

GERTRUDE MANNERING
A TALE OF SACRIFICE
BY FRANCES NOBLE

CHAPTER XX.—CONTINUED

"Dear Mr. Graham," she began, feeling that she could not now address him more familiarly, even for the last time, knowing as she did how completely the engagement was broken between them—"my cousin will give you this note this evening, when she tells you I am gone away, quite of myself, without her advice or any one's. You will not be surprised to find it so, knowing what useless pain it would be for both of us to meet again, when all is over, and when you would only have the same to say, and I could not alter a word of what I had to say. But I could not go without saying good-by, without asking you to forgive me if I was abrupt or unkind to all needlessly last night, if I said one word uselessly to hurt you; for I know you are sincere, and that you think you could not grant what I asked without injuring my happiness as well as your own. If you were not, you would not have told me so plainly and honorably the exact truth of what I must expect if I became your wife; when so many others in your place might have brought themselves to think it almost right to evade my questioning, or even have given a promise, careless of how it was meant to be kept. And for this I want to thank you again, with a gratitude which will be life-long; a gratitude which you will hardly understand knowing so little of the priceless treasure of our holy faith. I shall never forget you in my prayers, though we may never meet again on earth; for the thought of your suffering, even if it be mixed with anger against me, is harder infinitely than my own; because I have a dear home and father to return to, and as yet you have none. But that God Himself may console you for my loss, and bring you one day to happiness and contentment even on earth, shall always be the prayer of GERTRUDE MARY MANNERING."

Then taking out the ring from its case, she enclosed it carefully in the letter, and, having sealed up the envelope and addressed it, she went back again to her cousin.

"You will give it to him as soon as you see him, Julia, won't you?"

Lady Hunter took the letter from her gently, and put it carefully in her pocket-book.

"At once, love, of course. Gerty, I may tell Sir Robert, all may I not?"

"Oh, yes! Julia, of course. How could I wish to keep the truth from him, when they were all ready and the carriage waiting, Gerty went to say good-by to the two ladies who were in the house, who had not gone out with the rest; going as bravely as she could through the ordeal of their well-meant expressions of solicitude for her health, and their kind raileries as how quickly Mr. Graham would follow her when he returned and found her gone home unwell.

"Don't you think you might have stayed, Miss Mannering, and let us all help to nurse you, Mr. Graham at the head of us?" asked one of them playfully. "But of course you know best how your father would feel in the matter, about his only daughter too," she added, perhaps with an instinctive feeling that there was more in it all than met the eye, more than they knew as yet, something perhaps in Gerty's own unconscious look aiding the impression.

Feeling painfully that it must all seem somewhat strange to them, Gerty made her adieux, and was soon driving away by her cousin's side—away from Nethercotes, to which only three days since she had come in such joyous hope.

She sat quite still and almost silent, trying to realize that it was all over, her brief dream of happiness—all over, after the many months of waiting and hoping! It had come, only to be rudely shattered; and she was going back to the old life, to be apparently, in all things external, as though Stanley Graham had never existed—of whom she had made a god in her heart all this time.

She tried to rouse herself as they neared the station.

"I will write to you, you know, Julia, tomorrow," she said.

"If you knew, love, how I shall be looking for your letter!" sighed her cousin. "And you shall hear from me in a day or two; you would like to do so, I know, dear."

"Yes, Julia thank you." And Gerty's lips quivered as she thought of what her cousin's letter would contain.

They reached the station, and went to telegraph at once to Mr. Mannering, Gerty dictating the words:

"Do not be alarmed. I am coming home today by the train that gets to Moston at four o'clock, and will explain all. Do not come yourself to meet me. Send Mrs. Leeson if you get this in time."

She felt her father would understand that she had some reason for

wishing to meet him first quietly at home, and that he would not come, as she did not wish it.

As the train came up and Gerty took her seat in the corner of a carriage, Lady Hunter insisted on wrapping her up well in her rug and furs.

"Don't let me have the sin of you getting your death of cold, in addition to the self-reproach now, love," she whispered; and Gerty saw that her tears were falling.

"O Julia! don't say that of yourself—never think it even!" she pleaded, struggling hard to keep her own tears from the sight of her one or two fellow-passengers.

"Well, good-by, my darling girl," Lady Hunter added, in a still lower whisper. "Pray for me, Gerty, if it is not selfish to ask you to think so much of me at a time like this. You do pray for me, I know; but, if you can, pray more than ever for me from today."

Another clasp of the hand and the door was shut, and then directly the train steamed slowly out of the station; Gerty, with her hands tightly clasped under her rug, trying to say her rosary to herself; praying for a renewal of the help from God which was enabling her thus to flee from the temptation which, though conquered, would have been dangerous and alluring still to the hollow heart by its close proximity and persuasive presence.

CHAPTER XXI.

The train arrived duly at Moston, the station nearest to Whitewell Grange; and at once, as Gerty looked out, she saw that the old housekeeper was there to meet her. Jumping out of the carriage quickly, she ran up to her.

"Papa! Papa! she said anxiously, as she shook hands.

"Well, Miss Gerty, perhaps just a little at first; but he soon saw, of course, that if you were very ill you could not be coming home by yourself. And there was so little time to think about it, because the telegram only came in time for me to get here in the carriage. There is nothing the matter at Nethercotes, Miss Gerty, I hope; or you are not ill?" she asked, with the respectful familiarity which was the privilege of her long years of faithful service.

Even under the homely, kindly gaze Gerty's color rose.

"I am not very well," she said; "and so I knew it was best to come home and be quiet with papa for a while, as the house there is so full of visitors, you know. But Lady Hunter and Sir Robert have been very, very kind," she added, not wishing to raise any suspicion of unpleasantness on their part.

Perhaps the shrewd old housekeeper was not wholly devoid of a vague idea in the right direction as to what kind of trouble had driven her young mistress home so suddenly, though she had, of course, never heard even the mention of Stanley Graham's name in her life; but she only said very quietly:

"It was the wisest thing to come home, indeed, miss. To be feeling out of sorts in a strange house full of visitors is enough to bring on a downright illness. But you'll be all right now, quiet at home, won't you, Miss Gerty?"

"I hope so." And Gerty tried to smile her own bright smile, and to assume the old gaiety of manner, to hide her breaking heart. "Don't make me out a regular invalid, though, or else I shall fly back again, and perhaps make myself into one, you know." But even as she spoke her eyes wandered out of the carriage window—out into the familiar road, with its vivid recollections.

Was it only three days since she had seen it before—only three days? And it seemed years—years in experience and suffering, the short, too blissful interval of happiness being but like a delicious dream, but a dream which left with its loss all the pain of reality.

It was quite dark when they reached the Grange, and as Gerty ran up the hall-steps her father was there to meet her.

"Gerty!" was all he said, as he clasped her in his arms, his darling treasure, who had come back to him so strangely.

Again Gerty forced herself to smile before Mrs. Leeson and the one or two servants who were taking in her luggage.

"I'm so afraid I frightened you, papa! But I'm not so very well, so I knew it was best to come home, though my cousin was so sorry to part with me." And the cheery voice quite deceived the servants, if it did not wholly succeed with the anxious, tender father.

He led Gerty into the breakfast-room, where he had been sitting in the firelight, listening for the sound of the carriage-wheels, and looking out at intervals. They were scarcely shut safe in there alone when the courage and firmness which Gerty had kept all day broke down completely, deserted her at last for a time now that her task was accomplished.

"O papa, I shall never want to go away again! I have come back to stay with you always." And with her head on his breast and her arms round his neck, she wept out the pent-up pain in a perfect agony of sobs; wept out the yearning and regret for her lost love, for the ideal she had renounced.

"My darling!" was all her father said, as for the first few minutes he let her weep freely, only

stroking her hair with the old fond caress, the pretty hair, from which she had thrown aside her hat, and which lay tossed and tumbled now against his shoulder.

"Papa," she whispered, as she grew somewhat calmer, "you have been praying for me, I know, you and Father Walmsley, or—or I should not have done it; I should have been too weak. It makes me tremble now to think of—last night, to go over it all again." And as the sobbing words escaped her, Mr. Mannering knew what kind of trouble had come to his little Sunbeam, robbing it for ever of its gay brightness; he knew what manner of story his darling was about to pour into his ears.

"God help me to forgive him!" was his bitter thought, the man, whoever he is, who has stolen my darling's heart, only to break it, to send it back to me like this. Why are my fears realized so soon?"

TO BE CONTINUED

THE LIGHT IN THE WINDOW

Bridget, why does grandpapa put Our Lady's statue in the window at night-time—with a lighted lamp in front of it?"

Old Bridget, who had been with the Grant family ever since Philip's grandpapa was not even as old as Philip himself, smoothed out her apron and looked somewhat dubious.

"Why does he, my dear?" she paused again. "Sure, I'm afraid I ought not to tell ye."

"Oh, do! Please do! It's a secret? I know it's a secret! And so you've got to let me into it!" cried Philip, jumping up and clapping his hands excitedly.

Round the table he pranced, nearly upsetting the flour-barrel and the pasteboard along with it—rolling-pin and all. For Bridget was busy making pastries for tea and Philip loved to watch her at it. But now he had something more interesting to think about and there was nothing for it but to satisfy his curiosity.

"Sure, it's myself that feels guilty for telling ye such a wicked story!" cried the old woman, solemnly wagging her head. "Tis the story of a bad, willful boy."

"Oh, do tell me about him!—What did he do to be wicked? What was his name? Where did he live?"

"Tis of your own grandpapa's son I'm speaking. His little boy that was; God rest his soul! (She crossed herself.) For he's dead and gone long ago, I'm thinking; though master has it that he still lives—and that he'll come back to him one of these fine days! Well, now, I'll tell ye about his, Master Philip—but mind, you're not to breathe a word of it to anyone. Do ye promise? Ye do? Ah! I know I can trust ye. Well, listen now:

"The old master had a little son Danny—which is the short for Daniel. Danny was a handful of mischief from the very start of it; a sore trouble to his parents. There were six children in all; he was the eldest. When he grew to be about thirteen—your age, Master Philip—a terrible thing happened. 'Twas your father's birthday, and your grandmother—God rest her soul!—was making pastries for tea—same as I'm doing now. At tea-time Danny was all eagerness to devour those cakes; he was so fond of them. His mother always allowed two to each person, but on this occasion she somehow overlooked the number; and so it happened that when the pastries were handed round Danny only got one. He flew into a terrible rage, for he was hot-headed—always. Your grandpapa scolded him—said he wouldn't have any pastry at all and sent him to bed. Danny went upstairs, purple in the face with rage. They could hear him shouting and stamping overhead, but took no notice of him. They were used to his freaks and quiet, your grandmother went upstairs to look for him. But would you believe me?—Danny was not in his room, nor anywhere in the house. But on his pillow his mother found a note pinned. On it was scribbled this message in pencil:

"Dear Papa and Mamma.—This is to tell you that I'm leaving home forever. I shall never return.—Your son, Danny."

From that day to this his whereabouts have never been discovered. But on the night of his disappearance your grandpapa put him under Our Lady's protection, begging her to bring back to him his lost boy. Every night he placed her statue in the window, with a lighted lamp in front of it, to remind her to look out for him—to beckon him home. Years have passed; your grandpapa's children have grown up and married. Your parents died when you were quite little, and 'twas your grandpapa—God bless him—that brought ye up and minded ye for the sake of the lad he has never ceased to miss from the old homestead."

"And will Our Lady ever bring him back again?" asked Philip earnestly.

"Ah! that is not for me to say, my dear. But faith! I believe she will. 'Sure, a Mother never forgets her son. And lost Danny is Her boy, for your grandpapa placed him under Her care."

Philip lighted Our Lady's lamp himself that night. He asked his grandpapa to let him—but did not

mention why. He was anxious to do Her a little service and to coax Her to bring Uncle Danny home without fail!

He went to bed thinking over old Bridget's story. He could not get it out of his head. It seemed to haunt him. Bit by bit, the strange history—all the more remarkable because every word was true—kept repeating itself. At last he fell into a doze from which he suddenly awoke, owing to the window being gently opened by somebody outside, and to the fact that he was a very light sleeper.

His bedroom was on the ground floor—the window overlooked the garden. He had never troubled to bolt it at night because he liked to let in the fresh air. Outside he described the outline of a man's figure—standing on the sill, pushing down the sash. He could not see his features very clearly, but noticed that the lower sash was hidden by a long beard, and that he wore a slouch hat.

Philip held his breath to prevent himself screaming, for he felt very frightened. Then he closed his eyes so as to let the man think he was asleep, and breathed a prayer for God's help and protection. He lay very still after that—and listened, wondering what would happen next. He heard the man step into the room and cross it. Then the door-handle clicked slightly and he knew the man had gone. He breathed a sigh of relief.

His wits began to sharpen up now. To rouse his grandpapa was his next idea, so he jumped out of bed and crept upstairs to his room. Finding him asleep he quickly woke him.

"Eh? What's the matter?" cried old Mr. Grant suddenly opening his eyes.

"Sh-sh! Don't make a noise," whispered his grandson. "Get up at once. There's a strange man in the house."

"What?"

"He got in at my window, but I shut my eyes tight and pretended to be asleep. He's downstairs somewhere; maybe in your private room. P'raps he means to rob you."

"My God!" ejaculated the old man.

He rose, threw on a garment or two, bade the lad stay where he was, then hastened down to his sanctum; first taking the precaution to arm himself with a revolver—whence he always kept handy.

Entering as noiselessly as a cat, he suddenly switched on the electric current. Crouching by the safe, where he kept his cash, documents, etc., was a man, shabbily attired, his back to him, who, the instant the light flooded the room sprang to his feet with an oath, turned, faced him, snatched from his pocket a shining object which he pointed at him—then staggered back as if he had seen a ghost, letting the weapon drop weakly out of his hand.

In turn Mr. Grant pointed his revolver, but the man's lively countenance and the queer look he fixed on him filled him with a new indescribable emotion, and he laid the weapon aside.

"Father!"

In a moment the vagrant had flung himself in the old man's arms, weeping like a child.

"Danny!" Danny came back to me!" murmured the veteran in a sort of stupor, as if awakening from a dream. Then the whole truth burst on him and he woke up in a great, grand reality.

"My God! It is Danny!" he said. "Danny's here! Danny's come home! My boy—my son!"

And so, between sobs and caresses and tender, fatherly welcomes, the wanderer found peace at last.

Little by little Danny acquainted him with the history of his doings and wrong-doings—abroad, where he had emigrated when a boy. He had first worked for a well-to-do farmer, then, through associating with bad companions, had fallen into disgrace and received dismissal. His next job was a page-boy to a country surgeon, but he had tired of that, and finally settled down to a small position in a government office, where he had remained for some years. Unfortunately he had again mingled with bad companions, by whose evil influence he yielded to temptation—practising fraud and the like; in short, he had a dishonest life. Twice he had been imprisoned. At last he had returned to his native land, hoping to do better.

"But things don't seem to be on the mend," he protested bitterly. "I can't get employment here, turn where I will! Tonight I thought I'd try the old plan—housebreaking. 'Twas the light in your window that led me here. I was bent on robbing you; but I did not know it was your house. Father, can you ever forgive me?"

"Forgive you, Danny? Most willingly. Shall I tell you what light that was you saw? Years ago, when you ran away from home, I placed you under Our Lady's protection. Each night I put Her statue in the window with a lighted lamp in front of it. I implored Her to lead you home; to let Her lamp be your beacon, your guide to the homestead where the old father awaited you, yearning to forgive. Sonny, She has heard my prayer! You meant to rob me. Ah! She would not have it so. She brought us face to face. You are saved. Now listen. None here need be informed of your past misdoings, nor why you came tonight. Begin all over again, Danny. Be true to God and His Mother. Be honest. I'll set

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