

"IF LOVING HEARTS WERE NEVER LONELY—";

OR,

MADGE HARCOURT'S DESOLATION.

CHAPTER IV.

JACK TRIES TO IMPROVE THINGS IN GENERAL.



S though by rule, no sooner had Madge crossed the threshold of her home, than her face and manner changed visibly. Jack noticed it at once and wondered at it, for they had not even heard their step-mother's voice yet.

She seemed to withdraw into herself entirely and became almost taciturn, while a hard expression crept over her features.

All tea-time she remained silent, except for a few commonplace remarks, and as it seemed her wish to be unnoticed, Jack took the conversation upon himself and chatted gaily throughout the meal.

After tea they all went out on the lawn, and Jack settled himself for a lazy evening. Madge prepared to do the same, but, as she expected, she was not destined to go unmolested.

"I am surprised, Margaret, to see you settle yourself in that manner," remarked Mrs. Harcourt severely, "after spending the whole day on pleasure. You had better practise for an hour first and then get your work."

"If I have spent the whole day on pleasure I am sure I have earned it," was the somewhat bitter rejoinder. "Surely when Jack is at home I might have a few holidays."

"Holiday indeed!" replied Mrs. Harcourt, "why, it's all more or less holiday for you. It's a very bad thing for a young girl to pass a whole day in amusing herself. Jack doesn't want you for an hour, and you know I never allow you to neglect your practising."

"Not when I ask?" he inquired, with good-natured emphasis. "I always want Madge every minute when I am home."

"Then it is very absurd of you," replied Mrs. Harcourt tartly, without relaxing, adding, "come, Margaret."

For one instant Madge hesitated, then drawing herself up with a haughty air, that ill became her age, she went indoors without a word.

Jack watched her and there was a glow of pride in his eyes. He turned to

his step-mother, who was knitting vigorously beside him, her thin lips tightly compressed in their habitual manner, and remarked—"Don't you think Madge is growing into an uncommonly handsome woman?"

"Woman indeed!" was the short reply, "what nonsense, she's a mere child."

"At any rate she doesn't look a child, nor act and think like one."

"No, she takes far too much upon herself, and has altogether too high an opinion of her own abilities. It's all those ridiculous books she reads, I can't think why her father allows it. If he would but let me choose her reading for her!"

"But surely a girl of eighteen is old enough to choose her own books?"

"Certainly not, especially when she has such tastes as Margaret has. In fact she reads too much altogether. I have the greatest difficulty to get her to take any interest whatever in household or village matters."

"It isn't her nature, you see," said Jack thoughtfully, watching the smoke from his cigar with a perplexed look on his face. "What's the good of trying to make a girl do what she evidently isn't suited for, it only bothers her; anyone can see she isn't happy."

"H'm! and I suppose you think it's my fault," said Mrs. Harcourt sharply. "Why don't you go and complain to your father that I ill-treat your sister?"

"Because I'm not such an idiot," was the cool reply. "I didn't say it was your fault at all, I merely made a remark. Do you yourself think Madge is happy?"

"I think if she isn't she ought to be, with such a good home. If she would only think a little more of others and less of herself it would be better for her. I'm sure I try to do her good, but she's as obstinate and hard as a rock; moreover she thinks she knows best."

Not wishing to increase his step-mother's ill-temper, Jack let the unkind speech pass and again pressed his point.

"What I mean," he said, "is, that this place is so dull for a girl; it's enough to drive anyone melancholy mad. Why can't she visit with the neighbouring families and see a little life?"

"Because neither I nor her father consider her old enough. When she is the proper age she may go into society, but at present she is best learning her home duties. It's absurd of you to make yourself uneasy about her, for she's a most thankless girl. I sincerely hope you won't put any fresh notions about being dull into her head."

This was too much for Jack, and in a quick voice he exclaimed, "Oh, hang it all, I'm not going to sit still and hear Madge abused by anybody. She is anything but a thankless girl, and if

you'd try and understand her a little instead of worrying her so, you'd soon find I am right."

"Thank you for your advice," was the sarcastic reply. "You are wonderfully generous with it. Times are indeed changed if young men are to dictate to their parents, and they to give way to obstinate daughters' whims and fancies. I was not aware that I was speaking in abusive language of my husband's child."

"Oh, all right," quoth Jack hastily, shrugging his shoulders. He was far too indolent to care to raise a storm, and quickly tried to appease it. "I didn't mean any offence, I'm sure, I humbly beg your pardon," and he stooped to pick up her ball of worsted which had rolled to his feet.

Mrs. Harcourt relaxed somewhat, remarking, "You're a wonderfully cool young man, Jack."

"So I'm often told," he replied laughingly, "and to prove it, what do you think I'm going to do now?"

"I don't know that I should be surprised at anything," was the rather dry reply.

"Well, I'm going to fetch Madge for a stroll," and as he spoke he stretched his long legs, yawned lazily and proceeded to get on his feet.

"You will utterly spoil her," snapped his step-mother, "I expect she will be completely unmanageable by the time your visit is over."

"Well, well, young folks will be young," he replied merrily, and went in search of his sister.

"Stop that wretched strumming, Madge, and come out, do," he exclaimed, as he entered the drawing-room. "There's going to be a ripping sunset, just your kind, all blue and red and yellow and dreamy. I shouldn't wonder if it didn't start you writing poetry. My word," he continued, as Madge rose and shut the piano with a malicious little bang, "just fancy if you were to turn poetess and want me to listen while you read your verses, you'd drive me crazy; you're not likely to do it, are you?" and he put on an expression of unspeakeable anxiety.

Madge slipped her arm through his and led him off, saying gaily, "If I do, I shan't waste my genius on an intellect like yours. You'd never understand a line."

"Never mind, you can't smoke a pipe," he laughed, "and I don't believe you'd know which end to hold a gun."

Just then Madge remembered her step-mother's injunctions and stopped short. "What about that work?" she asked, with a slight frown.

"Oh, never mind about that, I've made it all right with the mater."

"I don't know that I should have bothered about it, if you hadn't," she answered coolly, "unless it were for