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## HILDA; OR, THE MERCHANT'S SECRET.

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### CHAPTER XVI.—Continued.

"Yes, and an amusing spectacle it is—the gay throng on the glistening ice in one of those fashionable Rinks. A military band is often in attendance, and then they engage in it with absolute *furor*. Everyone seems anxious to attitudinize on the glassy ice."

"Do the ladies wear any particular costume skating?" asked Miss Clifford.

"No; but their style of dress is very tasteful. Some skate admirably; their evolutions are so perfectly graceful they seem to skim over the ice like birds."

"It seems to me they know how to enjoy life in Canada," observed Cecil. "Hilda, when you return to Montreal I think I shall accompany you."

"Hilda is not going to return to Canada, Cecil," broke in Colonel Godfrey, eagerly. "Her future home will be at Innismoyne."

"I should like to learn to skate. I think I shall have a Rink made next winter. Wouldn't you like it, Hilda?" asked her cousin.

"It would be labour lost, Cecil; the climate is not severe enough. If you want to enjoy skating you must visit Canada," observed Sir Gervase.

"The carnivals at the Rinks are amusing spectacles," observed Hilda; "the characters are often well supported, and the dresses tasteful."

"Yes, the masquerades are gay scenes. It is so amusing to watch the different characters skating or dancing together. In a quadrille you will often see a strange assemblage of maskers. A graceful Spanish lady having a Chinaman for a partner. A Mary Queen of Scots, a George Washington. A Knight Templar attitudinizing with a Flower Girl, or a Spanish Grandee with a pretty Scotch lassie. It is this variety and contrast which gives such scenes their greatest attraction."

"Dancing on skates must be a difficult achievement," remarked Lord Percy Dashton.

"Skating is brought to great perfection in Canada. I have seen many graceful and surprising evolutions on the ice performed by those who are adepts in the art," observed Sir Gervase.

"Canada is going to be a great country," remarked Colonel Godfrey. "It will yet take its place among the nations."

"The Star of Empire glitters in the West," repeated Cecil sententiously, glancing archly at his lady mother.

"Not yet, Cecil; it has not set in our horizon yet," she added, scornfully. "This enthusiasm about Canada was displeasing to her. She merely looked upon it as a colony of Great Britain—to talk of its nationality seemed absurd."

Lord Ashleigh, to whom Canada was also an uninteresting topic, now requested Miss Clifford to sing.

As she rose to comply, Sir Gervase Montague took her chair near Miss Tremayne, and asked her in a low voice, "if she had decided upon spending the rest of her life at Innismoyne."

"Grandpapa has determined it shall be so," she replied, with a faint smile.

"And you feel obliged to acquiesce?"

"Yes, I may not oppose his wishes. Poor mamma wrecked the happiness of her life by doing so."

"Hilda, this trifling with me is cruel! I followed you to Ireland; I came to Innismoyne to have my fate decided. I will speak to Colonel Godfrey to-morrow. I cannot live on enduring this torturing suspense."

"You must not speak to Grandpapa on that subject," said Hilda, struggling for composure. Then, fearful that their agitated  *tête-à-tête* might attract attention, she rose suddenly and withdrew into the deep recess of one of the deep windows. Sir Gervase followed.

"Then you reject me!" he said in the hoarse voice of strong emotion.

Hilda was silent. Principle prompted her to answer in the affirmative, but the passionate love of her heart pleaded for her lover. She could not bring herself to pronounce his final dismissal. She clung still to the happiness of enjoying his love.

"I do not mean that. I cannot reject the love I so highly prize!" she exclaimed with subdued vehemence. "But it cannot be—not yet—at least, not for some time!"

Sir Gervase regarded her in surprise. The changing colour, the agitated manner, the trembling form, all bespoke emotion as stormy as his own.

She loved him, then! How the certainty of that thrilled him with delight! She had never before spoken so plainly—but why this

unwillingness to accept his hand? why hesitate to give a decided answer? He could not understand the secret cause of so much inconsistency.

"And why not for some time?" he asked, very gravely, yet with a deep tenderness in his tones.

"It is a whim of mine to test the strength of your affection," Hilda replied, with an effort to be gay.

"This is very much like coquetry, Hilda. You cannot now doubt my love for you. You merely want to show your power over me."

"Our acquaintance has been too short, we are almost strangers to each other. Marriages contracted too hastily are often repented of afterwards. I am young yet, only twenty! Can we not wait a year or two yet, Gervase?"

"Gervase!" how sweetly that word fell on his ear. It was the first time she had addressed him so familiarly.

"Ah, Hilda! the love is mostly on my side, or you would not speak so coldly of waiting," and a gloomy oppression clouded the Baronet's brow. The girl could not really love him, he thought she must be trifling with his affections.

Hilda did not answer, but she turned her dark eyes on her lover with a look that startled him. Fondness, anguish, and something very like despair, were mixed up in that look, thrilling Sir Gervase with an undefined presentiment of evil. He drew nearer to Hilda, he could scarcely resist the impulse to take her in his arms as if to shelter her from the sorrow he saw so plainly in the depths of those mournful eyes.

"What is it, Hilda? Something troubles you. Reveal it all to me. Confide in me, darling!" The tones were so infinitely tender, the expression of the face so noble, so sympathizing, that Hilda's crushed heart yearned to lay itself bare before him, to tell him all, to explain the inconsistency of her conduct; but it was only for a moment. Pride revolted at the thought of revealing her marriage to Sir Gervase, she shrank from such a declaration.

Her connection with such an one as Dudley would be degradation in his eyes, it was so in her own. No, she would wait in hope. If the Baronet's love for her was such as he professed, it would bear the test of time. A sailor's life was uncertain. Some day she might read of Dudley's death—might see his name among the wrecked. To her great relief, Colonel Godfrey's voice at this moment was heard asking Sir Gervase to join in a rubber at whist, very opportunely, Hilda thought, for she could not answer that question of Sir Gervase.

The next day was Sunday. Colonel Godfrey, at breakfast, invited those of his guests who felt inclined to attend divine service, to accompany him to church.

Lady Millicent excused herself on the plea of a bad headache. Colonel Godfrey declared she always had a headache when she spent a Sunday at Innismoyne. The rest of the party went, some from principle, others because they knew of no other way to relieve the ennui of the Sunday morning.

The church which Colonel Godfrey's family attended was about half a mile from Innismoyne. It stood in a lonely glen in the deep solitude of the mountains. The road leading to it was little better than a mountain-path. Its scenery was peculiarly wild. On either side were stupendous cliffs, clad with mosses, lichens, and luxuriant heather, while from their interstices sprang the ash and holly. The verdure of the lower sides of the mountains contrasting strangely with their bare and rugged summits.

A sudden turn in this wild road brought the party from Innismoyne in full view of the church so picturesquely situated, shaded by the dark and lofty branches of two stately yew-trees, the whole set in a frame-work of magnificent mountains.

The church was built in the form of a cross. The architecture was Gothic, and beneath its walls was the crypt of the Godfreys. There Mrs. Tremayne now slept with her ancestors the quiet sleep of death. The clergyman who officiated in this little church among the mountains was the Rev. Mr. Tyndall, a good man whose life was an exemplification of the duties religion teaches. The sermon he preached on this Sunday morning had been prepared with a view to reach the hearts of the fashionable visitors at Innismoyne. His earnestness made him eloquent, and the fearlessness with which he uttered the great principles he advocated, gained him the respect as well as the attention of his fashionable auditors.

He spoke of the grandeur of the soul, and the madness of those who allowed the world to fill what was made for God alone. He represented life as it really is—vain, illusive, its pleasures unsatisfying, its highest happiness fleeting and imperfect. Then he described the blessedness of a life of faith, of self-sacrifice and devotedness to God—a blessedness unfathomably deeper than the evanescent enjoyment of the worldling or votary of pleasure.

Hilda listened with reverent attention. She had never before brought under the influence of religious training. This high and holy strain was new to her. The solemn truths Mr. Tyndall

dall enunciated, fell startlingly on her ear. To her awakened conscience the sermon seemed preached for her. Every word went straight to her heart. Was the line of conduct she was pursuing in accordance with the principles of the Gospel? Certainly not. The life of self-sacrifice, renouncing the earthly happiness which was forbidden by laws, human and divine, that was what religion required. The path of duty, rugged and uninviting, was opening plainly before her now. Sir Gervase must be given up. Must be told that an insuperable obstacle prevents their union. The cravings of her heart for a love that was forbidden, must be denied. The conquest of self must be achieved at the sacrifice of all that could make life endurable.

So reasoned, and so thought Hilda, but the will was not brought readily under control. The fearful contest between passion and principle was again renewed, rendering herself and Sir Gervase miserable.

### CHAPTER XVII.

#### THE SHIPWRECK.

"I knew the storm was coming up, Hilda. All last night I heard the booming sound of the ground-swell, which always precedes a gale on the Bay."

It was Cecil Godfrey who spoke. He was standing with his young cousin at one of the windows of the library looking out upon the storm-tost waves of the Bay, over which a gale—coming in from the ocean—was wildly sweeping. In his hand he held a telescope, with which he was scanning the horizon for any vessels near the coast.

"Does the ground-swell sound like a continuous roar heard in the distance, Cecil? I noticed that noise too, but did not know it foretold bad weather."

"It always does. Heaven grant there are no vessels near the shore, for in this gale—sweeping inward—certain destruction awaits them."

"Are you sure there are none?" asked Hilda, anxiously. "Let me look through the glass, Cecil, hold it steadily for me."

"Well, what is the result of your observations? Have your bright eyes detected any vessels?"

"There is something looks like one crossing that dark sea-line far away. Look, Cecil, am I not right?"

"I am afraid it is indeed a brig, her masts—looking like bare poles—are just visible."

"And is it very near the coast? Do you think it will be driven up the Bay? Grandpapa says that navigation in a storm is very difficult."

Cecil was still looking through the glass. "It seems drifting rapidly towards the mouth of the Bay."

"How the gale freshens," he continued, after some twenty minutes had elapsed, and they were still anxiously watching the yet distant vessel.

"You have no storms like this in Canada, Hilda. The country is so far inland."

"I suppose not, although I have seen a wild gale sweeping over Lake Ontario."

"The brig is coming up before the gale," Cecil exclaimed, after another half hour had been spent in anxious observation.

At length a distress gun was heard booming over the Bay. With a white face, Hilda looked at her cousin.

"Can nothing be done to help them, Cecil?"

"Impossible! It would only be perilling more lives. No boat could live in such tempestuous waters!"

"Oh, Cecil! how calmly you speak. Just think of the feelings of those on board, with death staring them in the face!" and, overcome by her high-wrought feelings, Hilda wept hysterically.

Again the sad sound of the minute-gun was heard, making the windows rattle.

"Where is grand-papa?" asked Hilda, excitedly, "he will best know what ought to be done!"

"Nothing can at present be done, my dear child," said Colonel Godfrey in sad tones, as he at this moment entered the room and joined the cousins in their anxious watch at the library window.

A silence of some minutes ensued, during which each was observing anxiously the onward motion of the ill-fated vessel.

"What a scene of awful grandeur that bay is in a storm!" remarked Colonel Godfrey. "How those gigantic billows leap against the dark cliffs and dash their white foam and spray high above their rugged summits!"

"Is there not a low dangerous reef about two hundred yards from the mouth of the cove running partly across the bay?" asked Cecil.

"Yes; it is only hidden at high water. It is covered now, and if that brig should be driven on it, it will be wrecked almost at our door."

"Oh that would be dreadful!" exclaimed Hilda.

"But it would perhaps be safer for those on board," observed Cecil. "We could then help them by flinging them a rope and fastening it to the rocks on shore. Such things are often done!"

"But not easily done, Cecil," remarked Colonel Godfrey gravely.

"But if the vessel strikes on the reef something of the kind must be attempted," urged his grandson.

"How many persons are there on the deck? Let me look through your glass, Cecil. Most of the crew must already have been swept overboard," Colonel Godfrey continued after a careful inspection of the brig. "I only see five men on deck. One stalwart fellow is still at the helm, although any effort to steer her safely seems vain."

"There is Gervase Montague on the beach," exclaimed Cecil, "and Lord Ashleigh also; they can scarcely keep their feet, the wind is so high."

"They are sheltered by those high rocks," said Hilda. "Do you not think they will try to do something to help the unfortunate crew?" she asked very anxiously.

"Gervase is a noble fellow and will do what is in the power of man to do, and Lord Ashleigh would be brave enough to act, although rather too stupid to devise any plan. I must go and join them. I trust we shall be able to save the poor fellows!"

"I see some country people gathering on the beach," said Hilda, as Cecil left the library. "Do you not think, grandpapa, they will be willing to lend their aid?"

"They will do what human creatures can do," he replied; "but in danger like this man's power is weak indeed."

Very anxiously Colonel Godfrey and his grand-daughter watched the approach of the brig. At length it reached that part of the bay where the dangerous reef lay concealed by the foaming waters. It was a moment of deep suspense to those on shore, who knew the hidden danger; but those on board were only made aware of it by the striking of the vessel. The force of the shock parted her amidships. A gigantic sea swept over the wreck, carrying with it two of the crew, and bearing them on its crested top towards the beach, it dashed them lifeless on the rocks.

A cry of horror rose from the shore when the brig parted, and the white faces of the sailors were seen rising out of the wild waves as they struggled fiercely for life. In the stern of the vessel, which yet remained fast on the reef where it struck, three of the crew were seen clinging to the bulwarks and mutely imploring aid.

The gentlemen on the beach were now observed speaking to some fishermen, and offering them money to induce them to aid in saving the sufferers. But all held back, the danger was so great, although the distance to the wreck was not very far.

"Bless my soul! can Sir Gervase be mad enough to think of perilling his own life to save those men. Look, Hilda!" exclaimed Colonel Godfrey; "he has tied a rope round him, and is actually about to dash into the white breakers. What an act of noble daring!"

A low cry of horror from Hilda now made Colonel Godfrey turn quickly towards her. She had been looking through the telescope at the wreck, and the haggard faces of those sailors yet on deck were brought close before her eyes. In one of them she recognized the features of Dudley! What a moment of agony and despair! The glass fell from her trembling hands, and she would herself have fallen had not the Colonel caught her fainting form in his arms. But Hilda's senses were not long suspended. She soon recovered, with a dull, unaccountable sense of suffering, feeling as if she had suddenly experienced a stunning blow.

Surprised at her emotion, but attributing it to anxiety about Sir Gervase Montague, Col. Godfrey observed with a confidence he did not feel, "Sir Gervase is such an expert swimmer there is no occasion to feel so much alarmed. Besides the rope secures his safety. Look, Hilda, how manfully he breasts that wave! He will soon reach the wreck."

This was the first intimation Hilda had of the Baronet's danger. Colonel Godfrey's previous observation about him had been unnoticed in her intense dismay at recognising Dudley. Sir Gervase was then risking his life to save her husband's—the only one who stood between him and the happiness he coveted! How strange that it should happen thus! Who can paint the feelings of Hilda as she sat there, pale and trembling, watching with breathless interest the scene passing before her! She saw Sir Gervase, after battling with the wild sea, gain the wreck and climb on deck by the aid of a rope, which the man she thought was Dudley flung him. She then saw these two men—the husband and the lover—stand side by side upon the deck, making fast the rope—which was then drawn on shore. By the communication thus effected, the rest of the crew were enabled to reach the land in safety.

The sailors were, by the direction of Cecil, brought to the house of Colonel Godfrey, and one of them, the captain of the brig, who was in a state of great exhaustion, was put under the care of Evelyn, an old woman who had been nurse in the Colonel's family, and who still continued to reside with him, his most privileged retainer.

At dinner the shipwreck was the topic of conversation, and Sir Gervase Montague's act of generous daring elicited many compliments.