

# The Planter's Daughter OR FATE'S REVENGE

By MRS. ALICE P. CARRISTON

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

## CHAPTER X.—(Continued.)

In spite of care, trouble and privation the lady bore the undeniably stamp of having once been a beauty, and not very many years ago either. She was tall and slender, still graceful, and in every movement a thorough lady. Her plain, cheap attire could not conceal the fact that she had not only seen better days, but had kept that memory alive in her heart, which is more than many, who are forced to descend the ladder, are wise enough to do.

With a wan smile that spoke of physical weakness and repressed anxiety, Mrs. Burgess crossed the kitchen to Martha and placed the basket in the hands of her faithful domestic.

"How is Miss Claire?" asked the woman, eagerly.

"She seemed to be asleep when I looked in upon her a moment ago," replied the lady.

"Asleep at this hour!" exclaimed Martha. "Then she must have been up writing again last night."

"I fear so," rejoined Mrs. Burgess, sinking wearily into a chair beside the table; "oh, Martha, Martha, what can this journal contain that she keeps so mysteriously to herself? I must know!"

"So you shall some day, be sure;" then to turn her thoughts into another channel Martha added, "but what does this basket contain?"

"A few trifles for my husband's breakfast. Open it and see."

The good woman removed the lid of the basket and started back in amazement.

"Oh, what extravagance, ma'am!" she cried; "however could you afford it?"

"Don't scold me, Martha," answered Mrs. Burgess, with a wan smile; "it is so long since my poor husband has had a respectable repast. Men cannot bear privation as we women can. Besides, I wished to surprise him; it is his birthday."

In a burst of generous enthusiasm, Martha caught her mistress' hand, and was about to press it fervently to her lips when she suddenly receded a step as she exclaimed:

"Your ring, Mistress! Where is it? The one with the pearl!—your engagement ring! Have you sold it?" whispered Martha, with dismay depicted upon every feature.

"No, it is only—only pawned."

"Yes, as are your jewels, your silver, your laces, everything—even to the matress off your bed! Oh, that miserable pawnbroker!"

"Hush, Martha," interrupted the lady; "speak no ill of him, for he is the only friend from whom one can borrow without a blush."

"And for whom?" cried Martha, forgetting her position in her indignation; "for one who never asks what it has cost you to raise the money, so long as he has it to waste?"

In an instant Mrs. Burgess was upon her feet, dignity breathing in every attitude.

"Martha!" she exclaimed, warningly.

"I beg your pardon, Mistress," the woman returned submissively; "Mr. Burgess has been a good master to me, and you know that I would die for him, but it makes me angry to see you so anxious, while he remains calm and indifferent!"

"It is you, Mistress, who bears all the burden. Why does not Mr. Burgess borrow of his friends?"

"Because of a sense of pride, Martha, which you cannot understand."

Mrs. Burgess laid her hand gently, caressing upon the arm of her faithful friend, and with tears in her eyes, turned abruptly and left the kitchen. As she entered the little dining room, where a snow-white cloth covered the table which awaited such repast as Chance might offer, Mrs. Burgess found her husband standing by the window, gazing absently down into the sunlit street.

Philip Burgess was still a handsome man, though many years the senior of his wife, and long past the prime of life. He was dressed with that scrupulous care that bespeaks the gentleman, and there was none of the haggard anxiety in his cheery face that had prematurely aged his wife. As she entered he turned, and coming to her, took her hands in his.

"Your eyes are red," he exclaimed. "And you are paler than usual! When was Dr. Gresham here last?"

"Yesterday, and he agrees with me, that it is not so much a positive illness as some secret grief that is preying upon Claire's mind."

"A secret grief!" rejoined the gentleman; "our poverty, perhaps."

"No; Claire is too noble, too proud for that; it is not for our lost fortune that she weeps; a deeper grief weighs upon her heart. Our poor child is most unfortunate, since she is in love, and loves in vain!"

Philip Burgess started in amazement.

"I have divined her secret. I should have respected it, had I not seen that the hopeless tears she shed were shortening the few days that remain to her in this world. She consecrates almost every night to writing, and seems to take a little comfort in inscribing her thoughts, hopes and fears. I have been able to gain possession of one or two pages of this mysterious manuscript, written with a trembling hand, and blotted with tears. Thus I have discovered," continued the lady, "that Claire loves, but loves in vain."

"Loves—whom?"

"I do not know, but rest assured that I shall discover soon. Hark! she is coming. Not another word."

The next instant Claire Burgess stood before them. Had it not been for her excessive pallor, which the hectic flush upon her wan cheeks heightened, Claire Burgess might have been considered a rarely beautiful girl. To her slender, stately figure was added an exquisite grace, while her face, of a delicate oval, was classic in mould, and shaded by masses of rich golden-brown hair, which were gathered into a heavy coil at the back of her slender neck. Her full, gray eyes were wonderful in their size and brilliancy, seeming to embody all the life which, at her age, she should have been enjoying. At sight of her parents she paused a moment; then, advancing a step, exclaimed:

"Why do you look so sad! Mother, there are tears in your eyes!" And with a deep-drawn sigh, she added: "Ah, I understand; you were speaking of me."

"My dear child, we are going to save you; Dr. Gresham has assured us that..."

"Yes," interrupted Claire, "he told me yesterday not to despair, but that is the word they use when they cannot say."

"You—here!" he exclaimed, starting back in surprise.

"Silence!" she breathed, passionately; "I never witnessed such pride and misery! But the girl is dying—you may safely marry her to me—to Lucian!"

While this brief but significant interview was taking place upon the stairs beyond the closed door a scene of hysterical relief was being enacted. The moment their routed benefactress had disappeared, Philip Burgess exclaimed,

"You—here!" he exclaimed, starting back in surprise.

"You see I am not such a spendthrift after all. I have kept a dollar by me, and though it was the last, it has saved us from a great humiliation!"

Throwing her arms about his neck, Claire cried, with a sob in her voice:

"It was your noble heart, dear father, that has saved us!"

"Go to your rooms, both of you!" exclaimed Mr. Burgess; "she may return, and if so, she shall not depart until she has satisfied my suspicions!"

Scarcely had Claire and her mother vanished when the door opened to admit Dr. Gresham. With an exclamation of surprise and pleasure, Philip Burgess turned to the scarcely closed door.

"Where are you going?" demanded Gresham, abruptly.

"To call the ladies back," replied Mr. Burgess; "they have just left me."

"Do nothing of the kind! It is you whom I wish to see first of all, upon a matter of the utmost importance—to your daughter. I have already informed you that I fear that all that can be done for Claire is to render her declining days comfortable. Stay! hear me out. She requires other quarters than this miserable tenement; she needs luxuries, attention, a carriage. I will place them at your disposal, and you have only to accept them."

"What do you mean? What must I do? Command me!"

"Do you recall a friend of former days of the name of Russell Courtlandt?"

"Certainly I do; he died some six years since."

"Leaving a widow and one son. For a while their property was depreciated, but recently it has come into value, and Lucian Courtlandt is one of the wealthiest young men in the city."

"Well, well—go on," urged Burgess, eagerly.

"I beg your pardon, madam," exclaimed the gentleman, quickly offering the most comfortable chair that the room afforded; "will you be seated?"

Sylphide bowed and sank into the chair, glancing about her with the mental ejaculation:

"What misery! I wish I had brought five hundred dollars instead of one!"

While Burgess, whose eyes were not yet blind to the beautiful, thought:

"What a remarkably fine woman!"

"I do not live so far away as not to be considered a neighbor, and I have often heard your family spoken of—your former affluence and present distress."

Drawing himself up proudly, Philip Burgess replied:

"Then you have been informed, madam—"

"Of how nobly you bear this distress," said Sylphide; and with a glance at Mrs. Burgess, "and you, also—Mrs. Burgess, I suppose? And this is your daughter?"

"Yes, I am Claire Burgess," replied the young girl, with such unforced firmness that her father glanced quickly at her.

"Will you be good enough to inform us whom we have the honor of receiving?"

"My name is Hastings—Mrs. Hastings—I am connected with a charitable institution."

She did not dare to raise her glance to the three pairs of eyes that were fixed upon her until the voice of Philip Burgess broke the silence.

"Ah! A charitable institution," he said; "then I presume you came, madam—"

Quickly opening the silken bag which hung upon her arm, Sylphide interrupted the speaker with:

"I am making my usual rounds; I have received my share this morning, and am now distributing it."

"Do I understand that you are distributing—alms?" inquired the gentleman, a bright gleam darting into his blue eyes.

"Say, rather, assistance," she answered; "there is an honorable grade of poverty which objects to the term—alms, I believe."

"You are correct, madam," was the firm rejoinder.

"I regret to say," faltered Sylphide, "that the assistance I have to dispense is not as great as I could wish. There are certain unfortunates whose sufferings I should be glad to relieve."

"What does she mean?" breathed Claire, drawing nearer to her mother.

"And although I am unable to do so today," continued Sylphide, under the same painful repression, "I can at least—"

"Mother!" gasped Claire, in sudden dismay, checking her visitor's words; and as Sylphide turned from one to the other in astonishment, Philip Burgess advanced.

"You are fulfilling a noble mission, madam," he said, with haughty promptness, "and we regret that we are unable to contribute to it as liberally as we might have in the past."

"Contribute!" cried Sylphide, recoiling a step.

"You must see that our circumstances are somewhat cramped," continued the gentleman, without heeding her amazement; "yet you must permit us to contribute our mite to your collection," and as he spoke he drew from his pocket a one dollar bill, the last cent he possessed in the world, and with a courteous bow, placed it in the silken bag.

A crimson flush dyed Sylphide Courtemont's beautiful face to the very roots of her black hair.

"I thank you, sir," she stammered faintly; and turning abruptly, she left the room.

She was completely dumbfounded, stifling with mortification, and not until she reached the landing was she able to regain her breath.

The figure of a man came lightly up the stairs and confronted her, and, too late to conceal her identity, she found herself face to face with Dr. Gresham.

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"All of which I reject in the name of my wife and daughter," cried the old man, excitedly; "say! here is my wife—ask her if she has the courage to accept the terms!"

(To be continued.)

The Dollar.

"She's as bright as a dollar."

"Isn't she a bit forward at times?"