

# THE GRIP OF EVIL

## LOUIS TRACY

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### FOURTEENTH EPISODE

John Burton, a worker in a steel mill, suddenly inherits an English title and \$10,000,000. He decides he will spend his life, if necessary, in an attempt to solve the question "Is Humanity in the Grip of Evil?" Each episode of this series forms a distinct story in itself depicting his experiences in his search for the truth.

#### Humanity Triumphant.

##### The Appeal.

The fuse was a slow one. Evidently it had been selected in order to prolong the agony. Bill Reilly's nerves, less under control than Burton's, yielded to the strain and he seemed to find relief in upbraiding the wretches with whom he once had fraternized but who now hated him with a deadlier malice than the man they regarded as chiefly responsible for the gang's threatened disruption.

But, like all criminals, they were cowards at heart, and fled the danger zone long before the hissing serpent between the chairs could release its true venom.

Burton felt quite resigned to this last stroke of an outrageous fortune.

Was he ready to die? Did he really resent being thus reft from life in the plenteousness of his physical and intellectual powers? He did not know.

Bill Reilly felt some regret that he had not succeeded in accomplishing what he set out to do—rescue John Burton from the hands of the Hell-cats. He wished to free Burton, not for himself alone, although he had great admiration for the titled millionaire who treated all men as his equal, but he did desire in a measure to pay, in the one way he could, Grace Coe for the kindness she had shown him.

He regretted he had ventured alone into the hands of the Hell-cats and wasted a few precious seconds thinking how he might have let Blanche Griffin be more of a help to him in the work he had cut out for himself. He wondered whether Grace Coe, when she heard of his rejoining the gang, would believe Blanche's story, that he had done it to aid Burton or would think that he had suffered a change of heart.

No sooner was the room emptied of the cut-throat gang, not one of whom dared even the slight risk of watching the actual explosion of the bomb through an open window or doorway, than he made a determined effort to free himself. He succeeded almost at once, and with a whoop of triumph wriggled out of the chair.

By this time nearly three-quarters of the fuse was consumed, so this daring fellow, without the slightest hesitation, picked up the bomb and hurled it through the porch far out into a disheveled garden. Banging the door, so as to obviate any risk of injury by flying metal, he raced back to Burton's side and began untying him.

The Hell-cats had gone about their business more leisurely with the millionaire, and the knots defied Reilly's nimble fingers at first. He had only partially extricated the man whose life he had risked everything to save, when the infernal machine exploded with a deafening detonation.

But Reilly never ceased his efforts. Ere it was possible to distinguish the light of the day again John Burton stood at liberty by his side. The respite thus gained did not endure long. The Hell-cats understood how they had been felled, and swarmed back like angry bees returning to a disturbed hive. The almost defenceless pair carried no effective weapons, but seized the chairs which had formed their sacrificial altar, and defended themselves valiantly against all comers.

Such human riff-raff as composed this gang of gunmen, however, were not minded to risk broken heads and sore bones in a fair hand-to-hand fight. One of them whipped out a revolver and fired point-blank at Reilly. The bullet struck him in the breast and he staggered and fell. Burton, giving his faithful companion one agonized glance, was momentarily taken unawares and soon yielded to an attack in force.

The whole dramatic scene ended almost as quickly as it had begun. Burton was now a prisoner again, and poor Reilly lay groaning on the floor, little caring what further suffering a vicious fate might have in store for him.

For a few seconds it looked as though the brains of both men would have been shot out then and there. But, as Burton ascertained subsequently, Mother Flannigan had been an interested spectator not only of the fight but of Reilly's unexpected release, with its sequel in the explosion of the bomb outside the house. The old hag herself, aided by Two-Gun Jake, had experimented with fuses of various lengths, and meant making a last attempt to extort ransom from the principal victim before it was too late.

Knowing that the gang did not possess a second bomb, she determined to change her tactics, and intervened shrilly at the very instant one of her henchmen was drawing a pistol with intent to fire point-blank in Burton's face.

"You wait for orders, you boob," she screamed. "Who tote you to butt in? Put away that gun, and let him up in the chair again."

Her command was obeyed with difficulty, since both chairs had been broken in the struggle. While John was being lashed to a rickety seat, he looked calmly into the scowling faces of his persecutors. "What good will it do any of you to kill me?" he said. "You are only committing a stupid crime, which will surely be discovered, and lead to a hue and cry of the most determined kind."

Mother Flannigan thrust herself forward. Her evil eyes blazed into his.

"Now you're talkin'," she croaked. "Do us a bit of good, an' save yourself. Will you give us fifty thousand dollars, an' keep mum when we turn you loose?"

John shook his head.

"That is not my meaning at all," he said quietly. "To buy my life on these terms simply implies the triumph of evil. I will repay you by help and kindness. I will promise you the fair treatment which many of you have never yet received from society, but I absolutely refuse to bargain in terms of money."

"You do, eh?" screamed the virago. "Well see about that. You are in our hands here, Mr. Marquis, and don't you forget it. If it wasn't for the carelessness of some of these blunderin' idiots you and your pal would have gone up a minit since in smoke an' fire. You think, perhaps, that the cops are after us, an' if you can only waste time they'll rescue you. Don't you believe it. To prove my words I'll give you one hour. If, however, at the end of that time you don't promise to pay down fifty thousand plunks just when and where

we want 'em, I myself will drive a knife through your ribs, an' let the boys here finish the job as they like afterwards."

It was only too evident that the dreadful old creature meant what she said, but John met her gaze unflinchingly, almost with compassion.

"Very well," he said, "I accept your respite of an hour, but don't let poor Reilly bleed to death straight away. Let him have his hour, too. Bind his wounds, therefore, and give him some water."

"Now, men," he added, sweeping the grim circle of the Hell-cats with a comprehensive glance, "carry out your terms fairly and squarely."

"D'ye mean that you're willin' to pay?" broke in an eager voice.

"That is to be settled at the expiration of an hour," was the calm answer.

"He thinks he's playin' with us," sneered Mother Flannigan, "but I'll teach him. See if I don't!"

Nevertheless, moved by some lingering sense of fair dealing, she wet a handkerchief, made it into a pad and bound it tightly over the bullet wound in Reilly's breast. And thus began an hour of mental and physical agony.

Meanwhile some stirring events had happened in the city. It will be remembered that Burton had employed a Japanese valet during the absence on vacation of the smooth-spoken English servant who usually filled that office. He had come to like the little brown man, and retained him in his service, so that the two valets alternately performed the same duties.

When the gunmen made their attack on Burton's house, choosing the hours of broad daylight as the safest for their purpose, and depending for success wholly on rapidity of movement, the Japanese happened to be in a dressing room adjoining the library where his master was at the moment attending to some belated correspondence.

Hearing a sudden hubbub of rushing feet and muttered oaths, the little man ran in only to be blackjacked forthwith. He fell like a pole-axed ox, and the Hell-cats did not care whether or not he was actually dead. The fate of a valet was of no account. What they wanted was a bound and gagged millionaire safe in the limousine of a fast car, and this achievement they carried out with a daring and efficiency worthy of a better cause.

So the Jap recovered his senses, and was able to give the police a fairly lucid account of the attack.

The police decided that a widespread publicity would best serve their ends, and supplied the press with such meager details as they possessed.

Grace Coe was sitting down to a belated lunch-

Author of "The Wings of the Morning," "The Pillar of Light," "The Terms of Surrender," "Number 17," Etc.

The policeman gazed down at the questioner. Slightly amused, he took from her trembling hands a photograph of the carte-visite order, yellow with exposure, and much stained, it might be, with tears.

"No, ma'am," he said after careful scrutiny. "Who is it?"

"My son," came the answer. "I haven't seen him for ten years, but a man told me he believed he was in this city."

"What's his trade?" inquired the officer of the law kindly.

The wrinkled and tired face, already pallid with fatigue, blanched a little more.

"He used to be a locksmith," she faltered, "but—the man said—that my boy wasn't workin' just now."

Then the policeman understood. "Gone to the bad, eh?" he commented, trying to help the poor creature in a difficult confession.

"I suppose so," she almost sobbed. "He looked again at the picture, and shook his head."

"No," he said, "I haven't seen him. He can't be much of a tough, mother, or I'd be sure to know him. So cheer up! Sometimes things ain't so bad as people make 'em out. They're always ready to say the worst, you know. Tell you what—there's a sort of Settlement bureau in this town where young folk who have gone wrong are given a helpin' hand. You may find out something about him there. Even if Miss Grace Coe doesn't know him, someone in the Settlement may be able to assist you."

The woman had named the subject of the photograph "John William Evans," so the policeman was

"But how?" demanded Grace, intuitively realizing that Blanche would not be so disturbed without good cause.

"Don't you see, miss, he is wounded and in the hospital, and, if anyone, would know where those wretched men have taken Mr. Burton and Bill Reilly. Perhaps, if we bring his mother to him, she may arouse his better nature, and—"

Grace caught the drift of the girl's notion at once. "Oh, yes, yes!" she cried impulsively. "We must not lose a second. Let us act alone. Three weak women may succeed where the police have failed."

Mrs. Evans was easily persuaded. Indeed, she was ready to put the utmost confidence in Grace from the first instant of their meeting. A car was in waiting, and the three were taken swiftly to the hospital. Blanche was the first to alight, and was consequently just in time to see Jake being helped into an automobile drawn up by the curb at some distance from the main building.

She recognized the man with him as a particularly brutal and dangerous member of the Hell-cats gang, and ere she could frame a startled explanation which would convey the truth to Grace's ears while concealing it from the hapless mother, the other vehicle was vanishing down the road in a swirl of dust.

"Follow that car," she said instantly to the chauffeur.

Leaping inside, she tried to make clear a distinctly perplexing situation. It should be borne in mind that no other course was reasonably possible. Blanche was justified in assuming that Jake had been liberated from the hospital on the urgent representations of his friends, and had character though he was, he could not be detained, since no charge had been lodged against him. The quick-witted girl decided at once that Mother Flannigan and the gang needed him.

The pursuit continued until the gunmen's automobile turned into an almost disused track leading to the house which held the prisoners. Luckily, Grace Coe's driver detected the maneuver and contrived to pull up his own car behind a clump of trees. Hence Jake's companions—there were two of them, together with the chauffeur—saw nothing alarming when they looked around before entering the house.

Without the slightest hesitation the two younger women led Mrs. Evans towards the building, screening their advance as best they might by taking cover behind a ragged hedge.

At that time more than half of the allotted hour had passed, and John Burton, whose thoughts were

Burton, of course, remained in blank ignorance of the astounding fact that his audience was increased, for the three women had crept up unheard, and followed every word through the open window. It was well that this was so. The presence of Grace Coe could hardly have failed to disconcert him. The sight of her sweet face must have induced poignant thoughts fatal to the even flow of his address.

Seldom, indeed, in the history of this gray world has any man spoken to such a group of cut-throats under such conditions. By an inexplicable miracle—probably by the unknown action of that subtle force vaguely described as telepathy—Burton broke off abruptly at an instant when his hearers were keyed up to the highest pitch.

"How is time going?" he inquired, and the words fell from his lips so nonchalantly that for a few seconds none stirred.

Two-Gun Jake was the first to recover himself. He fumbled at a watch with his uninjured hand.

"Guess from what I've been told, you've still got five minutes," he muttered.

A white-faced old woman crouched beneath the windowsill gasped when she heard that voice. Mrs. Evans had listened like one in a trance. She understood neither the meaning nor the intent of that strange harangue, but it held her like the others.

Then John made his big hit.

"I want to use those five minutes to good advantage," he said, looking around with a benign expression which utterly baffled and nonplussed the woman and the men who a little while before had been thirsting for his money or his life.

"My own personal record now ceases to interest either you or me very greatly," he continued. "I shall not buy my life at your hands. Soon I myself shall be with yesterday's seven thousand years, while you will go back into the world, not enriched at my expense, but vastly poorer, because you will carry to the grave the memory of one more crime added to the many which have sullied and discredited the great trust which God gave when his Spirit breathed an immortal essence into your mortal bodies. I want to give you one final message—I want you to accept the one great truth common to all mankind. The chief, I might almost say the only, real driving force in the world is love. And love begins and ends with the maternal instinct, which is as strong in the jungle as in the most civilized of communities. Every man among you must have known it in greater or less degree. Even you," and he turned a luminous glance on the withered and shaking hag, "must recall those early years when you were a child at your mother's breast. If you have had children of your own, you must have felt the divine instincts of a mother. You were ready to risk life itself to bring a child into the world. You must have been prepared to sacrifice that same life over and over again for the sake of your offspring while it was still a wee mite, looking at you, and you only, for help and sustenance. I beseech you then, woman and men, when you go away from this house, to search into your own hearts and inquire whether the selfishness which now inspires you is really worth while."

If my example can assist you in finding the better way I shall regard death as a real blessing. You will deprive me of a few troubled years, but I shall count that loss as a gain—"my spirit, wandering to the unseen, encounters even one soul which I may have lifted out of the pit. I am not mouthing vain things. A man who has little more than a minute to live can, at least, afford to be candid with himself and others. I repeat that I shall not purchase my freedom. Do with me as you will, but, with my last breath, I implore you to pay heed to what I have said."

Two-Gun Jake strode forward, and stood in front of the prisoners. Though one arm was out of action, the other was as efficient as ever, and his right hand twisted in a businesslike way towards a hip pocket.

"Boys," he snapped, "I needn't tell any of you that I'm mighty quick on the draw, an' to that extent, what I have to say must go. I can't talk like Mr. Burton, but I can make my meanin' clear. We're quits with this guy here an' now. Is any of you-all particular anxious to argue the point?"

No one will ever know just what might have happened but for the interruption which came from a totally unexpected quarter. Mrs. Evans could be restrained no longer. She rushed in, scattering the startled Hell-cats right and left, and threw her arms around her son.

"That's spoken like my own boy," she sobbed. "I don't care what you've done, John. It's nothin' to me how wicked you have been. I'm your mother, and I'd believe in you even if they was to take you to the chair this minute, though I've sought for you an' wept for you through ten long years. You're good at heart, John. You couldn't be my son an' your father's, an' be a real bad man. Oh, my boy, my boy, I'm a pore ole woman, but I'm ready to die now with a smile on my lips!"

And thus, in the most effective way conceivable, did John Burton, tenth marquis of Castleton, find the answer to his question. He would scoff today at the conceit that Humanity is in the Grip of Evil. Conviction came through love. Had he searched the wide world he could have found no more beautiful and gracious partner than the girl whom he met amidst surroundings which might well have added one more to the many disillusionments of an eventful career.

Grace would not be a woman if she did not also appreciate the fact that she had become the countess of Castleton. But this new dignity only added to the sweetness of her disposition. It enlarged her sphere of usefulness. The elegances of a new life rendered her even more noteworthy, while her knowledge of real difficulties of the poor guided her philanthropic efforts into the one true and abiding channel, namely, that of education and self-help.

At this very day her most trusted assistants are Mr. and Mrs. William Reilly, while in the once-dreaded Hell-cats she has a band of willing and enthusiastic helpers, chief among them being a somewhat truculent-looking and energetic person who wins instant notoriety on the platform when introduced to expectant audiences as the famous terror, "Two-Gun Jake."

Why, even Mother Flannigan earns a respectable living in a laundry!

And this is the end. The allegory is plain for all men to read. Even in these days of horrible war, with its outrageous crimes and sanguinary holocausts, it is true now as ever that

God is in heaven,  
And all's well with the world.  
THE END.



1—Grace Coe Takes the Gangster's Mother to Gang Headquarters.  
2—Asking Grace Coe to Find Her Son.  
3—Burton and Reilly in the Gangsters' Power.  
4—He Could Have Found No More Beautiful and Gracious Partner.

son when her brother ran in with an evening newspaper in his hand.

"I am sorry to be the bearer of bad news, Grace, but feel that you ought to know the worst. Burton has been captured by the Hell-cats! They actually took him bodily out of his house, and have rushed him in a car to some place which the police have not been able to locate. I think you can help. Those people at the Settlement—"

The words died away on his lips, for his very heart was chilled by the sight of the wan misery in the girl's face. But she rose steadily enough, and her voice was extraordinarily under control.

"I half expected this," she said. "Yes, I must do what I can. Don't come with me, George. I shall go alone. You do not know the ways of my poor friends. If you are there, they will be dumb, but to me they will tell the truth."

On reaching the Settlement she found Blanche Griffin there. Her own despair was equalled by that of the girl whom she had dragged out of the gutter, for the newspaper reports made it clear that Bill Reilly, the ex-convict who had found redemption, was missing as well as the millionaire.

Poor Blanche was already harboring a dream of her own wherein a quiet cottage home, children, and the happiness which comes alone from love and honest work, might one day be hers. That vision was rudely shattered. It was replaced by a grim and tragic reality.

#### Wherein John Burton Solves the Problem.

In looking back through the history of an individual, as of a nation, it would seem as though idle chance played the most important part in human affairs. It is not so, of course. The apparently aimless currents of life mingle at last and unite in one mighty and irresistible stream of progress.

Who, for instance, could possibly have imagined any active connection between the arrival that day of a worn, frayed, elderly woman at the city's central depot with the deadly menace threatening John Burton and his faithful friend, Bill Reilly? Surely not the poor creature herself! On leaving the train she emerged into a crowded street, and the bewildered, half-frightened, half-despairing expression betokened by drooping lips and lack-luster eyes showed that she, at least, was irresolute of mind and sadly aware of her own unimportant place in the general scheme of things.

Amid the noisy chaos of the passing multitude she picked out a policeman, and approached him timidly. Fumbling in a reticule which she carried, together with a delapidated suitcase, she produced a photograph.

"Pardon me, mister," she said in a quivering, apologetic voice, "but do you happen to know a young man who looks like this?"

centered now in the great purpose which had dominated his whole life, was inclined rather to spend himself in a last effort towards regenerating humanity than in a seemingly futile attempt at self-preservation.

He had made up his mind firmly not to yield to the Hell-cats' demand.

A luminous thought pierced his brain as lightning darts through black stormclouds at night. What would Christ do in like circumstances? he asked himself. What did he do, when writhing in agony on the Cross of Calvary? There could be no doubt as to the answer. He besought his Father in heaven to forgive his enemies, "for they know not what they do." Straightway John Burton saw the open road, and took it.

"Say, boys," he exclaimed, attracting the attention of the Hell-cats within hearing, "would you mind asking Mother Flannigan and the rest of the bunch to gather round? I want to say a few words which should be of interest to all of you."

He used the simple phrases which alone these men could understand, and, not without some of the orator's skill, began by enlisting their curiosity, since they jumped to the conclusion that he meant yielding, and wished to have the bargain ratified by every member of the band. Soon they were all collected, and, by good fortune, the group of interested listeners was swelled by Jake and the others who had brought him from the hospital.

"I could talk more easily if you would kindly free my hands," went on John quietly. "There is no fear of my escaping," he added, smiling so genially that his captors grinned in unison.

John's bonds were untied; he stretched his stiff arms, and permitted his bruised body to relax.

"I hope you won't interrupt," he began. "I shall endeavor not to trespass beyond the allotted time, but it will not be my fault if what I have to say does not command a sympathetic hearing."

Then, to their intense surprise, instead of outlining a basis of agreement in terms of money and life, he sketched briefly, but with winged words, the story of his career. He depicted his childhood's days, passed in surroundings with which everyone present was familiar, and thus, at the outset, placed himself on a par with the limited intelligence and dismal experiences of his audience. He told how he had risen to be a foreman in the iron works, how he led the strike, and was befitted like another Samson by a Delliah in fine raiment and anointed with sweet-smelling spices. By a wave of a magician's wand he led them from the dirt and squalor of a working-class quarter to the palaces and well-tended lands of an English nobleman. He even held them spellbound by depicting the unhappy quest which had dominated his manhood's years—that unending and never successful search for an answer to the far-reaching question—Is Humanity in the Grip of Evil?

It happened that Blanche Griffin was standing near and heard what passed. Though she, too, was racked with misery, she almost unconsciously scrutinized the simpering youth in the print, and a doubling half-recognition flitted across her eyes.

"May I look at that?" she asked. Taking the little square of pasteboard to a window she examined it intently, and a half-repressed cry of amazement brought Grace to her side.

"It is—it must be—Two-Gun Jake," she whispered excitedly. "Of course, Miss Coe, you don't know him as well as I do, but unfortunately I have seen a good deal of him during the past four years, and sometimes, when in repose, he would look just like that. Oh, if this should be his mother, how fortunate for us!"