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Love & Conqueror

WEDDED AT LAST.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

Lady Eastwell's denunciation of Guy Stuart and Shirley Glynn was bitter, and vindictive to a degree which was terrible to contemplate. Even Major Stuart's guilt could not have justified it. She never spoke of the matter without a calm cold bitterness which startled her husband and caused her friends to say among themselves that her ladyship would make a bitter enemy. It was solely by her means that the reports of Guy's reason for hating Sir Hugh Glynn got abroad and were circulated far and wide, the threats he had uttered long before, being repeated to one and all; and it was in vain that Oswald Fairholme, terribly distressed, not only on poor Shirley's account, but because of the effect these rumors had in influencing public and private opinion against Guy, remonstrated earnestly and seriously with his sister and entreated her to desist and let her enmity rest now in this time of terrible distress. Alice listened to the remonstrances in silent silence, and answered the en-

treates by an hysterical attack which entirely routed her brother, who was glad to escape and leave her to the ministrations of her long-suffering maid.

Oswald had come down immediately on hearing of Guy's arrest, leaving Ruby at Fairholme Court, where his little daughter had been born; and although he had made every effort for Guy's behalf, he had found it quite impossible to get bail accepted. Already Lady Eastwell's insinuations, and so much weight, and Guy had spent all the long summer days in prison, shut out from the warmth and beauty and sunshine.

That he had borne his captivity bravely and patiently Oswald knew; and he had won the esteem and regard of the officials, from the governor himself down to the humblest warder. He was sanguine and cheerful as to the results of the trial; but the close imprisonment was telling on his health, and he was looking worn and haggard and ill.

It was well known that the ablest lawyers had been retained for the defense, that the great Q. C., Edward Montagu, had arrived by the night-mail; and Major Stuart's friend and solicitor, Mr. Harcourt, of the London firm of Harcourt & Clarendon of Lincoln's Inn, had little doubt as to the result of the trial. Still, confidently as he spoke, there was a great anxiety in his eyes, which belied the calm professional smile upon his lips

as he entered the crowded courtroom and glanced over the sea of living faces.

The court-house had been full many a time before, but never had it contained such a number of distinguished visitors. The entire gallery was thronged with ladies in rich somber mourning attire, silk and velvet and jet. Lord and Lady Eastwell and a few distinguished guests occupied seats near the bench, while Oswald from his seat near Mr. Harcourt glanced up once or twice anxiously to a slight dark-robed figure which sat in as retired a part as was consistent with a good view of the judge and prisoner; and beside the sable-clad figure were Lucie Grey and her father, Shirley's slim deathly color had been held in Lucie's tender clasp.

Lucie and Mr. Grey had come to Exminster on the previous day with Shirley, who had spent the intervening weeks at the Vicarage, and they were staying at the cottage of one of the Vicarage servants who had married and settled at Exminster. Her house would be quieter and more private for Shirley than an hotel, Mr. Grey had decided; and Ada had accompanied her sister. Shirley was stronger now, but she was still very delicate, and it was doubtful whether she would ever regain her former health. For three weeks she had lain between life and death in the spare room at the Vicarage, and it was thought only her youth and naturally good constitution and the tender devoted nursing which had won her back to life and suffering; for, although she struggled bravely against her sorrow and forced a smile to her lips, she suffered a lifetime of agony during those weeks which intervened between Guy's arrest and the trial. It seemed to her cruel beyond all words that Guy, who had forgiven so nobly and pleaded with her so earnestly in behalf of the husband she had despised and hated, should be accused of so base and terrible a crime; and the thought that she should have to bear witness against

the man she loved, accused of the murder of her husband, seemed to stupefy her and numb every thought and feeling into one ceaseless pain.

She had entered the court early—for Mrs. Grey had been anxious to save Shirley as much as possible from the curious glances and observations of the crowd—and few guessed that the closely veiled woman sitting so quietly was the widow of the dead man about whom so much had been said and thought and hinted during the long summer days.

The yhad entered the court early—the judge and sheriffs in their; and there was a momentary pause ere the prisoner was brought in. Mr. Montagu, the clever ugly face impassive as usual under his wig, glanced round the court with his gold-rimmed eye-glasses, let his eyes linger for the sixtieth part of a minute on Lady Eastwell's handsome eager face, looked away across the court again, said something with a little smile to the junior beside him, and then sat calmly as the accused was brought into court, tall and stately and grave, with the proud earnest look in the deep gray eyes which Shirley had known and loved so well.

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He was looking somewhat worn and pale, but there was no other trace of emotion about him as he bowed courteously and took his place; and the noble face, so true and earnest, made public opinion veer round in his favor. Surely such a man could not be a murderer! If he had caused Sir Hugh's death, it had been done in fair fight. He was no coward, no traitor.

Watching him intently and curiously, with eyes that saw his every movement, the eager audience noticed that, after one swift searching glance around, he sat, with downcast eyes and folded arms, grave, attentive, and proud, with no bravado or indifference, but equally without fear or nervousness, waiting.

The indictment was read. Ah, how every word pierced Shirley's heart! She had lifted her veil now, and sat with her eyes fixed upon Guy, whose profile she could partly distinguish; but, when Guy's grave, deep, musical voice answered steadily, "Not Guilty" she dropped her veil and sank back, shrinking as if all eyes were upon her.

Then the lawyer for the prosecution commenced his speech, and Shirley heard, with a faint sickening feeling of horror and anguish, the whole story of her marriage laid before the public in polished eloquent words. They were told how Miss Ross had been betrothed to the prisoner at the bar; how the deceased had loved her with an overwhelming passion which had let no obstacle hinder its course; how he had either induced her to consent to or deceived her into a Scotch irregular marriage, which was from various circumstances concealed until the very day when she was to become the wife of the prisoner. The lawyer drew a vivid and impressive picture of the trembling bride, the irate bridegroom, the husband claiming his rights and insisting on the possession of the wife which the Scotch marriage laws had given him. He described the furious resentment—natural, even just resentment—of the man who had been betrayed—how he had sworn vengeance against the man who had stolen from him the woman he loved, a woman whose beauty had dazzled an honorable man to a degree which prevented him distinguishing right from wrong. The act of the deceased with regard to his marriage with Miss Ross was not one that would bear palliation or excuse; it was one which he had surely repented when in the possession of his saner judgment, one which, perhaps he would have undone had it been possible.

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