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GERTRUDE MANNERING
A TALE OF SACRIFICE

BY FRANCES NOBLE
CHAPTER XI.—CONTINUED

And Gertrude herself, the object of all this solicitude, occupying just now no small share of the attention of society, the society which a month before had been ignorant of her very existence, how did she view the change that had come over her? What had been her inner life during this outwardly brilliant one, which was now on the eve of its close, as she sat with such pale, tear-stained face alone in her room, with her father's letter on her knee? She knew now—she had known for a certainty very soon after the first few days—that it was no passing romantic fancy she felt for Stanley Graham, but the deep, true love of a woman, strong and sweet at the same time, like her own nature. She knew too that she must have felt it even had it met with no encouragement or sign of return—she must have felt it still, though then she must have striven to conquer it, to bury it away unseen in her heart, bearing the pain with a smile bravely. But shy and modest as she was, with her school-girl bashfulness still upon her, Gertrude could not but see that this self-suppression was uncalled for; she could not but see it a hundred times a day when she was in Stanley Graham's presence, if only by the very sound of his voice when addressing her, so much more tender than she heard it when he spoke to others; by the very glance of his gray eyes, which never looked coldly or haughtily at her, never otherwise than with the eloquent yet respectful gaze which somehow would have made Gertrude, with the heart's true instinct, trust herself with him to the world's end, even had she not known beforehand what a refined, noble nature was his. And she grew to live only in his presence, as it were—to yearn for his as a daily necessity, which never failed her; she fed, as it were, upon the sweet attentions which were so doubly precious, coming from one so haughty and exclusive, until her love became in this short time a species of idolatry—a pure, unselfish one, indeed, but still idolatry too great and too absorbing to be given to any human creature, however perfect, however grand, however love which should be given only to God, which can only bring rest and peace to the heart when rendered to Him. And she knew this, poor Gertrude, she felt it, in the midst of her bewildering joy and hope; she knew she "loved not wisely, but too well."

She prayed on her knees every night that if it were wrong she might not grow to love too strongly; that she might not forget God for his creature. But though the spirit was willing, the flesh was weak, and the poor heart, which felt so strong after its refreshment of prayer, fell again into its fond idolatry with the daylight, when its idol was present once more.

"After all, it can be no harm to love him so, if—she loves me," she would tell herself. "If I am ever his wife, it will only be right, it will be my duty, to think more of him than all the world. And if I help to lead him to God, if through me he should learn to love instead of hating religion, if he should become a Catholic, I shall not have loved him for myself only, but for God's glory and to gain another soul for heaven."

But there was one care, one hidden trouble which she dared hardly acknowledge to her own heart, but which was there nevertheless, amounting to agony at times. Suppose her hope should be vain; suppose Stanley Graham, instead of growing reconciled to the thought of religion, should persist in his contempt for it; suppose, even if he ever should really ask her to become his wife, he should object to seeing her practise her religion; suppose, as would be but natural in one so proud, he should demur to submitting to a marriage before a priest only, without the Protestant ceremony. But Gertrude would throw off these fears—she could not entertain them and live, it seemed to her, during these halcyon yet restless days. The thoughts were suggested to her partly by Lady Hunter's words concerning Stanley Graham, and partly by the fact that since the evening on which she herself had told him she was a Catholic he had never referred directly to the subject, never questioned her about her religion at all, or seemed to care to speak of it when she tried to bring the conversation round to it, as she sometimes did in her generous repentance for what seemed to her her previous cowardice. In a word, he seemed to ignore her religion altogether—to wish to keep the fact of it out of his own mind, if possible. And it troubled Gertrude, because she could not divine the cause, whether her religion was really indifferent to him or whether it was that he did not wish to pain her by speaking of his own bitter prejudice against it. The terrible fear, already spoken of, that it might be because of his very hatred that he was so silent on the subject, because he would never endure that his wife should continue a Catholic, much less ever hope for him to become one—this terrible fear she dare not entertain; it dwelt in her heart, hidden down deep, never consciously acknowledged.

"If he really loved me, so as to wish to make me his wife, he would not ask me to choose between him and my religion; he would take me with my religion, caring for none himself. He cannot think there is any harm in faith, so he could not have any objection to seeing it in his wife; there is nothing dishonouring in it, surely, even in his eyes, and honor is his religion."

But in spite of her self-consolation, there were times when Gertrude longed for counsel and advice—for some one to whom she could open her heart, even while she felt that had such a one been at hand she could not have done it, she could not have spoken to any one of the love which was yet unspoken.

"Even Father Walmsley I could not tell yet, oh, no! more especially as Mr. Graham is what he is; if he were a Catholic it would be easier. But if he were here I should long to tell him, I should, though I should never be able to do it yet."

Gertrude had written to Father Walmsley once since her arrival in London, before she had met Stanley Graham, and in an innocent, lively letter, but after that it seemed to become impossible to write freely, and so his kindly, fatherly reply had brought no further letter from Gertrude, much as she longed to write to her best friend. It was almost a bitter task now to write even to her darling father, a task to do what so long had been her delight, for every line seemed almost like a lie to her dear old home in so short a time. Because, too, every time she sat down to write to him there came to her mind's eye the prospect of the day when she might have to tell him all, that she wanted to leave him, to give herself to another, one—and this would be the bitter part, she knew—who was not a Catholic, one who despised religion, who at best would only be submitting to it in her because of his love for her. How would her father bear it, he who was so proud of his Catholic ancestry, of their staid devotion to the faith, of the very obscurity into which his family had fallen through that steadfast devotion? How would Rupert, her idolized brother, the young follower of the glorious St. Ignatius—how would he bear to hear that his dear little sister, the loved companion of his childhood, was going to give herself to this proud, scornful heretic, nay, infidel? The thought was so hard, so bitter at times to Gertrude that she yearned wearily to be able to throw herself on her knees before Jesus in his Sacramental Presence on the altar, as she could so easily have done at home, there to beg grace and guidance in the trials which were coming upon her with the mighty human love which was absorbing her heart. Here in London she seldom had the opportunity she yearned for, except on the Sundays; but more than once the wish grew so strong upon her that when out driving with Lady Hunter, anywhere in the region of one of the Catholic churches, she had asked her to let the carriage stop for a few minutes while she tried to enter, and had been rejoiced on finding she was able to do so. Lady Hunter had gone in with her, partly through curiosity, partly through kindness; but Gertrude had soon almost forgotten her presence as she knelt in that Veiled Presence in the tabernacle, making the most of her precious minutes to pour out her pent-up heart in earnest, trembling prayer, while her cousin gazed at the bowed figure, envious of its absorption, envious of the faith she could not share.

But it was only at intervals that these shadows of a coming trouble darkened Gertrude's present halcyon existence, only at times that the thought of her father and home was so bitter as not to be chased away by the new joy in her heart, the sweet almost certain hope of Stanley Graham's love, and his changes it must work in his haughty nature, with its scorn and contempt of religion. Generally she revelled only in the sweet present, shutting her eyes to any thought but that of continued happiness in the future. All her awe of Stanley had vanished now, driven away by the strong love which had come to her so quickly. She could talk to him now freely on every subject but the one he so carefully avoided, and almost insensibly she grew to defer to his opinion in everything, making his likes and dislikes her own, with just enough of merry, artless opposition to charm haughty Stanley the more because of the graceful, confiding way in which she almost always eventually yielded.

In short, Gertrude had set up an idol in her heart—a noble one, it is true, but still only a faulty human creature whom she worshipped with a fond idolatry, unconscious that to observant eyes she betrayed her secret, even by the soft love-light that shone so often now in her sweet eyes, spite of her earnest efforts to hide her feeling, spite of the maiden bashfulness which recoiled from the thought that she might have been seeking before she first was sought.

And now it was all over, at least for a time; she must leave her

earthly paradise behind and go back to the old home with its quiet routine, to the dear father who awaited her with such longing love, but who, alas, could never be first in her heart again.

Stanley Graham was coming this evening to escort Lady Hunter and Gertrude to the opera, and afterwards to a farewell entertainment at the house of a common friend; and as Gertrude sat now in her room with her tear-stained face bent over her father's letter, the thought kept coming to her, not to be driven away.

"When shall I see him again? After tonight, when we say good-by, when shall we meet again? When we do, will he be the same, still unchanged, as I shall be?"

She knew that her cousin wished her to pay them a visit at their country seat in L—shire, and she had promised to do so some time about Christmas, if her father could spare her.

Was there not a secret hope in her heart that Stanley Graham might be there too, though Lady Hunter had not as yet exactly spoken of inviting him? At the same time, was it not this hope that was helping Gertrude to bear the thought of the separation that was so near, of the farewell that must be said this very evening, this last night, which was coming all too quickly?

CHAPTER XII.

The evening came, and Gertrude and Stanley Graham sat at the opera together. Rather curiously, the representation was once more the "Sonnambula," as it had been on that first night three weeks since; but Gertrude knew beforehand that it would not affect her now as it had done then—that the joys and sorrows of the heroine would move her only to a still keener realization of the hopes and fears in her own preoccupied heart. She sat very quiet, enjoying the music in a dreamy kind of way, and trying to look interested in the performance; trying to drive away the knowledge that it was Stanley Graham's presence which made her sole enjoyment, and not to wish that the opera was over, so that she could hear him talk to her again freely, as he could hardly do here, so that she might drink in the rich, sweet voice, which was better to her than any music—which, after tonight, would be silent for her, for how long she knew not.

A less keen observer than Stanley Graham must have noticed her abstraction from the stage, and the efforts she made against it. Lady Hunter saw it too, and perhaps guessed rightly at the cause; but she only said smilingly, as the curtain fell finally, and they rose from their seats:

"You are getting quite hardened now, you see, Gertrude; isn't she, Stanley? You can look at poor *Amina* now without a tear, eh, love?"

Gertrude blushed, as she always did at anything that seemed to indicate that she was betraying what she thought her secret; but Stanley Graham came to her rescue with a kind, frank smile, as he said:

"I fancy Miss Manning would be more likely to shed tears tonight at the sight of you, Lady Hunter, at the thought of having to leave you so soon. You have none to spare for *Amina's* imaginary troubles, have you?" And he spoke so very freely and kindly that Gertrude could not feel embarrassed any longer, but could only thank him with an eloquent smile.

"No, indeed, I don't think I can, Mr. Graham; I must keep them all for Julia. But still I think I must be getting very hardened too, as she says, and all in three weeks!" And the idea made Gertrude laugh genuinely now, as they made their way to the carriage.

"Besides," said Lady Hunter, as they drove off, "you know, Gertrude, I am going to claim you again very soon. It is quite a promise, Stanley, that she comes to us at Christmas at Nethercotes for at least a fortnight."

"Then we shall meet again, Miss Manning," said Stanley, "for I, too, have promised to visit Nethercotes about then."

"Of course you have, Stanley. It would not be Christmas there without you. We should miss him almost as much as the mince-pies, Gertrude, if they failed to appear," laughed her ladyship.

How thankful Gertrude felt that it was a dark, starless night, and that the light of the street-lamps was hardly sufficient to let her companion see the deep blush which she felt had risen to her face as she heard the confirmation of her hope! She strove to hide it still more by joining in her cousin's laughter, and then, trying to speak calmly, she said:

"Well, I have promised to come if I can, you know, Julia, if papa can spare me so soon again."

Stanley Graham turned towards her with a quick, anxious look, which deepened the blush on her face; but Lady Hunter only laughed kindly and carelessly.

"Spare you, Gertrude! Of course he will. Why, if he refuses he will only have me coming down upon him to carry you off myself; so he might as well let you be with us by less violent means. Besides, I don't feel as if you knew us properly, or fully belonged to us, until you have been with us at Nethercotes; so remember!" And she tapped Gertrude's hand playfully with her fan.

They only remained an hour or two at the reception to which they

went after the opera, because Lady Hunter wanted Gertrude to rest well for her journey home in the morning. And about the time was, it seemed still shorter to Gertrude the precious moments feeling all too swiftly on towards the hour which would bring darkness and weary longing to the adoring heart, at least for a time.

More than once, as Stanley Graham sat by her side tonight, talking to her as usual, but with even more tenderness and earnestness, Gertrude could not but perceive that he became agitated, and seemed on the point of saying something from which he quickly checked himself; and the conviction made her tremble with a joyful hope and wonder.

"How happy you are," he said, in his own calm tone again, after one of these occasions, "to be returning to a home not yours, with your father all impatient to welcome you, and loving the very walls of the old home as you do. The word 'home' is but a strange sound to a wanderer like myself, and as yet perhaps I hardly care for it to be anything else. I have a nominal home, of course, and cannot complain of it for want of beauty or comfort; but since my poor mother's death it has been desolate for me, and I cannot rest there. Perhaps some day I may settle down in it—I may grow to love it again, and not care any longer to be an aimless wanderer, as I am at present." And he sighed slightly, almost imperceptibly.

"I hope so, Mr. Graham," Gertrude said gently; for to have hesitated would have betrayed embarrassment. "It seems so sad not to care for home, not to be able to love it, doesn't it? But though I am so fortunate, though I have so dear a home to go to, and though I am longing to see papa again, still I am sorry to go away from London. I always seem doomed never to be all glad or all sorry about anything, but to have a mixture of both ways. You see my cousin and Sir Robert have been so very kind that I cannot help being sorry to leave them; and—and everybody," she added, blushing now for fear she was saying too much.

But Stanley looked at her more earnestly than ever as he said, with his own attractive smile:

"Miss Manning, when we meet at Nethercotes (for you have promised to be there, you know) will you promise to be glad to see me just a little, not to have forgotten me quite?"

Did he really feel so uncertain yet of her sentiments towards him, or was he only making assurance doubly sure before he separated from her? Gertrude could not tell; she felt, with a dismal sinking of the heart, that it might be only friendship he was showing her after all; and the temporary chill enabled her to look up with frank smile, though the blush was still upon her face.

TO BE CONTINUED

HIS LITTLE ONES

"Philip, my boy, I am delighted to see you. . . . And you look so well. Have you good news for me?"

As she greeted her visitor, Mrs. Livingston took the slender well-kept hands in hers and drew him to the light. She noted swiftly the silver strands of hair at his temples as well as the drawn cheeks and tiny furrows in his brow. He had changed considerably in two years.

"Aunt Isabel!" He smiled as he mentioned the pet name for the aristocratic old lady, his deceased mother's dearest friend. "I, too, am glad to see you again. You look just as charming as ever."

"Do I? It is a gratification to hear that, especially at my age, Philip. At sixty-five, well . . . one can surely say Beauty survived the ravages of Time." And smiling, she pointed to a chair, which Philip gratefully accepted, then seating herself, waited anxiously for some explanation of his return to America.

"You wondered, perhaps, why I left so hurriedly for England, and when you wrote requesting some explanation of my sudden departure, I could not pen my thoughts so disappointed and disillusioned was I. There seemed no other way, and so I sailed. I wanted to go somewhere, anywhere away from the narrow circle of selfish human beings that it was my misfortune to have become a part of. In England, I used an alias, but it was no use. Someone recognized me, and I was sought out, invited out, dined out, and all to what purpose? I was a desirable catch for some penniless noblewoman. I fled to France. Again I assumed a cognomen, and registered at one of the cheaper hotels. There I met a mixed class, the usual sort who frequent Paris sightseeing. Some of them were congenial, others friendly, while occasionally, I met the get-rich-quick type, who are feeling their way into the smart set, gradually. They bored me frightfully. I went to Rome. There I found peace, for a while . . . only for a short time. Apparently, I could not escape old associations. I joined a party of strangers going to Egypt. One of the party, an old French priest, gave me some sound advice. The result is, as you see, I am here."

"Philip, my boy, I can sympathize with you, but will not before I ask a few questions. You have not told me yet why you left so

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