

WON AT LAST.

CHAPTER I.

It was a woman who said this, a young woman clad in a neat print gown, with a white muslin apron, and a little fitted mob-cap—the regulation morning attire of the female servants at Chavasse—a woman fair-haired, thin-faced and pale, with a small thin-lipped mouth and large light green eyes. She was one of the housemaids, Virtue Dent by name, and was for some reason not popular with her associates down-stairs. Whispers which had somehow floated to the region level with the hall had pronounced Virtue Dent to be proud, disagreeable, unsocial, sly. Unsociable I dare say she was, and very likely self-contained and cold enough; but, this verdict notwithstanding, I did not think that Virtue Dent was sly. In point of fact, I rather liked the girl, partly because I knew that in general other people did not care for her, partly because her life had been an unhappy one. Her father had been one of the few black sheep in Whitesford—a poacher, an idler, always drinking and lounging at the bar of the Cap and Bells, the village ale-house, beating his wife and swearing at his children—there were only two, Virtue and a brother—and generally scandalizing Whitesford, which prided itself upon its good behavior. He died one day, coming to grief over his own doorstep when he was too tipsy to see it, and his broken-down widow, who took his loss terribly to heart, followed him in a month or two, while the son, who was his father over again, ran away from Whitesford, which certainly did not regret his loss—rather the contrary. This left Virtue alone. She was a thin slip of a girl in those days, rough and unkempt as well could be; but my mother took her and handed her over to the housekeeper to be turned into a presentable domestic as quickly as possible.

I do not think the housekeeper much liked her task, and I dare say Virtue had to put up with plenty of snubs and slights from the other maids; but she turned out a clever one herself for all that. Punctual, diligent, orderly, neat, clean and quiet, she was everything that could be desired by the most fastidious employer. My mother liked her, so did I, and if I had a fancy that she did not find her life so easy as it might be, it was certainly not because she had ever said anything to lead me to think so. Her thin pale face hardly

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ever flushed, her large bright eyes scarcely ever changed in their expression, her brows always fitted to a nicety and never wrinkled, her shoes never creaked. She was, taken altogether, the most demure, most staid, most efficient second house-maid that the Mount had ever had within my remembrance. And yet I do not think that the girl was meek—indeed the whispers I have spoken of before hinted that Virtue had a "nasty knack" of "saying things"—presumably disagreeable things—when she was put out.

This is the history of Virtue Dent, who she was, and what she looked like on that hot July morning, as she stood, with her large eyes fixed on me, after giving me my mother's message.

"Where is madame, Virtue?" I asked.
"In the office room, sir. I was to ask you to go at once."
I sauntered across the hall toward the office-room, a small plainly furnished room in which my mother usually spent the morning over whatever business might be on hand. She always found some letters to write and accounts to look over, bills to check, and so forth using more ink in a week than I should have used in a month. I was pretty well accustomed to being called in for some purpose or other—a consultation as to something to be done or not done on the estate, for instance—a thing which I always thought more or less of a farce, by the way, for I do not believe my opinion ever altered the issue of affairs on the estate.

I expected, therefore, to find madame busy over her accounts and letters; but I was wrong. She sat at her desk, but she was not writing. With her elbow resting upon it and her cheek supported by one fine white hand, her gray eyes bright and steady, she was looking out of the window thoughtfully. She did not seem to hear my entrance, and looked up only when I paused in front of her chair.

"Virtue said that you wanted me mother."
"I did," she answered, removing her hand from her cheek; "but I did not expect you so soon. How is it?"
I told her the parson was as hoarse as a raven, and could not do anything but cough and sneeze. She listened; but I do not think she either heard or understood—it required more than a cold and a sore throat to enlist madame's sympathies. When I had finished my explanation, she motioned with her hand toward the door.
"Close the door, Ned; I wish to speak to you."
I obeyed her, wondering what was in the wind—for that it was something uncommon I felt sure. I drew up a chair opposite to the desk and sat down.
My mother slowly raised the hand that had lain in her lap, and placed a letter on the desk, a filmy, foreign-looking affair. With her eyes fixed upon mine, she smoothed it out gently yet with an odd sort of agitation. Then she said, just as though there had been no break since her last sentence:
"About this letter."
"From abroad, isn't it?" I asked, bending forward to look at it more closely, for she still kept her hand upon it.
"Yes, I received it an hour ago. It is from Jamaica."
"Jamaica!" I echoed in surprise, for that madame's correspondents included one in that part of the world I had never known. "I wasn't aware that you knew anybody over there, mother."

"One person—one whom I have not heard from since before your birth," she answered.
"Who is it?" I asked, curiously; and she replied, quietly:
"Philip Orme."

CHAPTER II.

"Philip Orme," my mother had said, and said it as if I must know who Philip Orme was, whereas, so far as I could recollect, I had never so much as heard the name before.
"Philip Orme?" I repeated the name two or three times; but the repetition did not enlighten me in the least. Finally, I was obliged to ask in sheer helplessness, "Who is he?"
"Did you never hear of him?"
"Not that I know of."
"I really do not suppose that you did," said my mother, rousing herself, but still speaking in a constrained way. "This letter has taken me back so many years that I forget how long it is since I heard the name as often as I now hear yours. It does not matter, I knew Philip Orme many years ago, when I was a girl."
"Is he a relative, mother?"
"No."

Very quietly she answered the question; but a soft intonation in her clear voice startled me, and with some little wonder I looked at my handsome mother. Some vague memory of an old far-away romance in her youthful days came faintly to me, some suggestive whisper which I had heard somewhere, which had beenrafted almost to my baby years. Somehow I had always known that my mother had never loved my father, and that, had she followed her own inclination, she would never have been the mistress of Mount Chavasse at the branch of the Chavasse family which she belonged to as poor as I was proud, and so the marriage had come about. It had not been unhappy, but certainly it had not been one of love. My father, despite his demure, bright, jovial manner, had always stood a little in awe of the staid lady whom Whitesford called Madam Orme. Had she loved my father as Philip Orme, of whom I had never heard, that her voice softened so as she spoke of him? I could not help thinking that she had. I waited for her to continue, well knowing that I must ask no questions.

Presently she went on again, looking from the window, and still speaking in that tone of unwonted softness.
"Yes, I knew Philip Orme when I was a girl; but he was no relation. We were friends. He settled in Jamaica soon after my marriage; and from that time until now I have never heard from him."
"And now?" I asked curiously.
"Now, he is dead!"

Quiet as quietly as before she spoke; but I saw her hands tremble and her lips tighten. I do not know by it was that the words gave me shock, except that I had not expected to hear this.
"Dead?" I echoed.
"Yes. This letter to me was written by him when he knew that in all probability he could not recover from so severe illness which was upon him, with instructions that it should be forwarded to me in the event of his death. When it was sent he had been dead a day."

She was silent for a while, and turning toward the desk again, she looked down at the filmy-looking paper.

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per, as if hesitating what to say next. I tried to anticipate her.
"You wish to tell me what is in the letter, I suppose?"
"Yes, since it contains a request in which you are more or less concerned."
"It is one you wish to comply with?" I questioned.
"Yes."
"Then I hardly see why you need consult me, mother, unless, of course, it is something in which I can help you," I added, as an afterthought. "You are mistress of Chavasse."
"Perhaps," said madame, with a touch of coldness; "but, as you will soon be its master, I do not care to take so important a step without your knowledge. Philip Orme has left behind him a daughter."
"Oh, he was married, then?" I said quickly.
"Why not?" demanded my mother, with a flash of her keen eyes at me.
"Oh, I didn't know!" I returned, confusedly. "Who was his wife?"
"I do not know. From the letter I infer that she was a native of Jamaica, was speaking of the daughter."
"Yes, of course," I said, feeling unbidden. "The request you spoke of; about her, I suppose?"
"Yes; she is motherless as well as fatherless, and she is left by Philip Orme in my charge. If I will receive her."
"And of course you will?"
"Of course; but, as I was going to say, the way in which I shall do it partly depends upon you."
"Why, there is only one thing to do, so far as I see!" I said, pleased with her confidence and with the little bit of importance it gave me. "We must have her here, of course."
"To be continued."

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