

CHILDREN OF DESTINY.

A Novel by William J. Fischer.

Author of "Songs by the Wayside," "Winona and Other Stories," "The Teller," "The Years Between," etc. etc.

CHAPTER XXVIII. A RIFT OF SUNSHINE.

A week later Jerome reached Kempton. The journey home had been a long and wearisome trip. Yet as he stepped off the train at the depot and caught the twinkle of Gracia's eyes in the crowd, his heart gave a thrill of delight.

"I am so glad Jerome to see you back," Gracia said gladly, her cheeks coloring slightly. "It did seem so very lonely since you went. Often I thought that you would never return to me. I fancied myself all alone, dear, but that was foolish."

"I, too, have missed you sweet," Jerome said, looking into her joyful eyes. "I do not know what I would do without you. Your strong unselfish love seems to fill a void in life that is vast and cheerless. Without you I would miss all the gladness and brightness and sunshine."

"But where is Dick?" asked the girl, somewhat surprised. "Did he not come with you?"

"Yes, part of the way. He remained over at Trenton to see an aged uncle of his. He will reach home the day after to-morrow."

"How did you enjoy yourself, dear? Did the Place O'Pines surpass your expectations?"

Jerome could not help thinking of his meeting with Mad Nance, but brushed the thought aside, and replied: "Yes, I was more than pleased with the place. It is a beautiful country—charming climate, delightful scenery and pleasant company all the time. People are coming and going continually. Whom do you think I had the pleasure of meeting there, Gracia?"

"I hardly know, I suppose some rich duke or duchess."

"Ah, no, come down a little lower on the social scale, please. You surely could not picture me associating with the nobility."

"Why not? My Jerome, I think, is qualified to dine with kings and queens."

"But all jokes aside, I did meet the Duke of Kenyon. He startled all Europe some months ago by openly denouncing and exposing the follies of the smart set. Yes, and a rather fine fellow he is too. Sings exceptionally well, is an expert at the rifle and can say his 'ha-penny-damn' as well as any one. The Duke of Kenyon, however, is not the person I had in mind."

"Well, whom else did you meet? Some one great in politics?"

"No."

"In music?"

"No."

"In art?"

"Yes."

"I might have guessed it."

"Listen, I had the pleasure of an evening with the great Lachance."

"Really? An evening with the illustrious Frenchman? Why, all Paris, nay Europe, is wild over his canvases. I saw a reproduction of one of his latest pictures in one of the art journals. I think it is called 'Shadowland'—a wonderful forest scene of trees and moonlight."

"Ah, yes, I remember it. Do you know that very picture was executed at the Place O'Pines. I saw the original. Lachance painted it in one of the pine-woods. He has been staying at the island for several months. His physician recommended a rest, and yet the noted artist is 'killing time' by painting beautiful and wonderful pictures. Before leaving he presented me with a little landscape in oil—a very pretty bit of work. I know you will like it. By the way there is another surprise in store."

"Oh, do tell me, please Jerome, since this is the hour of surprises."

"Lachance will be so before leaving Kempton in a month or so before leaving for Paris and he has kindly promised to spend a few days with us."

"With us? You mean with yourself?"

"No, I mean us. Surely you are not forgetting Gracia that the Cardinal is going to figure conspicuously in a very important ceremony next week."

Gracia lowered her eyes for a moment and answered with a smile: "Indeed I am not forgetting, dear, but really this 'us' is very confusing to say the least. Yes, a week from to-day—"

"You shall become my wife," he interrupted. "Thank God for the gift of so sweet a gridding star!"

"All the arrangements for the ceremony have been made. The night before the wedding I shall have a birthday of my own. I shall be twenty then. Sister Benita is coming home for the two days. It will be glorious. We can hardly wait to see her in the old place. Aunt Hawkins, too, is beside herself for very joy. She has been anxious, planning for weeks. I hardly know what I would do without her. Even poor Matt Pency has been busy and exceedingly kind. He vows that not a single outside flower shall be used in decorating the house and the cathedral. All the floral tributes are destined to come from the conservatory. Oh, my dear, I have a thousand and one things to tell you. This morning Madame Landers called and fitted my trousseau. It is just a perfect gem—a lovely creation of white silk with yards and yards of—"

"Come, dear," Jerome interrupted somewhat abruptly, "there's a car. It is so far to walk to Bleur House. Besides I am very tired. Come, let's hurry! You can finish the description of that dress, sweet, when we are seated. I am sure it must be exquisite."

"Exquisite?" she cried eagerly with a certain air of pride. "Why a queen has seldom worn a prettier or a costlier one."

CHAPTER XXIX. THE UNRAVELLING OF THE TANGLE.

Jerome did not sleep much that evening. There was so much for him to think about, and in his heart he wished that he had never seen the Place O'Pines.

The confession of Mad Nance kept him awake nearly all night. He tried to shut out the sound of her haunting voice, but he could not. It haunted him as some horrible crime, awful and soul-crushing. What was he to do? He felt that he must tell the truth to some one, but Gracia was not to know. At day-break he rose from his bed and walked over to the open window. He was very tired. The morning air seemed to revive him. The birds were beginning to stir in the trees and the streets were already beginning to echo the song of toll.

Presently the bells of St. Agatha's tolled. They sounded music to his heart and carried his thoughts to that trusted friend of the cloister—Sister Benita. And while they ran over the roofs of the city a thought came to him, a bright, helpful thought.

"I have it at last," he muttered. "I shall go to Sister Benita and tell her the story of Mad Nance's death and show her the document. She was at the Place O'Pines with her brother at the time the Lescot child was stolen. Surely she would remember some of the circumstances. Perhaps Arthur told her all about it. In any case I shall go to her. She seems to be the only person to whom I could relate my experiences."

"That morning at 10 Jerome Chelsea stood at the door of St. Agatha's."

"Sister Benita is now at class," the portress answered him, "but she will be free in ten minutes. Can you wait so long?"

"Yes, I am in no hurry."

"Very well then. I shall tell Sister."

Ten minutes later Sister Benita entered the room.

"So you have come back to us again, Jerome," she remarked. "I am sure one heart is glad in Kempton to-day."

"You mean Gracia?"

"Yes. The poor girl felt very lonely during your absence. She is so affectionate. Her whole life is wrapped up in the forthcoming ceremony. She is as happy as a child."

"I do hope she may ever remain so, bright singing bird that she is. I saw her last evening and her happiness seemed complete. Aunt Hawkins too can hardly wait for your home-coming, Sister. Remember, you are expected to taste some of Gracia's wedding cake."

"I shall be there. Reverend Mother is very good to grant such an extraordinary request. It will do my heart good to see the old home again and wander through the well-remembered rooms which are peopled with pleasant memories. It seems a lifetime since the doors of Bleur House closed behind me. But tell me, how did you like the Place O'Pines? Is it not a rare and delightful spot?"

"It is the most beautiful place I have ever seen. Yet I wish that my foot had never stepped upon its ground."

"What do you mean?" Sister Benita asked, somewhat surprised. "What has happened? You speak strangely, Mr. Chelsea. I felt that your trip had been a delightful one. Pray, do not tell me that it was not."

Jerome shifted about uneasily in his chair. Then he looked at Sister Benita strangely.

"Can I trust you, Sister?" he asked doubtfully.

"Trust me, Mr. Chelsea?" questioned the nun, her face whitening. "Certainly. But what does all this mean?"

"I would like to tell you something. I must tell it to someone whom I can trust."

A strange feeling crept into Sister Benita's heart. She waited for his words with bated breath like one standing on the brink of a precipice. His sentences had brought a new terror to her soul. She could tell from his looks that there was trouble brewing.

"Speak, Mr. Chelsea," she said unable to wait any longer, "and tell me all I trust me. What you are about to say will remain a secret forever. Surely, you bring no bad news of the good child, Gracia?" she asked frightened.

"Not exactly," she repeated. "Tell me, Mr. Chelsea—tell me all!"

"I wish I had never seen the Place O'Pines," the artist muttered.

"Come, come Mr. Chelsea unburden the thoughts that seem to weigh you down. You will feel better afterwards. I know it all concerns Gracia and you."

Jerome regained his courage, and the words came fast. He described the visit to the pine-woods, the discovery of the blood trickling down the rocks, the following of the stream to its destination and the finding of Mad Nance in a dying condition.

"But what has Mad Nance to do with either Gracia or yourself?" asked the nun.

"More than you dream. I feel very sorry to have to say it."

"Continue, Mr. Chelsea," the nun pleaded.

Thereupon in words charged with intense feeling Jerome referred to the dying woman's confession.

"My dear brother's name was mentioned by this woman as that of her tempter?" shrieked Sister Benita, overcome with emotion.

"Yes, she spoke clearly, and there was no mistaking it."

"How long since the crime was committed?"

"Seventeen years ago."

"What was the nature of the crime?"

"A three-year-old child was stolen by this woman and your brother paid her well for it."

The nun's hands stole to her throbbing temples.

"Seventeen years ago—seventeen years ago," she repeated. "The very year Arthur and I visited the Place O'Pines."

"Did she give the child's name?"

"Yes—Lescot. The child's mother's name was Mazie."

"Mazie Lescot?" groaned Sister Benita. "Is it possible! And was she at the Place O'Pines?"

"Yes, she was a widow. Her husband was drowned at sea. She sold roses for a living and they called her the Rose-Queen."

"Mazie Lescot, the widow of Lawrence Lescot," repeated Sister Benita thoughtfully. "And she was the Rose-Queen! I knew her well at one time. She lived at Kempton. Her name then

was Mazie Rawlins. Oh God! I see through it all. I am afraid the story is only too true."

But what motive could your brother have had in stealing the child?"

"Arthur was once madly in love with Mazie, but she spurned his advances and married Lawrence Lescot, a poor mill-hand. The blow was too much for him. His mind became affected and he never recovered. The Lescot left Kempton after their marriage. Providence, however, seemed to have directed that Arthur was to meet Mazie again at the Place O'Pines. They must have met, yet my poor brother breathed not a word."

The tears came to Sister Benita's eyes and she wept bitterly. "Gracia then, is Mazie Lescot's child," she murmured. "I feel sure of it now."

She paused for a few moments while her thoughts wandered back over the past to that last day which she and her brother had spent together at the Place O'Pines. How that day loomed up before her now?

"I am afraid it is all too true, Mr. Chelsea," she repeated sadly.

Before Mad Nance died, Jerome remarked, "she confessed the crime to me, Dick and myself and bade me take down her sentences word for word. Here is the document. She signed her name just before she died. Read it aloud, Sister."

Jerome handed her the strange document.

"I cannot read it, Mr. Chelsea," she said in tears. "Please read it for me."

Slowly and distinctly Jerome read every sentence. "This strange man came to me at the cottage one night wearing a red wig," he continued nervously.

"A red wig?" interrupted Sister Benita. "I can now recall this very day. I remember finding it on his table next morning. He told me it belonged to one of the actors at the Olympic."

He then read of Mad Nance's entrance into the Lescot cottage, her stealing the child and carrying it to the bend of the river, where Mr. Gravenor met her and administered chloroform.

Sister Benita raised her eyes and said: "I remember distinctly Arthur's entrance into the boat the evening we left the island. He carried the little child in his arms. He told me he had adopted it and was going to take it back to Kempton with him. I thought nothing of the matter at the time as my brother was a man of moods, and felt that it was best to satisfy his whims. Arthur had been acting strangely for weeks. I remember distinctly smelling chloroform on the little one the night he brought it to us on the steamer. I drew his attention to the fact, but he replied that the child had had a cold and a strong smelling liniment had been rubbed on its chest. God forgive him, Arthur could not have known what he was doing."

When Jerome finished reading the document he asked: "Then, Sister, do you really think that this stolen child was no other than Gracia?"

"I am sure of it. It cannot be otherwise. I carried her all the way from the Place O'Pines seventeen years ago, and she watched her grow into womanhood. Gracia's Gracia," she wept sadly. "At last the shadows brighten. We always called you nobody's child but now we know that some mother's heart was broken when you were taken away."

"But listen," interposed Jerome. "Mad Nance in her confession calls the child Constance and you call the same child Gracia. This seems very strange indeed."

"Not at all. I am sure Arthur changed the child's name purposely."

"So Mazie Lescot, the child's mother is dead," murmured the grief-stricken nun. Poor thing! her end was tragic. I wonder what has become of the other child?"

"I did not hear," Sister Benita's thoughts instantly suggested me to read it to her on her twentieth birthday. I have not heard such genuine laughter for many a day. Sister Benita tried hard to throw a cloak over her feelings and succeeded. She could not help thinking of her dead brother. How she wished that he might suddenly come to life and explain in person all the strange mystery. Her thoughts stole to Mad Nance and her starting confession and she grew faint. Jerome, with Gracia at his side, felt that he was the richest man in all the world. He chatted briskly and his face beamed with smiles. To-morrow was to bring him the realization of all his fondest hopes; to-morrow he was to take Gracia to himself as wife. How his heart longed for the hour in which he could call her his forever! For weeks he had waited for the day. He had something to live for after all, something beautiful and precious that no one would ever dare to take from him.

After dinner all withdrew to the drawing room. When all were comfortably seated the Cardinal rose from his chair somewhat nervously and motioned Sister Benita to his side. The nun obeyed. His Eminence whispered something and she hurriedly left the room. Gracia wondered what all the strange proceedings could mean. She leaned over to Jerome and remarked, somewhat inquisitively: "I wonder what the Cardinal is going to do? He seems very nervous—poor, old man. See how his fingers tremble. He will never adjust his glasses. What do you think he is going to do, Jerome?"

"Probably speak a few words of advice and encouragement to us," Jerome replied, purposely concealing the real motive of the Cardinal's visit.

"But why did Sister Benita leave the room so hurriedly? Besides, she looked dreadfully pale. Oh, there she comes carrying something in her hands."

Sister Benita entered the room, the little casket in her hands. Nervously she placed it on the table and resumed her seat directly opposite Gracia. The Cardinal's eyes surveyed the room. They rested pitifully for a moment on Gracia. Then he began, notwithstanding his years, in a firm, clear voice—

"My dear children, on the eve of your intended marriage, let me speak a few words to you. I am glad to be with you this evening and I congratulate most heartily the young lady whose birthday is being so fittingly celebrat-

CHAPTER XXX. OLD LETTERS.

The night of Gracia's birthday arrived. All day long preparations had been in progress for the wedding on the morrow. Gracia was the embodiment of loveliness and happiness as she went flitting from room to room in her plain white gown, on some errand of usefulness. A large red rose glowed in her hair and another on her breast.

Matt Pency, decked in his Sunday best, was a very conspicuous figure about Bleur House.

"I am sorry to see Gracia go," he said to Sister Benita as the latter was admiring the floral decorations in the dining room. "She was life itself—music and song all the blessed day. Jerome Chelsea has much to be grateful for. Gracia is not one of them wall-flowers that a breath of wind will blow away. And she's no mad with the society craze either an' the pink-tea notions an' such like. Thank heaven for that! She can make her own play an' work with the best of them. But Aunt Hawkins an' I will be very lonely in this large house when she is gone."

A tear trickled down the old man's cheek and a look of sadness came into his eyes.

"Ah no," answered Sister Benita. "You shall not be left alone here. Listen, Gracia is not going to leave Bleur House. This is her home. Besides, another member will be added to your household to-morrow."

"Oh, I am so glad the young people are not going to leave us. With Jerome here it will be livelier than ever. He's a fine man, Jerome is—a regular, all-around gentleman. He brought me this card the way from the Place O'Pines, an' I think it was kind o' decent o' him."

"By the way, Matt, do you know," the nun asked, drifting into another theme, "what time of day it is?"

Matt's fingers stole to his watch. "It's exactly eight," he replied. "Just then the door bell sounded."

"I am sure it is the Cardinal."

"The Cardinal?" said Matt doubtfully. "Well, well! I think I had better go then."

"You must not be afraid of His Eminence. He is only a plain, humble old man."

Presently Aunt Hawkins came over on her crutches—rheumatism had almost made her a cripple—and whispered to Sister Benita: "The Cardinal is waiting in the drawing-room, dear."

"Pardon me, Matt. His Eminence is waiting."

The Cardinal greeted Sister Benita warmly.

"Have you brought the little box containing the letter?" he asked of her kindly.

"Yes, Your Eminence. Here it is," she said, "just as my brother gave it to me, and here is the key."

"I hope so. I have never tried it."

"Then this letter has never left the casket, since your brother placed it there."

"No, Your Eminence."

In a moment the key turned in the lock and the lid flew open.

"Ah, here is the precious envelope," exclaimed the Cardinal. "It does seem strange, Sister, that Arthur should have addressed it to Gracia and command you to read it to her on her twentieth birthday. When had I best read the letter?"

"After a little while, Your Eminence. I think dinner will be ready shortly. Ah, yes, there is the bell."

The two left the room, Sister Benita leading the way. In the hall the Cardinal met Gracia and Jerome.

At dinner a feeling of rare good cheer prevailed. The Cardinal was in his element and his fine, witty sayings kept everyone in good humor. Poor Matt Pency laughed so heartily that he could scarcely perform his duties at the table.

Instantly Sister Benita thought that she had not heard such genuine laughter for many a day. Sister Benita tried hard to throw a cloak over her feelings and succeeded. She could not help thinking of her dead brother. How she wished that he might suddenly come to life and explain in person all the strange mystery. Her thoughts stole to Mad Nance and her starting confession and she grew faint. Jerome, with Gracia at his side, felt that he was the richest man in all the world. He chatted briskly and his face beamed with smiles. To-morrow was to bring him the realization of all his fondest hopes; to-morrow he was to take Gracia to himself as wife. How his heart longed for the hour in which he could call her his forever! For weeks he had waited for the day. He had something to live for after all, something beautiful and precious that no one would ever dare to take from him.

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ed. I hope and trust that the young man to whom she has given her love will honor it as the most sacred gift that life can give him, that he will remain true to his promises and that God will bless both with an abundance of graces which make for perfection in this life and in the next. I have another matter to refer to and no time seems more opportune than the present. Sister Benita has handed me this casket which I hold in my hands. It was entrusted to her by her brother on his deathbed. When Arthur Gravenor was dying he commissioned her to open the casket and read the enclosed letter to you, Gracia, on your twentieth birthday. That day has now arrived and to-night your benefactor's desire shall be fulfilled, here in the presence of your friends. May God grant that it will bring into your lives added happiness!"

Gracia stirred in her chair like a frightened being. Her cheeks were pale.

"Poor thing!" thought Jerome, noticing her evident uneasiness. "I should have told her beforehand of this."

The Cardinal unlocked the casket and took therefrom the mysterious letter.

"See," His Eminence exclaimed, "the letter is addressed thus:

"To Miss Gracia Gravenor To be opened on her twentieth birthday."

Gracia's heart throbbled visibly, her eyes fastened on the Cardinal's wrinkled, noble face.

Slowly the Cardinal opened the envelope and read in trembling voice:

"Dear Gracia—On this your twentieth birthday Arthur Gravenor's voice speaks to you from the grave. It has a claim to confess. Undoubtedly, dear child, you have been wondering who your parents were, what became of them and how you ever drifted into the Gravenor household. I knew your parents well. They both lived in Kempton at one time. Your mother, Mazie Rawlins, was the only girl I ever loved and when she married Lawrence Lescot—your father—my heart was torn in two. My soul ached for revenge and, when five years later in company with my sister, Muriel, I visited the Place O'Pines, I again met your mother. She was a widow then, your father having been drowned at sea. Again I asked her to marry me. She refused, and again I swore that I would make her suffer. But it was madness and jealousy that drove me to it. In a far from sane state of mind I visited a low character, Mad Nance by name—"

Sister Benita lowered her eyes. Her face grew ashen white. By this time Gracia had risen to her feet looking in the Cardinal's kindly face, and waiting breathlessly for every word. Jerome stood at her side manfully, his face filled with an expression of pity that was touching.

"I visited a low character, Mad Nance, by name," the Cardinal repeated, "paid her a large sum of money and ordered her to go to Mazie Lescot's house and steal her little daughter who was about three years old. That very night I left the Place O'Pines and carried the stolen child to Kempton with me. Gracia—forgive me! That child was you. Your real name was Constance. For various reasons I thought it best to change it."

Gracia's head dropped into Jerome's strong arms. The surprise had been too much for her and her heart was heavy with anguish. The Cardinal paused thoughtfully a few moments and, noticing that Gracia had recovered, he continued reading—

"When I returned to Kempton I recognized the gravity of the crime I had committed. My remorse of conscience was great. I sought you to restore you to your mother, but it was too late. You were supposed to have been the victim of foul play. Your mother worried so that she died a day or two after the crime was committed."

As the story proceeded there was not a dry eye in the room. Gracia wept bitterly. It was the first time her heart had ever felt the pang of real suffering. Even the old Cardinal brushed aside a few sudden tears.

"I am sorry my dear children," he said "that the letter so far has not contained a cheery word, but it has to be read."

Then straightening himself he continued reading: "You had an only brother, Gracia. His name was Jerome. After your mother's death I enquired about him. I thought of bringing him to Kempton to spend his days with you, but learned from a friend in England that he had been adopted by a certain wealthy Sidney Terrace, a retired widower, living at 15 Mariton House Terrace, London."

"15 Mariton House Terrace?" shrieked Jerome, his face reddening with surprise, "the very place where I spent my boyhood days. Sidney Chelsea was my adopted father. Great heaven!"

A thousand thoughts pierced Jerome's mind. The room swam before his eyes. Then Gracia's voice roused him from his sudden stupor.

"Finish the letter, Your Eminence, please," gasped Jerome almost wildly.

The Cardinal continued. The letter was unearthing strange developments and, loud and clear, came the old man's touching voice: "Upon receiving the news of Jerome's adoption I wired Sir Sidney Chelsea and in time received a reply that the report was true. He had adopted Jerome Lescot, changing his name to Chelsea."

"Great God!" Jerome sobbed. "Then we are sister and brother!"

The news was too much for Gracia. She reeled and staggered and would have fallen to the ground but Jerome held her fast.

"Poor children!" the Cardinal whispered to himself, his voice overcome with emotion.

After some minutes Gracia regained consciousness. "Have I been dreaming?" she moaned, looking into Jerome's honest face. "Is it true that we are sister and brother?"

"Yes, dear," he replied in trembling voice. "It is only too true."

"But what a blessing my dear child, cheerfully spoke the Cardinal, 'that you should have discovered the truth in time.'"

"It is better so," said Jerome. "I am glad this evening has brought an unexpected treasure into my life. If Love

has not found a wife for me thank God she has found my long lost sister!"

"Turning he embraced Gracia and kissed her. For some minutes the two wept tears of gladness."

Sister Benita came across the room and tearfully whispered something into their ears. "I am glad for both of you," was all she could say. "Then she left the room. Aunt Hawkins followed her. In the mind of the latter a new light had suddenly dawned."

Gracia and Jerome had accepted the strange decree of fate with strong and courageous hearts.

Matt Pency, overcome with emotion, could not help shaking hands with them, saying: "It does my old heart good to know that you ha' found each other after havin' been parted these many years."

Presently the Cardinal rose.

"I believe, my dear children," he said smilingly "that I did not finish the reading of the letter which has brought such a sudden change into your lives, and the deceased Arthur Gravenor has proven himself a noble benefactor to you both by willing each one hundred thousand dollars. So you see Mr. Gravenor has made amends and I hope, dear children, you will not withhold your forgiveness."

"Sister Benita sat in the library, sobbing as if her heart would break."

"You must not weep so, dear," Aunt Hawkins said, entering the room. "Only a few days ago the latter had found a sealed envelope in the vault, bearing the Place O'Pines post mark. The date showed that it must have lain there for years. The strange happenings of a few days ago had at once drawn her thoughts to the letter."