

Love a Conqueror

—OR—

WEDDED AT LAST.

CHAPTER XXXII.

"Lucie, don't you think it is almost time for it to be over now?"

"Dear Lady Glynn, it is not late yet," Lucie Grey answered sorrowfully.

"Don't call me that, Lucie," Shirley said, rather irritably.

"Forgive me," the vicar's daughter returned gently, looking with very sympathizing eyes at the slender prostrate figure upon the couch in the little shabby low-ceiled sitting room adjoining Shirley's bedroom at the "Pack of Cards," and thinking how terribly she was changed with in the last forty-eight hours.

As she lay back against the dark red cushions of the couch, Shirley Glynn looked more like a dead woman than a living, breathing one; her face was as colorless as the white wrapper that she wore, there were deep dark circles round the heavy lusterless eyes, and her little hands lay helplessly beside her.

"Lucie, could you help me to the window?" she said presently. "I feel so stifled here."

"It would be better for you to lie quiet, dear," answered Lucie gently, dreading lest she should see the crowd which had assembled round the inn, waiting eagerly for the conclusion of the coroner's inquest which was being held at that moment. "Let me fan you, Shirley."

"Is it not strange?"—Lady Glynn looked up into Shirley's wistful eyes—"that all my strength should have left me so suddenly? Lucie, I wonder if I am dying?"

"Dying? Of course not!" said Lucie cheerily, in spite of her trembling lips. "Such a terrible shock as you have had was enough to make you feel weak. Let me lift you a little, dear, while I arrange your cushions." "Poor Hugh—oh, poor Hugh!" Shirley moaned feebly. "Lucie, I make me so glad and happy now to think that we are friends. We were not always friends," she went on, in her faint broken tones. "I had been hard and cold and unforgiving for years; but the night before—only the night before—we forgave each other. Do you know, Lucie, that at first I did not think it could be Hugh lying there!" she went on, after a pause, her eyes dilating with horror

as she pictured the body of her husband as it had lain prone and motionless in the centre of the group. "The hand, although it wore his ring, did not seem like his hand; but it was all so confused in my brain you know, and I could not see clearly, and they would not let me look upon his face."

"It was altered beyond all recognition," Lucie said gently. "Dear try to rest."

"It must have been a terrible fall! Poor Hugh! He was so handsome! Jack, my brother, thought him so handsome. Oh, I am so glad," she added pitifully, "that I had forgiven him, Lucie!" She lifted her little hands, and covered her face with a cry of horror. "Only a few weeks before I had wished I could kill him! It was Guy who told me how wicked I had been. He made me forgive Hugh. Lucie, did I fancy it—I fancy so many strange things now my head is so weak—or has Guy come?"

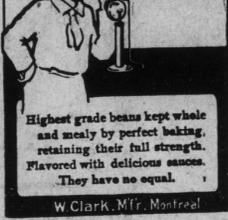
"Major Stuart is here, dear," Miss

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Grey shrank a little as she spoke. She was dreading always lest Shirley should ask some question she could not answer.

"Why did he come?" "It was necessary that he should be present."

"I wonder why? He was not with him when he fell, or he would have come back. Oh, Lucie, I wonder if he was killed at once," she added, struggling up among the pillows with wild eyes and panting breath, "or if he lay there dying all through that storm?"

Then she fell back again, with the horror deepening on her face. Lucie knelt down and took the trembling slender form and hushed it gently in her arms.

"He died at once and painlessly," Shirley, she said through her tears which fell thickly on the soft hair which lay upon her breast. "Try not to think of it, darling."

"How can I help thinking of it?" Shirley answered wearily. "All night long it haunts me—all night—and it prevents me from sleeping, and I feel sometimes as if I must shriek out with terror. Do you think—"

She lifted her head suddenly and looked at the tearful face. "You are crying, Lucie; I felt a tear upon my hand! I will not distress you again. Oh, I wish I could cry, Lucie!" "My poor darling!"

"Guy called me that," she said tremulously, "long ago—so long ago! That scene haunts me too, Lucie, in the night. You do not know of that and I will not speak of it now, because he is dead—poor Hugh, poor Hugh! Oh, my heart!"

"What is it, dear? Are you in pain?" Lucie Grey asked gently, as she saw the quick movement of the tall little hands.

"Yes—my heart—such a weary pain, Lucie! Now, do not look so troubled, dear; it will be better soon it is not much; but I have always been a coward at bearing pain."

Her head fell back wearily upon the cushions and she closed her eyes leaving her hand in Lucie's as she melted beside her, while Miss Grey, looking at the wan, death-like face framed in falling hair, thought that any more grief must kill her. And yet how could they spare her this grief, which might, which would, Lucie feared, come within the hour?

They had been careful to let none of the rumors which had been rife in the little town reach her; even Lady Eastwell had been carefully kept away—for it was she, who, in her violent hysterical passion of grief had cried out that the dead man had been murdered, and that Guy Stuart had murdered him, and there were hundreds who shared her belief; and little as Lucie Grey knew of Shirley's story, she felt instinctively that such a report would be to her more bitter than death itself. She remembered the look which had come into Shirley's eyes when he had joined them so unexpectedly among the rocks; she remembered how the lovely face had brightened and flushed and lost all its weariness; and, as she thought of Guy's noble face, she felt that the accusation was as false as it was monstrous.

And yet the proofs were dreadfully against him. They had set out together on the morning of Sir Hugh's last day on earth, and beside the body had been found, stained and discolored with blood, the silver-headed bamboo cane, the weapon which it was quite evident had given the blow on the head which had been the immediate cause of death. True the face had lost all semblance of humanity when the body was found, but the huge bowlder of rock under which it had been partly concealed had evidently tilted over and fallen

upon it, crushing the handsome face which had looked back so smilingly at Shirley a few short hours before, while, as if to let justice have every chance in its favor, the back of the head remained untouched, although the fair hair was matted and stained with blood. What a terrible, end to the brilliant career!

"What are you thinking of, Lucie?" asked Shirley, lifting the heavy lids languidly. "How sorrowful you look dear! I seem to bring sorrow and pain to all who love me."

"I would suffer infinitely more pain to possess your friendship, Shirley," Miss Grey said, in her soft sincere voice; and the faintest little writh of a smile flitted over the white lips.

"Thank you, dear. Oh, Lucie, what should I have done without you? Even Ruby could not have been a truer friend than you. Dear Ruby, she must not know," she added earnestly. "All her happiness at the birth of her little daughter would be destroyed. Lucie, how slowly the time goes! I wonder why they are so long!"

She moved restlessly on the cushions, and with a weary impatient gesture pushed back her hair from her forehead.

"Poor darling, it is wearisome for you lying there!" Lucie said, putting her cool hand upon the throbbing temples.

"What makes them so long Lucie?" The sweet eyes so sad and pleading, made Lucie's lip quiver; she felt sure that it was doubt as to the verdict they should return which had detained the jury.

"I cannot say, dear," she whispered tremulously; and there was a long silence.

"Lucie, how weary you must be and how selfish I am!" said Shirley, then. "Ring for some tea, dear; you have been here so many hours."

Lucie rang, not for tea only, but for a chance of speaking to some one who could tell her something of what was going on in the large dining room below. When the servant answered the bell, Shirley had relaxed into her old apathy, and lay back with closed eyes, so that Lucie had an opportunity of speaking a few words to the girl and having her suspicions confirmed.

"Oh, how will she bear it?" Lucie said to herself, great tears filling her eyes at the thought. "Oh, if the mother had only been well enough to come to her! I am afraid it will kill her."

"Lucie"—the shrill agonized tones started her, the wild haggard eyes were wide and horror-stricken—"don't let me go to sleep. I was dreaming, I suppose—oh, such a horrid dream!"

She clung with both hands to Lucie, who bent over her anxiously, and, so clinging, raised herself and stood upon her feet, trembling in every limb, with a cold dew starting in her forehead.

"Don't let me lie there—don't let me sleep, Lucie. I will sit up. Give me some air; I am choking! I cannot breathe!"

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Lucie hastily pushed open the window, letting the air play upon the white pinched face which lay upon her shoulder so heavily, while it required all her strength to prevent the nerveless limbs from slipping to the ground.

Below, groups of people were collected, talking eagerly among themselves; and one or two glanced up at the window but saw nothing to attract attention.

"What a murmur of voices!" Shirley's faint voice said. "Is there a crowd? My eyes are so dim I cannot see. There are people there, are there not?"

"Yes, dear. Are you better? Let me close the window."

"Why are the people there? Why are they waiting? Why don't they go? Lucie, help me—I cannot stand."

She was not insensible or unconscious, but the same terrible weakness was creeping over her again, and, but for the opportune assistance of the servant who at that moment brought in tea, she must have fallen to the ground. With the girl's help she was placed in an armchair, and Lucie made her drink a little wine. "It is absurd to be weak," she murmured, when they were alone again. "I am worse even than Mrs. Beadesert was on the night of the storm"—with a faint smile—"and I felt so impatient with her. But she fainted, you know, and lost all consciousness. Ah, if I only could! Lucie, I think death must be like this. Don't cry, dear," she added, as Lucie fairly broke down. "I promised I would—Ah, there is some one!"

(To be Continued.)

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