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HILDA; OR, THE MERCHANT'S SECRET.

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CHAPTER XXXI.

BLANCHE OSBURNE.

LATE in the afternoon of a glorious day in July, when the summer sun was pouring a flood of light and heat upon the city of Montreal and its environs, Blanche Osburne, returning from her daily round of visits to her numerous pupils, turned off from Sherbrooke street and began the rather steep descent of Rue St. Dominique. Slowly and wearily the graceful young music teacher moved along the dusty sidewalk of the narrow street until she reached a cottage of somewhat striking appearance. It was newly built of brick, the bright red of which contrasted strongly with the freshly-painted green shutters and verandah. It was situated a little way off the street, and shaded by an elm tree, placed in the midst of a small parterre in front. Around the slender pillars of the covered verandah, which extended on either side of the street door, innumerable climbing roses were mingling their bright scentless corollas with the white blossoms of the clematis and the pink and purple flowers of the sweet pea.

Opening a small gate Blanche Osburne entered the *parterre*, and ascending the steps of the veranda, threw herself wearily into a low rocking chair, placed very temptingly inside the French window, which was open to admit the air redolent with the sweet scent of the flowers. How delightfully refreshing after her hot walk was the shade of that elm tree to Blanche Osburne! How glad she was to find herself once more at home in that cool little parlour into which the warm summer sun never penetrated! Taking off her hat she threw it on a table near her, and leaning back in the easy chair she gave herself up to the enjoyment which the rest and shelter from the intense heat were calculated to afford.

What a pretty picture she made as she reclined there, her cheeks flushed with the heat adding a brilliancy to her blue eyes which they sometimes wanted; her luxuriant golden hair, not arranged in the prevailing fashion, in a chignon, but falling in soft natural curls, fastened off the fair young brow by a band of blue ribbon.

"What! already returned, Blanche! I did not expect you back for an hour yet."

It was an elderly lady who spoke, or, perhaps, we should say woman, judging her according to Thérèse Berkeley's ideas, for she was plainly dressed in a widow's garb. There was something singular in her appearance. Her figure was below the medium size, and remarkably slight in its proportions. Her pale face was very homely, with a disfiguring mark on one cheek. There were traces of suffering in that face which gave a look of age that years had not imparted. She was about fifty-five. She looked seventy. She was seated knitting in a cushioned fauteuil at the end of the small but handsomely furnished room which Blanche had entered so unceremoniously. She had been dozing as the girl entered, and just now woke up to see her with surprise in her accustomed seat in the window.

"I did not give my usual number of lessons to-day. And that enabled me to return earlier, and thank goodness I am home, for the sun is scorching!"

"You do look heated and weary, love. It is hard work attending pupils from house to house, but I hope you will have done with it some day, darling."

"What excitement there is still in town about this elopement!" Blanche resumed after a short silence. "At every place I go to it is the subject of conversation; my pupils will talk of nothing else. I have learned all the particulars of this sad affair. One does pick up so much gossip going to different houses!"

"And what more have you heard?" eagerly inquired her aunt, whom we shall call Mrs. Osburne. She was always ready to listen to the scraps of news which her pretty niece brought home every day from the homes of her several pupils. "Just to think of the wickedness of that Mr. Castonell!" she continued with pious indignation, "and he appearing to be such a saint! Such a beautiful preacher too! who would ever have supposed him such a hypocritical villain as he has proved himself to be!"

"Mr. Grant Berkeley has returned from Europe, aunt! he arrived to-day quite unexpectedly. It seems he received an anonymous letter which made him hurry home, and that home he found desolate! The family must be in great trouble about him—this elopement is such a sad, disgraceful affair! They are much

distressed on his account. Neither Miss Berkeley nor her cousin, Miss Tremayne, would take their singing lessons to-day."

"Miss Tremayne! did you say?" broke in an excited manner from Mrs. Osburne.

"Yes; Mr. Berkeley's niece, who has just come from Ireland."

"Is she a daughter of his sister's?" the tones were full of eager curiosity.

"No; I think not; her mother was an Irish lady—a real lady of the old country you know, aunt."

"Yes; I understand, a lady by birth. But how is she his niece? She cannot be a brother's child, for the name is different, and you say her mother was not his sister."

"I really do not understand; I have heard Thérèse Berkeley call her cousin."

"Then she is perhaps a niece-in-law connected by marriage."

"She may or may not be. I never inquired; it is no affair of mine," said Blanche carelessly.

"Why are you so anxious to know, aunt," she added wonderingly.

"Because her name startled me."

"Why? did you know any one of that name?"

"Yes, to my bitter grief I did years ago," and Mrs. Osburne bowed her head on her small thin hand, and for a few minutes seemed lost in painful thought.

"How much that Mr. Grant Berkeley is to be pitied!" Blanche resumed, returning to the subject of the elopement.

"How does he bear his wife's desertion?" asked Mrs. Osburne.

"It has almost driven him frantic I have heard. I was at his father's house to-day when he arrived; he drove there from his own home in Sherbrooke street to learn the particulars of the incoherent story his servants told him, and never shall I forget the grief-stricken, despairing expression of his colourless face. He was very much attached to his wife. She was so very fascinating as well as beautiful; she seemed to captivate every one who came within her influence. Castonell was not the only one in Montreal who lost his heart to the beautiful Mrs. Grant Berkeley."

"It is strange her husband did not hear the news before he reached home," Mrs. Osburne observed thoughtfully.

"It is, but as it is now some days since the elopement the papers have ceased to mention it, and from no other source would he be likely to learn it before reaching home. Few persons would wish to give him such information."

"Had he no suspicion of his wife's attachment to this man?" asked Mrs. Osburne, for whom the affair seemed to possess much interest.

"People say not. You know, aunt, Mr. Grant Berkeley is rather too fond of gambling. Much of his time was spent in the billiard-room; therefore, he was in a great measure ignorant of Mr. Castonell's frequent visits at his house. Mrs. Grant's son, young Mordaunt, has suddenly disappeared—gone, it is said, in pursuit of his mother."

"For what purpose?"

"To try and induce her to abandon the bad man who has beguiled her from her home."

"He may as well spare himself the trouble. Such women are not easily reclaimed after such a step. I knew a case something similar to that in which neither of the guilty pair repented or ever turned from the evil way into which passion tempted them to wander. This news has pained me, Blanche. It has recalled sad memories of by-gone days," and again Mrs. Osburne's head was bent to hide the emotion which this stirring of the bitter waters of memory caused.

"And the wife of this bad man," she continued after a short silence, "has his desertion left her destitute? She is to be pitied most. My sympathy is more with her than with Mr. Grant Berkeley who, from your account, seems to have neglected the wife he has lost, although I do not say that is any extenuation of her guilt."

"Mrs. Castonell does not want friends in this great trouble, aunt. She is much liked, and even strangers feel an interest in her affairs. She is going to open a school for young ladies, and Mrs. Smith—her particular friend—has recommended me as music-teacher."

"That will give you too much to do, Blanche. You will have to give up some of your private pupils if you accept this engagement. You know Stephen does not wish you to work so hard."

"I know that, aunt but Stephen must not have all the burden of the family on his shoulders. Berkeley & Son do not give him a salary adequate to his services, and without my help we could not live so comfortably. Besides, aunt, I want to get that new piano. It would be such a comfort to have a fine instrument instead of that used-up one we bought at auction when we came here. I have set my heart on purchasing one of Nordheimer's best pianos, and now this engagement at Mrs. Castonell's will soon enable me to gratify this wish."

"Well, dear, do as you like. I only hope your health will not suffer."

"Berkeley & Son are coming down in the world I am afraid, from the rumors I hear about them," Blanche continued, "and if

their pride did get a fall, few would be sorry, I am sure."

"Then they are not liked?" Mrs. Osburne remarked interrogatively.

"The family are not," Blanche replied. "They are too pretentious—to use a word which, though not in the dictionary, is very expressive—I have heard it said that they treat with haughty neglect their former friends who have not been able to keep pace with them in the race for wealth."

"Why do you think their affairs are embarrassed, Blanche?"

"Every one says so! and the retrenchment in their expense, and retirement in which they have been living since Miss Berkeley's marriage prove it to be true. Then Mrs. Grant Berkeley's extravagance and her husband's gambling have also contributed to involve them in difficulties."

"Is this niece of Mr. Berkeley's, this Miss Tremayne, dependent on her uncle—a poor relation, I mean?"

"Oh no, Miss Tremayne is an heiress, she has a large fortune left her by her grandfather, Colonel Godfrey. She is a beautiful young lady, that Hilda Tremayne!" Blanche continued, in tones of admiration, "and so unassuming, with such pleasant manners. She is so elegant-looking, too. Looks like a queen, and yet without pride. How different from her cousin, Thérèse. Oh how weary I am of the airs such girls give themselves!" and the ruby lip of the young music-teacher curled with disdain as she thought of the superciliousness of Miss Thérèse Berkeley and other such *parvenues*.

"But is it not near tea-time, aunt? What can keep Stephen? Ah! here he comes," added Blanche joyfully, as a young man was seen opening the garden gate.

CHAPTER XXXII.

MR. BERKELEY'S CLERK.

STEPHEN Osburne, like his mother, had been forgotten when the gift of beauty was sharing, yet the pleasing expression of his plain face redeemed it from ugliness. His figure was tall, slight, and angular, with a stoop in the shoulders—from constantly sitting at the desk—which did not add any grace to his appearance. He was past thirty, having nearly completed half the three score and ten years allotted to human life, yet he looked younger, which was probably owing to his light hair and fair complexion.

"Is tea ready, dear mother?" he asked, hastily entering and throwing himself wearily into the fauteuil, which she vacated on his appearance.

"It has been waiting some minutes," she answered, as she opened a door leading into another apartment, where a tea-table was spread with a tempting repast. A dishful of raspberries garnished with green leaves, with the usual adjuncts of cream and sugar, delicious hot buns, and home-made cake with iced butter.

"What makes you so late this evening, Stephen?" Mrs. Osburne asked, as she seated herself at the tea-table, and began to pour out a cup of fragrant hyson, which she knew her son would feel so refreshing after his long walk from the counting-house of Berkeley & Son.

There was no immediate answer, and an angry expression clouded Stephen's face.

"Let me eat these good things in peace, first, then I will tell you all about it, mother."

Something unpleasant then had occurred, which Mrs. Osburne and her niece waited anxiously to hear. Stephen eat his supper apparently lost in disagreeable thought, and the meal passed almost in silence.

"It was all owing to that young scamp, Mark Berkeley!" Stephen at length exclaimed, finishing his last cup of tea, and throwing himself back angrily in his chair.

Blanche gave a little start at the mention of Mark Berkeley.

"What's the matter, Stephen? You seem unusually excited."

"And have I not cause when Mr. Berkeley all but accuses me of appropriating a missing sum of money?" he asked, with a bitter laugh.

"You, Stephen! how dared he suspect you," and the scarlet of resentment mantled on Blanche Osburne's polished cheek.

The pale face of Mrs. Osburne grew still more pallid from apprehension.

"Oh do not look so frightened, dear mother," said Stephen, tenderly. "You know it amounts to nothing. He hardly dare accuse me of it. My character is too well established."

"But who can have taken the money?" asked Blanche. "If it is missing, somebody has stolen it, that is evident. But who is the thief?"

"Mark Berkeley, of course! No one else could have taken it!" Stephen answered promptly, with a defiant look at Blanche.

"Why do you suspect him?" she asked, indignantly.

"He was in the counting-room when I gave his father the parcel of money I had just brought from the Montreal Bank. It was a considerable sum, and it was needed to pay pressing debts. Berkeley & Son are hard up for

money, these days. Immediately after I put the money down on his desk Mr. Berkeley was called out by one of the clerks, and when he returned the money had disappeared, and so had Mark Berkeley."

"Then he must have taken it," observed Mrs. Osburne, who was listening with deep interest.

"There is no doubt of it," Stephen answered, decidedly; "and yet his father seems to lay the theft at my door."

"But he did not accuse, Stephen."

"No, not exactly in words; but it is evident that he suspects me strongly. He will not be willing to admit that his son would commit such an act."

"Are you going back to the counting-house again this evening?"

"I must, as we are very busy. I suppose I shall be there till nine o'clock, or perhaps later."

"The missing money may be found during your absence," Blanche remarked, hopefully.

"No fear of that! Whoever took it will keep a fast hold of it."

"Was there any one else in the room but you and young Berkeley?" Mrs. Osburne inquired.

"No."

"And after Mr. Berkeley was called out, did you not observe what his son did?"

"His son left when he did, and at the moment of his leaving he dexterously contrived to pocket unseen by any one the parcel of bank-notes."

"You speak very confidently, yet you cannot prove this," Blanche said, rather scornfully.

"It must be so! how else could it be gone? I did not steal it!" said Stephen, almost fiercely.

"You" exclaimed his mother. "No one will suspect you, Stephen! Do not fear that."

"I do not know," he remarked, with irritation. "People will be more likely to impute the theft to me than to Lieutenant Berkeley, of the Canadian Rifles; he is somebody and I am only Stephen Osburne, clerk with Berkeley & Son. The decision of the world is generally in favour of the rich man in such cases. 'The poor is hated of his neighbour,'" and Stephen laughed bitterly.

"But every knows that you are upright and honourable—that your conduct is without reproach," urged Mrs. Osburne, proudly. "And besides," she added, "have you not said that this young Berkeley is rather dissipated?"

"Yes; he is said to be a fast young man," Stephen observed, ill-naturedly glancing at Blanche. "That would probably tell against him."

"That would not convict him of theft," said Blanche, boldly; and I do not believe he took the money, Stephen," and the blue eyes turned defiantly on her cousin.

"Oh, of course, you won't believe anything ill of Lieutenant Berkeley," he answered, with subdued anger. "Perhaps you think I took it, Blanche."

"You know I do not. But I think there must be some mistake, and that it will turn up—"

"In some miraculous manner, I suppose," interrupted Stephen, with a mocking laugh. "Well, we shall see," and he was moving towards the door, when stopping suddenly, he asked:

"Do you know that Grant Berkeley has arrived?"

"Yes; I saw him to-day; he looks miserable. Have you heard who wrote the anonymous letter which brought him home?" Blanche asked, eagerly.

"How should I hear?" and her cousin smiled at the silly question. The writers of such letters seldom make themselves known. Mr. Grant Berkeley leaves town to-night by the train for New York in pursuit of the fugitives, having learned something of their whereabouts. He is not the man to sit down quietly under such a wrong as Castonell has done him."

"Do you think there will be a duel, if they should meet? Do you think Mr. Grant will challenge him?" asked Blanche.

"He will shoot him deliberately wherever he sees him, without going through the form of a challenge. He will not be withheld from this act by any religious scruples, for Grant Berkeley is minus of any devotional feeling. He does not even possess that respectable kind of religion which most people exhibit on Sundays; he is never seen at church. Castonell's life is not worth much, I tell you, when Grant Berkeley is on his track. And I do not blame him if he does shoot the villain who has robbed him of domestic happiness!"

"Stephen!" said Mrs. Osburne, reprovingly. "how can you utter such a sentiment!"

"Oh, mother! you feel as a woman—a good woman feels on this subject! You would, I suppose, say, 'leave the wretch to God's vengeance. He will repay;' but men think differently, and in my opinion Grant Berkeley is justified if he does take the life of Castonell. Consider what he has done!"

"I cannot see how one crime can justify another," remarked Mrs. Osburne, gravely.

The remainder of the evening was spent by Mrs. Osburne and her niece, anxiously awaiting the return of Stephen. As the clock was striking nine his quick well-known step