

complete. There was a slight dispute between the earl and the lawyer. Lord Caraven wished to have the ceremony performed quietly and away from London—Arley Ransome insisted that the marriage should take place at St. George's, Hanover Square.

"And so, my lord," he said, "let us distinctly understand each other. My daughter is bringing you a fortune that might be the dower of a princess. and she must be treated with due respect. I will not have one detail omitted. The marriage must be conducted as though you were espousing a lady of your own rank."

Lord Caraven laughed; he knew that there was no opposing such a decree—it must be complied with. He made the best of it. He invited his half-cousin, the Lady Frances Riche, a superannuated coquette, who still believed herself young and charming, to be bridesmaid. Lord St. Maure was "best man." A small but select party of guests were invited. Nothing was omitted.

For many days past the great world had been on the *qui vive* about the marriage. The wedding-dress had been shown at the court milliner's; the jewels could be seen at Messrs. Burford's. All fashionable London discussed the union, and all fashionable London knew what the girl herself did not know—that she was being married for her money, that her marriage was as much a matter of sale and barter as though she had stood in a slave-market with an auctioneer by her side.

Yet no one thought it wrong, an impoverished earl with a grand old title and a bankrupt estate—there was nothing for him but to marry money; and Hildred Ransome, the lawyer's daughter, had plenty. There was not one of all the men and women who read about the marriage, heard of it, or discussed it, who would have dreamed of interfering—no one to say, "Have pity on her youth and her ignorance; think before you sacrifice her young sweet life, her chance of happiness." There was no one to plead or to pray for her; on the contrary, the fair women of the world looked on her with envy. It was not every heiress who could purchase a coronet like that of Caraven. Her father thought her a most fortunate girl, and did not scruple to tell her so.

She herself could not analyze her own feelings. She was living quietly with her father in a river-side villa; a little later on she would be Countess Caraven, one of the stars of the fashionable world. At present she was, as it were, on the threshold of existence; in a little while a glowing, luxurious future would be before her.

"You must have a clever maid, Hildred," said Arley Ransome. "Ask Lady Riche to find you one."

Lady Riche succeeded, and Hildred rejoiced in the attendance of a bright, quick *Parisienne*, who foretold that the day would come when her mistress would be acknowledged one of the most beautiful women in England.

"She wants a little training; she will have to travel and mix in society—then you will see," reported Amice. "I have never seen a face or figure of greater promise."

The day before Hildred's wedding-day the Hollies had been one scene of excitement and confusion; there had been so many visitors, the number of presents was so great. Late in the evening, a magnificent bridal bouquet arrived from Lord Caraven. The wedding breakfast was all prepared; the trunks containing all that was needed of the grand *trousseau* were packed and corded—the labels were already addressed, "Lady Caraven, passenger to Paris," for the earl had decided on spending their so-called honeymoon there; every detail of the morrow's ceremony was arranged, and late at night Hildred Ransome stood with the earl's bouquet in her hand.

They revealed nothing to her, those odoriferous flowers; they were of magical sweetness, but they brought her no message. There was something pathetic in the picture—the drawing-room full of strange shadows, the light of the lamp falling where she stood, a contrast to the darkness around. She wore a dressing gown of white, soft, clinging material, fastened with crimson cords, her wealth of dark hair lay negligently over her shoulders, her eyes were bright with unshed tears.

It was a sweet, sad girlish face; a motherly woman looking at it would have drawn the girl's head down on her breast, and have soothed her with loving words. The morrow would be her wedding-day; the tired servants were all sleeping, her attentive little maid had gone to rest, her father had retired quite early to his room. The morrow would be her wedding-day, and they had told her that she could live without love. Her wedding-day! No laughing young sisters came to talk over the great event with her; no gentle, loving mother folded her in her arms and prayed Heaven to bless her in her new life; no laughing, bright, fond school friends were there as companions; she was quite alone, her heart aching and burning with a new sense of desolation and loneliness. Her wedding-day! Her toilet table was laden with jewels; he *fiance* had been lavish in his presents, no duchess had more elegant or costly surroundings—yet she would have given all, she thought, for some one to love and comfort her. Her wedding-day! Yet he had not been; he had sent no note with the flowers, only his card and his compliments; there was no promise of the love that was to come after marriage, not one kindly word to allay her doubts or her fears. There could be no picture more touching than this of the lonely girl with her flowers in her hand. She had turned to them as she would have turned to a living creature; her lover, who on the morrow was to be her husband, had not been near, but he had sent the flowers, and in her forlorn fashion she had fancied she should get some comfort from them.

But they revealed nothing to her. The costly blossoms lay cold, ragrant, without meaning.

(To be continued.)

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