

WON AT LAST.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

"Yes, sir. And ever since she's never had a word to say to me that wasn't as sweet and kind as ever," Virtue declared, giving a final sob as she dropped her apron.

"It would have been well if the judgment of all of us, myself included, had been as good as Miss Natalie's. Virtue," madame observed, gently. "There—do not say any more. By and by you must let me know how I can best make up to you for the unjust pain that you have suffered."

And Virtue, thus dismissed, went out of the room, very red-eyed, but looking much less miserable than she had looked of late, poor girl!

The letter had taken so long to read and so long to talk over and wonder at that it was late in the afternoon and nearly dark before the rector remembered that he had promised to be home to luncheon, and that it was now nearly four hours past the orthodox rectory time. He was bidding good-day to my mother and me, and Alice had run down into the hall to give him a farewell kiss and send a message to Major Constable, when Dr. Dizarte came in. That stopped the rector, of course, and he turned back with us into the library, designing, I felt sure, to say a word or two of comfort to his old friend and crony. And indeed the poor old man seemed to need it, so shaky, pale, worn, and tremulous did he look. I even saw tears in my mother's steady bright eyes as she looked at him and heard his weak faltering voice.

We told him about the great surprise of the day, but I do not think he listened much, or cared sufficient, to feel astonished. The old man's heart and thoughts were with his "boy."

He asked me about Natalie's condition, shook his head in response to the statement that she was still just the same, and then turned to the rector.

"I wanted to see you, Deeping," he said, his voice and hands trembling alike as he looked from one to the other of us. "I hear that I can go tomorrow to see my boy. I thought that perhaps you would come to—eh?"

The tremor in the old doctor's usually full voice and the wistful eagerness of the face which had always been so round and jolly would have touched anybody. I know it brought a lump into my throat, and I think I know why the kindly rector suddenly needed his pocket-handkerchief as he replied, heartily, saying that he would go—"of course he would."

As for me, I think I cared more for my mother than ever I had cared in my life, as she said, before I had time to speak.

"If it were not that I can not leave my poor little Natalie, I would say that I might make one of the party," Doctor Dizarte. As it is Ned will only be too glad to be my substitute; and you must please give Doctor Yorke my regards and warmest sympathy. It is a terrible position for him, but it can not be long now be—"

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I think that Alice Deeping was born to be a blessing to every one near whom she came. She was emphatically a blessing now, and warded off scene. Whether it was that the gentle womanly kindness of madame's words was unusual with her, or that their hearty substance was too much for him—poor old fellow!—I do not know; but it is my opinion that Dizarte was on the verge of a burst of tears at that critical moment, and that they would have certainly come in another second but for Miss Alice. She threw her arms round his neck and kissed him as she might have kissed her own father.

"And tell Roger from me, Doctor Dizarte," she cried, earnestly, "that I don't believe a word of it, and wouldn't if all Whittleford did—wouldn't even if Ned himself did. And tell him that there isn't a single sensible person who has known and liked him all this time who is not sure of his innocence. I don't care about evidence. No one but idiots would care for evidence in a case like this. I wouldn't believe it if they had found a hundred and fifty pistols, and his name engraved upon every one of them—there!"

For the first time since Roger's arrest I believe old Dizarte absolutely smiled. He patted tenderly her fluffy flaxen hair with his shaking old hand.

"Thank you, my dear," he said gently. "I'll tell my boy. Yes, yes—I'll tell him. You do me good. I should bear up better than I do, I know; but you see, my dear, that he—"

And here the old man broke off and wiped his eyes with his handkerchief.

We three went out into the hall together—the rector, Dizarte, and I. I was just helping the old doctor on with his coat, trying to cut a dismal joke meanwhile, and old Styles was standing ready to open the door, when a sound outside startled us—a horse's hoofs rattling on the drive through the rain, which had come on to pour furiously, and then stopping before the door.

"Who can that be?" I said, pausing in my talk.

Styles was opening the door. In the stream of light thrown out upon the steps we saw a drenched man dismounting from a panting horse. He came up the steps, looking about him curiously, and touching his dripping

hat-brim. I left the doctor's coat and advanced.

"Beg pardon, sir," he said, "but is this the place they call Mount Chavasse?"

"Yes," I returned, hastily, wondering, for there was an odd sort of excitement about him, "this is Mount Chavasse."

"And is one of you gentlemen Mr. Chavasse, sir?"

"I am. What is it?"

"I've been sent to fetch you, sir, from Bridgely Norton, and was to give you this." He drew from the breast of his soaked jacket an envelope, and held it out to me. "There are two other gentlemen I want to find too, the rector—Mr. Deeping—and Doctor Dizarte."

"These gentlemen are Mr. Deeping and Doctor Dizarte," I said, more astonished still, holding the envelope in my hand unopened, while the others drew a pace nearer. "Do you say you were sent here?"

"Yes, sir—sent from the Miter Arms."

"Who sent you?"

"A gentleman that's been staying here for the last few days, sir. He went out for a ride to-day and had an accident—was thrown, and his horse rolled over him. They say he can't live till morning."

With a rush of blood to my head, and a sensation of singing in my ears which I can feel yet, I tore open the envelope and glanced over its contents. Written in a weak, uncertain hand upon the rough sheet of paper, these were the words I read—

"If you care for the life of your friend, come here to me. Bring the rector—bring Dizarte. No delay. I shall be dead by the morning."

"RABY ST. GEORGE."

CHAPTER XXXIX.

Among all the hurried and exciting events of the last few days which it has fallen to my lot to chronicle, that journey through the pelting rain to Bridgely Norton stands out distinctly—the rattle of the horses' hoofs, the moaning of the wind, the patter of the rain upon the carriage roof, the splashing of the wheels through the thick mud and huge puddles, and the pale grave faces of my two companions.

It was still early in the evening when the wet and steaming horses were pulled up before the door of the Mitor Arms, in the High Street of Bridgely Norton, and we got out. Shown by a civil landlord into a parlor to wait, we were joined after a few minutes by a middle-aged, good-humored-looking man who was evidently a doctor. Old Dizarte was trembling so by this time that he was incapable of uttering a word, and I was not much better. We left it to the rector to conduct the conference. He was the only one, in fact, who had the self-possession to address the stranger at all.

"How is Mr. St. George now?" he asked.

The doctor shook his head, and glanced at Dizarte and me.

"May I ask if he is a relative of either you gentlemen?"

"He is not," the rector answered quickly. "You may speak quite freely, sir; and, on behalf of myself and my friends, I beg you to do so. We were given to understand that Mr. St. George was dying. Is that so?"

The doctor gravely bent his head.

"I am sorry to say it is. He can not possibly survive till morning—the nature of his injuries forbids it. We're not told how the accident happened?"

The rector answered in the affirmative. The doctor looked from him to me.

"You are Mr. Chavasse, I think?"

"Yes."

"Then it appears to be you that he most especially wishes to see. His first words on recovering consciousness were to ask if his injuries were serious. I thought it my duty to tell him the truth. He then contrived to write the note which I afterward dispatched to you, saying that it was a matter of life and death that it should reach your hands as soon as possible—in time, in short, for him to be able to speak to you and to these gentlemen. He has been anxiously expecting your arrival."

The doctor—his name was Wade, we found—paused.

"Is it certainly hopeless?" the rector asked.

"Perfectly hopeless. It is physically impossible that he can live for more than a few hours—twelve at most. Whatever he may have to say to you should be said quickly."

"Is he conscious?" I asked.

"Quite. Will you come now?"

We followed him in silence, Dizarte holding my arm, out of the room and up a clean narrow winding staircase. Opening a door, he motioned to us to advance, and we entered a room bright with the light of fire and a shade lamp, and with a bed draped with chintz hangings, on which lay, ten dervy covered, from sight, a crushed figure.

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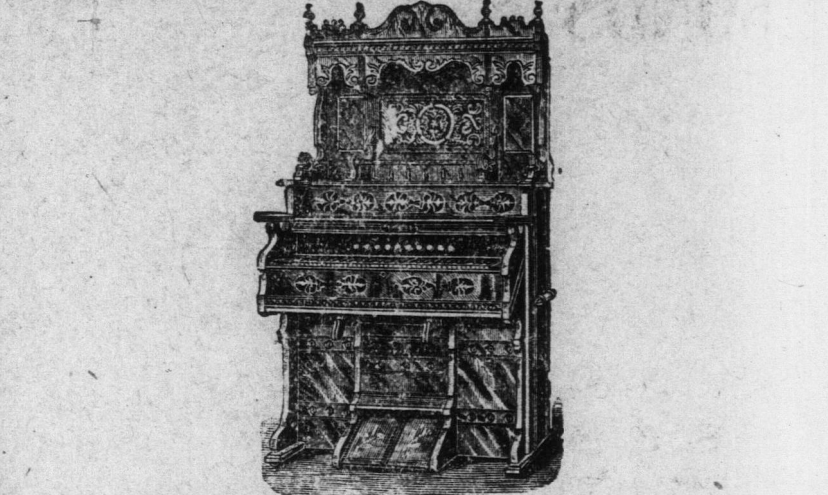
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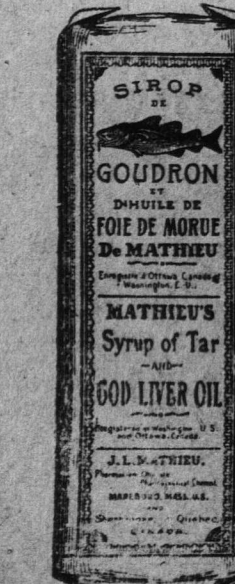
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