

On the way she was surprised to meet the object of her fire-light conversation, and struck by the unusual weariness of her ascent looked half-anxiously into her face as she passed. The feeling of sympathy came over her again, although Madge passed her without seeming to see her, and she hurried down with her letters and back again in order to overtake her, scarcely knowing why. But she had no reason to regret her haste, for, even as she approached her, Madge stood still on the staircase, pressed one hand over her eyes, and grasped the banisters tightly to save herself from falling.

"I am afraid you are not well," said Elsie, touching her gently. "Let me help you up these two steps and then you must come into my room and rest for a few minutes. It is the first door."

Madge started slightly and hastily attempted to move on.

"Thank you," she said quickly, "I am quite well, it was only a sudden touch of giddiness. I need not trouble you."

But even as she spoke she again reeled and had to support herself, so that it was impossible to protest further, and she suffered Elsie to lead her into her room.

"This lady is a little faint, mother," she said, as Mrs. Merton rose and came forward. "I have persuaded her to rest here a little while. I think a little rest would revive her. There is no one here," she added, leading Madge to a large arm-chair. "You will soon feel better."

Then she gently took off her hat and unfastened her jacket. "I have some eau-de-cologne," she said, reaching a bottle from a small table. "May I bathe your head with it?"

Madge thanked her and closed her eyes, and presently a faint colour came back into her cheeks.

She opened her eyes and looked at her kind benefactors.

"You are very kind," she said, trying to rise, "but I need not trouble you any further."

"Please don't speak of troubling us," put in Elsie quickly, "I am so glad that I happened to be at hand. Won't you stay until you are rested? We shall be so pleased if you will."

"Thank you," murmured Madge, and leaned back in her chair again. Somehow she found it pleasant to sit there and be taken care of. She looked round the pretty room, bright with photographs, and at the two kind faces before her, and a momentary sense of peacefulness possessed her. But all too soon her natural reserve returned, inducing a sudden impulse to seek her own solitary apartments.

"I think I must go," she said, and stood up to take leave.

For one moment Elsie hesitated, and then, with an intensely winning smile, she said, "We should be so glad if you would stay a little. Mother and I are quite alone, and we shall like your company so much."

Madge looked at her in surprise and then said suddenly, "I think I have seen you before; have we met anywhere?"

"Only on the stairs and out of doors,"

replied Elsie, "and then I thought you did not see me."

"Yes, I did, I remember now, I liked your face. It is kind of you to ask me to stay, but I am a very unsociable person. I'm sure you wouldn't enjoy my company."

"Please let us judge for ourselves," urged Elsie, and her mother added a word of persuasion, so that Madge was at last prevailed upon to sit down again.

"Will your husband be anxious about you, because we can easily ring and send him a message," said Mrs. Merton. "Perhaps he would join you?"

"He is out," replied Madge. "I do not expect him back yet."

"Are you making a long stay here?" asked Elsie, seating herself on a low chair beside her visitor.

"An indefinite one. We may go any day, or we stay for weeks. It depends upon how we feel."

"Do you like Monte Carlo?"

"I don't mind it. I would as soon be here as anywhere. I find all places are much the same."

"But surely friends and associations endear some to us more than others."

"I have no friends and no associations, except those I would rather forget."

Madge spoke with an undertone of much bitterness, and turned her face away to the fire. The gay life and throng of pleasure-seekers in Monte Carlo had not had a soothing effect upon her. And as she sat in Mrs. Merton's cosy sitting-room and felt the atmosphere of love and happiness and contentment that reigned there, a hard sense of desolation smote her.

She thought, if she had had such a mother, one who made a friend and not a subject of her child, how different she might have been now. A lump rose in her throat and tears were ready to start into her eyes, for she was tired and unwell, and her usual cold demeanour forsook her. But she was determined her new friends should know her as she generally was, so she resolutely controlled the rising softness in her heart and took refuge in increased bitterness.

After her last remark she expected Elsie and her mother to regard her in wonderment and perhaps expostulate with her.

She was surprised when instead Elsie said simply, "I am so sorry," and her mother went on quietly with her knitting.

"Have you travelled much?" asked the former, hoping to find a subject congenial to her strange guest.

"Yes, a good deal during the last year, at least since I was married. Before I never went anywhere."

"Are you fond of it?"

"Not particularly."

"Mother and I love it. We scarcely ever left London until two years ago, and since then we have seen a good deal."

"Yes?" said Madge questioningly, her interest beginning to grow. "Where did you live in London?"

"In Chelsea. I am a professional singer. I have earned my living by my voice for about ten years."

"Have you, indeed?" and now Madge turned and looked at her with scrutiny. Evidently the calm sweet eyes

pleased her yet more, for she asked kindly, "What is your professional name?"

"Marie Beaufoy," replied Elsie.

"Then I have heard you sing at the Orchestral Concerts," she said. "I remember your name quite well."

"Are you fond of music?" asked Mrs. Merton.

"Yes, very; I often went to concerts in London."

"I'm sure Elsie will be pleased to sing to you if you care about it any time."

"Indeed I shall," echoed her daughter, "if you will let me, some evening."

"Thank you," replied Madge, a little hesitatingly.

She was not sure if she wished to make a friend after going so long without.

Elsie, noticing her hesitation, changed the subject, bravely determining not to be discouraged.

"Did you live long in London?" she asked.

"No, I was never there before I was married. My home was in Cumberland."

"Do you like a country life?"

"I don't mind it. The winter seemed long."

"Yes, that must be the worst of it, unless one has brothers and sisters at home for company. Have you either?"

"No." She paused, then added in a low voice, "I had one brother, but he died."

"How sad," said Elsie, in the same kind, sympathetic voice. "You must have felt it dreadfully," and she purposely avoided looking into her visitor's face. "I have always longed for a brother. If I had one and lost him, I don't know what I should do."

Madge moved a little restlessly as if the subject hurt her.

"You wouldn't do anything but just endure it," she said, in a hard voice. "There is nothing else to do. It is a thousand times better never to have had one."

"I don't know," said Mrs. Merton quietly. "The memory is a glad one, and at least it is one more dear one to greet you hereafter."

Madge did not speak, but she bit her lips hard.

"Has he been dead long?" asked Elsie gently, adding, "I hope you won't think me very rude, asking so many questions. I seem to know you so well, after meeting you so often and talking to mother about you."

Madge looked a little surprised, but in her heart she admired the girl's frankness.

"I think it rather kind of you to have troubled to be interested," she said, "and if I had a friend I should wish her to be perfectly frank. My brother has been dead eighteen months. He was killed by an accident. He went out strong and well in the afternoon, and they carried him home dead in the early morning."

Her breast heaved, and she clutched the arm of the chair so that the veins on her hand stood out.

"Oh, how dreadful!" exclaimed