

AMBITION'S CONTEST

BY CHRISTINE FABER

CHAPTER XXI

ANOTHER PHASE OF WOMAN'S HEART

The harsh lines of Anne Flanagan's character were almost perceptibly softening under the influence of the pure and holy life of her young mistress. Ellen's noble charity touched her selfish feelings to the quick; Ellen's calm acceptance of every trial was a reproach to her ill-natured endurance of sorrows created by her own uncontrolled passions, and Ellen's love of and kindness to herself, evinced in various ways, were springs which put into action every tender chord in her sour and crabbed nature.

One morning that she was abroad on some one of the charitable commissions which she frequently executed for her young mistress, she suddenly encountered the Oriental looking stranger, whom she had once pursued in the streets of Florence. He was dressed in much the same garb, the short, embroidered cloak depending from his shoulders; a strange, conical-shaped hat covering his head. He showed by the expression of his swarthy face that he recognized her, and he attempted to convey, by something like a smile, that the recognition was not an unpleasant one to him. But the smile seemed only a mocking grin to Miss Flanagan, and it made her shrink with fear and dislike from him. He did not attempt to communicate with her; he even appeared to desire to leave her as rapidly as she could wish, for after a moment or two, he darted away in an opposite direction to that which she had been pursuing.

But her curiosity had mastered her fear. Determined now that opportunity had again presented, to make another attempt to ascertain something about the strange creature, she turned and rapidly followed him. He looked back, grinning, the woman thought, more sardonically than ever, and he even slackened his pace as if to permit her to overtake him. Determined now to accost him, Anne quickened her steps; but when she arrived within speaking distance, the strange being raised his arms and motioned her back. The expression of his face also changed; it wore no longer the mocking semblance of a smile, but all the signs of displeasure and wrath. His forehead was gathered into ominous frowns, and his eyes shot glances fairly aflame with violent rage. Miss Flanagan was too frightened to ask the question she had intended, and she could only stand, while her fear plainly betrayed itself to the stranger. He, apparently satisfied with the result of his action, turned and resumed his course.

Again did the curiosity of the woman predominate over her fear, and a second time she began the pursuit, though more slowly, and with some hesitation in her manner. But she had not proceeded far, when the stranger turned and made wilder and more menacing motions than before.

Miss Flanagan was too much appalled to attempt the pursuit a third time, and disappointed, vexed, and still somewhat out of breath, she retraced her steps. She could scarcely recover sufficient calmness to perform the errand upon which she had been dispatched, and when at length she arrived at home, it was only to shut herself in her own room, and give vent to her feelings in her own singular and extraordinary way.

Ellen, ever watchful and considerate for others, feared from the manner in which Anne secluded herself that the latter was ill, and she hastened to afford such relief as might be in her power. But the maid, without opening her door, answered to the kindly voice without that she was not well, and desired only to be left alone, and as the day wore on and Anne still did not come forth, the tenderness of the young mistress could not be satisfied without frequent inquiries, and leaving at the door a little repast which she herself had prepared for the invalid she imagined Anne to be. The latter, when assured that Miss Courtney had departed, came softly forth and took into her room the tray of tempting delicacies which had been left, and never, perhaps, was the perverted nature of the woman so truly touched as when she witnessed this fresh evidence of the tender charity of her young mistress. Tears, and tears that sprung from a kinder feeling than any which had that day filled her heart, dimmed her eyes.

"If she knew," she murmured, "if she knew my heart, it is far, far from me she'd keep." And then, as if some bitter remembrance pressed heavily upon her mind, she clasped her hands and ejaculated fervently; "God forgive me!"

When Ellen again came to the door with her kind inquiry, Anne admitted her.

"Come in, Miss Courtney," she said, with a strange tremulousness of voice, and when Ellen had seated herself in the chair Anne drew forward, the latter resumed, with the same singular, quivering tones:

"Your kindness has touched my heart. You have made me travel back overlong and wretched years till I stand again where I stood once, when happiness seemed within my reach. You don't understand me," seeing Ellen's bewildered look, "but you will when you have heard the story of my unhappy life. Listen

with the kindness with which you hear tales from the poor about you—listen with the pity which you have for sin, for never soul needed compassion more than mine does now. An orphan I received was flung to me as bones are flung to dogs. It was charity, and I was a pauper. Never allowed to forget that fact, I grew up imagining that one word comprised everything of hate and coldness—and that word charity. Neither admitted to the table of the relations with whom I dwelt, nor yet exactly degraded to the position of a menial domestic, my life became isolated, and morbid, and miserable. I had received some education; I occupied my spare moments in improving it, and my fancies filled the places of friends and companions. The relations with whom I had been compelled to make my home were proprietors of a large hotel, and my services were, in many ways useful. But once—her voice sank to a low and inexpressible tender pitch—"these services were brought into strange requisition. A gentleman putting up for the night there, was seized with sudden illness. No one dared to leave him, and there was nothing about him to prove his identity. The care of him devolved upon me, as being the most conveniently spared to nurse him. When he recovered, his gratitude for my attentions seemed to know no bounds. He was unable for weeks to leave the hotel, and during that time the kind interest he evinced in my welfare drew me out as nothing had ever been able to do before. I told him all my lonely, unhappy life—I spoke to him as it would have been impossible for me to speak to any one else. His sympathy was great, and I, in my gratitude, could have fallen at his feet and kissed them. He promised to help me to a happier position, and when he was leaving he gave me this, with a request not to open it till he had gone."

She drew from her pocket the little curiously-wrought box at which it was her wont to look so frequently, and which Ellen remembered having seen the day, when they were in Paris, that she discovered Miss Flanagan in such strange grief.

"When I did open it," Anne continued, "I found it filled with pound notes, and a little missive lying on the top of them, which begged me to accept the gift as a trifling tribute to the kindness I had shown an utter stranger, and also to keep up my heart, for he might soon be able to do more to relieve my unhappy position."

She opened the box, and disclosed a time-stained letter lying carefully within.

"This is the letter," she resumed, "and when I read it then, nearly twenty years ago, my heart bounded with the sweetest joy it had ever known. I imagined I could already tell what he might be able to do to relieve my position. I knew not what he was, further than he had the bearing, and manners, and education of a gentleman, and I did not question whether he might not be too far above me to think of me in the way of which I dreamed. I only knew that I wildly, madly loved him, and I waited with feverish longing to hear from him again. A letter came after a few months, desiring me to join him at a certain place. I cannot describe what satisfaction, my independence, my joy were then, and I hastened to obey his directions only to find that I had made the saddest and most terrible mistake of my whole life. It was not for himself he wanted me—it was not to return the wild affection which I burned to pour forth, but to give me the position of maid to the lady he was about to marry. And then I found out who he was. One so educated, so wealthy, so high in all this world's advantages, that, had I but known it before, I would never have dared to raise my thoughts to him. But now it was too late—I could not withdraw my heart, much as I would. I wanted to reject his offer, to tell the kind advance of his intended bride, whose sympathy he had enlisted in my behalf—but I could not. To know that I was near him—to hear his voice, to see him sometimes—was bliss which I would not forego, and I entered the lady's service. I fancied that my feelings were well concealed. I tried to study how to practice the most perfect deception. But this gentleman had a brother there, a keen-eyed, sarcastic man. He penetrated my secret; and at times, when we were unobserved, he seemed to take a delight in torturing me with his knowledge of it. I hated him. I grew to shiver at his presence; and every bad passion used to rise in my heart at his sight. But still I could not leave. I witnessed the marriage, and I hated the bride—I could have trampled on her in her gorgeous dress. I had never been so wicked. Before, in all my loneliness and unhappiness, I used still to try to be good, and to cling to my religious practices; but now everything like that was gone, and my heart was black with sin."

"Owing to the interest in my case with which she had been inspired, I was soon treated more as a companion than a domestic by the newly-made wife; but the hate in my heart for her only flourished the more, till I left her at last."

The woman had watched the consciousness slowly growing in Ellen's face—the expression which told how the latter was, dimly at first, but more and more clearly comprehending her own family, and she hastened to efface the impression.

"I left her at last," she continued, "Years have passed, and I have long

been out of her employment"—Ellen's countenance grew blank again—"but my bad passions have not entirely disappeared. Sometimes they burn less brightly, but they are never wholly extinguished. To day something occurred to bring them out in all their strength again and I thought it but just to let you know that they were exercising your care and kindness on one who still bears the hate and unhappy love of her youth. There, you have my story, Miss Courtney!"

Ellen was agitated by sundry conflicting feelings, without any voluntary act of her will. She had been, while the maid talked, linking all the strange circumstances and remarks which she had at any time perceived about, or heard from Anne, with the singular story issuing from the latter's lips, and she was almost ready to be told that it was her own father to whom the woman had been thus unhappily attached; but the latter part of the tale compelled her to a different inference, and some what puzzled, yet not distrustful, any portion of Anne's statement, and also relieved that it was not her mother for whom the woman still entertained such unhappy feelings, she answered in her own gentle, pitying way, till the tears streamed afresh down her listener's sorrow cheeks.

The woman seemed loth to end the conference, even when, owing to Ellen's kind efforts she had become calm and reassured; she appeared still as if she desired to say more. But she did not utter it, and when Ellen rose to leave her, she only asked that what she had told might be kept secret, even from Mrs. Courtney. The young girl assented, and when at length Anne Flanagan was alone, she muttered:

"It's of my mind, anyway. I told her the badness that was in my heart."

But despite her efforts to assure herself that she was quite relieved, her heart was not at rest, for she had concealed the truth from Ellen Courtney.

CHAPTER XXII
THE STRANGERS

A few days after Anne Flanagan's singular burst of confidence, Ellen returning from one of her charitable visits, was induced by the brightness of the afternoon to prolong her walk through the grounds of Ashland Manor. Turning her steps in a direction which she rarely approached, she wandered on in a sort of pleasant dreaminess, inhaling the soft air and admiring the bright hue of the freshly-springing foliage.

Suddenly she became aware that she was not the only stroller through the unfrequented grounds. Two forms emerged from an angle made by the wild shrubbery—one, the strange-looking being with whom Miss Flanagan had recently so singular an encounter, and the other a tall and remarkably handsome middle-aged man. Owing to the dark costume of Ellen, and the shade in which she stood, her presence was not immediately perceived, and she had time to note and wonder at the singular dress of one of the strangers—the short embroidered cloak, and the conical-shaped hat, from which depended a tassel that gleamed as if it contained some jewel.

They paused after walking a moment in her direction, as if in obedience to a desire of the elder and handsome man, and the latter began to survey the scene with a countenance expressive of deep interest. Then the strangely garbed individual perceived Ellen, and, signifying that fact to his companion, they both rapidly approached her.

A flush of alarm dyed her cheeks, and she looked sufficiently startled to be on the point of retiring, but the elder of the strangers said with graceful dignity:

"Am I in the presence of Miss Courtney?"

The sound of the voice thrilled her, and an unaccountable feeling which she could neither understand nor describe, suddenly filled her heart—as if she had heard the voice, had seen the face before, had even known and loved the person. She bowed assent to his question, while her heart palpitated wildly, and her flush increased to a rich crimson.

He extended his hand.

"Will you deem it a liberty if I request to hold your hand in mine for a brief space—though unknown to you I take a deep, deep interest in your welfare."

Something over which she had no control impelled her to put instantly her hand in his grasp; his fingers closed upon it with a warm and lingering pressure, and his magnificent dark eyes dwelt with a peculiar expression upon her face. Her whole soul seemed to respond to that glance, so passionate, and yet so strangely tender.

After a moment or two of the intense and singular survey, he let her hand slip slowly from his grasp.

"Good-by, Miss Courtney, and in your prayers remember sometimes the stranger who has ventured to accost you."

He turned suddenly, and putting his arm through that of his strange companion, they both walked hastily away. She felt like pursuing, to ask his name, and to inquire how and what he knew of her to cause his "deep interest" in her welfare, but her trembling limbs refused to bear her; she leaned against a tree near which she stood, and endeavored to compose herself.

The singular emphasis with which he had pronounced the word *stranger* in requesting her to pray for him,

still lingered in her ears, as did the tones of his voice, so strange, yet so familiar. She could not understand it, and at length, when she had become somewhat composed, she strove to put all thoughts of the strange incident out of her mind, and with a sigh and a prayer she returned slowly to the house.

Fearing that an account of her singular interview might in some way alarm her mother, she forbore to mention it even to Mrs. Courtney, and Anne Flanagan, for private reasons of her own, said nothing of her very strange encounter. Perchance both mistress and maid watched, when they went abroad, for another sight of the remarkable strangers, but neither of the latter ever appeared.

No tidings of Howard came to relieve his sister's suspense. Malverton sought no more to intrude upon her presence. And Ellen Courtney's life was soon as completely isolated as she could wish.

As the months wore on, Anne Flanagan's disposition seemed to grow less asper as if her very sympathy for a life so full of self-denial and noble devotion was that of her young mistress, prevented the display of her former harshness. Dick Monahan also continued to serve the young girl with all the faithfulness of a tried and trusted friend.

Little attention as Ellen fancied she attracted, her name was frequently mentioned, and interest and curiosity circled warmly about her. Even the good-natured garrulousness of such fond old creatures as Granny Cleary, who still dwelt in the lodge, found the goodness of "the young mistress" an inexhaustible theme.

With Mrs. Courtney, as month after month and even year after year swept their heavy round, hope often gave way, and she was obliged to have frequent recourse to Howard's note in order to revive her fainting courage with the apparently comforting meaning of its contents. Sometimes she thought of instituting inquiries through the colleges of Europe, imagining with Ellen that he might have entered one, but his request to have her make no search deterred her. But that which imposed the most severe and unnatural strain upon her heart was her resistance to his passionate yearning for her daughter's return. Once that yearning sent her to such desperate lengths that she even seized her pen to recall Ellen; then the picture of Howard returning to his old ambition and remaining abroad, severed from all influence which might still reclaim him, and the memory of disolute companions, came vividly before her. She dropped the pen, and pushed the paper away on which she would have inscribed her request to Ellen to come home. Her breaking heart would still longer endure the agony of that bitter separation, since Howard had promised, in the event of his being swayed by his old passions, to return to his sister; so, sternly shutting her sorrows into her own soul, she bore them in silence, not even seeking brother Fabian as had been her wont, for her griefs were too sore to endure his stern rebukes.

TO BE CONTINUED

"THE ROSE OF
YESTERDAY"

"O gift of God, of perfect day," quoted Brenda Conover softly, taking in with the comprehensive gaze of the nature-lover the long line of mountains clearly outlined against the dazzling blue of the sky; buttress, peak and escarpment, bathed in the splendor of the October sun, gave back gift for gift in wondrous light and shadow. Far to the north the misty purple of the mountains seemed merged in the gleaming blue of the ocean, the beautiful blue Pacific that nearer at hand was flinging its waves against dark cliffs and golden sands, its deep voice, muffled by distance, a mellow bass to the treble of the nearer bird notes. No wonder that Brenda's heart was stirred as she walked along the path to the beach. This was the most delightful holiday she had ever had, and this village clustered on the strip of land between the mountains and the ocean seemed to her the fairest place on earth.

"There's that lady again," she said, half aloud, "I wonder who she is, always by herself she seems so sad and lonely; but perhaps that is only my imagination. Surely no one could be so long in such a place as this. It seems more beautiful every day."

Coming to the beach she made her way to her usual seat beneath the cliff and remained some time in watching the rollers come in. The grandeur, the majesty of the scene lifted her heart to higher things, from the creature to the Creator, who holds the seas in the hollow of His Hand. Then almost involuntarily she began to sing the "Salve Regina," softly at first, then, responding to the beauty of the words poured forth her love to the dear Mother whose heart yearns over her banished children. As the last trembling note died away, she started up in surprise, for the lady who had so roused her curiosity was standing close beside her, and the sadness of the beautiful dark eyes went to her heart.

"You have a beautiful and sympathetic voice, it is right, think you, to sing in the open air and so close to the sea?" The voice was low and pleasant, and the smile she gave robbed the question of any abruptness.

"I never thought of that; perhaps I should not, but I felt it all so, the beauty and the grandeur, that I could not keep silence."

The other sighed. "Once I was the same, all emotion had to find expression in song, and now—" she broke off abruptly, and turned as if to go, but after taking a few steps, returned and sat down beside Brenda.

"I have noticed you on the beach every day for a week. Are you making a long stay?"

"Only a month; I wish it could be longer; but I must get back to work. I suppose we wouldn't enjoy holidays if we always had them, though, would we?"

"Certainly not, and nothing is more wearisome than a perpetual vacation, nothing more hard to bear than an enforced idleness. I ought to know that. May I ask what your work is?"

"Nothing very important, I fear. I am only a musical student, and since I had rather overtaxed my strength, I am sent down to recruit in this delightful place."

"Yes, it is beautiful, but one wearies of everything. I have been here two years now, so that it is almost like home. But tell me of yourself; are you a vocalist?"

"I hope to be, though I am not very sanguine about it, but I love music above all—don't you?"

"Forgive me," she murmured, and laid her strong, cool hand on the frail ones that were locked so tightly together. There was silence for a while, and then Brenda began to speak of the mountains, of all the beauty spots she had explored, and all she meant to explore in the coming weeks.

That was the first of many meetings, and Brenda grew to love Rosemary Fortescue with a love she had felt for no one since her mother had died five years before. That there was some mystery about her she could not fail to note, but made no effort to force her confidence. Often it seemed that the wall of reserve would be broken down, but by a supreme effort she would regain her self-control.

It was the hour of sunset, the mountain ridge was like a line of gold, and overhead the soft rose hues still lingered in the cloud-masses, but on the mountain side the mists were gathering, veiling in their folds alike black rock and living green. On a fallen tree by the wayside sat Brenda, but not now were eyes or mind on the scene before her; earth had no share in the thoughts that clustered round the holy words as the beads slipped through her fingers; the mysteries passed before her winning, wounding, gladdening. Even when she had finished the Rosary she still sat motionless, heart and mind full of joy in the glory of Mary in heaven, and she started as a hand was laid on hers.

"Did I frighten you? I did not mean to. I am sorry. But you were so lost in thought that you did not notice my coming. Oh, are you a Catholic?"

"I am, thanks be to God," replied Brenda, rising, for there was no mistaking the dismay in the other's tone, even if she failed to note how quickly the hand had been drawn back at the touch of the rosary.

"Do not be offended," pleaded Miss Fortescue. "I have felt so drawn to you in these days, and desirous of your friendship. I have never had much to do with Catholics, but I always had an idea they were ignorant and superstitious. Now, I know you are not the first; have we not talked on books for many days and young as you are, you are well read. But it seems to me this," and she touched the rosary, "is certainly superstitious. What can you want with a string of beads to say prayers on; surely the heart can go out to God without that?"

Then Brenda seeing that the other was in earnest, sat down again, and explained clearly and simply the mysteries, joyful, sorrowful and glorious, and how the recital of the rosary blends vocal and mental prayer. Then, gathering courage, she spoke of the Blessed Mother of God, given to us as Mother also, by those dear words on Calvary; of the love that falls at when earthly affections fail, making childhood purer and more blessed, strengthening the heart when temptations gather, giving courage and help when the fight is hard and bitter, and throwing its gentle light on the valley of the shadow.

She ceased; and in the silence came the everlasting thunder of the ocean, and nearer at hand the mournful cry of the night-bird, and the rustling of the leaves overhead. Then Helen Fortescue spoke, slowly, dreamily:

"I never thought of anything as beautiful as that. I have rather shunned religion as something dark and gloomy that robs life of its sweetness, but as you speak of it it would be the light of life. Mysteries! I like that word, for are we not surrounded by mysteries, do we not walk begirt with them; and pass from one to another until the last great one of all enfolds us? Yes, yours is a living faith, no cold collection of hard dogmas and crude superstitions as I once thought. Ah!" and the note of passion thrilled in her tone, "had I but a faith like that to lean on, in the hour of darkness and despair, even this bitterness might have been sweet, and a ray of hope might have shone where all is now darkness. You are young, you do not realize how cruel life can be, how bitter the cup that must be drunk to the very dregs. In vain we seek to avoid sorrow; it steals upon

us and blots out our hopes and aspirations as yonder mists had blotted out the hills."

"Look higher," cried Brenda, her voice vibrant with emotion, "over the earth the shadows may rest, but see the glory of the stars," and she pointed to where in the horizon the evening star gleamed in fitful splendor. A long, low cry broke from the other's lips, and ere Brenda could stop her she had gone.

Day after day, passed, and she had made no sign and in a short time now all opportunity would be gone. In vain Brenda haunted the beach; the slender, black-robed figure never appeared, and it was with a sinking heart she turned homeward on her last evening. Tomorrow she would be back in the city and she longed to see her friend once more before leaving, yet she could not bring herself to break the silence first. When she entered the cottage where she was staying, a note was handed to her, and her heart bounded with joy, for, though she had never seen it before, she felt sure the delicate characteristic writing must be that of Miss Fortescue. She was not mistaken, and though it was but a short note asking her to call at "Rose Cottage" that evening, she felt that all would come right. As she paused at the gate, she noted the fragrance of the roses, whose abundance gave the tiny cottage its name, and she lingered along the path, her hostess came to greet her.

"I fear I behaved very badly that evening and since; but you must pardon me, dear; I was more moved than I care to confess, and though I have been trying to shut my heart against what you said I find I cannot. Let us sit here on the veranda, I want to tell you about myself, and I prefer the friendly darkness."

"If you would rather not—" began Brenda.

"Ah, but I must, only very briefly though. I have eaten out my heart in silence too long. The profession you aspire to was mine. My voice was marvelous, so everyone said, and a golden future lay before me. I loved! I was loved; all life was fair, then the mists fell, and all was blotted out. I listened to the malicious gossip of one I deemed a friend, listened and believed, and quarreled with Leonard. He left in anger, and I never saw him again, for he went to Western America, and died there. I was miserable when he went away and grew careless. One night, on leaving the concert hall, I contracted a cold and, neglecting it, became seriously ill. My recovery was slow, and then the blow fell—my voice was gone; all my dreams of triumph faded as utterly as my dreams of love. I was persuaded to try a milder climate than that of Europe, and came out to Australia some twelve years ago. Since then I have drifted from city to city, until I found this haven of peace. I am still a young woman, but hope is dead, for me life has nothing but weariness. I have had my day, though it was short enough, and you know how the poet says:

Each morn a thousand roses brings, you say.

Yes, but where leaves the rose of yesterday?

The rose of yesterday, how truly that describes my hopes myself."

"Do you not think," said Brenda, striving to find some means to bring comfort to this stricken heart, "that your past is too bitterly sad? A good and learned friend of mine told me once to read two chapters of the 'Imitation' for every verse of his."

"Maybe, you are right, but I love the bitterness, at least I did, but since you spoke that evening I have been thinking of what you said. A mother's love, that I have never known, and when you spoke of Mary, our Mother; of help and strength, and comfort, my heart cried out in its loneliness for all you had and I lacked. Your holiday is up soon. Tomorrow! Well, at least you will write to me and tell me more of this beautiful faith that seems the branch of healing for every verse of his."

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"Ah, pray to the Sacred Heart of Our Dear Lord; He will help you. He will guide. See, I'll give you this Rosary; it was my mother's. I will teach you how to say it and then say it every day, call every day on Him Who has said, 'Come unto me all ye that labor and are burdened.'"

It was some six weeks later that Brenda, on opening the usual weekly letter from her friend by the sea, found only a few words written on the sheet—"I was received into the Church today and I know now, with God nothing is impossible, and bud and blossom may return even to the rose of yesterday."

"A letter in a strange hand from the South Coast," said Brenda one day, less than a month after; "I wonder has anything happened to Rosemary?" The smile faded as she read the note from the good priest she had known down there. Miss Fortescue was dead, and Mother Church had but gathered her into her arms to lay her in those of death. She sent Brenda a last message; with dimming eyes the girl read the faint, uncertain characters—"Our Dear Mother, Queen of the Rosary; a place at her feet for the 'rose of yesterday.'—Australian Messenger."

The visible organic unity exhibited by the world-wide Church under the Roman primacy is the greatest moral force which has ever come into being.—Father Pesch, S. J.

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