

AMBITION'S CONTEST

BY CHRISTINE FABER
CHAPTER V—CONTINUED
THE FIRST STEP IN APOSTASY

He impatiently altered the position of his head, reclining on the other side of the chair, where her touch could not reach it unless she changed her posture, replying petulantly: "Sufficiently well—only leave me—I am better alone!"

She rose, prepared to obey; but O'Connor who had been vainly striving to quell his indignation at the manner in which Howard received the fond attentions of the gentle girl, also rose, and, listening neither to his better sense, which would have cautioned him to silence, nor to his regard for Ellen, which would have counselled him to wait at least till she had left the room, he said suddenly, and in a voice tremulous from anger:

"Are you repenting for the cowardly thing you're after doin' down stairs? Are you mindin' the apostate that you made yourself for the praise of the company below? Are you thinkin' how God in Heaven and His blessed mother regards you now, and what broken hearts your mother and sister will have when they know it all?"

Howard sprang to his feet. The old man's words were the expression of the thoughts with which his mind was occupied. He questioned not how O'Connor had gained such knowledge,—he only knew that the speech, because of its very truth, stabbed his sensitive feelings to the quick, and goaded him to a madness of action which was foreign to his nature. He hurriedly crossed to the old man, drew his hand from the velvet cloak which still rested about his shoulders, and gave a passionate slap to the one of the withered cheeks. The blood rushed into old O'Connor's face, surging into the very forehead, and dying even to the withered neck. It was such an unexpected, such an unprecedented outrage, that his lips were sealed for a moment; then he bowed his gray head, and said in pathetically tremulous tones:

"Strike again, Master Howard. It is meet that an old servant who has been thirty years in the family should receive the first insult from the youngest son of them all."

Howard, who was heartily ashamed of himself, and stung more by the last rebuking speech of the old man than he had been even by the indignant censure, strode hastily back to his seat, buried his face in his hands, and sat motionless as a statue. Ellen, who had watched the scene with every trace of color flitting from her cheeks and lips, now sprang to the old man, who remained standing with his head still bent, and the hot, indignant flush in his face, and, catching one of his hands between her own, she said, brokenly:

"Forgive him, O'Connor; he didn't know what he was doing." The old man replied without changing his attitude: "God bless you, sweet angel that you are; but O'Connor can never forget the blow he received tonight," and, with his head still bowed, he went slowly from the room.

Ellen knelt beside Howard's chair. "Oh, Howard! Howard! how could you so forget yourself?" He could not bear her reproaches, and, rousing himself, he feigned a harshness which he was far from feeling, while he said: "Leave me, Ellen! I requested before to be alone."

He closed his eyes, but he might not see the heart-broken look in hers, and shut the door between the apartments when she had gone to her own room, that he might not hear her passionate sobbing. "Oh, mamma!" she moaned, "you counted on my influence in vain. Howard is beyond it all now. I cannot save him for you."

She sobbed herself to sleep on the velvet cushions on which she knelt, but the troubled slumber was full of visions of her brother, from one of which she awoke with a start to find him standing mournfully beside her. He bent tenderly to her, saying tremulously:

"I am afraid, Anne, that you do not like our prolonged stay from home, but it is for Howard's health." Miss Flanagan smiled grimly, and then, as she returned to her contentment, while she replied so much bitterly:

"I never had a home, Miss Ellen." The young girl would have questioned to elicit the meaning of such a strange remark, but something in that cold, stern face repelled even the sympathy she would have proffered, and she bent to her desk again.

CHAPTER VI
THE STRANGE VISITOR AGAIN

The life in Paris was so agreeably suited to every disposition of the Grosvenor household that six months had gone delightfully by ere any one seemed to be aware of it. There had been occasional absence of Lord Stanwix when he crossed the channel to make the stirring speeches which returned to his family in newspaper form, with the added laudatory comments of the press—speeches which fired Howard's soul, and made him more anxious, more impatient than ever for manhood's years.

The Irish agitators were beginning to assume a threatening form, and Lord Grosvenor, English born and English bred, endorsed with his tongue and pen the design of his government to tighten the bonds in which that unhappy country was held. Howard Courtney, taught by his mother to love Ireland as her birth-place, and incited to an affection for the country by the kindness and warm-heartedness of its people, an example of which was afforded by his father's servants, opposed the nobleman on principle and feeling; but when he would discuss the matter Lord Grosvenor waived it by saying, with his peculiar smile, and the malicious sparkle in his eyes:

"You and I hold a very different relation to each other to that which Ireland occupies towards my government. We are good friends, and must let no Irish feeling come between us," and the fiery youth was invariably obliged to let the subject pass.

The time of their stay in Paris drew at length to a close. Mrs. Courtney's letters were growing slightly impatient for the children's return, since Howard's health seemed to be so completely restored, and Lord Grosvenor and his lady decided on a few weeks' sojourn in Italy, from which country the party would immediately return to England, when Malverton would begin his collegiate term, and Howard and Ellen return to New York. Lady Grosvenor, though grieved to part with the gentle girl whom she had grown to love with an unwonted strength of affection, was pleased that the children were going so soon, and Ellen, delighted though she had been with foreign scenes and pleasures, rejoiced that her peculiar charge would be so soon resigned to her mother. Child though she was in years, she felt the responsibility of her mother's injunction as few girls of her age would have felt it, and though Howard, since his shameful outburst of passion towards O'Connor, had been exemplary in demeanor and expression, there was an undefined fear in her heart that this placid conduct only concealed for a time the fierce workings of his ambitious desires. For Howard, since this decision of Lord Stanwix, had grown moody and discontented. Foreign life, so different from his life at home, pandered to his fastidious tastes, in a measure gratified his ambitious wishes, and he was reluctant to relinquish it—so reluctant that his sister perceived it, and she said to him reproachfully:

"Surely, Howard, you are anxious to see mamma!" "Yes," he answered, "anxious to see her, but dreading that her fears for my health will impel her to control the bent of my desires," and he turned impatiently away, while Ellen painfully felt how he would sacrifice even affection's ties did they oppose the progress he wished to make. His discontent continued, entering into everything, and depriving every pleasure of half its charms, even for Ellen. Thus Italy, with its blue skies, charming landscapes, and thousand wonders celebrated for their beauty and antiquity, was entered with a heavy heart by the gentle girl.

Just the clime to develop your loveliness," Lady Grosvenor said to her on the second evening of their sojourn in Naples, when both from a balcony were viewing the effects of the sunset on the waters of the magnificent bay. "And just the clime to harmonize with that faith of yours," she continued, as Ellen blushed herself at the sound of some distant bells chiming the hour.

The gentle girl did not reply, and Lady Grosvenor knew by the attitude of the young head, and the peculiar expression of the fair face, that she was mentally praying, not for herself, but for that idolized, wayward brother, Howard. The kind-hearted lady turned away with a sigh, for she feared that Howard Courtney's was a nature which neither maternal love nor sisterly care could control.

Ellen could not bear to acquaint her mother with Howard's strange reluctance to return, and she strove to make description in her letters alone for the little she said about him. Recently he had adopted the plan of writing what he would say in her letter, as it saved him the trouble of writing a full letter himself; but these conjointly written

missives caused Mrs. Courtney's heart to throb with renewed anxiety. For Ellen she had no fears, for her religious enthusiasm was apparent in every line of the affectionate epistles she wrote. Mrs. Courtney's eyes swam as she read one which ran:

"Dear Mamma: "I cannot describe to you the rush of feelings which overpower me each time I enter those grand old Roman churches—God seems so much nearer there—as if those beautiful eyes with their sad, tender expression, which you used to tell me you were wont in your girlhood to imagine you saw whenever you thought of Jesus, were looking at me from every altar. I do not know whether it is due to the influence of the climate, or the people with whom I come in contact, but I perform my religious duties with more devotion here than I ever did at home. Perhaps the early martyrs have a special watch over this, their own city, and obtain through their sufferings the grace of worshipping well for even transient suppliants at their shrines. Whichever it is, pray for me, mamma, that my present fervor may not diminish, and that my faith may be made strong as that of the blessed martyrs."

Howard's brief appendix contained a description of the churches as works of art, but not a syllable in his coldly beautiful language to tell if those grand edifices had awakened within his soul a particle of religious fervor. Alas! for his mother! too surely she felt the spar, to which her broken hopes clung, drifting from their grasp.

Neither O'Connor nor Anne Flanagan were as well pleased with life in Italy as they had been with it in Paris, though to both, the multitude, and warm, religious character of the churches were something particularly pleasant. O'Connor was disgusted with the uncleanness of the "lazzaroni," as he termed the lower class of the natives, and found it difficult to adapt himself to Italian customs; while Anne Flanagan, holding herself aloof with what she considered becoming pride, and with her stern, repelling countenance, became an object of dislike and slight fear to the Italian servants with whom she came in contact, in consequence of which she was compelled to solicit O'Connor's escort when she went abroad, lest she might lose her way; not that the old man was better versed in the devious streets of the strange localities, but his tact and native intelligence accomplished the purpose as well as a hired guide would have done.

One afternoon when the peculiar pair were abroad in the streets of Florence on some shopping expedition of Miss Flanagan, the latter suddenly turned, with a sharp exclamation, to look after a man who had just passed her in the narrow street—a man who walked with gliding, noiseless gait, and whose peculiar garb attracted attention even amid the various peculiar garbs about him. The transient glimpse which she had obtained of his face showed her a complexion dark to swarthiness, straight black hair, and almond-shaped black eyes.

"What's the matter?" asked O'Connor, too absorbed in Miss Flanagan's agitation to have observed its cause. "Matter enough!" she answered gaspingly; "there goes the strange man who visits Mrs. Courtney every year. Come quick! I must see where he goes."

Seizing the old man's reluctant arm, she compelled him to hurry with her through streets where the massive, gloomy architecture of the buildings seemed, at first sight, to frown away all idea of beauty, and on by a divergent route, to the Casine, where the gay world of the beautiful city were assembled. On they hurried, still keeping that figure, with its snake-like gait, in view—the golden gleaming of the embroidery on his cloak shining out distinctly from the many and varied costumes of the pedestrians on the thronged square, and now, to the affrighted sight of O'Connor, and the intensely agitated one of his companion, flashing almost between the wheels of a decapitated looking drag, driven by an Italian Prince, with four showy horses. But the oriental-looking figure passed safely on to the circular square near the Arno, where the flower girls were busily plying their trade, his rapid course winding faster than his pursuers' hurried steps could follow.

He turned at last, as if aware of the chase, and smiled at the agitated couple, who, by violent exertion, had arrived within a few paces of him—it was a smile in which the eyes took no part, and, from that fact, seemed more like a mocking grin—then he resumed his erratic course with such an increase of speed that, in a few minutes, he was lost entirely to the agitated view of his pursuers.

O'Connor, disappointed and out of breath, turned upon his companions with: "It's like all your unreasonable whims, ma'am, to be dragging me on such a wild goose chase as this—following some outlandish stranger, for what purpose I'd be obliged to you if you'd inform me."

Miss Flanagan's chagrin was visible in the changing hue of her face. "You don't understand it," she said. "True for you," he replied, his indignation increasing at every step, "I don't understand it, for I haven't been trusted as you have been."

in the middle of the fashionable crowd, while she stood on tip-toe to whisper in his ear:

"You know as much of that man we have been following as I do. You have seen him when he made those visits to Mrs. Courtney, and you know how gloomy they always left her. This afternoon there seemed to be a chance of finding out something about him—what place he comes from, and why he makes calls so many miles away. That's the reason of the 'wild goose chase,' as you call it—and for something to satisfy myself." The latter clause was muttered in a tone the old man did not hear, and they resumed their way. He was disposed to be implacable, to vent his anger in a tirade on the strange actions of the Courtneys during late years, and to reprove the maid for the unbecoming curiosity which caused her to pry into the secrets of her mistress; but there was that in the woman's face and manner which deterred him, and the remainder of the homeward way was traversed in silence. Immediately that her room was reached, Anne Flanagan indited to her mistress the following:

"Mrs. Courtney: "Dear Madam—I have been face to face, in the streets of Florence, with him with whom you confer since—(and here she drew a great dash.) I followed to ascertain his whereabouts, but he baffled my search. Opportunity may present again, and if it does I will use more strenuous efforts. "Your faithful servant, "ANNE FLANAGAN."

O'Connor marvelled at the unusual impatience which Miss Flanagan, some weeks later, evinced for the coming of the mail, and marvelled still more when that lady, finding a letter addressed to herself, seized it with trembling hands and agitated air, and hurried to her room.

"It is past my comprehension," he muttered, as he watched her hastening through the arched corridor, "an' I may as well give up tryin' to guess what the quare things that are happenin' around me mane."

Miss Flanagan, in her own apartment, while an indignant flush strove to appear in her yellow cheeks, was reading:

"You have done very wrong, Anne, in seeking, by any means, to discover about the individual of which you write. The contract to which I pledged myself is not to be violated even by proxy, and never again suffer your curiosity to proceed to such untoward lengths. "Yours kindly, "MARY COURTNEY."

She crushed the missive in a passionate way between her nervous hands, paced the floor excitedly for a few minutes, then, suddenly stopping she pressed her hands to her forehead and moaned:

"All the bad feelings have come back again."

Perchance those bad feelings were the cause of the increased harshness in her tones, even when addressing Ellen, and the producer of that malignant expression in her face, which became habitual after the advent of the letter.

TO BE CONTINUED
THE SIXTEENTH PEARL

"Isn't it strange, auntie, that we never heard a word from—never a word?" Frances asked wistfully. "It is strange," replied Mrs. Naughton thoughtfully. "It's about six years, isn't it, since we had the last letter?"

"Six years and a half," her niece answered, sighing heavily. "It's curious, auntie," she went on after a pause, "I always miss him, and look for him to come, more in the winter than I do in any other time of the year. I suppose it is because I remember well that last Christmas before he gave me the first pearl. I was only five years old, so he's gone twenty years. A long time!"

"A long time, indeed," echoed her aunt. "But I am sure he is not dead," she added more cheerfully, "and that we shall hear something from him before long. All our prayers are not to go unanswered. I am convinced of that. So let's go on hoping and praying, my dear."

Frances brightened. "And maybe—who knows? he may be at home this Christmas," she said, smiling. "I guess you'll have to sell those pearls, Frances," her cousin George remarked lazily one day.

"Indeed, I shan't!" retorted Frances indignantly. "Why?" "What good are they?" he scoffed. "A lot of little white buttons in a drawer—Girls are funny!" "Little white buttons! I want you to know, George Naughton, I have fifteen perfectly beautiful, lovely, round pearls, and they're worth—they're worth—I can't tell you how much they're worth." The girl eyed her cousin in angry disdain.

"Humph! No, I don't suppose you can," he answered, dryly. "But where's the sixteenth one coming from? That's what I'd like to know." "Oh, I'm not worrying," said Frances loftily. "Maybe uncle will buy me one some day, or auntie, or—"

"George!" exclaimed Frances, flushing deeply, "if you say another word, I'll never forgive you!" "All right," grinned her cousin amiably, "but I think Tom ought to know the way you talk behind his back."

"Never mind, Frances," said Tom laughing, "I don't believe a word he says. I'll trust you." And the somewhat shy glance that passed between the two was not lost on the observant George.

"Oh, well, if you insist on buying the pearl, I suppose we'll have to let you," he said, in a resigned tone, sauntering off with his hands in his pockets.

"What's he talking about?" asked Tom, mystified. "I haven't the slightest idea," answered Frances, glaring after her cousin. "Let's change the subject." And the new subject, whatever it was, proved so engrossing that the call to Sunday evening supper found them still with plenty to say.

It was plain to the most casual observer that Dalton's admiration for his friend's cousin was deepening into something stronger, and in the course of time it became evident, too, that as far as she was concerned, Tom might add to the pearls any day. Matters stood thus when Tom was sent West on a business trip, expecting to be gone a month. But various annoying details occurred, and on a cold blustering night, three weeks before Christmas, he found himself in Denver still uncertain as to the date of his return. It was too bad, he thought gloomily, for the hundredth time, as he sought to dispel his increasing loneliness by watching the gay crowds on the streets. He drifted idly along, thinking of Frances and wondering just what he would select for her Christmas present. "I believe I'll buy something here," he thought with a sudden happy inspiration.

"It will help to pass the time. I did intend to wait till I got home, but—"

A jeweler's window took his eye and he stopped. In the midst of the brilliant array of jewels there was a handful of loose pearls in a velvet basket, against the dusky background of which they glowed with their own peculiar soft and alluring luster. Tom's eyes brightened.

The purchase made, Tom returned to the gay street feeling a little less lonely, for he could, reposing chastely in a handsome case in his coat pocket, brought Frances strangely near to him. A warm feeling stole around his heart as he allowed himself to dwell on the incidents of the presentation. And thus happily meditating he made his way towards his hotel, unconscious of a tall figure with a muffled face following furtively in his rear. As he reached a dark alley in the shadow of a large building he suddenly became aware of labored breathing just behind, but before he could turn, with a nameless fear in his heart, he was felled to the ground by a heavy blow. As his assailant stooped over the prostrate body, seeking the jewel which he had seen his victim purchase, a big car whisked quickly out of the alley and struck him with a violence which threw his body over against the curb. Victim and assailant both woke in a hospital some hours later.

Tom was not seriously injured, though he had a broken leg and a battered head. The blow from his assailant had thrown him to the side and thus out of the way of the car. The would-be robber, however, had received a mortal injury and was suffering intensely. When he awoke in the hospital the first face he saw was that of a Sister, who was assisting the doctor to arrange his bandages. He looked at her wistfully and then turned his eyes away with a groan. "I'm not fit to look at such as she," he thought remorsefully, before oblivion closed over him again. The next time he awoke there was a priest at his bedside. He still felt dazed, but he struggled back to consciousness.

"Father," he said weakly, "an encouraging hand on his. "You are better. Don't you think you could tell me your name?" A wan smile lit up the sufferer's face for a moment. "Ah, my name doesn't matter, Father," he said. "I'm nobody—just a wanderer—just a poor, unfortunate wanderer—no home—no friends—Oh!—a spasm of pain contracted his pinched features. "Oh, it's been a long lonesome road. I'm thinking maybe"—and he looked up at the priest wistfully, fearfully—"that this is the end."

"I'm afraid the end is not far off," the priest answered gently. "Do you want to make your peace with God?" The sick man groaned and turned his eyes away. His peace with God! Strange, curious words! How many years—hard, sordid, shameful years—it had been since he had experienced the sweetness of those words. Feebly his mind tried to grasp the meaning of it all. The priest helped him.

"You have had a hard life?" he asked softly. A quivering lip answered him before the man spoke. "Hard enough, Father."

"We all have our troubles," said the priest, speaking in a slow, soothing tone, "but the good God is over all. Did you ever think of that?" The sick man pondered a moment. Then he turned restlessly. "I had a good mother," he said with apparent irrelevance. "A good old Irish mother—you know the kind, Father? Oh, her heart would break if she could see me now!—and with an anguished sigh. "And those were her very words—the good God! Do you think"—and the haggard eyes

questioned the priest—"do you think he could ever forgive—a person—for knocking a man down and trying to rob him?" The last words were in a terrified whisper, to catch which the priest had to lean close.

It was four days later. In Tom Dalton's room at the hospital there was what George Naughton called "a sound of revelry," for the patient was better, his convalescence helped on by the arrival of George, always a host in himself as far as entertainment was concerned. The press despatches had carried the news of the assault back to Pittsburgh and George had left on the next train for Denver. He was weighted down, he declared, with messages from his father and mother—and Frances, put in merely as an afterthought.

"And what about the old duffer who attacked you?" he asked at the first pause in conversation. "He's dying," answered Tom, rather slyly. "Dying." Well, serves him right. The car hit him and all but missed you. It isn't often a thief meets retribution so quickly, is it?"

"The poor fellow!" said Tom thoughtfully. "Do you know, I feel rather sorry for him. Father O'Connor has been telling me about him—"

"Sorry for him!" interrupted George blankly. "Well I'm blessed! Tell you what," as Tom laughed, "if a thug up and hit me over the head, I'd be sorry for him—I don't think I'd be isn't a thug, really." Tom explained. "He's only a poor unfortunate old fellow who was driven temporarily mad by bad luck and exposure."

"Fine story!" said George derisively. "Every holdup man no doubt puts up the same plea. And old soft-hearted Tom—he's going to let him go scot free, I suppose?" "He'll be freed all right," Tom answered gravely. "Really, George," he added, "I wish you would go to see him and hear the story from his own lips."

"Who, me?" asked George in plain but ungrammatical surprise. "What do I want to see the old duffer for? Besides, if he's dying—are any of his people with him?"

"That's the sad part—I believe he had no people." "George," Tom went on with unaccustomed earnestness, "I can't tell you why, but I do feel sorry for the old man. Here's a man who knocked me down, gave me a broken leg, and worst of all, tried to rob me, and yet I can't feel hard toward him. He isn't a regular thief, he had never robbed anyone in his life, and he wouldn't have thought of doing it now, only he had been out of work and hadn't eaten anything for nearly a week. Think of it! And when he was almost starving he met an old mining camp chum who took him to a saloon and gave him a drink. That was the condition he was in when he attacked me. The queer part of it is," Tom concluded, "he told Father O'Connor he didn't want to hurt me—it was only the pearl he wanted for his little girl. But Father is inclined to think he was wandering when he said that."

"The pearl?" asked George in surprise. "What pearl?" "Why," Tom explained in some confusion, "I bought a pearl for Frances—for Christmas, you know."

"Oh!" exclaimed George significantly, "the sixteenth pearl! I knew you were slated for it! Well, pitying his friend's confusion, "do you really want me to go to see the old stage robber?" with a smile.

"I wish you would," was Tom's rejoinder. The small ward in which George's "stage robber" lay dying was in a pleasant corner of the hospital with a western outlook. The pale, wintry sun shone softly on the old man's face, and George was constrained to admit that the countenance turned toward him was a prepossessing one, though sunken now in the dark shadow of death.

"My name is Naughton," said George as he took one of the wasted hands. "I'm a friend of Dalton's you know, and he asked me to come to see you."

"The dying man looked up intently at the visitor. "Naughton," he said in a feeble voice. "I used to know a George Naughton here twenty-five years ago."

"Then you must have known my father," George said, "for he used to live here. In fact I was born here." The sunken eyes regarded the young man closely. "Your name is George," he said finally, "and you have a cousin Frances."

"That's right," George answered in growing surprise. "You knew my people then?" The lids fell over the watching eyes, and there was no immediate reply. Then George noticed a tear slip down the pallid cheek as a trembling hand was reached out to him.

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