SHIRLEY ROSS:

A Story of Woman's Faithfulness.

CHAPTER X.

Shirley was standing waiting for Guy in the great hall; and, as he went toward her, with a very forlorn look in her lustrous hazel eyes she put out two trembling little 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 useful ball-room, being somewhat out of the common, for in the recesses the suits of steel armor caught and reflected back the flickering lamplight, 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 diamonds on the little white left hand flashed and gleamed in the firelight.

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

"Why, 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 his with a little coquetry—"that you could be happy without me?"

Guy's smile deepened.

"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?" she added earnestly, lifting great sorrowful eyes to his face.

"My dear little girl, I am very sorry," he answered fondly, putting his arm around her and drawing her to his side. "I never cared much for balls, but I confess that I have been looking forward to this one. I wanted to see Miss Ross in all the grandeur of her first ball dress. But other fellows will be lucky enough to do so while I am travelling in a cold, dark railway carriage. However, I shall have one consolation," he added laughingly.

"What is that, Guy?"

"I shall see you, I hope, hundreds of times in your war-paint, my darling," he replied fondly. "Don't throw me off for a richer suitor in my absence, little woman."

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

"Could you not?" he questioned, smiling. "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 are 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 any one 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 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 must have cast its shadow upon them.

"Saucy girl!" he said. "Marry some 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 him 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. Crowter is a bit of an alarmist," he added musingly, "and he always thinks Uncle 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 Sir Hugh is my friend, and that he will take better care of my property than any one else," he added cordially; "so, sweetheart, 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 shrunk 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 cried, 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 wilful 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.

It was a rough, boisterous night, as he had said, but the avenue was well lighted in anticipation of the coming festivities.

Shirley stood still in the lighted doorway, with Sir Hugh at her side, as the dog-cart drove away; and Guy, turning as he came to the bend in the drive, waved his hand in farewell; then they both turned away and went into the hall again, Shirley shivering a little from the cold sharp wind which had been admitted.

"You are cold," Sir Hugh said gently; he was still very pale, and his voice was husky.

"It is a rough drive for Guy," she remarked sorrowfully, as they stood for a few seconds in front of the fire, side by side; and a momentary flash of angry pain sprung into the young man's handsome eyes.

"Yes—but I would rather be Guy driving away in the cold wind and darkness than—than—the happiest man in the world," Sir Hugh said slowly. "Ah, forgive me, Miss Ross. I will not offend you again. That was an irrepressible little outburst," he added, with a smile. "I won't vex you by my folly any more. And now, since Guy has left you in my charge," he continued, "will you not let me ask you to go and lie down for an hour or two, so as to be rested for to-night? Guy would not like to think that he had spoiled all your pleasure."

"But Aunt Geraldine will not be pleasd if I do not come down to dinner," she said, coloring shyly, and smiling a little as she added, "and I don't think Guy would be pleased if I were to let people think I was such a goose as to cry because he has left me for a fortnight; so, I must not, although I should like it, act upon your suggestion, Sir Hugh."

"It is because it is my suggestion that it finds no favor in your eyes," he said regretfully. "Do you bear malice, Miss Ross? No? Then give me your hand in token of forgiveness, and, as I am Guy's friend, let me be yours."

With a little smile she gave him her hand, and Sir Hugh bent over it and touched it with his lips. As he did so, Alice Fairholme and Ruby Capel, coming out of the oak-parlor, saw the two standing by the hall fire; and Ruby said in surprise—

"Why, it is Shirley and Sir Hugh!"

"Shirley putting her theory into practice," remarked Alice, with irrepressible bitterness. "She ought to be ashamed of herself!" she added as she passed up the broad staircase, holding her graceful head erect, and sweeping her soft blue dress disdainfully after her.

And Ruby, as she followed, with a touch of gravity on her beautiful piquant face, was reminded of the lines of the old song—

> It is well to be off with the old love
> Before you are on with the new,

and resolved to take Shirley to task for flirting before poor Guy's back was fairly turned.

CHAPTER XI.

"It seems as if the Fates would be propitious, Latreille," said Sir Hugh Glynn to his servant, as he put the finishing touches to his evening dress a little later in the evening. "Nothing could have been more *a propos* than Major Stuart's departure."

"The game is in your own hand, Sir Hugh," returned Latrielle quietly. "A proverb in my country says that 'the absent are always in the wrong.' I think you will be able to see that Major Stuart was in the wrong to leave Miss Ross so confidingly. He must know that such a beautiful young lady will not lack admirers."

"It is a nasty business," Sir Hugh said rather disconsolately. "I wish Guy were not so trusting," he said to himself, "he makes it so difficult to deceive him. Poor old Guy! We were boys together too."

"It will not be your fault if Miss Ross changes her mind, Sir Hugh," remarked his valet coolly. "You are not to blame if she has the good taste to prefer you to Major Stuart."

"But she will not," Sir Hugh said coolly.

"Then the alternative is in your own hands, Sir Hugh. I have shown you that it is an easy matter, and the young lady, even if she storms a little, will be grateful to you when she finds that she is really Lady Glynn."

"And it is safe and secure?"

"As safe and secure, Sir Hugh, as if the Archbishop of Canterbury had performed the ceremony. Here are your gloves, sir."

Sir Hugh took the gloves and left the room, with a grave, thoughtful, remorseful look upon his handsome face—a face which had grown haggard and pale during the last few days, and bore visible signs of unrest, which he tried to conceal under an appearance of gayety, which now, feeling himself unseen, watched, he had dropped. Those days which had been such happy days to Shirley Ross, as she dreamed her happy love dreams and smiled into her lover's eyes, had been days of intense agony to Sir Hugh Glynn. He, in general so careless and selfish and languid, had no repose night or day, no rest from the bitterness of his thoughts; he, who had been heartlessly selfish, and proud in a certain way of his heartlessness, who had smiled to himself at other men's weakness—he, Hugh Glynn, loved utterly as ever lover had loved, and in vain. It maddened him to think that the smiles for which he longed, the gentle words for which he hungered, the kiss for which he would almost have laid down his life, were all given to another, while he was rejected and almost scorned. At first his love had been a *melange* of desire, of admiration for Shirley's beauty, of pride piqued by her indifference; but now he loved her—not with the great, noble, unselfish love which Guy Stuart had given her, and which would have sacrificed itself unhesitatingly to her happiness, but deeply as he could love, with a passion which her indifference could not quell, but which opposition increased a thousand-fold. It was as much self-love as love perhaps, but it was a strong passion, and Sir Hugh had not power for resistance. She should be his, he swore passionately again and again in the long sleepless nights during which he paced his room in misery, by fair means or by foul; and, since fair means failed, since she loved Guy Stuart so deeply that nothing—Sir Hugh felt that to the depths of his passionate, aching, jealous heart—would tempt her from her allegiance, he would try foul.

But he had not yielded to temptation without a struggle; he loathed the means whereby he could steal her from Guy, he hated the man who had suggested those means, and yet, helpless against the torrent of his overwhelming passion, he was carried away so low as to think of treachery no dishonor if it would give her to him. He was thinking of those means now as he went slowly down the picture-gallery, drawing on his gloves and looking so handsome and distinguished in his faultless evening-dress; and Guy Stuart, leaning back in his corner of the railway carriage in which he was speeding towards Edinburgh, was thinking tenderly of the girl he had parted with so lately, and kindly of the friend in whose charge he had left her.

Lady Fairholme met Sir Hugh in the hall, looking stately and magnificent in her rich velvet dress with its trimmings of old point lace; and, while they were exchanging a few words about the music and the number of waltzes on the programme, which Lady Fairholme thought was too large and Sir Hugh considered not large enough, Alice came slowly down the stairs, looking very lovely in a dress of palest pink, with wild roses in her curly yellow hair.

Sir Hugh went forward to meet her with some *empressement*, but Alice, remembering the little firelit scene, the tall man's head bending low, and his lips touching the girl's slight hand, passed him with a quick reproachful glance and went toward her mother.

"Delphine wants your opinion, mamma," she said smilingly. "She says that Worth himself never made a prettier dress, and that you must praise her for it."

"It is very pretty, dear," Lady Fairholme allowed. "Sir Hugh, you are a better judge, perhaps, having seen more of Monsieur Worth's *confections* than I have."

"One forgets the dress," Sir Hugh began, as he bent his blue eyes on Alice for a moment in smiling admiration; but the girl turned away petulantly.

"How have I offended you," he asked her presently; "and why are you not wearing my flowers? I thought you would do me so much honor."

"You do not care whether I carry them or not," Alice said pettishly, "so long as Shirley carries those you sent her."

"How can you be so unjust?" Sir Hugh asked reproachfully.

"What can your cousin be to me but the *fiancee* of my oldest friend, and as such a very interesting person? May I tell Latreille to ask your maid for the flowers?"

"If I thought you cared," Alice began relentingly, dropping her eyes coquettishly, and then lifting them again to his face.

"You know I care," he said quickly, leaving her side for a moment to give the order to Latreille.

When he returned, Alice held out her hand to him to button one of her long gloves, and while he was bending over her wrist there was a soft rustle of silk on the stairs, and the patter of tiny high-heeled shoes.

"Here is Shirley," said Alice suddenly. "She does not look as if she were wearing the willow! Poor Major Stuart."

She was coming down slowly, fastening her gloves as she came, her eyes fixed on the little buttons, the long silken folds of her dress making a soft "swish" as they swept over the crimson carpet. Perhaps it was due to his having to stoop over Miss Fairholme's wrist that Sir Hugh's face flushed so darkly as he turned his eyes upon Shirley, his face was white as death, while it was with difficulty that he repressed the sudden passionate exclamation of admiration and love which rose to his lips. Alice Fairholme caught the swift gleam of longing which flashed into his blue eyes; and for a moment they both stood watching her silently, as she came. Hugh Glynn never forgot, even in the changes and misery of the future, how she looked then. It was the last time he ever saw her smiling and serene.

She was dressed in white; long spotless folds of lustrous gleaming silk fell straight and shimmering around her, cut square around her shoulders, where they were finished off with some soft old lace. There was not a touch of color anywhere, save in the vivid carmine of her lips; nor had she any jewelery. Her arms were bare above her elbow, and she carried a fan of carved mother-of-pearl and satin and Brussels lace which had been Guy's gift. Years after, Sir Hugh Glynn could have given every detail of the girl's dress, which seemed stamped indelibly upon his recollection. Never had she looked more lovely. Regret that Guy was not present to see her in her "silk attire" made her hazel eyes somewhat wistful and sorrowful, but the story her mirror had told her made her carry her pretty head haughtily erect, and there was a little triumph brightening her beautiful sad eyes. And, as he looked upon her, Hugh Glynn's heart beat high with passion and longing and love, and the last remnants of resistance under temptation fell away from him, and the tempter conquered.

"You might be wearing your wedding-dress, Shirley," said Alice carelessly; and at the heedless words the color rose, swift and scarlet, to Shirley's face, and Sir Hugh paled to the lips.

But there was no time to answer. One by one, in all the bravery of their dainty ball-dresses, the guests at Fairholme Court were coming down from their rooms. From the bachelors' wing, which could be reached by a staircase leading up from the smoking-room, the men sallied forth in their "war-paint," and presently the sound of wheels was heard in the avenue, and the band, concealed in a bower of greenery, struck up, and Shirley's first ball had begun.

CHAPTER XII.

The ball at Fairholme Court was like most other balls, especially those entertainments in the country where the town-bred langour has not yet penetrated, and where balls are not such common entertainments as they are in London during the season. The country people were well represented; there were plenty of pretty girls, and what is rarer still, of dancing men. Lady Fairholme was a charming hostess. Alice was in her element, dancing, and coquetting, and flirting, with Sir Hugh in constant attendance. Sir Gilbert moved among his guests, courteous, urbane, and a trifle pompous. Ruby Capel missed Oswald Fairholme from her gay court of admirers, and mentally inveighed against the exigence of Her Majesty's service in general, and Oswald's "chief" in particular, but enjoyed herself very much nevertheless. The music was excellent and the floor admirable, and altogether the ball was a success, and the new year opened right merrily at Fairholme Court.

The new year was about half-an-hour old when Sir Hugh at last was at liberty to leave the ball-room. He had been doing his duty manfully all the evening; he had danced and flirted and made himself generally very agreeable, and, although he had not danced with Shirley, he had managed to be near her very constantly, and had hovered about her with a gentle care and attention for which the girl was very grateful. She was not enjoying herself much, poor Shirley, for, as the evening wore on, she found herself thinking of Guy and his long cold journey and her excited imagination conjured up railway accidents and other troubles, until it required a constant effort to laugh, and smile, and dance, and it was a great relief to her when, profiting by a general exodus in the direction of the supper-room, she escaped from the ball-room and took refuge in the school-room, which, for the nonce, had been turned into a kind of supplementary cloak-room, where some of the gentlemen had left their plaids and overcoats.

It was very quiet and pleasant, Shirley thought, after the heat, and glare, and noise of the ball-room. The fire had burned somewhat low, for the household were all too busy to attend to their regular duties, and Shirley sank down before it into a low American chair, and crossed her little satin-shod feet on the fender, and closed her eyes wearily as she rested her pretty head against the cushion of her chair.

But she was not left long in solitude; the eager passionate blue eyes which had followed her so constantly yet so furtively during the whole evening had noticed her escape from the ball-room, and Sir Hugh had guessed where she would take refuge.

He had an excuse for seeking her, moreover, for that evening, just as they were entering the ball-room, a servant had brought Miss Ross a letter which had arrived by the evening mail, and Shirley had given it to Sir Hugh, smiling, and asking him to keep it for her until she was at leisure to read it.

"The postmark is Glasgow, and it is from Jack," she said lightly. "I suppose he is wishing me a very happy new year, but the good wishes must wait."

So the "good wishes" had waited until now, safely esconced in Sir Hugh's coat-pocket; but he thought that the time had come for them to be delivered.

So it happened that, while Shirley lay back on her cushions thinking of Guy, the school-room door was quietly opened and Sir Hugh's voice asked permission to enter, with a tone of entreaty which Shirley could not but hear.

She gave the permission very gently, and he came forward and stood beside her on the rug, leaning his elbow on the mantel and looking down at her with eager tenderness and longing; but Shirley did not meet his gaze.

"It is pleasant to get a little breathing-time," she said carelessly. "I don't think I shall care for balls very much."

"And yet you were looking forward so eagerly to this one!"

"Yes," she said simply; "but I did not think Guy would be away."

Sir Hugh's brow darkened. Guy—always Guy!

"It is a pity that old Jasper Stuart did not time his illness more conveniently," he said with a slight sneer; "he ought to have been more considerate. Shirley, are all your thoughts for Guy and Guy only?" he added almost despairingly, thinking that, if she would give him only one thread of hope at which to grasp he would abandon his fell purpose and trust that she might love him at last.

But the great grave reproachful eyes which were lifted to his for a moment were sufficient answer; for in them he read a love unchangeable, unutterable, which would be true to her life's end.

"Do you forget Guy's love for and trust in you?" she asked coldly. "I can not forget them, Sir Hugh, if you do."

"You must forgive me," he said, brokenly. "I am always offending you; but indeed it is very hard, and it is early days yet, you know. I have not got myself well under control. Even Guy would pity me if he knew how I suffer at times; but indeed—indeed I will conquer my folly and weakness."

The sweet hazel eyes were dim with tears then, as she looked at him for a moment.

"Sir Hugh, I am very sorry," she said, gently; and for a second he felt tempted to spare her—but only for a second. The next the trump cards of the game he was playing were put into his hand, and he could not resist the triumph they offered him.

"I will not distress you again," he promised. "By the by, I have some of your property to restore to you. Will you have your letter now?"

"Oh, thank you! Yes, I think I may indulge myself with five minutes' longer quiet," she said and took the letter from his hand. "Will you allow me?" she continued, smiling slightly, and Sir Hugh bowed a quiet acquiescence.

He had turned away from her as she opened the letter. The sight of her sitting there in her loveliness made the remorse which he could not quite cast away from him sting almost as keenly as Guy Stuart's trust had done. She was so fair and gentle, she was so compassionate for his pain, that he might have had compassion on her.

A slight cry, faint, terrified, anguish-stricken, made him turn quickly. Shirley had risen white as death, and, trembling in every limb, was looking with fixed staring eyes at her brother's letter.

"Good heaven, what is the matter? Are you ill?" he exclaimed, going to her side, and regarding her with intense anxiety. "Shirley, let me get you something—let me call—"

He was hastening from her side, when her voice—her voice, yet so unlike Shirley's sweet even tones in its broken hoarseness—arrested him.

"Get me nothing! Call no one!" she said, faintly. "Let no one come—"

He went to the door, locked it, and came back to her again. She seemed dazed and bewildered as she looked at him; the horror of some great trouble was upon her face, over which had stolen an ashen-gray tint, which robbed it of its brightness and beauty and startled him greatly, while her eyes looked up at him full of a bewildered pain pitiful to see.

"My child, my poor child, what has happened? What is the matter?" he said gently, only anxious now to soothe her; and at the anxiety and tenderness in his voice Shirley's composure failed. She sunk upon the seat from which she had arisen, and burst into a passion of tears, bowing her head in helpless anguish upon the arm of her chair.

Patiently, but with the same intense anxiety on his face, Sir Hugh waited; then, as the heavy sobs ceased, he said gently—

"What is it, Shirley? Your brother—is he ill?"

"No. Oh, Jack—oh, Jack!"

"He is not ill? Then there is nothing which need distress you like this," said Sir Hugh very tenderly. "Tell me what it is, my child, and let me help you."

"But—but—"

"But what?" he asked soothingly. "Don't let any fancied scruple prevent you, Shirley. You know that if I can do anything I shall be only too glad. Tell me, dear, what is it?"

She was lying back in the chair now, pale and exhausted, her lips quivering and the great tears still resting on her long lashes; she looked up at him piteously and shook her head with a weary little gesture of denial.

"Will you not tell me, Shirley? Remember, Guy left you in my care. How can I fulfil my trust unless you confide in me?" he said softly. "Forget all my folly, and remember only that he told you when he was leaving you, if anything went wrong, to come to me as frankly as you would go to him; "Shirley," he added, in earnest entreaty, "let me do what Guy would do if he were here now."

For one moment longer she hesitated—the next she had put the letter, and with it the opportunity he needed, into his hands.

There was silence in the little room as he took it from her—silence broken only, as Shirley remembered afterward, by the hard patter of rain against the window-panes and the howl of the wind among the trees outside.

(To be continued.)

Ingratitude.

Judge (to prisoner)—"It's disgraceful, Rastus, that there are such men as you to prey upon the community. Did it ever occur to you that you are worse than worthless?" Prisoner (mildly)—"Ef twuzzent fo' seech men as me, Yo' Honah, yo' wuddent be drawin' er big sal'ry ebbery yeah."

The Eternal Fitness of Things.

Mother—Bobby, is that the proper way to hold your knife and fork?

Bobby—I think it's a proper enough way, mamma, for what little there is to eat.—*Harper's Bazar.*