# Maud Percy's Secret . .

BY MAY AGNES FLEMING

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

(CONTINUED.)

Down in the spacious drawing room Lady Maude soon found herself fully occupied in receiving the guests, who began to arrive thick and fast. But this did not remove her strange anxiety concerning Erminie; and about an hour after, she stole away for a moment to pay a hurried visit to the nursery.

All was calm and peaceful there. Little Erminie lay asleep once more in her crib, and Martha sat dozing in her rocking chair. Half ashamed of her groundless fears, Lady Maude lightly kissed her sleeping infant and hurried away. Little did she dream how many suns would rise and set—how many years would come and go—before they two should meet again. The night in mirth and music was passing on and the hour of midnight approached.

The Duchess of B., Earl De Courcy, and Lady Maude, were standing conversing together, when, as if struck by a sudden thought, the duchess exclaimed:

"Oh! by the way, Lady Maude, do you recollect the strange voice that interrupted the ceremony the night you were married? Have you ever discovered who that was?"

Both Lady Maude and the earl grew pale.

"Never! The whole affair has been wrapped in mystery ever since," said Lady Maude, with a slight shudder.

"Dear me, how frightened I was that night!" said the duchess, arranging her bracelets. "It was quite dreadful; the most mysterious thing—just like a ghost, or something in a play."

The duchess broke off suddenly and listened, as the great hall-clock tolled the hour of twelve.

And just as the last stroke died away, that same terrific voice they had heard years before pealed through the spacious room like the deep tolling of a death bell.

"Two years ago this night a legal murder was committed, and now the hour of retribution is at hand. The sins of the father shall be visited upon the children and the children's children, even to the third and fourth generations. Woe to all of the house of De Courcy!"

As if the angel of death had suddenly descended in their midst, every face blanched, and every heart stood still with nameless horror. For one moment, the silence of the grave reigned, then a wild, piercing shriek was heard through the house, and the nurse Martha, with terror-blanched face, and uplifted arms, rushed into the midst of the assembled guests, screaming:

"O Miss Minnie! Miss Minnie! Miss Minnie!"

"O God! my child!" came from the white lips of Lady Maude, in a voice that those who heard never forgot, as she fled from the room, up the long staircase, and into the nursery.

But the crib was empty; the babe was gone.

The wild, wild shriek of a mother's woe resounded through the house, and Lady Maude fell in a deadly swoon on the floor.

And when Lord Villiers—his own noble face white and set with unutterable anguish—burst into the room, he found her lying cold and lifeless on the ground.

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Meantime, some of the most self-possessed of the guests had assembled round Martha, in order to extract from her, if possible, what had happened.

But half insane with terror already, the continuous screaming of the frightened ladies completely drove every remaining gleam of sense out of her head, and her words were so wild and incoherent, that but little could be made out of them. It appeared from what she said, that she had been sitting half asleep in her chair, with her little charge wholly asleep in the cradle beside her, when suddenly a tall, dark shadow seemed to obscure the light in the room; and looking up with a start of terror, she beheld the most awful monster—whether man, or woman, or demon, she could not tell—in the act of snatching little Erminie from the cradle, and flying from the room. Frozen with horror, she had remained in her seat unable to move, until at last, fully conscious of what had taken place, she had fled screaming down stairs. And that was all she could tell. In vain they questioned and cross-questioned; they could obtain nothing further from the terrified Martha, and only succeeded in driving the few remaining wits she had, out of her head.

Lord Villiers, leaving his still senseless wife in the care of her maids, with a face that seemed turned to marble, gave orders to have the house, the grounds, the whole of London, if necessary, ransacked in search of the abductor.

But there was one who sat bowed, collapsed, shuddering in his seat, who recognized that voice, and knew scious of nothing but her own maddening wrongs, glaring before her like a maniac, and dashing fiercely to the ground with her clenched fist all those who moved by pity, would [illegible] that those awful words meant, and that one was Earl De Courcy.

"She has murdered her! she has murdered her!" was the cry that seemed rending his very heart with horror and despair.

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CHAPTER XII.

Maddened, despairing, blaspheming, cursing earth and heaven, God and man, hating life, and sunshine, and the world, the wretched gipsy queen had fled from those who gathered around her on that morning full of woe, and fled far away, she neither knew nor cared whither.

She sped along through lanes, and streets, crowded thoroughfares, seeing nothing, hearing nothing, conhave stopped her. On, like a bolt from a bow, until the city seemed to fade away, and she saw green fields, and pretty cottages, and waving trees, and knew that she had left London behind her.

Night came on before she thought of stopping for a single instant to rest. She had walked far that day; her feet were bleeding and blistered; for nearly three days she had touched nothing but cold water, yer her iron frame was unsubdued—she felt no weariness, no faintness, no hunger. The indomitable spirit within, sustained her. She thought of nothing, cared for nothing, but revenge; and for that her very soul was crying out with a longing—a hunger that nothing could appease. She dared not stop for one moment to think; she felt she would go mad if she did; so she hurried on and on, as if driven on by some fierce, inward power, against which it was useless to contend.

How the night passed, how morning came, how she found herself in the peaceful depths of the forest, she never could tell. How, ere that sun set, she found herself with her tribe, lying prostrate on the cold ground, conscious, like one in some frightful nightmare, of what was passing around her, yet unable to comprehend what it meant—all was vague and unreal still. Past, and present, and future, all were mingled together in one dark, dreadful chaos, of which nothing was real but the dull, muffled pain at her heart, and the word revenge, that kept ever dancing in letters of blood-red flame before her hot, scorching eyes.

[To be Continued.]


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| | Assets. | Surplus. |
|---|---|---|
| 1893 | $6,453,309.56 | $229,292.86 |
| 1994 | 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 | 1,575,176.25 | 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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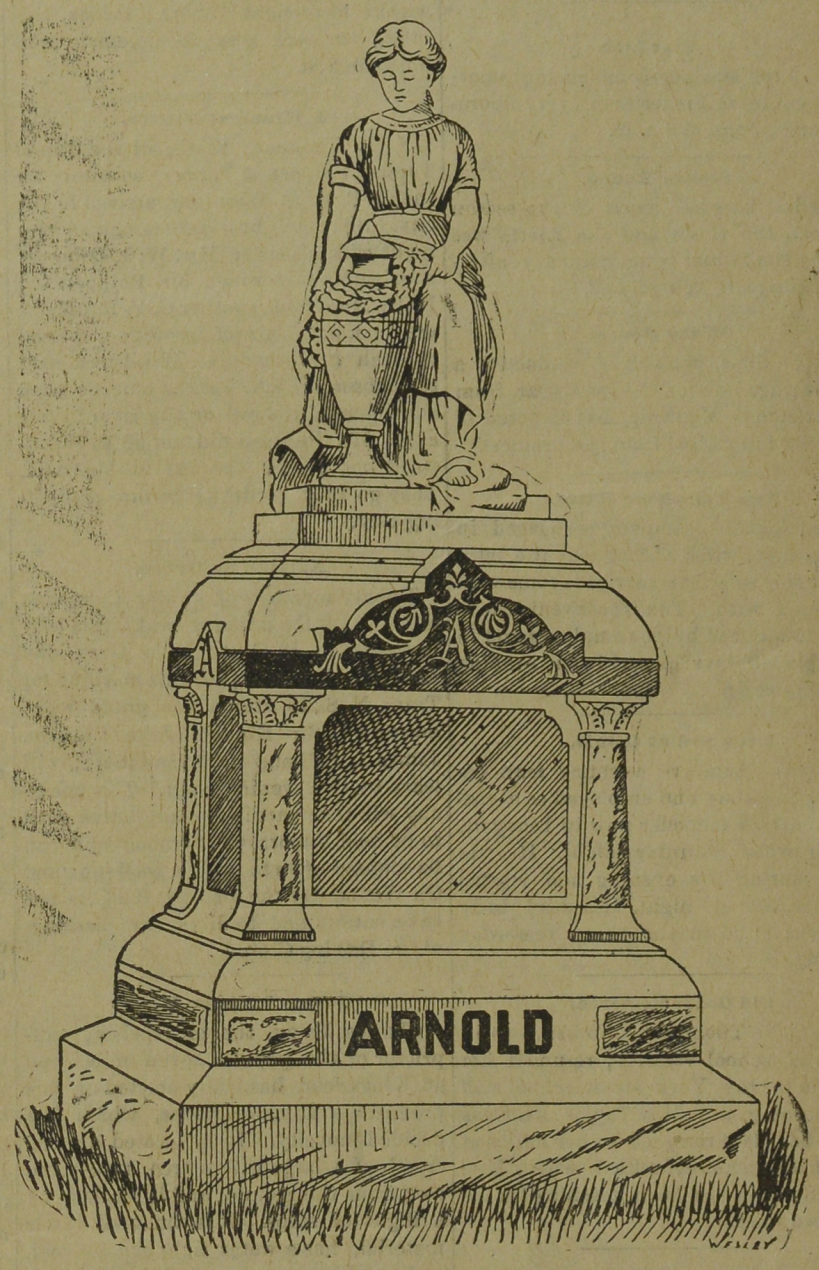


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