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**WON AT LAST.**

CHAPTER XXXI.

All the rest of the day the snow lasted, although falling less thickly, and I did not, as I had intended, walk into Whittlesford to see Yorke; but the next morning was bright enough, and after luncheon I set off, knowing that that was as good a time as any to catch my friend at home. But I was disappointed, for old Dizartle, whom I found having a nap by the fire in the dining-room, with his red silk handkerchief over his bald head, told me that Roger had left for Market Waxford an hour before. Cowdrick, the banker, had taken a turn for the worse, it seemed.

I stayed a few minutes talking, for the old doctor was full of his "boy's" new freak to leave Whittlesford, and was glad to have anyone to whom he could enlarge upon his grievance. Getting away by no means more cheerful for our talk. I stood hesitating at the gates of Redpots, not caring as yet to go back to Chavasse, which seemed to have had a cloud upon it ever since the night of that luckless ball. I was just debating whether or not I should endeavor to cheer myself up by turning in at the rectory for a chat, when a dog-cart, howling swiftly down the road, pulled up in front of me, and I looked up to recognize the lodge vehicle, with Major Constable in it, looking very brown and jolly, and his man beside him holding in the spirited bay mare.

"What are you after here?" the Major asked, bending down to shake hands. "Yorke, I suppose—eh?"

"Yes; and he isn't here, worse luck! Where are you off to?"

"Oh, Bridgely Norton!"—a busy town some eight miles on that side of Whittlesford. "I've some business there."

"Then I wish I had," I said, laughing. "I'd come if there was room."

"Would you care to? All right then; Jones can go back, provided that you'll undertake to drive. I can't manage that with one arm, you see. Jump up!"—as the man descended. "It's a glorious afternoon for a drive."

So it was; and the drive and the major's cheerful company pretty well dispelled the "blues" for the time being.

His business took longer to transact than he had expected, and it was late when we got back to Whittlesford—seven struck as I pulled up the mare at the lodge gates. I drove off again pretty rapidly, for the major had insisted that I should not walk, and I do not think it was a quarter of an hour later when I reached Chavasse.

Telling the man who came to take the reins to look well after the mare and before driving her back, I hurried into the hall, wondering how much time I had to spare before dinner. But my coat was not off before I was considerably startled by something—the sound from the library, the door of which stood open, of half a score of excited voices all talking at once.

There were madame's clear tones, a little higher than usual, and some shrill voluble sentences in French from mademoiselle; Nat's voice; old Style's feeble treble, and half a dozen others, among which I recognized Virtue Dent's.

Hurrying across the corridor, I went in. Madame stood in the middle of the excited group; old Styles was trembling like a leaf; poor old Batterbin was sobbing loudly in company with three or four of the maids; mademoiselle was gesticulating excitedly and pouring out scraps of mingled French and English at a rapid rate; and Natalie, very pale and quiet, stood close at my mother's side. Valla was there, but she and Virtue Dent stood together, a little apart from the rest.

"What could be the matter? I wondered, glancing from one face to the other before asking—

"What in the world is up? Anything wrong, mother?"

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"Wrong," madame echoed, tragically; and, coming forward, she put her hand upon my shoulder. "Worse than that. Ned, there has been a robbery here. Natalie's jewels have been stolen. Every stone is gone!"

CHAPTER XXXII.

It was some time before I recovered sufficiently from the stupid amazement into which this announcement threw me to enable me to understand anything but the stupefying fact that Natalie's jewels were really gone—stolen. Condensed, what had occurred amounted to this.

Madame had gone into Natalie's sitting-room after dressing, and found her alone, sitting half asleep by the fire, in the morning-dress which she had worn all day. Surprised at this, madame asked her if she did not feel well enough to go down; and Nat told her that, though she had rung her bell repeatedly, neither Valla nor Virtue Dent had responded. Vexed at this neglect, madame dispatched her own maid—a sober middle-aged woman named Briggs—in search of the missing couple. Briggs came back with a message from Mrs. Batterbin to the effect that Valla was suffering from the combined horrors of tooth-ache and a mustard-plaster, while Virtue had, directly after the servants' dinner, asked and obtained leave to go out for an hour or two, and had not returned, although the hour or two had lengthened into four.

In those circumstances Briggs had offered to help Miss Orme herself; and madame sat down by the fire until the ceremony should be concluded. A chance word of Natalie's presently led the talk back to the ball; and a comparison of the merits of Lady Roxborough's diamonds with those which had been worn by the young lady herself induced a remark from her to the effect that the clasp of her necklace was unsafe. Madame, deciding that it such was the case it must be looked to without delay, asked Nat for the key of her cabinet in order that she might examine it for herself. Nat produced the key, and madame, passing into the next room, unlocked the

cabinet and found it empty—absolutely empty! Not even the cases were left. The cabinet bore no signs of having been tampered with; the lock—a good one, made especially—had not been forced; there was no appearance of the room having been forcibly entered, but the jewels were gone.

The servants, called together on the spot—Virtue among them, for she had just returned—could throw no light upon the mystery. None of them had had visitors, and no one had been seen lurking about. The whole of them, with Styles and Batterbin at their head, begged that their boxes might be searched at once. They had nearly all been years in the house, and madame was reluctant to do this; but eventually it was done, and I will only say that a more unpleasant task I never had anything to do with. In the end it left us no wiser than we

had been at the beginning; and I am very much mistaken if the constables summoned hastily from Market Waxford, were any less puzzled than we were. The jewels were clean gone, as though spirited away. Very little sleep any of us had that night, and with the police about the premises, I wonder we had any.

The next day matters were worse, if possible. Breakfast was on the table, and we four—madame and the governess, Nat and I—were pretending to eat it, when the principal officer from Market Waxford, Chief Inspector Blake, rode up. The news of the loss of the jewels was all over Whittlesford by this time, and would be spread all over the county before evening. Inspector Blake was known to be both a clever man and a shrewd officer, and only the winter before had skillfully traced the perpetrators of an artful robbery at the Market Waxford Bank; and his services on that occasion had won for him a substantial acknowledgment from the directors of that institution. He was a portly, good-tempered looking, ruddy-faced man, but so obviously with all his wits about him that his mere appearance was encouraging. All that any of us knew he was master of in five minutes, and the first thing he did was narrowly to examine Natalie's rooms, afterward extending his search all over the house—a proceeding which occupied some very uncomfortable hours. Then he established himself in the library, and, one by one, closely questioned the servants, from old Styles downward. Almost before the questioning was over the inspector had formed a suspicion which he held on to tenaciously, and which seemed to grow blacker and blacker every moment—a suspicion of Virtue Dent.

Late that afternoon a message came to Nat and me, as we sat gloomily before the fire in the morning-room, to go to the library. On our complying, we found most of the servants gathered in a group with several doubtful faces, madame pale and disturbed, mademoiselle gesticulating as she muttered something, the inspector looking very dignified and important, and Virtue, her face buried in her white apron, sobbing bitterly beside his chair.

How he had done it I do not know, but somehow the inspector had managed to make out a pretty black case against the luckless Virtue. She had always admired Miss Orme's jewels, the diamonds especially, and had more than once said that she wished she had some of them! Yes; there was not a servant who was not ready to affirm that. And she always had access to the young lady's rooms? Yes; madame was reluctantly obliged to admit that. And the very last time the jewels were seen she was looking at and admiring them, was she not, and had seemed confused when discovered? Was this not so? Of course it was; and I could not and did not deny it. Very good. And she was the only one of the domestics who had left Chavasse since the day of the ball, when the contents of the cabinet were known to be safe, the young lady having worn the diamonds? Yes. Very good again. As to the motives—well, the inspector had heard that the young woman had a dissolute brother, who had run away from Whittlesford in some kind of a scrape, and who had been a drag upon her ever since.

(To be continued.)

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