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HILDA; OR, THE MERCHANT'S SECRET.

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CHAPTER XXVII.

THE INCUMBENT'S DISMISSAL.

Mrs. Grant Berkeley was ill, stricken down with a dangerous fever in the midst of gaiety and selfish enjoyment. The best physicians in the city were called in by her alarmed husband, but the disease seemed to baffle their skill. Her life was despaired of, and for days she lay in the Valley of the Shadow of Death. During this period of torturing suspense Mr. Castonell's anxiety could scarcely be endured. He haunted the street in which Pauline lived, and called frequently at the house to inquire about her. Edith was with her false friend in this time of danger. At length the fever approached its crisis, and a few hours would decide whether Mrs. Grant Berkeley should live or die. It was night, a night in early summer; the atmosphere of the sick room was oppressive, and Edith stepped out upon a balcony upon which one of the windows opened to breathe the cool fresh air and lift her heart in silent prayer to heaven for the life of one who she feared was unprepared to die—how truly unfit Edith never suspected!

The residence of Mr. Grant Berkeley was in Sherbrooke street. Below lay the vast city buried in deep repose. Not a sound came up from the silent streets; every noise was hushed, and the wearied population was at rest—dead for the time to the interests of life, indifferent to its pleasures and its cares. The moon in its full orb light was shining in a cloudless sky, looking down calmly on the sleeping city, gleaming upon its graceful spires and bright-tinted domes, and pouring a flood of quivering rays upon its noble river. The scene was so quiet and beautiful that Mrs. Castonell stood for some time silently admiring it while she drank in the balmy refreshing air laden with the scent of apple blossoms which came up from the gardens near, belonging to the palace-homes situated in the shelter of the mountain, whose dark outline was clearly defined in the moonlight.

At length her attention was attracted towards a figure standing beneath the foliage of some flowering trees which skirted the boardwalk on the opposite side of the road.

The balcony where Mrs. Castonell stood was in deep shadow, but there the moonlight was falling, shimmering on the leaves of the trees and casting their delicate tracery on the boardwalk beneath. Edith had no difficulty in recognizing her husband in this motionless figure looking so intently over at Mrs. Grant Berkeley's house—his gaze apparently fixed where the light was gleaming in the sick chamber. A sudden pang shot through her heart at the discovery, for the startling thought crept towards her that his anxiety about Pauline's life must be overpowering when he spent the night thus in the vicinity of her house. The prayer for Pauline's recovery died on Edith's lips as the agony of jealousy awoke within her. This man was still there, and she was silently watching him when, hearing herself gently called by Pauline's nurse, she hastily re-entered her room.

A change had taken place in Mrs. Grant Berkeley, the crisis was favourable, and her recovery might be expected; careful nursing was all that was necessary now.

The next morning Mr. Castonell called, and Edith communicated the joyful news about Pauline, watching the effect it would have upon him. If she expected any betrayal of emotion, any sudden rapture lighting up his countenance, she was disappointed. He received the information calmly, expressing, however, the very great happiness it gave him to hear she might be restored to her family and friends.

Edith was deceived. Surely there was no ground for the jealousy she had been indulging since last night! She did not know that her news did not take him by surprise; he had already heard it from Pauline's physician, the joyful emotion it had caused him had calmed down. Still the circumstance of his being seen during the night in the vicinity of Mrs. Grant Berkeley's house looked suspicious and required an explanation which Mrs. Castonell determined to have.

"What brought you out in the middle of the night?" she asked abruptly, looking steadily at him.

For this inquiry he was also prepared. He had seen Edith as she stepped out on the balcony, and he feared she had recognized him.

"I was attending the death-bed of an old man in St. Urban street, who died a little after midnight, and on my way home as the night was beautiful I walked along Sherbrooke street, thinking sadly of the scene I had just left. The dread realities of death and eternity will force themselves upon the mind," Mr. Castonell added with hypocritical solemnity.

"I saw you standing under those trees opposite," Edith remarked, pointing to the acacias on the other side of the street, now glistening in the rays of the morning sun.

"Yes, I stopped a few minutes thinking of Pauline, apprehensive that she, too, was even then passing away, closing her eyes on this earthly scene."

"It was just then the favourable change took place," resumed Mrs. Castonell, feeling quite relieved at this explanation, simply believing everything her husband told her. The painful suspicions which had filled her mind for some hours were now dismissed.

Pauline's recovery was slow, and it was some weeks before she again appeared in society. Still this prolonged convalescence was not irksome to the invalid, as it furnished some excuse for the frequent visits of the Rev. Mr. Castonell. This season of seclusion on account of ill-health was assuredly the best time for spiritual advice and consolation. When this gay votary of fashion was for a time, forcibly withdrawn from the seductions of the world, what more fitting opportunity to speak to her of the vanity of life and lead her by ghostly counsel to turn her thoughts heavenward and look beyond this fleeting scene to a home of immortality? So Mr. Castonell sanctimoniously observed to some ladies—busy-bodies in the congregation he called then—who presumed to find fault with his devoting so much time to Mrs. Grant Berkeley and neglecting other parochial duties. But this plausible excuse for his attentions to the fascinating invalid did not remove suspicion nor silence the tongue of scandal. And as time went on, and the daily visits of Mr. Castonell to Mrs. Grant Berkeley still continued, although that lady was restored to her usual health, the wrath of the congregation knew no bounds. Some threatened to leave the church, and all clamoured for his dismissal.

And it came at last the sudden unwelcome interruption to this delightful little drama which had been going on so quietly. Did the blow fall unexpectedly on the head of the infatuated Castonell. No, he had been looking for it with gloomy apprehension for some little time. He knew suspicion was awake, and although the evil day might be deferred come it must. His married flirtation would not be tolerated by the people of St. Mark's, even if he were guiltless of nothing worse; the reputation of their minister must be untarnished. How else could he benefit the souls committed to his care. Precept would not do without example. But although the Rev. Mr. Castonell was aware of this, although he knew full well that the flowery path he was treading led to the brink of a precipice still in his infatuation onward he steadily went, deaf to the remonstrances of friends, deaf to the voice of conscience. The pathway was so very pleasant, flowers of happiness with such glowing tints springing up at every step, the voice of the siren, so exquisitely sweet, luring him on and on to that fatal brink down which he knew he must at last fall headlong. Verily it was a fierce temptation which had seized upon the incumbent of St. Mark's, and well had the temptress done her work of destruction.

From this dream of happiness he was rudely aroused one morning by being dismissed from the incumbency of St. Mark's. Although the blow had been for some time expected, yet when it did come it fell with crushing weight upon the erring man!

What was now to be done. How could he henceforth supply the temporal wants of himself and family. With a tarnished reputation where could he now procure a curacy. But though he repeatedly asked himself these questions, this was not the infatuated man's chief anxiety. The reason of his being dismissed from St. Mark's must reach the ears of Grant Berkeley; his jealousy would be aroused—the wonder was how it had slept so long—and then farewell to those delightful interviews with the adored Pauline.

Such were the thoughts that crowded the mind of Mr. Castonell as he walked homeward after his humiliating interview with his diocesan.

A servant of Mrs. Grant Berkeley's was leaving the door as he reached his house in de Bleury Street; Mrs. Castonell was in the dining-room with an envelope in her hand, which the servant had just left. It contained a card of invitation for a fancy ball to be given at Mrs. Grant Berkeley's, to celebrate that lady's restoration to health and to society. The cloud on her husband's brow did not escape Edith's notice, but she little conjectured the cause. The scandal which was current about him and her friend had not yet reached her ears. Those whom it most deeply concerned—herself and Mrs. Berkeley—were the last to hear it. Something evidently troubled Mr. Castonell, and the anxious wife tenderly imagined what it was. He was going to inform her of his dismissal—not its cause; but their

daughter Maud just then entered the room, and he waited for a more private opportunity.

"What did Mrs. Grant Berkeley's servant want, mamma?" Maud asked, with girlish eagerness.

Her mother handed her the invitation card. "A fancy ball! how delightful that will be! the various characters and dresses will be so amusing and beautiful. How I should enjoy it! Shall you go, mamma?"

"No, Maud; the scene will be too gay."

"Too gay!" repeated Mr. Castonell. "Absurd! it will be well worth seeing."

"No doubt of that; but would it not be unsuited for me—a clergyman's wife?"

"You are too precise. What harm can there be in going to a fancy ball or a ball of any kind. People who are loudest in condemning such amusements are the greatest hypocrites. I am sick of such cant!"

Edith looked at her husband in amazement; she had never before heard him advocating worldly amusements. What a change had come over him of late!

"Oh, do go, mamma! you will enjoy it, I am sure!" urged Maud, to whose girlish imagination a fancy ball seemed a place of enchanting amusement.

"But, suppose I did go, what would the world say? what would the people of St. Mark's say?" and Edith looked inquiringly at her husband.

"Never mind what they say!" he answered, tartly; "it is of little consequence now," he added, in an under tone. The remark, however, did not reach the ears of Mrs. Castonell or her daughter. Both looked at the speaker in surprise. Even Maud saw the absurdity of not caring whether they offended the good people of St. Mark's.

"But I must mind," persisted Edith, and with grave decision she added, "although I might enjoy the fancy ball, I shall not go, lest I should incur the censure of those I esteem."

"You are a fool to deny yourself any innocent gratification, lest you should offend the gossiping coterie of the over-righteous who take upon themselves to judge others and condemn all who are not so hypocritically devout!" This was spoken with angry vehemence. The event of the morning had not improved Mr. Castonell's temper, never remarkably sweet in the domestic circle.

"It would never do for me to act as you advise; as a clergyman's wife it is necessary that I should respect the prejudices—narrow-minded though they may be—of the truly religious members of our congregation, and for me to mingle in the gayeties of the world would be a serious transgression in their eyes."

"Well! do as you like! I at least shall accept the invitation to this ball."

"You?" repeated Edith, regarding her husband in astonishment. She thought he had lost his senses.

"You go to a fancy ball, papa?" laughed Maud. "How funny that will seem!"

"Yes, I will go, Maud, and if you like I will take you with me. Your mother may refuse the kind invitation of Mrs. Grant Berkeley if she likes. You and I shall, no doubt, enjoy ourselves."

"Oh, papa, how good you are; won't it be delightful! but what character shall I assume?"

"Any one you like; consult with mamma about that, and now let us have dinner. I have business to attend to afterwards."

The meal almost passed in silence, except when Maud broke forth with some happy remark about the coming festivity she expected to enjoy. Edith was struck dumb in her surprise and anxiety about this whim of her husband's.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE COUSINS.

Some important changes had taken place in Mr. Berkeley's family during the year Hilda spent in Ireland. Claribel was married. Hilda was glad of this; there would be no longer any rivalry between them, and her own chance of happiness in her uncle's house would be greater. Claribel had married well in the world's opinion. Her husband was worth half a million of dollars. What did it matter then if he was twice her age, low-born and unpolished. He was wealthy; he could live in a palatial home; could entertain in a magnificent style, and allow Claribel to squander the money he had gained with little trouble by speculating successfully in petroleum.

Since Claribel's marriage the Berkeleys had been living rather retired. Mr. Berkeley's affairs were somewhat embarrassed, and retrenchment was thought advisable. This embarrassment Thérèse told Hilda, in confidence, as they sat together the day after her arrival, was, she thought, owing to Mrs. Grant Berkeley's extravagance. Not content with spending her own fortune, she was spending her husband's money as fast as she could, giving magnificent entertainments, and this was one means of involving the House of Berkeley & Son in difficulties.

"And Grant, is he not also extravagant, Thérèse?" Is not much of his time as well as his money spent at the billiard table?" asked Hilda.

"I am afraid that is the case," Thérèse acknowledged, reluctantly. "But just to think of Pauline's doings," she continued, with irritation. "She has sent out invitations for a fancy ball, to be given next week. The preparations are on a magnificent scale. Several hundred guests invited; only think what an expense that will be!"

"You will go, of course, Thérèse? You are no longer in the nursery, I believe?"

"No. I was emancipated at Claribel's wedding. I made my *début* then," answered Thérèse, gayly. "Shall you not go also, Hilda?" she continued. "You have never been to a fancy-ball, and it will be a grand affair, well worth seeing."

"I think not; remember I am in mourning. It would not do to be seen at such places now."

"But it is a masked ball. You can, if you wish, retain your mask; then you would not be recognized."

"Will not the guests unmask at supper?"

"Yes; but we could leave before if you wished. Really, you must come, Hilda. I shall enjoy it so much if you do!"

"I cannot decide at present, Thérèse. I may be induced to go from curiosity, it will be such a novel scene, and very entertaining, no doubt."

"Pauline was very ill some weeks since, this fancy ball is to celebrate her restoration to health and the world—a grateful acknowledgment to Providence for her recovery, I suppose," said Thérèse, ironically.

"A large donation to some charitable institution would be a better way of expressing her gratitude," observed Hilda, gravely.

"Oh, charitable donations are not in Pauline's line, said Thérèse, laughing. "She is too selfish."

"You do not seem to like your sister-in-law, Thérèse; what has caused this change in your feelings towards her?"

"This intimacy with the Castonells."

"And who are the Castonells?"

"Old friends of hers with whom she has been exceedingly intimate since you left Montreal."

"And why should this displease Miss Thérèse Berkeley? Is it because they are not rich or in society?" asked Hilda, smiling archly.

"No, that is not the reason. It is because people talk so about this intimacy. It has given rise to such gossip, and the things they say are not creditable to Mrs. Grant Berkeley, I assure you."

"And is Grant aware of this?" Hilda inquired, now feeling an interest in her young cousin's rather startling communication.

"Of course not; Pauline's husband will be the last person to hear such stories."

"But if these stories had any foundation would not Aunt Berkeley inform him?"

"Mamma does not believe them. She says it is all idle gossip."

"And I suppose it is. But what is it people say?" inquired Hilda, whose curiosity was aroused.

"Nothing more than that Mrs. Grant Berkeley is in love with the Rev. Mr. Castonell!"

"Is he a clergyman?"

"Yes, and the most eloquent preacher in the city. A very handsome man, too."

"Pauline admires his sermons, I suppose?"

"Yes, and himself too," said Thérèse, nodding her head emphatically. "Pauline knew Mr. and Mrs. Castonell years ago," she continued, anxious to impart more information. "Mrs. Castonell's father was her second husband. It appears the old man left her all his money instead of giving it to Mrs. Castonell."

"And does she feel no ill-will to Pauline on this account?" Hilda asked with some surprise.

"It appears not. However, Pauline intends that Frank Mordaunt shall marry Maud Castonell, and she will give back the fortune that way—at her death of course—but if she continues to live as extravagantly as she does at present, there will be little money left for Frank and his wife to inherit."

"Ah, now I understand the true cause of your enmity to Pauline. This arrangement about Frank's marriage with Miss Castonell does not please you. Is she pretty?"

"Yes, beautiful. But you are quite mistaken, Hilda, I am not a bit jealous. Frank might marry Maud to-morrow and it would not annoy me."

"You have changed your mind since last year, Thérèse. Remember you thought Frank Mordaunt a good party then."

"Ah yes," she replied carelessly, "but have I not told you that his mother is spending the money as fast as she can. So there will be very little left for Mrs. Frank Mordaunt to spend," added Thérèse with a mocking laugh.

"Ah, you are too worldly-minded, Thérèse. You would marry for money I am afraid."

"So I intend. I shall marry some gaudy old millionaire, like Claribel."

"And sacrifice every chance of happiness," observed Hilda with grave reproof.

"Not at all! Would not money enable me to purchase all the happiness I desire? You have not seen Claribel's splendid home yet, Hilda. You do not know what a fortunate match she made. And then her wedding was