

HILDRED.

(Continued.)

"I came down to find a book, because I could not sleep, and, seeing the lamp burning, I intended to extinguish it."

Lord Caraven took out his watch.

"Four o'clock," he said. "I am late—or rather early. I have been playing at billiards since eleven."

She looked contemptuously at him.

"I believe," she said, "that your whole soul is engrossed in billiards."

"I have played the best game to-night that I have ever played in my life," he told her, laughing.

She made no reply. He continued—

"I will quote a popular line—'If you're waking, call me early'—that is, some time after noon. We shall have a grand match at the club to-morrow evening, and I have staked a small fortune on the champion billiard-player of England."

Hildred looked at him—the handsome face was worn and haggard, the eyes were tired and dim. The picture was a striking one—the girl-wife in all the fresh beauty of her youth; the husband, still in his evening-dress, haggard, pale, yet handsome even in his fatigue; the lovely light of the morning struggling with the garish light of the lamp.

Hildred spoke at last—the valet had discreetly disappeared.

"I had no idea that you stayed out so late," she said gravely. "I do not think it is right."

"If I were you," returned her husband, "I would not waste my time in thinking about it. You know the old song—

'The best of all ways to lengthen our days
Is to steal a few hours from the night, my dear.'"

"It must be hard for your servants," she said, "though perhaps very delightful to yourself."

"You forget our compact, Hildred," he said, his face clouding. "You go your way, and I go mine; but I will allow no interference; my outgoings and incomings have nothing to do with you—do not forget."

"I do not forget," she told him haughtily.

"I will never allow any one to make any comment upon my actions," he said. "I please myself, and I always shall."

"I make no comment," rejoined his wife.

He recovered his good humor—it was impossible to look at her and do otherwise.

"We both, it appears, steal a few hours from the night, but mine are taken from the beginning, yours from the end. Good morning, Hildred," and the next moment she was standing in the hall alone.

She went into the drawing-room and opened the shutters, letting in all the glory of the sunshine, all the fragrance of the morning air. She opened the windows and looked out at the tall green trees. How fair it was—this world on which she looked! The sky was glowing with crimson and gold, the dew lay shining on the grass, the western wind was fragrant with sweet odors.

Looking at the morning sky, she remembered her husband's handsome haggard face under the garish light of the lamp, and she turned away with a shudder. What a false unnatural life it was! How she loathed it! She laid her head against the cool green leaves of the plants that half filled the window, and, looking still at the morning skies, dreamed of the world, of life as it might have been—so different—ah, so different, if she had only married some one who loved her!

The beauty of the morning sky, the fragrance of the flowers, awoke in her heart a longing for love. If she had only married a husband who loved her—who would have talked to her, cared for her—who would not have placed her outside his life, and have treated her as a stranger—she could have lived in the green heart of the land, away from the brilliant city, the sun would always have shone for her.

So thinking, so dreaming, she fell asleep, with her head amongst the leaves and the sun shining on her face.

When she awoke it was with a shudder: her dreams had all been of the earl's anger. She remembered the scene of the early morning.

"And now," she thought, "he will sleep until noon, and then play again until sunrise to-morrow. What a life! May Heaven pardon us for the time we waste!"

It was not until dinner-time the same day that she saw her husband again, and then he did not look very well pleased.

"Hildred," he said sharply, "I hope you do not intend to repeat this morning's performance. If you want books, take them upstairs with you. It is like a scene from a French drama, to open the hall door and find one's wife waiting there."

"It was quite an accident," she replied. "How can you imagine it to have been otherwise?"

He appeared rather ashamed of his harshness.

"I have heard so many stories," he said. "I thought perhaps that some one had been telling you that I spend whole nights at billiards, and that you wished to find out for yourself whether it were true."

"You do not understand me," she returned haughtily, "if you think that I would allow any one to speak evil of you to me."

He looked pleased.

"That is right," he said. "I see it was accidental. Do not let it occur again, Hildred. I should not like it. After all, you know liberty of action is the one great thing. I will let no one interfere with mine."

"I can assure you, Lord Caraven," she answered, "that I for one shall never try to do so."

"That is right," he said. "If you keep to that, we shall be good friends."

CHAPTER XVII.

A week after this little incident Arley Ransome called to see his daughter; he wished to congratulate her on her success in society, to tell her all that he had heard in her praise, and how his most sanguine dreams were being realized. As the father of Lady Caraven, people thought it worth their while to conciliate him. He was invited to houses which before this marriage he had never hoped to enter; he had been made welcome in the drawing rooms of Belgravia and Mayfair. What was even better, his practice was increasing. Arley Ransome was a happy man.

He was shown into the library, where the young countess sat alone royally beautiful, in a close-fitting dress of black velvet—velvet that fell in rich folds and swept the ground around her. The charming head and face were set off by the dark drapery; she held a book in her hands, but she had not read one word it contained. She looked up when her father entered, and he was struck by the despondency of her young face, the weariness of the dark eyes, the drooping attitude. He went up to her and, as usual, complimented her. She was looking so well, so beautiful, he must say, and what a success she had achieved!

No smile answered—the weariness and the despondency deepened. He took a seat by her side, and told her all that he thought would interest her most. Was she listening? He did not know, for she made no reply. Suddenly—and the shock of it quite startled him—she raised her eyes to his face.

"Father," she said, "do you know what manner of man this is to whom you have sold me?"

"My dear Hildred, hush! Pray be more guarded in your speech."

"I repeat, do you know what manner of man my husband is?"

"Oh, now you put the question in better form, I can answer it: You really should not use the word 'sold,' as though you were a slave; we do not sell people in England."

She laughed—surely the most dreary, the saddest laugh that ever fell from such young lips.

"We will not dispute about a word, papa. Answer my question—do you know what manner of man my husband is?"

"I know the earl is considered a very handsome, fascinating man by all who are acquainted with him," he replied.

"Handsome!" she repeated sorrowfully. "What has that to do with it? Do you know that he is utterly incorrigible—that he spends his days and nights in playing and betting—that he comes home at sunrise—that he neglects every duty?"

"Little foibles, my dear," he replied quickly; you must not think too much of them."

She folded her hands, and they lay listlessly on her dress.

"Little foibles, papa? If men call those things little foibles, I should like to know what they consider great sins?"

"We will waive that, my dear—it is not a matter for discussion," said the lawyer, almost wishing that he had not called on that particular morning.

But she was not to be silenced.

"Did you know what he was when you allowed me to marry him?" she continued.

"I knew that he was Lord Caraven—and surely that was enough—a peer of the realm, a man of ancient descent."

"Did you know that he liked gambling and betting better than any thing else in the world?" she asked.

"Mere foibles. All men have their weaknesses—those are his. You must have patience, my dear."

"Did you know," she continued, "that he does not even like me, and never did?"

"Nonsense, Hildred! You have all that you require," he said hastily.

"And a dead heart," she murmured—"a dead heart! Papa, did you remember that I was young, and that youth lives on love?"

"Nonsense!" he replied. "You have grown sentimental through having nothing to do, Hildred."

"It was a cruel thing, this marriage. I was so young—I might have been spared. It was a cruel deed!"

"My dear Hildred," said Arley Ransome, growing alarmed, "I did not deceive you. I never told you that Lord Caraven loved you. He asked you to be his wife; there was nothing said about love."

"You told me that I could live without it," she said in a low voice.

"I did," he assented.

She struck her hands together with passionate fervor.

"I cannot," she cried. "Heaven help me, I cannot. My heart is empty, my heart is dead, my life is vain. You deceived me when you told me that. You, my father, who should have saved me—who should have taught me better—you deceived me, and I wish that I were dead!"

"You are very unreasonable, Hildred," he said slowly.

"What have I to live for?" she cried. "I have no one to love me. My husband is a stranger to me; he values me less than his horse or his dog; he would not miss me if I died to-morrow; he has my money, he does not want me. There is no one in all this wide world so forlorn, so desolate as I am."

"You forget that I love you, Hildred."

"No, you never loved me, papa," she declared. "I am quite—"