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GRAPES AND THORNS.

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

CHAPTER X.—CONTINUED.

Annette divined the last thought, and replied to it. "It is impossible for a wife to be scrupulous as to the means by which she shall withdraw her husband from danger," she said with quiet coldness.

"You must know far better than I, Annette," her friend said quickly, feeling as though she must have spoken her thought. "At all events, you cannot be called selfish. And, indeed, if the angels of heaven were over-scrupulous with regard to their associations, we should lack their guardianship."

"You here, Honora!" he exclaimed. "What could have induced you?" "We had better not ask each other questions," she replied coldly. "It is late. Will you come home with us?"

"She drew back into a corner, and made room for him, with an air almost of disgust; for the moonlight showed his face flushed with drinking, and, as he spoke, a strong odor of brandy had been wafted into her face."

"Honora has been driving this evening, and is sleepy and chilly," his wife made haste to say in explanation, inwardly resenting her friend's hauteur, and regretting having brought her. "She is going home to stay all night with us. I am sure you did not know how late it is."

She furtively picked up his hat, that had fallen off, went on talking lightly, to cover his silence or prevent his saying anything senseless, and tried in every way to screen him from the scorn that she had exposed him to. He leaned back in the carriage, and took no notice of her. The presence of Honora Pembroke had confounded him, and he had just sense enough left to know that he could not keep too quiet. What had stirred her to interfere in his affairs he could not guess, for Annette had always so screened him that it never occurred to him she could have asked her friend to come. Had he known, it would have fared hard with his wife. He had, however, prudence and temper enough to keep him from making any disagreeable demonstration. John was at hand when they reached home, and, as the ladies went hastily up the steps and into the house, they were not supposed to be aware that it was his arm which enabled Mr. Gerald to go in without falling. Then Mrs. Ferrier stood in the open drawing-room door, and, under cover of her welcome to Honora, he managed to get up stairs unnoticed, fortunately for all.

For the truth between Annette's husband and her mother was over, and their intercourse was assuming a more unpleasant character than ever. Now, it was nearly always Lawrence who was the aggressor. Even when Mrs. Ferrier showed a disposition to conciliate, he found something irritating in her very good nature. Partial as his mother was, she was moved to expostulate with him after witnessing two or three of these scenes.

"You ought to recollect her good intention, Lawrence, and try to overlook her manner," she said. "I know well she does not show very good taste always; but you cannot criticize a woman in her own house."

"I am seldom allowed to forget that it is her house," returned the son rather sulkily. "At least, my dear, do not provoke her into reminding you of that," Mrs. Gerald urged.

Lawrence wished to stand well with his mother, and had, indeed, improved in his behaviour toward her in proportion as he had grown more impatient with Mrs. Ferrier. He seemed now to regret having answered her unpleasantly. "If you knew mother, all the little annoyances I have to bear from her, you wouldn't blame me so much," he said coaxingly. "With other frets, she has a habit of asking any of us who may be going out where we are going, and when we are coming back; and Annette has humored her in that. Teddy always tells her, too; but then he tells lies. That makes no difference, though, to her. Well, I have broken

"There is no use in anticipating evil, Lawrence," she said. "Perhaps that may be the means of bringing it about. Fortune loves a smiling countenance. As to mamma's plans and wishes with regard to John, the best way for us is to assume that it is impossible she should ever regard him as anything but a servant. And, indeed," she concluded with dignity, "I think she never can do otherwise."

But this assumption did not prevent young Mr. Gerald from going privately to F. Chevreuse, and begging him to interfere and try to bring her mother to reason; and perhaps Mrs. Ferrier was never so near being in open revolt against her pastor as when he undertook to show her that there were certain social distinctions which it was her duty to recognize and respect.

"I think, F. Chevreuse," she said stiffly, "that a priest might do better than encourage pride and haughtiness."

"He could scarcely do worse than encourage them," he replied calmly; "and it is precisely against these sins that I would put you on your guard. Persons are never more in danger of falling into them than when they are complaining of the pride of others, and trying to reform what they conceive to be the abuses of society and the world. The only reformer whom I respect, and who is in a thoroughly safe way, is that one who strives to reform and perfect himself. When he is perfect, then he can begin to correct the faults of

others. Moreover, the established customs and distinctions of society have often a good foundation, and are not likely to be set aside. What would you say if your chambermaid should insist on sitting down to dinner with you and driving out with you?"

Mrs. Ferrier found herself unprepared to answer. Indeed, no lady could be more peremptory and exacting than she was with all her servants except John. She was not yet ready to explain that her generalities all had reference to one exceptional case. "But John is not at all a common servant," she ventured to say. "He never lived out but one before, and then it was with a very grand family in England; and he wouldn't come here with us, only that he wanted to look round a while before setting up in business. I had to coax him to come, and give him the very highest wages. And Annette did all she could to persuade him."

"John is an excellent man, I am sure," F. Chevreuse replied. "I hope he will succeed in whatever good work he attempts. But we were speaking of your daughter's husband. My advice is that he return to the office where he was before, and remain there till something better presents itself. It is not of approval of any large and showy enterprise for him. It would not suit him. In that office his salary would be enough to render him quite independent, and leave him a little to lay up."

"Lay up!" repeated Mrs. Ferrier, with an incredulous circumflex. "He will put one-half his income into his wife's hands, and she can do as she will with it," F. Chevreuse replied. "Annette has spoken to me about it, and it is his own proposal. She will put the money in bank every month. What he keeps will be his own affair, and what she takes will be a small fund for the future, and will relieve a little that painful feeling he must have in living here without paying anything. It is decidedly the best that can be done at present. Besides," he added, seeing objection gathering in her face, "it may save you something. The young man is not to blame that he is not rich, and he is quite ready to take his wife home to his own mother, and Annette is quite willing to go, if necessary. They might live there very happily and pleasantly; but as, in that case, Lawrence would be the one on whom all the expense would fall, I presume you would make your daughter an allowance which would place her on an equality with him."

Mrs. Ferrier was forced to consent. Nothing was further from her wish than to be separated from her daughter, not only because she was more than usually solicitous for Annette's happiness, and wished to assure herself constantly that her husband did not neglect her, but because she had an almost insane desire to watch Lawrence in every way. Nothing so piques the curiosity of a meddlesome person as to see any manifestation of a desire to baffle their searching. The annoyance naturally felt and often shown by one who finds himself suspiciously observed is always taken by such persons as a proof that there is something wrong which he is desirous to conceal. Moreover, John had let fall a word of advice which she was not disposed to disregard.

She had been complaining of her son-in-law. "You had better let him pretty much alone, m'am," the man replied. "You'll never drive him to being a sober fellow, nor industrious. Scolding doesn't mend broken china. I have a plan in my mind for them which I will tell you after a while, when the right time comes. He wouldn't thank me for it now; but by and-by, if he doesn't drink himself to death first, he may thank my advice as worth listening to."

John had a quiet, laconic way which sometimes impressed others besides his mistress, and she did not venture to oppose him openly, nor even to insist on hearing what his mysterious plan might be.

It was, altogether, a miserable state of affairs, one of those situations almost more unbearable than circumstances of affliction, for the cares were mean, the annoyances and mortifications petty; and the mind which is ennobled by great trials, was cramped and lowered by the constant presence of small troubles which it would find disregard, but could not. For, after all, these small troubles were the signs of a great one threatening. It was plain that Lawrence Gerald, if not stopped, was going to kill himself with drinking. His frame was too delicately organized to bear the alternate fierce heats and wretched depressions to which he was subjected, and more than one sharp attack of illness had given warning that he was exhausting his vitality.

F. Chevreuse came upon him suddenly one day when he was suffering from one of these attacks. The priest had called at Mrs. Ferrier's, and, learning that Lawrence was in his room, too unwell to go out, went upstairs to him somewhat against Annette's wish.

"I will take the responsibility," he said laughingly. "The boy wants me to wake him up; you women are too gentle. You are petting him to death. No, my lady, I do not want your company. I can find my own way."

And accordingly Lawrence opened with pure, vigorous blood coursing through the veins and animating every fibre of the body, cold weather is not only endurable but pleasant and agreeable. No other blood medicine is so certain in its results as Ayer's Sarsaparilla. What it does for others it will do for you.

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his eyes a few minutes later to see F. Chevreuse standing by the sofa where he lay in all the misery of a complete physical and mental prostration. The priest drew a chair close to him, taking no notice of the evident disinclination of the young man to his society. "Now, my boy," he said, laying a hand on the invalid's shrinking arm, "are you desiring yourself up again? What has come over you? Come! come! Wake up, and be a man. You are too good to throw away in this fashion."

The young man turned his face away with a faint moan of utter discouragement. "I am not worth bothering about. I've played my stake in life, and lost, and what is left is good for nothing. Besides, if I tried, I shouldn't succeed. Why do you trouble yourself about me? I tell you that what there is left of me isn't worth saving."

He spoke with bitter impatience, and made a gesture as if he would have sent his visitor away. F. Chevreuse was not so easily to be dismissed. "The devil thinks differently," he remarked, without stirring. "He is fighting hard for you. Rouse yourself, and join with those who are fighting against him! You have an idea in your mind, because you have made mistakes and committed sins, you must lay down your arms. Nonsense! There are all the lives of the saints against you. Some of them never began to try till they found themselves on the brink of destruction. You fancy, too, that because you and your family have had misfortunes, and because you have not been very successful in trying to become a rich man, you must stand humbly aside for cleverer men, and ask no favors. You're all wrong. God made you, and put you into the world, just as He has the rest of us, and you have a right to the light and air, and to repair your mistakes and repent of your sins, without troubling yourself too much about what people say and think, and to do the best you can in worldly affairs without being humbled or ashamed if you can't fill your pocket with money as readily as some can. Let the money go, but don't let your manliness go, and don't throw away your soul. You are talking nonsense when you say that you are worthless. Respect yourself, and compel others to respect you, Lawrence. Nerve yourself, call up your good resolutions, and ask God to help you. Despair is a crime!"

The young man put his arm up, and covered his face with it, as though he had an emotion he was ashamed of; or, perhaps, because the light hurt his eyes. "If I could forget everything, I don't know but I could begin again and try to do better," he said faintly. "But there is no life in me now for anything."

F. Chevreuse rose immediately. "Rest, then, if that is what you need," he said kindly. "Rest, and forget everything painful. If any tormenting thought comes, say a little prayer, and tell it to be gone. Don't drink any liquor to quiet your mind. Let Annette get you some gentle sedative. I'll tell her to keep everything away from you, and let you lie here six months, if you want to. But when you are better, come to see me."

He was standing ready to go but waited for an answer. There was none. He spoke more earnestly. "You know well it is for the best, Lawrence; and I want you to promise to come to me when you are able to go out, before you go to see any one else."

"Well, I will. I promise you."

But the promise was given, apparently, only to get rid of the subject, and F. Chevreuse went away feeling that he had accomplished nothing.

Annette went directly to her husband, somewhat timid as to the reception she might meet with; but if he was displeased at having had a visitor, he did not seem to hold her responsible. He took the glass containing the opiate from her hand, and set it down beside him. "After a while," he said, "and now I am going to lock every one out of the room, and try to go to sleep. If I want anything, I will ring."

She began to make some little arrangements for his comfort, but, perceiving that they irritated him, desisted, and left him to himself. As she went along the passage, she heard the lock click behind her. Oddly enough, this little rudeness gave her a feeling of pleasure, for it showed that he felt at home there, and claimed a right to all that was hers.

"If only he will sleep!" she thought. He did not sleep. His first act was to throw away the opiate she had brought. "Some such dose as they give to teething babies, I suppose," he muttered. Then he seated himself on the sofa, and clasping his hands over his head, as if to still the burning pain there remained buried in thought. One could see that he was trying to study out some problem in his mind, but that difficulties presented themselves. More than once his eyes wandered to a little writing-desk opposite him, and fixed themselves there. "It would remove the only obstacle," he said; "and yet how can I? That would be going over it all again. Now I am not to blame, but only unfortunate; but if I do that..."

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It was pitiable to see a young face so distorted by pain of mind and body, and to see also that the pain was stinging him into still more angry revolt. He began pacing up and down the room, and, in his doubt and distress, seized upon one of those strange modes of solving the question in his mind which, trivial as they are, most persons have at some time in their lives had recourse to.

"If there is an odd number of squares in the carpet from corner to corner of the room, I will do it," he said, and began to count them. The number was odd. But, apparently, he wished to make assurance doubly sure, for he next counted the stucco ornaments on the ceiling. "Odd again! Now for the third trial." He glanced about in search of the object which was to decide his fate, and spied a large patriarchal fly that had crawled out of its winter hiding-place, and was clumsily trying its wings.

"If he can fly over that cord, I will go," he said; and since this was the last trial, and the poor insect seemed to him something like himself at that moment, he watched with breathless interest its efforts to surmount the great obstacle of the curtain-cord that lay in its path. The little creature attempted to crawl over, but, losing its balance tumbled off and lay helplessly on its back. The young man set it carefully and tenderly on its feet once more. "Now do your best," he said. "You and I have made a failure, but we will try once again."

Inspired, it would seem, by this encouragement, the fly put out its wings, gathered all its energies, and flew over the cord, tumbling ignominiously on its back again at the other side.

Lawrence Gerald did not give himself the trouble to assist again his fallen friend, but went promptly to pull the bell-tassel. He had thrown off all responsibility, and choosing to see in these trivial chances the will and guidance of some intelligence wiser than his own, resolved instantly on following where they pointed.

"I dare say I shall stumble like that clumsy fly, but I shall succeed in the end. At all events, I will try. I can't and won't stay here any longer. It is torment for me, and I don't do any one else any good." He seemed to be arguing with some invisible companion. They will be better without me. Besides, it was not I who decided. I left it to chance. If it was...

His wife entering interrupted the soliloquy. She found him lying down, as she had left him, but with a color in his face that would have looked like returning health, if it had not been a little too deep.

He stretched his hand out, and drew her to the footstool by his side. "Now, Ninon," he said coaxingly, "I want you to be a good girl, and arrange something for me so that I shall not be annoyed by questions nor opposition. It's nothing but a whim; but no matter for that. I want to go to New York for a day or two, by myself, you know, and I must start to-night. I'm not going to do any harm, I promise you. I feel a good deal better, and I believe the little journey will cure me. The train starts at 8 o'clock, and it is now 5. It won't take me half an hour to get ready. (Will you manage it for me, and keep the others off my shoulders?)"

She consented promptly and quietly asking no questions. If he should choose to tell her anything, it was well; if not, it was the same. She knew the meaning of this coaxing tenderness too well to presume upon it. It meant simply that she could be useful to him.

"What is he going to New York for?" demanded Mrs. Ferrier, when Annette made the announcement downstairs. "Mamma, you must not expect me to tell all my husband's business," the young woman answered rather loftily. "Poor Annette did not wish to acknowledge that she knew no more of her husband's affairs or motives than her mother did."

"Then he will want his dinner earlier?" was the next question. Mrs. Ferrier having, by an effort, restrained her inclination to make any further complaints. "No; all he wanted was luncheon, and his wife had ordered that to be carried up stairs."

"I suppose I am not allowed to ask how long he will be gone?" remarked the mother. "Oh! I certainly, mamma; but that is not quite settled. Annette said pleasantly. 'It depends on circumstances. A few days, probably, will be the most.'"

When Annette went up-stairs again, her husband was dressed for his journey. A valise, locked and strapped, lay on the sofa at his elbow, and his wrappings were strewn about. She observed that the oak writing-desk, that had not been opened for months, to her knowledge, had been opened now. The key was in the lock, and the lid was slightly raised. She noticed, too, that a little inner cover had been torn out, and lay on the carpet broken in two.

"The carriage will be round in a few minutes," she said. "I thought you would want plenty of time to buy your ticket and get a good seat."

He merely nodded in reply, but looked at her wistfully, as if touched by her ready compliance with his wishes, and was earnestly trying to recall the name of the man who had cured him of his ailment.

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