

it was!—she never looked at him; she did not talk or laugh; she seemed rather to avoid him, as it were.

"She does not like me," thought the earl; "and she has no little reason." He was frank enough to own that.

The dance ended, he led his wife to a seat, and then left her with a bow. She was never quite the same again. As it needs but a small match to fire a train of gunpowder, so it needed but little to awaken her love into keen, quick, passionate life. That one dance with him had done it. She loved him with her whole heart, and the suddenness with which that conviction flashed over her bewildered her. She sat quite still, the soft sweet music, the ripple of the little fountain, the subdued murmur, all mingling in her ears—flowers, lights, jewels, fair faces all dazzling her eyes—and she said to herself, "I love my husband." The whole world seemed changed to her. Shyly, timidly she looked at him. He was talking to a group of ladies, his handsome face all animation, his tall, well-built figure all grace. He was a man to be proud of—a man to love. But he must never know about this love of hers—this newly-found precious treasure. He despised her for her want of noble birth; she must keep her love as secret as the grave.

That increased the distance between them. She was so fearful that he should discover her secret, so fearful that he should think her unwomanly, so afraid that he should imagine she wanted his love, that she took refuge in cold, shy, proud avoidance. There were no more rides or drives to see the buildings and improvements; there was no more quiet letter-writing in the library. When Lord Caraven wanted Hildred, she had some gentle ready excuse, and with a house full of visitors it was difficult to determine whether those excuses were genuine or not. But from the night of the ball everything was altered between them; Hildred was no longer the devoted unselfish wife, who studied him and his interests above everything else—she was the proud, passionate, tender woman, who would rather have died than let him know that she loved him in spite of his neglect.

In consequence of this the earl was thrown more and more into the society of Lady Hamilton. His wife declined to ride with him; Lady Hamilton assured him that she could live in the open air. His wife had no time to discuss his letters; Lady Hamilton assured him there was nothing she liked better than overlooking another person's correspondence. His wife never asked him to sing; Lady Hamilton did so, and sat listening, and looking unutterable things. Lady Caraven's shyness was her opportunity. Not that she for a moment intended to make any mischief between husband and wife, or that she was in love with Lord Caraven; but she acted as she did simply because it was her practice to absorb the attention and engross the interest of every man that came within the sphere of her attractions. The deeper nature of the nobler woman did not recognize this. The young countess hid her love as she had hidden her jealousy. But it was hard to bear.

One trait more than any other convinced her that she was jealous of Lady Hamilton. She had until now been quite indifferent; all the world might know the terms on which she and her husband lived; she had not cared in the least. But now she grew morbidly anxious that this golden-haired beauty should never know them. She could not tell why, but she would fain have made Lady Hamilton believe that she was happy, that her husband loved her, that they were united and agreed as other husbands and wives. She tormented herself by wondering what Lady Hamilton would say if she knew the true state of the case; how the sunny blue eyes would gleam with laughter, how the fair face would flash with scorn! Lady Caraven said to herself that she would suffer death rather than permit the story of her unhappy married life to be known to her rival. Whenever she saw her husband talking to Lady Hamilton she wondered if she herself were the topic of conversation. Instinctively the two ladies were rivals—they hardly knew why—instinctively one developed a dislike of the other.

There was no one to warn the beautiful young countess that she was yielding to a terrible fault that would bring with it a terrible punishment. Sir Raoul was not well—the old wound pained him terribly, and there were days together when he could not leave his room, so that Hildred was left to the pain of her love and her sorrow.

Anything rather than that her husband should find out her secret. How he would laugh at her! The money-lender's daughter to love the earl—the neglected wife to give her heart all unasked, all unsought for, to her husband! She felt that she could not survive the sneer. He should not know it. He might think her capricious, he should think her anything but infatuated with himself. He said to her one morning, laughingly—

"Hildred, the days of our pleasant meetings seem to be passed."

She made him some evasive answer, and quitted the room. He looked thoughtfully after her. What had come over his wife? Had she grown tired of her devotion to him, or was it that her time was fully occupied with visitors? It was not a matter of much moment to him; he did not spend much time in thinking about her; but her manner slightly puzzled him.

No one else saw anything strange in her. Sir Raoul, who would have read her thoughts like an open book, was not present. To the others Lady Caraven was simply a calm, well-bred, graceful hostess. No one guessed what a storm of anger and love, of jealousy, and pain, warred under the calm, proud exterior. The love would have been easy to bear if the jealousy had not been there to poison it.

There was no real cause for it. Lady Hamilton intended some day or other to make a grand coup—to marry one of the wealthiest and noblest of her admirers. She was not one of those who would consider the world well lost for love. As for falling in love with a married man, she would never have dreamed of such a thing—not merely because it was wrong, but from the simple fact that it was a waste of time.

(To be continued.)

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