

HILDRED.

(Continued.)

There must be no encroaching on her privileges. No one must monopolize distinguished men like Sir Raoul when she was present. She must give the dark-eyed young countess a lesson, and the best way in which to achieve her end would be to monopolize the attention of the handsome earl.

"Jealousy is as bitter as death!" The words haunted Lady Caraven. Was she jealous? She could hardly tell. Her life seemed to pass in a fever of watching—to be filled with a brooding sense of something wrong, of something hanging over her, of foreboding she knew not why. She only knew that the presence of the beautiful blonde Lady Hamilton was a source of vague torment to her.

She was always apprehensive—she could hardly tell of what. She was of too noble a disposition willfully to encourage suspicions of any one, but she was ever thinking and surmising as to whether her husband admired Lady Hamilton or not. There were times when she roused herself and said to herself that it was unworthy of her—that all jealousy and suspicion was miserable—that she would rise above it and trample it under foot. Then she would find herself watching her husband's face to see how it lightened and brightened as he talked to Lady Hamilton.

She read a very sensible story one day—a story of married life—written to show how foolishly wrong and wicked it was of wives ever to begin to be jealous—showing how, if a woman once gave her mind to it, she could turn almost every incident in her husband's life to her own torment—how she could be miserable over every word he spoke, every look, every glance; and Lady Caraven took the lesson to heart. She said to herself that suspicion and jealousy were miserable failings—that it was far nobler to give entire and perfect trust, to rise above ignoble suspicions, to despise wretched, paltry jealousies. She said to herself that she would take warning by the story she had read.

But her case was different from that of other wives. There was perhaps in all the wide world no parallel to it. Lord Caraven and she had married without the least pretense of love, he detesting the marriage, yet forced into it, she honestly believing that it was quite possible to live without love; then after marriage she had been as he was now—profoundly, coldly indifferent. She at first had been inclined to love him—his handsome face and the prestige of his name had won her girlish fancy; then slowly, as her woman's soul and better nature awoke, she discovered his faults—faults that filled her with something like despair. Then came the turning-point of her life—the time when she felt sorely inclined to leave Ravensmere—the time when the noble advice of a noble man had saved her, had roused her to action, had influenced her so as to completely change her life, had elevated her, had given her an almost sublime idea of her duties and responsibilities. She had risen to the call; she had devoted herself to the welfare of her husband; she had used all her truest womanly tact, all her rare grace, all her intellect and talent, to rouse him from his evil habits, from his self-indulgence, from his neglect of every duty. She had succeeded even beyond her hopes; he was above the average now, whereas before he had been below it. The consequence was that she loved him. After passing through every phase of feeling, after being filled with admiration that grew into dislike, indifference, contempt, she had found herself at last in love with him.

It was the consciousness of that which made her more sensitively jealous. He was her husband. She loved him, but he did not love her. She asked herself, "Will he ever love me?" And the answer that her own heart gave her was a very despairing one. She was not the style of woman that he admired. He liked blonde beauty; and here, under their very roof, was a queen of blondes—a queen of coquettes. She would look sometimes at Lady Hamilton and think, "How he must wish that our marriage had been delayed! If Lady Hamilton had returned a little earlier, her money would have done just as well as mine, and he would have loved her."

It was a very natural thought, but one that made her exceedingly unhappy. To Lord Caraven himself the idea never occurred. He had his faults—they were not on the score of immorality or impropriety. He did not love the wife fate had given to him, but he respected her; and in some fashion of his own he respected the vague kind of tie that there was between them. At all events he then had no idea of outraging her feelings or insulting her by falling in love with any one else.

While the earl enjoyed the presence of his beautiful guest—enjoyed her coquetries, laughed and was amused at her flirtations, all in sheer idleness and good-humor—his dark-eyed beautiful wife was building up a theory of her own, and it was that her husband loved Lady Hamilton.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

The grand ball in honor of Lady Hamilton was to be given at Ravensmere on the last day of September. The summer weather still lingered; flowers that should have died before were still living, birds that should long since have sought a sunnier clime were still singing. On the evening of the ball a bright moon was shining in a clear sky, and the wind was sweet as in summer. There had been royal entertainments at Ravensmere, but none had ever been on a grander or more magnificent scale than this ball. All that flowers, lights, and superb decorations could effect was effected. There was tier after tier of brilliant bloom; the light of a thousand tapers made a brightness greater than that of day; tiny scented fountains rippled amongst the flowers. It was a superb spectacle; and of that magnificent scene there were two queens.

At the opening of the ball they stood for a few moments side by side;

and then opinion varied as to which was the more beautiful. The Countess Caraven was a woman of stately loveliness, Lady Hamilton of fairy-like beauty.

The countess, who had some vague idea that this night would be the turning-point in her destiny, had devoted much time and thought to her toilet. Her dress was of some shining material that resembled cloth of gold; the rounded arms were bare to the shoulder, the white neck and throat rising like a stately flower from its calyx. The golden hue of the dress enhanced the beauty of the dark eyes and hair; there was a slight flush on the splendid face, a deeper light in the dark eyes. She wore a suite of superb rubies; they lay in the coils of dark hair, and sparkled like points of flame on the white breast; as she moved the light scintillated and gleamed, it shone and played in the rich dress and jewels.

By her side stood her rival and perfect contrast, fair, blonde Lady Hamilton, in a dress of pure white—white, with green leaves and flowers—and with flowers in her golden hair—the perfect ideal of a fair, graceful, lovely woman. As they stood for a few minutes side by side all eyes were upon them.

The ball was a marvelous success. Lord Damers, who had come to Ravensmere purposely for it, said that he had never seen anything like it. He went up to the earl, who, looking very handsome in his evening dress, was watching the dancers.

"Do you know, Caraven," he asked, "who is the handsomest woman here?"

"The earl looked round with a smile.

"Amidst so many how can I decide?"

"The decision does not require a minute's hesitation," said Lord Damers. "Look round and you will see that there is no one to compare with your own wife. She is by far the most beautiful woman I have ever seen in my life."

The earl looked up wonderingly.

"Is she? Do you know that I have never thought much of her appearance?"

"Then you have been blind. Look at her now."

Lord Caraven looked up. He saw a tall beautiful figure and a magnificent face with dark, proud, brilliant eye and a lovely mouth, round which played a half-grave, sweet timorous smile. He seemed to be impressed.

"You are right," he said; "she is very beautiful."

"I should imagine so," returned Lord Damers emphatically. "Why, by her side even the brilliant Lady Hamilton looks faded. Every one is talking about your wife; you do not know how many envy you."

Lord Caraven laughed aloud. Perhaps if the world knew all, he told himself, there would be little cause for envy.

"She is beautiful," he repeated to himself. He had suddenly awoke to the knowledge of the fact. He said to himself that he must have been blind. Had this woman been any other than his wife, he would have thought her perfection. As he looked at her he wondered that he had ever boasted of his preference for blondes. What could compare with the splendor of those dark eyes, the exquisite coloring of that noble Southern face? He must have been blind. He crossed the room to where the young countess stood talking to Lady Hamilton.

"Hildred," he said simply, "will you save one dance for me?"

She looked at the pretty tablets, and then smiled at him.

"I am not engaged for the next waltz," she said.

"Then give it to me," requested the earl, and the dark eyes were raised to his.

"If I had been engaged, I should have felt inclined to break my engagement," she said.

Lady Hamilton was not quite pleased. Two suns could not shine on one hemisphere; and, if Lady Caraven had any idea of outshining her, the sooner that idea was abandoned the better.

"It is rather odd," she said, with one of her brightest smiles, "to see husband and wife waltz together—one would imagine you were still lovers."

Hildred was on the point of retorting that they had never yet been that, but prudence restrained her.

"You will not forget your promise?" said the earl.

"For the waltz—no," she replied.

"Let me see you write my name," said the earl.

And Lady Caraven took up the pretty tablets again.

They held many names. Against the waltz she wrote—"My husband."

He was watching her intently, and when she had finished writing he took the tablets from her hand. How strange the words looked! There were noble names above them, noble names below them. "My husband!" He wondered why she had not written "Lord Caraven," or his initials. As he returned the tablets to her, their eyes met in a long lingering glance. Suddenly she turned from him with her face on fire; and Lord Caraven, with a strange sensation at his heart, began talking to Lady Hamilton.

"This is my waltz," said Lord Caraven shortly afterward, as he came to his wife. She did not raise her eyes to his; she was afraid to do so. What if they should tell him her secret? What if he should read her name himself shining in their depths?

The earl half smiled, half sighed at the piquant strangeness of the situation. This noble woman, to the knowledge of whose beauty he had suddenly awoke, was his own wife. They had spent much time together, both sung and worked together, yet he never remembered to have embraced her; now his arm was round the supple graceful figure—the lovely face so close to his own. He saw before him the whole time, standing out clear and distinct from the others, the two words "My husband."

Lord Damers had told him that he was a subject of envy. They had all been a sorry mistake. How beautifully this neglected, unknown wife of his danced! It was the very poetry of motion. But—how