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A Broken Wedding Ring

By Bertha M. Clay

"No—far from it. I think it is the one step in life that makes or mars a man; his happiness or misery most certainly depends upon it; therefore, I hope to look before I leap."

"Quite right," said the general; "you could not do better. Men have such different tastes. Now what is your idea of a wife?"

Sir Basil laughed. "I do not know that I have formed one yet."

The general looked relieved. If his heart was yet untouched, why could he not learn to love Leah?

"I should like to know," he said, thoughtfully, "what you would expect in a wife. What are the qualifications you deem necessary in a woman who would aspire to that position?"

"I have never thought about it; I suppose my ideas are not different from other people's," answered Sir Basil, laughing.

"Would you marry for beauty money?"

"No; I should marry for love," said Sir Basil. "I should never marry for beauty, though I should like the woman I love to have a fair face of her own. I do not care for money—I have quite enough; but I shall not be ill-pleased if my wife has some fortune."

"His ideas are sensible," thought the general to himself. "I am sure that, if I had thought of marriage at all, it would have been much in the same way. At least he said, 'I should like to ask you one more question, and I beg that you will not think me tedious.'"

"I know your true friendship for me," said Sir Basil, "and I feel that nothing you might ask me would be prompted by idle curiosity."

"I should like to know," pursued the general, "if you have passed through the fever called love?"

"No, I have not," said Sir Basil. "I am heart-whole and fancy-free. I may add that I thank Heaven for it."

"So do I," thought the general. He was silent for some minutes, not quite seeing his way to the next question.

"If the story of the marriages of one generation could be written it would be a wonderful volume," said Sir Arthur, musingly. "Some men are led into marriage. I was and my marriage proved a happy one."

"I had never given a thought to it until some one told me that a certain lady favored me very much. I found it was true, and we were very happy."

Sir Basil was surprised to see that the general looked flushed and perplexed. He was a little amused, too, at his choice of such a subject for discussion. He wondered if Sir Arthur had any thoughts of marrying again.

"There are some very knotty points about this same love-making," continued the general. "I do not think, taking it as it is conducted now, that the ladies have a fair chance."

"Why not?" asked Sir Basil.

"The advantages are mainly on the side of the man," said the general. "If a man sees a girl and likes her, he has but to tell her so she can say 'Yes' or 'No' as she pleases."

"Certainly," chimed in Sir Basil. "Reverse the question. If a young girl sees a man and likes him ever so much, she cannot say so."

"It is certainly not the custom of English girls," laughed Sir Basil. "Do you think it fair to the weaker sex that they should be obliged to conceal their sentiments?"

"I must confess I should not like to see the custom reversed," replied the baronet. "Besides, there is a view of the matter which does not seem to have struck you, Sir Arthur. Women are more clever than men; they have a thousand quick instincts that we do not possess, and I fancy that, if any girl gave her heart unsolicited, there are many ways in which, without losing either her dignity or her modesty, she could let it be known."

The general looked hopeless, helpless. This view of the subject had not occurred to him.

"I mean," continued Sir Basil, "that, without saying one word, by her face and manner any woman could make a man understand that she likes him."

"If that be the case," thought the general to himself, "why has not Leah done so?"

Then he remembered that she was too proud and cold; she would die rather than stoop to that. But he must save her. Even the duchess admitted that at times an unhappy love proved fatal.

"I should like to know your opinion, Sir Basil," he said. "Should you think less of a girl if she had a great affection for a man who had shown no signs of any for her?"

"Certainly not," he replied.

"I will put a case to you, said the general, warning now to his work. 'Suppose that a lady, young and beautiful, all that is most gracious and graceful, meets a man and likes him so well that her liking grows into love for him, and that love takes such complete possession of her that not only her happiness but her life is endangered would you think it prudent or discreet if some of her friends, some one who loved her, told him of it?'"

"I should think it the kindest thing to do," said Sir Basil, carelessly.

"You would approve of such a line of conduct?" said Sir Arthur.

"If the man so loved were quite free, I could see no objection to it," said Sir Basil.

"Thank Heaven I hear you say so," cried the general.

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