

GRANTLEY MANOR.

A TALE

BY

LADY GEORGINA FULLERTON,

Author of "Lady Bird," "Ellen Middleton," &c

CHAPTER VI. (Continued.)

These words did what they were intended to do. Different as they were, there existed the strongest attachment between these two men. Walter, especially, loved Leslie with all his soul. He was his oldest and dearest friend. When he had been discouraged and disappointed in early life, he had shown him an affectionate kindness which had never been forgotten. When Leslie married the woman he himself loved best in the world, no jealous or resentful feeling found place in his heart—and he could not hate him, he only loved him better than ever, for her sake now as well as for his own. Mary's husband, the object of Mary's affection, became to him even dearer than the friend of his youth had been; the last words she ever said to him were, "Dear Walter, always love Henry," and now when Henry, after a long absence and some estrangement, for the first time gave him a glimpse into his feelings, and that glimpse revealed much secret suffering, the affection and the memories of past years revived, and Old Walter was persuaded to remain at Grantley, and yielded a gruff assent to Leslie's last "You will stay then?" just as twenty years before he was taken out fishing or hunting against his will, and dragged from his beloved books or Mary Thornton's pianoforte by the same half-imperious and half-affectionate compulsion.

On the evening of that day Margaret was sitting at the round table, near the fire, busily engaged in copying one of Flaxman's etchings of Shakespeare. It was the one in which Ophelia distributes flowers to the wondering and pitying courtiers; and she was deeply occupied, either with her drawing or with her thoughts, for, contrary to her usual habits, she had been silent for nearly an hour. Mrs. Sydney and Mrs. Dalton were playing at piquet, Mrs. Thornton was knitting in the armchair between the table and the fire, and the two Mr. Sydneys and Edmund Neville were reading the newspapers. At last Walter put his down, and she said to him in a low voice—

"So, I find you stay, after all?"

He nodded assent.

"That convinces me of what I would not at first believe."

"What is that?"

"That you love my father better than me. Nothing would make you stay when I begged you; and now, after that endless conversation in the library, it is all settled!"

"Are you sorry for it?"

"O no; my dignity never interferes with my pleasure! It plays second fiddle to it on every occasion. Are you shocked?"

"That depends on what you call dignity. I have a dislike to that whole set of words—'Self-respect!' 'Dignity!' 'Proper pride!' They are either the wrong names for Duty and Conscience, or they disguise, under specious terms, the very tempers against which Christians should struggle. But I do not approve of self-gratification playing the first fiddle, as you express it, on every occasion."

"Oh, you are so hard on that poor persecuted self of ours. Your own comes worst off, like a schoolmaster's son that gets flogged oftener than the other boys, that his father may not be accused of partiality; but that is no comfort to other people's selves."

"I thought you particularly admired self-denial, Margaret?"

"When I read of it, beyond expression. Do you remember me crying one day, when I was a little girl, because I could not be a martyr, and my asking you, very earnestly, if there was no hope of a persecution in our days?"

"No, I don't."

"Don't you recollect it? and your advising me to drop some hot sealing-wax on my hand, and see if I could bear it without flinching, before I prayed that the days of persecution might return?"

"That was cruel, I think."

"No; it was a practical lesson which I have never forgotten; it was at that time, too, that I gave Mr. Dempson the print of St. Lucy, which I wished him to hang opposite to that dreadful black leather chair of his."

"Did he?"

"No; he did not think it would keep up the spirits of his patients, he said, and it would make them think him an executioner. But I always took my print with me when I went to that horrid room; and when I had lost one tooth, I did so admire St. Lucy for losing all hers. How do you like my drawing, Walter?"

"It is very pretty, but not the least like the original."

"I did not intend it to be. Do you know what engrossed me so much just now? I was trying to represent in this drawing the image I form in my own mind of my sister's appearance."

Edmund Neville looked up from his book, drew the paper on which Margaret had been employed towards him, and examined it attentively. She was still talking in an eager tone to Walter—

"Now, of six people who may be thinking at the same moment of Ginevra, I suppose that no two among us have the same idea about her—the same form before our eyes when we name her. I wonder if our fancies are at all alike—yours and mine, for instance! I wish we could all draw."

"With eyes as black as any coal. With cheeks as yellow as an orange; With Leslie's nose, and Leslie's soul, Just modelled into something strange—Which English eyes will scarce approve, And English hearts will never love."

Mrs. Thornton seized the paper, and read aloud this effusion with much emphasis, and a particular pause at the word never, much like what street-singers make in the last line of "Rule Britannia," when they assert that "Britons never will be slaves."

Her conscience smote her, however, at this unqualified denunciation of eternal dislike to poor Ginevra; and she added, with a glance at her husband and at Walter, who had coughed and fidgeted since the lecture of his father's verses, "Indeed, we never can love her with a natural love; but we will try to love

her—even as a hen can love the duck she has hatched."

As Mrs. Thornton had in no sense, literal or figurative, hatched the young Miss Leslie, the comparison did not seem much to the point, but it satisfied her own sense of duty; that was enough for the moment. Margaret, however, seemed annoyed, and she bent her head over the portfolio with a heightened color. When she raised her eyes, she met those of Edmund Neville. With a sudden embarrassment, she took up her pencil again without speaking. He said, across the table—

"You were about to say something. What do you think of Mr. Sydney's sketch?"

"That I am sure it is as unlike my sister, as the concluding sentiment is unlike what I feel about her."

As she said these words, she held out her hand for her drawing, which he had retained a few minutes.

"You have done something to it?" she exclaimed, hastily. "It is quite altered; but much improved."

"Nonsense," cried Edmund. "What odd fancies you have. I will draw the original of Mr. Sydney's picture; and he sketched in ink a masculine, foreign-looking woman, with so striking a likeness to Colonel Leslie, and even a slight one to Margaret herself, that all those round the table were in fits of laughter; and the attention was directed from Margaret's drawing, which she put up in her portfolio a few minutes afterwards. Since the eventful day in which a new page of life had opened to Margaret, she had felt the strongest conviction that Edmund Neville was in love with her. This persuasion gained fresh strength every hour, although he had never again opened his lips on the subject; but he watched her constantly; he appeared anxious on every subject to hear and to understand her opinions; he seemed desirous of speaking to her alone, but when the opportunity presented itself, he either abruptly withdrew, after a few insignificant remarks, or he became abstracted in thought. Margaret struggled against the increasing interest she felt in him, and, in compliance with Walter's request, she tried to pause, to watch him, and examine herself; but these efforts only served to prove to her how engrossing was that interest—how strong were those feelings. The more she watched him, the more she was convinced that he liked her; but at the same time that it was impossible for her to doubt this, she sometimes felt chilled and disappointed at the mixture of coldness and hardness which accompanied the lively interest he so evidently took in her. When she sang, he seldom left the pianoforte, but it was with his head buried in his hands that he listened; and sometimes, after asking her for some particular song, he would suddenly walk away before it was finished. No day passed in which her heart did not at one moment swell with the consciousness of being loved, and beat with the hurried pulsation of joy at what seemed some unequivocal proof of affection, and in the next, sink with that faint sickening feeling of disappointment which a few careless words occasion when they convey the impression that the speaker's future fate and projects are in no way connected in his mind with our own. To Margaret, whose nature it was to reveal each passing thought, if not in words, at least by the expression of her eyes, or the tones of her voice, the restraint was almost intolerable; and when she had seen, or felt throughout the day, that Edmund had gazed on her for hours together—that if she spoke, he would, in listening to her, seem unconscious of the presence of others—and that a phrase, which he had begun in a tone of levity, would end with a sudden expression of feeling that seemed to promise a renewal of that explanation which she had once so rashly checked, and yet when no approach to such a better understanding was really made, and he would announce some plan, or make some remark, utterly inconsistent with the vision which she had fondly conjured up—her manner involuntarily grew impatient and irritable, and assumed a character which was not natural to her; or, perhaps, to speak more truly, betrayed faults of character which were scarcely perceptible as long as the current of her life glided on without a ripple to disturb its smooth surface."

One day, when this had been the case, and that she had answered with petulance some trifling question that had been addressed to her, and left the room with a cloud on her brow, and the lines round her mouth curved into that shape which occasionally spoiled the perfect beauty of her face, Edmund turned to Walter, and asked him in a careless tone if Miss Leslie was ill-tempered. Walter turned a deaf ear to the question and went on cutting a pencil at the wrong end. He would rather have died at that moment than acknowledged that Margaret was not an angel; but as angels do not frown and slam doors after them, he felt reduced to silence; but in a few seconds he said, in a calm voice—

"She has not been taught by sorrow the severe lesson of self-control. She must learn it some day, but woe to those through whom she learns it, if they deal not truly and gently with her."

"I should imagine," replied Edmund, "that your little favorite was more likely to sin against others, than to be sinning against herself."

Walter raised his eyes doubtfully, and looked at Edmund as if he would have ascertained the exact meaning of those last words. He continued in the same tone—

"I should fancy that her sister will have rather a difficult part to play here. Have you any idea what sort of person she is?"

"No," was the concise answer. There was another pause, and then Edmund laid his hand upon Walter's shoulder, and said in a low voice—

"I have a great mind to tell you what brings me here, and what keeps me here. You are the person, of all others, who will give me the best advice, and I know I can entirely trust you."

Walter face underwent a sudden change, and he answered with an impetuosity which seemed to take Neville by surprise.

(To be Continued.)

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