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THE BLACK MOTOR CAR.

By J. B. HARRIS BURLAND,

Author of "Dacobra," "The Unspeakable Thing," Etc., Etc.

CHAPTER XXX.

"VENGEANCE IS MINE."

"I only ask two things of you," said Jordison, "and then you shall both go free."

He was standing by the iron gate at the end of the tunnel. Arthur Holme and Lady Cliffe both faced him. Their wrists were still bound, but their faces glowed with the light of a great joy. They had been very near to death, but now life, and all that life meant to them, was within their grasp. Suddenly, and for no apparent reason, the man who had held them in his cruel grip, had bid them both go free. The night was over and the day was at hand. The sun itself, now rising from the east and turning the wide expanse of wet sand into a glory of gold, was not so resplendent as the light of freedom that had suddenly flashed up from the dark horizon of pain and death.

"I only ask two things of you," repeated Jordison, "but you must swear on the holy cross that you will do them. In the first place, you must both swear never to reveal either directly or indirectly, this hiding-place of mine, nor give any assistance, either direct or indirect, to those who desire to capture me."

"I will swear that," replied Holme, sternly, "though God knows what evil I shall do to the community."

Lady Agnes murmured some words to the same effect, and Jordison produced a small bone cross.

"This cross," he said, "was found in these caverns, in the bony fingers of a man who perhaps died for his faith in the time of the Romans. It is, without doubt, a most holy and sacred relic. You will each swear the oaths I desire by your God and the hope of your future salvation, and you will each kiss this symbol of your faith to seal the words you have spoken."

Holme swore the desired oath and kissed the little cross. Then Lady Agnes did the same, repeating the words in a faint and faltering voice, and shuddering as her lips touched the bone symbol of early Christianity.

"Now," continued Jordison, "you must each swear to me a separate oath. You, Arthur Holme, must swear that you will tell Lady Agnes Cliffe the true story of your life, and that you will marry her before a year has passed. You, Lady Agnes Cliffe, must swear that you will marry the man you love in spite of all opposition on the part of your parents. There is nothing disgraceful in his past history. He is a true and sterling man. I have done him a great wrong, and I intend to repair it. Do you both agree to swear these oaths?"

The two young people looked at each other in bewilderment. They could hardly believe their ears. Jordison had attempted both their lives, and now, as an alternative to death, he asked them to swear to fulfil the dearest wish of their hearts. They could understand the necessity of the first oath, but the second one was incomprehensible. "Why," began Holme in a stammering voice.

"Don't ask any questions," broke in Jordison savagely and abruptly, "for I shan't answer them. Will you swear?"

"I will, so help me God," Holme said fervently. "If Lady Agnes—" and he stopped and looked enquiringly at the woman he loved.

"Yes, Arthur," she said faintly. Her white face flushed with crimson, and there was a tender light in her eyes.

They both swore the oath, and once more they kissed the cross.

"The hardway goes round to the back of the island," said Jordison. "Keep close to the land till you come to a white piece of rock. Then strike across the sand in a straight line between the white rock and a black post on the shore beyond the salt marsh. You will then find a road and have no difficulty in reaching home. Be sure and keep

the straight line between the points I have named. On either side of you lies an enemy that will not be so merciful to you as William Jordison."

With these words Jordison took out a knife and cut their bonds and they were free. Without another word he unlocked the iron gate, and swinging it back on its hinges, stood aside to let them pass. They went out together without a word. Jordison watched their figures disappear round the end of the tunnel. He closed the gate with a crash and locked it. Then he turned abruptly on his heel and picking up a lamp from the ground, retraced his steps into the tunnel. And so William Jordison went back into the darkness, and his son went out into the light.

Twelve hours later the black car stood in the centre of the cavern ready for its last journey. Jordison had decided to run it to within a few miles of Liverpool before daybreak, and to make his way from that port to America. He had shaved off his beard and moustache, and his gaunt face looked wofish and hideous in its nakedness.

Lipp had packed such things as they required for the voyage in two trunks, and placed them on the car. Concealed about their clothes, sewn here and there in linings, scattered singly so as to escape the notice of the most diligent Custom's officer, were £50,000 worth of jewels. They had been picked from their settings and occupied an amount of space that was ridiculously small compared to their value.

Lipp lit the lamps, and the two men took their seats in the car. Then Jordison started the engines, and a few seconds later they glided through the open door and slipped down the long narrow passage to the sea. When they emerged into the open the moon was shining brightly over the waste of sand and water. Jordison steered slowly round the island till he reached the white rock, then he turned off at right angles and made straight for a twinkling speck of yellow in the west. The black post was invisible at night, but this light, which shone from the West Ray lightship, lay some ten miles beyond in the same straight line.

They crossed the dangerous sands in safety, though every now and then a sudden sinking of the wheel warned the driver that he had run over the edge of the track. Then they glided up a gentle slope, passed over the edge of the bank which kept the tide out of the low lying land, and went slowly westwards over the marshes.

The road was execrable. It was little more than a grass track, and the stones that had originally formed its foundation protruded through the thin layer of soil. It ran parallel to the road leading to the Red House, some eight miles north of it, and joined the old Roman Causeway. It had been originally constructed to bring up sand and shingle from the beach, but had not been used for many years. Where it joined the Causeway it had sunk several inches, and was submerged for a hundred yards in a shallow lake of water. On either side of it lay many miles of desolate marsh land.

When the motor reached the main road Jordison turned to the left and went southward. Lipp pointed out in picturesque language that this was not the way to Liverpool.

"I am aware of that, Lipp," Jordison replied grimly. "I have to call at Heatherstone Hall first."

Lipp pointed out the risk and broke into a torrent of oaths at Jordison's fool-hardiness. But the latter intimated that his servant could leave the car then and there if he liked, and Lipp relapsed into sullen silence.

Shortly after 11 o'clock the car glided under the shadows of the overhanging trees in the park. Jordison alighted, and told Lipp to keep his eyes and ears open. If anyone discovered the car he was to run straight back to the cavern. He, Jordison, would understand what had happened, and could make his way to their hiding place on foot.

When he had given these final instructions, he climbed over the wall and made his way through the plantation into the park. His gaunt face looked horrible in the moonlight. The loss of his beard and moustache laid bare all the evil lines of his features. The head of a vulture, peering round for the dead carcase of man or beast was not more loathly to look upon.

And Jordison's errand that night was death. He had resolved to kill Marie de la Mothe before he left England. Then, at last, his life-work would be accomplished. He had found his son and provided the young man's future happiness. It only remained to pay the debt he owed to the woman who had made him the thing he was.

His unbalanced mind, no longer able to distinguish between right and wrong, saw no evil in the thing he was about to do. The cold-blooded murder of a defenceless woman had assumed the appearance of a splendid act of justice. Jordison compared himself to an executioner, who carries out the sentence of the law. No criminal, he argued to himself, was more worthy of death than this woman. She had taken no life, but she had ruined that which was more precious than mere physical existence—the soul of a man who might have done much good, but who had sunk lower than the beasts that perish. Jordison saw nothing of his own free will in the matter. He only saw that all the misery and crime of his life lay at the door of Marie de la Mothe, and for that he had sentenced her to death.

He crept slowly through the park, moving on all fours from tree to tree, and crawling slowly to the great white house that glistened in the moonlight. He was but a small black patch on the grass, to the eye of his God no more than a wolf advancing on its prey, but to himself the stern shadow of impending gloom, relentless, glorious in his purpose, inevitable.

In either pocket lay a heavy loaded revolver, and he carried a dozen spare cartridges. But these weapons were only to be used in case of discovery, when he might be cornered and have to fight for his life. For the purpose of his mission

he trusted to a pair of muscular hands, the primeval weapons of man.

When he reached the house he was surprised to see that it was in darkness. Not a single light appeared in the long line of windows, save that which the glass reflected back from the moon. As a rule the Heatherstones entertained largely while they were in residence, and had guests at dinner nearly every night in the week. But to-night they had evidently gone to bed early, and Jordison was grateful for the good fortune which had smiled on his enterprise. It was, in his own mind, but one more proof that he was a chosen instrument of justice.

He crept cautiously through the shrubberies and made his way to the north side of the house. He effected an entrance through one of the windows of the servants' hall, and, taking off his boots, groped his way to the foot of the big staircase. He ascended this, and found himself in a long corridor, dimly lit by two gas jets, turned down to small bluish tongues of flame. He walked along it on tiptoe, and came into another and wider corridor, thickly carpeted, and leading to the principal bedrooms of the east wing. Here he was on known ground, and had no difficulty in locating the door of the Countess' bedroom. It was, as he had ascertained many months previously, the third door from the end of the corridor.

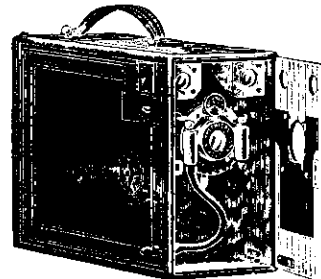
He placed his fingers on the handle and turning it softly, opened the door. Once again good fortune was on his side, for the burglar's at Heatherstone Hall it was more than probable that it would have been locked. The room was in total darkness. He entered quickly and closing the door behind him, turned the key.

Once in the room and out of the light of the passage he breathed more securely. He leaned against the wall and listened. There was absolute silence. His hand touched the switch of the electric light. Then he hesitated. Though he knew that heaven would applaud his deed, he had no wish to see the thing he was about to do. No, she should die there in the darkness. It was a more fitting end to her life.

He held his breath and listened again. He thought it odd that he could not hear the sound of her breathing. The sudden thought struck him that he had perhaps, after all, mistaken the room, or that the family had left Heatherstone Hall, and that Lady Heatherstone, departing from her habits of over two years, had gone with them. Once more he placed his hand upon the switch, and once more he hesitated.

Then he crept stealthily from the wall, and as he moved across the soft carpet to the bed, he suddenly noticed that there was a strange smell in the room, a sweet sickly smell like perfume, or the scent of hothouse flowers. For some reason or other it brought back a vivid memory of a scene in his past life—the first day he had ever kissed Marie de la Mothe. He remembered it well. She was pinning a gardenia in his button-hole.

When he reached the edge of the bed he stopped, and again listened. Then he passed his hand lightly over the coverlet



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