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HILDA; OR, THE MERCHANT'S SECRET.

BY MRS. J. V. WOLFE.

Author of the "Abbey of Rathmore," "Passion and Principle," "The Secret of Stanley Hall," "The Cross of Pride," &c.

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CHAPTER XX.—Continued.

"Will you tell me, my good woman, the name of the gentleman in whose house I am?" Dudley asked, without answering her question.

"Is it the masher's name you want to know? Well, then, it's Kurnel Godfrey, and a better name one needn't wish to have. He is one of the ould stock—the rale ginthry, I tell you."

"Has he any family?"

"Of coorse he has. There is Masther Roger who is dead, he died in Injy ten years ago this Christmas; then there's Lady Milcent, and Masther Cecil, and Miss Godfrey."

"Are there no young ladies besides the Colonel's own family?"

"Yes, one, Miss Clifford."

"Miss Clifford! Are you sure her name is Clifford?"

"Of coorse I am; what else would it be? But whist now, and ate yere supper; it's starving intirely ye are."

"Oh, thank you, I will eat presently. I just want to ask a few more questions. No offence, I hope."

"Och, none in life!" Eveleen spoke in the blandest of tones, but there was a dark scowl on her wrinkled face, which was carefully averted from Dudley.

"This Miss Clifford, has she been long here?"

"Not to say very long."

"What does she look like?"

"Just the pictur of an Alabaster doll, if ye ever saw one in a shop window."

"She is very handsome, then, with dark hair and eyes."

"Och, ye're quite mistaken, her hair is the colour of goold."

"Then it was not her who was in this room?"

"In this room! man alive ye're dhraming! arrah, do ye think Miss Clifford would come into this room where you are?"

There was an overwhelming scorn in Eveleen's tones.

"Some one *did* come. I saw them with my own eyes," asserted Dudley, bluntly.

"Bedad! that's quare, now. And what did she look like?"

"She was very beautiful, with black hair and eyes, and a face white as a corpse."

"The Saints defend us!" exclaimed Eveleen, crossing herself in terror. "It's the ghost you saw!"

"The ghost?" repeated Dudley, incredulously.

"Yes, the Banshee. It follows the Godfreys, and always is seen when some misfortune is going to happen. Arrah, what was she doing? Tell me all about it," continued the nurse, with well-assumed interest, again devoutly crossing herself.

"She was standing beside the bed looking down at me."

There was an expression of perplexity in Dudley's face. Like most sailors he was inclined to be superstitious.

"Holy Biddy!" it's a wondher ye didn't faint; but no doubt it was the bottle of holy wather hanging at the head of the bed that kept the brave heart in ye. You see I always keep it near me to defend me from the fairies and the Banshee herself, for she's mighty cross, they say, if ye vex her. Whist! and don't let us say any more about her, she does not like to be meddled with."

A short silence ensued, Dudley was lost in thought, and Eveleen was busy rekindling the fire which had burnt very low on the large, old-fashioned hearth at one end of the apartment. The more Dudley thought about the vision which had disturbed his sleep, the less was his reason convinced that it could be supernatural. The story about the Banshee was well enough; he had heard of such things before; but the likeness which it bore to his lost wife was so strange he could not understand it at all. And yet, how could it be Hilda who had appeared to him? How could she be here in this gentleman's family? unless—the thought startled him by the light it seemed to throw suddenly upon the subject—as governess to his children. Again he interrogated the old woman.

"Are there any children in the house?"

"Sorra one, they are all grown up long ago."

"Then there is no governess?"

"Of coorse not, what would she be doing there, when there's no children to tache? Why, what's come over the man!" muttered Eve-

leen, in no pleasant voice, "asking such quare, not to say impudent questions!"

The angry reproach which was intended to put a stop to Dudley's interrogations had the desired effect. He was silent but not convinced. The mystery was not cleared up. He tried to believe his visitant might be the Banshee, as the old woman affirmed it was, but the likeness to Hilda in that death-like face which he saw bending over him with such an agonized expression haunted his thoughts.

The following morning he left Innismoyne, to the great relief of Hilda and the nurse, but he still continued in the neighbourhood, residing in the little town of Ballyveichmahon, in order to recover a considerable part of the cargo of his vessel which had been washed on shore.

CHAPTER XXI.

DUDLEY VISITS THE CHURCH IN THE GLEN.

CECIL GODFREY'S birth-day, calm and unclouded, rose brightly after the gloom of the storm on the day preceding it. The tenantry on the Innismoyne estate were feasted and enjoyed the usual amount of pleasure and excitement on such occasions. The birth-day ball was well attended, the officers from a garrison-town, some miles distant, graced it with their presence, enlivening the scene by their gay uniform. Although it was Hilda's first ball it afforded her no enjoyment; how could it when her mind was filled with such deep anxiety? when the dread of Dudley's discovering her was never absent from her thoughts? Gladly would she have absented herself from the festive scene, if she could have done so without creating remarks. A though suffering mentally she could not plead illness as an excuse, therefore, with an intense feeling of wretchedness which it cost her an effort to conceal, she mingled in the gay throng, counting the hours as they sped, glad when the departure of the guests at length allowed her to retire to her own room, there, unobserved, to indulge the misery and anxiety which oppressed her.

Some days passed away, Dudley did not again make his appearance at Innismoyne, and Hilda hoped he had left the neighbourhood. She was ignorant of the fact that he was still lingering at Ballyveichmahon, waiting for the approaching Sunday when he expected to see Colonel Godfrey's family and visitors at church. There he thought he would have a good opportunity of recognizing the person who had disturbed his slumbers the night he spent at Innismoyne. He could not get rid of the suspicion that Eveleen had deceived him,—that the story of the Banshee was a mere fabrication. The more his thoughts dwelt upon the subject the less credulous he was.

At an early hour on Sunday morning Dudley wended his way along the wild mountain-road, leading to the little church so picturesquely situated in the glen. For nearly two hours he waited for the assembling of the congregation, stretched beneath one of the yew-trees already mentioned, its dense gloomy foliage sheltering him from the mid-day sun. It was a place well suited for meditation, the solemn stillness of the mountain solitude being unbroken, save by the monotonous sound of the waves as they dashed in ceaseless succession upon the neighbouring beach. But the unhappy Dudley was in no mood for pious meditation,—the thoughts that occupied his mind were unsuited to the holy day. Earthly anxieties, passionate yearnings for the loved one he had lost, usurped the place of holier desires, of higher aspirations. Anxiously did he watch the road leading from Innismoyne, and carefully did he scan each person that approached the church from that direction.

The service had commenced as the party from Innismoyne made their appearance. Hilda came first, escorted by Sir Gervase Montague. She knew that they were late and she was hurrying on, looking neither to the right nor to the left, her eye, therefore, did not notice Dudley's reclining figure, nor his wondering gaze which was fixed upon her as if she possessed the power of the basilisk. What a tumult of emotion did she excite in the bewildered mind of the poor skipper. How wonderfully like his lost wife she was, this noble looking Irish lady! The figure, the face, were so very similar! And yet she could not possibly be Hilda, the idea was absurd; then came the recollection of the same face bending over him as he slept, and his perplexity increased. Like one in a dream, feeling as if everything was unreal, he followed the aristocratic party into the church, and seating himself in a pew near the door, continued to watch Hilda, without for a moment removing his eyes from her. The magnetism of his eye at length attracted hers; their eyes met, but only for a moment,—fortunately for Hilda's self-possession, it occurred just as she was bending her knees in prayer. Whether there was any change of countenance or not, Dudley could not tell, for she quickly bowed head was instantly hidden between the small gloved hands. The crimson colour that flooded her face in that moment of painful surprise was unnoticed as well as the death-like pallor that succeeded, as the blood retreated suddenly to the wildly-throbbing heart. But during the prayers Hilda had time to master her emotion, and when she rose from

her kneeling attitude she had recovered her self-possession, and Dudley's eager eye rested again on the same calm, imperturbable countenance. During the rest of the service Hilda carefully avoided looking towards him. How glad she was when it was concluded and the congregation rose to depart! On leaving the church Dudley did not retire with the rest of the worshippers. He lingered near the door in order to have some conversation with the clergyman; he wished to ask him a few questions relative to Colonel Godfrey's family and the lady who reminded him so powerfully of his wife. That she was Hilda he did not now believe, for surely she never could have looked so unmoved after she had seen him and known he was so near her! So thought the simple-minded skipper.

The Rev. Mr. Tyndall had noticed the sailor in church, and also observed his want of devotion. He was glad of an opportunity to speak to him about the shipwreck, and taking advantage of it, he tried by a few pointed remarks to impress upon his mind the necessity for gratitude to the Merciful Being who had spared his life.

"Under Providence I owe it to one of the gentlemen who was in church to-day, observed Dudley, anxious to lead the conversation to the topic which possessed such engrossing interest for him.

"Yes, to Sir Gervase Montague. You owe him a debt of gratitude."

"I do, one which I will never be able to repay. Is he related to Colonel Godfrey?" Dudley asked, after a moment's pause.

"No, merely a visitor at Innismoyne; but," Mr. Tyndall added, smiling, "he will probably be connected with the Colonel before long; if report speaks truth, he is to marry into the family."

"Probably the young lady who walked with him to church," remarked Dudley, inquiringly.

"I really cannot tell. Miss Clifford was also at church this morning."

"The lady I mean has dark hair and eyes; she wore a blue silk dress and blue bonnet with white feathers. She is tall and very handsome."

"You must have observed her very particularly. I am afraid she attracted too much of your attention during Divine Worship," observed Mr. Tyndall, gravely.

"Is it her the Baronet means to marry?" persisted Dudley.

"Yes; the lady you describe will be Lady Montague."

"I suppose she is the Colonel's daughter?"

"No; only his grand-daughter; her mother was his daughter."

"Her mother! then why does she bear his name?" was Dudley's eager question.

"Bear his name! She is not called Godfrey," replied Mr. Tyndall, coldly. He could not understand the secret cause of the stranger's curiosity.

"Pardon me, sir; but I beg of you to tell me what her own name is," asked Dudley, in imploring accents.

The expression of the sailor's face struck Mr. Tyndall as being singularly anxious.

"You seem very much interested in this young lady," he observed. "Have you ever seen her before?"

"I think I have, in Canada."

"Hah! very likely; her mother died in Canada; they lived there some years."

"Good Heavens! And her name? what is it?" hoarsely asked Dudley.

"Hilda Tremayne; but I must now wish you good morning," Mr. Tyndall hastily added, as he mounted a horse which the sexton led towards him. "I have to officiate at a funeral in Tralee, and it is very near the time."

He then rode off, wondering at the emotion displayed by the stranger on hearing Miss Tremayne's real name. He must have known her and her family in Canada, he thought, and probably was an admirer of the beautiful girl in the time of her poverty. The truth, however, never dawned upon him, and the matter soon passed from his memory altogether.

CHAPTER XXII.

EVELEEN MEETS DUDLEY IN THE GLEN.

With his pulses wildly beating, and the blood coursing madly through his veins in his intense excitement at the revelation Mr. Tyndall had made, Dudley, on being left alone, threw himself beneath the shadow of a large rock to think over the astounding intelligence he had received.

"Her own name is Tremayne, her mother died in Canada!" he repeated again and again, as if unable to assure himself that he had indeed heard aright. "Then I was not mistaken, she is my own Hilda, found at last! My own Hilda!" he repeated bitterly. "Mine no longer! Mine never more!"

There was an indescribable depth of despairing sadness in his tones as he uttered these words, and bowing his face upon his hands, he wept the burning tears of man's strong agony. Then came the recollection of what Mr. Tyndall had said, relative to Sir Gervase Montague, thrilling Dudley with anguish, and stirring within him the bitter waters of jealousy.

"She shall not marry him!" he exclaimed

with frenzied vehemence. "To lose her, to live without her, I could endure, and have lived through the wild sorrow, but to see her the wife of another would drive me mad! Oh not that! not that!" and again the head was bowed, and the strong man shivered in his fierce emotion.

"I must speak to her!" he continued after a gloomy silence, suddenly starting to his feet. "I will demand to see her, and proclaim my right even in the presence of Sir Gervase Montague himself! His wife she shall never be! I can at least prevent that!"

In his wild excitement he neither saw nor heard the approach of a pedestrian—an old woman in the picturesque garb of the Irish peasant—until she stood close beside him in the narrow road, then with glad surprise he recognized Eveleen, who was just the person he wished to see. She was returning from Ballyveichmahon, where she had been attending Mass in the Roman Catholic chapel. Seeing Dudley in the vicinity of the church, and hearing the words that burst so vehemently from him as she approached, she immediately comprehended what had occurred, and feared that concealment with regard to Hilda was no longer possible.

"Well, then, is it yerself that's in it? and I thinking ye far enough away by this time!" she observed with a seeming carelessness, as if the unexpected sight of him was pleasing instead of otherwise.

"It's glad enough you would be if I was far away," he remarked sullenly.

"Ye seem to be in no pleasant humour this blessed Sunday. Ye put the wrong foot foremost when ye riz this morning," and with this sneering remark she was passing on when he stopped her by saying with subdued vehemence:

"I want to speak to you. You needn't be in such a hurry!"

"Well, then, keep a civil tongue in yere head if ye want a body to stop and speak to you. It's mighty tired I am with the long walk to chapel, this broiling day," she added, seating herself wearily on a projecting ledge of rock, "and hungry, too, into the bargain. Be quick and say what you have on yere mind, for I must be going, the dinner will be over when I get home."

"You will have but little appetite for your dinner when you hear what I have got to say, my good woman," said Dudley, in a tone of suppressed anger, for he resented the imposition she had practised on him. Then, in answer to Eveleen's look of well-affected surprise, he added with a sarcastic smile:

"I have again seen the Banshee!"

"Where? if a body may ax. Faix she's mighty fond of ye it seems!"

There was a provoking coolness in Eveleen's tones which irritated him.

"In church. Yes, this very day in God's house I saw the beautiful, living woman that came to me the other night, and who you falsely said was the Banshee. Now, what have you to say for yourself? Are you not ashamed, an old woman like you with one foot on the grave, to lie so boldly?"

"To the divil with yerself and yere impudence," exclaimed the nurse fiercely, starting to her feet with a menacing gesture. "How dare the like of you put the lie down my throat. I tell you it was the Banshee and no one else!"

"The Banshee and Miss Tremayne are wonderfully like," and Dudley laughed derisively. "Sit down, woman," he resumed after a short pause, seeing Eveleen about to move on. "Sit down and listen to me. I know all about it now; there's no use in denying it any longer."

"Know all about what? Arrah, man alive, don't be spaking riddles."

"About Miss Godfrey. The parson told me her real name."

"May the curse of Crummel light on him for that same!" muttered Eveleen. "It's the likes of him that lets the cat out of the bag. He wouldn't tell a lie to save his ownself from the gallows. Och, wirrah! what'll be done now?" she added mentally, sitting down again in her great perplexity. "It's no use thrying to deceive him any longer."

"He told me," continued Dudley, enjoying the look of blank dismay on the old woman's wrinkled face, "that her name is not Godfrey but Tremayne. And yet that is not her real name either, by right she should be called Dudley, Mrs. Dudley, for she is my wife, and you know it, woman!"

"Well, and what if I do?" said Eveleen, doggedly. "Ye bought her for goold, and ye ought to be ashamed of yerself for that same, taking a mane advantage of her poverty. Could not ye have helped her parents when they were in distress without axing her to be yere wife? Did not ye know she could never care for the likes of you. And now if ye have the heart of a man why don't ye lave her alone the rest of her life, and not be bothering her to acknowledge you for her husband? Arrah, mortal man, do ye think she'll ever do it? ever consent to live with you?"

"No; I suppose she would rather live with Sir Gervase Montague, and be called 'my lady,' replied Dudley with a mocking, bitter laugh.

"It would only be nathral if she did, such a fine, responsible-looking gintleman like him