

GERTRUDE MANNERING

A TALE OF SACRIFICE BY FRANCES NOBLE CHAPTER VIII.

Lady Hunter and Gertrude went out driving on the following afternoon, and on their return learnt that Mr. Graham had called during their absence.

She tried hard to think of nothing during her dressing but home and the convent, of Rupert, and of her father in his retreat, praying perhaps for her; but the task was almost a vain one: she could not be peaceful and calm; her heart would beat joyously in the anticipation of what was coming, and she knew it was not all the thought of the opera, delightful as the prospect of it was.

"I must not go back to papa vain and silly like that," she sighed. And she took not another look in the glass, though she lingered still some time longer in the room, unconsciously dreading the going down-stairs, though she dare not pause to confess the reason even to herself.

She went down at last, and found Stanley Graham in the drawing-room with her cousin and Sir Robert. He rose and came forward to meet her with a kindly inquiry as to whether she was fatigued, as he took her hand, with that tender yet respectful look which went so dangerously straight to Gertry's heart.

"You are quite ready to enjoy the opera, I hope, Miss Mannering."

"Oh, yes, indeed!" she replied earnestly, looking up with a smile as she recovered from her first embarrassment.

"It was really very good of you to come, Stanley," Lady Hunter said to him as they sat down to dinner. "I am afraid you have put off some other engagement for us. However, I hope it was not anything very fascinating."

"Ah, no! Lady Hunter, don't be at all uneasy on my account. It was only a promise to Major Leigh to dine with them at mess; but I saw him this morning and made it all right. I much prefer renewing my acquaintance with Mademoiselle Patti as *Amina* in your company and Miss Mannering's."

"Thank you, Stanley; we are highly honored," laughed her ladyship.

Gertry was somewhat quiet during dinner, for though Mr. Graham was very attentive and constantly addressed her, she did not feel able to talk to him quite so freely before her cousin and Sir Robert as she had done during their *tele-ante* the previous evening. Sir Robert was remaining at home that night; and Gertry was very quiet too in the carriage as they drove to the opera, letting Lady Hunter and Mr. Graham almost entirely monopolize the conversation, though her heart was beating fast in its new vague satisfaction, and with the excitement of being so near to beholding the sight she had longed for so often. When they were fairly in the theatre, in Lady Hunter's box, Gertry's excitement quite overcame her shyness; and as her cousin was engaged in talking with three or four other gentlemen who had made their way to the box, she turned to Stanley Graham and began to ask him several questions concerning the opera so earnestly, and listening so intently to his answers, that he felt as though he had never known what it was to enjoy a visit to the theatre before.

"You have seen 'Sonnambula' before, of course, Mr. Graham, have you not?"

"Many times, Miss Mannering."

"And you're not tired of it? You could not be. I should think for the music is so lovely; even I know that much about it."

"Well, no, I am not tired of it exactly; but if I were, I should resolve to try and enjoy it all fresh over again for your sake, because I should not like to be a kill-joy to your pleasure, you know," he said, with a smile.

"You are very kind," she said, blushing slightly, but with a frank look up into his face; and in another minute the overture began.

might not have done a few nights before. She spoke very little during the intervals between the acts, but sat gazing anxiously before her, unconscious of the almost tender admiration depicted on the pale, proud face so near her, as its deep eyes rested on her rather than on the stage.

And when it came to the joyous ending, the glorious "Ah, non giunge!" in which the heroine pours forth her whole soul in such delicious song, Gertry's eyes filled with tears so rapidly that she was obliged to brush them away, and she drew back in her seat, ashamed of having betrayed her emotion.

"Why, Gertry," whispered Lady Hunter, smiling, "this is a real tribute to Patti's genius!"

"It is very silly, I know, Julia," and poor Gertry blushed dreadfully. "I'm afraid I must look very foolish, Mr. Graham," she added, turning to him; "but I couldn't help it really. It was so delicious, altogether, the singing and everything; and I have never seen anything of the kind before, you know." And she tried to laugh away her emotion.

"Don't apologize, please, Miss Mannering," and Stanley Graham's voice was very, very gentle as he smiled at the upturned, tear-stained face. "If I might come with you to the opera every night, I should learn to enjoy it again, perhaps." And he sighed almost imperceptibly.

"How I wish I could cry at the opera, Stanley!" said Lady Hunter, as they rose to leave the box; Gertry feeling as though just awakened from a delicious dream, and wondering why all these people seemed to take it so coolly—what they came for, if they did not enjoy it as she had done.

"I should not care to come if I could not enjoy it," she thought. "But I suppose they are so used to it that many of them come only to meet their friends and show themselves off. But they can do that just as well and better at a ball. And what does Mr. Graham come for, I wonder?—for he can have no frivolous reason, I know."

For how could Gertry guess that Stanley Graham, intellectual and world-weary as he was, had come here tonight for nothing else than the pleasure of seeing her enjoy the opera; of revelling, as it were, in her fresh, unaffected delight and enthusiasm? How could she know that his proud heart was moved as it had not been for years, when she had turned to him with tears still glistening in her soft eyes, trying to smile as she apologized for her "foolishness," as she called it?

"Stanley, will you give your arm to my cousin?" Lady Hunter said to him, she joined him on leave-taking to the window. "I can take care of myself, you know."

The young man did as requested; and, taking his arm rather nervously, Gertry let him lead her to the carriage, unconscious of the pure, sweet happiness it gave him to have that little hand resting on his arm, that its very touch was to him like a revelation from a better, simpler world than the one he had known so long. And Gertry walked by his side as if in a dream from which she did not care to awake, but which was dispelled in another minute or two as they found their carriage, and Lady Hunter turned to shake hands with Stanley Graham, who had handed Gertry in before her.

TO BE CONTINUED

THE EASTER LILY

By Madge Wearé Simmons

She lived on the third floor of the apartment house; in this height, she had much to be thankful for. She caught the first beams of what sunlight a smoky, grimy city permitted; if a breeze blew at all during the hot day, she caught it. There was an angle of sky to be glimpsed through the maze of buildings that were rapidly elbowing the old reminder of former respectability out of space. Then, too, in the solemn hours of the night, when her infirmity tugged at her very heart strings, she was up high enough to escape the worst of the raucous city noises.

The little crippled girl, Susan Deane, needed every crumb of comfort this drab life afforded her. Her mother was worse than widowed—cursed with a man who imposed himself on her for weeks at a time, then basely fled when he ought to be helping support his afflicted child. She had been given a wheel chair by a charitable society, seated in this, most of the time, she passed the hours when her mother was at work, reading, playing with her flowers or gazing out into the sky at the shriveled horizon.

All day it was not quite so bad, but as evening drew on, she began to feel the loss of the tender-voiced mother. The last hour or two before she returned was the worst. In winter, the darkness settled down, almost with a thud; then lights began to flare against the murky sky that drew them back in glittering ribbons of smoky incandescence. She looked out at this time and dreamed.

Some nights, it was clear, and she eagerly watched for the first star; then she began to count the other well known orbs of the sky. Once or twice during the month, the silvery moon, in various shades of light and different curves and proportions, amused her as it set sail

across the angled nooks of her vision. In summer, it would be light long after her mother returned; then she saw the silhouetted sun effects as the orb of day sank to rest somewhere outside the range of her vision. But the same faithful stars decked the tinted sky and she was never lonesome.

Really, she had few fits of loneliness. The two rooms that sufficed for mother and daughter, were scrupulously clean. And flowers! The room was fringed with them. It took hours, some days, to wheel herself about the walls while she watered and fondled and talked to her pets. She had started modestly enough now, she almost possessed a parterre. No cheap, lagging, sickly "hollyhocks" either—no, the fairest bloom of the conservatory, the sweetest blossom of the winter hot house. The acquisition of which is another story.

Her mother scrubbed one floor of an immense skyscraper. Going in the afternoon, she worked until night. It was hard and disagreeable work for a woman, but it paid better than the soft places her limited education and training afforded. And always, she was borne along and upheld by the thought of the cheerful cripple, Susan, dismissing her with a smile and welcoming her back with a tremendous hug and kiss. Strange as it may seem, they appeared happy.

One evening Mrs. Deane entered an office, the occupant of which had not yet gone. He was staring moodily at his desk, on which stood a vase of beautiful flowers. He scarcely turned as the well known figure insinuated itself and went about the daily task. The flowers on his desk, also constituted a story. Two days before his wife had bounced into the office, bearing them in her arms. She flung them on the desk before him.

"Guess what these are for," she challenged; he pretended to frown, then with a wry smile answered, "A new fur coat?" She pouted and seating herself on the corner of his desk glared into his amused face.

"Don't you know what day this is?" He looked at his calendar.

"Sure," he nodded. "Friday, the 18th." She tapped the end of his nose.

"For shame," she scolded. "It is the anniversary of our wedding," and before he could recover from that, ran from the office.

At any rate, the flowers had been on his desk two whole days; he was thinking of bigger things than wedding anniversaries. As Mrs. Deane passed his desk with a waste basket in her hand he aroused.

"Here," he commanded, "take these dourishes or forget-mevers, or whatever they are and hurl them out the window." She stopped in blank surprise as he held out the flowers, but slightly wilted.

"Oh, no," she cried, "I won't throw them away—they are too nice. I have a little girl who fairly lives for flowers—" he looked at her as if vastly surprised to know that she had a daughter at all.

"That so?" he queried listlessly, flipping some papers away. "What's the matter with her?" She told him the simple story, told it so gently, with such a lack of whining, beggary cadences that his heart, (really a kind one) was won over at once. She took the flowers; more than that, there was a standing order left at the florist for any flowers Susan wanted. It is little wonder that the rough apartment smelled a perpetual fragrance and that the sun seemed to love to linger on the dainty bit it found to light up in the forbidding city.

Mr. Handon's phone bell tinkled; he took down the receiver. It was his sister, and in imperious tones she reminded him that he was expected to be at the farewell dinner being given her before she left for her European tour. With a smothered exclamation at his cursed luck in making engagements that he never felt like filling, he rang for his machine and after making out all arrangements at the office, was whirled across the city to the magnificent home where his bachelor sister held forth. He was one of the first arrivals, his wife not having arrived yet, and he took advantage of the last few moments with her in giving more or less sage advice.

"What's the matter, Billy?" he asked finally, noting her air of distraction.

"Just thinking—thinking what I shall do with this big lily Theodore gave me." He looked at the beautiful fragrant flower and laughed; flowers mean little in his ticker-tape existence.

"Fling it in the alley," he counselled gaily—and was rewarded with a frosty glare.

"It is really a beauty," chirped Miss Benton, admiring with the owner the rare Bermuda product. "I would advise turning it over to the house folks—"

"These are the very people," with an unwanted tenderness and reverence in his voice, "who can appreciate these things. We have no conception of the wondrous things that God has put before us. We are too artificial. I have no doubt that this gift will create a furor in that poor apartment such as a Wagner opera would in a thousand years." His sister was regarding him with an amused and curious smile.

"So be it then old top," she declared, "tomorrow morning you may have the supreme happiness of calling for the bijou and—casting it before awine," and the guests coming, they dropped the subject.

Sure enough, after the steamer slipped away from the dock, eastward bound with his sister aboard, he came back to the house and bore away the precious Easter Lily to the address given him by Mrs. Deane. It is true, also, that he uttered some impatient encomiums on the subject of apartment houses which refused the luxury of an elevator. He was pretty well winded by the time he gained the top row; the passageway was dark and rather smelly; there were various noises, children, angry men and scolding women. He knocked briskly on the door to which he had been directed by a brood of dirty-faced children, and in answer to it received a soft-voiced bid to enter. Once inside, he felt as if in another world.

The room was flooded in the rare sunshine that graced it; the floor was spotlessly white; the air was mildly fresh and warm. His eyes were fairly dazzled by the serried rows of flowers, some of them rather ancient and faded, it is true, but doing their bravest best to preserve the fine traditions that once distinguished them. The pretty canary, hearing the echoes of his father, completed the picture. That is, rather, almost completed the picture.

It took the shrunken form in the wheel chair to that; he looked up at the big, rich, well-dressed man with such a wealth of reverence and esteem that there came to his pretty well hardened eyes a dash of mist that rendered him helpless for a moment; she spoke, softly, smilingly, with a coy welcome that went to his very heart. Crippled as she was—he would have liked to have had her for his very own, to press the slight form to his breast and have her cheer him with a limpid sweetness of voice.

"Your mother told me you like flowers," he said as he advanced into the room and extended his hand; she placed her fragile fingers within it trustingly. "And as my sister went away and wanted this—whatever you call it—taken extra good care of, I thought I would bring it to you." He placed the gorgeous, odorous plant in its splendid setting, on the table by her side, and then stepped back to drink in the wonder and bliss and delight that fairly oozed out of the tiny figure in the chair.

She revelled in it, she played with it as a mother plays with her infant, she held her head aside in many an angle to size it up from every point of view. She fairly rhapsodized over the blooming thing; she forgot to thank him, or indeed was incapable of thanking him while the new born rapture lasted.

"Oh," she laughed and sobbed—and kissed the pretty thing again and again while the canary, as if aware of a new setting for the room, burst into redoubled melody. "Oh," and cried—in a way that furnished her company in her teary delirium as he mopped his eyes and said things under his breath. Beat all he ever had seen—by heck!

"Like it?" he finally managed to ask huskily, she looked up at him and placed the pathetic little claw in his big palm again.

"Like it?" she gasped: "I—adore it! Oh, thank you, thank you—" but any more thanks would have finished him so he left her side and going about the room made a fine pretence at admiring the flowers—when he didn't know one from the other. It must be a brave show for her, he thought, but measured in terms of the cascades of bloom, he was accustomed to furnish for his affairs, they looked like morning glories in a conservatory. She kept near him in the chair and as well as the saucy bird in the sunlit window permitted explained the wonders of her conservatory; he listened patiently. It was a lesson to the hard-hearted man of business, he never imagined he had so much sentiment in his system. He didn't seem like the same man when he left the room so often.

"What an Easter!" she cried as she clapped her hands; "how bright and sunny the world will be, with all this for me," and she laid a pale cheek against the delicate stem again. "It makes it seem more like church—I can almost hear the music—it seems that Christ has really risen for me—He will not forget me in seeing the grand ladies promenading with their Easter things on—will he?" He shook his head. Her innocent prattle almost carried him back to an Easter when it meant church and music and words of wisdom from the pulpit. And he thought merciful God, it took this castaway mite to infuse the spirit within him again. He wished his sister might be here; he would write her at the first opportunity and tell her all.

Filled with this new born delight, he finally managed to get away

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