

# Sylvia's Secret

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## CHAPTER XXV.

## Journeys End in Lovers Meeting.

IT was not Peggy Willoughby, but her father, the colonel, who answered Max Hamilton's call on the telephone.

"Is Miss Willoughby in?" asked Max, and a gruff masculine voice responded that she was not in, but was expected back shortly—who was it that was speaking, and was there any message for her? Max thought he recognized the colonel's tones, and inquired if he was correct in this supposition.

"I'm Colonel Willoughby," was the reply. "Who are you?"

"Max Hamilton."

"Max Hamilton!" said the colonel, with an audible shout of astonishment. "Is it really you, Max, my boy?"

"Yes."

"Where are you?"

"At the telephone in the post-office in Parliament Street."

"Bless my soul!" ejaculated Willoughby. "That's good! When did you return to London, my boy?"

"In the afternoon."

"Well, I am glad, and won't Peggy be delighted! What was your message? Were you coming to us to tell us all about your adventures and so forth?"

"Something of the kind," said Max.

"Can you come to dinner?"

"Much pleased—but make it at eight o'clock, if you can, colonel. I must go home and change."

"Eight, then—right," said Willoughby.

"Thank you!" And they rang off.

When Peggy returned to the house in St. Anton's Avenue, she was met by her father, whose beaming face instantly apprized her that he had some good news to communicate, and she conjectured that he had probably heard from her lover. Seeing the colonel's happy expression she smiled sympathetically, though her heart was somewhat heavy. Ever since she had received Max's telegram she had been oppressed by the question, "Does he owe his freedom to Captain Hollander?"

"Prepare yourself, my Peg, for a great but most pleasant surprise," said the colonel—and paused.

"What is it, father?"

"Oh, I am so glad—and you will be more than glad, my Peg," said Willoughby, with an accent of tenderness. "Max is in London! He telephoned to me a few minutes ago from Parliament Street, and he is coming to dinner at eight to-night as ever was!"

Peggy's beautiful colour became deeper—then she turned pale, so that her father, who was watching her solicitously, was afraid that the suddenness of the news, albeit very happy news, had been too much for her, and that she was about to faint. But she rallied herself, and smiled again.

"I should not have been so abrupt—I ought to have prepared you better," said the colonel, regretfully; "it's been a shock!"

"A shock! Oh, no, father," said Peggy. "I—I am as glad as glad can be! Did he tell you anything particular about how he had contrived to get back to England?"

"No, he'll tell us to-night, of course," said Willoughby, who was puzzled by Peggy's reception of what he had told her—it was hardly as enthusiastic as he had anticipated; he did not know of the bargain she had made with Hollander, and how it weighed her down.

"Yes," said Peggy; "he'll tell us to-night."

"What will he have to tell me?" she asked herself. Since she had bidden Hollander good-bye she had not heard from him, and she had tried to conjecture what his silence might mean. Well, she would soon know what fate had in store for her, but she prayed

with all her soul for strength and courage.

When Max had seen Beaumont and the Minister for War, he was still wearing the clothes with which Bertha Schmidt had supplied him in Treves; there had been no time or opportunity for changing them, even if he had had the money for purchasing other garments. As it was, he had not more than barely sufficient funds to carry him to London, and these he had borrowed from Bertha, who, indeed, would willingly have given him a larger loan, if he would have taken it.

After telephoning to the Willoughbys, Max went to his own rooms—the sight of them again, after his enforced absence, was, it can readily be imagined, very agreeable. He tubbed, and made a complete change. He still looked travel-worn and a little pale and haggard, but there was nothing noticeably amiss with his appearance when he was seen by Peggy Willoughby at dinner.

Max had counted on having a few minutes alone with her before that meal, but when he went into the drawing room he was received by her father and mother, who both showed how unmistakably pleased they were to see him again; Peggy, however, did not appear till just before dinner was announced—a circumstance which keenly disappointed him, and when he did see her he felt there was something about her that increased his disappointment.

Not that she did not seem as lovely and as desirable as ever—nay, she was more than ever lovely and desirable; but he was subtly conscious, in spite of the warmth with which she welcomed him, that there was some constraint upon her—it was indefinite yet tangible, and it chilled him. He had set out with bounding pulses, full of joy at the prospect of seeing her again, of clasping her in his embrace, of kissing her sweet lips! "What can be the matter?" he mused, as he gazed at her.

Before Peggy had come into the room, her father had asked Max for the story of his adventures, and had been astonished when the latter replied that he really had no story to tell.

"Oh, come, Max!" the colonel had protested; "there must be a story!"

But Max shook his head.

"The Germans released you—was that it, Max?" asked the puzzled colonel. "I should never have thought they would!"

"No, they didn't release me. Two nights ago I knocked down one of my gaolers and stunned him," said Max, very quietly—he never liked to think of that episode. "I put on his uniform, and aided by good luck and a heavy snowstorm succeeded in getting out of the barracks in which I had been confined. The Grand Duchy is only a few miles from Treves, and the same snowstorm, continuing, helped me to reach the frontier without being recaptured."

EVEN to Max this statement sounded extremely bald, and he was not astonished by the remarks the colonel made upon it.

"You must have had the most amazing good luck, Max!" exclaimed Willoughby. "Were there no soldiers about the barracks?"

"It was late at night, very dark, and snow was falling heavily," Max made answer.

"But all the exits from the barracks would be guarded, surely!"

"I got past the guard," said Max. "I was extraordinarily fortunate."

"You must have been—and I had no idea there could have been such slackness in the German army as your escape proves there must have been," remarked Willoughby; "even a late hour and a heavy snowstorm don't quite account for it, Max, my boy!" observed the colonel, with a very du-

bious expression on his face. "You were very lucky, Max; that's all that I can say."

"Uncommonly lucky," said Max.

"Yes, indeed," said Mrs. Willoughby, who while listening to the conversation of the two men with interest was still more interested in conjecturing why it was that Peggy was so late in coming into the drawing room. But when her daughter did come, she found a perfect explanation in Peggy's attire, for the young lady had put on one of her most becoming dresses—a pale-blue frock, which Max had admired—and had otherwise taken pains with her toilette.

The talk during dinner was hardly as gay as might have been expected in what should have been joyful circumstances. Willoughby referred more than once to the wonderful luck Max had had, and of course Max repeated his story—the story he had told the colonel and Mrs. Willoughby—for Peggy's benefit, and she said she thought it was "quite romantic enough for anything."

SHE noticed, with a sense of relief that was almost painful in its intensity, that he had said not a word of having received any assistance. He was not indebted, then, to Captain Hollander! But she said to herself that she must tell him about her bargain—otherwise Hollander might speak of it some day, and trouble might be made. This thought kept her pensive.

Soon after dinner the lovers were left to themselves in the drawing room, and they rushed into each other's arms—"Love took up the harp of life, and smote on all its chords with might," Peggy shed some natural, happy tears as he embraced her fervently and passionately, and he kissed her tears away; once more they confessed their love and murmured their vows. He observed with delight that no longer was he sensible of that feeling of constraint upon her; she was radiant!

It seemed to him that his absence from her, and all that he had undergone, had but endeared him the more to her, and therefore might be said to have been worth while. What, then, had been in her mind when she met him again? Or had he been mistaken?

Some minutes passed all too swiftly; then Peggy remembered.

"I have something to tell you, Max," she said, withdrawing a little from him. "It's something I'd much rather not tell you, but I think I ought to do so, as one never can tell what may happen."

Both her face and her voice edged with seriousness as she spoke, but Max smiled happily at her. What could she have to tell him, he wondered, that would mar their love for each other—and was not that everything?

"Yes, Peggy," he said gently, but her next words made him start violently.

"It's about you and me"—there was a distinct pause—"and Captain Hollander."

"Hollander!" exclaimed Max, in a queer tone.

"Yes, Captain Hollander," said Peggy. "Listen, Max, dear, and be patient with me. When I heard you were arrested as a spy and cast into prison at Treves I was in great distress."

Max took and pressed her hand. "And that distress grew and grew as the days went by, and nobody was able to do anything for you," she went on, returning the pressure of his hand. "I was always asking myself if there was nothing I could do to help you. Then there came a chance, as I thought it might be, for effecting your liberation—the chance came through Captain Hollander. Seeing he knew Germany so well, I asked him if it was not possible for him to assist you to

freedom, and he promised to do what he could for you, but on one condition. Can you guess what it was, Max?"

As she put the question, she observed that his face, which was now pearly turned from her, was dark with some emotion—some powerful emotion, but what it was she could not read.

"Max!" she said.

"Yes," he answered, turning his face to her; its strange and almost terrible expression made her suddenly afraid, but as she looked at him its aspect became less formidable.

"Captain Hollander told me he would help you to escape from Treves," she went on, "on condition that I married him. And I said that to get you out of the hands of the Germans I would do even that, Max!"

They had been sitting side by side; Max had now risen to his feet, and his face worked with rage—which Peggy misinterpreted.

"Oh, Max, don't be angry," she cried. "Not with you, you dear," he replied; "never with you!"

She had risen, and she came up close to him.

"Max! Max!"

"Sit down, dearest," he said. "Give me a moment to think."

"What is it, Max?" asked Peggy, after a while. "Tell me, dear."

"Yes," he at length said. "I shall tell you. It is about this man Hollander. He is not what you think him—what I thought him, Peggy. First of all, I must say that I did receive assistance in my escape, but it was not from him; on the contrary, that I went to Treves and was arrested was all his doing."

"What!" cried Peggy, staring.

"Wait an instant, dear. I cannot tell you how I got that assistance, for I have promised to keep silent about it, but if it had not been for that assistance I should still be in prison. Nor can I tell you how I came to know about this man Hollander; you must take it from me, Peggy, and believe it as I believe it. I heard it all in such a way that I can have no shred of doubt."

"Oh, I shall believe you, Max, though what you say seems very strange."

"It is strange—more than strange, Peggy; it is dreadful!"

Max sat down beside her, and pondered how best to tell her.

"Peggy, dear," he said after some seconds: "you have not forgotten Sylvia Chase?"

"No, Max," she replied, wonderingly; "what has she to do with it?"

"She was a German spy or secret agent—that's how she got the income that puzzled us all so much."

"Max!"

"It is true, and she was killed by another German secret agent because at the last she repented and would have made disclosures—"

"Oh, poor Sylvia," said Peggy, interrupting him.

"The German secret agent who killed her—prepare yourself, dear, for something most unexpected—was Captain Hollander."

Thereafter he told her nearly everything he had learned from Bertha Schmidt, but said never a word about that woman.

"Oh, poor Sylvia," said Peggy, interrupting him.

"The German secret agent who killed her—prepare yourself, dear, for something most unexpected—was Captain Hollander."

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## CHAPTER XXVI.

## Unmasked at Last.

EVENTS moved quickly, and the end of the drama, so far as Hollander was concerned, came with truly dramatic suddenness.

Max had suggested to the Minister for War that no time was to be lost, and no time was lost. Profoundly impressed by Max's revelations of Hollander's treachery, the Minister set to work at once to have them confirmed, if that was possible, by direct evidence. He knew that the greatest confidence had been reposed in Hol-