

# THE WEDDING BELLS;

OR,

## TELLING HER FORTUNE.

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

### CHAPTER XIV.

The day passed slowly and heavily; a sense of mystery and oppression hung over Featherstone Hall and its inmates. Mr. Graves, the superintendent, arrived promptly, and he was closeted for some time with Mr. Featherstone and his brother. Then a strict search over the entire house was instituted, the ladies and gentlemen submitting willingly to allow their wardrobes and trunks to be searched, in order to prevent the household feeling hurt at the investigation. But nothing was found, and the police-officer's stolid face bore an expression of perplexity which rather amused Ted.

Olara kept her room, suffering. Sylvia said, from a nervous headache which had completely prostrated her. Lady Ellison, anxious about Olara, and perplexed about her loss, tried vainly to recover her usual serenity, and sat with Lady Mary in her boudoir, talking about everything but the robbery of which their thoughts were so full.

Late in the afternoon Mr. John Featherstone and Mr. Burke drove off to the station, accompanied by Ted; and just as the dog-cart which was to take them to the station was driven round from the stables Olara awoke from a troubled doze into which she had fallen, and lifted her head from her pillows.

Sylvia was sitting by her reading, and at Olara's movement she started up.

"Is your head better, dear?"

"A little," the girl answered, languidly. "Is any one going away, Sylvia?"

"Only Mr. Burke," Sylvia said, excitedly.

"Mr. Burke?" repeated Olara, sinking back, her face as white as the pillows against which she lay. "Why—why—why?"

The pale, parched lips refused to finish the sentence. Sylvia bent down anxiously.

"He is only going away for a day or two on business," she said, hastily; and Olara caught her hand.

"You are sure—you are sure?" she said, faintly.

"Quite, dearest."

"Is it not sudden?"

"Yes, I think so. Uncle John is going also."

"O, Sylvia—Sylvia!" Olara cried, suddenly; and clasping her friend closely to her, she burst into a cruel passion of tears.

Two or three days passed in the same dreary, oppressive manner. The wedding guests departed. Letters came from the happy pair in Paris, which brightened up Lady Mary immensely. Olara Frith had come down-stairs again, looking very white and fragile, and showing a strange reserve of manner unusual to her, also carefully avoiding the mention of the lost jewels. If the theft were spoken of before her, she would flush and grow pale alternately, and such a fit of shivering would seize her, that by tacit consent they were silent in her presence on the subject.

As yet nothing had transpired; the theft remained surrounded by perfect mystery. All investigation had been of no avail—the strict search had been fruitless; and when Mr. Burke returned alone on the third day after his departure, they were as far as ever from discovering the truth.

Ted's friend, as he was still very generally called by the Featherstones, drove up, looking very handsome and far brighter than he had ever seemed before. Whatever business had taken him away, it had evidently had a satisfactory termination. Ted, who went out on the wide stone

steps to meet him, put his hand affectionately on his shoulder.

"How is she?" were Mr. Burke's first words.

"Who?—Olara, or your—"

But Mr. Burke's hasty movement prevented him completing the sentence.

"Olara, of course! Ted, be careful!" said Mr. Burke, with a quick glance around.

"Olara is better; she is down-stairs again. Why, there's no one to hear us, old fellow. Dick, was it all right down there?"

"Yes; thank Heaven, there was no mistake!" And standing on the stone steps, Mr. Burke drew a long breath of relief; then arm-in-arm they entered the house together.

"Uncle John has come up to town, then?" said Ted, as they crossed the outer hall.

"Yes; he was anxious to settle some business there," replied Dick; and they entered the inner hall, where Sylvia was presiding over five-o'clock tea; and when the home party were gathered, Sylvia, very bright and pretty, with Charles Dashwood in attendance, looked up and smiled a welcome to her brother's friend, who crossed the hall to greet Lady Mary, who was standing on a great fur rug which was thrown down before the old-fashioned hearth. Beside her stood Olara, tea cup in hand, and Lady Mary saw that though the girl's face had been white as death, as the young man entered a bright red spot appeared on each cheek, and a sudden flush came into her soft brown eyes.

Stopping for a moment to exchange a cordial hand-clasp with Mr. Featherstone, Dick went up to Lady Mary, while he gave one swift glance—eager, passionate, tender—at the girl's figure by her side. "I am very glad to see you back, Mr. Burke," her ladyship said, cordially. "We have missed you greatly, have we not, Olara?"

Olara made no answer; it seemed as if she had not heard the question; but Lady Ellison, who occupied a low seat near the high, carved oak mantel, answered for her.

"Greatly," she said, in her low, sweet voice; and going to her side, Richard Burke took her hand in his, and bending, brushed it softly with his lips with the graceful courtesy and chivalry of a former age. Then he went back to the rug, and put out his hand.

"I am glad to see you so much better," he said, in a low tone of unutterable tenderness, with his gray-blue eyes fixed on the girl's fair face. "You are better, are you not?"

Olara said nothing, neither did she make any movement to put her hand in his. Suddenly, and still in the same unbroken silence, she lifted her eyes, and looked him full in the face; and while his countenance expressed nothing but the utmost tenderness and the most unspeakable love, hers was full of the cruellest contempt, the bitterest anger.

For a moment she looked at him, surveying him from head to foot as she might have done a stranger who had grossly insulted her; then she turned scornfully and silently away, crossed the hall, and disappeared up the wide oaken staircase.

Lady Mary and Mr. Burke looked at each other in surprise, mingled, on Mr. Burke's face, with an expression of keen pain; while Ted's face flushed angrily at this insult to his friend. He started forward impetuously, but Dick's hand on his arm, and a meaning glance at Lady Ellison, who was, of course, unaware of

Olara's strange conduct, stayed the angry words on his lips.

Still, it was very strange! What could such a reception mean?

### CHAPTER XV.

"I KNOW WHO STOLE THE JEWELS."

"It is no use, old fellow; I have made a terrible mistake, and must suffer the consequences. I shall give it up and go away."

"Nonsense, Dick; there must be some mystery or other. The girl evidently liked you, and she is not one of those to change her mind."

"Who shall fathom the mystery of a woman's caprice?" said Mr. Burke, with a faint smile. "She thought she liked me for a time, I suppose. But I was a fool to think that I goodwin the love of a young girl."

"A fool—why?" said Ted Featherstone, hastily. "Why should you not win her love? She is either coquetting with you or she does not know her own mind. At any rate, there is no one else, and not the slightest necessity for you to give it up; and as for going away, that is out of the question."

"Why is it out of the question?" said Mr. Burke, wearily, leaning his head on his hand as he sat by the window and looked out on the grounds, where Sylvia and Charles, Olara and one of the younger lads, were playing lawn-bennis.

"Because, rather than let you go, I will make a clean breast of everything," said Ted, moodily.

His friend smiled sadly.

"You won't do that, Ted," he said, quietly. "I am not afraid of your betraying me. No man could have a truer friend than you have been to me ever since I saw you first. Do you remember it?"

"I remember it, and how you and Fred Farrell nursed me through that lung fever. Don't talk of friendship, Dick—I call you Dick still, you see. I owe my life to you twice over, and it is yours to dispose of as you will."

Their hands met in a strong, close clasp. Dick smiled.

"I think Miss Allen will have something to do with the disposal of your life, old fellow," he said, lightly. "Don't make such a complete surrender of it, Ted."

Ted Featherstone laughed; then his eyes followed the direction of his friend's, and dwelt upon Olara's graceful figure.

"She is evidently awfully unhappy," he said, meditatively. "I never saw a girl so changed in a few days. She cannot be fretting about the jewels, for I never saw a girl care less about trinkets and gew-gaws. I believe she is unhappy about you, Dick."

The other shook his head sadly.

"No; unless she is sorry to have to cause me pain. She has a tender heart, dear child."

"And yet she treats you so vilely," said Ted, angrily. "Upon my word, Dick, if you would let me, I'd give her a piece of my mind on the subject. For as I am of Olara, I cannot justify or excuse her insolence."

"It is not her insolence," Mr. Burke said, sadly. "It is not Olara's fault, she acts thus. It is some unconscious prejudice and dislike which have existed here during the last day or two. She has hate me for my presumption, but I think, if she knew the pain she causes, she would not act thus."

"She has little idea!" said Ted, savagely.

"Don't let your friendship for me make you unjust, old fellow," said Mr. Burke, quietly. "She is one of the sweetest, truest, noblest creatures I ever knew. Nay, it will not make me a worse man for having loved her, even if it make me a sadder one. Did I tell you how, the other evening—your sister's wedding day—it was—she told me how she had tried to find out Grant Ellison—how she had, unknown to his mother, employed a Jew-

yer to make every inquiry? And great tears ran down her cheeks as she told me how vain the search had been. If you could guess, Ted, what a restraint I had to put on myself not to take her in my arms and kiss those tears away," he continued, with a slight laugh, "you would think me a greater stupid than ever, unless a fellow-feeling makes you wondrous kind."

"Will you let me speak to her, Dick?" "Not for worlds."

"Why?"

"Old fellow, surely you can see that this is a matter in which no third person can meddle!"

"Then will you speak to her yourself?" Ted said, eagerly.

"How can I? She avoids me in every way. If I address her she makes no answer," Mr. Burke answered, wearily; then rising impetuously, he added, "I wish it was over. Let me go away, Ted—I only sink deeper and deeper into the mire here. I love her madly and hopelessly. While I remain here, while I am where I can see her, where I can dwell upon her sweetest, I shall never cure myself of such a mad passion. Let me go away, and perhaps—"

He broke off huskily, and sitting down by the table, covered his face with his hands.

Ted Featherstone went softly to his side, and put his hand affectionately on his shoulder.

"Old friend, dear old friend," he said, hoarsely.

In a few minutes Mr. Burke removed his hands from his face and looked up with a slight, bitter laugh.

"You see what I shall come to if I stay here much longer," he said, unsteadily. "I had let myself dwell upon the hope more than I thought. I had pictured our happiness, here and mine, and—Lady Ellison's; but it is all a folly—all a mad, foolish dream. Let me get away from it all—let me go back to the old life. It is all I am fit for—all I can hope for now."

"And your mother?" said Ted, very quietly.

Richard Burke's face flushed, and he turned away. There was a moment's silence, then Ted spoke again, in the same quiet, earnest voice.

"Listen to me, Dick," he said. "You are older and wiser than I am, and no doubt you know your own affairs the best; but if you will take my advice in this, I think you will not repent it."

"What do you advise me to do?" Dick asked, calmly.

"This: see Olara alone, and insist on receiving an explanation of her conduct to you. You have every right to demand it. She had shown a preference for your society; she had given you permission to love her; she has no right to withdraw it and to insult you without reason."

"How can I see her? She shuns me like a pestilence."

"I will manage that. Will you let me?"

"If you will; but, Ted," and Mr. Burke smiled faintly, "I may as well tell you beforehand that I shall be as wax to her hands."

"Not you," said Ted, laughing. "To-morrow, when the party for Arundel goes, take some excuse and remain behind. It is not going. Lady Ellison thought you would be too fatiguing for her. I am going to stay at home, and between us we shall bring this refractory young lady to a sense of her iniquities."

This conversation took place some three days after Mr. Burke's return, and during that time he had treated him with the same uncomplaisant opinion and insolence. She never spoke to him, she never looked at him; she avoided him in every possible manner, and a slight bow morning and evening was the only notice she ever took of his presence. Had Mr. Featherstone and his wife been less pre-occupied they might have commented upon this conduct; but the host was concerned in trying to make some discovery about the jewel robbery, and Lady Mary was anxious about one of her children