

Maud Percy's Secret

BY MAY AGNES FLEMING

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

(CONTINUED.)

"For, mother, even as I loved her she loved me. No, not as I loved her—it was not in her nature to do that, but with all the passionate ardor of a first, strong passion. I had long known I was not indifferent to her, but when, one night, as I stood bending over her as she sat at the piano, and heard her stately lady-aunt whisper to a friend that, in a few years, her 'lovely and accomplished niece' would become the bride of Lord Ernest Villiers, only son of Earl De Courcy, all that had hitherto restrained me from telling that love was forgotten. I saw her start, and turn pale as she, too, heard and caught the quick, anxious glance she cast at me. All I felt at that moment must have been revealed in my face, for her eyes fell beneath mine, and the hot blood mounted to her very brow."

"And you are engaged to another," I said, in a tone of passionate reproach. "Oh, why did I not know this?"

"It is no engagement of my making," she said, in a low, trembling voice. "I never saw Lord Villiers, nor he me. Our fathers wish we should marry, that is all."

"And will you obey?" I said, in a thrilling whisper.

"No," she said impulsively; "never."

"The look that accompanied the words made me forget all I had hitherto striven to remember. In an instant I was at her feet, pouring out my wild tale of passion; in another, she was in my arms, whispering the words that made me the

happiest man on earth. It was well for us both the room was nearly deserted, and the corner where we were in deepest shadow, or the ecstasies into which, like all lovers, we went, would have led to somewhat unpleasant consequences. But our destinies had decreed we should, for the time, have things all our own way; and that night I urged, with all the eloquence of a first, resistless passion, a secret marriage. I spoke of her father's compelling us to part; of his insisting on her marriage with one whom she could not love; I drew a touching description of myself, devoted to a life of solitude and misery, and probably ending by committing suicide—which melancholy picture so worked upon her fears, that I verily believe she would have fled with me to New South Wales, had I asked it. And so I pleaded, with all the ardor of a passion that was as strong and uncontrollable as it was selfish and exacting, until she promised, the following night, to steal secretly out and fly with me to where I was to have a clergyman in waiting, and then and there become my wife."

Once more he paused, and his fine eyes were full of bitter self-reproach now.

"Mother, that was the turning-point in my destiny. Looking back to that time now, I can wish I had been struck dead sooner than have hurried, as I did, that impulsive, warm-hearted girl into that fatal marriage. Then, in all the burning ardor of youth, I thought of nothing but the intoxicating happiness within my grasp. I thought only of the present—of the joy, too intense, almost, to be borne—and I steadily shut my eyes to the future. Had she known who I really was, I know she would have considered me unworthy to touch even the hem of her garment."

"All that day she remained in her room; while I rode off to a neighboring town to engage a clergyman to unite us at the appointed hour. Midnight found me waiting, at the trysting-place; and true to the hour, my beautiful bride, brave in the strength of her love and woman's faith in my honor, met me there, alone."

"Two horses stood waiting. I lifted her into the saddle, sprung upon my own horse; and away we dashed, at a break-neck pace, to consummate our own future misery. She did not utter a word; but her face was whiter than that of the dead when I lifted her from her saddle and drew her with me into the church."

"The great aisles were dimly lighted by one solitary lamp, and by its light we beheld the clergyman, standing, in full canonicals, to sanction our mad marriage. Robed in a dark, flowing dress, with her white face looking out from her damp, flowing, midnight hair, I can see her before me, as she stood there, shivering at intervals with a strange presaging of future evil."

"It was an ominous bridal, mother: for, as the last words died away, and we were pronounced man and wife, the harsh, dreadful croak of a raven resounded through the vast, dim church, and the ghostly bird of omen fluttered for a moment over our heads, and fell dead at our feet. Excited by the consciousness that she was doing wrong; the solemn, unlighted old church; the dread, mystic hour—all proved too much for my little child-wife, and

with a piercing shriek she fell fainting in my arms. Mother, the unutterable reproach of that wild, agonized cry will haunt me to my dying day."

No words can describe the bitterness of his tone, the undying self-reproach that filled his dark eyes, as he spoke.

"We bore her to the vestry; but it was long before she revived, and longer still before, with all the seductive eloquence of passionate love, I could soothe her into quiet."

"O Reginald, I have done wrong—I have done wrong!" was her sorrowful, remorseful cry to all I could say.

"We paid the clergyman, and rode home—the gipsy youth and the high-born lady, united for life now by the mysterious tie of marriage. Now that the last, desperate step was taken, even I grew for a moment appalled at what I had done. But I

Three weeks longer we continued inmates of Everly Hall; and no one ever suspected that we met other than as casual acquaintances. Looking back now on my past life, those are the only days of unalloyed sunshine I can remember in the whole course of my life and she—she, too, closed her eyes to the future, and was for the time being, perfectly happy."

"But the time came when we were forced to part. She went back to school, while I returned to London. I met her frequently at first; but her father, after a time, began to think, perhaps, that, for the son of an exiled count, I was making too rapid progress in his daughter's affections, and peremptorily ordered her to discontinue the acquaintance. But she loved me well enough to disobey him; and though I saw she looked forward with undisguised terror to the time when the revelation of our marriage would be made, we still continued to meet at long intervals."

"So a year passed. One day, wishing to consult her about something—we met at an appointed trysting-place. She entered the light chaise I had brought with me, and we drove off. The horses were half-tamed things at best, and in the outskirts of a little village, they took fright at something, and started off like the wind. I strove in vain to check them. On they flew, like lightning, until suddenly coming in contact with a garden fence, the chaise was overthrown, and we were both flung violently out."

[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	1,525,030.16
1898	1,278,649.29	1,665,430.85
1899	1,444,862.21	1,833,919.16
1900	1,575,176.25	1,959,882.01
1901	1,735,036.06	2,165,141.94

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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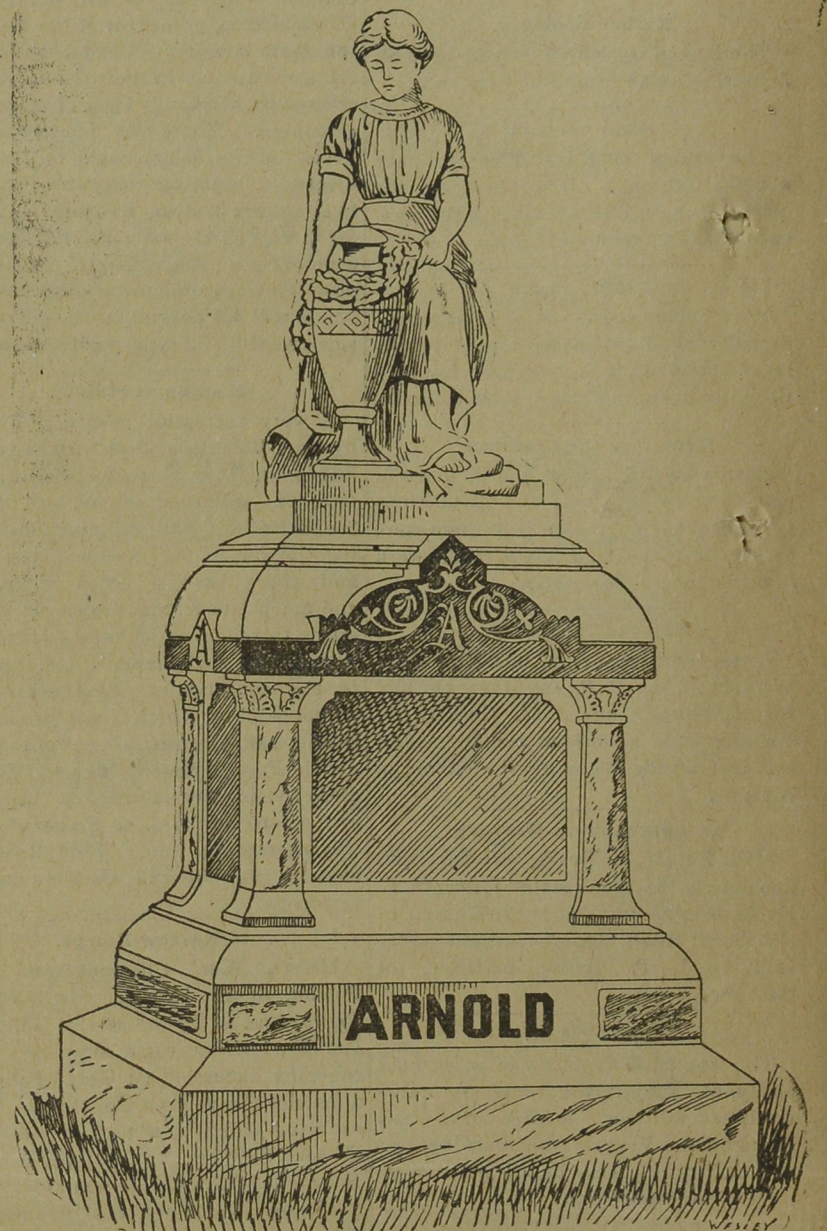
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