

# Lova a Conqueror

—OR—  
WEDDED AT LAST.

CHAPTER XLVI.

Lee Park—Lord Lee's estate at Adinbrook—presented a scene of unusual animation that winter morning when Sir Frederic Oliphant drove his daughter and Jack Ross past the school house over the hill; for the weather, though bitterly cold, was bright, and the sun was shining on the lake, on which a crowd of skaters were disputing themselves. Lee Park was not so remarkable for its extent as for the beauty of its situation. It lay in a valley with hills on three sides of it, while the mansion itself was built on the rising ground at the back. The lake lay quite in the hollow, and the sun glittered through the tall skeleton trees, on which the hoar-frost glittered and sparkled like diamonds. The ice was perfectly safe, and a quaint little chalet on the banks of the lake afforded accommodation to the chaperons and lookers-on. Bright fires were blazing in the two little rooms, and refreshments were provided for the skaters, who, numbering fully fifty, were enjoying themselves thoroughly.

It was a bright, animated, pretty sight, and sufficiently unfamiliar to Jack Ross to have an additional charm in his eyes. The bright faces and the ladies' pretty skating costumes, the snow-covered hills around, the ruddy light thrown from the fires in the chalet over the frozen lake, the glimpses of vivid color here and there from a bright-hued shawl, or wrap, or rug, thrown upon the hard ground, the merry voices and laughter, all contributed to make the scene one of unusual interest and brightness in Jack's sight.

But there was another reason for everything looking couleur de rose in Mr. Ross's sight on that fine sunny morning. The few words he had exchanged with Guy Stuart on the terrace at Erindale had cheered him wonderfully. He had fallen in love with Madge almost at first sight; the little tricks of speech and manner which the young girl had quite unconsciously acquired during her intimacy with Shirley gave her an additional charm for Jack; and, before many days had elapsed of his visit at Cotsford, where he had met her, he was irretrievably in love. At first he had given himself up to his happiness without a thought; but then it struck him that Sir Frederic Oliphant's only daughter and heiress might justly aspire to a wealthier and more highly placed husband. After all, he had but little to offer a woman whom he loved; his income, handsome though it was, depended a great deal on his residence in India; and how could he expect that Sir Frederic and Lady Oliphant would

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allow their darling to accompany him thither, even if Madge loved him enough to risk the perils of a voyage and to give up all her dear ones for his sake?

He had been very heavy-hearted when Sir Frederic and his daughter had left Cotsford, and he had been undecided as to the prudence of accepting the invitation to Erindale which Sir Frederic had given him with unusual cordiality, and which Madge had seemed to second with a glance from his sweet eyes. At first he had concluded that it was better to refuse; then he decided that, cost what it might, he would not deprive himself of the happiness a few days more of her society would give him; and, since the danger only touched himself, the happiness was worth the risk.

And, when he saw Madge in her own home, he loved her all the more deeply. When he saw her with her father, so bright and sweet and frank, and with her mother, so tender and careful and loving, the affection he had already conceived for her grew deeper and more intense; and he felt that there could be no happiness for him on earth, if she did not share his life.

Jack's early manhood had been but a solitary one, for, although he had made many acquaintances in India, he had made no friends; and for many a long month after he left England he had been weighed down by a sense of remorse and shame for the wrong he had committed, and which had caused his sister such bitter woe. He had not known the real extent of the misery which her visit to Dumfries had wrought for Shirley; but he had seen how terribly she had suffered at the thought of his disgrace, and in many a solitary hour during his voyage out to India he had dwelt with shame and horror on the depth of

sinfulness into which he had fallen, and from which poor Shirley had rescued him at such a cost to herself; and he made a firm resolve to keep in the narrow path of honor for the future.

He had left England for his post at Calcutta just before the time fixed for his sister's marriage; and, knowing that she was betrothed to and had professed a passionate love for Major Stuart, he was not a little surprised to receive a few lines from his uncle Sir Gilbert, telling him that Shirley was now Lady Glynn. The note gave him no particulars, and he had to fill in all the details for himself. He fancied that there was no difficulty in doing this, for he had seen Sir Hugh's evident devotion to his sister, and he remembered his own expressed regret at her engagement to Major Stuart. Shirley was very young, he thought, and, like many girls before her, she had accepted the first offer made to her, and, repenting afterward of having

done so, Guy Stuart had released her from her promise. Jack thought the marriage had taken place rather too soon perhaps; but, after all, Shirley was not very happy at Fairholme Court.

Shirley had been married some few months before she wrote to her brother, and then she said nothing about the circumstances of her marriage, nor did she say much, Jack noticed, about her domestic happiness. He knew that her husband was wealthy and most indulgent, and on several occasions Sir Hugh himself had written a few cordial lines asking him to return home even for a time; but Jack resisted the invitation all the more easily because Shirley did not second it warmly. Sometimes he had seen his sister's name in the papers as being present at some stately entertainment or in a

list of distinguished guests at a country house, and he had had some, undefined idea that she was not very happy; but in her letters to him she had never hinted at any unhappiness, and he had not asked her any questions.

Sir Hugh's death, the news of which reached him not only from private correspondents, but through the medium of the press, had startled and shocked him terribly, and he had read with mingled indignation, horror, and wonder, the account of Guy's trial for the murder of the friend who had betrayed him. At the time, he was making preparations to return to England; but the illness of his senior partner had detained him, so that he arrived in England only to find that his sister had disappeared and that every search had been completely unavailing.

Jack's anguish at these tidings was acute and bitter; and when he heard from Oswald Fairholme the circumstances of Shirley's marriage, his remorse was very great. All the suffering which she had endured had been caused by him—the brother who loved her and to whom she was so tenderly attached. He had at once confessed to Guy the motive of Shirley's presence at Dumfries, and Guy's gray eyes had flashed fire at the thought of how cruelly poor Shirley had been betrayed.

"If I had known that," he said, in a low deep tone of pain, "I should have found it much harder to forgive him even than I had already. Heaven knows," he had added brokenly, "if I did not murder him in deed, I had slain him in my heart more than once."

Between Jack Ross and Major Stuart a warm friendship had arisen. It had begun, as was natural, in their great mutual attachment to Shirley and their ceaseless anxiety about her welfare, and it had increased as they grew to know each other better and discovered the noble and enduring qualities each possessed. Another great bond of union between them was their loneliness, which drew them daily closer together. Every one of the few who maintained their friendship for Guy had other ties; Oswald Fairholme had his wife and children and the superintendency of his estate, for Sir Gilbert had died in the winter, and his son had taken possession of Fairholme; while his mother and the two younger girls had removed to London. And, although Jack would have been made welcome by his aunt, he felt that there was no real cordiality between them; and he was happier when with Guy.

It was a strange and touching bond which existed between them, and although they never mentioned Shirley except when they were alone, she was constantly in their thoughts. Jack was inclined to despair sometimes, and say that she must be dead, or she would not leave them in such cruel suspense; but Guy, remembering a look in her eyes when they had parted, and those few heart-broken lines she had written, felt that surely "Heaven would be merciful, and let them meet again."

(To be continued.)

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