

The Thirteenth Sonnet

Beatrice Redpath

Illustrated by

G. W. L. Bladen

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The Thirteenth Sonnet

By BEATRICE REDPATH

ILLUSTRATED BY G. W. L. BLADEN

A Story of a Poet's Love and Tribute of Sacrifice

Vincent Carres was one of those fortunate beings who seem destined for success. At college everyone knew instinctively that he would amount to something. It would have been quite absurd to think otherwise. He had all the qualities which were necessary, besides possessing a marvellous capacity for work. It was that, perhaps, more than anything else which I felt would serve him best. Not very much can be achieved without sustained effort. Genius and inspiration . . . well I suppose there are such things, but the man who works seems to go farther in the long run.

The son of a wealthy politician, life had been bountiful to Carres from the very beginning, and there seemed no reason to suppose that it would not continue to be so until the end. Tall, slight, with a pleasant manner and a moderate amount of good looks he was generally popular. We all liked him, partly I imagine because of his consistent good fortune, his air of well-being. That was, all except Burnside. There was no doubt in any of our minds that Burnside was fiercely jealous of Carres. In fact he took no trouble to hide it. He frankly and openly detested him, seldom missing a chance of making some scathing comment whenever Carres' name was mentioned. Of course it was simply a devouring jealousy. He felt that Carres would swim forward to success on an easy tide while he struggled helplessly against adverse conditions. And he was intent on success. It amounted almost to an obsession with him. Strugglingly poor, he was working his way through college with a dogged determination, which in the beginning had commanded a certain amount of respect, but gradually we grew tired of his

sullen moods. One after the other, he antagonized the entire class, until he was left pretty much to himself.

After I left college I was away on the other side of the world for a matter of ten years or more. It was curious to come back to familiar faces again and learn what one's friends had made out of life during that time. It was in a way like going to sleep and finding the calendar pushed on ten years, for I had been too much engrossed simply in living my own life to keep up a sustained interest in what had been going on at home. Of course I had heard scraps of news that had filtered through letters and newspapers, but such reports are never very satisfactory.

It was shortly after my return that I ran across Vincent Carres, and felt a genuine pleasure in meeting him again. From what I gathered from stray remarks he had been very successful. He was insistent that I should come down to his country place for the week end and meet his wife and I felt quite eager to do so.

"You remember Burnside at college," he said just as we were parting, "well, he's my secretary. Quite a useful one too."

I exclaimed in genuine astonishment, remembering Burnside's old hatred for Carres. It was distinctly curious.

"Poor devil," Carres went on to say, "he was absolutely at the end of his tether. I ran across him one day on the street. He was literally starving. I never thought he would turn out to be any use, but he saves me no end of trouble one way and another. Answers letters and sees uninteresting people . . . not much of a job, but better than starving."

It seemed utterly incongruous. I remembered Burnside's old enmity for Carres, and I did not imagine that this would in any way lessen it. What irony to be forced into such a position! But I could not feel any particular pity for Burnside. He had been too thoroughly unpleasant. Almost I pitied Carres for having to have such an individual under his roof. But perhaps he did not notice the other man's ill feeling towards himself, or perhaps Burnside had learned that sullenness did not pay towards the hand that fed you.

I discovered Carres' house at Meeds to be a marvellous old place with red roofs and grouped chimneys and long sloping eaves. Wide lawns stretched down to a winding river while along the borders daffodils flamed like a thousand candle fires. There was an aged gardener raking the paths and the tinkle of his rake seemed to scrape against the silence. There was

peace here and ample time for living, and I breathed a sigh of envy. As I had always supposed he would, Carres had received from life its undiminished best.

His own pleasure in the place was genuinely simple and unaffected, but I could see that more than anything else he was absorbed in his work. He was bringing out another book shortly, and he seemed almost to grudge a moment away from his desk. The habit of work had grown upon him. He could not help it, he was driven forward by something from within that would not allow him to rest and enjoy all that life had afforded him. Meeting Madeleine Carres I realized more than ever that life had given to him without stint. She was a tall, slender woman who walked with a swaying movement that was all grace and charm. Her eyes were large and gray and fringed with stiff black lashes which gave them an extraordinary star-like quality. They shone big and dark in the slightly pale oval of her face. She greeted me with a soft slurring voice in a manner that was slightly distant, a trifle aloof. She struck me as being difficult to know, there was almost a shade of coldness in her manner.

It was only that evening when she sang to us after dinner in the long airy music room that I recognized her marvellous voice. Madeleine Simon of course! Everyone on two continents had heard of Madeleine Simon, even I had heard of her from the other side of the world, and remembered having once heard her sing. Apparently she had quite willingly given up her career to marry Carres. I wondered, as I sat listening to her, if she had ever regretted it. Carres, so wrapped up in his work, scarcely seemed to be the man for her.



“Carres and Burnside went off early in the evening, to go over some manuscript, and I was left with Madeleine Carres.”

Burnside came into the room just as she had finished, to speak to Carres, and greeted me with a shade of surprise. I found him very much changed. It was only too apparent that life had rolled over him with all the crushing force of a steam roller. I felt that he must bitterly resent my seeing him in his present position, especially if he remembered how in the past he had spoken of Carres. He must most bitterly resent the contrast between his fortune and that of Carres. He had become retiring in manner, almost self-depreciating, as though continually aware of his inferiority. At least that was how he appeared at first. Later I began to see that he had in reality not changed very much. He was merely trying to disguise the old jealousy. Watching him as he spoke to Carres, I still felt that it seethed within. Carres and Burnside went off early in the evening to go over some

manuscript, and I was left with Madeleine Carres. She returned to the piano and began to play softly while I leaned back in my chair taking as much pleasure from looking at her as from listening to the music. I spoke of her cruelty in robbing the world of her voice to bestow it solely upon Carres, and she laughed lightly, and then on a sudden grew more serious.

“Happy women don’t need careers,” she said as she swept the keys with her long, slim hands, “the happy women are the women you don’t hear about.”

“And so in future we are not to hear of you,” I said, wondering a little whether she was actually happy. One could learn very little about her actual feelings. She seemed to be continually throwing up barriers behind which she hid herself.

“No, you will not hear of me, but you will hear more and more of Vincent,” she said, letting her hands fall into her lap. “You went to college with him, of course, so I suppose you are not surprised to find out how much he has accomplished already. He has a wonderful mind, and he works, oh how he works! There is no end to it. He never seems to tire. He seems to me like an exhaustless machine that cannot stop. If he hadn’t such a splendid constitution, I would be afraid that he would break down from overwork.”

“I suppose Burnside helps him quite a lot,” I said. “He also used to be a beggar for work at college. I’m surprised that he hasn’t done more. He was so determined in those days that he would succeed. He was so sure of himself.”

She shook her head, and for a moment a slightly pitying expression crossed her face. She seemed for a moment softened.

“Poor David,” she said, and I was surprised for an instant at her use of his Christian name. But of course it was only natural, seeing that he and Carres were old friends. “He is one of those people who are doomed, I’m afraid, to stand by and see other people get all the good things of life . . . all in fact that he himself desires and could never, never have.”

I looked at her curiously for a moment, wondering just how much she intended to say.

“It must lead to bitterness of spirit,” I said, still wondering a little.

“No,” she said, “with some natures it might . . . but not with David. I think he has grown used to it. One can even grow used to ill fortune in time.”

I wondered a little at her lack of perception. That was not how I had read Burnside, unless he had greatly changed. From the little I had seen of him since my arrival, I thought there was still the old brooding antagonism towards Carres. But perhaps I was mistaken. She surely should know, living under the same roof. Perhaps he had resigned himself to the inevitable with a good grace and I was merely hearing the echoes of the past. For his own sake I hoped so. Bitterness is not pleasant fare to feed upon.

I went down to Meeds several times that summer, and then there came a disruption in my own affairs, and it was actually two years before I heard anything of the Carres, and then it was in a fashion to leave me shocked, stunned, aghast! Vincent and Madeleine Carres were drowned together while crossing from Naples to Palermo in one of those wretched little packet boats plying their trade between the two ports. There had been a violent storm, and the boat to which the Carres had entrusted their lives had foundered. Nothing much was heard in detail of the disaster. The public, like myself, were left simply dazed by the fact that they had been drowned.

From the reports I read in the different papers I realized that Carres was much of a figure in his own particular world. I had not realized previously to what an extent. There were long paragraphs extolling his wonderful brain, his marvellous energy, the amount of his achievement, the amazing amount of work which he had done in a brief number of years. It was hard to reconcile myself to the fact that he was dead and that Madeleine Simon also was dead, that her beauty was gone, perished forever, and that marvellous voice which had thrilled and charmed and delighted so many was forever silent. Such a shocking waste of life angered one at the casualness of fate, at the very idea that such a catastrophe could occur. It seemed an inexcusable dispensation of Providence, an irreparable loss which nothing could justify. And then following swiftly upon the tragedy, before the public had had time to forget to exclaim over the disaster, came the sonnets, exquisite verses in which Carres made imperishable the love that he bore his wife. It was a marvellous monument, an epitaph without parallel. The sonnets were as though carved in marble, they would make the name of Madeleine Carres ring through the ages. They almost made one forget to brood over the horror of the tragedy since by it had come such a revelation of genius.

They refuted the fact which I had always dimly believed, that Carres' work had been the real love of his life. I had never felt quite certain that there was a great love in Carres' life. He seemed always consuming himself, burning up the fire within him with his ardor for work. But the sonnets denied any such theory. Witherton, as Carres' publisher, was all jubilation

over the finding of the sonnets. I dropped in to see him one day in his office in Sloane street and found him keyed up to a pitch of enthusiasm.

“It’s the summit of his career,” he said, picking up the little volume which lay upon his desk, “these will be remembered when everything else that Carres did will be forgotten. They are exquisite . . . they are inspired!”

“You think Carres had genius,” I said meditatively, “I always thought it was just a superhuman faculty for work. It seemed to absorb him to the exclusion of everything else in the world.”

“These weren’t done without genius,” Witherton said, “no amount of work could accomplish things like this unless there was a spark of the divine fire within.”

“He seemed too absorbed to be capable of a great passion,” I said, still lingering over the subject.

“H’m,” mumbled Witherton over his pipe stem, “he didn’t wear his heart on his sleeve perhaps. He was a bigger man than even the world gave him credit for being. These sonnets go to prove it.”

“At any rate, he had an excellent subject for the sonnets,” I said. “Madeleine Carres was a very beautiful woman,” and I lost myself for a moment in the remembrance of her charm. Witherton recalled me by speaking suddenly.

“I think you said that you knew that man Burnside. Went to college with him, didn’t you? Curious duck. I wonder if you could do something to help me. We are bringing out a biography of Carres, and I want to get at some minor points, but I couldn’t get a thing out of the man. I ran down to see him, he’s still living in the house, indexing the library I believe, but he’s like an oyster as far as Carres is concerned. He won’t talk. Perhaps he might talk to you. What do you say to running down some day and seeing what you can get out of him. I’ll give you a note of some of the points I would like to have cleared up.”

I told Witherton that I would do so, but knowing Burnside, I did not imagine that I would have much success. Still I was rather glad of the excuse to run down to Meeds and see the man, for I was curious to see how he would have taken the finding of the sonnets. I rather imagined that he would not be able to conceal his rancour from me. They would be the bitterest blow of all. I began to feel sorry for Burnside. After all, the beggar at the feast is not a particularly enviable position, and as far as Burnside was concerned, there did not seem to be even a crumb to fall to his lot.

There was an air of miscellaneous disorder about the house at Meeds the day that I went down, very different to the last time that I had been there. The atmosphere was that in which orderly living had come to a sudden stop, where the servants are without guidance and tasks are left undone. I looked around the room in which Burnside had been sitting at a large desk and saw the bloom of decay on tables and mantelpieces. Life after all was a queer proceeding I thought. The Carres, who had all that life could give, apparently, swept away in the very midst of enjoyment and success, while a man like Burnside, who had nothing especially to hold him to life, remained behind. Too queer to think about, the ordering of Providence. One could only vaguely hope that there was some sense and reason back of it all.

I looked at the book shelves which climbed to the high ceiling and remarked to Burnside on the amount of reading which Carres had apparently done.

“Yes, there was no limit to his energy,” he responded in rather a disparaging manner, “it was his chief characteristic. He had notes for a dozen volumes or more. If he had lived, one could not say where he would have stopped.”

“If he had lived, the verses would not have been found,” I said, “and after all they are what counts. As far as I personally am concerned, all the rest of his work might be put in the fire and not be missed. Of course, I daresay everyone doesn’t feel just as I do. I suppose,” I said, curious as to his reply, “that the sonnets took you as much by surprise as anyone.”

“I don’t think I am ever much surprised,” he said slowly, “at a thing of that sort. It’s not easy to sum up anyone’s possibilities. I always believe,” he went on in introspective tones, “that each one of us has genius if only he can discover the proper inspiration. Only, unfortunately, there are few of us who ever do,” he added, turning to look at me with an ambiguous expression.

So that was the manner in which he consoled himself for his obscure place in life. The inspiration had not come to him, otherwise he might have been as famous as Carres. It was at least a comfortable theory. Perhaps it took the edge off his bitterness.

“We can’t all of us be poets,” I said to further conciliate him. “Anyway, it wouldn’t do. Even genius requires an audience.”

Inevitably, he delved into generalities whenever I broached the subject of the sonnets. Otherwise he appeared to be quite willing to speak of Carres. I could see that the subject of the sonnets was bitterly displeasing to him. He

resented their existence, he resented them to the point of passion. That much I learned by his steady silences, by his marked unwillingness to make any allusion to them whatever. I felt that he would not allow himself to speak of them at all lest he should give vent to the fury of jealousy that seethed within him. The rest of Carres' work did not count apparently. He tossed it aside with a wave of his hand. But the sonnets . . . there was genius without question. He could not lessen their pure beauty by any words of scorn. And so he left them alone. He ignored them. These strange cloistered characters who live shut up within themselves, what queer passions they so often conceal under a disguise of mildness!

I came in that evening from a prowling about the grounds, to find Burnside standing with his back to the door of the long drawing room, lost in contemplation of a small portrait which hung against a narrow strip of black velvet on the gray wall. I saw instantly that it was a portrait of Madeleine. As he turned about with a hint of embarrassment in his manner, I saw his face and a sudden swift and amazing intuition swept through me. It astounded me, it left me perfectly aghast at what was so plainly revealed in his face. There was no disguising it. Burnside's narrow face was positively illumined by an inner radiance. I was embarrassed myself at such an utter revelation, and turned to look at the painting on the wall.

It was quite extraordinarily life-like. The gray eyes were calmly meditative, the lips curved slightly as though Madeleine were just a shade amused by life. It gave one the impression that she had been always an onlooker, more aloof even than I myself had fancied her in the few times I had seen her. The painter had caught more than a passing resemblance.

"She was a very beautiful woman," I said to the silent figure at my elbow.

He sighed an assent to my words.

"She was more than that," he said after a brief pause, "she was a wonderful woman."

"But cold," I said, "I cannot somehow conceive of her as being the recipient of the sonnets. She was like a marvellous statue. Even her voice lacked feeling. It was as clear as crystal and with just as much warmth."

I saw the color flare into his cheeks. He took a few steps away and gave an impatient shrug to his shoulders. His manner was always brusque, almost uncouth, and at present it was almost more markedly so.

“Decidedly,” he said with a note of absolute disdain in his voice, “she was not a woman to revel in emotion. She did not steep herself in sensation as so many women do. She was restrained if you like, if you mean that she did not run over with a cheap and silly sentimentality. She abhorred anything of the sort. She did not condescend to walk in the ruck of emotion. She was as distant as a star . . . and as beautiful and mysterious,” he said with a sudden deepening of tone.

He was positively uplifted. I had never heard him say so much in all the years that I had known him. His moroseness had fallen from him. He was a different creature. Curious, I thought, this melancholy figure a worshipper at the shrine of the beautiful Madeleine. No wonder he did not wish to speak of the sonnets, no wonder, indeed! Even in death Carres had made her so supremely his. What a life this man must have led, in the very glare of the Carres’ romance, conscious as he must have been all the time of the intensity of their love for one another. Poor devil! This was something very different to the old jealousy. That had been engulfed long since, swept quite away, drowned in the very sea of this new bitterness. I no longer wondered at his jealousy or felt it to be any reproach. He would not have been human if he had not bitterly resented the appearance of the sonnets. To Carres, the fame, the applause of multitudes, the love, the glamour, the romance . . . to this man nothing but a pale and formless dream.

How the discovery of the sonnets must have tortured him anew. Even after death the world must ring with the story of that great love, with the romance which he had watched all those years, brooding in silence and loneliness of spirit. I felt curiously sorry for him. What lives there are I thought and how little one knows! Great passions abroad under such strange disguises. A shabby uninteresting looking man, a man sullen and morose to a marked degree and beneath what a flame of passion, what depths of desire. I remembered the words that Madeleine Carres had said to me once concerning him . . . that he was of the kind who must stand by and see others get all that he desired. Had she known then? I remembered at the time that I had wondered just all she meant to convey but had pushed the idea aside as too absurd to contemplate. How he must have suffered in his proximity to their love. I could only think of him as a gray moth circling about the very flame that sings its wings.

I was intent on writing down some notes at the large desk in the library which Burnside had placed at my disposal the following morning, when a light breeze from the open window fluttered some sheets of paper to the

floor. I stooped to pick them up, and in doing so saw that one of them was a verse the opening line of which seemed vaguely familiar. I read on wondering where I had seen it before, until I realized to my complete amazement that it was one of the sonnets . . . but one which I had not seen. It was the rhythm that was familiar . . . not the words. I laid it down on the desk but continued to read it over in increasing surprise, startled by the fact that lay so clearly before me. It was copied in Burnside's handwriting, I recognized the sprawling capitals, the peculiar flourish to the letters. Why had he withheld this sonnet? Had he withheld others besides? I re-read the lines and found them even more delicately beautiful than the sonnets which had been published. Of course it must be included in the next edition. No matter what the man's feelings might be in the matter, this was definitely dishonest. Then, as I sat there, the verse before me, I saw that Burnside was standing in the doorway, an enigmatic expression in his eyes. I looked towards him steadily and a deep flush suffused his face. He took a quick step forward into the room and then paused, uncertain, hesitating.

"What does this mean?" I asked him showing my surprise, "this is one of Carres' sonnets."

He sat down without speaking and looked at me unflinchingly. At length he said slowly, almost painfully I thought.

"What meaning can it have for you?"

"Only one," I said, "you have held it back for reasons of your own. It is definitely dishonest."

"What reasons?" he said.

I paused for a moment, but my feeling of pity for the man was almost swept away by this discovery.

"What reasons," I said, "except jealousy?"

He looked for a moment as though I had struck him, but then he recovered himself.

"As good a reason as any other," he responded, and I saw that there was a smile of satisfaction beginning to show in his face.

"Yes, but it doesn't end here," I said, irritated by his complacency. "This sonnet must be included with the rest."

At that an instant alarm overspread his face. He rose and came and stood before me, leaning on the desk while he scanned my face with his deep-set eyes.

“You intend to let this be known?” he interrogated me.

“What else?” I said, growing more and more impatient with his absurd attitude.

He continued to look at me, his eyes narrowing, his expression changing until finally he said with a tremendous effort:

“That sonnet was written after Carres was dead.”

“You mean?” I said, and paused regarding him still with perplexity. He turned back and faced me with an expression of extreme weariness.

“If you will pry into what does not concern you in the least,” he said, “I wrote the sonnets.”

He saw the expression that spread over my face, and taking a step towards the desk, he dived into a drawer and brought out a sheaf of papers, flinging them down before me.

“If you do not believe, you can see for yourself,” he said, and walked away again in the direction of the window.

It took only one glance at the papers to see that he spoke the truth. Here were verses innumerable, all written in the same handwriting, all showing the same beauty as the sonnets. There could be no doubt that he spoke the truth. This man was the author of the sonnets. But with this realization came the amazing fact that he had deliberately concealed it. He had given to Carres the fame of authorship. Why, in Heaven’s name, why should he have been so casual to the fame that belonged to the author of the sonnets?



“In those ashes I saw the death of ambition, of wealth, of fame, of everlasting recognition from the world.”

The fact that he had written the sonnets was not in itself such a tremendous surprise. Instinctively I had begun to feel the truth of what he had just revealed. The surprise lay in the fact that he had not acknowledged the authorship of the sonnets. Poor, obscure, as he was, I could not understand why he should have pushed Carres farther into the

limelight while he retreated farther into the shadows. That was where I was mystified.

“Will you tell me,” I said at length, “why you have concealed this? Why did you allow this deception to go on? That is what I fail to understand.”

He turned and came back slowly into the room.

“Isn’t it clear to you,” he inquired, “what would have been said if I should have claimed the authorship of the sonnets? Cannot you imagine the calumny? Is not the world always greedy to snatch away a beautiful woman’s reputation? The sonnets were found among her papers. Would not that be enough to give scope for any amount of scandal?”

“But I don’t understand,”—I began stupidly.

“But I loved her,” he said briefly. “No, she did not return my love. It was Carres whom she loved, but he . . . he was nothing but a machine . . . he cared for nothing but the making of endless books. He had no eyes even for her beauty. He chilled her love until she hid it away, she tried to keep it out of sight. She was continually upon her knees to him in spirit . . . but he did not even care to know that she was there. Oh, she suffered. She who could have been all warmth and light and affection. She seemed to me always a lonely figure in a chill chapel, adoring a figure of stone.”

He paused, lapsing into a deep silence.

“It is curious,” I said, “how life mocks at simplicity. It follows such devious ways.”

But he was lost in his reflections.

“She was kind to me,” he said at last turning his glance upon me, “she was kind to me because she knew what suffering was. She knew what it was to love without response, so she did not scoff at my sonnets. She said she loved them for the magic of the words, for the beauty of the thought. But they meant no more to her than that. A poet must love a star,” he went on dreamily, “and if it but shines it is all that he can ask.”

“But,” I said sharply, to recall his wandering thoughts, “it is quixotic and absurd to allow the public to think that Carres wrote the sonnets. The sonnets are famous. Why should the fame not be yours? I don’t imagine that you ever had any particular fondness for Carres.”

He turned on me an uneasy glance.

“Carres . . . Carres does not matter one way or the other. You are thinking of how I hated him at college. That was all over years ago. A great passion sweeps little things like that aside. But no one must ever know about the sonnets. I trust to your honor never to reveal what you have found out. Can you not think what would be said . . . what odious fabrications would be built up around her name? You have come upon this by accident and you will forget it. You will only remember that Carres wrote the sonnets. The world must never know anything else.”

“And you have counted the cost?” I said, looking at him curiously. He appeared such a strange figure, sitting there in his shabby coat, the glow of an inner light still upon his thin face. The author of the sonnets. “You are content,” I said, “that the fame, the recognition, the applause shall go to Carres . . . while for you . . .”

“Obscurity,” he said, “what else? I only ask that the name of Madeleine Carres be held as pure as she was herself.”

“The book has had an enormous sale,” I said thoughtfully.

“It is nothing to me to be poor,” he said, “I have never been anything else.”

Somehow it exasperated one. The man was immovable as a rock. What he said was true enough. If it were discovered that he had written the sonnets what scope for a scandal! How it would be seized upon, what a history built up, what a fabrication of lies! But the woman was dead! For the sake of a memory this man was sacrificing, was open handedly giving away all that could make life worth the living. At least, that was how it appeared to me.

“It is not only the sonnets,” I said, “but any more verses that you may write . . . they would be easily recognized.”

“Naturally,” he said, “but I shall not write any more. If the sonnets were as fine as they are said to be, it is only because she inspired me. I could not have done it of myself. There was nothing in me that alone could have produced anything great. Madeleine Carres was the tinder from which I struck out fire.”

I looked down at the sonnet lying on the desk.

“And this?” I hazarded.

Before I realized what he was doing he had struck a match and was holding the paper in the flame. It blackened and shrivelled like something

alive. I watched it fascinated, until it crumbled down to a little heap of black ash. In those ashes I saw the death of ambition, of wealth, of fame, of everlasting recognition from the world. I looked at the curious figure in the crumpled shabby coat. He was laying those ashes at the altar of his ideal . . . at the altar of his love for Madeleine Carres.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

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Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *The Thirteenth Sonnet* by Beatrice Redpath]