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HILDA; OR, THE MERCHANT'S SECRET.

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CHAPTER VI.

THE place of residence chosen by Mrs. Tremayne on leaving Quebec, was a cottage on the shore of Lake Ontario, near Kingston. It stood in a verdant nook, sheltered from those gales which often sweep over that magnificent sheet of water, by a wooded headland, and separated from the public road by stately poplars. Stretching down to the lake was a prettily-laid-out garden with a terraced walk at the end, overlooking the water which laved the base of the garden wall. At one end of this terrace was an arbour trellised with flowering vines, and here Hilda spent part of each day admiring the scenery around and watching the various crafts passing upon the lake. Mrs. Tremayne's health was very much improved. Change of air, change of scene, and change of circumstances had contributed to effect this.

At the request of Hilda, her marriage was concealed, and she was known as Miss Tremayne, her mother reluctantly complying with this caprice. Whenever the mother and daughter appeared in public the rare beauty of the one and the elegant appearance of both attracted considerable attention and excited some curiosity in the minds of the gossiping public—a curiosity, however, which was not gratified, for no information could be obtained about these strangers who had come to reside for the summer at Ontario Cottage, on the Lake shore.

July had come! July with its balmy breezes laden with rich fragrance from countless flowers; its warm sunshine, its azure skies floating with such fantastic grace through the clear ether! and now the daily papers announced a horticultural exhibition in the Town Hall.

Hilda, who loved everything beautiful in art or nature, loved flowers; therefore, Hilda, accompanied by Mrs. Tremayne, went to the Floral Show. It was the first time she had seen such an exhibition—previously her life had been as retired as if she had been living in a wilderness—and the scene, as she entered the Hall, was as beautiful to her as it was novel. There was a splendid display of flowers, among which were some rare exotics. A military band was in attendance,—and while the eye dwelt with delight on the exquisite diversity in the shades of green and the brilliant variety of colour displayed in the flowers, the ear drank in the touching cadence of some Scotch or Irish melody or the spirit-stirring notes of a fashionable galop or quadrille.

After they had been sometime in the Hall, Mrs. Tremayne was taken suddenly ill, affected by the heat and rich perfume of the flowers. She would have fainted were it not for the timely assistance of an officer who found her a seat near an open window. This gentleman Hilda had observed in the Park the preceding day viewing her with evident admiration as she and her mother strolled about listening to the band of the —th regiment which was playing for the amusement of the public. His figure was tall and noble-looking, his face fine—the features regular, and the expression of the dark grey eye peculiarly pleasing. Since the preceding day his image had haunted Hilda, and it was with a feeling of pleasure she saw him among the crowd as she entered the Hall. A sudden interest had flashed into his face as he recognised her, and she knew that his eye followed her as she moved about admiring the flowers.

The very consciousness of this gentleman's admiration added to the beauty of Hilda, for the delicate colour on her rounded cheek deepened, and the dark eyes flashed with pleasing excitement. She felt the power of her beauty, and womanlike she exulted in the thought. Certainly, this day Hilda looked singularly well. Her coquettish-looking hat with its ostrich plume suited the oval face, showing it to advantage through the small veil of delicate texture. Her dress—a mauve muslin, its ample folds falling gracefully around her tall figure which her mantle of black lace did not hide. What a contrast did she present in this stylish attire to the shabbily-dressed daily governess introduced to the reader in the streets of Quebec, but at what a price had this change of costume been effected! would it compensate for the sacrifice of self?

Mrs. Tremayne who, in her long absence from society, had not lost the polished manner she had acquired in her youth, courteously thanked the stranger and addressed to him some common-place remarks, as he lingered near, evidently wishing to be of more use. Feeling too ill to remain longer at the exhibition she soon rose to return home, and grate-

fully accepted the stranger's offered arm on leaving the Hall. On reaching the street he called a cab and handed the ladies into it. How gracefully he lifted his hat as they drove off! and what glossy masses of brown hair Hilda observed shading his brow!

During their drive home Mrs. Tremayne never ceased praising their new acquaintance. It was the first time in many years that she had had any intercourse with a person belonging to the circle in which she had once been accustomed to move, and the associations called forth were full of mingled pain and pleasure.

On alighting from the cab on reaching the cottage, Hilda perceived a gentleman on horseback, riding leisurely along the road they had come. She could not be mistaken in the elegant appearance of that horseman—the stranger had followed them home. How flattering was the interest thus shown? Through the rest of that day the handsome officer filled her thoughts; his fine eyes flashed their admiration upon her, his rich voice sounded in her ear.

Had Hilda really forgotten her marriage, that she could allow her thoughts to dwell on the image of another! Far away on the trackless deep, was one whose fond heart turned yearningly to her, who counted the weary days of their separation. Whatever she might think on the subject, this man, such as he was—and oh how he did suffer in her estimation contrasted with this aristocratic-looking acquaintance!—claimed her affection. To him she had pledged her vows. Did not conscience whisper this unpleasant truth? Alas, yes! but its warnings were speedily hushed, its stern monitions disregarded.

The next day threatened rain, but though the atmosphere was cloudy, evening came and no rain had yet fallen. The air was excessively sultry, and taking her crochet-work, Hilda seated herself in the arbour, hoping to enjoy a cool breeze from the Lake. But not a breeze rippled its blue surface, nor stirred the foliage of the graceful elm shading the terrace. All nature wore that portentous calm which in summer often precedes a thunder-storm. The hour of sunset came and the departing luminary breaking through the heavy drapery of clouds which had veiled it during the day, cast a sudden flood of golden light upon the scene. The various crafts upon the lake, its picturesque islands, its points of land jutting out far into the blue waters, the spires of the neighbouring city—all were bathed in sudden sunshine.

It was at this moment that a tiny boat, propelled by a single rower, caught Hilda's wandering eye as it moved quietly over the sunlit water. The gentleman in the boat bending so gracefully to the oars, could not be mistaken. It was the stranger. There he was again in the vicinity of the cottage—vanity suggested—with the hope of seeing her. Day after day had she sat in that arbour, watching the boats upon the lake, but never until this evening had she observed him among the passers-by. It was very natural for the young beauty to imagine herself his magnet of attraction, vanity being the imputed characteristic of woman, although the sterner sex are by no means exempt from this so-called feminine weakness.

Mrs. Tremayne, who was reclining on a couch by an open window reading a popular novel, seeing the sudden radiance gleam on the page, looked out and, attracted by the beauty of the scene, joined her daughter in the garden.

"What a glorious sunset!" she exclaimed. "How the golden rays light up every object! It is such a sudden contrast to the previous gloom."

"Look, Hilda! really there is our new acquaintance in that skiff just now crossing the wake of the Toronto steamer! See, he is looking in this direction, resting on his oar, as the tiny boat rises on the swell of the steamer. How dangerous, too! He might be upset!"

"Even if he were, there is no danger," observed Hilda quietly; "he could soon be rescued from the shore."

"Does he not look handsome?" continued Mrs. Tremayne. "He has taken off his hat and is fanning himself. It must be warm work rowing this sultry evening. Now, we have caught his eye; how gracefully he returns my bow!"

A few minutes afterwards, and the gorgeous sunset began to fade from the scene. As suddenly as it had come, the golden light departed. The last gleam had scarcely vanished, when the dark clouds, partially dispersed, again rapidly overspread the sky, and some heavy drops of rain began to fall.

"The storm so long threatening is about to break at last!" Mrs. Tremayne observed, as a vivid flash of lightning lit up the gathering gloom. "How unfortunate! The officer will be overtaken by the rain! Do you not think, Hilda, I had better offer him the shelter of our roof till the storm passes?"

"But, mamma, wouldn't it seem odd? we know so little of him."

"Hospitality is always graceful. Think of his kind attention yesterday. I cannot from any ridiculous notions of propriety let him be drenched by the rain; lightning, too, is so dangerous on the water."

As she spoke, Mrs. Tremayne waved her handkerchief to attract the officer's attention. He was not long in observing it. Indeed he had been furtively watching that garden and the fair girl sitting in the arbour for the last half-hour. A few strokes of the oar brought him beneath the terraced walk where Mrs. Tremayne stood.

"I shall be glad to offer you shelter till the storm is over," she courteously remarked.

A flush of pleasure coloured the young man's face at this invitation. Giving his boat in charge to a lounge on the shore, he joined the ladies in the cottage just in time to escape the heavy rain, which now began to fall in torrents.

Mrs. Tremayne was an Irish lady possessing that frank courteousness which soon makes a stranger feel at home, and Major Montague—so the stranger introduced himself—was a man of the world, entirely at his ease in any society. The evening passed pleasantly in that little drawing-room, the shutters and drapery of the window excluding the glare of the lightning, while the rattling of the thunder and the noise of the rain passed unheeded by the trio thus brought unexpectedly together, and determined to enjoy the passing hour.

For some time Hilda took no part in the conversation, for, unaccustomed to society, she felt embarrassed in the presence of the stranger, who she intuitively knew was regarding her with no small degree of interest and admiration. Very busy she seemed with her crochet-work, her slender white fingers moving nervously, endeavouring to look unconscious that the Major's eye rested admiringly on her.

And faultlessly beautiful did she appear to that critical eye, as she sat at that little work-table—the glossy raven hair brushed back from the fair arched brow, the dark eyes veiled by the pure white lids whose silken fringes shadowed, the polished cheek glowing with the carmine of excitement.

Gradually Hilda joined in the conversation, timidly at first, but gaining more confidence as she became accustomed to the sound of her own voice. Major Montague listened attentively when she spoke. He perceived by her observations that she was well versed in the light literature of the day—a style of reading, by the way, not calculated to form her character according to an exalted standard, or impart to her mind a high moral tone.

Two or three hours passed, almost imperceptibly to Hilda and Mrs. Tremayne, so great was the pleasure they experienced, conversing with one educated and refined. The storm had passed, the rain had ceased, and still the officer lingered in that pleasant room, unwilling to resign the pleasure he felt in the society of his new acquaintances. The French clock on the mantle-piece striking eleven made him at last take his leave, but not before he had asked permission to continue his visits at the cottage. This request Mrs. Tremayne granted, notwithstanding some prudent suggestions which presented themselves to her mind, as the thought flashed through it—what influence would this intercourse, with one so fascinating, have on the wife of the absent Dudley?

On his way home Major Montague's thoughts were filled with Mrs. Tremayne and her beautiful daughter. There was a mystery about them which, like all mysteries, heightened the interest they inspired. Ladies they evidently were, he could not doubt that, but anything more than their names he had not been able to learn. There was a reticence shown about their affairs which made him suspect there was something to be concealed. He knew they had not been long resident at the cottage, but where they had lived previously he could not discover. Time might throw some light upon the subject, and in the meantime Major Montague determined to become a frequent visitor at Mrs. Tremayne's, and cultivate this agreeable acquaintance.

CHAPTER VII.

A SUDDEN DEPARTURE.

For the next four weeks, Major Montague continued to pay almost daily visits at Ontario Cottage. His pretexts for calling were various. Sometimes it was a piece of new music he wished Hilda to play for him, or a fashionable song which no one could sing so divinely as Miss Tremayne. Again it was the latest novel or the last number of some popular magazine which he thought might afford Mrs. Tremayne amusement. His visits were generally made in the evening; he came in his boat, and very frequently induced Mrs. Tremayne and her daughter to accompany him to some of the islands so picturesquely scattered between Kingston and the American shore, seen to such advantage in the sunset-hour or the calm moonlight summer night.

This was a period of intense enjoyment to Hilda. Suddenly she woke up to a blissful existence—entered upon a flowery pathway flooded with sunshine. Tasting now, for the first time, the cup of earthly happiness such as she had dreamed of, or read about in books, carefully did she exclude from her mind the one maddening thought which had the power to overwhelm her with despair. The recollection of her marriage was sufficient

to do this; therefore every thought of it, or of her previous miserable life, was instantly crushed; and Hilda, with the recklessness of youth, determined to enjoy the present, forgetful of the past, and hopeful for the future—yes, hopeful, trusting to the treacherous deep and the wild tempest's resistless wrath.

Even to Mrs. Tremayne this intercourse with Major Montague was a source of much gratification. It brought her back to the days of her youth, and there were times when she seemed to forget the miserable years which bridged that period with the present. Occasionally an anxious thought of the possible effect this delightful companionship might have upon Hilda shadowed her own enjoyment. The contrast, which could not escape the eye of the young wife, between her husband and the handsome officer could not fail of being prejudicial to the absent Dudley.

Was not Mrs. Tremayne guilty of great imprudence in allowing Major Montague's frequent visits. Conscience winced at this accusation, but Mrs. Tremayne was not one accustomed to keep a strict account with the inward monitor, the suggestion was disregarded, and the weak-minded and too-indulgent mother, unwilling to interrupt her daughter's happiness, allowed the evil to continue. An unexpected event at length effected what Mrs. Tremayne's judgment approved, but which her weak will refused to accomplish.

One evening when Mrs. and Miss Tremayne were waiting the arrival of their military acquaintance—who had made an appointment to escort them to a concert—they received a note informing them that Major Montague was obliged to leave Kingston immediately. That day's mail had brought him the sad intelligence of his father's death, in consequence of which he found it necessary to return to England.

The Major expressed much regret at not being able to bid the ladies adieu, but unless he left Kingston that evening by the Cape Vincent boat, he would be too late for the English steamship, which was to leave New York the next day.

"It was as well he did not come," Mrs. Tremayne observed as she furtively watched the change in her daughter's face at this unexpected disappointment.

Hilda looked inquiringly at her mother, who observed, with regret, that the dark eyes turned towards her were dimmed with unshed tears.

"I do not think I could have gone to the concert. I do not feel well; I must have caught cold on the water last night when we were overtaken by that sudden shower."

"Do you think he will be long absent from Canada?" Hilda asked, without taking any notice of her mother's observation about her health. It seemed to have escaped her notice so deep did the one thought of Major Montague's absence fill her mind.

"We have most probably seen our last of him," was Mrs. Tremayne's curt reply.

"Why do you think so?"

"Because Major Montague will probably leave the army, now that his father is dead. You remember his telling us one day he was an only son, he also spoke of a mother and sister living on the family estate in Devonshire. Indeed, Hilda, I think our chances of enjoying his pleasant society again are few. And it is better it should be so. Even if he were to return to Kingston before we leave, I would not again permit his visits. Henceforth a gulf must divide us."

"Must!" repeated Hilda, with an emphasis on the word.

"Yes, darling, must. This delightful little episode in our monotonous existence must end here. And, for my part, I think it is as well that this acquaintance with Major Montague should end now before any unpleasant dénouement had taken place. I mean, before circumstances made it necessary to inform him of your marriage. It was a foolish whim of yours, Hilda, wishing to conceal it."

"I only wish I could always hide it! yes, even forget it! never think of it again!" exclaimed Hilda vehemently. "Why are you always reminding me of that miserable marriage?" she added, almost fiercely.

"Now, Hilda, you are unjust," remarked Mrs. Tremayne in grieved tones.

"You know that from a weak compliance with your wishes I have scarcely even mentioned Dudley's name since he left Canada. I fear I have been very culpable in humouring your whims, and," she added after a moment's hesitation, "in countenancing your intimacy with Major Montague."

"Why reproach yourself with that, dear mama? It has been a source of much enjoyment to us both, has it not?"

Hilda spoke with assumed calmness, and there was unwonted tenderness in her voice. Her love for her mother made her always sorry for any little out-break of temper displayed towards her, besides she was unwilling that she should be made unhappy by thinking any evil consequences had arisen from her weak indulgence.

"I will not deny that it has, dear. The last few weeks have been spent very pleasantly. I only fear now when the Major's visits have ceased, you will miss his society exceedingly."

"And so I shall." Hilda spoke very quietly,