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Paying an Old Debt.

By Lucy Randall Comfort.



A CIRCUS tent! and just where we were to have had our picnic ground! Oh, Ernest, was there ever anything so provoking?"

Miss Maurand clasped her pink-gloved hands in tragic despair, as she stood at the entrance to the woods, in a bewitching summer costume, pink and white muslin, with a lace parasol lined with the softest rose color, and a jeweled smelling-bottle swinging from her belt by a slender gold chain.

"Hush!" said Ernest Vail, who stood beside her, looking romantically handsome under the shadow of a palm leaf sombrero. "Look there!"

Just beyond them, in a glade where the turf was smooth and level as a floor, a man in a coarse velvet suit lay along the ground, listlessly supported on one elbow, while a black pipe, between his lips poisoned all the summer air—and opposite to him, a girl of twelve or thirteen was laboriously going through the steps of an elaborate *pas seul*—a girl of gipsy darkness, with long black hair floating behind her, and arms waved picturesquely above her head, while her short spangled dress displayed the symmetry of her feet and ankles. Again and again she went through the wearisome details of the lesson—again and again the man interrupted her with bursts of angry profanity.

"Isn't that right?" said the girl, stopping short.

"Right! You grow stupider and more clumsy every day," snarled the preceptor.

"Then I'll try no longer!" said the girl, angrily throwing down her battered tamborine.

"You won't, eh?"

The man started up, with a muffled oath, and seized her savagely by one shoulder.

"Oh, Dominique," she cried, shrinking back, with a cry of mingled pain and anger, "don't beat me!"

"Stop!" Ernest Vale sprang into the glade, with eyes asparkle with indignation. "Ruffian! take you hand off that child!"

"What'll I take my hand off her for?" sullenly demanded the circus proprietor, for he it was. "The gal's mine."

"It's a lie!" flashed out the child. "I am not."

"And all children need a good beating once in awhile," added the man, his tone softening into an obsequious whine, as he noticed the elegance of the young aristocrat's dress, and the glitter of a diamond upon his finger. "Celestine's well enough; but she gets stubborn streaks. Now, then, Fina, don't be a fool! Try it again, and p'raps the gentlemen'll be willin' to pay liberal for a private view, him and his pretty lady, bless her sweet face!"

Violet Maurand laughed. "Oh, yes, Ernest," said she, "make her dance. Let's have an impromptu ballet. I declare, this is quite an adventure."

"Donna Celestine," said the circus owner, scenting money in the distance, "the Tarantula! Quick!"

But Celestine's tropic face had gloomed over. "I won't! I won't! I won't!" she exclaimed, savagely. "It's bad enough to dance in the tent before all those people. I won't dance here!"

"Didn't I tell you?" said the man to Vail, with a shrug of the shoulders. "When she gets a fit like this, no one living can stir her—no, not even if you beat her to a jelly!"

Miss Maurand turned away scornfully.

"I hate a scene," said she. "Come, Ernest. Don't you see the whole thing is put on to extort a little more money from you?"

And slipping her hand through Ernest Vail's arm, she led him away.

That evening as Mr. Vail sat smoking in his studio, vaguely dreaming over an idea of "Dido on the Shores of Carthage," a knock came to the door, and the

black-eyed circus dancer stood, eager and panting before him.

"Hello!" he exclaimed, scarcely believing his own eyes, "it's Celestine!"

"I've run away," said Celestine, resolutely controlling her sobs. "Look! See how he has beat me! And I'll drown myself before I go back to him!"

And pushing up the tattered sleeves of her dress, she showed livid black and blue welts on her arms.

Ernest uttered an involuntary expression of surprise and anger.

"Did he do that?" he asked.

"Yes, and he does it often. He says he'll kill me if—I don't bend to his will in everything. And I won't stand it. So I've run away."

"Have you no friends?" questioned Vail.

"No."

"No one to go to?"

She shook her head.

"You were kind to me," she said in a low voice. "You interfered when he was going to strike me. And I thought, perhaps, you could keep me!"

"And so I will," said Ernest, flinging away all scruples and conventional doubts. "I'll go to Miss Maurand. She shall take you in as her little maid. Stay here until I come back."

But Miss Maurand looked coldly on this plan, when it was broached to her.

"I never heard anything so Quixotic in all my life," said she. "I take a thievish gipsy child like that for a maid! I'm surprised that you should propose it."

"In that case," said Vail, quietly, "I must have her boarded out somewhere."

"But I don't see the necessity. What is she to you?" urged Miss Maurand.

"A helpless creature, who has come to me in her straits, and who shall not appeal in vain."

And Ernest Vail went back to his studio with his faith in Miss Maurand considerably shaken.

So Celestine Chantal went to boarding-school.

It was fortunate for Ernest Vail that he was not entirely dependent on his profession for support, else he would hardly have been able to indulge in such an expensive luxury as this piece of charity. A rich and childless old uncle announced his intention of making Ernest his heir, and had already afforded him a liberal allowance. Perhaps, had such not been the case, Miss Maurand would have hesitated ere she engaged herself to the handsome young artist. For Violet had a very keen eye to business.

"A charity child," said Miss Ignatia Livingstone, scornfully. "And a gipsy at that! I wonder—and all the girls wonder, too—how you can live on alms?"

Celestine Chantal's great dusk eyes flashed with fire.

"How dare you speak so to me?" said she.

"Because it's the truth," contemptuously retorted Miss Livingstone. "You are living on charity! My aunt says so, and my aunt knows all about it."

The next day Miss Chantal's little white bed in the south dormitory was found vacant. And Mrs. Liscombe, the principal, wrote a reluctant note, informing Mr. Vail that his young ward had "mysteriously disappeared!"

"I can sing," said Celestine to herself, "and I can dance! And no one shall ever twit me again with living on charity!"

Four years afterward Dr. Kent Wallace was called in to attend the prima donna of a little traveling opera troupe, who had contracted a sore throat. Dr. Wallace was seventy, the prima donna was only seventeen; but Cupid laughs at such discrepancies. The doctor cured her first—then he asked her to be his wife.