

THE YEARS BETWEEN.

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

CHAPTER XII.

THE PICTURE ON THE WALL.

Mrs. Atherton enjoyed the quiet life of Beresvale very much. To be sure, her thoughts often stole back to Billington to linger upon old scenes and old faces, but she was happy in her cottage up there on the hill. And it was a pretty place with its spruce trees, its bit of lawn and rosy garden. Nature had indeed lavished beauty upon that secluded spot.

Mrs. Atherton knew very few people in the village. When first she came among them she changed her name to Mrs. Vale, so that no one could identify her and Mrs. Atherton remained as far as they were concerned to the last. Everybody, however, looked upon the strange occupant of Ellen Allan's cottage with a certain air of suspicion. There was a mystery about it all they could not explain. The old gossips were busy wagging their tongues for a long time. They came forward with new theories daily. Finally the talk dwindled down to almost nothing, and the mystery, surrounding the little woman on the hill, remained a mystery for a great many years in quiet Beresvale.

The few hundred dollars which Mrs. Atherton had brought with her to Beresvale did not last very long. In time the last cent was gone, and the poor woman was forced to work for her daily bite of bread. But she was good in heart and soul and willing to suffer all for her master's sake. She never despaired—never murmured. Ten long years she had spent in Beresvale, and these were the iron years of struggle that told heavily upon her. No one would have recognized the Mrs. Atherton of Billington in that thin, stooped, sickly, white-haired, little woman on the hill. She was greatly changed and was not a well woman by any means. At times she would suffer the most violent headaches and cry out, loud in pain, so that the little bird in the window would stop its song in sympathy. These headaches had come on gradually during the last two years, but they were always getting worse. While they lasted she would go for days without eating.

One night there was a rap at the kitchen door, and a poor beggar entered, hungry and dirt-bespattered. A cold wind was blowing up from the lakes, and the night was clear. "I am cold, good woman, and very hungry," the sickly man cried out in suffering. "Come—sit down over here!" Mrs. Atherton motioned to him, "the fire is a little low, but 'twill soon burn up, and then you will get warm. I'll have something for you to eat in a few minutes."

Her last five-cent piece had purchased the loaf of bread she held in her hands, but she thought to herself: "Never mind, here's a poor fellow who seems to be dying of hunger. I'll give him all I have. God will not see me starve. I'll only have to sew a little harder to-morrow—that's all!" Mrs. Atherton did some sewing for one of the large linen factories in the village, and the money she earned with her needle was practically her only source of revenue.

The good woman busied herself, set the table, and in a few minutes the smell of fresh coffee stole through the room. She turned to wake the poor man who had fallen asleep in his chair. She touched his shoulder gently, and he whispered: "What is it, good woman?" "Come! I have a lunch for you." "Lunch for me? Ah, how good of you! You do not know how I have suffered." And she wheeled his chair to the table.

When the meal was over he again seated himself before the fireplace and for some time the two were engaged in conversation. "How did you happen to find the cottage?" Mrs. Atherton inquired, good-naturedly. "Well, it was like this. I travelled many miles on foot to-day, started out at sunrise and reached Beresvale this evening. The steamer had just left the wharf, but I was fortunate enough to see a man canoeing across the lake. I called out loudly to him and begged him to take me across, and he did. It was moonlight, and he could see me on the beach. He put me off at the landing and I stumbled along the road anxious to reach the village, but I could go no farther. Looking to the right of me I saw a light on the hill nearby—the only light visible anywhere—and thither I made my way. When I gained the top of the hill I saw a little cottage. There was nothing else to do. I was cold and hungry, so I rapped at the door and entered, glad as a child."

me on my feet again. This is how it all happened. He was a doctor—

"A doctor!" gasped Mrs. Atherton. Instantly her thoughts stole back to Charles Mathers. "Some two years ago one May afternoon," the beggar continued, "I was walking down the street when I saw a runaway horse rushing furiously over the slippery pavement. The occupant in the buggy had no control over the beast whatever. A passing street car had frightened the horse. He jumped and jerked his head, the lines gave way—and he was off like a shot. When I turned he was only a block away, and it looked like a drive to death. My heart urged me to rush out and try and stop the horse. The river moaned at my very feet, and it was an easy matter for driver, buggy and horse to be dashed to pieces over the narrow embankment. The sound of hoofs grew louder and louder. But I dashed into the open road and threw my arms about the horse's head. He dragged me a block, but I hung on with the strength of a hundred men. In a few minutes others rushed out and came to my assistance."

"That was a close call, Mr. Sykes." "Yes, driver and horse would have both been dashed into the river, had I not caught the horse by the head. And how grateful Dr. Mathers was!" "Dr. Mathers?" repeated Mrs. Atherton, in great surprise. "The beggar turned and eyed her intently. He saw that she had been deeply interested in his story. "Yes, the occupant of the buggy was no other than Dr. Charles Mathers—the renowned Mathers of Billington, the great surgeon who daily saves the lives of many people."

"How long since all this happened?" "Only two years ago." "And is Dr. Mathers such a wonderful man there?" "Yes, everybody loves him. He is very clever—and kindness itself." Mrs. Atherton felt that she was glad to hear that the world had been good to Charles, in all the long ten years since she had left Billington. In her heart she thanked God for having sent this beggar to her door that night to bring her this good news of Charles. It made her old heart feel young again to hear that he was not wanting in anything, and that he was great amongst the men of the city. Some day she would return to him—some day, when her thin, old hands could handle the needle no longer. So long as they were able to stitch and stitch, she would feel content to remain at Beresvale; and should things come to the worst, a letter or telegram would reach Charles in Billington any time.

"Ah, yes," continued Mrs. Atherton, "Dr. Mathers is a jewel of a man. He was so grateful to me for having saved his life. Of course I broke the bones of my arm and leg in the attempt, but he soon had me fixed up again at the hospital. From that day on I wanted for nothing. Dr. Mathers cared for me as a father. He interested himself in my behalf, and obtained for me a splendid position in one of the banks, but I could not stand the peril. I grew reckless. Drink was at the bottom of it all. One morning I went to my desk with the smell of liquor on my breath. An hour later the manager handed me a check and politely told me that my services were no longer required."

"Ah, that was too bad." The woman really pitied him. "But then drink has been the curse of many a one, and you should have known it." "Yes, I should have known better. I left Billington that same evening. I was disgusted with myself. I should have gone to see my good friend, Dr. Mathers, but I was ashamed. I did not have the heart to face him and tell him the whole story."

"And you left Billington without seeing him?" "Yes, I went to a neighboring town, secured employment, worked steadily a few weeks, but was soon told to go. It was drink again. And this is how I got down to my present low level. I now earn my living selling my little wares from door to door, content to seek other employment, but I prefer this sort of a life to any other, because I have a desperate struggle to earn my daily bread, and as long as this condition exists, not even a cent of mine will ever travel over the saloon counter."

"Have you heard of Dr. Mathers since you left Billington?" "No, not a word. He does not know what happened to me, and I am satisfied. But he was very well when last I saw him. Only there is a sore spot in his heart somewhere. One day I called at his office. He looked very tired and worn out, told me he had not seen his bed for some nights. It was a beautiful afternoon. The breezes wandered noiselessly through the open window and left a refreshing coolness behind. For a long time Dr. Mathers gazed thoughtfully upon a picture of a middle-aged woman hung above the mantle piece on the opposite wall. He eyed the painting intently. His thoughts were evidently wandering through the flowery meadows of by-gone days. Presently a large tear dropped from his eye, and I thought he dropped it. It seemed to wake him from his musings and he turned to me, somewhat apologetically, and said: 'Ah, Jim, forgive me! I forgot you were here. I was only thinking. That womanly face always makes me think. She was a second mother to me, but she left one day—oh, dear! it is ten years ago—and I have searched for her in vain all these years. Some day I will tell you the whole story, and then you will not wonder that I grew thoughtful sometimes.' But I never heard the end of the story. I lost my position the next day, and you see never went back."

Mrs. Atherton turned about nervously in her chair during the last few sentences. She felt like flying to Billington and clasping Charles to her heart. He evidently had not forgotten her. The more she thought of that picture on the wall and the beggar's story, the more she felt inclined to leave Beresvale on the next train. But something held her back.

passed quickly and pleasantly for her—but her health was beginning to fail.

CHAPTER XIII.

DOROTHY FAIRFAX.

Dorothy Fairfax, the accomplished daughter of Jerome Fairfax, banker, was the handsomest woman in all Billington. Her early days were spent at the convent where the clever sisters helped to develop her natural talents in music. She had a remarkable soprano voice for one so young. An only child, her parents naturally took great delight in her. At twenty she graduated, and for the two years following took singing lessons from the best teachers Billington could afford. At this time also, she moved in the highest musical circles of her native city. Her father had always promised her a few years abroad to finish her musical education, and consequently, when she was twenty-two, she was sent to Paris, later to Leipzig. She remained only one year at Paris and then took rooms in Leipzig. And here she was at the present time, but her thoughts were turning homeward.

Dorothy liked Leipzig immensely. She had come in contact with the nicest people during her two years' residence, and her heart felt very contented and happy in that luxurious "In Bohemia" student-life. Her friends and companions were artists, musicians and writers—all come to Leipzig to get what was best in the center of culture and refinement. They sat at the same dainty tables and sipped out of the quaint, china coffee-cups.

Dorothy occupied two pretty rooms on one of the leading streets of the German city and had for companion another Billington girl—one Bernice Chadwick. The latter was completing her studies on the piano. The two had come to Europe together and they were going back home again. At school the two had always been good friends, but this novel experience abroad had drawn them together on terms of closer intimacy.

Dorothy had a regular "In Bohemia" den. The walls were literally plastered with pictures of the old masters. On a divan in the corner were piled fully a dozen cushions. On the opposite side stood her piano, upon it a large marble bust of Liszt, gazing with dreamy, pathetic eyes about the little crowded room. And the sheets of music! There were piles of it scattered about on the floor, tables and chairs. Even the old piano's back was almost breaking with the weight of it. From an old-fashioned Venetian vase on the table a bunch of red and white roses sent their aroma through the room. At the two doors that led into a larger room, hung thin Japanese curtains. Bernice Chadwick's rooms were on the same flat, but a few doors away.

It was a delightful June morning, one of those clear refreshing mornings that make one feel it is good to be alive, when all one's cares and worries have wandered thousands of miles away and the heart knows nothing but gladness. Dorothy had just finished breakfast; and going over to her window, she opened it full length to let in the pleasant morning air. Down in the streets a jolly mountaineer was singing a dainty German love-song to the accompaniment of a mellow harp. The clear liquid notes of his tenor voice floated into the morning air and filled every nook of Dorothy's den with sweet sounds—

"The singer had a ringing voice, pleasant to hear and far too good for the open street. It was a voice that would have sounded well in a concert-hall, but one hears many such voices in the streets and in the haunts of the lowly. One seldom runs across a poor singer in Germany. The little melody was soon over. Dorothy was delighted with it and threw down a piece of silver to the singer, who caught it in his hat and bowed gallantly. Just then a crowd of jolly students passed by laughing loudly. In a few minutes the lectures at the university would begin, and the boys were hurrying to their tasks."

Dorothy stood a long time eyeing the changing scene in the street below. The sun shone full upon her, as she stood there, in the morning hour, her simple, white gown hanging loosely from her shoulders. She looked like a queen in contemplation, a look of intense joy upon her classical features. The sunbeams wandered through the meshes of her black hair, and when she turned, one could see that she had a complexion of dazzling beauty, fair and creamy. Her cheeks were twin roses that never lost their color. Her eyes were dark brown and dancing with long lashes, capable of changing with every thrill of emotion, and her lips were of brilliant red, hiding a fine set of pearly white teeth. Her every movement was graceful; her head seemed fitted to wear a crown, her fingers to wield a sceptre, and yet she had the features that were full of sweetness and innocence.

Presently she was disturbed in her thoughts by Bernice's entrance into the room. The latter never entered the same without upsetting or stumbling over something. She was a lively, jovial sort of girl, and this time the small table in the middle of the room suffered. In an instant the Venetian vase and the red and white roses lay in a little river on the carpet. "Turkish rug and worst of all, Bernice herself was tied down to the floor, not knowing whether to laugh or to cry. Entering the room in her usual careless manner, she had stumbled over a small foot-stool—and that foot-stool was to blame for all the mischief."

"Ah, never mind the Venetian vase, I'll get you another," interrupted Bernice with an air of suffering. "It's a pity that you—Oh! the pain! I wonder if I've broken any bones?"

The girl could not even restrain her laughter and Dorothy herself joined in good naturedly.

"Come, Dorothy! What's the use of crying over spilt milk anyway? Come give me your hand like a good girl and help me to my feet—or I'm dead sure." With Dorothy's assistance Bernice was helped to the divan, in the corner. In an hour the latter was on her feet as well as ever, trying to stumble over something else.

The morning mail brought several letters and papers for both of the girls. The contents, rest assured, were devoured eagerly. "Mamma expects me home in a month from to-day, Bernice. What do you think of that? She writes that she can hardly wait for the day." "And so does mine, she also has a letter from mother. She did not like the photographs I sent her at all. You know the ones we had taken in the coffee garden, with Herr Kreiser one afternoon. She says I look just like a regular Kaffee-klatsch, and I think probably she's right."

By this time Dorothy was reading the Billington Post, copies of which arrived in Leipzig every second Thursday. "Say, Bernice, the Post is certainly giving Dr. Mathers enough of advertising these days. Here is a whole column about him, saying how through an oil painting in an artist's studio he had at last come upon a path that would lead him to find an old friend of his—a Mrs. Atherton by name. The lady had disappeared from Billington under very suspicious circumstances many years ago. 'This interesting reading and you must see it. The paper is several months old. Mother must have sent it by mistake—but 'tis new to me.'"

"Do you know him, Dorothy?" "No, I have never met him, but I have often passed him on the streets. He's a fine man—a very clever surgeon and awfully good, 'tis said, to the poor." "He is quite young as well, isn't he?" "I should judge him to be between thirty-five and forty." "I don't remember ever seeing him," replied Bernice.

"Well, he is quite tall, has jet black hair, fair complexion and is clean shaven. He has what I would call a good, reliable honest face for a man, and I think he is quite handsome. He dresses well and has always a very prepossessing appearance; he is broad-shouldered and well-proportioned."

"I suppose this fine looking fellow is married, as usual," exclaimed Bernice. "Not by any means, Dorothy. At least I have not heard so. Mother generally writes me all the news and I'm sure she would not have forgotten to tell me this!"

Just then the clock struck the hour of ten. "Heavens! Bernice, it's 10 o'clock" exclaimed Dorothy, as she jumped from her chair and grabbed her music. "Here I'm supposed to be at the professor's studio at 9:30! Well! Well! I'll get my scolding for keeping him waiting this morning. Besides, he is very busy to-day. He expected me in early for a final rehearsal of the songs I am to sing to-night at my graduation recital. I suppose your piano solos will be perfectly done, you little imp!"

"Not by any means, Dorothy. When you are gone I shall get at them again. My fingers feel just like slate-pieces."

was without a doubt the best singer he had yet produced, and he wanted her to do herself and her teacher full justice in the concert-hall that evening.

"You see, professor, Dorothy remarked, "I was fully an hour late and I am to blame for it all. Bernice and I were chatting away and never thought of looking at the clock, when lo! it struck ten. So I grabbed my music and just hurried here as fast as I could, because I was afraid you would scold me. But I can sing now. The little difficulty in breathing is gone."

"Come, den, mein kind, and let's get to work." And together the two wandered to the music room. The studio was a large, well-lit, sunny room, plainly furnished but with comfortable looking. It contained nothing but a piano, a table and two or three chairs. Artistic busts of Beethoven, Mozart and Schumann looked down peacefully from the snowy-white wall. The room contained but one picture. It was a fine steel etching of Franz Abt. There were no carpets, rugs, curtains or bric-a-brac. Upon the table stood a vase containing some flowers.

"Vat 'tink you of des flowers mein Freund?" spoke Herr Kreiser as he drew his pupil's attention to the choice red roses in the vase. "Aren't dey beautiful? I raise dem all by mein self."

"Yes, they are beauties. I think, professor, you might give me a few to wear this evening." "Ach, Gott! Fraulein! You shall have dem. I shall pick dem fresh afterwards—also, a few for Bernice."

"But come and let's make us busy!" Dorothy's arms fell to her side; she took a deep inspiration and her voice was ready to fall in presently with the singing-master's accompaniment. The latter had almost finished playing the introduction, when there was a rap at the door of the music room.

"Ach! ach! das ist doch argentlich!" he exclaimed angrily, as he rose from the piano. "Mina, his wife, was at the door." "Hans!" she exclaimed softly, "dere is a man in de waiting-room to see you and he is in a beeg hurry."

"Vell! vell he must wait until his beeg hurry is passed by. I can't see him for half hour yet. So Mina, just tell him to wait little bit."

"All right, Hans!" "No, by any means, Dorothy. At least I have not heard so. Mother generally writes me all the news and I'm sure she would not have forgotten to tell me this!"

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shook the very columns of the theater. And how that applause fed her hungry soul! But then they were only dreams—mere, idle dreams—strung together in feverish states of excitement and conchard heart the girl could not help feeling that she was nursing a strange delusion. She would never be so fortunate as to have a chance of showing herself in grand opera. But, unsuspecting, innocent girl, she did not see the bright career the future had fashioned for her—out there, somewhere in the hours to come.

"Ach!" exclaimed the professor. "I forgot already so soon dat caption room. So pardon me, Fraulein, for a few minutes! I will go and see him and den we will go out together into de garden for des roses I promised you." And the jolly old man bowed his way out of the music room.

"Ach! Signor Lamperti!" he exclaimed as he shook his old friend's hand. "I am pleased to see you here again in Leipzig. You are lookin' vell, Signor—getting younger lookin' every time I 'tink." Signor Lamperti came originally from Naples. He was a tall, splendid-looking fellow, about forty years old. Most of his time was spent in London, England, where he was very popular as a conductor. He spoke English faultlessly, only that his speech had a slight Italian accent, pleasant and musical.

"I see, Kreiser, you are still at the old trade," Lamperti began, after some preliminary conversation about the weather and kindred things had been indulged in. "Ja! I have all I can do. By de way, one of mine pupils gives her graduation recital dis evening at de concert-hall. I would be pleased to have you dere, signor."

"Thank you! I shall take advantage of the invitation. By the way, professor, pardon the impertinence, but who is the girl who has just finished singing in the music-room? She has a capital voice—sings like a lark. I could have listened to her for hours. Her operatic selections were especially cleverly done. You know the opera appeals to me above all else. She has the kind of voice one does not hear every day."

Lamperti's words filled the old teacher's heart with pride. To think that they came from the great Lamperti himself! "De girl who has just finished her practice is Dorothy Fairfax—a foreigner. She leaves in two weeks for America. It is she whose graduation recital takes place dis night. Dis vas our last practice."

"Ah," interrupted Lamperti, "I shall go and hear her again then. She's a bird I'd like to capture, Kreiser." "Ach, signor, is that so? Vell vell!" "Yes, Kreiser, I am looking up material for a new grand opera company. So far I have selected all the principals except the prima-donna, and I believe I have come upon the proper person right here in your very studio. Yes, Miss Fairfax is the woman. Her voice is magnificent, voluminous—grand. She puts her whole soul into her singing."

Herr Kreiser was beyond himself. He had not expected such good luck. "Is Miss Fairfax a young girl?" "Yes, signor. She's about twenty-five." "And handsome?" "Very." "Ah! I am sure she is just the person I have been looking for for months. Do you think I can see her?" "Certainly. I shall go for her at once."

In a minute, blushing, girlish Dorothy was face to face with the great Lamperti. The interview lasted about thirty minutes. Lamperti told the singer how he had come to Leipzig looking for a prima-donna, how he had listened to her grand voice during the last half hour, and how greatly he was pleased with it. "Would you like to go on the stage, Miss Fairfax?" he asked kindly. "Very much, signor. My ambition has always been in that direction."

"Ah, I am glad to hear it. What about signing a contract with me for six months' grand opera? I understand your home is in Billington. Billington is on our circuit. We end the season there—remaining several weeks. So it will all be very nice to appear in your native city. What do you say, Miss Fairfax?"