance to the grounds of Cransea Hall there seemed to be more light, and she could distinguish the white gates and the outline of the trees against the sky. The complete silence had now given place to the murmur of the wind among the leaves and branches, and the girl fancied that far off she could hear the breaking of the waves on the other side of the island.

She kept close to the wall, and walked along it till she came to the little wicket gate that faced the east, and which was only a few yards distant from the pier. Here the trees overhung the road, and under their shadow it was very dark indeed. But looking eastwards there was more light than there had been on the marshland, for the sea always seems to reflect any glimmer there may be in the darkness. When she reached the little gate she paused, and leaning against the wall waited for something to happen. Then, when five minutes had elapsed, she began to whistle—very softly. The tune was one known to Ralph Lowick—the air of a song that he had often asked her to sing to him. She thought it would serve as a signal, and if anyone else heard it it would convey nothing to their ears.

The sound seemed very loud in the silence, and it made her realise that she was afraid. Up to now the strength of her purpose had given her courage, but now—she understood that she was alone—far away from any help—at the mercy of anyone who chose to attack her. It was possible that Ralph Lowick had been pursued and captured, and that the men who had taken him knew that he had written a letter and was waiting for her. Certainly it was very dark and very lonely. The house had been shut up, and there was not even a cottage nearer than Easternhoe.

Another ten minutes went by, and still there were no signs of Ralph Lowick.

"I am early," she said to herself, "or perhaps something has detained him."

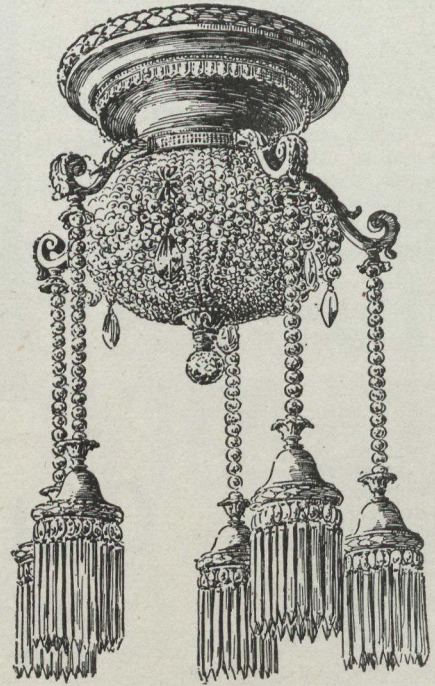
Then she started, and every muscle in her body seemed to grow rigid. There was the faint sound of footsteps in the distance—the sound of someone walking among dry leaves and fallen twigs, and the swish of boughs being parted by the pressure of someone's body. Then the latch of the gate clicked, and hinges creaked, and the gate itself swung to with a rattle.

"Is that you, Ralph?" she whispered. There was no reply, and she grew cold and sick with fear.

"It is I—Joan," she faltered, thinking that perhaps he would not betray himself until he was certain who was speaking to him.

Still there was no reply, and the girl gave a scream of terror—a scream that was muffled as something was thrown over her head, and died away into silence as a sickly sweet smell

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