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GERTRUDE MANNERING

A TALE OF SACRIFICE

BY FRANCES NOBLE

CHAPTER XXIII.—CONTINUED.

"O my Jesus," she prayed, with her gaze fixed on the tabernacle, "let it be so if it be Thy will; I am ready, with Thy grace. Take my life for his soul; give to my prayers the grace of His conversation to Thy holy faith; let me not ask in vain for one who would be so great and noble in Thy service. And that no thought of me and our mutual love may sully His turning to Thee, take me away out of life, so that he may be able to serve Thee perfectly. I offer myself to Thee without reserve to die, if it be Thy will, to obtain Thy grace for him; and, O sweet Jesus! Thyself comfort my father, if Thou takest me; comfort him as Thou canst so well do."

And as she prayed the solemn prayer, she felt no excitement or perturbation, but only a strange, sweet calm, as though Jesus Himself, speaking from His tabernacle, had asked this sacrifice from her, and had Himself given her the grace to offer it.

That night, when she had good-night to her dear Sister Teresa, the latter, knowing nothing of the prayer Gertrude had offered up, remarked how calm and happy she looked to-night, and told her of it.

"Well, I feel calm and happy tonight, somehow, Sister," Gertrude answered; "more so than I have done—since it all happened, in spite of the sorrow of having to part with you again tomorrow, Sister dear." But she said no more—nothing of the strange feeling that had come to her.

And during the journey home, too, she looked so peaceful and was so cheerful that her father was full of thankful rejoicing, telling himself that her visit to the convent had done his darling more good than he could have hoped for. Only to Father Walsley, two or three days after she got home, Gertrude spoke of what she had done, quietly and simply, half afraid he would disapprove.

"But it was no harm, was it, Father Walsley?" she said; "because God will not grant what I asked unless He wills it, you know. He will only take me if He wishes; so it must be all right, must it not?"

Father Walsley's voice was very earnest and solemn as he replied: "And you are not afraid, Gertrude, that if such a sacrifice were really asked of you, you would shrink from it; that you would cling to life with regret when the time came for parting with it—regret perhaps, for—his sake?"

"Father Walsley, I have thought of all that, of everything—even of papa—and I don't think God would let me feel afraid if the time really came any more than I do now. You see, father, I can't tell you how it is, but I have such a strange kind of feeling that if Stanley Graham ever became a Catholic, God would want him in some special way for himself; and how could I want to hinder that? O Father Walsley! if you knew him—how noble he is, how naturally great—you would think me but a poor little price to gain him for God, and if it should be so, if I am right, our Lord will help me to send entirely out of my heart the earthly love that has been so strong—too strong, I think now—and I should be able to care for him only as some one to be saved and made happy in a spiritual way. I should be able to feel like that before I died."

Father Walsley was startled and disturbed as he looked at the young, sweet face and listened to her speaking so calmly, so evidently without any thought of anything extraordinary in what she said; but he exerted himself to smile and make light of it, fearing her ideas might be the result of overstrained imagination, induced by her trouble and consequent bodily weakness.

"My child, do you think I can let you talk like this, of dying, as if it were nothing? What would your father say, Gertrude, if he thought you were so willing to leave him? Do you suppose I am in earnest when I asked you if you were ready to make such a sacrifice? No; in a year's time you will be asking me whatever I thought of you for telling me such a thing, and will be laughing at yourself for it when you are stronger, Gertrude. Meanwhile no harm has been done; the prayer would be pleasing to God, whether it is granted or not."

But Gertrude did not laugh as he hoped, or look confused; she only smiled as she said quietly:

"Father Walsley, it is just because I feel that never shall be stronger, that I think God put the idea into my mind—for, you know, I might as well offer to him for such an object what I may have to give up soon in any case. I have not told any one, but you, Father Walsley—and she hesitated now—"but I have never felt myself really well since—that night; I feel as if I never should, even if I became—his wife. I feel it here, so often—and she put her hand on her heart—as if it could never really recover from that—struggle; as if I had had—wrench of some kind which was too strong for me. But don't tell papa, Father Walsley, because, you know, I may be mistaken."

"And I hope and trust you are, Gertrude," he said cheerily but earnestly.

"No wonder you feel like that as yet; but believe me, my child, you will recover, so do not fancy or think about it." And with a sincere "God bless you!" he dismissed her, pondering long after she had gone on what had passed.

"What if it is no weak, ailing fancy, what if the conviction I have always had at heart should be a true one, and little Gertrude is proved to be no ordinary, weak girl, but as true and generous a martyr—made so by trouble and God's grace—as any of her ancestors who gave up their lives and liberty in the days of persecution?"

CHAPTER XXIV.

The months had passed on to June; everything looked fresh and green again—Whitwell Park all beautiful and luxuriant once more with foliage; but Gertrude grew stronger, only weaker, even on these long, bright days when she could sit out under her beloved trees, listening to the singing of the birds, and breathing the warm, sweet summer air.

The change had come on so gradually, and she had hidden it so carefully as long as she could, only laughing when a doctor was mentioned to her, that her father had more than once flattered himself she was getting stronger, and that the weakness that remained was only the natural consequence which lingered after her trouble, and which, with care, would in time leave her altogether. Not that he ever hoped to see his darling the bright, happy girl she had once been—not that his little Sunbeam could ever regain her old radiance; and, indeed, it seemed as if, somehow, had grown to love his sweet, sad, patient Gertrude with a love which surpassed the old one; as if, except for her sake, he was content to have at least safe back in his care, to be cherished and jealously guarded, until God in His own good time should, if he willed it, restore her even to earthly happiness.

He had learned to think forgivingly of and pray for Stanley Graham, whose name was never mentioned in the old Gram—never openly—though it never left their hearts; he had grown even to pity the proud man in his restless, unhappy exile, so young still and world-weary, whom the demon of pride and human intellect was holding so fast in his coils.

So it was not until June approached that Mr. Manning was all but no longer able to ward off his anxiety—longer able to shut his eyes to the fact that Gertrude, instead of recovering, was growing weaker and thinner day by day—fainting too, once or twice, when she had been sitting quietly with him under the cool shade of the trees. Though fearing to alarm her, he sent, after these occasions, for the doctor who had been their attendant for years, who accordingly came, without, however, rousing any of the signs of alarm in Gertrude which her father had feared. She answered all his questions quietly and smilingly, and was so cheerful that he told her she deserved to be very quickly well, she was such a good patient. Then he took Mr. Manning apart, and told him that he could not as yet see any cause for permanent alarm; that there was no chronic disease, only very great weakness and debility, and that great care would be needed, as well as constant nursing, before she would be anything like her old self again.

"She must go away too," he said; "to the seaside somewhere, where she could be perfectly quiet, with nothing to excite her"—hinting delicately that there were symptoms that she had been over-excited and over-strained in some way.

"Dr. Baldwin," replied Mr. Manning, with perfect truth and still keeping the painful secret, "she has never seemed quite the same to me since her visit to London last summer, when she stayed, you know, with her cousin, Lady Hunter. Perhaps I have been negligent in not sooner insisting on having your advice; but she has been so much against the idea, and so cheerful about her health all through that—that—you see, I could not—admit anxiety of this kind." And the pain of the tone, which told of the inward, vague, fearful forebodings, struck all too plainly on his listener's ear, much as he tried to speak quietly.

But Dr. Baldwin reassured him, telling him that they could hardly have done anything until now, when Miss Manning's illness first seemed to assume a definite shape; then, promising to call every day, until they should leave home, he took his departure, looking as he left the park considerably graver than on entering it.

The evening, when he had bade good-night to Gertrude and left her in bed, with Mrs. Leeson sitting by her, Mr. Manning walked down to the presbytery, and told Father Walsley the result of the doctor's visit. The good priest was startled, as we all are by bad news, even when we know we have been expecting; but he could not betray how little he was surprised to Mr. Manning; he could not betray Gertrude's confidence by telling her father how anxiously though secretly he had watched her all these months, ever since the strange revelation she had made to him and which he had with such a solemn feeling seen so likely to be proved to be no mere fancy such as he had hoped.

Since that day on which she had confided it to him the subject had

never been mentioned between him and Gertrude. He would not speak of it, through fear of keeping up the impression in her mind, and she felt she shrank from perhaps incurring his displeasure by naming it yet again as if of any moment. Though he knew it was ever strengthening in her mind with a calm, sweet conviction and resignation; he knew it a fresh every time she asked him, in that quiet though sometimes trembling tone, to go on praying for Stanley Graham—never to forget him. And knowing what he did, he had lately begun seriously to take the alarm, before her father did or dared to do, when Gertrude began frequently to be absent from the morning Mass, which had been such a loved, constant duty, being too weak to rise always so early; and he had been on the point of advising Mr. Manning quietly to call in medical advice, when he was relieved by the former coming himself to tell him he had done so.

TO BE CONTINUED

to receive a note from Joe, as he had once or twice upon the occasion of previous misunderstandings. When, however, a week had passed and then another week and no little note had come, he gave up expecting.

Joe was ever an obedient child; and since her father's death she had been more attentive than ever to her mother's advice and wishes. Mrs. Carroll was proud of her oldest daughter, and well she might be, for Josephine was possessed of the charm of face and figure that always attracts. An engaging manner and a musical talent that gave her precedence in the community did not lessen her charms.

For seven of the eight miles the priest and his companion journeyed against the storm without serious delay. The horse plunged steadily through the gathering drifts that threatened in places to make the road impassable. Once or twice, when the white banks seemed too deep for further progress on the highway, Jackson tore gaps in the fences and led his horse into the fields, in which manner the badly blocked portions of the route were passed in safety. Father Pat kept his place in the sleigh during these pauses, after being admonished by Jackson that it would be entirely useless for him to get out into the deep snow. Muffled in his great-coat and wading to his knees, these fence-tearing operations warmed Dan considerably. The road was familiar to him since boyhood. He knew the location of every ditch and culvert.

The road he had chosen led into the Carrolls' from the south, and, on account of its width and the kind of fences that flanked it, Dan figured that it was not apt to be filled with drifts. They were nearing the corner where they would turn north through their western course into this cross-road and were a little more than a mile from their destination when, before Jackson was aware of it, his horse was plunging desperately in a great drift. So near the turn, it could not be a long drift, he thought, and urged the animal through. Another mighty plunge and the tired beast fell over on his side, piling the muffled occupants into the snow—Dan underneath and Father Pat on top.

With some difficulty they extricated themselves. Jackson succeeded in freeing his horse from the thills and getting him upon his feet again. But a hasty inspection showed that the sleigh was out of commission, for that night at least.

"There's not another house nearer than Carroll's," Jackson reflected. "I used to ride horseback when I was a boy, Dan," suggested Father Pat.

"But Billy will not allow anyone to ride him, Father. It would be useless to try."

"I'll walk, then, Dan, if you'll lead the way."

The horse was tied to the fence and hastily blanketed. Jackson ploughed a rough path through the drifts of snow to the corner, his companion following in his wake. The effect of the brief exertion was visible, and the good priest stood beside Jackson at the turn of the road, breathing hard. Dan saw at once that his friend was not equal to a mile of such travel in the storm. He began to divest himself of his great-coat.

"Get upon my back, Father," he said as he stooped down before the priest.

"But your coat, Dan?"

"We'll dig it out later. Put your arms about my neck, and let me get hold of your legs. Now we're off." And the strong young fellow rose up with the well-wrapped messenger of God upon his back and strode through the deepening snow, in the teeth of the blast, towards the Carroll home.

When Doctor Martin arrived he pronounced the condition of Mrs. Carroll critical.

"She may die at any moment," he whispered to Joe aside. "Heart trouble."

Poor Joe's soul was torn with grief and anxiety. If the priest would only come. The doctor told of the bad roads he had to encounter during his three-mile trip from Greenville. He feared that the roads from Sarsfield were almost impassable.

"But Father Pat has a good team," said Joe's young sister, Mary. Then immediately the thought crossed her mind that, perchance, he might be away from home.

"I hope Jimmy found him at home."

Three or four women who lived nearby were present.

"Where's Tom?" asked one of them. Tom was the hired man.

"He's around the barn somewhere," said Joe, as she passed quietly to her mother's bedside.

"I'll go out and tell him to drive over to our place and have Ed and George take our team and the big sleigh and break the road towards Sarsfield for the priest," she asserted. "It's a fine strapping fellow he is. An' just think of the government situation he has. He'll be a gin-ral some day, Joe. Mrs. Gin-ral Miller is a pr-r-old title for any woman!"

Titles, however, are attractive to those even higher in the walks of life than Mrs. Carroll.

Dan had met his repulse upon the advent of the young officer and taken it without any outward display of emotion. He half expected

THE CALL OF THE CARROLLS

The cold snow pelted Jackson in the face almost caused him to drive by without seeing the figure of a little man who stood at the edge of the sidewalk waving frantically at him as he passed the village of Sarsfield. While he reined in his horse close to the curb the little man came quickly to the side of his cutter, and Jackson recognized the kindly face of good old Father Pat.

"Is that you, Dan? I thought it was you. Will you take me to a sick-call? My boy has driven over to Evert with Father Fischer and a lad had just ridden up on horseback from Carroll's," saying Mrs. Carroll is dying. The poor lad is inside, almost frozen and was just going uptown to get someone to drive me."

"Of course I will, Father," interposed Dan at the first opportunity. Father Pat was a genial little priest, of about sixty-five years, who always held the floor in conversation because he gave no opportunity for interruption until he had finished his rapid-fire speeches.

"Are you cold, Dan? You'd better come in and get warm."

"Thank you, Father. I am not cold. I've driven in from Uncle Joe's. I'll wait here for you."

All right, Dan. I'll be out in a minute." And Father Pat hurried into the parish house.

"So poor Mrs. Carroll is dying," mused Jackson; "I wonder—and he paused—"I wonder what Joe will do." He began slowly tapping the front of the cutter with his whip and was quite oblivious to the storm when he was roused from his reverie by the appearance of Father Pat. The good Father was muffled to the ears. Jackson assisted him into the cutter and tucked the heavy robes snugly about him on the outside, stepped in himself and soon his lively bag was speeding against the cutting storm, bearing the priest on his errand of mercy.

It had been a cold winter, but the present blizzard was the worst that part had seen "for thirty years" according to the "oldest inhabitant." The snow whirled and drifted, filling the freshly made sleigh track. It streamed from the crests of fence-bound drifts, a constant broadside against the travellers. Like birdshot, it peppered against their faces, driven before the fierce northwest blast.

The last time Jackson had called at Carroll's his departure was emphasized with the remark, "You needn't call again. Mr. Jackson, Josephine has other company that is more suitable." Whether Mrs. Carroll's sudden appearance at the door that evening had been the climax of an understanding with her daughter, or whether it was one of the blindest little woman's own planning Jackson did not know. Joe, at her mother's side, had neither by word nor sign encouraged Dan, as standing on the threshold, hat in hand, he turned a last glance towards her.

Young Lieutenant Miller, brilliant and dashing, just home on a furlough, had quite captivated mother and daughter. Mrs. Carroll had always manifested a great interest in her daughter's welfare. In Jackson she had failed to discover anything remarkable. He was a staid fellow, living with his mother in Sarsfield, and caring for her. They were comfortably supplied with the world's goods, but made no display of them. Dan managed one of the local big concerns.

"He's good enough for them that wants him, but they're better than him for you, Joe," Mrs. Carroll would say. The old lady was a strong believer in doing better, especially in the matrimonial line; albeit her judgment was not always of the best. Lieutenant Miller was not a Catholic. "But 'tis easy to change a man's religion," she assured Joe. " 'Tis a fine strapping fellow he is. An' just think of the government situation he has. He'll be a gin-ral some day, Joe. Mrs. Gin-ral Miller is a pr-r-old title for any woman!"

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