

REAPING THE WHIRLWIND

BY CHRISTINE FABER

CHAPTER XXVIII

The midwinter visitors had gone from Robinson's, and the early springtime, with its fresh green fragrance, had come. It was the season of the year which Mildred most enjoyed, and was it not for the persistent and constant company of Mrs. Phillips she would have been quite happy.

One afternoon when all three were returning from Professor Clarmont's Mrs. Phillips suggested that instead of entering the grounds by the narrow passage which they always took, they should follow the carriage road, the high gate of which, contrary to the custom, stood open. Cora, too favored the proposition, and Mildred knowing they could swerve into a secluded spot before they reached the house should it become necessary, consented. The widow seemed animated by some spirit of playful mischief. No sooner had they crossed the boundary that separated the carriage-way from the main road than she sprang on the paling of the gate, challenging Cora to the same feat. As there was no one in sight, Miss Burchill would not check her pupil's vivacity, and the girl, catching the spirit of active mischief, jumped up beside Mrs. Phillips. They swung to and fro for some minutes, enjoying at the odd sport, and finally closed the gate. Three pursued their way, not one of them seeming to think that they ought, perhaps, to leave the gate as they found it, or not deeming it necessary to do so, as the lodge keeper would probably attend to it. Having proceeded a little distance, they heard the sound of swift, almost furious driving. A curve in the road hid the vehicle, and in an instant Mildred saw the closed gates. Possibly it had been left open for the egress of this vehicle driven at such a rapid rate that the driver might be unable to check his horse in time. With a hurried cry of "The gate!" to her companions she dashed back by the road they had come. It was a vehicle furiously driven, the horse either having taken fright or having become unmanageable through some cause, and the driver being utterly unable, though he strained every nerve, to check the pace of the animal. Mrs. Phillips and Cora fled with terrified screams to the side of the road, the former in her fright not recognizing Thurston the driver, while Mildred, having reached the gate, swung it open, but too late to escape herself. The vehicle dashed through, knocking her down and rendering her insensible. Thurston saw the accident, but was unable to stop his horse until parties in the road caught the mettlesome beast; then he returned to find Mrs. Phillips and Cora bending over Mildred. The gate-keeper was also on the scene, apologizing for his absence at the time of the accident, but insisting that he had left the gate open while he went to perform a brief errand. Mrs. Phillips was in no hurry to tell how she had been the means of closing it, but Cora spoke up, her eyes full of tears.

"Yes, it was open, but Mrs. Phillips and I swung on it and shut it." All this time Gerald did not notice his stepmother; indeed, he seemed utterly oblivious of her presence, giving his whole attention to the unconscious girl at his feet. "We must send to the house for a litter of some sort," he said, addressing himself to the gate-keeper, who had brought water and vinegar and a sponge, all that he could think of in the way of refreshment for Miss Burchill who was recovering. She opened her eyes, and seeing who was above her she blushed violently. "You are better, Miss Burchill?" asked Gerald gently, but with such a concern in his tones that it made Mrs. Phillips sick for a moment. "Much better," she answered, but the tone of her voice indicated weakness still, and sitting up, she continued, "I think I can walk to the house now." Her effort was futile, for as soon as she attempted to stand she discovered that one foot was badly sprained. Gerald turned to Helen; it was his first recognition of her: "Will you be kind enough to go to the house and summon help? They can bring one of the easy summer chairs; in that way we can get our sufferers home." Did he single her out for the errand in order to free himself of her presence? Mrs. Phillips felt it to be so, and while she raged secretly, outwardly she responded by a most charming smile of assent and instantaneous departure on the errand. The gate-keeper brought a chair, and as Thurston assisted to place Mildred comfortably upon it, he said respectfully, "Is it not all so, Frank?" "I am under an obligation to you. Were it not for you forthrightly in running to open the gate, my neck might have been in jeopardy. The horse is one which Mr. Robinson has recently bought; I was anxious for me to try him, but I had no idea he had so much mettle in him."

"I did not know that it was for you I opened the gate," answered Mildred; "but since it is so, I am glad, for I owe you a deep obligation. I feel it is through you I have my present home."

"Is it a pleasant one? Are you quite happy and Gerald looked for an instant into her eyes, and seemed to await quite eagerly her answer. "The home is a very pleasant one," she answered. "But are you happy?" he persisted. "Do you suffer from any intrusion?" as if he divined why she did not answer his second question. "I ought not to permit myself to suffer from anything," she answered, evasively, and with a smile; "since so pleasant a home has been given me, I should be content to sacrifice my own feelings on many occasions."

There was no opportunity then for the reply he was about to make, for Mrs. Phillips arrival, followed by a couple of servants bearing a large easy-chair. Mildred was gently seated in it, and with Thurston on one side and Helen and Cora on the other, she was borne to the house. The sprain proved to be very tedious, confining its victim to her room for weeks, and affording a golden opportunity for Mrs. Phillips to take up her residence at The Castle under the presence of most affectionate concern for the young governess. She refused to leave her, and Mildred shut her teeth with an indignant protest against the widow's persistent attentions. Accustomed as she was to self-sacrifice, for the sake of showing a gentle, kindly example to her pupil, the effort, after the first desperate struggle, became less hard.

Thurston and Robinson sent every day kind messages to Miss Burchill and frequently there was a choice of compliments accorded by the company. How Mrs. Phillips heart beat as she saw those flowers and knew for whom they were; and how blinded by rage and jealousy filled her eyes as she caught their odor, and how she could have throttled Mildred, as she saw the young girl bend above them with a blush of pleasure.

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guests with that easy courtesy which marks the genial and well-bred man. Robinson evinced both surprise and delight at his presence, making jocular allusions to the retirement which Gerald had effected in the past, and declaring now that he knew what a thoroughly good fellow he was in society, he must make one of the gay company while they stayed. And Gerald somewhat won by the cordial festivity about him, an atmosphere to which he was long unused, did not entirely refuse.

Not a sound of the evening's entertainment reached the apartments occupied by Mildred and her pupil, and though both knew of the arrival of the visitors, neither seemed anxious to mingle in any of the sports. Even though Cora knew many of the guests from the intercourse with them which her uncle formerly insisted upon, she did not express the slightest desire to see them.

Mrs. Phillips, however, though in the presence of Miss Burchill affecting the same unconcern, was far from being so indifferent. On one of her daily visits she contrived to waylay a servant, and by skillfully put questions ascertained that Thurston really made one of the gay party in the evenings. That decided her. She must be near him, within sight of him, even though it was but to bring upon her a severe scolding. Making an excuse for calling upon Mr. Robinson she affected to be much concerned for the isolation of Cora. The little girl had no society, and now, while there was company in the house, it seemed cruel not to insist that she should come into the parlor in the evenings. Of course while Miss Burchill, to whom Cora was so strongly attached, courted such strict seclusion, it was natural the latter would be inclined to it. But if Mr. Robinson would insist upon his niece joining the company, Mrs. Phillips would sacrifice her feelings on the matter of retirement for the sake of chaperoning the little girl.

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to have Mrs. Phillips hear every word that he said. His greeting of his stepmother had been exceedingly formal, at which Mildred wondered, and thought more persistently than ever that Helen must have inflicted some injury upon him in severing the engagement and marrying his father. But with her wonted charity she stifled the thought.

On one occasion Mrs. Phillips could not avoid being separated from Miss Burchill owing to Hutchins' attentions to herself, but as Thurston was engaged with Cora in another part of the room, and Mildred was instantly monopolized by an elderly gentleman, who, having been told that she was the governess, wanted some ideas on teaching for the guidance of his own little daughter, she was not entirely dissatisfied. Handsome, infatuated Frank Hutchins would lead her to a part of the room which promised more seclusion, and as it was in the vicinity of Thurston, Mrs. Phillips willingly assented. They obtained cosy seats just in advance of Gerald and his little chatty companion, and near enough to hear every word of their conversation.

"You will ask her to sing that aria, Mr. Thurston," Cora was saying. "Why, Professor Clarmont said only the other day there was no better rendering of it on the 'operatic stage.'"

Mrs. Phillips was really faint; too well she knew of what Cora spoke, and how she would have been pleased to have her down, but the little widow seemed to think I'd make Miss Burchill unhappy if I asked her. Gerald hit his lip, and looked as if he was trying to restrain some unpleasant speech. "I'd like to have Miss Burchill meet the company well enough," pursued Robinson. "She's a pretty girl if she isn't so pooty as the widow, and I don't want her to hide herself away like that."

The next morning Mildred received a note from Thurston, respectfully but warmly requesting her in the name of Mr. Robinson to join the company that evening.

"I also, Miss Burchill," the note continued, "shall be delighted to have you accede to the request. I could not but think last evening, when I saw your little charge, of your loneliness in your secluded part of the house, indeed, I was much surprised to find that you had not accompanied her, but, expecting to have the pleasure of meeting you this evening."

Mildred smiled and blushed with pleasure, and when Mrs. Phillips came dancing in, preparatory to a descent to breakfast with the guests, Miss Burchill innocently told her of Thurston's note.

It became necessary for the widow to adjust such a portion of her dress as required her to turn her face away from Miss Burchill. By that means her changing color and expression were unseen. When she turned back there was not a trace of her baneful emotions, and she said, with her wonted sweetness: "Mr. Robinson will not enforce his request when you answer the note, stating your insurmountable objection to join the company. If you will write it immediately, addressing it to Mr. Thurston, I can give it to him before he goes to the factory."

She seized this pretext with a wild hope that it would be the means of bringing her into that contact with Gerald which she so much desired. Cora coming in, had to be made acquainted with the matter under discussion, and she impatiently burst forth: "Don't refuse, Miss Burchill. It will be so delightful for me to have you come; for the gentlemen all crowd around Mrs. Phillips, and she hasn't any chance to attend to me."

"You naughty girl to tell such tales," interposed Mrs. Phillips, playfully pinching the girl's cheek. Mildred replied: "I am not sure that it would be quite right for me to refuse since both Mr. Robinson and Mr. Thurston are kind enough to desire it so much."

"But they will not expect you to violate your principles, my dear Miss Burchill," said Mrs. Phillips again, "once that they know—"

She was suddenly checked by meeting Cora's eyes. The latter were fixed upon her with a look so keen and penetrating that she stopped in some dismay. Did the child understand the motive of her speech? But Mildred in her abstraction was quite unconscious of any but the literal meaning of Mrs. Phillips words, and in a few minutes, much to Cora's delight she said, with the quiet tones of one who had convincingly made up her mind: "I shall go down to the parlor, this evening."

To the parlor accordingly the three descended that evening. Mrs. Phillips as radiant as she had been on the previous night, and Mildred looking very modest and very pretty in her simple dress. Cora had insisted upon enlivening it with natural flowers, and they seemed to add to the sweet purity of the regular features. Mrs. Phillips assumed the role of chaperon, and not for one instant was Mildred suffered from her side; but she conducted her espionage in such a manner that the young governess thought it sprung from genuine kindness, and she was accordingly grateful. Even when Thurston came up with his salutation, he was obliged to have Mrs. Phillips hear every word that he said. His greeting of his stepmother had been exceedingly formal, at which Mildred wondered, and thought more persistently than ever that Helen must have inflicted some injury upon