

HILDRED.

(Continued.)

"Say rather what would I not do. I would reform all abuses. I would make Ravensmere a model estate—people should point to it as a pattern. I would make your laborers men; they are now only soulless drudges. I would pull down those wretched cottages where squalor and disease run riot, and build in their places houses such as even the poor could love. I would educate the children. What a question it is you ask me! What would I not do?"

The earl rose from his chair; he bent his head with chivalrous grace before her.

"My wife," he said, "you shame me."

"No," she cried, "you must not say that to me."

"I repeat it—you shame me," he went on. "Yes. I give my consent—my free, full, hearty consent. You will make a better mistress of Ravensmere than I do a master. You shall be the queen regnant. I will be your prime minister. I place and leave all authority in your hands, and I promise you most faithfully that I will never interfere; you shall pull down and build up, you shall do just as you will, I will never interfere."

She was so overjoyed with his promises, with the change in his manner, with the earnestness on his face, that she forgot all about her restraint and indifference, and she kissed the hand that held her own. She saw her husband's face flush crimson, and she drew back suddenly.

"I beg your pardon," she said; "I am very sorry. I did not think of what I was doing, I was so overjoyed."

He took no notice of the involuntary caress, nor of the apology, though both had struck him.

"I am glad you are pleased, Hildred," he said. "In placing my interests in your hands I feel that I have done to-day the wisest action of my life. To-morrow we will send for Blantyre, and you shall confront him."

She left him then, pleased, happy, confused, with an overwhelming sense of the responsibilities she had assumed, and with something, she could hardly tell what, stirring in her heart, while Lord Caraven looked in amazement at the hand she had kissed. He wondered if he should ever understand her; and he began dimly to perceive that in the money-lender's daughter he had found a noble, high-souled, glorious woman.

Then he smiled to himself, thinking that in these strange days it was impossible to understand anything, and that it was within the bounds of possibility that Hildred inherited her father's talents for business.

"And an excellent thing it will be for me," he said, "if she has."

CHAPTER XXXII.

The visitors at Ravensmere became dimly aware that some more important business than usual was on hand. The earl was seen with a pre-occupied face. He had been heard to refuse Lord Damer's challenge to a billiard match. He had distinctly stated that he should not join in the hunt that Colonel Hungerford had arranged. What was the matter? Lady Caraven was, as usual, bright, beautiful, and graceful; but those who knew her best saw that she was engrossed by some thought.

The earl rang for his footman.

"When Mr. Blantyre comes, show him into my study," he said; and then he went over to his wife. "You do not feel nervous at the task you have undertaken?" he questioned.

"No," she replied calmly, "but I fancy that Mr. Blantyre will feel nervous before we have done with him."

The earl smiled. If this trusted servant of his had deceived him, the sooner he was unmasked and punished the better.

"I think," said Lady Caraven, "it would be quite as well if we looked over that balance sheet before Mr. Blantyre comes—it will shorten the interview."

He acquiesced at once, and followed his wife to the study. The aspect of that room was somewhat changed. The photographs, the love-tokens that had displeased Lady Caraven, the portraits of popular actresses and of well known *danceuses*, had all disappeared; the room looked more like a study, for the tables were covered with books and papers.

If the young countess felt any surprise at its changed aspect she did not evince it, though she felt the compliment. She proved herself a wise woman by saying little; if she had uttered but one word too much she might have imperilled all her hardily won influence.

Gravely, proudly, without a word, she went to the table and took her seat. Her husband stood at some distance from her. Silently she bent her head over the papers.

"You have seldom, I suppose, looked over one of these balance sheets?" she said to the earl.

"No," he replied, "I do not remember that I have ever examined one."

"Then I will look over them," she said quietly. Before long she added, "Will you look at this, Lord Caraven? All this is quite wrong—several entries are incorrect, and the reckoning is falsified."

The earl was slightly embarrassed.

"I do not think, to tell you the truth, Hildred, that I am very clever at accounts," he stammered.

"But surely you can see whether this is correct? Believe me, a child could see it."

"Then I am not so wise even as a child," he said ruefully; but, leaning over her shoulder, he tried to understand what she said.

It was indeed easy enough—the whole sheet, as she pointed out, had been got up to meet the eye.

"And you have never noticed this?" said the countess.

"No, indeed," he replied—"I have never even thought of it."

"Then you have been a very easy master to please," she remarked. "I need hardly say, Lord Caraven, that the man who falsifies his accounts is a rogue. You know it."

"I know that much. I am afraid to think whether all the balance sheets he has prepared since he has been my agent have been like this."

"You have never looked into one, I imagine."

"No—never."

They were interrupted by the entrance of the agent himself—the man whom from his face Lady Caraven suspected from the first of being dishonest.

John Blantyre was a tall, gentlemanly looking man of specious manner and good address. A rogue from liking as much as anything else, he would not have cared to be honest if he could. He had contrived to ingratiate himself into the favor of Lord Caraven from the conviction that he could do as he liked with the easy, indolent, pleasure-loving nobleman. He had done so. He had pandered to all the young earl's weaknesses; to the cry of "Money, money," he had responded by wringing more and more from the tenants, by raising rents, refusing repairs, by all the mean and underhand tricks that he could play. He answered the earl's purposes well, because he could from some source or other always find him money. The young nobleman was too careless, too indolent to stop to think that while he was thus impoverishing the estate the unjust steward was enriching himself. Balance sheets were brought to him that he never even glanced at; bankers' books, bills, receipts, were passed over in similar fashion. He never troubled to look at any of them. The result was irretrievable confusion. John Blantyre had laid aside a fair fortune for himself.

"Let the worst come," he said to himself; "if I am caught there will be only a few years' imprisonment; then I can go abroad and enjoy my savings."

Yet he relied implicitly upon his good fortune that he should not be caught.

He entered the room smiling, with his usual bland, obsequious manner. His face changed when he saw the Countess of Caraven looking over his balance sheets. The earl pointed to a chair; the detected thief sat down.

The young countess' eyes were raised to the bland face of the agent. They seemed to burn him. The earl left the discussion to her, as he had said he would. Words could not have expressed the proud cold contempt of her face as she spoke to him.

"You are well aware, Mr. Blantyre, that this balance sheet is worth nothing? The accounts are all falsified."

"I am not aware of anything of the kind, your ladyship. There may be a few mistakes—it was hurriedly made out. May I ask permission to—"

"You may ask nothing, sir," she replied curtly. "Tell Lord Caraven if it be correct that you have taken a bribe from some one who wants Bromhill Farm—a bribe to turn out the old tenants and bring in a new one."

"Lord Caraven knows that he—"

But the countess interrupted him.

"Did you take the bribe? 'Yes' or 'No'?"

"Yes," he replied sullenly.

"Mr. Blantyre," said the young countess, "you are a detected thief. You have robbed your employer, you have falsified your accounts, you have ground down the poor, you have oppressed the helpless, you have made my husband's name hated and loathed, you have betrayed your trust, you have drawn down upon your own head the curses of those people whose ill luck has brought into contact with you."

"Stay, my lady. You accuse me, and give me no chance to defend myself."

The earl was watching his wife intently. He saw the color rising in her face, he saw the light in her eyes, he heard the passion, the scorn of wrong-doing that trembled in her voice.

"She is equal to it," he thought; "there is no need for me to interfere."

"You cannot defend yourself," she replied. "I hold innumerable proofs of what I assert."

John Blantyre cowered before the bright indignation of the fearless eyes and turning to the earl, said—

"My lord, I have been a faithful servant of yours; have you nothing to say for me?"

"Upon my word, Blantyre, I believe you have been a most consummate rogue," answered the earl. "I have placed all my authority in the hands of Lady Caraven. She is to do as she will."

The bland smile on the agent's face changed to an ugly sneer. The young countess rose from her seat, and, extending her arm, pointed with her finger to the door.

"I shall waste no words with you, sir," she said. "Go. We might prosecute you, we might force you to give up your ill-gotten gains, we might expose you to the contempt of the world—but you are not worth it. I let you go, and the punishment of your conduct will be that everyone will know that you have been dismissed characterless. Not one word!"

He made as though he would speak. She still kept her hand stretched to the door; her eyes overmastered him. He turned to quit the room.

When he reached the door, rage overcame prudence. He looked back at the noble figure of the young wife.

"I thank you, Lady Caraven," he said. "I owe this to you."

She made no sign that she heard him.

"To you," he continued with a sneer; "and we all know that you are here only on sufferance. Take care that your own turn does not come."

There was no answer. Not even a quiver of the white eyelids showed that she heard. His rage increased.