

One little circumstance had touched him to the very core of his heart. He had said that he would see for himself the state of Dromhill Farm, whether it was really in the desolate condition Blantyre had represented. He walked over the ground alone. Near a gate that led into a wheat-field he saw two little girls, evidently grandchildren of the old farmer, sitting under a hedge.

"Who is that man?" one asked the other.

The elder girl looked at him half shyly, but he affected not to see or hear them.

"Hush, Bessie," she said—"do not speak so loudly. That is the earl from the castle, who says that grandpa must leave the farm."

The younger one, with dire hatred in her face, stooped down and picked up a pebble.

"Shall I throw a stone at him?" she asked; and the elder sister, with a horrified expression, answered, "No."

It was but a slight circumstance, yet the earl had been deeply pained by it. He could just remember that when the late earl—his father—went amongst his tenants, it was with the air of one making a royal progress; that he was followed by blessings; that the little ones laughed aloud as he threw handfuls of small silver amongst them. How different was his own case! A child had taken up a stone to fling it at him! The contrast was great, almost pitiful. Did he deserve such a reception? He could see the childish face dark with anger, the pink dimpled hand grasping the stone. Something must be vitally wrong when even the children were ready to stone him.

He sighed uneasily. He had led a very pleasant life. Getting through a large fortune had been a pleasant occupation. He had enjoyed his gaming, his betting, his racing, his indolence. But now something else was stirring within him. Could it be regret or remorse, or was it simply that he was tired and out of spirits?

Presently the door opened and his wife came in. She had removed the jewels from her hair and her breast; her lovely face shone with a new light; her rich dress, her dark hair, made her a most attractive picture. She went up to him.

"You are very kind to wait, Lord Caraven," she said. "I could not get away before. Lady Damers insisted on my going to her room to see a new-fashioned head dress Worth has sent her. I could not get away. I am afraid you are tired."

"No," he replied; "I have been watching the moon, and thinking"—he did not tell her that his thoughts had been of the little child who wanted to stone him.

"I have come to ask a favor of you," said the young countess—"a favor on which the whole of my life depends. In granting it you will make me happy; if you refuse I shall be miserable."

"That shall not happen if I can prevent it," he answered.

His wife continued—

"I have never complained, because I saw no use in it; but I assure you that I have not been happy—far from it. Perhaps I am graver by nature than some women. I cannot fill my life with gaiety, visiting, luxury, and pleasure. I want something more. Other women have love to live for—I have none."

She stopped suddenly, looking terribly confused.

"I understand," he said, quietly. "Go on, Hildred."

"My time hangs heavily on my hands. I have nothing to do—no occupation. Oh, Lord Caraven, be patient with me! I want to ask you for something that will give me interest—that will occupy me—that will stand to me in the place of happiness and love."

"I will help you to it, if I can," he replied.

She looked so fair, standing there before him pleading her own cause. She drew a little nearer to him, as though her confidence in him were increasing.

"That is what I want you to do for me, Lord Caraven," she said. "I am not ignorant in such matters; you might sneer at me, and say my talent is hereditary; but you will not do that. I have some little experience, and I should improve day by day."

He looked at her, half wondering, half amused.

"What is it, Hildred?" he asked. "I do not in the least understand."

"It is this. I want you to let me be your steward—I mean, let me have charge of your estate. I could do the duties far better than Mr. Blantyre."

"I give him a large salary," said Lord Caraven, half laughing—"he ought to do them well."

"But you have seen for yourself that he does not," she returned, "he is not a just steward."

"No," was the grave admission, "he is not just. It is that which grieves me. He has abused my trust. I shall never believe in him again."

"Then let me take his place," she cried eagerly. "I do not mean in the mere keeping of accounts—you will always want some one for that—or even in the looking after little details; but let me be your head steward, Lord Caraven, and the welfare of your tenants and dependents, the well-being of your estate, the care of your property, shall be my one interest in life. I will be content to work early and late, to live without pleasure, if you will only grant my prayer."

"But you are a lady, Hildred. How could you find time for it?"

In her eagerness she forgot her reserve—she laid her hand upon his arm, and looked into his face.

"I am not a fine lady; I am a lawyer's daughter. It may even be that I inherit my father's liking for business. I shall find time, believe me, if you will give your consent."

"What would you do, Hildred, supposing I gave you my consent?" he asked.

(To be continued.)



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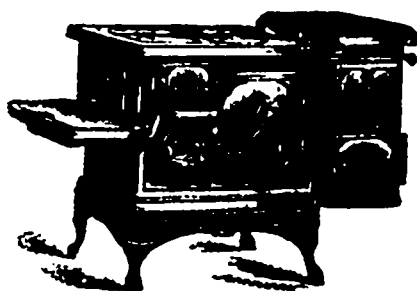
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