

GERTRUDE MANNERING A TALE OF SACRIFICE BY FRANCES NOBLE

CHAPTER XXVII.—CONTINUED No one spoke for a minute or two, Lady Hunter appearing bewildered with a feeling that showed her the world could never be the same to her again.

"I should like to go to Confession, you know, papa, because I should like to receive our Lord tomorrow, to thank him, you know, and to ask for strength to bear the—joy."

And so they left her alone again, as she wished, with Father Walsley. At once, as the door closed, she turned to him with an eager look.

"Father Walsley, I could not ask you before papa, but I know you won't deceive me. Was I—very ill? was it dangerous when I fainted?"

He could not deceive her, as she had said, so he answered very earnestly and gently:

"It was dangerous while it lasted; but you are better again now, my child and you must keep so, must you not, very calm and quiet, to be able to write your letter, so that—be may be here tomorrow?"

And he smiled cheerily; but she looked still more serious as she continued:

"Then if—that was dangerous, another might come—any time, might it not, father? Tell me truly, because, you know—I ought—to be prepared, and I don't think I am afraid."

He saw that it would agitate her more if he evaded the question, and that she was ready, with the wonderful grace God had given her, to hear whatever he might say.

"My child, you are right. Though we need not necessarily apprehend one, an attack might come with undue excitement; but you must not fear it or think of it, if only—for Stanley Graham's sake, Gerty; you must live to see him."

"But—if it were God's will that I should not, if I were to be taken—before—He comes, O Father Walsley! should I be resigned to give—it up, that last joy?"

He saw what was troubling her—what he himself had thought of with much anxiety—that if God should call her away before the moment for which they all waited so tremulously, there might be some regret, some earthly yearning, to tarnish the perfect resignation she had prayed for, and with which she wished to surrender her soul to God.

Taking up the small crucifix she kept always near her, he gave it to her, as he said earnestly and solemnly:

"If God should will it, Gerty, you would, would you not? try to make an act of perfect resignation, to be ready for whatever God wills—to live or die, Gerty. Would it be too hard, my child, too hard to give up willingly this last joy, if God saw it to be best—best for both of you?"

And as he prayed silently by her side, he thought for an instant that the sacrifice would be too much, too great to be offered at once without a struggle.

Gerty bent her face upon her clasped hands, as for a minute there rose before the poor little heart a vision of him who had been his idol; but who was gained now for God; and then with a beautiful smile she looked up as she spoke, in a voice a little above a whisper:

"Help me to pray to be quite ready for whatever is God's will, to wish to die—without—seeing him if it is best. Because," she added even still more solemnly, "it seems somehow, father, as if it would be so; as if it would be best, even for him, because I know I should not live long after—our meeting; something tells me the joy would be too great to bear quietly, and it would be harder for him, then than to come and find me dead already, spared the pain of parting, with his ring on my finger, the sign of our reunion. You see I am only very weak, and it might be that if I saw him some regret might come into my heart and keep me longer from God, or at least some thought too much of him and earthly love, some pain for his grief and self-reproach, that would make the parting harder for us both. And when I think of this, father, it is easy to give up this last joy of seeing him; I can almost pray for it to be denied, if it would make me at the last think less of God and too much of him."

Then for a minute or two Father Walsley knelt by her side, praying in silent thanksgiving for the great and wonderful gifts of grace God was bestowing on her, young and weak as she was, in return for the sacrifice she had made to him of her earthly love, in return for the unselfish offering she had made of her life to gain one noble soul for his service.

In a few minutes also Gerty had made her short, simple confession very quietly and calmly, now that earth was fleeing away so fast, as the good priest also felt with a strange, prophetic awe. Then, in a voice which trembled slightly, but without any other sign of agitation, Gerty asked if she were not in that state which made it fitting and necessary for her to receive Extreme Unction too; and again inwardly thanking God, who made

his task so easy, Father Walsley told her gently that she had but anticipated him in speaking of it, for he had intended to tell her that he should come prepared in the morning to administer it as well as Holy Communion to her, forbearing, however, to tell her also that, had he known of her rapidly increasing danger, he would have come prepared to give her Extreme Unction even today, before he left her.

Then, when he had talked to her quietly for a little while longer, he summoned her father again into the room, and bade her a temporary adieu, promising to return late at night, bringing the Blessed Sacrament with him, to be given to her very early in the morning, before he must leave to say his Mass.

She looked so calm and happy now that her father and Lady Hunter both tried to drive away out of their hearts the fear. "Will she be able to bear the meeting? will she even bear the inward excitement of looking forward to it all night, and perhaps nearly another whole day?" And they told her gently that they had sent for Rupert, so that he too might be here to welcome him whom God had called wonderfully in answer to her prayers, knowing not how they had betrayed to her the fear they felt—the fear which could not startle nor alarm her now, since God had made her so ready for whatever He should will.

Then they could keep her no longer from the sweet task—sweet, yet so sad—of writing herself, while she had strength, to summon Stanley Graham to her deathbed; the task which must have been so difficult and agitating if she had not been so weaned from earth, so full of heavenly joy, for the sake of him whom she had once loved too strongly, with an idolatry too great to be given to any creature. With her little, thin, white hand trembling slightly, but without other signs of perturbation to excite alarm, she wrote to Stanley her second letter only, and her last:

"Stanley, I am so happy, so full of joy, that it is too great for earth. You have blessed me with a delight you could never have given me even as your wife, Stanley—my own Stanley now indeed—because I know now I should have loved you too much, that I did love you more perhaps than God, and only a short, false happiness could have been ours then. But now, in dying, I love you in God, as we can love each other all through eternity, as you will love me too when the first grief is past, even if you should come and find me dead, Stanley, and I could not speak to you in words. And, oh! never reproach yourself, now or in the future; never say your cruelty has killed me, for that is the only thing that grieves me now, that you should think so for one instant. Every word you call stern which you uttered that day I know to have been wrong from you in the pain of seeing what I know seemed my obstinacy, which then you could not understand, by your hatred, which I know to have been sincere and earnest, against our holy faith—yours now, Stanley, thank God a thousand times. If there was one word that required forgiveness (though I remember none), the sight of your ring on my finger once more, to be buried with me, shall be the sign that it is forgiven joyfully, that I am your own again, more than before, in death. Do not grieve for me, Stanley; I do not wish to live now, never for your sake, because something tells me that God, who has called you so wonderfully by my death, which you are making such a happy one, wants you in some way for His service, that what He brought us together for is accomplished now, and that we must finish our His will, you on earth, and I, as soon as by prayer and pain I shall be made fit, in heaven, to meet again there as dear brother and sister in God. If they would let me, and if I had strength, I could go on for hours telling you all that is in my heart of wonder and joy, and of the welcome waiting for you in my dear old home from my father, who, for your own sake now, is longing to receive you, to bid you never reproach yourself again, but rejoice with him over my happiness. If I do not live to welcome you in words, know that I do it even more in reality in prayer in Purgatory, that even on earth your noble heart may find perfect peace and contentment in the exercise of our holy religion, which you will love now with strength surpassing that of the former hatred. The little crucifix which, if I can, I wish to have in my hands at the last, is to be given to you whenever I die, soon or late—the crucifix I had with me, Stanley, that night after our parting, which was with me during the last struggle, which struggle has won me now such a joyous, heavenly reward—your conversion, my own beloved, your conversion to God. I am growing weak and must write no more, but even in death remain

"Your own GERTY."

"Papa," she said then, as she folded up her letter and gave it to him, "I won't read it over; I will let it go just as it is, though it is so poor compared to what I should like to have written. He will understand—how hard it is to say fully all I want; so it may go now at once, papa."

And they gratified her by sending it off at once, instead of letting it wait for the usual hour for posting

their letters from the Grange, scarcely guessing, perhaps, her hidden reason for wishing it to be gone—that whatever should come in the interval Stanley might receive it as sent really from herself while yet living and expecting him. They knew from his letter that he must arrive in London late that night, so that he would be able to start for Whitewell in the morning as soon as Gerty's letter should reach him.

Gerty was calmer and quieter almost than before, now that her letter was really gone and that there was nothing more outwardly to be done but to wait for Rupert's arrival, which must be late in the evening, they knew; and she lay for the most part quite still, with her eyes closed, as if in bodily exhaustion, with her hand in her father's as he read aloud for her from her favorite spiritual book, or the prayers in preparation for Communion. And Lady Hunter, though she would not weary or excite Gerty by speaking much, yet seemed unable to tear herself from the room, from the sight of that sweet, peaceful resignation, the sight of which seemed to make her wonder how she could have been so weak as to let her go, as she thought of what she could have done—the fact that Stanley Graham had embraced the religion he had hated so long and bitterly.

Late in the evening, as they had expected, Rupert arrived, and was met in the hall by his father, who told him everything that had occurred before he went up to Gerty's room. Wonder-struck in the midst of his grief, and feeling, as they all did, that the next twenty-four hours of anticipation would prove a crisis in his sister's precarious state, Rupert went up stairs quietly to her side, and for a minute the color that rose to her face, and her quickened, gasping breath as she greeted her idolized brother, seemed to threaten the dreaded attack of her insidious complaint but it passed away, as she said with a sweet smile and whisper:

"Don't look so frightened, Rupert. I do not think our Lord will let me die, at least before I have received Him into my breast, to give me courage and strength to go before Him as my Judge. And when they left her alone for a little while with her brother, she continued: "O Rupert! it is not wonderful, is it not a good answer to our prayers—so soon before I die? You will be to him like a brother, I know, Rupert, not for my sake only, but for God's; if you do not know yet what a noble soul he has, what great things he will be able to do for religion; for he is not one to turn to it weakly, or with only half a heart or coldly; it will be with all his heart and all his noble mind. Isn't it strange how he has been before Lady Hunter, Rupert, in turning to God, when she has naturally seemed always so much more inclined that way? If she were only gained, I should not have one more wish on earth, Rupert, except," she added, in a lower, faltering tone, "that in a lower, faltering tone, that for papa's happiness, that he may not be too lonely and grieve for me too heavily."

"My dear little sister, that we can but leave to God's mercy, with many earnest prayers, and then do our best in a human way—my poor father! But for Lady Hunter do not be impatient, Gerty. You see she has scarcely had such ardent, incessant prayers offered for her as have been for Stanley Graham; and in any case, Gerty dear, she was perhaps all through less likely to yield quickly and in earnest to grace, so wedded to the world as she is, and only careless about God and religion, than one like him, who hated the very name, and whose love now will be as earnest as his former bitterness against it; one too who, by what you say, Gerty, must long have despaired and been weary of the world in his heart."

Gerty smiled so brightly that Rupert looked at her, hope for at least her temporary recovery rose within him.

"Rupert, when he is baptized, do you know, somehow, I should like him to take the name of Xavier," she said earnestly.

"And a pretty, beautiful name too, Gerty, that he should be happy to take for its own sake, as well as because you will ask him, dear."

She smiled again strangely to herself without speaking, and soon after grew so visibly weak and exhausted, though without outward agitation, that they persuaded her to try to settle to sleep for the night, because she usually woke very early in the morning, and wanted this time to do so specially, so as to release Father Walsley in time to say his Mass as usual at the church.

She was sleeping still, quietly and peacefully, with her father at his untiring watch by her side, when Father Walsley arrived, about one or two o'clock in the morning, being unable to divest himself of the vague fear, which she herself had helped to increase, that the death-sunings might come to her suddenly in her weak state, that she might be unable to fight long against the cruel disease, which must be so much augmented by the inward excitement and agitation which she concealed so bravely for their sakes. Lady Hunter and Rupert were up too, having been unable to rest in their anxiety; and drawing Rupert aside before he withdrew to wait in prayer with the sacred Treasure he carried with him, he told him what Gerty had not mentioned to them yet, that he was going to administer Extreme

Unction also to her this morning before leaving again. Rupert acquiesced and thanked him with quivering lips, and they separated silently.

TO BE CONTINUED THE NURSE'S STORY

By Anna C. Milogno They were nurses, recounting some of the strange experiences that are ever creeping up in their intimate profession. Then the fair-haired girl began:

"I've had more thrilling affairs than the one I am about to relate; but I think of it often. I sometimes wish that I could go into every home and tell it to parents."

"It was at one of the training camps, when the influenza was raging. You remember how it was—doctors and nurses few, sick and dying everywhere. It seemed like the end of the world. It seemed foolish to try to stop it. Yet you kept right on. But you didn't feel like a human being—just a piece of machinery wound up and kept going, you didn't know by what. Ordinarily, you'd have died or gone mad."

"I was on day duty in the death house. That's what they called it. We got the hopeless cases. It was rightly named. Then, as soon as they carried out a corpse, his cot was occupied again."

"This day an orderly came to me and said: 'Nurse there's a fellow over there under the staircase, who wants you to come and pray for him.'"

"Pray? And these dying men waiting for their medicine—begging for water! Pray! I wanted to laugh hysterically. Not that I hadn't prayed with them. I had. But at that moment to stop and start praying seemed excruciatingly funny."

"Later, the orderly came again to me. 'Nurse,' he said, 'that chap's pretty bad. He asks you please to come and pray for him.' 'I'll come,' I said dully, wondering why he could not pray for himself."

"He was a handsome young man and, at his first words, belonged, I knew, to the upper strata of society. He apologized for troubling me. 'But,' he said, 'I am going to die and I'm afraid to meet God.' 'Why should you be afraid to meet God?' I asked.

"'Because,' he answered, 'I do not know Him. I was so busy, I didn't have time for religion—to get acquainted with God.' 'He told me something about himself. He was the only child of a banker in a northern city. He had gone through college, then entered the bank with his father. He had a young wife. All his life he had been so busy, first with school, then with work and the duties of his position. 'But,' he added, 'I now see my sin. That's why I'm afraid to meet God. Will He condemn me for not knowing Him?'"

"I told him to look upon God as his merciful and loving Father, and pray to Him for forgiveness. 'But I don't know how to pray,' he replied. 'That's why I've sent you praying with the others. They seem happier then. Nurse, please pray for me!'"

"But, I said, 'I am a Catholic. I don't know how you Protestants pray. I know only my own prayers.'"

"Just say the prayers you say with the other boys," he pleaded. "So I went down on my knees and began. Our Father, Hail Mary, Creed, Confiteor, Acts of Faith, Hope, Love and Contrition. He listened with every faculty of his poor pain-racked body."

"Please, Nurse, repeat that last prayer," he pleaded. "I'll teach it to you," I said. "I left him whispering the Act of Contrition."

"The next day I visited him early. He asked me, when I had time, to write a letter for him to his wife. It was a tender, loving letter. It was to send it, in case he died. He assured me that he was thinking always of her, and had told him about God's love and mercy."

"In another part of the long room was a new soldier who had drawn my attention by the fact that he was so tall his feet extended beyond the cot. He was a splendid specimen of young manhood. He was from the hill district of the State, drawn, like thousands of others from the happy, free life of the farm to meet this ghastly death."

"As I was giving him his medicine, I caught sight of a badge of the Sacred Heart pinned on his shirt."

"Are you a Catholic? I asked. He admitted that he was. Learning I also was of the Faith, his poor face brightened."

"Maybe you can help me," he said. "You see I had been to confession, but I took down before I got to go to Communion. O, I do not want to die without receiving my Lord!"

"I sent for the chaplain. I was present at the administration of the sacrament, and—Oh, well! I saw some things in that chapel house to thank God for. This was one of them."

"By now, the parents and wife of the rich young man had arrived. They were distraught at his situation. 'Get a nurse for him!' the father commanded. 'I'll give a thousand dollars for a nurse!' 'All the money you have could not get a nurse for your son,' the doctor told him. 'Do you think

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