

GRANTLEY MANOR

A TALE

LADY GEORGINA FULLERTON, author of "Lady Bird," "Ellen Middleton," &c

CHAPTER XVII.—Continued.

"Is the gentleman a Catholic?" the priest inquired. Martha thought not; but could not tell for sure. "Did he know that she had sent for a priest?" he asked again.

The holy rites had been performed. To him who had received her first confession, Ginevra had made her last, and never had the pardoning words descended into her heart with a more sacred power than in that hour when life was receding and eternity approaching.

"Father, I am about to die. I feel it. I know it. And never have I thanked God for an earthly blessing as I thank him for this. But one prayer I have to make to you; and if you love me, as I know you love me," she added, as the old man's tears flowed down his withered cheeks, "I will hear it—you will grant it. I am married! Father, I am married! And Edmund Neville is my husband! I have seen him here, at the foot of my bed, at my side. His arm has been round me. I have felt his kisses on my cheek, and his tears on my brow. He will return—he will come again to the side of this bed once; I know not when—this night, or to-morrow, or later still; but I know he will come to look on what he once loved,—to ask the cold lips to pardon him, the dead to forgive him,—and there will be none to say, 'She blessed you—she prayed for you—she loved you to the last.' Father! you must be there when he comes. You must bless him. Will you, Father? Do not turn away—"

"I will pray for him, my child," answered the priest in a broken voice. "Oh! but you must bless him, Father! You must promise to bless him, or I cannot die in peace! Tell him I never loved any one but him. He thought I disobeyed him once—I never did. Tell him so, and ask him to keep this." She drew from her finger the little ring her tears had so often washed. "It has been near my heart ever since we married. I have never told anybody but you that we were married. I do not know why I am here. I think I went out of my mind, and was brought to this place. Comfort my father and my sister. Tell them how I loved them, but do not tell them I was married—unless you ought and confuted I—but if they love me, let them be kind to Edmund. Let me speak to you Father; do not bid me rest. I shall rest soon, but now hear me. By your prayers—by your tears—by the memory of her he once fondly loved—by all the sufferings I have endured—by the deep, deep faith with which I die—win him to penitence, to hope, to truth. Deal gently with him; and if the day should come when he sees the truth as I see it, as we see it, dear Father—tell him that in this my dying hour I foresaw it, and was glad."

Two hours later, when Father Francesco, who had hurried for a few minutes to his own home, was entering the front room, he found a lady in deep mourning established there, whose countenance and attitude betokened an extreme interest and anxiety. She rose at his approach, and glancing at his dress, said, in a manner at once quiet and respectful—

"May I ask, sir, if you are the priest who has been attending on—on my brother's wife?" He looked steadily and keenly at her, and in a tone which thrilled through Mrs. Neville's heart as if she had been herself the guilty person inquired after, responded—

"I am, madam. Where is your brother?" "There," she said, pointing to the next room; and unable to restrain her tears—"there, watching in despair over her unconscious form—an hour sooner, and he might have received her forgiveness." "She has forgiven him," he answered gently. "The last words she uttered were to invoke a blessing on his head."

"Thank God for that! Thank God for it!" Mrs. Neville ejaculated in a hurried manner. "If any one could tell him! I dare not go near them"—she trembled as she spoke—"there is something awful in such grief as his. He is almost out of his mind—but if he knew that she had prayed for him. Can you go in?" she asked in a nervous manner. "Could you speak to him?" Father Francesco approached the bed near which Edmund was kneeling, and gently touched his shoulder, but almost started back at the haggard expression of his face, as for an instant he turned it towards him. "Leave me," he said in a whisper. "Leave us. You can do nothing here. You were with her in her hours of consciousness. You brought her the consolations you could give. There are none for her destroyer. I have nothing left me but these last moments, in which I can hold her in my arms—do not disturb us. You do not know what grief—you may have seen it, but you never felt it, or you could not see that angel dying and remain calm. But I forget—you have killed her!" He bent over her, and looked into her face, as if, by the intensity of that gaze, he could detain the life that was ebbing. He drew her head on his bosom, and

spoke not another word; the priest was kneeling at the foot of the bed; after a while Anne Neville glided in, and knelt there also, and both prayed in silence. Thus the hours went by, and the night advanced; and the nurse went and came, and the doctor stood near the bed; Edmund stirred not—the least movement might have disturbed her; he would have wished to still the beating of his heart; her breathing was so faint he could not discern it. Now and then the doctor felt her pulse, and held a glass to her lips; she never moved, but a pang of speechless agony shot through his mind in those instants. Still he waited, and the hours went by, and the prayers of his companion grew more fervent, and the light of day began to dawn. Again the doctor drew near the bed, and this time he said, "The pulse is stronger." Still Edmund stirred not; something sharper than pain had run through his frame as those words were pronounced; and through the next hour he seemed to himself to suffer more than before, for there was a change, and life and death were trembling in the balance. The sun was rising, a ray of light made its way into the room, and she moaned faintly. The doctor signed to him to lay her head on the pillow, and he held something to her lips; she swallowed what he had prepared, opened her eyes once, closed them immediately, and fell asleep again. "She will recover now," the doctor whispered, and forcibly led him from the room. He would have tallied had he not been thus supported. The sudden emotions of that moment, joined to the excessive fatigue he had endured, almost overpowered him, and he nearly fainted. He had not given way to his feelings during all that long night; now he wept like a child, and then suddenly pressing his sister to his heart in a transport of joy, which she vainly endeavored to calm.

With a gratitude as fervent, but less vehement, Father Francesco sat for a moment by the bedside, from which all but him had withdrawn. He blessed the sleeping form of his Ginevra, and then rose to leave the place where he had suffered and prayed for so many hours. As he entered the front room, Edmund, whose face wore traces of the most violent emotion, went up to him and said in Italian—

"Father, you prayed for her all night. I heard it—I felt it." "I prayed more for you than for my Ginevra," answered the priest; and he added simply, but with his voice trembling as he spoke, "I was her mother's uncle, and came to this country to seek her."

(To be continued.)

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Holmfild, Man., Feb. 14, 1890.

W. H. COMSTOCK, Brockville, Ont.

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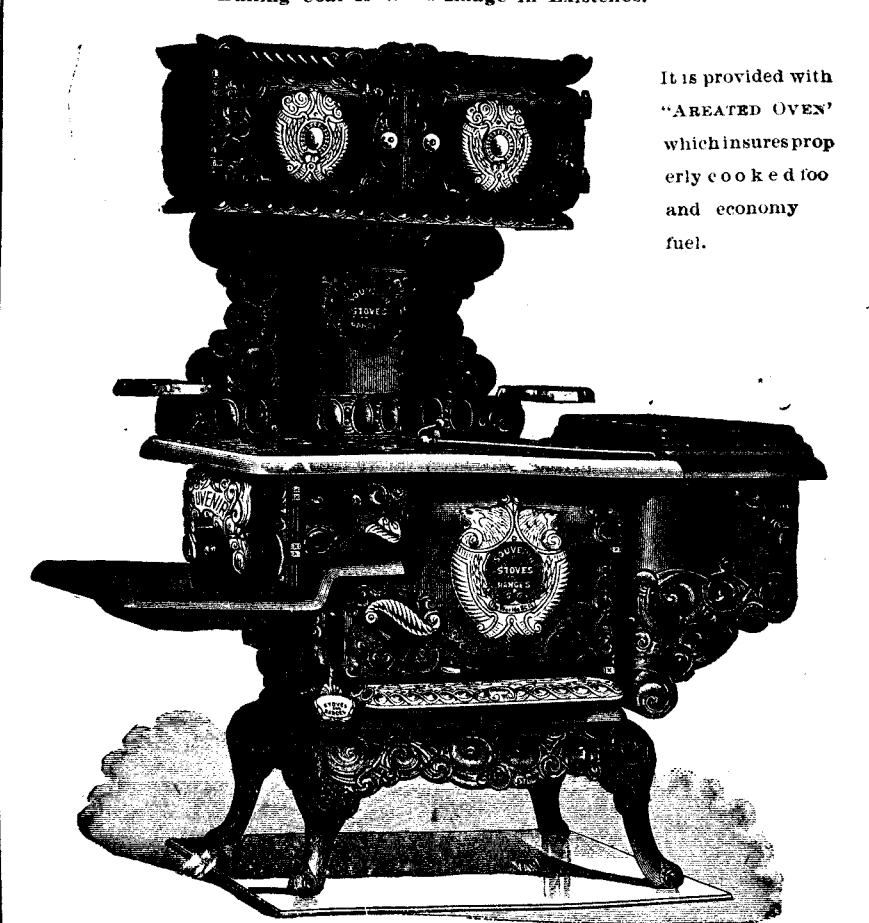
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