

The Planter's Daughter OR FATE'S REVENGE

By MRS. ALICE P. CARRISTON

Author of "A Walk from the Sea," "Her Brightest Hope,"
"Wayward Winifred," etc.

CHAPTER III.—(Continued.)

It simply seemed incredible that it was the haughty, high-spirited Sybilide Couramont who obeyed the nuncio's command with the submission of a lamb. What power did this rude fellow exert over this defiant girl? Had she met her master in him?

He pointed to the easy chair which she had left but a minute before, as she sank into it, he carelessly tossed his dripping hat upon a dainty sofa covered with pale blue satin embroidered with apple blossoms, and braced himself against the toilet table, the muslin drapery of which became crushed and soiled by contact with his muddy boots.

"First of all," he began, sneeringly, "your tragedy airs are out of place. So long as you do not bring us face to face I do not care a pin to meet him; what is more, I no more want to kill him than I want to marry you—for love."

He paused abruptly, and little by little she raised her great, dilated eyes to his face like two burning stars.

"It may touch your vanity in a vulnerable spot," he continued, sitting down upon the edge of the table and crossing one foot over the other, "but I don't love you a speck and never did; so you may as well know, first as last, that if you hadn't been worth your weight in gold, I wouldn't have looked twice at you. You're not my style. I'm hot-tempered enough myself, and bringing a fire-brand into my camp wouldn't have helped matters."

While he spoke the defiant look had been creeping back into Sybilide's face, brightening her eyes and curling her red lips.

"So you sought to marry me for my money?" she murmured, looking him steadily in the eyes.

"Most assuredly; for no other reason." "You have lost me and my money, too," she cried, springing to her feet.

"You, yes; but not the money. Your father left a will, did he not?" "No."

It is doubtful whether, had a bomb exploded at his feet, Oscar Couramont would have started more violently.

"Left no will?" he cried.

"I tell you, no," Sybilide replied with a steady, level glance.

Couramont shrugged his shoulders and presented himself upon the edge of the table.

"In that case," he rejoined, "all the property comes to you. Well, so be it—I must change my tactics. You must hand over to me the half of the estate, which by right your father ought to have left me."

The indignant reply that quivered for utterance upon Sybilide's lips was checked by a sudden knocking at the locked door which communicated with the corridor.

"Miss Sybil, Miss Sybil" called a woman's voice from the other side of the door.

With a wicked glance in her eyes, Sybilide turned upon Couramont.

"It is Diana, my maid," she said; "she will secure my release."

"Bah!" growled the rascal, "tell her to go away; I'm not half through talking to you. Do as I bid you; it is worth your while!"

Taking a step toward that thin partition that separated her from deliverance, Sybilide raising her voice, said:

"I do not need you, Diana. Continue with the packing." Then, with the darling gleam again shining in her eyes, she supplemented, "and if in half an hour I am not down stairs, ask Mr. Couramont to come up for me!"

"Fool!" sneered Couramont; "well, a woman always will have the last word, so I suppose I ought not to blame you for what you can't help. All is well, we shall have to talk fast, as I see no occasion to soil my hands with this fellow's blood. So, by packing up, you intend to leave Rosemont?"

"I do."

"Then we will proceed to business and settle everything up before you go—Sybilide, I want my share of the estate, and I want it now—to-night!"

"How dare you?" she demanded, turning upon him, imperiously; "your share? What do you mean?"

"Just what I say—I want my share." "There is no share for you; I doubt my poor father ever thought to leave so much as one cent."

"It is quite possible," retorted Sybilide with his imperturbable old man never loved me, but I loved me. And I intend that you all atone for my lack of common sense and your want of forethought in marrying this interloper."

As he spoke he advanced upon her as she stood in the center of the amber, and drew from an inner pocket a slip of paper.

"I am not stupid enough to suppose that you have a sum of money upon you overnight sufficient to satisfy my demands. Therefore, this letter, addressed to your executor, and stating that in accordance with an expressed wish of your father that his estate be equally divided between us two, his only heirs, you will sign."

He drew back a step and glared upon her so balefully that she recoiled and caught at a chair for support.

"Do you refuse to sign this paper?" he asked, steadily; "be warned in time of the secret of your life, a secret which you forever, even involuntarily, have made public!"

"What do you mean?" "Sign this paper, or I inform your husband that your mother was a slave. Like a flash of lurid lightning all that had been incomprehensible to her in her father's behavior burst upon the unhappy girl; his nervousness, his strange desire to marry her to Oscar Couramont, his wild entreaty for her to believe no evil gossip of her dead mother—all, all came back to her in that dreadful moment with the overwhelming force of a conviction. Yet even then she would

not believe it.

With hands cramped like the talons of a bird of prey, she sprang at her tormentor, uttering shriek after shriek of rage, horror and dismay.

"It is a lie, a lie, a lie!" she panted; "out of my sight! You—you—I—"

She staggered, beat the air for a moment with her arms, then with a low moan of fathomless agony, fell, face downwards, with a dull crash, like one stricken with death.

Too late Oscar Couramont discovered that he had over-reached himself. Sybilide was now incapable of signing the instrument which would make a wealthy man of him; besides, her cries had aroused the household, hurrying feet were mounting the stairs, already they were knocking at the door, and a man's voice in excited accents was calling upon her to open.

In less than half a minute the barrier would be broken down!

Snatching up his hat and revolver, Couramont sprang to the window.

"We shall meet again, my lady, never fear!" he hissed, menacingly; "we shall meet again, when my grip upon you shall be stronger than it is now!"

CHAPTER IV.

Four years had elapsed since the events narrated in the preceding chapter, and the flight of Couramont and his bride had ceased to excite comment and gossip long since.

Already the year 1862 is pregnant with its greatest day, Sept. 22, when the martyr President issued his immortal proclamation declaring the freedom of all slaves in the States and parts of States then in rebellion.

Since that memorable night of darkness and storm, in October, 1858, the face of the mistress of Rosemont has never once been seen upon her hereditary estate. Having been left in competent hands, the plantation has yielded its accustomed income, all of which has been transmitted through the bankers at Mobile to Lucian Couramont in whatever part of the world he chanced to be.

For a year the young lawyer and his beautiful wife traveled from place to place in the Old World, following the fashionable season from London to St. Petersburg, returning along the shores of the romantic Mediterranean.

It had been a term of unalloyed delight to Sybilide, and when, at the close of the year, a lovely baby boy came to join their party at Nice, the young wife trembled at her happiness. The horror of her wedding night with its appalling revelation now seemed so far away that she often wondered whether it had been really indeed, and not the delirium of a fevered dream. In the peace and joy of her maternity she persuaded herself that cruel Fate had forgotten her, and that henceforth she was destined to live in the auspicious light of favoring Fortune.

Oscar Couramont had given no sign of life; perhaps he had repented; perhaps he was dead. Sybilide could afford now to wish him no evil, since his baleful shadow had not crossed her sun-lit path.

Of course an explanation of her insensible condition when found in her chamber at Rosemont on that fatal night was inevitable; she owed it to her husband, and she gave it him according as she thought best.

"You see, I scarcely know how it was," she murmured as she lay in his arms upon her recovery to consciousness, "but when I entered my own room for the last time and glanced about me upon the familiar objects, it seemed as if father came back to me from the grave, his face wan and pallid, his two eyes burning like coals of fire. I was terrified, and, falling upon my knees, I besought him to tell me in what I had offended him, but he only shook his head and slowly vanished; and then I shrieked and fell fainting."

Lucian Couramont smiled a trifle unasily as he replied:

"I don't believe in visions myself; yours, however, must have been somewhat out of the ordinary run of unaided ghosts. Were you aware that your airy visitor wore muddy boots and a wet hat?"

"Lucian!" "It is a fact. The print of his hat has left an indelible stain upon your sofa, and the muslin drapery of your toilet table is soiled and torn."

With ready tact, Sybilide glanced upon terror-stricken into her husband's face.

"Then burglars must have entered my room while we were at church!" she cried.

"Do you have burglars in this part of the country, Sybilide?" asked Couramont with an amused smile.

"Well—if not actual burglars," was the innocent reply, "thieves at least, and plenty of them."

"Ah! But it strikes me as a little strange that you did not notice these signs of disorder when you entered your chamber."

"Now, Lucian, what an idea!" she exclaimed; "is it likely that, in the dim candle light and considering the excitement I was laboring under, I should be struck by the sight of a few rain drops and a smudge of mud? How absurd! Why should the damage not have been done by one of the dogs? They are fond of me, and often come up to my room."

"Dogs do not climb veranda posts to second story windows, my dear; and your doors were locked."

"I locked them!" "But I found your window open!" "Upon hearing my approach, the dog might have escaped by that means!"

"You say the dogs are fond of you, and dogs in general are too intelligent to risk any such jump as that. No, my love, it was no quadruped that entered your chamber to-night. It was a man!"

He felt her weight grow heavier in his arms, but she managed to preserve consciousness enough to falter:

"What makes you think so?" "I have instituted a search of the place, and have made certain discoveries."

Her hands set like a vise upon his arm.

"Discoveries!" she gasped, "what discoveries?"

"That some one climbed the pillar on the veranda nearest your window by means of the vines, and that the print of a horse's hoof is fresh in the soil of the lime-tree walk that leads up to that side of the house. Which facts incline me to your belief, that thieves have entered the house."

"Lucian, I told you so," she cried wildly; "it is true. There must have been a plot to rob us while we were at church. Don't you see?"

Lucian Couramont pressed his lips upon the damp, pallid brow, and gently depositing the graceful form upon the cushions of the sofa, he rose with the words: "You are over-excited and tired, poor child. You had better rest here to-night. We will leave Rosemont at daybreak. May, be still; I will send Diana to you."

She dared not remonstrate for fear of arousing the suspicions which she had lulled into oblivion. So she closed her eyes with well-feigned weariness, and Couramont left her to summon her maid.

No sooner had the door shut his manly figure from view when Sybilide started up upon her elbow, her dilated eyes burning with that deep red fire that one sees in a hungry wolf. She held her breath and couched his retreating footsteps, till they fell away into silence at the extremity of the long hall. Then she sprang to her feet, her pallid face aflame with animation, every nerve vibrating like the rudely swept strings of a harp.

"Saved!" she panted triumphantly; "saved! But what a narrow escape. I have bridged the abyss with a straw, and passed safely over. I shall be on my guard in future; it can never happen again. Were I to meet Oscar Couramont a hundred times, I should never be such a fool again."

The exultant soliloquy was cut short by the abrupt opening of the door, and a young mulatto girl, with a remarkably pretty, keen face, entered. She paused at sight of her mistress pacing to and fro so excitedly, and Sybilide paused also, fixing a sharp, questioning glance upon her maid.

"What is it, Diana?" she demanded, swiftly; "you have heard something; I see it in your face."

"I haven't heard anything, Miss Sybil," replied the girl, "but I've seen something—Miss Oscar."

Diana did not draw a breath for fully a minute after that unwelcome announcement, for Sybilide's small hand was set upon her lips like a seal.

"Hush!" she breathed, "do not dare to slip his name until we are gone. My husband does not know of his existence, and must never know, if we can help it. Where was my cousin?"

"In the lime-tree walk, Missy—mountain his horse."

"Thank heaven, he's gone, then, for the night! Are the trunks ready packed, Diana?"

"Yes, Missy, packed and strapped."

"See that they are loaded on the wagon to-night; we start at daybreak, and you go with me. I may have need of you in more ways than one."

Scarcely had the eastern horizon begun to flush with the promise of day, when the family coach, followed by the baggage wagon, rolled swiftly down the road that led into the river valley; and two hours later Mr. Oscar Couramont rode into the court yard at Rosemont, to be informed that, if he had come to breakfast, his meal must be a solitary one.

(To be continued.)

Two Famous Negro Women.

The old head-banckerchief negro is the aristocrat of her race. Aunt Dicey belongs to this type. She is a product of the eighteenth century, and recently celebrated her one hundred and seventh birthday. Aunt Dicey lives in a little cabin standing among pine trees on a spur of the ragged mountains of Virginia. In slavery days she belonged to a relative of Thomas Jefferson.

Aunt Dicey is a constant smoker, and has been one from her youth up. Her cabin walls are covered with magazine pictures and scriptural verses, many of them tacked wrong side up.

In the days of her youth she was a seamstress, and her neat sewing is the wonder of her many visitors. The finest needle is not too much for her wonderful eyesight.

The fame of "Aunt Jiny" has gone far beyond the borders of Mississippi. Aunt Jiny enjoys the distinction of being the only negro woman depot master in the country. Aunt Jiny has been a railroad employe for thirty-six years. She belonged before the war to some people down in Alabama, and was with them throughout the struggle. She says she warned them more than once of the approach of the "enemy."

Apt to Be Charitable.

"The impromptu speaker may be all right in his way," said Deacon Jones, "but as for me, give me the minister who writes his sermons every time."

"Why?" asked Deacon Smith.

"He is more likely to realize their length," was the significant reply.

As Others See Us.

"You always say the wrong thing at the right time, Henry," said Mrs. Fackem. "Now, I always think twice before I speak."

"Yes, my dear," replied the meek and lowly Henry, "but you are one of those rapid-fire thinkers."

As It Should Be.

"I suppose," said the visitor to police headquarters, "that every officer knows a rogue when he sees him."

"Sure," replied the desk sergeant; "but every officer doesn't seize a rogue when he knows him."

Ample Excuse.

Josh-I's'pooe Silas is mad at the fellow that sold him the horse.

Hiram—I dunno why he should be. If yet look at the horse yer won't blame anybody for sellin' him.

The man who originated the motto "Live and Let Live" didn't take the undertaker into consideration, but fell into his hands just the same.

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CHAPTER IV.—(Continued.)

And now nearly four years had passed since the troublesome events, and the Couramont family, accompanied by Lucian's widowed mother, were on their way back to their native land.

Sybilide had opposed this step as long as she dared, and had only given in at last through fear of arousing her husband's suspicions.

Between the two ladies no sympathy and no confidence had existed from the first of their acquaintance; by tacit agreement they seemed to be antagonists from the day they met. The haughty old lady regarded her beautiful daughter-in-law with a suspicious eye, nor was Sybilide for an instant unconscious of the espionage.

When the child was born, the elder Mrs. Couramont appeared to claim it as her own; for some reason, which she was powerless to explain, she always shuddered whenever she saw the handsome boy in his mother's arms.

"She'd like to rob me of him," Sybilide often thought, bitterly; "proud, old creature, I hate her more than she hates me!"

Under the circumstances, it was useless to attempt to induce Sybilide to go to Mrs. Couramont's home upon the Hudson, when they arrived in New York. She was resolute upon that point. She would go to a hotel with her husband and child until a suitable home was secured for them; she would not be the guest of Mrs. Couramont!

So it was arranged that Mrs. Couramont should go at once to her country seat, accompanied by her son, while Sybilide, with her 8-year-old Leon, and Diana, went to the Fifth Avenue Hotel to await her husband's return. A handsome suite of rooms was engaged, and the party were made as comfortable as wealth could make them.

The only actual cloud upon Sybilide's arrival in America was the fact that the first night would have to be passed without her husband.

As the twilight hour began to approach she grew more and more lonely and restless. Gazing into the busy Square failed to amuse her, and when Diana suggested that she should go down to the public dining room for dinner as a diversion, Sybilide felt the cold perspiration of apprehension start out at every pore, and she curiously commanded her maid to order dinner in their private parlor.

When the chery gaslight dispelled the gloom, the young wife and mother became more cheerful, and taking her boy upon her knee, she sang him a sprightly Creole song; that she had not thought of in four long years, until the child laughed and clapped his tiny hands in glee.

Suddenly Sybilide paused, with a song upon her lips, as an authoritative knock sounded upon the door. Obeying a sudden impulse, she sprang to her feet, handed the child to Diana, and answered the summons herself.

A hall boy stood before her in the lighted hall with a visiting card upon a silver salver. Sybilide did not hear him ask whether she were Mrs. Lucian Couramont; she picked up the card and glanced at the name inscribed thereon.

In an instant every drop of blood in her body fled with a sickening rush to her heart; but, though she turned as pallid as the dead, she uttered no cry, and did not stagger.

"Ask the person to wait in the public parlor," she said, with a supreme effort; and closing the door, she passed swiftly into her dressing room.

CHAPTER V.

The name inscribed upon the card, which Sybilide tore into little bits and cast into the open grate the moment she had escaped the curious eyes of Diana, was the name of Oscar Couramont. Had she been alone, she might have quailed. But she had a secret to conceal even from the mulatto, faithful as she was. Therefore, when Diana called to her to know what had happened, Sybilide answered with enforced calmness:

"Only a messenger from my husband. I am going to him in a moment."

Meanwhile she was touching her pallid, haggard cheeks with rouge. Thanks to this and the tiger heart in her bosom, there was no pallor and no sign of terror upon her beautiful face, as she swept slowly down the grand staircase, crossed the spacious hall, and entered the splendid suite of parlors. A hand raised the silken drapery that hung in the archway before which Sybilide stood, and like a flash her antagonist stood before her.

At sight of him she recoiled, and uttered a stifled cry. Was this revolting wretch before her cousin, the handsome Oscar Couramont? Was it possible that four years could have worked such an appalling change in any human being?

It was a wonder that the attendants below stairs had permitted such a disreputable object to mount the stairs and run the risk of terrifying the ladies he might chance to meet.

Sybilide, in all her pride and beauty, was horror-stricken, and stood speechless. Couramont was the first to speak. With a mocking obeisance and a remnant of the old, sarcastic smile, he said:

"I see you recognize me in spite of the change in me. Since it is your work, how do you like it? You have brought me to the verge of poverty and starvation."

"Yes, you! Had you remained abroad another month, I should have worked my passage out and come to you to demand my rights. I'm tired of this sort of thing. You are my debtor for keeping mum about that secret of your birth, and I want the matter settled up."

A grayish pallor, which the rouge but served to accentuate, settled upon the young wife's face, as she faltered, with a violent struggle at self-command:

"What do you demand?" "What I demanded four years ago, some next October; and I want to have the thing arranged here and now, for in

six months every cent of your property is likely to be wiped out by this war that is going on."

"You still seek one-half of my property?" "I want my half!" was the dogged retort.

"It is no longer in my power to part with it."

"Why not?" "I have a son and heir."

"You have a son!" he sneered; "so I've been told. Well, for his sake, then, you had better comply with my wishes."

"I refuse!" "So be it! Bear in mind that it is you who have declared war. Whatever happens, you are alone responsible. I'm a desperate man, Sybilide Couramont, and I'm sick of your trifling."

The cutting manner in which he pronounced her maiden name struck Sybilide more powerfully than all his moods. She was dazed, wondering what he could mean, dreading to seek an explanation.

When she came to herself she found that a group of ladies and gentlemen had entered the apartment, and that Oscar Couramont had vanished. She braced herself, and then sped wildly out into the brilliantly illuminated corridor.

All about her the guests of the hotel were leaving the dining hall, laughing and chatting gaily. Into every face she encountered she stared, as though bereft of her senses. She even descended the remaining flight of stairs to the rotunda, only to be driven back in very shame by the crowd of men she met.

Her only thought was that she had lost him, lost her only hope of salvation. Too late she became convinced that he was desperate, as he had said, and would do— heaven only knew what. She dared not think.

With lagging steps, clinging to the stair rail for support, she dragged her weary way up to her rooms. Outside the door she paused a moment to summon up a glimmer of courage and a wan mockery of a smile. Then she cautiously turned the knob and opened the door.

The lights had been turned low. Little Leon had been laid among the pillows upon the bed, and Diana slept the sleep of the just and weary, in her chair before the fire. With a low wail, that seemed wrung from a bleeding heart, the wretched woman flung herself upon her knees beside the bed, clasped the sleeping child in her arms, and rained passionate kisses upon his soft, flaxen curls.

"Oh, my boy, my boy, my boy!" she sobbed, "thank heaven, you are not old enough to guess your mother's woe!"

"Oh, mother in heaven, darling mother, bear me! strengthen and comfort me! I have not listened to the tongue of evil gossip, yet the cross is heavy to bear. Shield me, guard me, for I am alone and in danger. Save me the love of husband and child; 'tis all I ask!"

In the chill gray of early dawn, Diana came to her and touched her shoulder.

"Missy Sybil, Missy Sybil" cried the faithful creature, "get up and go to bed!" Sybilide rose slowly and painfully, pressing her hands upon her aching eyes, she said:

"I must have slept, Diana; I need no more. See, 'tis morning! I had better dress for the day."

At ten o'clock a telegram was handed her from her husband. Eagerly she opened it and read its cheery contents:

"Have heard of a lovely residence near Yonkers. Shall go to see it before returning to you. Love to you and kisses for the boy."

Heaven, how she kissed that scrap of senseless paper! To the poor, agonized soul it seemed like a ray of vivifying sunlight let in upon her dungeon keep. From the moment of its receipt she brightened up. She fancied she felt a strong arm encircling her and supporting her.

Diana asked permission to take little Leon for a stroll in the square, and was readily permitted to do so. When left alone, poor Sybilide went to her trunks, drew forth their contents and made selection of the costume which had been most praised by her husband in the happy days beyond the sea. It was a wonderful and beautiful collection of delicate violet silk and rich old ivory-tinted lace that set off her marvelous brunette beauty to perfection. She added a spray of lovely pink roses to her bosom, and the faultless toilette was complete.

With just the slightest bit of coquetry she glanced at her enchanting reflection in the mirror when all was complete, and seated herself in the embrasure of a window that overlooked the square to watch for her child and await the arrival of her husband.

Suddenly she heard the door of the room open and close. She sprang to her feet with parted lips, and outstretched hands, a glad, expectant smile quivering upon every feature. The smile vanished instantly as she saw, standing in the center of the apartment, not her child, not her husband, but the proud, stately woman whom the world regarded as her mother-in-law.

Attired in rich, trailing garments of uncompromising black, the elder Mrs. Couramont formed a startling contrast to the younger. She bowed coldly in acknowledging the chair which Sybilide advanced, and seated herself.

"You are doubtless surprised to see me here," she said, stiffly.

Sybilide bowed, and said in answer: "May I know to what I owe the honor of this visit?"

"To a painful duty," was the curt response. "Shall I speak plainly?" "If you please."

"Then came the blighting words more cruel than death: 'I have come for my son's child!'"

CHAPTER VI.

Had a thunderbolt fallen out of the clear heaven, Sybilide could not have been more amazed. For a moment or two she stared blankly at the rigid face before her, striving vainly to fathom her intense surprise. At last speech re-

turned said:

"I beg your pardon, I must have misunderstood you. You seem to have left my interest in the boy out of the question, madam."

"I said advisedly—my son's child!" came the rigid response. "Naturally you are his mother, I suppose, but so, unfortunately, any claims you may lay upon him will be vastly to his detriment, I must persist in calling him my son's child and entirely ignore you in the matter."

"Madam!" Had the haughty old lady possessed the merest taint of cowardice in her heart she must have been appalled by the silent exhibition of desperate, quivering wrath that was presented to her view. Feeling that the ominous silence that ensued was valuable time lost, Mrs. Couramont said:

"I am not in the least surprised at your display of impotent rage at finding yourself baffled at last; I anticipated it and have come prepared to parry it."

"Stop—where you are! Can you be so obtuse as not to learn that you are both insulting a wife and outraging a mother?"

"And can you be so witless as to flatter yourself that, sooner or later, your destiny would not find you out and hunt you down?"

"My destiny, madam! What do you mean?"

"That tainted blood flows in your veins, that you are a slave, that you have juggled my son into believing that he was marrying his equal in station, and have borne him an innocent child to a heritage of woe!"

She rose as she spoke, and, as if crushed by this avalanche of horror, Sybilide recoiled to a sofa and sank upon it, covering her face with her hands. Making the most of the advantage she had gained, Mrs. Couramont continued:

"I do not blame you for wishing to marry and be a mother, indeed, I feel some pity for you, but I can never forgive you for having trapped a free-born, reputable family in your scheme."

She paused, and, without raising her head, poor Sybilide murmured:

"Who told you of this thing?" "I know not. I received an anonymous communication this morning, stating the facts and inclosing proofs that your father, Col. Couramont, married a slave girl in Louisiana, and that you are the offspring of that