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CHAPTER XXVIII.

Milley instantly brought the situation to a climax by falling back on her cushions and bursting into tears. The staid face of the lawyer broke up into anxious lines, and his lips trembled with a kind of terror.

"My dear child! my darling!" he remonstrated. "Milly! Milly! There, there! For Heaven's sake, don't cry. You will make yourself ill. Hush! hush! She has not gone; I will ask her to stay." He strode after Nora, and almost stood before her to bar her progress.

"I—I beg your pardon," he said, agitatedly. "I really beg your pardon most humbly, but would you mind coming back to my daughter for a few minutes? I only ask for a few minutes until she has got over this paroxysm. As you see, my dear young lady, my poor child is an invalid. She is very weak, very weak and feeble, and—and—excitement is perilous, perilous! If you will come back and talk to her—" He stopped, recalled, by Nora's silence and hesitation, to the grave fact that he was addressing a stranger, a female, a young girl quite alone, and of whom he knew nothing. His eyes grew keen again and he fixed them on Nora's face. She met the glance steadily, unflinchingly, and somthing in the sad eyes must have reassured him. Nora waited, as if to see whether he was satisfied with his scrutiny, and she drew a breath of relief as he said, in a tone that seemed to indicate that he trusted her:

"Will you come back?"

Without a word she walked beside him to Milly, who literally received her with open arms and a smile that was like sunshine through rain.

"Am I not a willful, obstinate girl?" she said, with a loving glance at her father, who stood beside the chair with a rather troubled but resigned expression on his face. "You see, I always get my way. He has spoiled me, quite spoiled me. And now, papa, dear, go back to your letters. I want to talk to her."

With a shake of the head and a smile he obeyed; and drawing a sigh of satisfaction, Milly looked up at Nora.

"Do you think me very silly and selfish? I suppose you couldn't help thinking so. I can't help it. And now let us talk. Tell me your name?"

Nora was silent for a moment or two. She saw the danger of giving her own name, and yet could not, on the spur of the moment, invent a false one. Besides, she shrunk from deceiving this gentle-hearted girl, who seemed to have loved her at first sight.

Milly pressed her hand.

"Are you afraid?" she whispered. "You need not be. Whatever the trouble was, it was through no fault of yours. You are good! I know that by your eyes; and papa saw it too. I could tell that by the way he spoke to you. Whatever you were afraid of, you need not be any longer, now you are with us. You do not know how clever and how brave he is. He will take you part and protect you. Tell me now."

"It is Nora Trevanion," said Nora in a low voice.

Milly repeated it softly.

"What a pretty name! I like that. It seems to match your face. And now you need not tell me any more."

Nora sighed.

"I can not; only this, that I must leave here and go far away, somewhere I can hide—"

Milly nodded eagerly.

"You couldn't have a better place than Elm Square, where we don't even know the names of our next door neighbors," she said. "You might live with us there for fifty years, and no one would find you. This is England, and you are not a slave, and papa would not give you up"—she paused a moment with a little cry of doubt and dismay—"unless—unless you are married; then I suppose— But you are not, are you?"

"No," said Nora, faintly.

Milly looked relieved.

"Oh, I knew, I felt you were not!" she exclaimed. "Then if there isn't a husband, no one has the right to take you away, and"—she clasped her thin hands delightedly—"we may keep you."

Nora started and stared.

"You mean—"

"Of course," broke in Milly, "I mean that you may stay with us. You must be my companion, my sister. Now, don't look so grave and frown, or—or I shall have another fit of crying. You don't know how easily I get them."

Her mobile lips were beginning to quiver as she spoke, and Nora, who dreaded another paroxysm almost as much as the devoted father, made haste to falter out:

"Very well, I will stay if—if your father—"

Milly called her papa, and Mr. Lester came hurrying out as if he had expected the summons.

"Papa, Miss Trevanion—Miss Nora Trevanion—will stay with us. She is going to be my companion."

A curious expression of astonishment and doubt crossed the lawyer's grave face.

"Nora Trevanion, did you say?" he said.

"Yes," replied Nora, with downcast eyes.

He rubbed his chin and regarded her in silence for a moment or two, then he said in a peculiarly quiet and deliberate tone:

"Miss Trevanion is extremely good-natured in consenting to gratify your whims and fancies, Milly."

"It isn't a whim, and it isn't fancy," retorted that young lady, placidly; "but we won't argue, papa, dear."

Mr. Lester smiled.

"No, there is not much use in arguing when you have got your own way. You are wise for your years, my dear. But I was going to say I am very grateful to Miss Trevanion, and if she will give me the address of her friends I will write and ask them to permit her to pay us a visit—"

He looked with veiled keeness at Nora as he spoke.

She winced, but lifted her eyes to his.

"I have no friends," she said, in a low voice. "It is better that I should go—"

"There, papa!" began Milly, tremulously.

"Hush, my dear," he said. "You mean, Miss Trevanion, that you do not wish the friends you have to know your whereabouts?"

Nora bent her head in assent.

He seemed to consider for a moment or two, then he said, as slowly and deliberately as before:

"Very well; and now, Milly, I dare say your new friend would like to go inside and rest before dinner. To-morrow we can make our plans."

"They are made," she said, with a smile that robbed the words of their willfulness. "We must go back to London at once, papa."

"Indeed?" he said, with a faint smile.

"Yes," she went on, in a whisper. "She does not want to stop here. She is afraid of their following and finding her, whoever they are. Do you understand, papa?"

"Quite," was his calm reply. "I have no objection to going back at once. But Miss Trevanion need not fear being kidnapped. This is a free country, and she is her own mistress, I presume?"

"Yes—yes!" exclaimed Milly, eagerly. "She is not married."

"And is an orphan?" he puts in.

Nora bent her head.

"Very good," he said. "Now, I will wheel you in, Milly, and you and Miss Trevanion can have a committee meeting in your own room." He turned to Nora as he took hold of the chair. "You may confide in us or not as you please, Miss Trevanion; but if you should wish to tell us anything, do not hesitate. Your confidence will be held sacred."

Almost persuaded that she was dreaming, Nora walked beside the chair into the inn, Milly grasping her hand tightly, as if she half feared that Nora might suddenly change her mind and take to flight.

CHAPTER XXIX.

Six weeks later, Vane was walking down Mount Street, in the direction of Senley Tyers' studio.

It was an awful night. Snow had fallen and been trodden into slush; one of London's most charming fogs made the atmosphere as damp and uncomfortable as the pavements, and most men who were obliged to be out were hurrying along toward shelter.

But Vane was walking slowly, with his hands thrust in his pockets, his head bent, his whole attitude eloquent of the frame of mind in which a man is utterly indifferent to the weather. As a matter of fact, he scarcely knew whether it was wet or dry, snowing or raining, for Vane Tempest was an extremely unhappy man.

He made his way up to the studio, and presented in his wet and woe-begone appearance a striking contrast to the tasteful luxury of that apartment and the elegantly clad artist, who, in a purple velvet dressing gown, was lying back in an easy-chair before the fire, with a cigarette in his lips, a flask of Italian Chianti on the table at his elbow, and Tiger, the cat, coiled upon his knees.

He looked up as the door opened, and rose with a slight shiver; for the tall, thin figure with haggard face showing above the upturned collar of the wet and mud-stained coat was enough to produce a chill and make the spectator uncomfortable.

"My dear Vane!" he exclaimed, holding out his hand and drawing it away as quickly as he could from contact with the damp, icy one which Vane gave him. "What a deuce of a night to be out in! And why on earth didn't you take a cab?"

Vane dropped into a chair in front of the fire, still in his wet coat, and looked moodily at the flames.

"It isn't much of a night, I suppose," he said. "I didn't think of a cab. I like to walk. Cabs crawl and drive me mad." His voice matched his face. It was the voice belonging to a man grown haggard with trouble, suspense, anxiety; a man absorbed by a desire that, as day succeeded day, appeared to grow more hopeless. "I'm afraid I'm spoiling your rug."

"Never mind the rug," said Senley Tyers, who minded the rug very much. "Is there any news?"

He put the question gravely, sympathetically, but as one who foresees the answer.

Vane shook his head.

"None," he said, in the dull voice of an accustomed despair. "I need not ask if you have heard anything?"

Senley Tyers shook his head.

"Nothing," he said. "You know my opinion—what I think?"

"I ought to know it," said Vane, grimly; "you have told me often enough. I wish to God I could think with you! It would be a poor kind of comfort, but it would be something. But every time I try and persuade myself that she is safe and well I am tortured by doubts and fears that, if they do not end, will drive me into a mad-house. Yes, I would give half of the rest of my life to think as you do about it."

Senley Tyers glanced at him watchfully.

(To be Continued.)

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