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GERTRUDE MANNERING

A TALE OF SACRIFICE
BY FRANCES NOBLE

CHAPTER VIII.—CONTINUED

"Well, we must say 'Good-night,' I suppose, Stanley, with many thanks for your escort. I wish you were coming with us to Lady A—'s; we shall only stay an hour or two."

"I wish so too; but I must show myself at Mrs. Bauerstock's reception tonight, or I shall give serious offence. I met her this afternoon in the Park, and made a solemn promise not to disappoint her," he replied, with a smile which was somewhat sarcastic, Gertrude thought. "Ah! one of her literary receptions, isn't it? Well, Gertrude, you won't keep him any longer, for he is going into such terrible intellectual company that we must seem very frivolous indeed by comparison." And her ladyship laughed a musical little laugh.

"That is a very unkind speech, Lady Hunter." And as Stanley Graham spoke, taking off his hat with a farewell smile, the carriage began to drive away.

For the next few minutes Gertrude would have given anything to be alone, free even from the kindly affectionate presence of her cousin, so as to be able to collect her thoughts and calm the bewildering feeling—half joy, half pain—with which her brain and heart were throbbing. Ah! it was a beautiful world, she knew now only too surely, all too fascinating and alluring perhaps! No wonder she had been warned against it; no wonder she had been taught to pray for strength to resist its charms if they should prove perilous, to pray that she might not grow to love it too much.

And she could not pause to think quietly and try to define her feelings, for Lady Hunter began at once to talk as usual of the opera, of the house to which they were going, and of Stanley Graham; and Gertrude had to listen and reply, thinking as she did so what a strange whirl was this, the fashionable life of a London season.

"Julia," she said rather abruptly, after her cousin had finished some remark about Stanley Graham, "is Mr. Graham a Protestant, or has he any religion at all?"

And though she tried to speak carefully, Lady Hunter looked at her somewhat with surprise as she asked smilingly:

"What ever made you think of that, Gertrude?"

"Well, I was only wondering, Julia, because I can fancy somehow that he does not think much of anything of the kind." And Gertrude blushed slightly under her cousin's gaze.

"Well, you're right, Gertrude; he does not. I am afraid he is worse than myself in that respect; for while I tolerate all religions, he has no patience with any. Indeed, he is known as a professed infidel."

"O Julia!" escaped from Gertrude almost involuntarily.

"Well, perhaps not quite so bad as that, dear; for he does not believe in the existence of God, but no more. I expect he will be rather shocked if he hears you are a Roman Catholic, though of course he is so much accustomed to them, having been so much abroad. As to a boy doing as Rupert has done, it would make him bitter and scornful even to hear of it; so you must be prepared with the nice explanation of his conduct which you gave me the other day, love."

Lady Hunter spoke lightly and smilingly, knowing not the strange feeling of chilly desolation her words had cast over her listener's heart as she sat there so quietly. Gertrude said no more, but tried to smile, as she fanned herself quickly in her agitation. That Stanley Graham should be proved to be like that, his splendid intellect employed chiefly, perhaps, in hatred of religion, in scornful contempt of its very name!

She seemed able to think of nothing else all through the next hour or two while they were at Lady A—'s, and yet the knowledge did not drive away the new joy and wonder in her heart, only mixed it with a vague foreboding and sense of pain.

Only when they were at home again and she was alone did she seem able to pause and face the thoughts and feelings in her heart. She could not sleep, so she sat up in bed, with her long hair all about her shoulders, and her face buried in her hands.

"Oh! what am I doing? What does it all mean?" was her inward cry. "What is Mr. Graham to me? Oh! if he would only go away, or if I could never see him any more! He does not think of me; it is only because he sees I am shy that he is so kind, and, oh! so unlike any one else I have ever seen. Wouldn't I rather die than he should know that I have thought of him like this? I thought I never could feel this way towards any one; I thought I was so strong; and now—! Perhaps I felt too secure; perhaps I did not pray enough; but it is not too late. I can forget it; I can ask our Lord to take the feeling out of my heart before it grows too strong. But, oh! if only the time were over, and I could be safe back again with papa!"

But even in the thought, the idea that in little more than a fortnight she must leave her present life,

with its fascinations, which already had taken such hold of her heart, she shrank with a kind of dismay from the prospect, knowing, alas! too surely, what it was that held her so enchanted—that it was the presence of him whom she tried to wish never to see more. Only a few days had the thought of returning to her quiet home, with its sweet religious atmosphere, to her dear father and his fond, idolizing embrace, had given her unspeakable delight; and now was it really chilling her heart with its prospect, because that heart, which could never feel or love but strongly and with all its depth, had learned to thrill and palpitate at the sight of the face and the sound of the voice of one who, after all, was a mere stranger, who had certainly been very kind and attentive, but who would forget her, of course, when he ceased to meet her daily. An infidel too, one who held religion in contempt—most and more than all, the one true religion, which holy possession she, descendant of martyrs and glorious confessors, had ever guarded as her most precious treasure!

Gertrude turned round at last and threw herself face downwards on the pillow, weeping sadly alone there, in the silence of the night, tears so bitter as she shed then for the first time, which almost seemed in her bitterness to drive away the image of Stanley Graham and make it abhorrent to her.

"O papa! if I were only going back to you tomorrow! If I had only never come here at all, but could wake and find it all a dream, with the crucifix looking down at me in my own little room at home!" But not so easily was her trial to be ended—not so soon; not until her feet had trod wearily but patiently in the way of the Cross was the young, girlish heart to find peace.

CHAPTER IX.

When Gertrude rose next morning, she hardly looked as fresh as she had always done previously from her peaceful, healthy sleep. When she had fallen asleep at last, with the tear-traces still on her cheeks, she had been haunted by uneasy dreams, which changed vaguely and rapidly, until she dreamed that she herself was the heroine of the opera she had that night witnessed. She was *Aminta* walking across the broken bridge, when it gave way entirely, and she fell into the abyss below, calling out wildly to Stanley Graham to help her, for somehow he seemed near at hand among the spectators, and the shock awoke her too rudely to allow of her trying to sleep again.

With the bright summer sun streaming into her room, and the long, cheerful day before her, her anxiety of the previous night hardly seemed so sharp or so heavy to the still buoyant young heart, but yet her morning prayers were almost one long petition for strength and guidance in the new existence to which she seemed tending, for help in the trials which she felt vaguely, yet certainly, were in store. For the dim foreboding was upon her still, much as she tried to shake off the feeling, striving to tell herself how she longed for the day of her return home, where she would soon forget all her silly fancies, and the fascinations which now seemed at times too strong for her.

Lady Hunter noticed Gertrude's weary looks at breakfast.

"But a good canter in the 'Row' this morning will set you all right, dear, won't it? We can't expect your country roads to be quite so perpetual in London, after all, can we? But they will soon bloom again in their native air, all the better, perhaps, for a short absence. The only thing is, I hope your papa won't scold me for their loss, love."

Gertrude tried to laugh gaily.

"I must take a pot of rouge home, Julia, if you're so afraid, shall I? And the very effort to be gay brought back the color to her cheeks for the time, and her cousin could not guess at the pain the brave little heart was suffering even while she laughed so merrily. They went out to ride at the usual hour, about noon, and Gertrude tried to talk to Sir Robert with her customary ease and gaiety, the open air and bright sunshine kindly helping her in the effort. They had taken but two or three turns up and down the "Row," and were now stopping for a minute to speak to some acquaintances, when Gertrude, looking up, saw Stanley Graham riding in on to the ground, accompanied by two other young men. Alas! for her resolutions, for the strength she fancied she had gained by the discovery of where her heart and thoughts were tending! At the sight of him that poor little heart beat with a tell-tale joy; and had any close or interested observers been at hand, they must have seen the rosy color mount quickly to her face as the brown eyes sparkled with the new light that had come so often to them during these last two days.

Mr. Graham rode up at once to where Sir Robert and Gertrude were halting, and when he had spoken to them was seized upon by the friends to whom they were speaking.

"If one may venture to scold you, Mr. Graham," said a young lady amongst them, a handsome, fast-looking girl, "I think you ought to apologize to us all for having made us sigh in vain for you so long. And she laughed, somewhat boldly, Gertrude thought.

Stanley Graham's lips curled slightly, but he replied with perfect politeness:

"When I am so highly honored as to be sighed for by you, Lady Flora, I shall certainly be willing to apologize most amply."

Lady Flora shrugged her shoulders and was silenced, while Gertrude wondered to herself, "How should I feel if he ever spoke to me like that, with that freezing look and manner!"

"I thought you hated the 'Row,' Stanley," said Lady Flora's brother, a dissipated, shallow-pated youth—thought you had a great contempt for the whole affair, horses and people and everything," he drawled out, evidently enjoying the idea of being able to attack Stanley on any subject.

"You are right; I do not particularly care for the 'Row,' Edmund," replied Stanley, the naughty lip curling unmistakably now as he spoke the few curt words.

"Perhaps," said Lady Flora, willing to be revenged on Stanley for his speech to herself, "Mr. Graham has turned Papist in Italy, and comes here to practise mortification."

"Don't give me credit for any such self-denying motive, Lady Flora. I certainly did not come to practise mortification." And the tone implied so plainly that the presence of herself and her brother was a mortification to him that even the dull-witted youth understood the hint and hurried away, his sister urging her horse after him, without a bow to Stanley Graham, though she pointedly bestowed one on Gertrude and Sir Robert.

At once Stanley went up to Gertrude's side, the cold look and manner gone, and the look and voice she knew so well already stirring her heart once more, and dispelling like a mist what remained of the last night's anguish.

"I hope *Aminta* did not keep you awake last night, Miss Mannerling; and that you did not get up and walk broken bridges, or do anything of the sort?" And he laughed kindly as he rode on by Gertrude's side, his friends following with Sir Robert.

Gertrude blushed slightly.

"Well, I did dream that I was *Aminta*; but I woke suddenly by the bridge seeming to break, so I don't know how I might have ended but for that."

How little he knew, as the sweet voice spoke so gaily, and as he met the bright smile raised to his face—how little he knew of that last night's pain, of his bitter tears and home yearnings; how still less he knew of the "still small voice" which was whispering to the girlish heart even now, but from which she turned shrinkingly, trying not to hear it in her new, absorbing joy!

For nearly an hour they rode on together, up and down, Gertrude hearing nothing but Stanley Graham's voice, seeing nothing but his face, as she raised hers to meet his gaze, while they talked on as earnestly as was consistent with their horse exercise, Gertrude knowing and caring nothing about the remarks which were being passed upon her, and Stanley Graham supremely indifferent to them, if he guessed at their existence.

"Is Stanley Graham bewitched by that little Miss Mannerling?" exclaimed one lady to the gentleman with whom she was riding.

"It looks like it," was the reply; "for I never saw him do such a thing before as ride for a whole hour in the 'Row,' much less devoting himself to a young lady all the time."

"Who is that girl who is managing to fascinate Stanley Graham into making a fool of himself?" asked another, who did not know Gertrude, a young officer, a friend of Stanley's. "She is pretty enough for anything, to be sure, and there seems nothing fast about her; but still it is so unlike Stanley."

"Don't you know who she is?" laughed his brother officer. "She is a cousin of Lady Hunter's, a little girl from the country; wonderfully pretty and wonderfully natural and unaffected too; quite refreshing, as I discovered the other night at the Duchess of N—'s ball; being a protegee of the Hunters may account for some of her haughty Stanley's attention to her, but hardly for so much of it as he is bestowing just now."

All unconscious of the talk she excited, Gertrude rode on in her elysium, until Sir Robert again drew close up to her, asking her if she would not like to return home now to luncheon, as they were going to a morning concert immediately afterwards.

"Oh, yes! certainly, Sir Robert; I am ready any time," she replied quickly; and they turned their horses' heads, homewards, Gertrude wondering vaguely how long they had been out, and whether she ought to have proposed of herself to go in sooner.

Stanley Graham had good-morning to his two friends and rode home with Sir Robert and Gertrude, though he could not remain to luncheon, as he had an appointment elsewhere. But he was coming tonight to a literary soiree which Lady Hunter always gave towards the close of every season, and the thought made Gertrude's heart bound as he bade her a temporary adieu.

"It is only for a few hours—only for a few hours," it seemed to repeat with an inner joyous sound.

"What ever have you been doing?" exclaimed her ladyship, as she came into the hall to meet her husband and Gertrude. "You will

have to lunch very quickly, so I hope you are not very hungry, you two dusty, tired creatures." And she made Gertrude sit down just as she was, in her habit, as she would have to dress directly for the concert.

"Well, we are rather late, I believe," said Sir Robert; "but we all seemed to be enjoying ourselves so much that we evidently forgot the time—oh, Gertrude?" And he spoke so kindly, and so unmistakably without any *arriere pensee*, that Gertrude could not feel uncomfortable, though she might have done so could she have known that her cousin, seeing deeper and more quickly than Sir Robert, was wondering what had so bewitched Stanley Graham as to make him remain thus long in a place for which he cared but little, and that the wondering led her on to further reflections.

"Surely it cannot be that. But no, she is too young and girlish; he would never think of her in that way. And if even it were so, there could be no objection to it, rather the contrary, even from a doting father like hers. Except indeed—And some thought seemed to strike her, from which she turned away as painful or useless, smiling brightly again as she rid herself of it.

As Gertrude dressed for the concert, she was hardly thinking of her toilet, but of the last hour or two; of her ride in the "Row," with Mr. Graham; of their conversation, even of their intervals of silence, which had seemed only another stage of her elysium, with those piercing gray eyes bent upon her so kindly—the eyes which but that morning she had seen could look so coldly and scornfully if they chose.

WIFE

"There's more pluck and energy and grit in that little fellow's body than in any one of the whole of the forty boys put together. If he means to do a thing, he'll do it, no matter how many difficulties there are."

So said Mr. Francis Ashton, the boys' schoolmaster, to Canon Cameron, the rector of the parish.

"He does everything so thoroughly, I caught him trying to stand on his head the other day, and was obliged to command him to stop, or he'd have apoplexy. When he genuflects in church, he positively smites the ground with his right knee."

"Yes," murmured the Canon. "I've heard him behind me when he's been serving my Mass. I told him he would have a housemaid's knee, but I took care to congratulate him at the same time. What's he done now?"

"He sticks to it—the only Mass in Lent," answered Mr. Ashton. "Most of them have given it up, and he was the only one there this morning!"

"But look at the weather this past week," said the Canon, who was always ready to make excuses for the boys, as everyone knew, though, of course, the falling-off of attendance since the beginning of Lent had disappointed him a good deal.

"He's not particularly clever," went on the schoolmaster, "but he's fairly good at lessons, and such a beggar to stick! Once he gets hold of a thing, he's like a bulldog—he'll never drop it!"

"Let's hope he'll hang on to the Faith, then, in the days to come," said the Canon, and Mr. Ashton could not help thinking that he meant a good deal more than he said, as was often the case.

There had been a wonderful mission at St. Christopher's just before Lent, with astonishing results—quite a number under instruction, who seemed likely to make very satisfactory converts; a much larger number of the careless were now always to be seen in their places at Sunday Mass, and most of the worst "relapsed" cases had come humbly to Confession, and so far seemed to be keeping it up in the most edifying way.

But one of the most pleasant results had been the crowds of school children—boys, girls, and even infants—who now went to daily Mass on their way to school. It was true that the Canon, at considerable inconvenience to himself (and to several other people, by the way), had changed the hour of the second Mass from 8 o'clock to 8.30 for this purpose, and the mission Father, who had won all their hearts, had asked them to do it. He had paid so many visits to the schools, and told them so many delightful stories, and said how he would like to think when they went away what a fine show they were making at daily Mass, though, of course, nobody was obliged to go. It was a thing to be offered to Our Lord to show Him how they felt for His sufferings at this time. If it did involve a little discomfort all the better; it made the offering more worth having.

They had begun magnificently. The first week of Lent crowds tramped up the church with muddy, heavy boots to their places. For at St. Christopher's the children had the best places, nearest the sanctuary that is, and the grown-up set behind. Certainly the crowd at the end of the week had diminished slightly, and by the end of the second week still more. Then gradually the boys fell off, and at last only four or five—and these quite little boys—kept it up.

At last there came a morning (it was a very wet one) when only a

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