

"IF LOVING HEARTS WERE NEVER LONELY—";

OR,

MADGE HARCOURT'S DESOLATION.

By GERTRUDE PAGE.

CHAPTER XIV.
THE FUNERAL.

It was the day of the funeral, and Guy, who at Mr. and Mrs. Harcourt's earnest request, was remaining a few days longer, stood at the dining-room window with his hands in his pockets looking sadly out. He was waiting for Madge to come down, as he

wanted to ask her wishes about one or two details that he had been asked to see after.

Presently the door opened quietly, and he knew by the slow firm step that she had come.

He turned quickly and met her with outstretched hand.

"Good-morning, Mr. Fawcett," she said, touching his hand for a moment; then she sat down listlessly in an arm-chair.

She looked fearfully white and ill, and her face was drawn and haggard, but her lips were as firm as ever and her eyes as dry; she did not appear to have wept a single tear.

During the two days that followed that of the accident, she had been too prostrated to leave her room, but she had suffered no one to come near her except a favourite servant, and had scarcely opened her lips once.

On the third day she had appeared downstairs, and taken up her usual routine with a calmness that was worse to view than passionate grief, for there was with it an expression of such dumb, hopeless anguish, as wrung the hearts of all who saw her.

As she sat before Guy now, with the pallor of her face enhanced by her black dress, and her hands hanging heavily over the arms of the chair, his heart bled for her, and for the first time in his life he stood face to face with an overwhelming sorrow.

"I hope you feel a little better to-day," he began, in a voice of earnest commiseration, longing to say more, yet painfully conscious of his awkwardness in sympathising.

"Yes, thank you," she replied,

apathetically, and continued to look straight before her with a steady, aimless gaze.

"I suppose you know the funeral will be at two o'clock this afternoon?" he continued quietly.

She started a little, but only replied in the same manner. "Is it? No, I hadn't heard, but I supposed it would be some time to-day."

"You will of course be present?" he said inquiringly.

"No"—and she shuddered. "I—I—have decided not to go."

He looked surprised.

"Don't you think your father will be disappointed?" he asked.

"He will not be surprised; he has known me too long."

"But surely it will look very strange; you must have been seen out yesterday."

"That wouldn't affect me in the least," she replied, with a touch of scorn.

Still Guy hesitated.

"It doesn't seem natural for you not to go," he said, a little nervously.

"Nothing is particularly natural about me," she answered. "I have made up my mind not to go."

She looked down at the floor, then continued, with a sudden, unlooked-for warmth in her manner—

"I have been reading through the service, and I couldn't bear to hear it. If I stood there quietly, while the clergyman read 'The Lord gave and the Lord hath taken away, blessed be the name of the Lord,' and again, 'We give Thee hearty thanks, for that it hath pleased Thee to deliver this our brother out of the miseries of this sinful world,' I should be acting a lie and lending myself to a farce. The clergyman may say 'It is well,' and all about him acquiesce, but I, in my heart, should say, 'It is not well for me!'"

She grew more roused and sat upright, grasping the arms of her chair tightly.

"I loathe farces," she said, intoxicated with misery and blinded with passion, "I am sick of pretence—the world is choked with it."

Guy knit his forehead in perplexity, and looked hard out of the window. He wanted to say something to help her, but had no idea how to set about it. He had never thought about these things at all, much less probed into the heart of them, but for all that, her words sounded harshly on his ears.

"I don't know," he said at last, "I'm not clever enough to reason with you, but somehow I don't feel like that about it. I think you would be happier if you could take things more on trust a bit."

He rose from the table, upon which he was half sitting, and walked to the window with a grave thoughtful expression on his face, that had seldom indeed rested there before. When he again turned to her she had gone.

Late that evening, when the stars were already shining in the sky and the moon had thrown its silvery light over all the sleeping earth, a tall slender figure, with a white drawn face and black garments, glided out of the Manor House and down the garden towards the little churchyard.

Guy was taking an evening stroll, and when he saw her, he turned and followed, for since that evening when he carried her in his arms from the chamber of death, he had claimed a right of protection towards her.

In the clear light he saw her hurry across the grass to where, in a quiet corner, were two grave-stones, and beside them a new-made mound. Then he drew back into the shadow and waited, lest she should again be overcome and need his help. He saw her kneel down in the grass and lean wearily against the larger of the white stones, then he turned away.

For twenty minutes he waited, then fearing ill-effects to her exhausted nature from the exposure to the night air, he stepped out from the shadow and approached her.

She started when she saw him, but made no remark on his presence, merely rising and turning to him.

"I was afraid you had forgotten the grass was damp," he began, half apologetically. "Haden't you better come in now?"

She bowed her head in mute acquiescence and began to move away. After going a few paces, she stopped, and, turning again, said in a strange low voice—

"See, I have three graves now. On Sunday I told you I had no friends, only two graves. Now I have three graves, and neither mother, brother nor friend."

She hesitated a moment, and taking her listless hand in his, he said—

"Couldn't you look upon me as a friend now? I know I should only be a poor one, but perhaps better than none."

"You," she said, looking at him without seeing him—"yes, Jack loved you; of course you cannot be just nobody to me. Only think," she went on, looking once again at the quiet, moon-lit corner, "how many people have nothing in the world they really care for but two or three graves. Isn't it dreadful! I wish I could help them. I can't bear to think of anyone feeling as I do"—and a sob broke from her.

For answer he drew her arm through his, and led her back to the house.

That night he made a resolution, which seemed to him both natural and right, and two evenings later, in the same hallowed spot, he put it into words. He took Madge's unresisting hands into his, and said in a firm, manly voice: "Miss Harcourt, I have