

# The Planter's Daughter OR FATE'S REVENGE

By MRS. ALICE P. CARRISTON

Author of "A Wait from the Sea," "Her Brightest Hopes," "Wayward Winnefred," etc.

## CHAPTER XIX.

Gresham lagged on the way back to the villa. He had failed signally in his mission, he dreaded to face his constituents and admit how thoroughly he had been routed, and consequently he yielded to a certain sense of cowardice. But the loneliness of the night and the ferocity of the storm nothing daunted him; indeed, they conspired favorably to assist him in shaping his plans for the future, afforded him time and freedom to think.

Once a dim consciousness of being tracked assailed him; not that he positively heard a footstep; on the contrary it was merely that indefinable sense of a human presence, that peculiar power which a watching eye possesses to rouse a sleeper from deep unconsciousness. He heeded it so far as to turn and look behind him; in fact, he paused until a recurrent flash illumined the sudden road, but he saw nothing but the dripping branches swayed by the sighing wind.

Had he taken the trouble to retrace his steps a short distance and glance in at a darkening gateway, he would have found the man, Camille, crouching there, waiting to continue upon his mysterious errand.

The sound of the doctor's footfall upon the steps of the villa was the signal to attract Lucian Courtlandt to the doorway followed by Claire. The radiance of a lighted hall fell upon Gresham's face and dripping form. Ere a query as to the result of his mission could be framed, he exclaimed, cheerily, addressing Claire: "Come, come! You are violating my orders by remaining up so late. You should be snugly in bed and out of this miserable dampness."

"But, doctor," pleaded Claire, "how could you expect me to retire without seeing you? What have you to tell us? What says the poor woman?"

"I have to tell you that I am drenched to the skin and can't be expected to stand here shivering," he answered, with a forced laugh; "as to the 'poor woman,' I have merely to say that you have seen her for the last time; she will trouble you no more. Now, away to bed with you, and permit me to retire."

With an involuntary sigh of relief, Claire went towards the staircase, but paused and returned to the doctor. "You were gentle with her, were you not?" she asked.

"As gentle as a lamb," came the mendacious reply.

And so poor Claire retired with a lighter heart than she had borne in her bosom for many a long day. Scarcely had the hem of her flowing robe vanished at the head of the staircase than Gresham laid his hand upon Courtlandt's arm, whispering:

"Come with me into the library."

Instantly the transitory look of relief upon the young husband's face vanished and he turned deadly pale with apprehension. The door being closed, he faltered:

"Well, what is it, doctor? You have failed?"

"Signally," was the curt reply.

"Well, out with it. What is it?" demanded Courtlandt, despairingly.

"I have failed! I did not half understand the person with whom I had to deal. She has worked herself into a most unmanageable frame of mind, and is prepared to do anything."

"What said she?"

"Everything but the right thing."

"What does she insist upon?"

"The custody of her child."

Lucian Courtlandt's face darkened and he sank upon a chair.

"What are we to do?"

"Gresham indulged in another of his aggravating smiles.

"She proposes to kill herself unless you come to her within an hour," he replied.

"The hour must have elapsed."

"Yes, by fifteen minutes," answered the doctor, consulting his watch.

Courtlandt rose quickly and fixed both his hands firmly upon Gresham's arm.

"Do you think it possible that she can have made good her threat?" he breathed.

"Bah!"

Lucian Courtlandt turned away with an air of deep despondency. He paced the room, frequently passing his hands agitatedly through his hair, while his pallid lips framed inarticulate words. Presently he returned to Gresham and abruptly exclaimed:

"I know not what to do. You must direct me. What must I do?"

"You must see this woman to-night."

"To-night!" gasped Courtlandt, in dismay; "see her to-night? To what end?"

"There is but one way of adjusting this dreadful complication. You must make a concession."

"What concession?"

"Her child. It is Fate's revenge."

Whatever anguished reply Lucian Courtlandt might have made was sent flying into the realm of the unknown by a shriek, distant but distinctly audible to the two men.

The door was flung open, and with one accord they burst into the hall to find it wrapped in Stygian darkness, and while they paused an instant bewildered, a rushing sound as of feet rapidly descending the staircase greeted them; the outer door was violently slammed, then all was silence.

At the door of the nursery they paused, transfixed with amazement. A night-lamp burned dimly in the empty fireplace, feebly illumining the chamber, across the threshold of which Claire lay prostrate in a dead swoon, the train of her snowy white robe soiled by the imprint of a muddy boot. Martha Dunn, suddenly awakened from a surreptitious nap, was starting from her chair in dire alarm, while, strangest of all, little Leon sat bolt upright upon his pretty cot, staring in amazement upon the bystanders.

"In heaven's name, what has happened here?" burst from Courtlandt's lips.

"Never mind what has happened," answered Gresham, as he stooped to raise his stricken patient; "order out your carriage and go to that woman. Do as I bade you, if you have any consideration for this poor creature!"

"Where is my child?"

The words were pronounced in a low, sibilant tone, like the hiss of a venomous reptile. To speak truly, the voice of Syphilis Couramout in that supreme moment betrayed loss of maternal anguish at disappointed hope, than of suppressed fury at being baffled in her revenge.

At the sound of the returning footsteps of her emissary, she had darted from the lounge, upon which she had flung her weary, waiting body, with the celerity that a swallow wings its flight from its threatened nest beneath the eaves; she had recoiled a step, having thrown open the blinds to admit Camille, and stood waiting for his reply, her delicate hands clenched until the nails penetrated the flesh.

"I haven't anything to say," replied the man, sullenly, prepared to face the worst; "I haven't got the child—that's all."

"Why not?"

"Because I saw her."

"Saw—whom?"

"My young mistress—Mrs. Courtlandt."

"Shut the blinds," she said, merely, "and tell me how it happened."

She crossed to an easy chair beside the table that occupied the middle of the room; but instead of seating herself she stood leaning upon its back, waiting for him to speak. With the slow indifference of a man who feels himself hopelessly condemned, Camille fixed his leaden eyes upon her with a dogged defiance burning luridly in their dark depths.

"There ain't much to tell," he began, moodily; "I did my best; I stole in at the library window like a thief; I got upstairs and into the nursery, where I found the boy asleep. She came to the door a minute later—and great heaven! shall I ever forget the look she gave me?"

"You're a coward!" panted Syphilis; "why didn't you kill her?"

"For a man so fond of money, five thousand dollars is a neat sum. But you may possess the sum to-morrow—no decide!"

"No, no!" he exclaimed, placing the weapon upon the table with a ring, and moving away, but suddenly pausing to ask, "how do I know that you would stand to your agreement? What security have I? It isn't likely that you carry to much about you—"

"You think not?" she retorted, triumphantly; "I am happy to be able to inform you that I have twice that amount about me at this moment!"

Camille recoiled aghast.

"Ten thousand dollars!" he gasped.

"See for yourself."

She took from its resting place behind a sofa, a small leathern satchel, and extracted from it a mass of bank notes, bound with a narrow strap of paper.

"Is there ten thousand dollars there?" panted Camille, hoarsely.

"Yes, ten thousand dollars. It means a farm, a tranquil life and happiness."

Seizing the revolver, the man exclaimed, wildly:

"Direct me! What must I do?"

"You know well enough! It is but the work of a moment. In a few hours you can be far from here and in safety."

"Conceal those bills!" cried the wretched victim; "they dazzle me, fascinate me, make me mad!"

She broke the band, and flaunted the crisp leaves before his eyes.

"Look at them well!" she persisted; "they mean fortune, well-being, happiness."

"In heaven's name, don't you understand me?" he shrieked, fairly beside himself. "Don't you see they tempt me to kill you?"

"Me!"

She recoiled half way across the room, palpitating with terror.

"Yes, you!" he hissed. "And what do I risk? You have signified your intention of committing suicide to-night, and I think you can guess that I had far rather make the money by killing a wretch like you than by assassinating an honest woman!"

"Oh, no, no! You will not, dare not—I will summon—"

"Silence!"

He took deadly aim. She sprang towards a door opening upon the hall of the house.

"Help, help!"

"Hush, I tell you!"

"There was a sharp report of the revolver, a piercing scream, succeeded by a heavy fall and for an instant, the dimly lighted room was obscured by smoke.

Flung aside his weapon, Camille sprang to the side of his victim, knelt down, and tore the fatal fortune from her cramped fingers. Ere he could rise, there came a crash at the blinds, and in a flash, Lucian Courtlandt stood within the room.

"You have killed her!" he exclaimed, paralyzed with horror.

"Yes," came the desperate retort, "I have killed her, as she bribed me to kill your wife. I fell with the poison, and didn't see fit to fry lead. Well, I'm ready to take the consequences!"

Another sun is setting, and upon the vine-bung piazza of the Newport villa, Lucian and Claire sit side by side.

For some time silence has folded its wings above them, after the recital that he has given her.

"Claire," he asks, at last, "can you accord her your forgiveness for all she has done to you?"

"How can you ask that, Lucian?" she murmurs. "I am unworthy even to forgive. Let heaven forgive her if she has sinned." Then, after a pause, she looks up at him, tearfully. "But, Lucian, can you forgive me for my unjust suspicion of you?" she asks, tremblingly.

He takes her in his arms and kisses her for the first time, tenderly.

"If you are unworthy to forgive," he whispers, "how unfitting am I."

And so the night falls with a great peace, and rests upon them like a benediction.

(The end.)

As It Is Written.

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