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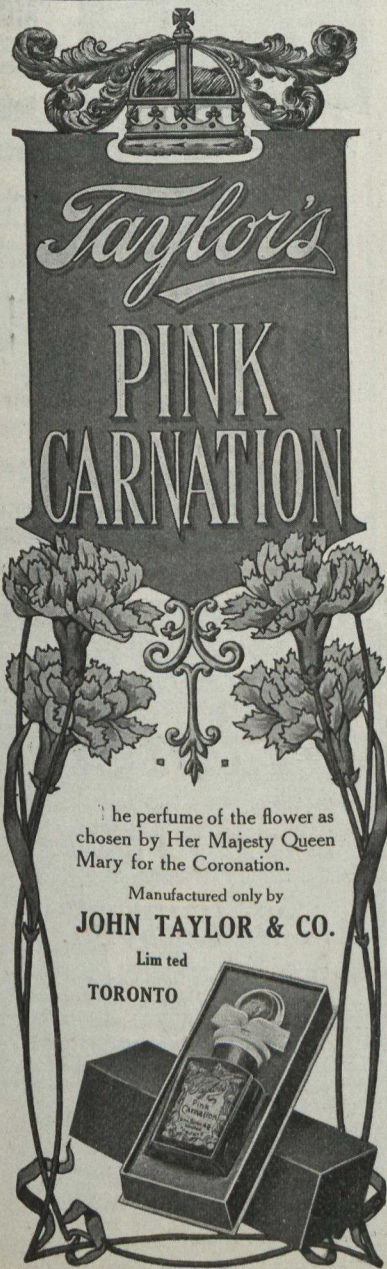
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By J. B. HARRIS-BURLAND

CHAPTER XIX.

TWO or three minutes elapsed before Ralph Lowick was brought into the room. The heavy weight had been removed from his chains, but as if to compensate for this, his hands as well as his feet were bound.

"You can go, Luigi," said the Spaniard. "I will ring when I want you again; and, Luigi, send word to Hagen to come here with four men—six rounds of ball cartridge apiece. They can wait in the kitchen, and have something to drink—something, mind you, but not too much."

Luigi departed, and Lowick looked at Senor Smith with a grim smile. "If they can't hit me in twenty-four shots," he said, quietly, "they must be very drunk indeed."

"You are talking nonsense," the Spaniard answered, coldly. "Well, Mr. Lowick, I'm glad to hear that you have decided to give in."

"I have no choice. If I had been here alone, I'd have snapped my fingers at you. But you were coward enough to bring Miss Endermine here, and I am forced to consider her wishes."

"Miss Endermine has something to tell you—unless she would rather I told it," and the Spaniard looked at Joan inquiringly.

"You had better tell it," she said, in a low voice.

"Well, it is just this, Mr. Lowick," Smith continued. "You say you are prepared to give away the secret of this invention. You will give me a string of names, which may or may not be the right ones. It will take six months at least to test the truth of your assertion. Much may happen in six months. You might escape; we might have unwelcome visitors. You see my position, don't you?"

"Certainly. Has this only just occurred to you?"

"Of course not. The position, however, was inevitable, and it was not till Miss Endermine showed me a means out of the difficulty that I saw my way clear to accepting your word on the matter."

"You can't do otherwise than accept my word, Senor. I cannot make a machine for you offhand and show you that I am speaking the truth."

"Quite true, Mr. Lowick, but we have found a way out of the difficulty. Miss Endermine has consented to go bail for you—to give herself as a hostage, so to speak. She is so sure you will speak the truth that she has entered into a bargain with me—a bargain which would, of course, be out of the question unless she knew that you were certain to speak the truth."

"A bargain?" queried Lowick. Then he looked at Joan. Her eyes were fixed on the ground, her hands clasped together, and her face was crimson with shame. Lowick did not know what to make of the situation. He realized that the Spaniard suspected him, that perhaps the man had even learnt of his intention to gain time by telling a lie. It was possible that one of the conversations in the hut had been overheard. But this reference to Joan giving herself as a hostage was incomprehensible.

"I see you are puzzled," said Smith, after a pause. "Well, I will make the bargain quite clear to you. If you speak the truth, Miss Endermine will marry you. If you don't, she will marry me."

Lowick shuffled forward a pace, and raised his manacled hands as if to strike the Spaniard in the face. The latter stepped back and laughed.

"It almost seems," he jeered, "as though you had intended to deceive me."

"Joan," Lowick cried, hoarsely, "this is not true? You have not made such a bargain with this scoundrel?"

She did not answer, and the Spaniard laughed.

"You are giving yourself away, Mr. Lowick," he said, coldly. "I'm afraid it wouldn't be advisable to trust to your word of honour now. And I don't know if even your oath would bind you."

Lowick was driven into a corner from which there was no escape, save through the gates of death.

"Joan," he said, in a low voice, "is this man speaking the truth?"

She raised her head and looked at him. There was entreaty in her eyes.

"Yes, it is true," she replied. "I have nothing to fear. You have no intention of telling a lie. You will swear that you are speaking the truth. You are known to be a man of your word."

"I shall say nothing," he continued. "I refuse to be party to such disgraceful bargain."

"Very well," said the Spaniard. "I will ask Luigi if Hagen has arrived," and crossing the room he laid his hand on the bell rope.

Joan rushed quickly forward, and laid her hand on her lover's arm. "Ralph," she pleaded, "you must not leave me here alone. For heaven's sake, you don't intend to leave me here—on this island—with these men?"

"I can do nothing to help you," he answered, coldly. "It does not matter whether I am here or not."

Senor Smith rang the bell, and half a minute later Luigi entered the room.

"Take the prisoner away," said the Spaniard, "and set him against the blank wall of this house. Has Hagen come?"

"Yes, your Excellency, he has just arrived."

"That is good. Put the prisoner under the iron hook which is in the wall, bind his hands to it, and set two lanterns near his feet—not near enough for him to kick them over. The men will fire at thirty paces. I will come out myself in a few minutes and give the order to fire; see that everything is ready before I come."

"Yes, your Excellency."

Senor Smith turned to Lowick. "Will you kindly go with this gentleman?" he asked. "If not, I will send for someone to assist him."

"You need not trouble—I will go with him."

Joan Endermine threw her arms round his neck and clung to him. "You shall not go," she said—"you shall not leave me here alone, Ralph, for Heaven's sake, have pity on me! Don't you understand what it would mean for me to be left here alone?"

"I must go, Joan," he answered. "Good-bye, my dearest. Heaven will watch over you."

Then he looked at the Spaniard. "You will not dare to harm her," he continued, in a low voice, "when you remember that I have given my life rather than be party to this bargain."

"I am never likely to harm her," Smith replied. "When you are dead she shall be sent back to Europe. I give you my word, and I have never yet broken it."

Lowick looked long and earnestly at the dark bearded face; then he smiled. "I think I can trust you," he said, slowly. "I am content. Good-bye, Joan dear. I know I am doing the right thing."



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