

AMBITION'S CONTEST

BY CHRISTINE FABER

CHAPTER X
THE FIRST THREATENINGS OF THE STORM

The sun shone cheerily through the long, narrow windows into Ellen's apartment when the young girl awoke next morning; it was brightening up the warm colors in the carpet, and sending its beams in the dancing way athwart the wall which made Ellen's heart glow light in spite of itself, and rendered her "Good morning" to Anne Flanagan more cheerful than she had herself supposed it could be. Breakfast, to which Howard had come, though obliged, he said, to hurry away immediately on its conclusion, was over; Taggart had carefully replaced the chairs, restored to the room its wonted look of quiet order. Howard had also gone, having first requested Ellen to give Taggart a written order for any book that she might require. So mistress and maid were alone when a little, quick knock sounded at the door. To Ellen's gentle "Entrez," there entered a young girl, apparently but little older than Ellen's self. She was slight in form, and had a bright sweet face, whose rich complexion was much enhanced by the vivid color of the ribbon in her hair and about her neck. She was gaudily, almost fancifully dressed, but there was something about her which made the gay costume seem quite suited to her—as if little fluttering-bows, and pendant ornaments, and bright colors, were a part of herself. She courted with a charming naïveté of manner, glanced with the bright, gay eyes quickly about the room, and said, in a low, sweet voice, rendered all the sweeter by the strong French accent which marked her tones:

"Monsieur Courtney, he recommend me here—say his sister desire waiting woman, and I come. I can do many things, sew like this—" she drew from a fancy satchel which she carried a strip of fine, white cambric, on which was an evidence of her neat and tasteful handwork—"and I can purchase for Mam'selle—and I know dem ways of Paris, but Vinnette know dem, and Vinnette will do all that Mam'selle say—so the present to you Madam—" with one of her charming bows to Anne Flanagan, who sat looking at her as if she was another of the many curiosities which Paris seemed to possess.

"You are the person about whom my brother spoke to me," replied Ellen, gently, and to Vinnette's apparently great delight her services were accepted, and she was at once entrusted with commissions by both mistress and maid.

Strange and unnatural seemed the life which Ellen led during the ensuing weeks. Beyond a hurried visit which Howard paid her each day, she saw little of him; want of time, he said, prevented his joining her at meals, and when pressed to tell where he dined or supped, he said reluctantly that it was in a cafe where his companions took their repasts. But Taggart, with his usual communicativeness, told Ellen much more; and when she, disliking his familiar manner, and half indignant at the betrayal of confidence, of which, to her, his unasked communications seemed to be evidence, left the room, he continued to address himself to Anne Flanagan, who was by no means a reluctant listener. Ellen spoke to Howard of her growing dislike for the servant, and the circumstances which had occasioned her antipathy.

"I do not like that fellow myself," Howard replied, "and I think he knows it; but then he is the private servant of the most influential member of the club; the others of us are permitted his services, and so long as he performs his duties satisfactorily, it would be little use for me to raise my voice against him. He is not entrusted into our secrets, so there is little beyond a description of our mode of living that he can tell you."

But, could the brother or sister have seen the malignant glances which Taggart cast upon them when their eyes were turned in another direction, or have heard his muttered imprecations at times when Howard had spoken sharply to him, or Ellen had resented by her cold, dignified manner his undue familiarity, both would have been most anxious to have him dismissed their service.

Long and lonesome were those Paris days to the young girl, accustomed to such a different mode of life. Music, with which she had been wont to pass sad and solitary hours before, was denied her here, because *The Club*, some members of which were engaged in study during almost all hours of the day, must have perfect quiet.

"I did not think that at first," said Howard, regretfully, "and it is only piece-meal as it were, that you yourself will realize all that you have sacrificed for me, and then you will regret it."

"Never, Howard," and the earnestness in her tones attested the sincerity of her reply; "I can fill my hours with study as you do—see, I have already begun."

She pointed to a table on which was spread an array of open books. He smiled as he glanced at their contents, and saw that they were treatises on subjects whose depth and abstractness usually deter female minds from even a light perusal, much less the close study which

Ellen seemed to have given to them, judging from the numerous notes marked in her hand on the margin of the pages.

"I am aiming to reach the times," she resumed, with an arched look at her brother; "though I shall not allow these grand ideas," pointing to the volumes, "to interfere with the practice of my religious duties."

Her brother did not laugh as she had supposed he would; even the smile faded from his lips, and he strode gloomily out, to the indignation of Anne Flanagan, who said:

"He might let you have a civil answer, any way, when you've given up so much for him."

"All in time, Anne," replied Ellen, striving to speak cheerfully, though her brother's abrupt exit pained her to the heart; "we will not lose faith in him, and perhaps one day God may bring him back to his own old self again."

Miss Flanagan doubtfully shook her head.

"It isn't for him I'm sorry," she said, "it's for you—he'll waste your life in this horrid place, and there'll be no good done for him either."

Ellen put her hand over the maid's mouth.

"Do not say that Anne, for we at least shall have done our duty; and God, you know, always rewards long, patient effort."

"Does He?" returned the maid, averting her head, and then she retired to her own apartment, in order to discontinue their conversation.

Ellen grew pale over her close study and want of air and exercise, for, save the morning Mass, which she attended as soon as she learned the way to the nearest church, she went out little. Vinnette, who came every day, accompanied by Anne Flanagan, but oftener alone. Thus the life grew irksome, with only its dull routine of books or dainty needlework with which to fill the hours, but the patient girl suffered no murmur to pass her lips; and she carefully revised the letters which she weekly sent home, lest a chance word might betray her utter weariness of soul and body. Howard never wrote now, alleging want of time and matter—"for," as he was wont to say when his sister importuned him on the subject, "I have nothing to write about save my health, and that is, as you know, excellent just now; so you can say all that for me."

Mrs. Courtney's replies contained no reproaches. A few words of loving advice to Ellen, a brief remembrance to Howard, and nothing more.

One afternoon that Anne Flanagan had gone out, and Ellen sat wearily poring over some musty book which Taggart had that morning brought her, Howard entered to pay one of his hurried visits. He seemed startled by the white face and heavy eyes his sister lifted to him—by the utter listlessness of her manner.

"You are not ill?" he said anxiously, putting his hand on her head.

"No," she replied, smiling faintly, "only a little tired."

She closed the volume, rose and walked to the window, that he might not further contemplate her weary-looking countenance.

Howard flung his hands behind him, and paced the floor in that quick, nervous way, which Ellen knew betokened fierce excitement on his part. She looked at him a little fearfully. How strong-looking, how manly he had become. It seemed to her before, and she found it difficult to reconcile this fair, ethereal-looking boy of three brief years ago, with this strong, athletic, though still pale-faced young man.

"Ellen," he said, continuing his walk, and speaking more as if he was answering his own thoughts than addressing himself to her, "I have done wrong in attempting to retain you with me right in the face of the sacrifices I foresaw you would be compelled to make; but your devotion to me touched my heart, and of all the pangs I have given to other dear ones, I could not bear to wring your heart by this one of separation from me. Then it was pleasant to have your presence so near; your smiles and tones when I could snatch a moment to enjoy them. I brought you here, because anywhere else days might pass ere I could procure time to see you. What our work is I cannot divulge; a little of its purpose may tell without breaking the bond of secrecy to which I am sworn."

He still continued to walk, his face flushed with the ardor of his excited feelings, and his eyes flashing, while Ellen listened with her lips apart, and the silken lining of the window curtain beside which she stood reflecting its crimson glow upon her cheeks.

"It is," he continued, speaking more rapidly, "to do that which shall not only cover the names of the performers with glory, but which shall effect a change for which the thanks of a grateful people will be everlasting. Our influence is increasing, our *will* is making itself felt, and one day Howard Courtney's name will occupy a place in the annals of the world's history as the name of one who lived for a purpose."

He paused in his walk, standing before Ellen, though he did not look at her, while he continued:

"A little while longer, and it will be in my power to give you a brighter life; to surround you with young companions. You have shared my voluntary exile—you shall be the companion of all my triumphs."

He waited her reply. None coming

he resumed gloomily, still without looking at her:

"You do not reply; you are indifferent alike to my triumph or failure; you have no encouraging word to stimulate my efforts."

She answered him then, but with a voice so full of emotion that its tremulousness threatened each second to break forth in a sob:

"When you speak of glory, Howard, I hear the rattling of the sods on newly-made mounds; and when you mention triumphs, which are to be won at the expense of everything that is true and pious in our natures, I see the name of which you speak only on the coffin-lid. How can I answer such speeches as you make? You talk of the 'march of intellect' as you call it, but how can I applaud, how dare I encourage, when that intellect ignores even the gratitude it owes to the God who has so generously made it?"

The peculiarly low, tremulous earnestness of the tones in which she spoke, compelled him to look at her; her face wore the same expression it had worn when her kneeling figure in the hotel at Sorrento had won him by its pure influence. That influence was winning him now, with an irresistible power from which he sought to break; he conjured up the brilliant dreams with which his life was fraught, summoned Ambition's will counsel to his aid, and said hastily:

"You are a fanatic, Ellen; when you are older you will understand these things better. But my time has expired," consulting his watch, that he might turn his eyes from her pleading face, and, with a hasty adieu, he left the room.

While Ellen, still in the position in which Howard had left her, was sadly thinking of the erratic course he was pursuing, Anne Flanagan entered in a state of violent excitement; she could scarcely quiet herself sufficiently to allow her fingers to untie her bonnet.

"I declare, Miss Ellen," she burst forth, "your brother has brought up a pretty piece. There's that French girl some home sick because we met Mr. Bronson—that lit the lamp when it was broad day-light—and he wouldn't notice her. And she's crying and fretting about some harm she's afraid will happen to the club. I couldn't make out what it was, and I don't think she herself quite knows; but it appears she's got some special interest in this Mr. Bronson, and for his sake she's been secretly watching everything the club's been doing. She wouldn't tell me so much, but she felt so badly when he passed her by. It seems it's the first time she met him, though she was watching to see him before we came. Then that Taggart says there'll be big times here after a while, and I wish you and me were well out of it." And Miss Flanagan giving her shawl an indignant fling across her arm, went hastily to her room.

Poor Vinnette's swollen eyes and pale face, when she paid her accustomed visit to "Mademoiselle" the next morning seemed to attest the truth of the incident which Anne Flanagan had so indignantly narrated; even the little fluttering bows, which had been so important a part of her costume, hung limp and careless as if the wearer had lost heart to arrange them in their usual pretty manner. To Ellen's kind query about her health she answered in a pitiful way, which almost won the sympathy of stern-faced Miss Flanagan:

"Not sick, Mam'selle, but so heavy about de heart." That was all the information she would vouchsafe, though the curious maid sought to make her impart more.

Taggart had almost every day the news of another member having been elected, or of one seeking admission to the club.

"They have a wonderful society," he said one day to Anne Flanagan, when, as usual, Ellen had retired from his unwelcome communications.

People talks of them abroad, hand great men comes 'ere trying to see them. They have invited to make their grand speeches in other places, hand that's the reason Mr. Courtney is haway so much lately, for he's the best speaker of them all. Oh, he talk grand—even in the French language, people say; hand they got talents, hand a splendid mind, hand can make wonderful speeches; so that sometimes rich young fellows gets turned haway." And Taggart, as usual, went smilingly out, closing the door softly behind him; but outside, in the little deserted passage-way, the smile immediately faded from his face, the malignant expression came into his eyes, he raised his clenched hand, and shaking it threateningly at the apartment he had just left, muttered between his teeth:

"You carry yourself 'igh with your American hairs just now—hand your brother speaks to me—hand I was a cur that wasn't worth his notice, but soon I'll show both of you what I can do—hand won't it be sweet to take down some of that pride." He shook his head in a self-satisfied way, and went forth with his wonted smiling face.

THE BOLD BURGLAR

Doctor Gilhooley, rough and ready, his Scotch tongue sharp as a razor and his heart as big as all outdoors, threw his outfit into his black bag and with some last words of direction to the good neighbor who was in charge of the sick woman, he left the house. He looked at his watch. It was two hours on the case, over since 11 o'clock. He was glad that the call had come before he retired, as it was much easier to start off at 11 o'clock at night than to tumble out of bed at one in the morning. The night was brisk and cold and a good stiff breeze was blowing. The doctor dropped his bag for a minute and buttoned his fur coat tighter around the collar. No one was abroad, but a passing policeman who stopped and looked at the doctor suspiciously for a minute, till the doctor laughed.

"What do you take me for, Jim, a burglar?"

"Hello, doctor, it's you, is it? How are you?"

"I'm fine, Jim. Happy New Year. You must have known I'm an honest man by the cut of my coat, for if you had suspected I was a desperate highwayman, you wouldn't have stopped so long looking at me. You'd be running to the other end of the town as fast as your legs could carry you."

The officer laughed. He was accustomed to the doctor's sharp sallies.

"You'd run pretty fast yourself, doctor, if you saw a highwayman."

"I would not," answered the doctor testily. "I've read a lot in stories about them, and I'm anxious to meet one in real life just to have a talk with him."

"It would cost you something."

"Not much," answered the doctor. "I haven't much to lose. To have money nowadays you must be on the police force or in the fire department, or be a member of the carpenter's union. A professional man never has a cent. Any burglar is welcome to all I have in my pockets and to my Ingersoll in the bargain and cheerfully, but a respectable and honorable burglar such as I want to meet, would probably give me a good one of the eight or ten such a gentleman would be likely to possess."

The officer who had been walking along with the doctor stopped to make his report at the box, while the doctor passed on into the night, in the direction of his own home. Whether his chat with the policeman had excited his apprehension about burglars, or whether it was a mere chance, or the result of an unconscious habit, he did not know, but as he pushed open the little wooden gate to go up the path across the lawn to the front door, he paused for a moment and looked about. To his surprise he saw that the grating over one of the cellar windows had been removed.

He hesitated an instant and looked up and down the street. No one was in sight. His first impulse was to go back for the policeman he had just left, but somehow after his railway talk to the officer, and his experience with the man who had been left in charge of stealing, he was reluctant. It would be hard perhaps to find the officer just now. And suppose his fears were mistaken. Suppose there was no burglar. He would be the laughing stock of the neighborhood. If this were the work of a gentleman of the profession, certainly he must be an amateur to do such a crude job, and leave outside the house such evidence of his presence. Perhaps, through the careless oversight of old Elsieph the housekeeper, (in his heart he knew this was not, and could not be the case.) The doctor was really as brave as a lion and fond of adventure, so he crossed the path, took out his keys, unlocked and quietly pushed open the front door.

Just inside the door was his office. The door of the office was closed, but as he looked a bright flash of light swept for an instant across the transom. This light gleam, through the frosted glass revealed beyond all doubt the presence of the burglar inside the office. There was another door to the office, opening from a corridor which led from the doctor's study. This door was seldom closed and was concealed from view by heavy portieres. The doctor tiptoed to the kitchen, where he removed his shoes, and thence to the study where he armed himself with a heavy stick, for he had a distaste for firearms, and never kept them.

Down the corridor, the doctor crept cautiously till he stood at the portieres and peered into the room. In the dim moonlight he saw the slight figure of the burglar bent over the desk in the middle of the room. As the doctor watched, the intruder desisted from his search among the papers on the desk, and went toward the little safe in the corner. With his key he unlocked and began to turn the knob and try the handle. The doctor smiled grimly to himself there was nothing in the safe even if the burglar opened it, but the burglar was a bungler. All in vain he rattled the handle and twisted the knob and finally he rose to his feet, apparently disgusted.

The doctor saw him clearly outlined in the moonlight. He was a slight figure and the doctor felt that there was not much to fear in a trial of strength. Still he waited till his opportunity was safe, and then leaping from his concealment, he brought the burglar to the floor with a bang, and stood watching him as he attempted to rise.

"Lemme up," he gasped, "I quit."

"If you move," said the doctor savagely, "I'll put a bullet through you."

A shudder ran through the bold burglar and the doctor rose to his feet. The burglar, too, started to rise, but the doctor roughly commanded, "Don't move till I get you or I'll shoot."

Obediently the burglar stretched on the floor of the office till the doctor switched on the electric light. He then gazed at his prize and his first feeling was one of quick pity. The stretched figure of the poor lad presented, but his tongue was as caustic as ever.

"Stand up, now, you young villain and murderer," he roared.

The lad rose to his feet and covered his face with his hands. Great sobs burst forth from him and tears trickled through his grimy hands.

"I ain't no murderer," he cried, "I'm a gentleman burglar, I am, like 'Once before,' scolded the doctor, though he was tempted to laugh at the gentleman burglar. "How dare you enter this house at night? What did you do for?"

"I was hungry," sobbed the lad, "and I had been reading of the adventures of Arsene Lupin and Raffles, and I wanted an adventure, too, besides getting a feed."

"How many times have you been on these midnight adventures?" questioned the doctor sternly.

"Once before," wailed the lad. "I got three two-cent postage stamps and a flashlight. I got nothing at all here. Honest to God, mister, I didn't find a thing."

"Of course you didn't," said the doctor. "You should have known better than to have come to a doctor's office looking for money. If you had been a real gentleman burglar you would have tackled a plumber or a frowd, or a jeweler, or a shoemaker, or a wealthy and privileged classes, and left the poor alone. I'm going to telephone to the police. You'll have to go to jail."

"O, please don't mister. I'll never steal any more if you let me go."

"Bosh," snapped the doctor. "You don't expect me to take the word of a dishonest boy, a thief, do you?"

"Arsene Lupin and Raffles never broke their words," said the boy proudly, and he looked the doctor in the eye, "and I won't either. If I give you my word, I'll keep it. Cross my throat!" and he made the sign of the cross over his throat with his thumb.

"Where do you live?" asked the doctor.

"Nowhere, sir. My father is dead, and my mother is dead, and I ran away from the home where they put me when my mother died. That was a month ago, I guess, and I have been living on the streets ever since. I've been selling papers and shining shoes and I clean sidewalks—and—Oh, don't make me go back," he wailed. "I don't like the home. They're all kids there and I'm a man. I'd rather go to jail."

The doctor walked up and down in perplexity. This was the most aggravating case he had had to diagnose for a long time. He was a good judge of human nature—what city doctor is not—and he believed every word the unfortunate lad had told him. There was a pair of very honest blue eyes watching him from out that grimy and tear-stained face which bore the marks of starvation. The whole unimpeachable and neglected appearance of the lad was a witness of the truth of what he said.

The doctor took up the transmitter. If he telephoned to the police, there was a simple solution of the difficulty. He laid it down again. He could not. He knew that the lad would be put in a cell, thrown into contact with criminals, and he dreaded the result even of a night. Too often he had witnessed the failure of reformatories to reform, too often he had seen boys like this emerge from the institutions that were supposed to reform them, worse than when they went in, with the stain of a "record" forever against them. He did not like to picture the lad before him photographed and measured for police records and the finger tip impressions made so that the next time he went wrong they would have more evidence against him.

God! It was not fair. This lad had never had a chance in life. Yet he was a good bright-looking boy. If he handed him over, he was sending him to perdition. And what if he had broken into a home? Was he not starving? Was it any sin for a starving man to steal? And even at that what was it that induced him? Was it not the hunger of the soul of the lad as well as the hunger of the body? Was not the poor starved soul of the lad longing for a break in the monotony of existence and for some of the pleasures of life which he had never tasted? Was it not the natural hunger of a lad for romance and adventure which prompted him to those acts of theft rather than any real malice. He glanced again at the lad who was leaning against a chair eyeing him curiously as he paced up and down.

"Sit down," he said. The boy obeyed. The doctor was something of a boy himself.

"Let me see the outfit of the gentleman burglar."

"The what?" asked the lad.

"Do you mean to tell me that you are a pupil of the great Lupin and Raffles and yet have not provided yourself with a gentleman burglar's outfit—with keys and a jimmy and a—"

The lad groped in his pockets and from one after the other he pulled out an assortment which he placed on the doctor's desk. There was the tiny flashlight, a couple of rusty old keys and a blunted paper knife.

"There was not a decent thing in the whole outfit, not even a skeleton key. The doctor smiled at the collection.

"What did you use this for?" He pointed at the paper knife.

"I tried off the screen in the cellar with that," answered the boy promptly.

"Is that all you have in your pockets?" asked the doctor.

The boy's pale face turned red and he dug down again into the depths and this time to the doctor's amazement he produced a common little mother-of-pearl Rosary.

"My mother's," explained the lad briefly as he bent his head. He was crying softly again.

"Shame on you, lad! and you a Catholic to be stealing! What would your mother think of that?" said the doctor gently.

There was no answer from the boy but a fresh gush of tears. Up and down paced the doctor. The boy had captured his heart.

"What would Elsieph say," the doctor kept asking himself. Elsieph was his old housekeeper. His wife had died shortly after the marriage and he had never married again. Elsieph had ruled the house with a rod of iron these many years. What would Elsieph say if he kept the child?

"Laddy," said the doctor kindly, "come along down with me to the kitchen and we'll get a bite to eat, I'm hungry."

To the kitchen the strangely assorted pair and the lad ate ravenously of the sandwiches which the doctor made, and of the pie which they found in the pantry.

"Will you promise me, laddy, not to run away if I let you stay here for the night?"

"I promise, sir," said the lad, with the blue eyes frankly looking up into the doctor's gray ones.

The last thought of the doctor was, "Jails make criminals and I don't want this lad to be a criminal. What the deuce will Elsieph say?"

The next morning Elsieph was astonished to find a ragged urchin a guest at breakfast, but knowing the doctor did a great deal of charity work—at which outwardly she often grumbled but inwardly was delighted—she said nothing.

After breakfast the doctor brought the lad to the pastor and told the story. The pastor had a talk with the boy and like the doctor was favorably impressed by him.

"Why don't you keep him?" queried the pastor. "He would be good company for you in the great house and he has no home."

The doctor hummed a little.

"Well, I don't know," he answered. "I'd like to, but it is a great responsibility."

The pastor, outwardly very grave was smiling inwardly, for he knew Elsieph and he knew the doctor, how he was ruled by her.

"I think," he said abstractedly, "that the lad would be a help to Elsieph. She is getting old now and he would be a great help. He could run the errands and answer the phone and tend to the furnace. Of course he would have to go to school, but even with that he would have plenty of time. I think I will drop in and see Elsieph myself this morning."

"Would you, Father?" queried the doctor eagerly. "That would be very kind of you," he added with marked relief. "Elsieph has the greatest regard for your judgment. Though, of course, if I decide upon reflection to take the boy," he added still again, belligerently, "I won't care whether she likes it or not; but—"

Poor Elsieph was flattered by the visit of the pastor, who called to consult her about the case. He pictured the poor, homeless lad and suggested that he would be of great assistance to her and said that she would be doing a great and noble act of charity if she would induce the doctor to keep the child. The pastor shook his head dubiously at this part of the conversation, and said that men were very selfish as a rule.

"The doctor isn't selfish," cried Elsieph, indignant at the covert attack on the doctor. "Oh, indeed, he's too charitable! I have a hard time to see that he doesn't give the house away as well as his time and money. He'll keep the lad. I'll see to that!"

The doctor after a little persuasion by Elsieph, gracefully yielded with a gesture of resignation and agreed that they should keep the lad. Poor Elsieph with her heart of gold took him to herself as her special charge, and the boy reciprocated the affection of the old lady and the kind doctor.

As far as I know the doctor does not belong to any charitable association. He has no affiliation with organized charity. He has no millions to leave for philanthropic objects when he dies. The general public does not know his name nor his work. The pastor and curates of the city parish where he lives are constantly discovering his charity as

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