

A DAGGER OF THE MIND.

Continued from Page 2

me with suppressing my emotions. You get them all creditable and otherwise. What is your impression of the general effect? Not that I am an angel, I am afraid. Perhaps, that I am a monster, or perhaps—

"That you are a Sphinx, Hilda." "And the Sphinx was a monster. Oh!" "A riddle, Hilda. Shall I ever understand you?" "Never! Don't try, for—blaten to a sad confession—I don't understand myself. Yes, I am a riddle without an answer. Riddle me, riddle me, riddle me right, am I a monster of darkness or angel of light? Give it up old man in the moon, give it up!"

"Yes, Hilda," I sighed, "I give it up." She was standing close to where I sat. For a moment I felt the stroke of her soft fingers on my hair. Then she laughed, and there was a liquid brightness in her eyes as she spoke.

"Te! me, Harry, what you have been thinking about." "I have been thinking about taking a voyage to Colombo." "A shadow crossed her face."

"Some facts have come to my knowledge which make me fear that our overseer is not taking proper care of our interests, and I think an unexpected visit may be necessary."

"Send Mr. Ashlin," she replied, quickly. "Mark is in Scotland, and does not mean to come back for a fortnight," I returned.

"Write to him. Don't go to Ceylon, Harry. Send Mr. Ashlin." "Why, dearest?" "Because he is clever, and knows all about plantations and overseers, and—"

"And because I am only a sleeping, or a sleepy, partner, I suppose." She took no notice of my tone of vexation. For a minute she gazed at me with eyes that saw nothing, a shade of sadness crossed her face, and, as she turned from me, she said, with a troubled sigh—

"Yes, Harry, go to Colombo to look after the overseer." So the matter was settled. I engaged my berth in a P. and O. steamer, and immediately started on my journey. But in spite of tranquil seas and cloudless skies, and every circumstance that to another would have rendered the voyage an agreeable one, it was to me but a long period of tedium and unrest. For, with the thought ever present that many weeks must pass before I should count the hours that would again bring me back to Hilda, each succeeding day dragged more wearily to its close.

In twenty-five days I had reached Colombo. When I visited the plantation my suspicions that something was amiss were at once confirmed. My enquiries led to disclosures of a far more startling nature than I had anticipated. My troublesome duties occupied me many days, but at length they were concluded, and a vessel homeward bound touched at Colombo on the very day that I was ready to depart.

"Hilda, Hilda darling, what is this trouble?" "Stop," she replied, in a hurried, breathless manner. "Don't—don't speak to me just yet. I—I—must begin—"

"I drew her to a chair, as I saw that her strange emotion rendered her almost unable to remain standing, and she sank into it at once. With a sickening sense of apprehension I waited by her side."

"Come, my Hilda," I said, "be brave. Let me share this trouble. Tell me the bad news." "No bad news, Harry," she replied, with a sad attempt at a smile. "But I have an explanation to make to you."

"Two years ago I formed an acquaintance which ripened in time into a friendship. But the tie of friendship was—that is, my friend and I—deemed insufficient, and to improve matters, as we thought, we pledged ourselves to a nearer and more binding union. At that the effect seemed satisfactory; but I soon had reason to doubt the wisdom of our act. I began to notice in my friend the evidence of some distress of mind. He showed a tendency to brood from which it was impossible to rouse him. What the subject of his reflections was I could not guess, but I saw that it was of a sad and painful nature, and I shrink from inquiring, as I thought he showed a disinclination to take me into his confidence. Of my friend's past I then knew nothing, but I learned some of it—part from himself, part from a companion who had been to him the best of friends—and I grieved the rest. Then I understood the cause of his unhappiness. He had offered me as loyal a heart as was ever possessed by man, but when he did so it was scarcely his own to give. He had asked me to become his wife, but I was not the wife he would have chosen had his choice been free. In the island of Ceylon a young life had been wasting away through a hopeless attachment. A cruel opposition on the part of her family had prevented her union with one to whom she had given her heart, and my friend had parted with her without hope, but with the knowledge that no other woman could ever fill the place she held in his affections. What it was that prompted my friend to form another tie I do not know. But he had secretly done so when he had reason to regard the step as a terrible mistake. Soon afterward he learned that the obstacle that had stood in the way of his life's happiness had been removed. But, though thus within his grasp, that happiness could never, he conceived, be seized by him. He had pledged his faith to another, and honour was at stake and claimed the sacrifice he was resolved to make. My poor friend—Hilda laid her hand gently on mine—was acting on a generous impulse, but he did not know that to carry out his resolve would be to wrong two women, and mar the happiness of three lives. My friend will yet see this as clearly as I do, and rejoice that the mistake has been discovered by others in time to set it right."

"I had listened at first in perplexity, and then in amazement, as Hilda spoke, but as she ended all other feelings were dispelled by one of intense relief that this was the explanation of the strange reception she had given me."

"I seized her hand, but she gently withdrew it." "Hilda, what has put these wild fancies in your head?" She smiled sadly.

"No, Harry, you can't deceive me. I am not guessing. I know the truth." "The truth?" I cried. "Who has told you this story?" "Mark Ashlin."

"Villain! Scoundrel!" I exclaimed, as his iniquitous design flashed on me. Hilda looked at me with reproachful eyes.

"Don't, Harry," she said. "Don't be unjust in your generous indignation. He would not have revealed your secret had he not seen it was the only way to prevent the sacrifice of your happiness, and hers—and mine."

"My passion had mastered me, and I burst forth again into wild denunciations of my false friend. But Hilda rose and checked me."

"Stop," she said. "You must not speak of him like this to me—you would not if you knew. I am his wife!"

"The words fell on me like a stunning blow. They took from me my strength—I could not speak—I could not move. It is strange that for the moment I felt no doubt about their truth, but I could not reflect on their import. My reeling brain presented to me only a succession of wild, confused emotions, which for the time rendered any effort at thought impossible. Then I seemed to realize at once all that her words conveyed—the success of heartless treachery—the loss of my love—the ruin of my life—and I struggled fiercely to convince myself that her utterance could not be true. Hilda

the wife of Mark Ashlin! Hilda pledged to me two months ago when I parted from her, now Mark Ashlin's wife! Madness! It was not true!"

"Hilda, child, my Hilda!" I cried, "have pity on me. Do not torture thus a human heart. Tell me how you spoke in cruel jest—tell me this is not true!"

"As I gazed at her, all expression faded from her face, and she stood motionless, with dilated eyes."

"Harry," she almost whispered, "have I—have I—been deceived?" "But she needed no reply. My words, my look, had told her."

"For some moments no sound escaped her parted lips. Her eyes were fixed in a gaze of horror. Then she whispered again:—"

"We are lost, Harry, lost through my folly. Oh my love, my love," she cried, in a burst of anguish, "coming to me for a moment, I meant to crush my heart and sacrifice my happiness, my life, for yours. But, this living death—the ruin of us both—what human strength can bear it?"

"In the midst of my agony the thought that I had won this great, unselfish love of hers filled me for the moment with the wildest joy, but only to intensify the horror of the truth that rushed again on my mind, that she was lost to me for ever. But I tried once more to disbelieve it."

"No, no, it cannot be true," I cried. "Unnatural, unreal as—"

"She stopped me with a moan of pain. "Harry, it is true; I was duped. He told me you would never break your vow to me; that the only way to save you was secretly to take the fatal step I did two days ago. Harry—only two days ago. Oh, to be parted from you thus, with your heart still mine! I cannot—"

"Her voice failed her, her self-control gave way, and she broke into a wild agony of sobbing."

"Nothing but the slight of her grief could have added to my torture. The power to think seemed again to forsake me, and my brain to run riot uncontrolled by my will. My senses, too, seemed falling me. I thought I saw Hilda turning and passing from me, and, with a wild cry, I fell upon the ground before her, endeavouring to clasp her knees in my embraces."

"But my arms enclosed nothing. She was not there. The next moment I lay in complete insensibility. The return of consciousness came to me in the form of a gradual and gentle awakening from sleep. I had been sleeping—I dozed—then I awoke—and found myself lying in the chair into which I had fallen to await Hilda's return; and Hilda was standing near me, with a smile on her sweet face."



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