

WON AT LAST.

CHAPTER XXXII.

"I have no reason beyond my own conviction, and that is amply sufficient for my own satisfaction!"

The Inspector coughed again. "Just so, miss—just so, I am sure. But the law—"

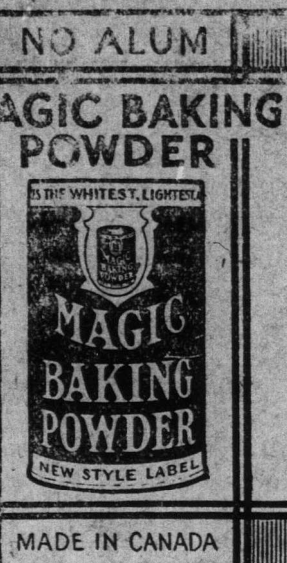
"The law can not move unless it is set in motion; and I refuse to do it. Virtue Dent is innocent of this robbery. Mr. Blake; and I say that she shall not be arrested."

"My dear Natalie," madame interposed, laying her hand upon her shoulder, "you are altogether forgetting the state of the case. It is placed in Mr. Blake's hands, and—"

"Not by me," said Nat. steadily, laying her other hand upon her arm; "and, pardon me, madame, I am the only person who has the right to do it—the stolen jewels are mine!" With a quiet dignity new to her, and which madame herself might have exhibited, she turned to the Inspector. "Mr. Blake, as the person robbed and the owner of the stolen property, I authorize you to do all that you can to recover it; but take no course of action which has in view the crimination of Virtue Dent. She is innocent, and I will never be a party to shaming her with even an assumption of guilt. Any question which you may wish to ask me I will answer of course, and I will give you any information which lies in my power. But remember, if you please, that I not only make no charge against this girl, but that I refuse to hear any more." She broke off, passed her hand over her forehead, and looked at him again. "Is there anything more that you wish to say to me now?"

With an air almost ridiculous; perplexed and astonished, the Inspector shook his head, then darted a discomfited glance at madame; but madame was looking steadily out of the window, and she would not see Natalie turned away quietly, crossed to Virtue, who was sobbing still, and put her hand upon her arm. "Don't trouble about it, Virtue," she said, sweetly. "I am more sorry than I can tell that this has happened. Don't cry any more—there's a good girl; it is sure to come right in a week or two, you know." She flashed a bright, scornful glance at the white face of mademoiselle, who was still looking at her amazedly, and then moved across to Valla. "I am tired, Valla," she said. "Come with me," and with that she passed out of the room.

Two days passed, but nothing occurred to throw any light upon the disappearance of Natalie's jewels, and it seemed likely to remain a mystery. Indeed Miss Nat had so tied the Inspector's hands by her course of conduct that the unlucky officer could really do nothing. He openly persisted in his belief that the robbery had been committed by some one within the house, and, failing to find any clue, he was obliged to leave the room, not even madame making any effort to detain her.



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and coat, and stepped out into the moonlight and the crisp, cold air. Walking and brooding uneasily and gloomily enough, and paying little heed as to the direction in which I went, it was not long before I found myself at the little gate leading into the lane. For a minute I stood leaning over it and thinking, my thoughts flying, as they nearly always did, to Roger Yorke. I had seen him only once since the loss of the jewels, and then he had been cold and taciturn—as unlike my friend, as possible. I do not believe he himself knew exactly what his plans were, but he was steadfast in his determination to leave Whittleford as soon as might be—within the next week or two probably. That I was intensely miserable about it I need hardly say; and now, as I thought of it, the fancy came into my head to go over and see him. Most likely I should find him at the village, and if I did not, the walk to the village would be at least as good as mooning about by myself, getting more miserable every minute. I being fidgeted to exasperation by mademoiselle and her knitting, I swung open the gate and turned toward Whittleford.

Walking pretty briskly, I soon got into the village, and so on into the High Street, where the few shops were lighted up brightly. Among the brightest was Haddon the tailor's, and that personage himself stood at the door, complacently surveying things in general and his own window in particular. Of course he saw me, and said "Good-evening," and I was obliged to stop.

"Good-evening, Haddon. Awfully cold, isn't it?" "Well, it is, sir, but seasonable—seasonable. Doesn't do to expect good weather here all the time, does it? Beg your pardon, sir, but nothing new at the Mount, I suppose—I may ask the question?" He meant about the jewels, of course; ever since the robbery every one who got a chance to speak to me had contrived to drag them in. The fact is that Whittleford had not had such a fine subject for gossip for the last ten years, and so was enjoying its unwanted treat to the full. But I was getting heartily tired of saying the same thing incessantly, and now answered shortly that there was nothing new, and, furthermore, that I did not expect anything. Haddon raised his eyebrows and looked sympathetic.

"Ah, indeed, sir? Nothing new, and yet they say that Inspector Blake is a sharp man too." "He isn't sharp enough to catch the thief in this case, anyhow," I returned. "Just so, sir; and each day makes me more unlikely, of course. Most mysterious, I am sure. But I beg your pardon, sir—I am keeping you, I believe cold. Walk in, pray, Mr. St. George is at home—indeed his dinner was taken up only a few minutes ago—he has been out all the afternoon, it is said. Walk up, sir, pray!"

Now certainly I had not come out with the idea of seeing Raby St. George at all, much less of absolutely going to see him; but Haddon stood out of the way, so evidently expecting me to go in as a matter of course that I did so almost without thinking. I had not seen St. George since the day when I had interrupted that scene in the park, and more than once since then, thinking of his white face and wild eyes, I had been sorry, and pitied the man. I had said something then too which had hurt him, although without any intention of doing it; and so altogether I thought that being here I would just say a word or two to him. It would not take long, and I knew he liked me.

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besides. I ran upstairs, thinking as I went of the amount of mischief which our nut-brown maid's black eyes had contrived to do in the few months which had elapsed since they first shone upon our quiet corner of the world; and for the hundredth time I wondered what the end of it all would be.

I tapped at the door of St. George's sitting-room, and, pushing it open almost at the same time, saw him before he saw me. He was sitting at the table, but, with his plate pushed away and his eyes cast down moodily, seemed to have forgotten his meal. He glanced up at the sound of the opening door, and it seemed to be that his haggard face looked ten years older. He started up and greeted me cordially enough, though rather constrainedly, too; and at his invitation I sat down in a chair by the fire, he resuming his own seat, and beginning upon his dinner quickly, as though not wishing me to notice that he had forgotten it before. One or two questions he asked about the robbery, listening with but a languid interest to the replies, and hoped that madame was well, never mentioning Nat's name at all. Then we were both silent, he sitting drawn back from the table, toying with a knife as he looked at the fire, and I sitting looking at him awkwardly enough. The fact is that, being there, I wanted to say something, but did not in the least know how to bring it out. At last I began, coloring and stammering a little too:

(To be Continued.)

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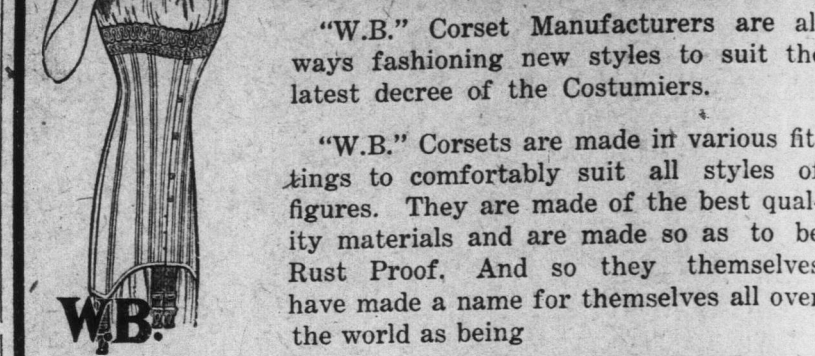
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