

HILDRED.

(Continued.)

The lady was standing with her face averted so that he could not at first see it. He beheld a queenly head, covered with masses of black, shining hair. He stood for some minutes lost in admiration; and then with a sigh she turned slowly round.

If he had thought the figure beautiful, he was even more enchanted with the face. He saw dark star-like eyes fringed with long lashes, and an imperial brow; he saw a mouth that was like a pomegranate-bud, fresh, red, and indescribably lovely; he saw a splendid face, oval in contour, and with the exquisite coloring that Titan gives in his pictures, dainty and brilliant. Yet over the beauty of the face sadness hung like a veil. He saw the glow of a scarlet geranium in the bodice of her dress and one in the dusky depths of her jet black hair.

That it was the money-lender's daughter never for a moment entered his mind—that he saw before him his cousin's wife never occurred to him. This beautiful girl was, of course, a visitor like himself—one of Lady Caraven's friends, he thought to himself, half sadly. It was not to be wondered at, with this glorious young beauty near to distract him, that the earl did not care for his wife.

He went forward to speak to her, and then for the first time she was conscious of his presence. She raised her dark eyes and looked at him. There are moments in life not to be forgotten—this was one. The dark eyes appeared to look right into his heart, and he seemed to recognize the soul that shone through them. She walked up to him, still looking at him, as though drawn by magic to him, his eyes half smiling into the depths of hers. He bowed at her approach.

She looked for one-half minute into the worn, scarred, noble face.

"I cannot be mistaken," she said, holding out both her hands in welcome. "You must be Sir Raoul Laureston?"

"I am," he replied, taking the delicate hands in his with chivalrous *empressment*. "And you?"

"And I!" she said, with a charming smile and a look of pretty astonishment. "I am Lady Caraven."

In the shock of his surprise he dropped her hands. This Lady Caraven, the unforned school-girl, the unloved wife, "tall and dark," one whom he would not like—this splendid woman! What had the earl meant by it? Sir Raoul was so startled that the shock kept him silent; and she, noticing this, thought that he was disappointed in her.

"Lady Caraven," he said, at last—"my kinswoman! Do you know that I can hardly believe it?"

"Why not?" she asked simply.

"Because I expected to see some one quite different."

"And you are disappointed?" she said slowly, half sadly.

His face lighted up eagerly.

"Nay, how can you say so? I am charmed, delighted. I cannot believe in my own good fortune in having so fair a cousin."

"Are you quite sure?" she asked. "For I fear that I have disappointed most people."

"I am indeed sure," he replied. And, looking into his face, she could not doubt it.

"You are Sir Raoul?" she continued. "I have been longing to see you ever since I heard that you were coming. Will you let me bid you a thousand welcomes home?"

He repossessed himself of her hands and clasped them warmly.

"You are a brave soldier," she said—"a hero. Again let me bid you welcome home!"

"That is the sweetest welcome I have ever had," declared Sir Raoul. "I shall not forget it."

The fair face was smiling at him, the lovely eyes were full of welcome, the ruby lips smiling kindly. It seemed to him that her whole heart was in the greeting she gave him. And Lord Caraven had said that he did not like this most charming and lovely girl!

"You are looking very ill, Sir Raoul," she said; "you will want nursing and taking care of. You must be well tended, and then you will grow strong."

He touched his breast lightly with his hand—that noble breast, the home of a noble soul.

"I shall never be very strong, I fear. Lady Caraven, I would give all my fortune for health; but Heaven knows best."

The dark eyes were full of womanly sympathy and compassion; they rested kindly on him.

"You are going to remain here," she said, "to make your home with us."

"I hope so," he responded, heartily. "I have no other home. This would indeed be one."

"I am so glad," she said, in her soft caressing tones; "and will you really let me take care of you, just as though you were my own brother come home from the wars?"

"Have you a brother?" he asked.

"No," she replied. "I am an only child."

"And I have no sister. I have always wished for one. When I was a strong man who did not know what aches and pains meant, I used to wish that I had a woman's gentle mind and heart to guide me; when health and strength left me, when I became almost helpless, I longed for the gentle hands of a woman near me; but my longing was never gratified."

She looked at him with a smile.

"You should have looked for a wife, Sir Raoul."

She repented of her words when she saw the terrible change that came over his face.

"A wife? No, I shall never have a wife. I wanted a sister."

"You must let me take a sister's place," she said, gently. "You do not know what your coming means to me. It will give me what I need so sorely—an occupation. You will let me nurse you when you are ill, wait upon you, read to you—tend you in all ways?"

"I am afraid that you would spoil me, Lady Caraven."

"No; but I will try to make you well and strong again. Do you really promise me that I may do this?"

His pale face flushed.

"Do you know," he said, "that you really embarrass me? I feel as though some fair young princess were offering to take charge of me. How can I thank you? It seems to me that the desire of my heart is gratified. I have a kinswoman to love at last."

She laid her hand on his arm and walked with him into the breakfast-room.

"You ought not to have risen so early," she said; "and now you must atone for that by taking some of my tea. I pride myself on being a good tea-maker."

Looking at her, he thought that, if she prided herself on her exquisite grace and her girlish loveliness, it would be only natural. He was perfectly charmed with her; she was modest and unaffected; there was a certain grace in her frank, kindly manner which made it impossible not to feel at home with her.

He was entirely so; and he smiled to himself. They were seated at the table as though they had known each other for years.

"But surely," he said, "we are amiss. We are not waiting for Ulric."

Her expression changed slightly, as it always did at the mention of her husband's name.

"Lord Caraven never takes breakfast here," she said slowly. "Our hours are not the same."

"Then he is a bad judge," remarked Sir Raoul. "I would far rather take breakfast here than anywhere else in the world."

To this Lady Caraven made no reply.

Before that day was half ended Sir Raoul was lost in wonder. How was it that the earl did not love this beautiful girl? He himself was charmed with her; he thought her delightful.

"Talk of an unforned school-girl!" he cried indignantly. "If Ulric calls her a school-girl, I should like to see whom he calls a beautiful woman! She is enchanting! She is fire and snow; she is humble, yet proud—haughty, yet gracious. She has character enough for a dozen school-girls, and they would be all above the average. I did not think a man could be so blind."

He had reason to know that she was as tender of heart as she was fair of face, for that same morning the old pain in his chest, the enemy that had laid him low, returned with redoubled violence. He was ghastly white and trembled with pain. Then he learned what the gentle hands of a woman were like. She showed no fear, no agitation. She was calm, tender, self-possessed. In one minute she had gathered soft downy pillows together on a couch, so as to support him.

"You will breathe more easily, Sir Raoul, if you lie there," she said.

It was a pitiful sight—the strong handsome man, the gallant soldier, the brave officer, the "hero of a hundred fights," lying there gasping for breath, great drops of anguish standing on his brow—a sight to make a man shudder and a woman to weep.

There was no haste in her manner—no agitation such as renders the kindest of women useless when they are most needed. She helped to place him on the couch, she laid the poor helpless head on soft pillows, she fetched some fragrant essence, and, kneeling by his side, bathed his face. She did not weary him by speaking or by useless expressions of sympathy. She watched the white parted lips, and gave him wine. When the terrible paroxysm had passed, he opened his eyes, all dimmed and dull with pain.

"See what war can do," he said slowly. "You are very good to me. It is coming again."

Again she helped him, never once losing her self-control.

"Is it gone?" she asked, as the tension of pain passed from his face and his hands were unclenched.

"Yes, thank you. I did wisely to long for a woman's gentle hands. I am grateful to you."

Then he told her how fiery the ordeal had been through which he passed.

"Can you imagine," he said, "what it is to me, a once strong man, a soldier, with all a soldier's longing for action—can you imagine what I feel at having to spend the greater part of my time on a couch? The very manhood within me recoils from it. I am always dreaming of what I could do if I were strong and well. I dream sometimes that I am on my favorite charger, sword in hand. I see the foe flying before me, and I am in hot pursuit. I wake to find it a dream, and to feel the red-hot rings of pain that seem to bind me. I ask myself why is it? Then, soldier, and man as I am, I bow my head and say, 'Heaven knows best.'"

She was looking at him with dark tender eyes.

"Have all lives such sorrows and cares, Sir Raoul?" she asked. "Is no one free?"

"I think not—the young and the beautiful, the great and the wealthy, the highest in rank, all seem to have their sorrows. I often think the greatest are those that we see the least of."

"Why is it?" she asked thoughtfully.

"How many times have I asked the same question of myself? I should say that souls require suffering to purify them as gold does the fire."

"I am quite sure," she said, raising her face to his, "that I should be better always for being happier."