

WON AT LAST.

CHAPTER XXX.

She was quiet enough now, and thanked me almost in her usual manner, but on the hand she held out I saw Fraser Froude's ring shining again. She meant to be obstinate—that was evident—and in more ways than one too, for, try as I would now, I could get no further word from her, and was at last fretfully desired to go down-stairs, and leave her to herself—a pettish request which I complied with just as Virtue came in softly with the key of the jewel-cabinet and as the dinner-bell was clanging away its loudest down-stairs.

A doleful dinner it was, and served to a doleful couple of diners. Madame merely toyed with her knife and fork, and sent her plates away one after another barely touched; and I was almost as bad. Natalie would not come down, sending a message to the effect that she was tired and would go to bed; and mademoiselle, on the plea of continued headache, kept upstairs too. That wretched ball was partly to blame for our low spirits. I dare say, for I am sure I sat yawning until my eyes watered; at any rate, it was not ten o'clock when we both gave up the pretense of being sociable, and said good-night, madame bestowing upon me an affectionate salute, a piece of ceremony which she never indulged in unless unusually troubled or softened. And I went drowsily and drearily upstairs, sleepily wishing two things—that I possessed some spell capable of neatly and comfortably annihilating Fraser Froude, and that I had one yet stronger which should be able to keep Roger Yorke in Whittlesford.

CHAPTER XXXI.

I do not exactly know what passed between madame and her ward on the subject of that miserable engagement. All I know is that, coming down rather late on the following morning, yawning and feeling that I had still considerable arrears of sleep to make up, I found both Nat and my mother already in the breakfast room, and saw in a moment that whatever explanation there had been to make between the two was over. And by and by, when the meal was finished, and madame called me into her little office room to help her with a batch of business letters, I was none the wiser, for she only told me calmly, although still with the heavy look of trouble upon her face, that for the present at least she could do nothing, and that she was too worried to talk

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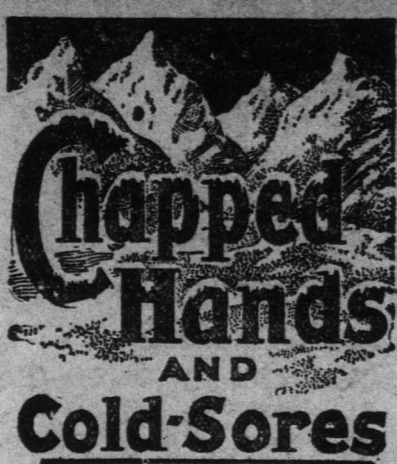
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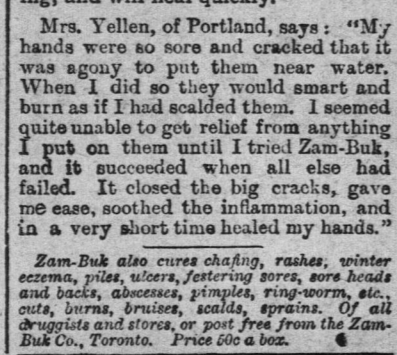


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about it any further. So I had to repress my impatient curiosity, and apply myself to the letters.

They were a pretty heavy batch, for the ball had upset madame's usual methodical exactness, and when they were disposed of it was close on luncheon time. A message from old Batterbin called madame away as we crossed the hall, and going on to the morning-room, where the interval between breakfast and luncheon was usually spent, I found that the chair in which Nat had been sitting was vacant—that only Mlle. Valigni was there. She was on the opposite side of the fire, knitting away at some white woolen work.

"Halloo," I said, looking round—"where's Nat, mademoiselle?"

"Mademoiselle Natalie has gone out," returned the lady, equably.

"Out?" I echoed, with a blank look at the window. "Why, it's snowing like one o'clock! What on earth did she do that for?"

"She did say that the house did choke her, and that she should scream if she did not have the air," answered mademoiselle, composedly.

"She oughtn't to have gone. A fine fuss madame will make! It's enough to give her her death of cold. How awfully foolish!"

"Bah, Monsieur Ned," cried the governess, impatiently, giving her needles a click—"it is you that are foolish, I think! Mademoiselle Natalie is not what you call an enfant a babe—that she can not look after herself. If it does snow and she does not like it, she will come in. She did go of her own accord."

Just so, but it seemed to me that in her present state of mind Miss Nat might do a good many things of her own accord which could not be accounted precisely sensible, though I did not choose to say so to mademoiselle. Instead, I went into the hall, put on my hat and overcoat, and, calling to old Styles, who passed toward the plate-room with a tray filled with spoons and forks, to tell madame that I had gone to fetch Miss Orme, I went out.

She would be somewhere in the park, I guessed, and tramped off down the drive, first peering between the clumps of bushes and thick trees, but failing to catch a glimpse of the cardinal-red dress which I knew she had on. Evidently she was not on the lodge side, for, although I whistled and called her name loudly, I received no reply. Turning back again, I crossed over and got into the Lady's Walk, and made my way toward the little gate in the fence, wondering if she could be there. No; there were no signs of her; and then a sudden thought struck me that she had probably wandered off to the little lake, where in the summer I had taught

her to row. It had always been a favorite spot of hers, and in fine weather was a pleasant enough lounging-place, though it made me shudder to think what it must be like on such a day as this. No doubt I should find the ridiculous little goose trying to freeze herself to death there! The snow was falling faster now, and I quickened my rapid walk into a run, hurrying down the broad path which led to the lake. I was almost within sight of it, and was congratulating myself on the luck of having thought to bring a thick shawl over my arm, when a sudden sound on my right brought me to an abrupt halt. I heard Natalie's voice, and a man's which I at once recognized. Springing in among the trees and round the trunk of a huge oak I came upon them, standing in a little clearing carpeted by the dead leaves which the wind had not yet swept away and scattered, Nat looking pale, angry, frightened—all at once—and close before her, so close that he could have touched her. Raby St. George.

I have said how she looked; but his face, its dark beauty distorted with passion, and of a dull white pallor, was quite horrible. Whatever it was that she had last said, it seemed for the moment to have stricken him dumb, for he stood with his eyes dilating as he glared upon her pale, scared, defiant face, and his arms hanging beside him as though they had been arrested in some passionate gesture. Then Natalie made a quick start as if to leave him, and in an instant his hand upon her stopped her and pulled her back. That was more than I could stand. I sprang toward him, clutched his shoulder, and dragged him back with such violence that he staggered and then fell heavily among the leaves.

I did not mean to use such force, for I was stronger than he as well as a head and shoulders taller, but my blood was up just then. He rose almost as quickly as he had fallen, and stood eying me, his breath coming fast.

"You will be sorry for this one day, Chavasse," he said, slowly, bringing out the words with a short pause between each. He breathed as though he had been running violently.

"I'm sorry enough now," I answered—for, though I did not like him, yet I did not want to hurt the fellow in his feelings or otherwise. "But it isn't my fault, you know. Whatever you have to say to Miss Orme must be said without that sort of thing, Mr. St. George."

"What do you mean?" he demanded, fiercely.

"What I say," I returned, doggedly, putting one arm round Nat's shoulders, for she had given a scream and was now clinging to me—"that I won't see her treated as I wouldn't see my sister treated if I had one;

and I say that that sort of thing won't do. We're not used to it. Gentlemen in England don't as a rule, bully women. And, as I came out to take Miss Orme in, it would be as well if you put off what you want to say to her until some other time, if you please!" I concluded, flustered in my way as much as he was in his.

"As I have had my dismissal from her, I need not stop to take it from you," he retorted. "But I tell you at parting, Ned Chavasse, that, if you are sorry now, and the day ever comes when the madness which is in my blood rages in yours, you will be more sorry yet."

He said not another word, nor waited for any reply, but, without a glance at Natalie, turned and disappeared rapidly among the trees. The snow was coming down so thickly now that the traces of his footsteps were blotted out almost as they were made; and Nat, still holding fast to my arm with her face hidden against my sleeve, was shuddering violently, although I hardly thought with the cold. I put the shawl round her.

"Come, Nat—we must hurry! This is awful. A fine cold you'll catch! It was lucky I found you. What made you go out?"

"The house stifled me," she muttered.

"Ugh! That's better than having the snow bury you. How came that fellow here after you?"

"He saw me and followed me."

"What for?"

"Oh, as though you did not know!" she cried, impatiently. "For mercy's sake do not torment me, Ned! He came to plague me as he has plagued me before, and to threaten me as he used to threaten me in Jamaica, when I was first afraid of him."

"Threaten?" I interrogated, indignantly.

"Yes—threaten. If you had listened you would have heard. It does not matter—nothing matters! I don't think we shall ever see him again—I hope not. Do hurry—I am so cold!"

From the tone of her voice I knew there would be little use in saying anything else, so held my tongue as I helped her through the narrow paths leading to the Lady's Walk, and so on to the house.

The hall was empty, and as I took off the snow-laden shawl and assisted her to unbutton her fur jacket, a sudden thought made me ask—

"I say, Nat—you didn't tell St. George that you were—that you were—"

"Engaged to Mr. Froude?" she put in, looking at me deliberately. "Yes—I told him."

(To be continued.)

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