

REAPING THE WHIRLWIND

BY CHRISTINE FABER

CHAPTER XLVI—CONTINUED

His question aroused anew her pity for the poor dead creature above stairs, and she said, with a burst of tears: "She has just died."

He knew whom she meant, and he became as sorrowful-looking as herself. Somehow, death in most cases levels all anger and animosity, and so softens in its grim light that which had aroused our displeasure that we pity and forgive almost unconsciously.

It was with Gerald. The rancor in his heart for his stepmother seemed to go suddenly out and to leave in its place a sad, pitying feeling that was more akin to tenderness than even to pardon from a sense of duty.

"Will you come with me and look at her? Her last word was your name."

He allowed her to lead him, and in a few moments he stood in the death-chamber beside her bed, and opposite to Robinson. It was across her head form that Robinson extended his hand in welcome, and then both men looked down at her,—she who had held so near and so strange a relation to them both.

The cold, pallid, rigid face bore scarcely a trace of resemblance to the woman he had once loved, and after a brief survey, Gerald turned from her. He had forgiven her, but he was eager to forget her.

Esaubury had another fruitful theme of gossip in the death of Mrs. Robinson, and in conjecturing what sort of a funeral she would have. They were not little surprised when they found that the factory owner seemed determined to pay every respect to the memory of his dead wife.

Servants reported her as lying in a sort of state on a magnificent bier in one of the parlors, and some of them went so far as to give surreptitious views of the corpse to their intimate friends.

Miss Balk, of course, heard of the death, and she immediately took her way to The Castle, asking, when she arrived for Mrs. Robinson.

"Mrs. Robinson is dead, ma'am," said the astonished servant. "I know she's dead," answered Barbara, with grim severity; "if she were living I would not have to come to see her. I have come expressly because she is dead, and I must see her."

The man in much doubt as to whether he should admit her, and yet in too much awe of her to refuse, found his hesitation cut short by Barbara sweeping past him with an angry spoken: "If you don't know where to conduct me, I can find someone who does."

She did not wait for the man's rapid steps behind her, but went on at her very swiftest pace, apparently careless of the part of the house to which her course might lead her. But the domestic overtook her, determining as soon as he should usher her into the presence of the dead to tell Mr. Robinson. He said, when they reached the parlor where the dead woman lay:

"She's in this room, ma'am." At the same time he opened the door very gently, and only opened it sufficient for Barbara to pass in; but she, giving him a look from her black eyes which he swore to his fellow servants was a look of the evil one himself, flung the door wide open and stalked in.

"The room was very large, and on an elevated bier in the centre reposed the remains of the recently made wife. There was no one present, being early in the afternoon, and the custom of the New Englanders to leave no watchers with the dead. So Barbara could act without fear of espionage.

ent amiability that used to make me feel like clawing her into some sort of temper; but I meant to be just to you until your intolerable vanity and tricky disposition made me hate you as I had hated her. I hated everybody who seemed to be won by your beauty or your manners; for that sole cause I hated Thurston.

"Your father must have known something of my feelings, for I took little pains to conceal them, but he was so broken down by secret guilt and remorse of his own that he did not pay much attention to them. When he was dying he told me the dreadful crimes he had committed, but I wasn't to tell them until your death, should I live longer, unless the telling of them should be necessary to prevent the commission of any further great wrong.

"A further great wrong was about to be committed. Poor fool! Out of your own mouth came the admission that through you Mildred Bur-chill was to be forced into a marriage with that old hulk, Robinson. Then was my time and my turn. I told your father's secrets, and you have met your deserts.

"That is all, Helen. I am going now. I wanted to have a last interview with you, just to tell you these things, and I didn't come before, because they said you were mad, and I knew you wouldn't understand me. But I guess your spirit hears and understands me now, and I wonder what it thinks of your beauty now? Poor, wretched beauty! It's all gone, Helen, and you are lying there as ugly looking as I am."

She wheeled from the corpse as abruptly as she had advanced to it, and she was taking her rapid way out of the room when she was met by Miss Burchill.

The astonished and somewhat intimidated domestic, unsuccessful in his search for Robinson, had as a last resource, told Mildred, and she, suspecting the identity of the strange visitor, had hurried to see her.

"Miss Balk," she exclaimed in a tone of pleased surprise at the same time extending her hand. But Barbara folded her hands more closely in her mantle, answering:

"There is nothing to give your hand to me for, Miss Burchill." "Something pained by this repulse, though at the same time determining not to yield to it, since she knew the eccentric character of the speaker, she said again, very gently: "I think there is, Miss Balk; from Mr. Rodney I have learned that it is to you I owe my release from my promise to marry Mr. Robinson."

"Events just shaped themselves that way," answered Barbara, in her severe tones. "Still," resumed Mildred, "I owe you not a little gratitude; not alone for my present happiness but for your kindness in the past to my poor old grandfather. I have never forgotten it; I shall never forget it, and for I pray daily that Heaven may ever do these things for me."

For one instant the hard, deeply lined face, looking so steadfastly at Miss Burchill, perceptibly softened; then she gathered her mantle to her, and answered, in her usual tones: "Memories of kind acts don't stay in most people's minds. It's the memories of things which rankle and burn that stay, and when you're tempted to be set up by any happiness that comes to you, just think of that poor wretch, taking her hand from her mantle with a jerk and pointing to the bier. 'She was set up too once, and what has she come to?' A miserable croud."

Without even an adieu she had passed Mildred, and was out in the hall before the young woman could recover from her astonishment sufficiently to see that she was properly conducted to the door.

CHAPTER XLVII

"Ashes to ashes, dust to dust." The minister who had performed the marriage ceremony performed the funeral rite, and all that was mortal of the once exquisite beauty was laid away one fair afternoon in one of the lovely resting spots in Mount Auburn. Robinson seemed strangely unlike himself. A peculiar and very unusual restlessness marked his whole demeanor, while frequently strange, abrupt starts and long, strained looks into vacancy would seem to betoken a mind not wholly rational. He evinced no grief for his dead wife beyond a solemn visage and the depth of the crease on his brow, but at the minister's prayer he bowed his head, and was even seen to move his lips, whether in accompaniment to the petition no one could tell. Was it that this unhappy death had stirred his callous soul and awakened fears for his own end? People who saw him were full of conjectures. Indeed they were far more curious about him—he who had been so long regarded as without the pale of all religious influence—than about the details of the costly funeral.

On the return to The Castle, all except Robinson himself, were surprised to meet Rodney. He had taken his departure but a couple of days before, and without intimating any speedy return.

"I have come on business that interests you all," he smilingly answered, "and right after dinner I want to hold a conference."

The conference was held, but without the factory owner.

"Robinson will not join us until he knows the result of our meeting," explained the lawyer, and then, laughing aloud as he looked from one to the other of their astonished faces, he began as soon as he had composed himself: "Providence works strangely, and justice, when it seems farthest removed, is often nearest to us. Here

is this wealthy Robinson—this hard, shrewd Yankee as he is—carrying with him for years a childish and incredible fear of ghosts, or 'spooks,' as he calls them. He insists that for years he has never failed to see them, mostly at a certain hour every evening, and to help ward off the dreadful fear in which they put him he has numerous lights ablaze in his study, and even in his bed-chamber, for sometimes they visit him there.

That was the reason he required Miss Horton's company every evening, though whether she saw the spooks or not I am unable to tell."

He addressed himself with a smile to Cora, who flushed deeply and answered: "I never saw anything, but uncle used to get into dreadful states, and at first he told me it was only nervousness; afterwards he accidentally revealed that he saw strange things."

"That was also the reason," resumed the lawyer, "that he wanted to marry. He felt, somehow, that his burden of fear might be lessened if he had a wife to help him to carry it, and now, however, that he has obtained a wife only to lose her so speedily, he is in greater dread than ever of these ghostly visitations and he would throw himself upon the mercy of you, his friends, and relatives, to bear him company—at least, during these trying times. That you can only do so by consenting, all of you, to remain at The Castle. He is aware that Miss Burchill and Mr. Thurston are only waiting for the day of their marriage, which is at hand, to take their final departure from Eastbury; that Mr. Thurston desires to engage in business in New York, and that Miss Burchill, or as she will be called, Mrs. Thurston, will accompany him. In order to obviate this necessity, Mr. Robinson has already taken the necessary legal steps for putting Mr. Thurston into possession of the wealth which he is convinced the late Mr. Phillips desired to leave to his son, and not to the lady who married him while she was bound by a promise of marriage to another. Rich as Mr. Thurston speedily will be, there will remain no necessity for him to engage in any business. It is also Mr. Robinson's desire that The Castle be enlarged and improved in accordance with the wish of any of its present occupants. That is all, and I now wait your answer to this poor, fear-stricken old man."

It was a minute or more before any one could speak. Then the warmest congratulations came to Gerald from every voice, and while he answered them he was secretly thinking of the beneficent and inscrutable ways of a loving Providence.

"Now, what shall I say to Robinson?" asked Rodney, rising. "All eyes turned to Gerald, but he looked at Mildred.

"Which shall it be?" he asked softly. "The Castle or New York?" "And she, with humid eyes, answered, without a moment's hesitation: "The Castle."

The factory owner seemed the most anxious for the wedding, taking almost a childish interest in the simple preparations, for Mildred would have no display. One of her first acts was a magnificent present to Mrs. Hogan, and a cordial invitation to her to visit The Castle. But Mrs. Hogan answered:

"You'll forgive me, dear, if I refuse; somehow, I can't bring myself to set foot in Robinson's place. I know he's changed, and the people talk of him as being softer in his ways, but I have a feeling for him here—putting her hand to her breast—"that while it wouldn't harm him, still won't let me think of him much. So you'll forgive me, dear, and may the blessing of Heaven be on your marriage and on your whole life after."

The wedding took place, a very quiet ceremony, followed by a delicious little homelike repast, and the departure of the bridal couple on a week's tour, Robinson having begged them not to make it longer. He counted the days from the moment that they started, and his face wore a strangely woe begone expression until the morning of their expected return. On that day he rose jubilant, and towards evening, when it lacked but an hour of the arrival of the train on which they were expected, he determined to drive to meet them. By some strange chance the horse which on one occasion put Thurston's life in jeopardy was harnessed to the wagon, instead of the animal the factory owner usually drove. But as the beast had lost much of its viciousness, and Robinson was too impatient to wait to have him changed, he drove on. They went fairly enough until a curve in the road made it necessary to wheel about somewhat. Then the animal's old mettle, which always rebelled at any curb, rose, and in a moment he was beyond Robinson's control. In his nervousness, he dropped a rein; he stooped forward to seize it, but the lurches of the horse drove him, head first, over the dash-board. He fell, his head out, so that it escaped the hoofs of the beast; but his foot had become entangled in the hanging rein, and he was dragged along, his body bumping with sickening thuds on the road.

Mr. and Mrs. Hogan were returning together from some errand. The strange sounds behind them made them turn.

"O my God! it's Robinson," screamed the afflicted woman, as she rapidly drawn vehicle, with its now bloody and dirt covered human appendage, came near enough to discern it plainly. "Save him, Dick!" she cried, urging forward her husband; but he needed no bidding.

In an instant, utterly regardless of his own life or limb, he was at the head of the horse, holding him with all his strength. But the beast would still have dashed on, perhaps even flinging to his death Hogan, who so courageously and desperately kept his hold, had not other passers by come to his assistance.

Robinson breathed, but no more. And it was Mrs. Hogan who piloted his bruised and bloody head upon her bosom, and shed down upon it scalding tears of commiseration.

In a little while all the village seemed to know of the accident, and, with such tender care as could be hastily provided, the factory owner was borne back to The Castle. His return was simultaneous with that of the bridal couple, and the ghastly, unconscious face which met them was the only welcome he could give.

The doctor said he might live until morning, and Mr. and Mrs. Thurston, together with Horton and Cors, watched tenderly by his bedside. Every heart had softened to him since the day when his helpless condition roused their sympathies anew. Both Mildred and Cora hung tearful above his pillow, each wishing for one lucid moment in which to whisper some tender words. At midnight, though the doctors had given little hope that such would be the case, consciousness returned to him. He opened his eyes wide, and turned them at once to Mildred.

"I want to speak to her," he said, with difficulty; "go away, the rest of you."

"They obeyed him. "I am dying, ain't I?" he asked, looking fixedly at her.

She told him gently, what the doctors had said.

"Then kneel here," indicating a position quite close to his face; "my breath's failing me, and I want to tell you something." He gasped, and his voice sunk to a whisper. "Bring your ear close. If I whisper, my strength will hold out."

She put her ear close to his mouth.

"When I married my young cousin long ago, and brought her back to Eastbury dead, people said I killed her. She took sick while we were away, and the doctor gave me medicine for her, and at the same time he gave me an application for my head—I used to have stunning headaches then—that looked dreadful like her medicine, but it was poison. I loved her, she was so gentle and childlike, but I wanted her money. I wanted the money that was so fixed upon her that I couldn't get it until after her death, and I used to think what if by chance these two medicines got mixed; and so I got to looking at them and handling them, and they did get mixed, and I couldn't tell which was which, and the nurse gave her the wrong one. 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