

## AMBITION'S CONTEST

BY CHRISTINE FABER

## CHAPTER XI

THE OLD, OLD STORY OF WOMAN'S HEART

One morning, on her homeward way from Mass, Ellen was pleasantly accosted in English by a lady who was as regular an attendant at the morning sacrifice as was the young girl herself—a woman of middle age, with a face whose expression told of long suffering, and whose faded habiliments betrayed the poverty which it was evident the wearer endeavored to conceal.

"That you were not French, I perceived by your face, Miss," the pleasant tones continued; "and it is so pleasant to meet some one who seems to have come from home, that I ventured to address you. Have I offended?"

The dark, kindly eyes, the white face, with its strongly marked lines of suffering, seemed to have something about them which bore a striking resemblance to Ellen's own suffering mother, and the girl responded, grateful for the self-made introduction.

Their homeward course lay in the same direction, and the pleasant tones continued:

"I felt drawn to you, my dear, because you seemed to be so lonely. Having lodgings opposite, I had many opportunities of perceiving your strange, isolated life. I knew that the woman with whom I sometimes saw you could not be your mother, and I was touched by your constant devotion to Church. I came from England with a daughter about your age, who was ordered hence for her health. She was all I had, but God called her. Immediately after, my fortune reduced. Accident discovered to me the means of earning a scant livelihood, but it suffices for my wants, and will till our Heavenly Father summons me also. I would not return to England, because my darling's grave is here, and my only solace lies in the weekly visits which I pay to it. Perhaps my humble efforts may be of service to you some time; if so, do not hesitate to command them."

She spoke tearfully, with a voice out of which emotion seemed to have been wrung long ago, still there was that in her tones which told how she had accepted her suffering with a resignation born only of the rigid practice of a religion which consoles when every other consolation fails.

They shook hands at the door of Ellen's domicile, and the latter waited, smilingly, till her newly-made friend had crossed the street and disappeared into the alcove which shaded the entrance to her dwelling. After that, they invariably met on the conclusion of the morning Mass, and walked home together. Anne Flanagan at first gave herself considerable concern as to whom this morning companion of her young mistress might be—going so far as to accompany Ellen to church on several successive mornings; but the strange lady impressed even her rigid notions of propriety so favorably, that she approved of the new acquaintance, and urged Ellen to accept the kindly invitation to visit which the stranger extended. Thus the acquaintance ripened to an interchange of visits. Howard expressed himself pleased that his sister had some friend to enliven the monotony of her life, though he requested to be apprised whenever Mrs. Boland visited Ellen, that he might not at that time enter his sister's apartments.

"And why be so fearful of meeting her?" questioned the sister; "she has heard me speak of you, knows what an affection exists between us, and is prepared to like you as much as she seems to like me."

"Oh," he answered, assuming a lightness of tone that she might perceive the real significance of his words, "I do not fear to meet her—I fear no one—but I would rather not see her; it will save my being subjected to a curious stare; you know, little sister, we, or rather the members of our association, do not wish to be known to any stranger for the present."

Without waiting for a reply, or deigning further explanation, he went hastily out. Thus Mrs. Boland, frequently as she came to Ellen's rooms, and much as she heard the gentle girl, with a laudable pride, speak of her brother's talents and learning, did not once see Howard Courtney. Once she said to Ellen:

"Even in my retirement I have heard his name—Paris, my dear, is speaking of him; but in such a manner as it has spoken of Voltaire and Rousseau—"

She desisted suddenly, seeing the quivering lips and blanched face of her startled listener, and afterwards, by tacit consent, Howard's name was dropped between them.

Mrs. Boland's two apartments were pleasant and pretty, with relics of better days oddly scattered amid the somewhat mean appurtenances of her present living. The carpet was worn almost to shreds, but the very shreds evinced the costliness of its texture; the furniture was faded and warped, but there were portions of it which showed the olden elegance of the material. A piano, one of costly mold, but now with defaced case, though still in tune, was one of the heirlooms, and sacredly guarded, because it had belonged to the dear, dead daughter. But the pleasant sunshine lighted all, and mellow-throated canaries poured their sweet gusts of music into the widow's ears from morn till night. To help her scanty

maintenance, Mrs. Boland wrought at some peculiar fancy-work—with vivid dyes and silken floss, fashioned charming little ornaments which Paris shops gladly purchased; and on many an afternoon, while she worked, Ellen Courtney brought forth from the old piano such strains as perhaps had not been elicited from it in its best days—accompanying it with her exquisite voice, till people paused on the stairs in the old house to listen in wondering admiration. As a relief to the monotony of her simple daily labors, she learned the widow's pretty employment—fashioned the ornamental things that they might adorn her own apartments, and cheered her weary hours by employing the latter in forming evidences of her newly-learned handicraft to send across the Atlantic to her lonely broken-hearted mother. But this acquisition to her industrial habits was soon to serve a purpose of which she, at the time of learning the work, little dreamed.

Howard's manner grew more gloomy than Ellen had ever seen it before, and it became evident even to Anne Flanagan that he was a prey to some anxiety; but he refused to answer, or evade their questions, till one day he saw Ellen alone, and she persisted in her usual affectionate queries about his apparent trouble. He answered at last almost savagely, and broke from her clasp on his arm to stride moodily to the window.

"I want money—the pittance mother gives me is not sufficient. With more money, I could command more influence in the club—the other members would listen to, and execute my designs, was there sufficient money to carry them through. I cannot ask them to expend their incomes, when that which I pay to the society is so trifling. But," turning suddenly around, and confronting his sister—"I will not have mother asked for more, under no circumstances and no conditions, till I am of age to claim my own inheritance."

Ellen was silent from pained surprise—nor did he seek a reply; and during the remainder of that day Anne Flanagan had not alone to wonder at Howard's moodiness, but to complain of Ellen's strangely abstracted manner.

"Oh! help me, Mother of God—Refuge of the weak!" the anxious girl mentally ejaculated many times during the day; "make known to me what I ought to do!"

And that night, when the maid soundly slumbered in the alcove cot, and the indistinct sound of debating voices had ceased in the assembly room, and the lights in that apartment had long been extinguished, Ellen Courtney sat thinking at her little study table. She had emptied on the latter the contents of her portmanteau, had placed with them the amount which remained from recent remittances, and found the sum to be larger than she had expected. She also gathered the last ornamental articles which she had wrought, and, surveying their workmanship carefully, murmured with a half-smile: "I think Mrs. Boland will find purchasers for my work also."

Then she buried her face in her hands to hold a consultation with conscience. Conscience put a rigid ban on that which she purposed doing, whispering that it would be furthering the infidel ideas which she felt Howard already entertained; but her woman's heart intervened for the gratification of his desire; she could not bear to think of his wistful expression; of the eager way in which he panted for that which would enable him to execute his designs. She rose at last, crossed staggering to the bed, and, kneeling beside it, murmured brokenly:

"Oh! mother, if only you were here! But I seem to have no one—no one!"

Yet her white lips said the trembling devotions, and, with more than her wonted fervor, she prayed for Howard and herself.

The youth seemed slightly startled when, on paying his customary visit the next day, Ellen drew him into a recess, and said, with an unwonted seriousness:

"This money which you desire to have, Howard, what purpose is it to serve? I mean, will it have to do with—"

She hesitated, as if unable to express her meaning.

"I know what you would say," he replied, hurriedly; "you would ask if its purpose would draw me still further from the Church than you suppose I have already gone. I answer, no!"—drooping his head as if for a pretext to avert her gaze—"it is to serve a purpose with which religion has naught to do. But why do you speak of a matter in which you cannot aid me?"

She drew out a little carefully-wrapped parcel, and, opening it, showed him the gold and silver contents.

Slight as the amount is it may assist you. Our remittances will be due in another week; take mine with yours. My expenses here are trifling, and I can contrive to defray them."

"How?" he asked, lifting his eyes.

She answered, striving to smile, though it was evident how far her heart was from the effort:

"I would prefer not to say just now, but I am almost sure that I can do it; so for the present be satisfied with what I tell you."

His face flushed, and he averted his head lest she might see the moisture which for an instant dimmed his eyes.

"Your goodness has almost un-

would that I were more worthy of it."

He took the money she proffered, wrong her hand hard and left the room with a lighter step and more joyous air than had been his wont for some time.

Mrs. Boland was somewhat surprised at the unusually early visit which her young friend paid her on that same day, but still more so when she learned the import of the call.

"To work for money, Miss Courtney!" she repeated, in anxious wonder; "surely nothing has happened—your mother—"

"My mother has not neglected to send our usual remittances," Ellen hastened to reply; "nor is this strange proceeding anything to cause you anxiety about my welfare; but please do not ask me why I do it—only believe me when I say I shall be happy while so working, if you think I can find purchasers for my articles."

"If you persist in this idea," was the good lady's slightly troubled answer, "I have no place in the country, and friend from England send his son for health to our place. De son, ah! how good, how nice he was, and how I love him; but we children den. After, he go to college to Rome, to make priest, day say; and den I feel so bad. But I pray to God, and I good still; and my fader love me so. My young friend he stay one, two years away, and den he come back suddenly. He stop at our place, because it on his way to Paris. My fader kind to him, and he kind to my fader, and him to me. Ah! mon Dieu, how I loved him den. But he so changed—he all for books, and for something he has in his head—tapping her own forehead, without looking up—"dat he thinks about all de time. He no tell me what it is; no tell his fader, who angry because he leave Rome. Den I learn dat he comes to Paris. I wish to come too. I think about it all day and all night. I no speak to my fader, for he no let me come. But I remember friends in Paris, and I write to them. My fader promise me home, and I come; but no find my friends. Ah, mon Dieu! but I have broken heart den. I return to my fader, but he no love me like he used; he no believe my story, and no one dat live dere believe it—dey look at me so—burying her face in her hands for a moment. "I not stand it! I come back to Paris, and find work—to do sometimes with English ladies who no speak French, and sometimes I sew and dey pays me well. I no go near my friends; I lives by myself, and people calls me Grisetete, but I no Grisetete. Once I meet him, my friend, near dis place; he no see me. I watch him go in, and I come here many days and watch him so. I fear to speak—to show myself—but I must see him; so I watch, and watch, and I learn many things. Monsieur Courtney see me sometimes, and he ask me once if I like something to do. I say yes, wid my heart jumping when he tell me; because if I wait on you, Mam'selle, perhaps I oftener see my friend. But I no see him till I out, and your woman, and den we meet—oh, mon Dieu, so near! He see me plain, he look at me, he start, but he no pretend to know. He pass on, and I go too, wid oh! such broken heart!—for I love him, Mam'selle. I have no heart for anything since, but still I watch, because I fears, oh! Mam'selle, I fears for dis club."

Ellen smilingly put back the tear-colored purse.

"I cannot take it, Anne—so doing would deprive me of the happiness I feel in earning what I now obtain; but I thank you for the generous offer, and we will love each other more dearly than we have yet done."

Nor could further persuasion from the maid induce the young mistress to accept the gift.

"I cannot understand it," said Anne Flanagan to herself that night in her apartment; "that child is making me almost like what I used to be. O God! that I might be good once more!" and she clasped her lean, tawny hands together, and paced the floor till her excited feelings became somewhat subdued.

If Howard in his hurried visits observed the implements of his sister's work, and suspected the source whereby she was enabled to permit him her remittances with his own, he passed no comment; nor would she enlighten him, even restraining Anne Flanagan's indignation at his "willful blindness," as the maid termed Howard's lack of observation.

But Vinnette saw and marvelled at the industry, one day saying, in her broken way:

"Ah, Mam'selle, you are very good. Once Vinnette was so, too; but dat is past. She only broken hearted girl now—she no more know peace, no go in church now, no say prayers—no notings but tink," and the gray eyes filled with the tears which it was evident had of late been no stranger to the poor young girl.

Anne Flanagan had gone to Mrs. Boland with Ellen's work, and the two girls were alone. Ellen stooped for a crayon that had fallen, and the pearl rosary which had been one of her mother's birthday gifts to her, dropped from her pocket; Vinnette reverently picked it up, and with a fresh burst of tears, put it into Miss Courtney's lap.

"Mon Dieu!" she said, covering her face with her hands, "I once say beads, too; morning, night—oh, so good—but now—"

She knelt by the little work-table, and bowed her head upon it in such a broken-hearted way that the tears sprang into Ellen's eyes, and she bent forward, saying, in her sweet tender way:

"You can be good again, Vinnette; and God will receive you back and help you to be good; and He will love you all the more when you turn to Him."

The French girl shook her head, and there drifted into her face a hard expression, which seemed to change the whole contour of her features.

"Ah! Mam'selle," she said in a listless manner, "you no understand it—you no pure, so good. You shudder when you hear my tale," and she affected a tremor to give more expression to her words.

Ellen bent till her lips touched the throbbing brow on the table—till her arms encircled the trembling form, and then she said, earnestly, tremulously, but still sweetly:

"Our dear Lord will understand you, Vinnette. He pities you now for the suffering you endure, and is holding out His arms to receive you."

The French girl started up, wound her arms about Ellen's neck, and with her streaming eyes lifted to Ellen's face, she said, as rapidly as her imperfect knowledge of the language would permit:

"Mon Dieu! you win me with your goodness—you embrace Vinnette; no one before do dat—people frown—say bitter things—my fader curse—here dey call me Grisetete; but Vinnette no such ting. I tell you my tale, and den you know how Vinnette feel."

She unbound her clasp from Ellen's neck, and again sunk on her knees by the table, keeping her eyes on the floor, and nervously toying with her fingers while she spoke:

"My moder die when I little—only my fader and I den. We live together for long time, so happy, so good. My fader very excellent man, and he love me so. We not live in our place, we have nice place in de country, and friend from England send his son for health to our place. De son, ah! how good, how nice he was, and how I love him; but we children den. After, he go to college to Rome, to make priest, day say; and den I feel so bad. But I pray to God, and I good still; and my fader love me so. My young friend he stay one, two years away, and den he come back suddenly. He stop at our place, because it on his way to Paris. My fader kind to him, and he kind to my fader, and him to me. Ah! mon Dieu, how I loved him den. But he so changed—he all for books, and for something he has in his head—tapping her own forehead, without looking up—"dat he thinks about all de time. He no tell me what it is; no tell his fader, who angry because he leave Rome. Den I learn dat he comes to Paris. I wish to come too. I think about it all day and all night. I no speak to my fader, for he no let me come. But I remember friends in Paris, and I write to them. My fader promise me home, and I come; but no find my friends. Ah, mon Dieu! but I have broken heart den. I return to my fader, but he no love me like he used; he no believe my story, and no one dat live dere believe it—dey look at me so—burying her face in her hands for a moment. "I not stand it! I come back to Paris, and find work—to do sometimes with English ladies who no speak French, and sometimes I sew and dey pays me well. I no go near my friends; I lives by myself, and people calls me Grisetete, but I no Grisetete. Once I meet him, my friend, near dis place; he no see me. I watch him go in, and I come here many days and watch him so. I fear to speak—to show myself—but I must see him; so I watch, and watch, and I learn many things. Monsieur Courtney see me sometimes, and he ask me once if I like something to do. I say yes, wid my heart jumping when he tell me; because if I wait on you, Mam'selle, perhaps I oftener see my friend. But I no see him till I out, and your woman, and den we meet—oh, mon Dieu, so near! He see me plain, he look at me, he start, but he no pretend to know. He pass on, and I go too, wid oh! such broken heart!—for I love him, Mam'selle. I have no heart for anything since, but still I watch, because I fears, oh! Mam'selle, I fears for dis club."

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time in the face of the facts presented, but he looked unconvinced.

There was a young priest from Ireland present, who had followed the story with the keenest interest, and after it had been finished, he remarked that he believed it to be quite true, and that, moreover, he believed that such happenings were not at all uncommon. He maintained that even the material science of the day took cognizance of those things in their theory of environment and its effect on character.

"Of course," he observed, "I do not mean that they believe in the spiritual character of these phenomena, but in their theory of the influence of environment, there is much which is very similar to the theory illustrated by the pastor in the story he has just told."

"If these experiences are so common," retorted the curate, "it is very peculiar that no one in my present company has experienced them. Even the story that the pastor has told so realistically is on heavenly evidence."

"If you want evidence with regard to these phenomena, read us some of the data which the Society for Psychical Research has published. Read the investigations of Sir Oliver Lodge and some of the foremost British American and Italian scientists—many of them rank materialists—and be convinced."

"I've read some of it," retorted the curate. "It's all bosh, filled with false philosophy from beginning to end. These men are merely groping for the light like moles in obscure cellars, and are shutting their eyes when they are in the face of the noonday sun, which is God's Truth. See what fools some of them are, even the cleverest. They were imposed upon by Palladino, the notorious Italian medium, who was an arch-fakir. Even the celebrated Lombroso himself was fooled. As for me, I never met any man whom I would consider sound, healthy and normal who ever experienced any of these so-called phenomena. They exist chiefly, I believe, in the disordered imagination of hysterical and abnormal people. The only difference between these abnormal people and the people in the insane asylum across the river is that the visions of the insane they are fixed hallucinations."

"I see, Father, that you're pretty much of a sceptic. Now, would I fall under your concept of a sane and healthy person?"

The curate laughed as he looked at the young priest, over six feet tall, handsome and well built.

"Yes, you could make my football team if I were forming one," he responded.

"Then, perhaps, Father, you will listen patiently to a little experience I had myself—somewhat along the lines of the story told by the pastor. I have never told it before, save only to my confessor, because I know the world is very skeptical about such things, and I have no desire to be considered a fool."

"Two years ago I was in Chicago, on my way West and I was traveling with another priest who belonged to the Leavenworth diocese. We intended to stay in Chicago only a night to break the long journey, as the weather was warm, and we were both tired after the run from New York. Neither of us knew that there was being held in Chicago at the time a convention of a masonic association until we found that all the hotels were crowded. We tried two of the largest, and they did not have a room to spare, and when we had received the same answer at a third, I said to the clerk, 'Can't you find us some sort of a room? We are only going to stay one night, and can put up with inconveniences. We are both fagged, and it's getting late.'

"The clerk hesitated a few seconds, and then said slowly, 'Yes, I can give you a room—but—its location is not very desirable. It has not been occupied for some time. There are two beds in it. If you wish to take it, I will have it made up immediately.'

"Certainly," I said, 'we'll take it. Anything at all will do for the night.'

"He called the bell boy and said, 'Take the gentlemen to six-twenty-nine!'

"The bell boy looked at the clerk in surprise.

"Six-twenty-nine?" he asked, hesitating.

"Yes, that's what I said," answered the clerk sharply, tossing the key on the desk.

"The bell boy took it without a word, and the elevator quickly brought us to the tenth floor. We followed the bell boy down the long corridor, and came to number six-twenty-nine."

"The room had evidently been closed for a long time, and I felt that there was some mystery about an unoccupied room in a crowded hotel. But it was a good, large room, with two beds, and we would be there only for one night."

"We went to supper while the room was being prepared, and when we returned and switched on the electric lights, everything looked cheery and bright. We finished the office, smoked and chatted a little while, and retired early, for we had a long trip ahead of us the next day and planned an early start."

"I don't know how it happened, but as soon as the lights were extinguished, I experienced a cold chill, and a certain feeling of indescribable terror took possession of me. The windows were open, and there was a

little breeze stirring, but the curtains swayed back and forth so regularly that they seemed to be manipulated by invisible hands. Once I thought I heard the patter of feet in the room, and I sat up straight, in bed, but I saw nothing, and all was still. My nerves, I thought, were getting unsteady, and I began to try to get sleep by counting sheep, and employing every other device that I could think of. Meanwhile, I could tell by the stentorian breathing of my fellow traveler that he was voyaging safely in the land of Nod.

"Had I been alone I would have arisen and turned on the electric lights to dispel the haunting shadows that filled the room, but I was ashamed to awaken my companion and admit my fears. A cold breeze blew steadily for an instant, and I fancied that the door opened, and shut. I sat up in bed and stared at its white outline. No one had entered so far as I could see. My nerves were certainly unstrung, when such vain imaginings could lay hold on me."

"I lay down again, blessing myself and resolutely shutting my eyes, resolved to pay no attention whatsoever to all these vain imaginings of an overstrained fancy, when I became conscious of the rocking-chair in the room swaying back and forth. It is true, it stood near the open window, and the breeze might have started it swaying, but I could not persuade myself then or since that this was the case. During a part of the night it rocked incessantly. If I had had sufficient courage, I would have pushed it away from the open window, for I tried to persuade myself that the breeze was causing it to move."

"I tried in vain to sleep, and found myself now with eyes shut, now with eyes open, staring into the darkness, as I heard the rocking-chair move or the floor creak as if someone walked on it or the mysterious footstep, soft and light on the rug. Far below us, the noises of the city gradually died out. In the early part of the night I could hear the clang of the electric cars, the tooting of automobile horns, the cries of the newsboys, and the thousand and one nocturnal noises of a great city. Now all was becoming silent."

"I had heard ten strike, and then eleven, and then twelve, and the city was still. Several times I was on the point of dozing off after twelve when one of the mysterious noises within the room would render me once more alert and sleepless. One o'clock struck, and I became aware of a presence in the room. The darkness in one corner seemed to gather, till it achieved a fantastic and threatening shape. Its size was gigantic. It seemed to touch the ceiling. I tried then to call my friend, but my voice failed. I tried to compose myself, to persuade myself that I did not fear, but I was really frozen with horror. I could no longer persuade myself that the presence was a creation of my imagination. It was really tangibly something objective and external. Once I thought the shadow drew near, and a cold hand passed over my face, but I blessed myself, and it retreated."

"Smaller and smaller it grew, but more and more clearly defined. It was assuming figure and shape and the shape was that of a woman. I could see her face now, but not clearly for it was turned from me. She was looking toward the door. She wore a long flowing gown of white, lustrous and dark. Her hair was turned toward me I saw that her face was beautiful but distorted with passion. Her hand was raised high above her head and in it there was a ghastly dagger. She turned her eyes toward me and the face took on such a devilishly hateful and malignant look that my blood froze. She seemed to advance toward me."

"Then I found my voice. I shrieked and my friend sat up instantly in bed wide awake. 'The shade paused and I saw the dagger fall and bury itself in the white bosom. There was a subdued groan and the sound of a fall and the vision disappeared.'

"My friend jumped up and turned on the light. I was absolutely unable to move, but lay there white and shaken after the terrible experiences of the night."

"After a while I followed my friend's example and arose and dressed. Meanwhile neither of us had uttered a word. Finally I asked, 'Did you see it?'

"The woman?" he said. 'Yes, I saw her. What a devilish expression on her face. I shall never forget it.'

"Then I observed that his face, too, was white and that he was trembling."

"We left the accursed room as soon as we could and sat the remainder of the night in the lobby. The night clerk was all apology when my friend reported to him that we could not sleep in the room. The hotel man admitted that the room was never occupied, and said that he did not understand how it had been given to us; that no one was able to sleep comfortably in it."

"My friend without narrating our weird experiences asked him what the complaint of others had been and the clerk responded that a young woman had committed suicide in the room some years before under peculiarly tragic circumstances and that the room was believed to be haunted. The clerk added that some people had asserted that they saw a woman in the act of plunging the dagger into her breast, but he observed that these people probably knew the story and were victims of their own

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