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A HIDDEN TREASURE.

BY MRS. OLIPHANT.

I DO not think they could have found a better place to hide in if they had searched over all the Continent. To be sure it was a place where travellers go, but not in crowds; neither is it a dangerous class of the community which frequents, or rather which darts down for a day upon Mont Saint Michel, and hurries over the castle, and is off again in hot haste for fear of the tide. I will tell you about Mont Saint Michel presently, but in the meantime it may be better to tell you who it was who was hiding there. It was Mrs. Mildmay, who was once so well known in the match-making world, whose pretty daughters did so well, and made such good marriages—and Nora, the last of that fair flock. Mrs. Mildmay was not the least in the world what is called a manœuvring mother. She had no time to carry her girls about, or exhibit them at public places, or put them up, as people say, in the market. Possibly these horrors were unknown to her, even in conception; but certainly she had not leisure to carry them into practice. The girls were not beautiful, and they had very little money—but they all married at eighteen, with a curious similarity which sometimes occurs in families. Naturally people smiled when Mrs. Mildmay complained, as she sometimes did, of this singular run of luck, and grumbled over the loss of her children. She cried at the weddings: but then it is part of a mother's rôle to cry—and the world in general, and the men without exception, concluded her a hypocrite, and envied her wonderful good fortune and success in getting rid of her encumbrances. One thing, however, which made it appear as if Mrs. Mildmay after all might possibly mean what she said, was the way she behaved about Nora. Nora was the youngest, light and lithe, like a tall lily, with hair of that Titian colour which has lately become so popular, and great eyes, in which the tears lay so near the surface, that the least touch brought them down. She was not lively nor gay, to speak of, except on very rare occasions; but she was tender-hearted, and moved by any appeal to her sympathies which did not come from the legalized authorities. Thus, she was not by any means too angelical to rebel when laws were made that she did not approve of, or when Mrs. Mildmay was struck with the curious whim of having her own way, and not her daughter's, which happened now and then. But let anybody appeal to her from outside, and immediately the big drops would gather in Nora's eyes, and all her tender soul be moved. She was the kind of girl who might fall in love off-hand, without two thoughts about it—and fight and beat half a dozen mothers for her ten minutes' attachment. And she was the last of all the flock, and the poor woman, who had brought them all up to be other people's wives, began to look forward with horror to the prospect of being left all alone. She thought to herself, if she could but save the last—if she could but keep her sweet companion a little longer, until the time when Nora should have "sense," and be able to exercise that impossible suffrage which the fathers and mothers somehow seem to believe in, and

make a good choice. Perhaps, in the depths of her heart, poor Mrs. Mildmay hoped or dreamed that she herself might somewhere light upon the not altogether impossible son-in-law who would be a son to her, and spare her a little of her daughter. Such futile dreams do linger in the corners of the female mind long after it ought to have learned better. Anyhow, Mrs. Mildmay was like the queen whose princess was to be all safe if she could but be shut up in a tower, and kept from all possibility of intercourse with old women spinning, until she had passed her eighteenth birthday. It was not old women, but young men of whom Nora's mother was afraid; but she thought foolishly that she would feel safe if she had only tided over the perilous boundaries of that eighteenth year.

And of course everybody knows how little she went out that last winter; how she kept poor Nora shut up, to her intensest indignation, and such sympathy on the part of her emancipated contemporaries, that schemes of forcible rescue were discussed at innumerable teas, over the five o'clock bread-and-butter. And then Mrs. Mildmay went abroad, the heartless woman; not as other people do, to places where a poor girl could have a little amusement—but to poky places where tourists go, and artists, and antiquaries, and travellers of that description. She was so good to Nora, that the girl would have been in transports of gratitude, had she not been, as she was, an injured woman, kept in the background by a cruel parent. Nora did not make the journey so pleasant as it might have been to her mother. She did not in the least understand the mournful yearning over her last companion which lay deep under Mrs. Mildmay's smile. It was not to be expected that she could understand it—and she was young and wanted pleasure, and to have her day as her sisters had. She was cross many and many a day when the poor mother was trying all that woman could do to please and amuse her, and call back her child's heart. But as for Nora, instead of letting her mother have it, she stood at the door in her youthful wantonness, and held that heart in her hand, like a bird, ready to let it fly she could not tell where. And this was the state of affairs when they came to the quaintest nest that ever fluttering bird was caged in, where Michael the Archangel, on the pinnacles of his chapel, sets one foot on land and one on sea.

If anybody could be safe under such circumstances, surely it must have been there; for there was not a man on the rock except the fishers, and Le Brique the guide, who took care of the travellers on the dangerous sands, and the brisk Curé, and M. le Aumonier. As for the travellers, Mrs. Mildmay felt sure she had nothing to fear. It was a poky place, and they were only poky people who ventured so far—people who wrote books about rural manners and customs, or archæologists, or artists, or devout Catholics, or tourist English—and Nora was in as little danger with such visitors as with M. le Aumonier himself. And the best of it was, that the girl was pleased, and liked the idea of living where never civilized Christian had lived before, and of being cut off from the world twice a day when there were spring-tides, on an inaccessible rock, where an enchanted princess might have lived, surrounded by sands that swallowed people up, and a sea that came upon you without any warning. She liked it perversely as girls do, and poor Mrs. Mildmay was at

ease in her mind, though very far from being at ease in her body. For all the roads are stairs at Mont Saint Michel, and the population not only catch and sell and eat, but breathe fish in all its stages of existence after death. That fine, infinitesimal, all-pervading quintessence of herrings and cockles, which is called air in most fishing towns, was concentrated into a finer and more subtle ichor still on the Archangel's rock; and M. le Aumonier's fauteuil, which he had placed at the service of the ladies, was but a hard arm-chair. Mrs. Mildmay was happy in her mind, but she was very uneasy in her person, and asked herself many a day, as she looked over the vast expanse of sand and irregular lines of sea, and saw the pilgrim processions winding with their crosses over the dangerous paths, or "kilted" into nondescript creatures, neither men nor women, to cross the chance currents that traversed it—whether her safety was worth the trouble. The pilgrims, and the indiscriminate host, all alike kilted; men, women, and children, who went day by day to get cockles and anything else that came in their way; and the stealthy tides that hurried up with a silent spring, like a beast of prey; and the sands that sunk under the traveller's feet, where Le Brique ran to and fro all the long day with his bare Hercules legs, and the bit of ribbon on his breast, that answered for eighteen lives saved; was all that was ever to be seen from the windows; except now and then, indeed, when the monotonous cadence of the chant announced a procession going up to do honour to St. Michael, dressed all in its best, with now and then a magnificent Norman cap, or even by times a scared and weary Bretonne, to give it a little interest; for, to tell the truth, Mrs. Mildmay not being an artist, thought but little of the castle or the chapel half way up to heaven, where the Archangel held airy sway. They were very fine no doubt, but she would not have given the prospect from her own little house at the corner of Park-lane with a peep over the Park, for half a dozen Gothic castles. And no doubt she was right.

But Nora happily was of a different way of thinking. The oddness of everything caught her fancy. She even changed out of her natural style, and took to laughing instead of crying, and grew a finished coquette in a moment, and bewildered Le Brique, and did her best to turn the head of that good Curé. She used to drag her poor mamma, or, when Mrs. Mildmay rebelled, the respectable Briggs, her mamma's maid, up all the horrible stairs to the chapel every time there was a pilgrimage—and that was so often that Briggs's knees gave way at the very thought. And the Curé, when he led the choir, and when it was M. le Aumonier who said mass, looked round and nodded at her, and metaphorically clapped his hands in the middle of the service when Nora's clear, cultivated voice rose up above those of the fisher maidens, and soared away into the dim old vault, in the *Agnus Dei*. The good man had a French horn which he loved, and from which he used to interject a note when the singers went too low; but they did not go too low when Nora was there, and he blew out his accompanying cadence for pure love. It was good to see him bringing in this instrument, carrying it in his arms as if it had been a baby; and it was all the instrument they had at Mont Saint Michel—except to be sure in the Castle chapel, where the pilgrims went,

carrying with them sometimes an odd enough music. All these primitive surroundings had, it appeared, a good effect upon Nora; and Mrs. Mildmay, poor soul, thanked heaven, and breathed a little freer, and put up with the atmosphere of fishes and the want of furniture, and M. le Aumonier's arm-chair.

This was the state of affairs one fair, slumbrous July day, when Mrs. Mildmay was alone in-doors. From her window she could look down on the ramparts and on the vast sands beyond, and the low line of the Norman coast, and Avranches on its hill, shining where it stands, and looking a great deal more agreeable in the distance than it looks on a nearer view, like many other things. Down below was an old bastion, sweet with a fluttering parterre of white pinks, and fanned by the great leaves of M. le Aumonier's favourite fig-tree. The sun was glaring on Avranches in the distance, and on the sea close at hand, and on the odd little groups on the sands, like specks—the cockle-gatherers at their work; and the windows were open, and no smell of fish, though there were so many in it, came from the sea. And a soft sort of drowsy content came over Mrs. Mildmay. Nora was out as usual, no doubt rambling about the castle halls and chapels, or out on the breezy ramparts, making abortive sketches, and enjoying herself. At last she had begun to taste again the child's pleasures—to love the air and the blue sky, and to be happy in her youth and her existence without asking anything else; and a feeling that the eighteenth year might after all be tided over, and the good choice made, and the not impossible son-in-law might yet be found in the future to glad the mother's eye, came into Mrs. Mildmay's heart. This is what she was thinking when she heard some one come in at the door. Doors have no locks in Mont Saint Michel, so that even with the best will in the world, an English lady cannot shut them, but must take her chance like her neighbours. Perhaps it was Nora—perhaps it was M. le Aumonier coming in for a chat. But it was a step slightly hesitating, which lingered and stopped, and then came on. Mrs. Mildmay did not take much notice, for by this time she was used to the place, and she went on with her thoughts, even after the door of her own room was tapped at and opened. "I beg your pardon," said an English voice, "could you tell me—Good heavens!"—and here the intruder stopped short. Mrs. Mildmay turned round from the peaceful Norman landscape and her dreams of peace; she gave a great cry, and started up to her feet, and looked him in the face. In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, all her fair hopes went toppling over like a house of cards. He might well say good heavens! For her part it was all she could do to keep the sudden tears of vexation and disappointment and dismay within her smarting eyes.

"Who would have thought to find you here?" he said, coming in and holding out his hand to her; and she could not refuse to take it. She could not accuse him of coming to look for Nora. She could not call in François and M. le Curé and a few of the villagers, and have him pitched over the ramparts, as she would have liked to do. She had to give him her hand, all trembling, and to say, "How do you do, Sir Harry?" as politeness demanded. And at any moment Nora might come in, who might not have her mother's objections! For he was a bright-eyed, gallant young fellow,

and would have given the Curé and François enough to do, had Mrs. Mildmay's benevolent desire been carried out. He came up to her with such eager cordiality, and such an affectionate interest in her movements, that she could not entertain the soothing idea that possibly it was not *that* he meant. Alas! the poor mother knew all about it. She knew how civil they always were, and how anxious to please. She knew the very smile, and the air of such deep deference, and the profound, disinterested devotion. "Is it possible that you are *staying* here?" he said. "What luck! I have just sent my traps to the inn, for a few days'—hum—fishing, you know; but I did not know what good fortune awaited me!"—The dreadful, deceitful, young hypocrite! And he sat down without being invited, and set a chair for himself opposite the door, where he could see everybody who entered; and Nora might come in any minute! Mrs. Mildmay felt that affairs were critical, and that there was not a moment to be lost.

"I was just going up to the chapel," she said, with outward calm, but all the inward commotion which arises from telling a lie. "I shall be glad to show it you. Come, it will be so good of you to give me your arm up all those stairs."

"What, now?" said Sir Harry; "you can't think how hot it is outside; and the smell of the fish. Of course I shall be delighted; but if I might advise, in the cool of the evening——"

"Oh! we are not in Italy, you know," Mrs. Mildmay said: "I never feel it too hot here, and we go out in hats, and don't make any toilette. The Château is well worth seeing; I am pretty well up in it now, and we are just going away. Come, it will be charming to show you everything," said the unprincipled woman; and with all this string of fibs she led him out, and took his arm as she had said, and climbed the stairs, and pointed out all the views to him. Nora was no doubt on the sands, and so long as she absorbed him in architecture, and kept his eyes turned upwards, no immediate harm could come of it. It was very hot, and the sun blazed down upon all the stony ramparts and all the scorching stairs, and the fish was overwhelming, and the ascent more inhuman than ever. Mrs. Mildmay felt as if she must drop, but still she hurried on. She told him the dates of the building (and made a dreadful mess of it), and the legend, and how it had all come about; and pointed out the chapel, towering, clustering up, a climax to all those buttresses and pinnacles, where the Archangel stood enthroned. Poor soul! she did it as the slave-woman crossed the ice, that her child might not be taken away from her. Sir Harry Preston's good-looking young face was as terrible to her as if he had been a hideous planter who would have whipped Nora and made her pick cotton. Had he not already paid the poor girl attention, and made all sorts of deceitful pretences to gain admission in Park-lane? And thus she toiled on, half-fainting, up to the castle door.

What was the awful spectacle that the mother found awaiting her there? Sir Harry thought it the prettiest sight in the world, but Mrs. Mildmay grasped his arm to support herself when it dawned upon her, and would have fallen if he had not caught her. It was simply Nora, seated under the gloomy portal, just where the portcullis came down, sitting against the gloom, with

the darkness going off into a deep black curve behind her, with her Titian hair blown about her shoulders, her hat off, her soft cheeks glowing, her great eyes opening wide with wonder and—heaven knows what besides. That was what the poor mother's over-caution had brought upon her. He might have gone away, but *she* had insisted on bringing him here. If she did not faint it was only from the fear that he might say something to Nora over her prostrate body. Mrs. Mildmay sat down on the stair beside her daughter, and looked piteously in her face, and made a last trial. How she had the strength for it she never could tell.

"Nora, my love, I am sure you are tired," she said. "Is it not surprising to see Sir Harry here? I am going to show him the chapel; but I am sure you are tired and hot, and want to go home. Go and lie down a little and rest, and never mind waiting for me. We are going away so soon, you know, I should like to see the chapel once more."

All this Mrs. Mildmay accompanied with looks which were much more eloquent than words—looks which said, "You know I dare not speak any plainer. Oh, go home, and don't drive me to despair!" And it was not to be supposed that Nora should like being sent home—though she was not quite prepared, being taken thus all in a moment, to fly in her mother's face.

She sat on the stair and mused, and it all went very quickly through her young head. Naturally she saw the matter from a point of view very different from that of Mrs. Mildmay; but Nora was at the bottom a good girl enough, and she did not want, as we have said, to fly in her mother's face. She had shaken hands with Sir Harry, and when she saw him it had certainly occurred to her that he would be rather a pleasant change from the Curé and Le Brique; and if it should perhaps prove possible to please her mother and not to send away the stranger—just then a happy inspiration came to Nora. She put on her hat, and got up from the stair, and took Mrs. Mildmay's arm.

"Mamma, I think Sir Harry had better look at the chapel by himself," she said, with a freedom which pretty young women of eighteen do not hesitate to take. "François is there, and will tell him all about it. It is a great deal too hot for you to be out, and I am as tired as ever I can be. Good-bye, Sir Harry. You will find that François can tell you everything." It was done with a perfectly natural impertinence, but yet it cost poor Nora something. She had seen just for one moment the pleading of her mother's eyes, and she had been startled by it. Her heart for the moment gave in to the superior force. Sir Harry was a pleasant diversion; but still, if it was so serious as that.—And she turned to the descent, and turned her back upon him, and left him to go sight-seeing, as if it was quite natural for a young man to come two days' journey out of the civilized world, and run the risk of being swallowed up by the sands or the tide, to study architecture at Mont Saint Michel. When Mrs. Mildmay saw it her heart leaped up in her fatigued bosom. She began to be sorry for Sir Harry as soon as she thought Nora did not mind. After all he had a nice young face, and the blank look upon it went to her heart.

"Perhaps we may meet again," said the relenting woman. "Good-bye, Sir Harry. But we are going away almost directly," she said, with renewed panic—and then, divided between cruelty and compunction, went away after her daughter, with knees that trembled, and took Nora's arm. As for Sir Harry, he ascended up under the dark portal, up all those gloomy steps, in far from a cheerful frame of mind. As if he cared for the castle, or François's explanations! And the two ladies continued their way down the scorching stairs. But it was not as if nothing had happened. After Sir Harry was out of sight Nora did not afford one word to her deprecating, guilty mother. Her great eyes grew bigger and bigger, and swam translucent in those two tears which filled them just to overflowing. After all, perhaps, it was not to be wondered at. He was very nice, and had paid her a great deal of attention, and, on the whole, was very different from Le Brique and M. le Curé. And then to think he should have come here in such a romantic, unexpected way. She did not say a word all the way down, and when she got home she had a headache, and took refuge in her own room, and cried. And poor Mrs. Mildmay took her seat again, very gloomy, in M. le Aumonier's arm-chair, and watched the reflection of the sunset burning far away on the church-tower at Avranches, and the cockle-gatherers coming home from the sands, and the slow evening clouds settling down upon the great, monotonous, colourless waste, with its margin of doubtful fields—and felt in her heart, poor woman, that the repose of Mont Saint Michel was at an end.

But it was not to be expected that it should end just in this way if Sir Harry was good for anything; and he was good for a great deal. The poor young man could not sleep all night; that is to say, he slept about twice as long as Mrs. Mildmay did, but that was a different matter; and in the morning he regained his courage. If Mont Saint Michel was a good place to hide in, it was a far better, indeed, a perfectly unexceptionable place to make love in. And, to tell the truth, it ended in that church in Knightsbridge, amid a great flutter of lace and display of jewels. The best of it was, that Sir Harry managed somehow to impress upon Mrs. Mildmay's mind the idea that he was the impossible son-in-law. It was a delusion she had never given in to before, though she had so many daughters married. But it must be allowed there was something touching in the way he gave her his arm up and down those stony stairs, and sought her society, and made love to her. When they left that little rocky refuge, even the mother was reluctant to dismiss the young invader who had made a conquest of her; and the fact was she gave in quite willingly at last, and went down to Sir Harry's place in the country to wait for them when the young people went away upon their wedding tour; though the other girls thought it was not fair. And they had a picture made of Mont Saint Michel, standing all lonely amid its sands, between earth and sea. And the historian of this adventure cannot do better than add as her moral, that the Archangel still stands divinely poised as Raphael made him, on his point of rock, and that there is not a better hiding-place to be found anywhere, if one should happen to have Mrs. Mildmay's fair pretext or any other reasonable cause to seek a refuge a little way out of the civilized world.