

THE YEARS BETWEEN.

A Novel by William J. Fischer. Author of "Songs by the Wayside," "Winona and Other Stories," "The Teller and Other Poems," Etc.

CHAPTER XV.

IN THADY'S STUDIO.

The heat of summer was intense and crowds were leaving Billington for the sea-shore. Dr. Mathers also longed for a holiday. He wanted to get away from work, from his office, from the hospital—

from everybody. Overwork and his many daily operations had unnerved him, and he needed rest badly. And where do you think he went to recuperate? It was to Stanford that his heart had so often turned during the past weeks—and to Stanford he went, now that there was a short holiday in store for him. And he was glad to return again to the home of his childhood. It had been a long time since last he had seen the place. Imagine then the pleasure such a visit would afford him.

Dr. Mathers found that Stanford had changed little in all these years. It was practically the same Stanford he had known in his boyhood—the same little, busy place of factories and mills. His father's old mills were still hives of industry, sending their smoke into the air. His home, too, recalled many memories, whenever he chanced to pass it, but now that his mother was gone, he did not care to enter it. Father Flynn's rose-garden was just as beautiful as ever. Hundreds of roses wafted their perfume into the air, but the gentle Cure, who had tended the precious blooms so faithfully, had answered the call of the Master and passed into fairer regions. He visited his mother's grave—only once. It made him feel so sick at heart that he did not think it wise to go again.

Long before Charles ever thought of visiting Stanford, he had heard great and wonderful things about that first chum of his childhood—the cripple, Thady Charlton. He had sent him regular letters in the days gone by, and thus the old friendship thrived and grew. In his young days Thady had always given evidence of fine, artistic taste. When a mere child, he was busy with his miniature set of paints, and as he grew older, his love for painting waxed stronger. Then he became a cripple and was forced to remain indoors more than ever. Other boys played and romped about the streets, but Thady sat at home before his easel painting wonderful pictures. He loved nature—the sun and star-kissed skies, the flashing rivers and lakes, the grand, old mountains, the green, grass carpets, the gorgeous flowers and lolly trees; the white dawns, the warm noons, the crimson dusks and lone, moonlit nights. He loved the animals of the earth, and the men and women and children who looked up to God in trust. He had a poet's pure soul, and he depicted the poetry of life on canvas—real, natural, convincing. He never painted a picture of earth without bringing in sun or moon, illumined skies, and he never made a friend without bringing heaven very near to his heart. Though he was crippled for life, he never murmured, never complained. His mind had an optimistic turn, and his canvasses as well, for he always viewed life through rosy glasses.

In time he drifted to Europe, where he spent two years walking the great art galleries and studying under the best masters. Then he returned to Stanford and in a short time his pictures commanded high prices, and he became famous. Dr. Mathers had been in Stanford only a few minutes, when he stood before Thady Charlton's studio-door. He gave a slight rap, and in an instant the door was opened by a rather sweet-faced girl of twenty—one of the artist's models. "Good-day, sir!" she remarked, somewhat brusquely. "Is Mr. Charlton in?" asked Dr. Mathers in a low voice. "Yes, sir," came the answer like a shot. "Your card, please!"

Charles handed her his card and she disappeared behind the heavy cloth curtains. In an instant she returned. "Mr. Charlton will see you in his studio in a few minutes." "Thank you!" Five minutes later Charles was ushered into Thady's work-shop. Thady sat at his easel, and when Charles entered, he threw down brush and palette and exclaimed in wild excitement, "Ah, Charles, I'm so glad to see you. Come, sit down beside me so that I can get a good look at you! How you have grown—so stout and robust, and quite good-looking! You old boy, eh? Believe me, I would never have known you."

Thady, too, had changed since last they met, and as he sat there in his long, gray gown, he looked like a poet in contemplation. He was very tall and thin, but he had a kindly face with dancing, brown eyes and heavy black eye-lashes. He wore his hair long. It touched his shoulders. For a long time the two friends recalled old scenes and faces in and about Stanford. Then both recounted their various experiences abroad, and every once in a while loud peals of laughter floated through the room. "You see, Charles, I am still helpless. My legs refuse to do their work. While in Europe, I consulted a number of eminent physicians and surgeons, but they all told me the same story. They could not relieve me in any way. So I am content and make the best of it. My crutches are all in all to me now. I could not do without them."

"You are very sensible, Thady. What's the use of worrying and fretting and storming against a barrier that God has placed in your way for some purpose? Perhaps if it wouldn't have been for this affliction, you would not be the great artist you are to-day. There is always a compensation somewhere, Thady."

"Great artist, did you say? Well! I well! And Thady laughed like a school boy. "Yes, Thady. For a long time I have been reading wonderful things about you in the papers. Only a few days ago, I saw somewhere that one of your

pictures had won a prize at one of the great art exhibits in London, England."

"Ah, yes, it was my canvas, "Where Sky and Land Meet," a delicious bit of coloring that pleased me immensely. I was just putting the finishing touches to this picture here, when you entered. In two weeks I ship it to Paris, where I hope it will win a prize."

Charles' eyes stole to the picture on the easel. It was a landscape—rivers and mountains and trees bathed in twilight-glow. "It is very beautiful," the doctor remarked, as his eyes drank in the wonder-glory of those crimson skies. "It is not a scene in Stanford, Thady, is it? It does not seem familiar to me."

"No, but it is not very far away—only a few miles down the river."

"Then, you sometimes go elsewhere for fresh ideas?"

"Stanford offers nothing new to me now. I have sketched and painted all her delightful places, and my soul longs continually for new material. I sometimes go hundreds of miles from Stanford to places where nature wears a different look. But come, Charles, let me show you some of my work! Kindly hand me the crutches, there in the corner."

Charles did as he was told, and, as the artist, rose from his chair, a feeling of suffering stole into the doctor's responsive heart. "He will never gain the use of those limbs, poor fellow!" he whispered himself as Thady led the way to his large gallery of pictures. "It was a beautiful spot to linger in—this wonderful room of studies, sketches and scenes."

"Most of these are sold," Thady remarked as the two entered the room. "I always ship them in lots to the art stores abroad. I am sure you will recognize some of the scenes and characters I have portrayed here in Stanford."

The first picture they came upon was a narrow street scene in Stanford, just as evening was setting in. Charles gave a cry of delight as he recognized the old familiar street. "That's Mott street, isn't it, Thady? Why, there's the old Italian—let me see, what was his name? Oh, yes—Gellini. Any one would know him standing at the door of his old fruit-store," remarked Charles.

They moved to the next picture. An old man, bent in years, was selling papers at a corner street in the glare of an electric light. "Ah! there's the old Tim Slade brought back to life again," joyously exclaimed the doctor. "Really, Thady, I can hear him now calling—'Ev-nin' News, Star-Telgram'! las' edition! What has become of him, Thady?"

"He sold papers for many years at the street corner and, as he grew older deafness came upon him. One day—it was just when spring was setting in—a street car knocked him down and they carried him to the hospital. He had not heard the motor man's bell. That evening the papers were full of Tim Slade. You know, Charles, he was a precious soul. Everybody loved him even though he walked the paths of the lowly."

"Did he die soon after his injury?"

"No. He lived a few days and, sometime after he was buried, we only found out that he had managed to save a goodly fortune in the years that God had given him."

"Is that so?"

"Yes. He bequeathed \$5,000 to the city to found a home for orphan news-boys."

"How good of him! But then, he was always the father of them all."

"Some of Stanford's most prominent business men to-day, Charles, were news-boys at one time, who often felt the sheltering wing of Tim's kindness."

Another picture that caught Charles' eye was a garden of roses, in one corner of which an old gray-haired priest sat, breviary in hand, lost in contemplation. "It was no other other than Father Flynn in his garden of flowers, near his beloved church."

"Thady, this is by far the prettiest thing I have yet seen. Is it sold?"

"No, not yet."

"You may have it, Charles. But I shall make you a present of it. I know Father Flynn was a great friend of yours, and this picture will mean a great deal to you."

Thady, however did not remember that in that very rose garden years ago, Charles' mother had met her death. This was really the meaning the picture carried into Charles' heart.

The two friends were now gazing at the last picture in the gallery. Presently they came upon another landscape on a somewhat larger scale. It represented a little cottage on a hill with pine-trees in front of it and a neglected garden behind. The face of a woman was visible over the rain-washed fence.

"Great heavens! where have I seen that face before?" exclaimed Charles almost wildly as his eyes stole over the canvas. "It is so familiar. Let me see, who can it be?"

"His head sank into his hands and for a moment he stared to the floor, wrapped in deep thought."

"Surely you do not know her, Charles?" interrupted Thady. "She is not a Stanford woman."

"Yes, I do know her. I have it now," he exclaimed. "It's the face of Mrs. Atherton! A little thin perhaps, but the same eyes, the same expression. Where is she, Thady? Where is Mrs. Atherton? For God's sake tell me and speak quickly! I've looked for her all these years!"

Charles did not know at all what he was saying. His mind was too busy thinking and he was so overcome with surprise that he could have cried for very joy.

"I do not know who the woman is, Charles," Thady interrupted. "I could not tell you her name. She never told me, but I painted that picture at—let me see what's the name again—yes—Beresvale."

"Beresvale?" whispered Charles. "Ah, yes, I know the place, but go on with your story."

"Well, I went to Beresvale for the summer. That was five years ago. I went away to sketch principally. Beresvale, you know, is a regular paradise for an artist. One day I climbed a steep

hill. 'Twas hard work, but I wanted to get a glimpse of the little village in the valley, and when I reached the top, the scene you see depicted on that canvas greeted my eyes. My fingers fairly ached to paint the picture, and my heart was so wet. So I set to work. The lady you see looking over the fence was the only occupant of the house, and I gave her a couple of dollars for standing still in that spot until I painted her. She was poorly clad—looked sickly, and I'm sure the money came to her at a very opportune time."

"The poor woman!" uttered Charles. "I'm sure it's Mrs. Atherton. She has felt the bitter sting of poverty. Did she speak at all, Thady?"

"Just a little. She told me she wasn't well and that she suffered great pain."

"But that was five years ago, Thady was it not? I am sure she is dead then by this time," sadly exclaimed Charles. "Do you know I feel positive that the woman is Mrs. Atherton. There can be no mistake as to her identity. Her face is stamped indelibly upon my memory. I knew that woman very well once upon a time, but one day she drifted away. That was many years ago, and up to the present, I have not been able to find her. I have searched for her all this time and had almost given up forever. Believe me, dear Thady, the memory of all of this is the one great arid desert in my life."

Then Charles related briefly how Mrs. Atherton had come in contact with his friend. "So you knew the woman who posed for that picture," Thady remarked when the little story was finished. "It all seems like a dream to me. I am sure you will want that picture now as a companion to 'The Rose Garden.'"

"I would give all I possess to own it, for I feel that through it I have been led to the discovery of this noble friend of mine, whom I had almost given up of ever seeing again in this life."

"It all seems very strange to me indeed. But that picture shall be yours. Let me hope that it has helped you to find your friend!"

"Thanks, Thady, I shall repay you for all of this some day. Oh, I am so glad I came to Stanford. I little dreamt that I would be the recipient of so pleasant a surprise."

"Nor did I," interposed the artist. "I suppose you will now dispatch yourself post-haste to Beresvale."

Yes, there's no time to be lost. I shall start for Beresvale this evening, and Mrs. Atherton is still in that cottage on the hill, I mean to take her back to Billington with me to spend her remaining days in peace and quiet."

CHAPTER XVI. THE COTTAGE ON THE HILL. When the train pulled into Beresvale Dr. Mathers could hardly contain himself for joy. His heart beat violently and sent the blood tingling through his muscles. At last! at last! he thought the mystery would be unravelled. In a few moments Mrs. Atherton would stand before his very eyes and tell him all. Then he would fly back to Billington with her and try to make her comfortable and happy. It was a debt he owed her. He knew he could never repay her for all that she had done for him. For days and nights, through long, cold winters, he had thought of her, the great benefactress of his life—and now, at last, he was to come to her in time of plenty, come to her own little cottage in its sweet solitude through the hill and reclaim her as his very own. Only last night, waking in his sleep, he had thought he had heard her calling for help. Then the vision floated past his eyes, and there, in the moonlight she stood—a weak, stooped, little body bowed with suffering and anguish. A shudder passed over him and he brushed the picture from his eyes instantly. Surely that was not the Mrs. Atherton he knew, so he argued it was only a picture of his irritable, excited imagination, and slowly and quietly drifted off to sleep.

As Charles walked the narrow path that led to the cottage, God alone knew what his thoughts were. A cool breeze swept lazily through the stately pine trees, and on the green grass the shadows nestled in the warmth of the quickening, morning sunshine. Volumes of delicious bird music floated from the bushes and trees around. On the cottage door-step that in that very rose garden years ago, Charles' mother had met her death, this was the only solitary note in the beautiful Lorelei, that bird and wind drew out of the harp-strings of the glorious morning.

Slowly he mounted the steps that led to the cottage-door. His heart fairly sank within him as he rapped gently. In an instant he expected to see Mrs. Atherton open the door. One minute passed—two—five! Again he knocked, but still no answer. He waited a while and knocked again. A passing breeze wandered over the grass. He heard its light footsteps. For a second it seemed to pause and listen for the sound of human voice. Then it sighed and crept away down into the deep valley below. Charles' eyes wandered to the two front windows. The curtains were closely drawn. Then he walked to the side of the house and entered. The door stood wide open—an invitation that Charles could not well refuse at present. He went from room to room calling out loudly, almost wildly: "Mrs. Atherton! Mrs. Atherton!"

But his footsteps on the creaking floor were met in vain. The curtains were drawn in every room. Not even a ray of sunshine-pierced the strange quiet of the little cottage. In the kitchen the cooking utensils lay about as if the evening meal had just been completed. On the table a lamp stood drained to the last drop. Dr. Mathers examined everything closely in the rooms, but nothing brought him any light as to the strange occupant of the little cottage. He wandered out into the neglected garden, where the lawns and noons and nights lingered in succession all the year round, and putting his hand to his mouth, calling loudly: "Mrs. Atherton! Mrs. Atherton!"

The echo came back from the valley below, fainter and dimmer. The sighing voice from the valley seemed to call to him—yes, laugh at him, and he did not like the sound of it. It irritated him

and for the moment he wished himself thousands of miles away from Beresvale. He called again and placed his hands to his ears to shut out the echo that was sure to follow from the valley below. Then he retraced his steps to the cottage, entered it, and returned again in a minute. For some time after he made a thorough search of the grounds but to no avail. He had failed to find any living being on the place. Then he left, heavily threaded his way down the green grassy hill. When he reached the bottom he followed a little path on the edge of the river to its destination. It brought him face to face with a blacksmith shop. The forge and anvil kept a number of men busy, and outside a half dozen horses awaited their turn to be shod.

Charles entered the smithy and, uttering a cheery good morning, remarked with an air of simplicity: "Gentlemen, is the proprietor of the smithy amongst you?" "Yes, sir!" came the loud answer from Abe Murray as he stepped out from in under the horse he was shoeing.

Charles walked over to him, asking softly: "Could you spare a few minutes, sir?" "Certainly," Abe answered carelessly as he lifted his pipe from the corner of his mouth, "the horses can wait awhile." Thereupon the two walked back to the smithy door.

"I am Dr. Mathers from Billington," Charles remarked. "Here's my card."

CHAPTER XVII. MRS. ATHERTON.

That evening just as Dr. Mathers' train pulled out of Beresvale, a woman could be seen in the moonlight making her way up the lonely hill that hung over the quiet village. Her face bore deep lines of suffering, her hair was snowy white. It was no other than Mrs. Atherton—known to the villagers as Mrs. Vale—returning home after a two day's absence. The thin pale face of the unfortunate woman looked ghastly in the moonlight. The Angel of Pain had often visited it and left upon it deep lines which the years could never efface.

When the sick woman reached the top of the hill, she was almost overcome with exhaustion and she sank upon an old bench nearby and, placing her head in her hands, cried out loudly to the lonely night around her: "O God my head—my head! The pain will set me crazy. Where have I been? Where am I now? What has happened? She seemed dazed, just waking out of a stupor. It was all like a dream she could not recall.

Old Abe Murray was right. Mrs. Vale had had one of her spells. She had left the cottage two nights before and had walked along the edge of the river in her mental excitement, until she had reached the forest. And here she had remained for nearly two days until a faint glimmer of reason shone in again over the vague, strange, incoherent imaginings of her diseased mind.

When she had rested, she rose and made her way to the cottage and entered it. Within it was dark and cold. No lamp glittered, no fire burned, and she was hungry and needed nourishment. The poor woman held her head tightly in her hands and cried out in suffering.

A year and a half passed. Mrs. Atherton's mental condition was growing rapidly worse. One day she suffered a severe attack, and almost instantly her mind became a blank. She wanted to get away from Beresvale. Voices were calling her everywhere; others were driving her out with terrible oaths, she said. She wanted to get away. If she stayed at Beresvale much longer she felt that she would meet certain death. These gloomy thoughts haunted her continually. They were the productions of a diseased mind. Early one morning in the throes of her wild excitement, she quit her bed, dressed hurriedly, threw her yellow shawl about her and made her escape just as fast as her feet could carry her.

One hour later she reached the station, but she did not seem to recognize her surroundings. The early morning train was just coming in. Hurriedly she entered one of the passenger coaches. The next minute she was being carried miles and miles from Beresvale.

The train did not stop at any of the small stations on the way. Billington was the first stopping-place for it was through train. When it pulled into Billington in the evening the conductor yelled at the top of his voice: "All change cars at Billington!" His strong voice seemed to arouse Mrs. Atherton out of her lethargy, and when he mentioned Billington, her eyes opened a little and she rose and went to the door with the other passengers and made good her escape. But she did not understand.

When the poor woman stepped onto the Billington platform her mind was again lashed with heavy hurricanes of thought, and she went groping through the snow and wind that winter night ignorant of her surroundings and everything else. She walked on hurriedly for a few steps. A hundred demons seemed to be pursuing her. The wind fairly whistled through the empty trees. For a moment she paused and seemed to listen for the sound of voices. Then, pulling her thin yellow shawl about her, she disappeared in the darkness.

Poor Mrs. Atherton, if Charles but knew!

CHAPTER XVIII. AN UNEXPECTED MEETING.