

WON AT LAST.

CHAPTER XXX.

It was the same pretty room which I had entered on the preceding night, and in which I had seen the brilliant little figure standing by the big glass, almost outshining the wax-lights which glittered round her; but there was no brightness to dazzle my eyes now—only a shaded lamp burned on a little table, and let me see Nat lying back almost lost in a huge chintz-cushioned chair by the fire. Her eyes were closed, but she opened them slowly as I approached, and her face brightened—if indeed such a woe-begone little face could brighten; for, as I saw her more closely, it seemed to me that she simply looked terribly ill.

"Oh, it is you, Ned!" she said, with a gasp of relief. "I was afraid it was madame."

"Afraid?" I echoed, wondering very much how I was going to get through my commission to talk to her. I had Roger before my mind, and somehow, although she looked so awfully wretched—poor little thing!—I felt myself getting angry again.

"Oh, yes—yes!" She got up, clasping my arm with two eager little hot hands, as she had done on the previous night. "I have shut myself up all day because I was afraid. Ned, you must tell her: I will not—I can not!"

"She knows," I said, shortly.

"Did you tell her?" she cried, eagerly, turning pitifully white. "What does she say? Is she angry? Does she say I shall do it? Does she?"

"Well, she says you must be mad," I answered, with brusque candor.

"Ah, so I was—no one knows how mad but you and me!"

"Don't bring me into it; I had nothing to do with it!" I returned, ungraciously. "I would have let you jump off the top of the house as willingly. Look here, Nat—haven't we had enough of this nonsense? You don't mean to go on with it, do you?"

"Yes," she cried, passionately, her eyes flashing; "you know I do!"

"Oh, very well! It's a cheerful lookout—that's all—Do you know he has been here, pray?"

"He has?" She dropped back into her chair again, shivering. "He has been here? Oh, Ned, I did not think he would ever do that! He is so proud, and I insulted him before them all last night, didn't I? Do you know that all night and all day I

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Miss Gallop.

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have been seeing him, looking just as he did for that one second? I have only to close my eyes and it all comes back—his face, and the lights, and the horrible crashing music. And he came here, and you did not tell me! It doesn't matter, though, for I said I would never see him or speak to him again, didn't I? And I meant it. Why did he come here? Was it to say he would forgive me? Ah, he doesn't know, you see, that it is I who will never forgive him!"

She buried her face in her hands as she finished, shuddering violently still. Two or three times I had tried to stop her rapid words, but without avail. There was even now only one "he" in the world for her—that was certain—and a lively prospect that seemed to open for Fraser Froude's promised wife. As soothingly as I could, I said—

"I only meant Froude, Nat."

"Oh!" She dropped her hands listlessly to stare at me. "Only Fraser Froude?"

"That's all. Madame thought you wouldn't care to see him, you know."

"Oh, no, no!" she said, shuddering. "Ned, I was afraid you meant—him!"

It was on the tip of my tongue to tell her bitterly that she need not be afraid of Yorke's troubling her again, but I bit my lip, and checked the words. The breach was wide enough in all conscience, and wanted no enlarging. Instead, I said, indignantly—

"And you mean to say that you're absolutely going on with this face—his engagement—while you feel like this? Look here, Nat—it's a burning shame, which every way you look at it! How on earth do you think you're going to bring yourself to marry this confounded lamp-post of a stock-broker while you love Roger Yorke? You may say what you like, but I say you do love him—you know you do! And you have Fraser Froude's ring on your finger there! It ought to burn you—by Jove, it ought!"

If it had indeed burned her, she could hardly have torn it off more quickly or dashed it down more passionately than she did as I spoke. The ring rolled across the carpet, and I stared stupidly after it, finally asking—

"And what's that for?"

"Because I hate it!" she answered vehemently. "I—I had forgotten it. Don't pick it up. I loathe the sight of it!"

"H'm!" I said, deliberately. "If I were you, I'd pitch the giver after it. Let it lie, by all means; I don't want to touch it. But does it mean that you're going to do that?"

"Do what?"

"Be sensible, and throw Fraser Froude over, of course."

"No," she returned, a sudden flood of color rushing into her cheeks, "it does not mean that. I had no right to take it off. I did not mean to take it off. Pick it up for me."

"And you will put it on again?"

"Yes," she said, obstinately.

"Very well. But look here, Nat—once off your finger, that ring shouldn't go on again. You have no right to wear it."

"No right. What do you mean?"

"That you have no business to wear a ring given you by any man but Roger Yorke." I returned, doggedly, looking straight at her.

Quite calmly and coldly she looked back at me, and I saw her little dark face harden and set as it had done on the previous day in the laurel alley by the gate in the park fence.

"Ned," she said, quietly, "am I to pick that up, or will you?"

"Oh, all right!"—and I shrugged my shoulders. "As you please, of course. Am I to pick it up or not?"

"If you do not, I shall."

I crossed over and picked up the ring, and bringing it back, tossed it into her lap. It fell upon her fingers, and at its touch she shivered with about as much aversion as she might have shown at the touch of the hand of its giver. As she did not attempt to touch it, I said, ironically—

"Perhaps I had better put it on for you. Shall I?"

But, instead of answering, she burst into a passion of weeping. I do not think I had ever seen a woman cry like that, before, and I was utterly scared, wondering what on earth Madame would say should she chance to come in and find us. It was fortunate that Nat stopped when she did, or I should have done something desperate.

"I say, Nat—you ought to have some wine or something," I said, a good deal softened. "This sort of thing won't do, you know. You will have a fit of hysterics next. Is there any wine up here?"

"No," she answered, petulantly; "I don't want wine—it will only make my head throbb more than it does now. Fetch my eau-de-Cologne, if you like—it is in the next room."

"All right. Where shall I find it?"

"Ask for it. She is there—mademoiselle. Madame sent her to sit with me, but I can't bear her in my sight. She will give it to you."

Fearing a second outbreak if I did not hurry, I crossed the room quickly to the door of communication between it and the next, and went in. My entrance was startlingly abrupt. I suppose, for it was followed by a low cry of surprise and fright, and a figure which had been bending over the dressing table, examining something by the light of a candle, turned a pale face and scared eyes upon me as I advanced, while something rattled and slipped from its fingers, falling to the ground like a sparkling string. Then I uttered an exclamation too, for the woman who had been so eagerly and secretly bending over the dressing table that was strewn with the glittering contents of Natalie's jewel-cases was not Lucille Valdin, but Virtue Dent.

Yes, Virtue Dent! And, of all the frightened, disconcerted faces which I ever remember to have seen, I think this girl's was the most so, always excepting the time when I had found her crouched behind the clump of bushes in the park on the frosty night when Raby St. George had made his first appearance at Mount Chawasse.

She did not even drop her usual demure courtesy—an action which always seemed mechanical with her—but merely raised her large pale-colored eyes to mine deprecatingly.

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her thin fingers fluttering nervously. So we stood for a minute. I should think, the diamond necklace which she had let fall sparkling and glittering on the carpet between us. At last I said, sharply—

"What are you doing here, Virtue?"

"N-nothing, sir," she stammered, confusedly, and stooped to pick up the necklace.

"I thought that mademoiselle was here?" I went on, glancing round.

"So she was, sir. But her head ached, and so she asked me to come and sit here while she went to lie down, for fear Miss Natalie called and wanted anything," the girl returned, looking from me to the toilet-table and back again.

"Oh, I see! Where's Valia?"

"Down in the house-keeper's room, sir. Her teeth ached dreadfully, and Mrs. Batterbin's afraid she'll have to have one out. Does Miss Natalie want anything, sir?"

"Yes. Give me her eau-de-Cologne, will you? I suppose you know where it is."

She went to the other end of the room to get it, coming back in a moment with a dainty little gold-stoppered cut-glass bottle. As I took it, I looked back at the glittering mass lying there in the dull light of the one candle, and at the empty cases.

"I say, Virtue—does Miss Orme leave her things about like that?"

"N-no, sir," she faltered, turning red as the cherry-colored ribbon on her cap. "only—only—"

"Only what?"

"Only last night she left the key in the cabinet; and just now I saw it, and hadn't anything to do, and so I thought it would be no harm just to look at them. That's all."

A great liberty, all things considered, I thought, supposing it was all; but I did not say so.

"Well, I'd put them away now if I were you; they're a good deal too valuable to be played with. Miss Orme forgot last night, I suppose. Lock the cabinet and bring the key to her in the next room."

"Yes, sir," she answered, hurriedly, and, turning to the table, began to put the things back into their cases as fast as her thin hands could move. With the bottle of eau-de-Cologne in my hand, I went back to Natalie.

(To be continued.)

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The successful claimant is a physician half the age of the defendant. It is safe to say that his amorous lacerations were well healed by the settlement.

This and similar sordid cases give weight to the view sometimes expressed that the action for breach of promise of marriage should be abolished or strictly limited. It offers no balm for the man or woman who is most really and deeply injured. It is never sought in such cases for which in fact there is no remedy save time and philosophy.

But it is a ready instrument of blackmail. Men or women caught in the coils of sentiment or passion do and say things that make them a prey to ridicule and shame. That is the blackmailers opportunity and the victims are bled under colour of justice. Far more harm is done than could be done by denying the right of action or by limiting damages to actual pecuniary loss strictly proved. To assess damages for injured affections is a foolish paradox. A love that can be weighed in a money scale weighed very little—Chicago Tribune.

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In the terrible battle of the day the flag had been torn into tatters and when he was sore wounded so that he soon must die the soldier set it still strong within him and rather than let the "bit of rag" fall into the enemy's hand he folded it up and placed it beneath him so that none might see it. This was why he would not let himself be moved by the kindly Prussian soldiers. He would die protecting the precious flag.

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