

"IF LOVING HEARTS WERE NEVER LONELY—";

OR,

MADGE HARCOURT'S DESOLATION.

By GERTRUDE PAGE.

CHAPTER XVII.



FOR some little time Madge had her wish and was unmolested by visitors of any description.

In a little more than two months, however, it began to be noised abroad among a certain set that Guy Fawcett had married a beautiful heiress, and countless speculations concerning her ensued.

The wonder was that no one appeared to have seen her; and next to

nothing could be discovered about her through her husband, because he firmly refused to be cross-questioned.

At last Lady Redfern, who claimed to be a friend of Guy's mother, stopped him one day as she was driving in the Park, and announced her intention of going to see his wife.

"I think you're a mean, shabby boy never to have told me anything about her," she said in somewhat shrill tones. "I actually only heard you were married two weeks ago. I've been wanting to come across you ever since. Will she be in this afternoon?"

"I don't know," answered Guy rather coldly, noting the vulgar showiness of her ladyship's attire; "but I can of course tell her you are coming."

"Well do, and I'll bring Ermytrude. They'll be just of an age, and I daresay Mrs. Fawcett will be glad of a young friend as she's a stranger in town."

Then she drove off, and Guy went home looking perplexed. He had an idea that Lady Redfern was one of the last ladies in London Madge would care to know, and he was vexed that he had not been able to prevent her calling.

"You are going to have a visitor this afternoon, Madge," he said, throwing himself into a low wicker chair near the open window.

It was very pleasant to be in that cool room after the heat and glare of the streets, and there was something more than mere kindness and affection in his eyes as he watched his wife, with graceful movements and deft white fingers, tending the flowers with which the balcony was well-nigh covered.

He could not help contrasting her quiet dignity with the fussiness and loudness of the lady he had just parted from. He mentally decided that Madge's hardest and most scornful expression was better than the empty frivolous look worn by most of the pretty faces he saw in the Park.

In reply to his remark, she merely raised her eyebrows a little and said indifferently, "Oh!" and went on with her work.

"I'm afraid you won't like her," he continued. "I would have put her off if I could, but I was fairly trapped. In fact, she simply told me to tell you she was coming."

"Why is she coming? What does she want?"

"She wants to see you. She said she had heard I had a beautiful wife, and she was coming to see for herself," and Guy watched her curiously to note the effect of his words.

But still there was no show of relaxation on the grave set face, and she only replied, "Oh, it's a visit of inspection, is it?"

"That's about it, but I suppose it's not an unusual thing. Did you know you were beautiful, Madge?" he asked half wistfully, breaking off.

"Yes, I suppose so, but I never cared much about it, except that it pleased Jack," and the faintest tremor shook her voice. "My mother was known in Rome for her beauty."

Guy looked down disconsolately.

"Jack, Jack, is it always to be Jack?" he thought.

He was growing jealous of the dead man's ascendancy in her heart, and it seemed to grow stronger instead of weaker.

This was not really the case, for Madge had thought of him continually, but Guy did not realise that. It might be because he was learning to desire more from her himself and to give more, but that did not occur to him; he only thought it was hard that she should persist in clinging so tenaciously to Jack's memory, to the cost of all else.

And meanwhile Madge went on tending her flowers and remembered with a craving in her heart how Jack had admired her face in the old days. It did not occur to her that Guy's admiration ought to be as pleasant, and she did not see the slight frown on his face; her thoughts were busy elsewhere. She was recalled, however, by his remarking—

"I suppose you'll stay in this afternoon?"

She did not reply for a few minutes, then said, "Is it necessary? I'd rather not. I suppose it would be rude of me to go out."

"I daresay she wouldn't like it. She's rather a swell in her way."

"Did you mention her name, I forget?"

"Lady Redfern. I don't know her very well, but she says she knew my mother and makes it an excuse to treat me like a schoolboy. I detest the woman."

"Oh, she's that sort, is she?" remarked Madge coolly, adding, with an air of unconcern, "Don't you think that palm shows better there?"

Guy turned his head.

"Yes, it's all right," he said. "That's a new arum lily, isn't it?"

"Yes, I bought it this morning, and I ordered some cork-work things. We shall scarcely see the houses opposite at all soon. I'm going to shut out London."

"Why, don't you like it?"

"Oh, the place is well enough," she answered carelessly. "At any rate, it's as good as any other, but I'm tired of those bare dull bricks opposite, and of wondering what the people are doing in those dingy-looking rooms."

Guy laughed a little, and just then the luncheon gong sounded and he dragged himself out of his chair.

As they left the room he linked his arm through hers. She was not indifferent to the caress intended, and slipped her fingers through his, but it was in a very matter-of-fact way, and her face did not soften.

Guy had begun to wonder sometimes if in her heart she really cared for him at all. For the first few weeks, if she had not actually looked pleased, she had at least coloured a little and seemed conscious of his touch, and sometimes she had slipped her hand in his uninvited. But now she seemed to take everything as a matter of course. He had always supposed a newly-married couple quickly got too much accustomed to each other to care about incessant caressings; but for all that, he did not find Madge's presence nor touch grow stale. On the contrary, he began to long and watch for a little warmth of feeling, and hungrily to grasp the few signs of affection she vouchsafed him.

Sometimes he took himself to task about it, calling himself effeminate; but for all that, the next time they were together he found himself longing again for that little warmth.

At other times he would make up his mind to be more independent, and as she did not seem to care whether he were in or out, he would spend long afternoons and evenings at a club, forgetting her for a time in the excitement of a game at cards or billiards. But the old craving invariably returned afterwards, and he did not know how to still it.

"Do you care about horse-races?" he asked, as they sat down to dinner.

"No, are you going to some?"

"I thought of doing so, if you didn't mind. I should be away two or three days."

"Oh, no, I don't mind," she answered at once with decision.

The sudden disappointed look on his face struck her, and she added kindly, "I hope you won't get knocked up by the heat."

"Oh, no, I shan't be in the sun much, but I'm afraid you will be awfully dull. I wish you'd come with me."

"No, I shan't be dull. I don't mind being alone in the least, and I haven't