

AMBITION'S CONTEST

BY CHRISTINE FABER

CHAPTER IX

THE FIRST GLIMMER OF SECRETS

Anne Flanagan was indignant when she found that berth had been secured for them on the vessel plying between London and Havre, and that from thence they were going to Paris, where Howard had provided a temporary home.

"To that jibbering place," she said indignantly, "where a body'd lose their power of speech for the want of some one to understand them. I don't know what your brother can be thinking about."

"Nor do I," said Ellen, sadly. "Howard will tell me nothing of our future."

Miss Flanagan sighed, and thought regretfully of O'Connor, whose services to herself were so efficient during their previous sojourn in Paris. They arrived safely in the gay capital, and Howard, who seemed to have learned so quickly the business-like ways of the world, gave his orders in just barely intelligible French, and the party was rapidly driven to some quarter which appeared to be situated in the very centre of the city. It was with such diffidence that Ellen went to Paris that she had no heart to view the busy scenes through which they passed. The very sunshine, streaming so cheerily upon everything, had lost its wonted power of gladdening her under almost any circumstances and any sorrow. The bright afternoon itself might as well have been night, for everything to her looked so dark and cheerless. She nestled to Anne Flanagan's side, and scarcely suffered her eyes to glance from the cab window.

The vehicle drew up at last before a high, dark looking building, the entrance to which was peculiarly constructed, having side passages branching off to suites of apartments, which were built upon the ground floor. The porter emerged from a gloomy looking alcove, when more dark French—so far as regarded the Parisian accent on Howard's part—was heard and the party was conducted through one of the branching corridors to a carved gilt-inlaid door at the extreme end. A bell was pulled from some recess at the side, and was answered by the door being opened by a man in English livery.

"Oh!" he said, in unmistakable Saxon tones, "I didn't expect you so soon, Mr. Courtney, but everything is ready."

Howard, dismissing the urbane porter, strode past the liveried servant with a curt "thank you," and ushered Ellen and Anne Flanagan into a large and somewhat pretentiously furnished apartment. There were velvet-cushioned chairs with gilt backs, and gilt ornamented, curiously twisted legs; sofas of ancient, cumbersome construction, utterly unlike the light, French make of their companions; the chairs; tables of burnished wood, whose polished surfaces reflected images of the great lamps which depended from the ceiling, all placed without any regard for taste, or even order, on a loosely laid down carpet. There were long, deeply cut, niches in the smooth, white walls, and most of the contained marble statuary—gracefully draped females in an inspired attitude, or warriors fiercely posing some death implement. A single picture was hung in the apartment—a great masculine head, painted in vivid colors, with black, living eyes, which would rivet the most careless attention. The windows—there were but two in the apartment—were narrow, extending from the ceiling to the floor, and were almost concealed by dark, heavy curtains. A row of hangings hid one corner of the room, for what purpose it was impossible to perceive. There was an ample fireplace, in which were materials for building a fire, and above, on a tier of black marble which jutted out from the wall, stood a pair of antique vases, a withered branch of palm in one, a faded bouquet in the other. But the striking peculiarity of the apartment was an elevated platform situated at one end; a light of velvet-covered steps led to the raised work, and it fancifully ornamented railing enclosed what was, apparently, the orator's stand. There was a strange air about the apartment—something so chill and grave-like in its surroundings, as if the latter were relics of a past age, and Ellen, shivering, fancied the faded flowers in the vase emitted a sickly, fetid odor. Even strong-minded Miss Flanagan drew her shawl tighter about her shoulders and whispered to Ellen:

"This is a ghost-like place."

"This is our assembly room," said Howard, pausing that his companions might look about them; then turning to the English-looking servant, who stood respectfully by, he said in a lower voice:

"Is any one in the study?"

"Mr. Brownson," was the reply, in as low a tone.

Howard stood for an instant as if irresolute in which direction to guide his companions, then muttering, "There can be no harm in showing it now," led the way to the part of the room which was concealed by the arras hangings. He lifted the drapery quickly, and the party stood within a much smaller apartment than that they had left. That which first attracted their view was a young man seated at the table which occupied the centre of the room. He was reading a ponderous tome, whose open pages covered the breadth of the table. His back was turned, but he appeared young from the contour

of his magnificently shaped head and the delicacy of his profile, which was partially turned to their gaze. He was evidently not aware of their entrance, for he did not change his position nor lift his eyes from the volume. Howard whispered to Ellen:

"Fear not disturbing him; just now he has neither eyes nor ears for anything but that which he is doing."

It appeared so, for the party walked about the apartment, glanced at some of the titles of the volumes which lined its sides, and examined the busts that adorned the hanging shelf in a corner, but the silent reader remained motionless as though he were the sole occupant of the room. Ellen and Anne Flanagan marvelled at this strange indifference. The latter refused to believe that it was not assumed, and, with her customary boldness, she stood before the student in such a manner that her form obstructed the light which fell from an irregularly shaped window upon his book. He stirred uneasily, brushed his eyes without looking up, and finding that the obstruction still remained, sought for the tinder-box which was attached to a patent constricted lamp placed on a stand near the table.

Then he lit the lamp in an absent, though methodical way; drew the towel which the peculiarly subdued light fell upon its contents; put his white, emaciated hand again under his brow, and continued to read in the same absorbed manner. Miss Flanagan was horrified. She grasped Ellen's hand, and, without pausing to see if Howard followed, hurried into the apartment they had left. Howard laughingly joined them.

"He is an uncanny being," said the maid, "and there is something fishy about the whole place."

The liveried servant laughed, showing his white teeth in an unpleasant manner, as he said, in tones which surprised Ellen by their familiarity:

"The lady will not be so frightened when she's ere awhile: will she Mr. Courtney?"

Howard did not reply, but turned hastily to one of the modes of egress from the apartment, motioning his companions to follow.

They found themselves in what appeared to be a suite of three apartments, each communicating with the other by means of sliding doors, which, now being shoved back into their grooves, permitted the party to view the three rooms at once. They were of the same size, moderately large, and furnished with the same deficiency of taste, which was so apparent in the "assembly room" as Howard had termed the main apartment. Furniture of antique and modern make were indiscriminately mingled, and ornamented with costly and petty value were placed side by side.

The heavy, stolid face of the domestic increased in rudeness, as he said, in more respectful tones than he had yet employed; "I dare not disobey."

Howard bit his lip, and beat the floor impatiently with his foot:

"Well," he said, at last, "open my room. I will be responsible for your disobedience in this case."

"Very well, sir," replied the man with alacrity, and detaching a key from his bunch, he hastened to insert it in one of the numerous doors which were ranged about the sides of the apartment, but which, being the exact color of the walls, were not at first sight plainly distinguishable, the white door swung easily back, disclosing a small, plainly furnished apartment. A bed, or rather a pallet from its meagre size and plain covering, occupied a corner; an unvarnished table of common wood another; a cushioned chair of the same material a third; while the fourth was occupied by a stand, whose shelves were filled with articles pertaining to a chemist's laboratory. A case of

cumbersome volumes occupied an entire side of the apartment, and a draped stand beside the table held a lamp similar to that which the queer occupant of the study had lighted. A single octagon-shaped window admitted light into the apartment. Through it could be seen the boughs of a stunted tree, that grew in the courtyard without, and the curtailed courtyard without, and through it streamed pleasantly enough the sunshine on the uncarpeted floor.

"Your room?" said Ellen, in frightened tones; "was it mentally contrasting its poverty-seeming appointments with the elegancies of his apartment at home; the velvet carpet, the silken drapery about his bed, the ornate, and Parian beauty of the articles with which his room at home was adorned."

"Is there something in it so very terrible?" asked Howard, laughingly, as they withdrew, and the attendant locked the door and put the key in its accustomed place on the bench.

His sister made no reply till they had again entered the room which he styled hers, and he had shown her a mode of egress by which she could pass to the street without entering the assembly room; then as she seated herself on one of the antique-fashioned sofas, she said sadly:

"As I said in England, Howard, I cannot understand your conduct. I know not why you should choose such a queer mode of living here, in preference to your own happy home where every gratification awaits you."

He glanced towards Anne Flanagan who was busily investigating the appearance of Miss Ellen's toilet table, and making sundry angry ejaculations when she discovered some articles missing—then he said in a lower tone:

"You will know all in time; and now you have but to express dissatisfaction with my arrangements, and I will send you home—it is not yet too late."

He spoke brusquely, rising as he did so, and looking towards Miss Flanagan, whose indignant expression betrayed her dissatisfaction with the arrangements.

"When I say that I do not understand you," said Ellen, reproachfully, "I do not mean that I wish to leave you."

"Enough," her brother answered, pressing the hand she placed in his clasp; "one day it may be in my power to repay this devotion: for the present a French girl—who speaks English, though imperfectly—will wait upon you at certain hours of the day to perform outside errands which you may have, and I have engaged Taggart to attend to the matter of your meals. That is he now—as the tinkling of a bell announced the desire of some one without to enter."

Howard opened the door, which led to some passage that gave egress to the street, and in a moment the liveried servant, with his ruddy countenance and white teeth, entered, preceding an apparently grotesque procession. There was a boy wheeling a carefully covered stand beside which walked two smiling gentlemen, whose spotted gloves and short white jackets told at once their profession. Within the apartment the services of the boy were immediately dispensed with, and the polite, smiling waiters proceeded to arrange the dinner for three. The *cuisine* had been evidently artistically prepared, and the tempting odor of the viands caused Miss Flanagan, who had at first looked sorrowfully on what she had supposed a meal not fit even for servants, to take her place with alacrity. The odd repast was conducted with undue state, but Ellen was able to partake of but little. The peculiarity of the situation in which she was placed weighed upon her mind, and there was something in the smiling face of Taggart, as he bent to know her wishes, which caused an undefined fear in her heart. But the meal was concluded, the portable stand covered again and wheeled away, the boy reappearing to perform this service, and the polite waiters, followed by Taggart, departed.

Anne Flanagan waited till the sound of their receding footsteps had quite died away; then, with a little less indignation than had characterized her tones two hours previous, she said:

"Is this the way we are to be served every day?"

"Exactly," laughed Howard, "breakfast, dinner, and supper will be wheeled in and out as this meal has been."

Miss Flanagan planted her foot down firmly on the tapestried carpet: "I tell you, Master Courtney, that your mother will be sorely grieved when she hears of these doings."

Howard laughed again. "Ah! Anne," he said, rising; "even my mother has yet to learn that Howard Courtney's will can be controlled by nothing save death."

He turned to Ellen, saying: "I cannot return to you before night," and he went out to the assembly room in a manner which showed that he thought he had already overstayed his time.

Miss Flanagan's indignation could no longer be controlled. Was this a prison to which Howard had brought them? It seemed so from the outlandish way in which things were done. Why could he not have hired respectable lodgings, where Ellen could be attended by servants at least like those to whom she had been accustomed?

Because he wanted me very near him, I suppose," answered Ellen from the couch on which she wearily reclined.

"Because no such thing," replied

Miss Flanagan, in a shrill tone, as she came and stood directly before her young mistress; "but because he has the same element of selfishness in his nature which has been in another member of the family; because it suited his purpose to place the irate woman elevated out there."

The irate woman elevated out there!" she repeated, "I know that the very you give him is wasted—lost upon him, as many another has been before it. Unconsciously to herself, her voice had assumed a sadder tone, but it was gone in a second, and she continued in her wonted shrill, indignant accents: "And such a home to provide for you—full of uncanny, unnatural things. Faugh! this very room smells of the faded things they have stuck in the vase out there!"

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always hat such deep work; hand they're so secret. At first they didn't want to 'ave you so near 'em, but Mr. Courtney 'e carried his point on conditions that hafter the first day he'd never let you henter the hassenibly room again; so you'll hafways find that door locked, hand no key that you 'ave will hopen it." He pointed to the door between Ellen's room and the main apartment.

"They never let their private rooms be seen, honly when by special permission some of the members brings hin ha particular friend, and then they can honly show their hown room; and Mr. Courtney knew it was has much has my place was worth to show haf the rooms to-day when he asked me. You seen the withered flowers hand the palm hin the vases—that's Mr. Brownson's whim: he will 'ave withered flowers and such things haround, to remind his brothers, has he calls 'em 'ow soon everything fades hexcept great thoughts. Oh, his queer!" and Taggart laughed and showed his white teeth in that unpleasant way again, while his fair listener felt relieved when the evening repast was wheeled in, accompanied by the same polite waiters of the previous meal.

Miss Flanagan's curiosity was aroused despite her efforts to the contrary, and she scrupled not, when every vestige of the supper had been removed, to place her ear against the panelling of the door which opened into the assembly room, to discover if possible what the muffled sound of voices which issued thence portended. Ellen remonstrated, but Miss Flanagan persisted, replying:

"It's my duty, child; for we don't know what this club, as that Tag—that's his name, calls them, may be trying to do."

But her sharpened hearing was unable to render intelligible the sounds she heard, or to distinguish Howard's voice from the others. Twice she fancied she caught the familiar accents, but it was only to be assured in a moment that the tones were not his; and at length she relinquished her efforts to discover what the transactions of their meeting might be, and seated herself beside Ellen, whose mute expression of anxiety touched more chords of sympathy in the woman's heart than the latter cared to acknowledge even to herself.

TO BE CONTINUED

BETWEEN THE SANDHILLS AND THE SEA

An Irish Story by Alice Deane

It is nowhere easier to lose one's way than amongst sandhills. Even in the comparatively small stretch that lies between Dangonnell and Tulloran landmarks are difficult to recognize, and wandering there one day in search of the old Abbey, we found ourselves circling round us on the shore, a man was driving a donkey laden with dripping seaweed, and as they were following a path leading in our direction, we waited to ask our way till they were within hail. "The Abbey is it? Faith then, 'tis a contrary way to be goin' from this." The old man, shrivelled and bent, pulled himself upright on his stick to answer our questions. "May be 'twould be best for yees to come along of me to the high road above, and I'd set you on your way. Without that ye'll be wastin' to go climb them banks till ye see Con Tierney's fishing cot lyin' on the shore, then, when ye come to the last toepod on the right, ye'll not take it, but wheel to the left a bit further on an' ye'll see the ruin foreinst yees; only there's an ugly gripe an' a couple o' walleens—"

But we decided the longer way round was certainly more desirable, and turning, followed Peter Keane, as we learnt the old man's name to be, in the direction we had come. He was the holder of five acres of land, for which he paid 50 shillings a year to the agents. Landlords are rarely names in those parts, all are absentees, most of them having never set eyes on the place or the people who supply the incomes that are spent elsewhere, indeed it might well have been at Tulloran that the man, when asked if there were any absentees, replied with conviction, "Absentees is it? Troth then the place is full of them."

From our guide we learnt that there was a Mrs. Keane, and that a "long" family had been reared in the cabin which was pointed out to us "over beyond." They were all dispersed now, ten sons, and a girl, and "An' ye may be talkin' of the screecher her mother let when that one was for to go! Didn't they hear them every step of the way from this to Dangonnell?"

"But had she to go?" we asked, "Couldn't ye have kept her when you only had the one daughter?"

"Kept her? Kept her is it? Wouldn't we have kept her, an' heart welcome, only she had no taste for poverty and hardship, the creature, an' what else had we to offer her? There was no had in it, but just her own free will. 'Bless me, mother,' says she, 'an' let me go, says she, 'but don't ask me to stop any longer in slavin' names an' want.' So we took the cross that herself had bought the time the mission was in Bullhaun, and the girlarher knelt down till we raised it up over her head, an' called down the blessing of God upon her, mornin' an' evenin' at home an' abroad; an' after that she quits out of it, an' legs it down the road, an' never an eye did we lay on the one of them from that good day—nor never will."

"Do they write to you?" we enquired.

"Well then they do, an' never forgets us at the Christmas. How could we live, else?"

That might be said, I think, in every family along the coast. How could any of them live on the barren bits of holdings if it were not for the money that comes to them from abroad?

On reaching the highway, we waited to receive instructions before parting with our guide, but having come so far he announced his intention of accompanying us all the way.

"G'wanomerat!" He emphasized his parting word to the donkey with a whack of the stick, mercifully in a place where there was a comfortable padding of seaweed. Evidently the animal understood this adjuration, for it proceeded immediately to go along home out of that, whilst its master led us once more in the direction of the sea.

A dull haze hung over the islands that blocked the full stretch of the Atlantic, but between them the waves showed grey and leaden, with angry ridges of white foam. The islands themselves are merely stretches of rock, bleak and rugged, without vegetation or sign of human life. In the bay, where gulls and terns had come for refuge, there was a big heaving swell on the incoming tide, and even where we stood, the dash of water sounded on the rocks with sullen roar.

The founders of the Abbey had done well in choosing their site, if they wished to live remote from the world. With the sandhills behind, and broad seas before, the rest of Ireland seemed no nearer than the country across the ocean, and one really felt the graveyard to be on the brink of eternity.

The builders of old did not lay their foundations in the sand; they chose the only head of rock for many miles, and piled their masonry upon it, at the point where it juts farthest into the sea. Then the westerly gales blew in, flying sand gathered in layers round the walls, and when graves came to be needed, it was in the sand, hardened by time, and bound to firmness with bent-grass roots, that the bodies were laid to rest. Nothing remains of the monastery that once was there, little even of the Abbey itself. There are two gable ends pierced with early Norman windows, where ivy has grown up, and sea and land birds meet and quarrel and finally nest; and between these ends, with a broken wall around it, is a great gray altar slab, weather-stained and worn, but with the five crosses of consecration still imprinted upon it.

Newer graves seem to have been dug over the old ones, but all are now smothered in weeds and nettles. Some of the mounds have bare crosses over them, some slabs and heavy ugly monuments, but many, nay most of the graves are nameless.

One reason for our visit was to seek the originals of some epitaphs we have seen in a magazine, said to have been copied from tombs at Dangonnell; on paper they were delightful, but truth compels us to acknowledge that they did not exist on stone.

One of the best run as follows: "Here lies Luke O'Neill, who was drowned off Boffin, and buried at sea, without even a coffin."

The nearest to this that we could find was a slab put up to the memory of one Patrick Melia, of whom it was recorded that he was washed off the fishing smack, Rose of Carna, and his body was never found; underneath, in newly-carved letters, was added, "And of Annie Melia, his wife, who also lies buried here."

Outside the ruin, and almost hanging over the sea, is a great lichen-covered stone, so old that its lettering is illegible; here we sat to rest ourselves and to listen to our guide's talk.

A commonplace modern headstone was beside us with a long inscription on it, lavish of adjectives.

"That's the schoolmaster's grave, an' he's as proud of it, as you please," we were told. "Never a Sunday all summer through but he comes walkin' out from Tulloran to see it still in it. He'll know the road well, when they come to bring him along, feet first, on the sticks."

With languid interest we read the praises of the late lamented Mr. and Mrs. MacManus, as set forth by their sons, but before the end our perseverance was rewarded.

"This stone is erected by Thomas John MacManus in memory of the above, also of their posterity back to 1641 when the family vault inside the Abbey was closed to them."

But the nameless graves were those that Peter Keane could tell us most about.

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