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PEG O' MY HEART
By J. Hartley Manners

A Comedy of Youth Founded by Mr. Manners on His Great Play of the Same Title—Illustrations From Photographs of the Play

Copyright, 1913, by Dodd, Mead & Company

"It would be the saving of us all" she insisted significantly.

But Alaric was still obtuse. "Now, how would my holding and molding Margaret save us?"

The old lady placed her cards deliberately on the table as she said sententiously:

"She would stay with us here—if you were engaged to her!"

The shock had come. His mother's terrible alternative was now before him in all its naked horror. A shiver ran through him. The thought of a man with a future as brilliant as his being blighted at the outset by such a misalliance!

He felt the color leave his face. "Engaged! Don't, mother, please." He trembled again. "Heavens—engaged to that tomboy?"

There was no escape. Mrs. Chichester held him firmly.

"She will have £5,000 a year when she is twenty-one—£5,000 a year—£5,000 of the very best!"

She took him in her arms and pressed his reluctant and shrinking body to her breast. "Think what it would mean, dear—your family preserved and a brand snatched from the burning!"

"That's just it. It's all right saving the family. Any covell do that as a pinch. But I do not see myself as a 'brand snatcher.' Besides, I am not altogether at liberty."

"What?" cried his mother.

"Oh, I've not committed myself to anything. But I've been three times to hear that wonderful woman speak—once on the platform! And people are beginning to talk. She thinks no end of me. Sent me a whole lot of stuff last week—'advanced literature' she calls it. I've got 'em all upstairs. Wrote every word of 'em herself. Never saw a woman who can talk and write as she can. And outside of all that I'm afraid I've more or less encouraged her. And there you are—the whole thing in a nutshell!"

Alaric thought for a few moments. The result of this mental activity took form and substance as follows: "She is not half bad looking—at times—when she's properly dressed."

"I've seen her look almost beautiful!" cried Mrs. Chichester.

Alaric suddenly grew depressed. "Shocking temper, mother!" and he shook his head despondently.

"The woman who loves always obeys!" cried his mother.

"Ah, there we have it!" And Alaric sprang up and faced the old lady. "There we have it! Does she love me?"

Mrs. Chichester looked fondly at her only son and answered:

"How could she be near you for the last month and not love you?"

Alaric nodded:

"Of course there is that. Now, let me see—just get a solid grip on the whole thing. If she loves me—and taking all things into consideration—for your sake and darling Ethel's—and for my—that is—"

As mother and son walked slowly toward the house they looked up, and gazing through a tiny casement of the little mauve room was Peg, her face white and drawn.

Peg decided to take a walk in the garden. As she reached the foot of the stairs Alaric came in quickly through the windows.

"Hello, Margaret!" he cried cheerfully, though his heart was beating nervously at the thought of what he was about to do; and across his features there was a sickly pallor. "What have you got there, all tucked away?" he ventured as the opening question that was to lead to the all important one.

Peg held up a book for him to see. "The only thing I'm takin' away that I didn't bring with me."

"A book, eh?"

"That's what it is—a book," and she began to go upstairs.

"Taking it away?" he called up to her.

"That's what I'm doin'," and she still went on up two more steps.

"You're not really going away—cousin?" he gasped.

"I am," replied Peg.

"Just a moment," he cried, stopping her just by an oriel window. She paused in the center of the glow that radiated from its panes.

"What is it?" she asked impatiently. She wanted to go back to her room and make her final preparations.

Alaric looked at her with what he meant to be adoration in his eyes.

"Do you know I've grown really awfully fond of you?" His voice quivered and broke. He had reached one of the crises of his life.

"No, I didn't know it. When did you find it out?"

"Just now—down in that room—when the thought flashed through me that perhaps you really meant to leave us. It went all through me. 'Pon my honor it did. The idea positively hurt me—really hurt me."

"Did it, now?" laughed Peg. "Sure an' I'm glad of it."

"Glad? Glad?" he asked in astonishment.

"I am. I didn't think anything could hurt ye unless it disturbed yer comfort. An' I don't see how my goin' will do that."

"Oh, but it will," persisted Alaric. "Really it will."

"Sure now?" Peg was growing really curious. What was this odd little fellow trying to tell her?

Alaric felt that the moment had now really come.

CHAPTER XXVI.

Alaric, Peg and Mr. Hawkes.

"COUSIN," said Alaric to Peg, and his voice dropped to the caressing note of a wooer,

"cousin, do you know, I am going to do something now I've never done before?"

He paused to let the full force of what was to come have its real value.

"What is it, Alaric?" Peg asked, all unconscious of the drama that was taking place in her cousin's heart.

"Sure, what is it? Ye're not goin' to do somethin' useful, are ye?"

He braced himself and went on: "I am going to ask a very charming young lady to marry me. Eh?"

"Are ye?"

"I am."

"What do ye think o' that, now?"

"And—who—do—you—think—it—is?"

He waited, wondering if she would guess correctly. It would be so helpful if only she could.

But she was so unexpected.

"I couldn't guess it in a hundred years, Alaric—rarely I couldn't."

"Oh, try! Do try!" he urged.

"I couldn't think who'd marry you—indeed I couldn't. Mebbe the poor girl's blind. Is that it?"

"Can't you guess? No? Really?"

"No, I'm tellin' ye. Who is it?"

"You!"

Then she leaned back against the balustrade and laughed long and unrestrainedly. She laughed until the tears came coursing down her cheeks.

Alaric was at first nonplused. Then he grasped the situation in its full significance. It was just a touch of hysteria. He joined her and laughed heartily as well.

"Aha!" he cried between laughs.

"That's a splendid sign. Splendid! I've always been told that girls cry when they're proposed to."

"Sure, that's what I'm doin'," gasped Peg. "I'm cryin'—laughin'. Sure, I think I'd rather have Michael, my terrier—if you don't mind."

He started forward. "Oh, come, I say! You don't mean that! Think—just for one moment—of the advantages!"

"If ye don't mind," replied Peg meekly.

To her amazement the gloom lifted from her cousin's countenance. He took a deep breath, looked at her in genuine relief and cried out heartily:

"I say! You're a brick! It's really awfully good of you. Some girls in your position would have jumped at me—positively jumped! But you—why, you're a genuine little hall marked A1 brick! I'm extremely obliged to you."

He took her little hand and shook it warmly.

"You're a plucky little girl, that's what you are—a plucky—little—girl. I'll never forget it—never. If there is anything I can do—at any time—anywhere—call on me. I'll be there—right on the spot."

"Bless you, cousin. You've taken an awful load off my mind. I was really worried. I had to ask you. Promised to. See you before you go!"

On the 30th day of June Mr. Montgomery Hawkes glanced at his appointments for the following day and found the entry, "Mrs. Chichester, Scarborough—in re Margaret O'Connell."

He accordingly sent a telegram to Mrs. Chichester, acquainting her with the pleasant news that she might expect that distinguished lawyer on July 1 to render an account of her stewardship of the Irish agitator's child.

He was shown into the music room and was admiring a genuine Greuze when Mrs. Chichester came in.

She greeted him tragically and motioned him to a seat beside her.

"Well?" she smiled cheerfully. "And how is our little protegee?"

"Sit down," replied Mrs. Chichester somberly.

"Thank you."

He sat beside her, waited a moment, then, with some sense of misgiving, asked, "Everything going well, I hope?"

"Far from it." And Mrs. Chichester shook her head sadly. "She wants to leave us today. She has ordered a cab. She is packing now."

"Dear, dear!" ejaculated the bewildered solicitor. "Where is she going?"

"Back to her father."

"How perfectly ridiculous!"

"But don't be uneasy," he replied easily. "She will stay. May I see her?"

Mrs. Chichester rose, crossed over to the bell and rang it.

"There is one thing you must know.

Mr. Hawkes. My son is in love with her," she said, as though in a burst of confidence.

"What? Your son?"

"Yes," she sighed. "Of course she is hardly a suitable match for Alaric—as yet. But by the time she is of age—"

Hawkes was moving restlessly about the room. He stopped in front of Mrs. Chichester as Jarvis disappeared to notify Peg.

"I am afraid, madam, that such a marriage would be out of the question. As one of the executors of the late Mr. Kingsnorth's will, in my opinion, it would be defeating the object of the dead man's legacy."

Mrs. Chichester retorted heatedly: "He desires her to be trained. What training is better than marriage?"

"Almost any," replied Mr. Hawkes. "Marriage should be the union of two formed characters. Marriage between the young is one of my pet objections. It is a condition of life essentially for those who have reached maturity in nature and in character. I am preparing a paper on it for the Croydon Ethical society and"—

Whatever else Mr. Hawkes might have said in continuation of another of his pet subjects was cut abruptly short by the appearance of Peg. She was still dressed in one of Mrs. Chichester's gowns. She had not had an opportunity to change into her little traveling suit.

"Well, well! What an improvement!" he said.

"I'm glad you've come, Mr. Hawkes."

"Why, you're a young lady!" cried the astonished solicitor.

"Am I? Ask me aunt about that!" replied Peg somewhat bitterly.

"Now, my dear Miss Margaret O'Connell"—began the lawyer.

"Will ye let me have £20?" suddenly asked Peg.

"Certainly. Now?" and he took out his pocketbook.

"This munit," replied Peg positively.

"With pleasure," said Mr. Hawkes as he began to count the banknotes.

"And I want ye to get a passage on the first ship to America, this afternoon if there's one!" cried Peg earnestly.

"Oh, come, come," remonstrated the lawyer.

"The £20 I want to buy somethin' for me father—just to remember England by. If ye think me uncle wouldn't like me to have it because I'm havin', why, then me father'll pay ye back. It may take him a long time, but he'll pay it."

"Now, listen"—interrupted Mr. Hawkes.

"Mebbe it'll only be a few dollars a week, but father always pays his debts—in time. That's all he ever needs—time."

"What's all this nonsense about going away?"

"It isn't nonsense. I'm goin' to me father," answered Peg resolutely.

Hawkes hunted through his mind for the cause of this upheaval in the Chichester home. He remembered Mrs. Chichester's statement about Alaric's affection for his young cousin. Could the trouble have arisen from that? It gave him a clew to work on. He grasped it.

"Answer me one question truthfully, Miss O'Connell. Is there an affair of the heart?"

Peg looked down on the ground mournfully and replied:

"Me heart is in New York—with me father."

"Has any one made love to you since you have been here?"

Peg looked up at him sadly and shook her head. A moment later a mischievous look came into her eyes, and she said, with a roguish laugh:

"Sure one man wanted to kiss me, an' I boxed his ears, an' another—almost man—asked me to marry him."

"Oh!" ejaculated the lawyer.

"Me Cousin Alaric."

"And what did you say?" questioned Hawkes.

"I towld him I'd rather have Michael."

He looked at her in open bewilderment and repeated:

"Michael?"

"Me dog," explained Peg, and her eyes danced with merriment.

Hawkes laughed heartily and replied:

As Hawkes looked at her, radiant in her springlike beauty, her clear, healthy complexion, her dazzling teeth, her red-gold hair, he felt a sudden thrill go through him. His life had been so full, so concentrated on the development of his career, that he had never permitted the feminine note to obtrude itself on his life. His effort had been rewarded by an unusually large circle of influential clients who yielded him an exceedingly handsome revenue. He had heard whispers of a magistracy. His public future was assured.

But his private life was arid. The handsome villa in Pelham crescent had no one to grace the head of the table, save on the occasional visits of his aged mother or the still rarer ones of a married sister.

And here was he in the full prime of life.

Yielding to some uncontrollable impulse, he took her little hand in both of his own.

Hawkes was not to be denied now. He went on in his softest and most persuasive accents:

"I know one who would give you all these—a man who has reached the years of discretion, one in whom the follies of youth have merged into the knowledge and reserve of early middle age; a man of position and of means; a man who can protect you, care for you, admire you—and be proud to marry you."

"Miss O'Connell—may I say Margaret?—I was your uncle's adviser, his warm personal friend. We spoke freely of you for many weeks before."

Continued on page 7.

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