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THE DAVENANTS.

BY MRS. J. V. NOEL.

Author of "Hilda; or, The Merchant's Secret," "The Abbey of Rathmore," &c.

CHAPTER VIII.

A STARTLING DISCLOSURE.

The night was fine though cold, the crescent moon had set many hours before, but the stars shone splendidly in the ebony sky. At the solicitation of Lascelles Emily rode with him, and his spirited horse took the lead in their early drive, Dr. Seymour's sleigh following with the rest of the party.

"Well, Miss Georgina, how did you enjoy the evening?" was the doctor's first observation as they drove from the hotel.

"Oh, exceedingly! It was a delightful ball!"

"You danced frequently with a very handsome partner? an old acquaintance, I understand?"

"Who—Dr. Delamare?"

"Yes; quite an Adonis, is he not?"

"He is very handsome and agreeable."

"Particularly so, people say; but I must confess he is not to my taste. He is handsome enough, I allow, but he is rather deficient in principle, I fear."

"Why do you make that assertion?" asked Georgina, anxiously.

"Simply from the fact that he holds the marriage tie too lightly. He pays more attention to young ladies than a married man is justified in doing."

What a pang of agony did these words convey to the heart of Georgina Davenant!

"Is he married?"

Her lips formed the words but her voice refused to utter them. Consciousness for a few moments forsook her, but the darkness concealed her deep emotion.

"That young officer with whom you danced the first set seems a nice person," continued the doctor, again addressing Georgina.

He received no answer. In her semi-unconscious state the words fell on her ear, conveying no perception of their meaning to her mind. She was still stunned by the shock the announcement of Delamare's marriage gave her. The news was so unexpected, so overwhelming.

"She is falling asleep, fatigued after so much dancing," remarked Mrs. Seymour, innocently.

Her husband thought otherwise, but he did not again address Georgina. He left her to her own reflections, believing they were not of the most agreeable nature. They rode on for some time in silence, the doctor admiring the stary heavens. The western sky blazed with the light of brilliant constellations nearing the horizon, while in the east were seen ascending "Arcturus with his sons," and the bright Northern Crown.

"What a sublime study is astronomy!" observed Dr. Seymour. "I do not wonder that the Ancients worshipped the celestial orbs. It was a very sensible system of idolatry, and if I had lived in those days I would have been a devout worshipper too. Just look at Sirius, Hermine, glowing with such resplendent light near the western horizon."

"I took that for the Morning Star," said Mrs. Seymour, in sleepy tones, roused from a little nap by her husband's voice.

"Now, Hermine, how could you make such a blunder after all my lessons in astronomy? One must be as stupid as an owl to mistake any of the heavenly orbs for the bright refulgent Dog-Star which shines with unrivalled splendour; besides it scintillates and Venus shines with a steady light."

"It is no use trying to teach me astronomy, Octave, especially now, when I feel so sleepy. All the stars look alike to me. I wonder how you can distinguish one from the other."

"It is quite easy, my dear, if you pay a little attention. Now look to the Zenith, Hermine, and"—

"Where is the Zenith?" asked Hermine, ignorantly.

"Just over your head, there you will see the majestic Leo and the Greater Bear walking in radiant pomp."

"Something is wrong ahead, sir!"

This interruption came from the coachman breaking in suddenly upon the doctor's lecture on astronomy.

"What is the matter?" he asked, jumping up quickly in the sleigh. "Who are those figures on the road before us, Tom?"

"It's Mr. Lascelles and Miss Davenant, sir. I think they have been upset, and that dark object far ahead is the horse running off with the sleigh."

"By George you are right! I see how it is," laughed the doctor. Then lowering his voice he added, addressing Mrs. Seymour, "Eugene, taking advantage of the *tête-à-tête* and emboldened by the shades of night, has been pouring soft speeches into Emily's ear, and

not minding how he was driving, has managed to upset the sleigh and precipitate both himself and her into that snow-drift on the road-side. Drive on faster, Tom! we'll pretend not to recognise them."

Tom, enjoying his master's joke, whipped his horses, and the spirited animals dashed onward.

"Stop, uncle! stop, for heaven's sake! do not leave us on the road," shouted Lascelles.

"Halloo! is it you?" asked the doctor with feigned surprise. "What has happened?"

"Only an upset," was the reply.

"No bones broken, I hope; nothing for me to do, eh?"

"Nothing, unless Miss Davenant should take cold after her exposure to the freezing atmosphere."

"To say nothing of her plunge into a snow-drift," laughed the doctor. "Jump in quickly, Emily. Here, Eugene, wrap the robes carefully about her on that side. My dear, you are half frozen, shivering with the cold! I really shall not trust you another time to his careless driving. What could he have been thinking of? Was he star-gazing?"

A negative, pronounced with some embarrassment, was the answer.

"What then?"

"Conversing with her, of course," broke in Mrs. Seymour. "You didn't expect him to sit silent and mind nothing but the driving?"

"Take my advice, Eugene, and don't select a *tête-à-tête* drive on a cold frosty morning as the best time to introduce such very engrossing topics. You see the result," remarked Dr. Seymour, slyly.

"We are nearing your chateau, Eugene," resumed his aunt, "that house we now passed is within a quarter of a mile of it. Will your servants expect us?"

"Yes, I said it was likely you would return with me. I knew you could not be comfortable at St. John's—the hotels are so full."

Shortly afterwards they came in sight of Eugene's residence. It was an old French dwelling rather imposing in appearance, sheltered by a grove of firs now in their wintry garb. Lights gleamed from some of the windows, and as the merry sleigh-bells announced their approach some domestics were waiting to receive them at the hall door. A table was spread with refreshments in the comfortable dining-room, of which no one partook save Dr. Seymour, who declared the keen frosty air had made him ravenous. The ladies immediately retired to the apartments prepared for them.

The sisters did not share the same room, much to the relief of Georgina, who in her present state of mind desired nothing so much as to be alone. She had not spoken a word to any one since that terrible disclosure of Dr. Seymour's. She felt like one in a dream, stunned, bewildered. Had she mistaken the import of the doctor's words? could she have heard him aright! These questions she asked herself repeatedly. Slowly the conviction that she had not misunderstood him forced itself upon her mind. Stony and motionless as death itself she sat for hours, her head resting on her clasped hands; no tear, no sob relieved the agony of her spirit. The gray dawn of a wintry morning stole into the room mingled with the unextinguished lamp-light, and yet she moved not. The vivid sunshine as the bright orb of day rose o'er the snowy landscape without, lighted up the apartment, gleaming on the golden curls of the bowed head, and still the unhappy girl remained motionless buried in despair. At length from the stupor of grief and the exhaustion of mind and body, she fell into an unrefreshing slumber, from which she was soon aroused by the voice of Emily outside her door.

"The breakfast bell has rung, Georgina; hurry and come down: don't keep Mrs. Seymour waiting. It is very late."

Rousing herself with an effort she cast a bewildered look around: she did not at first realize her situation, but the agony of the preceding hours was waiting in ambush for her, and soon it rolled in upon her mind with overwhelming power, forcing from her crushed heart a cry of anguish. Oh, the intense bitterness of that first awaking after some great sorrow! However, there was no time now to indulge her feelings. She must prepare to join the family circle. Pride, that potent feeling of her nature, forbade that she should in any way reveal her love for Delamare. She was still in her ball costume. In her great distress of mind she had not thought of changing it on retiring to her apartment, but had flung herself wildly into a chair to indulge the passionate grief she had suppressed in the presence of others. As she stood before the glass making a hasty toilet she was shocked at the haggard face it presented to her view. The storm of bitter disappointment and despair which had swept over her had stamped its ravages on every feature. She feared it would betray her heart's secret. She dreaded to meet Dr. Seymour's penetrating eye. With more than her usual care she arranged her hair and dress, then with a stern determination to crush down sorrow, to conceal her sufferings, she descended to the breakfast room, her face pale indeed yet wreathed with smiles—smiles in which there was no sunshine, glittering they were and cold as the moon-beams.

"Late hours don't agree with you, Miss Georgina," was Dr. Seymour's remark as she took her seat at the breakfast table. "You are unusually pale this morning," and he looked keenly at her.

"I shall be better after a good night's rest," she answered quietly; then turning to Mrs. Seymour she began to converse with affected animation about the ball, expressing the pleasure it had afforded her.

"Delamare is a capital dancer, and you honoured him pretty often with your hand," remarked Lascelles, with a light laugh. "It was well Mrs. Delamare was not at the ball, she might have felt jealous."

"Why was she not at the ball?" asked Georgina curiously.

"Oh she is too great an invalid! She never attends such amusements. Poor thing, I don't think she will live long," rejoined Eugene in pitying accents.

How these words thrilled with sudden hope the crushed heart of Georgina Davenant! Suddenly there gleamed a ray of light across the gloom of her despair. Delamare's wife was ill! she might die! How she blessed Eugene Lascelles for these words of consolation! With the sudden hope came the wish for such an event. How stealthily does sin creep into the heart; how carefully ought we subdue its incipient motions. But the longing for another's death Georgina did not subdue. She did not set her foot on the temptation as it crept towards her. She felt that without such a hope life would be a dreary aimless existence: that hope now was like a rainbow spanning the dark storm-cloud which had burst upon her.

Her love for Delamare was idolatry. She had given him all the love of her passionate nature before she knew of the tie that bound him to another. In the first outbreak of agony at the discovery of his marriage she clutched the happiness which the hope of his wife's death imparted, although it was at the expense of conscience. But the voice of that faithful monitor would not be silenced in the heart of the wretched Georgina. Again and again it knocked loudly at the portal she tried to bar against it. It reminded her that to wish for another's death was murder in the sight of heaven, and that to cherish any longer her love for Delamare was a sin. And through the storm which passion was sweeping over her soul principle strove to make itself heard. It bade her remember the unprincipled deception Delamare had practised in concealing his marriage; but in extenuation of this her fond heart pleaded his passionate devotion to herself, and although the glaring impropriety of his conduct in winning her affections could not be concealed, yet her self-love tried to throw a veil over such utter want of principle.

Week after week passed, and still passion waged its fierce contest with principle in the heart of Georgina Davenant. Feebly she struggled to forget, feebly she tried to crush down the passionate yearning for the love she knew was hers, but which she must cast from her. She did not again meet Dr. Delamare, although she never went into society without cherishing the hope of another meeting with him. Did he show that wished-for interview because he feared to hear her passionate reproaches now when the discovery of his marriage must have been made, or was the state of his wife's health such as to confine him to his miserable home? How that thought soothed the bitterness of her grief as with it came the hope that the hand of death would ere long sever the tie that bound him to Louise, for the sinful wish for his wife's death would not be subdued in the girl's heart, so sorely tempted, so incapable of resistance in her own weak womanly nature, unsustained by religious principle.

CHAPTER IX.

MADAME ST. HILAIRE.

DR. SEYMOUR'S conjecture that Lascelles had taken advantage of the *tête-à-tête* drive with Emily to introduce the subject most interesting to him, was correct. Emboldened by the unusual friendliness of her manner he had poured forth his tale of love, make her an offer of his hand. It was at this critical moment that the upset occurred, caused by his intense nervous excitement. This unceremonious breaking up of their conversation, the result of their sudden plunge into a snow-drift, was a great relief to Emily, who, although she had lately schooled herself to think of a union with Lascelles, still hesitated to pronounce the words that must determine her fate. Like Georgina, she slept little during the time she spent in her apartment. She knew that next day Eugene would require an answer, and the hours were passed in earnest self-communion. She felt that her love for Walter Avenell was stronger than death itself. Was she then justified in accepting the hand of Lascelles? Would he be content without that warmth of affection it was not in her power to bestow? Finally she came to the conclusion to reject this offer of marriage, but then came the remembrance of her father's declining health, and her poverty when that should fail. Filial self-devotion urged her to accept the hand of Lascelles, and to lift her family above the

desolating flood which poverty was again preparing to roll towards them, and this worldly consideration at length prevailed. She would become the wife of Eugene Lascelles, but she would not conceal from him her former engagement. She would confess that she never could feel another such attachment. If he could be satisfied with friendship and esteem she would accept his hand, but that was all in her power to bestow. And with this poor substitute for the depths of love of which a woman's heart is capable, Lascelles professed himself satisfied, cherishing the hope that a warmer sentiment would follow their marriage. He had no living rival, and therefore every reason to hope that the memory of the past would fade from her mind, and that with new ties would come a newly awakened interest in life. How easily we persuade ourselves that what we earnestly wish is possible! Our bitterest disappointments often arise from this self-deception, this buoying ourselves up with false hopes.

Not long after the ball at St. John's, the Montreal papers announced the marriage of Eugene Lascelles and Emily Davenant. The wedding was a quiet affair, and before the expiration of the honeymoon Mr. and Mrs. Lascelles left Canada for the Southern States, accompanied by Mr. Davenant, whose fast-failing health made a residence in a warmer climate absolutely necessary. Clara had accompanied the little party, but Georgina remained in Montreal with Dr. and Mrs. Seymour. Her residence with them, however, was not long. Mrs. Seymour, in her motherly care of Georgina, found fault with her frequent rejection of matrimonial offers, an interference which the haughty girl resented. The consequences were her leaving the protection of her kind friends and becoming governess in a French Canadian family living near Sorol.

The children whom it was her duty to instruct in English and various accomplishments were rude, stupid, and unmanageable. At the expiration of her engagement Georgina resigned her unpleasant situation and advertised for another. She was so fortunate as to obtain one where the duties would not be so arduous, as there was only one pupil to educate, and where the salary offered was liberal.

Her new home was situated on the Richelieu, near St. Charles. As she ascended the romantic river in a steam-boat from Sorol, her thoughts dwelt upon the possibility of again meeting Delamare. She did not, however, anticipate the dangerous happiness that was before her, if she had, she might have paused before venturing to enjoy it. It was late at night before Georgina reached the chateau, as her new residence was called. She was received with much courtesy by the mistress, Madame St. Hilaire. Fatigued with her journey, she soon retired to her apartment, where, leaving her to wander in the land of dreams, I shall relate some particulars relative to the family in whose house she is at present domiciled.

Madame St. Hilaire was a native of La Belle France. The first years of her married life had been spent at the court of the Empress Josephine. Suddenly, however, she was removed from the gayeties of the Parisian capital, and obliged to accompany her husband to his home in Canada. An unpretentious one it was compared with that to which she had been accustomed, and yet it had an imposing appearance in that Canadian wilderness, where it had been rather recently erected. It was a brick chateau, with high roof, tall chimneys, and numerous windows, flanked at either end with a round turret—built as near as possible to the model of the old baronial residence which Monsieur St. Hilaire's ancestors possessed in France. A blooming flower garden slipped from the front entrance down to the low parapet overlooking the Richelieu. In the background was the primeval forest, while in the distance towered the bold summits of Beloeil, Ste. Therese, and Rouville. Many years younger than her husband, Madame St. Hilaire, beautiful and fond of society, drooped like some fragrant exotic on being transplanted from the gayeties of the French court to this Canadian wild. Rumour whispered that there was a secret sorrow devouring the happiness of the young wife. That it was not the loss of fashionable amusements that was preying on her spirits, but an unhappy attachment to an officer in the French army and her separation from home. This report was confirmed when, some time after her arrival in Canada, a stranger of noble appearance was seen to visit at the chateau during the temporary absence of Monsieur St. Hilaire in Quebec, attending his parliamentary duties in the House of Assembly. Suddenly he returned to his home to find there, almost domesticated, the man whom he knew possessed the affections of his wife, who used the claim of kindred as an excuse for following her to Canada. Not long after, the handsome stranger's visits ceased, and it was thought in the neighbourhood that he had returned to his own country, but he was never again seen in the ranks of Buonaparte's conquering army. His fate was a mystery, but like many other unaccountable occurrences, it faded from the public mind.

About three years afterwards, Monsieur St. Hilaire died suddenly, by his own hand it was whispered, and Madame was left a widow with