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HILDA; OR, THE MERCHANT'S SECRET.

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CHAPTER XXIV.—Continued

"He is unsuspecting and has a generous nature, that much, at least, can be said in his favour. But, Eveleen, Dudley cannot be kept a prisoner."

"Why not? there's nothing aiser, sorra one will ever know anything about it."

"But my conscience, my sense of right—of justice, will not allow me to consent to this."

"The more fool you, Miss Hilda!" Eveleen said with considerable irritation. "Do you know what he said to-day? that he'd go and denounce you to the mather, and Sir Gervase, and Lady Milcent, and all of them."

Hilda winced at this information. The old woman's quick eye saw the change in her countenance.

"Yest! by the blessed saints, he did say that, Miss Hilda. And shure it was thrying to stop him from going straight to the Kurnel that I promised to get him a meeting wid yourself. I tried to coax him to lave you with your own people, and go about his business."

"And what did he say to that," Hilda asked very anxiously.

"He said he must see you first, but I'm afared he'll never do it unless he's obliged, he is so fond of you intirely, the misfortunate man!"

There was a long silence. Hilda leaning back in her chair, sat thoughtfully looking into the fire, the red glare from which fell brightly on her elegant figure, revealing the agitated workings of her beautiful features as she pictured to herself the scene when Dudley would reveal to Colonel Godfrey their marriage, and she must be confronted with him to deny or acknowledge it. How could she bear the triumph of Lady Milcent at such an *expose*? and Sir Gervase himself! how could she bear that he should be made acquainted with the astounding fact that the low-born skipper he had saved from a watery grave was the husband of the woman he loved?

Then, also, came the painful thought of her grand-father's distress at such a humiliating discovery, his sorrow, his regret, and, it might be, anger. Oh it was a severe trial this, a fierce temptation, which the nurse placed in the way of her young mistress. For more than an hour the wretched girl sat silent and motionless, battling with the subtle temptation, and struggling to subdue the evil desires of her own heart.

Silently and very anxiously did the keen eye of Eveleen watch her expressive face, in which she could read the passing thoughts.

"She'll consent, no doubt," she mentally observed, "it would be the height of folly to let him out now, and he so nately caught."

The conflict between good and evil in the soul of Hilda ended at length, and principle triumphed. Conscience made its voice heard above the tumult of emotion, rejecting the idea of keeping Dudley a prisoner, and trampling on the base suggestion.

No! he must be set free, let the consequences be what they might; even with the dread of all which her fancy so vividly pictured before her eyes, Hilda came to this determination. She would herself open his prison door and grant him the interview he desired.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE MIDNIGHT INTERVIEW.

Rising suddenly with a noble resolution to do right, Hilda electrified Eveleen by demanding the key of Dudley's prison.

"It's not going to let him out, ye are," and the old woman rose from her seat in sudden alarm.

"Certainly, I am going to release him."

"Ochone! and he'll go to the mather in spite of all you can say."

"He must do as he likes about that." There was deep sorrow in the tremulous voice, but a look of calm determination about the beautiful mouth.

"Arrah, Miss Hilda, agra, have you lost your senses?"

"No, I am perfectly sane; the unhappy man whose misfortune it is to be my husband, must be set at liberty at all hazards."

"Wait till the morning, then," and the nurse's countenance betrayed the anger and disappointment she keenly felt.

"Why wait till the morning?"

"Bekase, don't you know it's afther twelve o'clock, and the ghosts is all about. Bedad!

meself wouldnt go up stairs now, to be made Queen of Injy."

"I am not afraid. Give me the key, Eveleen." The voice expressed quiet command.

"Well, there it is, if you must have yere own way! and mind my words, you'll repint it yet, Miss Hilda; but you'll never be able to unlock that door wid your weeny hands."

"You will come with me, nurse."

"Shure I would, only for the ghosts, avourneen."

"Oh never mind the ghosts; they won't disturb us; here, take the key and lead the way."

"Wait till I get a lantern to put this candle in, the wind might blow it out on us, and then what would we do if we were left in the dark up stairs? Bedad, I'd die with the fright meself. Well now, that's too bad! the sorra lantern here at all at all," Eveleen continued, as she turned away in irritation from the old-fashioned cup-board, in which she kept her few belongings. "It's Mike that took it, no doubt, and shure I wouldn't mind if he only had the manners to put it back again. Now, I'll have to go all the way to the kitchen, for it's there he left it, I'll engage."

"Why give yourself so much trouble? a candle will do to light us up stairs. We do not require a lantern."

"Didn't I tell ye the wind would put out the candle in no time? Shure it comes sweep- ing in through them old broken windows up there."

"Well, if you must get a lantern, shall I accompany you to the kitchen? perhaps you are afraid to go alone?"

"Sorra bit afared!" answered the nurse, promptly; "bekase nara ghost ever ventures into that part of the house; they keep up stairs, intirely; that's the old ancient part, where the family lived in times gone by."

During Eveleen's absence, Hilda allowed her thoughts to dwell upon the approaching interview and tried to nerve herself for an event so painful. She felt an indescribable reluctance to meet her husband again—the man she had forsaken—whose happiness she had destroyed. What good could come of this meeting, she did not see; it could not heal the wound her desertion had made. All that he could say would never induce her to live with him; her mind was fully made up about that. Feeling such an intense aversion to him, she thought she was justified in living separated, provided she remained unmarried. If by leaving him she had rendered him unhappy, her life too was miserable. Had she not also suffered? She was so lost in this painful reverie that she did not notice the return of Eveleen with the lantern. The nurse stood silently regarding her, knowing intuitively what was passing in her mind, and hoping that in her reluctance to meet Dudley she might depute her to set him at liberty, which act of folly she vowed she never would commit, for the best thing they could do was to leave him where he was, she thought. Starting at length as from a dream, Hilda's eye fell on the old woman, as she stood patiently waiting, the light from the lantern shining on her withered old face, revealing its cunning anxious expression.

"Are you ready now, Eveleen? You have recovered the lantern, I see. Did any of the servants see you?"

"Och no; they're all in bed long ago, bekase it is Sunday night: the mather allows no diversion on Sundays. It used not to be so in my young days; it's many a good dinner we used to have, and all kinds of merrymaking afther mass. But the world is getting mighty good intirely in these days. Even the priest, Father Duffy himself, won't let the boys play at ball or hurling. Bedad, he followed Mike last Sunday with a horsewhip to give him a good bating for playing at football, instead of being at chapel, and Mike, the craythur, hid under my own bed in the corner there."

Hilda, who had listened impatiently to these remarks, now moved towards the door.

"Och, Miss Hilda, is it going in ainst ye are?" asked Eveleen much disappointed. "Och, my grief to think you won't listen to reason. Och, darlint, take till the morning to think about it. Shure you're doing it all in too great a hurry. Ye'll be sorry for it agin."

"No, nurse," said Hilda with solemn sadness; "the path of duty is straight before me. I cannot turn aside, let the consequences be what they may. Come, shew me the apartment where you imprisoned Dudley."

"The Blessed Queen of Heaven defend us from all harm!" exclaimed Eveleen, devoutly crossing herself as she followed her young mistress into the hall and reluctantly ascended the stairs.

The sound of approaching footsteps, distinctly heard in the silence of the night, broke startlingly on the ear of Dudley, and thrilled his heart with sudden hope. "It must be Hilda come herself to set him free!" With eager gaze he watched the door of his prison-chamber as the key was applied to the lock. It opened slowly, and with a suppressed cry of delight he recognized Hilda, who, desiring Eveleen to wait outside, advanced alone into the room. It cost her an effort to do this, to stand face to face with the man she knew she had wronged, the man who was her husband, although she had ignored her duty and boldly

set aside the claim he possessed to her obedience. All this came now forcibly to her mind, still her resolution never to live with him remained unshaken, her repugnance to the man was unconquerable, nothing could subdue that. Glancing furtively at Dudley, as she slowly approached, his look of passionate tenderness, mingled with mournful reproach, affected her deeply, in spite of herself.

"I regret exceedingly what has occurred. I knew nothing of it until within the last hour. I am come to set you free," she said, speaking in a hurried, deprecatory manner.

"I knew it was unknown to you. I knew you would never allow it." His tones were low and trembling. In the presence of Hilda all his old nervous timidity of manner returned, his great love for her, which nothing seemed capable of crushing, deprived him of self-possession. He struggled hard for composure, but in vain.

"Thank you for doing me the justice to think that, I do not deserve it from you."

"I never can think ill of you, in spite of all that is past," he went on to say eagerly. "Your leaving me, though it seemed cruel at first—and oh it well nigh broke my heart!—still I could not think ill of you. I never ceased to love you through it all, and now, now, when I understand how it was and why you did it, I cannot blame you. It was natural you should prefer your grand relations to the like of me. I am so different from them and from you in every respect. It was only to-day I heard all about it. It was only to-day I learned to look upon it all as I should. I blame myself now in accepting at the first the hand so unwillingly bestowed. I might know no good would come of it. No money can buy love. And the love I felt for you, aye, and still feel! is too great, such as no man ought to feel for any woman, such as is due to God alone," he added reverently.

"I am not worthy of such love," said Hilda humbly. "I am very grateful to you for it. I wish I could return it, but —" she hesitated. This unexpected gentleness and kindness on the part of Dudley touched her deeply, and she felt unwilling even by a word to wound his feelings. "You cannot return it," he broke in sadly; "I know that now. Once I did hope foolishly, madly hope, that my great love would win back some little portion in return, but that hope soon failed. And when I returned to Canada and found you gone, and the money at the bank not drawn since your mother's death, it did not surprise me, although it broke my heart."

His voice was very sad, and his plain features quivered with his deep emotion.

"Hilda!" he said suddenly after a moment's pause, "would you shun me, shrink from me as you do, if I was educated—refined I think they call it—like your relations—like Sir Gervase Montague?"

The introduction of the Baronet's name betrayed the jealousy rankling in the heart of the unhappy husband. "No," said Hilda frankly, and with pitying kindness in her tones. Dudley's great unselfish devotion to her in spite of the past was making itself felt, was finding its way to her heart, and touching its finest chords of pity and gratitude.

A sudden joy flashed over his agitated face.

"Thank you for that word of comfort. And now I suppose I had better be going. You are no doubt anxious to get rid of me," he added, his voice betraying the emotion this painful thought caused him.

Hilda did certainly wish this trying interview at an end, but she did not say so; she would not wound the feelings of the unfortunate man whose generous forbearance had stirred within her a deep fount of gratitude. Would Sir Gervase Montague himself, with all his elegance and refinement, have acted so unselfish and noble a part as this poor despised unpollished Dudley?

Until now Hilda had really felt no sorrow or regret for the misery she had caused her husband; her sorrow had been altogether selfish sorrow; her aversion to him had prevented her feeling that compassion for him which he really deserved. Now his character was standing out in such a noble light that this repugnance was softened, and she could commiserate his suffering. How intensely did she regret having ever accepted his hand, now not only on her own account, but on his! for now she realized the intensity of his devotion, and the anguish consequent on her desertion which he had endured. But these feelings of sorrow and compassion and regret, of what avail were they now? Love on her part was still wanting, and nothing but that could bridge the gulf that divided them.

Though Dudley spoke of going, he still lingered; it seemed to cost him a death-pang to tear himself away now, when he had at last found her, was again in her beloved presence, near her, speaking to her.

At this moment the door of the apartment was slowly opened, and Eveleen's head thrust in.

"Arrah, Miss Hilda, are you going to stay here all night? The life is frightened out of me wid them ghosts. I hear them thrampoos- ing all about."

"It is only the rats behind the wainscot, Eveleen. Wait a few minutes, I am coming presently."

"What a queer whim it was of the old woman's to shut me up here!" Dudley observed as the nurse's head was reluctantly withdrawn. "I suppose she was afraid I would do what I threatened when I met her in the glen to-day."

"Yes, she dreaded an *expose*; she feared that you would publish our marriage," Hilda added as she remembered her husband did not understand French.

"And did you dread it, Hilda?"

"Yes," she answered frankly.

"And still you set me free! Ah! you little know me. At first, in the madness I felt at hearing you were going to marry the Baronet, I thought of doing it. Jealousy maddened me. I thought better of it afterwards when the old woman told me it was not true. You are not going to marry him, Hilda."

"No. How could I marry him and you living?"

There was, or Dudley fancied there was, regret in her voice as Hilda made this remark.

"And yet you love him?"

There was no answer to this. She could not deny that she did love Sir Gervase, and she would not pain her husband's feelings by answering in the affirmative. Her silence and the expression of her face convinced Dudley his suspicion was well founded. His countenance changed; suddenly again the wild storm of jealousy swept over him, flushing his face one moment with the hot blood of passionate emotion, then leaving it ghastly in its extreme pallor.

"You do love him! you cannot deny it!" he cried wildly. "Oh, Heaven! and I owe my life to that man who has robbed me of your affections! Better that I had perished in the waves than that he had done me such a service!"

"He could not rob you of what you never possessed!" broke haughtily from Hilda.

There was much of the old scorn in her tones. She regretted the cutting words as they escaped, but the sudden change in her voice seemed instantly to calm Dudley.

"You are right! what I never possessed, too true! too true!" he said, mournfully. "Forgive and pity me. That thought maddened me. But it is time to put an end to this. All the talking in the world won't make things different now. To-morrow I shall be far enough away. I will never trouble you again. May you be happy. I wish I was dead, and then," he added, bitterly, "you would be happy indeed. But that time may not be far off. Life to a sailor is uncertain. Some day you will hear of my being again wrecked, and then there will be no Sir Gervase Montague to save my worthless life."

Anxious to terminate this very painful interview, Hilda now moved towards the door. Dudley followed her in silence. Eveleen led the way down stairs, with alacrity, glad to see him depart so quietly. In the hall below, Hilda stopped to bid him farewell, and off red him her hand. He took it eagerly, holding it in a strong passionate grasp for some moments while he regarded her with a look of indescribable fondness and sorrow.

"Forgive me!" faltered Hilda, her eyes filling with tears, "and believe me that I shall always feel deeply grateful for your kind and generous conduct towards me."

"Think of me sometimes! and, oh, remember, if you ever should want a friend—if you ever should be in distress—all I possess is at your service." The words were spoken in the husky voice of strong emotion. Kissing Hilda's hand passionately, Dudley then turned suddenly away to hide the burst of anguish which would not be subdued. A moment afterwards and he had passed from her loved presence out into the darkness of the night.

CHAPTER XXVI.

A DISCLOSURE.

LADY MILCENT GODFREY did not remain long at Innismoyne after the celebration of Cecil's birth-day. Lord Ashleigh and Lord Percy Dashford left in company with her and Miss Clifton. Sir Gervase Montague alone remained, lingering near Hilda, unwilling to return to Canada now, when it was arranged that she should reside at Innismoyne.

Since the night of Hilda's interview with Dudley, her manner towards the Baronet had grown strangely reserved. She avoided being alone with him—avoided giving him opportunities to pour into her ear the protestations of his love. A change had come over Hilda. The remembrance of the absent Dudley was often present with her now. The unselfish part he had acted had made a favourable impression. The voice of conscience was no longer silenced. It had been sounding in her ear since the Sunday she had heard that sermon on the life of self-sacrifice which religion required, from the lips of the Rev. Mr. Tyndall. Then she had determined to renounce the happiness which the possession of the Baronet's love afforded her—that was the sacrifice required from her—that painful conviction fastened itself upon her mind; but hitherto the rebellious will refused compliance with the demands of conscience. Now, however, the remembrance of Dudley's generous