

path to the loftiest height," quoted Elsie gently.

"You have read Carlyle?" asked Madge.

"Yes."

"And you don't hate cynics and sceptics?"

"No, I can sympathise very deeply with them."

"You have felt," continued Madge, half eagerly.

"Indeed I have."

"Then I think—I feel sure—that I should like you for a friend. Only you are sure to dislike me, when you know me better," she added, a little sadly.

"No I shall not," replied Elsie, firmly, "I do not take hurried likes and dislikes. I can read faces and I always know instinctively when anyone is well worth loving. Mrs. Fawcett," and she leaned forwards, speaking very earnestly, "if you will let me I should dearly like to be your friend. I love you already and I am not afraid of you. We both have suffered, let that be the bond between us."

"Very well," said Madge, half-wearily, "I do not think you will disappoint me. I do not know what is expected of friends," she added.

"Only what each feels inclined to give and that they stand by each other in every hour of need. Who fails then is no friend at all, but a poor counterfeit."

"Shall I tell you a little about myself?" she continued, "or don't you care to hear?"

"I should like to hear very much. It is good of you to offer."

"I want to prove to you my right to sympathise with anything in your past, because of what I have gone through," she said, and then she began:

"Until I was seventeen, I think I never had a care. My father was a clergyman and I half worshipped him; we were quite inseparable. When I was seventeen he died suddenly. I need not dwell on my distress, I was just heart-broken, and for a time everything seemed a blank. Then the knowledge of our poverty awoke me to the fact of the immediate necessity for action. I went to town about my voice at once, for I had often heard it warmly praised, and had an interview with an eminent musician. He was satisfied with my talent and I at once commenced my training.

"Then followed five years of great anxiety and care, for the competition in London is so great, that it is very hard to make a real start. I was growing seriously disheartened when a new influence came into my life; I became engaged. I believe I worshipped my lover, he was such a splendid man. He seemed to me more like a god than an ordinary being. It was my first love you know," she said with a little smile, "I have no other excuse for its extravagance. For one blissful year he was all the world to me; I can't tell you how he helped and encouraged me. Then came my first great success; I was engaged to sing at the Albert Hall. I remember it all as if it happened only yesterday; I made myself almost ill with nervous anxiety, as to

whether I should do myself justice or be too nervous. The evening came, and at the last moment, as I stood dressed and waiting for my cab, my lover, Frank Weldon, hurried in to say it was absolutely impossible for him to be present. My disappointment was great, I felt as if I could not sing at all, but he cheered me with his brave helpfulness and made me promise to do my best for his sake. He said he had to go into the country on important business, but he would come early the next day, to see how I got on."

She paused awhile and then continued, as if speaking to herself, "He praised my dress and appearance; he placed his hands on my shoulders and looked at me critically; then he kissed me and hurried away."

Again she paused and drew a deep breath, then added in a low voice, "I never saw him again, alive!"

Madge started with a low exclamation, and instinctively held out her hand.

Elsie took it, and though great tears stood in her eyes, her voice was firm as she continued, "It is an old wound now, but one of those that neither time nor happiness can erase, though they may heal the soreness. But to continue, I need not tell you much about the concert. I had all the success I could wish for, including two good encores."

"I remember feeling dumb with joy, and when my master shook my hand until he quite hurt it, and the other artists gathered round to congratulate me, I had nothing to say."

"The next morning I got up early in spite of a bad headache and prepared to watch for Frank. All the morning I waited at the window but he did not come, and so I ran out to get a paper to while away the time. The first thing I noticed was the heading 'Shocking Railway Accident' last evening. Moved by an unaccountable impulse, I stood and read it there at the book-stall! Among the list of killed I read 'Frank Weldon, Tite Street, Chelsea.' I knew it was my Frank, but I read it again and again without taking it in. Then I walked slowly home feeling as if I had had a dreadful dream and only just awaked. When I reached the house, I fell in a dead faint across the threshold."

"There is little else to tell. I never shed a tear for three days, and then mother took me to see him in his coffin, and a flood of passionate weeping saved my life and reason. I have not a very clear recollection of what followed. I know I had a great many engagements which I was obliged to accept, as soon as I was well enough, for a livelihood. Broken-hearted and worn with grief I had to go and sing to gaily-dressed throngs, until I thought the effort must kill me."

She hid her eyes with her hand and bent her head.

"Oh, the irony of life!" she said in a low, strained voice, "I may well feel sympathy with sceptics. To think of the many among those gay audiences, who envied me, because of my success—me—who only wanted to lie down beside him in the still grave. But after a time

peace and strength came, as it comes to all who wait; and then a quiet happiness which nothing can take from me, for it was bought at such a bitter cost."

She ceased speaking and remained with her face buried in her hands, lost in thought; and a long pause followed.

Suddenly Madge broke the silence. "I cannot understand it," she exclaimed half-passionately, leaning towards Elsie with a white face that worked with smothered emotion. "Why was it good? Why was it right? I say it was cruel! You needed him, he did you good; you had neither of you deserved it. If God is all-powerful, He must have been able to save him. Then why did He let him be struck down? It was the same with my Jack, and he was all the world to me. Oh Miss Merton! the Sorrow of Life! I can't understand it," and her voice broke. "God cannot be an all-loving Father."

"And yet," said Elsie gently, "it is those who have suffered most, who believe it most firmly. The happy and careless go on their way, without stopping to consider, while those who walk in the dark Valley of Pain, find Him nearer and dearer than He ever was before."

"But still, it may be a delusion. The heathens suffer torments for the gods they believe in, and we, who think ourselves so much better than they, smile pityingly on their folly. How do we know they have not cause to smile at us?"

Elsie looked up questioningly. "Are you an unbeliever?" she asked.

"I can't tell; I don't know myself," replied Madge. "I have tried to accept everything, but my reason revolted against so many things. I have studied the Bible carefully, but I only found it full of enigmas and passages that I could not reconcile with each other, or with anything else. I would believe it all if I could; life is terrible without religion. I thought I could grow callous and indifferent, and so I am generally, but there are times when a desperate craving comes over me, which I can hardly define and which nothing will satisfy. I thought I could stifle feeling, but when I see a mother and child clinging to each other, or an old, old man and woman, treading the downward path fearlessly, hand in hand, after long years of love, then I know I am a fool."

She paused and a short silence followed. When she continued, her voice had a low, thrilling sound in it, like the vibration lingering after a long acquaintance with sorrow. "The fate of our lost ones," she said, clasping her hands tightly and gazing hard into the fire. "It is impossible not to care. Oh, Miss Merton! only to know if it is well with them and if we shall ever see them again! The craving to know this never leaves me. By night and day I ask, but always there is only silence in the heavens."

Her beautiful face worked with emotion, as for the first time in her life,