

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 here in their hearts, I fear, millions of mischief."
Julius Caesar, Act IV., Scene 1.

(Continued.)

Yet, if flight were difficult, I found that, small as was the area at my disposal, there were several routes that could be attempted. To reach the mainland I could either take steamer at Totland or at Yarmouth for Lynton, or I could make my way northward across the island to Ryde or Cowes, and there embark for Portsmouth or Southampton—provided I could lay hands on some money. There was plenty at my bankers, waiting to be handed over to Janet under a will I had made in prison, so soon as I should have been hanged, but I could not get at it.

Speculating gloomily on my lack of funds, I put the question to Herzog:—"How am I to get away after I have settled Alphonso? I can't make tracks for South America without a supply of cash."

"You will have a sufficiency—when you have earned it. I have gained faith in you, my friend. You really must have a little in me," was all the reply he would vouchsafe. Evidently I was not to be trusted with money before his end was gained.

I could not press him further, for we were debouching on to the turfed promenade in front of the hotel, now in the cooler hours of the afternoon, crowded with visitors. Almost before I realised what was happening, we came face to face with Lady Muriel and her male companion of the morning, and with them—Janet—a whole history of anguish in her troubled eyes.

I lived a lifetime in the ensuing ten seconds. I almost felt the drop give way under my feet. Would my love recognize me under my disguise, and, if so, would she have the self-control to conceal it? After one furtive glance I dared not look at her to see but in that flash of time I thought I detected a faint tinge of colour mounting in the pale, wan cheeks.

Lady Muriel advanced with extended hand, and very prettily expressed her gratitude for the service rendered.

"It was naughty of you to run away from the steamer without giving me an opportunity of thanking you," she added. "My father will be here in a day or two, and I am sure he will want to join his thanks with mine."

Afraid of the effect my voice might have on Janet, and conscious that Lady Muriel's escort was regarding me with a sinister scowl, I only mumbled a few incoherent words. I positively felt Herzog's glare on the nose of my neck, and I knew that from his point of view, I was acquitting myself badly.

"Let me introduce you to my rescuer and his medical attendant,"

Lady Muriel chattered on, turning to those with her; "Mr. Marske and Miss Chilmark—Mr. Martin and Doctor Barrables. You see, Mr. Martin, I have already ascertained the name of my preserver, from the pier-master who had charge of your luggage. I was not going to let you off as easily as your modesty seemed to expect."

In bowing to Mr. Marske, whom I guessed from her association with him to be a relative of Sir Gideon Marske, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, I noticed a curious curl of his lip at her pronouncement of Herzog's pseudonym. Having effected the introduction, Lady Muriel with charming impetuosity turned to accompany us, chatting gaily. By an adroit movement Marske took possession of Herzog, going on a little in advance, with the result that I followed with Lady Muriel and Janet.

I was walking on Lady Muriel's left, and Janet on her right, so that for purposes of secret communication with this lively barrier between us, my sweetheart and I were poles asunder. Yet it might be a case of now or never. Every minute lost in making myself and my desperate straits known to Janet was a step towards the gallows. Surely my wits could find a straw to clutch at.

No, not a straw, but a common bit of thorny hedge-rose, plucked and cast aside by some tripper earlier in the day. I spied it lying on the turf ahead of us, and so contrived as to steer Lady Muriel straight over it. Would it? Would it? Yes, it stuck to her dainty skirts and trailed after her, hampering her graceful gait and causing instant annoyance.

"Would you mind, Mr. Martin? There's a horrid thing on my dress," she turned to me graciously.

I was on my knees in a moment, fumbling clumsily and to no purpose.

"Miss—ah, Chilmark?" I said, intentionally hesitating at the name and not daring to look up. "Your fingers are probably more deft than mine. Would you? Ah, now we shall be all right."

And then, as my dear girl stooped to help me, I whispered in her ear—

"For God's sake command yourself. It is I—Arthur. Lodging at Springthorpe. Must see you, unknown to the man with me."

Her soft palm, after detaching the bramble, closed for a second on my wrist. I took it as a signal that she understood.

CHAPTER XI.

The Creaking of the Stair.

With the disclosure of my identity to Janet I felt that my affairs had entered on a new phase. But, though

it had cleared the ground of one obstacle earlier than I could have hoped for, it could not be deemed to have brought me much nearer to the solution of the mystery that enshrouded the death of my mother and sister. By that alone could I put myself in a position to defy Herzog and expose the conspiracy against the Prime Minister.

Though Janet now knew me, and knew also that I was staying in the same house with her, I was as far as ever from obtaining the private interview with her that was necessary to turn her loving loyalty to practical use. That interview would have to be of considerable duration, too, in order to explain fully the importance I attached to that last strange dittance of poor Clara in her death agony. And when it was explained I greatly feared that it would be beyond my dear girl's powers to cope with the puzzle in the limited time at our disposal.

Yet the revelation of my personality was a distinct advance, and when I sat down to dinner with Herzog in our lodgings I was in better spirits than since the judge had pronounced my doom. Sometimes, when Mrs. Krance opened the door to bring in a fresh course, I could hear Colonel Chilmark's querulous tones and Janet's sweet voice in the room across the passage, and I had much ado, under my companion's inscrutable eyes, to dissemble my interest in our fellow-lodgers.

Curiously enough it was Herzog himself who referred to them, and his reference caused me a qualm of alarm. The man's methods were so subtle that I could not be sure that he was not testing my apparent listlessness about the Chilmarks. He had been in front of us when I released Lady Muriel's dress from the bramble on the cliff-walk, but he was the kind of person who has eyes in the back of his head.

"Nice people—those opposite," he remarked with a shrewd twinkle in his inconstant eyes. "The girl, at any rate. It is on the cards that I may have to cultivate the Colonel's acquaintance before our little business is finished."

"The less we have to do with outsiders the better. I should say," was the growling comment I forced myself to make. Was I, I wondered, playing the outcast, truculent villain to the life, or only bungling my part, to the secret amusement of this close observer? I would have given the world to know.

"How did Mr. Marske strike you?" he went on, chatting just as if we were what we professed to be—two seaside idlers with nothing to do but gossip. "I thought him a man in a

bit of a—what shall we say—a predicament."

"In what way?" I snapped, for Mr. Marske didn't trouble me two straws.

"He seemed to me to be like Issachar—an ass between two burdens," grinned Herzog. "In other words, I diagnosed him as a man making duty love to one woman, while his real attraction was towards the other."

I was sorely tried, but under cover of helping myself to a banana I managed to laugh. "And which might be the object of what you call the 'duty' love?"

"Lady Muriel, of course; being from the matrimonial standpoint a prize to a penniless man" was the reply that once more strained my powers of self-control almost to breaking point. The horrible inference that this fellow Marske, who had gratuitously, and in my hearing, gone out of his way to vilify me, and who had inspired me with instinctive repugnance, should be making eyes at Janet was gall and wormwood.

"A sort of Blue Beard," I forced myself to comment carelessly. "Yes, his record would blacken a whole street," Herzog mused aloud. "And the trouble of it is that—ah, bah! what am I talking of?" he checked himself. "After all, I am discussing the gentleman with whom the subject of records must be a sore point. A thousand pardons, my friend, I did not offend intentionally."

His reluctance to hurt my feelings—the feelings, be it understood, of one whom he deemed a cruel murderer—was, I felt sure, an excuse for stopping short in a sentence meant for my ears. It was a revelation to me that this Sphinx-like plotter could be guilty of such a laxity as letting his tongue run away with him. That he would do so except under the strongest emotion I could not believe, but what could there be in common between this conspirator against the Prime Minister and the son of a member of the Cabinet? I could not answer the enigma, but I was not likely to "lose sight of it."

"Come," said Herzog at the conclusion of our repast. "Let us go over to the hotel and play a game of billiards, or look on if we cannot get the table. There must be nothing mysterious about our movements. To play the hermit in a place like this would be to attract attention, and that might result in—"

He took his fat neck in his white capable-looking hand and made a significant motion as of choking himself. I understood the allusion and saw the force of his argument, though it was distressing to have to leave the house. I had hoped all through dinner that we should sit in the garden, perhaps, or in our sitting-room with the door open, and that I might be able to find or make an opportunity of speech with Janet. To think of her as just across that narrow passage, eating her heart out for that opportunity, was maddening.

However, preserving my chronic demeanour of surly obedience, I rose and went out with him in the dusk to the hotel, where I was glad to find the billiard table not only occupied but engaged—four deep. There was nothing to do but to sit in a corner and watch the play, while

IN ONE NIGHT.

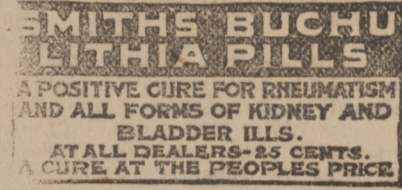
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Herzog talked to his neighbors on the settee and advertised our ostensible reason for being at Totland. I was treated with due respect as a wealthy invalid travelling with his private medical man, and I dare say I looked ill enough. It was not conducive to a robust appearance to hear the smart young stockbrokers and pursy business men from London waging their sovereigns for and against the recapture of "the Brockenhurst murderer."

At ten o'clock we left the hotel and returned to "Springthorpe," and on approaching the house my hopes sank as I saw there was no light in the Chilmarks' sitting-room. Janet and her father had retired for the night, and I had lost a day in the task before me.

Hearing us enter, Mrs. Krance appeared from the back regions, her little ferret face encircled in curl papers.

"I don't know if you gentlemen want anything more," she said with acerbity. "This is an early house, and I was about to go to bed."

Herzog gave her a sharp glance and pulled out his watch. "Why, it isn't half-past ten," he replied. "Come," he added in his oiliest manner, "you are not yourself tonight, Mrs. Krance. Something has upset you." "Well, yes; it isn't to you I ought to be cross, Doctor," said the woman, obviously mollified. "The fact

is my other lodgers, that I thought were permanent, gave me notice today of leaving at the end of the week. Then they took it back again, after the young lady came in from her walk, and want to stay on indefinitely. I don't hold with such blowing hot and cold, and me given no reasons."

For the fraction of a second Herzog's brows contracted. "No, Mrs. Krance, it is always annoying when we cannot divine people's reasons," he said, his eyes fixed on me as he spoke. "But if you are not to lose your lodgers, all is well that ends well. So far as we are concerned, by all means go to bed as soon as you like, for we are going, up too. One word, though, Mr. Martin is an invalid, you know. Are you a light sleeper—in case I should want hot water, or anything, for him in the night?"

"I can't say that I am, sir; I have such a hard day's work that I sleep pretty sound," the landlady replied. "Ah, well, let us hope that the occasion for disturbing your rest will not arise," said Herzog affably. "Good-night to you, Mrs. Krance, and pleasant dreams."

The breeze with the wispish little woman, over, we took our candlesticks and went upstairs. I felt that it was a tribute to my duplicity that Herzog parted with me at the door of his bedroom without any warning against attempts to escape. I had lulled him into complete confidence in my motives and intentions—unless, horrible thought, his net was drawn so securely round me that he knew that I could not break away from him. I remembered that at Southampton he had alluded to subordinates. Possibly he was putting his trust in them to watch the house, though neither on the boat or since our landing in the island had I seen him speak to any persons who would be likely to be his colleagues.

(To be continued.)

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