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# HILDA; OR, THE MERCHANT'S SECRET.

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## CHAPTER XII.

### A DEATH-BED.

The glorious beauty of a summer sunset is on the St. Lawrence, the dazzling rays glittering in lines of crimson light on the wide waters, gleaming in rainbow tints on the white crests of the foaming rapids, and bathing in a golden flood the wooded islands and picturesque shores of the majestic river.

Crowning a grassy slope in a romantic spot stands a low rambling house nestling in the cool shade of a clump of magnificent beeches. Its situation is very retired, scarcely a house to be seen for miles on either side. A wide veranda runs along the front of the dwelling, which is almost covered by the luxuriant foliage of creeping plants, and from this a continued flight of steps leads down to the river's brink. On the lowest step might now be seen a youth of some sixteen summers; he is sitting in a listless attitude looking dreamily out upon the water, his mind too deeply occupied to notice the beauty of the scene before him. Besides, it was familiar to him from childhood. Every summer, as long as he could remember, he had sat on that river's bank watching it flowing tranquilly onward, or boiling and surging and breaking in glistening foam over the hidden rocks which vainly obstructed its course. For the last few years of his life the solitude in which he lived had been distasteful. He longed to go out into the world and mingle in its pursuits, and it might be, make himself a name among his fellows, for the stripling had an ambitious nature. This day-dream seemed about to become a reality. A new path in life was opening before him. Only that day had this delightful truth dawned upon him. This was an important era in the youth's existence. Now, the old life of dependence with its many evils—its harshness, its insults—was about to end; to-morrow or next day he would be free to go where pleased, with ample means to procure all the enjoyments of life. No wonder then that the gorgeous sunset lighting up the picturesque scenery of the St. Lawrence was lost upon him, for the grandest scenes of nature are looked upon with indifference when the mind is occupied with events of deepest interest.

Suddenly a step was heard on the veranda above and a voice gently calling him broke the train of his pleasant reflections. He started to his feet and looked up with questioning eagerness in his handsome face. A lady, strikingly elegant in appearance, stood leaning over the veranda looking down upon him, and as the brilliant sunlight caught her figure it revealed the strong resemblance her face bore in its features and expression to his own. Any one, at a glance, would have pronounced them mother and son, and such was the relationship between them, for that lady was Mrs. Harrington, and the youth her son, Frank Mordaunt. The life of solitude to which Pauline was condemned on her marriage with Mr. Harrington, was of a longer duration than she had anticipated. Though in feeble health he did not die as soon as she expected. He lingered on from year to year, a burden, if not to himself, to all around him; but now the hour of release from this miserable existence was at hand—Mr. Harrington was dying.

"He wants you, Frank," Pauline said in a low voice.

"Wants me! isn't he gone yet! I thought it was all over by this time," and there was disappointment in the youth's tones.

"No, nor is he likely to go as soon as we wish," Pauline replied, with irritation. "It must be the trouble on his mind which prevents his passing away quietly," she added, as fearful of being overheard she descended the stairs and seated herself beside her son. "I am glad to get out and breathe a little fresh air," she continued, brushing back the rich masses of dark hair from her heated brow. "It is stifling in that death-chamber this hot summer evening."

"But what can Mr. Harrington want with me?" asked Frank, impatiently. "I am sure he never cared for my company when he was in health; it is many a time he drove me from his presence with a curse—yes, and quickened my movements with a blow," and at the recollection of his step-father's ill-treatment Frank's face darkened with an evil expression. "I wonder how I stood it so long! Nothing but love for you, mother, enabled me to live through the misery of the last eight years."

"You forget, Frank, there was another, and perhaps a stronger motive." There was a slight sarcasm in Pauline's tones which showed she understood the selfishness of her son's character.

"Well, so there was!" he replied doggedly. "But who first taught me to think of that," he added reproachfully. "Who schooled me to submit to a life of miserable dependence for the sake of gain?"

"Well, so I did! because I did not want to part with you—your presence was all that made life endurable," said his mother, soothingly. "All that is past now, Frank. He can never wreak his ill-temper on you or on me. The wealth we have dearly earned will soon be ours," and a smile of exultation flashed over Pauline's handsome face.

"But if he should recover! and he may yet, mother! Old Bob says that he doesn't think he is going to die yet!"

"He will not cheat death this time, Frank, be assured! his days are numbered; the end of all things earthly for him has come."

There was a heartless indifference in the way in which Pauline uttered these words—of such solemn import to a fellow-creature—which showed an utter want of feeling seldom seen in her sex; but the fiery ordeal through which she had passed in the solitude of that Canadian wild, with that crabbed-tempered, tyrannical old man, had hardened her nature and made her rejoice in his death.

"But what can Mr. Harrington want with me? You have not yet told me, mother."

"Oh it's just that whim which took possession of him yesterday when he found he could not recover. I mean the wish to alter his will and leave half his money to his daughter. He wants you to go in all haste for a notary."

"A notary!" repeated Frank, in dismay; "then we shall lose the money after all!"

"No fear of that, you foolish boy! we have the game in our own hands!"

"Then I need not obey him! and it is a comfort to be able to refuse," said Frank, in a voice of self-gratulation.

"But you must!" broke imperatively from Mrs. Harrington.

Frank looked perplexed. "I do not understand you, mother. If the notary comes here how can you prevent him adding a codicil to the will or making a new one if there is time. And in that case we would lose half the fortune."

"How stupid you are, Frank! do not you understand that if you do go to C— for a notary, you need not get back in time. You know it is some miles distant, and the horse may lose a shoe or some other accident may occur," Pauline added, with a meaning smile.

"How long do you think Mr. Harrington will live, mother?"

"He cannot live many hours, his pulse is almost gone, and the dews of death are already on his brow."

"Well! why take the trouble to go at all?" asked Frank, in impatient tones. "Tell him it is too late now. Why did not he think of it before?"

"And so he did. All through the day he has been harping on it continually, bemoaning his cruelty to his daughter, and regretting the will made in my favour. Fortunately, old Bob is ill in bed and as helpless as his master. Were it not for that fortunate circumstance a notary would have been here before now but there was no messenger to send except you, and it was not my pleasure that you should visit C— on such an errand."

"Then why comply at last?" asked Frank, in surprise.

"Simply for this reason, Frank. He offers to give you a large sum in gold which he has hid somewhere in the house. In order to get possession of that we must pretend compliance with his wishes, especially as doing so cannot injure us now, he is so near death."

"Ah, I understand! You are a cunning one, mother! How much money did he say he would give?" and the boy's eyes gleamed at the thought of clutching the glittering pieces.

"Some hundred sovereigns—not a bad reward for going on a foolish errand," replied the heartless woman, with a fiendish laugh as she ascended the stairs, followed by her son.

A few minutes afterwards they entered the chamber of death, and Frank Mordaunt stood beside the dying man. The last rays of sunset flashing on the diamond-shaped panes of the old-fashioned windows stole into the apartment and were now gleaming on the white drapery of the bed, and rendering yet more ghastly in their garish light the haggard face of that helpless old man, struggling there with the Pale Horse and his Rider. The impress of death on those well-known features filled Frank with indescribable awe. It was the first time he had felt the influence of the King of Terrors; he had never before stood beneath the dread shadow. He half repented the deception he was about to practise on the dying man; the voice of conscience was stirred within the boy.

"You want me to go for a notary!" he stammered forth, agitated and undetermined. "Yes! yes! do not lose a moment. I feel I cannot die till I have done justice to my child. How I have wronged her—these many years! withheld what was her due—but now even at the eleventh hour it is not too late!"

The tones were eager but faint, the words were gasped rather than spoken.

"Why do you linger? go at once!" he continued with something of his old imperiousness of manner.

That harsh, commanding voice, Frank had long accustomed to obey; he turned away mechanically to leave the room, undecided yet what to do, when a look from his mother arrested his steps.

"Why do you not ask for the promised reward?" she said—"the gold he promised to give you."

"He can get it when he comes back. Do not detain him now. If you expect mercy when your dying hour comes, let him go at once," wailed forth the unhappy man, turning his glazing eyes appealingly towards his wife.

But she was deaf to the voice of supplication—her heart was unmoved at the sight of the old man's anguish. She felt not the softening influence the presence of death exerts over most minds.

"But Frank wants the money now. Tell him where you have hidden it. He shall not stir a step until he has it in his possession," she added, with determination.

Mr. Harrington pointed to his desk. "The secret drawer," he said, faintly.

Pauline produced the key and searched eagerly, but in vain, for the drawer intimidated. At length she placed the desk on the bed beside the dying man, and with his feeble hand he pressed a secret spring, disclosing a hidden drawer filled with golden pieces. Frank's eyes sparkled at the glittering sight. He eagerly removed the contents to his pockets, and was again leaving the room, when the voice of his step-father stopped him.

"Are you going now? Oh, for the love of mercy, hurry! I will you promise me this?"

"Yes!" faltered Frank, who, under the subduing influence of the hour, meant to do as Mr. Harrington wished.

"Then you will not delay. You will be soon back." There was a piteous earnestness in the beseeching face.

"I will come back as soon as I can. You know it is some miles to C—"

An agonizing thought now struck Mr. Harrington.

"But if it should be too late! and I fear it is! If death should come before you return, promise me to fulfil my dying intentions to my daughter. Swear you will share the fortune I leave, with her," he added, turning with an imploring look from Frank to his mother.

"We will do no such thing!" broke savagely from Mrs. Harrington. "Frank cannot fulfil your dying injunctions, for the money is not his but mine. You willed it to me. Do you think I would have married you on any other conditions! No," she continued, with fierce vehemence. "I sold myself not only for gold, but for revenge! Yes, revenge! don't you understand? to prevent Castonell's enjoying one dollar of that money for which he married Edith. It is all mine now! every dollar! I have earned it in the years spent with you, bearing with your cursed temper, shut up here from the world, and treated more like a slave than your wife!"

The old man was appalled by this unexpected outbreak. The veil which had hidden the true character of Pauline was suddenly withdrawn. There was no longer any need to humour his caprices, to obey his commands. The hour she had long waited for had come at last. The Angel of Death stood ready to break the fetters of wedded bondage, and further dissimulation was unnecessary. No feeling of compassion for the dying withheld her from uttering her true sentiments now. Hers was a passionate and determined nature, and she felt a kind of fierce joy in throwing off the mask self-interest had so long imposed, and expressing some of the scorn and intense hatred she felt for the man who had been to her as well as to others a hard and tyrannical master.

Until this moment hope had sustained Mr. Harrington—the hope to be able to make some reparation to his daughter for his long heartless neglect, by bequeathing to her part of his fortune at the eleventh hour. But as he gazed upon the angry face of his wife—the expression of the flashing eye so hard, so pitiless—as he listened to her cruel words—revealing the true cause of her accepting his hand—as he felt his own utter helplessness, his mortal weakness—every hope was crushed within him. The indescribable anguish of that moment snapped the feeble thread of life and his spirit passed away from earth, leaving on the ghastly face, in death, the impress of his mingled emotions—an expression of rage, reproach and despair, which haunted Frank Mordaunt's thoughts for months afterwards.

Immediately after Mr. Harrington's death, Pauline once more visited England. Her motive in doing this was to enquire if her first husband were still alive. During Mr. Harrington's life she did not venture to make any enquiries, but now it was necessary to discover this before she ventured to appear in the world as Mr. Harrington's widow, possessing his wealth. Someone knowing the circumstances of Mr. Mordaunt's imprisonment, might unfortunately find out that her marriage with Mr. Harrington was illegal, and therefore the money she possessed as his

wife was not legally hers. But these fears—and they had troubled Pauline—were happily dispelled, by the very agreeable information that the convict Mordaunt had died suddenly of heart disease the second year of his imprisonment. Pauline's second marriage had actually taken place a few weeks before this event occurred. Still Pauline thought she had nothing to dread; the affair would never be investigated, for no one would doubt the validity of her marriage with Mr. Harrington. She therefore felt quite secure in the enjoyment of her wealth. How much she regretted she had not known of Mordaunt's death before; what anxiety it would have spared her!

During her stay in England Pauline became acquainted with Grant Berkeley, Mr. Berkeley's eldest son, who was associated with him in business. Attracted by the beauty and wealth of the fascinating widow, Grant made her an offer of his hand, although he was a few years her junior, and this offer Pauline thought proper to accept, although she felt no romantic affection for Grant Berkeley. No second attachment had Pauline yet known, and the passionate love of her girlhood was yet slumbering in the secret chamber of her heart. After an absence of several years Pauline again returned to Montréal. But she returned as a stranger to her native city. Her aunt had married a converted Jew and gone with him to Palestine. She had no other relations; she therefore concealed her identity with Miss Gordon's niece. She would now move in a different sphere, and she hoped no one would recognize Pauline Falkner in the rich and fashionable Mrs. Grant Berkeley.

## CHAPTER XIII.

### THE DINNER PARTY.

HILDA paid particular attention to her toilet the evening of her uncle's dinner party. For two years her vanity had slept, and she had beheld with indifference her brilliant beauty fade, but now, as she stood before the cheval glass, contemplating herself in her new costume, that slumbering vanity awoke, and she experienced a very natural feeling of pleasure at seeing that her beauty, dimmed for a time by suffering, had suddenly recovered its brilliancy, for beneath the magic touch of excitement Hilda was looking like her former self.

The Berkeleys gazed at her in surprise when she entered the drawing-room where they were awaiting their guests.

"What a metamorphose! Really, Hilda, I hardly knew you. You look radiant!" exclaimed her uncle, looking at her with fond admiration.

Mrs. Berkeley said nothing, but she saw it was a false move to induce Hilda Tremayne to join the dinner party, thus exposing Sir Gervase Montague to the witchery of her beauty. Claribel's chance of captivating the baronet, she felt, would now be small indeed. Mr. and Mrs. Grant Berkeley were the first arrivals. Pauline was looking charmingly. Her elegant dress of rose-coloured silk fitted to perfection, and contrasted admirably with her dark eyes and hair. A bandeau of pearls encircled her chignon, which was large enough to suit Thérèse Berkeley's ideas of what was stylish. Pendants of pearl glittered in her shell-shaped ears, and on her finely-moulded arms gleamed bracelets of the same costly gem.

Hilda looked up nervously as Sir Gervase Montague and the Hon. Mr. Cavendish were announced. At the first glance both gentlemen seemed strangers, but a second look at Sir Gervase convinced her that Major Montague stood before her. Altered he certainly looked, and this was owing to the mass of hair he wore on his upper lip and chin, which so changed his appearance that it was difficult to recognize him at first sight. Hilda met him as a stranger, but she saw by the colour that mounted to his face and the look of glad surprise that flashed over it, that he recognized her immediately. However, when he saw her bow without any recognition in her glance as they were introduced, the pleasure faded from his face, and a look of bewilderment grew into it.

The Hon. Mr. Cavendish was a fashionable young man, very like the fast young men in his rank of life at the present day. There was nothing military in his appearance; his style was more of an exquisite. He would be more at home in a lady's boudoir than on the battle-field. His dress was perfection in the most approved style of dandyism. The curl of his light moustache showed the care he bestowed upon it, and the soft masses of his fair hair were arranged with graceful precision. To dress well, to draw fashionable small talk, to waltz, to galop, and to smoke, seemed all he had to do in life, the only purpose of his existence. How many vain, trifling, foppish young men may be met with nowadays who have no higher aim in life than this young officer! The Hon. Mr. Cavendish was immensely taken with Miss Tremayne. He had heard some one casually mention that there was a pretty cousin living with the Berkeleys. But how beautiful she was! Quite distinguished-looking too! It surprised the young aristocrat, who had the narrow prejudices of rank, to meet any one with such an air of elegance out of a certain élite circle in England. He had seen many stylish-looking,