

GERTRUDE MANNERING

A TALE OF SACRIFICE BY FRANCES NOBLE

CHAPTER XVIII.—CONTINUED

"If he would not have me risk my soul, Stanley, if he would not have me offend God, he would, he must bid me do so if necessary. But his whole life would be a prayer for me afterwards. Stanley, that I might have strength never to shrink from the cross laid upon me; that I might embrace it for the sake of Him who died for us all, why bade us take up the cross daily and follow Him."

And the sweet, tearful eyes looked out with a far-off gaze, as though seeing—dimly as yet, perhaps—the heavenly consolation which awaited the throbbing heart that each moment felt the earthly joy departing from its grasp.

Stanley unfolded his arms, and took the clasped hands into his own so firmly that they could not resist. "O Gertrude! do not drive me mad. Do not make me wish I had been base and dishonorable, and had promised what I never meant to perform, and then by gentle influence won you entirely to my wishes, as I know I could if you were only my wife, Gertrude. O my darling! if you knew the love and happiness which should surround you, shielding you from the very breath of heaven if it blew upon you too roughly; how I would cherish you as never wife was before; how I would be your slave, Gertrude, in all else, if in this one thing you would yield to me!"

She looked up for a moment at the pale, proud face in its beauty, contracted and convulsed now with its terrible entreaty, and then struggled vainly in his grasp.

"O Stanley! do not tempt me," she cried out in her agony. "I am only a weak girl; do not tempt me like that. You do not know what it is to see God on one side and earthly love and joy on the other, and to have to choose between; to know, as I do, without a doubt, that if I choose that last I shall lose God and my own soul. Ask me to give up everything else, ask me even to go to the world's end with you, and I never see my father again, and I would do it, if you would ask me such a thing, Stanley; but not to give up my religion, to lose God for you. Ask me anything but that Stanley."

"And that is the one only thing I do ask you, not to persist in your mad superstition, and you refuse me. Gertrude, you do not love me; I have been mistaken. I am not the man you love, and you turn away with a bitter compression of the haughty lips.

Oh! how hard he was, how stern. It was too much now for the half-breaking heart, but she did not reproach him; she did not tell him that, having no faith himself, caring for none, he could not love her truly if he refused to allow her to practise hers, which he must see was dearer than life to her; she only turned to him with a sob, almost a wail.

"O Stanley! don't say that—that I do not love you, when my heart is breaking because, if you persist, I may not become your wife, because my dream of joy has been so short. Don't I love you now more than ever, when you have been so honorable and true, scorning to do as many might have done, won me by false promises, justifying the falsehood for the sake of the end in view? Whatever comes, never say that, Stanley—that I did not love you."

The first tear he had shed since his mother's death fell from Stanley's eye, but he would not yield; the terrible demon of jealousy and pride held him still, strong as ever, even as he took the girlish form in his arms for a last appeal.

"Prove it then, my darling; yield to me and become my wife, and do not drive me to despair. Yield to me, and I will defy the devil for your sake, shield you from every reproach. Even your father, dear as he is, shall be as nothing beside the love with which your husband shall surround you, Gertrude."

But she tore herself from his arms and stood before him with clasped hands, deadly pale now and very calm.

"Is this all you have to say, Stanley? Tell me plainly, for the last time, if you refuse what I ask; tell me quickly, I entreat you, Stanley."

Once more the cold, stern look rose to his face as he gazed down at the quiet, resolute little figure, and slowly and bitterly answered: "I cannot deceive you, you whom I loved so dearly. As my wife, I repeat plainly, as you ask, you should never with my knowledge, practise your religion as a Catholic. I had hoped it would not come to this—that you might not have spoken of it at all, and so saved me telling you the truth; or that, when named between us, you would trust me to make you see it all one day as I do, and to make you entirely happy, as even yet, if you yield, I know I could do."

Then he paused, and Gertrude spoke with a firm voice, but looking out before her, not at him, as the room seemed to reel and go round about her.

"Then, Stanley, I must bid you farewell; I can never be your wife!"

And turning quickly, she left the

room—left him there looking after her, with his arms still folded.

CHAPTER XIX.

Quickly but noiselessly Gertrude went up-stairs at once to her bedroom, and having locked the door, fearing to be disturbed, even by her cousin, unawares, threw herself just as she was, in her pretty evening dress, face downwards on the bed. For a few minutes she seemed to feel nothing but the stony rigidity into which she had forced herself while she had spoken those final words to Stanley; but then, at she seemed slowly to realize all that she had done, to face the full meaning of the change that had suddenly come in her life.

Then there began for her such a struggle as God grant may not often have to take place in any heart, least of all in the tender, sensitive heart of a young girl like Gertrude Mannering!

"It is to much," whispered the tempter, "too much for human nature—for a young girl to bear! You cannot give him up. Marry him, become his wife; he has promised to be content with the Catholic ceremony, and trust to his love afterwards to grant what you ask. He could not see her sad and conscience-stricken without relenting, perhaps even himself in the end being won to her religion."

And the vision of the life he had promised her—the powerful, sheltering love which would have encircled her upon his breast, shielding her from all pain and reproach if she would but have yielded—rose before Gertrude, making her writhe even bodily under the torture.

She thought of the stern, beautiful face as she had last seen it just now looking down at her, as she had rejected that mighty love, and tore herself from that tender, strong embrace.

"Let him make you his wife," repeated the evil spirit; "tell him you relent—there is yet time—and trust to the rest."

But with one terrible wrench, as it were, she turned from the tempter.

"O my God! help me. Can I commit a deadly sin now by yielding—by promising to do as he asks, in the hope of good coming of it after, in the hope which would prove false, perhaps, to punish me?"

And as she drove away the vision of the love she had, with God's help, renounced, as she shut her eyes to the image of that one face, and closed her ears to the echo still ringing in them of those terrible yearning entreaties, other visions came to soothe that distracted heart in its hour of temptation, the "temptation" against which she had prayed so simply and earnestly, in her sweet ignorance of its strength and meaning, as she knelt before the convent altar on that day of leaving school, little more than a year ago. The temptation had come now, stronger and more terrible than she could then have realized or dreamed of; but that prayer stood her in good need in this bitter hour, the simple prayer which she had poured out, then before Jesus in His sacramental presence. And the prayers she had offered up to often since, more earnest still, lately, because of the terrible need which had come to her for them; those, too, which had been breathed for her so fervently by those to whom she was so dear—were they not answered now? But for them, if they had been neglected, would the powerful grace have been given to her at once to renounce so resolutely and unflinchingly, young, tender girl though she was, the great love without which life would be so dreary and desolate? Without a doubt they were answered now, with all the sweet, compassionate grace of Jesus' Sacred Heart, whose love that poor child seemed to feel consoling her already for her sacrifice, as—the evil tempter driven away—she turned to the kindly vision of her father welcoming her back with outstretched arms, welcoming her, dearer and more precious than ever, to the old home so nearly forsaken, to the old peaceful life by his side, sheltered by his unselfish, unexact affection. There need be no secrets from him now—never again! Safe in his arms, she would weep out the story, sad and yet joyful too, of the past few months, with their care and pain—the story of her love and its ending, of her brief, delicious dream of earthly happiness. And Father Walmaley too, that kind, holy friend of so many happy years, she would never need to avoid and shrink from him again; he might know all now: how, when he had asked for her confidence, she had been unable to tell him of the idolatry she was cherishing in her heart for a haughty unbeliever while yet her love was not openly asked for; how she had not dared to speak of it because of that hidden fear concerning it which she scarce dared consciously avow even to herself.

Gradually the trembling heart grew calmer, the aching temples throbed less painfully, and Gertrude uncovered her face and rose from the bed, throwing herself on her knees by its side in an abandonment of thanksgiving and prayer for continued help and strength in the future.

"O my Jesus! I thank thee," she murmured repeatedly. "Mary, sweet Mother! help me to thank him sufficiently now and through

life. O God! if I had let myself be conquered; if I had yielded to Stanley's love and entreaties, and promised to do his will; if he had carried it out, as he would have done, however gently, and I had come to die, soon perhaps, within a year, as others have done!" And she shuddered even while she continued her prayer of thanksgiving.

She knelt so long that, when roused at last with a start by some coals falling heavily from the grate, she rose to find herself almost numb, trembling with cold, which she had not seemed to feel before. She threw a warm shawl about her and made up the fire, which had fallen low since she had come up to the room, and was just sitting close over it, when a knock at the door startled her again. She lowered the gas, so that her face might not be distinctly seen, and then opened the door, to find Lady Hunter's maid outside.

THE MISSING HEIRLOOM

The soft summer breeze on this Sunday afternoon was fragrant with the odor of pine and fir as Anna O'Kelly walked down in the path thickly carpeted with needles, across which the sunlight flickered and danced, to the small wooden chapel in the clearing. Her niece Eileen, a restless little sprite, accompanied her, and here Anna O'Kelly had come to spend the summer with her brother and his family at their summer cottage.

The chapel was but a temporary affair for the convenience of the Catholic visitors at the summer resorts near by. Many visited this town of Granby, on the Maine coast, and here Anna O'Kelly had come to spend the summer with her brother and his family at their summer cottage.

She was pleased to find she could enter and say a few prayers, as it was closed during the week, and sometimes immediately after Mass on Sunday. Today Father Burns had not returned at once to his own town, ten miles distant, and the chapel would be open until he was ready to return. The place was cool and quiet, and so soothing after a week of fun and excitement that she felt inclined to spend the afternoon there in prayer.

She finished her Rosary and began on some special prayers for favors received, when Eileen began to get restless. She gave the child her Rosary beads to keep her quiet; but after a while the child tired of these and began walking up and down, going into the different pews and picking up the prayer-books which had been left in the benches.

A few moments later she wandered outside and spent the remainder of the time running in and out until her young aunt was ready to return home.

Anna was just closing the door when she missed her Rosary beads and then remembered that she had given them to the child.

"Eileen, darling, where are auntie's beads?" she said.

Eileen ran back into the chapel and returned with the beads, but as Anna took them in her hands she felt a thrill of alarm for the small silver cross was gone.

"Eileen," she cried, "what did you do with auntie's cross?"

Eileen was frightened and began to cry. "Didn't do nuffin' with it."

Anna saw that if she was to get any information she must keep calm; so taking her small niece by the hand she led her into the church.

"Now, dear, show Aunt Anna where you put the cross," she said gently.

Eileen went straight to one of the pews.

"It commed off and I put it in this book."

There were several prayer-books about and Anna examined them all, but no cross appeared. She searched up and down, inside and outside of the chapel, but her labor was fruitless. Then she knelt in one of the pews and prayed, with a sob in her throat that she would find the cross.

It was near supper-time when she at last gave up the search and started wearily for home. The scene of the pines, the flickering shadows across her path and the roar of the sea in the distance were lost upon her, for her heart was heavy with the shadow of her loss.

Granny O'Kelly had given her the cross.

"It's an Irish cross, given me by the O'Kelly himself," the white-haired old lady had said proudly as she placed it in her granddaughter's hands a few hours before the Angel of Death had summoned her, "and when I'm gone, child, it's to be yours. It's blessed for a happy death and it has brought me many a blessing. I give it to you with my blessing and the blessing of those before me."

father, but one by one they came to the conclusion that she had dropped it somewhere, perhaps among the pine needles and really did not know where she had lost it.

"Keep up your courage, Anna; we'll hear of it before the summer is over," John O'Kelly cheerfully assured her.

At the post office, on trees by the path leading to the chapel, in the hotel office, at the boat landing—anywhere that there was a good chance of being seen—he posted notices offering a reward to the finder for its return. But the summer passed and it was not found.

Day after day Anna knelt and offered a prayer to St. Anthony, begging his intercession for the finding of her beloved cross. Sometimes the tears came unbidden as she thought of the little old lady who had given it to her. "Poor Granny, to think I had it so short a time, and she brought it over the sea and had it for years!"

"The blessing of the O'Kellys is on it," Granny had often said, and she had lost it, but all her prayers and all her sorrowful longings brought no results.

"St. Anthony will surely help," said Anna, hopeful to the last, and up to an hour before train-time on the day they were to leave she searched.

"Well, I guess St. Anthony went back on you this time," her brother said, teasingly when they were finally on their homeward way, but Anna spoke up spiritedly:

"There's time enough yet. It may be found before the last of the summer visitors leave."

But it was not discovered, although Anna made a novena to the good saint. She said little to the folks about it, dreading her brother's teasing, but never a day passed that she did not offer a prayer for the return of her cross. Often times she stepped into her own parish church and prayed, and lighted a candle; never a day but she watched the mail for some news.

The winter passed and another summer came, and they returned to Maine to find that a fire had swept the woods on the outskirts of Granby. The chapel was gone and the summer visitors were donating money for a permanent church in the centre of Granby—more convenient for all concerned.

All hope for the recovery of the cross was apparently gone, and though she often searched there was less chance of finding it now, as a new growth had started up on the fire-swept area.

On her return home after the summer she made up her mind that the cross was gone for all time.

"St. Anthony did not obtain my wish," she said, "but there was probably some good reason for it and I shall not think any more about it."

With this logic she resolutely put her loss from her mind; but just as if God had been trying her faith and courage, so came the answer to her prayer, and Eileen, who had been the one to cause the loss, was also the chief factor in its return.

Anna had taken Eileen to visit some friends in the suburbs of Boston, and they were obliged to cross the city on the elevated cars on their return.

They were on a South Station train and seated opposite them was a group of young men, some with dress suits and bags, some with instruments. Apparently they were surveyors—their tanned faces helping in the surmise.

After the first glance Anna paid no attention to them, having an interesting story to read; but Eileen seemed fascinated by the instruments and studied them with a child's unbiased curiosity. Suddenly Anna felt a tugging at her sleeve, and Eileen spoke excitedly:

"Aunty, Aunty, he's got your cross."

Anna gave a glance of startled dismay; and sure enough, fastened to the fob hanging from his pocket was a silver cross! Surely there was no other just like hers, and right in the centre, just as in hers, was an emerald.

The young man was as surprised at the child's outburst as was Anna herself. He blushed red through his tan at her niece's accusing finger.

Anna recovered herself.

"Sit down, Eileen; you mustn't act like that," she said sternly; but the child's eyes were blazing; she remembered the long search and how she had been continually questioned.

"It's yours, aunty! It's yours!" she persisted, alive with excitement.

The young man became embarrassed. Several of his party were watching him quizzically. An older man, apparently the engineer in charge, spoke to him glancing at Anna, who had returned to her story, unmindful of the fact that she was reading a page of advertisements upside down.

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