

WON AT LAST.

CHAPTER VII.

"Rather?" I responded, sympathizingly. "But then it depends a good deal upon what sort of article we get hold of. She needn't be an absolute frump."

"No; but she is sure to be—I'm certain of it!" said Natalie, getting up and dropping down disconsolately upon the window-seat again. "You grumble at Mr. Poinsett, and say what a life he leads you; but that's nothing to a governess."

"At any rate, she won't have a perpetual influenza and sore throat, I should hope," I said; for the unpleasant malady which had attacked the Reverend Titus on the day when I had first heard the name of Natalie Orme was still in full vigor, and seemed likely to remain so.

"I believe they're all frumps," grumbled Nat, posing herself upon the edge of the window-seat, with her hands clasped behind her back. "Why Alice Deeping told me—'Come in!'"

She broke off on hearing a tap at the door. It was opened, and Virtue Dent's pale face and white mob-cap presented themselves.

"What is it, Virtue?" I asked.

"I beg your pardon, sir. I thought madame was here."

"She went out five minutes ago," said Natalie, springing off her perch and moving to the door. "Come out, and let us have a walk, Ned. It is too fine to stay indoors."

"What—like that?" I asked, following her into the hall.

"Like what?"

"With that thin dress. A fine cold you'll catch!"

"Oh, yes! I must have a shawl. Where is Valla?"

Valla was not to be seen. Virtue Dent stepped forward with alacrity.

"I'll run for your shawl, Miss Natalie, if you will wait a moment."

"Oh, thanks! You will find plenty up in my room. Ask Valla to give you one," said Nat.

Virtue ran across the hall and upstairs. In a minute or two she was down again, a fluffy white shawl over her arm. After her stalked Valla. Her brown face wore its grimmest look as she stood with her bare braced arms crossed in her usual fashion. Madame had tried to induce her to wear the ordinary garb of feminine civilization, but without success. She had resisted even Nat's coaxing, and stalked about Chavasse in the same flaming robes which had taken my breath away on that day at the station.

Nat took the shawl from Virtue.

"Thanks, Virtue," she said, with her pretty smile. "You saved me a run."

"Will it do, Miss?" asked Virtue, with a glance at Valla.

"Oh, yes; but it is rather thick! I have plenty of thinner ones."

"I know, miss, but it was the only one I could see."

"You should have asked Valla to give you another," said Nat, wrapping the shawl round her shoulders.

"I did, miss—Virtue's greenish-gray eyes darted another look at the dark face—but she wouldn't give me any."

"Wouldn't?" The quick blood came into Nat's brown cheeks. "Why wouldn't you, Valla?" she asked, with some sharpness.

Valla looked up and shot an angry glance at Virtue; then she looked down at the floor and was silent.

"Why wouldn't you?" repeated Natalie, more sharply still.

"I am your maid, Miss Natalie. To bring your things to you is my work," said Valla slowly and distinctly.

Her English was very good—nearly perfect, in fact, with hardly any foreign accent. Her slow sibilant tones seemed to match her deliberate movements. Now they were soft and submissive as usual, a curious contrast to the look which Virtue had returned with interest.

"She said it was no business of mine," muttered Virtue.

Nat's golden-black eyes flashed again, and, with a haughty gesture, she said:

"It is your business if I sent you. Virtue. Please remember that Valla. If Virtue comes to you from me again, you will give her whatever I send her for."

Valla answered only by a bend of her turbaned head, then turned away toward the stairs.

Darting another glance at her—this time of triumph—Virtue Dent tossed her head and went toward the passage leading to the kitchen.

Nat put her hand on my arm, and we stepped out together.

"Nicely you've set these two by the ears, now!" I said.

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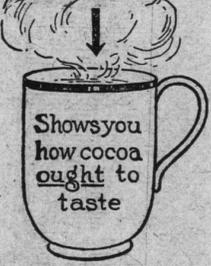
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ly well scared you," I said, with a lazy laugh.

"I was afraid of her when I was a little thing. In fact, Ned—I know you will laugh at me—although I know that she is devoted to me, there are times when I am a little afraid of her now."

"Why, she worships you!" I exclaimed, surprised.

"Yes, I know; but it is quite true, for all that. I have seen Valla in a temper once or twice, and I haven't forgotten it."

Strolling on and talking, we had got into the broad path known as the Lady's Walk, which wound away from the drive and had a high quick-set hedge flanking it on each side. There was a little arbour-like erection at the bottom, usually called the Lady's Chapel, though it was no more like a chapel than it was like a stable. A little winding path ran from it among the trees, leading to a small side gate in the park palings, which was shaded by a great horse-chestnut tree.

We stopped at the gate to look over at the lane lying bright under the rising moon, and some of the rich reddish-brown leaves fell crisply upon Nat's curls. It was very quiet, very pretty and peaceful, and for some time neither of us spoke, but stood listening to a nightingale that was trilling out its rich, sorrowful melody from one of the huge old elms.

"Halloo! Here's some one coming down the lane!" I exclaimed, roused by the sound of brisk, rapid steps on the hard, gray road: "Who is it, I wonder?"

"Doctor Yorke," said Nat, without turning.

"Why, you can't see him?"

"I can hear him, though, I suppose. He always walks about twice as fast as any one else."

She was right, for the footsteps drawing nearer, rounded the curve of the lane, and Yorke, his hat at its usual angle and his hands in his pockets, came down upon us. He looked rather astonished to see us standing there, and quickly took his hands out of his pockets to raise his hat to Nat.

"Good-evening, Miss Orme. You look like the nymph of the place with that white affair over your head."

"Do nymphs wear white crochet shawls over their heads?" she asked, coolly, giving him her hand.

"I don't know—perhaps—on chilly evenings, say. How are you, Ned?"

"Precious hot," I told him. "And what brings you down here to-night?"

"My patient, of course. I'm awfully late; but it's the governor's day at Market Waxford, and I haven't sat down for ten minutes since nine this morning. I have been on my feet ever since dinner-time."

"And at such a pace?" laughed Natalie.

Roger laughed too. His rate of progression was a standing joke with us.

"Pretty much, I think, I begin to fancy that Whittlesford has a sort of spite against me. Every one who can possibly manage it turns ill upon the doctor's Waxford days. I'll pass, by your leave, Ned?"

"I didn't know you had a patient here," I said, taking my arms off the gate to let him open it. "What is it? Battered rheumatism again?"

"Just that! I don't know that I can do much good; but madame doesn't like anything like neglect. I was told especially not to miss to-day."

"And you know better than to forget it—eh?" I said, as he passed on.

"Rather! Obedience to madame's mandates is a code in Whittlesford, isn't Miss Orme?"

"We find it so, don't we Ned. What do you think she has been saying this evening, Doctor Yorke?" inquired Nat, dolefully.

Roger laughed and said that he did not know. We were at the entrance of the Lady's Walk again now, Nat walking between us, with her white shawl held under her chin with one little brown hand. Her lovely eyes were as bright as stars, seeming to match the spangled stars upon her dress, I thought. She and Yorke were very good friends by this time. All shyness upon her part had quite worn off. On this evening her way with him had a jesting lightness such as she might have shown to me.

"I suppose you're awfully fond of Valla," I said, as we sauntered on.

"Oh, yes, of course!" she returned hastily. "She was my nurse when I was a baby, you know."

"I should think she must have pret-

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