

BENEATH THE WAVE.

A NOVEL

BY

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CHAPTER XL.

THE DEAD WOMAN'S RING.

Massam was always beautiful. In the spring time its sylvan glades and dells, fresh with their bright green verdure, seemed the very haunts for the fabled naiads and dryads of old. In the summer-time the glinting sunbeams stole through the long green arcades of foliage, and fell dancing on the grass below, and on the golden gorse, and the wild hill-sides, decked with ferns. Then came the autumn, when the trees changed their hues, and the bushes and twining brambles bowed their fruit-laden heads. But before this season arrived, during the first year of Isabel's marriage, Massam was forsaken by its owners.

She had grown weary of it, and Sir George was weary of it. Not quite a year ago, when his love was young, he had wandered with Isabel along the winding tracks, carpeted with their mossy turf, which led through the beautiful woods of Massam. Then he had listened to her flattering, low-spoken words, fascinated, yet half-afraid. Now he walked with her no more. He had won his heart's desire, and it had turned to gall and bitterness. The beauty that had been a snare to him had been a snare to others also, and had brought anger, distrust, and jealousy into his home.

He had been a gloomy man before his marriage with Isabel, but he was more gloomy now. He was often harsh and bitter to her, and shortly after the birth of her child, and Hilda Marston's marriage, Isabel insisted that a change of air was absolutely necessary for her health.

In this her doctor coincided—in fact with pretty pleading words Isabel had asked him to coincide. Lady Hamilton required change, the great man from town told Sir George, and as the season was now over in town, he recommended Brighton.

A furnished house was therefore taken at this watering-place. It was taken for August, and on the 1st of August, Isabel and her infant son, and her suite of servants, left Massam, and arrived safely at the comfortable house, which had been prepared for them.

Sir George did not go. He went to Scotland, intending to return to Massam on the commencement of partridge shooting, and he told Isabel before they parted, that it would be well if she also came back at the same time.

There was one tie still between Isabel and her husband, and this was their little son. Many a time Sir George would go up to the nursery, when no one but the nurse guessed he did so, and sit watching the cooing baby. He was a lovely child, "the young heir," as the nurses so proudly called him. But Sir George said nothing about his heirship. He would sit looking at the baby boy, and then turn away with a sigh. But he was fond of the sturdy little fellow, that would grasp his finger with a tiny clasp. Isabel also was rather proud, if not fond, of the child, and it was a link between them. "For the boy's sake I will bear with her, if I can," thought Sir George. "For little Reggy's sake I will try to be civil," decided Isabel.

The baby had been called Reginald, after Isabel's father, Mr. Trevor. Isabel had proposed to call him after his own father, but Sir George had requested, nay commanded, that this should not be. So his grandfather's name was given to him, and the old Squire at Sanda felt very proud when he heard that it was to be so.

He sent Master Reginald a very gorgeous gold-drinking cup as a christening present, and a pompous letter of good wishes to his daughter, on the same occasion. He was not asked to the christening, for Isabel had taken a great dislike to her father's young wife, and of course, she could not invite her father without her. But she penned a civil letter back to the Squire. She hoped that some day he would come to see her little Reggy, she wrote, and told him that he had no reason to be ashamed of his grandson.

Yet she felt anything but pleasant when, on her arrival at Brighton, she found that her father, his wife, and Patty Featherstone were also staying there. She had intended to amuse herself, and she felt very much afraid that they would be in the way. They called upon her formally the day after her arrival, and the Squire was apparently much delighted with his little grandson.

"I trust that we shall often see you, Isabel, as you are here?" said the Squire, as he kissed his daughter.

"Thank you, papa," replied Isabel, but she mentally resolved at the same time that she would see as little as possible of the family party.

Yet she had no just cause of anger against her father's wife. Lucinda did her duty to the old man, and tried to make him happy. If she were kind to her own people also, was she to blame? Isabel at all events thought so, and she accordingly behaved very coldly to Patty Featherstone during this first visit.

When people like they can very easily avoid even their nearest relations. Isabel wished to avoid "those Featherstone girls," as she still

called Patty and Lucinda, and Patty and Lucinda were quite sharp enough to see that this was the case.

Naturally they were annoyed, and naturally Mr. Trevor was annoyed. Then Isabel began to be talked about. Her great beauty, her husband's wealth, and her own careless disregard of appearances, were sufficient grounds for this, if there was nothing else. But unfortunately there was something else. Captain Hugh Warrington—a man well known at Brighton—remarkable alike for his good looks and his money, was constantly to be seen in the beautiful Lady Hamilton's train. This was first whispered to Mrs. Trevor, her father's young wife; and then when Lucinda was never to be seen in public with her lovely daughter-in-law, it was openly commented on.

Whispers pass on in a mysterious way, and the whispers about Lady Hamilton were not long in reaching Massam. Hayward heard them from reckless Antony Featherstone, who laughed and had his coarse joke at Sir George's expense on the occasion. As we know, Isabel's folly was now no news to Hayward. But he was angry, and said some sharp words to Mr. Featherstone, for the sake of Sir George.

"He should look better after her," said reckless Antony; and then he went away to spread the tale, and have his joke and laugh again.

When Lucinda first told her husband that Isabel was talked of in Brighton about Captain Warrington, the Squire of Sanda was perfectly horrified. His daughter to be indiscreet in her conduct, it was impossible, he argued. Then, when with his own eyes he saw how careless and defiant Isabel was of appearances, he at once determined to speak to her on the subject. He did so, and Isabel received his advice with scornful contempt.

"Did your youthful Lu," she said, "send you on this errand? If so, my dear father, I may as well tell you that you are wasting your time."

"Isabel," said the Squire, trembling, partly with emotion and partly with anger, "have you lost all the respect that is due to me as your parent?"

"You have no right to interfere with me," answered Isabel defiantly.

"For your dead mother's sake—for your husband's sake," urged the Squire, "surely you will never allow your name to be bandied about with this young man's?"

"What do I owe my husband?" answered Isabel passionately. "He treats me with utter contempt and indifference."

"Then it is your own fault," retorted Mr. Trevor. "When Sir George married you, he was, I am sure, deeply attached to you."

"It did not last, then," said Isabel, and in this reckless spirit she absolutely rejected her father's advice.

"Then I will speak to your husband," said the Squire, rising angrily to leave; and he actually contemplated writing Sir George on the subject, but his wife persuaded him not to do so.

"She will not stay long," said Lucinda, good-naturedly. "Don't make any further breach between them, if you can possibly help it. Foolish as Isabel is, I cannot believe that she will allow her vanity to carry her too far."

But though her father gave Sir George no hint of Isabel's indiscretion, Antony Featherstone was not so reticent.

"You should look after that handsome wife of yours, Sir George," he said in his careless, reckless way a few days after Sir George returned from Scotland. "I hear she's turning the heads of half the young fellows in Brighton, and that good-looking guardsman—the parson's relative—among the number."

Sir George gave no reply to this impertinence. He looked with his cold, haughty gaze at Mr. Featherstone's flushed red face, and then, without a word, he turned away. But this careless speech left its mark, and Sir George acted upon it. He wrote, in fact, at once to Isabel, and requested her immediately to return.

She replied civilly to this letter. She would like to stay a week longer, the sea air was doing the baby so much good—and so on. But Sir George was not to be beguiled. He started for Brighton on the morning that he received his wife's answer to his letter, and to Isabel's surprise and consternation, arrived there the same evening when Isabel was dressing to go to a concert at the Aquarium.

"I have come to take you home," he said, after coldly saluting her.

"But why?" said Isabel. "Reggy is so well here—and as papa is here—"

"Have you seen much of your father?" asked Sir George, and Isabel slightly coloured at the question.

"Not so much, of course," she answered, "as I would have done, if the Featherstones had not been with him."

"If you mean your father's wife, I hear she makes him a most excellent one," said Sir George.

"Of course," said Isabel, throwing back her head, "you are sure to say everything that will be disagreeable to me!"

But Sir George made no answer to this petulant reply. His eyes by accident had fallen on Isabel's rings, which were lying on a table near, where she had carelessly thrown them when she had commenced dressing for the concert. There were some half dozen of them, and they were all diamond ones. It was indeed one of Isabel's last fancies to wear nothing but diamonds, and among the sparkling circlets, Sir George's eyes were fixed intently upon one.

It was the great heavy diamond hoop that had

been on the dead woman's hand, whose body had been brought to shore by Hayward at Sanda. Isabel had kept this ring against her father's wishes, but she had never worn it at Massam. She was afraid, in fact, that Sir George would not allow her to retain it if he knew where it came from. At Brighton, however, she had constantly worn it. It was indeed a beautiful ring, remarkable for the size of the brilliant stones that it contained, and for the inscription on the inner rim, which, under the circumstances, had seemed so sad to Hilda Marston.

Suddenly—before Isabel had noticed that his attention was attracted by it, Sir George lifted this ring in his hand, and the next moment, in a voice sharpened by some strange agony, he asked:

"Isabel, where did you get this ring?" She looked up at this, and when she saw which ring it was, she slightly frowned.

"I don't know," she said, with affected carelessness, "at a jeweller's, I suppose."

"What jeweller's?" asked Sir George, in the same strange voice; and he nervously turned the ring, and read the words engraved on the inner rim as she spoke. "To my beloved."

He read these words, but not aloud, and then with something between a sob and cry, he sprang forward and grasped Isabel's hand.

"Tell me," he said, "for God's sake tell me, Isabel, where did you get this ring?"

His agitation was unmistakable, his face almost convulsed, and a sudden suspicion at once entered Isabel's mind.

"Why do you want to know?" she said, trying to free her hand. "Did you give it to some beloved one, then? Is it a souvenir of some lost love?"

She spoke these words half tauntingly, and with a curse Sir George dropped her hand.

"Woman," he said, facing her, "answer me. Where, and by what means, did you gain possession of this ring?"

"It was taken from a dead woman's hand," answered Isabel, defiantly. "And what, may I ask, was this dead woman to you?"

At this moment Isabel's maid, Ritson, who did not know that Sir George had arrived, entered the room, and without seeing him addressed Isabel:

"My lady," she said, "Capt. Warrington is here—"

"Then she paused, for she suddenly had perceived that Sir George was present.

"I am ready," said Isabel, and she went to the table and put on her other rings, looking defiantly at Sir George the while. "Where is my cloak?" she continued, speaking to Ritson; and then, as her maid placed it on her shoulders, she once more addressed her husband.

"I am going to a concert at the Aquarium," she said, "will you go? Captain Warrington is here, and his sister, Mrs. Woodford. I am going with them."

"You can go," answered Sir George, in a low, fierce tone, after a moment's hesitation; and Isabel, with a glance at her maid to follow her, drew her cloak around her, and quitted the room.

"Get him out of the room as quickly as possible," she whispered to Ritson, as soon as they were on the staircase. And the maid, after seeing her lady downstairs, where she was joined by Captain Warrington, returned to the dressing-room, in which she found Sir George still standing.

"Ritson," he said, speaking to her harshly and sternly, "do you know anything about this ring?" And he held the diamond hoop towards her as he spoke.

"Nothing, Sir George," answered Ritson, positively and truthfully. There were other rings that Isabel wore that Ritson did know something of, but not of this. Isabel, in fact, had never confided to her maid how this ring had come into her possession.

"Do you know how long she has had it?" asked Sir George, in the same stern voice.

"Ever since I have been with my lady," said Ritson, "but she never wore it until lately. I have seen it, however, frequently in her jewel-case at Massam."

"That will do," said Sir George. "Give me your lady's keys, and then leave the room."

"But, Sir George—" hesitated the confidential maid.

"I insist upon you obeying me," said Sir George. "Give me the keys."

"I—I—haven't them with me," murmured Ritson, tremblingly.

"Then bring me a hammer and a file," said Sir George, and the frightened woman left the room, and as she went downstairs she decided to send a messenger to recall her lady.

In the meanwhile, Sir George was looking around at Isabel's possessions. He would learn how she got this ring, he determined. There must be some clue in her desk, or in the locked drawers of her toilet-table; and as his heart was wrung with great agony and doubt, he made up his mind at once to search for it.

Ritson did not return with the keys, but Sir George was a strong man, and slight locks are easily broken. He waited a moment or two for the lady's maid, and then rang the room-bell violently, and in a minute or so the butler (who had accompanied Isabel from Massam) answered the summons.

It was known downstairs by this time that something had happened. Ritson, with scared looks, had herself hurried out to go to the concert to seek her lady, and the butler was, therefore, half prepared for the stern expression that his master wore, when he answered the dressing-room bell.

"Where is Ritson?" asked Sir George. "Why

has she not brought me the keys I ordered her to bring?"

"Ritson has just gone out, Sir George," replied the butler.

"Then bring me at once a hammer and a file."

This order the butler obeyed, and stood listening outside the door of the dressing-room, while the crash of wood-work and the wrenching open of locks was heard from within. The man stood with bated breath. He knew that probably some terrible discovery would follow this forcible opening of Lady Hamilton's locked repositories. Her servants had watched and commented upon her conduct now for long. These polite, respectful, household spies, knew now, therefore, that a crisis had come. The butler heard the wrenching of the locks, and then went down and told his fellows what was going on upstairs. He told them at least that Sir George was breaking open my lady's locks; but he could not tell them of all the dark passions that were raging in Sir George's breast as he did so.

With the hammer and file in his hand, and with his black brow knitted, and his forehead wet with dew, Sir George stood. He had first forced open the top drawer of Lady Hamilton's dressing-table. In this, lying on a confused collection of female vauities, he found a short open note. Sir George took it up and read it, and then with a muttered execration, dashed it on the floor.

But this note was one of many. They were all written in one handwriting, and as Sir George read them there was no longer any doubt in his mind of his wife's guilt. He had known before that she was a base and perjured woman, but he knew now that she had forfeited all right to the shelter of his roof.

He took out the letters one by one. Then with a bitter curse he laid them on a table near, and went on with his search. He was not seeking evidence of his wife's sin now. He was seeking for what he had remained there to seek—some clue as to how Isabel had become possessed of the dead woman's ring.

But he sought in vain. Amongst all her letters, amongst all her secrets, there was not one word to unravel this one. Yet Sir George could not be mistaken in the ring. This ring had been in his hands before. It had been given as a token of a love long dead. It had come from beneath the wave as an avenging sign to him. It was a symbol of his own guilt and sin, and in seeking for the knowledge of how Isabel had become possessed of it, he had learned that his wife was no better than a cast-away!

The room was all in confusion. He had flung the contents of her desk, her trunks, and her drawers carelessly aside as he searched them. Her jewels, her love-letters, her lover's gifts, all were strewn around, when suddenly he heard a light and faltering step approach the door.

Then the handle slowly turned, and pale and trembling Isabel appeared on the threshold.

She grew more afraid when she saw him. The fierce dark light in his eyes, and the concentrated passion of his expression, filled her heart with dread.

"Come here," he said, in a savage undertone, looking at her; but she shrank back.

"Don't be afraid, I'll not murder you," he continued in the same passion-stifled voice. "Come here; I want you to answer one question, before I see your face no more!"

Then Isabel approached him, and fell grovelling on her knees. She saw it was all discovered. Her sin, her folly, her falseness, were all known now, but she thought she might move him for the child's sake.

"For Reggy's sake," she said, with half a sob, looking up into his stern pale face, "for the boy's sake, don't turn me away!"

"He will be better with no mother," answered Sir George, in a hoarse voice.

"Don't say that—" she urged; but Sir George stopped her with an imperative gesture.

"Tell me," he said, "if your false lips can speak the truth—tell me, where did you get this ring?"

"At Sanda," said Isabel, who was too much terrified to refuse to answer. "A woman's body was brought on shore there by Mr. Hayward, and she had on several rings. That was one of them. Papa got them to take care of, as lord of the manor, and I asked him to allow me to wear that one. This is the truth."

"At Sanda," murmured Sir George, as if he were thinking aloud. "At Sanda—truly my sin has found me out!"

"What was this woman to you?" asked Isabel, gaining a little courage and rising.

"Not faithless like you, at least!" answered Sir George, again looking at her with withering scorn. "But it is all over," he continued, "my roof shall shelter you no more, and the name that you have dishonoured shall be taken from you."

"Be it so, then," said Isabel, drawing herself up to her full height, and facing him. "I am not a woman to ask a man to forgive me twice." And with these last words she turned away, and went out from her husband's presence.

CHAPTER XLI.

NEPHEMESIS.

A heavy thunderstorm broke over Massam the day after this dark and miserable meeting between Sir George and Lady Hamilton took place.

In the midst of it, amid the blinding rain and the fierce flashes of forked lightning, Sir George, pale, travel-stained, and visibly disturbed, rode