

WOODED AND MARRIED

BY CHARLOTTE M. BRAEME

CHAPTER XIV.

Lord Caraven stood in the billiard room at Ravensmere; he had been playing with one of his friends, who, having received a telegram, had gone to answer it. He stood alone, leaning carelessly against the open veranda, something more than his usual indifference darkening his face; he never liked interruption during a game.

"A most unpropitious moment," thought the young countess, as she caught sight of him; but, having given her word to Sir Raoul, she would have marched up to the mouth of a loaded cannon rather than break it.

Looking at the earl could not but confess that he had seldom seen a lovelier picture than his young wife at that moment presented, with a flush on her face, and her hands filled with sprays of fragrant mimosa.

She would not reveal her hesitation, but went straight to him, smiling so that he little guessed how her heart beat. He raised his eyebrows as she drew nearer to him. What was going to happen? Before he had time to speak his face was buried in a soft, dewy mass of fragrant mimosa.

"There!" said a laughing voice. "You said this morning that this was your favorite flower. I have been looking for the most fragrant sprays of it that I could find."

He could not believe the evidence of his senses; it was incredible that the laughing voice belonged to his cold, proud wife—the girl who had swept impudently from the room when he saw her last. He looked at her in amazement. She would not see the surprise on his face or make the least difference because of it.

"You have the very pick of the garden here," she said; "every spray has its own special beauty."

He roused himself, and tried to recover from the wondering stupor that had overcome him.

"You really remembered, Hildred, what I said?" he began, with a pleased look.

"Yes, and I think you showed good taste," she replied. "I know no flower lovelier than fragrant mimosa."

"And you really think that I have good taste?" he said.

"Yes. Why should you surprise you?"

"Ah, pardon me," he said, with a quick change of face and voice—"you gave me your name!"

There was hot rebellion for one moment—hot, bitter rebellion. Then she remembered Sir Raoul's words. It was for her husband's good. She tramped down the hot impulse of angry pride—she stilled the bitter anger and contempt. Her victory over herself was so great that she was even surprised at herself. She laid her hand on his arm.

"Nay, Lord Caraven," she said, gently, "you are quite wrong. I was not thinking of money. Gold is gross—I despise it—I could almost hate it for the mischief that it makes. I was thinking of something very different from money—something that money could not buy."

He was looking at her with keen curiosity.

"Hildred, what have you given me that money could not buy?"

The dark eyes gleamed softly.

"I will not tell you, Lord Caraven," she answered.

"But I must know. You have excited my curiosity—you must gratify it. You have enumerated three things that money cannot buy—happiness, virtue, love. It was none of these. Then what could it be?"

"I must go, Lord Caraven," she said; her face growing hot and her heart beating quickly. "If you weigh every word that I say, I shall have to be very careful."

"Hildred, tell me what you mean?" he requested. "What have you given me?"

"I will tell you," she replied, laughingly. "When you have counted all those tiny leaves on the mimosa."

She turned to go, but he put out his hand to detain her. She eluded him, and, with a light laugh, disappeared, leaving him by the veranda alone.

"You look astonished at something," said Lord Caraven's friend to him when he returned to resume their game at billiards.

"Yes," replied the earl. "I have seen a ghost."

"A ghost! The ghost of what?"

"I am not quite sure," replied the earl; "but I think it was the ghost of what might have been."

CHAPTER XV.

Lady Caraven was pleased as she dressed for dinner. 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?

When the gentlemen came into the drawing room she made herself most fascinating and charming. She sang, she talked, and when 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 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 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 quaint. He waited for her in the drawing room, where the blinds were still drawn, and through the windows of which a lovely moon was shedding floods of silver light.

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

"No," he replied; "I have been watching the moon and thinking."

"I have come to ask 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 it I shall be miserable."

"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 only a just steward."

"He is not just. It is that which grieves me. He has abused my trust. I shall never be held in him again."

"I do not take his place," she cried, eagerly. "I do not mean in the mere keeping of accounts—you will always want some one for that—not even in the looking after little details; but let me be your 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 just believe me, if you will give your consent."

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

"Sir Raoul would not be pleased if I told him that I would be your steward. I would estimate your property and point to it as a pattern. I would make your laborers men; they are now only soulless drudges. I would pull down those wretched cottages where squalor and disease run riot, and build in their places houses such as even the poor could love. I would educate the children. What a question it is to ask me! What would I not do?"

The earl rose from his chair; he bent his head with chivalrous grace before her.

"My wife," he said, "you shame me."

"No," she cried, "you must not say that to me."

"I repeat it—you shame me," he went on. "Yes, I give my consent—my free, full, hearty consent. You will make a better mistress of Ravensmere than I do a master. You shall be the queen regent; I will be your prime minister. I place and leave all authority in your hands, and I promise you most faithfully that I will never interfere; you shall pull down and build up what you shall do just as you will."

"No," she replied, quietly, "it is not."

"Ah, pardon me," he said, with a quick change of face and voice—"you gave me your name!"

He roused himself, and tried to recover from the wondering stupor that had overcome him.

"You really remembered, Hildred, what I said?" he began, with a pleased look.

"Yes, and I think you showed good taste," she replied. "I know no flower lovelier than fragrant mimosa."

"And you really think that I have good taste?" he said.

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He took no notice of the involuntary career, nor of the apology, though both had struck him.

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