

Maud Percy's Secret

BY MAY AGNES FLEMING

(CONTINUED.)

"Lor' sakes! I is hurryin', Miss Minnie," said Lucy, as she bustled in, drew out a small, round table, laid the cloth, and prepared to arrange the breakfast-service. "Spect dat ar' little limb t'inks folks ought to git up de night afore, to have breakfast ready time nuff for her," muttered Lucy to herself, looking daggers at Pet Lawless, who, swinging her riding-hat in one hand and her whip in the other, watched Lucy's motions with a critical eye. Erminie, with her sunny face and ready hands, assisted in the arrangements; and soon the whole party were assembled round the table, doing ample justice to Lucy's morning meal.

And while they were thus engaged, I shall claim your patience for a moment, dear reader, while we cast a brief retrospective glance over the various changes that have occurred during those ten years.

By the kind care of good-natured Mr. Toosyeps, and his friend, Admiral Havenul, the gipsy Ketura had been amply provided for. As Raymond and Erminie grew up, they had been sent to Judestown to school, with the children of Judge Lawless, whose daughter, Miss Pet, has already been introduced to the reader. The dark, gloomy recluse, Ketura, was an object of dread and dislike to the neighborhood around. She shunned and avoided them, lived her own inward life independent of them all, and was therefore hated by them. And when, about a year previous to the present time, she received a severe paralytic stroke, from the effects of which she never fully recovered, very little sorrow was felt or expressed. Sweet, gentle little Erminie was, however, a favorite with all, and so was the bold, bright high-spirited Raymond, to whom the somewhat eccentric Admiral Havenul took such a fancy that he insisted on sending him to college with his nephew Ranty, or Randolph Lawless. To college, therefore, the boys went; and Erminie remained at the Barrens, and went every fine day to Judestown to the district school, sometimes, but very rarely, accompanied by Pet Lawless; for that wild young lady voted schools and school teachers and "Committee men," unmitigated bores, all, and preferred her own "sweet will" and her pony Starlight to suffering through "readin', writin', and refigetic." In vain her father, the judge, stormed and threatened her with all sorts of calamities. Pet, metaphysically speaking, snapped her finger in the face of all authority; and the more she wouldn't, though she did offer to do her best to learn if they would let her go with Ray and Ranty. But gaiters were things forbidden inside the college gates; and besides, Ranty very ungallantly protested that all girls in general, and "our Pet" in particular, were nothing but "pests," and that he wouldn't have her near him at any price. Master Ranty Lawless did not like the female persuasion, and once gruffly announced that his idea of Heaven was, a place where boys could do as they liked, and where there were no girls. So as Pet had no mother to look after her, and queneed it over the servants at home, she grew up pretty much as she liked, and was noted far and near as the wildest, maddest, skip-over-the-moon madcap that ever threw a peaceable community into convulsions.

This much being premised, it is only necessary to say that Ray and Ranty had returned from college for a few months' vacation, the day previous to the commencement of this chapter, and then go on with our story.

"When is Miss Priscilla coming over, Mr. Toosyeps?" said Erminie as she filled for the third time his cup with fragrant golden coffee.

"Morrer evening," replied Mr. Toosyeps, speaking with his mouth full; "she's going to bring you a parcel of muslin things to work for her."

"The collar and caps she was speaking of, I guess," said Erminie, with her pleasant smile.

"How in the world, Erminie," exclaimed Pet, "do you find time to work for everybody? I never saw you a moment idle yet."

"Well, it's pleasanter to be doing something," said Erminie; "and besides, Miss Priscilla can't do fine sewing, her eyes are so weak, you know. I can't bear to sit still and do nothing; I like to sew, or something."

"Ugh! sewing's the most horrid thing," said Pet, with a shrug; "I don't mind reading a pretty story to pass time now and then; but to sit down and go stitch-stitch-stitching for hours steady—well, I know I'd soon be in a strait-jacket if I tried it, that's all! I was reading a real nice book the other night."

"What was it?" asked Ray. "I should like to see the book you would like to read."

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

nasty old cannibal! And then this lady, I forget her name, came and dressed herself up in men's clothes and got him—the fellow who went courting, you know—off somewhere. Oh, it was splendid! I'll lend you the book sometime, Minnie."

"Why it must have been the 'Merchant of Venice' you read," said Ray, "though such a jumbled up account of it as that, I never heard. I'll go over for the book to-morrow and read it to Min, if she cares about hearing it."

Before Erminie could reply, a surprised ejaculation from Pet made her turn quickly round. Ray's eyes wandered in the same direction, while Mr. Toosyeps sprang from his seat in terror, thereby badly scalding himself with the hot coffee at the sight which met his astonished eyes.

CHAPTER XVI.

A little old decrepit woman, bent double with age, leaning on a staff, and, shaking with palsy, stood as suddenly before them as if she had sprung up through the earth. Her dress was the most astonishing complication of rags that ever hung together on a human back before. A long, old-fashioned cloak that, a hundred years before, had probably been all the rage, swept behind her; and as it trailed along, seemed in imminent danger of throwing the unfortunate old lady over her own head, every minute. A brown, sun-burnt face, half hidden in masses of coarse gray hairs peered wildly out; and from under a pair of bushy, overhanging gray eyebrows, gleamed two keen, needle-like eyes, as sharp as two-edged stilettos. This singular individual wore a man's old beaver hat on her head, which was forcibly retained on that palsy-shaking member by a scarlet bandanna handkerchief passed over the crown, and tied under the chin.

Altogether, the little, stooping, unearthly-looking crone was one of the most singular sights that mortal eyes ever beheld.

So completely amazed were the whole assembly, that for some five minutes they stood staring in silent wonder at this unexpected and most startling apparition.

"Don't be afraid, pretty ladies and gentlemen," said the little old lady, in a shrill, sharp falsetto. "I won't hurt none 'o you, ef you behave yourselves. I guess I may come in?"

And suiting the action to the word, the little owner of the extraordinary head-dress hobbled in, and composedly dumped herself down into the rocking chair Mr. Toosyeps had lately vacated.

"Now, what in the name of Hecate and all the witches, does this mean?" exclaimed Pet, first recovering her presence of mind.

"It means that I'll take some breakfas', if you'll bring it down, miss," said the little old woman, laying her formidable-looking stick across her lap; and favoring the company, one and all, with a prolonged stare from her keen, bright eyes.

"Well, now, that's what I call cool," said Pet, completely taken aback by the old woman's sang froid. "Perhaps your ladyship will be condescending enough to sit over here and help yourself?"

"No, thankee," squeaked her ladyship. "I'd rather have it here, if it's all the same to you, I ain't as smart as I used to was; and don't like to be getting up much. Perhaps t'other young gal wouldn't mind."

"Well, there ain't many I like, but oh! this one was ever so nice. It was all about a hateful old Jew who lent money to a man that wanted to go somewhere a-courting; and then this Jew wanted to cut off a pound of his flesh, to eat. I expect—the

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bringing it here," she added, looking at the astounded Erminie.

Roused out of her trance of astonishment, not unmingled with terror, by claims of hospitality, Erminie hastened to comply; and placing a cup of fragrant coffee and some buttered waffles on a light waiter, placed it on a chair within the old woman's reach.

That small individual immediately fell to, with an alacrity quite astonishing, considering her size and age; and coffee and waffles in a remarkably short space of time were "among the things that were, but are no longer."

"Thankee, young 'oman, that was very nice," said the old woman, drawing out a flaming yellow cotton pocket-handkerchief, and wiping her mouth, as a sign she had finished; "my appetite ain't so good as it used to be; I reckon that'll do for the present. What's your dinner-hour, young gals?"

"Little after midnight," said Pet.

"Humph! I reckon you're trying to poke fun at me, Miss Pet Lawless; but no good ever comes of telling lies. Have you ever heard tell on Annanias and Sapphira?" asked the old woman, turning sharply on Pet.

"Whew! ghosts, and goblins, and warlocks! She knows my name!" whistled Pet, in unbounded astonishment.

"Yes; I know more about you than I want to know," said the little old woman with a scowl.

"Well, you ain't the only one in that plight, if that's any consolation," said Pet, carelessly.

"Do you know who I am, too," said Ray.

"Yes, I've heern tell on you," said the old woman, shortly.

"And no good either, I'll be bound!" said Pet.

"Well, no; sence you say it, I never did hear any good of him," said the old woman, taking out a huge snuff-box, and composedly helping herself to a pinch.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

A Chinese compositor needs a type case at least sixty feet long and has to walk about twenty-five miles a day up and down it.

When we get what we want, we do not enjoy it as much as we had anticipated.

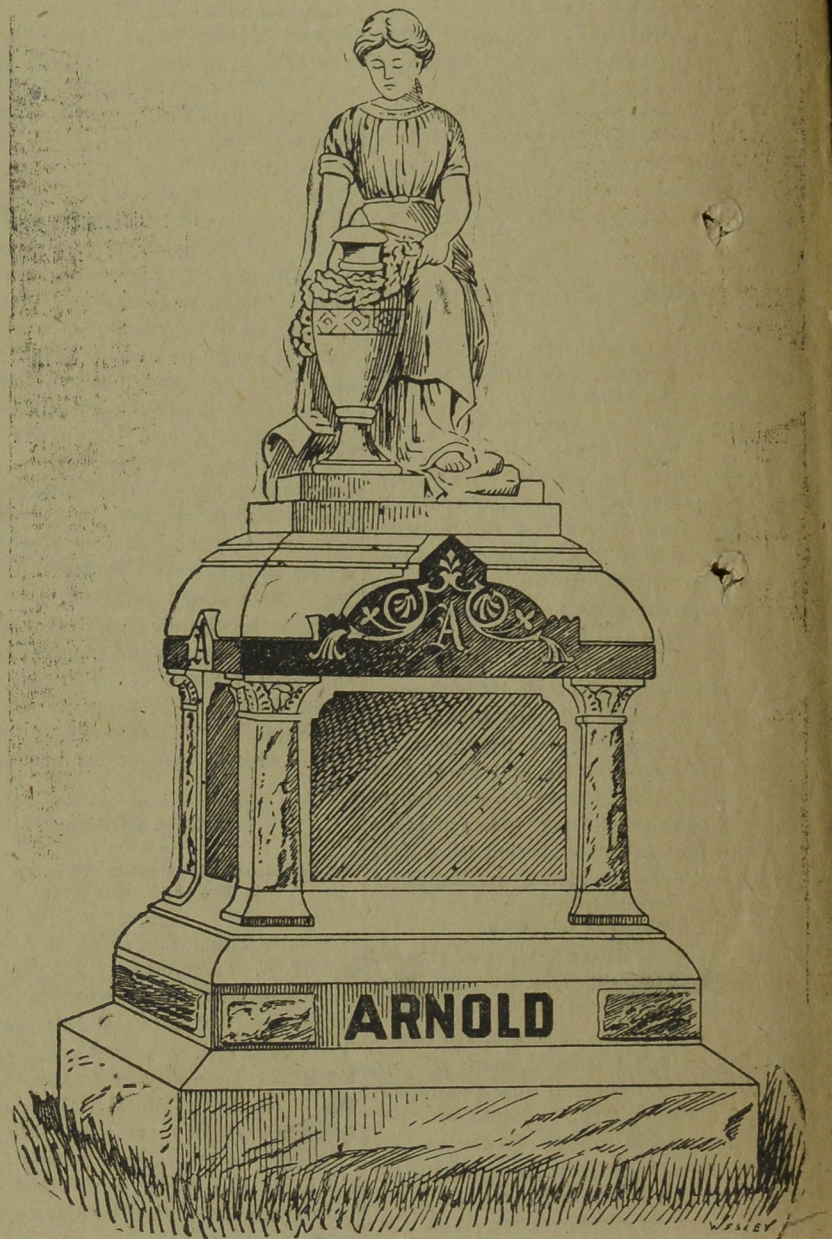
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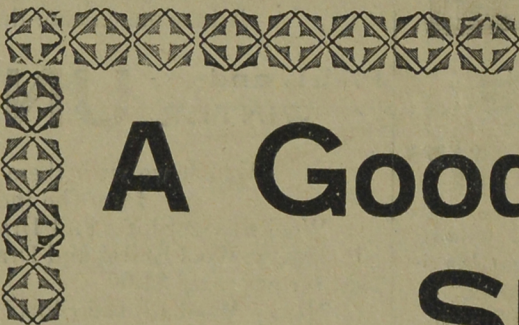
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