

THE WEDDING BELLS;

OR,
TELLING HER FORTUNE.

By the Author of "PROVED OR NOT PROVED," ETC.

CHAPTER X.

RICHARD BURKE'S STORY.

"I have said that in what I am going to tell you there is much to sadden and pain you," Dick began, in a low voice; "but I want you, while you listen to the short story, to remember always that if Grant Ellison had known that his mother had found such a devoted and affectionate daughter in Clara, his misery would have been infinitely less great. When he—he spoke of her," he added, hesitatingly, "it was always as being alone and childless. He did not know she had found a better child and sweeter comfort than he could ever have been!"

"As if I could be to her, much as I love her, what he was!" said Clara, sadly.

"His own life was miserable and desolate to a degree unusual even in the wild, rough life in the bush. He had been brought up in such luxury and extravagance, that he was totally unfitted for the hardships he endured; and those with whom he was forced to associate were nearly all of them beneath him in station and congenial society."

"But he had his wife?" Clara said, softly.

"His wife!"—and a deep flush stained the speaker's pale face for a moment—"his wife was not with him."

"How was that?" said Clara, quickly.

"She—she—she had left him!" he answered, hoarsely—"left him at Melbourne with another man, a rich sheep-farmer; but I will not insult your ears by speaking of her," he continued, as Clara sank back in her chair very pale and trembling. "She was utterly worthless, and before he had known her six months his miserable domestic life had fully expiated his deceit and disobedience."

"Oh! poor fellow—poor fellow!" sobbed Clara.

"Do you pity him," Mr. Burke said, grimly. "Surely he deserved his fate, hard as it was, for—his voice softened and shook a little as he went on—"It was a hard one. I myself, and Grant Ellison has no sterner judge than I am, cannot deny that. He had loved this woman madly; he had sacrificed for her his name, his prospects, his future; he had given up all, even his honor, for her—ay, and he would have given his life willingly to save her a pang—and she repaid his gifts by the basest treachery a woman was ever capable of!"

He spoke with a sudden passion, which showed that although hitherto he had feigned calmness, it was a composure he was far from feeling, and assumed merely to cover a strong latent emotion.

"How could she—how could she," Clara said, pitifully, "when he loved her?"

"At least she had nothing to reproach him with," Mr. Burke continued, struggling with his agitation. "He had given her his all, and he would have worked with all his might so that she should lack nothing, although he knew that she had had no love for him—that she was unworthy, selfish, mean, and vain. He had left her at Melbourne in comfort, with all the money he had in the world, sufficient for her to live upon in luxury for several months, while he went up-country to get work. Six months after, when he was lying sick unto death at a sheep-station in Menindie, he heard casually from a new hand that she was gone with his informant's former master to Sidney! Forgive me," he broke off, earnestly—"forgive me if I speak thus to you!"

"The news almost killed him," continued Mr. Burke in a moment, while Clara's tears fell fast. "It brought him to death's door, and for months he who had gloried in his strength was reduced to the most pitiable weakness; he could not move a limb, he could scarcely speak, he lay helpless and emaciated; and during all that time the rough but kindly men about the station nursed him with a tenderness of which I cannot speak."

"Was it then you knew him?" Clara said, looking up at him for a moment, although the tears in her sweet eyes made his face seem blurred and indistinct.

Mr. Burke hesitated a little.

"I knew him then," he answered quietly, in a moment. "He recovered at last; death does not come to the miserable, I think; it did not come to him then, for he passed through many years of misery after that."

"Were you with him when he died?" Clara said, tremulously.

"No," he answered, slowly.

"Do you know—can you tell me—," Clara began, but he interrupted her gently.

"There is no need to ask more, my child," he said. "I have told you all, and more than all, you need know; and the time of which I speak was a time of misery to myself not inferior to his, and it hurts me to go back to it."

"Forgive me," Clara said, hurriedly.

"I did not know. May I ask you just one more question?" she inquired, after a moment's hesitation.

"Then we will not speak of this again."

"Ask, my child."

"His wife; did you ever see her?"

"Yes. I have seen her."

"She was very beautiful?"

"She was more beautiful than any woman I have ever seen before or since," he replied, quietly. "More beautiful even than—than—Lady Ellison was in her youth."

"I think that is almost impossible,"

Clara said, in a low voice. "Poor, darling mother!"

"You are 'better to her than ten sons,'" he said, turning to her for a moment and putting his hand on hers, but Clara shook her head.

"He was her life," she said, tremulously. "You do not know how she loved him."

"I think I do," he said, tremulously. "And he loved her—oh! believe that he did; and in all he did afterward he was actuated by but one wish—to undo in a measure the misery he had caused. Has she ever told you of that last parting?"

"No, only that he came."

"Let me tell you, then. He came to Ashurst some days before he left England, and hung about the village, hoping to see his mother. He dared not send to her; he feared his father's anger not for himself but for her."

"Sir Douglas loved her dearly," Clara said. "But he was very proud and resolute."

"Grant knew his father well; he knew he should never be forgiven, but as the days went on and the time of his departure drew near, he was almost in despair. One night, a fair summer night like this, he stole to the grounds and up to the drawing room windows. His mother was there and alone. From where he stood he could see the beautiful room, which was so familiar to him, and which had never seemed so beautiful and so dear as then, and his mother's beautiful, sad face—his mother whom he loved, and whom after that night he was never to see again. Presently she came to the window, and then she saw him. Do you think she waited to blame him, to reproach him? Ah! no; she threw herself into his arms and clasped him to her heart."

"Dearest mother!" Clara said, softly.

"She went out into the air with him, and for an hour they sat talking over the future, she hiding her misery not to add to his pain. His father was away, as you are aware, so that no one knew of that interview. He told her his plans, and she prayed that he might prosper; and then she lifted her eyes, and looked him straight in the face."

"And are you happy, my darling?" she said, steadily; and how wistful, and eager, and tender the mother's face was no words of Grant Ellison's could depict."

"Did he answer her?" Clara asked, her face beautiful in its rapt, moved attention.

"He could not; he knew even then that there was no chance of happiness for him in his domestic relations. He put aside the question, smiling; but she understood the reason. She took his head in her arms, and pressed it against her bosom, and he burst into tears then, as he had often done in his childhood."

"How they must have suffered!"

"And then he had to leave her, and she begged him to be true to her, and he said that if he lived she should hear from him. But he broke his word. He could not write to her of his wretchedness, and he felt that it was better she should think him dead."

"And he said he would come back?" Clara asked eagerly.

"He said: 'If I live I will come back to you, mother,'" said Mr. Burke, unsteadily. "But she could hardly hear him; she had only strength to suffer. He lifted her in his arms, and carried her back to the drawing room; she tried to smile at him, but her head fell on his shoulder and her eyes closed. She never saw him go; he never knew how he got away."

"And he is dead?" faltered Clara.

"He said, 'If I live I will come back to you, mother,'" Mr. Burke said, huskily. "But, you see, Grant Ellison has never returned."

There was a long, long silence then. Clara's face was hidden, but her imagination had conjured up that last parting between the mother and her son, and her heart bled for that long-past misery.

Richard Burke's face was a sallow pale in the moonlight, and his strong hands had closed over the rail of the balustrade with a grip which showed how moved he was at the remembrance of the man he had known and liked on the Australian sheep-farm.

Presently he turned to Clara, and spoke in his usual manner.

"You must go back to the ball-room now," he said, cheerfully. "I have kept you out here an unconscionable time; but I hope you do not feel any chill, do you?"

"Oh! no," Clara said, rising; "but I cannot go back to the ball-room. You see, Mr. Burke," she added, trying to speak lightly, "I have been doing honor to your talent as a raconteur, and my red eyes would tell tales; besides I am not in a humor for dancing now," she added, brokenly.

"I have grieved you," he said, gently, taking her hand in his.

"Oh! no—please do not think so! One or two things you have said have made me very happy," she said, confusedly.

"You do not despise me now, do you?"

"You know why I deceived you, and you forgive the deception?"

"Would you really have been glad if he had lived?" he asked her looking down earnestly into the flushed, tear-stained face.

"Glad! Unspeakably, unutterably glad!"

"To lose Charnock and your heirship?" he pursued, with the same intent gaze.

"It would have been his by every right," she said, eagerly. "If sir Douglas had

lived, he would have altered his will, I am sure."

"But if not?" he queried.

"I would have given Grant back his own."

"You are generous; and yet, Clara, I know few who could dispense with their heirship so well as yourself."

"You are flattering me."

"No, indeed," he answered. "Clara, there are two questions I wish to ask you. Will you forgive me if one seems indiscreet?"

"What is it?"

"We will keep that for the last. The first question concerns your adopted mother. Her loss of sight—is it incurable?"

"I believe not—I hope not," she answered, earnestly. "You know it came after an illness. The London oculists give hope if she ever can make up her mind to undergo an operation, but she hesitates, and while her health is so delicate we dare not press her; but when she is stronger, I hope—I believe—she will recover her eyesight again."

"Heaven grant it!" he said earnestly, still holding her hands in his.

"And the other question, Mr. Burke?" the young girl said, after a pause.

"The other question concerns yourself," he answered, a smile curling his lips under his heavy mustache. "You will not be angry?"

"Angry with you—oh! no," said Clara, with a simplicity which showed that she intended no flattery.

"You are sure you will not?"

"Quite sure."

"Then I will risk it. Are you engaged to be married?"

The color deepened in the soft cheek.

"I am not," she said, steadily.

"And if a friend of mine—a friend whose happiness is as dear to me as my own—asks me if you are still free, if you are free to be wooed and won, may I tell him 'yes'?"

The deep, rich tones were very grave, and tender, and sweet. Clara's head drooped a little, and the small hands fluttered in his clasp.

"You may tell him 'yes,'" she said, in a voice which rose scarcely above a whisper, and a sudden, swift glance of passionate delight flashed into Richard Burke's dark, gray eyes.

He said nothing, but bowed his head low before her, bending lower and lower until it touched her hands, upon which he pressed his lips in one long, lingering, reverential kiss. She made no effort to prevent him, but stood perfectly still and motionless before him until he released her hands; and then, gathering up her white gauzy draperies, she fled away from him with the speed and lightness of a fawn.

CHAPTER XI.

For a few minutes Richard Burke stood still where Clara had left him, his face pale with the intensity of his emotion, his eyes bright with the softest love-light.

"My little darling," he said, tenderly to himself, as he bent over the balustrade—"my pure, sweet, ingenuous darling—can it be possible that such happiness is in store for me? Dare I offer her such a past as mine?"

He stood for some minutes silent and thoughtful, his face alternately grave to sadness, and brightening with a sudden, swift flash of joy; then he roused himself with an effort, and turned toward the windows to re-enter the house. As he did so there was a slight sound behind him; he turned rapidly just in time to see a dark shadow disappearing under the portico. Mr. Burke leaned over the balustrade and looked keenly around, but there was no sign of any one about.

"One of the servants probably," he said to himself, but nevertheless he waited for a few minutes, and then, seeing no one about the terrace or area, he re-entered the house, closing the window carefully after him.

Meanwhile Clara, still trembling and agitated from her interview on the terrace had managed to escape through the hall unseen and to reach her room. There she sent her maid with a message to Lady Mary, begging her to excuse her as she was very tired; and when the girl had gone to give the message, she went herself to wish Lady Ellison, who had left the ball-room a couple of hours previously, good-night.

"Is my mother asleep, Ferris?" she said, softly, at the door, but Lady Ellison's voice answered her from within.

"Ferris is down looking at the dancing, my darling. I have been waiting for you."

Clara went in quietly; thankful that Lady Ellison could not see the traces of emotion on her face.

Her adopted mother was in her bedroom, while the dressing room through which Clara passed bore marks of the maid's desire to see the dancing. Lady Ellison's rich dress was thrown carelessly on the sofa, her laces were scattered over the table, and her dressing-case and jewel-box were still open; but Clara, although her eye took in these details, paid no heed to them. She passed on into the bedroom. Lady Ellison was in her dressing-room, sitting in an arm-chair beside her bed.

"My darling!" she said, turning her face toward Clara as she entered, and holding out her hand.

The girl went to her side, and kneeling down, put her head caressingly on the blind lady's shoulder.

"Dearest mother!" she said fondly, her eyes filled with tears as she spoke at the thought of the son who had lived and died in such misery.

"Are you going to your room, Clara?" she said, tenderly. "Is the dancing over?"

"No, but I am very tired. Why are you not in bed, dear?"

"I was not sleepy. Besides, I wanted to see my little girl. Did I dream that a great many people told me that my

daughter was the belle of the ball?" she added, smiling, and putting up her hand to stroke Clara's cheek, but the girl caught it quickly, and held it in both hers.

"You dreamed it, mother!"

"Did I? Perhaps so, dear; but the voices sounded very real and lifelike, and they resembled my friend Ted's and Lord Henry Gale's voices, and Lord Ashurst's and Mr. Burke's. My darling, how you started, and how hot your hands are! Are you well, Clara?"

"Quite, mother, darling, but oh! I so tired! If I sit here much longer I shall fall asleep on your shoulder. Let me help you into bed, dear, and then I will go to my room."

"Thank you, dear," said Lady Ellison, when she was in bed. "Have a good sleep, my dearest, and good-night."

"Good-night, mother. Am I indeed your dearest!" Clara answered as she went away; and having allowed her maid to loosen her hair and replace the pretty ball-dress with a white wrapper, she dismissed her, telling her she required no more attendance that night.

As the maid was leaving the room she called her back.

"What time is it, Baxter?"

"Nearly half-past twelve, miss."

"Is that all? I thought it was nearly three."

"The dancing is to be over at one, Miss Clara. Her ladyship and Mr. Fetherstone wished it to be a very early party."

"Very well, you may go, Baxter."

When she was alone Clara, although she had complained of such great fatigue, seemed by no means anxious to retire to bed. She opened her windows, and sat looking out into the still, moonlit night in deep thought, recalling again and again the events which Mr. Burke had related to her, the tears running swiftly down her cheeks as she thought of Grant Ellison's sad fate—of his great love repaid by base treachery—his faith with betrayal. Then, from Grant Ellison her thoughts naturally turned to Richard Burke, and her heart beat quickly at the recollection of the tenderness which had come into his voice two or three times when he spoke to her—of those one or two sentences which came back to her now with a thrill of delight—of those last low-spoken words—that long, lingering kiss. Clara stooped her head as she thought, and with the prettiest and shyest of gestures she laid her cheek down where his lips had rested, and went into a dream of which the hero was tall and grave and stately, with earnest gray eyes and a splendid chestnut beard, and from which she was awakened by hearing steps and voices on the stairs and passages. Good-nights were exchanged, and after a few minutes a quiet tranquillity settled over the house—the deep, unbroken stillness of repose. A few minutes after the clock struck two.

Clara rose slowly and finished undressing; but while she plaited up her hair her cheeks grew hot at the remembrance of the subject of that dream, for our little heroine was by no means susceptible to the tender passion, nor given to sentimental musings over ideal lovers. Hitherto her heart had been untouched by any of the adoration offered to her frequently; but now she felt that her heart was hers no longer. She was not sorry; she was not ashamed. He loved her surely or he would not have spoken thus; and Clara covered her face with her hands as she thought of her answer to his question and the avowal it contained.

"He has been unhappy," she said, softly, to herself; "but I will make him so happy that he will forget all the unhappiness of the past."

Half an hour passed; the clock struck the half-hour after two, then three, but Clara still lay wakeful and sleepless on her pillow. She was not used to sleepless nights, and she grew impatient and restless, trying one by one every means of becoming sleepy of which she had heard at various times. She counted steadily up to a hundred; she repeated her multiplication-table; she drank some water; and finally jumped out of bed, half-laughing, half-impatient.

"I will take a turn in the passages," she said, slipping on her dressing-gown.

"I will go very quietly, and disturb no one."

She opened her door noiselessly and stole out. The long passages were very silent; the gas, turned down very low, made a dim light. Clara walked two or three times up and down the passages, then she went down a short flight of steps which led into the picture-gallery, on to which opened a suite of rooms, in which were situated the bed room and dressing-room occupied by Lady Ellison, the passage leading to the bachelors' wing being on the opposite side. At the foot of the steps Clara stopped, and stood looking, with wide-open, dilated eyes, at something or somebody in the picture-gallery. As she looked every shade of color faded out of the girl's face; her breath came in swift, hurried gasps; her hands were pressed to her breast, as if she were trying to stifle the rapid heart throbs. For fully five minutes she stood there, motionless, breathless, stupefied; then she turned and fled, with feet, frightened steps, back to her own room.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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