

not think it is such a great pleasure to be of it. I think it is quite possible that many would be civil to the Countess of Caraven who would have wasted little kindness on Hildred Ransome."

"There you are right," he said.

"I do not care for your great world then. I know worlds higher and greater—I would sooner belong to them."

"Yet it is something to be Countess of Caraven," said the earl. And his wife's sigh was the only response to his words.

CHAPTER XVI.

The people of the great world did not quite understand Lady Caraven. She was among them, but not of them. In crowded ball-rooms, in the opera-house, at garden-parties, and where the lovers of fashion congregated, her noble, beautiful face, with its look of proud reserve, appeared out of place. She was very popular, very much liked, but not quite understood. Fair ladies whose lives were one gay round of pleasure wondered why smiles did not come as readily to her lips as to theirs—why she was graver, more thoughtful, more abstruse.

It was so strange a life; the world around her was so brilliant, so gay, there seemed no room in it for anything but laughter and song. There were times when she looked wonderingly at the bright faces of others, crying from the depths of her soul, "My heart is empty."

The tender, loving human heart was empty. She had loved her father very dearly, and he had sold her to the handsome earl for a title—for the gratification of a paltry ambition. She had tried to love her husband, and he had amused himself by telling her of his conquests—he had frankly owned that he did not care for her, and that he never should. Her heart was empty. It was too noble to be filled with frivolity. She might have turned to that refuge for the destitute, flirtation. She might have thrown herself into the giddy vortex of the world—into the whirlpool of gayety. She might have lived on excitement. But she was too noble for any of these things—she could not have consented to them.

"What shall I do with my life?" The cry that arises from so many aching hearts now arose from hers. She had no one to love, no one to care for, the very duties that might have occupied her were taken from her; and something of all this was told in her beautiful young face. She had many sad thoughts. No one was more popular in society than the handsome earl; but people were quite alive to his failings, which were never treated very seriously—the rumor that he had lost a few thousands on the turf, a few hundreds at the gaming table, was generally received with a smile. He was "faithless and light of heart," he never sighed over his misfortunes, and the world loved the smiling fashion in which he bore them.

People had not made up their mind as to whether he loved his beautiful girl-wife, and Hildred often heard remarks not intended for her ear. One evening she was standing behind a group of ladies in a crowded ball-room, and she heard her own name.

"Have you seen Lady Caraven?" one asked another, and the answer was—

"Yes, I have seen her. She is very beautiful; but she is a thousand times too good for the earl."

"Yes, it was a sacrifice," said the first speaker. "She does not look happy."

Again, she was in a crush-room one evening, when, feeling cold, she drew her opera-hood over her face, and she heard herself spoken of.

"The Countess of Caraven. Poor child, she is to be pitied!"

Why was it that people seemed to pity her? Did the whole world know that her husband had married her for her money and did not love her? She fancied it must be so—and that belief made her more retiring than ever.

One morning she was restless and could not sleep. She had been thinking about her strange lot in life until her head ached. The pillow was hot; she longed to be up and breathing the sweet fresh morning air. She touched the repeater; it was just four. She thought a book might soothe her, and she was much interested in a new novel. She was always considerate about her servants. Many ladies would have rung for their maid, and have sent her for what they required; but Lady Caraven rose and put on her dressing-gown, intending to go to the drawing-room herself. Then the clear cold water in her dressing-room looked so tempting that she stopped and bathed her face and hands in it. She drew her wealth of dark hair behind her pretty shell-like ears. She had no thought of the lovely picture that she presented—her beautiful face glowing with roses from the cold water, her hair falling in most picturesque disorder, the graceful lines and curves of her figure showing to the greatest advantage.

She went down-stairs, and was surprised to see the large lamp still burning in the hall. She thought it had been forgotten, and went forward with the intention of putting it out. To her still greater surprise she saw Adolphe, her husband's valet, asleep in the great arm-chair. She spoke to him.

"Adolphe," she said, "what are you doing here? Why is this lamp still alight? It is morning."

The tired servant looked round him with an air of stupefaction for half a minute, then arose, and, seeing the young countess, grew puzzled and half alarmed. What was he to say if she repeated the question?

"What are you doing here?" she asked again.

He dared not say that he was waiting for his master; but, before he had time to reply, there came fortunately a knock at the hall-door, and the next moment the earl stood before her. In amazement he looked at the vision before him.

"Hildred," he cried, "what are you doing here?"

(To be continued.)

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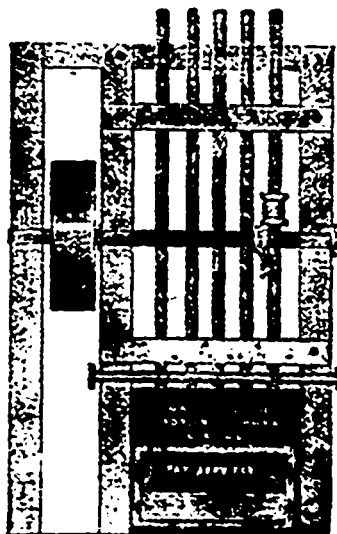
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