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HILDA; OR, THE MERCHANT'S SECRET.

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CHAPTER XXXV.—Continued.

Alas, no! In the eye that met hers in that rapid look she had seen recognition. What would he do? would he speak to her? would the secret so carefully guarded from her relatives, as well as from the world, be soon revealed? Oh those moments! how fraught with agony to her, while to those around how full of enjoyment. If she only could leave the Hall unseen while it was darkened! If she could steal away! The thought seized upon her mind so forcibly that it would not be dismissed. She would try. Mark Berkeley was sitting next her; they were at one end of the bench; they could leave without disturbing anyone. Telling him in a low voice that she felt ill she begged him to take her to the hotel. He immediately complied. Quietly and unnoticed she and Mark passed from the Hall, and taking a cab soon reached the Rossin House. Leaving her there Mark returned to the exhibition.

Once in her own apartment Hilda began to breathe more freely, and to indulge the hope that the threatened danger had passed. Dudley would no doubt miss her from the Hall when it was relighted. He would not, she feared, think he had mistaken another face for hers, but as her relatives were not known to him he would not be able to recognize the party with whom he had seen her, unless—ah! she had forgotten that he would certainly know Sir Gervase Montague.

Would he follow him and the Berkeleys to the hotel? would he find out she was there and demand an interview?

Late into the hours of that miserable night Hilda sat alone, thinking anxious thoughts and indulging in wild passionate regret. The painful excitement of her feelings completely banished sleep; the blessedness of quiet rest, such as Thérèse was enjoying in the same room, was not for her, tortured with such dark forebodings.

The clock of a neighbouring church had struck two hours after midnight; the deep murmur of the city was hushed. Scarcely a sound broke the stillness without, and in the hotel, too, all was quiet; its inmates seemed buried in repose.

Seated at the open window of her apartment Hilda looked out upon the night, welcoming the cool breeze which fanned her feverish brow. The room which she and Thérèse occupied was in an upper story of the Rossin House. As there were many strangers in Toronto the hotels were crowded, and Mrs. Berkeley's party could not find such accommodation as they wished.

One small apartment, on the third floor, was given to the two young ladies, while Mrs. Berkeley, Sir Gervase Montague, and Mark occupied apartments in a different part of the hotel.

Hilda was still sitting at the window drinking in the summer night air, weary but sleepless, when suddenly a lurid glare shot up into the starry sky. With a cry of alarm she looked out and saw vivid jets of flame bursting through some of the windows in the lower part of the hotel.

The Rossin House was on fire. The fearful element had been silently doing its work of destruction for some time, while the inmates slept unconscious of their danger. For a few moments Hilda lay back in her chair, as if stunned by the sudden peril.

At length she was roused by a shriek from Thérèse. The crimson light shining into the room made her instantly conscious of their situation as she suddenly awoke, and she gave way to her feelings with childish abandonment. Calmed a little by the assumed composure of Hilda she hastily dressed herself; then both prepared to leave their apartment and seek the rest of their party. On opening their door they found the passage outside filled with smoke, absolutely suffocating from its density and coming up from the hall below. To descend the stairs, therefore, was impossible. Safety was not to be found in that direction.

Hastily, therefore, they retreated into their apartment, shutting the door to exclude the choking smoke, which they already felt affecting their breathing; so that they were obliged to rush to the window and lean out to inhale the purer atmosphere without. Already the fire-alarm had sounded. The city was waking up to the threatening danger; the fire companies were arriving, and anxious spectators were filling the streets.

"But where are Mark and Sir Gervase?"

Thérèse vehemently exclaimed. "Why do they not come to help us? Do they think we can save ourselves?"

"Have patience, Thérèse; you must give them time; we shall be rescued; don't be afraid, they will not forget us. In the meanwhile you had better collect your jewellery; you can at least save that."

"Oh, it can be saved with the luggage," Thérèse carelessly observed.

"The luggage must be lost," said her cousin curtly. "You cannot expect anyone to risk his life to save that."

"Then what shall I do for my wardrobe," asked Thérèse with dismay. "All my beautiful dresses, and that exquisite French bonnet you said was so becoming. Do you really think I must lose all, Hilda," she added with childish regret.

"I am afraid you must, Thérèse. If we are saved ourselves it is as much as we have a right to expect," was her cousin's grave reply.

Some ten minutes passed, which seemed to the excited cousins as so many hours, and now Sir Gervase Montague was seen among the crowd below, directing the attention of the firemen to the part of the hotel where they were.

A cry of pity ran through the crowd when it was known that two young ladies were in an upper room of the burning building waiting to be rescued, and the window at which the two figures were seen distinctly in the brilliant fire-light soon became the centre of attraction to many pitying eyes. A ladder was brought and hastily placed so as to reach the window. As soon as it was secured Sir Gervase stepped eagerly forward with the intention of being the first to ascend.

With breathless interest Hilda watched these proceedings, her heart beating tumultuously with the expectation that she would soon be in safety, rescued by the man she loved. But now what stills that heart's emotion! what makes her shiver with sudden fear and sink fainting into a chair?

A man is seen to start suddenly from the crowd and, dashing before the Baronet, spring up the steps of the ladder with the agility of which only a sailor is capable. Incensed and surprised Sir Gervase closely followed, and both men entered the room almost at the same moment. Quickly both approached the inaccessible Hilda, each determined on rescuing her unmindful of Thérèse.

"Stand aside!" burst in the deep tones of powerful emotion from the stranger as he placed himself before Sir Gervase. "Save the other lady! this one is my care, the right to save her life is mine alone!" Then, lifting up Hilda with tender care, he folded her passionately in his arms, and passing through the window carefully descended the ladder.

Sir Gervase recoiled and stood like one petrified. The words just uttered revealed the tie that bound that man to her so fondly loved. How humiliating the discovery! how maddening the thought that she was legally the wife of him—bound by the marriage ceremony, by the vows she had tacitly taken to one so entirely un-fitted to her. Death only could sever that tie, his icy hand alone release her from the cruel bondage.

The voice of Thérèse Berkeley recalled his wandering thoughts. She had been regarding him wonderingly. She had not distinctly heard the words that burst from the stranger who carried away her cousin, but she saw that Sir Gervase was strangely moved.

"Will you assist me to descend the ladder," she asked, somewhat resentfully, "or must I call to some one below to come and help me?"

Muttering some apology for his apparent neglect, the Baronet carefully assisted Thérèse to descend and gave her into her brother's care. He then looked anxiously around for Miss Tremayne and saw her still supported in the arms of Dudley, while Mrs. Berkeley was chafing her hands and trying to restore animation. Recovering from her death-like swoon to find herself still in the arms of Dudley, Hilda shivered and closed her eyes again to shut out that passionate reproachful gaze. The Baronet saw the expression of strong repugnance in that quickly closed eye, and his deepest sympathy was awakened for the unhappy Hilda. Involuntarily he approached to snatch her from the encircling arms of the stranger—whom he now recognized as the man whose life he had saved at Innismoyne—but the dread of a scene, should he rouse the husband's jealousy, restrained him. Mark now approached and begged Dudley to restore the lady to his care.

Without saying a word Dudley complied. He had felt the shrinking of that loved form, he had seen the look of aversion in the eye that met his for a moment, and he knew instinctively that Hilda's feelings towards him were unchanged. Quickly turning away to hide the rush of wild regret this thought caused him he disappeared among the crowd.

The next day Mrs. Berkeley and her party left Toronto. On reaching Montreal Sir Gervase bade them a reluctant adieu and proceeded to join his regiment in Quebec.

It was some time before Hilda recovered from the effects of her mental suffering on that miserable night. The excitement of the fire was nothing compared with the shock the unexpected appearance of Dudley caused her.

On his account too she grieved deeply. She could not help feeling that gratitude which his generous conduct—again displayed—so well deserved. The expression of his face haunted her. He looked much altered; he was suffering. She could see that! and she was the cause! But was she not suffering too! how deeply none could tell! And Sir Gervase was wretched, during their brief intercourse she observed that! There were times when his countenance betrayed by its deep dejection the secret sorrow which had wrecked his hopes of earthly happiness. Poor Hilda; the burden of her blighted life seemed too heavy for her to bear. In the pathway of duty alone might she find rest for her troubled heart. Again she made resolutions never to see the Baronet, but to lead a life of seclusion lest she might be thrown once more into his society, hoping that by keeping steadily in the road of self-denial she might find peace, that was all she could hope for now; happiness such as others enjoyed was not for her—never indeed had been hers through her miserable childhood and her blighted youth!

CHAPTER XXXVI.

A FATAL SURPRISE.

It was a pleasant day in winter, the snow, that had fallen so noiselessly but steadily through the night, had moderated the intense cold, while it spread its glittering mantle over the face of nature, wrapping the piles of architecture in the City of Montreal, its squares and its thoroughfares, its abodes of luxury and poverty, its mountain and its river in one spotless robe of glistening white. The hour was noon, the sun from his meridian height was flooding the scene with light and making it dazzling.

Before the garden-gate of Mrs. Osburne's house in Rue St. Dominique a sleigh was waiting. Blanche was seen at the window of the pleasant parlour, but the lovely face no longer wore its bright expression, the brow was clouded with some great trouble, and the polished cheek was wet with many tears. Soon Mrs. Osburne came out, warmly wrapped up—it was for her the sleigh was waiting. Blanche followed her to the garden-gate, weeping, yet whispering words of comfort. As Mrs. Osburne was about to get into the sleigh, her niece clung to her as if unwilling to let her go, seized suddenly with some presentiment of evil. Are not such feelings often experienced previously to the coming sorrow, as if its darkness shadowed us before it fell?

"Let me go, Blanche! It is my only hope now to avert this dreadful evil. He will sympathize with my grief; a mother's tears must touch his heart—he is himself a parent." Then kissing her niece fondly, Mrs. Osburne stepped into the sleigh, and gave the driver directions to take her to the counting-house of Berkeley & Son.

And now she is being carried swiftly through the crowded streets, her veil closely drawn over her pallid face to shut out the glad brightness, for to her heavy heart the sun seems shining but in mockery of her trouble. A day of storm and gloom would have been more in accordance with her present feelings, for the gloom of a great trial had shrouded the light of joy from Mrs. Osburne. Like the widow of old, she was mourning an only son, not one removed by the hand of the King of Terrors, but lost by a moral death.

Stephen Osburne had fallen. He who had held such a high place in the opinion of his employers and fellow-clerks had sunk in their opinion, lost their confidence, and become disgraced in the eyes of the world. Lured by the voice of the Tempter into the forbidden path of sinful indulgence, he had in an evil hour staked and lost his employer's money at the billiard-table, and was now in prison waiting his trial for this fraudulent act. In the bitterness of his disappointment at his cousin's preference of Mark Berkeley, he had sought to drown his sorrow in the inebriating cup, and from this step in the downward course his descent into the abyss of ruin was easy.

It was only that morning that the knowledge of Stephen's arrest reached Mrs. Osburne and Blanche. His absence from home on the preceding night had grieved, but not surprised them. It was not the first time they had listened in vain for the returning step of the erring one. But little did they dream that Stephen was spending that night in prison, a prey to anguish and remorse.

The intelligence well-nigh crushed the wretched mother. Indeed she might have sunk under it were it not for the hope suggested by Blanche that Mr. Berkeley might be induced to pardon the unhappy culprit. To endeavour to move him to pity, to implore him to withdraw proceedings against her son, was what now brought Mrs. Osburne from her home to St. Paul Street. Surely Mr. Berkeley would yield to her entreaties. He was wealthy. The loss of two thousand dollars could not render him insensible to the demands of mercy—could not steel his heart against her appeal in behalf of her only son.

Such were the hopes that sustained the unhappy mother and nerved her to go through the trying interview now before her.

On reaching the counting-house of Berkeley & Son, she requested a young clerk with whom she was acquainted, to show her to the mer-

chant's private room. She did not ask for an interview—she feared he might refuse to see her.

Mr. Berkeley was alone, engaged in reading from foreign correspondents, when Mrs. Osburne entered unannounced. He looked up in surprise at his unexpected visitor, then started to his feet in amazement, and gazed at her with a face blanched suddenly with fear. That very plain countenance, so remarkable from the disfiguring mark on one cheek, was recognized though more than thirty years had elapsed since he last looked on it. His face became livid, he shook with over-powering agitation, and the word "Bessie" burst from his white lips in tones of intense emotion.

Mrs. Osburne's agitation on seeing him was not less remarkable. She recoiled a few paces as their eyes met, and stood breathless with eyes wildly staring, as if transfixed by the astonishment that took from her the power of speech. She had seen Mr. Berkeley before, the night of the Floral Exhibition. She had then been struck by the likeness he bore to some one she had formally known, but now the expression of his eye as it encountered hers, the surprise, the alarm, the recognition in it, but above all the tones of his voice as he pronounced her name, all assured her that he whom she thought that night she recognized was before her now—they had met at last!

Her emotion was too great for her feeble frame, weakened by sorrow, and with a faint cry she fell heavily on the floor, and lay there as one dead.

Mr. Berkeley did not at first move to assist her. He stood like one paralyzed. What was there in the appearance of that pale, sorrowing woman to cause the wealthy merchant such alarm—such strange emotion? Was it that he recognized in her one whom he had deeply injured, one whom he never thought to see again, but who had risen up now suddenly before him, to crush him with the weight of her just vengeance, to drag him down from the pinnacle on which worldly prosperity had placed him, and humble him in the dust!

Some minutes passed, and still that lifeless woman lay stretched where she had fallen, unaided, unpitied. The merchant's heart seemed suddenly turned to stone. What cared he if she never moved again. Nay, he would give half his wealth if those eyes never opened to reproach him, if those rigid lips never again moved to publish his sin.

The sound of approaching footsteps at length roused him to the necessity of appearing to do something towards her recovery. Pale, and trembling like a woman, he lifted up the lifeless form of Mrs. Osburne and placed her on a couch, sprinkling water on the death-like face and chafing the cold hands. But the rigid features never moved, the closed eyelids remained sealed as if in death.

A sudden hope thrilled the heart of Mr. Berkeley, and a gleam of selfish joy flashed over his troubled face. She must be dead! there was no pulse, not the faintest throb of the sad heart.

With a great display of alarm he called for aid and sent in haste for a physician. He did not fear the presence of others now. He believed those whitelips would never unclose to proclaim his villainy to the world.

In a few minutes Dr. H—, who happened to be passing, was in the room, and using means to restore animation. Very anxiously did Mr. Berkeley watch the result, dreading lest the skill of the physician might be successful. But nothing could re-animate that form now, life was indeed extinct. The violent rush of emotion had stilled the broken heart for ever.

An inquiry into the cause of her sudden death at once took place. Mr. Berkeley, with apparent sorrow and regret, stated that Mrs. Osburne had come to intercede with him for her son,—he intuitively knew that this was what brought her. She had begged him not to proceed against him, and on his refusing to comply, grief had overpowered her, and she had sunk fainting to the floor before he could move to prevent it. This statement seemed so probable that it was universally believed. Dr. H— declared that her fall had caused immediate death, which was evident from the severe contusion on her temple. Thus the public mind was satisfied with regard to the cause of this melancholy event. Some blamed Mr. Berkeley for his want of clemency, and pronounced him hard-hearted to deny the mother's petition. But most people justified his refusal to withdraw legal proceedings against her son.

Scarcely more than an hour after Mrs. Osburne left her home she was carried to a corpse, and poor Blanche, in her anguish, declared she knew something dreadful was going to happen, her presentiment of evil was so strong. That day Mr. Berkeley performed an act, which was considered noble by his fellow merchants, but which the benevolent part of the community regretted he had not consented to do some hours before. He procured the release of Stephen Osburne, by refusing to proceed against him. He did even more, he offered to reinstate him in his former situation in his counting-house, believing that the remembrance of his mother's melancholy death would be like a talisman to guard him from