"The Grip of Evil"

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BOOK II.

"THE UNDERWORLD."

Chapter III.

"The Weakling."

The tenth marquis of Castleton found the transition from the grime of the Plainfield steel works and the squalor of a fifth-rate American boarding house to the ordered magnificence and trim beauty of an English aristocrat's surroundings a good deal more trying than he expected. Granted good health and a true zest in life, it is questionable whether poverty is not a far happier state than riches for the average man or woman. At any rate, once the legal formalities connected with the succession to the title were gotten over, the newly fledged marquis found himself bored to weariness by the ceremonious state in which he was compelled to live.

Life a big London hotel was pleasant enough. The great establishments which cater for the passing guest used to be patronized so extensively by Americans before the war that their methods and ways had been almost unconsciously adapted to transatlantic standards. Even when the outbreak of hostilities replaced the flood of ordinary visitors with army officers and their relatives, the atmosphere of the hotel did not change. Then, weather permitting, there was always the infinite variety of old London to fill the daylight hours, while scores of theaters offered rival attractions for the evening.

It was only when the stalwart young marquis traveled to his country seat in the Midlands, and endeavored to make himself at home among a people whom he felt that he ought to consider as his own kith and kin, that his troubles really began. He was awed into submissive silence by a most superior estate agent. His tenants insisted on regarding him as a humorist merely because he spoke with an American accent. He was frankly afraid of the portly butler, who seemed to watch every mouthful he ate, and disapprove in silent horror of his table manners.

Thus, the butler blanched visibly when his lordship broke two eggs into a glass tumbler and mixed them therein a la mode Americaine. Next morning, John tried to eat an egg in the English fashion, and made a horrible mess on the tablecloth. He felt he ought to apologize to his own servants, yet was conscious of the irritating fact that the American method of eating boiled eggs was the right and sensible one, whereas the British system of juggling with a hot eggshell and a small spoon demanded three generations of training.

In a word, the new peer had hardly settled down into a strange yet increasingly pleasant environment before the call of the blood made itself felt and he returned to the United States.

It must be remembered that he could not ignore either the message given by the revivalist preacher Branton, or the serious purpose which life seemed to have brought hand-in-hand with great wealth and high social position. He thought, therefore, he could deal with certain problems more effectually in the land of his birth than in a country whose people and ways were as yet distinctly foreign. In returning to America he decided to drop the title, and thus avoid the snobbery which besets the path of a marquis even in a land of democracy. Hence, it was as plain John Burton that he re-entered New York.

This reversion to type was easy, because the passport he obtained on going to England with the lawyer who first brought the news of his patrimony was made out, of course, in his correct name as a citizen of the United States.

He did not go back to Plainfield. Such a course, as John himself put it tersely, would be simply looking for trouble, but he rented a beautiful house in a town of greater size and more varied social conditions—New York, in other words—and there deliberately set himself to read, improve his manners, and study eugenic problems. Unfortunately, his own strength of character and innate self-reliance prevented him from seeking the services of an experienced mentor. What John really needed was the kindly sagacity of a man of the world. But he was too independent either to seek such aid or yield to its direction if it were available. So, like every other headstrong nature, he paid in full for a dearly bought experience.

Oddly enough, he fancied he would gain a good deal in deportment if he took dancing lessons. Without asking anyone's advice, he went to the first dancing academy whose sign caught his eye. Therein fortune played him a scurvy trick, because in all that great city he could hardly have fallen into worse hands than those of Prof. Moretti, a tall, swarthy, slenderly built Italian who blended a certain expertness in his art with a crafty and designing nature that sought victims among his wealthier pupils.

One night John had been to a theater and had seen some new play which presented a psychological problem from an unfamiliar angle. On returning home, feeling restless, he decided to smoke and think out a perplexing situation on the lines suggested by the dramatist. He entered the library, a favorite room wherein he could always secure a certain measure of privacy.

It was his habit, when deply moved, to pace back and forth in front of a spacious fireplace. But the floor was richly carpeted, and his movements were so silent that when a slight rasping sound came from the dining room—which was on the same level but across the entrance hall—he became aware of it instantly.

At first he gave the matter little heed. The midnight noises of a still house are curious and often inexplicable. The wind, a mouse, the snapping of a fiber in a piece of dry furniture, the crumbling of mortar behind a wainscot—these and many other quite normal agencies will attract the wakeful ear. John, however, could not remain under a delusion when he distinctly heard a window raised stealthily. He swiftly switched off the light in the library, opened the door as noiselessly as possible, and crept on tiptoe across the parquet flooring of the hall.

The dining room door stood ajar. A flood of moonlight rendered the interior sufficiently visible for objects to be distinguished with clearness. John caught a side-long view of a man furtively examining the silver on the sideboard. The raised window told the rest of the story.

It was easy to calculate the distance for an effective spring. Before the would-be thief well knew what was happening, the outraged owner of the house had him pinned to the floor. Incidentally, the marauder had received such a blow on the jaw that he was knocked into momentary insensibility. Thereupon John picked him up, first running his hands lightly over the man's clothes to make sure he was not carrying a revolver. Then he carried the burglar into the library, put him in a chair near the table, and switched on the light. Without further ado, he went to the telephone and called for the police station.

"Busy," said the exchange operator, "but I'll call you just as soon as they are through."

"All right," said John, turning his attention to the captive, who showed signs of reviving.

On the table stood a plate of daintily made sandwiches and a glass of milk. John's habits were irregular at times, and his servants had orders to leave some light refreshment available at night in case he felt sleepless and decided to sit up and read.

The burglar's face invited scrutiny. Its general expression spoke of intellectuality and gentleness. The chin was weak, the forehead lofty, the nose straight and well-formed, the mouth flexible and tender as a woman's. Otherwise, the man was an unsavory object. His clothes were those of the poverty-stricken, and his person was unkempt. John noticed that his hands were well shaped and obviously unused to hard work.

When the man recovered his wits, a singular thing happened. His eyes seemed to be fascinated by the sight of the food. With a sublime indifference to all other considerations, he stretched out trembling fingers, grabbed a sandwich, and ate it voraciously. John let him do it, and watched him. Then he swallowed some of the milk, and seized another sandwich. At that moment the telephone bell rang. The metallic jangle startled the thief into full consciousness. He gazed up at John with a dawning look of terror that was pitiful in its abasement. Evidently, he understood what the ring of that bell meant.

But he did not stop eating. On the contrary, he was only more eager to devour the rest of the food on the plate. John watched him with increasing amazement. The bell rang again. He picked up the receiver, but put it back on its hook; then he moved closer to his prisoner and gazed at him curiously.

"You're a poor sort of thief," he said. (By this time the man had emptied the plate.) "What you seem to want is a restaurant. Were you hungry? Was that why you were trying to steal?"

"Yep."

"You'd better finish the rest of the milk," said John.

The man gazed up with a flicker of astonishment on his eyes. However, he took the milk and set down the emptied glass.

"Now, I'm ready," he muttered. "Guess you better bring along those cops. You're a white man, and I'm glad I didn't get clear with any of your stuff. But they'll put me away for five years, just the same. A poor devil like me hasn't got a dog's chance."

"Why do you say that?" John inquired.

"Because it's the cold, hard truth," was the stolid answer.

John drew up a chair and sat down. "Tell me," he said.

"You're not going to play the missionary act, I hope? I'm through with it. There was a minister in my last prison, and he seemed to reel off a straight spiel. But it didn't pan out worth a cent when I tested it in actual fact. So, back I go to the penitentiary, and that's all there is to it."

The man's words sounded hard and defiant, but they held an undertone of sadness and despair.

"That's for me to decide," said John firmly. "There's no fearful hurry about it anyhow. You're not a real expert at this game, you know. See what you can do with an honest story. But eliminate the limelight and slow music. It won't go. First, what's your name?"

"Gentleman Joe. It's a nickname, and not a very good one at that, but it's the only one I've known for seven years."

"Try back eight, then."

"Well, if you must have it, when I graduated from Yale and entered the First National bank in my home town, I was known to quite a crowd of people as Joseph Lawrence Drake. I was engaged to be married, too, to as nice a girl as ever lived. Now, look at me. A nice mess I've made of it, haven't I?"

"So it would seem," said John dryly.

"Well, what's the use? Go ahead, get busy with the telephone."

"You make me tired," said John. "Yale, a bank, and a pretty girl! That's a good start for a play."

"It's God's truth, anyhow," protested Drake fircely. "You won't believe it, perhaps, but my first break came about through Gertrude's mother. She was suffering from tuberculosis, but could be cured if given proper attention. The family was not well fixed financially, so I helped a bit—not much, but enough to reduce the size of my wad. I tried to even things up in a poker game. It all occurred in one night. I deliberatey joined a fast set, drank heavily that evening, played a crazy game, lost all the time, and gave an I. O. U.

"The brute who took it came to the bank next day and shoved it in at my window. I asked for time, but he raised his voice and said if I didn't come across there would be trouble. I lost my nerve—I never was a cast-iron proposition, anyhow—and promised to meet him that evening with the bills. When an opportunity offered, I took the money from the drawer. Then began the easy slide. Erasures, false balances, wild plunging to get out of the mess, and an examination of my books by a bank inspector. Almost before I knew where I was, I heard a judge giving me two years. And during those two years in jail I never forgot Gertrude's shriek through the court house when she heard my sentence. Sir, I've been all in ever since."

MORETTI FORCES GERTRUDE TO AGREE TO TRAP BURTON.

"How about the next five years?" inquired Burton.

"What do you think?" said Drake bitterly. "Prison doesn't reform a man. It taught me to be a sure-enough criminal. A cellmate put me up to a few wrinkles but we didn't make much show in the profession. We were let out together, were grabbed on our first job, and I was sent up again—this time for five years. The minister got hold of me during that time, and I promised, with God's help, to go straight. But it was hopeless. It always is.

"I've been out now a month. I tried to get a job in an office. The boss wouldn't even listen when I told him something of my record. I made a break at a laborer's stunt, but the foreman looked at my hands and saw they were soft. So he turned me down. I couldn't even sit in the park that a cop didn't come along and tell me to get a move on. The few dollars I had when I left the cooler soon melted. My heart simply burnt with hate against everybody in the world. I was an outcast, and felt like one. Tonight I saw your place,

"What about Gertrude?"

Drake started, and his worn face lighted with a sort of dignity.

"Guess I've done my worst against her already," he said. "I wasn't going back into her life, poor girl!"

The man bent forward and hid his face in the thin, nervous, delicate hands which provided such a copious indexe to his character.

For a long time a silence, broken only by Drake's sobs, reigned in the room. Then Burton said quietly:

"Lift up your head, Joe Drake, and begin to imagine yourself a man again! I am going to give you a chance. You'll leave here tonight with some money in your pocket and a new hope in your heart. Meet me tomorrow at 11 o'clock outside the Atlantic hotel, and I'll take you to an outfitter's. Get yourself fixed up by a barber earlier. Then, with some decent clothes on your body, you'll feel cleaner of soul. I am taking a chance, but I'll risk it. I want a secretary who will attend to a heap of routine business which doesn't interest me. Mind you, I intend to trust you. You will no longer be 'Gentleman Joe,' but Joseph Lawrence Drake, Gentleman. See that you don't betray my confidence.

The other sprang to his feet, almost delirious with joy and gratitude.

"Good God! do you really mean it?" he cried in a voice cracked with emotion.

"I shall not go back on a word I've said," and Burton's outstretched hand gave earnest of his intent.

Drake broke down utterly. As one in dream he pocketed the few bills Burton handed him; his eyes were so blinded with tears that his benefactor had to lead him through the door and across the hall.

CHAPTER IV.

"The Dancing Girl."

A fortnight later, Burton remembered that he was somewhat in arrears with his dancing lessons, and arranged to give an afternoon to teaching his rebellious feet the intricacies of the valse a deux temps and the turkey trot—those sure and certain credentials in the inner shrine of high society. He ordered his car and sought his secretary's approval of the garb donned for this auspisious occasion. Drake, now as elegantly attired as his master, looked him over critically and pronounced him O. K.

"You're the sure thing!" he said. "Walk down Fifth avenue in that rig about 4 o'clock any fine day and the girls will say, 'My! who's the duke?'"

Burton smiled. Drake(of course, did not know that he was addressing a vertiable marquis. Thus far, John had managed to keep that part of his dramatic history a secret.

The two young men went out together and entered the car. By evil chance, a mean-looking, shifty-eyed man, who had "crook" written on him in nature's unkindest script, happened to be seated on a bench near the entrance to the house. He eyed the two with envious interest. But his expression changed to one of blank amazement when he caught sight of the secretary.

"Could you beat it?" he murmured to himself. "Gentelman Joe, by all that's holy! And togged up regardless, too. Now, what do you know about that?"

GERTRUDE BROOKS HEARS THE DOOM OF A JAIL SENTENCE PRONOUNCED UPON HER SWEETHEART.

The occupants of the car paid no heed to the loafer. They were whirled to the center of the city, and the automobile drew up outside a fetching looking building which announced flamboyantly to all the world that this and none other was "Prof. Moretti's Dancing Academy." Nor did they know that the professor himself, advised by 'phone of Burton's intended visit, was watching through a window, and evidently keenly anxious that this particular patron should arrive.

When the car stopped, Moretti turned to a pale but strikingly handsome girl who seemed to be one of his assistants. She was disengaged. Several other couples were pirouetting on the waxed floor, a fox trot being the item of the moment, but this tutoress had clearly been kept in reserve. Moretti now turned on her with a gleam of excitement in his dark, sinister-looking eyes, which, though large and brilliant, were set too closely together.

"Hurry up," he said emphatically. "Rush into some pretty clothes. This fellow just coming in has money to burn. You're to be his partner, see? Do you get me?"

The girl smiled languidly. She understood. She was merely a pawn in the game. It was her business to attract, to please, enven to entice. Her employer provided Paris frocks for such special occasions, and paid her fairly well into the bargain. The implied contract was a sordid one. She could not help that. It was a hard world; but she had to live.

Moretti, who could be both gracious and superficially distinguished in manner when he chose, received Burton and his secretary with much unction. He rallied John playfully on neglecting his lessons and reminded him that he was losing money each time he failed to keep an appointment.

"That doesn't make any difference," said John indifferently. "When you feel you want a check, just let my secretary know and he will attend to it."

A maid took his hat and stick, and Moretti moved away by his side. At that instant the door opened and the girl who was to act as instructress came in. Charming and svelte as she had looked in her ultra-fashionable gown. She glanced idly from the two men to the secretary, who happened to be standing somewhat apart.

Simultaneously the light of recognition dawned in her face and Drake's. It was thus, after seven bitter years of separation, that "Gertrude" met once more her old-time fiance. She saw the gladness die out of the man's eyes, to be succeeded by a dull misery and shame that went to her woman's heart. Moving forward, with swift grace, she held out her hand.

"Joe," she whispered, "is it really you?"

"Yes, Gertrude," he said sadly. "I am overjoyed at seeing you, yet I want to sink into the earth."

Her feminine tact came to the rescue.

"Oh, don't let us begin to weep about the past the very moment we meet," she said, with well-assumed lightness. "We are both alive, anyhow, and that is something to be thankful for."

"Is it?" muttered her downcast lover. "I wonder!"

By this time Moretti had noticed the deeply interested talk between the two. He frowned. John's careless remark had enlightened him as to Drake's position. Smothering his annoyance, he called Gertrude, introduced her to her partner and succeeded in giving her a significant nudge.

Drake effaced himself as his employer whirled away in the dance. He went out, and to his surprise found that he was frankly delighted at having encountered Gertrude. He was walking down the street, holding his head high and indulging in day dreams, when that same doubtful-looking person who had noticed his departure in the car met him face to face.

Drake would have passed, but the other stepped deliberately in front of him and greeted him effusively. Clearly, the secretary was startled. He ignored the outstretched hand, and tried to pass on with a casual nod. But this disreputable acquaintance grabbed him by the arm, and a hoarse voice murmured in his ear:

"Sink me, Joe, if I ain't tickled to death to find an old pal so well fixed. You ain't goin' to try and put it over that you have forgotten Wall-eyed Bill, your old side-kick, are you? Come and have a drink. There's things you and I have to talk about."

Drake, of course, should have defied this ghoul. But the fatal weakness in his character which had first led to his downfall now urged him to temporize. He thought it best to yield for the time. Some show of cordiality, and the gift of a few dollars, might send Bill on his way rejoicing. He glanced at his watch with a pretense of consulting it.

"I find I have five minutes to spare, Bill," he said. "Come along! Let's find a saloon in a side street. It's as much as my job's worth to be seen drinking in public at this hour of the day."

"Goin' straight, eh?" chuckled Bill. "That's good. That's the right lay. I'm glad to hear it."

He accompanied the words by a hearty slap on the back, but if the hapless pigeon which this hawk had marked as legitimate prey could only have peered into the man's mind he would have found registered there the additional comment: "Yes, you are! Not if I know it, anyhow."

The two selected a saloon in one of those doubtful neighborhoods which seem to be associated with fashionable thoroughfares in much the same way that barnacles cling to a ship. Drinks were ordered. Drake insisted on paying, but Bill did not seem to be short of money, and paid the waiter.

Poor Drake tried to impress his companion with the responsibilities of his new position, hoping that the text, "Go thou and do likewise!" might take root in even such unpromising soil. When all was said and done, his heart warmed a little to one who had been his companion in the miseries and mental torture of prison life.

A third and a fourth supply of liquor was consumed. The talk grew confidential. In half an hour the unfortunate Drake was nearly drunk.

At that unlucky crisis, a row sprang up in the bar. The bartender interfered, and, in the course of the melee, was thrown violently against Drake, who, hardly conscious of what was going on, assumed that he had been attacked. In a gust of anger he snatched a bottle from the counter and struck the bare-headed man a violent blow. The other fell at once, with blood streaming from his scalp.

The original row was now in full swing, and no one paid any particular heed to the bartender's misfortune. Drake was still waving the bottle in drunken fury when his associate led him to a back door and into an alley. There the jailbird took the bottle from Joe's hand, and threw it away, forcing the other to accompany him.

The two men presented a curious spectacle as they reached the main street—the one, fashionably dressed, having almost collapsed as he came into the fresh air, while the other, an obvious ruffian, was apparently playing the part of the Good Samaritan.

Drake never knew how he got home. He managed to creep to his room, and pleaded illness for the rest of the day. Next morning, when he met Burton at breakfast, the latter was kindly solicitous as to his health. Drake nearly yielded then. He was bitterly conscious of his fall from grace, but resolved to make amends, and had recovered his poise when he was called to the telephone.

The croaking voice of Wall-eyed Bill came over the wire:

"Nice mess you got into yesterday, didn't you?" it said.

"What do you mean?" inquired Drake nervously.

"Huh! I like that! Forgotten everything, have you? Sorry, old sport, but it's my duty to stir your gray matter. Hike out into the park, and meet me near the fountain in half an hour. And watch your step! It's the chair for you this time if you ain't mighty careful!

Making some excuse to his employer, Drake went out. And the time came all too soon when his prison friend showed him a newspaper with the scare heads: "Bartender Slain in Saloon Brawl! Murderer Unknown! Makes Good His Escape!"

The black type danced before Drake's eyes. He was terrified.

"How does this concern me?" he asked.

"You!" cackled Bill. "You croaked that guy! Up to now nobody but me knows you done it, and I ain't goin' to squeal on you, Joe. You believe that, don't you?"

"What are you giving me?" demanded Drake thickly.

Bill's manner changed instantly.

"The straight spiel," he growled. "Puttin' up the unconscious act, are you? Don't you do it. If I split, there's twenty fellers who saw you in that saloon, an' would pick you out of a crowd. That guy is dead all right, and you killed him. It don't make no difference to me, one way or the other, but you'll have to toe the line and do as I tell you, or I'll put myself right with the cops and you go to the chair for sure."

Drake had to accept the lamentable truth.

"I haven't much money,' he faltered. "I've been at work only a couple of weeks, but I might scrape up a hundred dollars—"

The other laughed derisively.

"Search me!" he guffawed. "That rich guy you're living with can cut up better'n that. Now, here's my offer. Take it or leave it. The next time he has a lot of dough in the house, put me wise and I'll pouch it. It's dead easy. No one will ever suspect you, and I'll get away west. Now, don't cut up rough about it. You can't help yourself . It's the only thing to do."

The unhappy secretary saw no other way out of the difficulty. Sick with despair, he gave in. Just as on that first evil day he had helped himself to the bank's money, believing he would repay the "loan" by the proceeds of a fortunate gamble, he salved his conscience now by the resolve to work hard, save every cent, and repay Burton in course of time.

He knew that within the next few days his employer would withdraw from the bank a fairly large sum with which to purchase a small estate in the country whither to retire for a week-end when weary of the noise and heat of the city. So, having made the wretched compact, he crushed it out of sight until the time was ripe for its execution.

Being restless and unstrung, however, he sought Gertrude. But, on calling at her home—a cheap apartment house in the suburbs, he found that she was not at home. Walking back, he saw Burton's car approching. He recognized it at once, of course, and was speculating as to what business had brought his employer to that part of the city when he noticed that Burton was accompanied by a lady. The two were seated in the closed limousine.

So Drake repressed his first intent, and did not signal the chauffeur. As the car passed, he was astounded by the discovery that Burton's companion was none other than Gertrude, the demon of jealousy whispered another reason why he should fulfill Wall-eyed Bill's behests.

A strange episode in John Burton's life moved on now to its predestined close with the merciless swiftness of a Greek tragedy. Wholly unaware of the two sordid situations which were developing, Burton's own acts contributed to the denouement. On the one hand, he obtained the money from the bank, and actually set his secretary to check the bills and see if the amount was right; on the other, his kindly nature led him to take the pretty but sad-eyed dancing girl for more than one airing in his car.

He grew to like her. When away from Moretti she became natural and unaffected. The forced gayety of the ballroom deserted her. She was just a shy, wistful and delightfully timid young woman. In a word, her attributes were those most calculated to appeal to a man of Burton's temperament.

Unfortunately the girl did not confide in him altogether. Had she done so, at least one chapter of this history would never have been written. But she was proud, and would not ask for help, while the bitter experience of by-gone years had hardened her to the extent of believing that a man seldom gave disinterested assistance to a woman, especially a woman who was young and pretty.

Moreover, Moretti held her in cruel bondage. The crafty Italian knew that the girl's mother was now in imminent danger of death unless she was sent speedily to a sanitarium in the west. If Gertrude fell in with his plans, he promised her a sufficient sum of money to relieve her of all anxiety in this respect. But, if she refused, she thereby condemned her mother to the grave and herself to penury, as she would be dismissed instantly from her post in the academy and was unfitted by lack of training to fill any other position. She argued, too, as Drake had done, that Burton was rich, and would suffer little if any inconvenience from the loss of a few thousand dollars, a share of which ill gotten plunder would fall to her. Life as she had known it had mercifully calloused her.

For all that, she loathed the undertaking, though she could not nerve herself to be candid with her friend, and tell him of Moretti's wretched scheme. The upshot of these despicable plots came when the young millionaire received the following letter:

"Dear Mr. Burton: I am in terrible trouble and want your advice. Will you come to me this evening? Sincerely, GERTRUDE BROOK."

"The Anthrop, Apartment 24."

This missive reached him while he was actually working the combination of the safe to place the money in it with which he was going to purchase the country estate. Drake was watching him, and, in a fever of agonized remorse, was on the point of confessing everything, but the telephone bell rang, and Burton was summoned.

He left Gertrude's letter on the table. Drake, hardly knowing what he was doing, glanced at the handwriting, which, somehow, seemed familiar. Then he read, and his better instincts were forthwith submerged.

If Gertrude was minded to be that sort, why should he worry because her favored sweetheart was robbed of a few thousand dollars? But he could not bear to meet Burton again, and left some excuse with a servant as to a pressing engagement.

Hence, he did not know that the real estate agent through whom his employer was acquiring the country property had asked that the money should be brought to his office that night to close the deal and thus forestall other negotiations. Burton returned, took out the roll of bills, put them in his pocket, closed the safe, and went away in his car. After calling at the agent's office, he went on to the Anthorp, which was really Moretti's residence.

He was shown in, and found Gertrude alone in an apartment so well furnished that, had he given the least thought to the matter he might well have been suspicious.

The girl was very pale and exceedingly nervous. Her talk was rambling and she seemed ready to drop in a faint. Indeed, Burton was so alarmed as to her condition that he turned to search for some water.

At that instant, Gertrude braced herself for a supreme effort. She tore her blouse off one shoulder, let down her hair and screamed loudly. Her astounded visitor had just turned on his heel when a door opened and Moretti ran in. The Italian held a revolver, and his ferocious expression seemed to show that he would not scrupile to use it.

"So I've caught you, you woman stealer! You!" he shouted. "But you can't get away with this sort of thing here. Your night's work will cost you dear."

But he had not counted on the moral or physical force of the man he meant to victimize.

John stared coolly back at him and at the wild-eyed, distracted-looking girl. Then he dropped his handkerchief to the floor.

He had noticed that Moretti was standing on a narrow rug, which stretched to his own feet. Stooping, as though to pick up the handkerchief, John caught the corners of the rug and tugged violently. As he foresaw, it slipped easily over the polished floor, and Moretti was thrown so violently that his skull hit the floor with a force which disposed of him for the rest of the night.

Without a word to the cringing girl, Burton went out. He drove home, and entered the house quietly. He was thinking of going straight to his room when the sound of a pistol shot brought him quickly to the library.

Arrived there, he found Drake with a revolver in his hand, and a man lying in front of the open safe.

Burton faced Drake and then the whole truth came out. Drake made a full confession. He told how he had been tempted, and had fallen, how a furious squabble had taken place when Wall-eyed Bill discovered that the safe was empty, and had accused him of having "double-crossed" him. In the struggle that followed, Drake had shot Bill with the latter's gun.

So the troubled philanthropist, who imagined at first that the faithful secretary had merely shot a burglar, was faced now with a double record of intended treachery by two people whom he had befriended.

He moved to the telephone and called for the police. As Drake heard the fatal number, he shuddered and burst out sobbing, knowing full well how his record would go against him when brought to trial. But he could hardly believe his own ears when he heard Burton say at the telephone:

"You had better send a man around to my house. I've shot a burglar!"

Drake would have broken out into a protestation of gratitude, but Burton repulsed him.

"Get out of my sight!" he growled scornfully. "I never want to see or hear of you again."

The unhappy wretch slunk out of the room, and the man of great wealth was left alone with a corpse.

Truly, he might well ask himself: "Is humanity in the grip of evil?"

(To Be Continued.)