

the faintest interest in horse-races;" and with that she changed the subject.

About four o'clock in the afternoon Lady Redfern and her daughter arrived; and Madge, who was reading in her own room, went slowly to receive them.

She wore her usual plain afternoon costume of black, relieved with a deep vandyke collar of rich old lace, and her step was as stately as a queen's as she entered the room and approached her visitors.

She was somewhat taken aback, however, when the elder of the two ladies rose, and with a great rustle of silks and jingle of bracelets, hurried forward and greeted her with quite unexpected effusion.

"I'm so glad to make your acquaintance, my dear," she exclaimed. "I knew your husband's mother so well. She was a most charming woman. I gave him a good scolding this morning for not giving me an opportunity of coming to see you before."

"You are very kind," muttered Madge a little indistinctly, while she shook hands distantly with Miss Redfern and sat down.

"It was just like Mr. Fawcett to go and keep it all to himself," remarked that young lady in slow affected tones, leaning back languidly in her chair. "He never would make himself agreeable about his affairs. I always tell him he ought to have gone in for being a hermit, as he is so hopelessly unsociable."

Madge regarded her wonderingly, then turned to Lady Redfern and remarked stiffly, "My husband has been considering a rather recent bereavement in my family. We shall not be visiting at all at present."

"Oh, dear me, is it so? I see you are in black; I am very sorry. But I hope we shall be great friends soon, I am sure I shall like you. How do you like London? You must be very dull if you don't know anyone?"

"No, I am not at all dull, but probably it is because I share Mr. Fawcett's unsociable habits."

Miss Redfern raised her eyebrows and looked at her pityingly. She appeared to be regarding her as something of a curiosity, and did not take the trouble to hide her scrutiny.

"Mother and I are simply dying to know where Mr. Fawcett met you?" she remarked coolly, taking stock of Madge's attire with a scarcely concealed sneer at its severe plainness. "I am always interested in Mr. Fawcett, not because I know him very well, but because I have always heard so much of him from Jack Harcourt, who was his great friend."

A sudden astonished light flashed in Madge's eyes, but she did not speak, merely sitting a little more haughtily upright.

"I used to have to get quite cross with poor Jack," continued Miss Redfern carelessly, "for introducing his name so often. I suppose you have heard of him, he was such a nice boy, and he met with such a horrible end. It really made me cry."

If Madge was cold before, she was frigid now.

She first darted a look of scornful indignation at the unconscious offender, then, as if having decided she was not worth being angry with, she remarked with a haughty air—

"You are speaking of my brother."

"What!" exclaimed both ladies in chorus, "Was Jack Harcourt your brother?"

Madge remained silent.

"Well, I never should have thought it possible," gasped Lady Redfern, while her daughter, who had quickly subsided again into languid elegance remarked, "Dear me, how strange!"

"I can't trace the slightest resemblance," continued Lady Redfern, addressing her daughter, "Can you, dear?"

The young lady raised her pince-nez and surveyed Madge's face coolly.

"No, not the slightest," she replied; "Jack was all life and spirits. You are very quiet, are you not?"

"Yes, very," replied Madge drily.

"Then you are in mourning for your poor brother," said Lady Redfern. "Poor dear boy, how dreadfully sad it was; you must have felt it deeply."

"Yes, I did feel it rather," was the quiet reply in the same dry tones, and her face grew expressionless.

"Surely it is more than a year ago?" remarked Miss Redfern.

"Fourteen months; why?" and Madge looked straight before her.

"I only thought it was very unusual to wear mourning so long."

"It is a matter of choice, I believe," and Madge's lips curled somewhat dangerously.

"Oh, of course! I was only thinking what a penance it would be to me to be garbed in black for even six months. I couldn't possibly exist in it longer."

"Ah, my dear, you don't know what it is to lose a near relation!" interposed Lady Redfern, becoming aware that their hostess's eyes belied her cool demeanour. "Probably Mrs. Fawcett was especially fond of her brother."

"Yes," was the cool answer, "and that is certainly not the case between Fred and me. I should wear black only three months for Fred. I daresay Jack Harcourt would be rather a nice sort of brother," she continued carelessly, "for though he was always teasing, he never seemed to annoy one. Fred and I never do anything else but annoy each other."

Again Lady Redfern saw that suspicious flash in Madge's eyes, and wisely changed the subject.

"I suppose you have been to all the theatres?" she remarked.

"No, I'm not fond of them."

"Not fond of theatres!" and Miss Redfern again had occasion to exert herself so far as to raise her eyebrows. "I love them; a good theatre is like heaven to me."

"I haven't the privilege of knowing heaven, so can't make the comparison," replied Madge quietly, and as she spoke she stooped and picked up a leaf from the carpet. Miss Redfern bit her lips and her mother hastened to the rescue.

"Perhaps you don't approve of them?" she said inquiringly.

"Personally I see too much acting in

real life to care about making it one of my pastimes."

"Ah, I see, you hold views!" and Lady Redfern looked very knowing. "Ermytrude does too; it's quite the fashion now. I wonder if you two would agree in your ideas; it would be nice for you if you did."

For one moment Madge felt a desperate inclination to laugh, but she managed to control her feelings and remarked quietly, "I think we should be more likely to disagree."

"So do I," said Miss Redfern. "If you don't like theatres, I suppose you ride in the Park and skate at Niagara?"

"No, I prefer to look on."

"How very odd! I hate to watch other people having a good time unless I am in it. I much prefer other people to watch me."

"Your taste is not difficult to gratify," answered Madge sarcastically. "One can so easily attract attention. You might wear your hat the wrong way, for instance."

Miss Redfern glanced at her sharply. She had an uncomfortable feeling that she was being laughed at, and resented it deeply. It was impossible to glean anything from Madge's face, however, as she still assumed a blank expression and kept her eyes lowered.

This time her daughter's face warned Lady Redfern, and she again introduced a change of subject.

"I suppose you will be going with your husband to the Doncaster races?" she asked beamingly. "I know he always goes."

"No, I am not going."

"Indeed!" was the astonished reply.

"Is Mr. Fawcett perhaps not going this time?"

"Oh, he is sure to go; he'll want to know as quickly as possible how his stakes stand," and Miss Redfern spoke with an ill-concealed sneer, adding, "But perhaps you have cured him of betting?"

"He is certainly going," replied Madge, addressing herself to Lady Redfern and not deigning to notice her daughter's speech. "He was speaking of it at luncheon."

"I'm sure you are a pattern wife to let him off so soon," replied her guest. "I suppose you have only been married a few weeks."

"Nearly six months."

"Indeed, is it so long as that? And to think that I have only known it a fortnight. At any rate you will forgive me for not coming before, won't you; and I hope we shall see you in Park Lane very shortly."

Madge thanked her with forced politeness, and soon after the two ladies took their departure.

That evening "Mrs. Fawcett" formed the principal topic of conversation at the dinner-table in Park Lane.

"She's an oddity," was Miss Redfern's description; "quite too terrible! She looks like a Quakeress; wears a black dress and white collar, and folds her hands."

"She's certainly very handsome though," remarked Lady Redfern. "She has a beautiful skin and beautiful eyes."