

Maud Percy's Secret

BY MAY AGNES FLEMING

(CONTINUED.)

"Who shall describe that meeting? Long, long years of darkest crime and wildest woe had intervened since that lowering, lamentable day on which they had parted last. Years full of change and sorrow, and sin, and remorse—years that had changed the powerful, passionate, majestic gipsy-queen into the helpless, powerless paralytic she was now—years that had changed the handsome, high-spirited, gallant youth into the bronzed, hard-nosed, guilty man lying there dying—passing slowly out into the dead unknown. Yet, despite time, and change, and years, they knew each other at the first glance.

"Mother," said the smuggler, with a faint, strange smile.

"O my son! my son! O my Reginald! my only son!" was her passionate cry. "Has the great sea given up its dead, that I see you again?"

"You with all the world were deceived, mother. When I am gone, you will hear all. Mother, I have only come here to die."

"Her feeble arms were clasped around him; she did not seem to heed his words, as her devouring eyes were riveted on his face. He lay breathing quickly and laborously, his face full of bitter sadness as he saw the wreck of what had once been his mother. The woman Marguerite, had drawn back, and stood gazing on Ketura with a sort of still amaze. Ray was leaning against the mantel, his elbow resting on it, and his face shaded by his dark, falling hair; and Erminie, crouched on a low seat, white and trembling, sat watching all. So they remained for a long time, the dull, heavy ticking of the clock and a death-watch on the wall, alone breaking the dreamy silence.

The quick, sharp gallop of horses' feet broke it, at last; and the next instant, Pet, flushed and excited, burst in, followed by the doctor and by Ranty. All paused in the doorway, and stood regarding with silent wonder, the scene before them. Ray lifted his head, and going over, touched Ketura on the arm, saying, in a low voice:

"Leave him for a moment; here is the doctor come to examine his wounds."

Her weak arms were easily unclasped, and she permitted herself to be borne away. Of all the strange things that had occurred that night, none seemed stranger to Ray than this sudden and wonderful quietude that had come over his fierce, passionate grandmother.

The doctor approached his patient to examine his wounds, and Pet, going over, began conversing in a low tone, with Erminie, telling her how she had encountered Ranty. Ray stood watching the doctor with interest and anxiety; and as, after a prolonged examination, he arose, he approached him and said, hurriedly:

"Well, doctor?"

The doctor shook his head.

"He may linger two, three days, perhaps, but certainly not longer. Nothing can save him."

Ray's very breath seemed to stop as he listened, till it became painful for those around to listen for its return. The wounded man himself looked up and beckoned Ray to approach.

"I knew I was done for," he said with a feeble smile. "I was surgeon enough to know it was a mortal wound. How long does he say I may live?"

"Two or three days," said Ray in a choking voice.

"So long?" said the smuggler, a dark shade passing over his face. "I did not think to cumber the earth such a length of time. How does she bear it?" pointing to his mother.

"She has not heard it yet; she seems to have fallen into an unnatural apathy. The shock has been too much for her."

"Poor mother!" he said in that same tone of bitter remorse Ray had heard him use before; "her worst crime was loving me too well. Bring her here; I have something to say to her which may as well be said now."

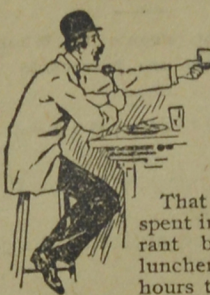
Ray carried over the almost motionless form of the aged gipsy.

"Mother," said the smuggler, taking the withered hand in his, and looking sadly in the vacant face, "Mother, listen to me. I have but a short time to live, and I cannot die till I learn if you have kept your vow of vengeance, made long ago against Lord De Courcy."

"I have! I have!" she exclaimed, rousing to something like her old fierceness. "O Reginald! you have been avenged. I have wrung drops of blood from their hearts, even as they wrung them from mine. Yes, yes, I have avenged you! They, too, know what it is to lose a child."

"Mother! mother! what have you

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CHAPTER XXXVIII.

In an elegantly furnished room, in a most elegant private mansion, a lady, still young, and exceedingly beautiful, sat with her head leaning on her hand, her eyes fixed thoughtfully and somewhat sadly on the floor. A little paler the noble brow, and a little graver and sweeter the lovely face, and a little more passive and less proud the soft, dark eyes; but in all else Maude, Countess De Courcy, was unchanged.

The rich black hair still fell in fleecy, silken ringlets round the sweet, moonlit face; the tender smile was as bright and beautiful, and the graceful form as superb and faultless as ever. There was a dreamy, far-off look in her dark, beautiful eyes, as she watched the setting sun—a look that seemed to say her thoughts were wandering in the far-off regions of the shadowy past.

The lady was not alone. Half-buried in the downy depths of a velvet-cushioned lounge reclined a proud, haughty, somewhat supercilious-looking young lady, most magnificently dressed. She was handsome, too—very handsome—despite her tossy, consequential air; but Lady Rita, only daughter and heir of Lord De Courcy, might be pardoned for feeling herself somewhat above the common. Her form was slight and girlish, but perfect in all its proportions, and displayed to the best advantage by her elegant robe; her complexion was dark as a Spaniard's, but the large, black eyes and shining black hair, of purplish lustre, were magnificent. Diamond pendants flashed and glittered in her small ears, glaring through the shadowy masses of rich, jetty hair whenever she moved, like sparks of fire. In one hand she held a richly inlaid fan, and with the other she languidly patted a beautiful little Blenheim spaniel that crouched at her feet and watched her with his soft, tender, brown eyes.

"Mamma," said the young lady, looking up, after a pause. The countess gave a slight start, like one suddenly awakened from a reverie, drew her hand, and turned round.

"Well, my daughter?"

"Do you know she is your sister, your mother's child?" asked the wounded man.

"I know it now; I did not before," was the awe-struck answer.

"You have heard she is in Baltimore,"

"I have."

"Then go there, immediately; ride as you never did before in your life, and tell them all. Bring her here; I would see her again before I die."

Ray started to his feet. "Tell her who you are yourself—her son; it will be better so. When they learn their long-lost daughter is here, they will need no incentive to make them haste. One act of justice must be rendered before I die."

"Let me accompany you," said Ranty, as Ray started from the house. "I know exactly where to find them. Saints and angels, where will the revelations of this night end?"

There was no reply from Ray; he could make none; his brains were whirling as if mad. He sprang on his horse, Ranty following, and in another instant they were flying on like the wind toward Judestown.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

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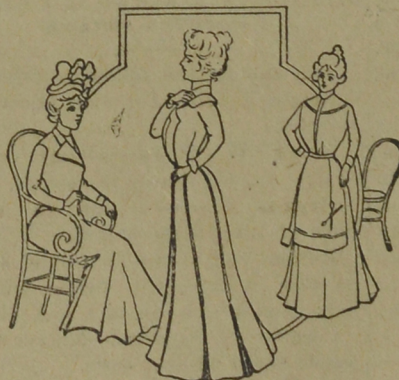
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