

The Years Between

A Novel by William J. Fischer.

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CHAPTER VIII—CONTINUED.

"No, not yet. He said, however, that before very long the event was to take place. He had just arrived from Paris to attend to some necessary transactions."

"And pray who is the lucky lady?" "A Mademoiselle Colette Berthier, daughter of Pierre Berthier, one of the richest bankers in Paris. Arthur showed her photograph. She is young, but quite ordinary looking. They expected, he said to be married in about a month. But let me return to my story. Arthur came to me for help. He told me he had invested the greater part of his money foolishly that brought him no returns whatever. He had placed most of it on real estate. You know Isabelle left him a goodly fortune. When he came to see me he told me that a debt of \$15,000 was staring him in the face. The debt had to be paid at a certain specified time or he would have to go to prison for it. The disgrace of it all would ruin him in Paris, and Colette Berthier, he was sure, would be woman enough to refuse his hand in marriage. Once married to Colette her vast fortune would fall to his lot and then he would be in a position to pay me back the \$15,000 if I would be good enough to lend him the sum."

"Did you question him at all about his business matters?" "Yes. He told me plausible stories, even showed me documents and books full of names and figures. He said that he had purchased a large dry-goods store in Paris, that had always been an elephant on his hands and had never paid him, and that he needed \$15,000 to pay off his creditors. An intimate friend of mine, he added, had been good enough to lend him an equal amount."

"And of course you lent him the \$15,000?" "Yes, Father, I did. That very evening we went to the lawyer's office and Arthur signed papers to the effect that one month after date he would pay back the borrowed money."

"Did he remain in Billington long after that particular evening?" "No. He remained only two days. He said that he had so little time on hand or he would have remained longer, and added that Colette was waiting for him in Paris to be married immediately on his return. He promised me that they would return to Billington on their wedding tour in a few weeks. Three months have now passed, the note lies unpaid in the lawyer's hands, and not a line has come from Arthur Neville to explain matters. I have heard nothing even of his marriage to Colette Berthier."

"The poor woman's heart seemed filled with strange misgivings. Father Salvini pitied her in her distress. He tried to console her with excuses that his own sympathy rendered up—but alas! Mrs. Atherton had seen another light creep over the strange horizon. For days Arthur Neville's name had hung on her lips. She could not sleep. In vain she prayed and asked that God might close her eyes, but there, before her on the very wall, she could read Arthur Neville's name in bright, glaring letters. Go where she might he stood before her, the fine, oily nephew whom she had loved deeply for her sister's sake. The recent fire had burned a large hole into her purse, and now, if this \$15,000 was also gone—terrible thought—she would be crippled financially. Then her thoughts would steal over to that hospital in London and she would see Dr. Charles flitting about on his errands of mercy amongst the pale sufferers, and her heart would almost break. Not that she loved money, but the thought of having been reduced so suddenly in financial circumstances to the verge of poverty fairly appalled her."

"Mrs. Atherton and Father Salvini had now reached the old marble gate in front of St. Jerome's."

"Why did you not tell me your troubles before, Mrs. Atherton?" the gentle Italian asked kindly. "It is really too bad you should have carried all this burden yourself."

"It is kind of you to speak so, Father, but until two weeks ago I had hopes that Arthur would turn up with his bride and bring the money with him. Then Mr. Jones, my lawyer, called on me and urged me to wait no longer, but put Parisian detectives on his track and arrest him. He was poor Isabelle's child, Father, and right along I had trusted in my darling sister in heaven to help clear up the matter. She was always so good, and I could never picture her only child a scoundrel and a swindler. But I finally consented to have the police of Paris make a thorough search of the city and their cable their findings to the detectives here. Only an hour ago Mr. Jones telephoned that a cablegram had come from Paris and asked me to call at his office this morning. I was expected to drop in at St. Jerome's on the way down to tell you all. But now that you have heard the first part of the story, I wish you would come along with me to Mr. Jones' office and hear the closing chapters. I am prepared now to face the worst."

"The poor woman in black trembled visibly and Father Salvini pitied her. In a few minutes the two sat in Mr. Jones' office."

"Any new developments, Mr. Jones?" Mrs. Atherton questioned eagerly.

"Yes," and the lawyer's voice halted—"but I am afraid they hold out little encouragement." Then he continued in measured speech: "This morning Chief Miles received a telegram from Chief Lafleur of the Paris force stating that an extensive search of the whole city had failed to bring to light anything concerning Arthur Neville."

"Could they not find out anything at his dry-goods store?" questioned Father Salvini quickly.

"They cable that there is no such store in all Paris," replied Miles, "and no business man by such a name."

"What about Colette Berthier, the daughter of the wealthy French banker?"

asked Mrs. Atherton. "Did he not marry her?" "The police report," the old detective answered, "that they have searched carefully all the directories of Paris for the name of Pierre Berthier and failed to find it. They even visited all the banks, and it ended in a fruitless search. The name of Pierre Berthier had never appeared on the books of any of the banking institutions of Paris."

"By this time Mrs. Atherton was beyond herself. The news had been too much for her. She threw her hands into the air and shrieked in all her grief: "I am ruined!—ruined! and all through Isabelle's child!"

The distracted woman wept like a child. It was a touching scene and much pity was felt for her in the hearts of the three men who stood witnesses to proceedings, so pathetic and heart-rending.

Some days later word came to Detective Miles that Arthur Neville had sailed for India instead of France. And from that day to this no one has ever heard of him. The search was kept up a number of years and finally abandoned.

The \$15,000 was gone forever, and Mrs. Atherton, poor, little, suffering woman, bore her leaden cross willingly and tried to shut out from her mind forever all memory of the treachery and deceit of Isabelle's only child.

CHAPTER IX. CHRISTMAS EVE.

Dr. Mathers' sojourn in England was nearing its end and the young man's thoughts were turning to Billington. During the years he had been away he had grown intellectually, and the big brainy surgeons at the hospital proposed a brilliant career for the young surgeon. Another two weeks and then he would have to bid good-bye to all his dear English friends and leave the noise and all the strange, wild, exciting life of old London behind him. Even now it all seemed like a dream to him—his coming to the city, the making of new friends; his interesting days at the hospital and the little confidences the leaders of medicine and surgery shared with him; the glorious sight-seeing and the interesting visits to the homes of the great literature, art and the sciences. Oh, he would miss it all even though his thoughts were turning Billingtonwards. He too felt anxious to take up the fight of life—out there somewhere, where God would see fit to place him, and his heart urged him to go. His months at the hospital with the sick and the suffering—ah! they were after all the greatest and pleasantest of all his life—and, when thoughts of his leave-taking came into his mind, a feeling of pain stole into his heart."

It was Christmas Eve—the last Yuletide that Mathers was to spend in the hospital. The corridors, private rooms and wards were festooned gaily with wreaths of holly and mistletoe. The nurses had been busy all day decorating so that the patients, who were unfortunately enough to be in the hospital over Christmas, would also feel a touch of gladness in their hearts at the most joyous season of the year. All day long flowers and gifts arrived at the House of Suffering, and all day long countless hands were busy arranging and distributing the bundles to their various destinations. Out in the corridors there was a continual patter of hurrying feet; it sounded like a falling of rain upon a thatched roof. Even Dr. Mathers caught a touch of all the bustle and excitement and worked good-naturedly with the Sisters and the nurses to help bring feelings of happiness to the hearts of the hundreds of sufferers in their neat, white beds.

The very spirit of Christmas had stolen into his heart and made him very happy. The hospital had been transformed into a flower-garden. Even the sickest patients could not help smiling in their narrow beds. It all made Charles feel as he had never felt before. The present he forgot his own little worries and troubles and worked and laughed and chatted briskly. He was glad to be alive—glad to be able to help brighten lives, that knew much of life's shadow and little of its sunshine.

He and Sister Margaret were putting the finishing touches on one of the children's wards. The active, merry occupants of the thirty or forty odd beds kept the room fairly alive with excitement and laughter. The doctor loved the little ones. Whenever he had a half hour to spare he sought their companionship, and it always refreshed him.

"You know, Sister," he said thoughtfully, as he fastened the last holly wreath on the wall. "I think a child is the sweetest, loveliest thing on earth."

And he was right. An innocent, white-souled child! On its pure soul ever lingers the benediction that has fallen from God's finger, and from its lips two roses blown apart—many a bird-like, cheery message taken wings and flies into the empty cages of our hearts to give us a glimpse of that soft-hearted, gentle, brooding peace and happiness we all ardently long for.

When the two left the children's ward all the little patients seemed happy save one. It was the little five-year-old who had seen his third day out of bed after a very critical operation. The child had been picked up in the slums, taken to the hospital and operated upon. In a short time the little waif won his way into the hearts of everyone. He was so thin and frail looking that everybody pitied him, and in time he turned out to be rather a spoiled child. But he was bright and his two little blue eyes fairly danced when he smiled, and he generously smiled upon all who passed his little crib.

"Sissi Marg'et!" he called out tearfully as the gentle nun disappeared with Dr. Mathers.

"Doctor, you must come and see the crib in the chapel. It's just beautiful!" Sister Margaret remarked as she passed into the hall. "Ah! there goes little Patsy—he's crying." The nurses had

named the five-year-old Patsy for short.

"Sissi Marg'et!" again came the shrill cry.

"Just a minute, doctor. I must see where the child wants. And the kind nun re-entered the child's ward."

"Sissi Marg'et!" "Take me wiv' yo'!" A minute later Sister Margaret joined Charles with Patsy in her arms.

"Patsy is a bad boy," teasingly uttered Charles.

"Not bad boy—No!" answered the youngster.

"Ah, yes, Patsy's a bad boy, cries like a baby," the doctor continued as he squeezed the little one's red cheeks with his fingers.

"Sissi Marg'et!" spoke up the little one as he gazed into her face. "Me—good boy? Isn't me, Sissi Marg'et?"

"Sometimes, Patsy," the nun answered, kissing him tenderly.

"Charles gave vent to a laugh which the child did not like.

"Go way!" the youngster cried as he motioned the doctor aside, angrily. Then he buried his face in the nun's snowy guimpe and mumbled: "Me not like dat man. Me only likes Sissi Marg'et, don't me, Sissi?"

By this time they had come to the chapel door and Sister Margaret put Patsy on his feet.

"Now, Patsy, I'm going to take you into church," she said. The child opened his eyes wildly. He had never heard the word "church" in all his life. He did not know what it meant.

"Patsy, I want you to be good in there, and to be with the dear little Jesus in his crib—in his bed."

The boy's eyes opened widely. Something puzzled his little soul up to the doctor's face and then back again to the nun's. He did not seem to understand.

"Come, Patsy, let's go in now and see little Jesus in the crib." The nun stooped to take his tiny hand in hers and lead him in. But he shook himself away from her and exclaimed with the innocence of a child: "No! I won't do in. I'm dust as beeg boy as 'e is and dust as old, if 'e vants do see 'e can come out here." And Patsy stamped his foot as if he really meant it.

The speech was two much for the nun and the doctor and both laughed heartily. It was rather disrespectful, but the child did not know any better. After all he was only a five-year-old—fresh from the slums.

With some coaxing Patsy at last entered with Sister Margaret and the two made their way up the narrow aisle to the candle-lit manger in the corner. He had never seen anything like this in all his life. His eyes rested long on the little infant so beautiful and life-like, and then they stole to the miniature sheep, oxen, and shepherds on the hill-sides.

The child looked over the little brass images standing around with deep interest.

"Oh, Sissi Marg'et!" he exclaimed as he clapped his hands. "Hasn't 'e got many toys do play wiv'. Will 'oo bring me in again so I can play wiv' 'im? 'E is a nice boy, Sissi, an' I like 'im so much."

The nun tried her best to silence his tongue, but without avail. There were quite a number kneeling around absorbed in prayer, and she did not wish Patsy to disturb them. However they had heard his childish remarks and smiles came unbidden to the faces of all.

When some minutes later Charles returned to his room a number of bundles lay on his table. His friends, at least some of them, had been kind enough to remember him.

This Christmas. The poor fellow was just loaded down with the weight of it, and she handed him an armful of papers, letters and parcels.

Charles smiled for a moment as he hurried through the letters.

"Pray, Sister be seated a minute! I just feel lonely to-night and long to have somebody to talk to." Again his eyes followed the writing on the envelopes. "Ah, yes! here is one from poor Thady. I would know his writing amongst a thousand letters—and here is one from Father Salvini. Just the one I have been looking for."

He tore the letter open hurriedly and read the contents eagerly. The next moment a heavy sigh escaped his lips and he grew deadly pale and sank into a chair. For a few minutes he did not speak.

"You remember, Sister, of my speaking to you the other day of Mrs. Atherton's apparent neglect in answering my letters," he at last began. Sister Margaret practically knew all his affairs. She was the only one in the whole hospital to whom the young doctor had ever confided.

"Well, Sister, my good friend, Father Salvini, now writes me a short letter but—I am afraid it contains very bad news for me. I shall read it to you—'My Dear Charles—'

Your letter reached me a few moments ago. I know you are anxious about Mrs. Atherton and I shall not keep you in suspense any longer. Owing to her great losses the poor woman's mind became affected to a certain degree and I had her removed to a home in charge of the Sisters. She still had a little money of her own, but she was eventually forced to close the doors of her mansion on Grosvenor street since she had become so reduced financially. It all preyed upon her so strongly that in a very short time she became a changed woman. Her mind wandered at times, but she was perfectly harmless. One day she went out driving with one of the nuns, and while the latter was in shopping she alighted from the buggy and disappeared with the crowd in the streets. And from that day to this no one has ever seen or heard of the poor woman. Exhaustive searches have been made, but in vain. Some imagine that she left the city by rail; others claim she is still within the city's limits while the majority seem to think she has been the victim of foul play. I know you will feel badly when you read this, yet no more than I. But you are to be with us soon again and then I will tell you all. In closing let me wish you all the joys of this festive season! Believe me, 'Sincerely your friend, ANTONIO SALVINI.'

"Now what do you think of all this Sister? Poor Mrs. Atherton! She was such a good woman. To think that such a misfortune should have come to her!"

"You must not complain. A God in heaven permitted it all and for the best."

"But I shall never see her face—"

"You do not know, doctor. Stranger meetings have happened before."

"Yes, but nobody seems to know anything about her, and perhaps even now, God knows, she may be lying dead—somewhere, and I, thousands of miles away, do not know where to ever meet Mrs. Atherton in this life again. I feel it."

Overcome with grief Charles tore the letter into shreds and threw the little pieces into the flames.

"Trust in divine Providence!" the good Sister spoke in parting. "No one knows, but that your path may yet lead to the same common cross-roads." And quietly she left the room.

For some time longer Charles sat alone with the quiet night and stared into the bright coals. When the last piece of the ill-fated letter had crumbled to ashes a sigh escaped his lips and he whispered sadly: "Poor Mrs. Atherton! I wonder where she is?"

CHAPTER X. THE WOMAN IN BLACK.

Mrs. Atherton was practically alone in the world. She had had an only sister—Isabelle, the mother of the deplorable Arthur Neville. One uncle was all that was left to her, and he lived in far-away Japan. One friend, however, still clung to her at Beresvale, and thither she went the day she made good her escape from the nun's carriage.

Billington was no longer the same to her now that she had become so reduced in circumstances. Many of the friends, who once sipped tea with her at brilliant social functions, now passed her by with the coldness of strangers. It was a stinging blow and it went to the poor woman's heart with double force. To be sure she found sunshine itself in Father Salvini's counsel. When poverty almost stared her in the face it was he who had her removed to the Sister's Home. The nuns were all good to her and she was grateful for their many kindnesses, but she could not make herself feel contented. Of course worry had helped to bring on the diseased condition of her mind. She would take strange freaks at times, and would often break into spells of weeping that almost broke her heart. But they would only last for a little time and then she would be herself again. Her appearance was also changing. She was getting thinner, paler and older looking.

It was after one of these depressing attacks that she remarked to Sister Patricia as the two walked down the well-kept garden-path: "Do you know, Sister, I does not hold forth to me the way it did only a year ago! Since these heavy losses have come upon me I feel so strange at times. And then, what have I to live for?"

"Ah, my dear, you have much to live for. Just think of your preparation for that other, larger, higher life, and then you have Charles Mathers, the dear boy, to live for. You have always been a second mother to him, and in a few months he will be here in Billington again with you, to pay the debt he owes you."

"No, Sister, Charles shall not meet me here in Billington, believe me, when he returns. I want to be far away when that time comes. He has been a good boy and I love him, but I must go away."

He needs help—money—now, more than ever, and I am not in a position to give him any."

"But, Mrs. Atherton, I am sure Charles will be able to look out for himself when he begins the battle of life, and incidentally help you along as well. But, then, you know you are welcome to a home with us here for the remaining days of your life."

"Sister, I will only be an incumbrance to him and to you all. The struggle will be difficult enough for him without having to take care of me. You know I have a little money to do me for a while, and then I can work. I will be glad to commence life all over again for a crust of bread, providing God does not deny me the health and strength."

"Mrs. Atherton. I don't like to hear you talk in this strain. I know you are not going to leave us. What would Dr. Mathers say to find you gone from Billington?"

Mrs. Atherton looked up at the tall, saintly-looking nun at her side.

"Dr. Mathers, did you say?" she whispered. "Poor boy!" She caught her white linen apron in her hands and lifted it to her face and wept like a child. The little rain of tears was soon over.

"Never mind Charles!" she began. "Some day, when he is nicely settled, I'll write him, but for a time he must not know where I am."

"You are not going away, Mrs. Atherton? Surely not. How I should miss you."

"No, not at present, good Sister," she answered as her thin hand stole into the nun's. For a few moments both walked on in silence.

All through life Sister Patricia and Mrs. Atherton had been close intimate friends. They had been companions even at school in their early days.

The peaceful, chapel chiming beat out upon the evening air. In the skies above the pink-tinted clouds were fast disappearing. A strong breeze stole through the bushes like a fleet hound, and there was a strange whispering of the dying autumn leaves.

"There! The chimes are ringing and I must be off to Vespers. Let me hope you will be in better spirits to-morrow, Mrs. Atherton."

The shy nun was leaving, but the woman's voice called her back.

"Sister Patricia!"

"What is it?"

"Promise me that you will never mention the talk we have had to a soul! I don't want it to come to Father Salvini's ears. I am sure he would never listen to my story. He would stand in the path I have mapped out for myself and hold me back."

"I promise! Then you have fully decided to leave us at some time in the near future?"

"I have, Sister."

"And pray, where are you going?"

"That I cannot answer at present. When I have reached my destination you shall receive a line from me, but remember that you keep my whereabouts a secret."

"I promise to keep secret all you have told me, but I will pray hard that you will not leave Billington. Really, Mrs. Atherton, I do not like to see you go."

That evening, as Sister Patricia knelt in the chapel, she mused within herself: "I wonder if I do wrong by keeping Mrs. Atherton's secret? A pleasant voice however spoke to her doubting conscience: 'By no means, my child.' Some weeks later Sister Patricia was stricken down with a severe illness, and her soul's journey across the misty horizon was but an entrance into the Heaven of which she had so often dreamed.

"Mrs. Atherton, do you know I have never seen you wear a black veil before, and it seems strange that you should wear one on such a beautiful morning as this."

"I seldom wear a veil, Sister, it is true, but somehow or other my eyes looked badly and I did not want anyone to catch a glimpse of them. To be honest with you Sister, this morning, when you asked me whether I had not slept well because my eyes looked heavy, it was not the loss of sleep that gave them such an appearance. I had a little crying spell just before."

"A rain of tears on such a sunny, cheerful day? Well! well! the two are almost incompatible. Really, Mrs. Atherton, I don't like the look of that black cloth over your face."

"Never mind, Sister, we all do very funny things at times. Don't we?" And she laughed gently.

The wearing of the veil was by no means "a funny thing." In Mrs. Atherton's mind it was a pre-arranged affair. She herself hated it, but she wore it not to hide her tear-stained face, but for an altogether different motive.

When Sister Philomene entered the large dry-goods store, after having tied the horse securely, the deeply veiled woman suddenly rose from her seat in the carriage, stepped to the pavement and was soon lost in the crowds of people on the street.

On her way to the depot she met many people whose she knew, but they did not recognize her. Her veil covered her face and she was satisfied. She hurried on she seemed to hear shrill cries of "Come back! Come back!" But her heart urged her on in feverish excitement.

She was now turning the last corner, but a few yards to the depot. To the woman's utter amazement she saw Father Salvini on the corner of the street. He only threw a passing glance at her and walked on. At the moment she felt like tearing the veil from her face and hurrying over to his side and telling him all. He had been a good friend to her through many years, but she guessed what he would question her now, and she did not care to have him speak. It would have been the same as to have Billington another month. She knew that Charles was expected home at any time and she did not want to be there when he arrived.

Mrs. Atherton stood still for a moment looking at the figure of Father Salvini disappearing down the street. The poor woman paused at the very cross-roads not knowing which road to take. The train whistled shrilly nearby. In another minute it would be pulling out for Beresvale, and Mrs. Atherton hurried to the depot and boarded her car just as the train was moving out.

Beresvale was reached in good time and Mrs. Atherton's visit to the cottage of her friend on the hill, that overlooked the peaceful, little rural town, was all in the nature of a surprise. Like herself, her old friend, Ellen Allan, had become reduced in circumstances to a degree much like her own. Only recently a sort of sympathy had stolen in between the two and drawn them closer. Then came a letter from Miss Allan begging Mrs. Atherton to come and spend the winter with her, and she was all alone. The letter came at a time when Mrs. Atherton was planning a change and consequently her thoughts at once stole to Beresvale. This is why she took the early train that particular morning.

When Mrs. Atherton reached the little thatched cottage she expected to see Ellen running out to meet her. But no one came. The solitary autumn afternoon to take her by the hand. With strange misgivings she knocked at the weather-beaten door, but a sighing breeze, rattling through the deserted trees, alone made answer. Again she knocked, but still no Ellen. Then she opened the door widely and entered the house.

From a room nearby came a sickly, thin voice: "Come in, I can't leave my bed to-day. It's the baker or grocer or—Why! it's you, Mae Atherton!"

It was a happy meeting. They had not seen each other for years.

"When did you come, Mae?"

"Just a few minutes ago."

"Oh, I am so sorry I am sick. This morning a sharp pain pierced my left side and I have lain helpless all day. But 'twill be better by morning I am sure."

Ellen had a spell of coughing just then which almost prostrated her.

"I think you had better have a doctor, Ellen. I shall go out at once for one."

Some minutes later Mrs. Atherton disappeared down the avenue of spruce trees in search of the nearest doctor.

Ellen was found at the very ill, and the doctor stated that he entertained slight hopes of her recovery. So Mrs. Atherton, as best she could, tried to make the poor woman comfortable. Two weeks later a funeral cortege passed down the lonely road bearing Ellen to her last resting place.

One evening when life hung merely by a thread, Ellen called Mrs. Atherton to her side and whispered feebly: "Mae, you've been so good to me, and all I have in this world I leave to you. This little cottage shall be your own when I am gone. Make a nice home of it, Mae! You deserved a better one wherein to spend your last days, but it is warm and cosy and you will have at least one spot you can call your own."

Thus the home of Ellen Allan became the home of Mrs. Atherton, and here the latter lived for a number of years in sweet seclusion, her sorrows and crosses her very own.

CHAPTER XI. AN EARLY CALLER.

It was a winter morning, late in January. The long silent stretches of God's white-out-of-doors looked silvery to the sunlight. There was a hint of misty softness on everything around, yet the heart of humanity throbbled on, steeped in sin and shame.

It was rather early for a caller to disturb Father Salvini's morning hour. He was just asserting the morning mail when a rap at his door drew his attention from the papers and letters in front of him. Father Salvini sat with his back to the door and thinking it was only a student on some trivial errand, exclaimed in a soft musical voice:—