

**Love & Conqueror**  
—OR—  
**WEDDED AT LAST!**

CHAPTER IX.

where Shirley stood talking to Sir Guy glanced across the room to Gilbert, who had followed Major Stuart into the oak parlour; she was very pale, but she was listening to and answering her uncle with perfect composure.

"I am very disappointed myself," he said quietly. "I had no wish to pass New Year's Day in a railway-carriage; but you see it cannot be helped—and I have no time to lose, Miss Fairholme," he added quickly, seeing that Shirley had already escaped from the room. "I have to catch the seven p.m. train from Dumfries."

"It is not a pleasant time of the year for travelling," remarked Alice, with a graceful little shiver. "I don't envy you, Major Stuart. But I hope you will find your uncle better than you expect. Medical men are not infallible, you know."

"Thank you, I hope so," said Guy absently. "Good-bye, Miss Fairholme. You will, I hope, allow me to thank you for your kindness during my visit at the Court?"

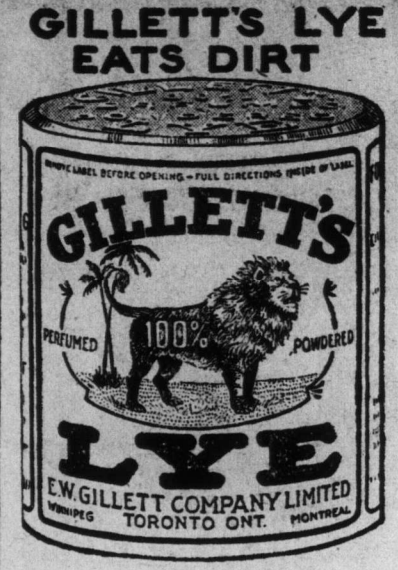
"You must at least carry away one pleasant reminiscence with you," she responded smiling, as she gave him her hand. "Good-bye, Major Stuart. We will take good care of Shirley during your absence. I hope you will not be snowed up on your way."

"I hope not," Guy said, as he spoke his farewells and hurried out of the room.

"Poor Shirley! Hard lines for her!" remarked Ruby regretfully. "Her pleasure is spoilt."  
"Yes, poor child," said Alice, in her soft voice, "half-triumphant light shone in Sir Hugh's blue eyes. But what can't be cured must be endured, you know, Ruby; so she must bear it as philosophically as she can."

CHAPTER X.

Shirley was standing waiting for Guy in the great hall; and as he was toward her, with a very tortuous look in her lustrous hazel eyes she put out two little trembling hands to meet his. The hall was all ready for the ball, being profusely decorated with evergreens and garlands and rich crimson hangings, while the polished floor was simply perfect for dancing. It was a pretty and tasteful ball-



room, being somewhat out of the common, for in the recesses the suits of steel armor caught and reflected back the fire and lamp light, and the grand staircase at one end, carpeted in crimson, would make a very comfortable resting-place for the tired dancers by and by. Shirley was standing before the great wood-fire that was blazing on the wide old-fashioned hearth, a slender drooping figure in a black dress, and as she put out her hands to meet Guy's, the diamond on the little white left hand flashed and gleamed in the firelight.

"Oh, Guy," she cried pitifully, as he took the little hands in his strong grasp, "this is a disappointment!"

"Is it dear?" he said kindly. "I am very sorry, Shirley."

"Must you go?" she whispered unsteadily. "Guy, it is my first ball, and I wanted to be so happy to-night."

"And I hope you will be happy," he replied, smiling a little—"you must be happy without me, my child."

"Happy without you!" Shirley echoed drearily. "I can't, Guy. Do you think"—she lifted her eyes to him with a little coquetry—"that you could be happy without me?"

"I think I could, my child, if it were necessary," he answered; "and I expect you will be so to-night."

"Then I am sorry to say that your expectations will be disappointed," she said drearily. "Guy, don't you care? Are you not a little sorry?"

"I am very sorry, Guy, old fellow," he replied fondly. "Don't throw me over for a richer suitor in my absence, little woman."

"As if I could!" she said sadly, so much depressed at the thought of his departure to remember her careless words.

"Could you not?" he questioned, smilingly. "Then what were those very heretical and unorthodox opinions you were giving vent to in my absence?"

"Ah"—Shirley drew a long breath and colored a little—"I did not think you heard, Guy?"

"But I did hear, Shirley," he answered gently; and, with a pretty little penitent gesture, Shirley put both hands on his breast.

"I am very sorry, Guy. I would not have had you hear them for the world; but—"

"Dear," he said, softly, "you spoke the words, did you not?"

"Yes, but not as they were repeated," she answered eagerly. "You know, Guy—you are sure, are you not?—that I would not pain you for the world, and that if you were a private in your own regiment I should love you just as dearly."

"Would you?" he answered smiling. "Those are pleasant words to hear, sweet."

"Then let them make you forget the others," she said, softly. "Those are true—the others were not. Guy, they do not pain you now, dear, do they?"

"I do not think they pained me much," he replied, smiling into the loving eyes which were lifted to his

face. "We will not think any more about them, Shirley. You will write to me, dear?"

"Of course. It will be so pleasant to write to you. I have never written to anyone but Jack," she said, smiling; "so you must not mind the letters being stupid."

"I dare say I shall not think them so," he answered, "especially if they tell me all about yourself and your doings and your flirtations."

"My flirtations?" Shirley echoed, with wide, innocent, smiling eyes. "What are they?"

"You know very well. You are a very demure little maiden on the surface; but still waters run deep. Do you think you will have forgotten me if I am away longer than a fortnight?"

"Of course, I shall in all probability have married some one else if you prolong your absence for three weeks," she answered, laughing.

Guy laughed also. It was strange how little both seemed to feel this separation. Certainly it was to be but a short one; but so much may happen in a fortnight, in a week, in a day, that some of the coming trouble might have cast its shadow upon them.

"Saucy girl," he said. "Marry some one else at your peril and his! If you do, as sure as my name is Guy Stuart, I will kill him! Therefore, if any one proposes to you in my absence, you can tell him so, and warn him."

"I certainly will," she replied merrily, and then the smile faded, and she rested her head against his wearily. "Guy, I wish you had not to go."

"So do I, love. But the dear old man has been so good to me always that I could not bear to think of him as ill and lonely. Dr. Crover is a bit of an alarmist," he added, musingly, "and he always thinks 'nele Jasper worse than he is, so that I do not believe he is so ill as he says. Why I had, as you know, a letter from the dear old fellow last week."

"Yes—and such a kind letter. You will give him my love, Guy, and tell him that I shall always love him for his goodness to his unworthy nephew."

"You are a darling!" Guy said softly, as he bent over her and put his lips to her brow. "I really think you are fond of me, Shirley."

"I really think I am—a little," she responded, laughing; but the next moment with a sudden tenderness and pain she had pressed her face against his breast. "Oh, Guy, oh, Guy, what shall I do even for those few days without you?"

"Shirley, if you cry, you will have red eyes for to-night," he said, bending over her with smiling yet sorrowful eyes; "and I cannot have people saying that Major Stuart has a queer taste to take that ugly girl! Darling, look up and give me a smile to take away with me."

"I am very sorry, Guy, old fellow," broke in Sir Hugh's voice at his friend's elbow, "but it is time to go! I cannot give you even five minutes more."

"All right—I am ready," Guy answered, as Shirley started up, flushed and trembling. "We don't mind Hugh, my darling," he went on, smiling. "He is very sympathetic, and can readily understand that I am not

quite as rejoiced as I ought to be to leave you."

"Readily," Sir Hugh answered, in rather a low tone, his face looking strange and pale in the firelight.

"And I am leaving you in Hugh's charge," Guy went on, fondly—both arms were round Shirley now, and his face was bent over her. "I know Sir Gilbert and Lady Fairholme are very good, but I know that Hugh is my friend, and that he will take better care of my property than any one else," he added cordially; "so, sweet-heart, if anything goes wrong during my absence, will you go to Hugh as frankly as you would come to me?"

"Of course, if you wish it," she said shyly. "But Guy, nothing can go wrong, dear."

"I think you know that nothing could give me truer pleasure than to render you any service," Sir Hugh put in, his voice a little husky, his lips parched and dry, "although of course I hope there will be no occasion."

"At any rate, I leave her much less regretfully knowing that you are at hand, old friend," Guy said, in his warm frank manner. "Now, good-bye, my darling; take care of yourself—and take care of her, Hugh."

He held her close for a moment and Shirley clung to him with sudden passion and pain. Now for the first time a heavy foreboding of dread and terror was upon her, and she shrank from the separation with fear and trembling.

"Darling, let me go," Guy whispered, as he unclasped the clinging hands. "Why, you foolish child, it is only for a week or two! Don't sob so, you silly girl. Why, Shirley, I shall not be able to leave you!"

Sir Hugh had walked over to the hall door and had drawn aside the heavy sheltering curtains and opened the strong iron-studded door.

"Guy, old fellow!" he called warningly, and at the sound of his voice Shirley started, checked her tears, and disengaged herself from Guy's clasp.

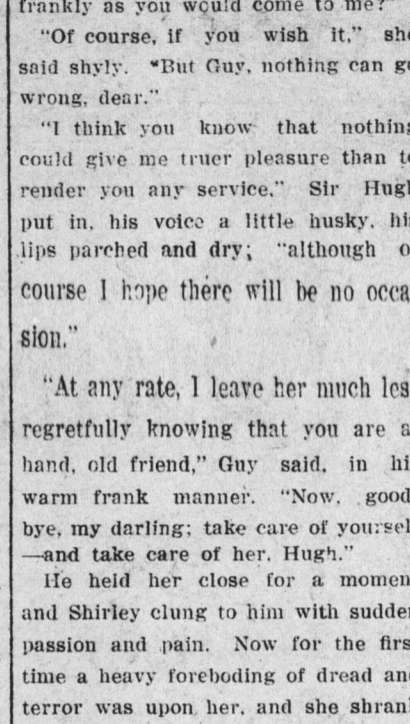
"Good-bye," she said, faintly, forcing a little smile to the trembling lips. "Guy, don't forget me!"

"That's my brave Shirley! No, don't come to the door, darling; it is so rough and boisterous. Oh, you willful lassie!" he added, smiling, as she went with him, and watched him get into the dog-cart which was to take him to the station.

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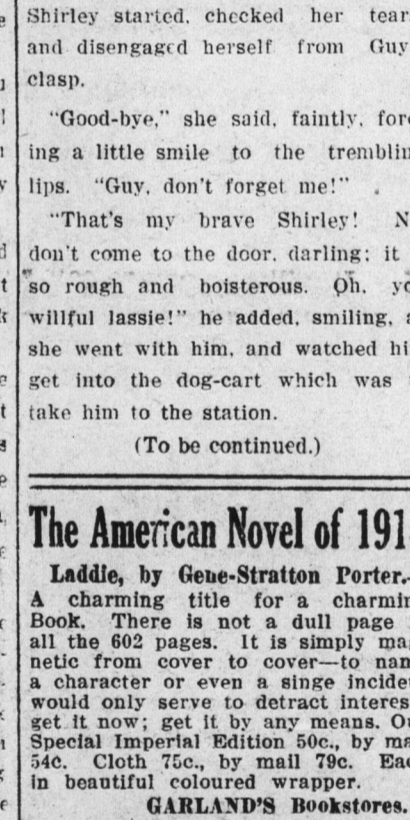
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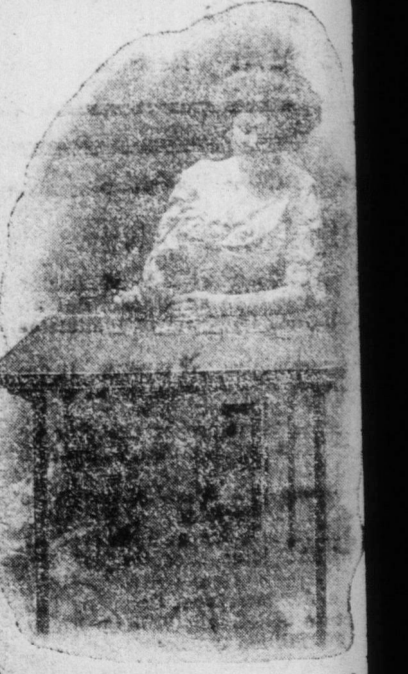
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