

HILDRED.

(Continued.)

"Was there ever a fate like mine?" cried the unhappy girl. "What have I done that such a lot in life should be mine?"

Her courage, her bravery, her hope and faith, seemed all to give way. She was in despair. Her husband believed her guilty of a great crime, and she had no means of proving her innocence. The only hope that remained to her was that the real criminal would confess, and so free her from the accusation, but that was most unlikely. In her own mind she believed that some lover of Lady Hamilton's, wild with jealousy, had fired at her; if so, it was most unlikely that he would accuse himself.

No, there was no hope. She had striven so bravely to bear a cruel fate; she had done her best, she had made a brave fight where many people would have run away—and now it was all ended. So far was her husband from loving her that he believed her guilty of a crime, thought her capable of a crime. The girl's heart failed her utterly, she would fain have turned her face to the wall and died.

"Sir Raoul would not have believed it," she said to herself; "he would have defended me."

All hope was at an end. She felt that she could never interest herself in life again. Then a vague, but none the less terrible fear, came over her. She could not tell what might happen. Suppose that Lady Hamilton should die? Some one must be punished. Her husband had said that he would keep her secret, but suppose that he found it impossible to do so—that, from circumstantial evidence, others suspected and accused her—what should she do? There could be no defense. She had been found behind the trees, and she had said she was guilty. Could it be within the bounds of possibility that she, Hildred, Countess of Caraven, would ever be brought before a public tribunal and tried for a crime of which she was perfectly innocent? Her vivid imagination ran riot about it. She pictured herself in a dark cell. She wept until from sheer exhaustion she slept.

A knocking at the door aroused her.

"Hildred," called Arley Ransome, "I wish to see you."

"Papa," said the girl, "I am tired of the world—tired of my life. Let me die in peace."

Fearful of the attention of his servants, he went away, returning again and again with the same entreaty, but she would not see him. She refused all food, she never attempted to go to rest, and at last Arley Ransome grew alarmed about her. He would not force open the door—that would create a scandal, and the notion of scandal was as bitter as death to him. It was with a feeling of intense relief that he saw Lord Caraven arrive.

"This is a terrible business," he said. "My daughter must have been driven to great extremes before she did this."

"It is all a foolish mistake," cried the earl. "Where is she? I want to see her."

"A mistake!" said the lawyer with dignity. "Most men would give your conduct another name, Lord Caraven. People should be careful before they make such mistakes."

"Where is Hildred?" cried the earl. "I want to see her at once."

"I am not at all sure that my daughter will see you," said Arley Ransome. "I must say that she has been cruelly treated. You are a peer of the realm, Lord Caraven, but have you behaved as a gentleman to my child? Have you treated her with courtesy or affection?"

"No, I have not, but this is not the time to discuss such subjects. I want to see my wife—to apologize to her."

That utterance cost the proud earl a great effort. It did not conciliate Arley Ransome.

"Something more than apology is due, my lord," he said gravely. "You write to me, telling me that my daughter has been guilty of an attempt to murder. In the silence and darkness of night you send her from home as though she were one of the guiltiest criminals in the world. You denounce her to me, and then you hurry after her saying that it is all a mistake. Such mistakes are not to be pardoned, my lord."

The earl kept his patience with great difficulty.

"Will you let me see my wife?" he cried.

Arley Ransome saw that he had gone as far as prudence would permit him to go.

"I can tell you nothing of your wife, Lord Caraven," he said, "I hardly know whether she is living or dead."

The earl's face changed.

"Is she ill?" he cried.

"Even that I cannot tell you," answered the lawyer. "My daughter has shut herself up in her room, and has refused to see any one. I can only say that since she heard you had believed her guilty of that crime she has neither eaten, drunk, nor slept."

"Let me go to her at once," said Lord Caraven. "Do not be hard on me, Mr. Ransome—I have had a great deal to suffer." And these few words disarmed the lawyer.

They went together to Hildred's room. Arley Ransome spoke first.

"Hildred, I have something very particular to say to you—open the door."

There was not a sound, and Lord Caraven began to feel slightly alarmed.

"Hildred," said her father, "I have a message from your husband."

Still there was no sound, and, unable to control himself, the earl cried out—

"Hildred, for Heaven's sake, speak to me: Let me in. I want to see you!"

The sound of his voice seemed to have an electric effect upon her. The next moment she turned the key in the lock and opened wide the door.

With a cry of fear and surprise he started back when he saw her. He had seen her lately so beautiful, so radiant—now her long black hair hung in disorder over her shoulders; her face was pale and stained with tears, her eyes were dim, her lips white. He hardly knew her.

"Hildred!" he cried. She looked at him with dim sad eyes.

"You?" she said. "Is it you who thought me guilty of murder?"

Lord Caraven turned to Arley Ransome.

"Leave me alone with her," he said. "I have much to say."

Mr. Ransome went away. The earl entered the room and closed the door. He went to his wife, holding out both his hands.

"Will you forgive me?" he said. "I can never pardon myself."

But she shrunk from him.

"You believed that I committed murder," she answered. "No, I cannot touch your hands."

"Hildred, listen. It was almost all your own fault—you said you were guilty."

"Not of murder," she rejoined. "I could not have supposed that you would think me capable of that, much as you dislike me."

"I do not dislike you, Hildred," said the earl, in a voice full of emotion, "and I am indeed grieved at having offended you. Do not refuse to pardon me."

"There can be no pardon, my lord, for the wrong you have done me," she replied.

And then the earl knew that, if ever he won his wife's pardon it would be a work of patience and of time.

"I cannot believe," he said, "that you will be unkind or unjust to me, Hildred—I have suffered more than you have."

"That is not possible," she rejoined—"no one has accused you of a terrible crime."

"But I have suspected an innocent person," he said, "and it is harder to inflict than to bear pain."

"My pain would not displease or discompose you," she replied.

There was something in her manner which half frightened him—she seemed as though her brain were dazed. She did not appear like herself. He began to wonder if suffering and suspense had really driven her mad.

"Hildred," he said, very gently, "do you know that you frighten me?"

"Do I?" she asked fearfully. "I am glad. You ought to be frightened about me. I have never done you any harm, and you have been most unkind to me—you have been cruel to me, you have made my life hateful to me."

"Nay, it is not surely so bad as that?"

"It could not well be worse," she said.

He gazed anxiously at her. She looked pale and wan, with the stamp of bitter weeping on her face. He saw too that she shivered like one seized with mortal cold.

"Hildred," he cried, "do forgive me—you do not know how grieved I am to see you like this. I want to tell you how the misunderstanding happened. Will you listen?"

"Yes," she replied mechanically, and she sat silent and motionless while he told her the story. She looked at him when it was ended with dull, dim eyes.

"I am very sorry," she said, "that Blantyre made the mistake. I almost wish that he had shot me through the heart. What have I to live for?"

"I could not spare you, Hildred—you have been the good angel of my life!" he cried.

"You would be better without me. Your estates are free and unencumbered now—you have roused yourself to a sense of your duties—you know how to perform them. I am of no more use. I am sorry that John Blantyre missed his aim."

"That is not like you, Hildred. Where is your bright energy, for cheerful animation?"

She clasped her hands with a shudder.

"I am sick," she said—"sick with a terrible despair."

He was at a loss what to say to her—she seemed immovable. Suddenly her face flushed, and a bright light came into the eyes that had been so dim.

"You sent me from your house, Lord Caraven, and pronounced me guilty on what seems to me very slight evidence. I may claim to be at least as credulous as yourself, yet I declare that had any one accused me of murder I should not have believed it. You judged me guilty at once—guilty of trying to murder—I, who never in my life trampled even upon a worm. Why should you have thought that I wished Lady Hamilton dead?"

He looked slightly confused.

"You remember that you told me you were jealous of her?" he replied.

"Jealous," she repeated, dreadingly. "Did I ever love you then? I have forgotten—my brain is dazed, dull. I seem to remember nothing except that you judged me guilty of murder. Did I love you?"

The wan face and dim eyes touched him inexpressibly.

"You have said so, Hildred. I hope you will say the same again," he answered.

"Never, if you thought me guilty of murder," she said decisively. "My life has been a sore disappointment to me, it has been hard to bear, and I had not one gleam of light. But it is all over now. Now that you have accused me of murder, I have no further interest in it."

She looked so hopeless and so dreary that he was deeply pained. It struck him too that she looked terribly ill.

"Hildred," he said gently, "be merciful. I am much to blame, but you will surely pardon me."

He tried to touch her hands, but she drew them proudly away. She stood before him erect and defiant.