

WON AT LAST.

CHAPTER XII.

"She is engaged to Major Constable—all signed, sealed, etc."

With a stifled sort of exclamation, Yorke swung round into his chair, and sat staring straight into the fire; but he said nothing. It was true, after all, then, poor old boy—he was in love with Alice Deeping! That was the conclusion that I jumped to in one breathless second, while I waited vainly for him to speak. But he did not so much as stir; and, before I knew it, I was blundering out some awkward words of consolation and sympathy. But their effect was not at all what I anticipated. Yorke wheeled round again in his chair, took his pipe out of his mouth, and stared at me with such a blank countenance, that I faltered and stopped involuntarily.

"What—on earth—are you driving at?" he said, separating the words for emphasis.

"Why—I—well, you see, I—" I stopped, and Yorke grinned.

"Have you got it into that head of yours, Ned Chavasse?" he questioned, with a rather uncomplimentary stress upon "that head." "That I am in love with Alice Deeping?"

"Well, I—that is, I didn't know. I thought it might be," I stammered.

"Ah, well, make your mind easy, Ned, my boy! It doesn't chance to be the case, you see."

"Well, I'm awfully glad of it," I returned, relieved.

"So am I. Constable is a lucky fellow. He has got one of the best and sweetest girls in Christendom; but I don't want to stand in his shoes for all that."

"And wouldn't if you could?" I suggested.

"Just so—and wouldn't if I could. So you see, old fellow, I don't need sympathy. Don't know what could have put such a notion into your head for my part. But you are always brimming over with fancies, Ned."

"Well, you looked queer enough when I told you!" I said in self-defense. "As to what put it into my head, Whittlesford has been marrying you and Alice any time this past six months."

"Looked queer, did I?" Yorke repeated, picking up his pipe again, and turning away for a match to light it. "Oh, I was startled for a minute! I'll go over and tender my congratulations to Miss Alice by and by, if I'm

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not called out. So the rector is pleased, is he?"

"Rather!"

"And Mrs. Deeping?"

"Takes it pretty much as she would take a new set of symptoms, I think," said, recalling Alice's account of how her mother had received the news.

"I suppose so. What is the opinion of Chavasse?"

"Oh, madame is delighted! Alice is prime favorite of hers, and she likes her more than any other girl."

"Cry?" Yorke repeated.

"Yes, and snapped my head off when asked her what it was about."

"Isn't she well?" he asked, quickly and sharply.

"I suppose so," I answered, though remembering at once that I had fancied more than once of late that the little delicate dark face was less rounded than it had been, and that Nat's saucy speeches and laughter were less ready. "I think she feels the cold a good deal," I supplemented.

"Never been used in Jamaica to anything like the weather we have here, you know."

Yorke nodded, apparently absorbed in his pipe. When he spoke presently, it was without looking round at me.

"Ned, that fellow at Holmeade—is he often at the Mount, now?"

"Froude, do you mean?"

"Why he is the only man there is at Holmeade, isn't he?" Yorke retorted. "Whom else should I mean? Yes, Fraser Froude—I say, is he often there?"

"Yes, pretty often—four or five times a week, I dare say."

"Oh!" With that monosyllabic, jerked out in a tone and manner very "gruff and short, he fell to staring out of the dark window as he puffed, and said nothing else.

I knocked the ashes out of my pipe, and hesitated as to whether I should fill it again. I had just made up my mind that there would be time for a whiff or two more, when Yorke startled me by turning round and asking, suddenly—

"Ned, do you recollect what you once said to me about that fellow?"

"What—Froude?"

"Yes."

"Do you mean that I didn't like him? I don't."

"Pooh, no! It wasn't that. What a fellow you are, Ned! You said that something took him to Chavasse, you know."

"Took him to Chavasse?" I repeated, all at sea.

Yorke's blue eyes flashed an impatient glance at me.

"You're uncommonly dense to-day, aren't you?" he said. "Yes—took him to Chavasse. You ought to remember it if you don't."

I did remember it then in a flash, and wondered at my stupidity in not remembering it before. Of course, when the admiration of Fraser Froude for Nat had been little more than a careless suspicion, I had told Roger Yorke of it, and had in consequence aroused his incredulous astonishment and sleep. Recalling his manner then, and linking it with his manner now, I felt an uncomfortable twinge. I began to think that I did really see daylight in good earnest at last. I said, awkwardly enough—

"Oh, ah, yes! I remember now."

"I thought it nonsense then," Yorke said in a restless unhappy voice, again looking at the fire; "I thought if a fancy of yours, which perhaps even you yourself hardly believed in. But I don't know now. What do you think?"

"Why, I think as I thought then," I answered, promptly and plainly.

"That he goes as Natalie Ormes' suitor?"

"Her would-be-one, at any rate; madame has begun to see it lately, I fancy."

"And she permits it?"

"How can she help it? He has said nothing. She can't well turn the man out."

"Then can't you?" cried Yorke, turning upon me with a suddenness which made me jump. "After all, you are the master of the Mount, to all intents and purposes. Haven't you influence enough to keep that fellow out of it?"

"Why, I can't kick down the steps, I suppose?" I retorted, a little injured. "It's more than you'd do yourself."

"Is it, by Jove! I know that one of these days I shall send those blessed phibing teeth of his down his con-founded throat. The mere thought—ah! There—hang it all!—and, with something like a half-checked groan, he got up, and, going over to the window, stood there with his back to me, looking out.

I sat quite still, saying nothing at all. There was no mistake about it. Roger was hit, poor old fellow, and, judging from the symptoms, rather badly! I wondered that I had not had the sense to see it all plainly long before this; no doubt I should but for saving my wits muddled by that mistaken notion about Alice Deeping. Now things were on another tack, drifting, the Fates only knew whither. And what on earth would madame say? This last consideration was enough to chain my tongue without any of the attendant perplexities. Presently Roger gave a half laugh.

"Nothing like being a big fool while you are about it, is there?"

"What shall you do?" I asked. Of course I understood him, and he knew it. There was no need to waste time in explanations.

"Make the best of it—what else?"

"Well, but look here, Roger," I remonstrated—"I don't see really why you need talk about it in that matter-of-course hopeless way, you know."

"Do you pretend to think that it is anything but hopeless then?" he retorted.

"Well, no—I did not; and I could not say that I did. I knew pretty well what madame would say to it, in the first place; and, in the second, I did not believe that Miss Nat cared any more for Yorke than she did for Fraser Froude, and I had long since come to the conclusion that, if the

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master of Holmeade came to Chavasse from then until doomsday, he would merely have his labor for his pains. And then there was Nat's ten thousand pounds, while Roger had nothing but what he could make; and he, poor old chap, was head over ears in love with her. Altogether it seemed a pretty complication. I looked at the fire dubiously.

"Well, at any rate, old man," I said, at last, "she doesn't care a rap for him, you know."

"Nor for me."

No. There we were again! I could not offer consolation on that point, since my conviction was that Nat was no more in love with this luckless lover of hers than she was with the man in the moon or old Dizarte himself. Perforce I was silent again, until Yorke said, still without looking round, and with his strong brown hands linked behind him—

"Well, Ned, although you haven't called me a fool, I've no doubt you think me one. I don't wonder—it's my own opinion. Thanks for your sympathy, my boy, for I know you feel it; but, at the same time, don't bother yourself about me. I didn't mean you to know it; but for the moment I was off my guard. However, since you do know it, remember that your knowledge makes no difference—I mean it makes it no harder for me. I have always known how it would be, and should have been a worse idiot than I am if I had expected that she would ever care for me."

(To be continued.)

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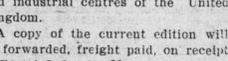
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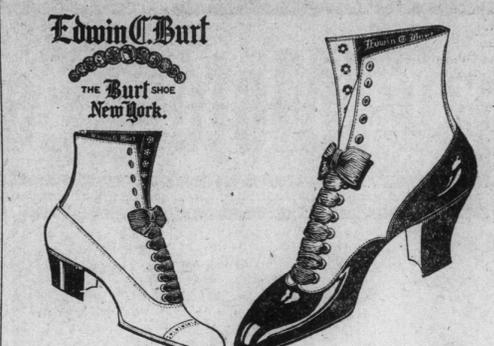
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