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**GERTRUDE MANNERING**

A TALE OF SACRIFICE

BY FRANCES NOBLE

CHAPTER XV.

Christmas had come round at last; the weary, anxious three months were over for Gerty, and she was to go to Nethercotes the day after Christmas day. That day itself she would not spend away from her father, though Lady Hunter had wished her very much to be with them for it.

"I could not leave papa, you know, Julia, on Christmas day," she had written. "Besides, as you are so far from a Catholic church, I should be out for two or three hours when I went out to Mass, and you would not like that, so it is better to wait, isn't it?"

And so today, Christmas day, Gerty and her father were alone together before their temporary separation. Father Walmesley had come home with them to dinner after the afternoon's Benediction, and then towards evening left them, guessing they would perhaps prefer to spend the last evening quiet alone.

"God bless you, my child," he had said to Gerty as he bade her goodbye, "and send you back to us safe and well." And Gerty responded to his kind smile with a grateful, eloquent look, though her heart was too full just then to let her speak.

Since that day on which the good priest had vainly sought her confidence, the subject had never been renewed between them; and there had grown up a kind of barrier, of respectful reserve on her part, and on his a scrupulous avoidance of anything like questioning her beyond what he was strictly obliged to do, but without any change otherwise in the old, kindly, fatherly manner, and with a still more earnest recommendation of her every day to God.

And even between her and her father there seemed to be a kind of tacit acknowledgment that something existed which could not be spoken of between them: for Gerty could not but see at times her father's anxiety about herself any more than she could help often breaking down in the effort to be her old bright self, and go about all the old duties and occupations in her once free, light-hearted manner as though she had no thought beyond. But outwardly all was unchanged: the old life was still going on, the very feeling that all was not the same seeming to have confirmed that still greater tenderness in Gerty's manner to her father and his every little attention to his wishes.

They had been at the midnight Mass together, and then out again to Communion; and on their return Gerty found a letter awaiting her from Lady Hunter, telling her how they were longing to welcome her at Nethercotes.

"The house is quite full now; all our visitors have arrived but yourself," wrote her ladyship. "Stanley Graham got here two days since, straight from the Continent, having only been home to Briardale for an hour or two on the way. He is looking very well, and I have made him promise to stay with us at least a fortnight or three weeks." And Gerty had read the letter to her father as usual, confirming afresh the suspicion now settled in his heart.

She played and sang for him and talked to him by turns, until they sat together all the evening; but when Father Walmesley had gone, the sadness in their manner growing more evident to each other as the hour drew near for saying good-night.

When it came, Mr. Manning held Gerty long and closely in his embrace with a silent eloquence. "You won't be too lonely without me, papa?" she said. "It is only for a fortnight." But she nearly broke down as she spoke.

"That's all, Gerty; only a fortnight," he said, smiling cheerily. "And now it is really time for you to be in bed, little girl, with a journey before you in the morning, and all the gayeties of Nethercotes." And he let her go, but she turned back for a minute to whisper, as if with an irresistible impulse:

"Papa, nothing would ever make you think—I make you afraid, I mean—that I could ever love you any less, could it, papa?"

"Afraid that my child could ever care any less for her old father! Never, 'Sunbeam.' But why do you think of such a thing? I can't tell; but going away, leaving you again so soon, makes me—sad, somehow."

"Never be sad for me, Gerty. Don't you think it makes me happy to see you going away when it is to enjoy yourself, as it is now?" And he smiled again, hiding the aching fear of coming sorrow and separation in his heart—hiding it until Gerty was safe out of sight, until she had gone upstairs, not to sleep just yet, but to lie awake in trembling but delicious joy at the thought of the morrow—joy which still was mixed with a vague foreboding of pain and sorrow.

Nethercotes was but little more than an hour's journey from White-well, so Gerty travelled alone, sitting quietly in a corner of the railway carriage, trying to hide from her fellow-passengers the tears which fell for some minutes after the parting with her father.

"When I see him again, when I come back, how will it be with me?"

she kept asking herself, her heart beating painfully and wondering as each minute bore her on nearer to the crisis in her life. She felt in a kind of dream when she got out at the station nearest Nethercotes and found Lady Hunter's carriage waiting for her, with her ladyship's own maid to meet her and look after her luggage.

"Lady Hunter would have come herself, Miss Manning," the young woman said to Gerty, "but she took a little cold last night, and thought it best to stay indoors all today, as it is so cold."

"Of course, Roberts; I am glad she has not come." And Gerty was glad for other reasons too, for she was thankful to be alone during the three miles' drive to Nethercotes; thankful to be able to be silent and try to realize where she was, whom she was about to meet again after the long waiting and yearning; to try and realize all that might bring forth, about to be called on to take the step which must decide her fate for life.

"And only a year ago I was just leaving the convent, thinking of nothing but being so sorry to leave them all, and so very, very happy to be going home at last to be always with papa. Am I going to leave him already? Shall I want to go so if—I am asked?" And though the girlish heart almost shrank with a kind of fear from what might be coming—the new, untried existence—it yet answered quickly, "Ah, yes, yes! if he asks me; wouldn't I go to the world's end, content to lose all else, all I love so dearly, if only he asked me?"

She roused herself with a start as they reached Nethercotes and entered the park, whose extent and beauty Gerty could see even on this gloomy, wintry day.

"I should like to see it in summer," she said to herself, trying to throw off her deep preoccupation, and to bring a smile to her face ere they reached the house, which now appeared in sight—a splendid, quite modern edifice, which Gerty knew had been built by the present baronet, Sir Robert, before his marriage.

"How different from our old Grange!" was her thought, as she ran up the steps and through the pillared entrance into the warm, luxurious-looking hall, where her cousin met her with a hearty kiss and a close embrace.

"Welcome, love, at last to Nethercotes," she said with her sweet smile; "I was getting quite impatient listening for the carriage. Why, you're as cold as an icicle, and trembling like a leaf; but no wonder, on such a day. So we'll go up at once to my little sanctum, and as soon as you have thrown off your wraps we will have some tea together." And Lady Hunter led Gerty into a perfect little gem of a room, her own special sanctum, furnished with every imaginable comfort and elegance.

"This is better than London, love, isn't it?" And when Gerty was freed from her hat and wraps, she made her sit closer to the fire on a low stool, and then rang for some tea.

"Now," she said, when it came, "for a regular good gossip over, like two old maids. Now begin to tell me everything—how your papa is; and Rupert, poor boy (don't be vexed, Gerty); and what you've been doing ever since, buried away at Whitewell; and why you are not looking so rosy as you ought to do after such a long rest in the country, away from my worldly society."

Gerty was beginning laughingly to reply to the shower of questions when Lady Hunter interrupted her: "But I forgot, love; I must tell you that some one is decidedly impatient to see my little country girl again, and was quite inclined to be dreadfully disappointed at not finding her here on his arrival, until I mollified his imperial highness by assuring him she would be here today—that he would only have to wait until dinner-time this evening. I believe he only went to the Meet today to make the time pass more quickly, for he does not care about hunting, though he is such a splendid rider." And though her ladyship spoke laughingly, and apparently in jest, as she had often done latterly in London, the tell-tale color rose to Gerty's face, while her heart beat so fast as almost to suffocate her.

But she tried to laugh carelessly, and began at once to talk of other things, unconscious that Lady Hunter had not spoken merely for the love of idle teasing, but to satisfy herself whether her young cousin's heart was unchanged, as she suspected—whether the event which she hoped, and yet somehow dreaded, might be looked for soon to take place here at Nethercotes; and also, too, with the kindly wish to reassure Gerty herself about Stanley Graham's own evident sentiments before she should meet him again that evening.

CHAPTER XVI.

Two hours later Gerty was dressed for dinner, ready to go down-stairs, but lingering yet a few minutes, as though dreading what was coming, trying in vain to subdue her heart's beating and to look calm and unperturbed. Then, almost unconsciously, she took one look at the glass, which she had nearly forgotten to do at all during her dressing, one look at the bright, sweet face, and then, becoming aware of why she did so, turned quickly away, almost delaying further went down-stairs.

Stanley Graham was not yet in the drawing-room. Gerty saw that at once, or felt it rather, almost before her quick, eager glance went round the room, and she sighed, almost in relief, that the meeting was deferred yet a few minutes longer. She sat down next to a lady to whom her cousin introduced her, and who at once began to talk pleasantly to her, though Gerty somehow could not always listen or answer so attentively, perhaps, as politeness might have demanded.

The door opened again at last, and, looking up, Gerty saw that it was Stanley Graham who entered. Again her eyes rested on the noble face which had haunted her ever, even in her dreams, since she had last beheld it; she looked once more, after her weary longing, on him who was all her world now, the object of her fresh young heart's passionate idolatry, for whose sake she had been content for the past three months to be, as it were, alienated, at least in part, from her dear, tender father. Her heart beat so fast now that she clasped her hands together upon it for a minute, quickly and convulsively, and then sat quite still, watching the one figure, from whose sight she was hidden as she sat. Was he feeling it all as she was? was it for her he was thinking now as he entered the room, or was it a blissful dream which the next few minutes might dispel? He stood for a while near the door, detached in talk by two or three gentlemen; but Gerty saw his gaze wander restlessly about the room until at last it reached her corner and their eyes met. Then the pale, proud face softened, as if by magic, into the attractive smile Gerty knew so well—the smile which had stolen its way to her heart, almost before she had exchanged a word with him, on the first night of their acquaintance. She saw him speak some excuse to his companions, and then at once he crossed the room straight to where she sat, caring not who saw or remarked the pointed action.

"I am very glad to see you, Miss Manning. You are quite well, I hope?" And the darkness and shadow doubt were lifted away from Gerty's heart as her hand rested in Stanley Graham's fervent grasp, as the music of his voice sounded in her ears again with an eloquence which depended not on the outward, polite, conventional words.

"I am quite well, Mr. Graham, thank you. I hope you are so too." And though she tried to speak calmly, the rosy color overspread her face as she raised her eyes to his—the sweet eyes for whose gaze proud Stanley Graham had been yearning every day and hour, though she knew it not.

"Quite well, thank you, but very tired and weary at last of being abroad—very thankful for the chance to be back again in England." And the earnest, tender gaze rested upon Gerty, charming her back wholly into the paradise from which she had been excluded during the past weary months.

Stanley was about to take a seat again by her side, which her lady companion had kindly vacated, when the dinner-bell sounded, and he was obliged to leave her to escort the lady allotted to him, while Gerty fell to the share of a nephew of Sir Robert's, whom Lady Hunter brought to introduce to her.

"I am very sorry, love, to interrupt you, she managed to whisper quietly to Gerty, "but you understand; it cannot be helped." And Gerty was borne away by her new companion. She could hardly have told how she got through the dinner, or what she talked about to her companion, who was a pleasant, amiable young man, bent on making himself agreeable; for he had been admiring Gerty ever since she had entered the drawing-room, and was perhaps disappointed to find that she was hardly so sweet and bewitching as he had told himself the owner of that bright face must prove on acquaintance. Poor Gerty, all unconscious of his thoughts, was but exerting herself not to appear unkind or stupid, wondering the while how long it would be before the dinner was over and Stanley Graham free to come to her side once more, free to let her worshipping heart once more rejoice in the close presence of its idol.

Lady Hunter rose at last, and as Gerty followed her with the rest of the ladies, she caught Stanley Graham's smile fixed on her for a moment as she passed out of the room.

"Now, Gerty, I want to introduce you to everybody, at least to all the ladies," said Lady Hunter, as they re-entered the drawing-room; "there was hardly time before dinner." And taking Gerty's arm affectionately, she introduced her to the company with evident pride and pleasure—two or three among them claiming Gerty's acquaintance already, having known her during her stay in London.

"Stanley Graham found a minute before dinner to speak to you, didn't he, love?" her ladyship asked in a low tone, as she and Gerty stood apart before the fire, when they had spoken just for a minute or two, Julia, replied Gerty; looking into the fire, away from her cousin's face.

"That's right. I was afraid you had done no more than shake hands when I was obliged to come and interrupt you. But talk of a person and he appears," she added, as the door opened and Stanley Graham entered alone.

"That's a good fellow!" she said, as she went to meet him. "I wish you could manage to indoctrinate a few more gentlemen with your dislike to the barbarous English custom of sending away the ladies, to stay behind deliberately to drink far too much wine." And her ladyship laughed gaily, knowing the while in her heart that it was not Stanley's dislike to the custom that had alone brought him so soon into their company this evening.

Until some more of the gentlemen came in he stood on the hearth-rug with Lady Hunter, talking to her; but his attention was really given to Gerty, who had taken a seat on a sofa near, where she sat silently, meeting his smile whenever she looked up.

"Well, and how do you think Gerty is looking, Stanley?" her ladyship asked now, turning round to her as she spoke. "You see she has turned up safe and sound, as I promised you, but hardly looking so well, I think, as she should do after such a long rest at home."

TO BE CONTINUED

THE MAN FROM CORK

The clock was striking seven as last, but smiling, Sister Evangelista went to the doorway of the old man's ward and stood there quietly, waiting for Sister Imelda, whose turn it was to be on duty for the night.

It was five or six minutes before Sister Imelda came almost running down the corridor. "Somehow, the dear Lord doesn't give me the grace to be on time," she panted in apology. "I'm very sorry to have kept you waiting. After we finished washing the dishes I went to play with the kittens, and forgot to watch the clock."

Like every one else in the house, Sister Evangelista loved merry as much for her childish lapses as for her very real virtues. She smiled with a trace of amoyence as she answered teasingly: "Sister, if you ever come as the clock strikes seven,—I—I—but why talk of impossibilities!"

With hardly a pause she added more seriously: "We have a new charge—an old, old man from County Cork. Tim is the only name he comes to have," gave him the third bed in the window side. Such a helpless old man he is—thin, and tired, and sad, and penniless, and pathetically ashamed of having broken down. He does not talk much, but two or three times the poor dear said that he deserves all his misfortunes and has no right to complain.

"God help us all if we're to get what we deserve!" Sister Imelda chimed in. Silence was the least of her virtues.

"I do not think he means his poverty—but I must go now or I shall be late for Office. Tom Shea is to have his medicine at ten and at two, if he is awake."

Half an hour later, when Sister Imelda passed down the ward, she looked anxiously at the newcomer, a frail old man, with thin gray hair and beard. Seeing that he was not asleep she spoke gently to him, asking if he was comfortable. To her surprise he started violently. Instead of replying he stared at her, bewildered, for a few moments, then, with a little moan, he turned his face and closed his eyes.

With a feeling of compassion for the queer little ways of advanced age, Sister Imelda passed on. By the time she made her second round he had fallen asleep. She stopped at his bedside to look, not into his worn lined face, but at the rudely chained old beads which were twisted about his right hand, such beads as she had not seen since she was a girl in Ireland. They vividly recalled a cabin of a winter's evening, with her stalwart father giving out the Sorrowful Mysteries—it was always those that he had said, whatever the day of the week, her frail little mother kneeling beside him, but a little nearer to the fire and grouped irregularly around them her four brothers and her restless, sleepy little self. Obeying a sudden impulse, she stooped and kissed the old beads, and two tears fell on the coverlet. "God bless them all," she murmured and the old man stirred in his sleep.

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