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The Sound of Wedding Bells

Won After Great Perseverance!

CHAPTER XXX.

"Yes," she says, with a sudden sigh, as if she had resolved to confide in him; "I will tell you. It is possible that you will be offended; that—that you will regret having done me the great, overwhelming honor of offering me what—what I prize so early; but I will tell you."

"Well?"

With dual courtesy he draws a chair for her, but she declines it with a motion of her small hand. It will be better that she should stand, and so he is able to hide her face from his watchful, intense gaze.

"Duke," she says, in a soft, hesitating voice, which she knows how to make musical, "you took umbrage just now at my saying that I am at most a dependent in this house; but it was quite true. I—I am poor, and alone in the world, and Lady Falconer, all of them, have been very, very good friends."

"Yes," he nods, "yes, I understand that, and I am grateful to them."

"What must I be, then?" she says, "who have enjoyed their friendship and protection for so many years?"

"I am sure," he says, with a courtly gesture, "that you are not wanting in gratitude or any other noble sentiment."

"Put yourself in my place, your grace," she goes on, drawing a little nearer to him, and just touching his sleeve with a timid gesture. "Would you, do you think, be able to refuse

them anything—any request that they might make? Suppose that they had cherished for years a hope connected with one in my position, do you think I should be capable of defeating it, at whatever sacrifice to my feelings?"

"No," he says—"no. I can understand that you would sacrifice yourself. Yours is the nature for self-sacrifice my dear girl."

Floor duke!

"Well, they have cherished such a hope; they have formed plans for my future, which I could not, without being ungrateful, shatter and throw down."

He looks at her with knitted brows; already he begins to see her meaning, but she is breaking it so carefully that it gives him time to breathe.

"What is their hope—their plan?" he asks.

She falters, and looks up at him with a timid, imploring glance, which goes straight through his anxious heart.

"It—it is connected with Sir Hugh," she says, faintly.

The duke starts.

"Do you mean," he says, with a little groan, "that they wish you to marry Sir Hugh?"

Her head droops.

"Yes," she murmurs.

The old man trembles.

"And—and surely you have not consented?" he says, in a low, anxious voice.

She raises her head and looks at him.

"Could I do otherwise?" she asks.

"Yes, I have consented."

He folds and unfolds his glove, and stares at the hearth-rug with heavy brows.

He is a gentleman, this great duke, and a promise is a promise. So she has promised Sir Hugh! Well, the sooner he is gone the better.

"I am very sorry," he says, clearing his throat—"very sorry for myself, of course. I—I hope you will be happy."

Then he stops, for she puts her hand to her eyes, and her bosom heaves.

"Do not wish me that," she says—"it cannot be fulfilled."

He flushes and fidgets with his gloves.

"Do I understand you—forgive me if I am wrong!—but—but your words seem to imply that you have sacrificed yourself?"

"Could I do otherwise?" she murmurs. "It is their wish. I—I could not but consent."

"But," he says, hesitatingly, "is not the sacrifice too great a one, if you do not love him? Do you love him?"

Oh, for a woman's truth and honesty! Only a short half hour ago, and she leaned on Hugh's breast, and gave him kiss for kiss! And now, with a little catch in her voice, she breathes:

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"No."

The duke takes a step or two on the rug, more agitated than he has ever been before in the course of his long life.

"You do not?" he says. "Then—then I think that this sacrifice is greater even than they could demand of you should make. My dear girl, such a marriage must end disastrously—it can only be productive of misery for you both."

"Yes," she assents, pressing her hand to her eyes.

"And—and," he goes on, warming to his theme, "it must not be allowed to go on!"

She glances at him inquiringly, and he shakes his head and puts his hand on her shoulder again.

"No, I am quite sure that I am right in saying that it should not be permitted! Anything else but that! My dear young lady, surely you must feel with me that nothing would warrant a woman in selling herself—even to pay a debt of gratitude!"

She shakes her head with an innocent sigh.

"I say," he repeats, his face flushed, "that it would but increase the debt, for it would bring unhappiness on him whom you married from a mistaken motive. Surely you feel this?"

"Yes," she murmurs.

He nods emphatically.

"Putting aside my own interest in the case, I say, as a sincere friend who has your welfare at heart, that it must not be."

She leans against the mantel-shelf, and raises her eyes to his face with trustful, childish confidence.

"What shall I do?" she murmurs.

"I feel that you are indeed my friend. Will you tell me, duke, what I ought to do?"

He considers a moment, then he takes her hand.

"My dear," he says, "you should go to Lady Falconer, and tell her what you have told me."

She shakes her head.

She starts, a splendidly feigned start of fright and reluctance.

"Oh, no, no, indeed I could not do that!" she says, hurriedly; "I would rather that things went on to the bitter end! I could not bear to see my

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benefactress' tears or hear her reproaches."

"My poor girl!" he murmurs, sympathetically, "what other course is open to you?"

She shakes her head sadly.

"I do not know. I feel that I cannot do as you advise, dear duke—"

He flushes at the "dear," and presses her hand.

"I could not face the—the disappointment and—distress of such an announcement! No, I feel that I am helpless."

"But," he says, perplexed and eager, "this that you are about to do is a very wrong thing. To marry without love—stop, tell me," and he takes her other hand eagerly. "If, I say, supposing that there was not this barrier in the way, what would have been your answer to my offer? Speak plainly, my dear girl."

Now many a woman would have burst into tears, or buried her head and sobbed the answer; but Lucy Fairfax is no common actress.

With a grave, almost saint-like face, she looks up at him steadily.

"Must I tell you?" she says; "then it would have been 'Yes,'"

He is silent for a moment, and his face proclaims the emotion which her avowal has caused him.

"Is that so?" he says, at last. "Is it really so? Do you really care for me?"

She raises one of his hands to her lips.

"How could I do otherwise, dear duke?" she murmurs, softly; "I, who have experienced your kindness for so long—who know and value the tenderness of your disposition and your great unselfish nature. Yes, I can admit it without shame, for have I not resolved to speak the whole truth? I should have said, 'Yes, because I love you!'"

The duke is visibly moved, and his hand trembles. Something within, some finer instinct, whispers that he is on the brink of something like dishonor; but he is under the glamour of the green eyes, the soft, thrilling voice, and conscience is lulled to sleep.

He is so long silent that her heart beats with a grave dread.

"Is he going to say that she must abide by her word, after all?"

At last he speaks.

"Lucy!" he says, and at the word her heart leaps.

She knows that she has won, but still there is some risky work to do.

"Lucy," he says, "you have made me very happy. Now with more certainty than ever I say that this sacrifice of yours must not take place."

She shakes her head.

"But it must not!" he repeats, "from this moment I consider you as betrothed to me. Is it not so? I say that it shall be so."

She looks up.

"But—but—Sir Hugh!" she murmurs, doubtfully.

His brow lowers rather haughtily.

"That must be for me to settle," he says.

"No, no," she says, with well-feigned alarm, "anything rather than there should be any open dissension. I would rather, far rather, take refuge in flight!"

"In flight," he says, and he smiles as he puts his arm round her! "Then you must fly with me."

It is just the idea she has been trying to put into his head, and at his words she feigns a little start.

"Oh!" she breathes, "do you mean it?"

He starts now, and his face crimson.

"Why not?" he says; "after all—and he ponders, "it is the best way of cutting the Gordian knot, of solving the difficulty!"

"Oh! but—" she whispers, faintly.

"But me no buts!" he says, smiling, and pressing her hand. "Why should we not? If you dread any explanation with them, why, all explanation can be avoided by a sudden flight. When we are married you can explain and I can put the matter in the right light. There is only Hugh—and his heart smites him suddenly."

She draws a little nearer to him.

"Shall I tell you a little secret?" she says, with a little smile.

"Tell me everything, Lucy," he answers.

(To be Continued.)

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