

The Greed of Conquest

By J. B. HARRIS-BURLAND

CHAPTER XXIV.

RALPH LOWICK looked at Joan for a few seconds, and there was dull despair in his eyes.

"You are mad," he said, after a pause. "You know it is impossible for you to stay here with this man."

"I know that it is impossible to leave him here."

"Then we must take him with us. That will kill him to a certainty. You don't know what it means to be in an open boat under a tropical sun. You and I may live through it, but a wounded man will die."

"Then we must all stay here," she said, firmly.

"I tell you the island is uninhabitable. And what is this man's life to you? If I were in your place, I should be glad to take the chance of freeing myself."

"I do not look upon my oath in that light."

"It was forced from you," Lowick cried, passionately. "You know that such an oath is not binding. You know that it is impossible for you to marry this man. A foul murderer, a ruffian who murdered innocent women! I think you have taken leave of your senses, Joan."

"I shall never marry him," she replied. "I know, as well as you do, that such a thing is impossible. But I do not intend to free myself by killing him."

"How, then, do you propose to free yourself?"

"There are other ways than murder," she replied, faintly, and he understood.

"No, you shan't do that!" he cried, fiercely. "I'll kill him with my own hands before you do that. I don't care if what I do stands between us all our lives, but I'm going to save you from that."

"There is no other way," she said, quietly.

"Yes there is, and I will take it now. You purchased my life, and whether you like it or not it is I who will pay the price, not you."

He strode towards the door, but she clung to him and so hampered his progress that he stopped, white and gasping for breath.

"It is no good," he cried. "You cannot prevent me. If I don't do it now, I shall do it some time—during the next few hours. Do you think that I—no, it is unthinkable. Joan, let go of me at once—I do not wish to hurt you, but if you don't let go of me—"

He tore himself from her grasp and sent her staggering back against the wall. Then, before she could prevent him, he had opened the door, closed it again, and turned the key in the lock. He knew that she could escape by the window on to the verandah, and as he passed through the hall he bolted the front door.

Then for a moment he paused, his heart throbbing, his face pale as death. This was murder that he was going to do—cold-blooded, deliberate murder, and, moreover, he was going to kill a man who was too weak to defend himself. The fact that the man was himself a murderer and as cruel a scoundrel as had ever warred against society, could hardly be said to justify the act. Civilization does not allow individuals to usurp the functions of the law, and even here, in this lonely island of death, where there were no laws save those of brute force, it was still a terrible thing to kill an unarmed and helpless man.

"Still, it must be done," he muttered. "If it is a question of his life or hers—she would die rather than be

married to a man like Senor Smith."

The hall door rattled, and the sound of Joan's voice roused him to action.

"Ralph!" she screamed. "Ralph—for pity's sake open the door."

He did not reply, but walked firmly down the passage to the door of the sick man's room. He felt in his pocket, touched the butt of a revolver, and then softly turned the handle of the door.

"Locked," he said to himself, as he placed his shoulder against the panels. A faint laugh came from inside. Then there was a groan. The sound made him shudder.

"Ralph!" cried a piteous voice, and a slim figure appeared at the end of the passage, and stood there as though afraid to move.

"Go back!" he cried, hoarsely. "This is no place for you, Joan. Go back, I say! You cannot stop me."

Again there was a faint groan from the room, and Lowick, placing his shoulder to the door, burst the lock away from the woodwork. Joan Endermine screamed, and ran towards him. But he did not move, he stood there looking at the man who was lying on the bed.

"Ralph!" she cried, clinging to his arm. "For Heaven's sake, Ralph!" And she tried to drag him back from the door.

He turned and held the revolver towards her, gripping it by the barrel. "Take this," he said. "I don't think I shall want it."

She took it from him, and stared at it helplessly. He walked up to the side of the bed and bent down over the Spaniard's face. Then he returned to the door.

"The man is dead," he said, quietly.

"Dead, Ralph? Oh, thank Heaven for that—thank Heaven you are saved from this terrible crime!"

"I will make sure," he said, slowly. Then he returned and examined the body, placing his hand over the heart, holding a mirror to the lips, turning back the eyelids. Joan Endermine waited outside the door, leaning against the wall. The revolver was still in her hand.

"Yes, he is dead," said Lowick, when he rejoined her. "He has taken his own life."

"His own life?" she faltered.

"Yes, he has poisoned himself. I expect he always kept something of that sort about him. He knew that sooner or later he would have to cheat the gallows."

"There are some islands eight hundred miles to the east of us," said Lowick, poring over a chart, on which someone had marked a red cross where the cartographer had thought there was nothing but blue ocean. "I don't know whether I've learnt enough about navigation and the currents to strike them, but we might try."

"Eight hundred miles, Ralph—in an open boat?"

"Yes," he answered, thoughtfully. "It's been done before. Crews have done it without half the chance we've got—crews without sufficient food or water."

"But, Ralph," she whispered, "supposing we didn't—we could not find the islands."

"Oh, we'd be almost certain to come across land. That part of the ocean is dotted with thousands of islands, and I shouldn't wonder if there are not one or two closer to us than the ones on the map. This place—'Smith Island,' as it has been called by the men who discovered it—was not marked on the chart. There may be others, not very far off—perhaps only fifty miles, perhaps a hundred."

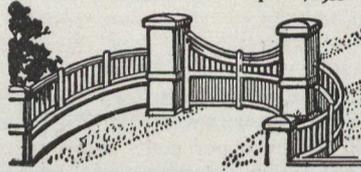
Joan Endermine rested her chin on

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