

peace and quietness. I've made up my mind to be docile while you're here, Jack, in order to keep her in a good humour."

"That's right, it's much the best way," he answered, adding, as they strolled leisurely out of the grounds, "I've been having a rare old time while you were practising."

"You haven't been talking about me, have you?" she exclaimed anxiously.

"Yes, and we both got angry."

"Oh, you shouldn't, Jack. You'll be certain to offend her and you'll never do any good. You won't get that money out of father unless you are very careful. You really mustn't mention me again, promise you won't."

"I don't know, Madge," he answered seriously, "I want to do something for you. I want her to let you go out a bit and have more life."

"It's no use and you mustn't say any more," she replied with emphasis. "If you get into trouble for interfering and spoil your visit, what shall I feel then, do you think? I should be wretched about it; indeed, Jack, you must leave me to fight my own battles. I'm not really so badly off as you think," she added with a little effort. "I don't let myself care about things, it's much the simplest way. All I want you to do is just to love me better than anyone else in the world."

"It's easy enough to do that," he said affectionately, "but I hate to think you are unhappy."

"I'm not always unhappy," she said, looking away from him, "and when I am, maybe it's often my own fault. Don't think about it," and as she spoke she determined to try her hardest to be gay all through his visit, that he might go away with a different impression of her.

She began that very evening, and chatted away bravely as if her heart were as light as a feather.

She even watched the sun sink silently behind those lonely, far-away hills in magnificent splendour, without a sigh, or, what Jack would have called an outlandish remark.

As they entered the house, however, a little later, a slight shudder passed over her, for she seemed to realise more fully the difficulties of the task she had set herself, and she felt her heart sinking as they joined their parents.

Their reception was not encouraging. "You seem exceedingly gay this evening, Margaret," remarked Mrs. Harcourt, looking up. "It is a poor compliment to your father and me, that Jack's visits should be the only occasions upon which you condescend to be cheerful."

Madge bit her lip and with an effort smothered the quick retort that rose to her mind, taking up some fancy work and sitting down in silence.

But Mrs. Harcourt would not let the subject drop. Her step-daughter's silent indifference was far more aggravating to her than a quick answer; she could not take things calmly herself and she disliked anyone else to do so.

"I hope you feel highly honoured,

Jack," she said with an ill-concealed sneer.

"Not at all," he replied gaily. "Why, it's the easiest thing in the world to make Madge laugh. Tell her a good joke and there you are. You should try it sometimes, mater. I expect you know no end of capital jokes, if you would only tell them."

A slow smile fluttered round Madge's mouth for an instant and she bent lower over her work.

"Don't talk nonsense, Jack," said Mrs. Harcourt quickly, trying to look severe. "I declare, you never grow a day older or wiser; you're a deal more like a silly schoolboy than a grown man."

"Talk nonsense, indeed! well, that's nice, when I was trying to help you out of a difficulty. I'm quite sure, if you two started joking with each other, the effect would be ludicrous in the extreme," and he looked at his sister with a desperately wicked twinkle in his merry eyes.

"Very impracticable help you suggest too," answered Mrs. Harcourt, ignoring the last part of his speech. "The fact is, Margaret bestows her smiles where she bestows her love, and that is with those she happens to fancy, instead of those who do the most for her. One would almost fancy she thought ingratitude a virtue."

Jack flushed up hotly in an instant and looked at Madge, but she, with her lips tightly compressed, stiched on in silence and seeming unconcern.

"Someone else is talking nonsense, now, I fancy," he remarked, quickly turning on his heel and walking to the window, too much annoyed to think what he was saying.

"Thank you," replied Mrs. Harcourt haughtily, "I must say your fine London friends have made you exceedingly polite."

"Oh come!" he exclaimed, shrugging his shoulders resignedly. "Let's have a game. Come and play Folly v. Wisdom, eh?"

Madge rose slowly, but she did not break through her sudden reserve, and spoke little for the rest of the evening, going to bed as soon as the game was finished.

There was no light in her room, and without getting one she quietly closed the door, and walked straight to the broad, low window-seat, where she usually sat to read or think.

It was a glorious night, and the girl leaned her head back wearily against the window frame and gazed up at the stars. Such a proud, bitter young face it was, pale and tired, yet beautiful, in spite of the cynical curve of the delicate lips and the stony glance of the dark eyes.

It was not to weep that Madge sat there in the darkness, neither was it to pray, though a womanly touch, or a word of true sympathy might have called forth a flood of tears. For the time had not yet come when she had ceased to feel—as yet she was only striving after it, believing, in her restless unhappiness, that such a fatal opiate would be balm. The aspect of absolute

indifference with which she received her step-mother's cutting remarks was but an assumed one at present; in reality they cut deeply, and she was but learning at an early age to act.

It is a lesson we all learn sooner or later, some more and some less. Not all the cleverest artistes are on the boards of the world's big theatres. There is one theatre, bigger than all, where the actors come and go, do their part, then vanish; and though they act, as no professional ever acted before, and though they spill their heart's blood with very earnestness, when the curtain has once fallen they are never recalled.

And often no faint gesture nor word of applause encourages them; no adulation nor admiration helps smooth the difficult path; no touch of sympathy drives the bitterness from tears; and no sense of "something achieved" pierces the gloom of declining powers. With aching hearts and tired eyes they make their bow and retire in silence, and ere their footsteps have well died away, another has taken their place and acts with the same grim earnestness and desperate reality, only to pass in their turn out through the dark night to The Silent Land.

But as Madge sat alone, gazing into the night, hard, bitter thoughts swelled in her heart and she let them throng in upon her and wrap her round, for it was dark and there were no spectators, so what need to act?

She did not tell herself she didn't care, she only clenched her white hands, bit her lips, knit her brows, and gazed hard at the stars. She let herself be her real self, as we do sometimes, when it is dark and we are alone.

Presently she rose with a sigh and proceeded listlessly to light her candles and prepare for the night.

The dread clouds of mystery and all the great inexplicables of life were beginning to fold in, with a cruel relentless grasp, on the lonely girl, and she had, or thought she had, no one to go to and no one to guide her footsteps into the only path that leads to rest. One could see by the quiet hopelessness in her eyes that she had already gone some way down into the dark valley of doubt and scepticism.

But there was one thing she made up her mind to, more firmly than ever, before she finally lay down. It was that, whatever happened, while Jack was at home she would be gay, even before her step-mother, if possible. Afterwards—well, no matter at present.

Neither did she fail, for, hard as the struggle proved, her love was stronger and carried her through.

During the coming fortnight, day after day, her laugh was heard mingling with Jack's; and, day after day, she received her step-mother's hard speeches in silence, and made an effort to please her.

And night after night, as she sat in her old seat on the window-sill, her young heart grew harder and yet more hard.

(To be continued.)