

The Greed of Conquest

By J.B. Harris-Burland

CHAPTER XII.

LOWICK ran back from the window and beat upon the door with his fists. He did not know what was happening, but it was certain that his machine and plans were in danger, and that he did not wish to remain locked up in his room.

"Open the door!" he yelled. "Open the door, curse you!"

There was no answer, and a second later there was a rattle of firing in the garden, and the screams of a wounded man. Lowick caught hold of the handle of the door and shook it with all his strength. If he had been on the outside he could easily have broken the door in, but in his present position he was helpless, unless he could smash the lock. He looked round for some weapon which might serve his purpose. The fire-irons had been removed, and even the chairs. He broke a leg off the table, and battered at the lock, but only succeeded in denting the outer case. Then he tried to turn the screws with the back of an ivory paper knife, and failed dismally.

"I'd better wait," he thought, "it's no use tiring myself. I may need all my strength to-night."

He returned to the window and looked cautiously out. There was no one to be seen on the patch of moonlit lawn, but he fancied he could distinguish a yellow light moving among the trees. There were shouts in the distance, then three shots in quick succession, and after that silence.

Ralph Lowick rubbed his eyes, and wondered if it were all a dream. Now that all sounds had died away, and there was nothing to be seen save the peace of a summer's night, it seemed as though everything that had gone before was unreal. The man who had fallen in the middle of the lawn had been removed. Everything was just as it might be on any summer night when the moon shone clear in the sky.

Then suddenly a violent explosion broke the silence; the boards under his feet quivered, and the windows rattled. This was followed by a single shot, and simultaneously there was a thud in the room above, and a cake of plaster dropped from the ceiling. Lowick sank on his knees and crawled along the floor.

"A warning," he said to himself. "Anyone could have put a bullet through me if they'd wanted to. I'm not to look at what's going on."

He crept close to the window again and peered over the sill. There was another sharp crack, and this time the bullet struck the woodwork six inches to the left of his face. He dropped as if he had been shot, and put his hand to his cheek. He had been struck by a splinter, and blood was trickling down from the wound.

"That fellow could have hit me," he thought; "but, whoever they are, I'm valuable to them. I don't suppose it will be long before I have a talk with one of them."

He sat on the edge of the bed and listened. Outside the house there was silence, but there were distant voices in the hall. Then he heard the sound of feet on the gravel drive—the steady tramp of men keeping time as they walked.

"Drilled," he thought. "Either soldiers or sailors. Merciful powers, this is an international affair!"

Then he wondered if any of the police had escaped to give the alarm in Easternhoe. Undoubtedly they had been overpowered, and probably any who had been captured had been killed. Still, it was possible that one had escaped, and if so, he would try and get to Easternhoe and telephone to Sinchester. There was a battalion of infantry at Sinchester, and if they were quick—no, of course they would not be in time.

It was fifteen miles from Sinchester to Cransea Hall, and it was not even likely that a single policeman would reach Easternhoe. A level track of marshland lay between the village and the sea—an open expanse that was only crossed by one road where there was not cover to hide a good-sized dog. If it had been a dark night it might not have been difficult for one man to escape. As it was, there was no chance at all.

"They'll take me away with them," he thought, "and then—well, it will serve the Government right."

I shall be offered my life, if I will give up my secret. I shall not give it up, and the world will be just the same as it was before this machine came to frighten the rulers of the earth. Perhaps it will be as well."

He rose to his feet as he heard heavy steps upon the stairs. Then someone tried the handle, and made an unsuccessful attempt to turn the key in the lock. There was a crash and the door swung inwards, and the light of a lantern mingled with the rays of the moon on the floor.

"You come along," said a man in perfect English. "We want you."

"Where do you wish me to go?" asked Lowick. He only asked the question because he wished to hear the speaker's voice again, and find out his nationality. The man had spoken with a slight foreign accent, but it was hard to say whether he were French or German, Dutch or Italian, Russian or Portuguese. The lantern was shaded on one side, so that it threw no light on the face of the man who held it.

But Lowick was doomed to disappointment. There was no reply. Two men stepped forward and gripped his arms on either side. From the brief glimpse he had of them he saw they were sturdy fellows dressed in clothes that might have belonged to English labourers. Their faces were hidden by masks that reached from the forehead to below the nose. Their dirty caps were pulled down well over their foreheads.

"I'll come quietly," he said. "You needn't grip me quite so hard."

They led him through the doorway and down the grand staircase into the hall. Another man walked behind with the lantern, and these three appeared to be the only men about the place. The hall was empty, but in one place the polished boards were wet. Beyond this there were no signs of anything unusual having happened. Certainly the men had done their work neatly and well. Where were all the servants? Where were the eight policemen and Inspector Turnbull? Undoubtedly they were all dead, or else they had been carried away to be killed later on. Lowick understood now why the men had been so long in coming up to his bedroom. They had waited till their comrades had departed, and the dead had been thrust out of sight.

"I do not know who you are," said Lowick, fiercely, as he was taken through the hall door on to the drive, "but I warn you that you are wasting your time."

There was no reply to this outburst, but one of the men slipped a pair of handcuffs on Lowick's wrists, and another bandaged his eyes. Then he was struck in the back with the butt of a rifle.

"If you don't walk quick," said a voice, "we'll drag you along by the feet. You'll find the road a rough one."

Lowick hardly heard the sense of the words, so intent was he on trying to discover the speaker's nationality from the accent of his voice. But the accent was so very slight that he could do no more than hazard a guess at the truth.

ANOTHER blow from a rifle sent him staggering forward, and he would have fallen if someone had not caught him by the arm. Then he was marched along, and he allowed himself to be led, offering no resistance. He knew quite well where they were taking him. Such an attack as had been made on the house would only have been possible to a force that had landed from the sea.

Ten minutes later he was helped down the steps of the wooden pier into a boat, and thrust forward on to one of the thwarts. Here someone held him tightly by the left arm. There were two sharp whistles, and oars creaked in the rowlocks.

For half an hour the men in the boat rowed in silence. Then Lowick heard the faint hiss of escaping steam, and the slow thrashing of a screw in the water. A minute later there was the creaking of blocks, and a bump.

"Look alive there!" said a voice in English. There were several more bumps. Then a guttural oath in German, followed by a few words in French.

"A cosmopolitan crew," thought Lowick; "but I expect it's all being done for my benefit."

"Get up," said a voice at his side, and Lowick rose to his feet. He stumbled over athwart, and was then lifted clean out of the boat by half a dozen strong hands. His feet alighted on a step, and he walked up a gangway, keeping one hand on the rail. When he reached the deck, which he calculated was about fifteen feet above the water-line, he was marched forward, then taken down some more steps, and along a passage. Then he was turned aside, and he heard the closing of a door. Footsteps died away down the passage, and he was alone. He laughed.

"I suppose it's out of the frying-pan into the fire," he said to himself; "but at any rate I shall not be tried for the murder of John Corodale."

Then he felt round the cabin with his feet, and finding a berth seated himself in it, and took the bandage from his eyes. He was in total darkness. There was not even the reflected glimmer of the moonlight on the sea.

CHAPTER XIII.

IT was not until half-past six in the morning, when the milkman from Easternhoe drove his cart through the gates of Cransea Hall, and saw something lying in the bushes by the big pine tree, that the news of the great tragedy reached the outer world.

The something that Mr. Timms found was the body of a policeman, with two jagged, blood-stained holes in the cloth of his blue tunic. Mr. Timms ran screaming, and jumping into his cart lashed the pony to a gallop, which soon brought him to the house.

Here, gasping with horror, he saw shattered windows, bullet-marked walls, and stains on the stone slabs under the porch; and when he had rung the bell, and knocked vigorously for two minutes, he opened the door and entered, trembling as much at his own impertinence as at the things he had seen.

Half an hour later Mr. Timms lashed a sweating horse through the long single street of Easternhoe, and those who saw his white face, staring eyes, and hatless head, thought he had gone mad. One woman went into hysterics, and two or three men followed the cart as fast as their legs would carry them.

Mr. Timms drew up at the police-station, and was fortunate enough to find the single policeman having his breakfast. He stammered out his incoherent story, and after the first few sentences the policeman tried to telephone to Sinchester, but he could not get on to the exchange. He ran across to the post-office, and found that something was wrong with the wires. They could get no answer from the post-office at Sinchester.

It was not till an hour and twenty minutes later that the news reached Sinchester, and thence it spread through the whole of England. The London evening papers contained a fairly accurate and complete account of the disaster.

The tale, indeed, was one which stirred the whole country to its remotest village. It was a story of wholesale and organized butchery by a gang of ruffians who had spared neither age nor sex. Inspector Turnbull, the eight policemen, and the entire household, with the exception of Ralph Lowick, had been murdered. Some had been shot, others stabbed, others—and these were women—strangled. Not a soul had been left alive. The grooms and gardeners had met the same fate as the indoor servants.

"Nothing in civilized warfare," said one paper, "has ever equalled this foul and premeditated butchery. Lest one human being should escape, and tell the news before the ruffians had got well clear of the shores of England, every one of these innocent victims was condemned to death. If we want to find a parallel for such a massacre in modern times, we must go to China or the wilds of Central Africa. We call upon the whole civilized world, in the name of civilization, to help us to bring this gang of desperadoes to justice; we call upon the navies of Europe to search for this vessel, and see that not a soul escapes from her alive."

That was the tenor of most of the leading articles; but some were more guarded in their statements, and one openly stated that the crime was the work of one of the great nations of Europe.

"It is only when the issues at stake are so large," said this journal, "that so horrible a butchery becomes possible. Sir John Lowick's invention was known to be one which would affect the destiny of this nation, and perhaps the future of the world. We shall soon know which nation is responsible for this monstrous and barbaric atrocity, and it is to be hoped that the whole world will combine to crush it out of existence."

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