

THE WEDDING BELLS.

TELLING HER FORTUNE

By the Author of "PROVED, OR NOT PROVED"

CHAPTER XXVI.

MISS CHESTER'S PROPOSITION.

Miss Chester sat down quietly, and Sir Grant, throwing himself into a chair, covered his face with his hands. The temptation was a great and terrible one. His own misery he could have borne, but Clara's—and this way was so easy, so simple! The actress was evidently sincere; it was as much in her interest as in his, and more, therefore she would carry out the plan thoroughly.

No one knew of her identity with his wife but Ted, and Ted was brave, and true, and lead—he would never betray him. It was a sore temptation. On one side happiness with Clara; on the other loneliness, desolation, and privation.

How could he give Clara up? his darling, his happy, innocent love! How could he bring such misery upon her? how could he blight her young life? It was terrible; and yet dared he so deceive her? Dared he put such an affront upon her as to make her go through a ceremony which would be but a mockery after all? And if in the future Heaven blessed them with children, how could he look into their innocent faces, knowing that he their father, had wittingly given them a burden of shame and disgrace! He loved Clara; he loved her passionately, truly, deeply. He loved her too truly and too deeply for such deception as that.

When he lifted his head and uncovered his face, Miss Chester glanced at him. He was deadly pale, and he looked haggard and worn, as if tired with the struggle he had undergone; but the expression of lofty resolve and resignation told the designing woman that she was baffled, and her brow darkened.

"I cannot do it—I love her too well for that," he said, simply, in a voice like the voice of a man in deadly pain, and she uttered a passionate exclamation of contempt and anger.

There was a long silence; then Miss Chester rose.

"You must allow me to dismiss you," she said, coldly. "I think we have said all we need say to each other, and there is no necessity for us to meet again. My proposal was dictated by sincere interest in you. You have rejected it. Henceforth we can go our separate ways. I am almost sorry I ever disturbed your billing and cooing, but I suppose you would have discovered me sooner or later."

Sir Grant rose.

"You want nothing of me then?" he said, huskily.

"Nothing. You are a poor man, and you have prevented me becoming rich. You can give me nothing. Were I in want, I know your mother's address, and I have sufficient proofs to support my claims upon her. If"—she had moved toward the door, but now turned towards him—"if you think better of my suggestion, you can let me know. It is still open to you."

She inclined her head slightly and passed out of the room, and in a moment the smart blue-and-silver page appeared and preceded Grant to the hall door, which he opened to allow him to leave the house, with a sense of his own importance so fully impressed upon his countenance that at any other time it could not have failed to provoke a smile.

Sir Grant left the house with a dazed feeling of misery about him, which prevented him being conscious of where he was and what he was doing. He walked heedlessly, his temples throbbing madly, and his heart full of unspeakable anguish. One thought was uppermost in his mind—Clara—poor Clara!

He wandered on aimlessly until he found himself somewhere near the park, and then he stood still, hesitating. Should he go back and tell her that her suggestion was accepted, that he would strive to forget her existence, as she doubtless would forget his? Should he keep silence and marry the pure young girl he loved so passionately, and devote his life to her happiness? If he sinned, he alone should bear the punishment; surely it ought not to touch Clara? And if he made her happy, that would atone. He felt confused and wretched as he drove the temptation from him once more, and went on his way, feeling much the same as a man may feel who has just heard his sentence of death and that of one dearer to him than himself. Should he not return to her at all—should he never let his eyes rest on the fair face which made his sunshine? It would be worse perhaps. He could go away, and then write to her, it—

"Why Grant," said a laughing voice, "are you going to cut us?"

He looked up with a start, and saw that his mother's carriage had drawn up by the side of the pavement, and Clara, leaning forward, was watching him, laughing at his abstraction.

Almost mechanically he raised his hat and went toward them.

"Where were you, Grant?" Clara said, laughing. "Miles away from Piccadilly certainly. Jump in, we'll give you a seat home."

He obeyed her, forcing himself to make some light reply.

"You look very tired, Grant," his mother said, gently.

"I have been walking all over London, I believe," he said, carelessly. "I lost my way in some benighted region, where Clara's favorite haunts are unknown. Have you paid your calls, *madre*?"

He was looking at his mother, for Clara's eyes, with their keen, tender scrutiny, were fixed upon his face, and he could not meet them. Lady Ellison answered smilingly, and a disjointed conversation was kept up until they reached the house, when the dressing bell was on the point of sounding, and they were obliged to disperse to their dressing rooms.

Clara was the first person to appear in the drawing-room; perhaps she had hoped to have a few minutes' conversation with Grant before any of the others came down; but if so, she was disappointed, for he was the very last to make his appearance; and then, although he looked very pale, and complained of fatigue, he seemed to be in very good spirits, laughing and talking incessantly during dinner in a manner which somewhat reassured Clara, who was anxious about his altered looks.

It was only when he and Ted were alone that the forced hilarity broke down, and he buried his head in his hands with a groan, which went to his friend's heart.

"Grant, old fellow, this is terrible," he said, huskily.

"And there is worse to come," Sir Grant said, gloomily. "If I could spare her—if I could spare her! Even now it breaks my heart to see her eyes watching me, as if she guessed what is in store for her. Ted, be good to her—ask Gracie to be good to her when I am gone."

"Gone—you are going, then?"

"Yes; I am going to-morrow morning. I shall see my mother to-night, and to-morrow morning early I shall get away. Do I seem a very contemptible coward to you, Ted? Great Heaven!" he rose with a cry of misery, which broke unchecked from his lips. "It would be as easy to plunge a dagger into my darling's heart as to tell her the truth, and see the sunshine die out of her face."

"Grant, my poor, poor fellow!" said Ted, huskily, his blue eyes dim with tears; there was a long and painful silence.

Then Sir Grant rose, with a little laugh, which sounded more painful to Ted's ears than the broken cry of agony had done.

"Come," he said, lightly, "let us join the ladies. Let me have one more taste of heaven before I go out into the blackness of despair."

His voice broke, and as they passed up the stairs together he caught once at Ted's arm to steady himself, and Ted Fetherstone marveled a little at the mighty passion of that love—at the force of that despair which could so utterly unnerve a man, strong of purpose and powerful of frame as Grant Ellison was.

The drawing-room, with the soft wax lights and the graceful women in their pretty evening dresses, made a pleasant and attractive picture. Lady Mary and her hostesses were sitting over the fire; Gracie and Clara, with Mr. Fetherstone and his brother, were grouped around the centre table, looking at some photographs of Italian pictures, which Ted and his bride had brought back from their honeymoon trip. The young men joined them—Ted going to his wife's side, while Sir Grant stood near Mr. John Fetherstone, his eyes, with that unutterable yearning in their depth, glancing over at Clara, although he did not seek her side.

Presently, when coffee had been served, Mr. Fetherstone and his brother excused themselves and went out together, while Lady Ellison and Lady Mary settled down to a comfortable chat before the fire, one lady initiating the other into the mysteries of a new knitting-stitch. Then Ted drew Gracie down beside him on the sofa, with a feeling of intense thankfulness that nothing could come between them; and Clara, going to Sir Grant's side, slipped her hand through his arm.

"Come and have some music," she said, caressingly. "I have got half a dozen new songs, Grant, and one or two of them would suit you to perfection."

He went with her into the smaller drawing-room, where the piano was placed, and as she bent down to get her music, she motioned him to sit down in a deep arm-chair drawn up near the piano.

"Sit down there and I will sing to you," she said, smiling. "You look tired to death, Grant, and I shall take upon myself to send you early to bed."

"Shall you, my darling?" he answered, with a faint smile; "yet it will rest me ever so much better to sit here and listen to your singing."

"Will it? Then I will give you half an hour," she replied, lightly, as she placed some music on the piano and turned to him.

"Only half an hour to-night!" he said, with unconscious emphasis.

"Why longer to-night than any other?" she said, laughing.

"Ah! why indeed? What song is that, Clara?"

"The Lost Chord—your favorite."

"Are you going to sing it to me, sweet?"

"If you like. Do you like, Grant?" she asked, leaning a little toward him, the sweet, red lips in tempting proximity to his own.

"My darling!" he murmured, fondly, and drew her toward him to press his lips to her own; but suddenly he remembered that he had no right now to press those sweet lips, and he drew back hastily.

Clara looked up astonished.

"What is the matter, Grant? Have I vexed you?" she said, earnestly.

"Of course not, childie," he answered, forcing a laugh. "How could you?"

She turned to the piano, and for fully half an hour her rich, sweet voice rose and fell, filling the room with melody; Sir Grant lay back wearily in his chair, and shaded his face with his hand, thinking that it was the last time he should hear that beautiful voice, which was sweetest music in his ears—the last time for years, perhaps for ever, that his eyes should dwell on that fair face and graceful figure.

When she had finished she turned to him.

"There," she said, gayly, "have I not been good? Are you not going to reward me, Grant?"

"How, my dearest?"

"By singing me just one song. I won't ask you for more to-night."

She left her seat on the music stool and he took it. Clara standing behind him, put both little hands on his shoulders.

"What shall it be, my Clara?" he asked, huskily.

"My favorite—'In the Gloaming,' she answered, smiling.

"Will you, Clara—will you?" said Grant, softly, turning to her for a moment; and Clara stooped her soft cheek against him for a moment.

"In the gloaming, O, my darling, Think not bitterly of me, Though I passed away in silence, Left you lonely, set you free, For my heart was crushed with longing— What had been could never be, It was best to leave you thus, dear— Best for you and best for me; It was best to leave you thus— Best for you and best for me."

"Your voice is a little husky, Grant," said poor unconscious Clara, tenderly. "I am afraid you have caught cold."

"You like that song, Clara?"

"You know I do, Grant."

"Would you think bitterly of a lover who left you lonely, set you free?" he asked, in a low voice of pain.

"It would depend on his reasons for doing so," she answered, wistfully, and the beautiful eyes sought his face anxiously. "But in any case, Grant, I would rather he did not pass away in silence."

"Why, my darling?"

"Because in that case I should be tempted to think that he did not love me," she answered, in a soft whisper, and Grant drew her close to him in silence.

"Come, young people, it is bed time," said Lady Ellison's voice in the other room, and Clara felt Sir Grant's start of surprise, and a kind of shudder which ran through him as he released her from his arms, but still held her hand in his as they went into the adjoining room.

And then they separated for the night the ladies going first. Ted, lingering a little saw how Sir Grant took Clara for a moment in his arms, and without a word pressed his lips to her brow in one long, lingering, passionate kiss. Then releasing her suddenly, he turned away in the same unbroken silence, and Ted caught one wistful, questioning glance from the girl's brown eyes as she, left the room.

"What are you going to do, Grant?" he said, gently, when he was alone with his friend in the drawing-room, and Grant stood with his elbows on the mantel piece, his face buried in his hands.

"I am going to write to—to her," he said, lifting his head, and meeting Ted's blue eyes, he laughed bitterly.

"Oh! do not be afraid," he said: "I shall not do anything rash, and—there is no water here!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

"TELL ME ALL ABOUT IT, GRANT."

An hour passed—sixty long minutes had dragged their weary moments away—but Grant Ellison still sat in the deserted drawing-room with his head in his hands, trying to think of the words in which he should break the truth to Clara, wondering how he should tell her. For himself he had almost ceased to suffer—the agony with which he had pressed his last kiss against Clara's white brow, had held her in his arms for the last time, had deadened all other suffering in him; but the thought of hers almost broke his heart.

Stronger than ever the temptation with which the woman he had married in his rash, impetuous youth had assailed him a few hours before, recurred to him now. Why should he suffer so terribly? Why, above all, should he break his darling's heart, when suffering to her at least, could be avoided? Why not hold his peace now and forever? She—that base, treacherous woman—would never break the alliance which would give her the vast wealth she was longing to grasp. The secret would be safe with Ted. Once he decided that it should be so; that when morning came he would go to the villa in St. John's Wood, and tell her that he would accept her proposal, that it should be as she wished—that that awful, irrevocable past should be buried out of sight for ever.

But the next moment Clara's innocent, loving eyes rose before him, reproachful and upbraiding him for the wrong he was contemplating; with a groan which he could not repress, he threw himself once more into the chair from which he had risen, and crossing his arms on the table, buried his head upon them, and the silence in the room was broken by a sound of smothered, choked sobs, evidences of a strong man's agony.

How long Grant Ellison sat there he never knew—hours might have passed or only minutes—when he became suddenly aware that he was not alone, and lifting his head with a start, he met Clara's piteous, pleading, sorrowful, brown eyes.

She was kneeling beside him, still wearing the blue velvet dress she had worn during the evening, the gold collar round her throat, the soft lace falling over her wrists, and on the little hand which stole up in mute sympathy and tenderness to his neck the great diamonds of her betrothal-ring flashed and gleamed.

"Clara!" Sir Grant said, in a low voice of pain.

"Yes, Clara," she answered, softly, and then two white, tender arms crept up about his neck, and the sweet tender voice whispered:

"Now, Grant, tell me all about it."

Grant could not speak; he drew her up into his arms with one passionate movement, then bowing his head upon her shoulder, he burst into tears.

"Grant!" the girl said, brokenly, "oh Grant, my darling!—my darling!"

And she folded her arms round him, and drew his head down on her breast with a tenderness almost motherly in its perfect love, its intense compassion. She did not ask him any question—she knew that as soon as he was able to speak he would tell her; and although her heart was full of terrible dread and fear, she did not give way, she saw that he wanted all her assistance to regain his own calmness.

Presently he lifted his head, and looked at her with weary, miserable, anguished eyes.

"Forgive me," he said, hoarsely—"forgive me, Clara!"

"There is nothing to forgive, dear," she answered, softly. "Are you able to tell me now, Grant?"

"To tell you—what?" he said.

"What is grieving you, dear," she answered, steadily.

And with a passionate gesture of pain, Grant started to his feet, and loosened his clasp of her.

Clara rose also, her face very white, her lips tremulous, but he did not look at her—only with faltering, unsteady steps, he turned toward the door.

"Let me go!" he said, hoarsely. "Let me go!"

One spring, and Clara stood slim and

straight, but trembling violently, before the door, barring it with one slight arm.

"I cannot let you go, Grant," she said, steadily. "Not thus—not thus!"

He turned from her with a despairing gesture of pain, and went back to the fire. It was unpeppable agony to him to see her, and to know that with his own hand he must deal the blow which would kill her happiness for ever.

She came slowly toward him, and laid her clasped hands upon his breast.

"Grant," she said, very gently, "tell me; whatever it is, I can bear it."

"Ah! Clara you little know!" he said, brokenly.

"I know that only something very terrible could move you thus, Grant," she answered, in a voice of the deepest tenderness. "Perhaps, when you have told me, it will seem easier."

"Easier?"

"Yes," she answered, steadily although her heart sank with foreboding, at the bitter, harsh laugh which broke from him. "Tell me, Grant."

She put her arm caressingly on his arm, and pushed him gently into a great arm-chair; then she knelt down beside him and rested her head against his arm.

"Tell me," she repeated, softly.

"I cannot—I cannot!" he said, brokenly.

"O, Clara! why did you come here to-night?"

"Because I saw you were in trouble, and it was my duty to share that trouble," she said, tremulously. Then her calmness gave way a little, and she caught at him with both hands. "O, Grant! I am afraid—I am afraid!"

He put his arm round her and drew her close to him in silence, laying his cheek against her soft brown hair, and the girl shivered and nestled close to him, while swift as light a thought passed through her mind: "What dreadful thing could touch them while they had each other?"

"Tell me, Grant," she said presently; and then, with his lips growing white with pain, he bends his head over her and tells her.

"My darling," he said, brokenly, "it would be easier for me to cut off my right hand than to tell you this; but you must know it, and forgive me, if you can, for the pain I have unwittingly and unwillingly given you. Sweetheart, you believe, do you not—you believe that it breaks my heart to hurt you?"

"Dear Grant, yes; but nothing can hurt me much while you are with me and well."

The tender, loving words, the sweet, upturned glance, made his hard task yet harder. He shivers, and his arms clasp her yet more closely.

"My darling!" he murmurs, passionately. "Clara, help me a little, dear. I cannot—I cannot say it!"

His terrible emotion makes her tremble, and she shrinks from him a little.

"Clara—Clara!" he cries, passionately. "Great Heaven! how can I tell her?"

"What is it, Grant? I cannot bear this," she says, brokenly, and her head falls against him, her slender frame trembling and shaking with passionate sobs.

He bends over her, and with strong, gentle hands lifts her from the floor and places her in a chair, a wide, deep arm-chair, in which the slender frame looks very small and childlike.

"My darling!" he says, softly. "Think—what could come between us?"

"Nothing," she moans; "I can think of nothing."

"Think again, sweet."

"Only—only this," she says, with a low cry of pain. "Is it that you have ceased to love me?"

"While I have life I shall have love for you," he answers, brokenly. "Darling, it is cruel to distress you thus; and yet, if you could know how it breaks my heart to give you pain!"

"I know, I know. Tell me, Grant."

"My child, think just once more; think of my past life. Think what mad act of folly committed then could affect us now."

Into the great brown eyes which are scrutinizing his face with such eagerness, comes a sudden horror—a dread which drains the color from her lips, and makes her shrink back from him.

"But—" she says, tremulously; then her voice falls, and she looks at him mutely, with wide-dilated, horror-stricken eyes. "But, Grant, she is dead."

"My darling, she lives still!"

"Lives!" She raised her hands to her head, and pushed back the soft hair from her brow with a wild gesture of misery.

"Lives! When—how did you know it?"

"Clara, that woman we saw together last night—the actress—she is the woman I married."

"She!"

The cry broke from her with a wild, passionate wail, which went to Grant's heart, and she cowered back in her chair, trembling in every limb, her face colorless as death, her breath coming in gasps.

"Clara, my darling!" he cried; "do not, for pity's sake—my heart's life, be brave now!"

The anguish on his face, the intensity of misery, made her strong for him. She covered her face for a moment with her hands, and when she lifted it she was very pale, but calm.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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