

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 I.

(Continued.)

That vindictive speech was my justification, for the voice was the voice of Roger Marske, and I knew that I had rightly solved the meaning of Clara Rivington's last utterance.

I made no answer, and the sound of his steps receding quickly, followed by the slamming of the front door, told me that he had fled from the scene of his crime.

CHAPTER XVI.  
A Justice of the Peace.  
But my triumph would be a barren one indeed if I stood there till the devouring flames broke in upon me, and in my extremity I turned to my last resource, the waste-water pipe running down past the window.

If I could gain the room above there would be no risk of meeting Roger Marske there now, and I might be able to escape through the house before it was fully alight.

With my penknife I cut the cord from the window blind, and, reaching from the window, made a loose slip-knot round the pipe. The other end I fastened to my wrist to give me confidence in my climb. Then, with an unspoken prayer, I clambered out on to the sill, and, not daring to look down at the dark waters below, I swung from my foothold to the frail support of the metal tube. It rattled and swayed ominously under the grasp of my fingers and the clutch of my knees, and every instant I feared that it would drag the holdfasts from the decayed mortar, carrying me with it into the oily flood beneath. But I kept on and upwards, thankful that girls have muscles nowadays, and at last I flung myself through the luckily open window of the room from which Marske had tried to shoot me.

The room was full of smoke, warning me, as did the roar of flames in the lower part of the house, not to try to recover my breath till I was clear of the burning building. Rushing through on to the landing, I found the front stairs burning fiercely, but I discovered a second staircase, little better than a ladder, which brought me to a kitchen, whence an unlocked door gave entrance on to a yard. Hardly knowing how I got there I eventually staggered out into the lane, just as the flames licked through the front windows, and the Mill House from foundation to roof was illumined in a lurid glow.

them. The burning of the Mill House and the attempt on my life were minor details of the far graver accusation which I believed myself to be now in a position to bring against Roger Marske and I wished to lose not a moment in doing so. Arthur's salvation, I was convinced, depended on my striking at the real criminal before the latter learned of my escape, and to achieve that end I must make myself scarce before the arrival of spectators.

These would come from the hamlet of Chipping Wyvern, through which I had passed in the morning, and as I should probably be recognized as the person who had inquired for the Mill House, I set off in the opposite direction. It was nearly dark, my watch telling me that it was just nine o'clock.

Stumbling along the stoney lane, I tried to formulate my plans, and here my inexperience, fortified by impatience for my lover's safety, led me into a grave error of judgment. I had reached a point in my investigation where I should have obtained trustworthy advice. The wisest course would have been to take train for London and confide all that happened to the solicitor who had defended Arthur at the trial. Instead of that I had hesitated between going straight to the police and laying an information with a magistrate.

After walking for over a mile, the lane brought me into a broad high road, and here, after another quarter of an hour's tramp, chance took a hand in settling the vexed question for me. I came to the lodge gates of what was evidently a large mansion, and as a light streamed from the open door of the lodge I stopped to ask my way to Brentwood.

"A matter of four miles, yonder," replied an old man from the chimney corner, indicating the direction from which I had come.

So I had got to trudge four weary miles before I could disclose to official ears the tremendous secret I was carrying. I had worked myself up to think that when the authorities heard my story, a mere stroke of the pen, or some equally facile method, would reinstate Arthur and put Roger Marske in his place. It was galling to have to wait an hour before utilizing my experiences, and the second alternative occurring to me, I asked: "Can you tell me where the nearest magistrate lives?"

The old lodgekeeper blinked at me queerly as he replied: "You'll be a stranger, then I reckon. Every one knows as the master be Cheerman. Not a common five shillings or a week beak, but Cheerman o' Quarter Sessions," he added proudly. And he pointed a palsied finger to the

lights of the great house among the trees.

Thanking him for his information, I set off along the carriage drive, and it was not till I had traversed three parts of it and was leaving the park for the pleasure garden that I remembered that I ought to have inquired his master's name. Not of real importance, perhaps, but useful in gaining admission. However, the later necessity was not to arise. As I approached the portico I caught the scent of a cigar, and, glancing at the lawn in front of the mansion, saw the stooping figure of a tall man in evening dress shown up in the light that came from an open French window.

He must have been watching my arrival, for he came quickly forward with, I could not help thinking, an undue eagerness for such a magnum as his retainer had described him. But the next moment, in a high-pitched, authoritative voice, he gave a simple explanation of his curiosity.

"You are the young woman from the post-office, and have a telegram for me, eh?" he inquired as he stepped from the grass on to the gravel. And he held out his hand for the non-existent message.

"No," I answered. "I do not come from the postoffice. I was given to understand at the lodge that you are a magistrate, and I want to speak to you on most important business—swear an information, I think it is called."

An exclamation that sounded like annoyance escaped him, but he atoned for it by a polite gesture towards the open French window. I could only see him indistinctly in the blend of dying daylight and a rising moon, yet I gathered an impression of capability, and the custom of command, tempered by age.

"If you will be so good as to step in here," he said, leading the way "we shall see the servants the trouble of answering the door. This is my justice-room, but I also use it for smoking purposes after dinner."

In the gloom of the garden I had taken him for a country gentleman, disappointed that I was not the bearer of a telegram announcing the result of some race in which he was interested. Here, in the shaded lamplight of the luxurious apartment, I at once recognized my mistake. He to whom I was about to impart my accusation against Roger Marske was no sportsman in the usual acceptance of the term. He was an old man with a sallow, unwholesome complexion, suggestive of late hours and life in cities, his burning eyes under the cavernous brows a-

lone having defied physical decay.

These he fixed upon me in a searching gaze as he seated himself at a great pedestal table, and I at once remembered what till now in my excitement I had forgotten—that my appearance after the climb up the stack-pipe could be none of the tidiest.

"You look as if you had met with ill-treatment. You wish to prefer a charge of assault?" he inquired sharply, taking up a pen and drawing paper towards him.

"I wish to prefer a charge of murder, and also of attempted murder, against one Roger Marske," I answered him eagerly.

Slowly, very slowly, he replaced the pen in the tray, and, joining the tips of his fingers, bent his chin to them as he surveyed me with a perfectly sphinx-like countenance. The scrutiny lasted a full minute.

"Of murdering, and of attempting to murder, whom do you accuse—this person?" he inquired presently, in a tone that sounded unpromising. It was not altogether incredulous, but there was a hostile ring in it that jarred, I knew not why. In putting the question he worked his face in a curious contortion that was hardly a smile, and I saw that his few remaining teeth were sharp and yellow, like an aged dog's fangs.

"I accuse him of murdering a young lady named Clara Rivington and her mother," I replied, ignoring the second and less material half of his question for the present. "The matter is urgent, because a perfectly innocent man has been convicted of the crime, and will be—will be hanged if he is recaptured." I added, nearly breaking down.

"Recaptured! The convict's name?" demanded the magistrate in his high-pitched treble, shooting a glance at me that boded ill for my cause.

"Arthur Rivington—the prisoner who escaped from Winchester Jail. You must have heard of it," said I, and then a great fear seized me that he would ask me if I had met or communicated with Arthur since his escape. I should have to lie if he did, for I could not confess to this strange-mannered, unsympathetic old man that I had seen my lover. For the same reason my lips were sealed about the plot against Lord Alphington, which alone I could have learned from Arthur. Doubtless my name and address would be taken; it would be known that I had come from Totland Bay, and if I told of my interview with Arthur he would be traced thither before his safety was assured. But I was not called upon to lie.

"Yes," replied my interrogator drily, "I have heard of the case. Now be so good as to lay your information against this other one, who, according to this extraordinary story of yours, ought to be in the convict's shoes."

So I took a step nearer to the table and poured out my story—how I had formed the theory that Clara Rivington's last words indicated the name of her murderer, how I had started out to trace the mysterious "Danvers Crane," and how the person whose name of Marske had inspired the idea had followed and laid in wait at the address which I had connected with "Danvers Crane." The old man ran his delicate fing-

ers through the scanty hairs on his forehead and regarded me with keen comprehension. "Then Roger Marske was at your point of departure on this extraordinary errand?" he asked. "Yes," I answered, seeing no harm in the admission. This country justice of the peace could not possibly be aware that Arthur was in the Isle of Wight, I told myself, any more than he could have known of Roger Marske's presence there.

(To be continued.)

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