



The Sound of Wedding Bells

— OR —
Won After Great Perseverance!

CHAPTER XXIV.

Sir Archie stands in the middle of the room, staring at the door which had closed on Dulcie and Lady Brookley, like one dismayed.

He saw it all now. The sudden pallor of the beautiful face when he had said, "Lucy Fairfax and Hugh are to be married"; the swift closing of the dark eyes as if under a blow revealed the truth.

She loved Hugh!
It was a hard blow for poor Archie, and it seemed to overwhelm him for a time, so that the old lord's volleys of anxious observations sounded vaguely in his ears.

She loved Hugh! Fool that he was not to have discovered it before! With something like a groan, he sunk into a chair, and recalled every little incident that bore upon his recently acquired knowledge, and as the panorama moved across his brain, he mentally called himself an idiot not to have seen how the land lay.

It was like his generous heart to feel for her more than himself, even while his whole being was tortured by the secret which he had discovered.

"My poor darling!" he mused. "How she must have suffered! But there must have been some misunderstanding between them! Dulcie is not the sort of girl to give the heart unasked for! And if there was something, then how did it come to an end?"

It never occurred to him that he might have been the cause, and he sat and pondered, heavy-souled with disappointment, and that creature of all sorrows, unrequited love.

"Cheer up!" growls the old earl, at last; he had been talking for half an hour and getting nothing but the most disjointed and inconsequential answers from Sir Archie. "Cheer up, my boy! It's nothing serious, depend upon it. It's a way women have. She'll be all right in the morning, see if she isn't. Lor' bless you, it's natural for a woman to faint now and then! Though," thoughtfully, "it's the first time she's done it. Rum thing you should know her, Archie."

"Yes," says Archie, absently.

The old earl winks, and lays a heavy hand on the square, straight shoulder.

"I say, Archie, my boy, if a man was on the lookout for a wife—what a chance for him, eh?"

"Yes," says Archie, again, a sudden flush coming upon his fair face. "Oh, yes, certainly."

"The prettiest girl I've seen from

the Channel to Peru, and as sweet and amiable as an angel. My boy, a man that had her for skipper would have a jolly cruise of it."

"Yes," for the third time responds Archie, and he sighs.

"Cheers up this place—does, indeed!" goes on the old earl. "Been quite a different vessel since she came on board. I wouldn't lose her for half a kingdom, so mind what you're about, my lad. No tricks allowed," and he slaps Archie on the back with a laugh and a sly twinkle in his small eyes.

Archie gets up and paces the room, then he comes back and watches the door.

Presently Lady Brookley enters, and he fancies that her keen eyes seek his face curiously.

"Well!" he says, anxiously, "is—is she better?"

The old lady nods.

"Oh, yes, she is all right; the room was hot, and she complained of a headache—"

"Call in Sir William," shouts the old earl.

The old lady smiles.

"I don't think we shall want Sir William," she says, rather dryly. "At the same time I don't think she is so strong as she looks. Poor thing, she has had some trouble. She was telling you, I suppose?" turning to Archie.

Archie nods.

"Yes, she was telling me. I—I was much surprised; I didn't know anything of it," and a look of pain comes into his blue eyes.

The old lady watches him under her bent brows for a minute or two, then she glances at the clock.

"Edward, are you going to sit up all night?" she says, with a smile.

"Eh? Bless me—time up, already, my boy."

Archie looks up, but the old lady lays her hand upon his arm.

"You go up, Edward," she says. "Archie and I are going to have a chat."

"Oh, very well; don't spin yarns all night, that's all," and he trots off in the best of humours.

Lady Brookley sits silent for a moment, then she turns to Archie.

"Now, Archie, light that cigarette you have been longing for, and tell me all the news; never mind the smoke, I don't mind the cigarette. You won't talk unless you have it, I know."

Archie takes out his dainty silver case, and lights up a cigarette, but he doesn't seem inclined to talk.

"Well," says Lady Brookley, with a sympathetic smile, "aren't you going to tell me all about this last love affair of yours, Archie?"

Archie colors, and looks up uneasily, and forces a laugh, but it is rather a dismal one.

The old lady smiles.

"Well, Archie, what is she like? and is she still hard-hearted and obdurate? or have you succeeded in persuading her that Sir Archibald Hope is not to be sneezed at?"

He shakes his head.

"No use," he says. "She's not one to be persuaded, aunt—you're tired, aren't you, and want to go to bed?"

"No, I am not. And you don't mean to tell me what she's like? You used to bring me their photographs, my dear boy—"

"I haven't got one of—the young lady," says Archie, dolefully.

"Ah, that's a pity. Well, now, suppose, instead of your telling me I tell you what she was like."

Archie shakes his head.

"You don't think I can?" goes on the old lady, with her shrewd smile.

"Let me see. Tall, dark, with an olive complexion, long, fringed eye-

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lashes, thick, silky hair, and a smile that makes stupid boys like you wish that you could secure the monopoly of it; the voice—well, that's very musical, and with a little laugh in it sometimes that I don't think I ever noticed in any girl's voice before."

Archie rises with dismay, and looks down at her as if she were a witch.

The old lady smiles up at him.

"Is that a pretty correct portrait, Archie?"

"But—but—" he says.

"And suppose I told you where she was to be found, and her name?"

"Aunt!"

"You stupid boy, did you think I was blind? Why, I saw it the moment she entered the room. The young lady who has stolen your heart is my Dulcie Dorrimore!"

Archie sinks into the chair, and stares at her.

"Then—then she has told you?" he says.

The old lady shakes her head.

"Not a word, my dear. Dulcie is not the girl to tell, even me—who love her, and whom, I believe, she really loves—a thing of that sort. No; but I am right, am I not? And why didn't you tell me?"

Archie knit his brows.

"I promised," he says, "that I would say nothing about her."

The old lady laughs softly.

"I see. The dear girl thought that it would make a difference here. Well, you can keep your promise, my dear. You shall tell me nothing, except this—do you love her still?"

Archie laughs—actually laughs; then he gets up and looks down at the keen, kindly face.

"Aunt, there is nothing in the world I wouldn't do to win her. Love her! I would die for her."

"Much better live for her," says the old lady, looking up at the tall, graceful figure and handsome face.

"I think she'd like that better."

Archie smiles his head.

"She doesn't care a pin whether I live or die, so far as that goes," he says, ruefully. "I am nobody to her."

"Then there is some one who is somebody to her?" says the old lady, sharply.

Archie is silent for a moment, then he says, sadly:

"I don't know."

"But I do," says the old lady. "Who is it, I wonder? What a fool he must be!"

Archie groans.

"Yes—think of any man who had the chance of winning her neglecting it!"

"Don't you neglect yours, then, my dear," she says.

Archie starts, and looks at her curiously.

"I haven't the ghost of a chance," he says, dismally, hopelessly.

She gazes at the handsome face, noble in its perfect Greek beauty, and smiles.

who loved her, if he only went the right way to work—never!"

Archie's face flushes, and his eyes flash.

"Perhaps you'll tell me the right way, aunt," he says.

Lady Brookley shakes her head.

"You must find that out for yourself, my dear, and I wish you every success. There, get me my candle, and don't sit up smoking all night, or you'll look pale and haggard in the morning, and that won't be the way to win her. But I don't know," she says, with a smile. "There, good-night."

And she kisses him.

Archie sits smoking for some time, if not all night, a subtle joy mingling with his pain and disappointment.

She is here, beneath the same roof with him. He shall see her tomorrow, hear her sweet voice, perhaps touch her hand! Though she does love Hugh, she is here, near him, Archie; and perhaps—who knows—he may win her. The hope, faint and uncertain as it is, makes his heart beat; and when he goes upstairs he glances at each door in the corridor, wondering which is that of her room.

And Dulcie, lying awake with sadly beating heart, with the words "they are to be married!" ringing in her ears, hears his step pause at her door, and a sudden thrill of pity stirs her. At least, if she cannot love him, she can sympathize with him; for is she not in the same position?

Perhaps they neither of them sleep well that night, for certainly when they make their appearance at breakfast, they are both rather pale and self-absorbed. All night that assertion of Lady Brookley's, about no woman being able to resist a man if he went the right way to woo her, has been haunting Archie, and he has hit upon some sort of resolution. The way to win Dulcie is certainly not by ardent wooing; he has tried that and failed. In the future he will go upon another tack, as the old earl would say.

Consequently when Dulcie enters amidst a storm of passionate exclamations from the earl—who has not yet got his devoted kidneys—Archie rises, and having put a chair for her, just ventures to say in a low voice:

"I hope you are better, Miss Dorrimore?"

"Quite, thanks," says Dulcie, just glancing up at him.

"If you're to have Sir William!" says the old earl, "have him at once. Confound it, do you think we are going to have you pine away and do nothing! I say it's shameful neglect, d'ye hear, my lady?" he roars.

"Yes, and so does all the square, Edward," retorts her ladyship blandly.

"But I don't mean to pine away," says Dulcie, with a smile, as she puts her hand upon the urn.

"If you do, it will be murder, simply murder, sheer neglect!" retorts the earl. "No! Don't touch those letters! You shan't read one. You have been worked to death, simply worked to death! D'ye hear my lady! I tell you what! You shall have an invalid chair, a Bath chair, and go round the park, and, by George, I'll draw it myself!"

(To be Continued.)

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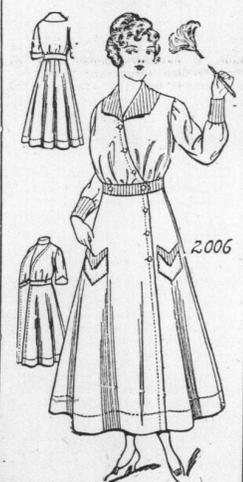
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