

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 XXII.

LOVE'S ROSE-TIME.

Gracia found a new meaning in life since the arrival of Jerome Chelsea's daintily written note. Her thoughts had probed down deeply into her soul, and now the heart went bounding. Excusing herself abruptly she hurried away from Aunt Hawkins, saying that she was anxious to get to work at the picture she had just sketched.

"You see, Auntie," she continued, "I am supposed to take my painting lesson at the studio to-day. Besides, I want to purchase a few necessary articles down town this morning."

When Gracia reached her room she threw herself into her large easy-chair, a feeling of intense joy in her young, untired heart. Unconsciously almost her fingers stole to her breast and drew forth the coveted letter. She kissed it over and over again, she held it in her fingers as if it were some sacred thing. Again and again she read the lines. Then more slowly she repeated each word, lingering long upon the music of its meaning.

"Pardon me, Jerome," she said, "I am addressing you thus, but my heart seems to whisper that you will not be offended. For the past few weeks I have been wanting to tell you something concerning a matter of vital interest to both of us. But, so far, my courage has failed me. When you come to the studio again you shall hear it all. Do not stay away too long. I shall count the hours until I see you."

"The dear boy!" she whispered, her heart beating joyfully. "What can he mean anyway? I am sure it must be about one of my canvases. Perhaps word has come from Paris that it has won a prize."

She paused a moment wrapped in deep thought. Then again she read the last lines slowly: "Do not stay away too long. I shall count the hours until I see you." In her mind she repeated the lines over and over again. They seemed to voice a tender, a pathetic longing.

"Surely Jerome Chelsea, the great artist, has not fallen in love with me," mused the girl. "Ah, no, he does not care for me. Even then her thoughts pained her, for of all the places in Kempton none seemed to draw her heart like the cosy, little studio of this busy artist. A sudden attachment had sprung up between the two from that first day on which Gracia had come to him as his pupil—a friendship supported by nothing artificial, but dependent upon an abiding reciprocity of esteem which infused new life and animation into both their hearts.

Jerome always felt sorry that the half-hour lesson was so soon over, and when Gracia was gone, he would sit for her for hours as he sat working at his easel.

"She is a perfect lady," he would say. "Her coming into the studio seems to bring the sunshine with it. All the day's worries vanish and her gentle, rich voice supplies many a lonely minute with music."

For some time Gracia's mind seemed to be treasuring glorious visions, for, wandering along her heart's highway, happiness—devoted twin-sister of Virtue—had come unbidden to her and left the sweetest peace upon it. Then her thoughts stole to the studio and to Jerome. It was such a blessing for her to think that he was so very near, such a comfort to know that his very fingers had penned sweet lines to her. In the days that had vanished she had often thought of him as some noble, stern guardian-angel who had been placed upon the very cross-roads of life just as she was passing. Often in her heart she thanked God for it. Often she would have spoken the word that was nearest and dearest to her lips; often she would have placed her hand tenderly in his; often she would have smiled at him in that delicious room of sketches and paintings, but that strange something, rising within her, always held her back. Now that the little letter had arrived from the man whom she had placed on so lofty a pedestal in her heart's kingdom, she hoped that her dream might come true.

Soon Gracia was on her way down the street in the direction of one of the art-stores, whether she was going to purchase some supplies. She peeped into many a shop-window, loitering here and there, her eyes resting for the moment upon some rare thing of beauty. Presently she passed a neat little cottage, standing several yards from the street. On one of the windows, emblazoned in black and gold, one read the inscription, JEROME CHELSEA.

She paused a moment as if wrapped in thought. Her lesson was not until three in the afternoon, and the city clock across the street only pointed the hour of ten. She knew Jerome would be at home. The morning hours were generally his working hours. How her eyes longed for sight of him! It seemed ages since she had seen him last, and yet only two days had elapsed. What was she to do? Cupid seemed to have complete control of the situation, and her feelings urged "yes." So down the quaint rose-path she hurried, her heart beating vigorously.

Almost breathless she ascended the narrow steps and rang the bell. The door opened and a pretty, girlish voice sounded.

"Good morning, Miss Gravenor."

"Is Mr. Chelsea in?"

"Yes. Step into the reception room a minute and I shall call him."

Gracia walked into the restful, lovely room—that home of bric-a-brac, curios, souvenirs, pictures and books. Presently the woman returned and bowing profoundly, said: "Mr. Chelsea is busy now and his place is in your room, which you must consider a very great honor. You are the first woman I have shown to the place."

"Really?" questioned Gracia, shyly. Gracia had a time in the past, but all the things about the studio were not known to this fussy, little mortal who answered the door-bell.

"Walk down the hall—the first turn to the right," the maid directed.

In a moment Gracia stood at the workshop door. A gentle rap and footsteps sounded within.

"Why, how do you do, Gracia? I beg your pardon—I mean Miss Gravenor," stammered Jerome, agreeably surprised. "Come right in, I was just thinking of you this moment, and here you are as full of life and beauty as ever. Really, Gracia—I beg your pardon—"

"Proceed! Just call me Gracia for short," interrupted the girl. "It sounds better."

"Do you think so?" he asked, a merry look twinkling in his eyes.

Gracia was a picture of loveliness in her smart spring gown of rich, black cloth. The morning sun, stealing through the large, open window, rested full upon her pretty face—the delicate pink rose-petal complexion, the small red regular lips, the snowy teeth and the dancing black eyes. She wore a plain, picturesque hat trimmed with roses which was very becoming to her neatly arranged black hair. At her throat sparkled a tiny golden cross set with diamonds.

Jerome, too, looked as if the spring had made his heart glad. Like Gracia his complexion was fair. His hair, a shade darker than hers, was rather long. When he smiled his red lips parted and several dimples showed conspicuously in his cheeks. A loose working gown of thin gauzy material hung carelessly over his form. From his white collar was suspended a black silken tie tied carelessly. He looked like a man enjoying the best of health. His features were clear cut and vigorous. In age he was perhaps a few years older than Gracia. The quick flashing light in his eyes showed plainly that he was an observant and thoughtful man.

"Fastening his gown somewhat nervously he rose and said bashfully: "Won't you be seated Gracia—here on this cosy couch? Come!"

Slowly he sank down beside her. Soon they were engaged in the most absorbing conversation.

"What brought you out so early?" he asked inquisitively.

"Oh, I wanted to buy a few brushes at the art store," she answered. "Besides, I had other shopping to do."

"Did you receive my letter?" he continued anxiously.

"Yes, Jerome, I did," she answered, her cheeks blushing deeply.

"Well, Gracia," he stammered uneasily. "I have something to say to you—something that has been troubling my heart this long time; something vital, all-absorbing."

"A sigh escaped the girl's lips. She stirred about nervously as one startled by fear. Slowly Jerome's hand stole into hers. The next moment they were face to face.

"Gracia! Gracia!" he continued. "I can keep the secret no longer. I must tell you—I must tell you—"

"Gracia—listen to me—I—love—"

"—you!"

Then his strong arm stole about her neck. She tried to release herself, but it was too late.

"Gracia! I love you," he gasped, looking into her beautiful, young face.

"You do not mean it, Jerome," she said. "Oh, it seems hardly possible."

"Anything is possible to one who loves," he answered drawing her closer to him. "From that first day on which you came to me for your lesson, I have loved you, Gracia, of that I am sure. I get you, but it was impossible. When I was lonely your sweet face rose before me and cheered me; when I was discouraged your clear voice always brought to my ear some consoling message. Whenever I went you rose before me like some white-robed saint to lead me on. I was never alone. You were always with me, bound to me by that strong chain of love which time can never destroy. Oh beloved! I have longed for this blessed hour and now that it has arrived I am satisfied."

"I, too, feel like uttering some prayer of thanksgiving, Jerome," she continued.

"If this, then is love—this glorious subtle force that is stealing through my being, I ask for no other pleasure than to rest in your strong arm, Jerome, and feel the eternal, abiding influence of your love. How could I help loving you?" she continued.

"You are so noble, great and good. I am only an ordinary girl and you—you are such a noted man of the world."

"You may think yourself only an ordinary girl, Gracia," he interrupted, "but mine is your humility. To me you are the greatest, noblest, sweetest woman I have ever known—an angel dropped from the skies, beautiful as the fallen snow and lovely as the stars in the blue heavens. With you always near, my life will be a path of roses. Without you it would have been cold and cheerless."

"Ah, Jerome, Love is sweet when sanctified upon the altar of a noble heart like yours and its rose-time is joyous. Oh, I am so happy—so happy. I love you—dear."

They drew a little closer and for an instant their lips met in that first white hour of Love's awakening.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE PAINTED PICTURE.

Gracia hurried home that morning with joy in her heart—the joy felt when comes into one's life. In her heart she had often longed for the love of Jerome, but she always pictured it as something lying far beyond her grasp—something of which she was unworthy, something that was meant for another. And now she had heard his lips speak the words that she had often heard in dreams and felt the pressure of his warm, strong hand, she knew that Love's very heaven had been opened to her at last. Like an innocent, pleasure-loving child she had entered that place of a thousand delights, where birds madrigaled unceasingly and where birds lifted their sweet faces to the sun and smiled as he passed by. It was a grand awakening to be so and

dearly transported from a world of dreariness and unrest into a haven of peace and happiness. Love had suddenly brightened a very dark shadow in her life; it had softened the bird voices into more tender strains and added a new beauty to sky and land and sea. To her heart it had given the treasures which God bestows upon His children in those first glad hours of the consecration. It had brightened the coming years to her life—the blessed season which even then gave promise of gay summers of happiness, bright autumns of hope and noble winters of peace.

Jerome regretted seeing Gracia depart from the studio. He would have liked to have kept her there forever, but what matter now that she sat enthroned in his heart?

When she was gone he lit a cigar and sank into his easy chair. For some time his thoughts traced beautiful pictures in the clouds of smoke. He pictured Gracia in the coming years helping him faithfully to attain the lofty ideals which the future guarded zealously; he knew that her love would ever fall upon him as some tender benediction—that strong love of hers which would bridge every difficulty, surmount every obstacle and lead him to the fields of success beyond.

Presently the old German clock, which Jerome had purchased in his student days at Leipzig, struck the hour of eleven.

"Time flies," he said gaily, "and I must to work."

He rose from his chair and threw his cigar aside carelessly.

"Oh, if that canvas were only done—if Gracia only knew!"

Thoughtfully he walked to the large, open window. For a moment his eyes wandered across the busy street, and he exclaimed, "What a beautiful morning," he exclaimed, "the very breath of poetry seems to linger everywhere. Strange! in every passing face I seem to see Gracia—my Gracia. O best love, great love! My heart burns for thee."

He brushed his hand and sat down at his easel, brush and palette in hand and began his work. There was a smile on his face as he sang lustily—

"Ask me no more where Love bestows
When June is past, the fading rose;
For your eyes they set, and then,
Those flowers, as in their causes, sleep.

"Ask me no more whether doth haste
The nightingale when May is past;
For your eyes they set, and then,
She winters and keeps warm her note.

"Ask me no more where those stars light
That downward fall in dead of night;
For your eyes they set, and then,
Fixed become as in the spheres."

"There, now, that looks better," he exclaimed as he lifted his brush from the canvas. "I wonder what Gracia will say when she sees the picture? I think it is the best I have ever done and I do hope it will bring me something from Paris. I am sure Gracia will be surprised. I have a few more finishing touches and then the picture will be done."

For two hours the artist worked faithfully at the canvas adding those little details which are necessary for the production of a great master piece. When he had finished he rose from his seat, walked back a few yards and faced the picture.

"It is magnificent," he exclaimed, his heart thrilling with pride. "I am so glad it is finished at last. I feel very tired. And now for a name."

"I have it, I have it," he thought deeply. "I shall call it 'Love's Blossoming.'"

Then he strode over to the table and rang the little bell.

"Did you ring, Mr. Chelsea?" the maid asked softly.

"Yes, Priscilla, I am very tired. Bring me a cup of strong coffee and a slice of toast. I am not going out for lunch."

"Will coffee and toast be sufficient?"

"Yes, Priscilla, I am not hungry, only tired and I want something to refresh me, that's all."

"When was Jerome sank into his arm chair. He ran his fingers through his long black hair and said thoughtfully: "Love's Blossoming—what a beautiful name!" Then a look of intense satisfaction stole to his eyes.

Gracia came to the studio that afternoon for her lesson. "Dear," he smiled as she entered the room. "I am glad, it seemed days since you were here, and yet it was only this morning."

Then his hand stole silently into hers and he led her across the room.

"You look tired, Jerome. Are you not feeling well?" Gracia asked, nervously, looking into his honest, manly face.

"I am feeling quite well, thank you."

"What have you been doing, dear?"

"I have been painting. I could hardly leave my canvas during the past few days. It haunted me continually, and I was very anxious to finish it. I painted hours yesterday and, when evening came, I will sit at my easel. Later I went out for a refreshing walk. When I returned the picture again attracted me and I worked until after midnight. When I fell asleep the morning sun was just rising."

"No wonder then that you look tired," Gracia said pitifully. "I am afraid you are forgetting the laws of the conservation of energy."

"Perhaps, but my very life seemed to be in the picture. It has taken me two months, dear, to give expression to a desire my heart has treasured for days, and now the picture is finished and it is the best I have yet done. A prize from Paris and then my happiness will be complete."

"You intend sending it abroad?"

"Yes, my dear. Space has been reserved for me in the leading art gallery of Paris for six pictures and this shall be one of them."

"This is all news to me, Jerome," Gracia exclaimed with surprise. "You have been at work upon that picture for two months and you never mentioned that it was to be sent to Paris?"

"I dared not, Gracia, but now—"

"That seems strange," she interrupted. "You dared not? I hardly know what you mean. What is the name of the canvas?"

"Love's Blossoming," he replied.

"What a pretty name! Your pictures are always well named, Jerome. You

show great taste in this matter. How did you happen to choose such a pretty one?"

"It was an inspiration, dear. The christening took place but a few hours ago, just as—"

He did not finish the sentence and Gracia wondered why he was so reticent.

"I do not understand you, Jerome. Come tell me all about it—and please finish your sentences?"

A troubled look stole into her eyes.

"Come, Gracia," he exclaimed, "let us see the picture first. It will speak for itself."

He led her into the workshop where the canvas stood just as he had left it. Gracia sprang forward with a thrill of delight and Jerome followed slowly.

"Oh Jerome—it's beautiful!" she cried, her eyes wandering over the great master piece.

Then her cheeks grew pale. She turned and faced him and her lips trembled.

The picture was a creation of soft subdued color, a garden scene with the spring full upon it. A clear, blue sky smiled above and shadows show everywhere. In the foreground stood a number of roses, and, bending over one of them, was a woman in white, beautiful and youthful looking. In her fingers she held a red blossoming rose. Her eyes were gazing into the very soul of the opening flower. They had a heavenly look in them—the light of heaven, clear and sweet beyond all understanding.

The woman in white was no other than Gracia.

"Why did you not tell me of this weeks ago?" she asked tenderly.

"Because I dared not. I loved you, but it was too early. Love's blossoming had not yet come."

CHAPTER XXIII.

A VISIT TO ST. AGATHA'S.

"I am so glad to see you, Gracia."

"It was a woman's voice that sounded in the neat, plainly-furnished room—Sister Benita's, bright, musical and cheery."

In the height of her happiness, after her lesson at the studio, Gracia had gone to St. Agatha's, to pour out her inmost feelings to Sister Benita. These visits to the convent on the hill were of a very informal nature. To Gracia they were special feasts of delight. She loved to be near Sister Benita. She was so different to the other women with whom she came in contact daily. Always sympathetic and kind, she possessed qualities of heart and mind which make for greatness—those noble, uplifting traits which are given to those who live pure and virtuous and exemplary lives.

Tall and distinguished looking, Sister Benita was above all a beautiful woman. As she glided through the room one could only think of her as a saint—a woman set far above the world's common lot, whose heart was filled with love for the Creator and whose life was a grand poem of self-denial and holy living.

Presently the artist worked faithfully at the canvas adding those little details which are necessary for the production of a great master piece. When he had finished he rose from his seat, walked back a few yards and faced the picture.

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