

AMBITION'S CONTEST

BY CHRISTINE FABER
CHAPTER-II—CONTINUED
THE COURTNEYS

Clasp her hands together till the delicate flesh was almost lacerated with her nails, she paced the floor, moaning, but in so low a tone that no sound was audible in the next room:

"Can it be, my God, that my hope is not to be realized? Punish me—send just retribution upon my head—but grant this one wish before I die."

She was about to kneel on the little prie-dieu which occupied a corner of the apartment, when a knock sounded. A man in liveried garb responded to her invitation to enter. He was of medium height, with a complacency which gave evidence of his good living, and a ruddy, pleasant face that betrayed his nationality as quickly as did his Irish phraseology. His abundant gray hair was combed in a fashion of his own on his wrinkled temples, and he had a peculiar habit, when addressing any person, of carefully smoothing down these forelocks, and now had his right hand so engaged, while, with a dignified courtesy, he said:

"The monk is below, ma'am."

"Very well, O'Connor," was the reply, in a tremulous voice, and waiting only to adjust the kerchief about her neck, and smooth the soft, dark hair, she followed the privileged retainer, and entered the parlor to meet the Brother, between whom and herself such an earnest conversation had been held on the day that Howard had been taken ill.

"Oh, Francis!" she said, extending her hands to him. He folded his arms against the proffered members and said sternly:

"That name is not mine."

"Pardon," she said, supplicatingly; "but old times revive so at every sight of you, that I almost forget you have become Brother Fabian since the moment you were taken ill."

She dropped her head, as if to conceal the agitation so visible in her face, but she lifted it in a moment, and said:

"Be seated; it is a long time since last you stood within this house."

"Eighteen years," he replied, pushing back the chair she proffered; and now, drawing his monastic cloak about him, "permission to pay this visit was granted as a special and peculiar privilege. I sought the permission because of the intolerable desire which, since the boy's illness, I have felt to look upon his face again. I fought with the strange yearning; I thought it conquered; but it flamed anew, and I am here to-night to see your son."

"Ah! you love my poor boy, then," she said, with a strange imploring in her tones.

He averted his face, but did not reply.

She approached him and thoughtlessly essayed to put her hand on his arm. He started back with a repellent gesture, and she, after a moment's pained look, sank on her knees, moaning:

"Is my very touch contamination? Is it part of the Order, to whose vows you are bound, that my early fault be thus constantly made a tool with which to wound my heart? Have I not been sufficiently punished by the sorrow of my early marriage days? and was not a greater one being laid upon my shoulders?"

"Get up, woman! This position does not become you!" and he held his cloak partially before his face.

"No," she replied, "this is my place—my place to implore the pardon of an offended God; to beg that He will not curse my old age for the sin of my youth—that He will save my boy from being a renegade to his faith."

The Brother started, letting his cloak drop suddenly from his face, and, stooping to the prostrate woman, he said in a low, eager voice:

"What mean you? What has suggested this idea to you?"

"His conversations are pregnant with heretic thoughts; his intellect aspires to grand achievements, and chafes at the bonds religion would impose. In time, perchance, he may cast his faith aside as a trammel which it would be unmanly to endure."

She lifted her face suddenly, and continued in a tone so fraught with pathos and earnestness that the monk's stern expression softened, and a commiserating look came into his dark eyes.

"Oh! my God! dear through my boy's life is to me for his own sake, and cherished through it is for the purpose which his living may achieve, still take him to Thyself ere he deserts the faith of his fathers, ere he renounces the teachings of Thy holy Church. Take him now, my God, while he is still innocent—my breaking heart will willingly yield him."

She buried her face in her hands, and the tears so long restrained trickled through her white fingers.

The monk waited till her emotion had subsided, and she had risen from her knees; then he said, in his peculiarly low tones:

"I must see Howard alone. Prepare him for my visit."

Gentle Ellen Courtney looked surprised when her mother requested her to leave Howard, but she withdrew silently, and in a few moments Brother Fabian was closed with the young scion of the Courtneys. The interview seemed very long to the anxious woman pacing the floor of an adjoining apartment, and

equally so to the wondering girl furtively watching her mother's face. She said at last:

"Mamma, why are you so worried?"

Mrs. Courtney paused in her erratic walk, then hurriedly crossed to where her daughter sat, and lifting the pale, sweet face, looked softly down into the clear eyes while she said:

"Oh! Ellen, my comfort, may God keep from your future the cause of anxiety which I have to-night. But do not look so frightened, darling; all will be well. Yes, all will be well," she said bitterly, in a lower tone, "when the anchor upon which I have rested my hopes has gone."

She turned away and resumed her walk.

Ellen gently followed her.

"May I not know the trouble, mamma, which—"

"No, no!" almost passionately interrupted Mrs. Courtney. "You can know nothing now. At some future time you may—till that time arrives never refer to this again."

Ellen sighed, but made no response, and continued to walk with her mother till Brother Fabian hurriedly emerged from the sick room. He bowed in his reserved, monastic manner to Miss Courtney, indicating that she might return to her brother, and descended with Mrs. Courtney to the parlor.

"Well?" the lady said nervously when the parlor door was closed.

"You must let him travel. Send him to Europe as soon as he is sufficiently strong."

"My God!" moaned the trembling woman, turning away that her blinding tears might not be observed. The monk resumed:

"You will accompany him?"

She turned suddenly, replying in a voice so choked with stifled grief that it was almost inarticulate:

"You know I cannot."

"Ah!" he said, almost sarcastically, "honor and probity hold potent sway now—and you are willing to sacrifice your children's interests to the pledge you so insensibly gave?"

"No; say rather that I am willing to atone for the wrong I did a noble heart. That I am endeavoring to win back the confidence of one who is dearer to me than life."

There came into her face such a worn, broken look that the monk shaded his eyes lest the compassion in their depths might become too visible. He replied:

"If you are resolved to persist in this fancied line of duty, and willing to allow your boy to travel unattended by maternal care, at least send his sister with him."

"Is it so imperative?" she asked, with sudden hope brightening her countenance.

"So imperative, that travel alone can ensure his complete recovery. So imperative, that it will be certain death if he is not in Europe by the coming summer."

"Then God help me, for I must let them go," was the heart-broken reply.

She did not proffer her hand to the Brother on his departure, nor did he extend his. When he reached the tessellated portico which led to the massive hall door, he turned to survey the vaulted corridor through which he had passed, pressed his hand to his forehead, and muttered:

"When again shall I stand here?" Then, suddenly resuming his former manner, he said to Mrs. Courtney, who had accompanied him from the parlor:

"Continue as you have done to let me know the state of Howard's health, and apprise me of the time when he will sail."

The weeping woman bowed her head, not trusting her voice even to reply to his cold "Good night," and the great door swung between the mysterious pair.

CHAPTER III

THE FIRST GLIMPE OF THE STRANGE VISITOR

There was a more natural sparkle in the convalescent's eyes, and a healthier flush upon his cheeks, from the time that his mother, with outward playfulness of manner, but with bitter, inward pain, had said:

"Grow strong rapidly, Howard; an ocean voyage is at hand."

"Do you mean that, mother?" he had asked with sudden strength in his tones.

"Certainly, my dear boy, and Ellen is going with you."

"Ah! I shall make a delightful little family party," and he leaned back on his cushions with a smile of satisfaction, evidently little dreaming that his mother was not to make one of the party. Dreading the surprise it would create, Mrs. Courtney refrained from acquainting them just then with her determination not to accompany them.

Much to the surprise of the attendant physician the boy did grow strong rapidly, was able to take brief drives, and ere long to make short excursions on foot, always attended by his mother and sister; and the window blinds of neighboring domiciles were wont to be covertly turned, that their owners might watch and descant on the—as they termed it—"idolatrous devotion" of the Catholic mother to her children.

But at length Howard was pronounced sufficiently strong to endure the fatigue of an ocean voyage, and Mrs. Courtney immediately began preparations. Loving little Ellen

was aglow with delight, and deftly sought to introduce her busy fingers everywhere.

"We shall be so happy in those foreign places, and the voyage will do

you good, mamma," she said, looking up from the trunk, in the packing of which she was endeavoring to assist.

Mrs. Courtney sighed, stooped a moment over the trunk, and then she was putting the trunk on wheels.

Then looked up, saying with such calmness as she could assume:

"My dear, it is not possible for me to accompany you."

Howard, who had been viewing his favorite scene—the bay—turned abruptly from the window, with a passionately muttered exclamation, while his sister paled, and stared aghast for a moment, then said tremblingly:

"But to whom can we look for guidance, mamma, on our passage over? Who will take care of us?"

"You will be obliged to take care of yourself, save such care as the servants who will attend you may be able to give, till you arrive in London, or Paris; in either of those places friends, to whom I have already written, will receive you."

"Why, mother," asked Howard, passionately, "can you not go with us?"

She answered with a calmness which she was far from feeling:

"For reasons which I will not state to you, but which are all potent to prevent my accompanying you, much as I should desire to."

She resumed her packing, but her trembling fingers seemed to retard the work she desired to complete so quickly. Howard had turned to the window again, but an angry flush had risen to his cheeks, and a frown was upon his brow as he looked abroad.

Ellen dropped silent tears on the little parcels she essayed to wrap, and a long and painful silence was maintained by the trio.

O'Connor, the gray-haired retainer, was summoned that night to the room of his mistress. He entered, pressing down his smoothly-combed forelocks as was his wont, and evidently wondering what could be the purport of such an untoward summons. When he learned that Mrs. Courtney desired him to accompany her children on their voyage across the Atlantic, surprise rendered him speechless for a moment.

"I can trust you, O'Connor," she said; "and for that reason I am sending you with my darlings. My own maid, Anne Flanagan, will attend Ellen."

"An' may I make so bold, ma'am, as to ax whether yourself is goin'?" Mrs. Courtney flushed.

"It is because I am not going that I have selected you in preference to a younger attendant for Howard. You have been with the Courtneys long—you have held Howard when he was a baby—you have seen him grow to his present years—for his own, and my sake, you will tend him carefully when he is far from home."

"I will ma'am—indeed I will!" and the faithful, old serving man bowed over the hand she held to him, and went softly out, with that mysterious feeling of awe about him which the presence of "the mistress" seemed always to inspire. They rallied him on his dispirited looks in the servants' hall, and at last he was roused from a lethargic silence into saying:

"It's a queer house, anyway, since the masher went so bargony."

"How did he go?" asked the plump little kitchen maid, who was a recent comer into the dwelling.

"Why, he wint without tale, or tidings of a goodby to anyone, and the next thing the mistress was in black, and the people said he was dead, though there was no one to prove it. And it's a queer house since that time, for quare people comes to it sometimes, an' altogether I don't like the looks o' things."

The wondering little maid extended her big, blue eyes, and was about to inquire further concerning the "quare things," but the old man terminated the conversation by abruptly leaving the room.

The wretched time—for Mrs. Courtney—of departure drew sadly near, and at length the eve of the eventful day arrived. The careful packing had been completed, and the youth, with unwonted brilliancy of spirits, was contributing to the mirth of the hour by anecdote and repartee while Ellen in compliance with urgent requests, sang simple ballads to her own accompaniment on the piano. Mrs. Courtney moved among the select throng with pleasant smiles and words, as if she bore no breaking heart beneath all. But the pleasant party separated at length; all the bon voyages, and oft-repeated wishes for the complete restoration of Howard's health had been spoken; the last carriage had driven rapidly away, and the mother was left alone with her children. They turned together from the door whither they had accompanied their friends, and walked slowly back to the brilliantly lighted parlor. Mrs. Courtney suppressed even the sigh which rose to her lips, closed the parlor door calmly, and thought to maintain the same calmness when she turned to her children. But one sight of Howard, who stood in a dejected attitude, looking wistfully towards her, swept away the stoicism with which she thought she had fortified herself, and she allowed full

vent to the emotion which she had been struggling to subdue. She hurried to where he stood, put her arms about his neck, straining him passionately to her bosom and moaned, while a torrent of tears fell on his upturned face:

"Oh! my son, how can I part with you?"

He answered, while tears sprang into his own eyes, and his voice grew tremulous as his mother's had been:

"It is your will that the parting shall be—but even yet it is not too late—cease this unmotherly mode of acting, and come with us."

She strained him closer to her heart.

"Press that subject no farther, for I cannot go. But," slightly releasing her grasp, and speaking in tones more touching than tender, "promise me, Howard, strict adherence to the principles of your faith while you are away, that no one of the ambitious dreams, with which your mind is so filled, shall come between you and your God—that the chimeras of the day, which may abound in the strange lands to which you are going, shall cease to influence you the moment they conflict with the teachings of your religion. Promise!"

Awed by the startling earnestness of her tone, the strangeness of her demeanor, Howard bowed his head and solemnly promised as she desired.

Pale, tearful Ellen, standing near, said, as if she were speaking to herself, when her brother had concluded:

"Was it necessary to bind him by oath to the duty he owes his God?"

Mrs. Courtney turned at the lowly spoken words, and answered, in as low a tone:

"Had he your simple piety, my darling, it would not be necessary. And then, as if again overpowered by some uncontrollable emotion, she drew one of her hands from Howard's neck, placed it about Ellen, and, kneeling, forced them to kneel with her, while she lifted her eyes to the stary night, just visible through the partially drawn curtains of the deep window, and said, in such passionate tones that her whole form became tremulous:

"Oh! my God! Thou who beholdest the secrets of all hearts, seest the anguish which is in mine tonight—knowest the hope which has supported my life for many a year—I petition Thee, in my sorrow, that Thou take both my darlings rather than one should prove renegade to the principles of his faith. A while ago I offered You but one; now I will yield them both, if Thou wilt accept the sacrifice, and refrain from inflicting a more terrible retribution."

She rose, kissed Howard who remained kneeling, and said:

"Go to bed now, my dear boy."

Then, drawing Ellen's arm within her own, left the room with the latter.

Howard continued to kneel, with his face buried in his hands, and his busy mind endeavoring to assign some reason for his mother's mysterious distress, and her equally incomprehensible determination not to accompany himself and Ellen. But persistent thoughts could solve no clue, and the youth, rose at last, repaired to the window, and stood looking out on the glimmering dawn. His thoughts reverted to the distant climes to which he was to sail on the morrow. His heart beat quicker with pleasant anticipations; his eyes sparkled at the prospect which he mentally beheld, of a wide field for his intellectual labor. But, alas! for his mother's hopes, and prayers, and tears, not a thought of the promise he had given her entered his mind.

His mother, who even then in Ellen's room was exhorting the latter to a careful surveillance of her brother's words and actions, saying:

"Your pure influence may accomplish that which my maternal love may fail to do, and your pure prayers may move Heaven's mercy and protection in his behalf, when my petitions would be spurned. Remember Ellen young though you are, you must take my place toward him, while you are away. Guard him for his own sake, for yours, and oh, for mine."

TO BE CONTINUED

IN MASQUERADE

It was a tall tenement in a busy Glasgow street, commanding a view of fields that had once been green, but now, abandoned to a carpet beater, represented only a dusty wilderness. A thin, elderly, shabby, genteel lady was toiling up the staircase, when a door opened sharply and a florid countenance emerged, its owner hurling at the ascending figure the pious supposition:

"When the Lord said we were to love our neighbor as ourselves, He surely did not mean that we should sweep the stairs in their turn!"

The lady paused to answer, rather nervously:

"If you are speaking to me, I really don't understand you."

"It pays no to understand sometimes," retorted the other. And in the midst of a ruffled stream of eloquence a bright faced young woman appeared, glancing from the irate housewife to the other, whose face wore a half-startled, half-scornful expression.

"You are Miss Gray, our new neighbor, aren't you?" she asked pleasantly adding, as the other person retreated with a swift and disturbing consciousness of touched hair upon torn and soiled hands in sharp contrast with the girl's dainty neatness. "Don't mind poor Mrs. Wilson. With seven sickly children and a very disobeient husband, she'd die

of suppressed emotion if she could not relieve her feelings by rebuking some one."

"It is all very strange to me," said Miss Gray, her hand trembling so that she could not unlock her door, and the girl did it for her. "Thank you! Do you also live in this building?"

"Yes; in the flat just over yours. There are only two of us. My name is Keith—Mrs. Keith. I shall be glad to be of any service to you at any time."

That was the beginning of Mrs. Keith's acquaintance with the old maid who had just come to lodge in the tenement, and had already earned the reputation of being very proud and distant. She had no intercourse with her neighbors, and kept her landlady at arm's length. A story that she had seen better days, and was living on the remnant of a fortune, found acceptance, and was considered to explain much. Out of her busy life Cicely Keith spared many minutes to brighten and cheer the old maid's lonely path. And Miss Gray always welcomed her, though she did not return the visits, excusing herself on various grounds.

One morning Miss Gray turned from an abstracted contemplation of the dingy street to admit Cicely, and greeted her with:

"I am so glad to see you! I was just thinking about you."

"Well, I want to give you an opportunity of proving that mind can triumph over matter, Miss Gray, by telling me how to renovate my voile gown so that it may be fit to wear at Lady Glydesdale's reception tomorrow. I have to describe the costumes worn at it for the Woman's Weekly, and I can't appear exactly in sack-cloth and ashes. You are so clever at suggesting improvements in dress that I thought it best to ask your advice, especially as I haven't a farthing to spend on the gown."

"H'm! Is it the only one you have," asked Miss Gray, doubtful of the possibilities of the well-worn voile.

"Dear me, no! I have a white silk, a mauve chiffon and a pink muslin, but they have been pronounced unfit for publication. You don't understand? My dear Miss Gray, if circumstances compel me to walk in mean attire, that is no reason why my heroines should, and so I bestow the loveliest raiment I could imagine on my latest creation. She, poor dear—and they are lying folded in brown paper on my desk, with a publisher's verdict, 'Not suitable,' write large upon them."

Miss Gray shot a keen glance at the "thin red line" along her friend's eyelids.

"I am sorry for your disappointment," she said kindly. "But some one else will accept the story, no doubt. How is Mr. Keith this morning? Still improving?"

"No," replied Cicely, her lip quivering—she held a corner of it between her teeth for a minute or two. "I am talking against tears, not time, Miss Gray. I mustn't break down, but if I stop to think I shall. Harry is so low and weak this morning that I doubt if there has ever been any improvement at all."

"I had no idea that he was so seriously ill; you never said so," exclaimed Miss Gray, almost reproachfully. "Wasn't it influenza that ailed him?"

"Yes, and he recovered from it to some extent, but he is not regaining strength. He can't sleep or eat, and the doctor says he will not until he has had a change of air. I had been hoping to receive sufficient money for that rejected story to take him away. Somehow my work has not been satisfactory of late, doubtless because I am too anxious about him to concentrate my energies and my thoughts on it; as a consequence I fail when success means more than it ever did."

"Why didn't you tell me sooner how you are worried and how weak he is?" Miss Gray asked, locking her hands together.

"I dislike troubling others with my troubles, but today I did feel the need of some one to speak to. I think that you have more sorrow, and therefore can sympathize with me in mine. I must not give way before Harry. The doctor looked so grave this morning when he asked, 'Can't you get him away from here?' And there—on my desk lay the answer—a rejected MS."

"Have you thought of anything that could be done?" asked Miss Gray, after a pause.

"I've almost resolved to pocket my pride and appeal to Harry's aunt, who, unfortunately, is estranged from him."

"Could she help you?"

"If she would. She is very wealthy, and he is her only living relative. It is rather a sad little story. She adopted him and brought him up as her heir. She was very proud and fond of him, and intended him to marry an heiress and enter Parliament. He married me in direct opposition to her, and she has never forgiven him."

"Why does she dislike you so much?" asked Miss Gray.

"There was no actual personal feeling in the matter," said Cicely. "She and I had never met, but she had an old-fashioned prejudice against women writers and thought that Harry might have done better than marry me. To her I was only, as she told me, a penniless nobody, who married him in expectation of getting her money, and she cast him off altogether. My relatives were displeased with me for marrying a man who had nothing of his own, not even a profession; so that it has been a case of Harry and me against the world."

"The aunt is a selfish, heartless, unjust old creature!" said Miss Gray, vehemently.

"Please don't say that. May not I seem heartless and selfish in her eyes? After all, Harry's marriage was a bitter blow to her. She could not know that I loved him for himself only, and would have married him had he been a pauper instead of the reputed heir of the rich Miss King, of Mansewood. Harry wasn't a bit used to roughing it, but we were happy as the day is long, able to laugh at our compulsory economies, without grief except the estrangements from our friends, until Harry's illness and its attendant worries began. All the time I have been asking Our Lady to say to her Son, as she did of old, 'They have no wine, and I must wait patiently for her answer.'"

Miss Gray pushed back her chair, her lips in a grim, determined line.

"Miss King of Mansewood, indeed!" she said contemptuously. "Well, before this day is over she shall have heard a piece of my mind! I will go to her and tell her what her plain duty is."

"Oh, no, you must not indeed!" cried Cicely, round-eyed with consternation.

"I will! I know all I want to know about her—enough to enable me to deal with her as she deserves."

"Dear Miss Gray, surely you will not betray my confidence?" pleaded Cicely. "You really have no right to make use of what I have told you. It was not my intention to cause you to think ill of Miss King. You must not intrude on her."

"I will make her admit that she is ashamed of herself before the day is over," persisted the old maid.

"You will only add to my distress if you attempt it," said Cicely; "Harry will be terribly grieved. When all is said and done, she took care of him when there was no one else to do it, and she is entitled to gratitude and consideration on that account, and no one has any right to reproach her. Can't you see that the world's respect, and justice, a stranger's interference? Do promise me that you will not go to her!"

"I will think about it," was the utmost concession the girl could obtain, and she went away discomfited and harassed.

Later she heard Miss Gray go out, and devoutly hoped that it was only some household errand.

Harry, pale and languid, noted the unusual shadow on her face, and held out a wasted hand to her.

"Darling girl, what care and anxiety I have brought upon you!" he said sadly. And then she soothed and comforted him with that cheerfulness which is part of the fortitude of patience.

Toward evening he fell asleep. The stillness of the room seemed to magnify external sounds—the roll of vehicles, voices, laughter, busy feet, all the stir and bustle of city streets.

Then came an imperious ring—a ring that sent a sort of shock through Cicely and brought to her eyes a look of dismay, almost of fear. Was it possible? Had Miss Gray really carried out her indiscreet intention? She opened the door with a sick dread upon her, before her eyes a white mist, through which she dimly discerned a figure in costly fur, with a gleam of gold on throat and wrist; an embroidered veil obscured the features.

"Miss King?" Cicely gasped scarcely able to articulate, and feathery plumes were inclined in a stately affirmative.

Cicely stood aside and permitted the visitor to enter. What would Harry say? Would he think that she had complained or grown tired of nursing him, weary of the struggle? Her neighbor had meant well, but what harm might she not have done? Tears blinded her, but Miss King stepped to the little bed room without a word. The unusual sounds had awakened the sleeper. He raised his head, so that the light fell on his attenuated features and over-large eyes.

"Aunt Marion."

He forgot the estrangement, the unkindness, every bitter word, and held out his hands to her in whom a thousand claims to love and gratitude met and were recognized and expressed in his action and his utterance of her name.

"My boy—my boy!" she sobbed, remembering only that she had held him as an infant in her arms; that he had filled her empty heart and life. And she cried over him, smoothed his hair, shook his pillow, tucked in the bed clothes as if he were still in her care. "You have been ill indeed," she said, huskily, stroking his thin hand.

"Oh, it isn't much—only a cold. But somehow I don't seem to throw it off as I should. It—it is good of you to come to see me."

"I am alone in my old age, Harry. I want you more than ever. Why should we longer be apart?"

He looked steadfastly at her.

"Won't you speak to my wife, Aunt Marion—to my dear, brave, true wife toiling late and early, always helping others, with none to help her; I, helpless, the lightest or least of her cares. Won't you speak to her for my sake, dear?"

"I'll speak to her—somehow—for her own if you will call her."

As Cicely entered Miss King turned to her, and the young wife started and recoiled. "I am ashamed of myself. I have been so for a long time, but I was too stubborn to admit it."

"But—but you are Miss Gray!" faltered Cicely.

"That was my alias, my non de plume—my what you will. Harry, I am supposed to have been enjoying a

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