

WON AT LAST.

CHAPTER V.

"I'm hanged if I know!" I returned, in the same under-tone. "Did you ever set eyes on such a figure? When I first saw her, I nearly collapsed."

"But who—what is she?"

"Natalie's nurse, or some such thing. She'll be a lively addition to Chavasse, won't she?"

"I should like to see madame's face when she first beholds her!" Alice cried, with a saucy smile, darting off toward her own gate. "Good-bye to you both until to-morrow!" she called out; and with that her blue skirts and flaxen head disappeared.

Turning round quickly, I encountered the bronze face of Valla, and gave a start. Those hard beady-black eyes of hers were glaring upon the closed gate of the rectory with a fierce intensity quite horrible to see. Had she overheard Alice's words? I wondered. I thought that, if she had, and wore that expression in consequence, she must be an uncommonly amiable creature. But in another moment the look was gone, and as the woman turned her turbaned head to look at Natalie sitting beside me, the large, featured, brown face was full of inexpressible tenderness. Natalie saw neither look; she was thoughtfully staring straight before her.

I whipped up the ponies to a smart trot, and in a very few minutes we were in the road which led to the Mount. Not until we had turned in at the lodge gates did Natalie seem to take any notice and then she started, and looked up at me inquiringly. "Are we there, Ned?" she asked with a nervous little clutch at my arm, and with the blood pulsing to and fro in her cheeks.

"There or here—whichever you like," I replied. "This is Chavasse, Ned; and there is madame on the steps waiting to welcome you."

CHAPTER VI.

I pulled up the ponies, helped Natalie out of the phaeton, and madame came down the steps. She was very pale as she took the girl into her arms and kissed her—very pale; but her voice was clear and quiet as usual as she bade her welcome to Chavasse.

"You must be terribly tired, my dear," she said, keeping her hand in hers; "and"—her eyes encountering Valla—"who is this?"

"It is Valla. She was my nurse, and has always been with me since my mother died." Nat said, timidly, her lovely eyes scanning the fine combed face above her. "I could not leave her."

"Certainly not; there was no need my dear." Madame beckoned to the housekeeper, who, with Virtue Dent and several of the other maids, was lingering curiously about the hall. "Take Miss Orme's maid with you, Mrs. Batterbin," she directed, quietly, "and see that she is comfortable. Tea is in the library, Ned; I thought it the best thing for Natalie after such a long journey. This way, my dear."

Still holding Natalie's hand, madame disappeared with her in the gloom of the great shadow hall. I gave the reins to Jim, and lingered

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ed a moment, watching portly old Mrs. Batterbin waddle toward the kitchen regions, with Valla, in her flowing rainbow-hued robes, stalking beside her, and followed by a couple of giggling maids. Not by Virtue Dent, though. She had dropped her demure courtesy to Natalie, with her rapid glance at her face, and then with her hands folded before her stood with her eyes fixed upon the ground. As I passed her she looked up, and met my gaze. The smile was on my face still, and I suppose she saw it, for the sedate lines of her lips relaxed, and she smiled too. Liking the girl, as I said before, I hated to say a word or two to her.

"What do you think of that article, Virtue?"

"She's very strange, sir," she answered, with some hesitation. "Will she live here?"

"Oh, yes, I suppose so! She is Miss Orme's maid—a regular native, you know. Her name's Valla!"

"Is that all, sir?"

"I believe so. I don't think they give for two names over there."

"Thank you, sir." She dropped me one of her slight demure courtesies in acknowledgment of the information, I suppose, and then stood before me, hesitating, and so obviously desiring to say something else that I asked:

"What is it, Virtue?"

"Madame said, sir," she explained, altering, "that I should wait upon Miss Orme, if I liked it and she liked me. Will she make any difference his Valla, do you think?"

"I don't know; we shall see," said. "She will expect to wait upon her mistress, of course. Miss Orme says she has been with her all her life."

"Thank you, sir; I thought I would be so," she replied, moving a step back and dropping the corner of her apron, which she had been twisting in her thin fingers. "Madame didn't know of her coming when she promised me, of course."

There was an odd intonation in the girl's quiet voice—a hopeless tone of which I did not like the sound. I looked down at her curiously.

"Why? Are you disappointed, Virtue?" I asked.

"Yes, sir."

"But why?"

"I like Miss Orme, Mr. Ned. I could do anything for her."

"But you have only just seen her, I said."

"I know, sir; but it makes no difference. I like her, and—I don't like

that woman—that Valla. Why, you have only just seen Miss Orme, sir, but you like her!" And with that, giving me no time to reply, she went quietly toward the passage which led down stairs.

I thought, as I turned away toward the library door, what a queer girl Virtue Dent was—and what a sharp one! She was right enough. I was fairly bewitched—not at all in a sentimental way, be it understood, by Natalie Orme, I think it was owing to her lovely golden-black eyes. I was at one with Virtue Dent there. And more—I began to think that I did not like Valla any better than she did. I could not forget the ugly look with which she had followed Alice Deeping's retreating figure. In fact, it struck me that Valla and Virtue were very probably about on a par for juiciness. The time came before long when I wished with all my heart that one of them had never entered the doors of Mount Chavasse.

I went on to the library—one of the pleasantest rooms at the Mount, in my opinion, either in summer or in winter. My mother's dainty tea-table with its old-fashioned dragon-china stood there, but neither she nor Natalie was seated at it. Madame had taken off the girl's little black hat, and stood with her two hands upon the slim shoulders, looking down into the small brown face with its rich blood ebbling and flowing under the transparent skin, and those wonderful eyes raised to hers.

"You are not like what I expected Natalie," she was saying, as I entered. "How old are you?"

"Nearly twenty-one. I know I look younger than that. I suppose it is through being so little. I did not reach poor papa's shoulder."

"No," said madame quietly. "You expected me to be taller," Natalie said, questioningly, "did you not make me?"

"I thought you would be fair."

"Ah, like papa! I was never like him. He used to tell me that I was my mother over again."

"I did not know your mother, dear."

"Oh, no—I know! She was never out of Jamaica. I have eyes and hair like hers."

"I dare say," said madame, a little coldly; and her fine white hand touched the rippling little waves and curls of silky black hair. "Nevertheless, you are very like your father, Natalie."

"Am I?"

"Yes. Not in eyes, or hair, or complexion, but your features are like his, and your voice resembles his. Well"—she sighed, and then stooped and kissed the girl—"you must try to be happy at Chavasse, my dear, and remember that it is always most freely your home for—for your father's sake."

She would have added more, I think, but that she turned her head slightly, and saw me standing at a little distance. She released Natalie immediately, and was instantly her quiet dignified self again—the stately Made ame of the Mount, whom nothing ever disturbed or moved from the placid proud tenor of her way.

"Find Natalie a seat, Ned," she said, cheerfully, "and make her comfortable. She must be terribly tired after such a journey, and must have a good long rest before dinner. By the way—I have not asked yet—I hope he did not keep you waiting at the station, my dear?"

Natalie half laughed as she sunk into the big chair I had wheeled forward, and took one of the dragon-tea-cups from my hand. I laughed, too, meeting her black eyes.

"Don't betray me, Ned," I said. "I told you I should catch it if you did."

"Nat!" madame repeated, surprised.

"I've been used to being called 'Nat.'" Miss Orme explained demurely, "and so Ned thought he would rather call me so too. You don't mind, do you, madame?"

"Of course not, my dear," madame replied, with amazing cordiality, considering that the proprietaries had sustained a rather severe shock. "Upon my word, Ned, you appear to have done as I told you, and made her feel at home. As that is the case, I think I will leave you to take care of her. I must see that your maid is properly looked after, Natalie. Does she speak English?"

"Oh, yes, every one does in Jamaica."

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I think! Valla makes mistakes sometimes, but only now and then. Papa said she was too sharp for a native."

"You should have seen Alice Deeping stare at her, mother," I interposed. "She was at the rectory gate and ran out like the madcap she is to speak to Nat. Her eyes looked like a couple of saucers. She said she would like to see your face when you first beheld her."

(To be continued.)

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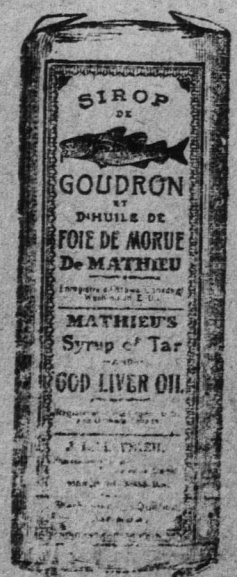
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