

# The Sound of Wedding Bells

## Won After Great Perseverance!

CHAPTER XXXIV.  
 "Can't you say what you want to say from there?" she says, shyly.  
 "No," he says. "It's a secret. Couldn't let aunt hear for the world."  
 "Go to him, my dear, or he'll be late for dinner," says the old lady, and Dulcie gets up and goes out to him.

"Well," she says, standing with downcast eyes, "what is it, sir?"  
 He puts his arm round her tenderly, and drawing her out into the hall, kisses her.

"Is that all?" she says. "That's rather presumptuous, isn't it?"  
 "Yes, I know," he says, caressing the smooth, white hand, his eyes devouring her face; "but I couldn't help it. And that isn't all, though. I wanted to ask about the jacket. You said you'd see to it, you know."

"Did I?" she says, pretending to forget. "Yes, so I did. I wonder whether Sarah has forgotten it. I'll go and see," and she gets her hand away and runs up the stairs.

"Where have you sent her now?" demands the old lady. "The dear girl will be tired out with the confusion and fuss, and I want her to look her very best to-morrow. I suppose half the county will be there?"

"Half! The whole!" he retorts, leaning against the door. "Every seat in the stand is booked, and the stewards have had to put an extra tent to stable the carriage horses. It will be the biggest thing they've had here for years."

"Well, I shall be glad when it's over," she says. "My head's quite in a whirl with it all. We've all gone racing mad. Even your uncle has begun to talk stable."

"Dear old boy!" he says, laughing. "Yes, I found him at the stable this morning, patting Cricket, and was only just in time to drag him away from his heels."

"He'll get kicked to death, as well as lose his money," she says, with a little groan. "I'm afraid to say how much he's backed—that's the word, isn't it?—the stupid animal for."

Archie laughs again.  
 "It's all right. He'll make a fortune instead of losing one, and then you can buy a few more china plates, you know, aunt."

"That's right, be impertinent, sir; that's the kind of manners you learn from your horsey acquaintances, I suppose. Now! there she is running down-stairs again, and as if there wasn't a moment to lose. She'll be used up to-morrow."

Archie turns eagerly.  
 "Well!" he says; then he laughs as Dulcie stands on the bottom step with a long face, and a hand held behind her.

"I'm very sorry—" she begins.  
 "Forgotten it, eh?" he says, serenely; "never mind! I'll wear the old one, it will do; don't you mind, dearest, it's not of the slightest consequence."

"Here it is, then," she says, producing a neatly folded parcel, "you had better open it, and see if it is all right."

He opens the parcel, and as his

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eyes rest on the fresh and dainty silk, he utters an exclamation of pleasure.

A new one, by Jove! Nicely made! Where did you get it, Dulcie?"

"I made it," she says, and she puts up her hands to keep him off; but he is too quick, and has her in his arms before she can prevent him.

"You did! you dear, clever girl! I must—you'll let me pay you for it?"

"No, no!" she says, holding back her head; "it's a present! you don't take payment for a present."

"Call it an acknowledgment, then," he says, and he kisses her passionately. "And you made it with your own dear hands! Why, Dulcie, I'll bring the Cricket in first to-morrow, if I break my neck over it."

A sudden pang—is it of presentiment—wings her heart.

"Oh, hush, hush!" she says, rebukingly.

"I beg your pardon. Why, you stupid, timid child, there's no danger. It was only my fun. But it was an idiotic thing to say. Forgive me. There, I'll bring him in without breaking my neck! I can't fail to win now. Why, Dulcie, I shall feel your hands about my heart—"

"Oh, hush!" she murmurs; for his passionate love makes her feel unworthy. "It is such a little thing to do for you."

"And I say it is a great thing. Why, Dulcie, take care"—and he smiles up at her—"take care, or I shall think you are beginning to love me just a little."

"Perhaps—perhaps I am," she just breathes, and she rests her hands on his shoulders, and looks at him with a dreamy light in her great, dark eyes.

"Now, Archie," calls out Lady Brookley, "are you going to dress? The dinner-bell will ring directly. Don't keep him, Dulcie; he'd stay there all night."

"I'm not keeping him, I assure you," says Dulcie, letting her hands fall from his shoulders. "Go and dress, sir."

And evading another embrace, she slips past him and escapes.  
 There is very little talked about at dinner save the Cricket and the race, and the earl is as full of the subject as any one.

"I've just met Hartfield, my boy," he says; "and I've laid another hundred on the Cricket."

"It's fortunate aunt has gone into the drawing-room," says Archie, with a laugh, "or you'd get a scolding, sir. By the way, I wouldn't back him too heavily. Accidents will happen; and, after all, it isn't a certainty."

The old man grunts.

"Never mind me," he says, filling his glass and chuckling. "Besides, I think it's pretty near a certainty. He is really a beautiful creature. I told Hartfield he hadn't a chance; but he seems to feel as confident as you do. Is Hugh Falconer coming?"

"Not that I know of," replies Archie, gravely. "I should think not."

"I heard that they wanted him to

go out to India," says the earl; "but I suppose he won't accept. Going to be married, isn't he?"

"Yes," says Archie, shortly.  
 The old man chuckles.

"I say, my boy, isn't it pretty near time that—eh?"  
 Archie colored like a school boy.

"I mean to pluck up courage, sir, and ask her, after the race. You know that she is, bless her heart, so reserved and—"

"Put it to her, Archie," says the old man, nodding his head. "The sooner the better, though. Heaven knows, we shall be sorry to lose her."

"You won't lose her for long," says Archie. "If she is agreeable, and I don't doubt but what she will be, I mean to propose buying a place near here, and then she will be near you in the summer, and in the season the house in the square—"

"You are a good lad, my boy!" responds the old man, patting his hand heartily. "It was what I was going to propose. Let's be near each other, Archie, while the old lady and I run the rest of the voyage. We've got to love her, you see, both of us. Bless my heart, who could help it? and I say, Archie, just you be careful to-morrow. No larks, you know. Keep a straight course! If you go and break your neck, you'll break her heart, and that won't do, you know!"

Archie laughs as he rises and pushes back his chair; and as he stands, so tall and strong, so self-reliant and confident, the laugh seems excusable.

"No fear of that," he says. "And now I must run off. I promised to look in at the stables. What a lovely evening! The mud is drying up; if it keeps fine all night, the course will be just right for the Cricket. I wonder whether Dulcie would come a little way with me?"

"Go and ask her, my boy," says the earl.

"I will," he says, and he goes to the drawing-room.

"Not further than the lane," says her ladyship. "It soon gets dark now. Go with him to the lane, dear, and you come back as soon as you can, Archie. You must get to bed early to-night, you know."

"Why, aunt, you are as anxious for my welfare as if you had put a hatful of money on the event."

"Oh, pray take him away, my dear," moans the old lady, with a grimace. "My ears are aching with stable jargon," and Dulcie, laughing, slips on her hat and a fur-lined Red Riding-hood cape, which he insisted upon her wearing, and they start.

It is a lovely evening; the sun has set, but the sky is still red with the reflection of the dying king's glory; one of two stars have slipped into the dark-blue sky, and peer down at the two graceful forms as they walk side by side. A thrush preparing for bed in the limes chirps a good-even to the world, and its mate answers from the chestnut.

It is the time and place for lovers, and for a short space they walk on in silence; it is not until they reach the end of the lane leading from the gate that he speaks, for his heart is too full of happiness, caused by her nearness to him.

"Go back now, darling," he says, in a low voice. "I am half a mind to leave the Cricket alone—"

"No, no," she says, in as low a voice as his, for the spirit of the evening has touched her also. "No, duty calls, and you must obey. After to-night I suppose—"

"After to-night," he says, with suppressed intensity, "nothing will take me from your side. To-morrow I am going to ask you something, a great thing, indeed, to ask, Dulcie! Can you not guess?"

"No," she breathes shortly, but with a swift, shy glance, and a little shrinking away from him.

"What is it he is saying? Though her instant instinct is to hurry away out of sound of that voice, her feet seem rooted to the ground."

"No, I shall not be here to-morrow, Hartfield," he says. "I should not have come down to-day, for I am very busy."

"You must be," says Lord Hartfield, for it is he. "Sorry you should have troubled, if I had known how matters stood with you, I would have given directions about the horse on my own account."

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"Don't be afraid, darling," he whispers, drawing her to him; "I will not ask you to-night, and to-morrow, let your answer be what it may, I will take it gratefully. But perhaps you will say 'Yes.' There, I won't say a word more, not a word. Go now, darling; I will hurry back. Shall I wait until you have got to the house?" he adds, with his usual thoughtfulness in small matters.

"No," she says, panting a little still, for she knows that he will ask her to marry him; "do not wait. I shall be quite safe." And pressing her hand he turns and leaves her.

She stands in the lane to recover her self-possession, for his words have moved her greatly, though she knew that he must speak them sooner or later.

But why should she be so moved? Is there any doubt in her mind as to her feelings toward him? Has she learned to love him, or has she failed in her endeavor?

She asks herself the question with bated breath, and the answer comes from her heart.

"Yes, I love him! I love him! It would be impossible to do otherwise, unless one were made of stone, and thoroughly, cruelly heartless. But—"

She dares not continue even to herself, dares not admit that the past has not even yet become blotted out—that period of passionate love which has colored the whole of her life.

Not yet even has the remembrance of those few fatal weeks faded away, and even now, as she stands and thinks gratefully, and even joyfully, of the deep, passionate love of the man who has just left her, she cannot feel sure if that other crossed her path all would be well.

"Oh, it is weak—weak!" she murmurs, covering her face with her hands and shuddering. "To such love as his I should be able to give full and undivided love in return. And I will—I will!" she murmurs, almost fiercely. "No memory of the past shall come between us to shadow his happiness. Dear, dear Archie! Yes, I do love you! I love you more deeply every day—every hour!" And as she stands looking up at the sky a great peace falls upon her and the past seems to fade away just as the clouds are drifting from the face of the young moon above her.

Then she turns to retrace her steps, when suddenly a man's voice breaks the stillness of the night, and at the sound her heart gives a great leap and seems to stand still; for it is the voice of Hugh Falconer.

Graver, deeper even than of old, and with a sad listless tone in it that strikes her even with the first word she hears.

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(To be Continued.)

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