

WON AT LAST.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

"Nat, I say, don't cry like that—there's a good girl! You will be ill, you know."

But she only stretched out one hand to me in a curious helpless way, and her sobs redoubled. I waited for an instant, and then lifted her to her feet.

"What is it, Nat? Has anything upset you—anything fresh?"

"No, no—it's nothing!" she faltered, trying to wipe herself.

"Oh, come, that's nonsense! Has madame been upsetting you? No?"—as she made a movement of dissent.

"Is it about the diamonds?"

"No, no!" She made a peevish gesture of dissent. "What do I care about them? I don't care if I never see them again!"

And I verily believed that she did not, for ever since the robbery she had been singularly apathetic about it. She had clasped her hands round my arm in her favorite fashion as we stood side by side, and I noticed something that made my heart leap. Fraser Froude's big diamond ring was gone from her finger. Her eyes met mine at the same instant, and she flushed a hot red.

"Nat, have you taken it off?"

"Yes," she answered with a shiver. "I could not bear it on. The sight of it made me turn faint."

"I can well believe it," I said.

She burst into tears again, crying quietly this time, with her curly head resting against my arm. Presently I whispered in her ear—

"Nat, you are tired of this, aren't you?"

"Tired?" she echoed. "Oh, Ned, I wish I were dead—I do, indeed!"

"You are going on in a fair way to die. I should think, Nat, look here—be the sensible dear little girl you are, and break off this confounding engagement now—to-night! It is not too late. What's the good of it all, anyhow? Here you are fretting yourself to death; here is Roger just as miserable as he can be, and vowing to be two hundred miles away from Whitesford before the week's out—and all for what? Some wild fad of yours which could be set right in two minutes if you only choose. Come now—let me tell him to-morrow that you want him to come to you to make it all up. Shall I?"

"No!" she said, shortly, and coldly, drawing herself away.

"You mean that you are going on with this suicidal engagement to

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ECONOMICAL WHOLESOME RELIABLE PURE MAGIC BAKING POWDER

Froude?" I said, more than half angry, for from the quiet way in which she had listened to me, I had fancied that I was making some impression upon her.

"You mean that?" I again repeated.

"I mean just that."

"If you do, I believe you'll be dead before you've been married a year!" I retorted.

"I hope I shall."

"And a cheerful prospect that is. I don't believe you mean it. Come, now—just say 'Yes,' and I shall know that Roger is to come here to-morrow poor old boy, and that Froude may go to Bath! Come, now—say it."

"I will not!" she cried passionately. "I tell you that if he comes here I will neither see him nor speak to him."

"Although you are breaking your heart after him now?" I said, bluntly.

"If that were true," she returned, defiantly, "don't you know that I would rather die a thousand times than tell him so?"

"If it were my case, I'd sooner tell him a thousand times than die once," I rejoined, practically. "Then you won't send a message to him?"

"No!" she replied, turning away stubbornly.

"Although he's going away miserably, and driven away through you?" I continued, mercilessly.

In spite of everything, I believe she would have yielded with a few more words, for her face softened wistfully, and the rapid color flushed it as I spoke, but for an interruption that occurred—mademoiselle's voice speaking outside. She hardened and stiffened at it in an instant, and the flush died away. Valla entered almost at the same moment; and, saying good night, coldly and quietly, Nat motioned to me to go.

I went miserably enough, to find upon going downstairs that old Styles was making his nightly round of inspection of the locks and bolts with a candle, and that madame had gone to bed with a headache. So after all I was obliged to follow the general example and go to bed myself, without having asked my mother for Blake's last news about the stolen jewels, and without telling her of the strange interview which I had interrupted in the Lady's Walk between Miss Valdimi and the unknown man with the ugly jagged scar across his forehead.

CHAPTER XXXV.

"I don't wonder at her being ill, poor child! How your mother bears the shock as she does I'm sure I can not imagine. What I have suffered in my nerves at night ever since it happened no one will ever know—never! And Alice is so unfeeling, and her father encourages her."

Mrs. Deeping was the speaker, and she ended her speech with a sigh and a shiver as she drew her wraps more closely about her, which were as thick as though the snug rectory drawing-room had not been very nearly of the temperature of a hot-house.

It was eight o'clock on the following evening, and I had walked over from Chavasse after dinner with a message from madame to the rector. But it chanced that the rector was busy in his study, and I had to wait, and had fallen into Mrs. Deeping's doleful clutches. I had the lady all to myself too, for, although Alice was in the room, she was talking to her major in a cozy corner by the window, and did not come to my relief at all. Now, at the fretful conclusion of her mother's speech, she simply made a gay grimace at me and went on with her whispered chatter. An inquiry of hers after Nat, which I had had to answer to the effect that she

was not by any means well, had produced Mrs. Deeping's speech and half a dozen more like it.

What answer I should have made I do not know, for Mrs. Deeping always exercised a most depressing effect upon my conversational powers, but, as luck would have it, the door opened just then to admit the rector. He greeted me with his usual jollity, and I gave him madame's message—I have forgotten what it was now. Then he looked across at the major.

"By the way, Constable, have you that book we were speaking of the other day?"

"Yes," the other answered. "I meant to bring it with me to-day, but it slipped my memory. Are you in any hurry for it?"

"Well, yes, rather. In fact, there should be a reference or two in it that I want to-night. I tell you what—I'll step round with you to the Lodge and get it. It's a fine night for a walk."

The major's ready assent was stopped by Mrs. Deeping's fretful voice.

"What is that you are saying, William? I did not hear. I'm quite certain that I am getting deaf, although of course you will never perceive it. Did you say that you were going out?"

"Just round to the Lodge, my dear. Constable has a book that I want," responded the rector, cheerfully. The man's unflinching good temper ought to have served as a cloak for the whole catalogue of his sins, whatever they were—that is certain. "Shall not be long—not more than half an hour or so, I dare say."

"Then I wish that, as you are going out, you would take a message" to Redpots. Really I don't know what has come to Doctor Yorke. He used to be so attentive, and now he has forgotten the lotion for two days together. Will you call for it? I shall not close my eyes this night without it, I am certain."

As gravely as though he believed in the lotion, the placid rector promised that he would, cheerfully adding that it would not take much longer if he went round by the river path; and then the major and I said good-night and went out into the hall, Alice following.

"She remonstrated as I took my coat."

"What—you off too, Ned? I declare it is too bad! I thought you meant to stay and help me to listen to mother. It's too much for me—only a moderately robust person—to attempt, you know."

"Now, now, my dear," the rector expostulated, as he buttoned up his plump person. "I wouldn't say that if I were you."

"No, daddy dear; you are content to think it." Miss Alice returned, with the coolest audacity, pinching his ear. "Then you won't be merciful and help me, Ned?"

I said that I wished to walk with the rector to Redpots too. I wanted to see Yorke.

"Of course!" cried Alice, pouting. "What you will do without your friend passes my comprehension. Well, if you must go, you must. Mind you give my love to Natalie; and tell her I'll never forgive her for being such a little stupid!"—for Miss Deeping could not at all get over Nat's

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luckless engagement to the master of Holmedeane.

We went to the Lodge, obtained the book the rector wanted, and then, coming out again, hesitated a little. It was intensely cold—the coldest night, I think, that we had had that winter—and the rector shivered under his thick coat. Evidently he did not much care for the walk down by the river to Redpots, and, seeing it, I suggested that I should give Mrs. Deeping's message there, and that he and the major should go back to the rectory. But he laughed at that.

"My dear boy, if I appear without that blessed lotion, I shall never hear the last of it. No, I'll come. It isn't far—that's one comfort."

The major said he would come too;

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and we all three turned off in the direction of the road by the river, which, as I have said, was the shortest way to Redpots, cutting off as it did a great loop of the High Street. And very cold it was by the river, although very pretty, for a light snow had fallen early in the day which covered everything with a glittering mantle of white. The rector was almost as fond of every inch of Whitesford as I was, and he paused presently to look about.

"You didn't get anything like this in India, eh, Constable?"

"Not exactly, sir. In fact, I don't think I saw a flake of snow all the ten years I was stationed there."

"No; you can't match an English winter," went on the rector, complacently. "And, to my mind, this little river just here is as pretty a scene as any you'll find."

"I thought so when I saw it first," assented the major. "After the color and glare of Calcutta, it was like a new world."

"That's pretty much what St. George—that Jamaica fellow, you know—said," I struck in. "The first night he was up at Chavasse I walked him home around here, and could hardly get him along. He was shivering like one o'clock, too, all the time."

"He usually is, I think," the rector observed, pulling up the collar of his coat.

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