

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.

(Concluded)  
CHAPTER XXXIX.  
Aftermath of Storm.

Four hours later a council of war was assembled in the library at "Ardmore" to consider the précis which Janet had received from Herzog, and the new light shed on my case by her experiences at the hands of Roger Marske and his father. There were present Lord Alphonington, Lady Muriel, Ralph Carden, and myself. Colonel Chilmark had been notified of his daughter's rescue, but was not well enough to join us.

Lord Alphonington, who had listened gravely to Janet's story, from the day of her departure down to the fatal conflict between Roger Marske and Herzog on the wreck, sat at the table, pursuing the packet of letters procured at Marske's chambers, Janet, pale and exhausted by her sufferings, lay back in an easy chair with Lady Muriel hovering near while Carden and I stood silent, waiting for the Premier's opinion.

It was given in characteristic fashion. When he had laid down the last of the letters, and made a careful examination of the instructions accompanying the comfits, the great statesman rose, and coming over to me held out his hand.

"These letters exculpate you completely and entirely," Captain Rivington, he said. "I am proud to be the first to congratulate you, though we must not forget that you will be in danger till you have the King's pardon. Fortunately His Majesty is no further off than Portsmouth today, and I shall start at once to procure an audience. In the meanwhile you will remain here as my guest."

"But, my lord, supposing the police come while you are gone," cried Janet, starting up in alarm. "Remember, Herzog told me that the search would begin this afternoon. It is known to everyone that the 'Mr. Martin,' who lodged at 'Springthorpe,' volunteered for the lifeboat and came up here after her return."

"My dear child," said Lord Alphonington soothingly, "the Prime Minister of England still has a few privileges, and among them I think that you will find immunity from police intrusion. But what of Herzog? I have heard of his as a skilled secret agent, but not in connection with all this bother."

I, too, had noticed the slip. In her excitement my dear girl had forgotten the pledge she had given to Herzog, to respect his alias, though his death robbed her lapse of any consequences to him. Perceiving this, and

that it could do him no harm, Janet faltered over her explanation—that she had promised the soi-disant Doctor Barrables to conceal his real name in consideration for what he had done for her.

A change came over the Premier's face as he listened to my love's halting tones, and I began to fear that we had lost our powerful friend, so gray and stern did he grow. But his half-incoherent exclamation revealed the real meaning of his anger.

"Herzog!" he muttered, under his breath. "He was Gideon Marske's man. My Heaven, but this is too terrible." And flinging himself into his chair he bowed his head in his hands.

I saw what had happened. His quick mind had penetrated the veil, and he had made the connection between Sir Gideon Marske and the plot against himself, in which, till that moment, I do not think he had wholly believed, or, if so, only to treat it as the work of some lawless anarchists.

There was a tap at the door and a footman brought in a telegram for his master. Lord Alphonington, pulled himself together on the man's entrance, read it, and heaved a sigh of relief.

"Thank God!" he cried. "Now we can hush this greater horror up. Marske was always clever, and he has taken the best way out."

"What is it, father?" said Lady Muriel. "May I see?"

"Read it out," said Lord Alphonington, rising heavily. "And then I will ask a favor of you all."

Lady Muriel's fresh young voice rang out firm and clear in the opening words, but trembled almost to a whisper as she grasped the true significance of the news. To us who knew it was as good as a confession of guilt in the task committed to Herzog. Sir Gideon Marske was too Marske to be always clever, and he had taken the extreme course because his dead son was about to be branded as a murderer.

The telegram ran:—"Regret to inform your lordship that Sir Gideon Marske, Chancellor of the Exchequer, drowned himself in the ornamental water at Marske Hall to-day on receiving telegraphic news of his son's death while aiding in rescue of lady on steamer nightshade.—Marryat-Hume, Private Secretary."

It was a full minute before the Premier could speak, but when he found his voice it was to command us all to silence as to Sir Gideon Marske's initiative in the plot against him. The empire would be shaken to its furthest borders, and

the clock would be put back three hundred years, if it leaked out that a political assassination had been planned by a minister of the Crown.

"I have His Majesty's ear, Rivington," he said, turning to me. "I can rely on his tact to join us in this conspiracy of silence. To explain your escape it will be necessary to bring in Herzog's part, but so far as the public is concerned let him be called Barrables, so that the reports can make an anarchist of him, or anything their ingenuity suggests, when they come to interview you. Roger Marske's misdeeds have no national importance, and can, and shall have full publicity."

With which he abruptly left the room, to start on the short journey designed to secure for me an even more mighty ally than himself—the only one in the realm who had power to stay the doom that had been pronounced. Lord Alphonington took Janet's hardly-won proofs with him, but we had all seen them, and there was plenty of food for discussion in the cold-blooded guilt they revealed.

The story disclosed was a commonplace one enough in its earlier stages—that of a trusting girl secretly married to a man who soon began to tire. My sister's letters showed that after a week's honeymoon up the river they had parted on good terms and by mutual consent, she to return to her home in the New Forest, and he to resume his bachelor mode of life in London.

From first to last Clara's letters breathed a spirit of true affection, without a hint of repining at the separation, but full of cheerful references to the time when they would be together "some day."

So matters went on till my mother's death, and fortunately for me it was easy to reconstruct Roger Marske's first crime from materials in one of Clara's letters. She herself had evidently been the intended victim, my mother suffering death in her place by merest accident. On the day when she received the poisoned comfits by post Clara had been unwell and had given them to her mother, who had probably put them away and eaten them a month later, such being the interval between Clara's acknowledgment of the sweets to her husband and the date of our mother's death. Thus at the time my sister did not associate the death with the present that came to her by post so long before, and my mother having suffered from chronic heart disease there was no trouble about a death certificate.

Roger Marske, delayed in his purpose, but not daunted by the miscarriage of his scheme, seemed to have allowed six months to elapse, and then again to have sent my sister a box of comfits, one or more of which was poisoned. The last letter written by her to him contained thanks for such a package, and also the statement that she meant to enjoy them later in the day, which was the date of her death. In her last agony her mind must have awakened to the fatal import of the sweets, drawing from her the utterance, which Janet under Providence, translated rightly.

Perhaps if we had had Herzog's subtle brain to help us we would have shed light on anything that was obscure, but that many-sided victim of circumstances slept his last sleep somewhere out among the subsiding breakers on the Shingles, locked, maybe, in the embrace of the scoundrel who had guised his final desperate murderous errand as one of mercy. I could think kindly of Herzog now, after what Janet had told me, on our way up from the beach, of his helpful resource on the Nightshade.

The storm had died down as rapidly as it had arisen, and the evening faded into night amid just such a sunset glow as I had watched from the attic window of the vacant house on the cliff twenty-four pregnant hours ago. But as we four sat together and made a pretence of dinner, and afterwards wandered from room to room, there was as yet no real sense of peace. The very air was charged with tension. I was still liable to be hauled back to Winchester to be hanged, and those dear people knew it, and tried in vain to make me forget that the search for me at the instance of the Home Office must have begun hours back.

It was at about eleven o'clock, while Lady Muriel was bravely keeping up appearances by singing to us that the climax came. The butler entered, and with a scared face announced that three gentlemen and "two other persons" were asking for the "Mr. Martin" who was staying at "Springthorpe."

"What sort are these other persons, Dawkins?" inquired Ralph Carden from the piano, where he was turning over Lady Muriel's music. "Don't be afraid man. Speak up."

"They look like prison wardens, sir," stammered the butler, agast at such a visit. "They—they are not behaving as one would wish, when inquiring for one of his lordship's guests."

"I'll soon settle their hash," said Carden, advancing to the door, but pausing as he reached it and placing his fingers to his lips.

For wheels sounded in the drive, and a moment later Lord Alphonington's voice was heard at the hall door.

"Well, why are you fellows crowding me out of my own house?" he asked, in cheery accents that seemed like the dawn of a new day.

A subdued rumble from the spokesman of the party was all that reached us in the drawing-room.

"Oh, indeed," came Lord Alphonington's resonant answer. "I have

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nothing to do with Mr. Martin's identity. But whatever it may be you need put yourselves to no further trouble about Captain Rivington. I have here His Majesty's full pardon for that gentleman, signed and sealed at Portsmouth on board the Victoria and Albert an hour ago. Just stop into the light and cast your eye over the document."

So passed the great shadow from my life, all the dark places that had clouded throughout those dreadful weeks being illumined by the light of truth at last. They tell me that I look ten years older, and my sweet Janet, though she appeared as young as ever on our wedding day, says that she feels twenty years older than I look. But, as there is peace in our hearts and no dishonour on our name, we can afford to laugh at the ravages, real or fancied wrought by the terrible experiences which we have, jointly and severally, here set down.

It only remains to say that the great secret of Sir Gideon Marske's dastardly plot against his noble chief never reached the man in the street, nor was the enforced resignation of two colleagues in the Cabinet ever connected in the public mind with my escape from Winchester. I have no doubt, however, that Lord Alphonington's private inquiries at the prison traced the blame to the proper quarters, and revealed to him how Herzog had wielded a key satchel powerful to open the door of my cage.

But if Sir Gideon escaped the everlasting obloquy of having schemed for the assassination of the Prime Minister, he fully shared the infamy heaped on his son when Janet's treacherous treatment by him was made public after the investigation necessary to my final rehabilitation. Being deprived of the advantage which the trial of Roger Marske would have given me, I had that investigation rigorously pressed home, and among the minor fish caught in my net was Mrs. Webley, the news-vendor at Notting Hill.

The woman confessed that during Janet's absence from the shop Roger Marske had entered, and that it had been at his instigation, "for value received," that she had sent my brave sweetheart to the Mill House at Chipping Wyvern, which, being near his father's country seat, he must have known of as a likely spot for compassing the death of the persistent little amateur detective who was so close on his heels.

And Janet and I, when we sit over the fire on winter's evenings in the old cottage in the New Forest, where to honest Sarah Leven's delight, there was after all no sale, come to varying conclusions about the man who played so great a part in our life-tragedy.

"Herzog was a rascal, possibly a villain, but with the elements of a good fellow in him," I will say.

And my wife will catch me up severely with the answer: "I won't hear a word against him, Arthur. He was a dear. He gave you the."

### THE END.

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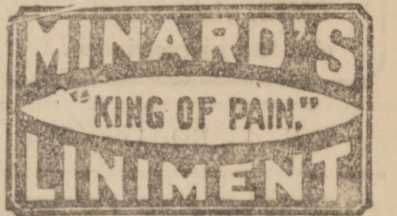
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