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.)

It was past noon when the handsome equipage, after astonishing the smoky East End streets, drew up at the dock gates. I was conscious of a subtle change in Sir Gideon's manner directly we alighted. Once or twice during the silent drive I had caught his eye fixed on me in stealthily malevolent, but instantly removed, contemplation. Now, for the benefit of coachman and footman and casual bystanders, I believe, he was the chivalrous old gentleman and the distinguished statesman being paternally civil to a girl not socially his equal, but whom it was his whim to befriend. But it was all done very cleverly, almost in dumb show, without gush.

Just as I have wondered what that nice maid at Marske Hall, had been told about me, so I have wondered what reason the powdered coachman and the elegant footman had been led to attribute to my sudden appearance at their master's house and to that long drive. I have never been able to ascertain.

"You will find some place where you can rest and bait the horses, Capps. I may be an hour—possibly two," said Sir Gideon. "Now," he added, turning to me with a little catchy laugh, "we will go and search for this wonderful vessel."

Having proceeded so far in my task I was not going to turn back now, but as I passed through the dock gates at his side a recurrence of my fear of him seized me with almost overmastering power. Intuitively, though without definite understanding, I may have noticed at that moment what I was only too well able to account for afterwards—that in the presence of others he never addressed me by my name.

We traversed several of the quays, my companion scrutinising the bows of each vessel as we passed, and then with an impatient gesture, he stopped and spoke to one of the dock officials.

"Can you tell me," he said, 'where I shall find a steamship called the Nightshade?"

"Next turning to the left—second berth in Number 2 Basin," the man replied. Sir Gideon mumbled his thanks and was hurrying on, but the official called after him the gratuitous information: "Her skipper has applied for his papers. She clears this evening, unexpected, I've heard.'

Sir Gideon did not appreciate this communicativeness, for he growled something about "meddlesome fellow," and directed my attention into a new channel by requesting me to look out for the name of the vessel. Like so many of the apparent trifles that centred round me that day his assiduity in glossing over the approaching and unexpected departure of the Nightshade did not strike me till later—when, in fact, it was too late.

My younger eyes were the first to discover the name of the ship we were looking for, and it was hard to reconcile her appearance with Sir Gideon's description of her as a yacht. Her low, black hull, with here and there patches of rusty plates, her dingy funnel and untidy deck, gave her more the semblance of a trading coaster or of a small tramp steamer. In pointing her out to Sir Gideon I nearly mentioned the discrepancy, but I checked myself, deeming it hardly worth while to split such a straw as that. What did it matter to me how she was described, so long as the proofs of Arthur's innocence were to be obtained on her?

"We will go on board at once," said Sir Gideon curtly, and, suiting the action to the word, he crossed the plank connecting the dock with the gangway. Following in his wake I had just set foot on the deck when a short, strongly-built man, wearing a cap with a tarnished band, but no other sign of his calling, came out of the chart-room under the bridge. His face was the most terrible I have ever looked upon—a whole history of drink and ungoverned passions.

"What the h—are you ladies doing aboard my ship?" he yelled. "Mistaken me for the P. and O. mailboat, I reckon. Well, be jolly quick in clearing off the Nightshade. We don't want any blooming toffs here."

My companion drew himself up with a great show of dignity. "I am Sir Gideon Marske," he said.

"The bloke that taxes us? Come to think of it, I've seen your ugly mug in the comics, or somewhere," retorted the captain of the nightshade. "If I had you out in the open sea I'd ropes-end you, and, by G—I'll do it in dock if you don't skip from my little hooker."

"I am here at the instance of a Mr. Danvers Crane, whom I think you know," said Sir Gideon, preserving his temper so completely that somehow I gained the impression that a false note rang in these exchanges. It was like the premature playing of a poorly rehearsed comedy.

The man in the amphibious garments placed a great fleshy forefinger to his sensual lips, and affected to consider. "Ah," he ejaculated. "Circumstances alter cases. I remember Mr. Danvers Crane—right as Moses. A nice chap, free with the spondulics he was. Why might Mr. Danvers Crane have sent you to me? There ain't no mistake, is there? I'm Captain Belcher, I am—the skipper of this craft."

"Then you are the person we want" said Sir Gideon, making a half-turn to me as though appealing for courtesy by including a lady in the business. "The matter is very urgent and very private, and you will be an—er—gainer by rendering us every assistance in your power. Is there—have you no place where we can converse——"

"On the strict q. t.? Of course there is. As there seems to be profit in it, you'd better step down into the cuddy," replied Belcher roughly, but still with that curious perfunctoriness of tone suggesting the playing of a part allotted at short notice and imperfectly learned. I ought to have been warned by it, and should have been, perhaps, if it had been anyone else's affair. As it was I was blind and deaf to everything but the immediate prospect of procuring from this brutal ruffian the details of Roger Marske's guilt, and I descended the steps into the evil-smelling den below, heedless of my danger.

If I had known then, as I do now, that Sir Gideon Marske was quite as deeply implicated as his son in the complex events depending on the vindication of Arthur, how different it would all have been.

The cuddy, or main cabin, of the Nightshade was an apartment some eighteen feet long by ten in width, having a table running down the centre and the stem of a mast piercing at the end furthest from the stairs. It was lighted by a smoke-grimed skylight. On each side were the doors of three sleeping berths. The atmosphere reeked with the odours of rank tobacco, fiery spirits, greasy meat, and damp clothes.

So much I had been able to observe when Sir Gideon, who had preceded me down the stairs, cleared his throat and glanced a little nervously at Belcher.

The—er—air is rather oppressive down here, captain," he said. "And the discussion upon which you will enter with this lady would be painful to me. I think I should prefer to return to the deck till—till you have finished the—er—negotiations."

"Right you are, governor. The young miss and I will soon come to terms, I'll warrant," replied Belcher. And he followed Sir Gideon to the foot of the stairs, as if, with a new-born politeness, to show him the way out. I stood by the table, watching the gaunt back and sloping shoulders of the old man as he climbed to the deck, and I was just wondering whether the pair had not exchanged a whispered confidence, when chaos swooped upon me.

Several of the cabin doors on either side of the cuddy were burst open. I was seized by violent hands, something acrid was pressed to my face, and the rest was blank.

CHAPTER XXVI.

"Sealed Orders."

How long I lay unconscious I know not, but, when I began to recover, my first sensation was that of motion. I was lying down, and the thing I lay on was swaying slightly to and fro. In my ears there buzzed a muffled metallic vibration.

Then, as my heavy eyes roamed wildly round the cramped space, all that had happened came back to me in a flash, and I knew that I was in one of the sleeping-berths of the Nightshade. and that the Nightshade was no longer in the dock. The vibration was caused by the pulsing of her engines. She was steaming slowly in open water. The voyage had begun, and I was a prisoner on board her—bound whither?

The shock of my awakening was so horrible that the full significance of my detention on the vessel only came to me by degrees. But when I tried the plan of carrying my mind back to the day before, they were degrees that followed each other quickly, and appalling enough I found them. That steady throb of the steamer's screw sounded live a death knell, for I guessed all too surely that I was the victim of a deliberate plot to get me out of the way of launching ruin on Roger Marske.

How I regretted not having trusted the instinct which, the moment I crossed the threshold of the library at Marske Hall, had bidden me beware of Sir Gideon. Apart from the danger-signal in his sombre eyes and hawk-like features, I might have known that no good man could have bred a Roger Marske. I saw too clearly how I had under-estimated the enormous catastrophe to one in Sir Gideon's position that I represented. There was more than paternal affection and family pride at stake here. There was the loss of high office, there was the overthrow of ambition, there was the down-fall of a public career entailed, as well as the stigma of having a son branded as a murderer; and between all these consequences and absolute immunity was interposed only the frail barrier of a girl's life. In my ignorance I was, perhaps happily, unable then to throw into the enormous balance against me the discovery of the Alphington plot, which would become imminent directly Arthur was a free agent.

I could picture to myself now, so easy is it to be wise after the event, the interview between father and son while I nibbled those treacherous biscuits in the library. Sir Gideon could have wasted very little time in upbraiding. Having ascertained from Roger the one paramount fact of his guilt, he must have at once faced the problem of how to silence me. He knew well that if he returned to me with an indignant denial I should take my information elsewhere. To admit the accusation, feign the deepest concern for his son's impending fate, and keep me in his power with promises of assistance on the morrow, was the only course open to him.

(To be continued.)

ASKED AND ANSWERED.

Simpson—I understand you have quit your job.

Benedik—Yes, that's right.

Simpson—What are you going to do for a living this winter?

Benedik—My wife's father.

AMERICAN TOURISTS.

Large Numbers Already Booking Their Passage Abroad for Next Summer.

London Chronicle.

There is an unprecedented demand for transatlantic steamer accommodation of New York at present for Americans, who intend spending next summer in Europe.

Almost all the best rooms on the steamers of the various lines have been engaged for sailings eastward during June and July, and for the return voyages in August and September. Agents say that never in their experiences have people begun, so far ahead, to engage berths. They say that by February, it will be impossible to secure any kind of a room for the summer months on any of the steamers.

Last year there were very few bookings at this time, and the season was a bad one for the transatlantic lines. Enough money, however, will be made this coming season to more than recuperate the companies for the lack of business they then suffered.

The present early bookings are supposed to indicate that commercial and industrial business in America, during the past months, has been so good as to induce people to spend their next holidays abroad. It is estimated that at least 100,000 Americans will be conveyed to Europe next June and July.