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GERTRUDE MANNERING

A TALE OF SACRIFICE
BY FRANCES NOBLE
CHAPTER XXV.

"Father Walmsley, may God help me still to forgive him—the man who has brought her to this, who will have been her murderer!" And Mr. Manning grasped his friend's hand for a minute, and then, sitting down, buried his face in his hands in the agony of his grief.

It was only a week since they had returned home from Beachdown, but Gertrude had grown so much worse, so weak as to be unable to walk, that the doctor had been obliged to declare his alarm to Mr. Manning, and had asked that a celebrated physician should be sent for from London to give his opinion and advice on Miss Manning's case, concerning which he himself said nothing more definite yet than that he was afraid there was immediate cause for apprehension.

Frozen, as it were, with the shock, Mr. Manning seemed unable to ask any questions or do anything but answer mechanically when the doctor offered to telegraph to London himself to arrange, if possible, the consultation with the physician in question for the next day, and then, abruptly wishing him good-morning, returned to his post by Gertrude's sofa.

But for the presence of Father Walmsley, who devoted almost the rest of that day to the Grange, Mr. Manning would hardly have been able to endure the hours of alternate despair and persistent hope which intervened before the physician could be expected to arrive with Dr. Baldwin. The good priest had a more difficult task to console him than in attending Gertrude herself, for with her, but for her father's sake, it was all sweet peace and resignation, as though the struggle with earth, and its joys and hopes, were long since over—fought in the past terrible hours which were doing their bodily work now upon her. Even her father could scarcely murmur in presence of his darling's sweet, peaceful face, or as he listened to her tender words of consolation, by which she strove during all that day of suspense to cheer and strengthen him for whatever might be the verdict concerning her.

"Because you know, papa, whatever happens even if taken from you, I shall be your own little Gertrude always, loving and praying for you, if for a time we shall be outwardly separated," she had whispered, with her arms around his neck, as at last he bade her "good-night," and was persuaded by Father Walmsley to go to bed himself for a few hours.

And now the physician had been, and after having seen Gertrude, and having held a long consultation with Dr. Baldwin, he had taken Mr. Manning into another room to tell him his opinion, or rather his confident, undoubting judgment. Being requested to conceal nothing, he said, as kindly and delicately as he could, that Miss Manning's case was hopeless. She was dying slowly of a decline which must have begun some months since, and could not have been cured, though it might perhaps have been arrested for a time if it had been noticed in its very early stage; but independent of that, there was also a heart complaint now very strongly developed, which might, if great care were not taken, carry off the patient within a week or two. He added this last sad information in order that every possible care might be taken to prolong the life which need not necessarily end for weeks or even months yet; and as Miss Manning herself seemed so calm and undisturbed, and to fear so little, was most favorable to her complaint to leave her so by telling her as little as possible of her state, as yet at least, until she grew anxious and insisted on the knowledge. And knowing nothing of the pure martyr spirit which animated the dying frame he had examined, nothing of how his young patient would have been shocked to have heard him counsel such careless, tardy preparation for death, the great physician pocketed his fee, and with a few polite words of sympathy took his leave of the grief-stricken father, to whom he had been forced to deliver the terrible tidings which by one stroke felled the brightness of his life for ever.

It was as soon as the two doctors had left the house that Mr. Manning went into the room where Father Walmsley awaited him, and there told him the sad verdict in that agonized exclamation which seemed to come, not from his lips, but up from the very depths of his heart. Then Father Walmsley sat down by him, and spoke to him of God and His wonderful designs; of how we cannot judge them, even if at first the manner of them seems so hard—too hard, often—to bear without His special grace.

"Mr. Manning, if He has given you a child to bring up for Him, and if now He wants her for Himself, having, through the means of the very man whom it is so hard to forgive, raised her in a brief space to sanctity to which she might not have attained in a lifetime of years if earthly love and joy had been her portion, do you grudge her to Him, the pure soul He wants thus early for Himself?"

"But she is my one treasure left, my one lamb, who I thought would be the brightness of my old age, Father Walmsley; must I give her up? I have my boy, I know, though I have given proudly to God's service; but, dear and precious as Rupert is, he is not like my little girl to me—her mother's parting gift. Can God ask me to see Him take her away and live?"

Mr. Manning, if she is weary of earth and longs for heaven; if the cruel blow that rent her heart with its too great human love has shown her how vain and fleeting is all earthly joy, so that she can never wish to go again; if she is one of God's own special favorites, and He wants to take her safe away from any more care and trouble or temptation—will you not, after the first hard grief is over, be prouder to have a sweet saint to pray and wait for you in heaven—one who will be evermore your own, dying thus early in her girlhood—than if you had given her into some human keeping, which must of necessity have been dearer than your own to her—given her to a man instead of to God?"

Then for nearly half an hour the good priest spoke on of Gertrude's own sweet resignation, of her generous forgiveness, and of unselfish, constant prayers for the proud infidel who, in his exacting, jealous love, had trampled on her tender heart because she could not for his sake belie its most sacred feelings.

"Will you be less generous and forgiving than the sufferer herself, Mr. Manning? Will you not say, 'God's will be done,' and still join Gertrude in her prayers for that poor, restless soul?"

Then Mr. Manning lifted up his face, ten years older looking, Father Walmsley thought, in that hour, and said in a broken voice, "May God forgive me, Father Walmsley, for my rebellion; may he help me to say from my heart what I must say in fact, 'His will be done!' Go to Gertrude, Father Walmsley, and tell her that her father will follow soon to pray by her side for him who is the cause of her death." Then he told Father Walmsley exactly what the physician had said, how carefully any excitement or needless agitation must be warded off from the invalid.

"Do not fear, Mr. Manning; I will tell her quietly and gently, and as gradually as possible. If I mistake not, she will be neither startled nor afraid, thank God, who has been preparing her so well all these months, though we knew it not!" Then he left the room and went up-stairs to Gertrude's bedroom.

She was still lying upon the sofa by the window, with her eyes closed and her hands crossed gently; but she looked up now as Father Walmsley entered, and the old housekeeper, who was with her, rose to leave the room.

"She has been wondering when you would come, Father Walmsley," she said, as she left the priest alone with her young mistress.

"Father Walmsley, you have come to tell me what the doctors said; I saw them go more than an hour since." And she pointed gently down the park; then turning quickly to Father Walmsley again, without any sign of agitation, she said earnestly: "Tell me everything exactly, please, Father Walmsley; don't be afraid of—shocking me; I know it already, you know. God has been telling me quietly all these months, even when you could not believe it, Father Walmsley." And there was such a strange, sweet smile on the pale face which looked up at him that the priest, who had known her as a merry, careless child, and then as a bright, happy girl full of natural, earthly longings, felt awed and hushed, as if in presence of a saint.

But he sat down quietly by her side and began his task, which she had made so easy for him—the task of telling her that a few weeks, or at most months, must see her in the grave; that without great care she might be called away even sooner and more suddenly; and that for her father's sake she must avoid anything that could hasten her death—even too much prayer, which might weary her, at least physically, in her weak state. While he was speaking, with that kind, gentle voice and fatherly manner, Gertrude listened quietly with downcast eyes; then as he paused at last, she raised them, and he saw the tears glistening in her depths.

"Poor papa," she whispered; "only the thought of him makes it hard! Only for him it would be so easy, so sweet, with God's grace; so joyful, Father Walmsley, because now I know my prayer—for him—will be heard."

And, my child, apart from the thought of your father, apart from that grief which will be holy even at the last, are you sure there is no other earthly regret to overcome? No human love which was so strong in you yet to make it hard for you to give up hope—to be ready, now the time is coming, to die young? Gertrude, if it were possible that Stanley Graham could stand by your side again now—if he came to ask your forgiveness and spoke to you with the old winning words of love, would not the struggle be hard to be perfectly resigned to die—not to wish to live? It would be not natural, my child; but I ask you so that, for the time that is left, we may ask God to take away even that from your heart, to make the sacrifice

you have already offered, and which he is accepting, quite perfect, Gertrude.

For a minute Gertrude was silent, with her face bent over her clasped hands, as the vision of Stanley Graham rose in her mind, clear and distinct; as the proud face in its beauty seemed to look at her with that pleading she had seen upon it on that last terrible night; as the rich, low voice seemed to ring again like music in her ears; and for a minute earth tried to bring her back from heaven—back to her idolatry and human longings.

But God, who had refused to deny for His creature in the past, to whom she had turned for help in her hour of trial, did not desert her now when the evil spirit tried to whisper to her again: He gave her strength to turn from the very thought of temptation, to assist it with scarce a sigh.

"Father Walmsley," she said at last, in a low, solemn tone, "I know I am very weak; I know that without God's grace I should have been at this moment what I dare not think, a wretched apostate for the sake of him I loved with a feeling far too great and absorbing, I know now, which will be the thing I shall be most afraid to look back upon when I am dying, because I may have to suffer so long for it before I can see God in heaven, Father Walmsley. But still I do not think there will be any regret in my heart, any yearning for him in a human way, though to see him again before he died would be such joy. I think I could bid him farewell calmly, joyfully almost, if he were a Catholic, Father Walmsley. You see, father, everything looks so different from what it did a year since, when I shrank from the very idea of dying. The shock was so great to find—what a dream it has all been—after I had been waiting and hoping so long for it; a dream so very short and brief that to give up earth now is not what it would have been then; now, too, when I feel this sweet, certain hope that I am not dying in vain, but that such a great soul as—his will be gained for God in His own good time."

Then Father Walmsley told her gently of her father's terrible grief, and of how difficult it was to him to forgive the man who had broken her heart, as he said, "But he will still forgive him, won't he, Father Walmsley? He does not refuse?" she asked, in a low, painful whisper.

"No, no, my child; no longer now. He has conquered in the struggle, and is coming now to pray by your side for him, so that the act of resignation you both wish to make will be proved to be perfect indeed." And as he rose to fetch Mr. Manning, Gertrude strove to keep calm for the meeting with the father who must soon close her eyes in death.

He entered and knelt down silently by her side, and as she put her arms around his neck they wept there together, his tears mingling with hers.

"Poor papa, poor darling papa!" she whispered at last. "But you are not really losing me, you know, papa; I shall only be outwardly hidden for a while. And you can always, not only at first, but in years to come, when you can hope that I may be, perhaps, safe with God, when I have satisfied for my sins in Purgatory—well, even then you can think of me as your little girl still, always young, and never having left you for any human creature." And she tried to smile as she looked up into her father's face, while he himself, with a terrible effort, calmed his outward grief, dredging the continued agitation for his darling. "And, papa," she added very gently and sweetly, "I know you still forgive—Stanley Graham; so—let us, before Father Walmsley goes, say the Rosary together for him, that our Lady may help him not to resist God's grace."

And kneeling down by Mr. Manning's side, Father Walmsley recited the rosary aloud, Gertrude and her father answering; she herself the calmest and least disturbed of the three in that solemn hour, with the shadow of death hovering over her, the one who so lately seemed to have a long, bright life before her, who might have looked to enjoy it still when the two who prayed with her were laid in their graves.

TO BE CONTINUED

THE FOURTEENTH GUEST

Margaret Burns looked with appraising eye over the dinner table. She had given much time and thought to its arrangement and knew that everything was just as it should be. Yet, as she moved around it, she straightened an already perfectly straight knife, patted a snowy napkin to make the monogram stand up better, put back into the silver bowl an advertisement bit of narcissus that, like the original of the name, was trying to see its beauty in the mirror and one deft little unnecessary thing that hostesses always do.

In the bedroom her husband was singing, in his big, untrained voice, snatches of the latest popular airs, and when "Mandalay" floated out triumphantly, she knew that the ordeal of dressing was over.

Margaret very much wanted this dinner to be successful, as it was the first large one they had given

since the golden honeymoon days, six months before. Besides, among the twelve guests—as many as their elastic little flat could hold—were men whose friendship meant big things for David, standing as he was on the lowest rung of the legal ladder. Margaret gave a minute to a happy little day-dream, in which she saw David run up that ladder and victoriously reach the top.

Her reverie was broken by the musical voice of the grandfather's clock in the hall telling the hour of six. She gave one last contented look at the lovely picture the rooms made in the soft amber light, quite unaware of the fact that, in her simple dress of clinging silk, her fair young face glowing with happiness and love, she was the loveliest thing in them. She went to the windows to pull down the blinds, and, looking into the dusk, saw a taxi stop before the house, its bright headlights like Harry Randolph, who was the "big chief" in the office where David worked as assistant.

"David," she called, "are you ready? Here is the first guest."

David, immaculate in his evening clothes, came from the bedroom. There was something very attractive about him in a big, boyish way. Before answering the bell he had time to tell Margaret how lovely she looked and to seal his approval in the proper way. They admitted Harry Randolph, who was the "big chief" in the office where David worked as assistant.

Soon the bell rang again, and this time it was Jack Spencer and his wife. Margaret could hardly wait for the first greetings to be over before she asked:

"Where's your sister, Mrs. Spencer?"

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Burns, but Marion was called out of town just an hour ago. I hope it won't inconvenience you. I hope it won't inconvenience you."

Margaret was quite sure that it wouldn't; nevertheless she was wondering how soon she could run in and tell Ellen to rearrange the places at table. At last all the guests had come. Over the buzz of happy voices and gay laughter hung that subtle spirit of good cheer or content, or whatever it will, that congenial people experience in anticipation of a good dinner.

But hardly had they been seated around the table when the spirit of good cheer quickly passed on Randolph's calling out in his rich Southern voice:

"Thirteen at this table! Who's superstitious among the crowd?"

As one, the women rose, followed by the men. Margaret looked about inquiringly and laughed gaily.

"Surely," she said, "no one believes in that foolish thing in these modern times?"

"I do for one," Mrs. Spencer answered. "I remember one dinner with thirteen at table, and the next day I was called out of town by my best Crown Derby cups and saucers, and four of my relatives came and stayed all summer. If that wasn't bad luck, please tell me what it is?"

All the women agreed that it was certainly the worst of luck. They began to grow reminiscent of all the bad things that had happened about the evil following the flouting of the thirteenth guest. The air became filled with gloom, and Margaret felt that her dinner was going to turn into a sad session of the "I remember when" club. She sighed under her breath. Randolph, seeing her anxiety and feeling responsible for having started the trouble, came to the rescue:

"Isn't there someone you could get to fill in, Mrs. Burns? These people are so full of awe over that old relic of a superstition past that they will go hungry rather than sit at this table."

Before Margaret had time to answer him, the sound of softly played music came from the flat above. Randolph looked at the ceiling, folded his hands devoutly and said:

"Our prayer has been heard. Behold! The Fourteenth Guest!"

"But I don't know her," said Margaret. "I couldn't very well ask her to fill in just because we are so silly."

"Appeal to her sporting blood," called out David. "Tell her about this happy crowd and the perfectly good dinner getting cold, and, if she's a lady, as I believe she is, she'll plug up the thirteenth hole. And we all can get busy on the roast chicken."

Margaret made a quick decision as Ellen's distressed and puzzled face appeared at the dining-room. She ran up to Flat 10 and pressed the bell somewhat fearfully; but, that Rubicon crossed, she became very brave. And her courage increased tenfold when she saw Betty Smith, smiling and friendly, standing at the opened door.

Margaret took the dive.

Yon Mrs. Burns from the Flat below, and we're giving a dinner, and we're just thirteen and they won't sit down—silly things!—and could you—I wish you would—won't you please help me out? It means so much to David and me to have it a success, and it looks a failure now."

Betty, having received from the good fairy who presided over her cradle the priceless gift of humor, laughed at the tragic tale and the weebeegone little figure in the gay evening dress.

"I'd like to help you out—it would be quite an adventure—but I don't know any of the guests, and—" she hesitated.

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