

# WON AT LAST.

CHAPTER VIII.

No idle threat was that resolve of madame's about a governess for her ward, and so we soon found out, to our mutual dismay. Nat chafed and grumbled to me, and I kept her company—a course of conduct in which Alice Deeping made an eloquent third. Madame knew of this, no doubt—there were few things in progress around her which escaped her keen eyes—but she said nothing.

There was a good deal of advertising, much letter-writing, and finally, at the end of a couple of weeks, my mother announced one morning that the governess of her selection would arrive at Chavasse the next morning. We were on the west terrace, Nat and I—reading, and she perched up on the broad stone ledge beside me, playing with a lap full of gorgeously tinted fallen leaves which she had picked up. A lazy little puss was our nut-brown maid, always busy with some queer, babyish, fantastic trick or other. Now she sat there with her curly head bare, idly arranging and rearranging some leaves among the ribbons of her broad-brimmed straw hat. Sometimes, to tell the truth, when I thought of the prospective governess, I felt bound to confess to myself that I did not absolutely envy her. Little as she was, Miss Nat could hold her own as well as Alice Deeping herself. Both will and temper had she, when she chose to exhibit them. Madame, coming out of the house, saw us there and promptly made her way towards us; she had an open letter in her hand.

Nat's eyes were as sharp as they were bright, and she dropped her hat with a deep sigh.

"Ned," she said, resignedly, "that letter's governessy!"

"Pooh! Don't think so," I rejoined.

"Oh, isn't it? Y, I'll see."

Madame heard of course—madame always did hear somehow. Coming up, she touched Nat's curls smilingly.

"You are sharper than Ned, my love. Yes, you are quite right. Mademoiselle Valdini will arrive tomorrow evening—in time for dinner probably."

"Mademoiselle Valdini!" Nat and I both echoed the name blankly, and really with reason. We had neither of so much as heard the name of Mlle. Valdini before.

"Is she the governess, mother?"

"Yes."

"You never told me, madame!" said Nat, with a pout.

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"My dear, I did not see any reason to trouble with my selection, particularly as I knew that you had an objection to the entire plan;" and, touched the girl's curls again. "Mademoiselle Valdini comes with the highest recommendation; she brings, I believe, the most flattering testimonials from her last post. I hope you will like her."

Miss Nat's shrug and pouting frown seemed to express that she did not hope, or wish to hope, anything of the kind. I hastened to speak.

"I suppose she's French? The name sounds like it."

"I believe so. At any rate, she is exceedingly accomplished, and bears the reputation of being a most excellent instructress."

With the utmost vigor Nat gave vent to the alarming words as she jumped off the balcony.

Madame raised her eyebrows.

"My dear child!" she said in a tone of decided displeasure. It was not often that she spoke in that tone to Nat, and the willful little creature raised her little brown face which was crimson.

"I didn't mean to say it, madame," she said, penitently, with comically raised eyebrows "but I couldn't help it. I mean it, you know. Both Mademoiselle Valdini, and both Mademoiselle's accomplishments!"

"Here! Now I won't say it any more."

"I hope not, my dear," said madame as she smiled indulgently. Nice! I should have caught it if I had been in Miss Nat's shoes, I know!

"You must not give mademoiselle a bad idea of her pupil, Natalie. You and Ned had better go for a long ride. I shall be busy all the morning, and you may not have many more at liberty," and madame swept off in doors again, Nat running after her, and making a series of derisive grimaces over her shoulders at me as she went.

No, I thought, as I went on with my reading, I did not envy Mlle. Valdini her pupil—not by any manner of means.

Mount Chavasse was far too dignified an establishment to indulge in anything so plebeian as bustle-outwardly, at any rate but I dare say that behind the scenes there was a good deal of it going on all that day and the next morning, preparing for mademoiselle. Madame was all her stateliness, was too entirely a lady; not to treat her governess as one and had she been a visitor, there could not have been more fuss—less perhaps. There were prepared for mademoiselle a charming sitting-room in pink, a delightful bedroom in green, a small room for lesson-giving of no color in particular; and finally madame announced at luncheon that everything was ready. Nat receiving the information with a wrathful pout as she cut her cold fowl and with a smart kick at my ankles under the table as an accompaniment to that demonstration.

"And when is the lady due, mother?" I asked.

"She will come on the 6.25 train from Charing Cross, probably. You had better drive to meet her, Ned."

But no—I remonstrated against that. To meet a foreign young woman who would perhaps strike me dumb with some outlandish lingo was I felt, a little too much. Besides, I promised Nat to ride with her round by the river, and afterward call in at the rectory to see Alice Deeping. How I should have sped if she had not been concerned, I do not know; as it was, madame yielded, and said that the carriage should go alone to meet the governess.

"Goodness knows it, will be awful enough when she is here, and we can't help seeing her!" Natalie ob-

served dolefully, when the meal was over, and madame had let us to ourselves. "I tell you what it is, Ned: we'll have a jolly afternoon if we never have another. I'll run and put on my habit now, and do you order the horses. Make haste!"

I obeyed of course. Everybody at Chavasse obeyed Miss Orme, from old Batterbin to the boy who swept out the stables. Her pretty roan mare and my own gray were ready some minutes before she came tripping down the great staircase in her closely fitting habit of green cloth, with its little cap to match. Behind her came Valla, carrying her whip, and following her, Virtue Dent.

The rivalry between these two grew more marked every day, and within the last week had received a fillip, though innocently, from madame herself. Valla, slavishly devoted to her little mistress as she was, yet was not a desirable attendant from more than one point of view. Nat was a careless little creature, liking to look pretty, if it were not so much trouble, but caring very little either what she wore or how she wore it. Valla's notions of costume favored of Jamaica taste, and, generally speaking, was more picturesque than appropriate; and madame was particular—fastidiously particular. Virtue Dent was a born lady's maid, and she had found it out. Without exactly ousting Valla, madame had installed Virtue in the post of Miss Orme's lady's maid—a state of things which Nat accepted, Virtue exulted over, and Valla fumed at. Indeed, I had caught such flashings of the black eyes toward Virtue's pale face sometimes as I should have thought, sufficient to make that demure damsel quail! Even now Valla did not look over-pleasant as she put the whip into Natalie's little gauntleted hand, and then drawing aside, stood with her arms folded, casting covert glances from under her downcast black lashes.

"Ready, Ned?" asked Nat, lightly.

"That's a dear boy! We won't get back before dinner time, when Mademoiselle Valdini will be in possession and the bolt will have fallen. Well, what is it, Virtue?"—for Virtue, in her gentle, deprecating way, had come forward.

"What dress shall I get ready, Miss Natalie?" inquired the girl in a low tone.

"It doesn't matter; anything that comes first," answered Nat, fastening her gauntlet.

"The one you wore last night, Miss?"

"Yes, that will do. Why, Virtue, you are more particular over what I wear than I am myself, I do believe; you certainly make more fuss."

She laughed and ran down the steps, and I followed her. I looked back when, having placed Nat on her horse, I mounted in my turn, and saw the tall figure and yellow roses of Valla still there. Her eyes were cast down; but, from the expression of her dark face, I could imagine the wrathful glances she was darting at Virtue Dent from beneath her black lashes. Virtue stood with a little smile upon her pale face and her hands linked before her white muslin apron—a very prim figure indeed. But as I looked I caught a glimpse of madame's skirts sweeping through the hall, and the picture was broken up. Virtue turned towards the passage leading to the kitchen regions, and Valla, still with her eyes on the ground, went slowly in the direction of the staircase.

It was a beautiful afternoon, not too hot, and we had a delightful ride

round by Holmeade, down by the river, and finally through the village to the rectory. The church clock was just striking the half hour after five when we pulled up at the gates and I lifted Nat off her horse.

"Another hour or so and mademoiselle will be due," I said, mischievously. "We must hurry, young lady."

"Indeed, I won't—for a dozen mademoiselles! Dinner isn't until eight o'clock to-night—I heard madame tell Batterbin so—and I mean to get home just in time to change my dress. If only mademoiselle's train could come to grief without hurting any of the passengers, I should rather rejoice than otherwise," mademoiselle's pupil observed, willfully.

One of the rectory servants came out to look to our horses, and we went in. The striped sun-blinds were down outside the drawing-room windows, and there was not a sound to be heard from within; from which state of affairs it was pretty safe to augur two things—that Alice was not here, and that her mother was taking her afternoon nap in company with her medicine-bottles. Nat halted in indecision.

"Do you think Alice is there, Ned?" she asked, in a cautious tone.

"No, or we should hear her."

"Then it is only Mrs. Deeping; and if we once go in there will be nothing for it but to listen to her dismal talk until she is tired. Oh, dear, I wish somebody would come out, so that we could ask!" For we were such familiar figures at the rectory that no one ever dreamed of the necessity of announcing us when we appeared there.

"Let's look about the garden," I suggested. "I dare say Alice is idling about them somewhere. I believe she spends half her time in that hammock."

"And, if she does, I'd like you to find her a better place, Master Nat," a bright voice behind us explained.

Easy—Alice Deeping, coming round the corner of the house, had caught the last words. "I thought you would come to-day, Nat. I've been to kiss for you. Have you been indoors?"

(To be continued.)

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