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## WON AT LAST.

CHAPTER XII.  
(Continued.)

It was growing dark when I reached the rectory, and the gates were open. The gardener had just passed through them with a barrow-load of dead leaves and other rubbish. He was a crusty-looking old fellow in a fur cap and a purple-sleeved waistcoat, and he had about the testiest temper in Whittleford. But I rather liked old Goslett, and stopped to speak to him.

"Hello, Goslett, how are you? Plenty to do—eh?"

Goslett growled, and informed me in one gruff sentence that there was "more 'an plenty" to do, that the weather was "eruel and cold," that he had the "rheumatisms bitter bad," and finally that this was the fifth time that he had filled "this blamed barrow" with "they bothersome leaves;" and, having delivered himself of so much in a manner by no means gracious, he took up his "barrow" and went off grumbling with it.

I laughed, and went on to the house. Striking into the path leading up to the hall door, I came upon a rather pretty little picture—Miss Alice and her major saying good-bye to each

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Mr. J. Hurlbert.

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other in a lover-like fashion. The hall door was open, and the flood of yellow light which came streaming out threw their two figures into strong relief—the major's broad shoulders and handsome head, and Alice's pretty figure in its clinging dress of crimson cashmere, her fluffy flaxen hair adorned by a coquettish little lace cap. And the light showed too a very softened and gentle look upon her saucy piquant face, a look which made me involuntarily think of the rector's last words; and I too came to the conclusion that Miss Alice was indeed "very fond" of her soldier-lover. She wanted to come down to the gate with him, it appeared, a suggestion which he combated on account of the cold—which, to be sure, was sharp enough. But Alice had her own way, of course, and in a minute or two they passed down the path, not seeing me, for I had drawn back into the shade of a group of laurels which grew there. In a little while Alice came running lightly back. I put out my hand and touched her arm as she passed me, and she started back with a slight scream.

"All right, miss, I saw you!" I said, laughing.

"My goodness, Ned; how you startled me! You horrid boy! What did you do it for?"

"Why, it wasn't my fault!" I returned.

"Oh, no, although you have nearly frightened me out of my shoes! How long have you been here?"

"Only a minute or two."

"Why didn't you come in then, instead of lurking about under the bushes like a burglar?"

"Because I thought I might be in the way, my dear," I said, half laughing. "Didn't I say I saw you?"

"I'm sure you were welcome!" she answered, tossing her head, but blushing brightly, too. "Who told you, Ned; or did you guess?"

"Guess? Not I. It wanted Nat to do that. The rector told us. He was round at Chavasse a little while back, I've come laden with all the congratulations that I can manage to carry. Considering that you have broken my heart, I hope I am fulfilling my agonizing task pretty well."

"You ridiculous boy!" cried Alice, laughing as we entered the hall; and she shut the door.

A bright fire was burning there, and a couple of comfortable looking chairs were drawn up to its warmth. Miss Deeping glanced toward the drawing-room and hesitated.

"Will you care to go in, Ned? Mother is asleep, I think."

"Not on any account then. We'll talk here."

"Of course. Didn't you know that that was Major Constable's name?"

"I didn't, indeed. That ring is valuable, too, I should think, Alice."

"Oh, yes! Father professes to be rather a judge of such things, you know, and I'm afraid to repeat what he says it is worth. For my part, I'm half afraid to wear it—I've never been used to rings. As for mother, I believe she dreams of it. I think she has asked me at least thirty times today if I'm certain it is safe. She is in a state of mild excitement about it—just like her, isn't it?"

"Just," I assented. "I say, Alice, what does she say about it all?"

"My engagement, you mean?"—and she laughed outright. "Ah, Ned, it has been as good as a play! I've had warnings enough to scare a Methodist parson. And the thing she wound up with," cried Alice, her pretty face dimpled with irrepresible laughter, "was a devout wish that I should never be such a victim to spasms as she had been! Did you ever, now?"

"I don't think you look much like a victim to anything."

"I'm sure I hope I sha'n't be, if mother is a fair specimen of matrimonial martyrs. How is Natalie?"

"All right; sent her best love and all that sort of thing, you know. She would have come with me, only she had to practice some special songs with mademoiselle."

"That mademoiselle is a horrid tyrant, I believe," said Alice, wrinkling her forehead. "I don't like her a bit; do you?"

"Not a scrap," I returned bluntly. "Neither does Nat, or I am mistaken. I say, Ned, what is that is up with Roger Yorke?"

She spoke quite coolly and easily, turning her frank blue eyes upon me; but I know that I flashed her a look of quick suspicion in reply. The name, mentioned so abruptly after that of Lucille Valdini, had startled me; but certainly I could read nothing of concealment or half-expressed meaning in her face. I repeated her words stupidly—

"Up with Roger Yorke?"

"Yes. Do you mean to tell me that you have not noticed it?"

"Noticed what?"

"Why, how he is altering!" Alice said, holding out her hands to the fire again, and making her ring flash redly in the light. "I thought you were sharp-sighted, Ned Chavasse!"

"And so I think I am; but I certainly haven't seen any change in Roger," I said, uneasily, all the perplexities and doubts which I had tried to stifle seeming to crowd upon me again. The fact is, I've not seen quite so much of him lately. How do you mean he is altered, Alice?"

"Why, in every way!" Alice declared, emphatically. "A month or two ago he used to be always ready to talk and laugh—altogether the jolliest fellow in Whittleford; now he is

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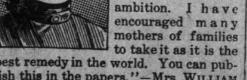
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grave and quiet, almost gloomy. I'm sure, when he was here to-day, I could hardly get a sentence out of him. And you haven't noticed, you say?"

"Perhaps he's out of sorts," I suggested.

"Pooh! It isn't that. No; he's bothered about something."

"Do you know of anything likely to bother him?" I asked, flashing another keen look at her, as I thought of the suspicion over which I had been brooding as I came along, and in which she was implicated.

She, however, shook her head with the frankest of looks.

"Indeed, no; I wish I did know what it was. I like Roger Yorke, and I don't like to see him looking so wretchedly depressed. He is too steady to get into debt, and I don't know what else to put it down to, unless indeed he has fallen in love with your charming mademoiselle," concluded Alice, with a laugh.

"What on earth makes you connect Roger with mademoiselle?" I queried, considerably startled.

"Why, nothing—it was only a joke! Doctor Yorke is hardly goose enough for that. I should be far more inclined to imagine him a victim to Nat—the demure little puss! There—there's mother calling me; I shall have to run! Will you come in and speak to her?"

But I excused myself from that, and, leaving only my apologies for Mrs. Deeping, shook hands with Alice and came away. But outside the rectory gates I paused and pulled out my watch. Half past four, and the dinner hour at Chavasse was not until two hours later. With a sudden resolution, I made up my mind to walk on to Redtops and see if I could not find old Roger. True I had not noticed the change in him of which Alice Deeping had spoken; but I had too firm a belief in the keenness of that young lady's observation to doubt that it was there; and I had got it into my head that this gloom of his was caused by the secret, whatever it was, in which Miss Valdini was concerned. As I have said, I had been trying to forget the whole affair of late; but Alice's words had again stirred up my old doubt and perplexity. After all, I thought I would speak to him about it, and take the chance of his telling me to mind my own business. On the other hand, it might relieve him to refer to it.

(To be continued.)

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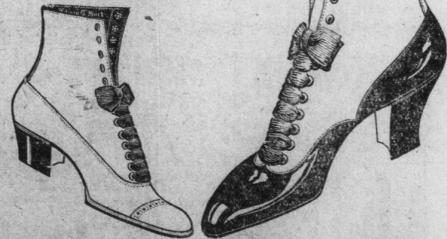
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