

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.

(Continued.)

"And where did the chase end?" he went on. "Where did this strenuous villain, as you describe him, lay in wait for you?"

"At the Mill House at Chipping Wyvern, which is even now on fire through his attempt to burn me in it," I replied.

"I had made an impression at last. The old man half rose from his chair, his lips twitching and his blue-veined fist clenched in a gesture of menace which it was impossible to account for. Could it be that he resented my having brought such an unsavoury business so close to his own domain?"

"The Mill House at Chipping Wyvern. Then where is—" he was beginning to shrill at me, when a tap at the door checked him. A footman in a plain but handsome livery entered, but paused irresolute on seeing me.

"Well, Sanders, what is it?" his master asked sharply.

"I beg pardon, Sir Gideon, but Mr. Roger has arrived from London and sent me to see if you were in your room," was the reply that set my knees trembling as they had never trembled before throughout that fateful day. In ignorance I had made an official confidant of the father of the man I came to charge. This was Sir Gideon Marske, the well-known Cabinet Minister, and I did not need to look twice at him to see which side he was going to take.

"Inform Mr. Roger that I am here and that I shall be obliged if he will stop this way," he said to the footman, who bowed and retired.

ARTHUR RIVINGTON'S NARRATIVE CONTINUED.

CHAPTER XVII.

The Tube of Atropine.

On the morning after Janet's departure Herzog elected, in spite of a cloudless sky, to remain indoors, satisfying the curiosity of Mrs. Krance with the invented explanation that I was not very well, and must save myself up for the dinner at Lord Alphonso's in the evening. His real reason for not going out was soon apparent in the receipt of several telegrams which arrived at short intervals, all of them demanding prompt replies.

So absorbed was he in this business that, without letting me out of his sight, he left me pretty much to my own devices. He had said nothing to me as yet about the means he intended me to employ for the assassination of the Prime Minister, and I was beginning to hope that for that week at least, I should be reprieved from the ordeal of

defying my evil genius. For all that I was utterly miserable and dejected. The ill-omened and, I believed, unpremeditated departure of Roger Marske by the same boat as Janet had kept me tossing in anxiety for my brave girl till dawn, and now as the slow day wore on I could hardly contain myself.

I wondered if Colonel Chilmark, whose querulous tones in conversation with the landlady often reached me from the opposite sitting-room, had heard from his daughter. There would have been plenty of time for her to notify her safe arrival in London so as to reach her father by first post.

"This is deadly dull," I said, affecting a yawn towards luncheon time, when Herzog was hard at it translating one of his cipher telegrams. "Would there be any objection to my going and having a yarn with that old Colonel over the way? You can keep your eye on the front door, to see that I don't bolt."

My companion looked round from his occupation at the table in the window, squaring his broad shoulders to get a better view of me as I lounged against the mantelpiece. His eyes pierced like gimlets, but something of the sternness passed from them before he spoke.

"My friend," he said, "you are not in social mood; neither, I expect, is Colonel Chilmark, after being deserted by his charming daughter. It will be better for both of you if you remain where you are. Take comfort by the fact that I shall relieve your boredom by occupying your attention very fully after lunch."

I dared not press the matter, never knowing how far this human enigma had penetrated into my inmost soul. He turned to his work again, and having handed his reply-telegram to the waiting messenger, smoked in silence till Mrs. Krance appeared with the luncheon tray.

The meal over, Herzog surprised me with the proposal that we should go out in a boat, my astonishment being greater when, after descending to the beach, he declined the services of the owner of the craft he hired.

"My friend will row me about, and as we shall not go far from the shore you need be under no apprehension for us or for your boat," he said to the boatman. "I am his doctor, and I prescribe the exercise for him."

Motioning me to take the oars, he sat in the stern, and when we had pushed off his explanation was forthcoming. "Walls and hedges have ears, and I have instructions to give which must not be overheard," he said in a low voice. "Keep away from the pier and avoid other boats while I school you to win your freedom."

Pulling clear of the youths and maidens in canoes, and threading a course through the yacht anchorage, I swung to the left and bore away to the left under the shadow of the cliffs, where we were in comparative seclusion. Herzog, whose eyes, now concentrated his attention on me, and it must have occurred to him that it is difficult to study the physiognomy of a man wearing a broad-beamed wherry with a stout passenger in the stern.

"Left her drift a little, and look at this," he said.

He referred to a pill-box which he took from his waistcoat pocket, removing the lid and holding it towards me. It was nearly full of cotton wool, on which lay a tiny tube of indiarubber. "Take it carefully, it is a very delicate contrivance," he added.

Holding the box in the palm of my hand, I saw that the tube was bulged at one end, after the fashion of the "release" of the pneumatic shutter of a snapshot camera. The whole thing was very small, not more than half an inch long.

"Looks like a sort of squirt. What am I to do with it?" I asked, more than half guessing its deadly purpose.

"That tube contains, in solution, a grain of atropine, as you are probably aware, a most potent and instantaneous poison," Herzog replied, watching me intently. "When we are sitting over our wine with Lord Alphonso to-night you will find or make an opportunity for squeezing it into his wine-glass. He will be a dead man in two minutes, and unless you bungle the operation no suspicion will rest on you till after the autopsy. You will be there, remember as an honoured guest, who three days ago saved Lady Muriel's life at the risk of your own."

"It sounds easy," I said, stifling my nausea with an effort, and pretending deep interest in the tube.

"It is easy; I have made it so intentionally, Rivington, because you must forgive me for saying that I miss something in you which your reputation had led me to expect—the power of initiation."

I forced a laugh, trying to make it cynical. "You are quite fatherly in your solicitude, but I do not think that you will find that shall bungle the administration of his lordship's dose," I replied. And then, well knowing that there would be no need for the information, but to deceive him, I added: "And where do I come in? What arrangements have you made for me to get away, which, after all, is the essence of our contract?"

"The safest and surest arrangements," he said. "We shall return to our lodgings, after the proper condolence; you will take the first train from Freshwater to Cowes in the morning, crossing to Southampton, and be on board the Royal Mail steamer that sails for South American ports in the afternoon, with two hundred pounds in your pocket."

For answer I shut down the lid of the pill-box and placed it in my vest pocket. Then, resuming the oars on which I had rested, I pulled slowly towards the shore, hoping that the significance of my action had been misunderstood in the way I wished. I gained the impression that it had, for Herzog nodded his satisfaction and allowed me to retain the box.

It was still in my pocket, when some hours later, we quitted our lodgings and walked around to "Ardmore" in the gathering dusk to keep our dinner engagement. Under the lamp opposite the entrance gates Herzog plucked the sleeve of my dress coat and came to an abrupt halt.

"The moment—I want to look at that thing," he said.

"Cold beads of perspiration broke out on my forehead, but I produced the box and stood with quaking knees while he examined the little syringe. The grunt with which he returned it told me nothing.

"It is all right—in good working order?" I asked, feeling constrained to say something.

"Quite right," he answered, glancing at me curiously in the lamplight. "Come along, or we shall keep our noble host and hostess waiting."

CHAPTER XVIII.

Slight-of-Hand.

When Lord Alphonso's butler announced us as "Mr. Martin and Doctor Barrables" at the drawing-room door, and lady Muriel and the greatest servant of the King came forward to welcome the escaped convict, I had no thought for the grim humour of the situation. For the moment even I had no thought for myself, or of the cataclysm I was supposed by my companion to be there to bring about. I was more concerned to see if Roger Marske had returned from his dangerous proximity to Janet in London. A swift glance round showed that he was not in the apartment.

The sonorous tones of the Premier recalled me to a sense of present surroundings and to the vital necessity for all-round deception. I almost felt Herzog's eyes burning on the nape of my neck.

"In such a debt as you have laid on me, Mr. Martin, words count for little," said Lord Alphonso, warmly gripping my hand. "I should like to do something. But there, you are a rich man, I am told, with no preoccupations beyond your health, and I must content myself with conventional thanks."

Gracious Heaven! Do something for me? If he would only take the noose from round my neck and restore my honour, was my unspoken thought, as I murmured a feeble reply.

With ready tact he passed on to Herzog after a minute's chat, which his quick intuition must have told him was for some reason painful to me. I was taken in charge by Lady Muriel, who made much of me, and was much concerned lest I should

have taken harm by my immersion. Sympathetic as she was, I was conscious that she was a little distraite. Her eyes kept wandering to the door, and I guessed that our dinner party was not complete. Someone else was expected, and my mind again reverted to Roger Marske. Somehow I could think of nothing that night but that Janet and he had gone away in the same steamer with, if my sweetheart's theory was right, diametrically opposite interests at stake. I have often speculated since whether animal magnetism, or some such influence, was at work upon me, inspiring the instinct that these two were under the same roof and she in dire peril.

(To be concluded.)

WILL SETTLE BY ARBITRATION.

The Hague, Jan. 4.—Herr de Savornin Lohman, a Dutch deputy, has been appointed to arbitrate the difference between France and Great Britain arising from the rights claimed by Great Britain in connection with her protectorate over the Sultanate of Muscat, which has been submitted to the arbitration of the Hague tribunal.

London, Jan. 4.—The Anglo-French difference in regard to Muscat arises from the granting of a coaling station to France by Muscat some years ago. Great Britain contends that under her treaty with Muscat in 1891 the latter has no right to make such a concession without the consent of Great Britain. This is doubted by France.

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The experience of this lady is that of thousands of others who have been assured that nothing short of an operation would rid them of this distressing complaint. On the face of it, it appears as if too many surgeons operate in order that they may keep their hand in, and lose no portion of their skill; then, again, too many surgeons are anxious to experiment (like the scientific man in Mark Twain's pathetic story of the dog and her little puppy), and do not have proper regard for a patient's physical welfare or condition.

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