

AMBITION'S CONTEST

BY CHRISTINE FABER
CHAPTER VI—CONTINUED

THE STRANGE VISITOR AGAIN

For Howard, true enjoyment had gone out of everything. It was apparent to the most casual observer that his gaiety was forced, and the very smiles which Malverton's mirthful sallies sometimes provoked faded ere they were well upon his lips.

"Was it illness of which he would not speak?" Lady Grosvenor affectionately queried, but Howard shook his head and took special care to evade all future questioning. Ellen had ceased her inquiries and remonstrances, for both had been impotent to secure satisfactory replies; she sought, by busying herself with such preparations for their return home as those in which she was capable of assisting, to banish her fears for her brother, and anxiously counted the days which must elapse ere their embarkation for New York. Between Howard Courtney and Malverton Grosvenor, opposite natures though the lads possessed, there existed a friendship almost girl-like in its warm attachment, particularly on the part of the English lad, to whom, ardent admirer as he was of genius in any form, there was something so brilliant in Howard's extraordinary talent that it excited his warmest admiration and love for the fortunate possessor. Inheriting but in a very slight degree his father's superior parts, possessing but a very ordinary ability for mastering knowledge even in its simplest form, and acquiring intelligence only by intense application, he yet possessed that which was worth them all for the insuring of happiness to himself and those about him. He had the generous, kindly qualities of his mother—her quick, ever-ready sympathy, and her benevolent disposition. It never occurred to him to envy Howard Courtney; knowing his own deficiency in native talents, he was content to acquire by persevering study such knowledge as he might, without even breathing a wish to be other than he was, and delighted when opportunity presented itself for the bestowal of his need of admiration on those whom Heaven had gifted. But simple and unostentatious as his character appeared to a casual observer, beneath all that courtly reserve and inimitable grace of manner which he inherited from his father, there was a depth and solidity which more brilliant characters sadly want. His friendships, once surely formed, were undying; his love of truth something marvellous in one who had so many and such gay companions; and his religious belief, as he had been taught it, something to which he lived strictly in practice as in thought. His applause of Howard had been more enthusiastic than that given by the other lads, and his praise of Howard's talents more frequently and glowingly expressed. Perchance it was owing to these facts that the latter reciprocated Malverton's hearty friendship, for there was in Howard Courtney's nature, as there is in all such natures, that which craves praise with an inordinate longing, and can know no happiness when every evidence of admiration is withheld. But warm friends as the lads were, Malverton was not aware of the cause of Howard's strange, disquietude, though he had affectionately pressed him upon the subject, until a day or two before their intended departure for England. They were sojourning in Sorrento, the last place in Italy in which a stay of any length had been made, and Ellen, on the balcony of the hotel was enjoying the balmy breeze which blew from the sea, when she was attracted by the sound of voices just beneath where she stood. Still as the scene was, broken only at intervals by the plying of some fisherman's oar, and the distant murmur of a miniature water-fall as it leaped down the rocks on the coast, the conversation was unintelligible. She bent from the balcony to discern more plainly the forms now emerging from the shade of the portico into the path that led to the shore, and recognized her brother and Malverton, both engaged in earnest, animated debate, judging from their excited gestures, Ellen, watching with breathless interest, saw that Malverton put his hand before his eyes, and return hastily toward the Hotel, while Howard slowly proceeded on his way to the shore. She turned from the balcony into the apartment from which it opened, and waited for Malverton's step to announce his approach. Then she met him in the corridor.

"Has anything occurred between you and Howard? I saw you from the balcony, and feared from your manner that there was some unpleasant feeling."

She spoke so timidly, with the color flushing in and out of her cheeks, that she suggested the idea of a frightened fawn to the youth. This voluntary addressing him was so unwonted that for Ellen Courtney to do that, that it rendered him silent with astonishment for a moment; then, with his usual strict adherence to truth, he answered:

"I wish I could say, Miss Courtney, that there was nothing the matter; but something has arisen between us which has rendered me exceedingly uncomfortable—not upon Howard's or my own account, but on account of those whose life-long love and hopes are bound up with him."

Seeing her white lips about to part for further questioning, he hastened to add:

"I think you will learn it all from your brother."

She dropped her head and turned back to the apartment, while Malverton passed slowly to his room. Howard returned ere long, and at once sought his sister's apartment. Flinging himself into the chair which she had vacated on his entrance, he begun in the passionate manner which had become habitual with him of late:

"I am not going home with you, Ellen."

All the undefined fears which had been so long in her heart were assuming palpable shape now; but with a calmness which surprised herself she asked:

"Because I am going to college somewhere in Europe," he replied; "and to go home would be a needless loss of time."

With her voice still as firm as though some terrible clasp did not seem to bind her heart, she said:

"Is it a needless loss of time to go home, that mamma, whose heart is breaking because of absence from you, may see you before you go to college?"

Howard sprang from his chair, and began to pace the room while he answered:

"I know all you would say, Ellen, and how pretty you can plead for those old-fashioned notions of yours; but it will be no use; I shall not go home—I am going to college with Malverton Grosvenor."

All the religious fervor of which Ellen Courtney's finely wrought nature was capable, and all the religious horror which such an enthusiastic soul as hers must feel at the bare contemplation of such a step as that which Howard had avowed his intention of doing, were aroused. The timidity of the child, became at once merged in the spirit of a fearless and devoted woman. Her own identity seemed lost; she was simply one to whom a case—as she considered it—of premeditated apostasy had become known, and it became her stern duty to put forth every effort which she was capable of making to prevent it. It was that his child sister, as Howard had always regarded Ellen, who talked and pleaded with him now, who grasped his hands and forced his attention, whether he would or not—it was some one to whom Howard Courtney had never listened before; her firm, earnest words elucidating the treacherous position he was about to occupy towards his God, his mother, and himself; her touching appeal to the manhood in his nature, and her forcible descriptions of the truth, beauty and consolations in the religion he would virtually adore, made a vivid impression on the boy's impulsive mind. The restless tapping of his foot against the carpet ceased, and the nervous wandering of his glances settled to a steady, interested look down into her face.

"If you must go to college in Europe," she concluded; "if affection's call is so dead in your heart that you will not return to see your mother, at least give her the comfort of knowing that you have gone to a Catholic college—become a pupil of the Propaganda."

He started.

"That would be to enroll myself for the priesthood?"

"And why not, dear Howard? It was with that idea your school days first began; and in your studies for that sacred office will come the light you so much need in your darkened soul just now. Be careful how you reject grace, because by such rejection, the light of faith is often withdrawn, and then, dear Howard—"

She stopped, overpowered by emotion, and he saw the picture her words conjured up. He realized for one brief moment the ghastly, bitter life men lead who have no religious belief—no thought beyond the present life. He broke her grasp, and paced the floor with folded arms and compressed lips. It was a hard struggle. Ambition fought desperately, and might have conquered the strokes of faith had not the latter derived new strength from the presence of the enthusiastic girl. She stood erect, and motionless as a statue, save that her eyes followed every turn of her brother. The latter, while she would leave the room—out of her sight he could have the victory to please his own baneful inclinations, but with her pure face towards him he could not resist the influence which was strongly urging him to acquiesce in her desire. He paused before her at last, and said slowly:

"For your sake, Ellen, I will enter the Propaganda. Perhaps as you say my studies may diminish, if they do not banish, the distracting desires which beset me now. Write to mother—I cannot—so that she may have all the preliminaries arranged for my admission."

The reaction of feeling on the gentle girl dispersed at once all the premature womanliness with which she had so startled Howard, and made her her own timid, sensitive self again. She bowed her head that he might not see the tears which were rapidly filling her eyes. But the brother and sister held a long conference after that—a conference from which Howard came forth with a subdued if not a better heart, and from which Ellen issued with a more serene expression of countenance than she had worn for weeks. Meeting Malverton in one of the deserted parlors, whether he had gone for the quieter perusal of a book, she said, with a charming blending of frank-

ness and modesty in her manner:

"Accept my thanks for the counsel you gave Howard. He has told me that the cause of your dispute was due to the earnest manner in which you dissuaded him from entering a college adverse to his faith. I thank you sincerely for your generous act, and I know you will be pleased to hear that he has decided to enter the Propaganda."

She turned smilingly away, and he repaired to the window to watch her white-robed form as she hurried to join Lady Grosvenor in the latter's walk to the shore. For the first time there arose in the youth's heart a feeling of envy towards Howard Courtney—he envied him the possession of such a sister.

CHAPTER VII
AMBITION'S FIRST WILD COURSE

The letter which told to Mrs. Courtney the decision of one of her children to remain longer from home was very carefully and tenderly worded; breathing naught of the victory which a sister's influence had achieved, and stating nothing which could convey to the mother's mind the imminent peril of her son's soul, it only gently acquainted her with Howard's decision and strove to assuage the woe of a longer separation by picturing the happy result of a term of study in the Propaganda.

Mrs. Courtney, with eyes whose appearance attested the practice of frequent and protracted vigils, read the missive twice ere she fully comprehended its import; then, with a nervous dispatch, she donned her out-door garments and hastened with it to the institute where Brother Fabian taught. The mild-faced, black-robed porter conveyed her tremulously-given message, and after the lapse of a few moments, Brother Fabian joined her in the little plainly furnished reception-room.

"Well?" he said coldly, turning his eyes to the floor after they had rested a moment on her face.

She proffered him the letter for a reply, and stood with drooped head while he perused it.

"Well!" he said again, glancing his eyes for the second time over the neatly written contents.

She answered tremulously:

"Arrange for his admission, and tell me if I may not think God is answering my prayers—may I not hope for the realization of that which alone can render my old age happy?"

He looked for an instant at the white, haggard face, and replied, as if his words were meant for his own hearing:

"It is not for man to comprehend God's inscrutable ways." Then, as if eager for her departure, he approached the door, saying: "I will have all the necessary arrangements made, and—"

with a slight diminution of the sternness in his tones—"your daughter, I suppose, will remain in Europe till Howard has entered the college?"

Mrs. Courtney turned to a picture of the *Mater Dolorosa* ere she answered—turned and stood with an eager gaze fixed upon the painting, while her features became distorted as if with some sudden pain. When she spoke, it was with a voice so broken that the Brother bent forward to catch the incoherent words:

"Ellen will not return to me till Howard accompanies her, or the changes of the future bear him from me forever. She will remain to be if not directly near him, at least where thousands of miles of ocean will not separate them."

The Brother hastily relinquished his hold upon the knob of the door, and strode towards her, saying sternly:

"This is madness, woman!"

She replied, without turning her gaze from the picture:

"Not madness, since it will help to complete the sacrifice to which I have pledged myself—not madness, since it will show how earnestly I strove to accomplish the blessed end—and not madness if it will be accepted as a pious atonement for early wrongs—O, divine Mother!"—clapping her hands, and putting a passionate entreaty into her voice—"pray for strength to be given me!"

The Brother looked pityingly for a moment, then wound the monastery cloak closer about his shoulders, and with a gently spoken farewell, which Mrs. Courtney did not heed, went slowly out; but the closing of the door roused her from her painful contemplation. She drew the heavy crape veil over her face, and went forth into the street, from which all brightness seemed to have departed.

The American letter, for which Lord and Lady Grosvenor impatiently prolonged their stay in Italy, arrived at last. Howard almost rudely grasped it from Ellen's hand, and hurried to his room to peruse it; the gentle girl followed with a slower step, but with a palpitating heart. His brow darkened ere he had half read the missive.

"I cannot be trusted," he thought; "since she deposes Ellen to remain."

He half flung the letter to her, and turned to the window.

Poor, pale, fluttering Ellen! On learning that the charge of the yielding of which she had so ardently anticipated, was to be still longer borne, that the mother whom she yearned to see was to be, for an indefinite time, separated from her, and that home scenes, for which her affectionate heart panted, were not to greet her, she bowed her face on the missive, and cried wilder tears than Howard had ever known to dim her eyes before. He was touched at the sight of such unusual grief, and, turning from the window, said gently:

"Cease, Ellen! I am the cause of this sorrow, and your tears are staining me to the heart."

She sprang to his side, knelt at his feet, and holding up her clasped hands, which still retained the missive, she said:

"O Howard! you have read here, written anew, the charge which mother gives me—to watch over your faith. Poor, simple girl as I am, how can I influence such an intellect as yours? But promise me, Howard, that you will watch yourself, and that mother shall welcome you on your return as a priest of the Most High."

Her face, to his affected gaze, seemed to assume the expression he saw in the face of a suffering madonna—painted by one of the old masters, which had hung in some Italian church he had visited, and the countenance of which, with its wonderfully touching look, had made a strange impression upon his mind. The rays of the sunset streaming in through the open windows was tinged her hair with a golden hue, and the white robe, lying in soft folds about her person, all conspired to make that scene carve an indelible remembrance on Howard's heart. In after years the vision of that white, kneeling figure was wont to come unbidden and unwished, when a false sophistry and the influence of a delusive ambition held him entirely in their sway. Impelled by the untiring tenderness of those strange feelings, he stooped to her now, and said:

"I pledge myself to do all I can, Ellen, in order to gratify your wish. Will that do?"

A smile, which seemed to flood her whole face with its brightness, answered him, and the grateful pressure of her fingers upon his own, with the tremulously spoken:

"If you do, Howard, I shall not mind the longer separation from mamma," repaid him for the sacrifice of feeling which he had made.

Lady Grosvenor had also received an American letter—one from Mrs. Courtney—written in the tender, pathetic strain which could not fail to touch the English lady's heart. Without betraying aught of the domestic difficulties which prevented her personal attendance upon the children, she told sufficient to enlist Lady Grosvenor's warmest sympathy—to make her even forget, for a time the anxiety caused by the covert ill-feeling existing between her husband and Howard. Immediately on her perusal of the missive she sought Lord Grosvenor.

Some of its contents are of such a private nature, Stanwix, she said, "that I cannot read you all; but it will be sufficient for you to know that Mary Ashland—as I prefer to call her still—desires us to retain Ellen with us till Howard has finished his collegiate term. The dear girl's education can be conducted in our house, and she will occupy the place of a daughter to me. Her mother makes but one proviso—that we permit her to go once a year to Rome to see Howard. You will not object, dear?"

Lord Grosvenor bent from his haughty height, and put his arm caressingly about her shoulders.

"I can refuse you nothing when you plead your eyes to mine in such a pleading manner. Keep Ellen Courtney with you if you wish."

Everything was arranged at last; the preliminaries for Howard's admission to the Propaganda concluded, and he was accompanied thence by the Grosvenors, his sister, O'Connor, and Anne Flanagan, when an affecting farewell of the lad was taken. For poor O'Connor there was no further, and immediately that the party arrived in England he sailed for New York, laden with loving messages from Ellen, and regretted more than he suspected by Anne Flanagan, who was still to remain as Miss Courtney's maid.

Ellen Courtney sought, by applying herself diligently to the directions of the tutors whom Lady Grosvenor provided for her, to banish the pain caused by her separation from Howard, and her impatience for the arrival of the time in which she was to visit him. Malverton had gone to Eton, and Lord Grosvenor was absent much of the time on parliamentary debates pertaining to the Irish troubles. At such periods Lady Grosvenor was wont to make the gentle girl her constant companion, and she watched with unfeigned pleasure the development of a character whose singular unselfishness excited her admiration.

Six months of this gentle life had gone by, and one evening Ellen, who had declined accompanying Lord and Lady Grosvenor to some fashionable assembly, stood in the drawing room by the low French window which opened upon the lawn. The air was balmy with the zephyrs of spring, and the moon's shimmering on the freshly sprinkled grass made the scene such as delighted the fair being who gazed upon it. Suddenly a form rapidly crossed the space where the bright rays shone, and advanced directly to the house—not to the massive front entrance, but taking a circuitous route to the drawing room windows, it lightly vaulted through the open casement, and stood beside the frightened, and well-nigh screaming girl.

"Hush," said the stranger, putting a hand over her parting lips.

There was sufficient light for Ellen to recognize her brother in the travel-stained form, and flushed, wild-looking face of the stranger.

"Be not alarmed," he whispered; "but take me where we can be neither heard nor seen, and I will explain my sudden appearance."

With trembling limbs and a wildly beating heart she hastily conducted

him to her room; then ascertaining that Miss Flanagan was securely occupied in her own apartment, she locked the door in obedience to his request, and breathlessly waited his explanation. He threw himself into the easy chair just beneath the lighted chandelier, and even Ellen's frightened eyes saw how much he had altered during the few months of his absence. He was much taller and older looking, with that girlish delicacy of complexion for which he had been remarkable, replaced by a ruddy brown—the contour of his countenance, his whole bearing so indicative of manliness that his sister half shrank from him, as some one who had usurped her brother's being.

She remained aloof, gazing with a sort of horror-stricken surprise, till he extended his hand, saying:

TO BE CONTINUED

MRS. GRIGG'S LETTER

She read printed matter with difficulty; she could certainly write her own name, but other people's handwriting was too much for her. Very few letters came to her in these days, and the few that did reach her were read aloud by old Peter the postman.

Yet one day Mrs. Grigg resented Peter's supposition that the delivery of a letter gave him the prescriptive right to read it. There were other people in the world who could read handwriting quite as glibly as he did, she reminded him; so Peter had gone away a little huffed. This was why, on a certain morning in March, Peter handed Mrs. Grigg a letter and made off with a curt salutation. She did not call him back.

"Sarah Miles said she'd likely drop in for a cup of tea," Mrs. Grigg reminded herself; "I'll get her to read it to me. Ah, I expect it's from Jack," she continued, as she examined the envelope. "Well, I'll keep all right till Sarah comes. He wants money, I expect; and I wish he may get it."

It is a pitiful thing to hold in your hand a missive which is meant for your eyes alone, and yet be unable to read it; but though this was Mrs. Grigg's case she did not pity herself. A letter more or less of small consequence to her—particularly if it came from Jack, her second, but by no means her favorite son. For according to Mrs. Grigg's creed this spoiled son of a dead father had committed three of the biggest crimes known to the sect to which she belonged; he had gone on the stage; he had married an actress; he had become a Catholic. That he would come to a bad end Mrs. Grigg was positive. She never wrote to him—would not have done so if she had been able to write, but he wrote to her regularly, if not frequently. And, marvel of marvels, he had asked for money only once since he had left home—not of her, but of his father who was then living. Of course his father sent it, and of course—ah, Mrs. Grigg was wrong that time—the money was repaid within a month. Yet in spite of these facts, Mrs. Grigg never received a letter from him without feeling quite sure that, this time at least, Jack wanted money.

Today's missive seemed to be a little thicker than usual, so that Mrs. Grigg felt more positive than ever that it contained a request for a loan. She would never lend him a penny, of course, but she would enjoy the pleasure of saying so—of dictating a reply through the medium of Sarah Miles, who wrote all her letters.

But Miss Miles was a dressmaker, and an order for mourning that same morning deprived her of the smallest chance of drinking tea with Mrs. Grigg for several days to come. So the letter lay unopened in the little corner cupboard which was kept locked.

"It's a queer thing as you can never see people when you want 'em," Mrs. Grigg told herself on the afternoon of the second day after the arrival of the letter. "If I hadn't particularly wanted to see somebody I should 'a' had a dozen callers by this time. But just because I do want somebody to read me a letter—well, it's always so."

Mrs. Grigg might have seen several dozen people pass her cottage that day at different times if she had chanced to have been in one of her front parlors, but then she had spent the whole of the morning in her tiny farm-yard; for though she did not pretend to farm, she still kept a cow or two and a good deal of poultry and many pigs. But now it was afternoon, and the high road seemed to be deserted. However, in another hour or so the school would loose, and though her cottage stood a little outside the village, several boys passed it on their way to outlying farms. All the better, she reflected, to get the letter read by a boy who did not live in the village.

When the clock struck four she laid down her sewing and passed into the front garden. Though she was not over-anxious to hear the letter read, it seemed queer to have it read in the house a day and a half without opening it. So she would look out for Tom Rice's boy, a lad she could trust.

But before she reached the garden gate she perceived that a boy was already fumbling with its rather complicated latch. He was not very big, and at a glance Mrs. Grigg saw he was a stranger. He was coming to ask the way, or the time, or perhaps for a glass of water—strangers often did. Even as she opened the gate for him, the thought struck her that it would be much nicer to

have her letter read by a stranger than by young Tom Rice. And this boy looked almost like a gentleman's son. No Grifford lad, this!

"Come in, sir, come in!" she said; "the latch is a bit awkward."

"Could you kindly tell me—?" the boy was beginning, cap in hand, when Mrs. Grigg interrupted him with, "Yes, it's just a bit after four; but come in and rest yourself and have a cup o' tea. I'm just goin' to have mine. And you look tired."

"I am a little tired," he admitted, taking the easy chair she offered him, "and I thank you very much, madam; you are most kind. And I dare say you'll be able to tell me—"

But Mrs. Grigg, who was already taking the letter from the corner cupboard, called out to him, "You can read writing, I expect, young sir."

"O certainly, madam," he replied with a little laugh which lit up his pale face and made him look almost pretty.

"Then while the kettle boils you just read me what's in that letter," she said, handing the opened envelope to the visitor.

"Oh!—but— I say!" cried the boy jumping to his feet, "this is too funny! Why, this is a letter from daddy! Then you are Mrs. Grigg—you are my grandmother!"

Mrs. Grigg's only reply was to drop suddenly into the nearest chair and groan.

"Grandma!" exclaimed the boy, "you're not ill, are you? Can I get you anything?"

He had come close up to her, but the only reply she made was another groan, followed by a feeble "Read it!"

"But, grandma, you don't mean to say you haven't read it?" he asked. "Why, daddy wrote it on Sunday, and today's Tuesday."

"Read it, lad," groaned Mrs. Grigg.

It was a long letter and it contained a check. Jack Grigg had just enlisted; it was at the beginning of the war. His wife had accepted a professional engagement which was likely to be more or less permanent. They had three little girls at school—

—Jack didn't mention the word convent—but their great difficulty was Johnnie. He was too delicate for the ordinary boarding-school, and they wanted to send him into the country. If his grandmother would only take him for a year, Johnnie would benefit enormously. They would be only too glad to pay whatever she thought right—and so on.

"But, my dear mother," the letter concluded, "I am bound to make one condition. Like his father and mother, Johnnie is a Catholic, and he must be brought up as such. I wrote first to the priest of Grifford; he tells me that he takes a few pupils, and he has promised to look after Johnnie's education, both religious and secular. So the boy will go to him daily, and to church as often as possible. You will not find him nearly so troublesome as his father was; indeed I shall not be at all surprised if he turns out to be a very agreeable house-mate."

It was Johnnie who saved the kettle from boiling over, and did so neatly that Mrs. Grigg could scarcely believe her eyes. Yet she sat stock still in her chair and seemed to be incapable either of speech or movement. That she was genuinely upset was evident enough.

"You'll feel better after a cup of tea, grandma," said Johnnie, lifting the lid of the teapot. "Yes, the tea's in, I see. Shall I mash it grandma?"

Now if there was one thing more than another about which Mrs. Grigg was exceedingly particular it was the making of her tea; yet she sat silent—fascinated, perhaps—while Johnnie carefully poured in the water, and not too much of it.

"Of course, I take mine very weak," he remarked, "with lots of milk."

Quite a hundred times before she went to bed that night Mrs. Grigg told herself that her son Jack had always been a fool, but that the notion of her taking a boy—a Roman Catholic boy—to live with her proved him to be an absolute idiot. Why, she would as soon think of harboring a viper. However, she supposed the lad must stop for a day or two till his father could find a place for him. She had already dictated to Miss Miles a letter to Jack in which she had told him to remove the boy as quickly as possible. Two days later she received from her son the following telegram:

"Priest has got lodgings for Johnnie. He will remove boy tomorrow."

"Then, for the first time for many years, Mrs. Grigg bowed her head and wept bitter tears. A very inconsistent woman, you will say; but is not inconsistency the dominant note of many women, and of most men?"

Yes, she was genuinely grieved. The boy had been under her roof only a few days, yet somehow he had made his way into the very center of her rather hard old heart.

"Well, I shan't part with Johnnie, that's certain. I can tallygraft myself, if it comes to that. And I will."

The telegram that Johnnie sent off said—

"Granny won't part with me."

It was not so much that she took possession of Johnnie as he of her. From the moment of his entering the cottage he may be said to have dominated it. Johnnie had adopted his grandmother, and really there was nothing more to be said about it.

Twenty times a day Mrs. Grigg told herself that the child resembled his father in nothing—except cleverness. Jack had always been clever; but then he had been wilful and idle,

and she had been a very good mother.

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