

Love a Conqueror

OR WEDDED AT LAST!

CHAPTER III.

"You have Uncle Gilbert's letter," Jack Ross said, after a pause. "Does he say anything, Shirley?"

"There is much that I do not understand," the girl replied. "And I have a long letter for him which mother wrote before we left Heidelberg—a very long letter, Jack. It seemed almost as if she had a presentiment. Oh, I wish—I wish she had not come!"

The hot burning tears rose thickly to her eyes; but she choked them back. Jack put his arm round her and drew her fondly to him.

"Poor little Shirley, it has been terrible for you; but, dear, Dr. Graham tells me that the travelling has made no difference, or very, very little."

"And she was so anxious to come." "Could you let me see Uncle Gilbert's letter?" said Jack presently. "There may be something in it which would help us to understand what our mother tells us."

Shirley took some letters from the inner pocket of her sealskin coat, which she was still wearing, and, selecting one, handed it to her brother. As he took it from her she showed him mutely another letter, or rather a thick weighty packet addressed in his mother's handwriting to her brother, Sir Gilbert Fairholme, Fairholme Court, Dumfrie. Jack's lips quivered slightly as he saw the pretty graceful Italian handwriting; then, turning away, he carried his uncle's letter to the mantelpiece, where a dim light was burning, and read as follows:—

"My Dear Marian,—I have received both your letters; and I did not answer the first because it required consideration; and, before I had thought over it sufficiently, your second letter came. When your husband died—three years ago, I think—I made you a proposal to return to Scotland and live there quietly; but your reply was so decided, and you shrank so unmistakably from my proposal, that I did not repeat it. Even when your son settled in London you did not seem to see the necessity of making a home for him there by settling there with Shirley; but that was no affair of mine. You preferred living abroad, and perhaps,



in all circumstances, it was just as well. You might have met persons who knew your history, you said. I should have fancied that you were far more likely to do so wandering about the Continent than living quietly at home in England or Scotland. But you said Scotland had been cruel to you; well, of that I cannot judge. You have been cruel to yourself. I think; but you were always willful, and it is too late now to alter or regret the past. You wish now to return home; your health is falling, you tell me; but you are so young that I hope your weakness is only temporary, and that our more bracing air will set you up again. Should you not wish to come to Fairholme Court, where, however, you shall be made very welcome, I will take a small house for you and my niece at Dumfrie. Your story is well nigh forgotten now, and, even if it were not so, the fact that Lady Fairholme and myself consent to forget it will be sufficient. We are still the Fairholmes of Fairholme, my dear Marian, although you have been so long absent that you may have almost forgotten that fact.

"My son Oswald is with his regiment at Chatham. Alice is, now at home, but she has been spending some weeks at Edinburgh, where she has been so much admired. The two younger girls, Maud and Jean, are still in the schoolroom; and Shirley, I suppose, still young enough to share their studies. You may rest assured that all that can be done to make you comfortable in your old home, or a new one if you prefer it, will be done. Happiness, perhaps, you cannot expect—wrong-doing always brings its own punishment; but you may find quiet and peace here. You tell me that your children do not know your story; nor is it necessary that they should, so far as I can see. Let it die now, and be buried and forgotten. We will not disinter it."

"I inclose a check for your travelling expenses, as I wish you to have every possible comfort. Do not spare expense. Lady Fairholme joins me in love to you and Shirley. I have very good accounts of your son, and at my request Mr. Burnett is going to give him a post in the Glasgow branch of his establishment."

"Your affectionate brother,
"GILBERT S. FAIRHOLME."

It was not an unkind letter, but somehow, as he read it, a hot feeling of anger rose in Jack's heart against his uncle. What did he mean by his cruel sentences that it was too late to regret or alter the past? His mother's married life had been a very happy one; why should she regret? What did he mean too by the phrase that wrong-doing must always bring its own punishment? What wrong had his mother done—his dear mother? There was something strange and incomprehensible about it all, something which made Jack anxious and uneasy, and made him wish with as great an earnestness as Shirley's own that his mother would awake from her stupor and find strength to tell them herself what they so much wished to know.

He folded up the letter and gave it back to his sister in silence. Perhaps Sir Gilbert meant kindly; but he had an unfortunate way of showing kindness. The letter was like his uncle, Jack thought. He had seen him only once, in London; but he had felt then that there was no sympathy between them. Sir Gilbert was many years older than his mother, tall and grave and pompous and dry, and Jack could not guess how much he had loved his beautiful young sister in the days gone by, before she had caused him such grief.

"He calls Aunt Geraldine,"

Fairholme," said Shirley huskily. "Is it not strange and cold, Jack?"

"Perhaps they don't get on very well," Jack answered bitterly. "Or, perhaps he wanted to impress our mother with the thought that it was not a sister she was going to, but a sister-in-law."

"But he meant to be kind, Jack," Shirley whispered softly. "He sent the check, you know, and he would have come himself to London if he had not been laid up with gout."

"I dare say he meant to be kind, dear," said Jack sorrowfully. "But I wish—oh, how I wish, Shirley, that we had no need to accept his kindness!"

"Hush, hush, Jack!" the girl said quickly, thinking she saw her mother move; but it was only the flickering shade cast by the lamp upon her face. There was no change in her death-like calm.

All was very still now. The city was sleeping; its great passionate heart was stilled for a brief space. Not a sound was to be heard, not the wheels of a passing vehicle or the echo of a hurrying footstep; and the stillness fell heavily upon Shirley's heart like the calm which comes before a storm.

So, minute by minute, the long night-hours passed away, and the time crept on toward the dawn. The night seemed to have grown suddenly chill and even yet more quiet. It was as if an icy breath passed over the quiet earth for a moment. Any one who has watched by a sick bed knows that moment, when the one day seems to breathe its last, and there is a strange tremulous pause before the new day dawns upon the world. Shirley had read a description of it, and had been struck with it. It came back to her now, and she felt its truth:

"Do you know that moment in the night—the passage, as it were, from day to day—when a chill breath seems to pass over the earth, and for a space all the world is hushed as if by death? You may feel it by sea or by land. I have shivered and trembled under its spell while gasping for breath in the sulphurous Red Sea. Or in the heart of London, should you be awake, you lie and feel that yesterday is dead indeed and the new day not yet fully born. This is the time when feeble old men and children die and Death seems most terrible."

For this moment Shirley had been waiting with a strange thrill of superstitious dread. Would her mother die then—die without giving them a word or sign—die without telling them that secret in her past life which, unless she told them, they would not know? As the "chill breath" swept over the room, Shirley leant forward eagerly. The long lashes on the sunken marble cheeks flickered slightly; and the girl held her breath in agony. No, it was not the shade of the lamp now; the white lids were lifted slowly and heavily, and

"Unto the dying eyes
The casement slowly grew a glimmering square."
At the same moment, even as the white lips parted to speak, the great dawn of another October day stole slowly and stealthily over the east.

"Shirley," Marian Ross said faintly, in a voice so low that it hardly

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reached the girl's quick ears, "where am I?"

"We are in London, dear, and Jack is with us," the girl answered, in her calm, brave, gentle voice.

"Jack!"

A glimmer of joy flashed into the dying eyes as they fell upon her son. Jack bent down and put his lips to hers in silence. Shirley, kneeling, lifted the beautiful head upon her arm.

"Have I been very ill?" said Mrs. Ross, feebly. "I think it must be near the end now, Shirley; but—I cannot—I cannot—"

Her voice died away upon her lips; but the dying eyes, growing wild in their intense eagerness, went from one young face to the other in piteous entreaty; and Shirley brought some of the restorative and held it to her lips. She could hardly swallow; but she drank it eagerly, and it seemed to give her a momentary strength.

"Lift me, Shirley—lift me higher," she said, in a somewhat stronger voice. "I can breathe more easily so. And I must tell you both, because you will hear it better from me; but it is a long story," she added faintly, "and the time is so short. Oh, Shirley, why did you not let me tell you in the train?"

"Tell us now, mother," the girl said, through her tears. "Is it anything about Uncle Gilbert?"

"Oh, no—oh, no! But it is a long story, and I am so tired!" wailed the dying woman, with bitter anguish, almost as keen as if she could see into the future and know what misery ignorance of her story would bring upon her daughter.

(To be Continued.)

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