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Love a Conqueror

—OR— WEDDED AT LAST!

CHAPTER XVIII.

It was a pleasant dinner table, utterly serene and cloudless; and the next day, when the storm-clouds broke with violence those present looked back at it with longing wishes that the by-gone hours could come again.

The only shadow which fell, and that but lightly, on Shirley's face that night was when she thought of Jack, on his way across the "deep deep sea" to his new work and his new home; but her sorrow for Jack's absence was almost completely compensated by the thought of the letter he had written to her before he sailed—the loving, tender letter wishing her all happiness, and repeating his promise, in earnest, heartfelt words which had brought the happy tears to Shirley's eyes, that she should never again have cause to be ashamed of her brother. And Shirley felt that he would keep his word. She was thinking of Jack now tenderly and thankfully, when her attention was caught by a name uttered by Guy's deep rich voice, a name which made Shirley's heart beat fast and furiously.

"By the way, Sir Gilbert," he was saying, "can you tell me anything about Glynn? I wrote to him at Maxwell; but I have received no answer; and I should be extremely sorry if he is not present to-morrow."

"He is abroad with Lady Glynn," answered Sir Gilbert quietly. "He won't be present, Stuart, although of course Lady Fairholme sent him an invitation."

"Lady Glynn has been very ill for some months," Lady Fairholme said, "and she became alarmingly worse early in January; and Sir Hugh, who is a very devoted son, went at once to Cannes, where he has been we conclude, ever since."

"It is so strange he has not written to me," Major Stuart remarked thoughtfully. "But he never was a good correspondent, and I suppose he does not improve in that respect. Perhaps we may come across him in our travels."

"What an extremely handsome and agreeable man he is!" said Lady Capel, in her languid high-bred voice. "I think there is no doubt that he will not remain longer abroad than is absolutely necessary. He is not a man to neglect such an estate as Maxwell; and there are other attractions, I fancy, in this part of the world."

Miss Fairholme blushed, and her mother, glancing at her, smiled a little indulgent, encouraging smile.

Shirley, bending over her plate, was white even to her lips. It was strange how Sir Hugh Glynn's name always affected her; but she could not forget his last words to her, and the kiss he had left upon her cheek when they had parted. She felt bitterly ashamed and humiliated when she thought of it; but she had decided not to tell Guy yet. Later on when they were old married people she would tell him, when Jack should have proved himself truly penitent and fully retrieved his error.

When she looked up again, the conversation had drifted away from Sir Hugh and had wandered to other topics; and presently Lady Fairholme looked at Lady Capel, and the ladies left the dining room, and went into the great drawing room, which was brilliantly lighted to display the wedding gifts, which had been laid out upon the table, and which were very numerous and costly.

The two elder ladies speedily composed themselves in attitudes of repose in arm-chairs on either side of the fire; Shirley sat down in a low chair, a little apart, and folded her hands in her lap, looking very sweet and thoughtful and happy; Alice and Ruby stood by the table, admiring the beautiful parure of diamonds which Jasper Stuart had sent his emerald niece, and which was a royal gift in the way of beauty and value.

"After all, Madam Shirley," Ruby said, gayly, coming to Shirley's chair with a laugh in her sweet dark eyes, "you have not married a poor youth with only his love for a dowry. I shall very fine being disinterested in you, but I felt quite sure that you were aware that Major Stuart had a very wealthy uncle, whose favorite nephew he is, and whose heir he doubt he will be."

Shirley looked up and smiled, but there was a shadow of pain in her beautiful eyes which Ruby did not see.

"Do you remember how you said you would throw him over for a richer suitor, if you got the chance?" continued Ruby merrily. "You have not forgotten it, Alice, I dare say."

"Don't remind me of that to-night, Ruby," Shirley entreated, with a quick tone of pain in her low voice which Ruby heard.

"Dear, forgive me!" she said softly. "I spoke in jest—I did not mean to hurt you. I would not have grieved you for anything. Why, how white you are, Shirley! You must not dare to faint away, or I shall elope with Major Stuart on the instant; and how would you like that? Shirley dear, added the girl penitently, seeing that her light words had given far more pain than she thought. "forgive me, I am so sorry."

Shirley put her little fingers softly into Ruby's hand and smiled her pardon; and then Miss Capel sauntered away to the piano and began to play softly and sweetly. She was still playing when the gentlemen came in and coffee was served; and Shirley face grew perfectly serene as Guy, after a few words to Ruby at the piano and exchanging a few sentences with Lady Fairholme by the fire, made his way to her side and sat down, with an air of perfect content, in a great arm-chair by her elbow.

"At last!" he said softly, under cover of one of Mendelssohn's "Songs without Words." "I thought I should never get you to myself for half an hour, and I have been positively hungering to hear your voice, Shirley."

"Have you? You have borne up pretty well, all things considered," she returned saucily. "You seemed in excellent spirits all through dinner."

"It was no 'seeming,' pretty one," he declared, smiling. "The good spirits were perfectly genuine, I assure you. Happy, my own? I should think I am happy! There is no happier man in all the three kingdoms than I am to-night."

Shirley's sweet eyes, with a bright tender light in their depths, were raised to his, and Guy, meeting them smiled, and under cover of her fan which lay open on her knees, too, her little fingers fondly in his.

"And you, my dearest, are you happy?"

"So happy," she answered softly "that it seems as if my happiness were too great to last."

"Don't say that, love," he said quickly. "Why should it not last? Shirley, it shall be the object of my life to keep you happy."

"An object not difficult to attain, Guy, while I have you."

"Thank you, my own," he said "only; and there was a brief happy pause. Then he asked her gently whether she had missed him a little during his absence.

"A little," Shirley repeated softly with a sudden tremor in her sweet tones. "Oh, Guy, there was not a minute in the day in which I did not miss you and long for you, with such a heart-ache!"

"My dearest!" Guy's tender voice said, as he clasped the little clinging fingers closely in his strong palm. "Oh, how I wanted you sometimes!" Shirley continued tremulously. "But I was never so lonely as I was before Guy, because I had your love, and the thought of it made me happy, and so proud."

"Proud, dear one?" he said, smiling. "Yes, so proud that you who are so good and generous and noble—no, I will speak, sir—I have not promised to obey yet, you know—that you should have cared for me—such a Polish girl, with nothing to recommend but—"

"But what?" Guy asked softly, smiling at her pretty confusion. "But my love for you!" she whispered.

"My darling," Guy said tenderly, restraining with some difficulty his inclination to take her in his arms and kiss the sweet lips which made such pleasing confessions, "how can I thank you for such pretty words? They are so pleasant, Shirley, and they make me so happy!"

"Do they, Guy? Do they really make you happy? I like to think that."

"Then you may think so, sweet."

"Guy," she said, with sudden earnestness, her face paling with intense feeling as she turned to him. "I think if anything came between us now, I could not bear it. I should die."

"Thank Heaven that nothing can!" he returned earnestly; and Shirley experienced such a pleasant feeling of being loved and protected that every shadow fell away, and the perfect peace on Guy's face was reflected on her own.

Meanwhile the rest of the party were amusing themselves as they thought best. Oswald had replaced Ruby at the piano, and was playing the "Wedding March," with a smile upon his face, and his dark eyes, full of fun and tenderness, fixed on Ruby's pretty brunette face, as she stood resting her elbow against the piano, with an expression of mingled amusement and some other feeling fighting for the mastery upon her mobile features. Alice was at the other end of the room, playing bezique with one of Oswald's friends, who had already taken possession

in love with her, and who, although not such a desirable party as Sir Hugh Glynn, was by no means a "detritamental."

Sir Gilbert, from his arm-chair, was glancing occasionally at his niece, and seemed in doubt or hesitation as he did so, for his face wore a slightly troubled look, and there was a very unusual expression of indecision in his blue eyes. He did not like the idea of clouding the happiness on Shirley's face; but in his breast-pocket lay the letter which his sister had been anxious about during her last hours—the letter she had entrusted to Shirley for her uncle, and which contained, written by herself for her daughter's perusal, the story of her life.

(To be continued.)

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