

GERTRUDE MANNERING

A TALE OF SACRIFICE
BY FRANCES NOBLE

CHAPTER XXVII.—CONTINUED

"I am so sorry," she said, with her sweet, rueful smile, "but, you see—just for a minute—it seemed to be coming near, what I have been so hoping and praying for."

"And perhaps it is not so far off either, my child," was the quiet answer, as, looking at her very earnestly, he resumed his difficult task; "but you must promise not to excite yourself at all while I tell you why I think so." Then, very slowly, so slowly as to make it at first purposely only half intelligible to her, he told Gertry how Lady Hunter had written to Stanley Graham, and of the answer which had just come from him; of the wonderful news of his conversion to the Catholic Church, and deep repentance for the past.

Gertry sat motionless against her pillows, with her hands clasped, and her eyes now and then raised to Father Walsley's face; not excited, but with a strange awe upon her, a wonder too absorbing yet for agitation, as it dawned upon her at last that Father Walsley was not telling her what might possibly be, but what really was—that her prayer was heard, the sacrifice of her life accepted, as she had prayed it might be; that Stanley Graham was coming to her death-bed, an infidel no longer, but a Catholic now, forced, as it were, at last to yield to the grace he could no longer resist.

"Father Walsley," she said, in a low tone of entreaty, with a smile so beautiful on her pale face that it struck the good priest as that of one who already looked on heaven, "may I not see the letter? May I not read it, to convince myself it is not all a happy dream?"

Then he gave it into her hands; and with the sweet tears falling from her eyes she read it, not once, but many a time over, kissing it lingeringly as she folded it up at last.

"I may write to him myself, may I not?" she asked pleadingly, looking up again. "Papa will be kind to him, for his own sake now as well as mine. Ah! Father Walsley, when he comes, when you grace to him like I do, you will not wonder why I have wanted him so for God. Ah! it is almost too great joy, as if it could not be real. And yet it is true."

She was so strangely calm amid her absorbing joy, there seemed so much more of heaven than of earth in her happiness, that Father Walsley was not able to ask her.

"My child, you are sure there is no regret to overcome? No undue longing for life, which could now have been joined with his?"

She looked up with a strange, happy look, and shook her head. "Don't be afraid, father. If I had lived he might never have yielded to grace, and I—think, I trust that our Lord will give me grace not to wish to come back to earth even when I see him; that I shall be able to—remember that I tried always to pray for him for God, not for myself." But her voice began to tremble and her face to flush again, as if in the reaction after her strange calmness, so that Father Walsley rose and summoned her father, who waited outside.

"Papa," Gertry whispered, as he took her in his arms for a minute, "you must never grieve about me now, even when I am dead, because I am so happy that it seems like heaven, papa, to think of it—such joy that I hardly dared to look for it to come to me on earth! You will so—love him too, papa, you will console each other always. And the ring, papa darling, the poor little ring that I sent back to—him, where is it, papa? Ah, you have it! Now put it on for me yourself, so that—we can tell him you did it, and then he will know at once—that you have forgiven him." And as her father with his trembling hand placed Stanley's ring once more on her finger, as she looked at it, her voice, which had been growing more and more agitated with every word, seemed to fall entirely all at once, and falling back on her father's arm, she fainted away.

The joy, gently as it had been broken to her, had been too much for the poor little heart when once that first wondering calm had vanished, and for a minute, in his agony, Mr. Manning thought she was dead; but Lady Hunter and the nurse, who now came in to give their assistance, assured him that though perhaps dangerous, from the very complaint that had caused it, his darling's attack was not necessarily a fatal one. Gertry was slowly recovering when the doctor arrived on his daily visit; and when he had solemnly assured Mr. Manning that this time the seizure would not end in her death, though he looked terribly anxious as he said so, he asked Father Walsley in a low tone what had caused the attack. It was hardly possible to keep him in ignorance of all the circumstances now, when also Stanley Graham might be expected in a day or two; so drawing Mr. Manning aside, Father Walsley whispered that they must speak to him for a few minutes, and told him what the doctor had asked.

Then Mr. Manning, speaking as quietly as he could in his agitation, told the doctor, what he had never

directly done before, the nature of the trouble that had been the cause, as they felt only too surely, of his daughter's illness. He did not mention the precise reason for the separation between her and Stanley Graham, but only that such a separation had been necessary; adding that circumstances had now occurred which would enable them to come together again for the short time left to his daughter on earth, and that it was this news which, though told to her as gently as possible, must have caused her sudden attack.

The doctor listened without surprise, perhaps only to the confirmation of his own suspicions, and then said very earnestly in reply:

"Mr. Manning, if there has been anything of this kind, you must never reproach yourself for what has been told her today, for consenting to let this Mr.—Graham, I think you said, come to her as he wishes, and for allowing her to read his letter. To have let her continue in ignorance of whatever has occurred would have been cruel, nay impossible, under the circumstances. And in her weak state it would in any case have become every day more difficult to ward off agitation from one of an excitable, sensitive nature like hers. Some slight cause might any day now have produced an attack quite as serious as this has been; indeed, though we may not have seen it, the very hiding of the anxiety and inner feelings concerning this one matter must have been so injurious that the joy she is feeling now can scarcely be as much so, because any day the repression might have become too strong for her, and she ended her life suddenly, and of course more painfully than it can end now, even—should another attack come soon."

"Then—do you fear one, Dr. Baldwin?" earnestly asked Father Walsley, seeing that Mr. Manning could not speak.

"I will not deceive you," replied the doctor gravely. "Though I cannot, of course, foretell one, Miss Manning is in that state now that you should be prepared for the worst any time, especially after the agitation, which is unavoidable, of seeing Mr. Graham when he arrives. I think you said she wished to write herself to give him the required permission. Do not hinder her if she wishes it when she is quite recovered, in an hour or two, if she does not fatigue herself with too long a letter, because he should in justice be written to today, as every minute is precious that keeps him from her; and if she once recovers from the agitation of seeing him, she may be all the better for his frequent presence."

Father Walsley turned for a minute to Mr. Manning.

"Would you wish to send for Rupert, Mr. Manning? It would do no harm, and it is but fair to have him near his sister now, at least for a day or two."

Mr. Manning grasped the priest's hand eagerly.

"Of course, of course. I seem to think of nothing, Father Walsley, nothing but—her. If—she—died without seeing Rupert, I could never forgive myself." And he looked so broken down, so changed, that even the doctor was for a minute un-manned.

At once Father Walsley wrote out a few words to be immediately telegraphed to Rupert:

"Can you come home for a day or two at least? Your sister is in a very dangerous state."

And then he followed the doctor and Mr. Manning back into Gertry's room.

She was quite conscious now, and was talking quietly, with that sweet smile on her face, to Lady Hunter, whose arm was supporting her tenderly. When the doctor had assured himself that nothing more could be done at present, he took his leave, having quietly given directions as to what must be done in case of another attack, which, however, he did not yet apprehend.

As soon as he had gone Mr. Manning took his place again by Gertry's side, which Lady Hunter gave up to him.

"You see I am quite right again now, papa darling," she whispered, as her hand sought his in their fond, accustomed way. "And I may—write to—him today, may I not, papa, to tell him—how happy he has made me—and—you; to tell him—to come, that—you will receive him joyfully even, papa dear?"

Even if it had been a positive enemy, one whom he personally disliked, for whom she pleaded, her father could not have resisted his darling's low, eager tone of sweet entreaty, the yearning gaze of the eloquent eyes which shone now with such a joyous light.

"Tell him to come, Gertry, whenever he chooses; I am ready to receive him for your sake, because it will bring you happiness, even if I were not ready to forgive him for God's sake, who has called him in such a wonderful way to the faith which he has hated so long, at a—time, too, when no—hope of possessing you, my darling, can have influenced him in any way."

"That is it, papa, the greatest joy of all; what I have prayed for always for him. And, papa," she added, in a low, solemn whisper, holding his hand very fast, "if—even—the seeing—him should be too much for me, if it—killed me—you could not grieve, papa dear, because it would be joy that would have done it; your little girl would

have died of joy too great for earth, and he—the cause of it, must be very dear to you always." And a strange awe, which for a time seemed to render mere human grief unfitting, came over her father as she spoke, as he seemed to feel that his darling, so ripe for heaven, could not be long for earth, that God was calling for her to be given back to Him very quickly now.

TO BE CONTINUED

THE RETURN

"But, John, it's only for a month," pouted Elsie, looking up at her tall husband.

"I was thinking of the money, my dear," returned John gravely. "Things have been dull with me lately."

"It would take only rough clothing," insisted Elsie.

John had a momentary vision of what Elsie would call rough clothing—the best sports costumes to be obtained in their town.

"Where did you say the party was going?"

"To the Humboldt Mountains in Nevada. Just think, John, what a wild, romantic spot that must be!"

John looked grave. So there was no romance in keeping the house neat and clean, and waiting for his coming at night!

"I'll see what can be done," he promised, as he took down his hat and coat. Elsie danced away with a light heart. When John said he would see what could be done, the thing was as good as settled. She knew that much. How would he get the money? Oh, some way. Father always had produced it when necessary. John would get it. Men always did.

One week later the party was en route to Nevada. John was apparently comfortable, as he was to take his meals at a restaurant near their home. Of course Elsie was proud of John but she longed for adventure. She always knew just what John was going to do next; just when he would be home in the evening and that his viewpoint would be sensible and safe. Now, this party, for instance, would in some way shock John. Mrs. Yardell was so sparkling and witty that Elsie forgave certain indelicacies of expression, but John would never forgive them. All the sparkle in the world would not blind John's eyes to the fact that in his code a lady was careful in speech, and did not smoke cigarettes. Of course Elsie had been reared to believe as John believed, but it did not seem that in order to be fashionable, one must compromise a bit—anyway she was on the road to romance; to wild barren stretches of desert and great white crowned mountains. She became a part of the gay, free life of the party about her. That is, she partially did. She could not smoke. "Oh, you'll learn," laughed one of the women.

A few days later the party was settled high in the Humboldt above Ruby Valley. Far down one could see the light of a ranch house; halfway down the mountain a great flock of sheep was encamped for the night. In the clear air the steady, "Baa-baa" came up to the laughing party.

The tents were up; the Dutch oven on the coals; one of the men was playing the ukelele; a woman sang intermittent snatches of Broadway jazz. In a moment of silence a voice was heard from the edge of the forest:

"But, my dear, you surely don't think Anna should stay with that old fossil just because he loves her? Think how bright and witty she is. She could marry anyone."

The ukelele took up the burden of a popular song and the bit of gossip was lost in the general confusion.

Elsie sat silent. John was watering the lawn by this time. He always watered the lawn after dark. He would wet the pansy bed and the little apple tree at one corner of the back lot. He said the apple tree made the place like home—there had been apple trees in his father's back yard. Elsie had preferred an Italian cypress. This was life—and that existence back there. She remembered what the gossip had said of Anna—but that was too far—too far!

"Elsie, Ducks, come over to Reno with me for a while when this crowd goes back," cried Mrs. Yardell affectionately, throwing one arm about Elsie's shoulders. I'm not going back for a long time. Jack will rage but he always does that." She laughed as if Jack's opinions had little weight.

"I can't afford it," said Elsie.

"But I can. I'm going to spend a thousand of what Aunt Mary left me. I'm burning money now—a-days, Elsie."

"I'll think it over," promised Elsie.

"How did you ever marry a man like John? He looks as if he had never had an emotion in his life."

Elsie struggled between a conviction that Mrs. Yardell spoke the truth and an earlier inborn conviction that a husband should be sheltered under all circumstances.

"He is very clever," she asserted.

"Oh, yes, yawned Mrs. Yardell, "but with that hair and that color, you could marry anyone."

"But I am married," protested Elsie.

"Bless the child," laughed Mrs. Yardell. "It would be a pity to see you go back before you shed such mid-Victorian ideas. You'll come with me."

All through the next two weeks

the gay party laughed and sang and came dangerously near a hilarity which was anything but well-bred. A flask had been handed about on more than one occasion but Elsie, remembering John's grave eyes, had passed it by. The oldest man in the crowd, a gay bachelor, turned to look at her with approval as she did so. So he felt as John did. Then why? She did not understand this world very well.

At last the day approached when the trip homeward was to be made. Tomorrow the tents would come down; the clothes were already packed; Elsie walked alone down the hillside, thinking, thinking. Should she go on for another gay month or should she go home?

"That life is ruining your charm," Mrs. Yardell had told her. "Soon you will be old and staid."

She walked down the mountainside, turning this way and that to avoid the clinging bushes. When she came out of her reverie it was quite dark and she was plainly lost. She ran forward uncertainly. There were mountain lions up here. Only yesterday morning there had been tracks about the camp. Her knees shook and at the breaking of a twig she gave a little cry. At last she turned to an ancient beaten path. She followed it down, and then quite suddenly it took a sharp turn and she came upon an open campfire. She ran forward gladly and then stopped—it was not her camp.

A man sat before the fire—a dark, foreign man who bent over a package upon his knee. He turned sharply as one accustomed to guard his sheep. Ah, this was a herder's camp. He arose and bowed low before the lady as he had been taught to do in Basque across the sea. In the next few minutes from his slight knowledge of English and her slight knowledge of Spanish, or Basque dialect, they arrived at some degree of understanding. It was best that the lady remain there until morning. His tent, his simple meal, his life, were it necessary, were hers to command.

With broken speech he made his guest welcome, placed a soap box by the fire, served a great bowl of steaming stew. Warmed, reassured, she looked eagerly about her. Surely this was romance enough—lost upon a wild mountain-side.

That a grave face this man had and with what solemn courtesy he had made her welcome. Something in his manner said, "All woman kind is worthy of respect." He was bending over that same package. He looked up caught her eye, and holding his package up, smiled. It was as if the sun shone behind that somber face. She took the package from his hand. A picture—the picture of his wife and children. What clean, bright faces! And the woman's face was wonderful. Her eyes were so calm, so trustful. No doubt she felt certain of this man's love and devotion; she was waiting for him away off there in Basque. What a lovely way to feel!

What a romance was something else in the package—a rosary. She looked down at it and the herder, watching her face, explained in one brief phrase, "Dios Omnipotente"—"on the mountainside in summer, on the desert in the long, cold winter—God was omnipotent. When had she, Elsie, thought of God? It had been a long, long time ago.

The romance faded; a pain grew about her heart. There is something wrong with us all, she thought. The herder, his face still illumined, talked on brokenly—of his wife, his boy and girl, of the good old priest who advised them in his absence, of how he sent his money home, and a portion always to his Church. Honor, faith and loyalty were the things he had thrown away their money; his was the high, big purpose which made him save each penny. All women were sacred in his sight—no wonder! Here upon this mountainside burned the fires of sacred devotion, here was steadfastness, loyalty to his sheep, to his wife, to his God and his Church.

His puzzled gaze cleared. Ah, the lady was thinking of someone dear to her as these were dear to him—someone whom she longed to see—that was it.

"We cannot afford it," Robert had said. He, like this man, was bending every effort toward securing prosperity and comfort for his wife and as for children—John longed for children. What kind of wife did John have? Not one like this woman in the picture whose fine, clean face showed steadfastness of purpose.

A shout! Voices. Hurried footsteps approached. The rescue party burst into the camp, half laughing, half frightened.

Ten minutes later, one of the men walked over to the Basque and offered him a banknote. The Basque looked him steadily in the eye and put both hands behind him. Elsie stepped quickly between the two. "You do not understand," she said to the American. "He is a gentleman."

At breakfast next morning the party broke camp. To Mrs. Yardell's entreaties, Elsie repeated steadily.

"I am going home."

John was watering the little apple tree in the back yard. His heart was troubled. She was so young. If only he could hold her steady for a year or so, life would settle her. If only he could hold her past this restless stage!

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