

'The Grip of Evil'

Author of "The Wings of the Morning," "The Pillar of Light," "The Terms of Surrender," "Number 17," Etc.
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Twelfth Episode--Into the Pit

CHAPTER XXXII. The Hell-Cats.

When, if ever, the biography of John Burton, the man of Castleton, is written, his adventure with the gang of notorious criminals known to the police and to newspaper reporters as the "Hell-cats" will probably bulk large in that interesting and exciting record.

In the first place, it was through their instrumentality that he had met Grace Coe, an event fraught with the utmost significance to his future life; secondly, he conceived the idea of himself marked down for the gang's signal vengeance, with results which nearly proved disastrous on more than one occasion.

The affair began so quietly that no one could have suspected its extraordinary outcome. One morning John was seated in his study, going through some business papers, when his valet announced that a poor woman wished to see him. Burton at once gave an emphatic refusal. He had learned long since that philanthropy, if it would be reasonably successful, must set about business lines and that all the good he could do was to refer to a trustworthy secretary, who either investigated through in person or made inquiries through one of the many charitable associations in the city. By this means the young millionaire was saved, at least, from downright swindling.

The servant was leaving the room when it became evident that the woman would be refused to be denied. He had crossed the hall and was striving to enter the study without further announcement.

Moreover, John had heard a soft, well-spoken voice saying tearfully, "I am sure, if you will only let me see your mother, she would help her. There is no one in all this large city more deserving of assistance."

Better experience should have taught Burton that the more plausible the story the greater chance there was that it might be based on deceit. But he never could refuse the appeal of a woman so clearly and so humbly. He had the valet allow the applicant to enter. Yet, some degree of prudence having been forced on him by events, he no sooner saw that the new-comer was young and good looking than he made a dash for the door and warned the servant to remain within earshot.

The girl, who was very poorly dressed, and seemed to be in a state of genuine grief, and who had her name as Blanche Griffin.

"My mother has been broken down by anxiety and illness," she explained. "Father died two years ago, and my brother is in a hospital, having been seriously injured while at work in a munition factory. We have really tried hard, Mr. Burton, to keep body and soul together, but my mother absolutely refuses to have our wretched little troubles intruded upon by the ladies who come around on what they term 'almshouse' visits. It is not our fault that we have to live in the slums, and it is hard on broken-down working people that they should be classed with outcasts simply because poverty has overtaken them."

The plea was nothing new to John. He had often found the direst want among the honest and industrious poor, and one of the difficulties of organized charity was to conquer in the face of the false pride which refuses to make known its sufferings. He was somewhat attracted, too, by the girl's manner and appearance.

Glancing at a diary, he found he had no engagement of importance that morning. The weather was fine, and the district named by the girl was not far distant, so John decided to accompany her, and, as his car was temporarily out of commission, they went there together on foot.

Now, the valet happened to be an unusually observant man. He was well acquainted with his master's temperament, and regretted the soft-hearted impulses which seemed to lead Mr. Burton into so much trouble. He, the valet, had formed a somewhat unfavorable opinion of Blanche Griffin. Her wretched rags and ready tears did not deceive him at all. He saw that the girl was well nourished, that her hair was beautiful, and that her cheeks bore traces of makeup, recently applied.

Further, when his master and the young woman crossed the avenue and turned into a side street, they were followed by a stocky, over-dressed young man who seemed to have been awaiting their appearance.

At any rate, for some reason which the valet himself could hardly explain, this latest episode of his master's life rendered him uneasy. Above all else, he did not like the name of the locality given by the girl as her mother's residence. It was highly improbable that decent working class people would live there at all.

So, deeming it best to satisfy these vague doubts, he took his hat and followed Burton and Blanche. On turning the first corner he saw them walking about two hundred yards ahead. At an intervening street corner he was surprised to find the fashionably dressed man in conversation with a certain Billy Reilly, whom the valet recognized as a reformed criminal now employed in settlement work by a Miss Grace Coe, only daughter of a local banker. The valet, who sympathized with rescue work, had looked in at the settlement once or twice, and had scraped up a sort of acquaintance with Reilly, and he had no hesitation now in approaching him. By the time he drew near, Reilly had parted from his companion and was watching the latter with anxious eyes as the man swung jauntily down the street after Burton and his companion.

"Who is that fellow, Bill?" inquired the valet.

"He is a tough known as 'Two-Gun Jake,'" said Reilly. "He's one of the worst gun-men among the Hell-cats, and he has just told me that they have a ripe one in tow."

The valet instantly grew very wide awake indeed.

"What does he just mean by a 'ripe one'?" he inquired.

"I am afraid they're putting up some game on you, fellow, who has just been recognized as a reformed criminal now employed in settlement work by a Miss Grace Coe, only daughter of a local banker. The valet, who sympathized with rescue work, had looked in at the settlement once or twice, and had scraped up a sort of acquaintance with Reilly, and he had no hesitation now in approaching him. By the time he drew near, Reilly had parted from his companion and was watching the latter with anxious eyes as the man swung jauntily down the street after Burton and his companion."

and a cop, an' tell him just what you have told me. There's no use in him and you coming alone. He must ring up the station house and get the reserve squad along. And, hurry! When the Hell-cats mean business they put in quick action."

Meanwhile John Burton was being entertained by Blanche to a moving story of hardship and distress, unalleviated by a solitary gleam of hope or happiness. Had John been wiser he might have been rendered cautious by this very fact. The poor are not unhappy. They make light of their privations; having few wants, they have equally few desires. The mere habit of living from hand to mouth entails a careless juggling with fate which is by no means indicative of wretchedness. It is almost safe to say that there is more real joy and content in many a hovel than in a king's palace.

Be that as it may, John was soon undeceived. His companion led him into a tumble-down tenement. After traversing rickety stairs and dark and evil-smelling passages he found himself in a large and very well-lighted room. His quick ears caught the click of a lock, and he turned to ask the girl why she was thus securing the door, when he became conscious that several men had entered through other doors, apparently leading to bed-rooms or closets.

One glance at the nearest ruffian told Burton how outrageously he had been swindled. Without a spoken word he leaped toward the door and endeavored to open the lock, believing that if he could only gain the narrow passage he might be able to fight his way out.

To his surprise, the door opened in his face, and Two-Gun Jake entered. The gun-man took in the situation in a second, and lunged himself at Burton's neck. John was momentarily staggered by this unexpected assault. Before he could recover himself he was grabbed by a dozen hands and pinned against a wall.

He never before set eyes on such a leathome crew as the men into whose clutches he had fallen. Each face bore the impress of crime and drink. The low forehead, the cruel, sunken eyes, the cold, steel-gray hair with lust and avarice—these were the features common to the Hell-cats, who, indeed, must have been named by an artist in criminal nomenclature.

Two-Gun Jake relinquished his hold when his assistants were able to secure John without his help.

"So, you are the wise guy who goes around handing dollar bills for the benefit of the deserving poor?" he growled loudly. "Well, I guess there's no one more in need of your kind help than this yer crowd. We're going to trouble you, Mr. Burton, for ten thousand dollars. This is our price—not a cent less. An' make no mistake, you're going to pay and keep a shut mouth afterward, or we'll increase your weight by several ounces before you get home. Now, what do you say? A friendly settlement, or the other thing?"

Burton did not reply at once. He was trapped and knew it. He looked almost comatose as he gazed at the man who had deceived him to this end, and who had fled violently under his piercing gaze. He noticed that a wizened old bar was now standing by Blanche Griffin's side, and apparently blessing every effort, however, to overcome the two men, and Burton could only see out of the tail of his eye that his unknown rescuer was making a gallant fight against overwhelming odds.

He, too, was about to collapse again under the united attack of four or five men, when the door was burst open, and a number of police in uniform appeared.

The fight stopped then and there, of course. The sole intent of every rascal among the Hell-cats now was to save his own skin, so the room emptied as though by magic except those who had been gripped by the officers of the law at the first onset.

Burton noted in a dazed sort of way that the man who had taken such risk in order to help him had disappeared with the rest. This fact puzzled him. He could not understand it at all. He yet had to learn that if Reilly were seen to be in active collusion with the police his life would undoubtedly be forfeited, since the Hell-cats would strain every nerve to punish him.

Reilly's only chance of safety in the future lay in convincing his former criminal associates that he had really meant well by them in bringing the warning of police intervention, and that he had attacked Two-Gun Jake merely to put an end to a foolish and untimely argument. In order to deceive them he must either fight or yield. He might have endeavored to trip the policeman, and seek a new refuge.



"THIS WOMAN LURED ME INTO THE TRAP," EXCLAIMED BURTON.

Burton would probably have regarded the man's threat as a sheer bluff, but Bill Reilly knew better, and realized that if the young millionaire's life was to be saved he must act fearlessly, and at once. Rushing at Two-Gun Jake, he spun the man off his feet with a very effective upper-cut.

This assault coming from such an unexpected quarter, momentarily stupored the Hell-cats, and the men holding Burton relaxed their grip. As a result, John regained his feet, and was thus able to help Reilly in the furious struggle which now broke out, because Jake was the first to understand Reilly's strategy, and promptly called on his associates to put the traitor "out of business."

"He's only playin' for time," he yelled. "Go to it, boys, an' get both of 'em!"

The marvel was that revolvers were not used; possibly some sense of real and instant danger withheld the gang from shooting. Reilly, however, was every effort, however, to overcome the two men, and Burton could only see out of the tail of his eye that his unknown rescuer was making a gallant fight against overwhelming odds.

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Of course, he was able to gain a slight respite by reason of his knowledge of the familiar but intricate turns in the Settlement building. Thus, he dashed into the office used by Miss Grace Coe a few seconds in advance of the hue and cry.

The girl looked up with an air of surprise, since her trusted assistant was not in the habit of entering so unceremoniously.

"I can't help that, miss," said the policeman gruffly. "We caught him on the job. If he's honest why did he run?"

The argument was unanswerable. Reilly was handcuffed forthwith, and would have been led away in durance vile had not Burton come in with the valet. Of course, John recognized immediately the man whose valiant intervention had saved him from serious injury if not from death itself.

"Why," he cried in amazement, "this chap is on our side. He helped me at a critical moment. If he had not fought with the utmost courage I would have had a knife between my ribs."

The police looked surprised, as well they might, but Burton explained matters so lucidly and Grace Coe's tribute to Reilly's character was so convincing that they had no option but to release the prisoner.

They saw, too, that they must not cite him as a witness, because his appearance in behalf of the authorities would practically condemn him to death. His testimony was not really needed, since they themselves had caught the gang while actually engaged in a kidnaping outrage which

might easily have eventuated in murder. So they went away having taken full details of the affair from its intended victim, and Reilly slipped out of the office soon afterwards in order to change his clothes and remove from his face and hands the evidences of that breathless struggle.

Burton was therefore left alone with Grace Coe, the valet having gone with the police. It was the first time the two had met, and John, finding himself in the company of a charming young woman whose life was devoted to philanthropic effort, expounded the theory which possessed him like a nightmare.

"I do not agree with you Mr. Burton," she answered. "My experience of life leads to a directly opposite conclusion. It is nothing new to me to hear such views, however, because my own father holds that it is impossible to reform a criminal, but I am certain that this terrible verdict of mankind is both unjust and unwarranted by the facts. Why, you owe your life today to Bill Reilly, a notorious burglar who has committed numerous crimes and has served several terms in the penitentiary!"

John was decidedly taken aback by the girl's vigorous defense of her protégé. He smiled, and did not reply at once. Looking around the trim office, with its tastefully chosen and practical air, he decided to investigate Miss Coe's theories.

"I am interested in settlement work," he said at last. "I have seen something of it already—under different conditions—and would like to learn your methods. May I come occasionally and help you?"

Grace blushed prettily. Not every day did she receive offers of assistance from young and good-looking millionaires.

"We are always glad of the co-operation of earnest-minded people," she said simply, and John liked her all the more that she did not accept his services too readily.

Oddly enough, Grace's convictions were tested severely that very night. Infuriated by the failure of his attack on Burton, Two-Gun Jake resolved to break into the Coe's home and rifle it of money and jewels. Blanche Griffin was his tool. When he had forced a window and seen that the coast was clear he helped his confederate to enter the Coe's home and rifle it of money and jewels.

The girl was actually collecting a number of valuables when she upset a vase, and was surprised by Grace, who walked in from her bedroom and switched on a light.

Instead of screaming for help she caught the would-be thief by the arm, spoke to her kindly, and soon brought tears to Blanche's eyes.

Jake, witnessing this scene from the garden, was so astounded by it that he neglected his own job and was grabbed by a patrolman, who straight-

way brought him into the lighted room.

Grace, however, was true to her principles. She denounced the policeman and literally dumped Jake by declaring that Blanche was her maid!

The result was that Jake was set at liberty, and Grace kept the discredited Blanche in the house as her guest. Blanche Griffin was so overcome by this treatment that she promised to reform and undertook to cut herself adrift from the Hell-cats forthwith.

Thus far things had gone well, but the day's doing had sown the seeds of future mischief, and John Burton was destined to receive further and very bitter proof of his theory that humanity was in the Grip of Evil, even as his meeting with Grace Coe had brought to him the realization that there was something of good in the world.

(End of Twelfth Episode.)



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