

HILDRED.

(Continued.)

"We are a party," she told him—"we are three."

Lord Caraven laughed.

"Three is a very small number, Hildred. What would Lady Hamilton say if she came here and found that we had not invited any one to meet her? Raoul and I would be exhausted by the amount of homage we should have to pay. Lady Hamilton is the very queen of coquettes."

"I do not like coquettes," said Lady Caraven, curtly.

"It would be wonderful if you did," laughed her husband. "Dark-eyed and dark-haired women like you, Hildred, are generally severe; golden hair and blue eyes take naturally to flirtation. But that is no settlement of our difficulty. There is but one course open to us—to write and say that we shall be delighted. You will write, of course?"

"If you wish it," said Hildred quietly.

"Then we will draw up a list of people to invite while she is here. We must have some eligible men."

"What does she want eligible men for?" asked Hildred; and the two gentlemen laughed at the question.

"Is she a widow?" continued the young countess.

"One of the youngest, prettiest, wealthiest widows in England," said the earl.

Lady Caraven felt a vague dawning of jealous dislike.

"I am almost sorry that she is coming now," put in Sir Raoul; "we are so very happy—all our quietness will be broken up and destroyed."

In his heart Lord Caraven almost re-echoed the wish.

"You forget the honor, Raoul," he said gayly. "Lady Hamilton does not visit everywhere; nor does she accept all invitations. I know a German grand duchess and a Russian princess whom she refused."

"What is her rule in accepting invitations then?" asked Hildred.

"I think, as pleasure guides her in everything, she goes only where she thinks she shall enjoy herself," replied the earl.

"And what does she think that she shall enjoy here?" asked the young wife anxiously.

A gleam of mischievous humor came into the earl's face.

"Perhaps a rumor of Raoul's gallantry has reached her," he said; but Sir Raoul indignantly rejected the supposition.

Perhaps the Countess of Caraven had never undertaken a task more unpleasant to her than the writing of this letter, yet it had to be done with all the graceful courtesy imaginable. Then the earl made out a list of people whom he thought the brilliant young widow would like to meet.

"There," he said,—"we have an eligible marquis, a court favorite, a millionaire, a philosopher, and a soldier. Surely between them her ladyship will receive homage enough."

His wife noted with infinite satisfaction that he had not mentioned himself. Evidently he had no idea of paying homage to her; but the words, "one of the youngest, prettiest widows in England," had made a disagreeable impression on her. She could not tell why, but she had an unpleasant foreboding that evil would come from the widow's visit, evil both bitter and sore.

"There is another thing, Hildred," said Lord Caraven—"Lady Hamilton must have amusement. You will have to lay aside your work for a time and attend to it. We must have a ball—a grand ball, not a mere dancing party—we must have dinner parties and picnics, a regular round of entertainments."

"And my work must stand still?" she interrogated, regretfully.

"I am sorry for it, because I know that your heart is in it; but rank and position have duties that we cannot ignore. When a lady like Lady Hamilton volunteers a visit, it is necessary to receive her with all courtesy. You will be able to do something, but not much."

She sighed deeply, and her beautiful face became sad.

"I am sorry, dear," he said kindly; "but it cannot be helped."

He wondered why her face brightened so suddenly, why she looked up with a sudden glad light in her eyes. He had called her "dear" for the first time in his life, and he had done it quite unconsciously. The word that meant so much to her was less than nothing to him.

He wondered why she spoke in a tone through which the sweetest music seemed to vibrate.

"I shall not mind it at all now," she said, with a warm smile on her face, and, having no key to her meaning, the earl said to himself that women were indeed wonderful creatures.

He would have thought so had he known how happy that one word had made his young wife, how she garnered it into her heart and pondered it, how she brooded over it with silent happiness that could not be put into words; and he did not even know that he had used it. He would have said the same to a friend or a child, he would not have used it to his wife if he had thought of it or noticed what he was saying, for the simple reason that he considered any tender words between people who never could love each other nonsense.

With a light heart she sent out her invitations. Sir Raoul wondered when he heard her singing sweet snatches of song—wondered with a sense of gratification. She must be happier than she had been, or she would not be so light of heart.

The invitations were all accepted, and due preparations were made for receiving the beautiful Lady Hamilton. The handsomest suite of rooms in the castle were set aside for her; there was an air of expectation, of subdued excitement, that did not quite please the young mistress of Ravensmere. When the earl had, as he expressed it, time to think the

matter over, he was pleased—his wife perceived it in many ways. He lingered with Sir Raoul, telling anecdotes of Lady Hamilton, and of her powers of fascination; and then Hildred learned that they had been lovers when young. Why they never married, why their love came to nothing, she did not know. If any one had tried to explain the mystery of flirtation to her, she would not have understood it. That people could play at love for the mere pleasure of playing at it, that it was possible to stimulate emotion for the mere sake of enjoying it, she did not understand. Life was full of reality to the earnest, high-souled woman who had accepted her fate with heroism worthy of herself.

"I must not be jealous of this beautiful Lady Hamilton," she thought—"but it is almost enough to make me."

The lovely widow was to arrive in time for dinner. That was one of Lady Hamilton's practices. She liked to be seen first in the full glory of her dinner-dress, in the full blaze of her beauty. She lived solely and entirely for her beauty, and for the homage it brought her. If she had been suddenly deprived of it, if any accident had robbed her of it, she would have been without a single occupation in life: she lived for it, she studied it. What would suit her, what became her, what attitude showed her figure to the greatest advantage, what pose was most favorable to the display of her graceful neck, what jewels looked best on the golden hair, what flowers harmonized best with the lace that was like a flower—this was her only occupation. She worshipped herself, the perfection of her own face. It was no idly assumed position; it was the profound study of her life. Never did naturalist spend more time over a flower than she did in the selection of a dress or a bonnet; she brought all the powers of her mind to bear upon it. She liked to hear praises of her beauty. She was not in the least flattered when any one called her clever or intelligent—no praise of her wit or power of repartee ever delighted her. She liked to read that the "beautiful Lady Hamilton" had been at such a ball—she liked to be told that she was the prettiest woman in London. Moreover, she was an insatiable coquette. As for really loving any one, she had never done such a thing. Perhaps the nearest approach to love which she had ever felt was the kindly feeling she had had for the handsome earl. She did not marry him, because he had not money enough.

She was a dear lover of luxury, this lovely Lady Hamilton. In all her gay life of twenty-three summers she had known nothing else. She wanted jewels to deck her loveliness, she wanted magnificent rooms, plenty of servants. She loved light and perfume, and flowers—she had all the tastes of a refined woman of the world. She liked good pictures, rich picturesque dresses, and she chose from her lovers the one who could give the most of these things. That was Sir Gerald Hamilton. Certainly the handsome earl was better looking, but then she had been told that he was embarrassed in circumstances. She married Sir Gerald, who was about thirty years older than herself. A magnificent appointment had been offered to him in India: he had accepted it, and Lady Hamilton, because she knew that she should reign supreme there, went with him. The climate did not suit Sir Gerald, he died, leaving her the whole of his fortune, and Lady Hamilton returned to England, more beautiful, more charming, more coquettish than ever. It was said of her that no man could resist her, and that she never scrupled as to winning a heart or breaking it, if only *pour passer le temps*.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

It was the evening of the day on which Lady Hamilton was expected. Several of the guests invited to meet her had already arrived, and the young Countess of Caraven anxiously expected her visitor. She had a strange kind of foreboding about her.

"I wonder," she said to Sir Raoul, "if some people do bring misfortune with them. I have an idea that Lady Hamilton will bring evil to me."

Sir Raoul laughed, and told her in his simple chivalrous fashion that a beautiful woman could bring only sunshine and happiness; but the young countess sighed.

"Helen of Troy did not bring much sunshine," she said, "and she was beautiful enough."

"But," objected Sir Raoul, "there is a difference; Lady Hamilton is not her fatal loveliness. Times have altered; no woman's face, I think, will ever cause another thirty years' war."

The young countess resolved upon being armed at all points. Her maid felt that at length her mistress was doing justice to herself. She was the evening very difficult to please—no dress was pretty enough; she chose one at length of purple velvet, long, graceful, and made after a picturesque fashion that Hildred particularly affected—cut square so as to show the beautiful neck and shoulders, with wide hanging sleeves, fastened with a diamond knot on the shoulder—a dress that was the triumph of good taste. No ribbon, no flowers, no ornaments nor trimmings marred its graceful simplicity. She wore nothing but diamonds with it—a small tiara on the crown of the queenly head, a necklace round the white throat, a small chain on the white breast, and a bracelet on one of her beautifully molded arms. Nothing could have been more magnificent, in better or simpler taste.

Sir Raoul looked delighted when he saw her. "Lady Hamilton may be very fair," he thought, "but she will not look like Hildred."

The earl did not notice either her face or her dress; he admired her skill, her genius, but he was certainly not in love with his young wife.

It was with some little curiosity that the young countess went to meet her guest. Lady Hamilton had been shown into a pretty little bookish room where she awaited her hostess; and these two women who were so strange to cross each other's lives looked almost eagerly at each other.

Lady Caraven saw before her a tall, graceful, lovely blonde, whose