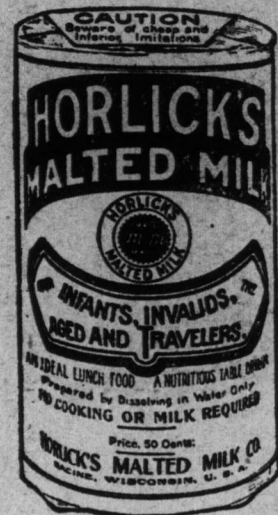




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**Love a Conqueror**

**WEDDED AT LAST!**

**CHAPTER III.**

Cruel to her! What mattered it to her? What mattered it to Gilbert Fairholme's long displeasure; his wife's unbroken silence and content? They mattered little to her now as she lay there, white and beautiful, drifting slowly away, across the sea of death, home. Never, even in the days of her beauty, when she had been the belle of every ball, and Miss Fairholme of Fairholme had been the reigning toast in the county, had she looked lovelier than now. She was as white as marble; even the parted lips through which her breath came so feebly were pallid; but the long lashes swept her cheeks in a heavy dark fringe and the rich dark hair in all its luxuriance streamed down upon the pillow, falling in silky waves over the crimson flannel of her wrapper and on her kneeling daughter's clasped hands.

It was night now, almost midnight, and the sounds of life and animation which had been unceasing during the three hours which Shirley had passed by the bedside were gradually dying away. Sometimes there were steps and voices in the passage without, which made the girl start and look anxiously at her mother but they did not disturb her rest. Then, as these gradually died away and ceased, the occasional shrill whistle of a train rose upon the silence of the night, making the girl's heart throb fast and her pulses quicken; but it did not reach the numbed senses of the dying woman. Ah, when Shirley's broken-hearted sobbing, "Mother, mother!" was unheeded, would any other sound pierce those dulled ears?

What could that story be, Shirley wondered to herself, as the night wore on—the story she was so anxious to tell, but for which she had not strength? It could not be a short story, or she would have told it; she would have found power enough for that. What did she mean by sin and shame and sorrow? There was no sin, no shame on that lovely marble face, only sorrow and suffering, and

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and there had been flowers on the bright little dinner table; and her mother had looked so lovely in her delicate dress and black lace bonnet that more than one had turned to admire her as she passed by, and she had laughed and blushed at her husband's smiling compliments, as if she had been a girl in her teens.

That day, too, in Brussels, a long golden summer day, when they had picked in the Bois de la Cambre and enjoyed its glorious trees and lovely verdure, and had watched from their seats by the lake the stars come out one by one over the deep blue sky, and had driven home down the long boulevards in a shabby little one-horse vehicle, of which Jack had made such fun! And that day in Venice, when Shirley got her first peep at the Queen of the Sea! How well she remembered her wonder and delight, and the beauties of Florence and the grandeur of Rome. Ah, how she remembered them all!

And that last terrible day when her father died! Could she ever forget that? Could she ever feel less pain than that memory than she did now when the hot tears rose thick and fast, and the red lips quivered with

represible pain? It was at a quaint little old seaport town on the coast of Brittany, and during the morning Shirley and Jack had wandered down the steep path at the end of the village which led to the beach. It was toward the end of the summer; the bathing season was over, and the fishing fleets were preparing to put to sea. The fishermen were busy with their boats, the women within doors were making active preparations for their husbands' departure. It was a cheerful, pleasant little place, and the sea was heaving and flashing in the sunshine and rolling up on the beach where the waves broke with a musical little ripple. Shirley and her brother had sat down on the side of the old boat which stood high and dry and had talked of England, and wondered why they knew so little of home, and had laughed and chattered with a sturdy old fisherman who was working away at his nets close by Shirley could remember his kind, weather-beaten face even then. The ad been so happy and light-hearted; so shadow of the coming trouble had fallen upon them; their father and mother were well. He had been out ketching during the morning, and had come home a little tired, and was resting on the sofa in their little sitting room—for they had been spending the summer at Port St. Pierre, and Shirley was burnt by the sun into a clear soft brown. And then she and Jack had run up the steep path with merry laughter and shouts, to the chalet on the edge of the cliff and Mrs. Ross had met them smiling too, but with upraised finger urging silence, because their father was asleep.

beneath them now, but soon to surmount them, peace. Shirley tried to think—she tried to look back into the past and recall her mother's life; but it had always been calm and peaceful and apparently happy, and the look of deep sadness had been so constant on her face that Shirley had grown to regard it as natural. No, there was nothing in the past of which Shirley knew intruding that look of anguish and misery on the dark eyes. Her father's death had been a fearful sorrow truly, and she had been a fearful sorrow truly, and she had recovered, but there was no shame to touch him.

No, they had been happy years—Shirley felt sure of that—happy years and pleasant, occupied with wanderings in quaint foreign cities and husband and wife, never remaining long in any one place, never wearying of it, but taking and enjoying all its charms and beauty, and then leaving it—going southward with the swallows, lingering under blue skies and breathing soft balmy air—the northern world was frost-bound and chill, then, when the golden summer days came back, returning northward again, but never coming to England—never.

Yes, it had been a pleasant life, although to Sir Gilbert Fairholme it had seemed a strange and wandering existence. Rowland Ross was an artist, and he had not cared to have a settled home anywhere, but had followed his art; and wherever it led him he was content to go, and his wife had been content to follow. It had not been a very successful artistic career, for, although he had genius and lacked perseverance, which is, after all, the key to success; but, as long as he made sufficient money to keep his wife and children in comfort he had not cared. Naturally a hopeful and happy dispositioned man, he was nearly always bright and cheerful, brave under disappointment, and always tender and loving to his own. The children's lives had been sunshine and cloudless; they had grown up with an intense love for all that was beautiful in nature and art, they had received every educational advantage—for abroad in those sunny foreign lands professors were obtained who, in England, would have asked the same number of pieces in gold or those they received in silver—and Shirley had such a beautiful voice that it was well that it should be highly cultivated, and she loved music.

Ah, those happy days! How they came back, one by one, bright and vivid, as if twenty-four hours had not elapsed since their evenings fell and their light faded to Shirley Ross, as she knelt in the silent room in the still night hours. That day in Paris, when, after spending some long happy hours at the Louvre, feasting their eyes on its beauties, they had gone and dined at a bright little restaurant in the Palais Royal, and had finished up the evening at the Theatre Francaise, where they had been charmed with Sardou's exquisite comedy *Maitre Guirra*—Shirley remembered that day so well; the chestnut trees were in flower and the sun was shining so cheerily down on the gay groups of bonnets and children in the gardens.

Poor mother! It was the last time Shirley ever saw her face bright and smiling. An hour afterward she went softly into the little sitting room, and then came a quick terrified cry which brought Jack and Shirley quickly into the room. Their father was lying quietly upon the cushions, his eyes closed, his lips parted in a faint smile; but there was a strange, awful, indefinable look upon his face which, although they had never seen death, told them what it was. Their mother was bending over the sofa, and she turned her face to them with a pitiful look of entreaty.

"I cannot wake him," she said hurriedly; "and he is so cold. I think he has fainted."

She bent over him again, touching his hands with one of hers. Then her face changed; a terrible look of anguish came upon it, and before Jack could go to her assistance, she had fallen in a swoon at their feet. Rowland Ross was dead.

That was three years ago now; but Shirley remembered it all as clearly as possible, as clearly as though it had happened yesterday.

Presently the door opened, and Jack came softly in, Shirley rose and went to meet him, and they kissed each other.

"There is no change," she said gently. "But I do not think she is suffering."

"She is not—not dead?" Jack faltered, as he glanced at the still face.

"Oh, no—oh, no!"

"Does Dr. Graham think she will recover consciousness?"

"Yes, he thinks so; and I hope so—oh, I hope so!" Shirley said earnestly.

"I should like her to know us again," Jack remarked, with forced composure.

"It is not only for that," Shirley said tremulously; "but there is something she wants to tell us—you and me. She is very anxious that we should know it."

"What can it be, Shirley?" said Jack wonderingly. "They never had any secrets from us."

"They have kept one, I think," the girl observed, in her tremulous, broken voice. "She seemed so anxious to tell me in the train from Paris; but I dared not let her. She was so weak. I did not want her to talk."

"What can it be?" Jack said again, with a long look at the quiet face.

"I cannot think. She said something about shame and temptation," Shirley replied, a faint color rising in her face.

"Shame touching our mother? That is absurd, Shirley!" the lad said, flushing to the roots of his curly hair.

"Not touching her, I trust, Jack, but touching something we ought to know," she whispered low. "I hope she may be able to tell us."

"Is she asleep?"

"No, she is in a stupor, I think." (To be Continued.)

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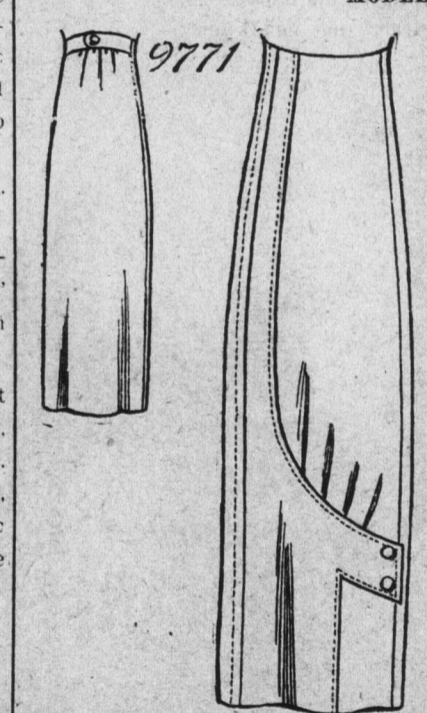


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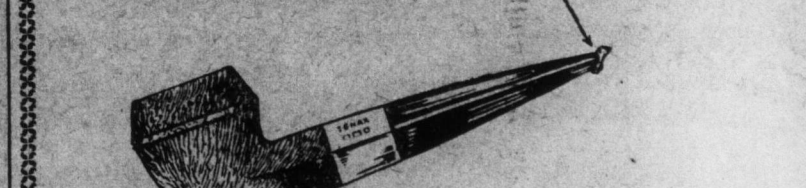
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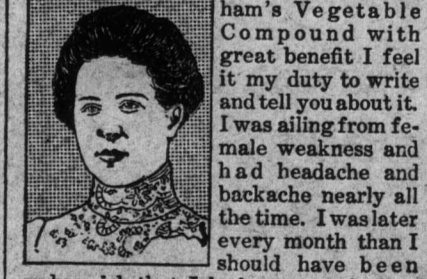
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