

GRANTLEY MANOR

A TALE

BY

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

CHAPTER IX.

Poor Margaret looked very unhappy, and it was with a real feeling of interest that Maud Vincent took her hand, and looked into her face as she replied—

"My dear girl, do not add to your distress by unnecessary self-reproaches. You have only vaguely discerned in your sister's manner and conduct what must be repugnant to your own sense of right, and what I have known long ago was the case. I have had the most unequivocal evidence of the extraordinary contrasts between her apparent reserve and her real character."

Margaret started, and looked anxiously at her companion.

"You know already," continued Maud, "that we were at Genoa at the same time she was, and that we saw a great deal of her. I never liked her from the first; there was something so cold and uncertain in her manner, and she never seemed at her ease with me; but Lucy took one of her violent encores for her, and I never heard anything from morning to night but praises of Genevra Leslie, and exclamations about her beauty, her goodness, and her talents. They used to read together, and walk together, and Lucy, who had always had rather a fancy for Catholicism, was quite taken up with her new friend, and went with her to convents and hospitals, and churches, and found out, accidentally all sorts of beautiful traits of charity and self-denial which this wonderful model of perfection practiced in secret. I hid my diminished head, and began to feel rather ashamed of my prejudice against her; when, alas! for Lucy and her idol, I too made a discovery of secret doings of a very different character. One morning that Frederic and I had walked out before breakfast, we passed before the church of the Capuchins, and, attracted by the music, we went in, and standing near a column, watched the service for a few minutes. Among the poorer people who were kneeling before the altar, was your sister; and certainly, I never saw any one appear more devout than she did. She seemed to pray with her whole heart and soul, and while the beads glided through her fingers, her eyes were fixed with an intensity of supplication I never saw in any eyes before, on the crucifix over the altar. I could not take my eyes off her, and I observed her do a very kind thing during the service. There was a little girl kneeling by her on the cold marble, for their were neither chairs nor benches within reach, who looked very ill and weak, and leaned against her for support; I felt touched, I own, when I saw your sister, instead of shrieking from the dirty mass, while she remained kneeling herself; and her attitude was so beautiful, that I was not surprised when Frederic touched my arm, and pointed to her and to a picture of the Virgin and Child, which hung near us, and whispered, 'How like!' As we came out, Frederic said to me, 'Do let us ask Miss Leslie to breakfast with us; it will please Lucy so much.' I made no objection and we accordingly went up to her as she was coming down the steps, and proposed that she should return home with us. She thanked me, but declined with that gentle manner, and that peculiar smile which you know so well, and which is always to me so suspicious.

"Well, my dear Margaret, if you have seen nothing in your sister's manners and conduct which you dislike or disapprove, 'Mettez que je n'ai rien dit,' as French people say. I do not wish to force you to concur in my unalterable opinion on the subject; of course, if Genevra is attached to an Italian lover, there can be no fear of her endeavoring to gain the affections of any one else."

"But," exclaimed Margaret with impatience, (for she felt the full force of Maud's insinuations,) "but can she really be a miserable hypocrite? Does she fail to serve God, to love goodness, to honor virtue? Is there no reality in her faith, in her piety, in her affections? O, Maud, she cannot be so disgustingly wicked!"

"My dear child, it does not follow because your sister is a coquette, and, as I sometimes think, more than a coquette, that she absolutely feigns the sentiments she seems at times to possess. I dare say she has a sort of half-scenic, half-romantic religion, which is very common among Catholics, and which has nothing to do with morality, and I have no doubt that she is very good to the poor, and all that sort of thing; but her religion teaches that you can make up for every kind of sin by good works of an easy description, and that if you confess and get absolution, you may feel quite satisfied, and go on just as before; so you see that Catholics can be very religious and very immoral at the same time, without being exactly hypocrites."

"I see," said Margaret, thoughtfully; "that accounts for it all."

"There he goes. Reckless and headstrong as ever! Ah, Signora, your pretty little sister will have much ado to keep her captive in order, even if she succeeds in bringing him to her feet."

"Are you in earnest?" said his companion, suddenly turning towards him and looking him full in the face.

"I am—but I do not think he is, though he certainly said something like it yesterday."

"It is impossible," said Genevra, and there was a tremulous movement in her hands, as she rapidly passed her needle through the canvass.

"It is very undesirable he should marry so young," continued Mr. Warren, "but by no means impossible that he is thinking of it. My agent told me that it was reported all over the country that he is about to marry your sister. I don't believe it myself, but they say he will believe very ill to her if he does not, and between ourselves, Signorina, I must say that she looks head over ears in love with him already."

"No, no," exclaimed his companion in a hurried manner. "No, you must be wrong. It cannot be; but—but, you should speak to your nephew; you should tell him what people say. You will not let this go on; you can save much misery by speaking to him at once."

"Oh, so I suppose Miss Margaret has confided to you her inclination for my too captivating nephew."

"You are quite mistaken," replied Genevra coldly, but in an instant returning to the charge, she added, "you promise, don't you, to speak to your nephew?"

"But perhaps he really does mean to marry your sister, and, if so, would it not be a pity to interfere and spoil such a match?"

Genevra was silent, and Mr. Warren continued—

"My nephew would do well to marry an heiress, for, rich as he will be, his means will never equal his extravagance. I happen to know that he is deeply involved in debt already."

"Has he not a kind father?" asked Genevra, without raising her eyes.

"Kind enough when he is not thwarted, but intractable in some cases; full of crochets, and prejudiced to excess. He had a great antipathy to me at one time, but I won his heart when I was last in England by attending the meetings at Exeter Hall."

"What is Exeter Hall?" asked Genevra, who had heard of Exeter Change, and supposed one of Mr. Neville's peculiarities might be a taste for wild beasts.

"A place, my fair signora, where we thank God that we are not as other men are—that is, deluded papists like yourself. Do not be angry—you know well I am no fierce Protestant like my brother-in-law, but it was necessary to convince him that I had not fallen a prey to Popery, the phantom that haunts him by day and by night. By the way, you will be a sad obstacle to Edmund's marriage with your sister. A Catholic sister-in-law! the very idea will make his hair stand on end!"

(To be continued.)

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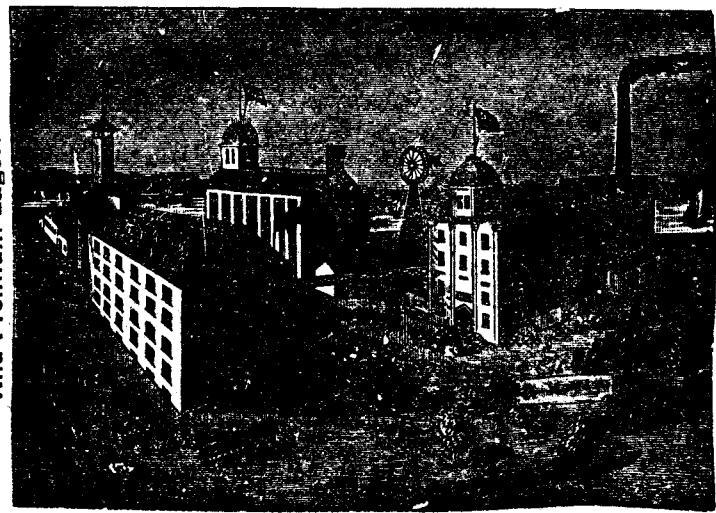
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