



The Count and the Wedding Guest

ANDY DONOVAN HAD HIS DINNER EACH evening in the house on Second Avenue where he lived in a furnished room. One evening at dinner he met a new guest, a young lady, Miss Conway.

Miss Conway was small and quiet. She was wearing a plain brown dress. She seemed interested in very little except her dinner, and her dinner did not interest her very much. She looked up at Mr. Donovan and spoke his name, and then began to eat again.

Mr. Donovan had a smile that everyone liked. He smiled at her and then thought no more about her.

Two weeks later Andy was sitting outside the house enjoying the cool evening. He heard a movement behind him. He turned his head, and could not turn it back again.

Coming out of the door was Miss Conway. She was wearing a

night-black dress of soft, thin cloth. Her hat was black. She was putting black gloves on her hands. There was no white and no color anywhere about her. All black. Someone in her family had died. Mr. Donovan was certain about that.

Her rich golden hair lay soft and thick at the back of her neck. Her face was not really pretty, but her large gray eyes made it almost beautiful. She looked up into the sky with an expression of sadness.

All black, readers. Think of her. All black, and that golden hair, and looking sadly far away.

Mr. Donovan suddenly decided to think about Miss Conway. He stood up.

“It’s a fine, clear evening, Miss Conway,” he said.

“It is to them with the heart to enjoy it, Mr. Donovan,” said Miss Conway. She took a deep slow breath.

“I hope no one—no one of your family—has died?”

“Death has taken,” said Miss Conway, “not one of my family, but one who—I must not speak of my troubles to you, Mr. Donovan.”

“Why not, Miss Conway? Perhaps I could understand.”

Miss Conway smiled a little smile. And oh, her face was sadder than when she was not smiling.

“Laugh and the world laughs with you,” she said. “But the world is not interested in sadness. I have learned that, Mr. Donovan. I have no friends in this city. But you have been kind to me. Thank you for it.”

He had done nothing except offer her the salt at dinner.

“It’s not easy to be alone in New York,” said Mr. Donovan. “But when New York is friendly, it’s very friendly. Shall we take a little walk in the park? It might be good for you.”

“Thanks, Mr. Donovan. I would enjoy it. But I don’t want my sadness to make you sad.”

They went through the open gates of the park and found a quiet seat.

“We were going to be married soon,” said Miss Conway. “He was a real **Count**. He had land and a big house in Italy. Count Fernando Mazzini was his name. My father didn’t want me to marry him. Once we ran away to get married, and my father followed and took me home.

I was afraid they were going to fight.

“But then my father agreed. Fernando went to Italy to make everything ready for me. My father’s very proud. Fernando wanted to give me several thousand dollars for new clothes, and my father said no. When Fernando went away, I came to the city. I work in a shop.

“Three days ago I had a letter from Italy. It said that Fernando had been killed.

“That is why I’m wearing black. My heart has died, Mr. Donovan, with Fernando. I cannot take interest in anyone. I should not keep you from your friends who can smile and enjoy things with you. Shall we walk back to the house?”

Now, readers, if a girl tells a man her heart has died, he wants to make it live again.

“I’m very sorry,” said Mr. Donovan. “No, we won’t walk back to the house yet. And don’t say you have no friends in this city, Miss Conway. I’m your friend, and I want you to believe that.”

“I have his picture here,” said Miss Conway. “I wear it on a chain around my neck. I never showed it to anyone, but I will show it to you, Mr. Donovan. I believe you to be a true friend.”

Mr. Donovan looked for a long time and with much interest at the picture. The face of Count Mazzini commanded interest. It was wise, bright—the face of a strong, happy man who could be a leader of other men.

“I have a larger picture in my room,” said Miss Conway. “When we return, I will show you that. I have nothing more to help me remember Fernando. But he will always live in my heart. I am sure of that.”

Mr. Donovan decided that he wanted to take the Count’s place in Miss Conway’s heart. He did not seem to think he could fail. He would be friendly. He would keep smiling.

When they returned to the house, she ran to her room and brought down the larger picture of the Count. Mr. Donovan looked at it. No one could have guessed what he was thinking.

“He gave me this on the night he left for Italy,” said Miss Conway.

“A fine-looking man,” said Mr. Donovan warmly. “Miss Conway,

will you go to Coney Island with me next Sunday afternoon?"

A month later they told the other guests in the house on Second Avenue that they were going to be married. Miss Conway continued to wear black.

A week later the two sat on the same seat in the park. Donovan had had a sad face all day. He was so quiet tonight that Miss Conway had to ask him why.

"What's wrong tonight, Andy?"

"Nothing, Maggie."

"You never were like this before. What is it?"

"It's nothing much, Maggie."

"Yes, it is; and I want to know. Is it some other girl? Why don't you go to her, if you want her? Take your arm away."

"I will tell you then," said Andy, wisely. "But you will not understand. Have you heard about Mike Sullivan? Everyone calls him 'Big Mike' Sullivan."

"I never heard about him," said Maggie. "Who is he?"

"He is the most important man in New York. He is a mile high and as broad as the East River. If you say anything bad about Big Mike a million men will be ready to fight you.

"Big Mike is a friend of mine. I am only a little man. But Mike is as good a friend to a little man as he is to a big man. I met him today by chance, and what do you think he did? He came up to me to shake my hand. I told him I was going to be married in two weeks. 'Andy,' says he, 'I will come to the wedding.' That is what he said to me, and he always does what he says.

"You don't understand it, Maggie, but I want to have Big Mike Sullivan at our wedding. It would make me very proud."

"Then why don't you ask him to come?" said Maggie.

"There's a reason why I can't," said Andy, sadly. "Don't ask me the reason, for I can't tell you."

"But can't you smile at me?" said Maggie.

"Maggie," said Andy, after a few minutes, "do you love me as much as you loved Count Mazzini?"

He waited a long time, but Maggie did not reply.

And then, suddenly, she put her head against his shoulder and began to cry. She held his arm, and her tears wet the black dress.

“Maggie, Maggie,” said Andy, forgetting his own trouble. “Tell me about it.”

“Andy,” said Maggie. “What I told you was not true, and there never was any Count. There never was a man in love with me. All the other girls had men in love with them. And Andy, I look good in black—you know I do. So I went to a shop where I could buy that picture. And that story about the Count—none of it was true. I said he had died because I wanted to wear black. And no one can love me, because I didn’t tell the truth. I never liked anyone but you. And that’s all.”

But Andy did not move away. Instead, his arm pulled her nearer to him. She looked up and saw that he was smiling.

“Do you—do you still love me, Andy?”

“Sure,” said Andy. “You have made everything fine, Maggie. I hoped you would do it, before the wedding-day. Good girl!”

“Andy,” said Maggie, after a little time, “did you believe all that story about the Count?”

“No, not very much,” said Andy. “Because that is Big Mike Sullivan’s picture that you are wearing on the chain around your neck.”