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SEAL OF THE WEST

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WON AT LAST.

CHAPTER XL.

This was the precious story which I had listened to that morning, as Nat, bathed in tears and filled with contrition, had sobbed it out to me from a sheltering nest of sofa-cushions, winding up with the incoherent declaration that she would never as long as she lived dare to see Roger any more, and throwing out a final hint to the effect that she considered herself solely and entirely to blame for everything that had occurred—the matter of mademoiselle and the diamonds included, presumably—and that the sooner she either went into a convent to expiate her sins, or died, leaving him free, with her blessing, to marry somebody else, the better and more satisfactory it would be for all parties concerned.

This, then, was what I wanted to tell my friend, and what presently, after a word or two of introduction, I began to tell him. Yorke's face as I went on and his expression when I had concluded were a study. It seemed that he could not get over it at all.

"And that was all?" he said, at last.

"Just that," I assented.

"And she could condemn me on the word of a fellow like that!" he went on bitterly.

"Yes," I assented again. "But look here, old fellow—it wasn't his word alone, you know. There was that blessed business with mademoiselle; and I went and corroborated that. You might have turned suspicious of her perhaps in the same circumstances."

"I don't think so."

"And then she's such a hot-headed little creature when she gets upset or excited," I went on; "and upon my word I don't believe that on the day when she was so mad as to go and engage herself to that unlucky man Froude she was more than half in her right senses. The fact is, her temper was up, and she didn't care what she did. And look here, old man"—and I lowered my voice involuntarily, as though the skeleton could overhear—"if you still have the fancy that she doesn't care for you, you'd have dropped it if you had seen her for the last day or two. I verily believe that a little more of it would have killed her. Dizarte feared for her brain, you know."

"Why, is she ill?" Yorke asked, with quick anxiety.

"Bless you, no, not now! She doesn't want anything but you—although, to be sure, the awkward part of it is that she has firmly made up her mind never to dare either to see or speak to you any more. At present she is undecided whether to end her days in the retirement of a convent or to go off in a galloping consumption—in the latter case you will have the goodness to drop an occasional tear upon her tombstone. I fancy the convent rather carries the day at present ,though, mainly, I believe, because the consumptive symptoms don't appear to be coming on very strong. That's the lively sort of talk she has been pouring out to me all day, and it strikes me that the sooner you come along and put a stopper on it the better. There's no one else who knows anything about it, and the consequences is that I get it all. We've had rather too much of mopes and misery lately, and I'm getting tired of it."

Yorke half laughed, and his face lost the momentarily hard look which it had worn. I went on:

"The worst of it is she has taken it into her head to blame herself for everything."

"Herself?" he echoed. "What do you mean? What is she to blame for but this absurd tea-cup storm—poor little thing!"

"Of course—that's what I want to know. But say what I will, she has got it into her head that everything that has happened is her fault. Absurd, of course! She is the cause of it undoubtedly, after a fashion; but I don't see how she's to blame for that. As I put it to her this morning, she wouldn't have married St. George in any circumstances; and, if her engagement to you had been announced instead of to Froude, St. George would very likely have served you as he served him. I myself haven't a doubt of it." Nor had I, remembering what the last words of Raby St. George had been.

"What did she say?" asked Yorke.

"Oh, that view of the question comforted her a little, I think!" I returned, getting up and beginning to button on my coat. "But she's dead on the convent at present, old man. You'd better hurry up, or she'll have taken the veil before you know it."

"Do you remember," Roger asked, rising too, "the day I said that I would never come into her presence again unless she sent for me?"

I made a wry face at that, remembering well enough.

"Oh, I recollect! But you know, it seems to me, Yorke, that the next stupid thing to taking a stupid pledge is to keep it."

"Ah, that's pretty much my own idea—in this case, at any rate!"

"Just so. You'll come then?"

"I would probably do that if she were on one side of the globe and I on the other. What are you grinning at?"

"I was wondering which of you two was the more gone of the pair," I said. "All serene, then! I'll go home and comfort the disconsolate damsel with the news that one of these days, when you've nothing particular to do, you will find time to come over and give her your gracious forgiveness before she retires finally from a heartless world. She really believes it, you know—there's the joke of it. I've no doubt she is at present amusing herself by crying her eyes out over the inspiriting prospect. And there's madame all this while firmly persuaded that she is fretting her heart out after that unfortunate Froude. Can't you walk back with me now?"

"Not very well. You see, Ned"—and he laughed—"I can't well neglect the doctor, bless his old heart—just now, at any rate! He'll be in directly to dinner, and after that I shall be free. I'd come quickly enough but for that."

No doubt; but in the circumstances I thought he was quite right to stay where he was, and said so, as we left the den together. But, as we crossed the hall, a thought came into my head which made me pause and ask curiously:

"I say, Roger, did you know anything of mademoiselle's husband, Max Steinhart?"

"I knew him by sight—little else. Why?"

"What sort of a fellow was he?"

"A heartless, daring sort of scamp, in my opinion. But his wife, poor thing, was devoted to him."

"Ah, we fancied that from her letter!"

"I believe that woman loved the rascal passionately," said Yorke, looking at me. "He had dragged her down, disgraced her, ill-treated her too, I have heard my sister say; and yet she will cling to him devotedly while she has breath in her body. Do you think she would ever have stolen those jewels and run the risk which she did run but for him? Not she! I'll wager anything that, whether she says so or not, he first instigated her to do it. Queer, isn't it?"

I nodded.

"And yet we all thought that she was setting her cap at Froude."

"And so she was, no doubt; but that was when she thought her scamp of a husband was dead."

"You never saw him about here, did you, Roger?" I asked.

"No. I had no suspicion but that he was dead, as he was reported to be until Dizarte told me yesterday."

"Then that second time you rushed off to Paris it was not about anything connected with him?"

"Of course not," Yorke returned, looking at me curiously. "My brother-in-law was ill, and I was telegraphed for. I thought I told you."

Of course he had told me; and I reddened as I shook hands again, telling him that I should keep a lookout for him at the Mount, and feeling more ashamed than ever I had felt yet that I had been dense enough to doubt my friend's perfect truth and honesty. And then, happier than I had been since the night of the ball, I left him.

Getting back to Chavasse as expeditiously as possible, I found madame nowhere visible, and Nat just where I had left her a couple of hours before, curled up on a couch by the library fire, staring with a very woe-begone face at the blaze; and, judging by the look about her eyes, she had been fulfilling my prediction and industriously endeavoring to cry them out of her head. Virtue Dent sat there, quite her placid self again, stitching away at something that looked like a sheet. She had been sent to keep guard, I suppose; but she got up when I entered, and, making her usual demure courtesy, left the room.

"Well, old lady," I said, cheerfully, sitting down by Nat's side, "and what have you been doing with yourself?" But the deepest sigh which the little lady was capable of heaving was the only reply I got. I tried again.

"Been talking to Virtue, eh?"

"No."

(To be continued.)

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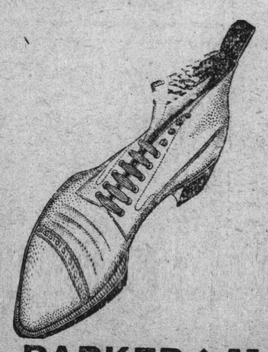

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