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OUR SERIAL STORY

JOHN HALIFAX, GENTLEMAN

By MRS. CRAIK

CHAPTER XXX

(Continued)

And as if, even to this day, the mention of the young man's name brought back thoughts of the last day we had seen him—a day which, its sadness seen gone by, still kept its unspoken sacredness, distinct from all other days—John moved away and went and talked to a girl whom both he and the mother liked above most young girls we knew—simple, sunny-faced Grace Oldtower.

Dancing began. Spite of my Quaker education, or perhaps for that very reason, I delighted to see dancing. Dancing, such as it was then, when young folk moved breezily and lightly, as if they loved it; skimming like swallows down the long lines of the Triumph—gracefully winding in and out through the graceful country dance—lively always, but always decorous. In those days people did not think it necessary to the pleasures of dancing that any stranger should have liberty to snatch a shy, innocent girl round the waist, and whirl her about in mad waltz or awkward polka, till she stops, giddy and breathless, with burning cheek and tossed hair, looking—as I would not have liked to see our pretty lady to-night, I was inclined to say to her—

"When you do dance, I wish you a wave of the sea, that you might ever do Nothing but that."

And in her unwearied spirits she seemed as if she would readily have responded to the wish.

We did not see Guy among the dancers, who were now forming in a some what confused square, in order to execute a new dance called quadrilles, of which Miss Grace Oldtower was to be the instructress.

"Where is Guy?" said the mother, who would have missed him among a room full of people. "Have you seen Guy anywhere, Miss Silver?"

Miss Silver, who sat playing tunes—she had declined dancing—turned, colouring visibly.

"Yes, I have seen him; he is in study."

"Would you be so kind as to fetch him?" The governess rose and crossed the room, with a stately walk—stately than usual. Her silk gown, of some rich soft colour, fashioned after Mrs. Halifax's taste, and the chaplet of bay leaves, which Maud had insisted upon putting in her dark hair, made an astonishing change in Miss Silver. I could not help noticing it to Mrs. Halifax.

"Yes, in deed, she looks well. John says her features are fine; but, for my part, I don't care for your statuesque faces; I like colour—expression. See that bright little Grace Oldtower—a thoroughly English rose; I like her. Poor Miss Silver; I wish—"

What, out of compunction for a certain sharpness with which she had spoken, Mrs. Halifax was about to wish, remained undeclared. For, just this minute, Guy entered, and leaning his handsome head and his tender pettish soles over the "English rose," as his mother called her, led her out to the dancing.

We sat down and looked on.

"Guy dances lazily; he is rather pale too, I fancy."

"Tired, probably. He was out far too long on the ice to-day with Maud and Miss Silver. What a pretty creature his partner is!" added Ursula thoughtfully.

"The children are growing up fast," I said.

"Ay, indeed. To think that Guy is actually twenty-one—the age when his father was married!"

"Guy will be reminding you of that fact some day soon."

Mrs. Halifax smiled. "The sooner the better, if only he brings me a daughter or whom I can love."

And I fancied there was love—motherly love—in the eyes that followed through the graceful mazes of her dancing the bonny English rose. Guy and his partner sat down beside us. His mother noticed that he had turned very pale again, and the lad owned to be in some pain: he had twisted his foot that morning in helping Maud and Miss Silver across the ice; but it was a mere trifle—not worth mentioning.

It passed over, with one or two anxious inquiries on the mother's part, and a soft, dewy shadow over the down-dropped cheek of the little Rose, who evidently did not like to think of any harm coming to her—old play fellow. Then Sir Herbert appeared to lead Mrs. Halifax in to supper. Guy lumped along with pretty Grace on his arm, and all the guests, just enough

to fill our longest table in John's study, came thronging round in a buzz of mirthfulness.

Either the warm, hospitable atmosphere, or the sight of the merry youngsters, or the general influence of social pleasantness, had for the time being dispelled the cloud. But certainly it was dispelled. The master of the feast looked down two long lines of happy faces—his own as bright as theirs—down to where, at the foot of the table, the mother and mistress sat. She had been slightly nervous at times during the evening, but now she appeared thoroughly at ease and glad to see her husband take his place at the head of his own hospital board, in the midst of his own friends, and

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his own people, honoured and beloved. It seemed a good omen—an omen that the better things outside would pass away.

How bitter they had been, and how sore the wife's heart still felt, I could see from the jealous way in which, smiling and cheerful as her demeanour was, she caught every look, every word of those around her which might chance to bear reference to her husband; in her quick avoidance of every topic connected with these disastrous times, and, above all, in her hurried grasp of a newspaper that some careless servant brought in fresh from the night mail, wet with sleet and snow.

"Do you get your country paper regularly?" asked some one at table. And then some others appeared to recollect the Norton Bury Mercury, and its virulent attacks on their host—for there ensued an awkward pause, during which I saw Ursula's face beginning to burn. But she conquered her wrath.

"There is often much interest in our provincial papers, Sir Herbert. My husband makes a point of taking them all in—bad and good—of every shade of politics. He believes it is only by hearing all sides that you can truly judge of the state of the country."

"Just as a physician must hear all symptoms before he decides on the patient's case. At least, so our good old friend Dr. Jessop used to say."

"Eh?" said Mr. Jessop, the banker, catching his own name, and waking up from a brown study, in which he had seemed to see nothing—except, perhaps, the newspaper, which, in its printed cover, lay between himself and Mrs. Halifax. "Eh? did any one—Oh, I beg pardon—beg pardon—Sir Herbert," hastily added the old man, who was a very meek and worthy soul, and had been perhaps more subdued than usual this evening.

"I was referring," said Sir Herbert, with his usual ponderous civility, "to your excellent brother, who was so much respected among us—for which respect, allow me to say, he did not leave us without an inheritor."

The old banker answered the formal bow with a kind of nervous hurry; and then Sir Herbert, with a loud premise of his right as the oldest friend of our family, tried to obtain silence for the customary speech, preliminary to the customary toast of "Health and prosperity to the heir of Beechwood."

There was great applause and filling of glasses; great smiling and whispering; everybody glancing at poor Guy, who turned red and white, and evidently wished himself a hundred miles off. In the confusion, I felt my sleeve touched, and saw leaning towards me, hidden by Maud's laughing happy face, the old banker. He held in his hand the newspaper which seemed to have so fascinated him.

"It's the London Gazette. Mr. Halifax gets it three hours before any of us. I may open it? It is important to me. Mrs. Halifax would excuse, eh?"

Of course she would. Especially if she had seen the old man's look, as his trembling fingers vainly tried to unfold the sheet without a single rustle betraying his surreptitious curiosity.

Sir Herbert rose, cleared his throat, and began—

"Ladies and gentlemen, I speak as a father myself, and as son of a father whom—whom I will not refer to here, except to say that his good heart would have rejoiced to see this day. The high esteem in which Sir Ralph always held Mr. Halifax has descended, and will descend—"

Here some one called out—
"Mr. Jessop! Look at Mr. Jessop!"

The old man had suddenly sank back, with a sort of choking groan. His eyes were staring blankly, his cheek was the colour of ashes. But when he saw every one looking at him, he tried desperately to recover himself.

"Tis nothing. Nothing of the slightest moment. Eh?" clutching lightly the paper which Mrs. Halifax was kindly removing out of his hand. "There's no news in it—none, I assure you."

But from his agitation—from the pitiful effort he made to disguise it—it was plain enough that there was news. Plain also, as in these dangerous and critical times men were only too quick to divine, in what that news consisted. Tidings which now made every newspaper a sight of fear—especially this—the London Gazette.

Edwin caught and read the fatal page—the fatal column—known only too well.

"W—'s have stopped payment."

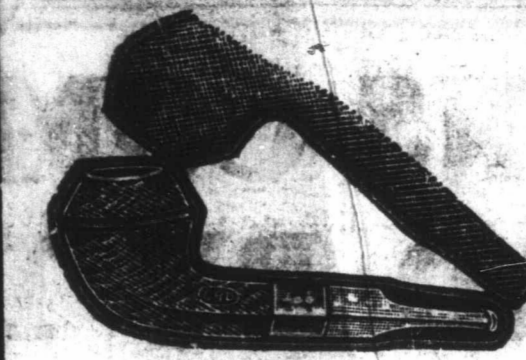
W—'s was a great London house, the favourite banking-house in our country, with which many provincial banks, and Jessop's especially, were widely connected, and would be one knew how widely involved.

"W—'s stopped payment!"

(To be continued.)

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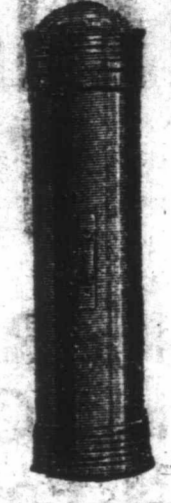
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