

The Greed of Conquest

By
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CHAPTER XXVI.

"WHAT is it, dear?" asked Mrs. Endermine, looking up from her needlework. Then, as she saw the expression on his face, she rose from her seat, and hastening to his side looked at the letter which he still held unopened in his hand.

"I don't recognize the writing," she said. "Why do you look like that, Dick? What is the matter? Are you ill?"

He put his hand to his throat and tugged at his collar, as if he were choking. "Lowick!" he gasped. "Ralph Lowick!"

The woman swayed a little; then she put a hand on his shoulder and steadied herself. "Open it, dear," she said, in a low voice. "Or give it to me. I will open it and read it to you."

"Yes, yes," he stammered. "You read it, Edith. I—I can't see. I haven't got my glasses."

She smiled, for she knew that he never required glasses for reading. Then she took the letter from his hand, bent over him and kissed his forehead, and, seating herself in a chair, opened the envelope.

"Dear Colonel," Mrs. Endermine read, in a trembling voice. "Joan is all right." She read no further, but covered her face with her hands and burst into tears.

"Heavens!" shouted the Colonel, springing to his feet. "This—Look here, Edith, for Heaven's sake don't cry. There's nothing to cry about. I feel as if I could shout, dance, sing, fight a man twenty years younger than myself. Edith—look here, old girl, for pity's sake don't cry. That's not the thing to do at all."

He caught her by the arms, lifted her to her feet, and held her close to him, as he had done when they were lovers—more than twenty years ago.

"Edith, my dear child," he whispered, "this is great. There's nothing to cry about—nothing." And all the time the foolish old fellow was crying himself like a child.

"Thank Heaven!" whispered Mrs. Endermine. "Oh! Dick, I—I can't realize it yet—I can't understand."

"You sit down and read the letter," he said, roughly. "Then you'll understand all about it. Here, give it to me. I'll read it."

He took the letter from her, and she, poor woman, caring little for anything else now that Joan was alive and well, leant back in her chair, folded her arms, and silently thanked God for His mercies.

"Joan, stammered the Colonel—'Joan is all right. We are in London at the above address. We were married yesterday at a registry office.'"

"Married?" interrupted Mrs. Endermine. "My little Joan married?"

"Yes; why not?" said the Colonel, fiercely. "I hope you're not going to cry about that? Well, let me go on. We can talk afterwards. 'We were married yesterday at a registry office. I've a lot to tell you; but it will have to wait. You must come and see us in town, as we dare not come down to Easternhoe. I am still in hiding, and if it had not been for Joan I should not have come back to England. All news must be kept till we meet. What I wish to impress upon you is that I am risking my life in writing to you, and you must not tell anyone that either Joan or I are alive. Please burn this letter directly you get it. We have not yet decided what to do, but Joan wishes to see you both before we decide. With kind regards to yourself and Mrs. Endermine, I am, yours sincerely, Robert Carter.'"

"Robert Carter?" repeated Mrs. Endermine. "Why—oh, Dick, are you sure that—there was a Robert Carter, don't you remember—that young man Joan met at the Wilsons' ball, and who liked her so much?"

The Colonel laughed heartily. "This is written by Lowick," he replied. "There's no doubt about that. He's stolen Carter's name in case this letter might fall into other hands—21a Egham-square, Bayswater. Mr. and Mrs. Robert Carter—ha, ha! We'll find them, Edith; we'll go up to-night. If we're quick we can catch the last train."

"Oh, Dick, we must be very, very careful. Supposing we were watched and followed?"

"Oh, that's all nonsense on Lowick's part. Why, he's the man England is looking for at this time.

He's the man that can save her and bring Europe to its senses. Lowick! Great Scott! woman, why, if he'd killed a thousand Corodales the country would welcome him with open arms."

"Yet he must know best, Dick. He says that he is risking his life in writing to us. Oh, Dick dear, we must be very, very careful. We must not forget, in our joy, that no one else must know of it. We must control ourselves—keep guard on our words and looks."

"Oh, you can trust me, Edith. You can trust me for that. Will you get ready? We must catch this train. Say you've got to go and see your doctor. We'll stay at Morley's—no, the Great Western Hotel at Paddington. That will be nearer to them. Hurry up, there's a good woman. We'll dine in the train."

Mrs. Endermine kissed him and left the room. "By Heaven!" he said to himself, rubbing his hands together. "This is splendid—glorious news—not only for us, but for England. We'll show them now, by gad—we'll show them!"

"YES, we had a pretty rough time on the whole," said Lowick to Colonel Endermine. "And so had the others. I hear that the Vallombrosa went down in a cyclone; no one was saved."

He had come to an end of that part of his narrative which related to their adventures on Smith Island, and had paused to fill and light his pipe. Mrs. Endermine and Joan were upstairs in the bedroom, and the two men were alone. Lowick had told everything, having first bound his father-in-law to a vow of secrecy, and the Colonel, who had been through the horrors of two years, had shuddered as he listened to the tale of cruelty and carnage.

"You will, of course, make this news public?" said the old man, after a long silence.

Lowick rested his elbows on his knees and stared at the fire, which burnt feebly, after the manner of lodging-house fires, in a big old-fashioned grate.

"I mean at the proper time," the Colonel continued. "I think you ought to do that. There was a great stir about the loss of the Ajax and the Agamemnon, and it was thought that they went down in a cyclone. People even wrote to the papers and said that the vessels were badly constructed. The South Pacific Squadron spent a month searching for them. Then, at the beginning of November, there were rumours of war, and the squadron was brought closer to Europe; and when the war broke out the whole thing was forgotten. But there are wives and mothers still hoping, Ralph—hoping that their sons and husbands will return to them."

"I may tell the truth," said Lowick. "Later on it may be possible. Well, I will go on with my story, Colonel. Our troubles were by no means over when we left the island, though we had nothing more to fear from our fellow-men. We had a fresh breeze and fair weather for two days, and then we caught it. I never wish for that experience again."

"A cyclone, eh?"

"No, just an ordinary storm—the sort of thing one wouldn't worry about on a liner, even on a good sound sailing ship; but in an open boat—well, if we hadn't struck land we'd have gone to the bottom."

He paused, and moistened his lips with his tongue. He saw the whole scene plainly before his eyes—the waves like grey hills crested with whirling snow, the dead calm in the hollows where the sail flapped, the swoop forward on the summits where the gale threatened to tear out mast and canvas, the continual bailing, day and night, for forty-eight hours on end. There was no need to describe all that in detail to Colonel Endermine. No words could adequately describe the agony and suspense of it—the continual strain of being face to face with death for forty-eight hours.

"You were driven ashore?" queried the Colonel.

"Yes, it was a miracle we escaped with our lives. Fortunately, the boat drew very little water, and we were flung up on a shady beach. We saved some of the provisions, but lost the boat. I got a knock on the head that laid me out senseless. If it hadn't been for Joan, I'd have been sucked back into the sea again. She saved my life."

"And then?" queried Colonel Endermine, gnawing his moustache.

"Well, I'm not going to tell you about our life on the island. All that will keep. We had some food, and there was fortunately a spring of water. Then there were cocoanuts, and turtle, and a few fish."

"Cocoanuts and turtle!" echoed Colonel Endermine. "Great Scott! you must have suffered from indigestion."

Ralph Lowick laughed. "We couldn't think of that," he said. "Joan made the best of them. We kept our matches dry, fortunately, and she turned out an excellent cook. It was like a picnic—not at all bad fare, I can tell you. I made Joan an excellent hut, and fixed up a sort of a tent for myself with the said and a few bits of wreckage."

"There was, of course, another side to the picture," said Colonel Endermine.

"Yes, there was," Lowick answered, gravely. "Joan was very much troubled about you and her mother. I think if it had not been for that, we might have been happy. And then there was always the fear that one of us might die, and the other be left alone. That kept me awake at nights."

"H'm, yes, Ralph. I can understand that. I've felt it myself—different, of course, when you're in civilization and among friends. Well, my boy, and what are you going to do now?"

"Wait a moment. I have not told you all yet. We were picked up by a Swedish trader, and brought into Stockholm. Fortunately, no one on board could speak English, so we weren't worried with questions. We told a sort of story—in dumb show."

"But when you reached Stockholm?"

"The war had broken out there, and no one could talk or think of anything else. Our arrival attracted no attention. We said we had been wrecked on the Brenda, a small sailing vessel, that our names were Mr. and Mrs. Carter, of London. I had my gold watch and chain still on me, and Joan had her rings and some other jewellery. We sold them, gave part of the money to the captain of the vessel that picked us up, promising to send more when we reached England. Then we came over here."

"It was very risky, Ralph, if you really think you are in danger of being tried for the murder of Corodale."

"It might have been risky at any ordinary time, though I look a bit changed, don't I?"

Colonel Endermine stared at the incipient beard and moustache which had transformed Lowick from a rather good-looking young man to a somewhat untidy ruffian.

"Yes, I wouldn't have known you; but Joan, her portrait was printed on a poster and sent all over England."

"I suppose so. Well, as I say, at any other time there might have been a risk. But who thinks or talks of anything else but this horrible war? There was bad news this morning."

"Yes, indeed, Ralph. I don't know what is going to happen."

"America and Japan could turn the scale in our favour," said Lowick, thoughtfully, "but I see they have both decided to keep out of the business."

"Yet they talk of the ties of blood," said the Colonel, bitterly, "and of gratitude. There is only one quarter where England can look for help."

"To whom?"

"To you, Ralph. Make a couple—make a single one of your machines, and the world will be at our mercy."

RALPH LOWICK made no reply. He leant forward, staring at the fire, his elbows resting on his knees, his hands clasped together.

"You said you had destroyed the machine and plans," the Colonel continued, "but I can't believe you would have done so without fixing the whole thing in your mind."

"You are right. I committed every detail to memory. But—" Again he paused, and pressed his lips tightly together.

"But what, Ralph?"

"That blow on the head, Colonel—when we were driven ashore on the island. It was more serious than I thought at first."

The Colonel looked at him blankly. "You don't mean," he stammered, "that you—that your memory—no, of course not—or you'd have forgotten all you were telling me just now."

"I could not make another machine," Ralph Lowick said, quietly. "It is one thing to remember a few incidents, and quite another to remember all the details of a very intricate machine."

"Oh, Ralph—my dear boy—you must try and remember. Think what it means to you and Joan. Why, if you were to come forward at this crisis, you could ask what you like, a free pardon, a pot