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Love a Conqueror OR WEDDED AT LAST.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

"Guy, rest now—you shall tell me another time," she entreated, seeing the terrible emotion under which he was laboring, and how unfit he seemed for further fatigue; but, after a moment, Guy lifted his head and went on earnestly—

"He told me what I had already guessed, that the wife he loved so dearly had forgiven him, and that, thanks to me, he should be happy again; and he thanked me in words which made me feel so unworthy when I remembered what a struggle I had had with myself. And he said that—but the words are too generous to be repeated—only, my darling, I must tell you this, for it seemed to me afterward that a foreboding of his sad end must have been upon him—he said that his was not a long-lived family, and that there might be happy days in store for me with you in the future. Darling, I hurt you to hear this; forgive me."

"It does not hurt me," she answered, raising her eyes, heavy with tears to his; she was kneeling by his side now, resting her head against his arm. "It takes so much of the pain away. Tell me all, Guy."

"When we parted—truer friend than we had ever been in life before—he asked me to give him my stick and to let him send me one in exchange; and the last I saw of him was when he was standing gazing at me as I went, looking so strong and handsome and happy. My darling, thank Heaven that I had no bitter thoughts in my heart against him then!"

"She pressed her head against his in silence, too deeply moved to speak as she thought of the brilliant career so suddenly cut short, the life so suddenly taken; and on Guy's face as he sat by her side, there was great weariness and pain and regret."

"It was a terrible end," he said huskily then. "Shirley, have you an idea who could have done this dreadful deed?"

"She shook her head wearily. "I did not know that he had an enemy," she said faintly. "Guy could it not have been—could it not have been an accident?"

"I fear not, my darling; and—with an irrepressible burst of pain—"until the mystery is cleared up I shall be a dishonored, crime-stained man."

"She lifted her head and looked at him.

"You dishonored—you crime-stained! But"—her breath came quickly as a new fear came into her eyes—"you have been acquitted, Guy!"

"Acquitted—yes; they had not proof enough to condemn me," he said bitterly; "but until the guilty man is discovered, I am the guilty man, Shirley."

"Guy, who can think you so?" she asked, lifting her head and looking at him proudly.

"Thousands," he answered. "My darling, think! You, in your faith and trust, have never doubted me for a minute—you bore noble witness to that effect to-day—but others will not believe in my innocence. My own, do you not see that to many the motive for such a crime is evident in my love for you. His life, poor fellow, was the only thing to stand between us—between you and me, Shirley, it would have been easier, Heaven knows, to me to die than to see you tried as you were tried to-day. My poor girl, if I could have spared it you!"

"And—and—the lovely face was full of an unpeppable horror—"dc they say—do they think that you killed Hugh to—oh, Guy, I cannot say it!"

"She sank down in an agony of pain. Somehow this thought, so intensely horrible to them both, had never struck her; but now it filled her with an unutterable shame and anguish. Was this what they were saying of them? Was this what they believed? Oh, it was awful! No shame could equal this—no disgrace was ever so great!"

"Guy was grieved beyond measure at the effect of his words. She lay in his arms, trembling with an intense suffering which he was powerless to control; all the life seemed to have died out of her face as it rested against his breast, her breath came in quick faint gasps; for a moment he thought she was dying and would have summoned assistance, but she stopped him.

"Call no one; let no one see," she said, with stiff white lips, and he vaulted anxiously until the terrible motion had in some degree passed away and a faint shade of color had taken back to her lips.

"I have startled you—forgive me," he said gently, disengaging herself from his arms; and, moving a little way from him, she sat down on a low chair; and a silence fell between them, a silence of strange embarrassment, a silence so intense that he could have heard a pin drop in the room.

"Guy, is it true?" Shirley asked at length, in a curious constrained voice.

"That they will say so? I fear so, indeed, love," he answered tenderly. "But"—he moved to her side and bent over her—"need we mind that, Shirley?"

"She looked up at him with a blind bewildered expression in her hazel eyes, an expression which filled him with pain and fear for her.

"Darling," he said softly, kneeling down by her side and encircling the trembling form with his arms, "you will come to me now, will you not? I shall be a dishonored, crime-stained man."

"She lifted her head and looked at him proudly. "You dishonored—you crime-stained! But"—her breath came quickly as a new fear came into her eyes—"you have been acquitted, Guy!"

"Acquitted—yes; they had not proof enough to condemn me," he said bitterly; "but until the guilty man is discovered, I am the guilty man, Shirley."

"Guy, who can think you so?" she asked, lifting her head and looking at him proudly.

"They have been such weary years, my own," he went on huskily—those years of wandering and striving—how hard Heaven only knows!—to forget you, but your face was ever before my eyes, your voice always in my ears, the touch of your dear fingers always lingering in my hand. Once, when I was very near death—I had met with an accident and fever had ensued—I thought you were standing beside me. I thought that I prayed you to put your lips to mine once and kiss me before I died. Shirley, my own, would you have cared so much?"

"I wonder—I wonder if you can guess how much, Guy?"

"My darling!" He clasped her to him with sudden passion; but she disengaged herself gently but firmly from the tender arms, leaving her hands in his as her eyes rested upon him with an intense love and sadness, an agony of renunciation and woe which he would not, he dared not understand.

"Oh, Guy, poor fellow!" she murmured softly; and the tears gathered slowly in her eyes. How changed he was—how terribly changed—and how greatly he had suffered! It broke Shirley's heart to add to that suffering; and yet how could she go to him bringing with her a confirmation of the horrible suspicion which people had entertained? How could she marry him when the marriage would but confirm his guilt and shame. Yet, reading the agony on his face and feeling the acute pain of her own aching heart, how could she send him away? He had left her when his love might have brought with it shame and disgrace. Did she love him well enough to ask him to leave her?"

"Oh, the weary struggle which ensued in the sorely tried heart—oh, the agony of conflicting doubts and fears! Had she any right to send him away when she loved him so passionately, and when she was free to return his love? Had she any right to add to the unhappy, solitary, loveless years he had already spent? Had she any right to make him suffer further torture and agony? And yet to add to that unmerited shame which had already fallen upon him! Could she do it—she who loved him?"

"My darling"—how tender his voice was now in the new dread which had come upon him, and which he would not let her see?—"you must not let the past trouble you any longer. It is all over, and together we will forget it. You look so frail and white, Shirley, that I cannot be happy until I see some roses in your cheeks, and until these little hands"—kissing them softly as he spoke—"have a little more flesh upon them. You have been very ill, they tell me."

"Yes; but I am quite well now, Guy," she answered tremulously, and hid her face upon his shoulder, as he knelt by her side, to shut out his pleading face, so worn and haggard, yet so full of tenderness and love; and he folded his arms round her so gently that the pain at her heart deepened, and she dreaded with a yet more earnest dread what was to come.

"Do you remember, Shirley, one night long ago at Fairholme Court, that some one—I forget who now—sang some lines about the 'radiant grace of to-day,' begging the present to remain, and asking—

"What future can restore, when thou art flown, All that I hold from thee and call my own?"

I remember so well thinking that happy as the present was, it was the eve of the day which was to give you to me, darling—that the future would be yet happier, that it could hold no great grief for us since we were to share it together. But the great grief, which came to us ere twenty-four hours had elapsed we could not bear together; we had to bear it apart. Now, my dearest, there is nothing to separate us. Looking far on into the future, I can see no shadow of another parting from you, my own."

"Can you not, Guy?" she whispered softly, still with her eyes hidden. "I cannot, darling, save for the few months which must elapse before I come to you and ask you to put your hands in mine and come to me, my darling, my wife! But this will not be like a parting; it will be but a short time, and we shall be able to see each other often, dear."

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"Guy"—she spoke still with her face hidden against him, but his hands lifted her hand and rested it fondly and caressingly on his shoulder—"Guy, could anything make you doubt my love for you?"

"I think not, love," he answered, drawing her closer to him. "Even if I were to hurt you?" "Even then, Shirley."

"You would know—ah, you would be sure, would you not, that I did so only out of love for you, and because I knew it was best for you?"

"I would try to think so, my darling," he answered softly, a sudden dread chilling him as he listened to the words which seemed so difficult to utter, spoken as they were so slowly and brokenly, with the fair head bowed upon his breast.

"You would try? Thank you, Guy. Oh, my darling, my darling"—she clung to him now with sudden passion, her head pressed against him with a convulsive strength—"won't you help me? I cannot say the words, but—but—you can guess them without my saying them."

"What words, Shirley?" His voice was very low, as he bowed his head over her; and, rising to his feet, he lifted her and supported the beautiful head resting heavily against his shoulder, as she stood trembling in every limb, prevented from falling only by the strong arms which in-folded her.

(To be Continued.)

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