

"IF LOVING HEARTS WERE NEVER LONELY—";

OR,

MADGE HARCOURT'S DESOLATION.

By GERTRUDE PAGE.

CHAPTER XXIII.

ANOTHER CONFLICT.

AS Madge and Elsie sat talking through that long afternoon, Guy was very differently engaged.

During their two weeks in Monte Carlo, he had been passing his time in his usual careless, reckless manner, and the anxious look on his face the previous evening was not without due cause. The downhill road had been smooth and easy enough so far, but he had come to a barrier now, and a chasm yawned before him, which, if he had not the courage to turn back, would engulf him.

And on that bright sunny afternoon, while Madge laid bare her heart to Elsie Merton, Guy was put to the test and—failed.

For the first week fortune had favoured him at the gaming tables, but since, he had lost steadily and heavily. In the early hours of that afternoon he staked nearly everything he had left, in a wild venture to win all back; and lost all.

He left the Casino, as countless others have done before and will do again, while the terrible curse of gambling stains the earth—a ruined man.

He did not see the people that passed him; he did not see the pitying looks that followed him; he did not see the spring flowers or the sunshine; he saw only a vision of utter ruin.

With toilsome steps and bent head he climbed a narrow cliff path, and at the top he sat down and buried his face in his hands.

At first he was too much dazed to think. One overwhelming fact alone filled all his mind and wrung his inmost heart, and that was that he must leave Madge.

About this there seemed no question whatever to him.

He had gambled away his substance but he had not lost his sense of honour, and the idea of living on his wife under such circumstances was impossible to him.

No, no, it was all his own fault, all his own blind foolishness, and now he must go away where his disgrace would not touch her.

He raised his head and looked away across the blue waters, and a mighty conflict waged within him.

"I can't go," he said with clenched hands and teeth. "I can't bear not to be with her."

"You must," said a voice within him. "You can't live on her, and what else can you do here? Besides, when she knows she will turn from you; she will despise you; how can you face that?"

"How can I go and leave her all alone?" he urged fiercely. "I am her husband, it is my right to remain with her and take care of her."

"You have forfeited your right," replied the voice. "She is better without you now, and you know she would wish

it. She is not afraid of being alone; she is self-reliant and independent and will not miss your protection. She only liked you before; she did not love you; she will despise you now—do you hear?—she will despise you."

He groaned aloud and rose hastily, as if it were more than he could bear. He looked down the face of the cliff and for one wild, delirious moment he meditated suicide. "But I must see her again," he muttered between his teeth, and turned away. As he did so his attention was drawn to a small church not far away. The door stood open and he heard voices singing. The impulse to go nearer moved him, and with dragging steps he entered, and sat down in a dusky corner alone, leaning forward with his face buried in his hands. He remained thus some time, for the service seemed to soothe him.

But as he sat there, in that little foreign church in his hour of bitter need and heard the quiet praying, for the first time in his life he had a gleam of what was contained in the true heart of religion.

Without a word passing his lips or being addressed to him, a quiet strength seemed to enter his soul and the conflict grew less fierce.

"Yes, he must go," he said to himself. "It was the only course open to him, and the only one which gave him a chance of retrieving his wrong steps and regaining his right, once more to watch over her. How could he expect to win her love now, and what right had he to seek it?" he asked, "since by his own act he had made himself unworthy."

Then once more a great wave of anguish and weakness passed over him, and he ground his teeth fiercely together and clutched his hands tighter to his head.

The thought of leaving her wrung him past endurance. "I can't go," he muttered. "It isn't as if she didn't care for me at all; she must care a little."

"But does she care enough to forgive you?" asked the voice, and his only answer was a stifled groan.

And meanwhile the people thronged past him, out of church, unheeded. When at last he looked up, he found it had grown dusk, and that but for one or two others he was alone.

Then came that moment of all others in a man's life—the moment when he first desires to pray.

For the first time in his life, Guy Fawcett went down on his knees and buried his face in his hands in silent, wordless prayer.

And as he knelt thus, such a sense of his own littleness and unworthiness swept over him, that he hardly dared to breathe, but the cry of the publican was in his heart, "Oh, God! be merciful to me a sinner!"

And who shall say that wordless

prayer did not find its way straight to God's Mercy-seat, for are not the secrets of every heart known to the Great Creator?

How long he remained thus, with the stillness all about him he never knew, but he was aroused at last by the gentle touch of a hand on his shoulder and a voice saying, "My son, I have a message for you."

He looked up and his eyes met the tender, sympathetic gaze of an aged man, who said softly, "The Master said, 'Come unto Me all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.'" Then he passed on his way, and Guy, after bowing his head once more for a few minutes, rose and left the church with a heart that was strong to do and dare.

But there was one thing for which he lacked courage, and that was to say farewell to Madge.

He simply dare not trust himself and decided not to run the risk of it; fearing to undermine his determination and undo all that it had cost him so much to bring his mind to. Accordingly he wrote to her instead, and gave the note to a trusty messenger, to deliver in a few hours. Then he wrote one or two business letters, and afterwards went to the station and took the first train to Marseilles with intent to sail in the next vessel leaving for a foreign country.

He had just sufficient money to get all he required and pay his passage; afterwards he must do the best he could.

Thus it happened that rather later than Guy's usual hour of returning, while Madge was sitting lost in thought over her afternoon's conversation, she received the following note—

"DEAR MADGE,

"I have to leave Monte Carlo hurriedly on important business and have not time to come up and see you. I will write in a day or two. Don't be anxious. Yours,

"GUY FAWCETT."

"Has the messenger gone?" she asked looking up quickly.

"Yes," was the reply, "he said there was no answer."

"Very well, I will have dinner at once; Mr. Fawcett will not be returning to-night," and a few minutes later, without showing the slightest perturbation, she sat down to her solitary meal.

When it was ended she went to bed, as her head ached badly after her rather trying afternoon, and it must be confessed her thoughts were far more occupied with what had passed then, than with her husband's unexpected absence. The latter did not surprise her very much, for he had been a little erratic in his movements once or twice, and she supposed he would be back in a few days.

(To be continued.)