

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 XXV.

THE CARDINAL'S CHOICE.

Two months later Sister Benita was again seated in the plain convent reception-room, indulging in quiet conversation with two callers. They were Gracia Gravenor and Jerome Chelsea. Love had drawn the hearts of the latter so closely together that they were thinking of a not far distant day which was to bring them the realization of all their most hopeful wishes—that day when which could be crowded all life's endless years of sorrow and suffering.

Only the day before Jerome had sent Sister Benita a beautiful picture as a gift to St. Agatha's. It was a picture of Christ as a child of six, sitting in a far-off eastern garden of flowers and shadows. His Mother bending over him tenderly, looking in hand, teaching him some little, helpful lesson, a look of hopeful yearning upon her noble face.

"Thanks very much, Mr. Chelsea for that beautiful picture," the Sister said after a few minutes. "It was very good of you. We are all in love with it and my pupils fairly rave over it. It is so life-like and original. We have set it up in the art room where everyone can see it. The Cardinal, too, admired it this morning after Mass. He thought the idea a pretty one and asked me the artist's name. I told him and he expressed a desire to meet you, Mr. Chelsea."

"The Cardinal saw the picture?" Jerome asked. "And he liked it? Well, I'm so glad—the dear, old man. It was very good of him to say so much. Do you know, Sister, I too would like to meet His Eminence."

"That can be arranged very easily. We expect him for Benediction at 3, and if he is not hurried, I will arrange with Reverend Mother for a meeting."

Sister Benita knew the Cardinal was intending to have the whole interior of his cathedral decorated in oil. He had seen Jerome's work in the chapel and had praised it frequently. No wonder she was anxious that he should see it at a meeting. The Cardinal had mentioned several artists from amongst whom the fortunate man was to be selected. She had never heard him mention Jerome's name, yet in her heart she hoped he might yet be the Cardinal's choice.

"I appreciate your kindness very much, Sister," Jerome said gratefully. "It is all very good of you, but I tremble at the thought of meeting the dear Cardinal."

"You need have no fear, Mr. Chelsea," she replied. "His Eminence is the plainest and humblest of men. Everybody loves him. He is so good and kind. He is a father to all."

"And has the heart of a child," Gracia interrupted. "I met him frequently. He always takes such an interest in everything I do."

"The day you will have news for him today, I am sure," Sister Benita added smilingly. "Certainly, Auntie," the girl answered, "and he shall know all, even to the ringing of the wedding bells. I intend asking him to marry us. Do you think he will refuse?"

"No, child," the nun spoke tenderly. "He could never refuse a Gravenor. The Cardinal and my father were the best of friends. He called daily to see him when he was ill. They were like two brothers almost—partners of a friendship that was strong and abiding. But when he was the wedding bells to ring, Gracia?"

Gracia's eyes stole over to Jerome, and for an instant the two exchanged smiles. Presently the latter came to the girl's rescue.

"A month from to-day, Sister," he remarked glacially. "We are to be married the twenty-third of June."

"The month of roses and true lover's bliss," interrupted Gracia.

"The twenty-third of June," thoughtfully repeated the nun—"the day following your birth-day, child."

"Yes, I shall be twenty then."

"Benita, a shadow creeping silently over her face. "How time flies!"

"I am sure it will bring gladness to the young girl's heart," she murmured. "On his deathbed Arthur asked me to be good to the child for his sake. For his sake? I wonder why?"

Sister Benita seemed troubled yet she was not anxious to show her present feelings, therefore she said in the sweetest voice: "I rejoice with you both that the day is near at hand. Love, when sanctified by grace and blessed by God, is a great and noble gift and I am glad to know you are both possessors of the priceless jewel."

She came near telling them about her brother's letter, but decided that it was best not to do so for the present.

Mother over—the little imp! However I should be glad to be with both of you on that day of days."

There was a momentary silence and she continued: "I suppose you find your work very trying, Mr. Chelsea. I use it of the brush frequently, and very often the smell of paint is really nauseating to me."

"It is not so with me. During the act of creating I am happy. I fairly long to see the pictures of my fancy come to life on the canvas, and yet when the work is done I am exhausted and ambitionless. I have had a busy winter and spring of it and I long to get out into the open, far away from my workshop for a little while."

"I am sure a holiday would do you a world of good."

"I know it, sister, and I intend going away to have almost decided to leave to-morrow."

"So soon?"

"Yes, you see, I intend remaining away three weeks. This will leave me a week to prepare for the wedding."

"And pray may I ask where you intend to go?"

"I am going to the Place O'Pines. They say it is a pretty place."

"You will not be disappointed. It is a garden of roses."

"Were you ever there, sister?"

"Yes, years before I entered the convent. I went there with my brother and enjoyed the stay immensely. The scenery is perfect—a rare delight to an artist's eye. It is summer all the year round at the Place O'Pines. Do you intend doing any sketching or painting there?"

"I do not, Sister. It would not be much of a rest for me then. But I intend to do some hunting."

"The pine woods are full of game. I remember when I was there hunting was rare sport for the men."

"Are you going alone, Mr. Chelsea?"

"No. My good friend, Dick Freer, accompanies me."

"That will be very nice indeed."

"Just then the door opened and Gracia entered, her face beaming with smiles."

"This all settled Auntie, dear," she exclaimed taking the nun's hand in her own. "Just think of it Mother Bertille has granted permission and—"

"Really?" interrupted Sister Benita. "I can hardly believe it. I consider it an extraordinary favor."

"And so do I," added Gracia. "I told you I would succeed. Remember, you are going to spend two whole days at Bleur House. Thank God for it! A carriage will bring and take you back safely each night."

"Mother Bertille is very gracious indeed to grant me such an unexpected pleasure. I shall live the past all over again. To me it was a cold, cheerless country. Now it is alive with the song of birds and warm with memory's sunshine."

"They will all be delighted to have you there. Poor Aunt Hawkins and Matt Pency will not close their eyes in expectation for nights when I tell them the good news."

"To Gracia," came the nun's quick reply.

"Well, well. This is a surprise," the Cardinal remarked. "I thought I read a secret in Gracia's eyes when I entered, but after all what does a poor old Cardinal know of such things. However rejoice with you, children, and I will gladly hold over the decorating of the cathedral until you, two, are settled in your own house."

"Will your Eminence grant a request?" Gracia pleaded earnestly. "Pardon me if I appear bold, but will your Eminence officiate at the ceremony? We should be the proudest people in the world."

There was silence for a few moments. Then the Cardinal said: "I cannot refuse you, my children. For the sake of my old departed friend, William Gravenor and the strong abiding memories which that friendship still gives me, I shall be only too glad to pronounce the words which will bless your union."

Then he shook hands with the two lovers.

"God bless you both!" he said as he left the room, gathering his red cloak about him.

Sister Benita was elated. The proposed work at the cathedral would help the young artist materially. It would add another jewel to his crown of successes.

Gracia, too, in her heart of hearts felt glad that she had received this sudden recognition.

"He is the Cardinal's choice. Think of it!" Sister Bertille whispered to her as she kissed her good-bye at the convent door. "I am glad for both your sakes."

CHAPTER XXVI. IN THE PINE WOODS.

Jerome Chelsea and his chum, Dick Freer, arrived at the Place O'Pines eagerly longing for the pleasures which the famous resort was to afford them. They had been friends tried and true, for many years, and this holiday trip, previous to Jerome's intended marriage, would give both a much needed relaxation from stern and more strenuous duties. They had met several years before in Paris where Jerome was pursuing his studies in art. By mere chance he had met Dick in one of the cafe chantants. Dick had come to the French capital in order to study the banking systems in vogue on the continent, previous to taking over his father's institution at Kempton. Afterwards letters, gentle breathers of a strong friendship—travelled to and fro continually from Kempton to Paris and before very long Jerome opened a studio in Kempton.

Dick Freer, who had already lived twenty-three years of his life, was one of the rising young men of Kempton. Manager of one of the largest banks in the city his name was highly respected in commercial circles. His father, too, was considered one of the wealthiest men in the place, and some day Dick was to become heir to all his wealth, for he was an only child.

A week passed quickly at the Place O'Pines for the two friends. It had been a week of genuine comfort and rest. Jerome revelled in the riotous changes of color that moved slowly along the distant wide range of hills from dark to light, his eyes glancing drunk in the majestic gray, peacefully upon the miles of wild, embracing sea and the acres of lordly pine forests. He really beheld June at her loveliest—the breath of sighing winds from her lips, the glimmer of roses in her cheeks, the sudden glory of long, languorous moonlight nights, the bright eyes of his artist-soul longed to give expression to the pictures that loomed continually before him! But no! he had left brush and palette behind in Kempton and had promised himself not to indulge in his favorite occupation until some time after the marriage. The enchanting luring beauty of the scene, however, could not so soon be forgotten. The clear solemn dawns, the warm golden afternoons, the peaceful, crimson dusks and the bewitching, starry nights in all their dazzling display of color and atmosphere, the vision of all of these would some day be transferred to canvas—some day when Gracia and he would live gloriously together as man and wife.

He could not forget Gracia, girl of his affections. Beautiful and pure, she was the artist's ideal. He kept his heart's fires ever bright. He wandered in imagination with her continually through leafy avenues of sunshine and shadow. Go where he might she rose before him like some white-robed angel, and each time he thought her more lovable, more beautiful. And in many a careless, singing brook he caught the music of her voice, clear and soft, and consoling.

"Ah, my pretty one—my little singing bird!" he would often exclaim to himself. "Soon I will take you home to your own nest. I cannot understand it at all. Thousands and thousands of miles divide us, and yet I never feel lonely. Your presence always seems near."

One morning after breakfast he sat on one of the balconies of the Clarendon, reading his morning paper.

Dick soon appeared on the scene.

"What's new to-day?" Dick asked, sinking into the chair beside him.

"Nothing much," he answered. "These foreign papers do not interest me. I wish the Kempton Chronicle were here. Some how or other I feel just a little lonely this morning. I sent it to long for the old place."

"Cheer up, Jerome—don't grow morose! It's very unbecoming of you. Let's shoulder our rifles and make for the pine woods. They tell me there is fine shooting."

"Has the morning mail arrived, Dick?" he asked absent-mindedly.

"Yes, I think it must be distributed now. But what about going hunting? This is a fine, clear morning."

"No one is finding fault with the weather, Dick, but some how or other I don't feel exactly right here, pointing to his heart. "Everything seems to be out of place."

He had been waiting almost daily for a letter from Gracia, but alas! the longed-for missive had not arrived. His heart was beginning to have strange misgivings. Gracia had promised him faithfully to write the day after he left Kempton, but she had not fulfilled her

promise. A whole week had passed now, and there were no signs of a letter.

"Come, Jerome. Stop your dreaming!" said Dick. "I shall get the rifles ready, eh?"

"Very well then, but I would like to leave over my morning's mail before leaving."

"Then I shall get it for you down stairs."

"Thanks."

Ten minutes later Dick arrived with a bundle of papers and letters.

"See here, Jerome," he exclaimed glacially, "this is for you. The office clerk, noticing my awkwardness in handling a mail bag and the elevator. So you see you are getting to be quite a man of importance, receiving letters and papers by the armful. Surely you are not going to waste through all those papers. It will be right before you finish, and our day's sport in the woods will be only an unrealized desire."

"Have patience just a few minutes! I merely want to see the letters. Here's one from Paris, a few from London and here's the Cardinal's handwriting."

His fingers moved so fleetly and when he read the post mark on the last letter a look of disappointment stole into his face.

"Pshaw! confound it anyway! I'll not go shooting to-day, Dick. I am sorry, but I am down and out. I feel disgusted myself."

"Perhaps this then will lighten your spirits, Jerome," Dick said smilingly as he drew forth a letter from his pocket. "I think it is the one you have been waiting for, the one with the scent of rose-pear, the only one from."

He did not finish the sentence, but he knew the handwriting too well to be mistaken.

"You wretch—how sly fox!" cried Jerome. "And you dared be so cruel as to keep it from me?"

Eagerly his eyes scanned the handwriting. A smile came to his eyes and he exclaimed in the fullness of joy: "Thank God! it has come at last from Gracia! Dick! I'll hunt with you all day if you like. Gracia is well and happy."

He gave a sigh of relief and all his heavy thoughts and feelings disappeared.

"You poor, love-sick boy," Dick remarked teasingly. "I am glad for your sake, that the letter has again put your heart in its right place. I think you got over the dislocation mighty quickly, and that too without the aid of surgeon or chloroform."

"Love, my dear fellow, overcomes every difficulty," Jerome answered with a smile. "In my case you see she was aurse, surgeon, anesthetist, all in one. Some day, Dick, you will be the victim. Then it will be my turn to laugh."

Just then the clock struck the hour of ten.

"Come let's off to the woods," Jerome exclaimed with an outburst of enthusiasm. "I long for the breath of the wild pine."

Soon they were off, their rifles on their shoulders, eager for a day's sport. An hour later they stood in the very midst of the pine woods—that vast cathedral of green and shadow.

"See here, Dick," cried Jerome, somewhat nervously, "there's blood trickling down this large rock. I wonder what it means?"

In a moment Dick was at his side, and together they watched the little stream of blood trickling slowly into the valley where they were standing.

"Some animal or bird must be lying on top somewhere," said Dick, "bleeding to death—a victim of a sportsman's bullet."

"There has been foul play here, Dick," remarked Jerome. "Here is the axe."

He bent over and lifted it from the ground. It was stained with blood.

"I am sure the woman has been murdered," cried Dick. "She has been done to death with that axe."

The woman opened her eyes. She struggled to gain her speech, but seemed unable to collect her thoughts. Presently her lips moved. A lucid interval had come, her mind was clear and she spoke with difficulty in the faintest whisper, slowly but distinctly.

"Murdered? Ah, no. Do not say that. There has been no murder. I came to cut down some small trees for wood. I gather my own fuel in these woods. There is my axe in your hand, and the blood came."

"How long have you been lying here?" questioned Jerome.

"Not very long. I do not know. I feel so strange!"

"Do you live near here?"

"Yes, in a little cottage, a half mile or so from here."

"Then we shall carry you home."

She raised her hand as if to ward them off. "No you must not," she said. "I am going to die here."

"But you are not going to die," Dick spoke kindly.

"The end is not far off," the woman answered trembling. "The blood flowed too freely, and I am so weak."

Jerome lifted her head slightly from the grass. It was cold and clammy. Then with the other hand he kept pressure upon the wound.

"I am so glad you came, gentlemen," she continued, her tears flowing down her cheeks. "I am so glad—so glad!"

"Pray," questioned Jerome, "will you tell us who you are? Perhaps we can find your friends."

"Friends?" questioned the old woman. "I have none. I am all alone in the world. My life has been a record of crime and degradation." She halted a moment as if to catch her breath.

"The world about the Place O'Pines knows me well. I am a companion of thieves and murderers."

She moved about uneasily. The two men saw that she was growing weaker.

"I have lived an awful life of sin and shame," she said again, her speech coming interruptedly, "and now I know my minutes are numbered. I beg God's forgiveness for all my sins. I am sorry, heartily sorry, for all the wrongs I have done. If, O God, it is not too late, cleanse this soul of its guilt by washing it in the fountain of Thy mercy! Gentlemen, you have come at the right hour. I am dying—I know, I feel it. Before I go I would like to make a confession to you which will startle the people around here. Publish it in all the corners of the island; I am sorry for my share in the crime. It has been a mystery to the people long enough. Friends, on my part, take down every word on paper. Hurry! I would like to speak while my memory is yet clear."

Jerome, pencil in hand, sank on his knees and waited breathlessly for the dying woman's words.

At last she began in a faint, trembling voice: "On my death-bed here in the pine woods, in the presence of you two gentlemen, I wish to unravel the mystery surrounding the Lescot tragedy which has puzzled the dwellers about here for nearly seventeen years. Mazie Lescot, a three-year-old child was murdered. Seventeen years have elapsed since then. Great heavens! I am dying. Only two more weeks and then she will be twenty. God forbid that my surmises are correct! Gracia a stolen child, her mother done to death by the very deed itself, and Arthur Gravenor, the girl's father and greatest benefactor, the instigator of the crime. How horrible! I cannot believe it. What will Sister Benita say when she knows all? Gracia must hear nothing of it, it will only help to darken the brightness of her wedding morn. Stolen or not, I am me to me she is still the most perfect woman on earth. She shall go through life without knowing anything of this strange woman's confession."

Jerome's face had grown deadly pale. He looked sorely troubled. His mind seemed to be battling with a mighty problem. Unknown to himself the signed document slipped out of his fingers and fell to the grass. Then his head sank into his hands, and for some time he was busy with his thoughts.

eyes when she breathed her last—the peace that comes when the heart is suddenly released from all its cares."

Jerome looked troubled. The strange document he held in his hands which bore the dead woman's signature, fairly set his mind ablaze with burning thoughts. He decided, however, not to say very much to his companions at the present time. What after all was the said to be said? What had come upon the dying woman, provisionally it seemed, yet the mention of Arthur Gravenor's name in connection with the stealing of the Lescot child brought Kempton and the occupants of Bleur House very near Gracia especially. However, the present moment were not to be utilized in the exploiting of the strange mystery which hung for the present over the memory of the departed mill-owner at Kempton.

"This is a strange predicament," remarked Jerome nervously. "What shall we do with the dead woman? Surely people will not judge us rashly and implicate us say, for perhaps, murder, how shall we get out of the difficulty? The woman has been taken away."

"Yes, that is certain," Jerome. "I let me see. I shall hurry to town to get the chief of police and acquaint him with the circumstances of the case. He will probably bring the coroner with him."

"Go at once and come back quickly. I shall keep watch over the dead until you return."

The minutes passed slowly for Jerome as he sat on the stump of an old pine tree awaiting Dick's return. And what lonely, long minutes they were for him, leading his thoughts down deeper into the strange, vague problem that had been forced so suddenly upon his mind.

His fingers stole nervously to his pocket and, taking therefrom the signed document, he read it again. A look of terror crept into his eyes. Slowly and carefully, word for word he studied the lines. They seemed to haunt him and conjure up the dead. They brought a sense of weariness and unconsciousness to his heart, such as he had never experienced. Disgusted and disappointed he wished that he had never seen the Place O'Pines. Instead of reaping pleasure from his vacation a wild spirit of unrest had settled over him. Something seemed to be pulling continually at his heart's strings; he hardly knew for what was. The man whom Mad Nance had mentioned as her tempter could be no other than the young mill-owner of Kempton. There had been only one man by that name in the history of the place as far as he knew. Besides had he not often heard Sister Benita say that that trip years ago to the Place O'Pines when her brother was "so poorly?" A light seemed to dawn on the darkness. Alas! fresh shadows were falling over the path which had been pictured as bright and sunny.

"I am sure," he argued, "that the master of Bleur House was guilty of the stealing of the Lescot child, but what motive could he have had for the strange notion? I cannot understand it at all. I wonder what became of the child? It cannot be Gracia. The stolen child's name was Constance. But then he might have changed his name for obvious reasons. Gracia, I know, was an adopted child. She knows nothing of her parents. I have often heard Aunt Hawkins say that she came to them when a little child. Let me see. The child was three years old. Seventeen years have elapsed since then. Great heavens! I am dying. Only two more weeks and then she will be twenty. God forbid that my surmises are correct! Gracia a stolen child, her mother done to death by the very deed itself, and Arthur Gravenor, the girl's father and greatest benefactor, the instigator of the crime. How horrible! I cannot believe it. What will Sister Benita say when she knows all? Gracia must hear nothing of it, it will only help to darken the brightness of her wedding morn. Stolen or not, I am me to me she is still the most perfect woman on earth. She shall go through life without knowing anything of this strange woman's confession."

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Presently footsteps sounded several yards away. Jerome caught the ring of Dick's cheerful voice.

"I heard of his death soon after. I have often wondered since what became of Constance. Mrs. Lescot died within twenty-four hours of a broken heart, thinking her child had been murdered. So you see Mazie Lescot's child was not murdered—murdered, I repeat—but stolen by this wretch who realized too late, what it means to tear heart's asunder. And now, O God, I am sorry for all my crimes."

The words came slower and fainter: "I wish that I had lived a better life. There was once a Magdalen and Thou, my Creator, didst bless her. This gives me courage and hope—Lord—forgive—me! My heart is—breaking—with—sorrow."

She paused for a moment, lingering upon the sentences her cold lips had just uttered.

"Raise—my—head—quickly," she gasped. "I—can—hardly—catch—my—breath—pencil—Let—me—sign. Quick!—before—it—is—too—late—within—twenty-four hours of a broken heart, thinking her child had been murdered. So you see Mazie Lescot's child was not murdered—murdered, I repeat—but stolen by this wretch who realized too late, what it means to tear heart's asunder. And now, O God, I am sorry for all my crimes."

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When the t both seemed t passed on the n led in Jeru startle him o moved about i Dick had b ion's face fo the tears star in the artist's which would i "What is asked kindly well, are you "No," he an but well. Th have totally r nothing, but oh, how I lo from here and say you, Dick "I shall be ever you are twenty-four h I shall be at that I could Gracia!"

In what is tive quart crowded and old church c the general a pervades a b of means to k In one of it after noon on priest and a were teachi classes of squirmed re efforts to b —Father Bou taking adva between the sessions whi schools to pr First Commu the priest's hand and cr "So this cla he said plea The boys at their tea smiled ene smile which stood but b bright and n Father B portant qu saying app "They ar child,"—the last—en it, we must Communion "Oh, yes, they cried a good."

They ar bright, but s she laughed and animat many Frenc she said as had at least The thers "God w he sighed h "And no for each of unwieldy l nice crucifi she bezges pulsively—

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