

## HILDRED.

(Continued.)

It was the early dawn of morning when she reached the station—a large railway-junction where she was both unknown and unnoticed. The train started for London in an half hour. No one spoke to her or appeared to see her as she took her place, and in a few more minutes she was on her way.

It was a hard punishment—terribly hard for such a trifle, she thought, wondering that the earl could be so stern. She was tired, fatigued, exhausted with passion and emotion. She had neither eaten, drunk, nor slept since the evening before. When she reached London, she asked a porter to call a cab for her, and gave the address—"Mr. Ransome, the Hollies, Kew;" and the drive thither seemed to her more than ever like a dream.

## CHAPTER XL.

Arley Ransome had not worked quite so hard of late; there was but little need. He had achieved the height of his ambition; he had a large fortune; he was able to speak of his daughter the Countess of Caraven; he could claim kinship through his daughter with some of the noblest families in England. There was no need now to work quite so hard; he could linger over his daintily-spread breakfast table and read his papers at his leisure, content if he reached the city before noon.

On this morning he had seated himself so as to enjoy three things at once—the beautiful view of the river from his window, the bright fire in the grate, and the *recherché* little breakfast that had been served up to him. It was a sudden shock to him when, on hearing a sound, he raised his eyes to the door, and saw there a pale beautiful woman who stood wringing her hands.

"Father," she said, "I am come home."

In utter amazement he started from his seat. His daughter, his beautiful Hildred, the Countess of Caraven, pale as death, wrapped in a dark travelling cloak! What could it mean?

"I—I am very glad to see you, my dear," he said: but he had a horrible foreboding that something terrible had occurred, and that the days of his greatness had vanished. "Come in—pray come in, my dear—do not stand there. How strange you look! Where is Caraven? Dear, dear, how odd it is! Come in, Hildred—the servants will think it strange to see you standing there."

She entered the room, and walked up to him with haughty mien.

"This is the end of my marriage father," she said calmly—"the marriage that you told me could be happy without love. This is the end of it, and I am come home."

"Sit down, my dear, sit down: there is nothing so horrible as a 'scene,' and this looks like one. Take off your cloak and your bonnet. What a strange head-dress!"

She unfastened the thick travelling-cloak, and there in picturesque disarray was the rich evening-dress of amber and black, with a faded crimson flower clinging to it. The lawyer looked on in utter dismay. This disregard for dress and appearances spoke more forcibly than anything else could have done—told more plainly than words that something dreadful had happened.

"Evening toilet, Hildred! Pray, my dear, put on your cloak again. I did not know—I was not prepared—put it on quickly, before any of the servants come in. What is it, Hildred? What is the matter?"

"Not much, father," she replied drearly; "my marriage has not turned out well, and I am come home, you see."

"But that is nonsense—you cannot come home. What is the matter? Tell me!" and the lawyer with a very resigned expression of face put away his *pâte de foie gras*, and folded his hands to listen to his daughter's story.

"You have not quarreled with the earl, I hope—that is, you have not left him?"

"He has sent me away," she replied; and Arley Ransome's face grew very dark.

"There is not much to tell," she continued wearily. "You misled me—you told me that marriage could be happy without love. I find that love is the soul of it, that without love marriage is like a dead body. I being weaker and inferior, was the first to learn to love. I learned to love my husband—he has never cared for me."

"You are too sentimental, Hildred," said Arley Ransome severely.

"I have been doing my best for my husband," she continued, "and we were growing happier. In time I think that he would have loved me: but some one else, a fair woman—one of the kind of women that he admires—Lady Hamilton, came, and—"

"I see," said the lawyer—"the old story, jealousy and quarreling. Surely, Hildred, you have not thrown away the labor of a lifetime by growing jealous and vexing the earl?"

"I have done worse than that," she said "far worse. I was jealous of Lady Hamilton. I thought that both she and my husband were deriding me. I followed them when they went out to see the sun set over the lake. I hid myself behind the alder trees to listen if they said anything about me, and then—I cannot tell how it happened—my husband saw me. He was very angry: he said I was never to enter his doors again, but to return home at once to you."

The lawyer's face cleared.

"You are quite sure that you have told me the whole truth?" he said.

"Yes, quite sure. What should I keep from you? It seems a very hard punishment for what was merely a fault rather of judgment than any-

thing else. I told the earl that I loved him, and that jealousy had driven me mad."

"You told him that? Then rely upon it in a few days all will be well. He will forget his anger and come to find you."

"I do not think so," she returned.

"You are quite sure, Hildred, that you have hidden nothing from me?" he interrogated, adding, "It is, as you say, severe punishment for so small a fault."

She looked up at him in surprise.

"What can I have to hide, papa? In telling you of my love and my jealousy, I have told you the worst."

"Then all will come right again. In the meantime keep up appearance—go to your own room unobserved and wait until your luggage arrives. I shall say that you are come for a few days' change. Keep up your spirits all will come right again, I feel sure."

"I am very tired, papa," she said. "I think I will stay in my room to-day."

"Very well, my dear, do just as you like; you know best, of course. I will say that you do not feel very well. Go to your room, by all means. I hope that you will soon be better. Now try to cheer up; it will be all right. I will see to this difficulty with your husband for you."

She looked up at him proudly.

"You must not interfere, papa. I shall never return to him now."

He looked pityingly at the white face.

"You appear very ill, Hildred. Is there nothing that I can do for you?"

"Nothing," she replied coldly. In her heart she felt bitterly angry with her father. She had trusted him, he had misled her. She did not offer to kiss him, or to touch his hand, but went quietly out of the room and upstairs, leaving him with some very unpleasant thoughts.

It had not been an agreeable interruption to his breakfast, but he tried to think little of it. It was only a quarrel, after all, and his daughter had done nothing wrong. He should make it all right in a few seconds when he saw the earl. He wrote to him before he went to the city, telling him that his wife had reached home safely, but was looking very ill.

The rest of that day Hildred remained in her room, and on the morning she did not come down-stairs. It was afternoon when Arley Ransome, with a face as pale as death, asked for admittance to her apartment. She bade him enter, and he did so, with an open letter in his hand. It was her husband's writing, she perceived.

"You have deceived me," said her father sternly; "you told me that you had hidden nothing from me. Your husband tells me that he has hidden you here because you shot Lady Hamilton on the evening of the thirty-first—shot her with intent to murder, and that you confessed your guilt."

Without a word or a murmur, she looked at him, and then fell like one dead at his feet.

## CHAPTER XLI.

The young countess, as she stood behind the alder-trees at Ravenshurst, had heard the sound of a shot; she was too dazed with her own grief and misery to note the direction from which it had proceeded. She had fancied that something went whirring through the trees. That something was the ball that had been fired at Lady Hamilton, which pierced her shoulder, and would have pierced her heart had it gone in the direction in which it had been aimed. For the moment Lord Caraven had been too bewildered to know what had happened, what he was saying in reality to his guest was that he liked his wife's maiden name better than any he had ever heard. Lady Hamilton, who never liked to hear any one praised but herself, asked at once what it was. He had answered, "Hildred Ransome;" and there were the words Lady Caraven had heard. They had been no sooner uttered than Lady Hamilton fell on his shoulder with a faint, low cry—a cry that seemed almost simultaneous with the firing of the shot.

The earl knew she had been shot, but by whom or why he could not guess. He laid her down for one minute while he looked around; that was that he saw the white face of his wife. He jumped to the conclusion that she had done it: she, and no other, was there on the spot. She had even to himself avowed her jealousy. She had followed them, and in the madness of her folly had shot Lady Hamilton. No other idea occurred to him. He said to himself at once that it was so, and he implicitly believed it. He had rushed to her, and told her that she was a "guilty woman." She had owned it. But they were speaking of different kinds of guilt. He meant the guilt of murder, she meant the guilt of being a spy upon him. No doubt of her guilt relieved his mind. Even in that first bewildered moment he had said to himself that she should never enter his house again, but that he would shield her because she bore his name. He had told her to remain where she was while he carried the senseless lady to the house.

There was terrible consternation. He had the presence of mind to throw the agitated inquirers off the scent. He said that the poacher was out—must be out, for a chance shot fired in the woods had wounded Lady Hamilton. Some of the gentlemen staying at the house went with keepers to scour the woods. There were the threats of vengeance as the rogue who had done the mischief. Meanwhile a groom was dispatched to Court Raven to summon a doctor—the wounded lady had been taken to her room and laid on the bed. At first the earl was frightened lest she should prove mortal; but one of the ladies staying at the castle, who was something of a surgeon, declared that the wound was not dangerous, and that the ball could soon be extracted. After hearing that, the earl returned to his unhappy young wife. His first great fear that she had been guilty of murder had been removed, there remained the fear lest the wound should prove dangerous in the end. It was better, he thought, that she should be away at once.