

Maud Percy's Secret

BY MAY AGNES FLEMING

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"The Fatal Wedding"
"The Unseen Bridegroom,"
"A Terrible Secret."

(CONTINUED.)

The intense sorrow of the Countess De Courcy had also been subdued and rendered far less poignant by time. She, too, had been obliged by her elevated position, to resume that place in the fashionable world she was so well fitted to fill. But when in the glittering assembly, the brilliant ball, the gorgeous pageant, was sweet lost Erminie forgotten? Never! Outwardly, that one great sorrow had left its traces still in the deeper pallor of the lovely face, in the subdued light of the large, melancholy dark eyes, in the soft, tender smile, that seemed something holy as it hovered about the sweet beautiful lips. Her love for children amounted almost to a passion; those "human flowers," as some one prettily calls them, could at any time arrest her attention and make her forget all else. Not a child among all the earl's tenantry that had not received proof of her affection, in the shape of creature-comforts; and even as she idolized children, so was she invariably loved by them in return.

The country-seat of the De Courcys was a fine old mansion, embowered in trees, with splendid parks, fine preserves, and surrounded by beautiful scenery. Here, with their friends the earl and countess were in the habit of going each summer, to spend a few weeks; and here the happiest moments of Lady Maude were spent, wandering through the dim old woods, where she could dream, undisturbed, of her lost darling.

Taking her accustomed walk one day, she was arrested by the loud cries of a child near. With her sympathies ever enlisted for children, she glanced quickly in the direction and beheld a little, infantile-looking child of two years old, apparently gazing bewildered, and screaming away at the top of its lungs.

Lady Maude approached, and at a single glance became deeply interested in this little stray waif.

It was a face of singular beauty that met her eye. A dark, olive complexion, large, brilliant black eyes, coal-black hair, that now hung tangled and disordered over her shoulders. Her little dress was torn and her hands and face scratched with brambles. The child was evidently lost.

Lady Maude approached; and the child, turning to gaze on her, for a moment ceased her cries. Stooping down, she parted the tangled cllocks of the dark little face, and gazed long and earnestly down into the bright eyes that fearlessly met her own. It seemed to her she must have seen a face like this somewhere before, and that it was connected with some dark memory—what, she could not tell.

The child looked up to the pale, sweet face of the lovely lady, and artlessly lisped:

"Ma mere."

"French," murmured Lady Maude in surprise. "How in the world can she have come here? Where is 'mother,' little one?" she asked, in the same language.

"Gone away—bad man get Rita," lisped the little, innocent.

The Countess was at a loss and perhaps would have gone with the little one farther into the woods, had not one of the earl's game-keepers come up at that instant, and taking off his hat, said:

"Better not venture into the woods, my lady; a gang of gipsies passed through last night." Then catching sight of Rita, as the child called herself, he burst out, in surprise: "Why, bless my soul, here's one of 'em!"

"Does this child belong to the gipsies?"

"Yes, my lady; saw her with them when they passed through last night.

She's got left behind in a mistake. I don't believe she's one of 'em, though; stole, most likely."

"Do you think so?" said Lady Maude, with interest. "Why do you think she has been stolen?"

"Why, my lady, if she had been one of themselves, some of the women would have had her; but nobody seemed to own this one, or to care about her. I saw, one of the men draw her alongside of the head last night, with a blow that knocked her down. Lord! how my fingers were itching to do the same to him!"

"Poor little thing!" said Lady Maude compassionately, folding her in her arms with a sudden impulse. "Poor little thing! Yes, now I think of it, it is more than probable she has been stolen, for she cannot speak English. Carry her to the hall; her poor little feet are all cut and bleeding, and we cannot allow her to perish here."

The man lifted the child in his arms, and followed the countess to the hall, where she gave orders to have the little foundling properly dressed and cared for, before presenting her to the earl. He smiled as he listened to her story, and followed her to the room where little Rita now yawned and neatly dressed, sat on the floor, playing with some

But as his eyes rested on the dark, brilliant face, the smile faded away, and a half-puzzled, half-doubtful look took its place.

"Is she not beautiful, dear Ernest? Does she not remind you of some dark, rich tropical flower?" said Lady Maude, in admiration.

"Or some bright-winged, gorgeous little butterfly—yes," said Lord De Courcy. "But, Maude, it seems to me—I cannot account for it—but it seems as if I had seen it somewhere before."

"O, my lord! have you, too, observed it?" cried Lady Maude, breathlessly. "It was the first thing that struck me, too. How very singular!"

"I suppose she resembles some one we have both known. There is no accounting for the strange likenesses we see sometimes in total strangers. Well, what do you intend to do with this little bird of paradise you have caught?"

"Let her remain here in charge of the house-keeper. I cannot account for the strange interest I feel in this little one, Ernest."

"I should like to see the child you do not feel an interest in, Maude," he said, smiling. "But are there no means of finding out to whom she belongs. Her parents may be living, and lamenting her loss, even now, dear wife."

"There are no means of discovering them, Ernest," she said half-sadly. "The gipsies are gone; but Martha found a little silver cross round her neck, on which were engraved the letters, 'M. J. L.' I have laid it carefully aside, though I fear her parentage may never be discovered."

"Well, do as you like with her, dear Maude. The child is certainly very beautiful. I believe you love all children for our lost treasure's sake."

"Oh, I do—I do! my sweet, precious Erminie! O, my lord! if this little one had blue eyes and fair hair like her, I could find it in my heart to adopt her for our darling's sake."

"You would not let such a trifle as that prevent you Maude, if you really wished it. But let the child remain. Rita—that's her name, isn't it?—come here, Rita."

He held out his arms. Rita looked at him from under her long eye-lashes, and then going over, nestled within them just as Erminie used to do.

The simple action awoke a host of tender memories that for a moment nearly unnerved the earl. Rising hastily, he kissed Rita and left the room. But from that day the little stray waif was an inmate of the hall, and with every passing day, grew more and more deeply dear to the earl and countess.

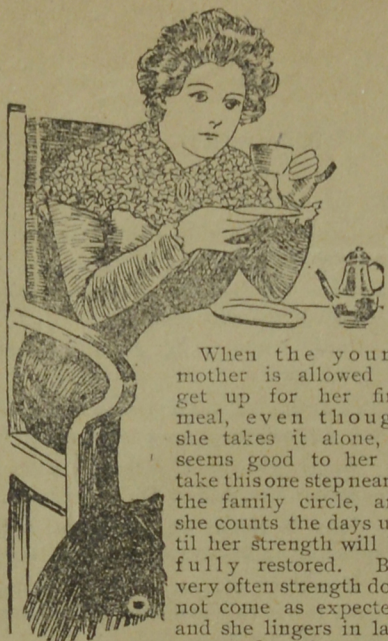
Without legally adopting her, they learned to look upon her, as time passed, in the light of a daughter sent to take the place of the lost one. Rita addressed them by the endearing name of father and mother; and the world tacitly seemed to take it for granted that little "Lady Rita" was to be heiress and daughter of Earl De Courcy.

At seven years old, Lady Rita had her governess, and began her education. She seemed to have forgotten she ever had any other father and mother than Lord and Lady De Courcy.

And so, while the lost daughter was living in poverty, in a little cottage, in her far-distant home, dependent on the bounty of others, the adopted daughter was growing up, surrounded by every luxury that fond hearts could bestow upon her.

CHAPTER XXIV.

Your pardon, dear reader, if, without further preface, I skip over a



When the young mother is allowed to get up for her first meal, even though she takes it alone, it seems good to her to take this one step nearer the family circle, and she counts the days until her strength will be fully restored. But very often strength does not come as expected, and she lingers in languor and weakness. At such a time there is need of an invigorating tonic, and the very best tonic which a nursing mother can use is Dr. Pierce's Favorite Prescription. It contains no alcohol nor narcotics. It gives real strength.

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period of six years. One brief bird's eye glance at the past and then to go on with our history.

Those six years had changed Ray and Ranty from boys of fifteen to young men of twenty-one, and had metamorphosed Erminie and Petronilla from little girls of twelve and eleven to young ladies of respectively eighteen and seventeen. Beyond that it had wrought little change in Judestown or its inhabitants.

Master Ranty having displayed, during his rapid career at College, sundry "fast," tendencies, was sent to sea to take the nonsense out of him. That young gentleman bore his fate with most exemplary patience and resignation.

Great was the delight of the worthy admiral, his uncle, when he heard of his nephew's destination; and it was partially through his influence, that, some months after, Ranty, radiant in blue roundabout and bright brass buttons stood on the deck of the "Sea Nymph," and wrote his name in tremendous capitals, as "Randolph Lawless, U.S.N."

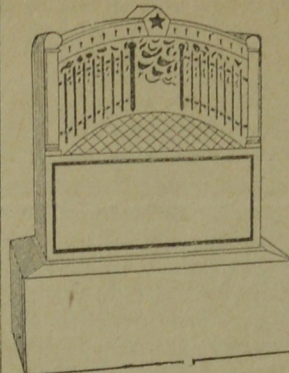
"Now, remember, Minnie, you must not go and fall in love with anybody else," was his parting words, "if you do I'll knock all creation into everlasting smash; I'll hurl the whole universe into the regions of space; I'll set fire to every blessed one in the United States, and bring all the world and Nebraska Territory to universal ruin!"

Duly impressed by these appalling and blood-chilling threats, Erminie dutifully promised not to "go and fall in love with anybody else," and Mr. Lawless transformed into a dashing midshipman, gave his friends at home his blessing, and set off on his first voyage.

Ray, who even in his boyhood had displayed great talent in legal matters, was now, by the kindness of the Admiral in New York City, studying law.

Erminie, too, was absent from home now. Having completely captivated the heart of the generous and eccentric Admiral Havenful, as she did that of most others, he set about thinking one day, what was the best means to display his affection. Just then he recollected her fondness for learning, and the few opportunities she had to indulge that fondness; and jumping up, he struck the table a vigorous blow, exclaiming:

[TO BE CONTINUED.]



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