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## The Sound of Wedding Bells

—OR—

## Won After Great Perseverance!

CHAPTER IV.

They pace the room, and Dulcie, with downcast eyes, directs a little sidelong glance at him.

Yes, decidedly he is handsome. It is just the manly beauty which she has always pictured as her beau ideal. And if he looked distinguished out there, fresh from his encounter with the mob, he looks doubly so now that the suit of tweeds has been exchanged for correct evening dress, and the severe outline of black sets off the stalwart shoulders and upright, soldierly form.

In silence they walk round, and then suddenly the absurdity of the thing, the absurdity of walking with a man whose name she does not know and who has done her most effectual service, strikes Dulcie; and though she struggles to suppress it, the ever-ready laugh ripples from her lips.

He doesn't look surprised; but he turns his dark eyes on her inquiringly.

"May I venture to ask," he says, "what has excited your risible faculties?"

She laughs again. "This is too ridiculous," she says. "As if it were not hot enough standing still here, without promenading round this dreadful room, mute as if we were at a funeral, and one of us as uncomfortable."

"One of us? That one I presume is,

in your opinion, myself?" he says, touching his breast.

"Of course," she assents. "I am not uncomfortable—I am perfectly happy. But you are bored with the whole thing, are you not? I know what you will say—that you are not—that you never spent such a delightful evening, and all that," she goes on; but he does not speak.

"At least you are candid," she says—"that is, sometimes. Why did you tell a falsehood about that wretched bracelet?"

"Was it a falsehood?" he says, with a quiet smile. "An evasion, perhaps. I said 'No doubt,' if you remember."

"Yes, and led my aunt to infer that you had picked it up in the room. I call that as good as a falsehood. Why did you say that?"

He looks round; there is a quiet little alcove containing a rickety wooden chair and a dingy sofa, near which they stand.

"Suppose we sit down?" he says. "We shall be less like mutes in a funeral procession, perhaps," and he pushes aside the curtain and hands her to the sofa, taking the rickety chair for himself.

"That will let you down," she says, calmly. "Nine out of ten of the chairs in the hotel have broken limbs or strained spines. I don't know why; perhaps it is because the proprietor hopes an accident may occur which will necessitate a visitor remaining for months."

He props the chair against the wall, and deposits his tall form upon it, stretches out his legs, and looks at his boots.

She watches him for a moment over her slowly sweeping fan, then she says, abruptly:

"You haven't answered my question. Isn't that rude?"

"I beg your pardon. I have a bad habit of growing absent-minded. I have lived much by myself. Your question? Yes. Well, I thought perhaps that you had not yet had time to give an account of your adventures to your aunt. I think you said!"

"That is a roundabout way of accusing me of deceitfulness and secrecy," says Dulcie, calmly, but with a flash of light in the eyes that, while it enhances their beauty, gives indications of a certain warmth of temper.

"If that was your impression," she goes on with unnatural calmness of manner, "you are quite wrong. I never conceal anything from my aunt, because—slowly and emphatically, not to say defiantly—"I never do anything I am ashamed of."

He looks at her. She makes a picture at the moment that is well worth looking at. The clear oval face warmed by the color of indignation, the dark lustrous eyes, the half-parted lips, the silken hair, the whole graceful, lithe body in its background of dingy moreen curtains—a beautiful, entrancing, bewitching picture that keeps him for a moment silent.

"I see," she says with dangerous

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suaveness, "you don't believe me. You think that it was unlady-like, improper"—she draws a breath at the ugly word—"for a girl so young as I am to be out in the streets alone."

"And to accept the aid of a stranger. Oh, I quite understand. Your manner said so quite plainly, when you stood on the pavement."

He colors faintly under his tan, and his lips move for a moment. It is all so true.

"At least," she says, turning crimson, "you are too candid to deny it."

"I beg your pardon," he says, with a smile. "You haven't given me time. I was going to say that you quite exaggerate my estimate of the little, to me very agreeable, incident."

"Oh, please don't," she says with a little curl of her lips. "It didn't appear that you thought it very agreeable at the time."

It is quite true; he didn't. He remembers distinctly the feeling of annoyance with which he felt compelled to drag her out of the crowd, the feeling of censure with which he looked down at her, a young girl alone in the streets.

"Perhaps you think," she goes on, hurriedly, "that it is altogether singing against the proprieties that aunt and I should be staying at this big hotel, two women alone—"

"I—" he tries to break in, but she will not allow.

"At any rate if you do, you quite agree with aunt; poor aunt! She has never ceased to utter moaning and lamentation for the hour of weakness in which she was induced to fly the situation."

"Situation?" he says with polite curiosity. She colors and looks aside, her under lip caught for a moment between her teeth as if she had let slip a word she would willingly recall. Then suddenly she looks round and laughs. It is a strange laugh, almost defiant, and matches the sudden daring and audacity that shine in her eyes.

"I am the most indiscreet of persons," she says; "I was on the point of telling you a secret. Do you know"—she pauses, and her lips part with a mischievous smile—"I am sorely tempted to tell you."

He looks at her. What is this mad-cap creature about to say now?

"I sincerely hope that you will yield to the temptation," he says.

"It would be rather amusing," she says; "your horror and disgust at my 'impropriety' were so enjoyable this evening that, I almost court a second edition."

"I will promise to be as horrified and disgusted as possible if you will tell me," he says; "have you committed any very great social crime?" he adds, coolly, and in as matter-of-fact a tone as even Dulcie could desire.

"Perhaps I have," she says; "though perhaps," and she turns with a little gesture of eagerness, "you might think I had done quite right."

"I feel sure that I should think you had done quite right. I feel sure that you would never do anything you were ashamed of."

"This quoting of her words nettles her.

"I spoke the truth," she says; "I never have. You shall judge. By the way, we have not been introduced."

"True," he says. "Permit me to introduce to your gracious notice—"

She stops him with a sudden touch of her slender hand.

"Stop! Let us be strangers. We don't know each other, and we don't want to."

At this sublime piece of candor he stares, then smiles.

"If you would speak only for yourself—" he says.

"I do," she says. "Candidly, I really should not like to know you. Did you not notice that I was going out of the room when I saw you? Yes"—with a sigh—"I see I shall have to admit that I, too, tell stories! Well, then, I am ashamed of what occurred this afternoon, and I want to forget it; and, don't you see, that every time I saw you I should be reminded of it, so that I do not desire, for my part, an extension of our acquaintance. You, on your part, will certainly not wish it—"

"I beg your pardon!"

"Therefore," she goes on, smoothly, "let us remain strangers. Tonight we shall part, as the song says, to meet no more. You will go on or remain in Rome, and I—that is on, my aunt and I—will go on our journey. Is that agreed?"

He is silent for a moment.

"Well," he says, "if the telling of your secret is conditional on this, so be it; but if you think that it is impossible we shall meet again, I tell you that you are reckoning without remembering the very smallness of the world."

"I will risk it," she says, with a laugh. "After all, you and I have spent this much of our existence without previously meeting; it is not too much to hope that we may spend the remainder in the same manner."

He smiles, and his eyes wander from her face, so beautiful, so fresh, so pliant, to the garish room, round which awkward men—most men are awkward when they dance—are ambling, rushing, jostling, with young girls, married women, gay widows, in their arms—the usual foreign hotel contingent, in fact, that every traveler is familiar with. It seems so hackneyed and stale, and the girl beside him, with her bright, natural but extraordinary frankness, not to say audacity—seems so fresh by contrast, that his eyes come back to her face, and he sighs.

"Very well," he says, in his quiet voice, "we will hope that we may never meet again. And now for your secret."

But apparently she has forgotten, or repents her promise to disclose; for she has fallen into a little reverie as silent as those which distinguish the man at her side. Suddenly she turns with a little start, and laughs softly, meditatively.

"I was thinking," she says, explaining her silence—"wondering whether you will believe me."

"Believe you!" he says.

"Yes," she says, leaning back, and smiling ruminatively over the edge of the fan, against the dark crimson satin of which her dark eyes shine large and lustrous. "It is such a strange, such an absurd, such a preposterously 'novelish' sort of story, that you will very likely think I am romancing."

"I assure you—" he begins.

"It is for that very reason," she goes on, apparently taking no notice of his interjection—"because of its strangeness and absurdity—that I feel I must tell you. Do you remember the story of the man in the poem, the 'Ancient Mariner,' who button-holed the wedding-guest, and insisted on boring him with a long story in 1

don't know how many verses? Please consider me in the light of the Ancient Mariner, and prepare to be bored."

He doesn't look bored; instead, his dark, keen gray eyes are fixed on her face with admiration intense and interested—not approval, but admiration.

"(To be Continued.)"

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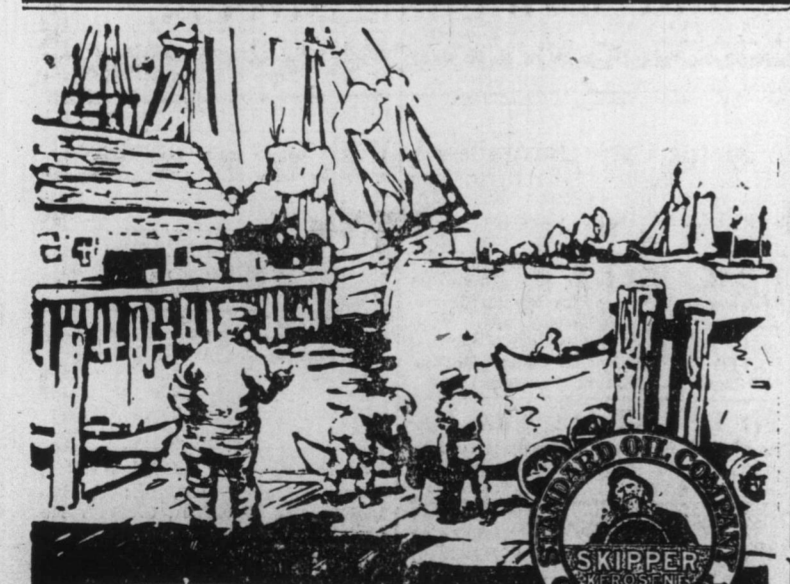
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