

A LOVELESS MARRIAGE

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THIS BEGINS THE STORY

Maria's mother was killed in a house fire, and her father, a doctor, was the last to see her. Maria was only a few years old at the time. The only bright spot in her life was her father's lawyer, who had been her father's friend since childhood. He was a kind, old man, and he had been her father's friend since childhood. He was a kind, old man, and he had been her father's friend since childhood.

will never have any if she gets married. Poor little modern, progressive fool! She would not believe it if I were to tell her what heaven it is to hold your own baby in your arms.

I stayed on at the house till late in May, and then suddenly, lying in bed one morning, I thought to myself—if I stay here any longer I shall go mad!

The trees were nearly in full leaf, the birds were singing in the branches, there were flowers in the garden.

Francis was away! Eliza had been home for a few days from her visit, but gone away again to stay with some one else. Neither of them wanted me; neither of them cared what I did, or where I went.

I looked up Richard's things in a great chest, put the house in order, and went away.

I went down to a little village on the Devonshire coast, where a small wheel in the sunshine and little waves lap the shore, and where there is peace in the winding lanes.

I bought a small cottage kept by a young newly married woman; she had a baby three months old, a dear, chubby, good-tempered thing, and sometimes she let me nurse it when she was busy.

Often I sat in the sunshine at her cottage door, while the fat baby slept happily on my lap, and closed my eyes and dreamed. I was back in the years that were gone, with my own baby on my knee.

I had not made enough of those golden days, but I did not let them slip carelessly through my fingers without a thought of the day when I should nurse each moment to my heart, and yearn and yearn to have them again.

"Richard sent his love to you," Night and day those words haunted me. Often in the darkness I still wake with the tears on my face, and stretch empty arms to draw him close.

"Mother, I love her love, my boy—my darling," I whisper to him through the space that divides us. And I listen and pretend that he will answer.

Don't laugh at me, you who have no children of your own, but you can't understand. Only those women who have had a dear beloved son and lost him could ever know the wreck it made of my whole life.

But I was happier there in Devonshire than I had been anywhere since I lost him. The sea was so beautiful, the country so fair, it was impossible not to feel contentment and peace.

Eliza sent me one or two postcards. Her friends had taken her to Paris; they were gay people, and not at all the sort of companions I should have chosen for her. But it would have been useless to remonstrate; she went her own way entirely.

She wrote snatches of news to me. She said she felt sorry for him, and that she was having the time of her life. She said that the Farleys—her friends—knew "tons" of men, and that she got any amount of attention. She said that the head and neck of mourning, as black as soot and depressing.

As an after-thought, she added that she hoped I was having a good time. I was, in my own way, but it was a way which she would never have understood or tolerated.

I used to spend long hours on the cliff with the sea breeze blowing through my hair, thinking and dreaming. Sometimes I went to sleep on the soft grass, with the whispering sound of the wind for my lullaby, and the song of a tiny lark high up in the blue sky.

One day when I had fallen asleep, I was awakened by a hand on my shoulder. I started up in dismay, my heart beating fast. The light shone had clouded over, and large drops of rain were falling; away in the distance came the growl of thunder.

A man was standing, hat in hand, looking apologetically at me.

"I was afraid you would get wet through; we are in for a storm," he said. Then, "Good heavens! Is it really you?" he added, in sort of shocked voice.

I laughed mirthlessly.

"Yes, it is," I told him. "Have I altered so much? You haven't; I should have known you anywhere."

CHAPTER XXXIV

It was Richard Tempest.

He stood staring at me as if I were a ghost.

"Have I altered so much?" I asked him. "Why do you stare at me so?"

"Oh, Richard, I have lost my boy! I have lost my boy!"

I began to sob helplessly.

He did not answer for a moment, then he put his hand through my arm in the old kindly protesting manner which I could still remember.

"You will get wet through," he said gravely. "Can you run? There is a shed in the field."

I obeyed him, the tears blinding me, big sobs choking my throat.

He stood beside me, staring out across the sea. Presently:

"It's useless to say I'm sorry," he said. "I—what can I say to you, Marjorie?"

I sobbed out the whole story to him. I tried not to blame my husband, but I found he had been kind to me, and I did not say so; for I saw his face darken, and his big brow meet in a frown.

"I don't know what to say to you," he said again. "How can any words of mine comfort you?"

But he had comforted me; for the first time I had been able to unburden myself to some one who really understood and sympathized. I dried my eyes resolutely.

Richard pushed the door to. Once when the thunder crashed overhead it felt as if the whole shed must fall about our ears; the lightning penetrated the cracks in the rough boarding like slits of burning fire. Richard looked at me.

We were no longer young, my hair was gray, but in my heart was still only the girl who had loved him.

The storm died away, and a wet, apologetic-looking sun stole out from behind the black clouds, and smiled at our ears; the lightning forgiveness for having been frightened away.

Richard rose to his feet, drawing me up with him.

"How fresh everything smells," I said. "And how glad the earth must be."

He opened the door, and we stood looking out at the sea and sky.

"I think we might venture now," I said. I gathered my skirt round me, and looked at the wet grass, and then at Richard.

"I'm afraid there's no other way back," he said, answering the question in my eyes. "You'll have to change when you get in." He pushed the half-closed door wider, it swung back and would have struck my shoulder had he not pulled me hastily away. To do so, he put his arm round me, and—did not take it away.

Was it very wicked of me I wondered afterward, to give myself up to the happiness of that little moment? All my life I had starved for love; all my life very hope and dream I had cherished had been snatched from me.

For a moment I closed my eyes and stood motionless; I could feel his breath on my cheek, then he let me go and stepped out into the wet grass.

AND HERE IT CONTINUES

IT WAS NOT my boy who lay there. It was a wonderful carved image of a little girl, cruelly like him, and yet so different.

The ugly death that had come so early had not left my hands clasped in my lap, staring at him, waiting for him to open his eyes.

At first Eliza's grief was very violent; she locked herself in her room and refused to eat, and just lay on the bed and cried and cried.

Once I went in to see her, and tried half-heartedly, I am afraid, to comfort her, but she only pushed away from me and wailed afresh.

"I was so looking forward to going to Cambridge to see him and his friends, and now I shall never go! Oh, it is a shame; a cruel shame!"

"Aren't you going to get some things for yourself, mother?" she asked me impatiently one day. "You can't go out till you get some decent mourning!"

I did not know what to do; I only wanted to be left alone. What did it matter what clothes I wore, or how I looked, when Richard would not be there to see me?

"Earth to earth, dust to dust!"

The words fell mechanically on my ears; I looked at Eliza, who clung to her father's arm and sobbed. She made a picturesque enough figure; afterward I was a funeral director, and I seemed to feel her brother's loss more than any of us. I think I smiled when I heard it; what was her loss compared with mine? What was her grief compared with the despair that had turned my heart to stone?

Francis looked deathly white, and if I had had any power of feeling, I suppose I should have felt sorry for him. One of the servants in the background was sniffing audibly and blowing his nose; there were tears on the wrinkled skin of the vicar.

He wiped his eyes as he finished reading, and closed the Bible. There was a little pause; then two men came forward and lifted the ropes that bound my boy's coffin.

I suppose they were as gentle as they could be, but they seemed horribly rough to me; the coffin swung and tilted awkwardly as it was lowered into the grave.

I think it was at that moment that the hands of iron that bound my heart seemed to snap.

I rushed forward with an anguished cry, my hands outstretched.

"Oh, don't hurt him; don't hurt him!" I wailed.

Some one caught and held my arms; some one else was holding my soul. "Poor soul!" But for the moment I was blind and deaf to everything but the fact that this was my eternal farewell to the boy I had worshipped. I believe I wept; I believe I wept; I believed against the kindly hands that held me, and tried to beat them off.

"Richard—Richard—Richard!"

I was a soul torn to shreds. I was mad with misery; I would have thrown myself into the grave with him but for those restraining hands; when something seemed to snap in my brain, and the world went black before my eyes.

But I couldn't be ill; when I opened my eyes again I was in my own bed, and the doctor sat beside me. I asked him if he thought I was going to die; I wanted to die. I wailed with a throbbing heart for his reply, but he only patted my hand gently and told me I should be better soon.

I could have lain there so thoughtfully and just let my life ebb out, but it was not to be. Perhaps it is true that grief does not kill, for I was up and about again in a few days.

Francis tried to be nice to me, but I repulsed him; I could not bear him near me. Eliza said the house got on her nerves; she declared that the smell of funeral flowers would never leave it, so she packed her new black clothes and went off to stay with some school friend. I was left virtually alone.

I felt as if years had passed since that Christmas Eve; I was not surprised to look in the glass and see how gray my hair had grown.

CHAPTER XXXIII

The vicar was very kind; he came often to see me. He talked a lot about heaven, and the life to come, and promised me that some day I should see my boy again, and I listened and tried to believe it, but I never had been a very religious woman, and eternity seemed so far away.

I wanted Richard now; I wanted to hold him in my arms and kiss his dear, sunburned face, and hear his merry laugh. I felt that I could not look forward to a shadowy future.

And always I thought of him as he looked when he lay in his coffin; his white, close-folded lips; his closed eyes with the tiny blue veins showing on the marble; his ever and over again I lived those hours of anguish.

The sight of his clothes about the house broke my heart afresh every time I saw them; an old cigarette case which he had bought, lying on the shelf in the room that had once been the nursery and afterward the playroom, was like a knife in my heart.

I sat down in the empty, lonely room and wondered how I could ever go on living.

It was like a house of the dead. I had lost my boy; Eliza, too, for she and I had drifted miles apart in the last few weeks; she had no patience with me, and perhaps I had lost love for her, because she was so like the father, whom I had never loved.

The empty nursery was peopled with visions of baby faces and echoes of baby voices. I felt like an old woman who had seen and done by the fireside and dreams of her girlhood and womanhood that have long since vanished into the forgotten past. Perhaps her grandchildren and daughters are middle-aged men and women; but for me—I am only a young woman yet, in mere matter of years, but I am as utterly alone as if I were on a desert island in the middle of the sea.

I had dreamed of the day when my Richard would bring some girl to me, and ask me to love her because he did. I had dreamed of the day when perhaps one of his might marry in my arms—children, all of them.

When she says she cannot stand children; when she tells me that she hopes she

THE GUMPS—Ding-a-Ling!



SOMEBODY'S STENOG—Nice an' Refined 'n' Everything



The Young Lady Across the Way



VERNON McNUTT



By FONTAINE FOX

SCHOOL DAYS



By DWIGHT

PETEY—At Pinehurst



GASOLINE ALLEY—A Chance to Unload



By KING