

"I had my life given to me to enjoy, as others had," she said. "I had the power of loving, the longing for happiness, as others had. What right had you to crush them? What right had you, because you wanted my money, to take my girlish heart and break it? What right had you to inflict all these years of shame and sorrow upon me? What have I ever done to you that you should repay me after this fashion?"

"Nothing," he replied; "I am guilty."

"When you thought I had tried to commit murder, you turned me from your doors; in the darkness of night, alone and unfriended, you bade me begone. Which kind of murder is worse—that which destroys a body, or that which slays heart, mind, brain, and hope? I say that in this sense you have slain me."

"Hildred, be merciful to me!" he cried.

"I will show you the same mercy you have shown me. Go from my presence and do not let me see you again."

"Do you mean that, Hildred?" he asked sadly.

"I do. You have disliked, despised, scorned me, ever since we first met. Now that you have suspected me of a crime you have reached the climax. We shall meet no more."

"You said that you loved me, Hildred," he pleaded.

"Did I?" she replied with a harsh laugh. "Then I take back my words. I love you no more, you have been cruel to me—as cruel as the men who put out the bright eyes of a little bird that it may sing more sweetly. Let me pass; I have no more to say."

With shining eyes and pale passionate face she swept from the room, leaving the earl overcome with astonishment.

"She is the most high-minded woman I have ever met in my life," he thought. "I have been blind indeed. How superb she looked in her indignation! I will win her yet. I have never cared about winning her before, but I swear to give my life to the task now."

It seemed probable that it would be a very long one, for Lady Caraven positively refused to see her husband again. In vain Arley Ransome pleaded for him; she was inexorable.

"Even a worm will turn when it is trodden upon," she said. "I have suffered my last indignity at his hands."

The earl was compelled to return to Ravensmere, and he did so almost despairingly. Lady Hamilton was fast improving, she would be able to go to her own home soon, the doctor said, and all anxiety about her was quite at an end. The truth of the story had come to light, all the papers had it; every one knew that Lady Hamilton had been shot by mistake, and that it was the young Countess of Caraven whom John Blantyre had intended to kill.

The earl confided the result of his mission to Sir Raoul, who was not much surprised.

"You have tried her beyond her strength," he said: "I should advise you without loss of time to return to London again."

Lord Caraven did so, but his journey was fruitless. Hildred refused to see him; to all entreaties from her father she answered simply—

"I have not one word to add to what I have said," and with that answer the earl was obliged to be content.

In sheer despair he sent for Sir Raoul, who, though almost unfit to travel, hastened to him, he besought him to use his influence with the beautiful young wife who had no pity for him. Then he grew wildly jealous at the idea that she would listen to Sir Raoul when she refused absolutely to listen to him.

"Why should you have more influence over her than I have?" he asked half angrily.

"Because," said Sir Raoul, "I understand the higher, better, nobler part of her nature, as you, I fear, will never understand it. I will try what I can do."

"Tell her, then, Raoul," went on the earl, his tone and manner changing suddenly, "that I was blind to her beauty, her goodness, her truth, but that I see all now; tell her that I did not love her when I first knew her, but that I love her now; tell her, if she will but forgive me, I will make the devotion of my whole life atone for my past neglect."

Sir Raoul promised. Lady Caraven did not refuse to see him. He was shocked and startled at the terrible change a few days had wrought in her. He looked at the pale face.

"You have suffered, Hildred!" he said.

"Yes, I came to the end of my patience at last. I can bear it no longer, Raoul; it was a life of torture after all, and I will never return to it. I could not be brave any longer."

"Poor child!" said the grave, pitying voice. "Some words are running in my mind, Hildred, about those who, having put their hands to the plow turn back again. May I ask, are you one of those, Hildred? Are you tired of heroism?"

"There was no heroism in my life," she said.

"Nay, pardon me; there was the grandest heroism possible. Do you know what my idea of heroism really is?"

She looked up at him with greater interest than she had yet displayed.

"Tell me, Raoul."

"This is the grandest heroism," he said, "the heroism that makes saints and martyrs bearing the burden of our lives patiently and cheerfully, never failing in strength and endurance. I thought that you would be a heroine, Hildred. I thought that you would heroically and cheerfully bear the crosses and trials of your life. So you did, for a time; now you have laid down your cross, saying that it is too heavy for you to bear. Ah, Hildred, believe me, good was never yet won by cowardice! Take it up again, this burden you have laid down. In the day of adversity fail not—be a heroine until the end."

(To be continued.)

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