

# WON AT LAST.

CHAPTER XLII.

No one but Yorke it appeared, I thought, recalling what he had once said to me on the subject of Fraser Froude; but I did not choose to say that, and uttered an exclamation of vague astonishment instead.

"And received by the country, too," madame went on—"received here! In my whole life I have never been so terribly deceived. Really, although the man is dead, I have hardly patience to speak of him. And to think that he had the audacity to propose to Natalie! That is worse than all."

I suggested consolingly that at any rate madame was not to blame for that.

"Of course not; but it does not make the thing less annoying and humiliating. To think that my adopted daughter should nearly have become the prey of a common adventurer! He only wanted her money, of course!"

"Of course," I echoed, thinking how right Roger had been in that too—that is, declaring that Froude did not care for Nat.

"What an escape for the dear child!" cried my mother. "And to think that she is absolutely fretting for him! That seems worse than all."

"Don't trouble yourself about that, mother," I said, bluntly. "Nat isn't fretting for Froude. In point of fact, although it doesn't sound particularly pleasant to say it, I know his death was nothing less than a relief to her."

"You think so?" asked madame, slowly, looking at me. "You have said so before, I know, but I am afraid you are mistaken, Ned. She must know of this, however. Where is she?"

"In the library. No—don't go yet, mother—as she made a movement to rise. "Nat is there, but I didn't leave her by herself. Don't go yet. I want to tell you something first."

Madame sunk back into her chair again, looking at me curiously, but without any suspicion of what was coming. I could see, indeed her handsome face broke into a slight smile.

"You are very mysterious, Ned. What is it?"

"Look here, mother—hasn't it ever struck you that in this wretched affair which is barely over now there was some one else mixed up that Nat might be fretting over—some one who

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wasn't Fraser Froude and who wasn't Reby St. George?"

I had done it now! If ever there was a very handsome modern Medusa in a point-lace cap, madame was one now as she stared at me.

"Don't you understand, mother?" I said.

"Do you mean Doctor Yorke?"

"Of course I do."

"And it is he—"

"That she has been breaking her heart for," I struck in. "Of course it is. He is with her now!"

"And you left them together?"

"Why, yes! It didn't appear that I was particularly wanted."

"What do you mean?" demanded my mother.

"Well," I said, deliberately, "you see they were—"

"Were what?"

"Kissing one another, as far as I could see. I wouldn't swear to it, of course."

"Really, in a small way, I never saw anything more intensely amusing than the expression which this last speech of mine brought to my mother's face. The Medusa look changed to wrathful incredulity as she rose."

"And do you mean to tell me, Edward, that Natalie permits—"

"Permits!" I struck in. "Whew, I like that! Why, it isn't Yorke's fault seeing that she threw herself into his arms and began to cry with all her might the moment she saw him! I must say that I don't see myself as she was to blame. Not that he appeared to object much."

With a sort of gasp, my mother sunk back into her chair, looking at me helplessly. I went down upon my knees beside her, as I used to do when I was a youngster, while I pleaded my friend's cause.

"Look here, mother—listen to me for a minute. It's quite right—it is Roger, and he only, that Nat has been breaking her heart for; I've known it all along. They have loved each other almost, from the first, and to take her from him now—even supposing you could do it—would be nothing short of sheer brutality to both of them."

"You have known it all along?"

Madame said, in an incredulous, wondering tone, too much taken aback, as I thought, to be very indignant.

"That Yorke loved her—yes. That she cared for him I didn't know until he went away to Paris just before Christmas. It was then that they came to an understanding."

"And Doctor Yorke proposed," my mother was beginning, when I stopped her.

"No, he did not; and I don't believe he would ever have done so. Yorke is an honorable man, and that ten thousand pounds of hers was quite enough to chain his tongue, knowing that he had only the partnership. Why, they'd most likely have gone on making themselves wretched for me, had they not long, if it hadn't been for Nat!"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, she made love to him, in plain English," I returned, laughing at the recollection.

"Who says so?" cried the astounded lady, sitting bolt upright in her big chair.

"I do. Why, I heard her! It was all her fault—there's no mistake about that."

"Oh dear!" cried my mother, helplessly. "And you say that now she—"

"Well, she was trying to choke him, to all appearance," I returned, coolly.

"At any rate it looked like it."

It was too bad, of course, but for the life of me I could not help laughing. Madame sunk back with a gasp into her chair.

"It is dreadful—really dreadful!"

she said, with an air of solemn resignation. "My dear, it must be all through her not having been trained properly, when she was a child."

Perhaps so, although that view of the question had certainly never struck me. But I knew that the fight was not over yet, and I waited to hear what madame would say next. For a few moments she was silent, then she asked, abruptly.

"Do you say that she likes him?"

"Well, the last few days have nearly killed her, anyway," I returned, bluntly.

"But she accepted Fraser Froude!"

"Yes, I know. The little simpleton—she made a nice muddle of things, and all for nothing too! It was all that fiery fly-away temper of hers. She was offended with Yorke for some trifling thing, it was all her fault, as she would be the first to tell you." At this stage of affairs I doubted the policy of complicating matters by enlarging upon that subject.

"Why, if she had married that wretched Froude, she would have fretted herself into her grave before long! You know how horribly miserable she was; and upon my word I can't help saying that it served her right! She is as head over ears in love with Yorke as he is with her, and that is putting it pretty strong."

"Why did not Doctor Yorke speak to me?"

"He has had no chance. I will tell you how it all was."

And forthwith I launched into a copious explanation of the whole affair, though always with the reservation I have mentioned, and implored madame with all the eloquence I was capable of to smooth things for my friend—and not entirely without success, for I saw her handsome face soften as she looked at the fire.

"You won't try to put a stopper on it, will you, mother?" I said. "Those two are devotedly fond of each other and would be simply wretched apart besides if you had either the power or the right to part them—which of course you haven't, or the will—which I hope you haven't. I don't think you could ever do it now. And Nat has a right to choose for herself, you know, as you said when Froude proposed for her."

"But no title, and no position, really," observed madame, regretfully.

"Well, no, of course not," I returned, obliged to admit that, "but, after all, a doctor is a gentleman, and a man can't be more than that. And as for his not being rich, I don't see that it matters. There is Nat's money—which can be tied up as tightly as you please. She loves Yorke, mother. It won't do to overlook that."

"No, no," assented my mother, very softly and slowly.

There was a wonderfully gentle, almost wistful look upon her fine face, and I fancied that her white hands were not quite steady. My thoughts flew off to my old idea about Philip Jrme, and I thought I knew why she was yielding as to the love of his laughter. It must have been a very deep and a very true passion the mere memory of which could still move the strong heart and proud nature of Mme. Chavasse. I went on:

"And, after all, I don't know where you could find any one to match Roger Yorke. Compare him with that unlucky Froude, for instance, or with poor St. George, who would most likely have ended by murdering Nat if she had married him. There isn't a finer fellow in Dareshire—in looks and everything else."

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"No—true," said madame, thoughtfully.

I fancied that the battle was about decided in my favor, and got up from my knees—for I had kept to my penitential attitude all this while.

"You will be gracious, mother?" I said, pleadingly.

"It seems that I have no choice." With a half sigh madame rose, and, putting her hand upon my shoulder, kissed me—a rare exhibition of affection for the mistress of the Mount.

Roger Yorke has certainly a capital special pleader in you, Ned. Don't look so anxious, you foolish boy! I promise to be gracious, as you term it. I suppose I may go and interrupt their tete-a-tete now?"

"Thank you, mother!" I said, heartily, and then followed her trailing skirts across the hall and into the library.

H'm! Altogether it struck me that it was quite as well that I had prepared madame's mind for the exact state of affairs. For the picture in the fire-light of Miss Nat with Yorke's arm round her, and her curly head comfortably nestling against his coat-buttons, might possibly have given her a turn. It was a very picture, and it appeared highly satisfactory to the parties concerned, but it was rather startling, and I am not sure that I did not hear madame give another little gasp as we stood for a moment unseen by the door.

Nat was speaking in a tone which suggested that she had condescended to postpone her funeral for a little while, at any rate.

"No, I know you won't mind. Madame has been so good to me always. I wouldn't make her unhappy for anything. That is—with a little laugh—"anything but you, of course!"

(To be continued.)

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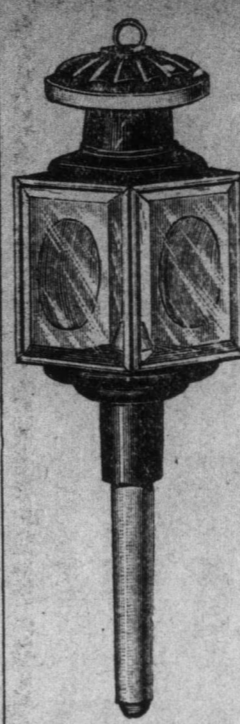
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