

Chapter XXIV. Hostility.

When she was not eating her meals or asleep in her bed, absolute silence on Mrs. Presty's part was a circumstance without precedent in the experience of her daughter. Mrs. Presty was absolutely silent now. Mrs. Linley looked up.

She at once perceived the change in her mother's face and asked what it meant. "Mamma, you look as if something had frightened you. Is it anything in that letter?" She bent over the table, and looked a little closer at the letter. Mrs. Presty had turned it so that the address was underneath; and the closed envelope was visible still intact. "Why don't you open it?" Mrs. Linley asked.

Mrs. Presty made a strange reply. "I am thinking of throwing it into the fire."

"My letter?"

"Yes; your letter."

"Let me look at it first."

"You had better not look at it, Catherine."

Naturally enough, Mrs. Linley remonstrated. "Surely I ought to read a letter forwarded by my lawyer. Why are you hiding the address from me? Is it from some person whose handwriting we both know?" She looked again at her silent mother--reflected--and guessed the truth. "Give it to me directly," she said; "my husband has written to me."

Mrs. Presty's heavy eyebrows gathered into a frown. "Is it possible," she asked sternly, "that you are still fond enough of that man to care about what he writes to you?" Mrs. Linley held out her hand for the letter. Her wise mother found it desirable to try persuasion next. "If you really won't give way, my dear, humor me for once. Will you let me read it to you?"

"Yes--if you promise to read every word of it."

Mrs. Presty promised (with a mental reservation), and opened the letter.

At the two first words, she stopped and began to clean her spectacles. Had

her own eyes deceived her? Or had Herbert Linley actually addressed her daughter--after having been guilty of the cruelest wrong that a husband can inflict on a wife--as "Dear Catherine"? Yes: there were the words, when she put her spectacles on again. Was he in his right senses? or had he written in a state of intoxication?

Mrs. Linley waited, with a preoccupied mind: she showed no signs of impatience or surprise. As it presently appeared, she was not thinking of the letter addressed to her by Herbert, but of the letter written by Randal. "I want to look at it again." With that brief explanation she turned at once to the closing lines which had offended her when she first read them.

Mrs. Presty hazarded a guess at what was going on in her daughter's mind. "Now your husband has written to you," she said, "are you beginning to think Randal's opinion may be worth considering again?" With her eyes still on Randal's letter, Mrs. Linley merely answered: "Why don't you begin?" Mrs. Presty began as follows, leaving out the familiarity of her son-in-law's address to his wife.

"I hope and trust you will forgive me for venturing to write to you, in consideration of the subject of my letter. I have something to say concerning our child. Although I have deserved the worst you can think of me, I believe you will not deny that even your love for our little Kitty (while we were living together) was not a truer love than mine. Bad as I am, my heart has that tender place left in it still. I cannot endure separation from my child."

Mrs. Linley rose to her feet. The first vague anticipations of future atonement and reconciliation, suggested by her brother-in-law, no longer existed in her mind: she foresaw but too plainly what was to come. "Read faster," she said, "or let me read it for myself."

Mrs. Presty went on: "There is no wish, on my part, to pain you by any needless allusion to my claims as a father. My one desire is to enter into an arrangement which shall be as just toward you, as it is toward me. I propose that Kitty shall live with her father one half of the year, and shall return to her mother's care for the other half. If there is any valid objection to this, I confess I fail to see it."

Mrs. Linley could remain silent no longer.

"Does he see no difference," she broke out, "between his position and mine? What consolation--in God's name, what consolation is left to me for the rest of my life but my child? And he threatens to separate us for six months in

every year! And he takes credit to himself for an act of exalted justice on his part! Is there no such thing as shame in the hearts of men?"

Under ordinary circumstances, her mother would have tried to calm her. But Mrs. Presty had turned to the next page of the letter, at the moment when her daughter spoke.

What she found written, on that other side, produced a startling effect on her. She crumpled the letter up in her hand, and threw it into the fireplace. It fell under the grate instead of into the grate. With amazing activity for a woman of her age, she ran across the room to burn it. Younger and quicker, Mrs. Linley got to the fireplace first, and seized the letter. "There is something more!" she exclaimed. "And you are afraid of my knowing what it is."

"Don't read it!" Mrs. Presty called out.

There was but one sentence left to read: "If your maternal anxiety suggests any misgiving, let me add that a woman's loving care will watch over our little girl while she is under my roof. You will remember how fond Miss Westerfield was of Kitty, and you will believe me when I tell you that she is as truly devoted to the child as ever."

"I tried to prevent you from reading it," said Mrs. Presty.

Mrs. Linley looked at her mother with a strange unnatural smile.

"I wouldn't have missed this for anything!" she said. "The cruelest of all separations is proposed to me--and I am expected to submit to it, because my husband's mistress is fond of my child!" She threw the letter from her with a frantic gesture of contempt and burst into a fit of hysterical laughter.

The old mother's instinct--not the old mother's reason--told her what to do. She drew her daughter to the open window, and called to Kitty to come in. The child (still amusing herself by fishing in the lake) laid down her rod. Mrs. Linley saw her running lightly along the little pier, on her way to the house. That influence effected what no other influence could have achieved. The outraged wife controlled herself, for the sake of her child. Mrs. Presty led her out to meet Kitty in the garden; waited until she saw them together; and returned to the breakfast-room.

Herbert Linley's letter lay on the floor; his discreet mother-in-law picked it up. It could do no more harm now, and there might be reasons for keeping

the husband's proposal. "Unless I am very much mistaken," Mrs. Presty concluded, "we shall hear more from the lawyer before long." She locked up the letter, and wondered what her daughter would do next.

In half an hour Mrs. Linley returned--pale, silent, self-contained.

She seated herself at her desk; wrote literally one line; signed it without an instant's hesitation, and folded the paper. Before it was secured in the envelope, Mrs. Presty interfered with a characteristic request. "You are writing to Mr. Linley, of course," she said. "May I see it?"

Mrs. Linley handed the letter to her. The one line of writing contained these words: "I refuse positively to part with my child.--Catherine Linley."

"Have you considered what is likely to happen, when he gets this?" Mrs. Presty inquired.

"No, mamma."

"Will you consult Randal?"

"I would rather not consult him."

"Will you let me consult him for you?"

"Thank you--no."

"Why not?"

"After what Randal has written to me, I don't attach any value to his opinion." With that reply she sent her letter to the post, and went back again to Kitty.

After this, Mrs. Presty resolved to wait the arrival of Herbert Linley's answer, and to let events take their course. The view from the window (as she passed it, walking up and down the room) offered her little help in forecasting the future. Kitty had returned to her fishing; and Kitty's mother was walking slowly up and down the pier, deep in thought. Was she thinking of what might happen, and summoning the resolution which so seldom showed itself on ordinary occasions?