

SYLVIA'S SECRET

(Continued from page 14.)

which was given him by a man whom he had seen more frequently than any of his gaolers—an official of minor rank, but as he paid Max's room a visit several times daily, evidently charged with a special supervision of him.

With this man Max had once or twice essayed to talk, as he thought his expression was not unfriendly, but had only succeeded in eliciting monosyllables, grunts or shrugs—generally, however, accompanied by a sort of smile, which appeared to show that he would have entered into a conversation if he had not been debarred from doing so by some rule of the place, or by the orders of his superiors. Max's surprise was beyond description when this individual handed him the letter, and without a word of explanation immediately quitted the room.

The letter was written in crabbed German characters, and was not easy to read; it took Max some time to make it all out. Bertha Schmidt wrote:

"This letter is given you by my brother, Herman. I have told him how you saved my little Fritz. For the sake of the boy, who is as dear to him, Fritz having lived with him and his wife while I was with the fraulein in London, as he is to me, he will help you to make your escape to-night. You must do exactly everything as I tell you, and as it has been arranged between him and me, else your chance of being free will be less. I pray you not to hesitate.

"When he comes to see you late in the evening you must knock him down with such violence as to stun him—there must be no mistake about that. Then put on his uniform and cap; go into the passage, and make your way out—Herman will arrange that the path will be as clear for you as is possible without exciting suspicion against him. In some measure you must trust to yourself. The password at the gate to-night is 'Sedan.' The north gate alone will be open at that hour; outside, a short distance away, you will find me awaiting you.

"Bertha Schmidt."

A chance of escape! A possibility of it—perhaps a probability! And this strange woman, Bertha, was making the opportunity, because he had saved her little Fritz. Well, Max said to himself, he must not fail to grasp it, even if it were somewhat at Herman's expense.

Late in the evening Herman again entered the room; he closed the door. Max was sitting on the solitary chair, and he rose up, and looked at the man, who smiled gravely at him.

"It is time," said Herman; he moved forward, and taking up the chair on which Max had been sitting held it up and gave it into Max's hands. "With that," he continued; "you must strike hard and stun me—"

"BUT you will suffer," said Max, taken aback when the means were presented to him.

"Do not hesitate," said Herman, earnestly; "it is the only way by which suspicion can be kept from falling on me; the more I suffer the less I shall be suspected of complicity. When you go out keep to the right—always to the right."

He turned his back to Max, and said "Strike!"

But Max did hesitate.

"Strike," commanded the man. "Strike hard. It is the only way! If you do not take it, then you shall remain here."

Max still hesitated, however; it seemed horrible to do this thing in cold blood.

"You waste time," said Herman, impatiently. "Strike!"

Max hesitated no longer; Herman went down like a felled ox, and the chair broke and smashed into several pieces.

Max looked at the man—now an inert, senseless mass.

"Have I killed him?" Max asked himself, but a hurried examination convinced him that Herman was only stunned. Leaving the room after

having donned the man's uniform and cap, Max turned to the right as he had been bid, passed a soldier who was acting sentry in the passage, and who did not even look at him, walked with the measured step which he fancied Herman would have used, along another passage without encountering anyone, and so came into a yard, in which no soldiers were to be seen. Snow was falling fast and thick, and that helped him. Keep on to the right, always to the right, he presently came to the gate, which was guarded by a picket.

As he came near he was challenged. His heart beat furiously as he gave the password, "Sedan." So near the goal, would failure meet him in sight of it? But the password was all-sufficient, and the guard suspected nothing.

He passed through the gate. He was free!

Outside he was met by Bertha Schmidt.

"Come with me," she said, in a tone that forbade talk.

CHAPTER XXII.

Amazing Revelations.

FAST and in great flakes fell the snow as Max Hamilton followed Bertha Schmidt, a couple of paces behind her, through the streets of Treves in dead silence, though silence was hardly necessary to the success of his escape.

Bertha walked quickly, and Max stepped out in her wake at the same speed well content; he asked no questions, feeling confident that he was safe in intrusting himself to her; now and again he glanced at the streets, to see if by recognizing some familiar things he could make out where they were going, but the night was too dark with the ever-tumbling snow for him to be sure. What mattered that, however? The night and the storm were serving him well. His heart was filled with joy and thanksgiving; it was as if a miracle had been wrought on his behalf, and was still being wrought.

And it was this woman—a woman whom he hardly knew, but the life of whose child he had saved, with no thought of recompense—this sinister Bertha Schmidt, whom he now suspected of being concerned in the murder of her mistress, Sylvia Chase, in some manner as yet undisclosed—it was she who had planned his escape and was giving him his freedom!

After some minutes' hard tramping Bertha Schmidt stopped before a house, opened its door, and bade Max enter.

"You will be safe here for the night," she said to him, "that is, if you carried out my instructions to strike Herman so as to stun him—it was a necessary part of my plan for your escape."

"I'm afraid," rejoined Max, rather shame-facedly, "that I did hit very hard; he was quite unconscious, and would, I think, remain so for a considerable time." He told her how Herman had ordered him to use the chair as a weapon, and how he had hesitated, then yielded on being told that "it was the only way."

"It was the only way," she said. "Herman will never, surely, be suspected of being implicated in your escape."

"I don't know how I am to thank you and him," said Max, with deep security of feeling. "Words are poor things to express what I feel."

"It was a debt paid—but not yet fully paid," she rejoined. "Come and I shall show you something."

She led him into a small room, and there in a cot lay little Fritz, rosy with sleep, a pretty picture, which would have been dear to any mother's heart.

"He would not be there—like that, but for you," said Bertha Schmidt to Max, and there were tears in her voice and in her eyes; a mother's love was transfiguring her! This woman might be wicked, Max thought

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