

GERTRUDE MANNERING
A TALE OF SACRIFICE
BY FRANCES NOBLE

CHAPTER XXII.—CONTINUED

His presence was even more of a delight and consolation to Gertry than her father had hoped. She was almost gay again as she talked to her idolized brother, who was mixed up with none of her trouble; who brought no associations or recollections of it to her mind, except the thought of how entirely he would have been lost to her if she had yielded to that terrible temptation. She told her father on one of the three mornings, when they all went to Mass together, that it was well Rupert was staying no longer with them, for she had been dreadfully distracted several times during Mass, watching the sweet heavenly expression that developed itself so strongly upon his face as he prayed.

"I'm afraid, papa," she said, "I got thinking how proud we ought to be of him, even now; and how proud we shall be when he is a priest, and I shall hear people praising his Jesuit brother. And her father smiled, and thanked God that they had been able to procure this consolation for his little girl.

Then Rupert had so much to tell them about the college and his old companions, whose names they knew so well; and they had so much to talk of, without much mention of Gertry's London visit or her short one to Nethercotes, that the evenings passed all too quickly—the pleasant evenings by the fire in the old dining-room, which reminded Rupert and Gertry so much of the days long ago, when they used to play at their favorite game in the priest's hiding-hole, with their father often looking up from his book to watch them. Rupert carefully avoided any open notice of his sister's pale looks and quiet, sad demeanor, even when they were most visible, which was not so often during his stay; but Gertry knew how deeply he felt for her, and his silent sympathy, and the prayers she knew he offered for her, were the best comfort he could have given her.

Only once, on the morning of his departure, when they were taking a farewell walk alone together round the park, did Gertry openly speak of the trouble, and mention Stanley Graham's name to Rupert. "I don't like you to go away thinking I would not speak to you of it, Rupert dear," she said; and then she talked openly for a few minutes of all that had happened in a low, trembling tone.

"Gertry," Rupert said, as she paused, "if you knew what I felt when I got my father's letter and knew what you had escaped, what this—this Mr. Graham had tried to lead you into! Gertry, you might perhaps, never have seen home again if he had accomplished his task."

"No, Rupert, I might not; I do not know. You see, I—I think he would have wanted to marry me at once. I should have had to become his wife while I was at Nethercotes, and—well, we could not have let papa know until it was over." And her voice trembled very much now.

"He meant that, I know, because I could not have come back and told papa that I had promised to give up my religion, and Stanley would have been afraid of losing me if I once came home again."

"Thank God, Gertry, he has lost you!" said her brother quickly and fervently. "You yourself can say that too, can't you, dear, while yet you are praying for him?"

"Yes, Rupert."

And a deep sigh spoke more than words could have done, as they turned again to go into the house. And as they said good-by two or three hours later at the station, Gertry whispered:

"Don't think too hardly of him, Rupert; you would not if you knew him. Don't, if only for my sake. Pray for him, Rupert, as you would if you only knew him," she repeated.

"Don't be afraid, Gertry," was the reply. "I shall never forget to do that, to pray for him, whatever I may think of him; and I will try and not think hardly for your sake, and because it is not for us to judge our fellow-creatures, Gertry."

CHAPTER XXIII.

It wanted but a week from the beginning of Lent, and Gertry was going to pay her promised visit of a few days to N— Convent, which could be deferred no longer after the pressing letters she had received from the nuns and one or two of her old companions, the latter, of course, being in entire ignorance that anything had come to sadden their bright, sweet favorite, Gertry Mannering. Her father was going to take her, and intended remaining the few days at the little country inn at which he had always stayed during his visits to Gertry when she was at school.

"It will be like the old times, Gertry," he said; "and I shall like to see Rev. Mother again and all of them, and the old place itself too." Besides, papa," she replied, "with something of the old arch look, you could not lose sight of me for so many days, I know."

And so one bright, cold morning very early in March they found themselves in the train, beginning the journey which had so long been such a familiar one during those past happy, peaceful years.

When they reached N—, Mr. Mannering sent Gertry on at once to the convent alone.

"I know, you would rather go alone first, Gertry," he said, "to get the first meeting over; it will be best. Tell Rev. Mother I will come in the morning to see her."

And with a lingering kiss Gertry left him, and took her seat in the coach which was to take her to the convent.

Her father was right: it was less painful for her to be alone on her first arrival and during the familiar drive, which was so associated with the carefree, happy past. It was winter now, as it had been when she had last looked on the quiet country scene, when she had left it, but fourteen months ago, without a cloud on her brow or a trouble in her heart, except those brought by the pain of parting with her dear, kind friends the nuns, and the companions who had all so loved her. Then as she drove into the convent grounds her heart contracted with a sharper pain still, as she recalled her own words to her father as she had last driven through these familiar spots: "I wonder how it will all look when I see it again; I wonder if I shall be changed at all, papa. I shall look a little older, I suppose; more of a young lady, that's all."

The time had come now; she looked again upon the beloved scene, and though it was unaltered, was she not changed as she could never have dreamed of—changed as fully as though the lapse of years had passed over her head, to be the old, laughing, careless Gertry never, never more? Her heart beat painfully as she waited in the reception-room; but directly Rev. Mother appeared, bringing with her dear Sister Teresa, Gertry forgot her confusion in their hearty kisses and earnest words of welcome. They forbore, as Rupert had done, from noticing her pale looks and visible thinness, knowing as they did, though not yet fully, the story of the terrible shadow that had come so early to darken the bright life of their beloved pupil; but they were shocked at the change nevertheless, though they had been partly expecting it.

Then for the next few days the old convent life existed again for Gertry; because, though they treated her as a visitor, and gave her a nice little room of her own, she insisted on living as much as possible with the girls, most of whom were her old companions, instead of always being apart "in state," as she called it. She sat among them at recreation, to their great delight and her own increased popularity, listening to the innocent, simple talk which once had been so interesting to her, of all the little changes that had taken place since she left, laughing while one girl who used always to be in scrapes in Gertry's time told her how she never got into any now, but that another had quite taken her place in that line, one who used to be quite a model a year since; and how Sister So-and-so was not half as strict as she used to be; and what a grand retreat they had had last year, and how sorry they had been for Gertry to miss it—until she could have almost wished, as she sat there, to wake and find herself still at school, and the past year a dream. And yet no, she could not—oh, no! not for worlds, spite of the terrible pain and yearning in her heart.

"I cannot wish never to have known him, never to have loved him, no! Even if I never see him again on earth, I can pray for him always; and if only he ever comes to God, even at the last, all my pain and sorrow will have been but an easy price for a soul like his."

But though Gertry did her best to be merry and cheerful, and always to hide that any shadow had crossed her life, even the innocent convent girls were not wholly deceived, and were not without an idea that something more than delicate health was the matter with Gertry.

"I never saw any one so changed in my life," said one confidently to another, among a group of the elder girls. "She is not very well, the dear, I know, of course, and she is just as nice as ever; but somehow it seems as if she had seen some trouble or other, or were thinking of something quite different from what we are all talking about."

"And I should not at all wonder if she were," said another, who was considered rather a worldly girl, and a great authority on worldly matters, having only come to school rather late. You don't suppose she has been all this time at home for nothing, and in London, too, last season," she added somewhat contemptuously.

"And then," put in a sweet, pious little girl, "she does have such long talks with Sister Teresa. And I know she is a great deal in the chapel, when she is not with us. She let it out accidentally, and I am sure it is beautiful to see her pray, when we do see her, as if she quite forgot everything and everybody but our Lord."

And so the week passed, with its quiet, sweet routine, varied only by the two or three visits of her father to the convent; and on the last evening Gertry knelt at Benediction in her usual place, the one they had allotted to her on her arrival. She had been feeling ever physically tired and weary all day, as she often

did now, but she stayed in the chapel after the rest were all gone, bowed down alone and motionless; and as she did so a strange feeling seemed to come over her, a thought almost like inspiration, which made her start joyously, and then look up with a trembling wonder.

SHATTERED DREAMS

By Anna W. Mulline

Two years ago, Jerry Simmons had left Andersonville without a word to anyone, not even to little Martha Evans.

"Why worry over him?" Sue Benjamin had advised, noting that Martha's spirits were at ebb. "The very best of men are not worth crying over. Dry your eyes and forget him."

She was Martha's friend and the confidant of all her troubles.

"Oh, Sue, dear, you don't understand, or you'd never say that," Martha had rejoined, with a sob, realizing this and, in a voice that carried above the others, insisted on silence.

"Oh, girls," Martha said, when finally she could be heard, "I'm so happy. As soon as Jerry returned last night, he came to see me. I never was so surprised in all my life. I asked him why he had not written, and he told me that he wanted to be sure of his plans before he told any one. I didn't have the heart to scold too much, for he told me that he had been working day and night, and girls," she continued, now lowering her voice to a whisper, "he showed me his bank books. I could hardly believe my own eyes. Why, if he worked in this town all his life, he could never have saved what he has during the past two years. I asked him how he managed, but he only laughed and said I didn't understand business. People in the cities surely have wonderful opportunities for making money, and I'm glad Jerry had the courage to leave Andersonville when he did."

"Well, it's great to think that he is back," one of the girls remarked. "I certainly never thought you would see him again."

Martha's eyes were bright and her face was flushed.

"Girls," she said earnestly, "I prayed him back. I couldn't begin to count the novenas I've made, the votive candles I've burned, and even the Masses I have had offered, and she added with a smile, "my prayers have now been answered."

"Answered, Martha," some one exclaimed, "why this is only the beginning of the answer. You know, we girls expect an invitation when the real 'answer' is granted; and don't you think we deserve an invitation for all the prayers we've said for you?"

Most of the girls in the mill were Catholics and had always been willing to say "Yes" to Martha's many appeals for prayers.

"Of course you do," agreed Sue. "The prize is not going to slip through our fingers this time, and we all shall soon be receiving our share of a wedding cake. Shall we not, Martha?" she asked brightly, placing her arm over her friend's shoulder.

The little ripple of excitement caused by Jerry's return soon died out and the town had gone back to its usual, everyday routine when, like a bolt from the sky, came the news that Jerry and Sue had eloped. No one dared go near Martha that morning, either to console or question her. Her wild expression and unwonted silence kept the girls away. By noon, however, the unnatural restraint gave way to hysterical crying.

"My heart is broken," she sobbed bitterly. "I've lost faith in human nature. The very ones I trusted above all—Jerry—Sue—the hypocrites. Even God seems to have turned from me, after all my prayers, all my novenas, all my trust. Oh, I wish that—I wish that—oh, leave me alone," she cried, as she pushed away the girls who were trying to console her.

Time went on and Martha became bitter and more bitter. As she looked ahead, the future meant only a stretch of lonely days, spent beside a grinding, soulless loom and then, some day, she would drop beside it, useless.

Three, four, five years passed and Martha, still at her place, watched familiar faces about her being replaced by new ones. Most of the former girls were married now and had happy homes and chubby babies of their own. And still she was alone, pathetically alone. Her dark hair was showing signs of gray and furrows were beginning to leave permanent marks on her pale, thin face.

"Let your friends know your home address, Miss Evans," the superintendent said one morning, as he handed her a letter. "It's against the rules to have mail sent here, you know."

Martha took the letter and glanced at the postmark. Could it be possible? Quickly she tore open the envelope and glanced at the signature. Sue! About to crumple the letter between her fingers, one sentence caught her eye, "for the sake of my little boy." Quickly she read on, unable now to stop. Her brain became confused. What terrible things she was reading! Jerry had been dragged from a river into which he had thrown himself in a moment of despair, and Sue, her money, home, everything gone, was now earning a mere pittance with which she was trying to support herself and her boy. Martha's heart beat faster. A satisfaction thrilled her.

"Nothing more than she deserves," she murmured as she read on.

"When Jerry left Andersonville, it was on the advice of the man who caused his ruin. Dazzled with the prospects which that devil held out, Jerry entered into a dishonest scheme which has robbed not one, but hundreds of poor families of hard-earned money. This he would do, and he would do it well planned and always managed to keep within the limits of the law. Filled with a sense of his new power, he came back for you, but when he saw you, so good, and so far above him, he had not the heart to drag you down with him. He told me this years later and it made me almost insane with jealousy. I knew Jerry was doing wrong, but I loved my new life too much to try to stop him. Once I did urge him to drop everything. I was sick then, and thought I was going to die. When I got better, I stopped urging, and the days and years passed on and we forgot God. Jerry had been told in confession that he must return the money which he had unjustly taken. This he would not do, and he cut himself off from the Church. In his bitter remorse, he grew to hate the name of Catholic. If I had only been firm in doing right, how different things might be today! But I have paid for my weakness. Over night all we had, position, money, home—all were swept from us and then came, worse than all—Jerry's death. And such death, in despair and away from God, and how much of his sin is mine? It is strange that I should turn to you, whom I have wronged so deeply, but the remembrance of your goodness and strong faith are ever before me and give me hope. It was the memory of you that saved me from following Jerry, and taking my little boy with me. Martha, there are any hope for me? I am writing with the courage of despair."

Martha folded the letter and gazed at the loom before her. Mechanically she guided a slipping thread.

"Oh my God," she murmured, as she tried to stifle her sobs, "it is I who should beg for forgiveness from Thee. Instead of seeing Thy guiding hand, shielding me from harm and possible danger to my soul, I turned from Thee, when I could not have my own way, forgetting, in my blindness that, though Thou hast said, 'Ask and you shall receive,' Thou hast taught us to add, 'Thy will, not mine be done.'"

"Will you be home from the mill all day tomorrow, Aunt Martha?"

"Yes dear, all day."

"And mother's going to stay with you too, even after you both come home from Mass and Communion?"

"Yes, mother too. And, Jerry boy," Martha said, as she drew the sturdy, golden-haired lad closer to her, "don't forget to ask our Lord tomorrow, when He comes to you for the first time, to keep you good, now and always."

"Yes, Aunt Martha, I will, and I'm going to pray for you and for mother and for my dead daddy, too."

Martha's eyes filled with sudden tears, as she looked into the blue eyes of the little lad standing beside her, so like those of another Jerry whom she had known so well. Softly she breathed a prayer for that other Jerry in hope that at the last dark moment, God's boundless mercy might have rescued his soul from the depth of despair. For she remembered that even

"Betwixt the saddle and the ground Is mercy sought and mercy found."

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