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# HILDA; OR, THE MERCHANT'S SECRET.

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[Written for the Canadian Illustrated News.]

## CHAPTER XXIX.

### EDITH'S SUSPICIONS.

AFTER dinner Edith followed Mr. Castonell into his study, whither he went to be alone to form plans for the future, and think over the overwhelming trouble that had fallen upon him. He looked displeased as his wife entered the room; her presence there was unwelcome, it was not of her he was thinking now.

"Well! what do you want?" he asked ungraciously, raising his bowed head and turning on her no tender look.

"I came to speak to you about this fancy ball. Do you really intend to go? or are you merely jesting?"

"I was not; I said what I really mean to do."

"But consider the consequences of such folly," gently urged Edith.

"What consequences?"

"You will lose the incumbency of St. Mark's."

"I have already lost it!"

These words were spoken with assumed composure, but there was a look of deep dejection in the handsome face.

"Lost it!" and Edith grew suddenly faint and sank into a chair unable to support herself.

"Yes, I was dismissed this morning by the Metropolitan."

"And why dismissed?" came faintly from Mrs. Castonell's white lips. She was trembling from the sudden shock. It was so unexpected.

"They are not satisfied with my services," replied the husband evasively.

He could not tell her the real cause.

"And now what are we to do? where are you to get another church?"

"I shall not seek one. I shall look for something else, some other means of support. The Church does not suit me. A man is obliged to be too straight-laced. The profession of a clergyman ought never to have been mine."

"You should not say that; you have powers of eloquence which few clergymen possess."

"Oh, yes! but that eloquence would have done better at the bar, or I at least would have made a better lawyer than preacher. People expect too much from one of my cloth. They actually think a clergyman should be perfection. No little *faux pas* is tolerated nowadays, the religious world is so evangelical, so sanctimonious."

This was said very bitterly.

"And it is right to maintain so high a standard," said Edith boldly. "The spiritual guide of the people should be as near perfection as human frailty will allow."

"And thou, too, Brutus!" thought Mr. Castonell, on whose ear in the present state of affairs this remark of his wife's fell unpleasantly. He could get no sympathy from anyone. She, too, seemed inclined to judge him with severity, although she had no suspicion of the true cause of his dismissal. What a fool she must be not to notice his flirtation with her friend! He had often thought this and so had many others. But Mrs. Castonell was not a simpleton. She was a pure-minded, high-principled woman, who was slow to think evil of others. Besides, she really did not know of her husband's frequent visits to Mrs. Grant Berkeley's. He had carefully guarded the knowledge of this from her. His sudden dismissal from the incumbency of St. Mark's was a cause of much surprise as well as anxiety to Edith. Could it arise from some cause, some undercurrent of events unknown to her? She sat silently pondering the subject, unmindful of her husband's presence, unmindful of everything but this one great trouble. At length the voice of Mr. Castonell fell startlingly upon her ear. To her surprise he was again adverting to the fancy ball. How coolly he seemed to take their sudden trouble.

"When is this ball to take place?" he asked.

"To-morrow night."

"And you are only invited to-day?"

"Yes, the man said it was his mistake; he had omitted to deliver the invitation sooner. Pauline thought it had been sent."

"Yes, I knew she spoke to me about it last week, and said she had sent you an invitation."

"And was it she who persuaded you to go?"

"No; she did not suppose I would. She knew what was expected from a clergyman. It is a sudden whim of mine. Now that I am no longer the incumbent of St. Mark's I can do as I like I suppose."

"Yes, you can do as you like," said Edith coldly, "but you ought not to act inconsistently with your profession."

"I tell you it does not matter now what I do," he observed with considerable irritation.

"I really cannot understand you. Why should your dismissal from St. Mark's render you indifferent to the world's opinion? It does not necessarily prevent your being appointed to another church. You have not been guilty of any misconduct."

Castonell's eyes fell suddenly as they met his wife's earnest gaze. Was it that he saw there the shadow of a newly-awakened suspicion?

"I wish you would say no more on this subject. I have made up my mind about going to this ball. All you can urge will not alter my determination," he remarked doggedly.

"Then you will go alone."

"No; Maud shall accompany me; the child shall enjoy the scene."

"In that case I shall go too."

"Ah, indeed! then you also will brave the world's opinion," said Mr. Castonell with a sneer as he looked furtively at his wife. Suspicion, he feared, was at last awakened.

"Yes, I have changed my mind. If Maud goes I go too. It is not right to let a young girl go into such scenes alone."

"Not alone! she goes with me."

Mrs. Castonell fancied her husband was unwilling she should accompany them, and this determined her to go to the fancy ball.

"I shall go with Maud," she said decidedly as she left the study.

Mr. Castonell's fears were not without foundation. Suspicion was awake in the mind of Edith. This dismissal could not be without some sufficient cause, she reasoned. The Rev. Mr. Castonell had been so much liked by his own congregation, such a favourite preacher too in the city. They had thought so very highly of him. Could this unexpected event be in any way connected with his acquaintance with Mrs. Grant Berkeley. What Maud had once said relative to the estimation in which she was held by some persons in Montreal now forcibly occurred to Edith. And they were so very intimate with her! Could this have displeased the congregation of St. Mark's, or was there some undercurrent of events known to them of which she was ignorant?

It must be so! and now Mrs. Castonell remembered many little occurrences which had at the time pained her, exciting her jealousy for the moment, but which she had afterwards generously dismissed from her mind as unworthy of her friendship for Pauline and her confidence in her husband's principles. Then this strange determination of his to go to the fancy ball. Ought not their present trouble render him indifferent to any such amusement, even if he had been in the habit of frequenting such scenes. Surely there would be little enjoyment for her there; why, then, should he be so determined to go?

Edith did not know—how could she—the real cause of his going to this ball. He knew that by doing so he would have a good opportunity of not only enjoying Pauline's society, but of informing her of the misfortune that had befallen him, which he feared would put an end to their intercourse for the future. But there were other thoughts, other motives actuating him; there was the hope of being able to persuade Pauline to take a step from which she had hitherto shrunk; the time had now come—so he reasoned with himself—when this step must be taken, and the evil he had for some time contemplated could no longer be avoided.

The remainder of that day and the next were passed by Mrs. Castonell in no enviable frame of mind. Gloomy apprehension for the future, suspicion and jealousy were doing their part, powerful to destroy her peace and render the thoughts of the approaching amusement irksome to her. Still she would go if it were only to watch the proceedings of the Rev. Mr. Castonell at a fancy ball. The idea of his going there was so preposterous that she fancied him bereft of reason. And so he was, the infatuation under which he laboured was a short-lived madness. Any powerful passion, anger or avarice, or hate, or love, may be considered, while it lasts, as a species of insanity, the mind having for the time lost its balance, and the will, powerful for evil, having uncontrolled sway.

To Maud Castonell the anticipation of the ball was an unmixed delight. The character her mother chose for her was that of a Spanish Girl. She would herself go as a duenna. The costume for both was easily got up without any expense. Poor Edith must look to that now when the means of support were suddenly taken from them. Mr. Castonell would not, for reasons best known to himself, tell his wife or daughter what character he intended to assume. Edith regretted this. Still she thought she would be able to recognize him under any disguise.

## CHAPTER XXX

### THE FANCY BALL.

THE preparations for Mrs. Grant Berkeley's masked-ball were in a princely style. A great number of invitations had been sent out, but all were not accepted. The prejudices of society against Pauline on account of her flirtation with Mr. Castonell, were very strong, especially now when his dismissal from St. Mark's became known. Still there some who, for this night, were willing to ignore this scandal, because reluctant to lose the enjoyment which her brilliant *fête* would afford. The Berkeleys were among those who sent no acceptance; the family of Grant Berkeley were too indignant at the scandal about his wife, to countenance her proceedings by their presence at her ball. Grant was in Europe, whither he had gone on commercial business.

The house, which was isolated with a garden in the rear, had been thrown open for the reception of the guests, and the large garden had also been prepared for the same purpose. Tents had been put up, temporary little temples erected, and coloured lamps gleamed among the trees. Refreshments too were provided for those who wished to wander out into the cool night-air from the crowded rooms. Fortunately the weather was fine,—it was the end of June. Innumerable roses and other flowers rendered the night-air redolent of perfume, while within the house the rarest exotics adorned the rooms and floated their rich delicious fragrance through the heated atmosphere. Altogether it was a great success—this masked fancy-ball of Mrs. Grant Berkeley's, and to Maud Castonell as well as others, the scene was one of exciting gaiety and enjoyment. In the reception-room, fitted-up in the Oriental style, the beautiful hostess, in the character of a Sultana, received her guests unmasked. Edith thought she had never seen Pauline look so well. Her style of dress suited her superb dark beauty. It was some rich gossamer material, the golden tissue of which shimmered with every graceful movement of her queenly figure. She was standing beneath a brilliant light which gleamed upon the jewels in her hair and on her finely-moulded arms, causing them to flash back dazzling rays.

Glad was Edith when she found herself with her young daughter among the motley throng that her identity was concealed. She felt it was no place for her to be seen. The guests were to unmask at supper, but she determined to leave before then. Mr. Castonell also intended to do the same. He, too, was glad that his disguise enabled him to remain unnoticed. It suited his secret plans to come to this fancy-ball, but it was just as well that no one should know of his being there. No one but Pauline, she for whose sake he had taken such a step. She was aware that he was coming to her *fête*. He had met her the day before in Notre Dame Street, and during a hurried conversation he had informed her of his intention—told her the disguise he intended to assume, and learned what character hers would be. No more than this had passed between them. A gentleman of Pauline's acquaintance joined her then, and he bowed his adieu. Pauline was still ignorant of his dismissal from St. Mark's; the fact had not yet reached her ears.

As the night wore on, Mrs. Castonell moved from room to room, endeavouring to discover her husband in every masker whose figure resembled his. She and Maud passed almost unnoticed in the crowd, and she was glad of this. But it did not suit Maud to be thus neglected, and when later in the evening she was invited to form one in a set of quadrilles, she gladly accepted the invitation, pleased to have an opportunity of stepping to the exhilarating music, which filled the apartments and floated away on the midnight air outside. Anxious and unhappy Mrs. Castonell stood alone waiting for Maud near a door opening from the ball-room on a balcony. When the set was finished the mask who had asked Maud to dance, led her back to her duenna and then disappeared through the open door.

"That was papa, I am sure!" whispered Maud Castonell to her mother.

"How did you recognize him?" she asked, doubtfully.

"By his voice."

"I am afraid you are mistaken."

"Oh, no indeed, it is he! there he is again in the next room! what a pretty dress! what character is it, mamma?"

"A Knight Templar. The figure is like him," Mrs. Castonell observed, thoughtfully.

"Is it not strange, mamma, that he did not make himself known to us? I wonder why, don't you?"

Mrs. Castonell did wonder, but she made no reply. She was thinking that this odd conduct of her husband's meant something more than caprice. There was some hidden motive in this concealment. Edith's suspicions were now fully awake.

"There is papa again!" Maud suddenly exclaimed, after a short silence, during which time he had disappeared among the crowd.

Following the direction of her daughter's eye, Mrs. Castonell saw the Knight Templar again standing near a door leading into the hall; he was earnestly watching the masquers as they passed him. Was he looking for any one? for Pauline? The jealous thought

flashed a thrill of pain through the sad heart of Edith.

"I wonder where papa got that handsome dress?" Maud observed.

"He hired it at the theatre, I suppose."

At this moment a mask in the character of Night, her black gossamer robe glittering with stars, joined the Templar, and the next moment both passed into the hall. This was evidently the one for whom he had been waiting. Edith did not for a moment doubt that she was Pauline. No other figure could have such stately grace, such queenly motion. She had changed her dress after the reception was over, and assuming a new character, had for a time ignored the hostess and mingled with the maskers.

To the great delight of Maud another candidate for the hand of the Spanish Girl, now approached the duenna and her charge. Mrs. Castonell, who readily recognised Frank Mordaunt in the dashing Austrian Officer, willingly committed her young daughter to his care for a time.

"It is Frank Mordaunt," she whispered. "You may make yourself known to him, and after you are tired dancing come back here and wait for me till I return."

The next moment Maud Castonell was whirling round the room in the arms of the young Austrian to the exquisite music of the St. Cloud Waltzes, while her mother, hurriedly making her way through the crowd, pursued the Templar and his companion. On entering the hall they were nowhere to be seen, but fortunately the remark of a Black Domino directed Edith where to follow them.

"Did you observe that couple who just passed into the garden?" the Domino said to his companion, an Italian Brigand.

"Yes; both were remarkable looking figures; do you know them?"

"The lady is, I doubt not, our charming hostess. She looks well in her new character."

"And the Templar, who is he?"

"The figure looks like Castonell's, but it cannot possibly be the clergyman. By the way have you heard of his dismissal and its cause?"

The reply to this question Edith did not hear, for as the domino and his companion moved on, their voices were lost in the distance.

Crossing the hall, Edith passed into the garden.

Before she reached it Night and the Templar had disappeared among the maskers. Still she hurried along the illuminated walks looking for them among the motley throng. Several maskers turned to look after the Duenna who passed them so rapidly, her slight, dark figure seeming to shrink from observation. One of them, a British sailor, addressed her asking, with a laugh, if she was in pursuit of any one, if Donna Maria Antonia had escaped her Duenna's vigilance.

"Yes," she replied with assumed gaiety, she has eloped with a Templar, have you seen them?"

"Just passed them five minutes since. They have gone down that walk."

Along the walk pointed out, Mrs. Castonell now hurried, although doubtful whether the sailor's information was correct. It led to a retired part of the garden, not intended to be frequented by the guests, for it was not lighted. If the Templar and his companion wished to enjoy a *tête-à-tête* without interruption, this was, she thought, the most likely place to find them. She looked eagerly around, and at a short distance discerned two figures, who, from their height, must be, she supposed, those she was pursuing. They were conversing eagerly Edith could see by the faint light of the stars glittering in the clear sky above, and from the impassioned gestures of the Templar, and the earnest attention with which Night listened, she knew the subject was one of intense interest to both. What that subject was Edith longed to learn, but she dared not venture nearer lest she might attract their attention, and she did not wish to be recognized. Her husband knew the disguise she had assumed, and he would easily recognize her. For more than twenty minutes this *tête-à-tête* lasted unseen by any one except the Duenna, who, fearful of being observed, sat crouching among some currant bushes on one side of the walk. At length it was ended, and Night and the Templar began slowly to retrace their steps to the frequented part of the garden. Edith's heart throbbed violently as they approached, conversing in a low voice, lest they might perceive her stooping figure, but her dark dress helped to render her invisible.

As they were passing, the still night air wafted a few words distinctly towards her.

"Could you not make arrangements any sooner?"

It was the Templar who spoke, and the voice was unquestionably Mr. Castonell's.

"Impossible! I must wait to—"

The rest of Night's answer was lost to the Duenna, but she had heard enough to convince her the words were spoken by Mrs. Grant Berkeley.

All doubt was now at an end, suspicion was confirmed, and the agony of jealousy thrilled the heart of Mrs. Castonell.

The confirmation of her worst fears had a