

BENEATH THE WAVE.

A NOVEL

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CHAPTER XXX.

A HESITATING ANSWER.

Poor little Ned continued very, very ill. Some days there seemed to be reasons for hope, and some days hope seemed quite to pass away. Through all this dreary time Hayward acted as Hilda's faithful friend. He came daily, and brought whatever luxuries he thought the sick child could take, and he asked his employer, Newcome, to advance fifty pounds of his salary, as he wished to assist a sick friend. Newcome opened his sharp little brown eyes to their widest extent upon this request being made to him.

"Why, ye don't mean to say," he said, "that you are such a—?" (he was going to say "fool," but stopped himself when he remembered Sir George Hamilton) "that you're such a soft one as that? To borrow money to help a friend?"

Hayward laughed.

"Yes, I am such a fool," he said, "so will you oblige me?"

Newcome made no objection to do this. He fancied some day or other, through Sir George's agency, that Hayward would become a great man, and he was anxious, therefore, to give him no offence. He also was undoubtedly pleased at the idea of the thrashing that his nephew, Mr. Joe, had received from Hayward's hands. He had many a secret grudge to repay this objectionable young man. He had even condescended to chaff Hayward on the subject, and had asked him if he had been horsewhipping any more young scamps lately.

So Hayward continued on good terms with his employer, and did not absolutely dislike his work. It was not degrading, at all events, for the worst written book he was ever called upon to read did not approach in vulgarity and lowness of thought such men as his uncle and cousin Moxam.

On the second or third day of little Ned's illness, he took Hilda the fifty pounds he had asked Newcome to advance, and placed the notes in her hand with a smile.

The girl burst into tears when she saw them. "No, no, I cannot," she said; "not all these—I might ask Lady Hamilton for a little help—you too are poor."

"Yes," answered Hayward still smiling, "but not too poor to help a friend. We must try to pull little Ned through—and—you don't mind my saying this—but I wish you would not ask Lady Hamilton for anything."

Then Hilda dried her eyes, and held out her hand, which Hayward took.

"God will bless you," she said in a voice broken with emotion. "You have truly helped the fatherless and the poor."

Thus all anxiety about money was over for the present at least, but still little Ned got no better. Sometimes he lay in a stupor, and sometimes he raved and wandered, but it all ended in the same thing. It was a bad case, as the doctor had told Hilda from the first, and gradually Hilda almost ceased to hope.

One evening the end seemed very near. The child lay gasping, panting—struggling as it were with death. Hilda stood in tearless agony by the bed, holding up the little sufferer, and trying vainly to relieve him.

It was a pitious sight. By and by Hayward came quietly into the room, and stood also by the bed. He too thought the end was drawing near. Suddenly he went up to Hilda, and whispered:

"Hilda," he said, "would you like to see Jervis?" And he coloured like a girl when he asked the question.

Yet he felt that this young man might bring them some comfort. The very presence of his serene and perfect faith, which left all things so confidently in the hands of God, might, he thought, console Hilda in this trying hour, and that he asked if he might bring his friend.

"Oh, yes," said Hilda, eagerly, "yes."

Anything—if they could—but do anything! Mrs. Bargeat, their landlady, had shaken her head and prophesied with the freedom of her class during the evening "that it was no good trying anything now." But it is hard, very hard to believe that we can do no more. So Hayward went for Horace Jervis, and half an hour later the young curate entered the room.

"He had a face like a benediction." Unconsciously, Hilda looked up for hope and comfort in the serene grey eyes that were bent so kindly upon her. And he had some to give. He had stood by sick-beds and death-beds so often, that he was familiar with the needs alike of the sorrowing and the dying. He could tell of the peace which the world giveth not, and cheer the startled summoned soul, with words of hope and pardon.

He knelt down by little Ned's bedside and prayed, but the child heeded him not. The fluttering spirit was dulled by the mysterious link that bound it to the stricken-fevered frame. And yet Hilda felt thankful that the curate had come.

"Will you come again?" she said, with

streaming eyes, before he left, and in his gentle, kindly way, Mr. Jervis promised to do so.

"But do not be afraid," he said. "You are not forsaken. God is keeping watch over the child."

How often Hilda thought of these words during the night! God was keeping watch over the child. Whether he lived or died he had still a father in heaven, and somehow this thought seemed to lighten the responsibility that had weighed on the poor girl's heart.

She told something of this to Hayward. "I have blamed myself," she said. "If I had married, little Ned might have been so differently brought up in every way. This is what my sister says. I thought only of myself."

"If you had married?" repeated Hayward, in surprise.

"Yes," answered Hilda, blushing. "I never told you, but Mr. Trevor asked me to be his wife before I left Sanda. This was why he would do nothing more for little Ned. I—I fear I was selfish."

"No," said Hayward, warmly, "you were a good and honest girl. Never marry a man you do not love; if you do you will be false to all that is true and noble in your heart."

Hilda blushed more deeply still at these words, and her head fell. Life seemed so difficult to her, and there were so many things hard to understand. This illness of little Ned's, for one thing. She had been doing her best. She had tried to be honest, and had preferred a life of toil, almost of penury, to taking a false oath, and swearing to love the old man who had asked her to marry him. And yet all this evil had come upon her, and the shadow of a great grief.

This did not lighten as days went on. Little Ned fought with death, and after a weary struggle the grim foe for a time seemed to leave the child, but the marks of that deadly fray remained. The strong, healthy, mischievous, merry little boy was gone. What Hilda had left was a pale, drooping child, almost dead, and with some other painful drags of the dangerous disorder through which he had passed.

He was now a constant care. It took all Hilda's time to attend to his fretful wants, and to soothe and try to amuse the poor little fellow who such a short time ago had been so well and strong. Then grim care came to add to Hilda's troubles. Her late pupils declined to receive her after having scarlet fever in the house, and what was Hilda to do?

Horace Jervis and Hayward were more than good to her. The curate would never allow her to despond. He was greatly interested in her, and almost daily he came to see little Ned. The poor boy was threatened with hip-disease, and Jervis took him to one of the most eminent surgeons in London, and spared no expense in endeavouring to restore his health.

All this threw the curate constantly with Hilda. Hayward had told him of her refusal of Mr. Trevor's offer, and the girl's sweet, unselfish, tender nature, her noble struggles for independence, and her patient endurance of poor little Ned's fretful complainings, when she was doing everything for his benefit, deeply touched, and finally won Horace Jervis' heart.

But he did not at first tell her so. Had he who lived not for earthly things any right to form new and tender ties? Would they bind him to life with too strong a bond, and make death—which he believed to be but the gate of heaven—seem dark to him, if it separated him from the woman he loved? Again and again he argued these questions. But at last the girl's care-burdened life decided him to speak, for one day Hilda with painful hesitation asked him if he would help her to gain some new occupation.

"My pupils have left me," she said. "Miss May, who was here yesterday, told me plainly that she dared not now recommend me, because if a child were to take scarlet fever a year hence, under the circumstance she would be blamed for it. Yet it is absolutely necessary that I should work. Do you think I could be a schoolmistress, and that you could get me into some parish school? I will do anything—I must do something. I might perhaps be a telegraph clerk?"

Then Horace Jervis after a moment's silence spoke.

"Will you be my wife, Hilda?" he said quite quietly. "I will take charge of the boy. Do you think you could learn to like me well enough to marry me?"

Could she learn to like him well enough to marry him? What made Hilda start when she heard these words, and a burning blush dye her face? Was it another face that rose before her? A clever, thoughtful face, that she had first seen in the little village church of Sanda-by-the-Sea? Yes, she was thinking of Philip Hayward. Of the man who did not love her, as she had so often told herself sadly enough, but whose image now came between her and another man. She had ordered herself not to love Hayward. He was her friend. She was bound to him by extraordinary bonds of gratitude, but this was all. Not until Horace Jervis said, "Will you be my wife?" did she admit to herself that Philip Hayward was anything more to her than this. Then, when she thought of marrying another man, she knew that she loved Hayward, and that the thought of anyone else bound to her in such close relationship would be hateful to her soul.

But on the other hand there was little Ned; and there was also the generous man, who in this hour of trial had asked her for her love.

"Well," said Jervis gently, almost tenderly,

looking at the girl's changing face, "do you think you could learn to love me?"

"You—you—are very good," faltered Hilda. "How good!" said Jervis. "Sometimes I have thought of late, do you know, Hilda, that it was not 'good,' or even right of me to seek your love. I feared the sweet tie might make life too pleasant to me, and perhaps interfere with what ought to be, and must continue to be, its most absorbing interest. But lately I have taken another view of this, and I pray God that it is a right one. For one thing there is the child to consider, for another, can we not be fellow workers? There are many cases of sin and sorrow where a good woman's voice and presence is more than a man's. If you will be my wife, we might help each other."

It was not a romantic wooing, was it? And yet Jervis' heart was beating with tender emotion, and he loved the girl he was asking to share his work. You see he esteemed this beyond everything. It was his Master's work. If Hilda would come and help him she too would enter that gracious service. It was thus he had argued when he decided to ask her to be his wife. But who knows? Perhaps the frail mortal deceived himself and clothed his own fond yearnings in words of seeming duty and reserve.

"May I think?" hesitated Hilda. "This is so sudden. Let me have time to think."

"Yes, certainly," answered Jervis. "Tell me to-morrow what you think. Be quite open with me, Hilda. Let me be your friend as well as your lover?"

"Yes," said Hilda, and she held out her hand, which the curate pressed, and then after a few more words he took his leave.

It was a momentous question that the poor girl was left to decide. Between a good man's love, a settled home and position in the world, and comforts and tender thought for the sick child in her care, and a vague, shadowy feeling—an unreturned love—for another man. Yet that vain shadow disturbed her. It made her shrink from the thought of what otherwise would have been sweet to her, and tremble at a prospect which might have seemed so fair and smooth.

But she was not left alone to make her decision. During the evening Miss May (who had been very kind in sending little Ned jellies and fruit during his illness) unexpectedly arrived. No sooner, then, did the old lady enter the room than she at once noticed Hilda's agitated and absent manner.

"Oh, my dear!" she said, fixing her sharp brown eyes on the girl's face, "surely no new misfortune has happened to you?"

"No," answered Hilda; and then, eager for a woman's counsel, she told her old schoolmistress of the curate's proposal.

As she finished her story, Miss May jumped up off her seat and kissed her.

"My dear!" she said, "I never was so pleased."

"But, Miss May, I don't know—" faltered Hilda. "I—I don't love Mr. Jervis."

"Then learn to do so, as fast as you can," answered the energetic old lady. "What? you don't mean to say you are hesitating? My dear, are you mad?"

"I hope not," said poor Hilda, trying to smile.

"You would be utterly so, stark mad, in fact," continued Miss May, "if you did not thankfully accept this young man's generous proposal. Why? do you know what you are? A girl without a sixpence. No particular beauty either, though you have an agreeable face; and then you do not forget the unfortunate child that you have the misfortune to have attached to you?"

"No, I don't forget poor little Ned," said Hilda, her eyes filling with tears. "Mr. Jervis mentioned him twice—he said he would take charge of the child."

"Then I can only say he's a man in a hundred, and you should thank God night and day, for having got him!" piously ejaculated Miss May. "My dear, offers of marriage are not plentiful for poor girls who have to work for their bread. I had one, and I may tell you, though I wasn't bad-looking, and was quite agreeable to be married, that I never had another."

"And you think—"

"I think—no, I don't think, I'm sure, that it's your duty gratefully to accept this proposal, and immediately begin to love Mr. Jervis with the greatest fervour. Ah, my dear, a good man to help and protect you through life doesn't fall to everyone's lot! You are a fortunate girl, and if you got to know this young clergyman through little Ned being expected to die, I can only say that it was very obliging of little Ned to appear to be so near his end."

"O Miss May!"

"I am quite in earnest, my dear. Bless me, what a lucky girl you have been! With you by no means remarkable looks, you might have faded and faded, and no man ever looked at you."

This strictly practical view of the case was not without its influence on Hilda. Another strong, practical argument, too, in favour of Jervis was the state of her purse. That "base coin dug from the bowels of the earth," has indeed a wonderful influence on our destinies. It is all very well for those who have never felt the want of it, to talk grandly and largely on the subject. But wait until the pinch of poverty comes, before which you can estimate money at its full value. Hilda had felt this

cold pinch. She had known what it was literally to want the means of existence. She had been forced—oh, cruel necessity!—to borrow; to accept the grudging dole which usually falls from the rich man's hand.

So, when Horace Jervis came for his answer the next day, she accepted him. Then the young curate took her in his arms and kissed her pale cheek.

"My dear, may God bless the new life on which we are about to enter," he said, solemnly. "May it be to His glory and honour."

Hilda trembled, and her heart was greatly troubled when she heard these words.

"I—I—fear I am not good enough for a clergyman's wife," she said, with much hesitation.

"None of us are 'good enough,' Hilda," answered the curate with a smile, "but we must try to make each other better."

"I will try," said Hilda, and she put her hand modestly into her betrothed's. She meant she would try to do her best, not to make Horace Jervis better, but to do her duty in the new life that she had now chosen.

"I wonder what Hayward will think of this?" presently said the curate. "Do you know, Hilda, I once thought that you and he were likely to marry each other, but when I hinted this to Philip he told me that it was not so—that in fact some unfortunate attachment had greatly embittered his life."

"Yes," answered Hilda, with changing colour, "he once cared for the most beautiful woman I ever saw—for Miss Trevor, now Lady Hamilton."

"Poor Hayward!" said Jervis, kindly. "But in time I trust that he will get over it—in time I trust he will find a good and loving wife."

"Yes," said Hilda, and she sighed, and almost immediately afterwards changed the conversation.

But the day did not end until her interest was excited afresh in Hayward. The late evening post brought her a letter from him, the contents of which greatly surprised, and even alarmed her. They were as follows:

"My dear Hilda, excuse my not calling to see you before I leave town this evening, for I have spent such a busy, distressing day that I have not had time to do so. Sir George Hamilton called upon me last evening, and from circumstances which have occurred, urged me to return with him to Massam. Something very painful and tragic has happened there, but I have not time now to write the particulars to you. I write this note so that you may know where I am to be found, and if you want any money or anything else that I can possibly do for you, please let me know, addressing your letter 'Care of Sir G. Hamilton, Massam Park.' I will write you further particulars when I reach Yorkshire, and I remain, dear Hilda,

"Yours, very truly,

"PHILIP HAYWARD."

"P.S.—Tell little Ned, with my love, that if I remain in the country—of which there appears to be a probability—that he must come and stay with me, and that I will get him a pony."

"P.H."

Never before had Hilda received a letter which had so completely puzzled her. Hayward had never even hinted at the possibility that some day he might return to Massam. Then what could have occurred there that was at once tragic and painful? Hilda tried in vain to answer this question, but she felt uneasy and disturbed. Why had Hayward gone back to Massam? Why had he once more approached the fatal beauty that had so nearly destroyed his life?

CHAPTER XXXI.

CLOSE ON LIFE'S TREAD STEALS DEATH.

To answer these questions, and to explain Hayward's letter to Hilda, we must go back two days. Two days, then, before the evening on which she received it—received the letter that caused her such anxiety and pain—the hounds had met at Massam Park. It was a favourable morning, and a great gathering of the gentlemen of the neighbourhood had assembled there. Isabel was now in the zenith of her popularity, and was almost universally considered the most beautiful woman in Yorkshire. Men raved about her charms, and even women as a rule admitted them. But she was a greater favourite with gentlemen than with ladies. This, perhaps, was only natural. The careless, even slightly defiant manner that she often indulged in was more likely to fascinate men than matrons, and there were faint whispers too (not exactly scandals) that she was indiscreet in her friendships, and that Mr. Hamnaway, Sir George's lawyer, was more frequently at the Park than there was any necessity for.

But this did not affect her position. Sir George's great wealth and her own beauty had fully secured this, and Lady Hamilton of Massam was courted and admired wherever she condescended to appear.

The morning on which the hounds met at the Park, she had felt very triumphant. She went out on the terrace after the breakfast was over, and stood there talking to the red-coated men, while some of the favourite hounds also gathered around her. Always gorgeous in her dress and surroundings, she wore this morning a costume of dark green velvet and sable, and as she stood with the sun shining on her golden hair and wonderfully perfect features, she was conscious that every man present was admiring her.

Prominent in the group near her was her old acquaintance, the handsome guardsman, Captain