

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.)
He who demanded admission was Lord Alphonso, the man whom I had been released to slay. His stately figure was drawn up to its full height, and his fine face wore a sternly expectant expression that filled me with dismay. I knew what had happened. Lady Muriel had thrown me on her father's mercy, which, as Herzog had said, would be equivalent to throwing me to a wolf chained with red tape. By virtue of his office he would have to fall on me and rend me.
I drew up the blind, and, unfastening the window, gave him admission. Now that the die was cast, and there was to be no more hole-and-corner work, I felt a man once more.
"Am I to address you as Mr. Martin or Captain Rivington?" said the Premier, as he stepped over the threshold, gazing curiously round him.
"You have been told that I am Rivington, the escaped convict?"
"By my daughter, who told me a lot of other incredible things."
"If I can convince your lordship of the truth of the other incredible things by admitting Lady Muriel's first statement I shall be fortunate," said I. "Yes, I am Arthur Rivington, and I was practically released—escape is not the word for it—to kill you."
He produced a gold snuff-box, took a pinch, and glanced out of the window. "Gad, how it blows," he said. "That steamer will be on the Shingles if she doesn't take care. Well," he added, turning his mocking gaze on me, "why don't you kill me now? You will never get a better chance?"
"I never intended to kill you, my lord," I began hotly. "If you think that—"
But he stopped me with a quick imperious gesture. "Do not trouble to plead on that count of the indictment," he laughed harshly. "What even your character you have but a poor wit, Captain Rivington, or you would have known that I should not have come here alone and unarmed if I had credited that story. What I am concerned with is your guilt, in that baser crime of which you were convicted."
"I am the victim of a miscarriage of justice," I replied sullenly, "and I can assure your lordship that the plot against your life was no myth, so far as the principals in the background were concerned. Whether the man who called himself Doctor Barables was in earnest I am not competent to judge."
"It strikes me as more like a plot

on the part of that man against Sir Gideon Marske's reputation than against my life," the Premier remarked thoughtfully. "However, that is not the point at issue. I have to deal with you promptly, or I shall become legally accessory to your alleged crime—a pretty kettle of fish. Just run through the main heads of Miss Chilmark's action, so far as it is known to you, leading up to her disappearance and Mr. Roger Marske's supposed connection with the case. Be concise, please."
So once again, snatching a grain of comfort from his use of the phrase "alleged crime," I sketched the occurrences that had followed my escape, dwelling on Janet's explanation of my sister's dying words, on Roger Marske's attempt to capture or kill me in the Branksome pines, and on his departure for London at a moment's notice when he found that Janet was going up.
"Be sure, my lord, that that was the act of a guilty conscience," I urged. "He must have suspected that Miss Chilmark had been to my mother's old home and had there discovered the name of Danvers Crane, which would eventually bring her on his trail."
I laboured the point advisedly, for I was aware that Marske's abrupt and inadequately explained departure had been noticed, if not resented, by Lord Alphonso.
"Humph!" he muttered, taking snuff again. "All this sounds mighty like mere tittle-tattle. Still—"
He broke off suddenly and strode to the window, where, after a minute's reflection, his attention was diverted to what he saw.
"I knew it. There'll be a wreck," he cried. "That steamer is almost in the breakers. The clumsy beggars are trying to put back to Yarmouth without proper sea-room."
I could not work up any enthusiasm about a vessel in distress just then, and I respectfully but firmly brought him back to the subject.
"My lord, I should be greatly obliged if you would ease my suspense by informing me how you propose to deal with me," I said.
He cast another glance on the struggling steamer, and then turned upon me with such impetuosity that I took it for anger. And so, in a sense, it was, though not for me. It was the irritation of the official mind brought into conflict with private influences.
"Look here," he blustered, taking snuff furiously, "there is one thing in your favour which inclines me towards you in spite of my better judg-

ment. You saved my daughter's life, and have not once referred to it."
"I have been convicted of murder, my lord, but that is no reason why, being innocent, I should not endeavour to remain a gentleman," I replied.
It was a pompous speech, which I should have laughed at myself in happier days, but it struck home. It made his lordship swear.
"D—you," he cried, his grey moustaches bristling. "You have put me in a fine hole, sir. Now listen to me. I cannot be mixed up in shielding an escaped convict, and I shall see to it that information of your whereabouts is duly furnished to the authorities. But in consideration of your having saved Lady Muriel Crawshaw's life, I shall stay my hand for twenty-four hours—on the chance that Miss Chilmark may return with news that may be of service to you."
It was a concession, and I was about to thank him for it, when my eyes, facing the window, saw what was for the moment hiding from him. The steamer had grounded on the Shingles, and the great white seas were engulfing her. An unconscious gesture on my part caused Lord Alphonso to turn seaward. He caught my meaning at once, and hurried to the window, I following.
The Prime Minister on his holiday was a smaller man; he had provided himself with a pair of field-glasses, and, having unslung them, he was proceeding to focus the wreck, when round the corner of the house, into his field of vision, walked Roger Marske. My enemy's eyes glanced eagerly over Lord Alphonso's shoulder at me.
"My lord, I have been inquiring

everywhere," he panted. "I rejoice to have found you—to put you on your guard. You do not know who that fellow is, whom you have admitted to your table and your intimacy."
Before any reply could be made, a sharp report, heard above the strife of the elements, assailed our ears—the sound of the signal mortar at the coastguard station, fired to call the lifeboat crew together.
With exasperating interest in the event toward, the Premier pulled out his watch. "Now I wonder how long the rascals will take to man the boat?" he reflected aloud. "What was that you were saying, Marske? The wind and sea were making such a noise I didn't quite catch it."
Heavens, how I exulted in that diplomatic fiction—sign that the great statesman meant to abide by his promise. For there was no doubt that he had heard every word of the incipient accusation, and was merely sparring for time. Marske repeated his words with redoubled venom.
"Who is this gentleman? Why, Mr. Martin, of course, who saved Muriel's life so gallantly last week?" Lord Alphonso replied calmly.
"It doesn't matter what he has done or what he calls himself," Roger Marske vociferated loudly. "That man is Arthur Rivington, who was condemned at last Assizes and escaped from prison two days before execution."
Lord Alphonso's ripple of silvery laughter was a revelation in the art of polite sneering. "My dear Marske, what a hallucination," he said. "Ah perhaps that blow accounts for it. What's the matter with your head?"
With difficulty my enemy choked down an oath, and I noticed for the first time a discoloured swelling on his left temple, partly hidden by his golfing cap.
"I met with a slight accident last night—in London. It has nothing to do with my statement about that man, which you will find to be correct," he replied. "Be guided by me, my lord, and go and fetch the village policeman while I stand guard over Rivington. I have a revolver."
As he spoke he produced the pistol, and well I knew what my fate would be if I were alone with him. He would shoot me like a dog and plead self-defence. But the Premier's word was as good as his bond.
"Tut, tut, but that thing up there is sensible, or if you can't do that, go and see a doctor," he said impatiently. "Come, Mr. Martin, I am all agog to witness this excitement. Let us go down to the beach and see the lifeboat launched."
It was stepping out into open with a vengeance, and powerful as was the protector at my side I felt that I was lost if Marske went himself for the police. But any hesitation on my part would have stultified the generous position taken up by the Premier, and for some reason—probably because he would not let me out of his sight—Marske did not take that course. He followed Lord Alphonso and myself from the vacant house, and so down the chine to the shore, where we took our places among the fast-growing crowd of spectators round the lifeboat-house. Lord Alphonso, that astute mov-

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er of pawns in the game of life, kept up a semblance of intense interest in the breathless arrivals of members of the crew. Standing, stop-watch in hand, he asked questions of bystanders and counted the brown-visaged, blue guernseyed fishermen as they passed into the shed where the willing "helpers" were already preparing the boat for her journey.

Away across the mile and a half of angry sea the steamer was plainly visible—a hopeless wreck now, swept by succeeding avalanches of foamed breakers, which now and again hid her entirely from our sight.

But as yet I found it hard to sustain an interest in the endangered vessel and her crew. I felt like a spectator at a theatre, brought to see a play which one is expected to applaud when one's centre of attraction is among the audience.

(To be continued.)

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Average Prices of Commodities, as the Old Year Ends --- Has the Rise Hurt the Working-man?

Somewhat contrary to general belief, 1904 was not a year in which average commodity prices achieved and held a new high level. The London Economist's index number, fixed at 100 for the end of December, as against 2197 on December 31, 1903. On March 31, however, an "index" of 2234 was reached, which with one exception, was the highest in fifteen years—that exception being March 1901, when 2240 was reached. Following is the end-of-the-year record for some lines past:

End of	End of
1904.....2,136	1894..... 1,923
1903.....2,197	1893..... 2,082
1902.....2,003	1892..... 2,120
1901.....1,948	1891..... 2,133
1900.....2,125	1890..... 2,340
1899.....2,145	1889..... 2,236
1898.....1,918	1888..... 2,187
1897.....1,809	1887..... 2,230
1896.....1,950	1886..... 2,059
1895.....1,999	1885..... 2,023

The natural question always suggested by this general rise of nearly 12 per cent in six years, is its bearing on the working class. The Economist combats the deduction that hardship has been caused. It first procures statistics of continuity of employment, derived from a Board of Trade "blue book". On the basis of decennial averages, employment in 1900 being the unit of comparison, it finds these results:

Ten yrs. Average.	Ten yrs. Average.
1890-9.....98.2	1870-9.....99.2
1880-9.....97.6	1860-9.....98.6

And for more recent calendar years, on the same basis:

1903.....	1901.....	1900.....
97.5	99.1	99
98.2	100	100

Finally, taking the principal groups of expenditure which bear upon the incomes of the laboring classes, it produces the following comparisons, calculated on the general average of 1900:

	Food.	Rent.	Clothing.	Light	Fuel and
1900.....	101.8	100	98.7	86.0	
1895.....	97.3	96.3	98.8	74.8	
1890.....	107.4	89.9	101.2	76.5	
1885.....	119.8	90.1	102.9	74.1	
1880.....	139.7	86.6	108.5	77.3	

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