

WON AT LAST.

CHAPTER XII.

"Are you sure of that, Yorke, I asked, doubtfully. I was beginning to think what a fine fellow he was, and what a power of attraction there was about his frank handsome face and cheery way. Nat might care for him after all, and, if so, she was not the sort of girl to heed the fact of his being poorer than she, madame notwithstanding.

"As sure as I am that the sun will rise to-morrow. She has no more thought of marrying me than she has of marrying you."

"And you don't even mean to ask her?"

"No."

"Well," I said, shrugging my shoulders. "I know precious well that I should if it were my case."

"If it were your case?" Yorke laughed, as he wheeled round from the window and came back slowly to the fire. "Well, I like that! There's a great deal of likeness certainly between the future master of Chavasse and ten thousand a year and Doctor Dizarte's partner."

"Well, if you were in my position," I was beginning, when he cut me short.

"If I were, I would make her care for me. As it is—"

"As it is, you're going to let Fraser Froude get her, I suppose?" I supplemented, rather out of temper.

"No, I don't think that," he said, quickly. "I don't anticipate that. But, at the same time, there's nothing—no, nothing that I would not rather see. I hate that fellow, Ned!"

It was plain that he did from his style of saying it; and his manner startled me.

"Well, you needn't then," I said. "I tell you that Nat doesn't care a straw for him."

"Nor he for her. That's what puzzles me."

"Eh?" I cried. "What makes you think that?"

"I know it."

"I think you're out there, Roger. If he doesn't care for her, what do you suppose that he's eternally mousing about Chavasse for?"

"I say that that is what puzzles me. I can't make it out. Look here, Ned—I'm not likely to make a mistake about a thing of this sort when it concerns her, and I tell you that he doesn't care for her. That is not the reason that he's always after her—he's hanged to him!"

"Well, but what can be the reason?"

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then?" I asked, dubiously, and certainly unconvinced.

"I say I wish I knew."

"I don't like him, you know, old man," I said, thoughtfully, staring at the fire. "and I wish to goodness that he'd keep out of Chavasse, and let Nat alone; but, all the same, this idea of yours that he doesn't care for her is new to me. I've always given him credit for that. But of course you may be right. If he wasn't up to the eyes in cash himself, it would make me fancy that he'd got her money in view."

"Her money?" Yorke repeated, turning to stare at me. "What are you talking about?"

"Natalie's, of course?"

"Has she any money then?"

"Of course she has—ten thousand pounds! Didn't you know it?"

"I never even dreamed of it," he returned, his brown face paling a little as he looked at me. "I have always supposed her to be entirely dependent upon your mother."

"Bless you—no! Her father was well off. It was a home and protection that he wanted madame to give her—nothing else. He left her ten thousand pounds, as I said."

A pause ensued; Yorke stood with his arm on the chimney-piece, looking with a moody face down into the fire, and said nothing. I glanced at my watch—it was a quarter to six. It could be as much as I could do to get back to the Mount by dinner-time. I took up my overcoat and began to put it on. My fingers were busy with the last button when Roger said sharply, without raising his head—

"It doesn't make much difference, after all, Ned, my boy—only puts her a little further out of my reach, if that could be. But look here! Her having money explains to my mind my puzzle about Froude."

"Why, he's as rich as a Jew!" I exclaimed.

"Doubtful. At any rate, we don't know it for a fact. Every one knows that a stock-broker—and that's what he is, I suppose—may be a millionaire one day and next door to a beggar the next. Neither you nor madame would much like the idea of his making a victim of—Miss Orme."

"By Jove, no! But I think you're on the wrong track, Roger—I do, indeed. Froude's rich enough, and I think he's fond of Nat—not that he'll get her, though, any more than—"

"Any more than I shall," Yorke put in, finishing my sentence in a way in which I had certainly not meant to finish it. "Well, you'll keep silence, Ned? If I am a fool, Whittlesford needn't know it."

"Of course, I will," I returned heartily; and with that we shook hands, although I was not quite ready to go yet.

"Thanks, my boy," and his big brown fingers gave my hand a grip which made me wince. "I meant to keep it all a secret, and make the best of it; but, since some one is to be perforce in my confidence, I'm glad it chances to be you. I'd sooner have my secrets in your keeping than in that of any one else."

I do not know how it was exactly—perhaps because the confidential nature of our talk had made me feel nearer to him than I had ever felt yet, my chosen friend though he was—but suddenly the resolution which I had so ignominiously broken when I first came in returned to me. I gave myself no time to think better of it, but

hurried out the words in a rush. "Look here, Roger," I said; "talking of secrets, there's something I should like to say to you—something that has bothered me a great deal. I've been within an ace of speaking of it half a dozen times, but haven't had the cheek. What is it that you know about Mademoiselle Valdin?"

Yorke's face had simply worn a curious and puzzled expression when I began to speak; but a deep flush overspread it as I brought out the name, and he gave a violent start. I was awfully curious, but I began to wish that I had held my tongue.

"What do you mean? What do you know about it?" he demanded, harshly and quickly.

"I saw you with her in the Lady's Walk on the very night she came to Chavasse," I answered.

With an exclamation which struck me as being a good deal more emphatic than pious, Yorke turned away, strode to the end of the room, and came back.

"How came you to be there, pray?"

"I couldn't sleep, and went out to smoke a cigar."

"If it were anyone but you, Ned Chavasse, I should say you had played the spy."

"You'd better say it then," I retorted.

"Pooh! You heard as well as saw, I suppose? What did you hear?"

"Very little," I answered, feeling rather hurt and a trifle sulky. "As or playing the spy, Yorke, if I had wanted to do that, I suppose I could have set all the tongues in Whittlesford tattling by this time. As it is, I have never mentioned it to a soul."

"No, no, of course not!" he said, astily. "I beg your pardon, Ned; I was surprised. Thanks for being silent about it. It was the best thing—no, only thing either to do or to be done."

"And is that all you are going to tell me?" I asked, blankly, a good deal astonished.

"No," he said, thoughtfully, after a moment's hesitation. "Look here, Ned: I'll tell you all that I can, without breaking the pledge which I was fool enough to think sometimes, to give her. It isn't much. I met her by chance in France about a year ago before she came here; Clara, my sister, knew her. Her life had always been rough, though I'm not at liberty to tell you how or why. While I was still there she got into awful trouble—what it was I can't tell you—and it fell to my lot to be of some little service to her. It was a disgraceful business, horrible business, at mind you, it was not her fault—she was no more to blame for it than you are. I neither saw her nor heard of her again until I met her at Chavasse," Yorke stopped.

"Well," I said.

"Well, I was awfully surprised, as you must have seen. I knew well enough that, if madame became acquainted with her past life, she would have to march from the Mount. She had it too, and it was to beg me to tell her in the Lady's Walk. I wish that she had never found her way to Chavasse, and I told her so; but I did at last promise that, so long as nothing came out from any other source, I would not speak. That promise I have kept and must keep. Remember, Ned, that for what happened in the past she was not in the least to blame, and it was entirely over and done with before she came to Chavasse."

"You are sure that it is so?"

"I will pledge you my honor that it is so."

"And," I said, thinking of what she had told me, and hesitating about what I wanted to say next—"I suppose she's all right? I mean that there's no doubt about her being a fit companion for Nat, you know—eh?"

"If I had had any doubt about that, she would not have been with her for a week," said Yorke, very quietly. "You may be sure of that."

"I suppose I may."

"You may. Well, will you trust me enough to keep silence about this, too, Ned?"

I said "Yes," and meant it, feeling, although I was puzzled still, that, after all, I would take Roger Yorke's word against that of anyone I knew. But then a sudden thought struck me, and I said, abruptly—

"You flew off to Paris the next day, I remember. Had that anything to do with mademoiselle?"

"Yes," he answered, readily. "There was one thing she told me which I wanted to prove to be true before finally pledging myself. I went to do it."

"And it was true?"

"Strictly."

"I was as satisfied as I was ever likely to be upon the subject, it seemed, and I said so, bidding him good-night, and again promising to keep his confidence in both particulars. But on the doorstep a strange fancy came into my head, which made me say—"

"I say, Roger; I suppose you weren't sweet upon this blessed mademoiselle, were you?"

"What's that?" Yorke laughed out a loud hearty laugh of frank amusement which was more like his old light-hearted self than anything I had seen in him that night. "What next will you get into your head?" he said. "Remember, silence is golden. Good-night!"

And it was not until I was back at Chavasse and up in my room, hurrying for the ringing of the second dinner-bell, that I uncomfortably remembered two things—first, that after all, Yorke had not told me outright that he had never been in love with Lucille Valdin, and, secondly, that I had forgotten to tell him that there had been a second and an unknown witness of that interview in the Lady's Walk.

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