

The Planter's Daughter

OR FATE'S REVENGE

By MRS. ALICE P. CARRISTON

Author of "A Waif from the Sea," "Her Brightest Hope," "Wayward Winfred," etc.

CHAPTER XI.—(Continued.)

The door had opened while he was speaking, and Mrs. Burgess had entered with a radiant face, bearing several sheets of manuscript in her hands. So great was her excitement that she did not heed the presence of the doctor, and hastening to her husband, she held the manuscript before his eyes with trembling hands.

"Look!" she cried; "at last I know the secret which is killing our poor Claire—I have discovered the name of the man she loves! Read these pages; they were written by her last night."

Philip Burgess seized the proffered sheets and ran his eye over their tear-blurred surface. Suddenly a name arrested his attention; he uttered an inarticulate cry, flung the manuscript upon the table and grasped the doctor by both hands.

"Gresham!" he cried, joyfully, "I accept! It is no longer a question of acquiring a fortune at the price of my honor, at the cost of my name, but of saving my daughter's life!"

Claire herself was a silent auditor of the triumphant exclamations. She had reached the open door and paused upon the threshold, hearing her father's words. In the next moment she described her precious manuscript, the secret of her life, lying exposed upon the table, and with a wailing cry of dismay she staggered forward and flung herself upon her mother's breast.

"Oh, mother, mother!" she sobbed, a burning flush mounting her pallid brow, "what have you done?"

"Pardon me, my child," replied Mrs. Burgess soothingly, as she caressed the drooping golden head; "but I could not see you suffer and remain in ignorance of the cause another day."

"Well done, wife!" exclaimed Philip Burgess; "had you not acted thus promptly, I should have rejected the happiness of Claire's life—for now she will live!"

"My life—my happiness!" gasped the young girl, raising her head and glancing in dismay at her father; "oh, father, you have not read the secret of my foolish passion!" And when he nodded to her with an assuring smile, she added, in despair: "It is a relic of our past happy life which I have not had the strength to combat against. Instead of forgetting this man whom I met by chance in that brilliant world now closed to us forever, I have been so foolish as to cherish his image in my heart."

"And justly, Claire," replied the old gentleman; "are you not worthy to bear the proudest name in the land?"

"Ah, but if you knew his name!" sobbed the girl.

"I know it, and he will be here shortly."

"He—here!" gasped Claire, recollecting a few steps and standing alone.

"Yes—Lucian Courtlandt! He comes to demand your hand in marriage."

Completely overcome, Claire tottered to the nearest chair and sank into it, and it is doubtful if she heard Martha open the door and announce:

"A lady and gentleman to see you!"

A moment later Lucian Courtlandt appeared upon the threshold with his haughty mother leaning upon his arm.

The young man was pallid but composed, while Mrs. Courtlandt's stern features were wreathed in smiles. A few words of welcome were exchanged between Philip Burgess and his wife and Mrs. Courtlandt, Claire meanwhile sitting there with drooping head, apparently unconscious of her surroundings.

Presently, however, the words of Mrs. Courtlandt penetrated her dulled hearing. "Old friends," remarked that lady, with affable condescension, "I have the honor of demanding the hand of your daughter Claire for my son Lucian!"

At these words, Claire struggled to her feet and threw herself into her mother's arms.

"Poor child!" thought Lucian Courtlandt, "how beautiful she is!"

"Miss Burgess," said Mrs. Courtlandt, gently, "are you willing to be my daughter?"

Poor Claire murmured some inarticulate words, and her head sank lower upon her mother's breast.

Then Lucian advanced and took one of the pendent, snowy hands.

"Claire," he murmured, "will you be my wife?"

But there was no reply; joy had deprived the happy victim of all sense, and she lay unconscious in her mother's arms.

CHAPTER XII.

Two short weeks had made a startling change in the circumstances of the Burgess family. "The lovely residence in the neighborhood of Yonkers," which Lucian Courtlandt had telegraphed Sylphide he had gone to see during those brief happy hours that succeeded their return to America had now been rented for the accommodation of Claire and her parents until the wedding should take place, and later was to become the home of the married pair.

It seemed incredible that the bright-faced, happy woman, who sang joyously to herself as she brushed off the spacious piazza, could be Martha Dunn; yet it was she with every line of care and anxiety smoothed from her honest face, and a smile set in its place.

It was a balmy morning in mid-June, one of those rare days when gentle

zephyrs rustle the dense foliage that shades the verdant earth. Even Claire seemed to inhale the abundant vigor of the scene as she stepped forth upon the piazza, clad all in white, with fluttering ribbons of a delicate violet tint, to greet the morn.

A quick, light step crunched the gravel of the path, coming from the direction of the stables, and a moment later the lean, athletic figure of Dr. Gresham swung round the corner of the mansion and mounted the steps. As he reached the piazza Philip Burgess came out, radiant and cheery as the morn itself. The two men shook hands; Burgess heartily, Gresham with slight constraint.

"Well, aren't we as fine as fine can be?" exclaimed the former, with a glance thrilling with pride upon his charming domain.

"Fine, very fine indeed!" was the crisp, business-like reply; "but I have something of the utmost importance to say to you, and as we are alone for the moment, no time could be more opportune."

"Oh, then, you need not hesitate!" his old friend by the arm and led him to the farthest corner of the wide piazza, out of earshot of the windows; "now then," he continued, "as to-morrow is the wedding day, I should like to know how Claire has accepted the conditions?"

"Conditions—what conditions?" inquired Philip Burgess in a puzzled way.

"Why, the child, of course."

The old man started and paled guiltily.

"I haven't said a word to her about the child!"

"Is it possible?" exclaimed the doctor, in wild dismay; "she's got to know about it."

"Of course she has! Now that you are here, why don't you tell her yourself?"

While they stood conversing they had failed to notice that Claire had been gradually approaching the house, with her hands filled with dewy, fragrant roses; in fact, they were not aware of her presence until she was close upon them, and her cheery greeting disturbed the awkward silence that had fallen.

"Were you speaking of me?" she asked, earnestly.

"Yes," answered Gresham; "we were speaking of you and your approaching marriage."

With a desperate effort that was really pitiful to behold, the father began:

"Claire, I have something to say to you before your marriage. Listen, my child; it is a matter of serious import—to you."

"Is it something about Lucian?" she asked.

"Yes."

than the present." As he spoke he took she exclaimed, brightening; "anything you have to say of him I shall be only too happy to hear. I can never tell you how content I am at the prospect of becoming his wife!"

With one despairing glance at Gresham, Philip Burgess turned away, mentally ejaculating:

"I can't, I can't tell her, for it may kill her!"

Fortunately, at this moment Martha came out upon the piazza, and announced that her mistress was ready to see the doctor, if he would kindly come in.

"I will go with you," whispered the old man in Gresham's ear; "her mother can tell her better; women can weep together."

And they entered the house, leaving Claire standing there, with an expression of dazed bewilderment upon her fair face. One by one the fragrant roses filtered through her fingers, and fell unheeded and writhing to the ground; and though she was scarcely conscious of the impression, it seemed as though a tiny cloud, no bigger than a man's hand, had risen upon the horizon of that perfect day.

At last the roll of carriage wheels upon the avenue beyond the lawn arrested her attention, and, raising her eyes, she descried the Courtlandt livery rapidly approaching the house through the trees.

Her heart stood still with a dizzy throb, but when the equipage drew up and the widow Courtlandt alighted alone it was with a heart heavy with disappointment that she crossed the piazza to greet the lady.

Mrs. Courtlandt took the girl in her arms, and disposed a light kiss upon her brow; then linking her arm in Claire's, she led her to a retired nook, where stood a rustic seat screened by dense vines, that lent an agreeable twilight against the brilliant glare that reigned around. Being seated, the lady took Claire's hand in hers and said:

"This is just the opportunity I have been seeking; I have wanted to talk with you, my dear. Lucian will be here in an hour, and this is the last time that we shall be together before your marriage. First of all, I wish to thank you for the sacrifice you have made, and the noble sentiments which have prompted it."

"Sacrifice! Noble sentiments!" murmured Claire, in astonishment; "indeed, madam, I deserve no praise. My action in the matter has been prompted by purely selfish motives."

"Oh, I know that devotion has become second nature with you," replied the lady, patting Claire's cheek; "but your self-denial cannot escape our gratitude. But you shall be rewarded, my child; we will woo you back to health, and, ere long, you will be reconciled to Lucian."

Yes, yes, I hope that some day my son will love you."

"Love me, love me, do you say?" faltered poor Claire, like one in a dream; "he is going to marry me—"

"What credit is there in his giving his hand?" were the next paralyzing words; "are you not a thousand times more generous in giving his child a name?"

"His child!" muttered the girl, in a stupefied way; then suddenly seizing the widow's hand, she exclaimed violently, "his child!"

"Listen, Claire; if it is your will, we will unite our forces, set up our batteries against our common enemy, against this woman whom I hate, as you ought to hate!"

At this revelation Claire fell back against the seat, while through her dazed brain darted with lightning-like rapidity the thought:

"Oh, heaven grant me the strength to hear her to the end!"

Then as Mrs. Courtlandt, amazed at her sudden silence, turned and looked at her, she started up, exclaiming hysterically:

"Ah, yes! The woman he loves—the mother of his child! But I do not understand why she does not oppose my marriage?"

"I will tell you, Claire. Lucian worships me and is passionately attached to his child; I promise you that he is entirely reconciled to his marriage with you, and regards it seriously, as he does all other obligations in life."

"Yes," came the bitter response, so low as scarcely to be audible, "he has a noble heart!"

"He will be here in a few minutes, and I will tell him where to find you," said the lady, rising with the relieved air of one who has executed a painful duty.

"So kiss me, my dear, and I will go in and say good morning to your mother."

Claire submitted to the caress, and when left alone sat for some minutes among the swaying vines. At last the burning words rose to her lips:

"Heaven help me, how I loved him! Fool that I was to dream that I should be loved in return! Why, they have been speculating upon my approaching death; and if he leads me to the altar to-morrow, he counts upon my lying dead before it ere long. This luxury—this gold—are but the price of my dishonor! I want no more of them, and only ask to return to the misery of poverty!"

Her last words escaped her lips in a sigh of unutterable anguish, while to her unheeding ears came the beat of the horses' hoofs that bore her expectant bridegroom!

Upon the spur of the moment she determined to go at once to her father, inform him that she retracted her promise, and break off the unhallowed match then and there, despite the consequences. She sprang to her feet full of her resolve, but ere she could take a step the sound of voices arrested her. Her woman's curiosity asserted itself; she parted the veil of vines with trembling hands and gazed out across the sunlit lawn.

There she saw Lucian, the man she loved with the one absorbing passion of her life, standing in all his manly beauty, in conversation with Dr. Gresham, who was about to take his leave. The two men were shaking hands and exchanging smiling words of congratulation.

The girl's heart rose in her breast as she listened, and she clung faintly to the vines for support until their thorns entered her delicate flesh. The physical pain and the mental anguish roused her once again to the exigency of the moment, and with precipitate steps she turned and fled in at the open door.

(To be continued.)

The Old Umbrella.

"I've always had it in for the man who carries his umbrella around with him as a walking stick or just in case of rain, and usually succeeds in poking it into the face of everybody with whom he comes in contact; but now I've nothing to say," said a guest in the lobby of a local hotel one morning last week.

"Upon reaching this city a week ago I deposited my umbrella in the check-room of the station and went off happy in the thought that I would do no damage during the day from that source, at least. Well, instead of spending the day in Washington, as I had intended, I've been here a week, and forgot all about my parachute until this morning, when I strolled down to the station to redeem it, and myself a ticket for home. At any rate, there among other checked articles I spied my old dollar umbrella, and pointed it out to the gentle-looking little woman in attendance as I put down a dime and corresponding brass piece.

"The charge is seventy cents," she sweetly informed me, not noticing my little dime.

"Seventy cents!" I exclaimed, in tones that suggested she was trying to rob me.

"Yes, sir; seventy cents," she as sweetly continued. "We charge ten cents for every twenty-four hours an article is left in storage."

"Well, there was no mistaking the statement," concluded the visitor, "so I cashed in. Anyhow, I think Washington is a great old place."—Washington Post.

Acquiring the Taste.

"You don't mean to tell me he actually kissed her? How did he manage it?"

"Easy. He just shut his eyes and exercised his will power."—Baltimore News.

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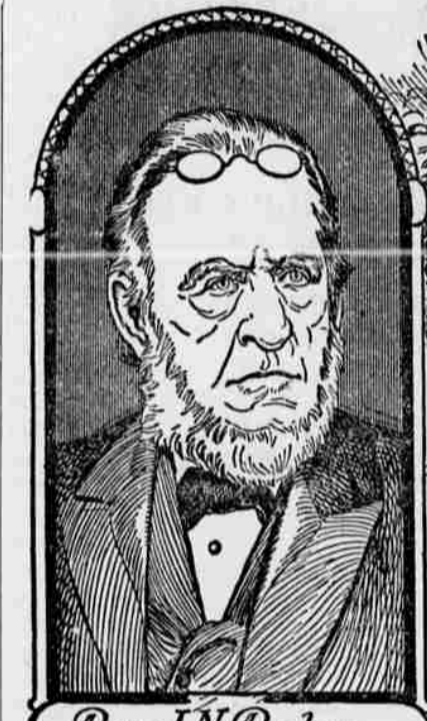
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