

GERTRUDE MANNERING

A TALE OF SACRIFICE

BY FRANCES NOBLE

CHAPTER I.

"Let me have just two minutes in the chapel before I go, sister."

"An, sister! It doesn't seem five years, does it, since I first came?"

"Not good-by, Gertrude dear, but to ask Him to go with you into the world, and never to let you send Him away by sin."

Gertrude sighed as she looked again into the nun's calm, sweet face, and then ran quickly but softly along the corridor and up the stairs which led to the convent chapel.

Five years before Gertrude Manning had first come to school, a little girl of twelve; and now the happy, peaceful time was over, and she was going home to begin her life in the world, of which yet she had seen so little, going half in joy and half in sorrow—joy at the prospect of being always with her dear father, who was everything to her—for mother she had none—and sorrow at leaving her beloved convent and its still more beloved inmates.

Gertrude, or "Gerty," as her companions liked better to call her, had always been a favorite in the school; and even the good nuns themselves, though they would not show any partiality, could hardly help feeling it for the child whose bright, sweet face took all hearts by storm almost at once, if it were only by the very beautiful eyes, which could look so laughingly bewitching or so mournfully sympathetic, as the feelings of their possessor prompted.

And the sweet yet bright, intelligent face was a true mirror to the young girl's character; to the keen, clear intellect and warm, loving heart; to the generous and forgiving, if at times somewhat quick, sensitive temper.

Gertrude had never been what might be called one of the model girls in the convent; she had had her share of scrapes and misdemeanors; she had always been among those who looked forward with girlish delight to their entrance into the world and its untasted pleasures, but she had never been sincerely good and pious withal, ever really prizing her holy religion above all things, and her very faults had been lovable, as it were.

And now they were going to lose her; she was going to be emancipated from the happy, innocent convent life, with its wise and gentle restraint, to go home to be once more her father's spoiled darling, to receive the admiration which the world was sure to give to one whom nature had bestowed so many outward as well as inward gifts.

For two or three minutes she knelt there in the chapel, on the floor just outside the altar-rails, with her face buried in her hands and the tears still flowing.

"O Jesus! take care of me always; never let me forget Thee or cease to love Thee in the midst of the world. I am very young and weak; give me always grace to resist temptation, to be firm always in our holy faith, whatever trials may come!"

Did she know—that young girl, little more than a child as she was—did she understand, in that sweet innocence and heart freedom, the full power of the "temptation" against which she prayed so simply and earnestly? Could she realize in her inexperience the "trials" which might be in store, while everything looked so bright? Hardly, perhaps, and sad would it have been could she have done so; but surely none the less acceptable to Jesus' Heart was the innocent prayer; none the less surely would He give her the strength she asked for as she stood trembling, as it were, on the threshold of the busy, perilously-fascinating world.

Her prayer over, Gertrude rose and went quickly with Sister Teresa to the reception-room, where her father awaited her. He came forward at once and kissed her with a yearning fondness, which showed how much she was to him and what a happy day this was on which he could claim her again entirely for his own. He was a tall, slender, fine-looking man of sixty, but seeming older than that from his very white hair and venerable aspect.

The Rev. Mother, who was with him seeing the tear-trace still on Gertrude's face, took her hand with a kind smile.

"What, Gertrude! tears again, when the day has come for which our little girl used to long so much?"

be here again in the old way," and her lips quivered as the tears glistened again in the bright eyes.

"No, I couldn't spare Gerty, Rev. Mother," said Mr. Manning, as a sad shadow passed across his face, brought there by the thought of the dead—of Gerty's mother, his beautiful girl-wife, his bright darling, who had blessed his life for three short years and had then been taken from him, leaving him the little babe of scarce two days old to be her own namesake, and to fill up the heavy void in his heart.

"No, Rev. Mother," he continued after a pause, "I have given Rupert to God freely and willingly, proud that my boy is destined to such a high vocation; but may He forgive me if I say that I cannot spare Gerty, my little girl; or rather if I say that I do not think I shall be called on to make the sacrifice—that I do not think He will want her to serve Him in that way."

Gertrude's eyes were fixed on the God's will of the earnest Catholic seemed struggling in his heart with the father's human feelings as he looked with an almost anxious inquiry at the Rev. Mother, who readily replied, with a sweet smile, "I think with you, Mr. Manning, that God will not call Gerty to our life. We cannot tell yet, of course, but it seems to me that she is a flower that will bloom best in the world, and that God will give her grace to help others on with her, if she asks for it and corresponds with it when it comes. Eh, Gerty?" she added tenderly, turning to the young girl for the last kiss and embrace.

"Don't expect anything too good from me, Rev. Mother, for I'm afraid I'm not likely to do anything very great or wonderful. Only pray that I may not have grown into a stiff, worldly young lady when I come to see you next year—for I am to come, you know; papa has promised." And trying to laugh, to keep back a sob, Gertrude tore herself away from her two dear nuns, and followed her father out to the vehicle that waited to take them to the nearest station, some two miles off.

It was but two days from Christmas, and the snow lay thick everywhere as they drove out of the convent grounds. Gertrude gazed lingeringly at the white, peaceful scene.

"I wonder how it will look to me when I see it again, papa—whether it will seem changed. I wonder if I shall be changed at all when I come again. I suppose I shall look a little older and more of a young lady, that's all. O papa! it is nice to be coming back to be always with you again." And as she sat there by him her father drew her still closer, and stroked the pretty, bright hair that escaped from the little convent bonnet.

Ay, well might she wonder! She would see her dear convent home again, perhaps, and in no very long time; but would it be with the same joyous, childlike heart? Would she bring back with her no heavier trouble than that she now carried away? Would the eyes that looked again upon the familiar spots be dimmed by no more bitter tears than those which glistened in their bright depths today?

CHAPTER II. Whitewell Grange, Gertrude Manning's home, was situated in Essex-shire, seventy or eighty miles from London, the nearest town to the convent still being just quitted. The Grange stood in a small park which was quite a miniature of rural beauty of every kind. It had belonged to the Mannings for centuries—indeed, before the Reformation the family that had been a notable one in the county; but since then, despoiled of the greater part of their possessions, often fined and otherwise persecuted for their firm adherence to the ancient faith, they had sunk into comparative obscurity and insignificance, content to keep that which was more precious than all their worldly goods and prosperity—the priceless treasure of the holy Catholic religion. Family pride the Mannings may have had, perhaps; and who could blame them?—for they boasted a long and stainless pedigree; but prouder still were they to have "suffered persecution for justice's sake," to have been thought worthy in the most troublous times to give the shelter of their mansion to many a hunted priest and religious, happy to brave peril in such holy cause, and to receive in return from their saintly visitors the blessed ministrations for which the poor Catholics of those days had to hunger so often and so long. There was a priest's hiding-hole in the old dining-room of the Grange, and in its dark recess, in the worst days of persecution, when once staying in the house for two or three days, the great Jesuit, Father Gerard, had lain concealed for a night, until the baffled search of the priest-hunters was over, and the trembling household might breathe in peace for another short space. This hiding-hole had always been a favorite spot with Gertrude and her only brother, Rupert, in their childhood, when they used to play there together for hours, Rupert being always the hidden priest, and his little sister the baffled pursuivant

searching vainly and sounding the innocent-looking panels, and then changing into the gentle lady of the house who came to bring refreshment to the half-faint prisoner, or to announce to him that he may now come forth in safety.

A portion of the pretty innocent play had now become earnest, for Rupert Manning had already finished his novitiate in the Society of Jesus and he always laughingly said that he felt sure the first seeds of his vocation had been sown in his childhood during the hours he had played in the hiding-place which had once for a whole night contained the blessed confessor, Father Gerard.

"You ought to have let me out quicker always, Gerty," he had said one day to his sister, when she was crying at the thought of parting with him; not that she was not very proud to think that her idolized Rupert would one day be a Jesuit priest. "You ought to have let me out sooner if you did not want me to go and be a Jesuit. You always kept me in so long that I have caught some of the graces that Father Gerard left behind him wherever he went. I take no credit for it at all; it is you, Gerty. And the youth would try merrily to laugh his dear sister out of her sorrow for his temporary loss.

Rupert Manning was just a year older than his sister, and was now close upon nineteen. He had been sent early to one of the great Jesuit colleges, and from the age of fifteen had never swerved from his desire to be admitted into the Society. Not three years later—before he was eighteen, when he left the college—his father, after a brief and painful struggle with himself, let him go at once to the novitiate, instead of remaining two or three years in the world, as he, Mr. Manning, had at first wished.

"It would be no use, papa," the boy had pleaded; "it would only be so much time lost, and I should want to go all the same at the end of it. Let me go now, while you are used to me being away, while it will only seem as if I were at college still."

"Then you shall, my boy," the father had said at last; "I ought to be ashamed to let you be more courageous than I am, Rupert. God knows it is not that I am not proud to think that my son will be a priest of such a glorious order; but you see, Rupert, I always get thinking of your mother more than ever at these times. If she were alive, it might be easier to part with you, and give up the hope of knowing that the old home will be yours when I die; but I ought to remember how happy she must be to know what a life her boy has chosen. She used to wonder so much what you would grow up to be, Rupert; she used to talk about it so often when you were a little thing in her arms, before Gerty came and she died. She used to pray so often that you might always be kept good and pure amid the temptations of the world. Perhaps God has sent you this vocation in answer to her prayers, Rupert."

"Poor mamma!" said the boy sadly. "If it is so, you know you will not only be willing to let me go, papa, but glad as well." Then seeing that sad remembrances were crowding on his father's mind, he linked his arm in his boyish fashion, and led him out into the grounds, talking merrily. "Don't forget to give Father Gerard a share in the business too, papa, whatever Gerty says to the contrary."

This had all happened more than a year previously, and now Rupert had just finished his novitiate, as we said before. He was a tall, graceful youth, whose face had more of the beauty of expression than merely of feature, and his father was rewarded for his sacrifice every time he saw the sweet, heavenly look which was becoming habitual now on the boyish face.

And after all, even in an earthly sense, what had Mr. Manning to desire more, now that he was to have Gertrude once again with him entirely, his little girl, loved with a more peculiar, yearning tenderness than even his idolized boy? During her earliest years, when she was quite a child, he had never intended to part with her, never meant to send her to school at all. He must keep her always in his sight, he told himself, and let her be educated entirely at home, his precious darling, his Gertrude's dying gift. And until she was twelve years old he had kept his resolution. Gerty was kept at home under the care of a governess, as there was no convent sufficiently near for her to attend as a day scholar; but as the time passed on, Mr. Manning saw clearly, much as he tried to shut his eyes to the fact, that the child's education would make but little progress if conducted in this fashion. To know that she was in the house and not have her near him, her father found impossible most days out of the seven. He was continually invading the school-room on some pretext or other, and fancying Gerty looked pale, would carry her off for a walk, or a ride, or a drive with him, or would give her a whole holiday, so that she might go with him on some little pleasure trip or other, until the poor governess was often on the verge of distraction. And then, too, the child had no companions of her own age, for the Mannings only associated intimately with one or two families in the neighborhood, and her brother's holidays came but once a year. It was but a

lonely life for a child, for Mr. Manning saw little company since his young wife's death, and lived almost entirely among his books, and works of charity and piety. Not that little Gerty ever found it lonely; she was as happy as a queen, a bright sunbeam in the grave old house, wanting nothing but to be always with papa.

"If her mother had lived," Mr. Manning used to say to himself as he looked after her. "It would have been different. I should not have been so weak. We might have kept her at home without interfering in this way with her education; we could have had children here oftener of her own age; she might, perhaps—have had sisters." And the tear came into the poor father's eye as he gazed on his little one, and as he was forced to admit that it was selfish, perhaps peculiar, to let her grow up perhaps peculiar and too old-fashioned, without the incentives to emulation which she would have at school.

And so, soon after Gertrude had turned twelve years old, her father called her to him one day, and they held together one of the loving chats to which they were accustomed in the deep, peculiar relationship of demurring her darling papa wished it and thought it best. If any one else suggested the separation, Gerty's bright eyes would have looked quick rebellion and defiance; but as it was, she put her arms round her father's neck and kissed him.

"Yes, papa, I'll go to school, if you really, really, want me to. Poor papa, how lonely you'll be! But there will be holidays, won't there, where I shall go? I won't go where there aren't long holidays, papa, every year."

And so it had been settled; and Gerty had stolen quietly up to the chapel to tell this her first trouble to our Lady, asking her to help her not to rebel and feel too sad about it, but to make the years pass quickly and bring her home safely again to papa at the end.

Thin to papa at the end. Thin had been dismissed from the Grange, and Mr. Manning and Gerty, foolishly perhaps, some would say, had given themselves a good, long holiday together of three or four months while a convent was agreed upon to which to send the latter.

It was no difficult task to find one, even for so anxious a father as Mr. Manning, and the Convent of the Sacred Heart at N— was fixed on as the temporary home of his precious little girl. When the dreaded day came he himself took her there; and even in his terrible loneliness he could not feel unhappy at leaving her in such a healthy, beautiful spot, in the care of the good nuns, who had seen at once what a very precious charge had been committed to them, and who soon grew to love his little Gertrude for other reasons in addition to those of their sacred duty.

TO BE CONTINUED.

MYSTERIOUS RITA FAUSSET

Mrs. Dunkerley was entertaining her bosom friend, Maria Jane Jukins, with tea and gossip in the little back parlour which opened out the well stocked shop, keeping an eye meanwhile on the shop door—plainly in view through the glass door of the sitting-room—in case a chance customer might appear in quest of some tea time commodity which had run short; ordinarily, except in untoward circumstances of this kind, 4 o'clock was a slack time.

Opposites in external appearance, they were entirely unlike in all their views—religious or otherwise. Maria Jane was a Particular Baptist of the most unyielding type; Mrs. Dunkerley was a Catholic. It gave their neighbors much discussion that two so unlike in every respect should remain close friends. Perhaps each found her complement in the other.

"What you tell me, Maria Jane, is surely startling enough. But I'm not one that's given to make mysteries out of nothing. Depend upon it, there's an easy explanation, as you'll find before long. Look at the captain! A perfect gentleman, yet as free and pleasant as one of ourselves! Then the young lady. As quick and merry as a bird, and a perfect beauty!"

"Beauty is but skin deep. I always say," interjected Maria Jane. "They're not the kind of folk to have secret mysteries hidden away," continued the postmistress. "Miss Aspin is the best run and out my shop laughing and joking with the best of them. Fancy that little beauty mixed up with anything shady!"

"Well, for my part," rejoined Maria Jane. "I prefer a young lady as conducts herself more like a lady. Liza Ann Linney actually saw Miss Rita smoking one of those nasty cigarettes when the captain and she were walking in the garden after lunch the other day."

"The captain and Miss Rita would strike any unprejudiced folk as being altogether of the right sort—open as the day, and pleasant as

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