


LOLA CRAWSHAY
 BY MARCHMONT, E.A.
 AUTHOR OF "MISER HOODLUMS' SECRETS", "THE MURDER OF MISS STRANGE", "BY WHOSE HAND?", "THE OLD MILL MYSTERY", ETC., ETC., ETC."
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"If you do not forgive me, I shall leave the manor tomorrow morning."



"What shall I sing to you?" he asked. "And yet why should I ask forgiveness? Was it not the fault of your own beauty? Who would blame me for losing myself in the maze of your eyes?"

"I will not forgive you if you do not give me your solemn word of honor never to recall your offense and never to dream of offending again."

"I am not an idiot," he murmured. "I love an offense? Stay, I am sorry. I pain you," he cried, with a sudden impulse. "On my honor I will never again forget what I wish I need never remember." And he spoke with such apparent earnestness and feeling that Mrs. De Witt forgave him without another word.

With Beryl he was audacity itself. He paid her marked attention in a perfectly deferential manner, but in a way which those present could not fail to notice.

"There is a truce till tomorrow at 12 o'clock," he said to her as soon as they met. "I hold you to your word. Till then things are as they have been here, and you play your part with the rest."

"I have no part to play," she answered coldly.

"Pardon me. You are anxious for the honor of the family." The sneer in his tone was quite perceptible to her. "And if you do not keep your word and maintain the terms of the truce I will not keep mine, and you can force an open eschandre. As you will."

And Beryl, forced in this way, was compelled to submit to the little attentions which of deliberate purpose he paid her.

It was part of his plan that all at the manor should for that night see that the two were on excellent terms, and in that he was so completely successful that Sir Jaffray mentioned it both to him and to Lola.

The Frenchman's almost reckless gaiety lasted all through the evening, and Lola could not fail to notice it. It disturbed her. She knew the man, and knew well enough that it was the cloak for a state of nervous restlessness, the result of great agitation of some kind. She watched him closely, endeavoring to get some clue that would give her the key to the problem of his intentions and feelings, but she could detect nothing.

Beryl was struck by it also and surprised by it and was angered at the false position in which the man by his audacity placed her, but she set it down merely to his desire to brazen out his villainy before her and to show that, though he was afraid not to accept the terms she had imposed, yet he was resolved to accept them in his own way. Some of the effects, too, she put down to wine. She observed that he drank heavily at dinner, and this increased the disgust she felt toward him.

But not a glimpse of the terrible truth dawned upon her, not a thought that ever in the midst of his wildest sallies, his loudest laughs, his tenderest songs, his thoughts were all set in deadly concentration upon his plan to take her life that night.

She retired early, going to sit with old Lady Walcote in her rooms, and there was not a thought of personal danger in her mind. She was relieved to think that the man had spent his last evening at the manor, and that from then the atmosphere of the place would be the clearer for his absence, and she was glad to reflect also that one part of the complicated problem would be the morrow be in a fair way of settlement.

When the man himself was gone, it would be much easier to deal with the question as it affected Lola, and this was the thought which she had when, after some two or three hours, she went to her own room, which was next to that of Lady Walcote's, to go to bed.

Fortunately for her, she could not sleep. The interview with Pierre Turrian had opened up a vein of human nature which was so novel to her—naked, unblinking, unashamed villainy—and she had been so profoundly moved by all that she had heard and by the mystery and misery which hung over the house that she lay awake hour after hour, tossing from side to side, trying to see some way out of the tangle.

For a long time she burned a light, reading now and again in the attempt to break the thread of her painful thoughts; but, finding this vain, she put out the light and lay in the darkness.

The night was not, however, a very dark one. There was a moon, though

its light was shrouded by the heavy drifts of clouds which a somewhat fitful wind was driving across the sky. Her blind was drawn up, according to her custom, to catch the earliest morning light, and now and again when her eyes had grown accustomed to the darkness she could watch the flying clouds as she lay with her face turned toward the window.

It was while she was thus occupied, having made another vain effort to get to sleep, that she fancied she could hear a noise, though whether it was in her room or out in the corridor or in the next room or outside she could not say. Thinking that it might be Lady Walcote moving, she listened very intently.

What she heard next made her heart beat quickly. She was a brave girl, full of resource and daring at need, but the noise she heard might have made a man nervous.

It came from outside in the night, and it seemed that thieves were breaking into the manor house. What she heard was the sound of a ladder being placed close to her window. She heard the end as it struck the wall and again as it was moved into a different position.

She could think rapidly on occasion and act as well. Now she jumped out of bed, slipped on some clothes and a dark dressing gown and turned to alarm the house.

But with her hand on the door she paused, and, moving swiftly back across the room to the window, she looked out cautiously, keeping herself well out of view.

Just as she reached the window the head of a man who was creeping stealthily up the ladder reached the level of the lowest pane of glass, and, putting his face to the glass and shading it with his hand, he peered into the room.

Beryl saw the man and shrank back, shuddering and cold as she recognized the handsome, cruel face of Pierre Turrian.

Then in an instant the meaning of it all flashed upon her.

He had begged for the delay in order that he might destroy the evidence of his villainy and murder her, the only witness who knew of it.

CHAPTER XIV.
THE ATTEMPT ON BERYL'S LIFE.
 The instant that Beryl saw who it was that was threatening to break into her room and guessed the reason of the visit she shrank back as closely as possible to the wall and waited in breathless suspense while Pierre Turrian completed his scrutiny of the room.

By stooping her head forward very slightly she was able to watch him and saw that he was bending sideways from the ladder while seemingly holding on to it with one hand.

So long as he continued to stare into the room she did not move a muscle and almost held her breath lest he should hear her and being disturbed make off.

For her rapid, shrewd brain had resolved that she would if possible let him carry out his intention of getting into the room, in order that he might the more clearly reveal his object, while she took ample means to provide for her own safety.

Her nimble wits devised an easy method of tricking him if only he would give her an opportunity of a couple of minutes' preparation, and this, to her intense relief, he did.

Finding that he had not placed the ladder sufficiently close to the window to be able to open it, the man descended it slowly and softly, just as he had climbed it, and Beryl, straining every nerve to listen, heard him go down.

With swift, deft movement she so made up the bed that it looked as though some one were sleeping in it, and then she opened the door, which was covered by a curtain, and muffled her head in a dark shawl she stood in the doorway sufficiently concealed by the door curtain and waited.

She had not long to wait.

Almost as soon as she had finished her preparations she heard the top of the ladder bumping softly against the wall as Pierre Turrian came up it again.

As he reached the top and his head showed between the window and the sky the moon shone out and lighted up the window and the figure of the man and came flooding into the room almost to the feet of the girl.

She saw him peer eagerly into the room, while it was thus illuminated, and she could fancy his eyes gleaming with satisfaction at finding all quiet within and seeing what looked like the form of the sleeper still and motionless on the bed.

In another second the moonlight had gone, and all was dark again, and before Beryl's eyes had recovered sufficiently from the change from moonlight to dark to let her see what he was doing she heard the click of the window bolt as it flew back before the thin knife blade which Pierre Turrian had passed between the sashes.

The next instant the lower sash was raised cautiously, slowly and almost noiselessly, save that the draft caused by the rush of air from the window to the open door set the curtain rustling, while Beryl felt the night air strike cold and chill upon that part of her face which was uncovered so that she might see what was being done.

As soon as the window was raised high enough the man stepped in so soft-

ly and quietly that Beryl could scarcely hear him, and then he closed the window behind him.

At that instant a thought occurred to the girl. What if the Frenchman were not coming in search of her, but were merely paying a surreptitious visit to this wing of the house and had chosen by chance her room to pass through? In that case she stood right in his path.

But his actions almost immediately removed the doubt.

The moon had not shone out again from behind the clouds, and the room was too dark for Pierre Turrian to see with any clearness, but Beryl's eyes had grown so accustomed to the gloom that as he stood between her and the window she could watch every action of his.

He stood quite still for almost half a minute, looking toward the bed, as it seemed, and the stillness was so acute that Beryl could even hear him breathe.

After a pause he took something from his pocket which she thought was a handkerchief and shook it out lightly, and, folding it carefully, held it in his left hand. Then he stood still, with his head bent forward toward the bed as though listening intently for the breathing of the sleeper he thought was lying there at his mercy.

Beryl clinched her teeth as she noticed this.

Next, and with only a slight pause, he took something from another pocket. What it was she could not see, but when she saw him put it to his mouth and heard a slight creaking sound, as of a cork being drawn, she knew that it was a bottle, and she was prepared to see him pour the contents on to the handkerchief. This done, he thrust the bottle hastily into a side pocket and moved slowly and very stealthily toward the head of the bed.

A faint smell of drugs spread itself over the room, and Beryl recognized it instantly as chloroform.

It was now quite clear to her what he meant to do.

He was going to drug her first and probably suffocate her and then search for the paper which she had told him that morning was the only incriminating piece of evidence in her possession. He meant to murder her.

This thought, which might well have unnerved her, had a quite opposite effect. It stimulated her courage, and from the security of her hiding place, and with the assurance that she had only to step out in the corridor and call loudly for help to be quite safe, she watched his every movement with infinite interest.

He had passed now out of the line of the window, and his movements in the deeper gloom were more difficult to follow, but she could still make out what he did.

Before he reached the head of the bed it was obvious that he was puzzled by something unusual, probably, she thought, by hearing no sound of breathing from the bed. He bent forward and listened again intently, and as he was in the act of doing this the clouds parted again from before the moon's face, and the silver light came once more streaming brilliantly into the room.

Before it vanished Beryl heard him mutter an oath in French into his mustache while he stood not knowing what to do.

Then he moved forward again to the head of the bed and stooped low down, keeping the chloroformed handkerchief in evident readiness to hold over the face of the sleeper.

There was now no possibility of mistake as to his intentions, and Beryl chose that moment to intervene.

In a low but perfectly clear voice she said:

"Are you going to play or sing, M. Turrian?" she asked. "The lovers have ridden off together and left us. Lola was full of excuses for leaving me, but I told her I would certainly excuse her, seeing that as the other people are coming soon this may be the last chance they would have of billing and cooing together, and they are so absurdly happy with one another that I could not think of letting etiquette interfere. Besides, Lola is such an unconventional creature one can't expect her to do as other people."

"No, true; otherwise you'd be riding with the husband and I should be talking to the wife. As it is, they positively leave us together. It is very dull when you think of it. If anything were to happen! If I were to fall violently in love with you or with me, their responsibility would be enormous."

Mrs. De Witt laughed not very pleasantly.

"You are a singular man," she said. "Because I loved you yesterday afternoon and don't love you this morning? Say rather a natural man. Passion, madame, is a garment to be worn only on occasion, lest it should grow shabby and tattered with too much use."

"You are insulting."

"Not in the least," he answered insolently. "Women in the morning are appendages, in the afternoon playmates and in the evening playthings, but they are never necessary, except in the sense of being necessary evils, and that only after marriage."

"I have no desire to be an appendage to an idle singer," said Mrs. De Witt very angrily, and she swept out of the room, disappointed at the difference between his present mood and that of the previous day.

Pierre Turrian was glad to get rid of her so easily, and he went out soon afterward, and choosing a part of the drive which would enable him to catch the earliest glimpse of Lola on her return he walked up and down, thinking and smoking cigarettes incessantly until she came.

As soon as he caught sight of her coming he hurried back to the house and waited for her to dismount, and the moment she entered the great hall of the manor he spoke to her.

"Where can we go? We must be very private."

"Come into the library," she answered, leading the way into the room where they had had their first interview at the manor.

"If any one wants me, I am engaged," she said to the servant. Then, when the latter had closed the door,



He glanced across the spot where Beryl now showed herself.

"It is useless, M. Turrian. You will have to choose some other time and means to murder me."

The man started from the bed as though the outlined figure had suddenly taken life and struck him. He could not tell from where the sound of the voice came, and he stood irresolute and apprehensive and muttered a half suppressed oath.

"I have been watching you since the moment your face first appeared outside the window. I have waited only to see what you intend to do. I can see that plainly now. I know the smell of chloroform"—he pushed the handkerchief hurriedly into his pocket as she said this—"and now if you do not go instantly I will route the whole household and proclaim you a murderer before every soul in the manor."

He glared across the spot where Beryl now showed herself, having thrown the door partly open.

"You are the devil!" he growled between his clinched teeth, while he seemed as though he would venture to attack her where she stood, but she did not flinch, and the impulse passed.

He muttered a whole volley of oaths in French under his breath, and, recognizing the uselessness of attempting to do anything, he opened the window again and got out on to the ladder just as the moon shone out for the third time, lighting up with its gleams the evil, vindictive, handsome face.

She fastened the window after he had gone out and stood and watched him as he slunk away, keeping in the shadow of the house. Then she lit a lamp, and

wrapping herself in warm clothes, read a book until the morning broke. Then she got into bed to snatch a couple of hours' sleep, knowing that the servants would be moving about the manor and that she need fear no further attack.

Early in the morning she was awakened by a servant who explained that a messenger had come from Leicester Court to say that her father was ill and wished her to return home instantly.

Before this summons all other considerations vanished, and, explaining hastily the circumstances to old Lady Walcote and leaving a letter for Lola, the girl hurried home, leaving the complication in which she had become entangled exactly where it had stood on the previous day.

Thus when Pierre Turrian inquired at breakfast with some perturbation where Miss Leicester was he heard to his great relief that she had gone home. This meant a respite for him.

He had come down determined to brazen it all out, to dare Beryl to do her worst, to deny absolutely any story which she might tell as to the attempt on her life and to risk everything on the chance of getting a few more days at the manor house in order to complete a plan which had been shaping itself in his thoughts as a sort of last desperate act.

In that he needed the help of Lola and resolved to have a long talk with her and compel her to fall in with his views.

But he let nothing of his darker thoughts appear in his manner, and he was as jaunty in air, light of tongue and pleasantly chatty as usual during the whole of breakfast.

In whatever direction the conversation turned he took such care as was usual with him, whether he knew anything about a subject or not, and except that he looked a little haggard from a sleepless night there was nothing in his manner to suggest to any of the others that anything unusual had happened or was being planned by him.

He was annoyed when he heard Sir Jaffray say that he and Lola were going to ride out together, because he wanted to have his interview with her as soon as possible and had intended to speak to her that morning, but he accepted the temporary check with equanimity as inevitable.

Before she started, however, he managed to get two minutes alone with her when she stood with her habit on waiting for Sir Jaffray.

"I must see you today alone for an hour," he said.

"Thank you. I have nothing whatever to say to you in private," she answered curtly.

"Something has happened of which you know nothing. I want to tell you. It affects the whole position here, and everything is in peril. You must be warned for your own safety. I'm not a fool to cry 'wolf' without a very real cause. You know that. There is serious danger."

Lola bit her lip and was startled despite her efforts.

"I shall probably be back some time before Sir Jaffray and will see you before lunch."

"I wish you both a pleasant ride," he said aloud with a smile, for Sir Jaffray had come up. "I shall try to do an hour or two's work at music." And he stood, smiling and bareheaded, looking after them as they rode away down the drive. Then he turned back into the house and went to the music room, where he found Mrs. De Witt evidently waiting for him, but he was in no mood for flirting or fooling with her.

"Are you going to play or sing, M. Turrian?" she asked. "The lovers have ridden off together and left us. Lola was full of excuses for leaving me, but I told her I would certainly excuse her, seeing that as the other people are coming soon this may be the last chance they would have of billing and cooing together, and they are so absurdly happy with one another that I could not think of letting etiquette interfere. Besides, Lola is such an unconventional creature one can't expect her to do as other people."

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"Come into the library," she answered, leading the way into the room where they had had their first interview at the manor.

"If any one wants me, I am engaged," she said to the servant. Then, when the latter had closed the door,

she turned to the Frenchman. "Now, what is it?"

He looked at her for a moment without replying and then said with emphatic deliberation:

"The worst that it could be. Everything is known."

And for the moment Lola lost all her self possession in the cold cram that seemed to seize and paralyze her heart at the man's words and manner.

CHAPTER XV.
"IF SIR JAFFRAY WERE TO DIE SUDDENLy."

For more than a minute Lola was unable to frame a word in reply to what Pierre Turrian had said. The almost brutal frankness with which he had delivered the thrust had overwhelmed her, and the host of nervous fears which had plagued her during the time of his presence in the house now recurred with cruel and distressing force.

It was Pierre Turrian who broke the silence with a jeer.

"You seem a good deal upset by a simple thing which you ought certainly to have expected. Where are your wits? You couldn't think this kind of thing was to go on forever?"

This speech started the hope that the man was really deceiving her and playing for his own purposes.

"What do you mean by the secret being known? What secret?" she asked.

"You're not going to hark back to the rubbishy nonsense that we played at when we met here first, I hope." And he laughed sneeringly. "I don't care what you do, though. You can start any fool's tale you like, for that matter, but what I mean is this—that there is now a third person who knows that you and I were married in the Church of St. Sulpice at Montreux, and that person means to tell everybody else."

"Who is it?" There was no hope in the tone in which the question was asked.

"Some one who doesn't bear you much love—Beryl Leicester—and a very unpleasant antagonist she is, I can assure you."

"How do you know that she knows?"

"For the best of all possible reasons. She told me so. She put into my hands a copy of the register from St. Sulpice and asked me what it meant."

"And what did you say?" came the question, eagerly interposed.

"What should I say? That it was a lie, and that she was the victim of an extraordinary delusion, but she very soon showed me that I was the liar, and when I found that she did know I gave the business up and told my version."

"It's you who let out the truth with your tale of the Devil's rock!" cried Lola vehemently.

"Nonsense! She had the facts, and it was only a matter of when she should speak. She spoke to me yesterday, and I told her my version of the matter. My faith, but I painted myself as black as a raven and you as white as a dove!" He laughed heartily as he said this. "Imagine you white as a dove, the innocent and all unsuspecting Marguerite persecuted by an atrocious villain of a Mephistopheles, myself! I compelled you to marry me. I made your life a hell. I drove you to rebel. I ill treated you and fell over that rock, with never a stamp of the foot to help me. I hid myself, waiting for vengeance. I tracked you down when you had married. I drove you to this life of lies. All I, I, I, I for the villainy, and you for the sweet, pure victim. On my soul, when I think of it I laugh down to my boots!"

He lighted a cigarette and puffed at it in silence for a minute, and when he spoke again there was a sharp change in his tone and manner which made Lola look up.

"But I had a purpose, mark you, and if the devil hadn't failed me for once I would have carried it out and have silenced that sly she cat once for all. I sought to get delay by making you out the victim, and I meant to stop that fool's chatter for good and all."

"What do you mean?"

"That that cold faced cat was within an ace of death last night; that I went to her room in the dead of the night to save you from her devilment, and had it not been for some cursed chance that kept her awake and let her hear me coming, you would have woken up this morning to find that your old rival was laid out cold and stark, freed from the fretting troubles of this wicked world by the blessing of chloroform and my strong arm and unable to go chattering about other people's business."

"Do you mean you tried to murder Beryl Leicester last night in her bed in this house?" cried Lola, paling with excited agitation.

He paused before he answered and looked at her askant, with his eyelids half closed.

"Is murder so much uglier in a bedroom than on a mountain side that you shudder at the sound in the one case and yet can do the deed in the other? Bah!" He sneered and waved his hand impatiently. "Don't be a fool, Lola. Tell me the truth and say you're as sorry as I am that I failed. Don't cant."

"As God is my judge," she cried passionately, "I would rather ten thousand times that you had killed me!" And then, overwrought, she sank on a chair that was by her, and, leaning her arms on the table, buried her face in them in an agony of tearless misery.

His words had revealed to her with lightning vividness the full horror and hopelessness of her position.

The price of her sin had nearly been murder, and the thought overwhelmed her, yet she was helpless.

Why was her fate linked with that of this man of infamy, who held in his relentless hands the power to crush her life and dog her to ruin?

Where could it all end save in greater misery for them all? And then she reproached herself bitterly for having sought to escape from the meshes of the net which fate had woven round her.

For some time she could not regain her self command; but, recognizing at last how worse than useless with a man

like Pierre Turrian was any attempt but that of firmness, she made a great effort to show a bold front to him.

"Better?" he sneered as soon as she raised her head. "It was rather a hard hit, I dare say, but you mustn't lose your nerve just now. There's work to be done."

"You are right," she answered steadily; "there is work, but it must not and shall not be murder."

"You'd be much wiser if you didn't use such ugly terms. You seem to forget that half the actions of the whole world depend for their respectability upon their description. Now, if you're enough pluck left to listen quietly, I'll soon show you which way your interest lies."

"You can say what you like. It is immaterial."

He glanced at her angrily and muttered an oath at her for the tone in which she spoke.

"There is no time now for losing our tempers, or else you'd make me go so with that infernal sneering manner," he cried angrily. "This is how things stand: You married me at Montreux at the Chapel of St. Sulpice, and you are now in law, if not in love, with me. Being still my wife, you married the master of this place, and in doing that committed what your law calls bigamy. You did it, as you will say, in ignorance, hoping that you had seen the last of me when the stamp of that pretty but energetic foot of yours sent me rolling down into the gorge from the Devil's rock; but unfortunately for your plea of ignorance when I came here you went on pretending that you were Sir Jaffray's wife and continued to stay here, through you knew the marriage was bigamous and void. Do you see what that does? It just pricks the bubble of your innocence, and it puts you a deal deeper into the mud than you were before. That's all, and if it's any consolation to you you may know that I saw that from the first, and it suited my purposes that you should be compromised as much as possible."

He stopped and looked at her in triumph and as if expecting an outbreak, but she had mastered her emotion by this time completely.

"Go on," she said quietly.

"That means that you can at any moment be put on your trial for bigamy and have to face the whole world from the prisoner's dock, and, what is more, that I can put you there and will if you drive me to it. Get that into your head clearly."

"I am waiting to know what you want. I have never doubted either your bullying cowardice or your cunning."

"What I want is easily said. I want to clear away from your path the difficulties that threaten to ruin you."

"You are suddenly very solicitous as my account," she retorted.

"And I mean to show you the only way in which it can be done," he continued, not heeding the interruption. "Sir Jaffray has settled on you a good many thousands of pounds, and as I happen to know, he has in his will, like a loving husband should, left you everything that he could leave without touching the entailed estates. Now"—he paused and looked very closely at her and spoke very deliberately—"Sir Jaffray were to die, say, by any accident or suddenly in any way you would as suddenly be freed from all your embarrassments."

She met his look and returned it with one which seemed to hold his eyes fast on her.

"Well?" She uttered the single syllable question without allowing a sign or symptom of her feeling to be seen in her face.

"I mean," and his voice grew a little hoarse and unsteady—"I mean that Sir Jaffray is the one obstacle in your path, and it is necessary for your sake and for mine that the obstacle should be removed."

Lola clinched her hands till the nails nearly ran into her palms, and she bit her lip hard in her agitation, and it was fully a minute before she trusted herself to speak.

The Frenchman filled up the interval by lighting a fresh cigarette and walking up and down the room. He was glad of the pause, for the strain of the moment told on him. He was very pale, and the perspiration came out in a line of beads on his forehead.

"I think I understand you," said Lola at length when she could trust herself to speak. "And what is to happen after—after what you mean?"

He was by the door of the room when she spoke, and he turned and answered, standing still. He tried to speak lightly.

"What should happen?" he cried with a wave of the hands and a slanting of the shoulders. "You would be free, and I would claim you as my wife."

"You would claim me?" she repeated. "Certainly," he said masterfully. "You would be my wife?"

He stopped suddenly without finishing the sentence and turned toward the door.

"What's that?" he cried. He rushed to the door and tried to open it quickly, but in his haste fumbled with the handle and then threw it open and looked out.

There was no one there, though he thought he could hear the whisk of a dress, but he said nothing of this to Lola.

"I was mistaken," he said, returning to the room and closing the door behind him.

"It must be a devil's plot indeed," said Lola, "when it makes even you imagine that there are eavesdroppers."

He made no answer to this.

"Well, you know my plan now," he said. "It is the only one possible to get us out of this mess. What do you say?"

"You don't expect me to reply to a hand that I am ready to take part in a plot to murder my husband?"

"Why not? You have already rehearsed the part with me."

(To be continued.)

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