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HILDA; OR, THE MERCHANT'S SECRET.

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CHAPTER I.

THE CONFLAGRATION.

The gloom of a starless night hung densely over the harbour of Quebec, shrouding its forest of masts and the commercial portion of the city skirting the base of the lofty promontory, while it wrapped in its ebon drapery the frowning fortress above, with its lengthened line of massive fortification.

Suddenly through the Egyptian gloom there shot up into the midnight sky a column of red light, and the cry of Fire! Fire! resounded through the silent streets. Soon a startling peal rung out from the Hôtel Dieu, and ere long another and yet another metallic tongue began to tell the fearful tale and summon the sleeping population to the scene of danger.

In the attic room of an humble hotel in the Lower Town, a young man and his wife were sleeping their first sleep in the New World, having that day arrived in the city of Quebec from Liverpool. Roused by the deafening clangor of the bells, the young man sprang from his bed in sudden fright, for the crimson glare of the fire shone so brightly into the room that he at first supposed the hotel was in flames.

"By George! it is a grand sight," he exclaimed, as his eye took in the fire-illuminated scene.

The fire was in the Lower Town along the wharfs. Several large warehouses were in flames. One containing turpentine and oil was burning with irrepressible fury. The ruthless element was spreading rapidly, shooting up intensely brilliant jets of flame, and shedding a fitful splendour on surrounding objects. The shipping in the harbour seemed bathed in crimson light, while high above the burning buildings, brought out prominently by the red glare, was seen the amphitheatre of houses crowning the steep front of the promontory. Even the tall spires of the various churches in the Upper Town caught and reflected back the vivid brightness, and the citadel itself in all its frowning grandeur might be seen looming up darkly into the ebon sky.

"What a splendid bonfire to celebrate our arrival in Canada, Fanny!" the young man gaily continued, addressing his wife, as she, also awakened by the bells, joined him at the window.

"Oh, Lewis, the fire is quite near us," she exclaimed in alarm. "It will reach the hotel."

"And suppose it did, what have we to fear? The trunks containing all our worldly goods could be easily removed."

There was the bitterness of discontent in the young man's tones, which fell painfully on the ear of Fanny.

"Regretful already, Lewis!" she said reproachfully. "I feared it would be so. Man cannot make sacrifices and not repent of them afterwards!"

"There you wrong me, Fanny!" broke in Lewis earnestly. "No poverty could make me regret what I have sacrificed to gain you. I feel our poverty only on your account. Were I alone I could bear it without repining. But when I think of the humble lot I won you to share, its many privations and anxieties, I cannot help rebelling against Providence, which doles out to some a pittance, and gives to others no better than they are—the wealth that renders life a blessing. Why should there be this difference between man and his fellows?"

"But there is a better time coming, Lewis," said Fanny hopefully. "In this large commercial city you cannot fail of getting employment, and that is all we ask. The means of support will make our lives happy enough. We can do without wealth, Lewis."

"Wealth is not to be despised, and for your sake I hope one day to possess it, dearest. In such a country as this, where fortunes are often made, the expectation is not visionary; but I must leave you for awhile alone, Fanny. I must go out and try to be of some use to those suffering by the fire. A man should not stay at home with such a sight as that before him!"

When Lewis reached the scene of the conflagration he found a dense crowd assembled, many of them assisting in removing various articles from the buildings threatened by the flames, but the most part among whom were many women, who were merely looking on enjoying the excitement of the scene. There must be something peculiar in the constitu-

tion of the female mind, which gives such sights so great an attraction for the daughters of Eve. It may be curiosity, or perhaps a morbid fancy for what is awful as well as grand; but did any one yet see a large fire when there were not many women among the spectators?

Every possible effort was made to subdue the conflagration. Several fire companies were on the spot, untiring in their exertions; but still the devouring element held on its way unchecked, the flames spreading with dread rapidity.

Shortly after Lewis joined the crowd, a new sense of danger thrilled the hearts of the spectators, and made them tremble for their own safety. The warehouse just attacked by the fierce flames was said to contain some casks of gunpowder landed that day from a vessel alongside the wharf. This circumstance had been overlooked until the merchant to whom it belonged arriving suddenly at the scene of the fire, proclaimed the terrible fact, and offered a large reward to anyone who would assist him in rolling the casks into the water. The danger was imminent; the crowd fell back appalled, and an indescribable scene of confusion ensued. Lewis heard the reward offered. A very large sum it appeared to him. Could he but win it? then what a new start in life he might make. Poverty with its many evils would be left behind, and the goal of prosperity might yet be won.

Impelled by these thoughts, he was the first to volunteer to undertake the dangerous work. Not a moment was to be lost. Already the fire had attacked the roof of the building, in the ground floor of which the powder was stowed. Hastily the merchant to whom it belonged led the way to the spot. With cool intrepidity these two men now set themselves to the hazardous work they had undertaken, and commenced to roll the powder casks along the wharf into the water, the only safe way of disposing of them at such a time. A breathless silence reigned through that dense throng of men and women, who, jammed up in the narrow streets, found it impossible to follow their first impulse and flee from the threatening danger. The fit en minutes employed in removing the casks seemed as many hours not only to the numbers looking on and holding their very breath in terror, but to the undaunted merchant himself and the young man who shared his peril.

As the last cask of powder was rolled off the wharf the roof and upper storey of the warehouse fell in with a loud crash, sending up a dazzling column of flame from the mingling fire-masses, and now the pent-up feelings of the crowd burst forth into one long exultant cheer, expressing their intense feeling of relief.

"What is your name, my brave fellow?" asked the merchant, turning to Lewis, as they stood together on the wharf silently contemplating the burning building they had so recently left.

"Tremayne" was the reply in a low guttural voice, for now when the danger was past and the excitement which had sustained him over, the reaction left him nervous as a woman. He now realized the risk he had run and the peril which had threatened his beloved Fanny as well as others, for if an explosion had taken place the hotel in which he had left her must have been destroyed.

"Have you been long in Quebec?" was the next question the merchant asked.

"I only arrived yesterday."

"You are seeking for employment, I presume. What can you do? Can you write well? I can offer you a place in my counting-house. Would that suit you?"

"Just the situation I want!" said Lewis eagerly.

"Besides, the reward you so nobly earned will be yours."

"I do not want any reward for saving life," said Lewis proudly. "Now that you offer me employment I shall have a means of support, and that will be sufficient recompense for the help I have given you."

"If you despise money in that way you will never be rich," was the merchant's observation; but the pleased smile with which he regarded Tremayne showed that he had made a favourable impression.

Some troops from the garrison now arrived, and set themselves to check the conflagration by pulling down buildings likely to be attacked by the flames, and in this way the fire was at length subdued.

Lewis Tremayne was one of the last to leave the scene of that night's destruction. The rosy light of a July morning was breaking over the City of Quebec, when he returned to the hotel where he had left his wife. The changed expression of his face, now beaming with happiness at the good news he had to impart, struck her forcibly the moment he entered their humble apartment.

"Fanny! the cloud of adversity is breaking up and the bright sunshine is gleaming through it!" he exultingly exclaimed, as he threw himself into a chair at her side and drew her fondly towards him.

She listened with delight to his account of the merchant's offer to take him into his counting-house, but her fair young face paled as he spoke of the peril that had so recently threatened their very existence.

"Oh, Lewis! to think we were in such danger and I knew nothing of it, sitting here looking with so little concern at that dreadful fire!" and she shivered at the very recollection of the danger they had so narrowly escaped.

"Well, it is all over now, dearest, and instead of harrowing up your feelings by picturing what might have occurred, let us talk over the pleasant change in our prospects which last night's fire was the means of effecting."

"Yes! how unexpected is this good fortune! how happy we shall be, Lewis! no more carking cares to disturb our peace. And what a sensation this noble act of yours will make in the city! your name will be in all the papers."

"Heaven forbid!" exclaimed Lewis Tremayne, fervently. "Only think of the consequences, Fanny!"

"Oh, how stupid of me not to think of that! they would then learn where we were!" and the bright expression faded from the handsome face. "What if they should find us out, Lewis?" and Fanny's blue eyes turned with anxious enquiry towards her companion.

"You may well look aghast at the very thought, darling! Disgrace, ruin, nay, something still worse, would assuredly follow such a discovery!" said Lewis Tremayne, moodily, and his face reflected back the startled expression of his young wife's. "But we must not alarm ourselves," he continued, rallying his spirits and trying to smile away his fears. "Fortunately, my name is not known, and if the incident concerning the powder should be mentioned in the public papers, I shall be spoken of as a stranger, merely an emigrant."

And Lewis was right. That day's papers did certainly mention the incident connected with the fire in which he bore a conspicuous part, and speak in high terms of his bravery, but no name was given, therefore the fears of Mrs. Tremayne were happily removed.

In the course of the day, Lewis called at the counting-house of his new friend, and was received as a clerk—with a good salary—in the firm of Berkeley & Co., Quebec. His business talents and unwearied attention to the duties of his new situation confirmed the favourable impression he had made on Mr. Berkeley. Before the expiration of one year he was advanced to the lucrative office of confidential clerk, then, in the course of time, he became junior partner, and finally, he so gained on the good will and affections of the merchant that at his death he bequeathed to him his wealth on the sole condition that he should change his name and assume that of his benefactor, with which conditions Tremayne willingly complied.

CHAPTER II.

THE BERKELEYS.

A STARLESS September night, when a sharp easterly wind was driving the quickly-falling rain in the face of the few pedestrians whom necessity or pleasure brought out in such unpleasant weather, the hour was eleven, and the scene a brilliantly-lighted room in a handsome residence in Montreal. On one side of the glowing coal-fire, his slippered feet resting on the low fender, sits an elderly gentleman of pleasing exterior, whom the reader may easily recognize for Lewis Tremayne, or Berkeley, as he has been for some years named. Shortly after the death of his benefactor he removed with his family to Montreal. He is now reading a lengthy account of the late desolating gale which swept over the British Isles, in which, as a merchant, he is particularly interested.

Mrs. Berkeley occupies the opposite side of the fire, her matronly figure reclining more comfortably than gracefully on a low couch. During their prosperous career time had touched very lightly the merchant and his wife. Fanny's beautiful face retained much of its comeliness, and there were no grey hairs yet visible in the brown tresses so carefully arranged beneath her fashionable cap. The face of Lewis, too, had few lines either of care or sorrow. One could easily see that he was one of those fortunate men to whom life seems given for enjoyment. Whatever cause he had for anxiety and discontent when he arrived in Quebec, a long life of happiness and prosperity since, had hushed all repining and banished anxiety from his mind.

Near Mrs. Berkeley sits Mark, her youngest son, just entering on manhood, but still looking boyish in spite of a carefully cultivated moustache of very light hair. At the centre table beneath the brilliant gas-light, Claribel Berkeley, the eldest daughter, is busied with some fancy work, while on a tabouret at her father's knee nestles the pet and the beauty of the family, Therèse, a young girl of fourteen summers.

The silvery tones of a small French clock striking the hour of eleven made Mr. Berkeley look up from his paper in surprise.

"Bless me! is it so late and the train not in yet, something must have delayed it," he said, rather anxiously.

"The train will be in by midnight," observed Claribel, "John heard so at the office this evening. It was delayed at Cornwall from some cause unknown."

"A collision with the up-train, perhaps," remarked Mark, with a sly glance at his mother.

"Heaven forbid, and your cousin on board!" exclaimed Mr. Berkeley, in dismay.

"N'importe! so that we only get rid of her,

n'est-ce pas, ma mère," he whispered, bringing his boyish face in contact with the maternal ear.

Mrs. Berkeley gave him a reproving glance. "That would be too dreadful!" she answered, in the same low tones. "Much as I feel annoyed at her coming here, I should be sorry if anything like that occurred."

"Had not Therèse better go to bed?" suggested Mark. "It is past her usual time. Late hours are injurious to children."

"Children, indeed!" echoed Therèse, indignantly; "you don't look so old yourself in spite of that apology for a moustache that doesn't even darken your lip. If I were you, Mark, I would dye it."

"Mind your own business, Miss!" retorted Mark angrily, his face flushing scarlet from wounded vanity.

"Mark is right! it is time for you to go to bed, child," said Mrs. Berkeley, who always took her younger son's part in these contests between him and his sister.

"But, ma, you said you would let me sit up to-night till cousin Hilda came," pleaded Therèse.

"You can see her to-morrow. I did not think the train would be so late."

"Ah, mamma, do let me stay! mind you promised! did she not, papa?" and the blue eyes turned appealingly to Mr. Berkeley.

"Do let the child remain, Fanny. It will not be long now till the cuts arrive," and the fond father laid his hand caressingly on the wavy curls of his favourite child, who nestled nearer in her grateful love for his interference.

"Lewis, you spoil that girl by your constant indulgence. I can do nothing with her."

"I think all share in spoiling her," observed Mark, with asperity. He had not yet forgotten his sister's ill-natured allusion to his moustache.

"Except yourself, Mark, I owe you nothing on the score of indulgence," and Therèse looked defiantly at her brother.

"I am the only one who takes the trouble to correct your faults. Everyone else lets you do as you please."

"And I wish you would follow their example."

"Always at dagger's points, you two!" said Mr. Berkeley, reprovingly. "I wish, Mark, you would be less severe with your sister. Remember she is only a child."

"A very precocious one, you must allow!"

"She hits you hard sometimes, I am afraid," said Mr. Berkeley, laughing—takes you down a little, does she not?"

"You will be sorry for encouraging her in her pertness," said Mark angrily, as he observed the titter with which this remark was received.

"You must not be too saucy, Therèse," Mr. Berkeley continued, looking down steadily on the really beautiful face which was turned up with an arch expression to meet his gaze. "Mind! I will not encourage pertness or ill-nature."

"Not encourage it, indeed! and what is laughing at her but encouragement?" exclaimed Mark, angrily.

"Well, she is not always to blame. You are often severe with her, Master Mark. A little more kindness would disarm her childish raillery. Take it in good part, or else do not be the first to provoke the sarcasm that wounds too deeply."

Mark, somewhat discomfited, walked about the room, whistling "the Mabel Waltzes." He sought in this way to calm his irritated feelings.

"I wonder what cousin Hilda looks like! Is she pretty, papa?" asked Therèse, breaking the silence that followed.

"I really cannot say, Therèse, I have not yet seen her. Her mother was, I have heard, very handsome; she probably resembles her."

"She'll cut you out, Therèse! She will be the beauty par excellence of the Berkeley family!" said Mark, with a provoking smile.

"How old is she, pa?" continued Therèse, only noticing her brother's remark by a contemptuous grimace.

"I do not know, my dear."

"About the same age as Claribel, I suppose," remarked Mrs. Berkeley.

"The same age as Claribel!" repeated Therèse. "You must mistake, ma! Claribel is six years older than Mark."

"Claribel is no such thing! Who told you my age?" demanded Miss Berkeley, fiercely, dropping her work and glaring on her young sister.

"Ha! you'll catch it now, Therèse," laughed Mark. "You have touched a sore part there, Mignonne! You must have been peeping into the family bible."

"So I was," said Therèse, carelessly. "Pa let me look at all our ages when he was reading it last Sunday."

"Ma! I thought the record of family births was not submitted to the gaze of every one," and Claribel looked daggers at her mother.

"And it is not, my love. It is carefully locked up in your father's escritoire."

"And only taken out on Sundays when he reads the bible," broke in Mark, with an impertinent grin.

"Very carefully indeed!" observed Claribel, indignantly, "when Miss Therèse has learned our ages by heart and will not have the discretion to keep them to herself."