

HILDRED.

(Continued.)

"Of course, later on—not just now perhaps; he is not a bold wooer, your handsome earl, Hildred. You are sure to think him reserved and cold; in time all that will wear away. I may tell him to-morrow that you accept his offer?"

"Yes," she replied.

And then, to her surprise, her father, who was one of the most undemonstrative of men, bent down and kissed her.

"You have made me very happy," he said.

"Why, papa, one would think you wanted this marriage!" she cried.

"You seem very anxious about it."

"It is my hope realized, Hildred," he said gravely. "I am very happy."

Then he rose and left her seated by the river-side.

"Lady Caraven—Hildred, Lady Caraven!" She repeated the words to herself; they had a pleasant sound, and it was pleasant to think that she would be a countess—pleasant to remember that the handsome young Earl had sought her in marriage. How little she had dreamed of this when she sat down by the river-side an hour before!

He would come to see her on the morrow, there was no doubt. What would it be like—this brilliant life in which gaiety, fashion, love, and happiness were all to have their part? The light had died in the western skies, the birds had sung their last song, the flowers were all asleep, but it seemed to Hildred Ransome that she would never sleep again; the restless beating heart was stirred for the first time from its passionate rest. It was fancy, of course—all fancy—but the long low wash of the waves certainly sung "Love's Young Dream." It must be fancy, but the wind did whisper it—

"There's nothing half so sweet in life."

"I will go in," thought Hildred, "and sing something that will take the sound of those words from me."

It so happened that the first sheet of music she took up was Mrs. Jameson's pathetic ballad, set to sweet, sad music—

"I have had joy and sorrow, I have proved
What life could give—have loved and been beloved;
I am sick and heartsore
And weary—let me sleep;
But deep—deep—
Never to waken more!"

The words struck her with new meaning. "Have loved and been beloved"—it was like Theckla's song—

"I have tasted the highest bliss;
I have loved and have been beloved."

This was not in accordance with her father's assurance that love was all nonsense.

But then she had forgotten that these were poets writing according to their lights—only poets, and not to be believed. It was perhaps a pity after all, she thought, that they—these sweet singers—should teach people to estimate things so falsely—should try to place love above everything else—above wealth, fame, rank, title, gold—when her father, a shrewd, clever man, assured her that it was but nonsense—that people were better and happier without it.

She felt very wise, very superior to these poets. Life had higher things than love, she said to herself. It was very well in its way.

She, for one, was quite content not to know it. Life held duties—noble duties, noble work. What was love but recreation? It was very well for schoolgirls to talk of in whispers, or for poets to write sweet, sad rhymes about; but for men and women—Her father perhaps was right—it was better to be without it.

When this lover of hers came on the morrow, would he mention love to her, or what would he talk about? She sighed as she rose from the piano, flattering herself that she had sung all sentiment away—sighed with a sweet, half-sad longing.

And then, after all her trouble—after singing to drive the words away—after moralizing and trying to make herself a stoical philosopher at eighteen—she found herself, as she went to her room, singing—

"Oh, there's nothing half so sweet in life
As Love's young dream!"

CHAPTER IV.

Hildred Ransome was engaged to be married; she was to be Lady Caraven, and on this day her lover was to visit her.

Arley Ransome went off to business early. The first thing he did was to send a note to the earl, saying that all difficulty was removed; his daughter had consented. The only thing remaining was for him to ask her to settle the wedding-day.

Lord Caraven read it through, then crushed it in his hands, and finally tore it into shreds and threw it under his feet. He had not brought himself to a proper state of submission yet. He would have given the world to escape from Arley Ransome; but the choice was plain enough—ruin, shame, and despair, or marriage with the dark-eyed girl who was "not his style," and whom he was quite sure he should never like.

Then his thoughts veered round a little. It would be pleasant to restore Ravensmere Castle to its old prestige—it would be pleasant to pay his debts, to feel the load of care and anxiety removed from him—it would be pleasant to take his place in the world again. As for the price, he must

pay it. If Arley Ransome would not save him upon any other condition, he must marry his daughter. If the father was content to give his child to one who honestly owned he did not like her, surely he need not pity her. Surely again, if she were willing to marry a man whom she had seen only once, she herself deserved no pity.

The marriage should take place in due course. The Ransomes had as it were drawn him—nay, forced him into it; the consequences must recoil on themselves. In his own mind he considered the daughter quite as bad as the father—indeed he made little distinction between them. The union was to be; there was no further need for scruple. They wanted his title, he wanted their money. He would be civil to them; they could not expect more.

On that evening Hildred Ransome received a letter and a ring. The envelope bore a crest, and she knew at once that it was from Lord Caraven. The contents were short, but to the purpose; it was not a love-letter, for there was no semblance of love in it.

"My dear Miss Ransome,—I have to thank you for your consent to my"—then came a word that had been carefully obliterated and "wishes" written over it. "With your permission I will call to-morrow. I have sent you an engagement-ring—will you wear it? I am yours"—here there was an illegible word—"ULRIC CARAVEN."

She laid the letter down with a sigh and a smile. She had fancied that a love letter would be very different. She opened the little parcel that accompanied the note; it contained a magnificent diamond ring—her engagement-ring. She placed it on her finger, and the sun falling on it made it shine like fire. Still, as she looked at it, her eyes filled with tears. She would have liked some one to put the ring on her finger; although she was engaged to be married, and was to be a countess, she felt very lonely and desolate.

Arley Ransome smiled when he saw the ring. At least it was an earnest of good things to come.

"Very nice, very appropriate," said the lawyer—"really a ring suitable for the coming Lady Caraven."

The day after brought Lord Caraven himself.

That interview was something to be remembered. Mr. Ransome, hoping to make matters smooth and pleasant, had invited his future son-in-law to dine with him, and that he might not feel dull had asked the humorous and brilliant talker Mr. Carway to join them.

It was well that he had done so, for the actual presence of her lover seemed to strike Hildred dumb. She looked at him whenever she found that he was looking elsewhere. She thought him very handsome. His indolent, careless grace contrasted so favorably with her father's sharp, brisk manner. She wondered why the earl looked worn and haggard. He was only twenty-seven, her father said. She wondered, too, why he was not more *empressé* in his manner. He took her down to dinner, and the only words they exchanged were about the warmth of the day. During dinner they never spoke, save for the most ordinary civilities. When dinner was over, the earl evidently preferred the society of Mr. Carway to hers.

"Why had he asked to marry her if he did not care to talk to her?" she said to herself. "How strange it was!" Then her father invited Mr. Carway to have a game at chess, and the earl walked slowly across the room to where she was sitting. He stood by her side, tall, stately, despite his indolent grace of manner. Her heart beat. What was he going to say? He bent his head somewhat stiffly.

"I have to thank you, Miss Ransome," he said, "for honoring me by wearing my ring."

She looked up at him, and there was something in the calm gaze of the pure eyes before which he shrunk as her father had done.

"You wished me to wear it, did you not?" she asked. "My father thought so."

"Certainly. I am delighted."

Try as he would, he could not conceal a *soupeon* of irony. She detected it and looked at him again. He bowed and continued—

"I am fortunate indeed. I have to ask you, Miss Ransome, now that you have consented to—to become Lady Caraven—to tell me—that is to say—what day will suit you?"

"Day for what?" she asked innocently.

"A day to be married on," he replied.

A look of rebuke stole over the girlish face.

"You spoke of it so lightly," she said, "that I fancied you meant a day for going out somewhere. You spoke as if you were asking me to arrange a day for boating on the river."

"What shall I say then?" he asked, smiling despite his annoyance.

"It is not for me to tell you," she replied, in all simplicity.

He laughed aloud.

"Shall I say 'Loveliest, fairest'?"

With an air of grave displeasure she rose from her seat.

"Lord Caraven, I will hear no more," she said; "your manner does not please me."

He longed to retort, "Nor do you please me;" but he was merely a fly in the spider's web—he could not escape. He followed her. After all, he was a gentleman, and she was to bear his name.

"I am unfortunate, Miss Ransome," he said, "in having displeased you—pardon me. I had every intention of asking you the question with all due decorum—pray permit me to repeat it."

She was still so much of a child that she was puzzled what to answer. Her manner rather puzzled him too—it was so calm, so self-possessed. There was not the faintest flush on her face, no light in the grave, beautiful eyes, no latent smile—there were no little airs and graces such as surely belong to a young countess-elect.