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WON AT LAST.

CHAPTER XXII.

"Whom do you think I had with me just before dinner, Ned?" madame asked, under cover of the music.

"Don't know," I returned, though my thoughts instantly flew off to Roger Yorke. "Who?"

"The blacksmith—young Flood."

"Phil Flood!" I echoed. "That was cheek, too, to come at such a time. What did he want?"

"The promise of the Wayside Cottage."

"Oh! Did you give it to him, mother?"

"Certainly not!" said madame, severely. "I much regret that I was ever induced to say that I would think of it. Not of course that I could foresee how the man would go to the bad. I am much mistaken if he was not partially intoxicated to-day. His presenting himself to me in such a condition was simply disgraceful," concluded my mother, with her loftiest air of dignity.

"It's that wretched Cap and Bells," I said, deprecatingly; and madame smiled satirically.

"My dear boy, what nonsense! You would not, I suppose banish intoxicating liquor from the world because there is a weak minority which will become inebriated through its means? Blame the man."

"Flood used to be a smart fellow enough," I said, feeling sorry as I

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thought of pretty little laughing dimpled Lotty.

"I know; but he is utterly changed. And, Ned, what is it that the foolish man has in his head about Doctor Yorke?"

I started, and felt the color rush hotly over my face as madame looked at me with her keen eyes. Not that I could answer her question, for I could not, but the mere mention of Roger's name just then made me feel confused and awkward. I stammered out—

"What did he say?"

"I can hardly tell you. He was not properly sober, as I said; but he muttered something about having been wronged by Doctor Yorke, and being revenged some day. I really don't pretend to understand properly, but he seemed to imply that he—Doctor Yorke—was to blame for his going wrong."

"What utter rubbish!" I said angrily.

"It struck me as being so," madame returned, composedly; "and I dismissed the man, saying merely that he must reform speedily and thoroughly if he wished to have the Wayside Cottage. Then you don't understand it?"

"Only that his blessed beer must have muddled his thick head," I answered, feeling still more indignant. "Flood has a stupid dislike to Roger, I know; he has given him a lecture or two upon his idiotic conduct—and I served him right!—but that's all. If he said Yorke has ever done him any harm, or tried or meant to do it, you may be sure of one thing, mother, and that is that it's a falsehood. I'll stake my life on that any day."

Madame gave me no answer beyond a slight inclination of her handsome head, and I sat, uneasily wondering whether she believed me or not. She looked up presently.

"I had another visitor this afternoon, Ned, while you were in the village."

"Had you? Who was it? The Roxborough Chace folk?"

"No—Mr. Froude."

"Oh, him!" I ejaculated, disparagingly. "And what did he want?"

"Guess," said madame, smiling at me.

"Can't I'm not good at guessing. Not to ask you again to buy any of those blessed Egyptian bonds he's always talking about?"

"No," returned madame, quietly, laying her work aside as she looked at me—"not this time, Ned. He came to ask me for Natalie."

CHAPTER XXIII.

I was not surprised, for I had been daily expecting something of this kind; but I was rather taken aback all the same. Nat's lovers were indeed "coming it strong," and that all at once, too. Here was Raby St. George, come from over the seas, Fraser Froude actually popping the question, and Yorke off the Fates knew where! Something would come of all this before long, I thought, starting stupidly at my mother's handsome face in the pause filled only by the ringing voice from the piano. What on earth would the next move be? My open eyes and mouth did not please

madame, I suppose, for she said, with a touch of irritation:

"Don't you understand me, Ned?"

"Oh, yes, I understand well enough!" I stammered, collecting myself with an effort and sinking back in my seat.

"Then why stare in that foolish manner? You are a perfect boy still, really, my dear."

"Enough to make me," I returned, referring to the staring and not to the "boy." "What outrageous cheek, though! A pitiable object like that coming to ask for our Nat! What did you tell him, mother?"

"I could tell him nothing," answered madame, quietly.

"Well, you sent him about his business, of course?" I said, surprised.

"Certainly not."

"No?" I interrogated blankly.

"Of course not. It is not my province to do anything of the kind. That is Natalie's concern."

"But surely you don't want her to accept him, mother?"

"I do not think there is the slightest fear of her doing anything of the kind," returned madame.

"I should think not!" I put in wrathfully. "Why, he's old enough to be her father, not to mention anything else!"

"At the same time I had, and felt that I had, no right to dismiss him without reference to Natalie. In the case of my own child I should not, except in an extreme case, exercise any such arbitrary power, and certainly not with her, to whom I am not even a legally appointed guardian. She must choose for herself."

"Oh quite so, of course—yes!" I stammered eagerly and hastily, at the same time thinking of Roger, and wondering a little whether my mother would stick to her own expressed tenets when his case came before her for judgment. "Luckily there isn't any doubt as to what she will say to him," I added.

"No, fortunately. Of course she must marry; and with her peculiar style of beauty she ought to marry well," went on madame musingly, seeming to talk more to her lace-work than to me; "but I hope it may not be for several years yet. I am very glad that she has no attachment for anybody—although, to be sure, she has none as yet to whom she could possibly take a fancy."

"I muttered something—I have not the least idea what—thinking how odd it was that, despite the keenness of madame's eyes, she could be so blind in this particular case. But it was not my province to enlighten her just now—that was certain. I hummed a bar or two of Nat's song, and looked at the fire.

"What did the old fellow say, mother?" I asked, after a few moments' amused meditation.

"Do you mean Mr. Froude?" inquired madame, in a tone which made me perfectly aware that she did not approve of my method of alluding to the master of Holmedean."

"Yes. How did he bring it out? What did he say?"

"Oh, the usual thing, I suppose!" madame returned, but smiling a little now, as though amused herself. "He was perfectly self-possessed about it, spoke a good deal of his position and the settlements which he would make were his proposal accepted, saying

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that the fact of Natalie herself having a fortune was the reason which had deterred him from speaking before, since he was completely disinterested; and finally he said that, although he had hopes, he would by no means venture to say that Natalie returned his affection."

"Well, I should think not!" I broke in, indignantly. "That would be a trifle too rich. Are you not going to tell her, mother?"

"No; he wishes to plead his own cause. He asked me to allow that, and of course I had no objection. But I thought it right to warn him that I believed he was mistaken in fancying that Natalie cared for him."

"I should rather think so!" I wondered he didn't speak to her without taking you into his confidence as a preliminary."

"I am sorry to hear you say so," responded madame, with a cold politeness which made me aware that I had "put my foot into it." "I consider his doing so merely a proper mark of respect to me. What, Natalie—tired already, my dear?"

The group at the piano had broken up, and Nat came forward to the fire, saying that she was awfully hoarse, and could not sing any more. Dinner had been later than usual, and it was past ten o'clock by this time. St. George, drawing out his watch presently and looking at it, seemed startled.

"I had no idea it was so late," he said. "I must apologize for remaining so long, Mrs. Chavasse"—how comical it seemed to hear madame called "Mrs. Chavasse"—"but the time has flown."

"I hope you will consider the Mount as your headquarters while you remain in Whittlesford, Mr. St. George," madame returned graciously, rising and giving him her hand. "You will dine here to-morrow, of course. Natalie has hardly had time to say a word to her old friend yet. Her tongue seems to have taken a holiday to-night, I think."

In her rarely caressing manner madame put her arm round the girl's shoulders, her fine white hand patting her brown cheek; but Miss Nat did not respond by anything but a faint smile. She would not even glance at St. George as he said good-night, but merely gave him a couple of very cold little fingers. Then, when he had gracefully and easily accepted madame's invitation for the morrow, I followed him out into the hall. He had said that he was not quite sure of his way back through the village, and, as he preferred walking to riding, I had volunteered to go with him. Now I helped him into his great-coat—a coat thickly lined with fur.

(To be continued.)

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