

Love & Conqueror

WEDDED AT LAST.

CHAPTER XL.

Sometimes she wondered a little why Madge, who was so frank and candid, and who showed such confidence in her, should never mention Guy; but she never did; and Shirley dared not venture to pronounce his name. She felt that even now she could not speak it without betraying herself, and, if she showed the slightest emotion, Madge might have her suspicions aroused, and she might be discovered. And then she would think wearily of the time when she would have to leave her little home and go out on her wanderings again. In the spring, when Guy came back, she must go away and hide herself once more, and find a new home. Perhaps, when Guy was married, and happily settled with his young wife, she might write to Oswald and Ruby and the Greys; they would not betray her to him then; and perhaps Ruby would take her in, and let her look after little Bertie and the baby-girl who had fluttered down into Oswald's home-nest the autumn before.

How she thought of them all during those long lonely vigils, of all her dear ones, whom she might never see again! Had they forgotten her? she wondered. Did they think of her sometimes, and feel a little sorry for her? Perhaps they thought her dead; and the fact that she had never applied for the annuity which Sir Hugh had left her would have given strong grounds for such a belief. What would they have said, she wondered for such a belief. What would they have said, she wondered sometimes if they had known that she had been in want, that she had been without a shelter for days, that she had almost died of starvation?

She was growing stronger now although Madge Oliphant often felt dissatisfied about her health. Perhaps she would never be really strong again; but she was much better, and she was looking almost like the Shirley of old, in the black dress she always wore, and the white mob-cap with its large black Alsacian bow which Lady Oliphant liked the schoolmistress to wear.

And the autumn passed, and the winter followed, and Christmas came—a regular old-fashioned Christmas people called it, with a hard frost and snow upon the ground and a blue sky and sunshine overhead. An Christmas was to be greeted warmly at Erindale. The church was to be decorated and joyful anthems were to be sung; and in the Hall and the Rectory, at Mrs. Ford's lodge and in every cottage there were to be feasting and merrymaking—everywhere, save in that little red-brick cottage where the school-teacher lived, and where she was to spend the Christmas alone, for even her little handmaiden had gone home.

It was Shirley's own wish that she should spend it in her little cottage home—the home which had grown dear to her from its rest and peace; for there were many who would have welcomed the schoolmistress's fair face at their tables, but Shirley had declined every invitation. She preferred to spend Christmas alone, she said gently, but decidedly; and they forbore to press her, for the sweet sad mouth could be very firm at times and she was evidently sincere in her desire.

On Christmas Day the snow fell heavily, covering the hills and the

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valley with a soft, white, spotless mantle, so that many who came from a distance were deterred from attending Divine service, for the snow had drifted in places, and made the crossing of fields and by-paths rather a dangerous undertaking. Still the pretty decorated church was well filled, and there was no brighter, fairer face among the worshippers than Madge Oliphant's, as she sat in the Hall pew in her soft furs and velvet dress, against which the white skin and golden hair shone so delicately fair.

Shirley, from her place in the aisle, let her sad eyes rest upon her with a wistful pleasure. She was very lovely, this young girl who was to teach Guy to forget her, very lovely and bright and good; she would make him happy—thank Heaven for that; and she bowed her head upon her hands and tried to forget the one happy Christmas she had spent in England, that immediately following her engagement to Guy, which his season brought so clearly and freshly to her mind. Well, it was something to have had even those few days of happiness to look back upon; some poor women had not even those. She had known the pleasure of requited love for a season; some women went from the cradle to the grave without feeling its sweetness without possessing its joy.

Madge stopped her, when coming out of church to whisper a warm wish for happiness and welfare, and

Shirley answered it mutely, but with an expression in her eyes which more than satisfied Madge; and then, escaping from the parents of her pupils who offered her in no less sincere good wishes, Shirley climbed the hill to the top of which stood her cottage—a rather solitary home certainly, or there were no houses near the school-house and the cottage adjoining. It was a little lonely, Shirley thought, as she entered, closing the door carefully after her and fastening it, for though tramps and marauders were few and far between she was not very courageous, and she felt safer with the doors secured. A little terrier—a present from Madge, and a great favorite of Shirley's—greeted her with joyful shrill barking, and prevented the loneliness and solitude from being too oppressive, and the fire was burning cheerily, as if it meant to do its best to make Shirley's solitary Christmas Day a little brighter, while the school children had put up some jolly and mistletoe upon the walls—and Shirley smiled sadly at the home-ward attempts at decoration.

The day wore on slowly; the snow fell heavily at intervals in great soft white flakes which covered the ground and lay there, blotting out all paths, and making the face of the surrounding country a pure white waste, over which it would soon be difficult to find one's way. The stillness in the little sitting-room grew intense and almost oppressive; the fire blazed up brightly, and Shirley had lifted Jip on to her lap; it was pleasant to feel the warmth and life of the little animal in this complete stillness. Her thoughts had wandered away back to the past, to that happy Christmas Day at Fairholme Court when she was engaged to Guy, and all her life lay before her, cloudless and serene, lighted by the sunshine of the love she had won. Hugh had been there also—poor Hugh, who had loved her with that love which had been so fatal to them all, that love which had blighted her life and Guy's and his own.

Then she recalled other Christmas

days spent at Glynn and in London, stately ceremonial feasts which had wearied her excessively; and the day of the preceding year—that awful Christmas Day which she had spent alone in London, fearing discovery and detention, an unhappy fugitive from love and peace and rest.

Well, if it were to be done again, she would do it; it had been for the best. What did her sufferings matter if he were happy with the sweet young girl who loved him and whom he loved? She could go away and drift out of Madge's life as she had drifted out of Lucie's and Ruby's, and out of the lives of all who loved her. As soon as the fine spring days came, she would go away and seek another shelter.

Sitting before her cheerful fire, leaning back in the low cushioned chair, a thought struck her; she would write to Jack—she would tell him all, everything, without reserve, and ask him to advise her what to do. Perhaps he might even come home and fetch her. Dear Jack! He was well off now; his sojourn in India and the industry and steadiness he had displayed had won him a junior partnership in the firm; and when she had last heard from him, just before Sir Hugh's death—she could not call it murder, even to herself—he was a wealthy man, and he had spoken of coming home soon. Had he returned? she wondered. Perhaps not. Perhaps, if she addressed a letter to him at Calcutta, it would reach him; for she could not recall his address. Dear Jack, who had never known the truth about her marriage! There had been no necessity to burden him with the knowledge that it was through him that such misery had fallen upon her; but he should know all now, and he would take her away somewhere perhaps where she could be quiet and at peace until the time came.

She put the little dog down gently from her lap and rose from her seat; the afternoon was wearing on, but the dazzling whiteness of the snow prevented it from being as dark as it generally was at that hour. Besides, the cheerful blaze of the fire lit up the little room, playing odd tricks with the shadows on the wall and peering into far corners, as if to discover any lurking intruder. Opening a little escritoire on the right-hand side of the fire, Shirley took out

writing materials and placed them on the table; then she trimmed and lighted the lamp, and moved over to the window to draw the curtain.

As she did so, she drew back, with a little stifled cry of terror, and covered her face with her hands, for pressed against the pane of glass, a face had looked in upon her—a face with wild haggard eyes—a face which had disappeared immediately when the eyes met hers.

For a few minutes Shirley stood with her eyes covered, physically unable to move in her terror, her heart beating furiously, her breath coming in quick gasps; then, when she mustered courage to remove her hands there was nothing visible but the window and the white road and fields beyond.

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She staggered toward the window and forced herself to look out; but there was nothing in sight, save the snow which had fallen previously and a few slow heavy flakes which were beginning to fall; the little dog however, was running about restlessly and barking excitedly, as if he too had seen something which had aroused his suspicion or his alarm. In an agony of terror Shirley dragged the curtains over the window—she dared not open it to close the shutters which were outside—and crept back to her chair, trembling with a terror which had taken all color from her face and lips and strength from her limbs.

"Jip, come here!" she whispered, as she covered over the fire, feeling an icy thrill of horror which made her shiver from head to foot; but Jip although he paused for a moment in his restless running to and fro, resumed it almost immediately, his uneasiness adding greatly to the terror the poor woman was enduring. "Jip—oh, Jip!" she said pitifully, in a voice hardly above a whisper, for her lips were shaking with terror. "Come here, Jip!"

But Jip, for once, was deaf to his mistress's voice; he was flying about the room, scratching impatiently at the door, barking furiously and sniffing vigorously, and showing other signs of discomfiture and perturbation of spirit. Something forced Shirley to open the door into the little passage for him; he flew out, barking furiously and excitedly at the outer door—the door which Shirley had bolted so securely.

Was it again the force of her imagination acting upon her senses, or did she really hear a sound, as if some one was stealthily trying the door from the outside? Surely the handle moved! And, in an agony of mortal terror, Shirley fled back into the sitting room, covering her face with her hands to shut out sight and sound.

How long she knelt there with her head buried in her hands she never knew; but an hour at least must have passed, for the fire which had just been built up before the alarm came was a glowing red mass. For some time Jip had continued his barking; and when she lifted her head he was no longer in the room. Trembling till, she rose to her feet. All was quiet; there was not a sound to break the stillness, the silence which seemed so awful now to the terrified woman in her loneliness. She went to the window and drew back the curtains; but the snow was falling heavily, and she could see nothing. She closed the curtains and came back shivering, when a little moaning sound from Jip startled her; he was lying just across the outer door, and, as he saw Shirley, he looked up at her appealingly with a pitiful little whine, turning his eyes to the door the next minute, as if entreating her to open it.

(To be continued.)

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