

The Victim.

"Hand me the bowl, ye jovial band! He said—"twill rouse my mirth;"

SELECT STORY. Bought With a Price. (CONTINUED.) WEDDING CHIMES.

HE morning brought no comfort to Lilly. Estelle, it is true, showed no traces of last night's stormy grief, but she shrank from Lilly's touch; yet a stranger, looking at those two young girls, would have thought that Lilly had done something of which she felt ashamed.

But Lilly had a task at which she quailed. That fatal letter must be written to Neville, and hers must be the hand to deal the blow! It must not be delayed, either, for she knew the tidings would soon be spread far and wide, and may reach Neville's ears.

The squire came that morning, and had an interview with the vicar. After that, Estelle was sent for, and Lilly knew that her father had given his consent.

Dear papa!—he little knows what treachery this is to Neville.

But, in truth, the vicar had been somewhat astonished at the squire's request. He wondered what his beautiful Estelle could see to love in this middle-aged man. That she was marrying him for his wealth, never entered his mind.

You are sure you love him, my dear? the vicar had asked.

Estelle would have preferred that this question had not been put to her. She would have avoided it if she could, but her uncle waited her reply. So this false girl further perjured herself by replying, "I do."

The squire would hear of no delay. There was nothing to retard their marriage, and he begged Estelle would name an early day. To his delight, his fair "fiancee" made no objection. She also wished her marriage to take place without delay.

You will be able to wait till Neville returns, my love, I hope. I have just heard from him—only a few lines, in which he says that he shall be away from England for a few weeks.

Estelle was therefore all eagerness for her marriage to be over before Neville's return.

Lilly's letter was written and sent. She had broken the sad tidings as gently as possible, but she knew that, strive as she would, the blow would be a bitter one.

She was sick at heart, as day after day passed, and Estelle's wedding-day approached.

The squire was seldom apart from his bride elect.

Her suite of rooms were being prepared under her own directions, and there needed continual visits to be made to them.

These were being most gorgeously furnished.

Then there was the purchasing of her own especial pony carriage, and the ponies themselves were found difficult animals to find.

Estelle was determined the ponies should be perfect, no matter what the cost.

Then there was the presents to be admired.

The squire's were especially costly, and Estelle began to congratulate herself on the wisdom of her choice.

Besides these multitudinous engagements, the bride elect was obliged to respond to the congratulations which poured in upon her from the people of Ashton.

The wife of the millionaire would be a great personage among them.

There was a great drawback to this wedding in Estelle's imagination.

She would have liked a grand wedding, to be accompanied by a fair "cortege" of attendants and bridesmaids, and for the ceremony to be performed by one bishop at least.

But this could not be if she were married from her uncle's house, and even Estelle did not care to shock the proprieties of all Ashton by being married from the Manor House, as the squire proposed.

It was a source of annoyance to him that he could not make the day one of great display.

But they decided at length, to compromise the matter, by letting it be known that all festivities attending the wedding, would be deferred till their return from the wedding tour.

Estelle's trousseau was also left till they should reach Paris, so nothing remained, but to perform the ceremony.

The night before the wedding, Estelle once more held a battle with her good angel.

A letter had just reached her from Neville.

From it she found that Lilly's letter had never been received.

In it he told her of his success in the case which he had undertaken, and then added—

I have ventured to disobey you, this once, my own darling girl, and have written to you. I know how glad you will be to hear that henceforth my prospects are secured.

Estelle rose from her chair, with the intention of telling her uncle all, and begging him to release her from her present dilemma, when accidentally, her eye lighted on a magnificent sapphire cross, sent by the squire only that afternoon.

No, she added, I cannot draw back. What, give up these costly jewels! Oh, Neville! she moaned, wringing her hands in agony. Why, are you not rich enough to give me these things? I cannot part with them—it is asking too much.

Not a sign of any emotion did Estelle show on her wedding morning.

She had at all times a royal way of wearing her beauty, but to-day she looked more regal than ever.

Lilly was one of her bridesmaids. She could not well refuse, for her father knew of no reason why she should object.

The bridesmaids were well content to wait for their ball till the bride's return.

It was only a postponing of the conquests they looked to make in their wedding dresses.

He at all times bears but a secondary part at his own wedding.

All Ashton, however, was at the wedding.

Rich and poor alike flocked to see the bride of this mighty millionaire.

These who saw her were almost awestruck at her beauty.

Very lovely she looked as she took her place by the middle-aged man who was to be her husband.

Old enough to be her father, murmured one old crone.

It is clear why she be having him, returned another.

She be as beautiful as an angel, was the verdict of another.

Although the wedding was shorn of much of its glory in Estelle's opinion, she had no mind to detract from her own appearance.

The momentous words had been uttered; and the village bells rang out right merrily!

The bride and bridegroom were to begin their journey at once.

They were to drive to the station, in one of the new carriages which the squire had bought for his bride.

The servants were in new liveries, and looked quite imposing.

The carriage—with its positions in wedding favours—and the four greys, with white rosettes at their ears, dashed up to the station, just as the London train came in.

A wedding, by Jove! exclaimed a traveller, the only one who stopped at Ashton.

It must be some great swell, by that turnout! Who can it be, in Ashton? Those are certainly the village church bells.

What a row they are making—they almost deafen one. What deference Symes, the station-master, is paying them! I declare there is a saloon-carriage put on for their highnesses. I will just wait and get a peep at them—we do not have such swells in Ashton every day.

It will not keep me long from my darling! How I long to see her dear face! How astonished she will be to see me! I just want to see the joy spring into her face at the sight of me.

So here comes the bridegroom. A snob, one can see at a glance! Rich, I suppose, but I should not fancy him a very delightful husband.

But here is the bride! Young—far too young for that old hunk. I hope she will lift her veil. I should like to see her face. Wonder if it is anyone belonging to Ashton. Her figure is too queenly for anyone that I know—except my own precious love's.

Ah, ah! you old rascal! you need not smirk and grin like that. You are not the only one to be married. I shall soon follow your example. I hope I shall make a more presentable bridegroom than you.

But here the traveller laughed, gleefully to himself. What makes me so jealous of the old fellow, I wonder! One would think he had stolen my bride. How my darling will laugh, when I tell her. There! I thought she would show her face.

Good God! he gasped, and reeled against the fence.

Chapter VIII. A HEAVY BLOW.

HE midnight train was due at Ashton. The huge monster had just come puffing into the station, when a passenger was seen approaching.

He came on at so slow a pace, that one of the porters shouted out that he would lose his place if he did not hurry.

The passenger was looked at curiously as he entered the station. His hat was slouched down over his eyes, and the collar of his coat so turned up that no portion of his face scarcely could be seen.

He walked, too, as if the effort was too much for him.

His figure was bowed, as if with age, though it was not that of an old man. Even had not the porters been too busy in the morning with the wedding party to notice their one passenger to Ashton, they would never have recognized this one returning by the midnight train as the same.

It is doubtful whether even those near and dear to him would have passed him by, so changed had he become in a few hours.

Oh! grief hath changed me since you saw me last. And careful hours with time's deformed hand, Have written strange defeatures in my face.

But what had become of this one passenger during these hours since the morning when he had alighted from his carriage with such a buoyant step of youth and happiness? Why, too, at the sight of the bride's face, had he become suddenly stricken as if a death-blow had been dealt him?

Why? Because that fair young bride was the same beautiful girl who a few months before, had pledged her troth-pledge to him—the same to whom he had been hastening with loving ardour to claim the fulfilment of that pledge.

Neville, for he it was, knew then that his love had been betrayed. She, upon whom he had framed the whole scheme of his future life, and on whom he had looked to sweeten all his future joys and cares, had proved treacherous to her troth.

Her wedding bells even now sounded in his ears, but how they seemed to be his own death-knell.

Estelle little recked of the mortal agony which was rending that true and faithful heart so near her. Perhaps it was well for her coming triumphs that she should not have seen that stricken, wan-looking face beholding her.

As the train moved on, bearing the millionaire and his bride along with it, Neville reeled from the spot, only eager for the moment to hide his anguish from prying eyes.

There were outhouses near, solitary enough even for his purpose, and in one of them the stricken man found shelter.

There, for hours he remained prostrate upon his face, and wrestled with his grief.

Now and then a convulsive shudder shook his frame, but no loud wailings proceeded from him.

His hands were clenched so tightly above his head that the nails had penetrated his flesh, and yet he heeded it not. So he remained till night came on, and the same instinct which sends a stricken lion to his lair, made him eager to reach his own.

Then it was he had returned to the station, in time for the midnight train.

His chambers reached, a feeling of relief came over him, that here he was safe from human pity. No one had recognized him. No one knew of that day's mortal agony.

No human eye had witnessed this dark hour of his life. Neville did not intend this grief to shackle his faculties and weaken his prowess in the battle of life.

No, he would combat it and conquer. The wound should not remain gaping in the sight of the world.

He would cover it up till healed, though he knew the scar would be there.

The next morning he went about his business affairs much as usual. The only change was, that, if possible, he paid more attention to them than he was in the habit of doing.

The clerks were startled at the extra care with which he inspected their work.

His brother barristers noted with admiration the keenness with which he solved a knotty point under dispute.

But none of them guessed at the bleeding heart that beat under that calm exterior.

As Neville had written to Estelle, his success was now a thing secured.

His first brief had brought him into public notice in a manner, peculiarly calculated to test his skill.

He was retained for a case which caused much notoriety and diversity of opinion.

It had first been intended to have been placed in the hands of one of the leading members of the law courts, but sudden illness had compelled this one to relinquish it.

He had recommended Neville as his substitute, having had some knowledge of him, and knowing that he would be in time an honour to their profession.

To Neville this trust was especially gratifying. His patron must be made to see that he had not been deceived in him.

But there was soon another incentive for him to succeed. Neville, even on his first interview with his unfortunate client, became greatly interested in him.

He felt sure of his innocence, but so dark and intricate was the mystery surrounding the crime with which he was charged, that Neville knew that he must bring all his sagacity and prescience to bear upon it.

He had also to make a journey to the continent to collect evidence, for so subtle and skilful had the web of circumstantial evidence, been woven round his client, that Neville dared not trust the unravelling to other hands than his own.

The attorney who had employed Neville, held but faint hopes of clearing his client from the charge.

The case was briefly this:—A wealthy West India planter had lately returned to England. He had always been of an eccentric turn of mind so that when he took possession of an estate—Whorthing Priory—which he had purchased, he had at first refused to respond to the friendly intercourse of his neighbors.

These therefore left him to the seclusion he sought; but finding in time that a recluse's life was not to his taste, he bethought him of looking up some of his relations.

His solicitor was appealed to, and in the end he had invited two nephews, both sons of his two only remaining sisters, to visit him at the Priory.

He refused to see or hold intercourse with any other member of the family.

Mr. Maitland had come to the determination of founding a family, and as he had no intention of marrying, he decided that one of his nephews should instead, and that one should be his heir. For this purpose they should be his guests, and so give him an opportunity of judging their characters.

Not that he intended they should know his design till his decision was made.

The young men both arrived on the same day. Though cousins, it was their first meeting. They were much of an age, equal in height, and both possessing much personal beauty.

Their uncle treated them both alike, though Fred Annesley paid him by far the greatest deference.

Lawrence was sorely troubled, but determined no longer to remain his uncle's guest.

That night Lawrence left the Priory and the next morning his uncle was found dead—stabbed to the heart in his sleep.

The knife with which the deed was done was proved to be Lawrence's.

His stealing off as he had done was against him also.

Then there was the quarrel with his uncle overheard by the servants.

This was the case as told by Lawrence to Neville.

The young barrister's suspicions rested on Fred Annesley, though it was proved he was miles away the night of the murder.

There were several witnesses who had seen him in various parts of London.

If Lawrence Hamilton was proved guilty, then his cousin, Fred Annesley, would inherit his uncle's wealth.

This was the dark deed which Neville's skill was to bring to light.

And in the end, he did bring it to light, and proved that Fred Annesley, and not his client, was the perpetrator of the murder.

How he proved it, matters not. Fred Annesley had never left the Priory, but was all the time secreted in a room, which was unknown to anyone but himself, and which communicated with his uncle's room.

He it was who had been Lawrence's accuser, and had placed the money in the place where it was found.

He also, had murdered his uncle, probably to prevent his own villainy from becoming known, and also to make sure there should be no reconciliation between his uncle and Lawrence.

The one who was thought to have been Fred Annesley, whom many were prepared to swear was miles from the spot, was discovered to be an accomplice of Fred's in many a villainous deed, and was so like him, that they could not be recognized apart.

This man had been aware that Fred Annesley must be prepared to prove an alibi, and had purposely shown himself in the places usually frequented by Fred when in town.

Neville and his client became firm friends.

Lawrence Hamilton inherited his uncle's property, but so broken was he in health, owing to the dark cloud which had so long hovered over him, that his physician recommended a year or so of travel.

Fred Annesley's friends were spared the shame of seeing one of their race die a felon's death, for he saved the hangman his office by taking his own life.

He was found in his cell dead from poison, but he had first cleared his cousin Lawrence from any crime laid to his charge.

The skill with which Neville had conducted this case was the turning point in his career.

Attorneys, now, were eager to secure his services for their clients.

Neville was in a fair way of soon securing a large fortune.

But what was all this to him, now that he knew Estelle was lost to him.

The blow was indeed a heavy one. On Neville's return home, that fatal day to him, he had found Lilly's letter, which had lain among a pile of papers, and had been overlooked.

A few days after, Lilly received the following few lines from Neville,—

I know all, though your letter was mislaid for some time. The blow has been a heavy one, but my chief effort will be to forget Estelle's treachery. Let my father remain in ignorance of all that has passed. Do not mention her name when you write to me.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

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