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WEDDED AT LAST!

CHAPTER XVI.

He quailed a little at the thought of Guy Stuart's rage and despair when he found his darling stolen from him; but Sir Hugh was physically no coward, and he felt that he could protect his own. Besides, it might not be impossible to induce Guy, who was naturally both passionate and jealous, to believe in Shirley's participation and consent to the visit to Dumfries and its consequences, in which case he could blame no one but himself for believing in the truth of a girl unworthy of his faith. There were a hundred ways of getting out of the difficulty, he thought, as they sped on through the gathering wintry dusk. At any rate Shirley was his, and no one could take her from him. She was his wedded wife.

Meanwhile, at Fairholme Court, Shirley Ross was quite unconscious of the terrible labyrinth of difficulty and misery into which her unconscious little feet had wandered. She had escaped all further questioning from her uncle by that opportune fainting fit, from which she revived to find herself in her own room, with Alice in attendance, bathing her head with eau-de-cologne and holding strong salts to her nostrils.

Miss Fairholme seemed to give little heed to Shirley's faint apologies. With her short swoon was not a matter of such importance as to cause any comment. Shirley was a little overtired, she fancied; she had been doing too much, and had paid the penalty. Alice shook up the pillows of the sofa on which her cousin lay, and made her drink some wine and smilingly told her that she must not have such pale cheeks when Guy came back; and Shirley sank into a heavy slumber of exhaustion, feeling almost passionately grateful for her cousin's kindness. But Alice had always been kind to her since her engagement.

The next morning, when Shirley awoke, there was a bright sun shining and a clear blue sky overhead.

She hurried through her dressing with the thankful thought that all was well with Jack, and went down to breakfast feeling brighter than she had felt since the night of the ball. Her uncle and Lady Fairholme were in the dining room, and they greeted Shirley with far more eagerness than usual; and Sir Gilbert immediately imparted to her the very pleasing intelligence that Mr. Leeson, Jack's employer, had written, offering to make Jack the manager of the establishment at Calcutta, provided he could arrange to start almost immediately.

"It is a splendid opening for Jack," said Sir Gilbert excitedly; "and I must write to him not to hesitate."

"You ought to be rejoiced at your brother's good fortune, Shirley," remarked Lady Fairholme kindly; while Shirley looked very pale and bewildered and startled. "Of course it will be a great disappointment to you not to have him present at your wedding but you must not be selfish, you know, my dear child."

Shirley smiled faintly. She selfish where Jack was concerned? That was impossible.

"I will write this morning to Jack to say that he must accept and agree to whatever conditions Mr. Leeson chooses to make," said Sir Gilbert presently. "You had better write a few lines also, Shirley, and congratulate your brother."

"Very well, Uncle Gilbert. I will write this morning."

"You are a good child," said Lady Fairholme, smiling; "and here is your reward," she added, handing her a letter in Guy's well-known handwriting.

Shirley took the letter eagerly just as Alice entered, and Lady Fairholme turned to her.

"Your papa has had a note from Sir Hugh, Alice," she said. "He is obliged to start for Cannes to-day being called away by Lady Glynn's illness. He sends kindest regards for you, dear."

"I wonder how long he will be away?" Alice returned, as she sat down to her breakfast with a heavy shadow on her fair face.

And Shirley, although she said no thing, wondered also.

CHAPTER XVII.

"It is of no use glancing at the unfortunate time-piece every five minutes, Shirley, my child. It won't go a bit faster even under the fire."

your bright eyes; and the train is not due at Dumfries for two good hours yet, which means that it will probably get here before the next three!" Shirley laughed merrily.

"You do not seem to have a very good opinion of the punctuality of the cross-line, Ruby?"

"No, I have not, my dear," answered Miss Capel warmly, raising her arms behind her head in an attitude which showed her pretty figure to much advantage as she leant back in the low chair in which she was sitting. "I have a vivid recollection of waiting an hour at Weldon myself yesterday; and I am afraid they won't be the least bit punctual now, lassie, although they carry your bridegroom."

"But I am sure, if they knew how impatiently Shirley was waiting, they would put on extra steam," said Alice lightly.

"I am sure so also," Shirley agreed gaily; "because the stoker may have a sweetheart somewhere; and he would no doubt sympathize with my impatience."

"And Guy's!" laughed Ruby. "And Guy's, of course," said Shirley, resting her chin on the palm of her hand, and looking steadily into the fire, with a tender love-light in her eyes which made her more beautiful than ever.

"It was a bitter winter afternoon with a cold raw wind blowing and gray lowering sky overhead. The had been watching the weather rather uneasily at Fairholme Court that day, for it was the eve of Shirley Ross's wedding day, and every one was hoping that the sun would shine in the sweet young bride who was to leave Fairholme Court on the morrow.

A wedding in a house is always the occasion of more or less bustle; and although Shirley had begged for a quiet wedding, Sir Gilbert would not allow his niece to be married without due ceremony and a certain amount of eclat.

There were to be no guests present but Ruby Capel and her mother, the bridesmaids but Alice and Ruby and the two younger girls. Oswald came up from Chatham for the occasion, and had brought a couple of friends to "enliven the girls," as he said. But the continued serious illness of old Jasper Stuart made an activities quite out of place; and Jack had sailed for India the week before, to Shirley's bitter disappointment.

Still the thought of seeing Guy so soon made every sad thought disappear like snow before sunshine; and the beautiful young face was full of certain softened happiness as Shirley sat looking into the fire, with her head resting against Ruby's knee, as she sat on the rug beside her.

The girls were in Alice's pretty little sitting room, sipping their tea in cozy, luxurious privacy, after a busy day of last preparations for the wedding, which made easy-chairs and the fragrant cups of tea very acceptable.

Ruby was avowedly lazy, lying back in her chair, with her little slippers feet raised on the fender-stool. Shirley was stretched upon the rug, nestling her pretty head against Miss Capel's knee; and Alice had taken possession of a lounging chair at the other side of the fire, and reclined there in perfect comfort.

"I wonder you have not coaxed Captain Fairholme into taking you to the station, Shirley," Ruby said lightly.

"Perhaps if you were to use your influence, it might have more effect," replied Miss Ross wickedly; and Ruby's rich brown cheek colored brightly.

"It is a bitter night, and we are going to have snow, I am sure," Alice Fairholme said, with a shiver. "I am convinced that Oswald would not take you, Shirley, even if Ruby asked him to do so."

"Cannot you imagine a fall of snow heavy enough to block up the lines Shirley?" asked Ruby, pulling the pretty pink car near her hand in playful revenge for Shirley's little speech. "No song, no supper—no bridegroom, no wedding!"

"My imagination is not so vivid as you give it credit for," Shirley said merrily.

"Is it not?" laughed Alice. "I believe the mere suggestion has made you as white as a ghost, only I cannot see your face, I hope it will not snow," she continued practically. "If

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"It will not matter to us," Ruby said merrily. "The snow will make those great velvet dresses of ours look delightful, however detrimental it may be to Shirley's satin and lace. And it does not in the least matter how she looks, now that she is provided with a bridegroom!"

Shirley laughed as her thoughts went with a little innocent vanity to the costly dress of satin and lace which had come from Paris on the previous day. It did not matter to her how she looked in any eyes but Guy's, and she felt pretty sure of what he would think of her.

"I wonder you do not choose to be married in a travelling dress, Shirley. It is getting much the fashion," Ruby remarked, after a pause.

"I should have liked it," Shirley said gently, "but Uncle Gilbert was kind enough to wish me to have a real wedding dress; and now I am very glad, because I shall like to have it."

"And it will be very useful to you when you join," Ruby remarked. "You can wear it at all the balls the regiment will give you."

"But Guy has sent in his papers," Shirley said, smiling. "I am not to be an officer's wife at all, Ruby. Sir Jasper wished it so much that Guy was obliged to give in. I am sure he felt it very keenly, though, for he was greatly attached to ours."

(To be Continued.)

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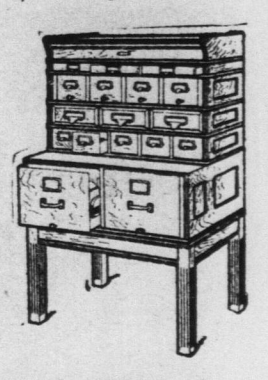
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