

THE STORY OF A GREAT SECRET.

Millions of Mischief.

By HEADON HILL.

Author of "By a Hair's Breadth," "The Duke Decides," "A Race with Ruin," Etc., Etc.
"And some that smile have in their hearts, I fear, millions of mischief."
Julius Caesar, Act IV., Scene 1.

(Continued.)

And if I made one little slip I should return there to suffer the dead penalty. The thought wiped away the delight of the contrast and brought me back to earth again. It being the height of the tourist season the little steamer was crowded running as it did in connection with the first fast London train of the day. Herzog had, doubtless for reasons of his own, taken first-class tickets, with the result that we had been free to mount the bridge deck. He, who was at once my evil genius and my preserver, stood at my side, leaning over the rails and chattering tritles to me—for the benefit of bystanders.

Of these, the nearest was a tall handsome girl, plainly but expensively dressed, who save for a maid, seemed to be travelling alone. There was an air of detachment about her, a sort of interest in her impersonal surroundings, that somehow gave the impression of the "great lady." I could see that Herzog was keenly alive to her propinquity, and probably knew who she was. At any rate, he seemed to be talking at her, labouring the relations, supposed to subsist between him and me.

"If you find the air too cold up here, Mr. Martin, let us go down to the lower deck," he said. "I can't have you catching cold, you know, just as you are going to begin your cure."

Determined to play my part for the present, I was making some appropriate reply, when a broad-shouldered, slim-waisted man came up the stairs and advanced towards the fair unknown. There was a swaggering braggadocio in his manner, a self-assertion about his waxed moustache, that filled me with vague dislike. He glanced contemptuously at me and was treating Herzog to the same sort of survey, when his eyes, blood-shot and red-rimmed they were, darted for one fleeting instant, and were quickly averted.

"Sorry I could not come up before, but I have been occupied in looking after your luggage," he said as he joined the lady.

"It doesn't matter at all," was the reply that sounded like a snub. "Have you done with your newspaper yet? If so, I should like to look at it."

The gentleman affected to search in the pockets of his travelling cape, and then gave vent to an exclamation of annoyance. "I must have left it in the train," he said. "Are you always as eager for news as you are this morning, Lady Muriel?"

"No, but I am particularly interested in this escape that everyone is talking of," was the answer that thrilled me with a wonder that no

creased tenfold when the speaker added in a grave, sweet tone, "Not on my account, you know, but a friend of mine is a staunch believer in Captain Rivington's innocence, and she has affected me with some of her enthusiasm."

"The effect of this to me astonishing communication, which presumed an acquaintance between 'Lady Muriel' and my Janet, on the person to whom it was addressed was marked and instantaneous. His brows contracted in a deep scowl, and he waved his hand with a gesture of impatience.

"Don't waste your sweetness on such a scoundrel. There was no doubt that he was guilty—any more than there is that he will speedily be caught and hanged," was the amiable comment which, accompanied by a glare round that chanced to rest on me, filled me with nervous apprehension.

"You speak so violently that the wish might well be father to the thought," said the girl coldly.

"Not at all. I know nothing about the case, and care less." And then, with the obvious intention of changing the subject, my unknown detractor exclaimed, "By Jove! look at that big steamer we are passing—a troopship, I think."

We had reached the narrowest part of the Solent, where the long spit of shingle terminating in Hurst Castle stretched, out towards the Wight opposite, and through which the pent-up current swirls like a mill-race seaward. The girl turned suddenly to look at the huge vessel that was rapidly nearing us, and in her excitement put her feet on the lower rail and leaned over. What followed happened so quickly that recollection fails me to describe it. The girl, who had been called Lady Muriel, overbalanced herself and fell into the sea; the captain rang down a sharp "stop" to the engine-room; a deck-hand began to fumble with a recalcitrant life-buoy; a glance at the man who had first right of rescue told me that instead of availing himself of it he was running distractedly to and fro, plucking at his waxed moustache.

In that supreme moment I forgot everything—forgot that I was a condemned criminal, to whom attracted attention might probably mean death, forgot that I wore a disguise that salt water might ruin; forgot, in fact, all that was vital to my own interests in face of the imminent catastrophe of a fellow creature drowning before my eyes. Shaking off Herzog's restraining hand, I plunged overboard and struck out for the limp figure just floating to the surface after the first immersion. As she was sinking again I managed to

grasp her dress, and so to hold her up till the steamer had backed down to us. By the time we had been helped on board I was nearly exhausted and was only conscious that Herzog, as he led me below in an iron clutch, murmured in my ear: "Idiot! were you trying to put the noose round your neck? If the springs of those false whiskers hadn't held you'd have been a dead man the day after tomorrow."

"They warmed and dried me before the furnace below, Herzog superintending the operation with professional care, and procuring a change of clothes from my recently-purchased wardrobe. During the process I was too dazed to think of anything except to rejoice that I had saved a life, but when I stood up, dry and comfortable again, yet apprehending a fresh outbreak of abuse from my conductor, I saw that he had recovered his chronic good-humour.

You might have ruined everything by that rash act," he said, as we returned to the deck. "You would have done so if I had used gum for those whiskers instead of springs. As it is, you have begun well, my friend, and have established your footing in your victim's camp. You will experience no difficulty in approaching his lordship now."

"Why?" I asked, not comprehending his mood.

"That dainty piece of femininity which you pulled out of the water is no less a personage than Lady Muriel Crawshaw, Lord Alphonso's daughter," he whispered with a horrid chuckle in my ear. "I shall see to it that you are a persona grata now, my friend. You shall be asked to the house. You will get your chance for the stroke, which is to make history, at close quarters."

The treacherous suggestion sickened me, and I needed all my self-restraint to keep me from telling him that he was mistaken if he expected his murderous mission to benefit by the rescue. Luckily at that moment a diversion was caused by Lady Muriel's maid, who came with a prettily-worded message of thanks from her mistress. Lady Muriel was below, changing into dry things and recovering from the shock, but she hoped to have an opportunity of thanking me in person before we landed.

That, however, was not to be, for directly the boat touched the pier Herzog hurried me ashore, and Lady Muriel had not yet reappeared on deck.

It would never have done to let her thank you amid all this hurly-burly," he explained, as we walked up the pier ahead of the other passengers. "It might have made a pre-

mature end of the whole business. Now she will be certain to look you up at our lodgings, and it shall not be my fault if the acquaintance does not ripen."

CHAPTER IV.

So Near and Yet So Far.

At the pier-head a surprise of the pleasantest kind was in store for me. Herzog stopped for a moment to instruct the pier-master what to do with our luggage.

"There are two portmanteaux on the steamer, one labelled 'Martin' and the other 'Doctor Barrables,'" he said. "Please send a porter up with them to 'Springthorpe,' where we have taken rooms."

I walked on at Herzog's side, wondering if my ears had deceived me, for if I had heard aright it seemed that the hand of Fate was strong upon me—for good or evil, who could say? "Springthorpe" was, I knew, the name of the house where Janet and her father, Colonel Chilmark, had been lodging since the winter. From that address she had sent me several letters while I was in prison, both before and after my trial. It would go hard with me if, staying under the same roof with my love, I could not obtain speech with her and tell her my desperate case.

"I have already engaged rooms?" I hazarded, mastering my emotion, as we trudged up the steep road leading to the scattered clusters of red-brick villas that form the rising watering-place of Totland Bay. The attitude I had assumed towards my task made it necessary that I should evince an eager and intelligent interest in our programme.

"I do not jump in the dark, my friend," my companion replied. "I have selected our pied-a-terre for two good reasons. The first and most important is that our windows overlook the grounds of 'Ardmore,' the mansion where Lord Alphonso is to spend his leisure. The second, of almost equal consequence is that there is only accommodation for one other set of lodgers, the present ones being people, according to my information, who are not at all likely to interfere with our plans. A retired Indian Staff Corps colonel, nursing a deranged liver with the aid of a devoted daughter is not a combination that should prove dangerous to men with a secret 'like ours.'"

The Colonel's liver! How I blessed that tremendous factor in my fortunes at that moment. It was owing to that disorganized organ that my engagement to Janet was a secret. Nobody knew of it but ourselves and my solicitor. I had only met Colonel Chilmark twice, but those two occasions had been enough to convince me that Janet paid a just tribute to his temper in not wishing to divulge our mutual compact till we were in a position to marry. After my arrest, she had written to beg to be allowed to show her faith in me by proclaiming our engagement, but my legal advisers had been dead against it. Not only would it have furnished the prosecution with another weapon in an additional motive for my alleged crime, but it would have doomed the girl to the lifelong disgrace of having been associated with me.

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lovers was greatly in my favour now, for I might be able to communicate with her before Herzog discovered that he had chanced to establish me in close propinquity to such a staunch ally.

"Five minutes' walk brought us to 'Springthorpe'—a pretty little house standing in a shady garden. As we passed up the path to the front door my heart beat wildly, for there, at the open window facing us, sat Colonel Chilmark, smoking and reading a newspaper. He looked up at our approach, and favoured us with the jealous scrutiny of a seaside visitor appraising possible fellow-lodgers, and it was a good test of my disguise that he showed no signs of recognition. I must have been in his mind too, for he had doubtless been reading the account of my escape.

The front door stood open, and the landlady herself darted out to meet us. I studied her anxiously, guessing how much might depend on her. I saw with dismay that she was a quick-moving, bright-eyed, alert little woman, who would be certain to see and hear every movement of her lodgers if she wanted to. Should she prove as inquisitive as she looked sharp I should have no easy task in disclosing myself to Janet. (To be continued.)

AMERICAN IMMIGRATION.

Minnesota is Jealous of Canada's Growing Time.

Minneapolis, Minn., Dec. 19.—(Special)—Realizing that year by year more and more American farmers cross the border and take up land in the Canadian Northwest. The state legislature of Minnesota will make a determined effort to check, if not put an end to the movement. There are in Minnesota some 2,000,000 acres of swamp-lands. At the next session of the legislature A. L. Cole member-elect, will bring up the matter of draining all these lands and then granting them to men who will put them under cultivation at once. This scheme, it is declared, is only the beginning of an effort to turn back tide of immigration from Canada.

ARE LOOKING FOR TROUBLE.

London Dec. 19.—The Tangiers correspondent of the Times, referring to the fact that the French mission to Fez was compelled to travel by sea by way of Larache instead of direct overland owing to the hostility of the tribes, remarks that there is a strong anti-European feeling in Morocco. He declares that Maghzen is more than secretly hostile and that the tribes are openly so to any European interference with their affairs. The correspondent learns from native sources that the Sultan is officially notifying the legations of his intention to dismiss all foreign officers attached to the Moorish court and army, including the French military mission, the Italians employed at Fez, Sir Harry MacLean and other British officers.

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