

Sylvia's Secret

by Robert Machray
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CHAPTER XI.

The Way of A Maid.

PEGGY WILLOUGHBY'S kiss awoke emotions in the heart of Max Hamilton which it would be impossible to describe, but the thrilling, the amazing, the incredible fact stood out—she had kissed him, voluntarily and without any concealment whatever, before her parents and before his rival, Captain Hollander, the man whose suit he had most reason to fear.

It might be, simply, that, as her father had said to him, Peggy had asked him to undertake a mission or a commission, he had accepted it, and the kiss merely sealed the bargain. Even if the kiss meant no more than that, it was none the less a wonderful thing to him. But if it meant more? The mere idea made him dizzy with happiness, yet his modesty prompted him to dismiss it. And could a kiss, given in what might be regarded an almost public manner, be considered a token of love?

"You have received your commission, my boy," the colonel had said with a kindly laugh, and Max had replied in the single syllable "Yes," because the surprise and agitation of the situation thus suddenly sprung upon him were too great for him to utter another word. After he had spoken there had followed some tense seconds of silence during which he and the others were thinking of what had happened.

"What a queer thing for Peggy to do," at length said her mother, in a voice that quavered a little; she thought, however, that it was her duty to offer some explanation, some justification of her daughter's act.

"I have never seen her so interested in anything before," she continued, but just a trifle nervously; "the dreadful death of Sylvia has affected her tremendously; she is quite worked up and excited. You can see that she was carried away," she said to Max. "She is not usually so impulsive."

Max murmured something which sounded like that he "understood perfectly," but he was still rather confused.

There was no doubt, he was telling himself, that Peggy had been carried away and had been moved out of herself. But the shining, splendid fact remained—she had kissed him of her own accord before them all—and the fact remained shining and splendid even after his brain had steadied itself, and he had tried to put himself in her place in an endeavour to see what was in her thoughts at that moment, that supreme and ever-memorable moment when her lips had touched his.

Except that the blinding effect of his modesty prevented him from glimpsing the truth that she had fallen in love with him, he did understand her fairly well. It was just as Mrs. Willoughby had expressed the situation. Peggy had been wrought to a high pitch of emotion and excitement by Sylvia's murder, and though her own connection with it was indirect and indeed remote, there were circumstances about the tragedy which made a special appeal to her.

Max said in his heart that Peggy was a girl of warm feelings and of generous sentiments, and could not endure that the character of the woman who had been her friend years before when they were at school together should be traduced or besmirched—he saw that it did not enter into her mind that she might have been mistaken in her reading of that character—and she was deeply and sincerely anxious that her friend's character should be vindicated. Max had agreed with her in disbelieving

PREVIOUS chapters introduce chiefly Max Hamilton, editor of "The Day," Peggy Willoughby, with whom Hamilton is in love, and Villiers Chase, another friend of Peggy's. All at supper together in London. Max leaves hurriedly to catch a night train. Thinking of Peggy he is roused by "All Change" and turns to rouse a lady in the compartment who, upon investigation, turns out to be Sylvia Chase, sister of Villiers Chase—mysteriously murdered. Investigations are at once begun by Superintendent Johnson, who, to confirm a statement made by Max Hamilton, visits Colonel Willoughby. Peggy begins to recognize the fact that she loves Max. A telegram is found in Sylvia Chase's handbag sent from Charing Cross, and making an appointment at Hampstead Heath station. Johnson and Max visit Sylvia's brother, who tells them that she had been a governess in Germany; afterwards, Sylvia's flat, but no clues from either her letters or her German maid Bertha. At the inquest an open verdict is returned. Peggy asks Max Hamilton to find out the truth about the murder. He promises to do his best. It is discovered that Sylvia was not paid an annuity by the Nordheims.

that Sylvia had had a love affair with some rich man, and she had not un-naturally turned to him as a possible champion and avenger of the murdered woman. The kiss had been an impulsive expression of her warm heart; as her mother phrased it, Peggy had been "carried away."

What Max did not make allowance for, however, was the part which Hollander unconsciously had played in bringing about the dramatic incident, in preparing the way for the psychological moment. In a measure, it was Hollander whom Max had to thank for that kiss.

Hollander's coldness and indifference on this and on the previous occasion when Sylvia's fate had been the topic of conversation, as well as his advocacy of the theory that there had been a rich lover in the background of Sylvia's life, had disgusted, enraged and antagonised Peggy. To her he appeared hard, cynical, unsympathetic, almost brutal—altogether unlike Max, who, besides, had not lost that touch of romance which she had discovered in him when he first told her the story of the finding of poor Sylvia's body in the first-class compartment, that compartment of which it might be said, she believed, that destiny had reserved it for him that Saturday night.

SHE had liked Hollander, but now he had fallen in her esteem. She contrasted him with Max—to Max's great advantage. Even if she had not loved Max, she now would have preferred him to the other man, but loving him she was hardly in a position to render even-handed justice, and thus it was that Max scored all along the line.

When, after kissing Max, Peggy left the drawing room, her heart was bounding wildly, almost painfully, but she had small regret for what she had done; she had acted on an uncontrollable impulse, and she was far from being sorry. Yet, of course, she knew that she had been guilty of a very unconventional thing—it might be called a daring thing. She wondered what her mother must have been somewhat scandalized, but would have some explanation to offer; she felt sure that her father would laugh the matter off as a joke, as something without serious point on the part of his Peggy. She hardly stopped to consider what Hollander might think of it. The question was, What would Max think of it and her? Would he understand? And how much would he understand? What significance would he attach to the kiss?

She went to her room, and panting,

as if she had been running, threw herself upon the bed. She put a question to her own heart—What did she desire Max to understand? Did she wish him to understand that she loved him? She knew very well now that she loved him with her whole soul—would her kiss reveal that to him? She half-hoped, half feared.

As she thought of it, she was in a tumult. Perhaps it might be that she had appeared forward, unmaidenly, undignified! Would Max think so? To the others it might be that she had appeared in that light, but surely not to Max, not to the man who loved her as she felt Max did? He could not so misread her! Yet what did he think? After further agitated self-communing, she came to the conclusion that she did not altogether desire that Max should regard the kiss as a confession that she loved him—the wooing must come from him; that was her right, her right as a woman. Yet if he did completely understand—well, it could not be helped. And Peggy blushed again, but smiled.

In considering these high matters of the heart, Peggy had almost forgotten how it had all come about—what she had asked her lover to do, the strange love quest which she had invited him excitedly to undertake. When she did remember it, she had some qualms. Her father had reminded her that Max had his work, his own work in the battling world to do. "Well, cannot he do this also?" she asked herself; "surely he will understand that! I don't expect him to do impossibilities. He has his career!" And she whispered within her heart that she would be well-pleased to share that career. However, she deemed it best to make quite clear to Max what she expected from him.

Within some twenty minutes after leaving the drawing-room she returned to it, an extremely self-composed young lady, looking as if she had never kissed anybody—but, for all that, looking extremely kissable.

Her father and mother, Max and Hollander were still in the room; the young men had been waiting more or less patiently to see if she would come back to them; the four of them had been chatting on various topics, but not with any profound interest, for not a soul of them but had Peggy in his or her mind's eye.

"I'm afraid I was rather silly just now, Max," said Peggy, with a disarmingly charming smile.

"You can scarcely expect me to think so, Peggy," Max replied, smiling in response. "It was—" he hesitated for the right word.

"Silly," said she, glancing at her mother, who was smiling gently, as at a little bit of comedy.

"Splendid," he said, with a slight laugh.

THERE was a lightness in his way of speaking the word, and in his manner, that reassured her; she thought he could never speak in that way, which sounded like mere gallantry, if the kiss had told him that she cared for him; and instantly she was sorry to be reassured—such is the way of a maid. She looked questioningly into his eyes, which so far she had avoided meeting, and immediately was no longer sorry. She saw that the light laugh had covered deep feeling, for she did not fail to understand that love for her was shining out of those fine eyes of his.

"He does not know yet," she thought; "it will all come right before long."

But she quickly looked away, rather afraid there might be too vivid a hint in her own eyes.

"I was silly," she said aloud.

"I told Max," interposed Mrs. Willoughby quickly, "that you were carried away by excitement."

"Yes, that was it," cried Peggy gaily. "Of course, that was it! I



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