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**GRAPES AND THORNS.**

By M. A. T., AUTHOR OF "THE HOUSE OF YORK," "A WINGED WORD," ETC.

CHAPTER X.—CONTINUED.

Mrs. Gerald was silent, astonished by this unexpected lecture, of which she quite well understood the meaning. He would have no child of his brought up as he had been. But why should he speak of it now?  
"There's too much liberty and recklessness among young men," he went on. "They have too much their own way. Parents ought to see what misery it will lead to. If they don't care for what the child may make them suffer, they ought to recollect what the child has got to suffer when at last it wakes up to life as it is, and finds itself with ruinous tastes and habits, and not one right idea of anything. I am inclined to believe that it would be better for half the children in the world if they were brought up and trained by the State instead of by their own parents."

They had reached the station, and he stepped slowly out of the carriage. His wife ventured to ask how long he would stay away.  
"Oh! I've nothing to do in New York," he said carelessly. "I shall not stay there more than two or three days."  
He leaned into the carriage, and took her hands. In the darkness she could not see his face, though the light from outside shone in her own; but his voice was tender and regretful, even solemn. "Good-by, dear," he said. "You have been only too good to me. May God reward you!"

He bent to kiss the hands he held, then hurried away before she had recovered herself sufficiently to speak.  
"What a good by it was!" she thought with a startled heart. "One would think he were never coming back again."  
He did come back, though, and sooner than he was expected. He appeared at the door the next evening, nearly falling in, indeed, so that John had to steady him. Annette had run out of the drawing-room on hearing the servant's exclamation, but, at sight of her husband in such a state, was about to turn back in disgust.  
"It isn't liquor, ma'am," John said. "Something's the matter with him. I told you yesterday that he wasn't fit to go away. Just push that chair this way for him to sit down in, and bring him a glass of wine."

"I had to come back," the young man said. "I was sicker than I thought, and not able to go on. I don't know how I reached Orichon; and just now, walking up from the station, the cold wind on my forehead made me dizzy. I thought I should feel better to walk. Don't be frightened, Annette. I can go up stairs now."  
He had every symptom of fever, and before morning had grown so much worse that a doctor was sent for, though much against his will.  
"I don't believe in doctors," he protested. "My mother always cured me when I was sick without sending for a doctor. It's all guess-work. They only know what you tell them, and they sit and stare at you, and ask you questions when you don't want to speak a word. I hate to have a doctor look at me."

Mr. Gerald was indeed a very difficult patient for both doctor and nurse, irritable beyond expression, and nervous to the verge of delirium. At first no one was allowed near him but his mother. Then he found her tender sadness depressing, and insisted on having his wife in her place. Finally he begged John to take care of him.  
"Keep the women away, if you don't want me to lose my senses," he said to the man. "They start and turn pale or red every time I cough or speak in my sleep; and even when they pretend not to notice, I know they are watching me all the time. I don't dare to groan, or sigh, or rave, though it would sometimes do me good. I want somebody by me who doesn't care whether I live or die, but who just does what I ask him to. Let Louis open the door and sit up in the dicky. It's what he was made for. He's far more of a footman than you."  
"I wouldn't give either of you your salt as footman," John retorted, smiling grimly. But he did not refuse to assume the post of nurse, and, having undertaken it, rendered himself so useful and unobtrusive that the others all gave way to him, and the sick man had no disposition to change again. He seemed a rather hard, dry man, but he was patient, and showed none of that obtrusive attention which is sometimes more troublesome to an invalid than neglect. If Lawrence groaned and tossed about, the attendant took no notice of him; if he said, "John, don't

leave me alone a minute," the man would sit by his side all night, as untired, apparently, as a man of wood.  
So three nights passed, and still the invalid grew worse.  
"Wouldn't you like to have me read some prayers to you, sir?" the watcher asked one night. "They might quiet you."  
Lawrence broke out impatiently: "Do you think I am going to die? I am not. That is what the women are all crying about. Mrs. Ferrier came in to-day, and told me she was having Masses said for me, and sprinkled me with holy water till I was drenched. And Bettie, when she sat here to-day while you were away, rattled her beads and cried all the time, till I told her to get out of the room. That's the way with some people. The minute a fellow is sick, they try their best to scare him to death. Why don't you offer to read the paper to me, or tell me an amusing story? Give me the oplate now."  
"The doctor said you were not to take another till 12 o'clock," the attendant said.  
"I don't care for the doctor's orders. Give it to me now. I know best what I need."  
"I believe you do," John said quietly, and gave him the oplate.  
But in spite of care, and of a determination to recover, the illness grew upon him, till finally the physicians intimated that if he had any religious preparations to make, he had better get them made as soon as possible, for his strength was rapidly wasting, and they could not promise that the result would not be fatal.

Mrs. Ferrier went in great distress to F. Chevreuse.  
"What shall we do?" she asked.  
"After having refused to see a priest, and flown into a rage whenever we mentioned the subject, at last he is willing to have one. But he will see only one but F. O'Donovan; and F. O'Donovan is laid up with gout, so that he cannot move hand or foot. I went out to him to-day, and I thought that if he could possibly be wrapped up and brought in a carriage, I would ask him; but, Father, I couldn't have the face to speak of it. The doctor doesn't allow him to stir out of his room. Even Mrs. Gerald sees that it can't be done. I've begged Lawrence to listen to reason, but he is so set that if he had asked to have the Pope himself, he'd be mad if we didn't send a messenger to Rome. I could send to L— for a priest, but that might be too late. He is falling very much. I do wish you'd go once again, Father."  
F. Chevreuse had already been twice, and had been denied admittance in terms anything but respectful.  
"Certainly I will go," he said. "I should have come up this evening, if I had not been sent for. Poor Lawrence! I cannot understand why he should have such a prejudice against me."

It was early twilight when they reached the house, and, as they entered, the lamps burned with a faint ray, as if they, like all sounds and sights in that place, had been muffled. "You go right up and tell him there's no one to be got but me," F. Chevreuse said.  
But Mrs. Ferrier shrank back. "He never will consent if I ask him," "Annette, then."  
"He won't allow Annette near him," the mother sighed.  
"John," said the priest, "will you go up and tell Mr. Gerald that I am here to see him?"  
"I wouldn't venture to, sir," John answered. "I don't believe its of any use; and if you'd take my advice, sir, —"  
Even Mrs. Ferrier was scandalized by the man's presumption, and faltered out an "O John!"  
"I will go myself," F. Chevreuse interrupted. Stay down here, all you people, and say the rosary for my success. Say it with all your hearts. And don't come up stairs till you are called."  
As he went up a door near the landing softly opened, and in it stood the young wife with a face so woeful and death-like that tears would have seemed joyful in comparison. She said not a word, but stood and looked at the priest in a kind of terror.  
"My poor child!" he said pityingly, "why do you stay here alone, killing yourself with grief? Go and stay with your mother and Honora till I come down."  
She made that painful effort to speak which shows that the mouth and throat are dry, and, when words came, they were but a whisper. "O, Father!" she said, "don't go in there if you have any human weakness left in you! You have to be an angel and not a man to hear my husband's confession. Find some one else for him. He will not speak to you."  
"Never fear, child!" he answered firmly. "I may have human weakness, but I have the strength of God to help me resist it."  
She watched him as he softly opened the door of the chamber where her husband lay, heard the faint cry that greeted him: "Not you! not you!" then the door closed, and she was alone again.

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in the presence of God, listening to your eternal doom. What will you care then, my poor boy, who helped you to loosen from your conscience the sins you have committed in this miserable world? It cannot be because you hate me so much, this unwillingness. Is it because your sins have been so great? There is no sin that I have not heard confessed, I think; and the greater it was, the greater was my comfort and thankfulness that at last it was forgiven. Come, now, I am God and not your Blessed Mother, and forget who I am. Remember only what I am—the minister of the merciful God—and that I have no feeling, no thought, no wish, but to save you."  
The bed-curtains made a still deeper shade in that shadowed room, and out from the dimness the face of the sick man gleamed white and wild.  
"I cannot!" he said. "You would not want to hear me if you knew. You would never give me absolution. You do not know what my sins are."  
The priest seated himself by the bedside, and took in his strong, magnetic hand the thin and shaking hand of the penitent. "No matter what you may tell me, you cannot surprise me," he said. "I have heard every crime, I cannot refuse you, and every confession, I cannot refuse you. I have only pity and love for you. Tell me all now, as if you were telling your own soul. Have no fear."  
"No priest ever before heard such a confession!" The words came faintly. "You do not know."  
"Confess, in the name of God!" repeated the priest. "The flames of hell are harder to bear than any anger of mine can be. God has sent me hither, and I have only to obey Him, and listen to your confession, whatever it may be. It is not my choice nor yours. We are both commanded."  
"Promise me that I shall have absolution! Promise me that you will forgive me!" prayed the young man, clinging to the hand that he had at first shrunk from. "I didn't mean to do what I have done, and I have suffered the torments of the damned for it."  
"I have no right to refuse absolution when you are penitent," was the answer. "The person who repents and confesses has a right to absolution."  
"You will give it to me, no matter what I may tell you?"  
"No matter what you may tell me," repeated the priest. "The mercy of God is mighty. Though you should hem yourself in with sins as with a wall of mountains, He can overlook them. Though you should sink in the lowest depths of sin, His hand can reach you. A sinner cannot be moved to call on the name of the Lord, unless the Lord should move him and have the merciful answer ready. I have blessed you. How long is it since your last confession?"  
The sick man half raised himself, and pointed across the room.  
"There is a crucifix on the table," he said. "Go and kneel before that, and ask God to strengthen you for a hard trial. Then, if you come back to me, I will confess."

F. Chevreuse started up, and stood one instant erect and rigid, with his face upraised. Then he crossed the room, knelt before the crucifix, and held it to his breast during a moment of wordless prayer. As a sigh reached him through the stillness of the chamber, he laid the crucifix down, and returned to the bedside.  
"In the name of God, confess, and have no fear," he said gently. "Have no fear!"  
The penitent lay with his face half turned to the pillow, and the bed was trembling under him; but he no longer trembled to speak.

To the company down-stairs it seemed a very long interview. Mrs. Ferrier, Mrs. Gerald, and Miss Pembroke, kneeling together in the little sitting-room near the foot of the stairs, with the door open, had said the rosary, trying not to let their thoughts wander; then, sitting silent, had listened for a descending step, breathing each her own prayer now and then. Their greatest trouble was over. Evidently F. Chevreuse had overcome Lawrence Gerald's unwillingness to confess to him; and the three women, so different in all else, united in the one ardent belief that the prayer of faith would save the sick man, and that, when his conscience should be quite disburdened, and his soul enlightened by the comforts and exhortations which such a man as F. Chevreuse could offer, his body would feel the effects of that inward healing, and throw off its burden too.

In an adjoining room at Louis Ferrier, biting his nails, having been forbidden by his mother to seek distraction in more cheerful scenes. He watched the women while they knelt, and even drew a little nearer to listen to their low-voiced prayer, but lacked the pity to join them. He was both annoyed and frightened by the gloomy circumstances in which he found himself, and, like most men of slack religious belief and practice, felt more safe to have pious women by him in times of danger.  
John had taken his place on a low stool underneath the stairs, and had an almost grotesque appearance of being at the same time hiding and alert. With his head advanced, and his neck twisted, he stared steadily up the stairway at the door within which the priest had disappeared.  
For nearly an hour there was no

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answer. "I do not own you any more than I do others."  
But he patiently forbore to press the question then.  
"Encourage him to come to me whenever you think I can benefit him," he said to Annette. "You can't tell best. He has not quite recovered his spirits yet, and it will do no good for me to urge him. Make everything as cheerful as you can for him. It sometimes happens that people get up from sickness in this depressed state of mind."  
"Yes!" she replied, looking down. She also had grown sly of F. Chevreuse, and seemed willing to keep out of his sight.  
But to others she was perhaps rather more gay than she had known her for some time. Her mother found her at once kinder and more exacting, and complained that they seemed now to have become strangers.  
"And how nervous you have grown, Annette!" she said. "You crush everything you take hold of."  
"What have I crushed, mamma?" asked the daughter, with a light laugh. "Have I made havoc among your bonnets or wine-glasses?"  
"It isn't that," Mrs. Ferrier said fretfully. "You squeeze people's hands, instead of touching them. Look at that baby's arm!" They were entertaining a baby visitor.  
Annette Gerald looked as she was bid, and saw the prints of her fingers on the soft little arm she had held unconsciously, and caught an only half-subdued quiver of the baby lip as the little one looked at her, all ready to cry with pain.

Every woman knows at once how she atoned for her fault, by what caresses, and petting, and protestations of sorrow, and how those faint red marks were bemoaned as if they had been the stripes of a martyr.  
"If you touch any one's arm, you pinch it," the elder lady went on. "And you take hold of your shawl and your gloves and your handkerchief as if somebody were going to pull them away from you. I've seen your nails white when you held the evening paper to read, you gripped it so; and as to taking glasses and cups at the table, I always expect to see them fly to pieces in your hands."  
"Isn't she an awful woman?" says Mrs. Annette to the baby, holding it high and looking up into its rosy, smiling face. "Isn't Annette a frightfully muscular and dangerous person, you pink of perfection? What shall we do with her? She pinches little swan's-down arms, and makes angelic babies pucker up their lips with grief, and sets tears swimming their blue violets of eyes. We must do something dreadful to her. We must forgive her; and that is very terrible. There is nothing so crushing, baby, as to be forgiven very much."  
And then, after one more toss, the infant was let suddenly and softly down, like a laptul of roses, over the face of its friend, and for an instant Annette Gerald's eyes were hidden in its neck.  
"Come and have a game of chess, Annette," her husband called out across the room.  
"Yes, dear!" she responded brightly, and setting the child down, went to him at once, a red color in her cheeks.  
"Why do some people always notice such little things," he said frowningly, "and instead of attending to themselves, watch how people take hold of cups and saucers, and all that nonsense, and fancy that some wonderful chance hangs on your eating butter with your bread, or preferring cheese?"  
Annette was engaged in placing the men, and did not look in her husband's face as she answered in a gentle, soothing voice:  
"It is rather annoying sometimes, but I find the best way is to treat the whole jestingly. If one shows vexation, it looks serious. But you can ridicule a person out of hanging mountains by threads."  
He was going to answer, when something made him notice her face. The color was still bright there, but the cheeks were hollow, and dark circles had sunk beneath her eyes.  
"Why, you are not looking well," he said, only just aware of the fact. "Are you sick? Did you get worn out taking care of me?"  
She waited an instant till the others, who were leaving the room, should be out of sight, then leaned across the table, careless that her sleeve swept away the two armies who had just placed, and took her husband's hand in hers, and bowed her cheek to it with a sob.  
"O Lawrence! Lawrence!" she whispered.  
He made a motion to draw his hand away, but let it remain. "My God! what is the matter with you?" he exclaimed.  
She leaned back instantly, and made an effort to control herself. "It must be that I am not well. Don't mind me. And now, you will have to place your own men, and give me the first move."  
He placed the men, and appeared to be thinking pitifully of his wife as he glanced now and then into her face. "It seems better of me not to have taken better care of you, Annette," he said.  
"Oh! you needed care yourself," she replied lightly. "Don't imagine that I am sick, though. It is nothing. You didn't marry me to take care of me, you know, and I am not very exacting."  
She would have caught back the last words, if she could, before it was too late. They escaped her unawares, and

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sound but the small ticking of a clock and the occasional dropping of a coal in the grate. Then all the waiting ones started and looked out eagerly; for the chamber-door opened, and F. Chevreuse came out.  
One only did not lift her face to read what tidings might be written in the face of him who came forth from the sick-chamber. Kneeling, almost prostrate on the floor, Annette Gerald still remained where F. Chevreuse had left her. She did not look up even when he passed by her side, and she felt that he was blessing her, but only bowed still lower before him.  
"Take comfort, my child," he said. "You have no reason to despair."  
She looked up quickly into his face, with an almost incredulous hope in her eyes.  
He was pale, but some illumination not of earth floated about him, so that she could easily have believed she saw him upborne in air with the buoyancy of a spirit. The heavenly calm of his expression could not be described; yet it was the calm of one who, reposing on the bosom of God, is yet aware of infinite sin and suffering in the world. It was such a look as one might imagine an angel guardian to wear—heavenly peace shorn of heavenly delight.  
He motioned her to rise, and she obeyed him. She would not then have hesitated, whatever he had bade her do. His imposing calm pressed her fears and doubts to a perfect quiet. There was nothing possible but obedience.  
"Go to your husband, and see if he wants anything," he said. "Let him be very quiet, and he may sleep. Tomorrow morning I shall bring him the Viaticum; but I think he will recover."

She went toward the chamber, and he descended the stairs. John, bending forward eagerly, caught sight of his face, and drew quickly back again, blessing himself. "The man is a saint!" he muttered, and took good care to keep himself out of sight.  
F. Chevreuse was met in the sitting-room door by Mrs. Gerald, and the other two pressed close behind her; and when they saw him, it was as though a soft and gentle light had shone into their troubled faces.  
"You are afraid that so long an interview has exhausted him," he said. "It has not. The body is seldom any worse for attending to the affairs of the soul, and a tranquil mind is the best rest. Annette is with him now, and if left undisturbed, I think he will sleep. Pray for him, and do not lose courage. God bless you! Good-night."

Not one of them uttered a word. The questions they would have asked, and the invitation they would have given the priest to remain with them, died on their lips. Evidently he did not mean to enter the room, and they felt that his doing so was a favor for him to offer, not for them to ask.  
They glanced at each other as he went away, and Honora Pembroke smiled. "He looks as though he were gazing at heaven through the gate of martyrdom," she said.  
But the next morning, after seeing Gerald, he stopped a few minutes to talk with the family, and still they found that indefinable air of loftiness lingering about him, imposing a certain distance, at the same time that it increased their reverence and affection for him. The familiar, frequently jesting, sometimes peremptory F. Chevreuse seemed to have gone away for ever; but how beautiful was the substitute he had left, and how like him in all that was loftiest!

Lawrence was better that morning, and gained steadily day by day. Nothing could exceed the care and tenderness with which F. Chevreuse watched over his recovery. He came every morning and evening, he treated him with the affection of a father, and seemed to have charged himself with the young man's future.  
"I think you should let him and Annette go to Europe for a year," he said to Mrs. Ferrier. "It would be better for him to break off entirely from old associations, and have an entire change for a while. His health has not been good for some time, and his nerves are worn. The journey would restore him, and afterwards we will see what can be done. I am not sure that it is well for him to live here. When a person is going to change his life very much, it is often wiser to change his place of abode also. The obstacles to improvement are fewer among strangers."  
The young man received this proposal to go abroad rather doubtfully. He would not go away till spring, and was not sure that he would go then. As he grew better in health, indeed, he withdrew himself more and more from the priest, and showed an uneasiness in his society which not all F. Chevreuse's kindness could overcome.  
"You must not shun me, Lawrence," the priest said to him one day when they were alone. "You have done that too long, and it is not well. Try to look on me as very firmly your friend. Let me advise you sometimes, and be sure that I shall always have your good in view."

Lawrence had been very nervous and irritable that day, and was in no mood to bear expostulation. "You can't be my friend," he replied with suppressed vehemence. "You can only be my master. You can only own me body and soul."  
"That is a mistake," was the quiet answer.  
"Don't waste time, money, and health, trying every new medicine you may see advertised in the papers. If the cause of your trouble is in the blood, liver, stomach, or kidneys, take Ayer's Sarsaparilla at once, and be sure of a cure. Take no other."

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"Why do some people always notice such little things," he said frowningly, "and instead of attending to themselves, watch how people take hold of cups and saucers, and all that nonsense, and fancy that some wonderful chance hangs on your eating butter with your bread, or preferring cheese?"  
Annette was engaged in placing the men, and did not look in her husband's face as she answered in a gentle, soothing voice:  
"It is rather annoying sometimes, but I find the best way is to treat the whole jestingly. If one shows vexation, it looks serious. But you can ridicule a person out of hanging mountains by threads."  
He was going to answer, when something made him notice her face. The color was still bright there, but the cheeks were hollow, and dark circles had sunk beneath her eyes.  
"Why, you are not looking well," he said, only just aware of the fact. "Are you sick? Did you get worn out taking care of me?"  
She waited an instant till the others, who were leaving the room, should be out of sight, then leaned across the table, careless that her sleeve swept away the two armies who had just placed, and took her husband's hand in hers, and bowed her cheek to it with a sob.  
"O Lawrence! Lawrence!" she whispered.  
He made a motion to draw his hand away, but let it remain. "My God! what is the matter with you?" he exclaimed.  
She leaned back instantly, and made an effort to control herself. "It must be that I am not well. Don't mind me. And now, you will have to place your own men, and give me the first move."  
He placed the men, and appeared to be thinking pitifully of his wife as he glanced now and then into her face. "It seems better of me not to have taken better care of you, Annette," he said.  
"Oh! you needed care yourself," she replied lightly. "Don't imagine that I am sick, though. It is nothing. You didn't marry me to take care of me, you know, and I am not very exacting."  
She would have caught back the last words, if she could, before it was too late. They escaped her unawares, and

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