

THE STORY OF A GREAT SECRET.

Millions of Mischiefs.

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.

PROLOGUE.

The meeting of the Cabinet came to an abrupt termination with the sudden rising of the Premier Lord Alphonso's colleagues watched him nervously as he strode to the door of the council chamber, and watched him with graver apprehension as he turned there and faced them, his usually impassive countenance ablaze with righteous wrath.

"That, my lords and gentlemen, is my policy," he exclaimed. "If you will not agree to it I must reconstruct or resign."

For twenty seconds the great statesman stood with his majestic figure framed in the black oak of the doorway, his eagle glance singling out the three dissentients. Then, shaking his mane like an angry lion, he turned and was gone.

After an interval of awe-struck silence the other ministers followed him out of the room—all but the three who had been the cause of this unheard effect. These pulled their chairs closer and prepared for an informal discussion of their position. The tall man with the stooping shoulders and the yellow snags of teeth was Sir Gideon Marske, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the ponderous, oily man was Mr. Northmoor, the Home Secretary; the brisk little man with the furtive eye was Viscount Trevose, Secretary of State for War. In their different ways they all looked frightened.

And well they might, for having failed to carry their point at this, the stormiest cabinet council of the century, they were left face to face with the prospect of being stripped of the emoluments of office. Professional politicians each and all, they were none of them rich, and the Premier's threat to reconstruct or resign touched the pockets of these pretentious but impetuous men.

"Political assassination has long been in the limbo of the past, or it would be a case for a hired bravo and a dagger," said Sir Gideon Marske, with the nervous laugh of one who throws out a tentative jest. The other two started and looked at him fixedly. It was true that Lord Alphonso's death would cut the Gordian knot of their perplexities. The question at issue was the attitude to be preserved towards a Foreign Power which need not be specified. The Prime Minister's policy made for conciliation, with a view to reducing the people's burdens; his opponents were for yielding to popular clamour, which would probably plunge the country into war, with its inevitable consequence of enormous expenditure.

Lord Trevose, with the memory of his mortgaged acres pressing him, echoed the Chancellor's laugh. "Of course it is an anachronism, but a knife in Alphonso's ribs would assuredly save the country from humiliation; only a bold front can prevent a costly war," he said. Himself he could not deceive, but, like his associates, he half hoped to dress up his mercenary aspirations in the garb of patriotism—for the deception of the other two.

Mr. Northmoor, the Home Secretary, did not laugh. He was one of those who had no need for laughter of that kind, inasmuch as in his speech was a bland, purring note that left his hearers in doubt as to his sincerity. You could take him seriously or not, as you chose, which was convenient to a many-sided man. But those who knew him well were aware of certain peculiarity—a mere trick of manner. He always coughed quite easily," he said, glancing quickly from one to the other of his colleagues. Sir Gideon and Lord Trevose watched him, open-eyed and open-earred. Yes, the remark was followed by the short wheezy cough significant of intention.

For fully a minute the three statesmen sat and looked at each other in an awe-struck silence, when Sir Gideon was the first to break.

"You are always fond of your little joke, Northmoor," he faltered huskily. "How—supposing, of course, that we meant business—how could the thing be done?"

"You have heard of the Rivington murder case, for which one Arthur Rivington is now lying under sentence of death in Winchester Gaol?" Mr. Northmoor asked quietly.

Yes, they had all heard of the case, as how should they not, when all England was ringing with the infamy of the young man recently convicted of the cold-blooded, calculating murder, at intervals and by poison, of his mother and sister.

"Well, in that wretched gentleman, we have an instrument ready to hand," proceeded the Home Secretary impressively. And, feeling his ground by a glance at his colleagues' faces, he went on: "For no particular reason—with the maudlin sentimentality of the age perhaps—the jury recommended Rivington to mercy, and the matter came before me officially to decide. As usual, I sent for the judge who tried the case, who happened to be Sir James Morrison—about the most lenient of the pack. He was dead against any

deviation from the capital sentence, ridiculed the recommendation of the jury, and affirmed that the prisoner's guilt was beyond the possibility of doubt, and that the crime was the most cruel, the most cunning, the most carefully covered-up that it had ever been his lot to try. 'A fiend in human shape,' was the learned judge's last word about Arthur Rivington, and I maintain that as patriots, with our dear country hovering on the brink of a terrible war, we are justified in using any fiend in any sort of shape for averting such a catastrophe."

His hearers were not deceived by his heroics, though they struggled hard to believe that in their own individual cases that whole-souled sentiment was really genuine. "But if the fellow is going to be hanged how could he serve our—I mean the turn of the country?" hazarded Lord Trevose after a pause. "Though willing to go far, the Secretary of War was not an imaginative man. His obtuseness caused irritation to Sir Gideon Marske, whose shifts and expedients were a by-word.

"Don't you see? Northmoor, as head of the Home Department, has his grip on the prison service," said Sir Gideon. "Northmoor will pull the strings and the little figure will 'Escape,'" interjected the Home Secretary with a snap. "Marske has grasped the situation to a nicety. I can see to it that the cage is left unfastened and that the bird flutters out—only to be recaptured and turned to our purpose immediately. Herzog, of the Secret Service, is the man to take him in hand and tell him what he has to do as the price of his freedom."

"But what of Herzog himself?" Lord Trevose suggested uneasily. "I know something of the fellow—that he is an unmitigated scoundrel. We should be simply delivering ourselves bound into his hands if we asked him to act as go-between in such an affair."

Mr. Northmoor purred softly, like a large, sleek, well-fed cat. "Ask Sir Gideon," was all the answer he vouchsafed.

"Mr. Herzog's value as the most faithful and unscrupulous member of the Secret Service lies in the fact that at a word from me he would go into oenial servitude for life," said the Chancellor. "He was in my department originally, you know—as a Surveyor of Taxes. When he went wrong I spared him because I recognised that the service would gain by the addition of a tool without conscience or compassion, who would not dare to decline any dirty work the State might require of him. And the State

does require dirty work sometimes."

In their blind egotism the unintentional naivete of the concluding words escaped them all, or they did not see, or affected not to see that the task to be entrusted to Herzog's hands came under the category of the Chancellor's sententious pronouncement. All that they were concerned with was the assurance, with which Sir Gideon was able to satisfy them, that the proposed tool was so utterly discredited, and his dossier so well known to the permanent officials, that even if he proved recalcitrant no one would believe him against the ministers of the Crown. And of course he would be instructed verbally, by one of them, without witnesses.

So far the discussion, and then silence swooped on the three statesmen again. Once more they regarded each other with eyes striving furiously for limitations of the mutual confidence necessary to conspiracy. Presently Lord Trevose yawned, then rose briskly and said—

"Well, we've wasted a lot of time over this fairy tale. I shall go to the club for lunch."

Mr. Northmoor laid a fat hand on his arm and whispered, "Sit down, Trevose. It isn't a fairy tale, is it, Sir Gideon?"

"Not so far as I am concerned," replied the Chancellor of the Exchequer, showing his yellow fangs in an evil grin.

And Lord Trevose sat down again.

Arthur Rivington's Narrative. CHAPTER I.

The Brink of the Scaffold.

"One, two, three, four," tolled the clocks of the ancient city led by the cathedral chimes. Four o'clock on Thursday morning I was to be led to die. The melody of musical sounds wafted from afar through the iron-barred window meant that I had exactly sixty-five hours to live before I passed for the last time out into God's sunlight, there to be hanged by the neck till I was dead.

The harsh voice of the judge who had flung those fatal words at me across the crowded court three weeks before was still ringing in my ears. Then I had hardly realised their real import, welcoming them indeed as the conclusion of a horrible nightmare, and, above all, as terminating his lordship's ruthless invective on the enormity of my offence. But now, with the sands in the hour-glass of fate so nearly spent, the words of doom buzzed in my ears with a meaning full of menace.

Glancing round the sombre limits of the condemned cell, at the bare, drab-coloured walls, the bare table with its drab-bound Bible, the drab counterpane of the hard bed on which I had spent what seemed a lifetime of sleepless nights, I felt that I could welcome the realisation of the grim words of my sentence, but for one fact—that I was innocent of the almost nameless horror of which I had been convicted.

And give a month of freedom I was confident that I could lift the load of ignominy that had overwhelmed me, by shifting it to the right shoulders. At any rate, I should have the chance of proving my innocence at the expense of the unknown fiend who had robbed me of mother, of sister, and of good name.

(To be continued.)

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