

## HILDRED.

(Continued.)

Time had familiarized him with her presence in the house; but it was seldom that he took any especial notice of her; seldom that he spoke to her. As for any display of kindness or love, it was out of the question.

It was a dreary fate. She tried to bear it bravely, to store up golden knowledge and wisdom; but at eighteen, when the heart longs for love, and the fair opening life craves for its full enjoyment, it is difficult to live on knowledge and wisdom. She strove hard; she told herself that marriage was irrevocable—that hers could never be undone. The only thing that remained was to make the best of it. How to do that was now the great study of her life. She found herself opposed on all sides. If she attempted to ask the earl anything about the people on his estate, the answer was always, "Go to Blantyre." As she neither liked nor trusted Blantyre, she never condescended to ask him a single question.

"My life is empty," she would say. "I might almost as well be dead as living."

No more painful life could have been imagined. Ravensmere was gay enough; they saw plenty of visitors, they had balls and dinner-parties; their visitors were gay, worldly, brilliant people, who came to enjoy themselves for a few days, and did not care to enter into the cares and trials of their hostess. With them she was gay and brilliant—she would show nothing of the anguish that never left her; they should not go away and talk about "Lady Caraven, the wife whom her husband did not love," whatever it cost her, and the effort was at times terrible.

The earl saw her only at those times, and he smiled significantly.

"Women have no heart," he said, scoffingly. "This girl is just as happy as though she had the most loving husband in the world. She has what she wanted, and she seems to enjoy it too."

Of the noble, womanly pride that disdained all complaint; of the brave spirit that fought so resolutely with her longing for happiness and her longing for love, he never even dreamed. To him she was a girl content with her fate—a girl who enjoyed her title, her position, her gayeties, who did not look beyond them, who cared nothing that she was a neglected widowed wife. Had any one told him the contrary, he would not have believed it; he would have said it was a misconception. She looked very nice at the head of his table—very handsome, very graceful; she could sing like a nightingale, she never interfered with him. What more could he wish for?

"I begin to think," said the handsome earl to himself one day, "that I have not done so badly after all. If I had married for love or anything of that kind, what trouble I should have had, what reproaches, what tears—and a woman's tears! I would sooner face untold hardships. I should have had all the uncertainties of love; now I am spared it all, and my house is presided over by a queenly mistress. Taking everything into account, I consider I am a fortunate man."

So he said in his blindness; but the time was to come when he would awaken from that blindness with sudden passionate pain.

When the month of May came round, he decided upon going to London. Halby House was prepared for them, and the handsome earl's friends made ready to receive him with open arms. He had been welcome in his penniless state, and, having married a wealthy heiress, he was now doubly welcome. Those who had won money from him looked forward to winning more; those who had gambled and betted with him before looked forward to a renewal of those delights. He would be welcome.

The *élite* of the fashionable world were not sorry to receive their favorite again. The rumor that Halby House was to be thrown open, that the young Countess of Caraven was very beautiful, that the earl's revived prosperity would enable him to vie with the best party-givers in London, was good news. The only one indifferent to it was the young countess herself—and she would fain have hidden her sorrows from all eyes and remained at Ravensmere.

## CHAPTER XV.

Halby House was, as rumor said, one of the most magnificent mansions in London. It had been closed for some years, the earl's affairs not permitting his residence there. Now circumstances were different. Arley Ransome—to whom this spring was to bring the keen enjoyment of his ambition—had undertaken to have it redecorated and refurnished. He had gratified the earl by begging that he would leave the matter entirely to him; it would delight him, he said, to place so valuable a present in his daughter's hands as a wedding-gift. The earl laughed indolently.

"It is rather late in the day for a wedding-gift," he said; "but do just as you like."

Arley Ransome did just as he liked; he enjoyed it very much. He had the pleasure of going to the best shops in London and ordering all kinds of things for "my daughter, Lady Caraven"—"my daughter, the Countess of Caraven."

It was a poor ambition for a clever man; but it was his, and he had gratified it at the cost of his daughter's happiness. That mattered little to him; he was father-in-law to the Right Honorable the Earl of Caraven—he was the father of the beautiful Countess of Caraven. What this did for him, how it advanced his interests, he best knew.

Halby House was talked about for its splendor and magnificence, even before the earl and countess came to town crowds of people went to see it. It was considered a triumph of art. The earl had not asked his young wife if she would go up to town; he had taken her consent for granted. He knew that she must be presented—that, if he failed in that duty, Arley

Ransome would be indignant; and he was fairly caught in the toils. He was not particularly ashamed of his wife; he was not proud of her; but he had ceased to feel annoyed by the reflection that he had married a money-lender's daughter. The Duchess of Morley was to present her; and, once under the shadow of her grace's protection, a triumph was sure to follow.

A proud day for Arley Ransome was that of his daughter's presentation at court. He drove to Halby House to see her before she went, and to him his daughter looked like a miracle of beauty. Full dress enhanced her loveliness wonderfully; her neck, arms, and shoulders were beautifully molded, and they were shown to greatest advantage, as was the perfect rounded figure. The court-dress was one of unusual magnificence—a silver brocade elaborately trimmed with rich lace. She wore a *parure* of diamonds; the waving plumes that lend so grotesque an effect to some faces gave her an air of majesty. The lovely Spanish face and dark eyes were a study in themselves.

She was alone with her maids in her dressing-room when Arley Ransome came. He sent up a little penciled note, saying—

"Hildred, can you come into the drawing-room for a few minutes? I want to see you in court-dress."

There was no elation in her heart as she raised her magnificent train in her hand and threw it over her arm. She went down-stairs grave, collected, almost sad.

Arley Ransome started as she entered. Then he made a low bow. "My dear Hildred," he said, "I congratulate you. How beautiful you look! You were born to be a countess."

"Then I was born to very little purpose," she replied hastily.

He would not notice the petulant reply.

"I must repeat that you look very beautiful indeed, my dear child," he said. "I am surprised—gratified."

"I am glad that you are pleased," she replied. He was her father, and she was compelled to honor him; but she felt that she could never forgive him for having sold her—sold her for a title.

"I think, my dear," said Arley Ransome nervously, "that it would be quite well if you could try to—to look a little brighter. You do not look happy. How is it?"

"Did you ever expect that I should be happy, papa?"

"Of course. Most certainly you have everything to make you so."

She made no reply. The lawyer's eyes glistened with keenest satisfaction as he looked at her.

"It is a proud day for me," he said—"the day on which I see my daughter in her court-dress. Throw down the train; let me see the full effect."

Without a smile on her face she complied, standing before him, calm, beautiful, self-possessed. At that moment, the earl, not knowing she was there, entered the room. He stared at the lovely apparition.

"Hildred, I did not know that you were here. You are ready, I see."

"Quite ready," she replied, briefly.

"Then we will start at once," he said.

Arley Ransome went up to him.

"You must feel pleased and proud," he said. "The most beautiful woman presented to-day will be your wife. I predict for her a signal triumph."

"Which will add considerably to my domestic happiness," remarked the earl.

Yes, he was pleased. He saw people whose opinions he valued turn to look at his wife; he heard her name whispered; he saw admiring glances follow her; he felt that amongst fair pink-and-white English girls she looked like some southern queen. But the knowledge of all this did not in the least warm his heart to her. And she? She had ceased to feel any great interest in his opinion. The time had been when she would perhaps have stood before him, and have said, "I hope you are pleased with me, Lord Caraven." She would not now, she was proudly, superbly indifferent. Indeed she would have given much for the impulse, the desire to please him. It had all faded away—died of neglect.

There was no prouder woman at the Queen's Drawing-room than the money-lender's daughter, the unloved neglected wife of the handsome earl. How little she had dreamed of the splendid pageant when she was at St. Roche; thinking only of study! How little she had thought that at some time or other she would be a countess—Countess of Caraven—that she would be taken to court by a grand and stately duchess.

"I wish," she said, with a sigh, "that I were at St. Roche again. There life was bright, because it was full of possibilities; the possibilities are all accomplished now, and it is bright no longer."

For a few minutes she forgot her troubles, when she stood before the queen. Then there was a crush, a mingling of smiles and sighs, and the drawing-room was over.

Arley Ransome was a proud man that day. He intended his daughter to be the stepping stone to honor. The handsome earl was not at all elated—he heard all that people had to say about the beauty of his wife, but he did not place much faith in it. To him she would always be the unformed school-girl of the Hollies. When any one praised his wife, he thought it was done to please him; and he laughed cynically to himself, knowing how mistaken they were.

He wondered a little what his wife thought of her great success. It struck him that he would ask her. He reached home at the same time that she did, and followed her to the drawing room, thinking as he looked at her how grave and earnest her face was.

"How did you feel through it all, Hildred?" he asked.

"Something like a daw in borrowed plumes," she replied. "I do not think I shall care very much about your great world, Lord Caraven. I do