

Maud Percy's Secret

BY MAY AGNES FLEMING

(CONTINUED.)

That time had come now. Calling, one morning, and finding her in the drawing room, he was greeted with a brilliant smile, with a quick flush of pleasure, and a manner so different from her customary one, that his heart bounded with sudden hope.

"I am truly rejoiced to see Lady Maude recovering her spirits again," he said, his fine eyes lit up with pleasure.

"If Lord Villiers only knew how much cause I had for that 'nameless melancholy,' he would forgive me any pain it may ever have caused him," she said, while a shadow of the past fell darkly over her bright young face.

"And may I not know? Dearest Maude, when is this mystery to end? Am I never to be made happy by the possession of this dear hand?"

He took the little, white hand, small and snowy as a lily-leaf, and it was no longer withdrawn, but nestled lovingly in his, as if there it found its rightful home.

"Maude, Maude," he cried, in a delirium of joy, "is your dark dream, then, in reality over? O Maude, speak, and tell me! Am I to be made happy yet?"

"If you can take me as I am, if you can forgive and forget the past, I am yours, Ernest!" she said in a thrilling whisper.

In a moment she was in his arms, held to the true heart whose every throb was for her—her head upon the breast that was to pillow hers through life.

"Maude, Maude! My bride, my life, my peerless darling! O Maude, this is too much happiness!" he cried, in a sort of transport between the passionate kisses pressed on her warm, yielding lips.

Blushingly she rose from his embrace, and gently extricated herself from his arms.

"O Maude, my beautiful darling! May heaven forever bless you for this!" he fervently exclaimed, all aglow with passionate love.

She had sunk into a seat, and bent her head into her hand, not daring to meet the full, falcon gaze, flashing with deepest tenderness, that she knew was bent upon her.

"Speak again, Maude! Once more let me hear those precious words from your own sweet lips, Maude! Maude, sweetest and fairest, speak!"

He wreathed his arms around her, while he seemed breathing out his very soul as he aspirated her name.

"But you have not heard all, my lord. This secret—do you not wish to hear it?" she faintly said, without lifting her dark, beautiful eyes.

"Not unless it is your wish to tell it. I want to hear nothing but that you are my own."

"Yet, when you hear it, my lord, you may reject the hand I have offered."

"Never, never! Nothing under heaven could make me do that!"

"You speak rashly, Lord Ernest. Wait until you have heard all. I dare not accept the noble heart and hand you offer, without revealing the one great error of my youth."

"You commit error, my beautiful saint? You, who are as perfect in soul as in body. O Maude, I cannot believe it."

"It is true, nevertheless, my lord. But oh, how shall I tell you? How can I confess what I have been—what I am?"

Encircling her with his arm, he drew her down until her white face lay hidden in his breast, and then pressing his lips to the dark ripples of hair sweeping against his cheek, he murmured, in tenderest whisper:

"Tell me now, Maude, and fear not; for nothing you can say will convince me you are not as pure and unsullied as the angels themselves. What is this terrible secret, sweetest love?"

"O my dear lord! every word you speak, every caress you give me, makes my revelation the harder!" she passionately cried. "And yet it must be made, even though you should spurn me from you in loathing after. Listen, my lord. You think me Lady Maude Percy?"

"Yes, dear love."

"That is not my name!"

"What, Maude?"

"That is not my name. No; I am not mad, Lord Villiers, though you look as though you thought so. I have been mad once! You and all the world are deceived. I am not what I seem."

"What in heaven's name, do you mean? What then, are you?"

"I was a wife! I have been a mother! I am a widow!"

"Maude!"

"You recoil from me in horror! I knew it would be so. I deserve it—I deserve it! but O Lord Villiers, it will kill me!" she cried, passionately wringing her hands.

"Maude, are you mad?"

"I am not—oh, I am not! if a grief-crazed brain, a blighted life, a broken heart be not madness."

"But, Maude! Good heavens! You are so young—not yet eighteen! O,

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

it cannot be—led; incoherently.

"Would to God it were not! Yet four years ago I was a wedded wife!"

"Wife, mother, and widow at eighteen? Maude, Maude—how can I realize this?"

"Oh, I was crazed! I was mad! and I did love him so, then! Not as I love you, Lord Ernest, with a woman's strong, undying affection, but with the wild, passionate fervor of youth. I must have inherited my dead mother's Spanish blood; for no calm-pulsed English-girl ever felt love like that."

"O Lady Maude!—Lady Maude! I could hardly have believed a messenger from Heaven had he told me this."

"God be merciful to human error! A long life of sorrow and remorse must atone for that first rash fault."

He was pacing up and down the long room with rapid, excited strides:

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his one face flushed, and his hands tightly shut, as if to keep down the bitterness that rebelliously rose at this unlooked-for avowal. He had expected to hear some light, trivial fault, magnified by a morbid imagination; but not a clandestine marriage.

And therefore, pacing up and down—up and down, with brain and heart in a tumult—Lord Ernest Villiers' pride for one moment overcame and mastered his love. For one brief moment only—for then his eyes fell on the drooping figure and despair-bowed young head, and the anguished attitude went to his heart, bringing back a full tide of pity, love and forgiveness. All was forgotten, but that she was the only one he ever did or could love; and lifting the sorrowful head and grief-bound form in his arms, once more he clasped her closer to the manly young heart she could feel throbbing under her own, and whispered:

"My own life's darling still! O Maude! if you must grieve, it shall be on my breast. If you have erred,

so, too, have I—so have we all, often. I will forget all but that you have promised my arms should be your home forever!"

"And you forgive and love me still? O Lord Ernest!"

He kissed away her tears as she wept aloud.

"One thing more, dearest. Who was my Maude's first love?"

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

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	Assets	Surplus
1893	\$6,453,309.56	\$229,292.86
1894	6,597,336.30	359,783.12
1895	6,797,391.05	435,113.55
1896	7,039,323.43	507,348.19
1897	7,236,555.75	548,321.09
1898	7,544,227.02	574,224.75
1899	7,991,042.63	576,807.50
1900	8,482,038.00	586,040.24
1901	9,013,082.63	607,932.00
	Premium Income	Total Income
1893	\$ 964,201.08	\$1,261,930.51
1874	989,552.73	1,296,145.86
1895	1,040,240.77	1,353,713.38
1896	1,107,779.45	1,421,686.70
1897	1,182,965.15	1,525,630.16
1898	1,278,649.29	1,665,430.85
1899	1,444,862.27	1,833,919.16
1900	1,575,176.23	1,959,882.01
1901	1,735,036.06	2,105,141.94

Notices of Death, Amount of Insurance in Force.

1893	\$456,000	\$35,914,417
1894	452,628	36,312,041
1895	498,969	36,932,148
1896	418,436	38,086,849
1897	604,811	39,943,575
1898	571,316	42,222,364
1899	600,206	46,054,820
1900	594,110	50,191,853
1901	685,472	52,945,044

From the foregoing tables it will be observed that more than two and one-half million dollars have been added to the Assets during the period outlined, that the Premium Income has increased seven hundred seventy thousand dollars, that the surplus to policy holders has increased nearly three-fold and that over seventeen million dollars more insurance is now in force than at the beginning of the term designated.

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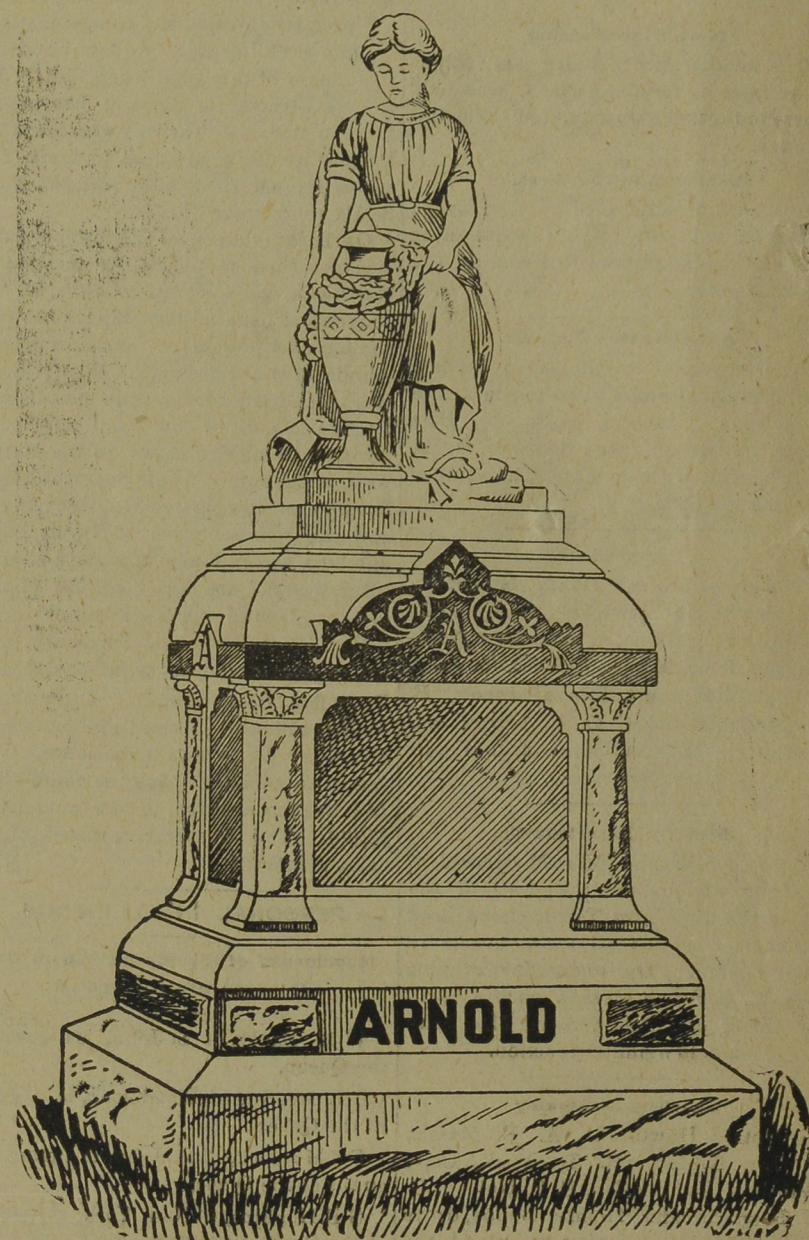
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