

AMBITION'S CONTEST

BY CHRISTINE FABER

CHAPTER XXVII.—CONTINUED

Brother Fabian visited us once, as you must remember. That visit disclosed to me that even he loved my boy. But when I, encouraged by that fact, would have presumed on it, to win some hopeful word for myself, I was sternly reminded that there was a great barrier between us...

Again Mrs. Courtney's hand sought the bosom of her dress. This time it brought forth a little ivory case attached to a gold chain of delicate workmanship. She paused before she opened it to beg to Ellen, who was now kneeling beside her, and to say with a voice that threatened again to fail her through emotion: "Never since the wretched night upon which your father left me, twenty-three years ago, until I received the news that Howard had become a priest, have I suffered even my eyes to look upon this. I wore it near my heart, but I would not look at it lest the agony of separation from my husband should become more unendurable, and because I fancied that I ought to shut it away from my sight until I could imagine myself to be more worthy of him."

She pressed the spring, and the case parted to show a face that seemed strangely familiar to Ellen—a youthful face, more youthful even than Howard looked, and bearing a very strong resemblance to the latter, particularly in the expression of firmness which marked the lower part of the pictured countenance. But it was not the fact of that resemblance which made Ellen so familiar to Ellen; it was something that caused a feeling almost akin to pain, and she bent with passionate eagerness to endeavor to evolve some recognition from the painted features. It flashed upon her at last—the remembrance of the stranger who had accosted her in the grounds of Ashland Manor, and though the latter had appeared much older than he whom the picture represented, the similarity in the expression of the faces was sufficient to proclaim the identity. She started up with a glad cry, and flinging her arms around her mother's neck, she said brokenly: "I have seen my father!"

Moments elapsed before she could recover herself sufficiently to give to astonished Mrs. Courtney an account of that singular interview. "You have seen your father," tremulously repeated Mrs. Courtney, when she had learned all that her daughter could impart; "and perhaps he was not able to sever us all completely from his thoughts, else why should he revisit my early home?"

Ellen was again bending over the picture. Now she understood the feelings by which she had been actuated when she had been so singularly accosted in the grounds of Ashland Manor, and why he, who styled himself the "stranger," had spoken to her in such a manner. Emotions pressed upon her too deep for utterance, too wild for restraint, and her whole soul seemed to gush forth in the cry which thrilled even through Mrs. Courtney's own astonished feelings: "Father! father!"

CHAPTER XXVIII. UNCLE AND NEPHEW

The singular story of Mrs. Courtney's life was the next day told to the young priest, and the treasured miniature disclosed to his astonished and entranced view. It was all so like some thrilling fiction, utterly unsuspected to the matter of fact in which they lived, that he felt almost disposed to regard much of the tale as the effect of a too ardent fancy, wrought upon by long and severe suffering; but the very evidence of that suffering so visible in his mother's appearance, in her manner as she recounted her tale, compelled him to believe her statements, and he too, like Ellen, was overwhelmed by strange and wild emotions.

Later in the day, when, having reported himself at the cathedral, he turned his steps in the direction of the Brothers' Institute, portions of his mother's story seemed to float before his mind like detachments of a strange dream whose impression could not be effaced. He was impatient to see, and yet he unaccountably shrank from a meeting with the religious, whose near relation to himself he had so recently learned, and not sure, from what his mother had told him, that the Brother would desire his kinship to his old pupil to be known by the latter, he was somewhat in doubt as to the manner in which it might be expedient for him to meet Brother Fabian.

Thus, actuated by doubt he ascended the steps of his old school, pausing, ere his hand sought the bell, to allow the swell of singular feelings in his breast to subside. The autumn sunlight showered upon him as he stood on the stoop; the voices of children at play on the wing below came up to him together with the hum of traffic in the adjacent streets, and the gray buildings of school and church loomed up with the same grim fronts they had worn in his school days. There was little change, save that some of the neighboring dwellings were a newer and more fashionable exterior; but to him, who stood in such strange hesitation, what changes had not time brought! When last his feet had pressed those steps he was a youth, panting to follow wherever his wild ambition would lead, believing himself to be fatherless, and little dreaming that the religious who exercised such unwonted care over his studies had a nearer and a dearer interest than any possessed by the mere tutor. Now, he was a man, seeking only to pursue heaven's will, expecting the return of a father, and about to meet, perchance, the embrace of an uncle. He raised his eyes to the clear sky, while a flush, born of the gratitude in his heart, burned for a moment on his cheeks.

He rang the bell. It was the same mild-faced porter who had been there in Howard's time who answered the summons. Howard trusted to the changes which time had effected in his appearance to pass unrecognized—for he was too full of strange emotions to desire to receive the welcome of the Brothers till he had first met his uncle, and he was not deceived. The porter did not recognize him, but conducted him at once into one of the reception rooms.

"What name?" he asked, as Howard seated himself where his face was in the shade. "None," was the reply, "a person who wishes to see Brother Fabian." Brother Fabian came. His quick, elastic step, once so familiar to Howard, and now not forgotten, sounded in the hall; his tall form darkened the doorway of the reception chamber; his dark, stern face was turned towards the silent figure in the corner; still Howard made no motion. He waited till the religious had closed the door and advanced to the centre of the room. Then the young priest arose, and flinging back from his forehead the wavy clusters of hair, he extended his hands with a softly murmured: "Uncle!"

Rapid and strange was the transformation in the dark, stern countenance of the Brother. His cheeks flushed to the red glow of animated youth, his eyes sparkled with a strange blending of tenderness and passion, and he, too, extended his hands, not to grasp Howard's, but to fling them about the latter's neck, while there broke from his lips a passionate heart cry: "At last—my nephew!"

Long was that interview; for many were the questions pertaining to Howard's life abroad, to the circumstances of his ordination, which Brother Fabian asked; but there were no other inquiries, no allusions even, as to how and when Howard had been informed of his relationship to the religious. The latter seemed to avoid all such topics, and the young priest, observing that, forbore himself to broach them. But at length the uncle conducted his nephew to receive the welcome of the other religious. To the latter, Brother Fabian still remained Howard's old tutor—for, not having acknowledged the kinship before, he shrank from proclaiming it now. The young priest received a warm greeting from those of the Brothers who had been in the institute in his time. They had little difficulty in remembering the clever lad whose over-studious work had well-nigh caused his death within their own doors, though they did not so readily recognize in this all healthy-looking young man, the delicate boy for whom even some of their own number had predicted an early demise. It was a new subject for joy when they learned that his first sermon was to be preached in the Cathedral—the church which the Brothers attended—on the following Sunday.

He could hardly tear himself from their kindly importunities, and it was only when the fading sunlight announced the close of the autumn day that he found himself at last descending the steps of the Institute. Every ring which sounded at the door of the old house on the battery caused Mrs. Courtney's heart to palpitate wildly, and sent her to the entrance hall to learn who the applicant for admission might be, even before the domestic could inform her. Ellen, knowing the cause of this anxiety, shared it, and mother and daughter's strange eagerness was not unnoticed by Anne Flanagan, who, with her old habit of talking to herself, muttered: "They're looking for the messenger!"

And Anne had still an anxiety of her own. Confident, from the manner in which Ellen shared her mother's apparent watch for the coming of some one, that Mrs. Courtney had imparted her confidence to her daughter, she feared that from that confidence Ellen might have learned sufficient to know that Anne's own story had not been an entirely truthful one, and she looked nervously for some evidence from her young mistress which should prove that her surmise was correct. She did not fear that her tale had been repeated by Ellen to Mrs. Courtney, for Ellen's own word, pledged not to repeat that confidence, was sufficient to reassure Anne.

O'Connor, according to orders received from his mistress, had speedily installed Dick Monahan in a position suitable to that gentleman's capacity. Honest Dick would have preferred now to assume his own name, but his betrothed, averse to making any explanations till she should be prepared to announce the time of her marriage, desired the retention of his alias, and the faithful lover willingly obeyed. So four days of the brother's and sister's first week at home passed, and Saturday arrived—the day before that on which Howard was to begin, for the first time, his priestly duties. He had gone to the Cathedral on business pertaining to the morning, and Ellen and her mother were busy with some details of the household.

A sudden and sharp ring sounded at the hall door. It was enough to make mother and daughter start and simultaneously hurry to the balustrade that overlooked the entrance hall. It was the messenger. Both caught the gleaming of the embroidery on his cloak, as the domestic ushered him into the parlor, and turned to convey the card to Mrs. Courtney. But that lady, pale and breathless, and followed by Ellen, was already at the foot of the stairs. She seized the card from the man's hand, and only waiting to assure herself that the inscription upon it was the same, and to motion to her daughter, who, undecided whether to advance, had remained midway on the stair, to follow her, she hurried to the parlor. The domestic went below to recount what had occurred to his fellow-help.

"Faith, I'm thinking that what with the children coming home, and Master Howard being a priest, Mrs. Courtney is not herself at all. Sure, you'd think she couldn't wait to walk, but that she must fly to meet that strange man, whoever he is. She just snapped the card, without a word, and herself and Miss Courtney is in the parlor with him." O'Connor, as he frequently did, assuming the privilege which length of time in his present position conferred upon him, reproved the domestic for passing any comment, but at the same time, he was himself deeply engaged in noting upon the circumstances, and he looked over at Anne Flanagan, who had also heard the remarks, with an expression which seemed to indicate that she could explain the mystery if she would. But whatever were the thoughts of the woman, she betrayed them neither by word nor sign. In the parlor was a singular scene. In the centre of the room stood that strange, foreign-looking figure; his black eyes glistening, it might be from emotion, and his tawny face slightly flushed, perchance, from the same cause, for Mrs. Courtney had already brought Ellen forward as the daughter of him from whom that card had come, and had poured forth, in touching language, the message she desired to be returned. "My pledge is fulfilled," she cried, tears of joy streaming down her cheeks, "and he can no longer delay to fulfill his. My son is a priest; he will preach his first sermon tomorrow, in the Cathedral. Tell him that his children know all, and they wait to receive their father. Four-fold love shall be given him, and in the happiness of the future we will all forget the past."

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neat or clever or good-looking a girl as herself? It had been hard to leave her widowed mother, to be sure, to say nothing of her younger sisters and brothers; and of course there had always been plenty of work for her, as the eldest, sometimes a good deal too much, she used to think, to do at home. But what easy, happy work it had been, after all, she thought now, to help to keep the little house tidy, to dress the little ones for school, feed the chickens, pick out the weeds from the flower-beds in front of the door, or water the gay-blossomed little border that lay all around the housewells beneath the wide-spreading, low-hatched eaves. And then there had been the long, happy, winter evenings by the fire-side, when the work on the little farms grew slack, and this neighbor and that dropped in for a chat and a smoke, a song and a dance, or a night of story-telling around the cheerily blazing fire of turf and logs in the wide, old-fashioned grate. Poor Ned Carmody, 'twas he that had been the finest step-dancer and rasciest story-teller of them all! And how different her own lot! In life might have been had she hearkened to his wooing and married him, instead of breaking his poor, faithful heart by deserting him as she did—all just because she was determined never to live under the same roof as her mother-in-law even though old Mrs. Carmody, sweet faced and kindly and good, would surely have been the easiest woman in the whole world to get on with! How happy she might have been!

And then there was dear Sister Rose at the convent, who had always made such a pet of her during her school days and after. And kindly, jovial Father James, whose cheery "God save all here!" as he stepped in over the threshold of their little home had been enough to gladden and uplift the saddest and heaviest of hearts. Was he alive still, she wondered. And if he could see her now, would he recognize in the hard-faced, world worn and bitterly disillusioned woman she knew herself to be to-day, the rosy-cheeked, blue-eyed, innocent little colleen of whose silken head of curls he had so often laid a kindly, blessing hand?

Her heart chilled within her as she thought of the terrible change he must discern in her, not only in her looks, alas! but in her heart and soul and mind. How many long years it was since she had last knelt to a priest in confession! And would she ever find the courage to it now, even were she given the opportunity?

Time and again a great longing had come over her to feel once more the happy sense of relief and uplifting which a good confession so wonderfully and almost miraculously brings in its train. But her heart failed her each time as she thought of the great length of years she had been away; and of telling her sins to a strange priest, as all priests were to her now—and had been almost indeed for the whole length of the twenty odd years she had lived in this desolate, sorrowful place, where, as some one had truly said of it, men and women were steeped to their very eyes in sin.

Well, she could only thank God that after all, she had never been quite as evil as some of them. Her sins were rather those of omission than of commission; and it had been so easy, after all, to slip out of the way of regularly attending Mass and the Sacraments in those first days in New York when her duties as waitress in a large hotel had kept her early and late at her work. She had seen more than a few of her companions drift away from religion in just the same way as herself, especially after a couple of them had been dismissed for going out to Mass on Sunday at an hour when the managress had appointed other duties for them. And then, when still a girl, she had married a man of alien religion, or rather of no religion at all, it seemed the easiest thing in the world to drift away altogether from the practice of the ancient faith which she had learned at her mother's knee.

What a foolish, wicked creature she had been! Yet, bad and selfish and heartless as her husband Tom had proved himself to be, she had at least always tried to be a good and faithful wife to him. Even after he had left her altogether for a younger and better-looking woman, she had still preserved the native purity and modesty which was her rightful Irish inheritance, working hard early and late to keep body and soul together at machine-work that was ill and grudgingly paid for. And though she had forgotten almost every other prayer that she had learned at her loving mother's knee so long ago, there was never a time when temptation came to her that she did not offer up a little petition to the Mother of God that she might help and save her at least from lapsing into a life of such terrible infamy and shame as she here saw on every side of her. That little whispered prayer alone, she knew, had saved her.

Ab, why had she forgotten the holy teaching and practice of her own beautiful faith, in everything else save in that! If she could only kneel before kindly Father James once more as in the happy days of long ago, and see his hand lifted to bestow the blessed absolution above her weary, humble head! She knew now that she was dying. Dying, though a young woman still, of loneliness and hard work and bruised and broken heart, and that she would not see her home, or the green fields, or kindly Father James, or any other the courage to send for one, who was

priest: for even could she summon there to deliver such a message for her, here in this awful place? Her neighbors, she felt she knew them, would simply laugh and shrug their shoulders at the silliness and simplicity of such a request. There was only one other Catholic, as far as she knew, in the place beside herself, and that was Mrs. Carroll, a very old woman who lived on the next story, and who used sometimes to pause as she passed her door to bid her a kindly "Good morning." But the old creature had been ailing for some time, and it was so many weeks now since she had seen her or heard her voice that she felt the poor old body must be very ill and bedridden, if not actually dead and buried without her knowing.

If only she could have come to her—yes, she might then have found courage to make her request, and tell her of the terrible longing that now filled her heart to be safely shrived once more of her sins. A little while ago she had yearned for the green fields at home. Now nothing else on earth seemed to matter save that she should go before her God with her soul newly shriven and made white. And again the little prayer to the Blessed Mother of God, the "Memorare," the one little prayer which she had not altogether forgotten, went heavenwards from her pale and bloodless lips. Almost before it was ended a low knock resounded on her door, and somebody came softly and gently into the dimly-lit room. Looking round, she saw, as though in answer to her prayers, a priest—no, not dear Father James, though she thought for a moment it was he—but a priest much older, with silver hair, and just as kindly and holy and sweet a face. "My child, you are ill, and all alone here!" he said in some surprise with a deep, rich, Irish accent, as he came forward and blessed her, his eyes resting with a pitying gaze on her worn and pallid features. "Is there anything I could do for you, poor child? I have just been upstairs visiting a poor old Irishwoman named Carroll, and she told me that you too, were Irish and a Catholic."

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