

THE YEARS BETWEEN.

A Novel by William J. Fisher.

Author of "Songs by the Wayside," "Winona and Other Stories," "The Toilet and Other Poems," Etc.

CHAPTER XXIII. TANGLED THREADS.

That same morning Dorothy took Mrs. Atherton out for a walk, but the former said nothing about the locked or her conversation with Sister Angela. She thought it best to wait awhile. Mrs. Atherton did much talking while they were out walking, but it cost her quite an effort to do so. Her memory seemed very bad; she could not summon up the words as quickly as she would have liked.

"You've been so good to me," she said to Dorothy. "Pray tell me who you are?" Thereupon Dorothy related how she had come across her in the Refuge down in the slums, and of her removal to St. Mary's where a wonderful operation had been performed upon her. It all seemed like a dream to the poor woman. She was surprised, dazed and could not collect her thoughts. The past two years were enigmas she could not solve. She could not recall a thing that had happened. Her mind was a blank. There was a missing link somewhere between the Past and Present. Her memory could not supply it.

"St. Mary's Hospital! St. Mary's!" she turned the words over and over again in her mind and for some time tried to recall memories that knocked at her heart's door. The sound of the word was familiar to her.

She raised her eyes to the imposing edifice beyond the green stretch of lawn and exclaimed: "Then that's St. Mary's—let me see!" And she turned about and took in the surroundings. "I have it at last," she said. "Why, to be sure, I'm in Bill-in-Bill!" She could not finish the word and Dorothy came to her rescue.

"Is it Billington?" she asked. "Ah yes—Billington, that's the word. Why, this used to be my old home."

There was no doubt in Dorothy's mind now that the woman beside her was no other than Mrs. Atherton. A new-born joy filled her soul. For the first time in many months Mrs. Atherton knew where she was. But how she happened to reach Billington was a puzzle to her—a puzzle which even later she could not solve.

Dorothy was satisfied with her progress that afternoon. Before she left the hospital she looked up Sister Angela and told her about the new discoveries. "I am afraid, Sister, I shall have to resort to Sherlock Holmes's tactics to keep all this away from Charles's ears and eyes. I want to surprise him you know very soon."

"Yes, Dorothy," interrupted Sister Angela, "a bird whispered to me the other day that wedding bells were to ring some time in August for two people I know very well."

"You little dear!" ejaculated Dorothy. "Who ever told you that?" "Ah, my girl, I know all about it. Your mother was here to see me the other day and told me."

"I'm afraid I shall have to give mother a good scolding. But then she didn't know I wanted to surprise you. Yes, Sister, Charles and I expect to be married the latter part of August, and I intend to keep this Mrs. Atherton surprise for him until then. What do you say?"

"It will be glorious, Dorothy. Just think how Charles will feel, when the patient upon whom he performed such a wonderful operation turns out to be his good friend, Mrs. Atherton, whom he has thought dead all these years."

"But I am so afraid, Sister, the cat will out of the bag long before the expected time and then all our plans will come to naught. Whatever can we do to prevent Mrs. Atherton and Charles from meeting in the meantime?"

"I heard the doctor saying he was going to take a holiday soon—a couple of months I think he said. Couldn't you manage to get him off as quickly as possible? With Mrs. Atherton between ourselves we could manage nicely, I think."

That same evening Dr. Mathers dropped in to see Dorothy. They were seated in the drawing room and soon Mrs. Fairfax joined them. After some preliminary conversation Dr. Mathers said: "I think I shall take a holiday one of these days, perhaps in a month—the beginning of June. I am just about at the end of the tether."

"Yes, I am afraid, Charles, you are forgetting the laws of the conservation of energy," said Mrs. Fairfax. "You must get away," interrupted Dorothy. "You are not well at all. Only to-day I heard at the hospital that you should lay off for a rest. But what is a month for you dear? You should have at least two, and, may be an especially delightful month full of that comfort and restfulness which you need badly, why not go as soon as possible?"

man said. "It speaks volumes for you, Charles. The whole city has heard of it."

The doctor lowered his eyes. He was an humble man and did not like fine compliments. "The credit's not mine, Mr. Fairfax," he exclaimed. "It was the good nursing pulled her through. But she did remarkably well. Her eyesight and arm are better, and I really think in time her mind will clear up and then she will be able to tell us all about herself. At present we are perfectly at sea as to who she is and where she came from. I have not seen her for a long time, but Sister Angela gives me good reports."

Dorothy felt elated that Charles was going on the early morning train. This prevented him from dropping in at St. Mary's before leaving. Now that Mrs. Atherton knew she was in Billington the only natural thing for her to do was to ask all manner of questions. Dorothy wanted to make sure that Dr. Charles would not be the person to answer some of them. She wanted him hundreds of miles away for a little while.

The following day Dorothy called again at St. Mary's. "Good morning, Mrs. Atherton!" "Good morning, Miss Fairfax—Miss Fairfax!" answered the patient. She had remembered the name. "My memory is getting better you see. I remembered your name."

"Don't call me Miss after this. Call me Dorothy, I like it better. I brought you some violets, Mrs. Atherton. They are just fresh from the florist's. Rent them lovely?"

"They are beautiful, Dorothy, I cannot understand why you are so good to me."

"Because I have learned to love you," the girl answered. Dorothy could not help noticing how freely the woman talked. The night had indeed improved her mental condition. Now and then she would halt in the midst of a conversation, her eyes would wander, but it would only be for a second. Dorothy could not silence the woman's tongue. Now that Mrs. Atherton was returning to her right senses she had so much to say and so many questions to ask.

"Do you know," she continued, "ever since yesterday my mind seems to be clearing fast. Now that I know I am in Billington, I am not puzzled so much. But the last few years is all chaos and darkness to me. The last I remember I was in Beresvale," she continued. "It was a morning just like this, and I was sitting under the pine trees listening to the birds, but there the past ends. I don't know how I drifted to Billington and never shall."

"You said yesterday that Billington was your home," remarked Dorothy, as she looked at the gray-haired woman before her. "Ah yes, child," she answered with a thrill of emotion. "Just then a tear trickled down her cheek. 'I lived here for many years. But then 'tis a long story. I shall tell it all to you some day. The incidents are coming back to me daily. Soon I shall have all the threads strung together again.'

Then her thoughts drifted to her attending surgeon. "My doctor has not been here to see me for a long time now. If I was really as sick as you say I was, then he must have done wonders for me. How shall I ever ask him his name? Do you know I never asked him his name. He is a stranger to me, but then I have been away from Billington so long. I believe he never even asked me my name."

"You were too sick to tell him. Believe me you were only able to tell us your name several days ago. And it is nearly a year and a half since the operation."

The woman looked strangely into the girl's eyes. She simply could not understand it at all. It seemed as if she had had a long sleep and was just now waking.

"By the way, Dorothy," Mrs. Atherton began, somewhat excitedly, "is there a Dr. Charles Mathers still practicing in the city? I know him very well once—but it is a long long story and—"

"Oh, do tell me, Mrs. Atherton!" Dorothy pleaded. Dorothy felt sure now of the ground whereon she had been building. It was Mrs. Atherton. She knew it. She felt it, and her heart beat violently. It was the most exciting moment she had ever experienced.

"Do tell me the story!" she cried as the room fairly swam before her eyes. "Tell me the story! I shall listen to every syllable. Dr. Mathers still resides in Billington. He is one of the greatest men in the city to-day."

She did not like to say "surgeon." She was afraid the word might carry the woman's thoughts to the man who had so often stood at her bedside. "Has he done well?" sighed the poor woman.

"Very well, indeed," was the answer. "Thank God! I'm glad to hear it."

"But, pray, tell me the story! Does it concern Dr. Mathers?" "Yes, it concerns both of us," she added with a sigh.

Then the tears came to her and, while they were falling fast, Mrs. Atherton told the story of her whole life, just as it has been related in these pages—her leaving Billington, and her going to Beresvale, and her bitter hours of struggle in that place.

patient. "By all means keep the people out of her room," she said, "and don't let Father Salvini, should he return, in to see her. She asked me about him yesterday; they were old friends you know, and it did seem so good to be able to tell her that he was out of the city for a few weeks."

"Yes," replied the nun, "if she should tell him her name that would settle the whole matter. I know you are quite anxious to surprise him also."

The day Dorothy called for Mrs. Atherton she came for the express purpose of taking her down town for a walk. Now that the latter knew she was back in Billington again she felt quite keen to get a glimpse of the pleasant streets she once loved so dearly.

They walked on slowly; there was so much for Mrs. Atherton to see. When they had walked several blocks Dorothy could not contain herself any longer. There was something she wanted to tell Mrs. Atherton, and the sooner the better.

At last she summoned up courage and exclaimed, somewhat nervously: "Mrs. Atherton, I have a great surprise in store for you, and I simply cannot keep the secret any longer."

"Surprise for me?" questioned the woman eagerly. "I hope it is good news."

"Very. You will be grateful I know." "The other day you remember asking me about Dr. Mathers?"

"Yes, I do." "Well, you will be surprised no doubt to learn that the man who stood at your bedside many a day in the past—the man who performed the skillful operation that saved your life is no other than—"

"Charles Mathers," interrupted Mrs. Atherton, greatly agitated. She had almost expected it, but yet she hesitated. She could not believe it. It was all so very sudden. For a moment she grew dizzy and almost fell to the ground, but her companion held her in her arms.

"Yes," answered Dorothy, "he is the man."

"I can hardly believe it, Dorothy," gasped the woman. "It all seems so strange, and yet it can easily be true. It is years and years since last I saw Charles, and it is only right to think that time has so changed him that I could never have hoped to recognize him. And then, he would never know me in my white hair. I am a different looking woman now. But how did I happen to fall into his hands?"

"In this way. I sang at a concert down in the slums. It was arranged by don't know who. Charles accompanied me to the place. You know we were engaged."

"You're engaged to marry Charles?" uttered Mrs. Atherton, in surprise. This was the second bit of news Dorothy had kept for her, and it was almost too much for the poor woman.

"It all sounds like a fairy tale," she said. "To think that I should come to Billington, and that the boy, dearest to my heart, should save my life, and I not know him! Soon I shall have all the threads strung together again."

"No, I have not. My husband died years ago," she answered, in trembling voice.

"I wonder what his next question will be," she thought. Mrs. Atherton was playing her part well. So far she had not betrayed her secret.

"Then you are free to accept my offer?" "I am. You are very kind, and I shall think it over and let you know definitely in a few weeks. Will that do?"

In a few weeks! Just about the time that Dorothy Fairfax was to become the wife of Dr. Mathers.

Mrs. Atherton kept her word, and when at the wedding-breakfast she appeared in person with no less a chaperon than Dorothy, the charming bride herself and was introduced to the merry guests grouped around, as the long lost benefactress of Charles's early days, the gentle reader can best picture the commotion—the intense surprise—the feeling of surprise joy that shone through smiles and tears, in the eyes of those staring for the moment through the smilax and the orange-blossoms.

price-laden conversation had taken Mrs. Atherton's thoughts away from the many persons she passed on the street. She was just then living for Dorothy, Charles and herself and, in her mind, could not help picturing the happy meeting which Dorothy had arranged so cleverly. As for the past, she left those vast, dark, gloomy areas behind—never to set foot upon them again. She lived now in the living Present, her thoughts upon pleasant ways, redolent with rose-pine fume, bright with sunshine and musical with the song of birds.

In passing Mrs. Atherton recognized familiar faces, all grown older since she had last looked upon them. But no one seemed to know her. The past had dealt too severely with her.

"Come let us drop into mother's," Dorothy said lightly. They neared the Fairfax mansion. "She will be glad to see you."

"And I, too, shall be happy to look upon my old friend again and press her to—"

"Here! here!" exclaimed Dorothy, quickly. "I am afraid you are forgetting your promise. You must—"

"Oh, yes. I'm to act the stranger—cold, cheerless, heartless—half-witted. I almost forgot."

"You must forget that you are Mrs. Atherton, that is all."

Dr. Mathers arrived home the last day of July, much benefited by his trip. The first patient he visited was Mrs. Atherton. He was interested in her case most.

The patient came to meet him as he entered the room. Mrs. Atherton—poor, little woman—felt like rushing up to him and putting her arms about his manly neck and crying out her heart for very joy. She looked him up and down for a few minutes. She could not help it. Presently she noticed in his face a resemblance to the Charles she had known long ago. She felt like crying out to him: "Charles! Charles! I am Mrs. Atherton. Come to my arms! It was cruel of me to leave you, but I thought it all for the best."

Instantly her thoughts stole to Dorothy and she thought of her promise, and the words she would have spoken froze on her lips.

"Not yet! not yet!" she whispered to herself. The time is near at hand and then her heart will be satisfied.

"I am glad to welcome you back, doctor, after your trip," she exclaimed nervously. "You look better since I saw you last."

"Is your mind clearing up faster now?" "Somewhat, thanks. But the last few years are a perfect blank to me. I don't know how I happened to reach Billington and what occurred after I got here. They tell me I have been at St. Mary's going on two years now. It all seems like a dream to me. You have been very good to me, doctor. How can I ever repay you?"

"By coming and making your home with me for the remainder of your days. That is all I ask of you. Have you any children? Is your husband living?"

"No, I have not. My husband died years ago," she answered, in trembling voice.

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kinds of weather." He turned to look at the young man. "What's the matter with you, Lucius? You are thin as a rail, and you must be over six feet tall. Stand straight, my boy! you look as if you'd had a long sickness!"

His mother answered: "No, Cousin Philander, he ain't sick, only a little bilious. I'm givin' him yellow dock and sassaaparilla for it, and I guess he's worked too hard fixin' the picnic grounds for 'Independence Day' you see, there's agoin' to be the biggest celebration the township ever had."

"Independence Day," repeated Dr. Case, "how natural that sounds here. Out in Illinois we only say 'Fourth of July.'"

"Well; whatever you call it, there's good to be all kinds of doin's. During the war nobody took much heart in keepin' the day, but now peace has come an' the slaves is all free, so the whole township has jined in an' lots of the old inhabitants is comin' back to help. I don't know when I've lotted on a celebration as I have on this one, an' you're surprisin' us this way just puts on the cap sheaf. Now, Cousin Philander, set down, an' Lucius an' me'll have a cup of tea with you," for the hostess had bustled from kitchen to pantry while keeping up the conversation.

"I don't see that you've lost any of your knack in cooking," said the visitor, "everything is as good as it was the last time I was here."

"Well, Cousin Philander, there's a lot in knowin' how, even if you ain't got much strength; do have another of them tarts. I manage to keep Lucius fed an' clothed an' that's all I want. Oh son, you must get up early and wash off the rockaway an' brush off the cushions."

"You won't need the rockaway," said Lucius eagerly. "you an' Cousin Philander can go in the new buggy, an' I'll ride in the big waggon with the folks that's on the program."

"What you want to poke yourself up there for," demanded his mother; you ain't on the program."

"Yes, I be," said the son defiantly. "I'm agoin' to read the Declaration, the minister's got an awful cold an' can't speak above a whisper, so I agreed to take his place."

"You ain't a goin' with them folks. You know I'm likely to have one of these spells after wearin' myself out doin' up your white linen suit an' cookin' all day to get ready," Mrs. Hill's obstinate chin and thin lips showed her determination.

"Blame it all!" cried Lucius, desperately. "you needn't overwork. I want you to keep a hired girl, an' I'm ready to put the washin' out. I asked you to go to the general table an' not bake nothin'."

"Oh, yes, you're dreadful willin' to have me keep some wasteful hussy for you to court right under my nose, an' you know with my weak stick I can't eat victuals that I ain't used to, you've got to be right with me so if I git took sudden you can take care of me."

"Come, come, Cousin Laurinda, don't be foolish. I'm a doctor and you'll be safe with me; courtin' is all right; Lucius ought to have a wife and three children by this time; all my children are married. I'd like to 'beau' you around again the way I did thirty-six years ago 'Independence Day.' Don't you remember, you were huffy at Ransom and I was mad at Ziny because they went home from singin' school together, so we rode in my buggy and we passed them on the road and Ziny made a face at you? We made up afterward and you and Ransom stood up with us, when we was married; Ziny and I have laughed over that day many a time."

"We're goin' to eat by ourselves, I won't mix with a crowd," said the hostess, ignoring her cousin's effort at cajolery. "Lucius, you've got to mind me, or you know what'll happen," she began to tremble violently, a red spot burned on each cheek, she threw up her hands and screamed.

"Catch her, Cousin Philander, she's off in one of them plaguey fits. Oh Lord! what shall I do?" said the frightened son.

The doctor received the patient in his arms, quietly laid her on the floor and unfasted her belt and collar. "Don't be scared, my boy, I know how to manage her; go into the pantry and fix some mustard draughts to put on her feet."

As she seemed unconscious, he followed Lucius, who was working with nervous haste.

"Oh, Cousin Philander, don't leave mother; she might die an' I couldn't forgive myself. I hadn't ought to have crossed her, though she's terrible provokin'."

"Put more mustard into that paste, Lucius, I want it good and strong. Your mother isn't going to die. I've seen hundreds of such attacks and never knew them to kill the patient, but they often shorten other people's lives."

"You see, she loves me pretty near to death, an' wants to do everythin' for me, but she won't let me have no liberty. I've got a middlin' good voice an' I wanted to sing in the choir, but when I left her to go to practice she just went out of one fit into another. She don't want me to git married, an' she's pretty near got the hydrophobia about girls."

"When I come of age thirteen years ago, I had a notion of waitin' on Polly Clark, but when she found out my wife would have to live with ma, she wouldn't hear of it. She married ten years ago an' she's a No. 1 housekeeper. Several times I've seen girls that I'd been glad to have married, but ma always upset everythin'."

"Do you remember father's step-brother, Henry Meigs? He went to Iowa about the time you moved to Illinois—well his girl, Fidella, got the Center school, here, an' bein' a stranger she s'posed her Aunt Laurindy would be willin' to board her, so she come right to our house; she's real pretty an' sings the nicest kind, an' she wanted to help ma about the work, but she hadn't been here a week before ma worst fits was a-come; an' she had the first fits you ever see; I was up four nights with her an' six or seven times she lost her breath so long we thought she was really gone. Cousin Fidella had to go away; she's boardin' at the tavern now."

"The doctor stole in to look at the patient. 'She's quiet,' he announced. 'Lucius, whom does the farm belong to?'"

"It's ma's while she lives; you see father thought she was so weakly she wasn't long for this world, so he wanted her to git all the good out of his property she could. He set a sight of store by her and thought I'd git it as soon as I was able to hand 'er it."

"You're thirty-four years old, Lucius. What wages have you had since you were twenty-one?"

"I hadn't had nothin' but my victuals an' clothes an' a dollar or two of spendin' money once in a while. I did stan' out for an agreement to pay me somethin' reasonable, but she had a dozen spells inside of a week an' I quit askin' for it; she says I might have patience till she's in her grave an' all she scraped up an' saved 'll be mine."

"My lad, Grandma Boyd had this trouble, and she lived to be ninety-eight—she'd be living now a hundred and fifteen years old, if she hadn't fallen down stairs one night and broken her neck. Your mother will outlast you if things keep on this way. Don't be frightened at her symptoms—she's coming to now; I hear her stir."

Lucius stood in wonderment. "Do you know for certain that these fits won't kill her?"

"I'll stake my medical reputation on it, my lad; now here's a prescription I want filled for her; go to the drug store at the Center and take your time; I'll look after your mother."

"Good land," cried the son in wrath and chagrin, "has ma made a fool of me all these years?"

"Not only you, but herself—hurry out before she finds you are going," and the doctor walked into the kitchen with a glass of water and a spoon as calmly as if he did not hear her groaning and calling:

"Lucius! Lucius! my feet's burnin' up; don't let a dym'n woman suffer so; oh! oh! oh!"

"I've sent Lucius to get some medicine for you, Cousin Laurinda; it's only the mustard draughts that you feel; the counter irritation is just what you need, now take this powder."

"I don't believe I can swallow; oh dear! you don't know how to wait on me; you hadn't orter sent that boy away. Oh, my feet, my feet!"

"Down with that powder, Laurinda—there, it's gone."

"Take off them draughts, Philander. I won't have my feet blistered, I'm going to that celebration."

"Your better, but you must keep the mustard on a while," said the cousin good-humoredly.

"I shan't, nuther," cried the patient, rising hurriedly and jerking off the draughts, she shook her clothes, and felt of her disordered hair. "What'd you let me lie on the floor for. I'm pretty near skin and bone, an' my back's as sore as a bile."

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