

quiet beauty of the summer evening seemed to soothe her; she slackened her steps and a soft, expectant look dawned in her eyes. On reaching her destination, she leaned her elbows on the top rail, and resting her chin on her hands, surveyed the scene before her.

Madge possessed a deep love for nature, and the remembrance of her step-mother's harsh voice faded for the time being before her beautiful surroundings.

The June sun was just lingering over the summit of the distant hills, shedding one last brilliant glow over all the silent earth around her, before making way for the coming night. It seemed almost as if he were loath to leave a scene so fair, as if he would like to have stayed his course a little to gaze with her on the still beautiful earth. The Cumberland hills stood out dark and soft against the deepening sky, while a gentle breeze swayed the trees and murmured through their leaves, sometimes ceasing, as if afraid to break the wondrous silence. From the little village nestling in a hollow below her, came ever and anon a sound of life. Now it was a boy's shrill whistle; now a child's shout or a mother's call, and mingled with these the blacksmith's hammer or the passing of feet down the village street as the labourers went home to a well-earned rest.

Madge heard the faint sounds, nothing escaped her, but they did not, as far as she was concerned, add any beauty to the scene. It was the hills and the heavens, and the great stillness that appealed to her, not her fellow-man, and as she looked away to where the last rays of the sunlight were fading, a half-stifled sigh escaped her parted lips and she clasped her white hands convulsively. But at this she turned sharply away, and with a resolute expression gazed in the direction from which she expected Jack. She knew from experience what sort of an effect gazing at the sunset would have on her, and to-night there must be no unnecessary sadness in her heart, for was it not the gladdest night in the whole year—the night that brought her Jack? So she banished her usual bitterness and stood there on the hill-top waiting hopefully, her tall, slim, erect young figure and perfect profile rendering her far from the least beautiful object in that beautiful scene.

It was not altogether easy however for her to banish all unpleasant thoughts, for she was still conscious of an angry feeling at the tone in which her step-mother had addressed her. She hated to be called "child," and the result was generally flat disobedience.

"Keep me from meeting Jack indeed, just for a paltry supper," she said to herself, after waiting some time and growing impatient in consequence, "and to talk of being out late at this hour. I expect she'll go and pour a long tale of wrongs into father's ear, and be as cross as a bear when Jack and I get in. No one would think I had been trying to please her all day for his sake. I did want his first evening to be a pleasant one, but it's no use hoping for anything, much less trying to please a step-

mother," and she knit her brows with a frown as she gazed anxiously into the dusk.

She was beginning to fear Jack had missed his train, which would have been a bitter disappointment to her, for his visits were the one bright spot on her shadowy horizon, and he the idol of her existence, the object upon which the deep love of her strong nature was almost solely lavished.

And these precious visits of his were so few and far between, for life in the little Cumberland village possessed few attractions for lively Jack. He contrived to pass his time much more happily in London on a yearly income of £500 which his mother and an aunt had left him.

He had studied for the bar with a view to becoming a barrister, but as time passed and no briefs appeared, he changed his profession for the more congenial one of enjoying himself. Of home affairs, beyond anything connected with Margaret, he took little note, his yearly visit being entirely upon her account.

If he did not love his sister with the same devotion she showed for him, at least he loved her better than anyone else in the world; indeed, as deeply as his light-hearted, happy-going nature was capable of loving.

With his step-mother he had always managed to keep friendly; but then Jack was friendly with everybody, and had the happy knack of turning unpleasantness aside and forgetting all about it.

He was very sorry for his sister, for he could not help seeing that she was unhappy, but he was at a loss to discover means for helping her, so he let matters rest.

He had tried to persuade her not to notice their step-mother's fault-finding, but to make friends among some of the neighbouring families on her own account, and to amuse herself in the way she liked best.

But, like everyone else, he totally misunderstood her. He could not realise that the quiet life, with the solitary hours and deep reading which had grown to be her pleasures, had made her vastly different from the girls he knew in London. He was only vaguely conscious that somehow she was different, and on the whole it was a circumstance to be deplored. However, he did not often trouble about it, having come to the conclusion that "Madge was a caution, but would turn out all right when she got married and mixed more with others."

His thoughts were something of this description as he walked quickly from the little station in the direction of their usual meeting-place, and there was a slight shadow on his usually sunny face. It vanished instantly, however, as he turned a sharp curve on the hill-side and came full in view of the anxious watcher.

He whistled the bugle-call, which was their usual signal, but not before Madge had descried him and was halfway over the stile. Another instant and she was in his arms, embracing him with a fervour that those who only knew the silent, haughty girl at home would have believed impossible.

"Oh, Jack!" she exclaimed, "it's worth living just to have you again! I am so glad you have come. I was afraid you had missed the train. Let me look at you," and she held his face between her hands and gazed lovingly into his eyes. "You dear old fellow, you're splendid," she said. "You look handsomer than ever."

"Thank you," he replied, disengaging himself and making a low bow. "May I return the compliment?"

"If you really mean it,"—and there was a half-eager questioning look in her face as she drew his arm round her and proceeded homeward.

"Mean it indeed?" he echoed; "I should think I do mean it! Why, Madge, I believe you're one of the prettiest sisters a fellow ever had to be proud of."

A quick gleam of delight shot through Madge's eyes. Not that she cared for the compliment particularly, but to win Jack's praise was one of the sweetest things in life to the lonely girl. If she were beautiful in his eyes, the rest of the world might think what they liked; it was a matter of no concern whatever to her.

"I only wish you were a little more rosy and not so thin," he continued. "I sha'n't be able to call you my little Madge now, you must have grown quite a foot since I was last here! I suppose I shall have to call you 'Margaret,' and treat you with respect now."

"What nonsense, Jack! Just as if I should ever be anything but 'Madge' to you," and the dark glossy head nestled very lovingly on his shoulder.

Jack bent over and kissed her, saying: "Then you shall be 'Madge' all my life, and we'll have a downright jolly time together for the next two weeks."

"Two weeks!" she exclaimed, looking up quickly. "Surely you'll stay at home longer than that?"

"I'm afraid I can't," he replied hastily. He had not meant to approach the subject that evening, but the words had slipped out unawares. "I'm going yachting with some fellows then, and it's too good an opportunity to miss. But I'll tell you all about it another time, Madge; don't let's think of parting directly we have met. Why do you look like that?" he continued, as a bitter smile hovered round the girl's mouth. Anyone would think you were thirty instead of nineteen. Are you angry?"

"Oh, no," she replied, with a hard little laugh. "I was only thinking of the difference between what this visit is to you and what it is to me. There's a little difference, too, between the pleasures we think too good to miss. For instance, when step-mother goes to Coleve to do a day's shopping, I settle myself in the library, to read in peace, the whole day. I refuse to see anyone because it's too good an opportunity to miss."

Jack looked serious for a moment; he did not like his sister's tone, or the look on her face as she spoke. However, he let it pass and remarked, laughing—

"So you still persist in calling your dear mamma 'step-mother'?"

"I don't know what else to call her,