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WON AT LAST.

CHAPTER XXVII.

"Well, I must go, I suppose," I said. "I dare say I shan't be long. Nat, you'd better keep within sight of the chapel there, and then I shall easily find you."

"All right—only don't be too long, or I shall freeze!" she answered, and then I turned and followed Virtue's skirts, which were whisking out of sight again by this time.

It was not much that madame wanted, I found—only a list of things which had been forgotten to be made out for one of the men to take to Market Wexford.

I had finished it, and was going off again, when madame stopped me.

"By the way, Ned, Natalie has seen her flowers, has she not?"

"Oh, yes—Virtue brought them in."

She is in luck, I think.

"It is really very provoking!" madame said, not paying any attention to what I thought. "How could Mr. St. George imagine that she could wear crimson with cream and scarlet?"

"Perhaps he forgot," I suggested.

"Then it is very careless of him. I told him expressly the colors of her dress yesterday, knowing that he meant to ride over to Market Wexford for a bouquet. I was sure I made him understand. It was just at the rectory gate, as Roger came up."

"Oh!" I said, thinking that I could guess how St. George's memory had

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Mr. J. Hurlbert.

come to play him a trick. "Well, she can't wear that, anyway—she was saying so—or Froude's sister."

"I should not have liked her to wear his," madame said, a little stiffly. "I really wish the man would speak, and take his dismissal. And Ned, how came Doctor Yorke to send her any flowers?"

"Why shouldn't he?"

"Oh, there is no reason why he should not, of course; but it strikes me as being rather presumptuous—that is all! I wish he had not done so."

"Why? They match all right, don't they?" I asked.

"Yes—that is the annoying part of it, and I suppose it can not be helped. They are charmingly arranged, certainly. She means to take them, I suppose?"

"Oh, yes, I think so! She said they were the only ones that would go with her dress," I returned, with hypocritical indifference.

"I wish they had been Mr. St. George's selection instead of Doctor Yorke's; but really he has only his own inattention to blame for it. He is sure to be annoyed."

"Then he must get over it—that's all. I say, mother, I know you like St. George better than Froude, of course, but you don't want Nat to encourage him by carrying his flowers, do you?"

"Why not?" asked madame, calmly.

I was too much taken aback to answer with my usual gibes.

"Why, you wouldn't like her whisked back to Jamaica, surely?" I said, blankly.

"Certainly not. If Raby St. George is successful in his suit, it is not his intention to return to Jamaica. He will in that case settle in England—as near the Mount as possible."

"Did he tell you so?"

"Yes, a week or so since. His attachment to her, besides being certainly sincere, is an old one."

"I know that—she told me," I put in, bluntly.

"Exactly. It was his sole motive in visiting England."

"And he might have spared himself that trouble, and stopped away," I said, getting near the door, for I felt that I might chance to say something indiscreet presently. "If St. George has any sense, he must see that Natalie hates him like poison. She will never take him, mother—don't think it! She'd sooner marry Froude of the two, I do believe, if she were forced to take one or the other."

Getting back to the Lady's Walk, my temper a good deal ruffled, I was surprised that I could not see Nat. Perhaps she was in the chapel, doing her best to catch her death of cold by way of preparation for the ball. No—that was empty; and I hesitated, anathematizing the little puss for giving me the slip, and wondering whether she could have run in-doors again. More out of humor, for madame and madame's latest notion had vexed me, I turned down the narrow laurel alley leading to the side-gate, and then saw Nat standing by it. She did not turn round as I advanced, although I did so noisily, and I called out in an injured tone—

"Well, you're a nice young woman to wait for a fellow, I must say!"

But, instead of returning the saucy answer I was expecting, a violent shudder shook her from head to foot, her curly head sunk down upon the

clasped hands resting on the top of the gate, and her figure swayed as though she were going to fall. Amazed, I sprang forward and caught the tottering figure.

"Why, Nat, are you going to faint?" I said. "My dear little girl, what is it?"

She shook off my arm the instant it touched her, and, drawing back, stood erect, looking at me. I could not repress a dismayed exclamation, for Nat's face looked as I had never seen it yet. What on earth could have happened to bring that look of dazed horror—it was nothing less—to her eyes?

"What is it?" I repeated, putting my hand on her shoulder. "Has anything been scaring you, or what?"

"Ned," she said, slowly, moving her lips with an effort, "you are a Chavasse—you would not tell a deliberate lie, would you?"

"Of course not!" I returned, promptly, but more puzzled than before. What on earth could she be driving at? "What do you mean?"

"Then you will tell me the truth now!" she questioned, maintaining her steady look.

"Of course I will, if I can. What in the name of wonder do you mean, Ned?"

"You promise?" she said.

"Of course I do!" I returned, impatiently. "But all this is worse than Greek to me. Tell you the truth about what?"

"Tell me what you know of the secret between Roger Yorke and Made-noiselle Valdin!"

I was dumfounded, hopelessly aken aback, and for a moment stared at her blankly. Then, like the idiot I was, I stammered out as stupid an answer as lay in my power.

"Why, how in the world did you come to know anything about that?"

"So it is true?" she said, quietly.

"Who told you?" I blundered, making things worse.

She made a motion with her hand toward the lane, and then pressed it to her forehead, but did not speak for a moment. When she did, it was slowly, with a pause between every word, almost as a child repeating a lesson in a language it did not understand would speak.

"It is true there is a secret between them, that you have seen them meet clandestinely, and that he refused to tell you what the secret is, is that true? That is my question—he, one you promised to answer."

She must have read the answer in my troubled and coloring face, I suppose, for she wrenched her shoulder away, and made a sudden dart to pass me. Whether she was staggering again, or merely caught her foot, I do not know; but she stumbled and nearly fell. I caught her, steadying her against me, and holding both her hands tightly.

"Nat, look here—I don't know what you've heard or what you imagine, but whatever it is and however it is, you're making a fine mistake to take it like this. I never should have told you, of course—I promised Roger that I would not—but still I'm not going to let about it now. It's quite true that here is some sort of a secret between Yorke and that blessed governess, and that I accidentally witnessed an interview between them. That's right enough; and so it is that he wouldn't tell me what it was when I asked him. But, whatever it is, there's no harm in it—I'm certain there isn't! I'd stake my life there isn't!"

"No harm?" She laughed a cruel little scornful laugh. "No harm in a secret which he could conceal from all the world, which is hidden from you, his chief friend, who are pledged to conceal your knowledge of it, and which requires midnight interviews for its keeping? I—I have not so much faith, you see; I would not stake my life so very easily, even if that were all."

"All?" I echoed, startled at the last words. "What do you mean?"

"Oh, it doesn't matter!"—with another laugh, and drawing herself away. "You would stake your life that that was false too, no doubt. Never mind. 'So much between us,' he said that night. He was right, wasn't he? I know what it was now, and so that's all."

"Nat," I cried, catching her wrist, "do you mean to tell me that you're going to throw over Roger Yorke like this for a wretched tale which has crept about Heaven knows how, and has got to your ears in the same way?"

"A wretched tale which you, his best friend, are forced to admit the truth of!" she retorted. Then, with a sudden change of tone—"Oh, Ned, I did not believe it—I did not! I—I laughed at it, and said I would listen to no such paltry falsehood; and now you tell me that it is all true!"

"Who told you?" I cried hotly. "Who has been poisoning your mind in this way? Nat, you shall tell me, surely as I'm Yorke's friend and would stake my life if there was need, upon the truth of his love for you? Who was it?"

"I shall not tell you."

"You will not?"

"No," she returned, obstinately, with a swift tightening of her lips. "I will not."

A sudden thought struck me.

"Was it mademoiselle herself?"

"No."

"Then it must have been Raby St. George; he must have picked something up!" I said rapidly.

But with the same stubborn face he answered.

"It was not Raby St. George."

(To be continued.)

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