

HILDRED.

(Continued.)

It was wonderful how the expression of the beautiful face had changed during that quiet interview. She rose with the gayest, sweetest laugh he had ever heard from her lips.

"I am a Woman with a Mission," she said, "and I shall always think of myself with capital letters. Raoul, I cannot be grateful enough to you. When you first entered the house I felt as though Heaven had sent me a friend. If happiness comes to me through following your counsel, how shall I thank you?"

"I shall need no thanks, Hildred," he replied. "You are and have been, ever since I first saw you, the dearest object on earth to me. You are my dear sister, Ulric's wife. I have loved Ulric all my life—I could not help loving you."

"Now I am going to practice my first lesson in humility," she said. "Raoul, I wish that you could be in the room when I give my husband the mignonette."

"That would spoil it all," he replied, laughingly; "and he is so quick, so keen, he would find out at once that the little scene had been arranged between us."

"Then I must venture all by myself, I suppose," said Lady Caraven. "I feel as shy as—I cannot tell you what. Raoul, if he is cross or contemptuous I shall lose heart."

"No, you will not. Having once put your hand to the plow, you will not turn back. When your hope or your courage fails you, say to yourself, 'I have to win my husband's heart'—that will give you all your courage again."

She walked slowly down the path, Sir Raoul by her side. She looked round on the four high ivied walls.

"I have always loved this little pleasure," she said. "I shall love it better than ever now. It will seem almost like a church to me."

"Why like a church?" he asked with some amusement.

"Because one of the best sermons I have ever heard preached has been preached to me here," she replied. "I have learned a lesson here. I shall never see these high ivied walls or touch a crimson carnation without thinking of you, Raoul, and all that you have said."

Then he watched her as she went from one bed of mignonette to another, looking eagerly for the choicest sprays, holding them up to him with wistful eager face and sweet pathetic eyes.

"Will this do, and this?" she asked as simply as a child. "Oh, Raoul, I hope he will not be angry—I hope he will be pleased! I shall tell you how I get on. I am nervous about it."

In another minute the beautiful face disappeared, and Sir Raoul was left in the pleasure alone.

"A man might lay down his life for such a woman as that," he said, with what was almost a sigh.

Lord Caraven stood in the billiard-room at Ravensmere; he had been playing with one of his friends, who, having received a telegram, had gone to answer it. He stood alone, leaning carelessly against the open veranda, something more than his usual indifference darkening his face; he never liked interruption during a game.

"A most unpropitious moment," thought the young countess, as she caught sight of him; but, having given her word to Sir Raoul, she would have marched up to the mouth of a loaded cannon rather than have broken it.

Looking up, the earl could not but confess that he had seldom seen a lovelier picture than his young wife at that moment presented, with a flush on her face, and her hands filled with sprays of fragrant mignonette.

She would not reveal her hesitation, but went straight to him, smiling so that he little guessed how her heart beat. He raised his eyebrows as she drew nearer to him. What was going to happen? Before he had time to speak his face was buried in a soft, dewy mass of fragrant mignonette.

"There!" said a laughing voice. "You said this morning that this was your favorite flower. I have been looking for the most fragrant sprays of it that I could find."

He could not believe the evidence of his senses; it was incredible that the laughing voice belonged to his cold, proud wife—the girl who had swept imperiously from the room when he saw her last. He looked at her in amazement. She would not see the surprise on his face or make the least difference because of it.

"You have the very pick of the garden here," she said; "every spray has its own special beauty."

He roused himself, and tried to recover from the wondering stupor that had overcome him.

"You really remembered, Hildred, what I said?" he began, with a pleased look.

"Yes, and I think you showed good taste," she replied. "I know no flower lovelier than fragrant mignonette."

"And you really think that I have good taste?" he said.

"Yes. Why should that surprise you?" she asked with a smile.

His face flushed and his eyes drooped.

"I fancied," he said hurriedly, "that you considered me altogether graceless and without one redeeming quality."

"Indeed I do not," she replied earnestly, thinking of all that Sir Raoul had said in his favor. "That is a great mistake of yours."

"There is one thing," he confessed, in a low voice—"I have shown the worst side of my character to you."

She felt frightened and inclined to run away.

"You will not lose my flowers or throw them away!" she said. And then she was startled, for his handsome indolent eyes were looking into hers with a new expression in their blue depths.

"Am I so wanting in chivalry and gallantry, Hildred?" he asked her. "I believe this is the first thing that you have ever given me of your own free will, is it not?"

"No," she replied quietly, "it is not."

"Ah, pardon me," he said, with a quick change of face and voice—"you gave me your fortune!"

There was hot rebellion for one moment—hot, bitter rebellion. Then she remembered Sir Raoul's words. It was for her husband's good. She trampled down the hot impulse of angry pride—she stilled the bitter anger and contempt. Her victory over herself was so great that she was even surprised at it. She laid her hand on his arm.

"Nay, Lord Caraven," she said gently, "you are quite wrong. I was not thinking of money. Gold is dross—I despise it—I could almost hate it for the mischief that it makes. I was thinking of something very different from money—something that money could not buy."

He was looking at her with keen curiosity.

"Something that money could not buy," he repeated. "I declare that you puzzle me. I thought gold was omnipotent."

"I do not think so—I do not like it. Omnipotent? Why, Lord Caraven, all the wealth in the world could not buy happiness or love."

"No," he said quietly, "it could not; yet, Hildred, money has done something for me."

"I do not intend to depreciate it," she remarked; "but it is not omnipotent; and there are many things in this world of far higher value than money."

"It is true," he said thoughtfully.

She laughed again, and, if he had known her better, he would have detected tears in the sound of that laugh.

"We are positively agreeing, Lord Caraven," she said.

He was looking at her with intense curiosity in his face.

"Hildred, what have you given me that money cannot buy?"

The dark eyes gleamed softly.

"I will not tell you, Lord Caraven," she answered.

"But I must know. You have excited my curiosity—you must gratify it. You have enumerated three things that money cannot buy—happiness, virtue, love. It was none of these. Then what could it be?"

"I must go, Lord Caraven," she said, her face growing hot and her heart beating quickly. "If you weigh every word that I say, I shall have to be very careful."

"Hildred, tell me what you mean?" he requested. "What have you given me?"

"I will tell you," she replied laughingly, "when you have counted all those tiny leaves on the mignonette."

She turned to go, but he put out his hand to detain her. She eluded him, and, with a light laugh, disappeared, leaving him by the veranda alone.

CHAPTER XXIX.

"You look astonished at something," said Lord Caraven's friend to him when he returned to resume their game of billiards.

"Yes," replied the earl—"I have been enjoying a novel sensation."

"What is that?" asked his friend.

"I am not quite sure," was the laughing reply—"I should not like to be too certain of it—but I believe that I have been flirting with my own wife."

The young countess had hastened smilingly away after presenting him with the sprays of mignonette. If that was the result of a few kind words, she said to herself that she would often say them. Sir Raoul saw her smiling and blushing, with a glad light in her eyes.

"Well," he said, "what success, Hildred?"

"The best in the world," she replied; and her pleasure was increased at dinner-time when she saw that Lord Caraven wore some of the mignonette in his button-hole.

She tried hard to keep strict watch and guard over herself. When she found herself relapsing into her old *hauteur* and proud silence, she roused herself. She who had always passed by her husband with lofty unconcern, who had never deigned to make the least reply to any remark of his, now studied little speeches that she could make to him; she asked his opinion; she smiled at his jests. People looked at each other in quiet wonder. Had they, after all, made any mistake about their host or hostess?

Lord Caraven was fond of music; he had a rich, ringing tenor voice which, as a rule, he was too indolent to use. He would troll out a verse of a love ditty, or the chorus of a drinking-song in a fashion that made one long to hear the rest. In the evening Sir Raoul asked him to sing.

"It is too much trouble," said the handsome earl. "Why should I exert myself to sing when other people can do it so much better for me?"

"That is an idle excuse," returned Sir Raoul. "Lady Caraven persuades your husband to sing; he has a voice almost as rich and clear as Mario's, but he will never use it."

She came over to him. He looked at his beautiful young wife in all the shimmer of satin and gleam of pearls; he gazed earnestly into the beautiful face.

"Do sing, Lord Caraven," she said. "You owe me something for my flowers this morning."

"Do you really wish me to sing, Hildred?" he asked.

"I do indeed," she answered.

"Then you shall be obeyed. Will you have an old-fashioned English ballad, or a Scotch one? No French or Italian for me. I like good hearty words."