

## REAPING THE WHIRLWIND

BY CHRISTINE FADER

### CHAPTER XXXIV—CONTINUED

"Are you quite sure that you can place that note in Miss Burchill's hand today?"

"Quite; and to convince you, I shall depart immediately, without even waiting to speak to Mrs. Hogan's little ones," both of whom, from a little distance, were busily looking at the beautiful lady.

And Helen took her leave, but she did not repair to The Castle. She hurried instead to her own home, and having found that some rare good fortune had sent Miss Balk out, she dispatched the servant abroad on an errand and went to the kitchen. Drawing forth the sealed packet, she held it above the steam of the boiling kettle until the seals dropped apart and the open letter lay in her hand. Then she hastened to her room, locked herself in, and read in bold, manly, but evidently hurried characters:

"I know not how to address you, for I am not aware that you know much, or in fact anything, about me, and yet it seems impossible to doubt that you have at least heard of Chester Horton, your mother's only brother. Perhaps she has told you of her wild affection for me when I, in a reckless and impetuous youth, would burst from restraints that were only for my good. In my headstrong folly I ran away from her at last from England, where she lived then, and I came here to America. That was before you were born. Meeting with rebuffs more severe than I had anticipated I came at last to sow steeper oats. I obtained a good position with a banking firm in Boston, and I rose in the world. Strange chance made me acquainted with the sister of Caleb Robinson, the wealthy proprietor of the factory here. He was a loutish Yankee boy at that time, and while I loved his pretty sister, who was utterly unlike her brother, I could not bear him. He saw my dislike and resented it. We quarreled, and finally we got to keeping out of each other's way."

"I continued to get on in the world, being advanced to the position of confidential clerk of the firm, and my home for (my wife loved me) was happy. I wrote to England to my sister, your mother, but it was only to receive in reply from those who knew her there that she had come to this country,—exactly where, they could not say."

"One black day the chief banker of the firm was discovered dead, evidently murdered. The books were found to have been tampered with, figures falsified, and whole records torn out, and everything was traced circumstantially to me. I was innocent of all, but the sternest facts told against me and I was about to be held for trial when one of the partners in the firm who had been my warm friend from the time that I was advanced to my last position, and who now expressed his belief in my innocence and sympathized with me, contrived to get me secretly away. He intended that I should flee to Europe, but I determined to linger a day in order to enlist Caleb Robinson's sympathies for my wife and child, whom I must now abandon for a time. It was a dangerous expedition, but I did not shrink, and I came here secretly to Eastbury, staying in disguise at one of the humble places in the village, while I dispatched a letter to Robinson appealing with all the force of which I was capable to his sympathies, and begging his care for my wife and little one. He sent me an answer the words of which at that time cut me to the quick."

"It was while waiting for his answer that I accidentally learned of your mother's residence in Eastbury. I even saw her, and you with her, Mildred. You were then a child of seven or eight years, and my first impulse was to flee to you both, but sterner thoughts restrained me. I had given sufficient pain to your mother's heart in the past without now inflicting an additional one, as I must to if I disclosed the cause of my presence in Eastbury. Also, she might not believe me innocent of the crimes with which I was charged and that would cut to the soul. So I fled, but the very next day I was apprehended and brought back to Boston for my trial."

"The sentence came speedily enough, and but for the efforts made in my behalf by the partner of whom I have spoken it would have been my execution; as it was, it was imprisonment for life. I bore it as well as I could. I tore myself from my wife and babe, and faced with what resignation I could summon, I went to my grim life before me. My wife wrote to me and sent me frequent pictures of herself and my child, but we never met. I did not desire it, for I felt the meeting in such a place would have been too much for her. She died at last; they gave me word of that and that Caleb Robinson had taken my little girl. Oh, the fierce longing to behold my child that ate up my soul then! I felt as if I must burst the prison walls and be free; but I had to be patient, and I carefully bided my time. My good conduct for so many years won for me many privileges, and at last there came a chance of escape. I seized it, and with a will to drive every obstacle from my path I secretly made my way, and providence favoring me, I arrived here yesterday. My cautious inquiries elicited sufficient to guide me to the Hogans, where I presented myself as one Robert

Wiley, who had known your relatives in England, and was now anxious to see you. They are simple, good people, and all that they have told me about you, reassures and consoles me. It seems like a singular and tender dispensation of Providence that you should have the care of my darling. Did you know that she was so nearly related to you? Have you learned to love each other? And how, Mildred, will you meet me? Will you believe in my innocence? Will you meet me as your mother's once idolized brother? It was a relief to write all this rather than wait to tell it to you, and besides I wanted you to know my history before you should meet me. Now having written it, I am in doubt how to get it to you. I have a fear of trusting it to the mail, for by this time there must be a hue and cry after me, and Mrs. Hogan has some strange repugnance to setting foot on Robinson's premises, but she has promised to find me a trusty messenger. When this reaches you, will you come as soon as possible to Mrs. Hogan's? I feel every moment as if some detective were ready to grasp me, but I shall brave it all in order to see my daughter. When you come, perhaps you can devise some means of bringing her to me, if only for a few minutes. It is unnecessary to warn you to burn this letter, and to guard its contents sacredly until your own breath."

"Impatiently until I see you."

"Your uncle in distress,"

"ROBERT WILEY."

Mrs. Phillips' cheeks were glowing and her eyes sparkling when she finished reading, and yet she felt a keen sense of disappointment. She had hoped that this letter from a masculine stranger to Miss Burchill might have revealed something unfavorable to the character or reputation of the governess, and in that case what an opportunity would she not have, what ways and means would she not employ, to let Gerald know that Miss Burchill was not such a pattern of virtue! But the letter, as it was, was of a kind, could Gerald read its contents, to enlist his interest in and sympathy for the governess. She bit her lip in her vexation and disappointment, and her brow gathered into a scowl that took away much of its beauty. At length her face brightened, and hurriedly getting writing materials, she copied every word of the letter. That done, she sealed the original, and with both documents safely in her pocket, she hurried out. Miss Balk had not yet returned, and Helen walked with utmost speed, lest she should meet her, for inexplicably to herself, she had a sickening dread of encountering the spinster just then. Perhaps she felt that the ominous-looking, penetrating eyes, that seemed to have the knack of observing what was not intended for observation, would discover, somehow, the base act of which she had just been guilty. But Barbara did not appear, and Mrs. Phillips was again at the Castle, three hours after she had left it. Robinson, however, was out, and the servant could not tell the time of his return. She would wait, and she seated herself at one of the windows that commanded a view of the path by which any pedestrian must come who sought entrance to the house, debating with herself whether to send immediately Mr. Wiley's letter to Miss Burchill, or to wait until she had her interview with Robinson. While she was thus undecided she saw Thurston coming up the path. In a moment her resolution was formed. She bounded out to the hall and confronted him just as he opened the door.

"Drawing the sealed packet from her pocket she extended it, saying at the same time, with an air of gentle and melancholy reproach:

"Obedience to the harsh request which you sent me this morning reduces me to my present strait. I was intrusted with this letter for Miss Burchill. The gentleman who gave it to me was most anxious to have it reach her from my hand, but I have been rudely excluded from her apartments. In my perplexity as to how I should gratify his desire, I have been waiting here to see Mr. Robinson. However, as you are Miss Burchill's friend and champion, I shall give it to you."

Gerald took the letter, saying quietly, though her words had aroused unpleasant surprise and doubt in his own mind:

"There need have been no difficulty about so simple a matter as conveying a letter to Miss Burchill. A servant is always at hand. However, as you say, I am Miss Burchill's friend," with an emphasis on the last phrase that shut his listener to the soul, "and I shall deliver it to her."

He bowed gravely and left her. Had he once turned back to see the expression which distorted her features he might well have wondered how he ever had been won by the charm of her beauty. Rage and hate changed the color of her face and swelled the veins in her forehead, causing her temples to throb with such agony that she pressed them against the cold glass of the window-panes for relief. That which added to her unhappy emotions was the thought that Mildred, in her dismay and perhaps grief at the contents of the letter, would reveal those contents to Gerald, and thus secure in him a firmer friend than he might be even at present. She writhed at the thought, even though she experienced no little satisfaction at the remembrance of having told him that it was a gentleman who had given the letter. Robinson was coming in. She hastened to compose her face, and to

meet him with the pretty, and confidential air which she knew exerted so winning an influence upon him.

"Take me to your study," she said sweetly. "I have something so secret and so important to tell you."

He led the way to that apartment, ringing as soon as he had entered it, for the candles to be lighted, though the wintry day had not yet declined, and he did not even seat himself until every wax light was ablaze.

Helen drew forth a copy of Robert Wiley's letter.

"You will wonder, my dear Mr. Robinson, at the accident which placed the original of this in my possession, and which Miss Burchill has by this time. It was given to me for her by the man who signs himself there. As I was excluded from Miss Burchill's apartments, I gave it into Mr. Thurston's charge."

Robinson adjusted his spectacles and read it: read it more than once, from the length of time which elapsed until he looked up from its perusal. Then his face was so changed that she shrank involuntarily from him. The crimson spots which any mental disturbance brought into his cheeks were burning there fiercely, and contrasted with the yellow, blue and dried, parchment-like appearance of the rest of his face, gave him a very singular look. His mouth, was drawn into an expression of such determination that his lips seemed like a thin blue line.

She summoned courage to say:

"I thought it right for you, Mr. Robinson, to know the contents of that letter as well as Miss Burchill; and I thought also,—she had conquered her fear, and she pulled her chair to him, and put her hand in its old confiding fashion upon his arm,—its contents rightly used must bring Miss Burchill to your feet."

"Oh! What do you mean?" And the red spots on his cheeks glowed the more, and his eyes from which he had taken the spectacles, flamed at her like little balls of greenish fire.

"Has not the thought suggested itself to you?" Her voice was so tremulous from her eagerness that she could scarcely pronounce the words. "Could you not, with your wealth and influence, place this Chester Horton or Robert Wiley as he signs himself here, in security? Could you not assist him to such a disguise that in another country he could live safely with his daughter if they should both so wish it? And could you not make all this the condition of Miss Burchill's becoming your wife? Set before her the two alternatives; Mrs. Robinson, with her uncle placed in safety and assisted to a comfortable living, Miss Burchill, with her uncle remanded to prison and her relationship with him given to the public. It may be that her affection for him will not be sufficiently great to make her consent to your wish, especially now, as I more than suspect that she loves Gerald Thurston, while, on the contrary, her sense of duty, or her affection for her cousin Cora, or both, may be motives sufficient to win her consent with little difficulty. In either case, since you wish Miss Burchill to accept your hand, my plan seems a feasible one, does it not?"

She was glowing as if the flame of a heated furnace fanned her face. The factory owner had not once taken his eyes from hers, and now they seemed to burn into her own as he said:

"You are a pretty little witch, Mrs. Phillips; I wouldn't have thought of that, now."

Helen, exulting that her proposition seemed to be so well received, hastened to add:

"But you must be careful, Mr. Robinson,—careful lest Miss Burchill should confide in Mr. Thurston; his sympathies once enlisted, Chester Horton might be got without much difficulty beyond even your reach."

"Oh, yes; I shan't forget all that. But this thing about Miss Burchill liking Gerald. Are you pretty sure of that?"

"From all I have seen lately,—yes; and the regard on Mr. Thurston's part is owing to his admiration of her virtue. Once prove to him that Miss Burchill has flaws in her character as well as other people, and his esteem will scarcely remain. I fancy that I gave him one unpleasant subject of thought when I handed him that letter and told him it was from a gentleman. I think it rather startled him to find she had a man friend other than himself. So, Mr. Robinson, if you will work carefully, restraining any precipitation, and if Miss Burchill has discretion enough not to confide in Mr. Thurston, and if she has sufficient tenderness of heart to see occasionally this unfortunate relative of hers, why Mr. Thurston may get to know of her surreptitious visits, and they may cause him to wonder, and perhaps doubt a little in this lady's affection for himself."

Robinson was looking at her with a curiosity in his expression almost ludicrous, and he said as soon as she had ceased:

"So you ain't such a friend to Miss Burchill as we thought you be. Well, if you women don't beat us men all to pieces for smilin' at each other when you'd rather be tearing each other's eyes out."

"Oh, no! Mr. Robinson. Don't judge us—don't judge me—so harshly. I was Miss Burchill's friend until she turned Gerald against me,—Gerald for whom I would have done anything."

"It appears to me that you have more'n a stepmother's liking for Gerald," said the factory owner.

Helen had gone so far in her candor to this man whom she secret-

ly loathed, that she felt impelled to go still further, and with a reckless disregard of the dictates of prudence she told him, with her handkerchief to her eyes, of her former engagement to Gerald.

"Methusala!" exclaimed the factory owner. "I reckon I understand it all now. That's the reason Gerald acts so queer and stiff to you. But how in thunder did you come to marry his father,—for his money, eh?"

In answer to which Helen told a very pretty little story, exculpating herself entirely and rather making herself out the victim of a plot by the Tillotsons to marry her to Phillips, of whose relationship to Thurston she was quite ignorant. Gerald had neglected her; he had not answered her letters; he had not concerned himself about her, and she, poor innocent, in despair and helpless, had become the bride of Mr. Phillips. I did not inform him of the fact that I had been engaged to another."

she continued, through the tears which she could make to flow at will, "because that other had so cruelly neglected me; but when we were married it seemed to me that I should have no secrets from my husband, and I told him then, hardly two hours after the ceremony. But how did he receive it? Instead of accepting it as a proof of my wifely honor, instead of cherishing me for my frankness, he threw me from him, calling me a terrible name; and when I fell, stunned by his act and his words, he bade me begone. I fled from him, but before I reached the door Heaven had punished him, for he fell in the fit which preceded his death."

Her face was now buried in her handkerchief, and she was gently sobbing.

The factory owner's memory had been working while she recounted her tale, calling up, almost unconsciously to himself, the tragic portions of the Phillips will case, that he had read with such avidity at the time, and he exclaimed:

"You didn't tell that when you was called to give your testimony in the court. If I recollect right, you said your husband was good and kind to you to the last, didn't you? And wasn't that the point some of the lawyers tried to make,—that if there was any disagreement between you it would have shown good grounds for a change in the will?"

Helen was a little frightened. She had not thought to have gone so far in her tale, nor to have had it produce such a thought in Robinson's mind.

"I'm sure I don't know," she said. "I was not myself at that horrible time, and then, to discover that Gerald was the son of the man I had married nearly killed me." She was sobbing again.

The factory owner waited for her emotion to subside, and when she took her handkerchief from her eyes they had nothing of the homely appearance which copious weeping gives to most eyes. Tears glistened in a very pretty way on her eyelashes and cheeks, but that was all.

Robinson looked from her to the open letter, asking:

"Yes if you wrote this, and want the letter sealed that you gave Miss Burchill?"

Helen laughed and averted her head, as she answered:

"You must not question the offices a friend performs for you. If I have done you a service, prove your gratitude by accepting it unquestioned; if not, do not censure me for having tried to serve you."

"And serve yourself at the same time, eh?"

"And the factory owner grinned sickeningly; then he continued:

"You want Miss Burchill out of the way of Gerald, even if you can't have him. Well, it's all right as long as I want Miss Burchill; and I reckon we're about alike in our thoughts just now, both of us havin' a mind to do anything that'll make us succeed. We'll be pretty sure not to blab on each other, and I am sort of obliged to you for what you've done, Mrs. Phillips, though it's been kind of dirty work for a lady like you to open a sealed letter."

"I did not tell you that I opened a sealed letter," she said, growing slightly pale.

"It's all the same as if you told me. How in thunder could you get this, pointing to the letter before him, 'if you didn't have the other?' and it ain't likely Chester Horton would have sent a letter to Miss Burchill without sealing it. But you needn't look so skered; I ain't going to blab anything, and as I said before, I'm obliged to you."

He rose, folding the letter as he did so preparatory to putting it into his pocket.

"Let me have it," she said, extending her hand, "or destroy it now, in my presence," as she shook his head in answer to her request.

"I must have it," she repeated, almost trying to snatch it; but he evaded her, and answered while he shut it up in his pocketbook.

"I'll allers like to keep such doctyments for a while; but as I said before, you needn't be skered; my keeping it ain't going to do you no harm."

The clock on the mantle chimed the hour as he spoke, and he raised his eyes at the sound. In an instant the same mysterious change came over his appearance which had so disturbed Miss Burchill during her interview with him on the night of the ride. His knees visibly shook, and his very teeth seemed to chatter, while his eyes looked over Mrs. Phillips, and apparently to a distant corner of the room. She turned awfully to see the cause of his evident terror, but as in the case of

Mildred, scarcely a shadow was observable.

"What is it, Mr. Robinson?" she exclaimed, turning to him with lips and cheeks as pale as were his own.

He raised his hand as if to motion her to silence, and his lips moved, but no sound came from them. She, as completely terrified as he seemed to be, was uncertain whether to fly or to remain; indeed, her limbs appeared to be paralyzed, and she leaned in a helpless way against the chair beside which she stood, while she felt as if her very hair were standing on end. At length he turned his eyes from the part of the room where they had been steadfastly fixed, and sank into his chair with a great long drawn breath of relief, while the perspiration rolled from his face.

"Skered?" he said looking up at Helen, and attempting to smile, but the attempt was almost an exact representation of the grin of a death's-head. "You didn't see anything," as Helen now totally overcame, sank into her chair. "Spooks don't come arter you, yet. They come arter me. They come every day, but mostly later than this."

"Let me out," moaned Helen. "I shall faint here."

"Pooh, pooh!" said the factory owner, now quite recovered. "Don't be so skered; them spooks don't do no harm. Wonder old Phillips' spook don't come arter you."

But Helen seemed on the verge of fainting, and he hastened to lead her out to the piazza, where the sharp, frosty air revived her.

"I'll go home," she said, eager for the first time in all her life to be away from The Castle. She had a wild feeling of some mysterious presence being still about her, and Robinson, as he stood beside her, tall, spare, and curious looking, seemed in the semi-darkness like a ghost himself. To her great disgust, he insisted on accompanying her home; she looked so white and weak that he feared some accident to her on the way, and he would not trust her to a servant's care lest she might unconsciously make some revelation of the recent scene in the study; so despite her protest and entreaties, he accompanied her, leaving her only when the door of her own dwelling had closed upon her. He had refused the invitation to enter, much to Helen's satisfaction, her satisfaction being increased when she saw Barbara in the hall, that lady having hurried thence when she heard the knock— and she had been in ample time to see Helen's escort. Mrs. Phillips was still so pale that it excited Miss Balk's curious attention, and her greeting was:

"You look as white as if you had seen a ghost."

The widow shuddered and looked at the black eyes fixed upon her own with a thought that resolved into words, "have been here."

"Is this woman a devil, that she seems to divine everything?"

But she did not answer, and she was proceeding to her room, when Barbara followed her, saying:

"Is old Robinson falling into that net you set for Gerald? Well, you won't have such a tug to pull him in, but won't he lead you the life when he gets you? You'll do penance for all your sins then, Helen."

Mrs. Phillips would endure no more; she turned short upon the stair which she was ascending, and stamping her foot, screamed rather than said:

"How dare you insinuate such things of me! And you have fallen wide of the mark this time. Mr. Robinson will make Miss Burchill his wife."

"Really?" replied Barbara with a coolness which showed no astonishment at the information. "And Mrs. Phillips would endure no more; she turned short upon the stair which she was ascending, and stamping her foot, screamed rather than said:

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