

The Sound of Wedding Bells

Won After Great Perseverance!

CHAPTER XIX.

With a shudder, Dulcie shrinks back against the balustrade, and covers her face with her hands.

"Don't, don't, Miss Dulcie!" implores Sarah. "Don't give it up—don't cry, miss. She may pull round, even now!"

"Dulcie's hands drop; there are no signs of tears in the dark eyes.

"Let me go to her!" she says, hoarsely.

Sarah draws her into a room—it is Dulcie's bedroom, as neat and well-ordered as if she had slept in it the night before—and turns up the gas. Then she starts, and stares at her aghast and dismayed.

"Oh, Miss Dulcie," she exclaims, in a horrified whisper, "how ill you look! Oh, dear, dear! and I meant to break it to you properly. You'll be ill, miss—you will, indeed, if you take on so."

Dulcie waves her hand wearily.

"You'll find her very much changed, and it was a long journey," she falters, throwing off her ulster and hat with weary impatience.

"And at night, too! But you didn't come alone, miss?"

"Yes, but never mind me—what does it matter? Tell me all—tell me all. How long has she been ill? How did it happen? What is it? Oh, my poor dear!"—and she wrings her hands—"if I had only come back with her! Why did I let her leave me, after all these years? Why don't you tell me?"

Frightened and dismayed, Sarah tells her story.

Her mistress had come back, complaining of a cold on her chest; had taken the usual old-fashioned remedies, and got worse; had refused to see the doctor until Sarah had taken upon herself to send for him; had, notwithstanding the doctor's got worse and was now—

Here she stops, and puts her apron to her eyes.

Dulcie listens to the commonplace—all too commonplace—details with dry, aching eyes and chilled soul.

"Oh, why did you not send for me before—at once?" she asks.

"She wouldn't let me, miss; she said it was only a cold, and that she didn't want to spoil your pleasure; you were so happy amongst the grand folks."

Dulcie wrings her hands.

"And it was only last night she whispered, 'Send for Miss Dulcie, miss.'"

"And you didn't telegraph!" says Dulcie, despairingly.

"She wouldn't hear of it, miss. She thought a telegraph would frighten you; she was always so thoughtful."

"For Heaven's sake, don't speak as if she were dead!" exclaims Dulcie, the "was" stabbing her to the heart.

"Oh, let me go to her now—at once! Oh! if I had but come with her!"

"It was the journey, miss," says poor, faithful Sarah. "She caught cold in the train. But there! you look as if you'd caught an illness, too, miss. You must have something—a cup of tea. Such a time of night, too!"

But Dulcie scorns all offers of re-

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freshments. She bathes her face and cheerfulness, and then, with an awful sinking of the heart, is ready to face the worst.

"You'll find her very much changed, miss," says Sarah, warningly, as she opens the door of the sick room.

But notwithstanding the warning, Dulcie is all unprepared.

"The little cold" has done its work with awful speed and completeness, and the thin, white face that looks up with the old, timid, deprecatory smile, bears already the sign-manual of King Death.

Without a word, but with a stifled sob, Dulcie sinks on her knees beside the bed, and kisses the wan face, and poor Aunt Fernor puts out a hand—

alas! so thin and weak—and rests it on the glossy head.

"And so these two who have loved each other, who have had until lately no separation even of a day, are wrapped in silence."

Aunt Fernor is the first to speak, and the alteration in the voice sends a cold chill of fear through Dulcie's veins.

"Why didn't you wait until morning, dear?" says the faint voice. "What a dreadful journey, and so late, so late! You didn't come alone, I hope?"

"Yes, dear," says Dulcie, trying to speak in her old, light-hearted tone; "yes, and nobody ran away with me, you see. Why"—with a sudden gulp—"why didn't you send for me before? I have been scolding Sarah mightily."

A faint smile, wistful and loving, creeps into the wan face.

"I didn't want to spoil your pleasure and cut short your visit, my dear; and you must go back in—in a day or two."

Dulcie makes a gesture of emphatic repudiation of the idea.

"But you must, my dear! It wasn't Sarah's fault; she—she is a foolish, frightened creature—she always was, you know, Dulcie!—she wanted to send for you the second day, I'm glad she didn't; you have had a few days more, at least."

Dulcie groans.

"If you had but sent for me!" she says.

"I thought I should have got better," goes on Mrs. Fernor, "but"—with a piteous little smile that brings the tears to Dulcie's eyes at last—"I haven't, you see. I'm afraid!"—

tries to call back some of its old pause—"I'm afraid I sha'n't get better now, Dulcie."

The warm, strong fingers close spasmodically on the thin, wasted hand.

"You see, dear, I'm an old woman. I did not feel it until Dr. Brown remarked that a person at my time of life should be careful. Yes, I am an old woman, it seems. At any rate"—with another little weary smile—"I am not going to be much older."

"Don't!" breaks from Dulcie's lips, in an agony.

The hand caresses the silken hair with tender fondness and pity.

"My dear, it wouldn't do for us to deceive ourselves. In a few days—hours, perhaps—there will be one stupid old person the less in the world. And"—with a little weary sigh—"I shouldn't mind much, but—for your sake, Dulcie. It seems hard to leave you, dear."

Trembling, and with streaming eyes, Dulcie clings closer to her.

"Aunt, you frighten me! I—I can't believe it. It can't be true. It is only a cold; the doctor said so himself, did he not? You will, you must get better. See, aunt, I'll nurse you! I—I won't let you die! Oh, no—no! don't say so! I can't bear it. Oh, if I had but been at home! Aunt, you must have another doctor, a physician, to-morrow."

The old deprecatory smile plays faintly upon the timid face.

"Dulcie, dear, not all the physicians in the world could keep me here much longer. Dr. Brown knows me too well to be deceived. And—I shouldn't like to hurt his feelings by calling in any one else, dear. I've known him ever since I was a little girl. I think he was sorry to tell me the truth, dear; and I pestered him a great deal—rather unfairly; but I told him that you didn't like to be taken by surprise, and that I should like to prepare you."

"Oh, aunt! Always! me! Always for me; no thought of yourself. Oh, Heaven! how selfish I have been. Aunt"—with feverish intensity—"I have worried, and wearied, and tired you often in the old times; but I never will again—never, never! But, with a little bob, 'I loved you all the time! You never doubted that, dear!'"

The old lady shakes her head.

"Never, dear. Yes, we have always loved each other, we two; and you never worried me, dear, more than I deserved. I was a foolish, stupid old woman, while you were a quick-spirited girl! You were always good, Dulcie! with a little touch of pride that is very pathetic. 'Always, I don't think I ever saw a girl with brighter spirits!'"

Dulcie's head drops on the coverlid. She will need her full spirits now, and where will she find them?

There is silence for a moment or two. Sarah creeps in, and stands at a respectful distance; but the eyes of the dying are sometimes very sharp.

"There's Sarah with the medicine," says the faint voice. "Medicine is no use, we all of us know; but it's a little form that Dr. Brown likes to keep up, and I wouldn't hurt his feelings. It—it—is—only—sugar and water. I think, dear; but I take it, of course, because he always asks when he comes if I have done so."

Sarah administers the medicine, and comes round to Dulcie with the awful noiselessness that is so dreadfully significant to poor Dulcie, and the weary eyes close.

"She will sleep now, poor dear," she whispers. "You must take some rest, Miss Dulcie, or you will be ill! Come, miss!"

But Dulcie declines with a shake of the head, and crouches down with her face against the thin wasted hand.

And so the few remaining hours of the night pass, and the morning breaks, still finding her true to her post, and still firmly refusing to leave it.

At midday the doctor appears, an old, white-headed man who has dandled Dulcie on his knee, and who lays his hand upon her head with gentle sympathy as he looks down at the anxious inquiry in the dark, piteous eyes.

He does not repeat the old formula of "while there is life there is hope" to her. The anguished entreaty for the truth, and the whole truth, can-

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not be met so easily.

"You must bear up, my dear," he says, with a sigh. "She is very ill, very, and I am glad you have come."

"But," pleads Dulcie, with clasped hands, "is there nothing that can be done—nothing?"

He turns his head away, then looks at her suddenly.

"Yes, my dear; we can make her last few hours happy ones. That is something, is it not? Don't let her see you give way, she dreads that, poor soul, more than anything. I am glad you have come, my dear. Send for me if you want me before I come again, and"—and he takes her by the arm and draws her to the light—"you must take more rest, my dear—at once, mind."

Then he goes, and Dulcie returns to her post. The day passes, and the night comes again, and with it the angel of death draws nearer.

The thin, wasted hands, has got weaker, the voice feebler, and the weary eyes are loathe to open; but whenever they do they rest upon the pale, beautiful face they have loved, and the old, timid smile comes with them.

So the hours pass, pass as if with the unreality of a dream. At times Dulcie thinks that she is indeed dreaming; that she will awake presently and find herself at Holme Castle, sitting beside Hugh, or listening to the languid voice of Lady Falconer.

Was that only a dream, and is this a reality? She scarcely knows. Sarah's muffled tread as she goes in and out seems like the footfall of a ghost; the thin, wasted face lying so still and peaceful on the pillow at her side is the only thing that seems real and that she can cling to with any reality.

The night comes, and the thin voice is heard murmuring that beloved name:

"Dulcie."

"I am here, dear. I am always here. See!" and she lays her cheek on the hand.

"Dulcie, I want to speak to you. Is—is—Sarah—the doctor—here?"

"No one is here but me, dear."

The wasted hands feels blindly for the girl's firm one, and closes over it warmly.

(To be continued.)

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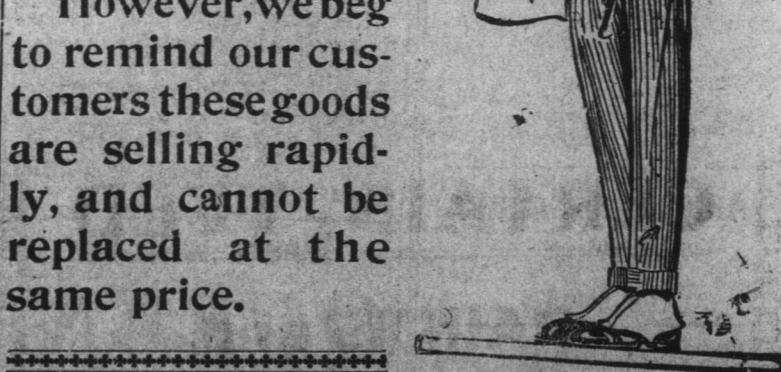
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Italy Faces Grave Crisis

Need for Three Million Tons of Wheat is Most Urgent.

Turin, Oct. 18.—The Italian Government has re-opened its session at Rome under peculiar circumstances, two facts being so prominent as to make a Ministerial crisis possible. Owing to their nature they will probably be discussed only by secret session.

One has to do with serious riots which occurred in Turin the latter part of August, die, in part, by the delay in providing the town with sufficient bread, and in part to political discontent. The other question concerns the general food crisis that has out Italy, which led to the resignation of the Food Controller, Gaspare Canepa; whose place has been taken by General Alferi.

The Turin riots lasted several days and the authorities were obliged to use machine guns, while some of the rioters were destroyed by bombs thrown from aeroplanes, this being the first time aeroplanes have been used for such a purpose. No reliable figures have been published as to the number of dead and wounded in the riots. Calculations vary from fifty or sixty dead to five hundred, the latter number being given in the report of a non-Italian authority in Turin.

The question of supplies is especially grave regarding wheat, coal and wool. Italy produces no coal and must import all she needs. Her wool is insufficient, owing to the immense consumption for military clothing.

But the most serious of all is the necessity of importing this year about three million tons of wheat. Otherwise it will be almost impossible even with the restrictions imposed on bread cards, to reach the next harvest. The Government is being called upon by Parliament to justify its action with respect to both of these situations.

Whatever the result is, in line with the present ministry in power, under a new Cabinet, the minister determined to carry on the fight for the victorious end, and defeat the forces of the intrinsigant. Socialists, who are trying to spread dissatisfaction among the troops and induce them to cease fighting after October 1st.

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