

HILDRED.

(Continued.)

They sat down side by side, and Lord Caraven positively forgot all about the plans in his wonder at his wife. How bright her face grew as she dwelt on the advantages of the pretty houses!

"We shall have no more pale, stunted, deformed children," she said. "Ah, Lord Caraven, you do not know how the sight of those children has touched my heart! Do you remember Mrs. Browning's pathetic lines—

'The children—oh, my brothers!'

"No; I have never heard them," he replied.

"If you saw the dull, pale faces, the dim eyes, the deformed limbs! I always feel ready to cry out, 'Give the children air, for Heaven's sake!' Now in these our new houses they will have air; we shall see rosy faces, we shall hear the music of glad young voices, and as you pass by they will bless you, Lord Caraven—they will stand up together, the young and the old to bless you. Oh, let us make haste!"

Looking at her, listening to her, he thought of the child with the darkening face. "Shall I throw a stone at him?" What a contrast between the picture she painted and the sad reality! Something like a sob rose to the lips of the earl. Stoned by a child! How the disgrace of it clung to him!

"You are thinking of something else," she said, suddenly coming to a close in the midst of her description of cottage-gardens.

"I plead guilty," answered Lord Caraven. "I was thinking of you."

"Of me?" she exclaimed, with such sincerity of surprise that he was startled. "I did not know that you ever thought of me. You must not think of me now; I want all your attention for these plans; you must decide as to them."

"I cannot help thinking of you, Hildred. Tell me, from where do you get your wonderful energy, your fresh, bright interest in everything?"

"I cannot tell you," she replied. "I suppose all things are part of myself."

"Then you have a wonderful self, Hildred, and I may be pardoned for thinking of it. Now about these plans—I think this is the simplest, the prettiest, and the best."

They discussed them in full detail, and that conversation had something so interesting, so piquant in it, that the earl was deeply interested.

"Thank you," said Hildred, looking up with a charming smile—"I am grateful to you for relieving me in my perplexity."

"The pleasure has been all on my side," he answered; and that was the most gallant speech that the earl had yet made to his wife.

The difference in them was plain to be seen. Men who had gamed and betted with him, who had won his money and paid him in flattery, shrunk from him, seeing that their hour was over. They sneered about him, and said something to each other about petticoat government. But one day, when Lord Caraven had refused a heavy wager at billiards, some one remarked that Lady Caraven had taught him better ways. He looked up with a frank laugh.

"My wife?" he said. "Oh, no! She has had nothing to do with it;" and he honestly believed what he said.

Her influence had been so wisely directed, so sparingly used, that he could not trace it; and he thought that he alone had aroused himself from his long trance of indolence. No woman on earth could have won a greater victory.

"I am so glad I have been patient," she said to herself. "I am glad I chose the higher and nobler part, instead of the weaker one of running away."

So time passed on, and the beautiful summer days were filled with schemes and plans for the benefit of others.

It seemed to the earl that he was really waking up from a long sleep. The world was wearing a different aspect for him. He had never even given a thought to politics. With the arbitrary insolence of youth he had pronounced them nonsense—and that was one of the things that Sir Raoul deplored. Hildred too was sorry for it. She had been so successful in other matters that she ventured at last upon this. It was by a series of well-directed questions that she first aroused his attention. In trying to answer them he grew interested himself. "If I had a vote," Hildred had a fashion of saying, "I should try to urge it measure." At last Lord Caraven awoke to the consciousness that in the government of Britain's mighty empire he too ought to have a voice.

They had seen nothing of John Blantyre since his abrupt dismissal. The earl had been told that he had left Mere Cottage, but that he was living at Court Raven. That piece of intelligence did not trouble him; the unjust steward was part and parcel of the past—a past he was beginning to think of with regret. Nevertheless, John Blantyre lived only for his revenge.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

Autumn came with its golden wheat, its ripe fruit, its gorgeous beauty of coloring. The spirit of improvement was at work at Ravensmere; already the obnoxious cottages had disappeared, and in their places clean, healthy, well-drained dwelling-houses were springing up. Lady Caraven worked hard, allowing herself little rest, and the earl was filled with wonder at her systematic method.

"You ought to have been a man and a lawyer, Hildred," he said to her one day.

"I would rather be a woman and a countess," she replied, with a low happy laugh.

The first thing that she had done was to make a list of every laborer and dependent on the estate, his name, condition, income, the number of his children, how they lived, and where they were educated, so that there was not one a stranger to her. The earl looked admiringly at it.

"Do you really mean to say, Hildred, that all these people are dependent on me—that, more or less, I have an interest in all of them?"

"I do mean it," replied his wife earnestly; "and there seems to be something noble to me in the idea that one man has it in his power to benefit so many others."

"That is from your side of the question," said the earl; but he thought more seriously than he spoke.

Already a perceptible change had come over Ravensmere. Fast-looking men who had rejoiced in the title of his lordship's friends had all left—men of note were beginning to seek his society. He had written several articles on social science and home politics that had been highly thought of—he who believed himself too indolent even to write a letter—but these articles and essays were rather the result of his wife's observation than his own. Women were, of course, very much inferior; but it was a great thing to have a clever wife. She would talk to him, suggest ideas, give her opinion; and then, when they had discussed the matter well, she would say to him—

"Those are excellent ideas of yours—why not put them into form?"

It was she who revised and corrected his papers—she to whom in fact they really owed their existence, although the world praised him. His reputation was growing rapidly. Only a few months, and such a difference!

"Thank Heaven that I have been patient!" the young countess often said to herself.

They worked together. She made their duties so pleasant to him that he would not for the world have renounced them. Husband and wife became, as the earl said, good companions, good friends. They had many interests now in common—the improvement of the estate, the building of model cottages, the education of the young, the relief of the aged and distressed. With a thoughtful look in his blue eyes the earl would sometimes say to his wife—

"I cannot imagine why I thought all this so tiresome before, or what gives me so much pleasure to do it now."

No one was more gratified than Sir Raoul. He exulted in the fact that his predictions were fulfilled.

"I always thought a good woman's influence boundless," he said; "and now I am sure of it."

But he was not misled; he saw exactly how things were—that the earl had started with the conviction that his wife was an unformed school-girl, and that, though believing her now to be a very clever woman, he still retained much of his early impression. Lord Caraven had accepted the fact that he did not love her with a lover's love, and that their marriage was a fair mistake into which his own folly had led him—and he had not changed his opinion; he absolutely never thought of love with reference to her. They were good friends, with one common interest—that was all.

But with Hildred it was not quite the same thing. She had once loved him; and now, as his better nature appeared, she began to care for him again. Not that she ever betrayed such a feeling to him. She was kind, affectionate, patient; she devoted herself to his service; but no word indicating a warmer feeling than friendship ever escaped her lips. She did not even own to herself or know that she was beginning to love him.

It was almost impossible to help it. There was something very lovable about the careless, debonaire man; his very faults had a kind of charm because he owned them so frankly; his handsome face would have been a passport to any woman's heart; moreover, he was so earnest in his endeavor to do better, so truly sorry for the ill-spent, miserable past, so anxious not to relapse into bad habits. She could not help loving him.

"I can imagine," she thought to herself, "how a mother feels who has taught her little child to walk."

She had a half-protecting fondness for him; she would fain have stood between him and every temptation of his life—have been his good angel; he was in some vague way to her a child whom she had taught and trained. Whether this affection would develop into the jealous love of a woman remained to be seen. She found herself always thinking of him, always trying to find out what would please him, always studying him; there was hardly a moment in the day in which her thoughts did not dwell on him. When he called her by name, her heart thrilled with pleasure; when he praised her even ever so faintly, it seemed to her that earth held no higher joy; if he asked her to do anything, she knew no rest nor peace until it was done. There was no man in England whose comforts were better attended to; yet husband and wife were simply good friends—nothing more.

One day, after luncheon, when some visitors were staying with them, conversation turned on a certain Lady Hamilton, who had just returned from India.

"Lady Hamilton was one of your early loves, Ulric, was she not?" said Sir Raoul laughingly.

"I suppose so," replied the earl carelessly. "I had a great many early loves, if one may believe all the stories told. Do you know what my opinion is?"

"No," answered Sir Raoul, "I do not."

"I do not believe that I have ever loved at all—that is, using the word 'love' in its best and highest sense."

"Then it is for want of appreciation," said Sir Raoul, curtly.

Neither of them knew that Hildred had overheard the few chance words but they had pierced her heart as with a two-edged sword.

He had never loved any one! She was his wife; he had never