

HILDRED.

(Continued.)

The view from the window was a beautiful one, extending over the pleasure grounds and the green undulating woods. The wind that came in so gently was laden with the breath of flowers. Hildred looked at her husband, and then, half kneeling, she took up her station by the side of his chair. What it cost her to make that advance no one but herself knew. Her face flushed, her heart beat. It seemed to her a bold step. If Lord Caraven felt any surprise, he was very careful not to show it.

"Your ancestors were such noble men," she said. "I had no ancestors, yet I would never do a mean action. Where do my instincts of nobility come from? And you, Lord Caraven—you call yourself an unworthy descendant of these great men. Why?"

"This is a troublesome question," he replied with a smile; "and the answer would have but little interest for you."

"Everything that concerns you interests me," she rejoined quickly. "Why should it not?"

"I have not been so kind to you, Hildred," he said, "that you should feel interested in me."

"Perhaps we have both made mistakes," she returned, "I think I can guess what you would say. You mean that you have done nothing great and glorious."

"It may be so," said the earl. She looked up at him, with all her heart in her eyes.

"There is one thing to be said," she remarked. "You may not have done any great or brilliant deeds, but you have never done a mean one."

"I hope not," he replied.

"Nor," she continued quickly, "would you allow a mean or unjust deed to be done in your name—would you?"

"No," he answered, so decidedly that she was filled with great content.

She ventured on a further liberty, one that touched him. She laid her hand on his.

"I knew it," she said, "I was sure of it. I knew that you might seem indolent, that you might be unfairly influenced, that you might perhaps at times be misled, but I feel quite sure that it was against your code of honor, against your wish and will, against your ideas of right."

"What is against them, Hildred?" he asked.

She was silent for a few minutes, and then she laid her hand more tenderly upon his.

"Thank you," she said, "for letting me speak to you. I was half afraid at first, but now you give me courage."

Her sweet humility disarmed him. If she had been proud, haughty or petulant, there would have been little chance to plead her case. Her gentleness touched him. For the first time in his life he took her hands and clasped them in his own.

"Do not be afraid of speaking to me, Hildred," he said.

She had so much at stake that she trembled. He saw her beautiful face grow pale and her lips tremble.

"Hildred," he said gently, "you pain me. What is it you would say? Speak to me without fear."

Then she took courage. She raised her eyes to his.

"I know of a great act of injustice that is being done in your name, Lord Caraven;" and, in her own forcible language, she told him the whole story. He listened in silence.

"Do you assure me, Hildred," he said at last, "that this is true?"

"It is perfectly true," she replied.

"That Blantyre has taken that bribe, and has refused in my name to renew Moore's lease?"

"Yes, he has done that."

"Then," said the earl, with unusual decision, "his reign will be a short one. He told me that Moore was letting the land go to ruin—that the farm was not bringing in half what it could be made to bring—that— Well, I have not patience to repeat all he said. If this be true, he has deceived me—and, by my earldom, I vow he shall not deceive me twice."

She had hardly dared to hope for such ready answer—such hopeful response.

"Will you listen to me," she said, "while I tell you more?"

"Yes, I will listen," replied the earl, with gloomy face.

She did not spare him. She told him how his estate was worse cared for and more mismanaged than any other in England—how the poor cried out for help and did not receive it, the sick and the sorrowful for relief and did not get it—how the wretched homes caused fever and rheumatism and a host of miseries—how the laborers on his estate were worse paid, worse lodged, and worse fed than on any other—how the tenants were more heavily burdened—how his name was spoken with curses not blessings.

He listened without reply, but she saw that his face had grown very pale and that his lips trembled. She spoke with passionate earnestness; there should be no mistake about the matter—he must thoroughly understand.

"All this," he said, "while I have been sleeping here! Hildred, I will see for myself what is the truth. I will trust to no one's opinion—I will go over to Bromhill. Will you ride over with me?"

She looked at the broad golden beams of the sun.

"It is so warm," she said, "you will not care to go out."

"Warm!" he repeated almost wrathfully. "What matters a little heat when so much is at stake?"

Then he looked quickly at her.

"If it is too warm for you," he said, "I will go alone."

She sprung to her feet with a glad light in her eyes.

"No," she replied, "it is never too warm for me. I love the sun. Let me go with you, Lord Caraven."

"Will you ride or drive?" he asked.

"I will ride," she replied, having heard him say that morning that he would rather ride ten miles than drive one.

He looked pleased.

"I will see for myself," he repeated. "Do they think that I am so blind as to be hoodwinked with false stories?"

"No, but they have believed you too indolent even to care whether the stories were true or not," said Hildred.

There were some little surprise even amongst the servants at seeing the young earl and countess ride off alone. What did it mean? Were better times really coming?

Sir Raoul watched them start; and he said to himself, as he looked after them—

"The greatest gift of Heaven to men is surely the noble influence of a noble woman."

The earl would see for himself—and he did see. It seemed to him that he must have been asleep for years. Where were the smiles of welcome that years ago used to greet him? Now laborers passed him with a sullen face, with a touch of the cap and a muttered curse. He saw the wretched tenements where disease reigned triumphant—he saw mothers whose children had died for want of nourishing food—he saw strong men whose just condemnation of him was written in their averted eyes and closed lips. He saw that for him there was no affection, little respect; yet he was lord of the soil—in some fashion master of the destinies of these people.

He rode in silence—silence that his young wife did not care to break, for she saw that he was aroused at last. They went to Bromhill, and there the earl saw matters for himself. There was little need for words to tell him how the prestige of the old name had sunk. Those honest yeomen, the Moores, whose forefathers had served his ancestors so gallantly and well, had no smiles, no welcome for him; they were sturdily respectful, they said little—the old man who had pleaded so passionately to Hildred least of all. But the young, indolent, pleasure-loving earl shrunk before the calm stern faces; he knew that he was in the wrong.

Nevertheless, if they were stern and cold in their reception of the earl, they had a warm welcome for his beautiful young wife. She had not ignored centuries of service; she had not broken the bonds between master and servant; she had not left the best interest of their lives to Blantyre. They crowded round her—even the little children came to give her the flowers they had gathered, and to look at the pleasant shining face. There was a court of inquiry held within the old farm walls; the earl listened attentively to the old man and his sons; then he looked gravely at them.

"You have done well to speak out boldly," he said. "I could as soon imagine Ravensmere without a Caraven as Bromhill without a Moore. You need not go to Blantyre again. I will sign the lease—and it shall be done at once."

He spoke only once on his way home, and then it was to say to his wife—

"I have done justice there; and, if I can, I will do justice whenever it is needed." And, as they rode on through the sunlight, she told him Heaven would bless him for it.

CHAPTER XXXI.

Lady Caraven was pleased as she dressed for dinner. She recalled the happy faces, the grateful words that she had seen and heard but a few hours before at Bromhill; it was worth living for, this power of doing good. She had seen something in her husband's face that day which had surprised her, something that drove away the indolent, easy expression. Was the sleeping lion roused at last? Had her passionate words, her keen indignation, moved him? Had he grown ashamed of his indolence? Had he tired of his pleasures?

Sitting opposite to him at dinner-time, she looked at him attentively. Certainly there was a change in his face. It was brighter, keener, more on the alert; the eyes were full of light; he seemed interested in what was going on. Once during dinner she met Sir Raoul's glance, and it was full of pleased surprise.

"Now is my time," thought Hildred—"now I may secure what I want."

When the gentlemen came into the drawing-room she made herself most fascinating and charming. She sang, she talked; the whole party thought her exceedingly entertaining. It was when her husband was looking most pleased, and listening to her with real interest, that she went up to him.

"I have a little favor to ask of you," she said. "Will you give me five minutes of your time this evening?"

His look was one of pleased, bright expectation.

"Assuredly, Hildred—as long as you like. I am beginning to think that my interviews with you are welcome ones."

So when the most of the visitors had gone to their respective rooms the earl lingered. It was something novel to him, this appointment with his own wife—something piquant. He waited for her in the drawing-room, where the blinds were still undrawn, and through the windows of which a lovely moon was shedding floods of silvery light.

He sat down thoughtfully, looking at the sky; he could hear the faint click of the billiard balls, he knew that many a merry jest was passing in the smoking-room. But in some vague fashion—he could hardly understand why—he felt tired of all such pastime. His wife's earnest face rose up before him; again he seemed to hear her pleading passionate words. Her own expression haunted him—"a wasted life." Was his life indeed wasted? Young, handsome, talented, did he live in vain?