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The Sound of Wedding Bells

— OR — Won After Great Perseverance!

CHAPTER IX.

Holme Castle is what is known as a very regular household; that is to say that everything is done at stated times, and the big clock in the hall that strikes the hours and half hours, and grows at the quarters, as if it had a settled spite against Time, is the controlling spirit of the place.

At eight o'clock Dulcie is roused, very considerably aroused, by a tremendous beating of a gong, and under the impression that the Castle is on fire, at the very least, springs out of bed and goes to the window.

Her apprehensions are allayed, however, by a knock at the door, and the voice of the demure servant-maid murmuring, "Eight o'clock, ma'am."

"Oh," says Dulcie, not overgratefully, "is anything the matter? I mean, what time is breakfast?"

"Nine o'clock, miss."

"Thanks," says Dulcie. "Stop a minute, is there a bath-room—of course there is; but where is it?"

"I'll wait and show you, miss," says the maid.

Dulcie puts on her dressing-gown—she looks very tall and slim in the long, striped robe de toilette—and opens the door.

The maid goes to a small room at the end of the corridor, fitted in the

most complete fashion as a bath-room and proceeds to turn on the hot water. But Dulcie stops her.

"Not hot water," she says—"I never use it. Thanks, that will do. Nine o'clock, you said. Will you please bring my aunt a cup of tea?"

"Yes, miss," says the maid, eying first the bath and then the slim, graceful figure, with barely suppressed wonder. No hot water! When the "young ladies" have a bath, it is a ceremony of much elaboration and preparation, and more hot than cold water by a great deal.

"You are sure you won't have any hot, miss?" she says, doubtfully. "The water is very cold—it comes from a well in the stable-yard, and—with a little irrepresible shudder—"it is like ice."

"That is beautiful," says Dulcie, nodding her head; and the maid wonderingly departs, to recount in the servants' hall her admiration and awe of the new "young lady," who can face cold water without blanching.

Long before nine o'clock, Dulcie, with sparkling eyes and peach tinted cheeks, the result of "no hot water," descends and enters the breakfast room.

Apparently the family are still upstairs, for there is no sign of them, and the butler and footman who are laying the cloth glance at her with subdued surprise. Evidently the ladies are in the habit of keeping the hours and nothing more. She looks round the room, stands by the fire a moment, then goes out into the hall, and seeing a door open, naturally makes for the fresh air.

As she steps outside she realizes that the Castle is indeed a castle; traces of the old moat are still discernible, though the moat has been filled in, and now forms a wide terrace that runs round the outside of the building. From this terrace is a

view of the park, a mighty expanse of grass-land, studded with glorious trees, beneath which glide the graceful deer. Under the terrace is the pleasure or ornamental gardens, beautifully kept, with velvety lawns of lawn and brilliant flower-beds. Here and there a marble faun rises from amongst the green, or a Titan bends beneath the weight of a pitcher from which trickles a crystal stream.

In all her life, Dulcie has never seen such a place as Holme Castle, has never even imagined it, and she stands looking from the park to the Castle itself, a stately pile of weather-stained and very grimy stone, with all a girl's delight in the grand and the beautiful. Suddenly it flashes across her mind that this—all this, Castle and park, and pleasure, yes, and title, too, may be hers by the utterance of a mere word—"Yes;" and the thought brings the blood to her face, and a strange light in her eyes. Then she smiles.

"If one were base enough to sell one's self, it would be a good price!" she murmurs. "What would not one do to be the mistress of all this?"

Then she laughs softly; and passes along the terrace until it ends abruptly by a flight of stone steps leading, as she judges by the buildings, to the stables. She pauses here a moment, looking wistfully downward, until suddenly there comes upon the air the sound of the barking of dogs, the neighing of horses, and the grunting of pigs.

For animals, Dulcie has what Aunt Fernor describes as "an insane affection." Often that good lady's heart is made to beat with terror by Dulcie's insistence in the matter of patting strange dogs and stroking strange horses.

She listens for a moment, glances at her watch, and finding that there are still twelve minutes between now and nine, she runs down the steps, passes under the old stone archway, and finds herself in the stable-yard. Grooms and stable-boys are busy at work, grooming and leisurely passing to and fro with straw and buckets, and they stare at the vision that has suddenly descended amongst them. Without pausing to consider whether it is quite the correct thing for a lady, and a visitor, to wander alone round the stables, Dulcie makes for an open door, and is instantly surrounded by half a dozen dogs of various breeds, from a huge mastiff to a wiry-haired Skye-terrier, who sniff and point round her for momentary inspection, and then as she stoops down and pats them, and addresses them in endearing accents, jump up with friendly energy. A groom comes forward to drive them off.

"They won't bite, miss," he says, with a sympathetic grin. "Down, Leo! down, Snip!"

"I am not afraid," says Dulcie, laughing. "I am never afraid, and I have never been bitten."

"No, miss," says the man, touching his cap respectfully. "Ah, that's just it! I believe there's nothing dogs hate more than for people to be afraid of 'em. They know directly. It's like distrusting of 'em, you see, miss."

Dulcie nods, and draws the great head of the mastiff against her with a caressing grasp.

"Now, that there dog, Leo, the big 'un, he's one of the best-tempered animals I ever see, but most people when they see him begin to back and look fearful at him, and he gets nasty directly. Get down Turk! They'll make your dress in a mess, I'm afraid, miss."

"Never mind," says Dulcie. "I am so glad there are so many dogs! I shall often come and see them, if I may."

The man grins with satisfaction. "Yes, miss; for if you're fond of dogs, there's the hounds in the kennel at the home farm. But you mustn't go there alone, miss."

Dulcie nods.

"May I go into the stables?" she says.

The man touches his hat and opens the inner door. She picks up the tiniest of the canine crowd, a small black and tan, and passes in. There, all sleek and shining, with their cloths on, stand the carriage horses, and a couple of hacks. The stables are perfect in their way; solid oak, shining brass and steel, plaited straw, all as clean and neatly ordered as a

toy stable from the Lowther Arcade.

"They are all quiet, miss," says the man, stripping the cloth off the nearest horse and passing his hand over the shining quarters. "There ain't a kicker in the stables, miss; Sir Hugh wouldn't have one at any price."

Dulcie, filled with infinite delight, goes up to them, one by one, and strokes and pats them, murmuring propitiating endearments, which the horses seem to understand, for they arch their necks, and push their cool, smooth noses, into her small white hands confidingly.

"Beautiful creatures!" she says. "How warm and well kept they are!"

The man grins and nods gratefully. "Yes, miss, we take care of 'em; they're good nags, all of 'em; but the best of 'em is in here. It's the master's charger, miss; he came down by steamer, poor fellow, a week ago."

A beautiful creature, miss, and as kind as a kitten. And yet, they do say that he's as fierce in a battle as the master himself. Sir Hugh rode him through the war, miss."

"Oh, I should like to see him," says Dulcie, eying the door wistfully.

The man opens it, and a magnificent black charger turns his head toward them, and neighs as they enter.

Dulcie stands and stares at him eagerly.

"Are you sure he is quiet?" she says. "He looks so big and powerful."

"He's as quiet as a lamb, miss, he is, indeed," and he goes up to him and slips the cloth off.

Dulcie puts down the terrier and goes up to the horse and strokes him, then gaining courage, puts her arm round his neck, and turns her head to laugh triumphantly at the man, when she sees in the doorway, where the man stood, the tall figure of Sir Hugh; he is dressed in a suit of shooting cords, and is smoking a cigarette, and there is a smile and a look of admiration on his face, which may be meant for the horse or the slim, graceful girl, or possibly both.

He raises his hat.

"Good-morning," he says, and at the sound of his voice Dulcie sees that the horse pricks its ears and turns its head with as plain a gesture of welcome as if it were made to a human being. "Is this fair?"

"Is what fair?" she demands.

"To wear the affections of my old Nigger from me? On the first morning, too!"

She laughs.

"Is he very fond of you?"

"Astonishing and incredible as it may sound, I believe he is," he answers, with a smile.

"He is a beautiful creature," she says. "You must be fond of him."

He nods.

"Your man tells me that he has been in battle with you—has he?"

He nods again.

"Yes, he was in the last fight, and two or three skirmishes before that. He is a thorough soldier, is Nigger."

"Come and speak to him," says Dulcie. "He is dying for a word."

He laughs, and goes up to the horse and puts his hand on its shoulder, very near that of Dulcie, which lies white upon the black shining skin.

"Well, old man," he says, and the horse paws the ground and stretches out its head to him. "Well, old man, got over your sea-trip. Yes, he looks well."

Dulcie looks from man to horse and the thought flashes through her that they look both of them perfect specimens of their kinds.

"If," she says, "I had a horse like that, I think I should be happy—I mean quite happy."

He smiles.

"There are not many like him," he says. "Poor old Nigger! He had a narrow squeak for it last time."

(To be Continued.)

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