

# Love a Conqueror —OR— WEDDED AT LAST.

CHAPTER XLII.

"Papa is coming for me on his way from Adinbrook," she said, trying to assume her usual cheerful manner. "I had such a lot to say to you that I did not want to be hurried away before it was dusk. Why, Jip, old man, where have you been—upstairs? Are you glad to see me," she asked, smiling—"gladder than that naughty mistress of yours is?"

"He could not be that," Shirley put in, in a low voice of pain; and Madge, with a quick repentance, put her arms round her.

"Forgive me," she said coaxingly. "That was a naughty speech; but I am so glad to see you, dear Mrs. Grant, that it hurt me to think you are not equally pleased to see me."

"You know that I am glad," Shirley answered, gently disengaging herself. "Sit down by the fire, Miss Oliphant, while I see about tea."

"Miss Oliphant" again," Madge said pettishly; "and I have so often begged you to call me 'Madge!'"

"I am afraid I cannot please you, to-day," Shirley said, with a smile, as she glanced over at the pretty dissatisfied face on which the fire-light fell.

"You always please me," Madge answered quickly. "But why are you so very dignified to-day?" she added, with a little laugh. "I am almost afraid of you—you keep me at such a distance."

"You fancy I do; but, dear, between the village schoolmistress and Sir Frederic Oliphant's daughter there is a wide difference."

Shirley passed into the little kitchen beyond, coming back presently with the tea-kettle, which she placed on the fire; then she began to prepare the table for tea, going about it with a quiet grace which made the homely occupation a very pretty sight in Madge's eyes.

"Where is Janie?" she asked presently; and Shirley's face was turned away, or Madge would have seen how the color rose into it at the question.

"I have sent her home. I prefer being without her," she answered. "Without her!" echoed Madge. "But you surely do not intend to remain here alone all night?"

"Do you think that Jane would be a great protection?" Shirley asked, smiling slightly.

"No; but it would not be so lonely for you, and she was very useful. Did she displease you?"

"Oh, no?"

"Then why did you send her away?"

"Because I preferred to be alone."

Her tone was very gentle, but very firm, and there was a short silence, during which Shirley busied herself making the tea and Miss Oliphant sat looking into the fire, with a puzzled, wistful expression in her blue eyes.

When the tea was made and covered with the pretty coxy, Shirley begged to be excused for a moment; and Madge heard her run lightly up the stairs, although she closed the door carefully after her when she went out. She was not absent many minutes; but, when she returned, it seemed to Madge that there was an added shade of sadness on her face.

"Where is Jip?" Madge asked lightly.

"He stayed up-stairs," was the quiet answer. "No, don't call him, dear, he—he is so restless, he makes me nervous."

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She went to the table as she spoke and began to pour out the tea; and as she handed Madge a cup, she forced a smile to her lips.

"And now tell me of all this delightful visit," she said cheerfully. "I am on tender hooks of curiosity, Madge, to know what made it so very pleasant."

"Have you caught cold?" Madge asked, looking at her keenly.

"Caught cold? No. Why?"

"Because your voice sounded rather husky, and when you went up-stairs you had a terrific fit of coughing."

All the color died out of Shirley's face; and she rose hastily, going to the fire to put some more water into the little tea-pot.

"Did you hear me?" she said unsteadily. "I had no idea I could cough so loud."

"You coughed dreadfully. I wish you would see Dr. Lloyd. You look anything but well. Will you let me send him up on my way home?"

There was a slight hesitation; and then Shirley said lightly:

"I will think about it. Come, Madge, tell me about your gayeties. Is Cotsford a nice place?"

"Yes, the house is very quaint and old and charming—not quite so large as Stuartleigh, but quite as ancient."

"Stuartleigh?" Shirley repeated, mechanically.

"Yes," Madge said quietly sipping her tea—"Major Stuart's place. We drove over there it is only a few miles from Cotsford—three or four."

"But I thought—I thought—Major Stuart was abroad?"

"You thought wrong," Madge said, with a bright laugh and a hot blush. "He came back a fortnight ago, and he and a friend are at Stuartleigh. Poor Guy!" she added sorrowfully, a sudden shadow falling upon the brightness of her face.

"Why—is he ill?"

"Ill? Oh, no! He is much stronger than he was last winter; but—Ah, well, some day I will tell you all his story, and you will see whether there is not some excuse for the depression under which he labors sometimes!"

All his story! Did any one in all the wide world—did Madge herself—know that story as Shirley knew it? she wondered.

"And we coaxed Guy and his friend Mr. Ross over to Cotsford," Madge continued, looking at the fire, her cheeks flushing a little as she spoke.

"And I am sure it did them—What is the matter? Are you faint?"

She put down her cup hastily and went to Shirley's side, for she was drooping over the table in a helpless manner which alarmed her guest.

"It is nothing," she said. "I am sorry I startled you, Madge; but it is nothing indeed. You were saying you induced Major Stuart and—"

"Are you really better, Mrs. rant, I shall insist on your seeing Doctor Lloyd," Madge said as she went back to her seat.

"Dr. Lloyd cannot do anything for that sudden faintness, dear; it is an old enemy. Well, Madge, so are you not going to tell me all your doings?"

"I am afraid of tiring you."

"Tiring me! I am longing to hear." And the pale face wore an expression of eagerness and anxiety which made Madge smile.

"You are a regular daughter of Eve!" she cried delightedly.

"I am charmed to have discovered a falling at last in this little perfect woman about whom all Erindale is raving. Our dear model schoolmistress is curious."

"Very curious," Shirley acknowledged, with a forced smile. "Gratify my curiosity, Madge."

"Madge! How pleasant it is to hear you call me that!" the girl said, smiling, as she drew up a stool to Shirley and sat down at her feet. "Well, renews a nos moutons—nos moutons being Major Stuart and Mr. Ross."

"Mr. Ross?" Shirley repeated, her heart beating wildly.

"Yes, a friend of Guy's from India," Madge said, a little shyly. "How hot the fire is!" she added. "It is scorching my face."

Shirley put both her hands gently on the flushed cheeks; Madge pulled them down to her lips and kissed them softly.

"Did you like Mr. Ross, Madge?"

"He was very nice."

"Is he handsome?"

"Yes, very handsome."

"And did you like him, Madge?" Shirley persisted gently.

"I—I do not know."

The words were very shyly and sweetly spoken; and Shirley wondered a little at the tremor in the girlish voice.

"Is Mr. Ross going to remain in England?" she said presently.

"For the present—yes; he and Guy are coming to Erindale next week for a few days."

Coming to Erindale! It seemed as if Shirley's heart stood still with terror at the very thought. Coming to Erindale! It was well that Madge Oliphant was too much occupied with her own thoughts to look up at the white and stricken face leaning back against the chair.

"Papa took such a fancy to Mr. Ross," went on Madge's sweet, unconscious voice—"he liked him so much that he is quite pleased at the thought of a visit from him; and you will see him too," she continued softly, "for we have talked about our model 'schoolmarm' until they are both anxious to see her."

To see her. What new terrible complication was this? Shirley felt faint and dazed and giddy.

"They are coming in a few days," Miss Oliphant went on. "And I shall bring them to see Mrs. Grant, of course. But I should like her to be looking somewhat—" She broke off suddenly and lifted her head with a little gesture which commanded attention. "Why," she exclaimed excitedly, "surely there is some one upstairs! I am certain I heard some one cough."

"It must be Jip, then," Mrs. Grant said, sitting up in her chair, quite composed now. "You forget that he is upstairs."

"Jip could not cough," Madge said hubbously—"and it was a cough I heard, I am sure."

"Jip often makes a growling noise which might easily be taken for a cough. Who else could be up there, Madge?"

"No one, of course, without your knowing it—unless some one might have concealed themselves there to startle you, or even do you injury."

"You absurd child! It would have to be a very small individual who could conceal himself or herself in either of those little attics. Why, I am up and down constantly, and I could not fail to see any one who was there? Besides," she added earnestly, anxious to remove the idea from the young girl's mind, "Jip is such a good watch-dog, you know, that, if anyone were there who did not belong to the house, he would never cease barking until he had the matter seen into."

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"I don't think it is right for you to be here alone at night," said Madge decidedly. "You might be ill. No one knows what might happen."

"I am afraid Jane would not have been of much assistance if I had been taken ill, for it required all my strength to wake her up in the morning," said Mrs. Grant, with an attempt at laughter.

"Then you must have some one more efficient. I will speak to mamma about it."

There was a moment's silence; then Shirley said gently:

"I am sure you do not want to pain me, Madge. I prefer being here alone. I do not want any assistance. Should I need it, dear, I will promise you to obtain it if you, in your turn, will promise me to say no more about it. And also I entreat of you not to mention it to Lady Oliphant at all."

"Why not?"

"Because—because—well, call it a whim if you like, and gratify it."

"I suppose I must when you ask it with that look in your eyes. Ah, there is papa!" she added, as Sir Frederic's knock sounded at the door.

They went together to the door, where Sir Frederic was waiting for his daughter. He lifted his hat courteously to Shirley, but did not offer her his hand.

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(To be continued.)

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