

Love a Conqueror

—OR—

WEDDED AT LAST!

CHAPTER XIX.

"I was proud of my conquest, one which others had attempted in vain; but I did not love Sir Henry Proctor, whom I had known three months when your father, Shirley, came to Dumfries, and Gilbert invited him to Fairholme. He was very gentle to me, but very cold; he disapproved of my conduct, and reproved me more than once; but I loved him with all my heart and soul and strength. I loved him; and there was no woman on earth so happy as I when, one day, a danger to which I was exposed, and from which he rescued me, forced him to betray the love for me which he had hitherto kept concealed, because he was not wealthy enough to aspire to Miss Fairholme. Ah, how happy I was!

"My brother did not receive the news of our attachment very cordially. Mr. Ross was not rich, and his profession was seriously against him. In Gilbert's opinion, still when he saw that my happiness was involved, he consented to an engagement between us; but we were not to be married until I was twenty-one—a condition to which we both agreed willingly. Shortly afterwards Rowland went to Rome to continue the study of the art he loved.

"I missed him greatly, for I loved him with my whole heart; but my love did not prevent me from continuing my flirtation with Sir Henry Proctor. My engagement, the news of which he had received very calmly, did not seem to trouble him at all; he was just as devoted as ever, but he did not put his devotion into words and so I was off my guard. I thought he was willing to look upon me as a friend. He often met me in my rides and walks and he was a most agreeable companion.

"One day—ah, how clearly I remembered all its details afterward, although they made so little impression upon me at the time—we were riding together at some distance from Fairholme. I was unattended, for I rarely rode with a groom, but Sir Henry's servant was with him. A sudden and violent storm came on, which frightened the horses and compelled us to seek shelter. We found it in a wayside inn where they were

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able to accommodate the horses, and Sir Henry and myself were glad to dry our clothes by the kitchen fire. We were laughing and chatting merrily over the mishap, when the innkeeper's wife came in to ask if we would take any refreshment. Sir Henry answered at once, 'Yes; my wife would like some tea, if you please.' 'And what will you take, sir?' 'Some toddy,' he answered, laughing; then when she had left us, he turned to me, merrily asking how I liked the position I had assumed—or rather which he had given me—as his wife.

"We were very merry over it; and when the woman came back, Sir Henry spoke frequently of his wife, and I laughed and coquetted and called him my husband, and told the landlady that we had not been married long, and said many other foolish things. I dare say, Sir Henry said laughingly that I had been engaged to some one else, but that I preferred him; so I had thrown the other fellow over and had married him. And the landlady laughed too, and said she did not wonder, for Sir Henry was handsome enough to make any girl false. And all this time Sir Henry's groom was standing in the kitchen, a distance from us, but where every word reached him distinctly.

"Well, the storm ceased, and we rode away, and I thought no more of our adventure. Sir Henry came daily to Fairholme—and he was too agreeable and pleasant not to be missed; he did not come—and the month passed on until I was approaching my twenty-first birthday; and I began to look forward to Rowland's return.

"But one day—oh, Shirley, shall I ever forget the day?"

Shirley had been reading attentively and without a pause for some time when she reached this part of the mother's narrative, and during the last few minutes she had grown terribly pale, and an expression of intense horror was creeping slowly into her wide dilated eyes. Now she stopped, pushing the sheets of paper from her with a quick passionate

movement; and, as she rose from her chair, the letter fell fluttering down at her feet. She did not heed the falling sheets as she moved away from the fire, pushing back her hair from her face with a wild trouble gesture almost of despair. She did not know what horror had come upon her; she was trembling from head to foot in an undefined agony of fear, her breath was coming in quiet gasps of terror, and the throbbing of her heart might almost have been heard in the stillness of the room. For a few moments this terror held her, then it passed away, and she forced her stiff livid lips to smile at the pale, horror-stricken face as she saw in the looking-glass as she passed on her way back to the fire.

She stooped, lifted, with little remorseful tender fingers, the fallen sheets and smoothed them out, pressing them, with a passionate revulsion of feeling, to her lips; then, still trembling a little and very pale, she sat down and recommenced to read.

"But one day—oh, Shirley, shall I ever forget the day?—your uncle came into the room where I was writing to Rowland, and, with a sternness he had never shown to me before, handed me a letter from Sir Henry Proctor, claiming me as his wife. I remember how I laughed, and said gayly that Sir Henry must have taken leave of his senses; but Gilbert's gravity never changed. He sat down and desired me to tell him all that had happened at the inn. I made

light of it; but he interrupted me. 'Marian,' he said sternly, 'this is no jeering matter. In this country there are marriages called irregular marriages which are as binding in law as any others. Persons with no intention of marriage may become married, even when they do not know that they are legally held to be so. If the facts are as Sir Henry Proctor has stated them in this letter, there may be the greatest difficulty in proving that you are not his wife.' I looked at him in surprise, with a feeling of intense horror creeping over me. 'May I see the letter?' I said steadily; and, when he gave it to me, I was able to read it calmly, and to acknowledge that Sir Henry had merely related what had occurred at the inn where we had sheltered during the storm. But I could not believe, even when Gilbert assured me of it, that that could possibly constitute a marriage. Of course legal assistance was sought immediately and the eminent lawyers whom my brother consulted gave conflicting opinions. One said that I was Sir Henry's wife, another that it was no marriage; but I saw then the danger to which I had exposed myself. Heaven only knows how I suffered during that terrible time! Of course Rowland had to be told; and, as soon as he came to Fairholme, Sir Henry pressed his claims upon me, and all my entreaties were in vain. At first Gilbert, anxious to avoid scandal, angrily refused to have the case referred to the law-courts; but my passionate pleading—I threw myself on my knees, Shirley, until he consented—last succeeded. Shall I tell you the result, my daughter? A few words spoken in jest at a wayside inn in the presence of witnesses made me the wife of a man whom I had never loved, but whom now I abhorred. I was Sir Henry Proctor's wife. It was a matter that I had not given my consent, that I was ignorant of the boniface marriage law in force in the country I loved so dearly; I was his wedded wife. I think they believed that I had been a consenting party and that I was willing then to accept a richer suitor than Rowland Ross and that I had consented to this irregular marriage to avoid the blame which a fit so justly incurs. But so that as it may, I was his wife. A long period of darkness followed Shirley. I was very ill—sick unto death—and I was better when I went home to Sir Henry's magnificent estate—a wife who hated her husband and despised him for the treacherer that had caused her misery, who loved another man with all her heart.

"Shirley, how can I tell you this? How can a mother confess to her child what will perhaps make her espouse her and hate her for the same she has brought upon her name? How can I tell you how my endurance failed under the misery and wretchedness which were my constant companions? My health

gave way; a terror of death without white lids, unseeing eyes, then the white lids sank, a ghastly pallor overpread the lovely face, and all grew dark as she fell back in a merciful unconsciousness.

(To be Continued.)

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—only soothe me to sleep; and I was too weak to be very curious, or to feel anything deeply. But, as days went on, my strength came back, and with it my recollection; and I suffered an agony of distress when I thought of the shame I had brought upon a name hitherto honored and unstained, and that I myself had sunk to the lowest level and was worthy only of contempt. I was almost quite strong again when I saw Rowland, and the sight of his pitying compassionate face, so altered and sorrowful, almost broke my heart, and I longed to die. But I was well enough then to hear the news which he brought me; and he told me in his grave tender voice that I was free now—that Death had freed me. Sir Henry Proctor, on his way to Rome in pursuit of me, had been one of the victims of a terrible railway accident in the south of France.

"You know the rest. Your father loved me enough to share my shame and misery, and we were married. With what intense love, what heartfelt humility, I became his wife you cannot guess, my child; how earnestly I prayed for his happiness is known only to the Hearer of Prayer and my own heart. That he was happy I believe, and I think I helped to make him so. But of his goodness, his patience, his unflinching love for the erring woman whom he made his wife I cannot speak, even to you. You were not too young when you lost him to appreciate his nobility, and, my child, that you will always revere his memory is my truest wish.

"And now, my darling, I must cease. I am very weary, and I have told you all. Forgive your mother, Shirley, and think kindly of her, if you can. She has sinned much, but she has suffered; for all the love and peace of so many years of her life have not blotted out her regret for that irrevocable past. May such love be yours, my daughter, but not such regret! Heaven forever bless you, Shirley!"

That was the end; the piteous confession was finished, the last words were read; and Shirley's hazel eyes were raised slowly from the pages over which she bent. For a moment she stared straight in front of her

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9528.—A PLEASING HOUSE OR CALLING GOWN.



Ladies' Dress with or without Chemise and with Long or Shorter Sleeve.

Brown checked gingham with trimming of tan chambrey is here shown. The design is appropriate for all wash materials, and will develop equally well in silk or cloth. Green linen with white embroidery for trimming would make a cool dainty frock. Blue and white wash silk finished simply with stitching, and worn with a chemise of fine lawn would also be pleasing. The fronts of the waist are cut low and finished on one side with a smart revers. The neck opening reveals the chemise, which may be omitted. The skirt shows a new back, with dart tucks, the fullness of these tucks may be arranged in gathers. The pattern is cut in 6 sizes: 32, 34, 36, 38, 40 and 42 inches bust measure. It requires 6 yards of 36 inch material for a 36 inch size.
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