

## HILDRED.

(Continued.)

"I cannot say; I have never seen her. Caraven did say that she was an unformed school-girl. It was a queer marriage for our handsome friend."

"Had she a fortune? Did she fall in love with him, or what?"

"Of course she had a fortune—a very large one, I believe—some say two hundred thousand pounds. I know one thing—Caraven was utterly ruined; he had not a shilling to fall back upon; and after his marriage he appeared in full feather. Halby House has been the house of the season; and I am told that Ravensmere in its magnificence is equal to a palace. He must have had a large fortune with the lady."

"I hope that he married her a little from love," said Sir Raoul.

Major Vandeleur looked at him.

"Lord Caraven has been going steadily to the bad for many years past," he remarked. "I do not think that you would recognize him—his character, I mean; he has not carried out the promise of his boyhood."

"He has had great temptations," said the soldier, "and no occupation; in those few words you have the cause of many ruined lives. If what you say be the case, major, I shall hesitate about going to Halby House. I have always made my home with the boy because I loved him; but a wife in the house alters matters. What is she like, this Lady Caraven?"

"I cannot tell you; I have not met her. The only time I heard her discussed was on her wedding day; she was only just eighteen, and people said she looked very unhappy."

"Only eighteen! And when was she married, Vandeleur?"

"Last year, Laureston."

"Then she is only nineteen now; that is very young," said Sir Raoul inquiringly. "I am afraid I should be an interloper. And I should not feel at home. Caraven is very fond of her, I should say. I do not think that I shall go to Halby House."

"You have plenty of money," returned the major, brusquely—"why not buy a place of your own?"

"I would do so—that is, I would have done so long ago, but that I am uncertain about my own life; it has hung upon a thread so long that I have never dreamed of anything for myself."

"I ought to be a judge," said the major; "and I prophesy from your appearance that you will grow better—not worse."

Their conversation was interrupted by the arrival of a note for Sir Raoul.

"It is from Caraven," he said, as he hastily broke the seal.

As he read it, his whole face brightened, a light came into his eyes.

"I knew the boy's heart was in the right place," he remarked. "There could be no kinder letter than that. He will not hear of my remaining here or going elsewhere. I am to go to Halby House at once, where everything is at my service, and his wife joins in begging me to go. The boy is not changed, you see. His heart is good."

And the major, having some little respect for Sir Raoul, forbore to tell him what rumor said about the handsome earl and his heart.

"I shall go," said Sir Raoul—"this has quite decided me. You think I am right—do you not?" he added, seeing a strange smile on the major's face.

"Certainly. I was thinking of the earl, not of you," and long after the two friends had parted Major Vandeleur looked very grave.

"It is like going into a wasp's nest," he said. "Raoul is a noble, simple-hearted soldier. He will have little patience with the earl—perhaps even less with his wife."

No such thought troubled Sir Raoul; to him it seemed quite right and just that his kinsman should extend the hand of welcome, that his wife and himself should beg him to visit them, that their home should be his.

"I may be able to do some good," said Sir Raoul. "Ulric always listened to me."

So he was full of hope as he drove to Halby House.

"What will this young wife be like?" he wondered. "A money-lender's daughter—nothing very noble or brilliant; but Ulric loved her, I suppose. She will be a city *démouelle*. Let us hope, for Ulric's sake, that she is pretty and accomplished."

He caught himself wondering more than once what she would be like, and then he laughed at himself for his pains.

"I have so few relatives," he said, "that the fact of finding a new one is something wonderful."

His worn face flushed with emotion as the carriage stopped at Halby House.

"When a man has but few friends, he knows how to value them," he said to himself. "I know Ulric will be pleased to see me again."

## CHAPTER XX.

The earl was at home expecting Sir Raoul. He was shown into the library, and there in a few moments he was found by his kinsman. They met with outstretched arms and warm words of greeting, but the earl looked sorrowfully into his kinsman's face.

"You have suffered very much, Raoul," he said, quietly.

"Yes, and never thought to see you again. You are changed too, Ulric—I feel inclined to ask where is the sunny-faced boy whom I loved so dearly?"

Lord Caraven laughed a little bitter laugh.

"The truth is, Raoul, I have not turned out very well. I may have been a good boy, but I have scarcely made a good man."

"A fault acknowledged is often half amended," said Sir Raoul.

"Yes," admitted the earl carelessly; "but I feel no great desire to amend—I half wish that I did."

"I hear wondrous news, Ulric—that you are married. Is it true?"

The earl's face darkened, as it generally did when any mention was made of his wife.

"Yes," he replied gloomily, "I am married."

"And your wife, I have been told, had a large fortune."

"That is true," he said. "Have they told you anything else?"

"No, except that she was Miss Hildred Ransome, the great lawyer's daughter."

"The great money-lender and schenier's daughter," corrected the earl.

"She will not be answerable for her father's faults. What is she like, Ulric, this young wife of yours? I never had a sister, and my mother died when I was a boy. It will be quite a novelty to me to claim kinsmanship with a lady."

"All novelties are not agreeable ones," was the moody reply.

"This one will be, I am sure. I shall be quite proud to address 'My cousin, Lady Caraven.'"

"You are a *preux chevalier*, Raoul—you believe in the sex," said the earl.

"And do you not, Ulric?"

"No, not in one of them. The fact is, I feel quite certain that you will not like my wife, and it annoys me."

"Like her?" echoed Sir Raoul. "How strangely you speak! Certainly I shall do more than like her, your wife and my cousin. I tell you that the thought of seeing her is a positive pleasure to me."

With hasty steps Lord Caraven walked up and down the room. He seemed as though about to speak, but then stopped abruptly. He stood at last in front of his cousin.

"Raoul," he said, "I am not good at keeping a secret. The truth is, I do not like my wife."

"Not like her, Ulric: You are jesting, surely?"

"I wish to Heaven that I were! I know I am a prodigal, a spend-thrift; but I think sometimes, now that I am a little older, that I might have been a better man had I been happily married."

"But, if you did not like her," said Sir Raoul, with an air of utter astonishment, "why did you marry her?"

"That is the question. I think the answer is—because her father wished her to be a countess."

"What had his wish to do with you, Ulric?"

"Some day I will tell you all," he replied. "It is not a pleasant theme. But, with all my faults, I dislike deceit—and I would not have you think that you are about to enter upon a scene of domestic felicity."

"But the lady herself," said Sir Raoul—"since you confide in me, may speak—does she not know that you do not love her?"

"Yes, there has never been any pretense of affection between us."

"Then," said Sir Raoul slowly, "it seems to me that the lady is the one to be pitied—between her father and you."

"You can pity her if you like—she can hold her own remarkably well," returned the earl. "I do not want to talk about it, Raoul. Every man pays the price of his folly sooner or later—I am paying it now. I do not care ever to mention the matter again, but I thought, if you had some idea of entering an earthly Eden, you had better be disabused."

"I wish that it were an earthly Eden," said Sir Raoul slowly.

"My wife brought me a large fortune—a fortune that saved me from ruin—and I insist always upon all respect being shown to her. She is, as she ought to be, entirely mistress of the house. I am always particular about that. Now that we have finished with the matter, there is perhaps one thing more that I should say. My wife will be very pleased to see you, she will make you very welcome."

"And you do not like her?" interrogated Sir Raoul.

"Well," replied the earl, "you see she is not my style—not at all my style. I like fair women—she is dark; besides, I never think a man loves a woman whom he is compelled to marry."

"You were compelled to marry her then?" said Sir Raoul.

"It was either that or ruin—such ruin as would have left me penniless. I did hesitate for some time whether I should purchase a revolver, or marry Miss Ransome."

"My dear boy, why did you not send to me?"

"There are things that a gentleman cannot do," said the earl proudly. "I could not borrow from my friends."

"People have different ideas of honor—some of them are very strange ones. For my part, I should think it a thousand times more honorable to borrow from an old friend than to marry a girl for her money, knowing that I disliked her."

"The alternative was forced upon me. Besides, Raoul, all that you had in the world would not have been sufficient."

"Was it so bad as that?" he asked.

"Yes, it could not have been worse. Do not let me be a hypocrite, Raoul. That lesson would have lasted some men their lives—it has not been sufficient for me. I do not think, honestly speaking, that I am one whit a wiser man than I was. The only thing is that fortune has been with me instead of against me."

"Poor boy!" said Sir Raoul, pityingly; "we must hope for better things. Shall I see your wife to-night?"

"No, I think not. Lady Caraven has gone to Covent Garden—her favorite opera of hers is being played. She will not be home until late. You look very tired, Raoul—I should advise you to go to bed. We shall not remain many weeks in London. You will, of course, go to Ravensmere with us?"

"If you desire it; if you are kind enough to invite me, I shall be very