

Sylvia's Secret

by Robert Machray
Author of - "Sentenced to Death," etc.

CHAPTER XVII.

Snatched From Death.

BEFORE leaving London Max Hamilton wrote to Peggy Wilmoughby telling her that he had received his marching orders, and was setting out that night for the city of Luxemburg, where he did not know how long he might have to remain.

As it happened, it was his first love letter to her; they had always been able to communicate with each other, when they wished by means of the telephone, but Max was aware that she had gone out for the afternoon and evening, and so was not to be got at in the usual way.

It was not a lengthy letter; like most men who have much writing to do professionally, Max was apt to make his private correspondence somewhat brief. Peggy, however, did not think of the shortness of Max's letter; it was so full of the burning love which he felt for her that she deemed it the finest thing ever penned; she read and re-read it not a few times but many; perhaps she kissed it; in any case, she put it away among her treasures; in the dark days of trouble and anxiety that were to sweep down upon her it remained a comfort and a joy; she has it among her treasures still—though once she came near destroying it, as will be by and by told.

He did not mention what reason Beaumont had given for sending him in so hot a hurry to the Continent, as that was a confidential matter between the editor and himself, but he did say that his expedition was in connection with the threatening attitude of Germany. He referred to his want of success with respect to the solution of the mystery that surrounded the murder of Sylvia Chase, but said he hoped to find it on his return, if in the meantime it had not been discovered by others. Little did he imagine that every mile which took him further from England was taking him a mile nearer the revealing of the truth.

Peggy did not get Max's letter till the following morning; it was delivered at the house in St. Anton's Avenue just about the very time when Max was getting into the train for Luxemburg at l'Est station in Paris, that is, shortly after eight o'clock. His journey from London had been unmarked by any incident of note, and indeed he had managed to sleep for two or three hours after leaving Calais, but there had been plenty of time to think. Naturally he thought much of the girl he was leaving behind him, but his mind was also greatly occupied with the work before him.

When Beaumont had told him to start for Luxemburg, one thing had struck him as rather strange, and this was that the editor had kept to himself the source from which he had derived the information regarding the projected action of Germany; this was unlike Beaumont, so far as Max was concerned, for generally he gave him his fullest confidence when he sent him anywhere as a special correspondent. Max tried to guess whence Beaumont had received the intelligence, and came to the conclusion that it had not been through any official or ordinary channel.

As in duty bound, he was in closest touch with all the current news of the time; ever since Beaumont had spoken of the probability of his sending him to Germany, Max had made a special study of the various articles in the British, French and German Press dealing with the agitation; he knew, therefore, that this idea of the annexation by Germany of the Grand Duchy of Luxemburg, the independence and neutrality of which were guaranteed by the Powers, was something novel; there had not been the slightest hint of such an eventuality; if it actually

took place, it would be in complete violation of existing treaty obligations, and war could not but immediately ensue, unless Great Britain and France were prepared meekly to accept the situation.

That seemed an almost unimaginable thing. Yet, Max, thinking matters out, said to himself it looked as if Germany felt so arrogantly strong that it counted on this almost unimaginable thing being realised, as if, in fact, it could do what it liked in Europe without considering the susceptibilities of the other Powers, and help itself to this or that coveted territory. And if Luxemburg, why not Holland, a country even more desirable? He could not believe that the other two Powers would tamely submit, for that would be suicidal. Therefore there must be war.

It was more probable, he reflected, that Germany was reasoning in the same way. It might be that she wanted to fight the British, just as in past years she had fought the Austrians and the French. He wondered why, if Germany wanted war, it should begin taking the small Grand Duchy; to do that seemed a sheer waste of time as France could be struck at directly elsewhere.

AS Max pondered these things he began to wonder, furthermore, whether his editor, notwithstanding all his acuteness and sagacity, had not been misled into attaching too high a value to what he had heard. Was the story of the proposed annexation true? It appeared to Max to be just a little doubtful, all things considered.

On reaching Paris he bought the French papers and the two journals which are published in English there in the morning, and after quickly scanning their columns he had seen no indication whatever in any of them of the suggested action of Germany with regard to Luxemburg. Had an article on the subject been published in "The Day" there would certainly have been quotations from or references to it in some, at least, of these Paris papers, but as there was none, it was evident that Beaumont had not been so sure of the accuracy of the statement as to make it public.

Apart from this silence on the topic, there was enough, however, in these journals to show the strain and tension of international affairs.

Early in the afternoon Max Hamilton arrived in the city of Luxemburg, one of the most beautiful, romantic and interesting of European capitals; even in the depths of winter it presented a wonderful and extremely picturesque appearance.

It is a city with a much-storied past; it has been occupied in turn by many great nations and peoples—Romans, Franks, Germans, Spaniards, Austrians, French, for it held one of the strongest natural positions and so became one of the mightiest fortresses in the world. Two years before the Franco-German War, a question about it nearly precipitated that terrible struggle between France and Germany, the result of which fatally altered the balance of power; the question was settled at the time by the demolition of the fortress. But Luxemburg did not lose its attractiveness.

It was not the first time that Max had visited it, but he had never before viewed it in winter, and his gaze was charmed with it now. The place was beautiful—he also saw that it was quietly going about its everyday business, as if it had nothing to fear, nothing to dread.

As he had travelled eastward through France, and particularly near the frontier, Max had kept his eyes wide open, but had observed no extraordinary signs of military activity, and

now he found Luxemburg as tranquil and serene as though there was no such thing as even the ghost of a notion that it and the Grand Duchy were about to be gobbled up by voracious Germany.

Max put up at one of the leading hotels, the Grand Hotel Brasseur; there all was calm and repose. He looked up the proprietor of a local paper, to whom his card, with "The Day" engraved upon it, was sufficient introduction; this gentleman spoke gravely of the general situation, said, however, nothing of the annexation of his country, and appeared to be most anxious, above everything, to impress Max with facts and statistics showing what an excellent tourist centre Luxemburg was—which was true, but scarcely a thing to be noted on the eve of a great war, affecting materially its destiny.

Max next saw a deputy, a member of the little parliament of the Grand Duchy, with whom he had made acquaintance in Brussels two or three years before, and had a long conversation with him, in the course of which the subject of annexation was never even mooted until Max alluded to it as one of the possibilities of the future. The deputy laughingly demurred, taking the matter as a joke.

From these interviews Max returned to his hotel with his mind made up. Luxemburg, it was plain to him, was absolutely unconscious of its impending fate—if annexation were its fate. Not in this peaceful city was to be obtained such information as Beaumont, his editor, had sent him to find. Had Beaumont been misled? Max wondered more than ever.

Having reached the "Brasseur," Max dispatched a brief telegram, written in the special cypher code of "The Day," to Beaumont, giving the result of his observation and inquiries. The words, decoded were:

"Nothing obtainable here confirming suggestion. Think annexation undreamt of locally. Not even a subject of talk."

"After he gets my message," said Max to himself, "I shan't be surprised if he recalls me at once."

MAX had some dinner, and then began a letter to his editor. He was in the midst of it when a telegram was handed to him. He opened it and read:

"Try Treves."

This laconic dispatch was unsigned, but Max understood that Beaumont had received his telegram and that this was his reply—this order to go on to Treves, and try to find in it the information he had failed to come upon in Luxemburg; it did not occur to him that it could be anything else but a reply to his "wire," or that it might have been sent by any other person.

From the writing room, in which he had been penning his letter to his editor, Max went to the office of the hotel, and there he learned that he could get a train to Treves that evening about midnight. And to Treves he went, having first finished and posted his letter to his chief. In it he gave an account of his trip and of his impressions of peaceful Luxemburg; he stated he had received the telegram ordering him to "Try Treves," and that he would be in that city next day.

Treves, or Trier as the Germans name it, is only a journey of an hour or two—it depends on the speed of the train travelled by—from Luxemburg, and Max duly reached it in the small hours of the morning. He was as familiar with the one as with the other, for the region in which both are situated, the delightful valley of the Moselle and its tributaries, was one of his favourite holiday haunts. He took a room in the hotel that stands opposite the Porta Negra, one of the interesting



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