

## WON AT LAST.

CHAPTER XXI.

The rustle of a dress and the opening of a door made us all look round, and I saw a sudden flash brighten the languid eyes of Raby St. George, and a sudden color rise in his dark cheeks. He thought it was Nat, I suppose; but it was only mademoiselle who entered, her pale face as composed as usual, her thin figure, in its trailing black silk, borne with its usual grace. As yet she had not seen the stranger, and I took the opportunity which madame's introduction gave me to slip out and hurry upstairs to dress for dinner.

Dressing is never a lengthy process with me, and I was in my shirt-sleeves, brushing away at my hair, when I heard a tap at my door—a very gentle tap—followed by an eagerly whispered "Ned!" through the key-hole.

"Halloo!" I returned, by means of the same medium.

"Are you ready to come down?" Nat's voice asked mysteriously.

"Pretty near. Why?"

"I'll wait for you then—only make haste," and then came the soft sweep of her skirts across the corridor.

I made haste, of course, and went out. She was standing lower down the corridor, staring out of a window, but as she heard me she turned round quickly, and it struck me instantly that I had never seen her look so pretty. What her dress was I do not know, but she had some of her queer barbaric jewelry on, glittering upon her throat and wrists, gleaming in her thick short curls, twinkling in her ears. She was pale enough to be sure, but her eyes were like stars.

"Well, what is it?" I asked.

"Ned, have you seen him?" she whispered, nervously.

"Of course. I came up just now."

"Well, why don't you go on?" she said, impatiently. "Do you want me to cross question you? You can say what you think, I suppose. What do you think of him?"

"Well," I returned, meditatively, "he's an awfully handsome fellow; there's no denying that."

"Who wants you to deny it?" she retorted irritably, giving my arm a shake. "I don't deny it myself, do I? I know he is handsome—I told you so. I believe you are trying to be stupid. Do you like him?"

"No," I said, promptly.

"And why don't you?"—with a quick glance up at me, and pulling one glittering bangle rapidly round and round upon her wrist.

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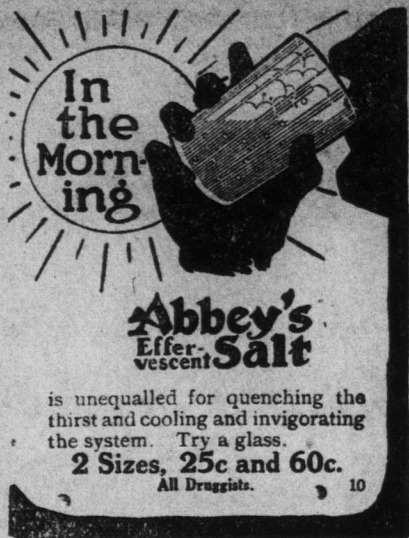
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"I don't know."

"Ah, neither do I; and by and by, when you know him better, you still won't know. Is he going to stop here?"

"To dinner? Oh, yes, of course!" "I mean altogether."

"Not that I know of, he has put up at the Station Hotel for the present."

"And he is going to stay in England long, did you hear him say?" she asked, with the same nervous eagerness.

"No; he didn't mention anything of the sort while I was there. I say, Nat, I suppose you think he has come for you, eh?"

"I know it," she answered, in a tone of most perfect conviction.

"Like his impudence, then! A man must be either more or less than a fool to come bothering round a girl when she has shown him she doesn't want him, that's all."

"Raby St. George is not a fool, Ned," she said shaking her pretty head. "You need not think so. He is anything in the world but that."

"That means he's a little bit of a knave, I suppose? So he may be for aught I know, but he's certainly an idiot to come all that confoundedly long journey for the pleasure of being sent back again. By Jove, he must be awfully spoony on you, miss!"

"Didn't I say so?" she cried, pettishly. "And I tell you that I hate him for his pains."

"Just so," I returned, easily, raising my elbow off the window-ledge as the second dinner-bell clanged out down-stairs. "Well, after all, I wouldn't bother myself about it, Nat. He can't well whip you off to Gretna Green against your will, when all's said and done, and you can't well give yourself away twice over, you know."

"No; that is lucky, isn't it?"—and I laughed to see how this reference to Roger was enough to bring all the bright crimson back to her cheeks with a rush. "Wait a minute, Ned; don't go down for a minute. He and madame are talking, aren't they? Did they say anything about me?"

"Madame had only said you had run away to dress, not knowing he was there."

"And he believed that, you think?"

"Of course, he did. He didn't see you."

"Oh, didn't he?" Nat gave me a look of half-pitying, half-contemptuous wonder. "Ned, what a goose you are! I tell you that he not only saw me, but knows perfectly well that I saw him and ran away from him. You don't know Raby St. George, as I told you once before; but I do. There—come down now, while my courage is screwed up."

She started away from my side and ran down-stairs so quickly that it was only outside the library door that I caught up with her. There she stopped short, and looked up at me with such scared eyes that I nearly laughed.

"Why, Nat, you don't mean to say really and truly that you're afraid of him?"

"Ugh!" she shuddered, and then threw up her little curly head proudly. "Of course I'm not; but, oh, Ned!"—whispering eagerly, as we went in—"I wish—I wish Roger were at home!"

## CHAPTER XXII.

My limited experience tells me that things mostly happen as they are not wanted to happen, and of course on the present occasion madame, for some reason best known to herself, had not only taken herself off, but mademoiselle also, and Raby St. George stood by the fire alone. He turned round sharply however, at the opening of the door; and, although I, ger's rival to boot, yet I could not help did not like the man, and he was feeling a tinge of pity as I saw his dark face changed at the sight of Nat.

He was badly hit, poor fellow—there was no doubt about that—and he showed it even more plainly than did Roger. His slender hand—a hand so thin and delicate that it did not look like a man's—trembled as he took hers, and his slow languid voice shook as he spoke to her. As for Miss Orme herself, I must confess I could not help admiring the little lady's acting. Had she seen him a week before and had his presence now at Chavasse been quite a matter of course, her greeting of him could have been no cooler and no more self-possessed than it was. Certainly the artful little maid could hold her own, I thought.

"What a surprise to see you, Mr. St. George!" she said, enthroning herself in madame's big chair with a slow stateliness which would have done no discredit to that dignified lady herself. "Really I could hardly believe it! And what in the world induced you to take so long a journey in such terribly unpleasant weather?"

So coolly and carelessly she asked the question, waving her fan idly to and fro as she looked at him, that I did not wonder at the dark flush—a flush of mingled anger and resentment as I read it—which swept across his handsome face. He did not speak coolly in reply, and I could see that he was paying no more attention to me than to the poker. Whatever might have been the characteristics of Raby St. George's former love-making, he certainly did not beat about the bush now.

"The weather was nothing," he responded, a harsh jarring note in his soft voice, which had a dogged touch of resolution in it too. "I simply followed you to England as soon as I could."

Leaning with my arm on the mantel-piece beside Nat's chair, pretending to look at the fire, I saw that his lips trembled nervously behind the softly waving fan, although over it his eyes met his as quietly as ever.

"Ah, you have business, I suppose? I think I remember hearing something of it before I left Jamaica. It seems a pity that you did not choose a different time in the year. Even Chavasse itself is under a certain disadvantage in winter—isn't it, Ned?"—glancing up at me with a smile. "You and I must show Mr. St. George all the beauties of Daleshire which this firesome weather has not spoiled."

"Oh—er—yes, certainly, of course!" I stammered, a good deal taken aback myself by her coolness, and drawing back a little.

It certainly did not seem that she required my protection, and I picked up a paper and pretended to read it, but waited to hear what she would say next from behind the fluttering fan.

"And when did you arrive, Mr. St. George? Later, I suppose?"

"I landed yesterday."

"Only then! Then I won't ask you how you like England yet. I think it is lovely."

"Better than Jamaica?"

"Oh, yes, a thousand times."

"Then you are not very faithful to your old country!" He did not say it as a question, but bitterly; and Nat gave a little laugh in which I do not think he heard the tremor.

"Certainly not. It seems to me very foolish to say you like a place best simply because you chance to have been born there. No, I don't think I could bear either Jamaica or life here after my English experiences. After all, I am half English, you know."

"You did not think so once," Raby St. George said, in a tone which suggested that he was keeping a tight rein over himself; and again Nat laughed carelessly.

"Didn't I? Perhaps not. But I don't think I was much more than a silly child in those days, was I? One changes and grows wiser more quickly in England, I think."

"Have you changed?" he asked.

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eagerly, moving a step nearer to her chair.

"Oh, yes, in ever so many ways! I have grown wonderfully clever, thanks to mademoiselle—you saw her, didn't you? I can play my own accompaniments when there are not too many sharps and flats, I can manage to write a letter without the dictionary, and Ned has taught me to ride and row and drive and fish, and I don't know what besides."

"And is that all?" he asked, gloomily, nervously, unclasping his delicate hands.

"Not quite, madame declares that I have grown an inch taller, but I don't believe it. Let me see—what were we saying? Oh, about your business, to be sure! Do you remain long in England, or is it only a flying visit?"

"Only you can tell me that," he answered; and for an instant I saw those nervous fingers grasp her bangled wrist, holding it tightly. "You dragged me here," he went on, in tones uncomfortably low and fierce, "and you it must be who will either keep me here or send me back again. You know it, Natalie!"

Madame's crisply rustling skirts were audibly outside the door, and it opened to admit her and mademoiselle.

Natalie rose, dropping the fan with which she had shielded her face until now, and with her black eyes looking full and coldly at Raby St. George.

(To be continued.)

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