

## "IF LOVING HEARTS WERE NEVER LONELY—";

OR,

MADGE HARCOURT'S DESOLATION.

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CUMBERLAND  
AGAIN?

o you think I ought to go?" and Madge looked up questioning at Elsie, who was arranging some flowers on the table beside her.

They were in London now, in a pretty little flat in

Hampstead, where they lived with Elsie's mother.

It is just a year since Guy went abroad, and all that time Madge has heard no word from him.

For the first three months after his departure she had been in a state of mind bordering on frenzy, for the sudden awakening in her heart to hope and love, and the subsequent falling away of all her meditative habits and uneventful existence, resulted in a chaos of conflicting emotions.

At last the moment had come in which her true self stood triumphant, stripped of all its fetters, and she knew herself to be just a clinging, loving woman, instead of the hard unfeeling being of her own fantasy. And in that bitter hour of awakening, with its agonizing consciousness of foolishness and weakness, Elsie had been her unflinching support and stay.

The links that now bound these two together were those that the angels forge, when one human being in his hour of utter need leans on a fellow creature and is comforted.

No single stone had been left unturned that could help them to find the wanderer, but all their efforts had proved futile. They traced him to the West Indies, and then they lost all clue of him. Meanwhile Madge had made her home with Elsie and her mother, and was now waiting quietly until her night of weeping was passed and her morn of joy come on. For she had learnt it at last, that hardest lesson of all, she had learnt "to wait."

There had been no exaggeration in that sudden revelation on the day she received Guy's letter. The weeks as they passed only proved its truth, and deepened, broadened and widened the hitherto latent but real love that bound her to her husband; the man who had been her friend when she lost the idol of her girlhood. She saw it all at last. The chequered, entangled path of life that lay behind looked clearer now that it was removed to a distance, and she understood how she had first been blindly wrapped up in Jack, then her sorrow, and herself in both. She knew that there was something more than a mythical legend in the old story of the

voice that thundered on the mount. "Thou shalt have none other gods but Me." She knew, too, that the "Sorrow of life," because it alone ennobles and purifies and strengthens is in reality the "saving of men."

And as she looks up at her friend with an open letter in her hand, the dark eyes have a softer look in them and the curved lips are less compressed. True, her cheeks are hollow and faint lines show on her forehead, but for all that, though the world might not think so, her face is more beautiful than it ever was before.

Elsie thought so as she looked down at her and marked the slightly hesitating, plaintive expression.

"I don't know what to say," she answered, in reply to her question. "It is difficult to help you one way or the other."

A short silence followed, during which Madge rose and stood looking out of the window, with her hands behind her back.

"It isn't going to be with my stepmother I mind so much," she said, "it's the associations and memories. It will be dreadful to face them all without even you."

"Perhaps it won't be so bad as you think. Being in the old home may make things easier; is Mrs. Harcourt seriously ill?"

"I hardly know; father doesn't say much. I fancy she's had a slight stroke."

"Does he ask you to go?"

"He says he wants to see me, and now my stepmother is invalided, they would be very glad if I would go for a time."

"I think I would go if I were you," replied Elsie quietly.

Another pause followed.

"Supposing Guy comes," said Madge at last, in a low voice. "He would be sure to look for me in London first."

"I will do everything in my power, dear, as you know," replied Elsie gently, "and will send him after you as soon as possible, if I find him."

For answer Madge took her friend's hands in hers and kissed her lovingly.

"I know you would," she said, "I will go to-morrow. I have been selfish quite long enough; it is time I tried to be of a little use to someone."

Accordingly, late the following day, after the early spring evening had already closed in, Madge once again crossed the threshold of her home.

A dull sense of pain weighed at her heart, but she bravely withstood it and returned her father's welcome warmly. Soon afterwards she stood beside the couch of the woman who had caused so much bitterness in her life; and as she looked down at the wasted form and hard set face, and noted the restless, unsatisfied expression in the keen eyes, a dawning sense of pity swept over her.

"So you've come back, have you?" was the ungracious greeting. "I suppose you'll find it more to your taste now you can have it all your own way in the house."

For answer, Madge smoothed her pillow and spoke sympathetically of her long and trying illness.

"I hope we shall get on better together now," she said kindly. "I have come to look after you and father, if you will let me."

Mrs. Harcourt turned away without replying, but she refrained from any further hard speeches, and from that day a happier relationship grew up between Madge and her step-mother.

Meanwhile Elsie waited and watched in London for news of the wanderer, and a month after Madge's departure her hopes were rewarded.

She was standing waiting for an omnibus one afternoon when a tall man, with a bronzed, sunburnt face, came and waited beside her. She looked up at him, and instantly recognised Guy Fawcett, in spite of his aged appearance. For a moment she was entirely at a loss how to proceed, but the necessity for immediate action was so strongly impressed upon her that she took what seemed the only course open, and accosted him.

"Excuse me," she said a little nervously, "but I think you are Mr. Guy Fawcett."

Guy looked at her in surprise, and remembered having seen her before. He raised his hat instantly and replied—

"Yes, that is my name, but I am afraid you have the advantage of me; I can't recall yours."

"Probably you have never heard it. I was staying at the same hotel as you and Mrs. Fawcett last spring in Monte Carlo, and that is how I came to know you. My name is Merton, and I am a friend of Mrs. Fawcett's."

Instantly Guy's manner changed from one of polite curiosity to ill-concealed eagerness.

"Yes," he said, rather hurriedly, "I remember you now." A slight and awkward pause followed, then he asked without looking at her, "Have you seen Mrs. Fawcett lately?"

"Yes, until a month ago she was living with my mother and me. She is now at her home in Cumberland."

"Indeed!" he exclaimed involuntarily.

"I am sure you will like to hear about her," continued Elsie, eyeing him keenly. "If you care to come home with me now, I can tell you a great deal."

He assented, and half an hour later they were seated together in the little drawing-room at the flat.

At first he continued ill at ease, but Elsie's manner quickly reassured him, and they were soon talking as if they had known one another all their lives.