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Gertrude (Chapters 19-20)

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GERTRUDE.

CHAPTER XIX.

I trust the reader will forgive my long forbearance to say any thing of Gertrude, when he observes that the various details, with which we have been so long engaged, owe all their interest to the influence they might exert over her feelings, conduct and destiny. The letter of Henry had filled her with amazement and distress. She had read it over and over again, and her mind had not failed to take the hint, he had intended to convey by the few words so significantly underscored. In this she saw a ray of hope and consolation. But this, at times, was darkened, and the prevailing state of her mind was that of perplexity and dismay. If indeed the supposed hint meant any thing, surely he would find some means to speak more plainly. Might he not even venture to write by mail? Though it might be unsafe to be too explicit, yet a letter, which even her mother might be permitted to see, might be so expressed as to convey to her own mind assurances that she was not forgotten or deserted. Eagerly did she watch the arrival of every mail. Eagerly did she scan the countenance of every person who might by possibility be charged with a letter to her. Even the sight of her rejected lover, Mr. Crabshaw, whom she met at a President's levée, awakened a tumult of undefined emotion, and gave to her countenance and manner an expression from which one less obtuse might have gathered new hope. The reader needs not to be told that Henry did not write either by the mail or by Mr. Crabshaw, and that every day did but add to the perplexity and distress of Gertrude.

But news from home did come at last; and it

came in the shape of the Doctor's letter, announcing his deliverance from utter ruin by the generous interference of Lucy Townsend. In this intelligence Mrs. Austin saw nothing very cheering, for it amounted but to this: that she had not been aware of the full extent of the evil, but that an arrangement had been made by which it would, in the end, prove not *much worse* than she had before supposed. Yet strangely enough Mrs. Austin seemed to be much elated by it, and paraded it to Gertrude as something which ought to cheer her spirits. Poor Gertrude by no means saw it in the same light. To her it was shocking to think how near her kind protector had been brought to the verge of ruin, and to see that his loss could not involve less than half his fortune. Whatever consolation the mother found in the Doctor's hint of the deep impression made on Henry, by the beauty and generosity of Lucy, there was nothing in this idea at all consolatory to the daughter. She coupled it with the fact of Henry's letter by her mother, and his silence ever since, and she began seriously to suspect that he to whom she had given the priceless treasure of her virgin heart was basely deserting her for gold.

Mrs. Austin had too much art to endeavor to rally the spirits of her daughter. A little reflection satisfied her that, apart from what was said of Henry, there was enough in the Doctor's letter to add to Gertrude's dejection, and that she herself ought rather to appear depressed than cheered by it. She therefore soon sobered herself down again to a manner expressive of much resignation to

inevitable misfortune. Thus Gertrude was left in possession of the poor privilege of indulging her feelings in the solitude of her own room, and in silent sadness in the family circle. She went less into company too, though, when there, self-respect and a regard to the laws of society made her strive to appear no less cheerful than formerly.

There is nothing that so strongly engages sympathy as a sincere effort at cheerfulness under the pressure of real grief. The most pathetic tone that ever strikes the ear, is the voice of a woman who strives to lighten the burden of her woes by a sprightly strain. No object that meets the eye appeals so strongly to the tenderest affections, as the sad smile of one who strives to close the fountain of her tears and to appear gay. Sympathy is rarely given to those who seem disposed to exact it; while it gushes forth spontaneously toward such as shrink from the thought of troubling others with their sorrows.

It may be remarked, moreover, that it is never so consolatory, never so precious, never so engaging as when thus manifested on behalf of those who are careful not to exact it. Clamorous grief is of the family of the horse-leech. No measure of sympathy can satisfy its demands. But the meek and humble, who bear their afflictions in uncomplaining silence, regard the interest which others may take in them as a gratuitous boon, for which they can never be too grateful.

Gertrude was one of this description, and nothing could exceed her sense of the kindness of Harlston, who, while he was careful not to betray any unbecoming curiosity, could not disguise the tender solicitude which the change in her countenance and manner awakened. Fearful of being obtrusive, he was perhaps less attentive than before, while the attentions he permitted himself to pay were less characterized by a desire to please, than a fear of being troublesome. Still he found himself more than ever drawn to the house of Mrs. Pendarvis, and, as Gertrude did not always appear, he was more than ever thrown in contact with Miss Bernard. The revelation made by Ludwell had led him to regard that young lady with more interest than before. He did not indeed see her character in a favorable light, but he had learned to look upon her faults not as the spontaneous manifestations of a bad heart, but as a something adscititious, superinduced upon a noble nature by causes over which she had had no control. He had seen that she was capable of deep, abiding and devoted love, and although he was not of that class of coxcombs who think every woman must fall in love with them, he was not so very humble as to suppose it impossible that a young woman of her temperament, though proposing nothing to herself at first but to secure his fortune, might, with slight encouragement, get up a case of love too sincere for her own comfort.

Thinking thus, he was careful to abstain from

every thing of that common-place gallantry, which is commonly called making love, though in truth it rarely affects a woman's feelings, except through her vanity. Could he have kept himself away, he would have avoided her. As it was, seeing her every day, and being often alone with her, he thought to effect his object by a change of manner. But this very change was the means of deceiving Miss Bernard, and reviving, in some degree, the hope that was nearly dead in her bosom. He felt for her a compassion to which he had hitherto been a stranger; and this was coupled with no small admiration of the strength of mind which had carried her through her severe mortifications, and left her still a cheerful, engaging and valuable member of the social circle. His manner was consequently at once kinder and more respectful, and the change was something like that which comes over a raw youth, when he first discovers that she, whom he had all along regarded as a mere mortal, does really belong to the order of celestials. In her sanguine moods Miss Bernard easily brought herself to see the matter in this light. At other times it was impossible for a person of her deep experience to mistake the tokens of his attachment to Gertrude. Between these opposing hopes and fears her mind continued to waver, until it finally settled down in a sort of compromise. Harlston was certainly interested in both ladies: perhaps he preferred Gertrude: but not so decidedly as to make it impossible that he might be brought to prefer Miss Bernard: and clearly were Gertrude out of the way—dead—married—or disgraced—Miss Bernard would be sure of him. So she settled the matter in her own mind.

Heretofore she had been conscious that, in imputing interested and mercenary views to Gertrude, she had done her injustice. The simple integrity of her character was too marked to be mistaken, and Miss Bernard could not bring herself seriously to believe her capable of marrying any man she did not love. At the same time she could not help seeing that that passion had no place among her feelings toward Harlston. But of late there was an unaccountable change in her manner towards him. He was obviously an object of much more interest to her than before. His attentions were more kindly received; his tenderness soothed her; his conversation wiled her away from her sad thoughts; and then, when she would leave the room and retire to her chamber, the smile did not leave her lip until she was alone; and none was permitted to witness her desolation of heart, when she compared the noble and generous, but unrequited devotion of Harlston, with the base desertion of him whom she still felt she must ever love. Miss Bernard saw nothing of this; and she began to suspect that the feelings of Gertrude were assuming a hue which the heart easily mistakes for that of love, and to fear, that, should Harlston offer his hand, it would

be accepted. There was the more reason therefore, that means should be devised to prevent that offer, or to defeat any engagement to which it might lead.

It was in this state of things, that Mrs. Austin had thrown in her way an opportunity, as she supposed, of learning a secret that she might dexterously turn to her own purpose. Her disappointment at not being let into it, and her vexation at being made the instrument of an irreparable breach between Gertrude and her unknown lover, supplied a new motive to her machinations. She saw that it would be in her power at any moment to produce disgust in the mind of Harlston, by putting him on the train of this clandestine correspondence. But there was no need of haste. Her game was to let things take their course, and so to play her own cards, that, though he might give his heart to her rival, he should not withhold from herself a full measure of admiration and esteem. She well knew how easily a valued and sympathizing female friend can attach herself, as by a sort of grafting, to a heart lacerated by the thought, that its best affections had been unworthily bestowed.

Miss Bernard was one of those whose minds are always engaged in comparing the conduct and circumstances of others, and thence deducing their motives. In this instance not a word, or look, or tone of Gertrude's escaped her observation, and she had abundant matter for it, because Gertrude, relying on the perfect understanding between Harlston and herself, took no pains to disguise her feelings towards him. She esteemed him highly, she valued and returned his friendship, and she was profoundly grateful for the kindness of his manner towards her, always most kind at the moments when she most felt the want of sympathy. "What can this mean!" thought Miss Bernard. Had sorrow produced its usual effect of softening her heart and quickening her sensibility, or was she eager to escape the storm which threatened to wreck the fortunes of her family, by finding a shelter in the arms of a man she did not love. It best suited the temper of Miss Bernard's mind to adopt the latter hypothesis, and nothing could exceed her virtuous indignation at the thought. Had Gertrude been habitually addicted to professions of disinterestedness, it would but have been a case of commonplace hypocrisy, at which no one would be surprised or shocked. But that she who made no professions, and who sometimes in a half serious way spoke of convenient matches as very convenient things—that she who, while talking thus, had by the quiet simplicity of her manners and the manifest integrity that characterized all she said and did, satisfied even the sagacious Miss Bernard, that she was the last woman in the world to think of marrying for convenience, should thus offend against the purity of her sex, was not to be endured. Who would not be indignant to observe, that immediately

after the receipt of the news, of Dr. Austin's difficulties, her manner to Harlston became such as to embolden him to approach her more nearly than before; to take her hand; to speak to her in the low and earnest tones of one secure of possessing her entire confidence and regard; and that at the moment when it would appear that he had been saying something particularly tender, she would look up in his face, with a glance at least as eloquent as his words could have been? It was impossible these things could escape him, and it was manifest that he was encouraged by them. But what would he think, if he did but know all that Miss Bernard knew? How could he fail to put the same interpretation on the whole matter, which to her was so obviously the true one? She wished he knew it. But he would never find it out. His high Southern notions of delicacy would never permit him to enquire into any matter which a friend might choose to conceal from him; and unless Miss Bernard should undeceive him, how was he to escape being taken in the toils of a mercenary drapery-miss? It was her duty to do this. The problem was to do it in such a way as should not awaken the least suspicion of her purpose.

The day of Doctor Austin's departure from Washington was a sad and agitating day to poor Gertrude. She was sad through sympathy and concern for him. She was agitated; for he was returning home; he would see Henry in a day or two; she might write by him: and if she did not express all she felt, she might at least say enough to make him explain his extraordinary letter. But what could she say? How indeed could she write at all to one who had invited her to forget him, and plainly showed that he meant to desert her. She did not leave her room that day, and Harlston, on calling, as usual, was told she was indisposed. The next day he called again and found Mrs. Austin and Miss Bernard, the only occupants of the drawing-room. His enquiry for Miss Courtney caused her mother to leave the room, and presently after Gertrude entered. Her countenance was sad, and her cheek was pale. Harlston met her, and led her to a seat. "I am afraid," said he, after the ordinary enquiry after her health, "that you find the hours and habits and dissipations, and, above all, the moral atmosphere of Washington unfavorable to your health."

"I am sorry," said Gertrude, making an effort to speak playfully, "to hear that I look so badly. As gentlemen do not commonly tell ladies of such things, I am afraid the case is very bad indeed. My glass speaks plainly enough, but, perhaps, self-love has made me insensible of the whole truth."

"Indeed, Colonel," interposed Miss Bernard, "I thought you had been a man of more gallantry. Do not you know that a lady can not bear disadvantageous comparisons even with herself?"

"Is the selfishness of a pretty woman then so concentrated," asked Harlston, "that the self of

the *present moment* is all she cares for, without regard to what she was yesterday, and will be again to-morrow !”

“Certainly. We live but in the present moment. Yesterday is past and gone, and all our to-morrows may depend upon to-day. A day lost may be the loss of every thing. When a lady is *in face*, and shines out in the full power of her charms, who knows that the man, on whom her destiny depends, may not be insensibly impelled to speak the word which can never be recalled? But, chilled to-day, he may be icy-cold to-morrow. The great advantage of the glass is to tell a lady when she must not show herself in company. Those who understand its admonitions profit by them, and always have a head-ache at such times. Gertrude you know had one yesterday, and if she would have taken my advice she would have kept it still. But she would make her appearance, and even means to go to the ball to-night.”

“I hope,” said Harlston, “Miss Courtney’s health may not suffer by her imprudence. I do not think she has any thing else to fear. We might tire of the rose, if the lily did not sometimes come to relieve the sameness, and it sometimes happens that the change from gay to sad, and from the glow of health to languid paleness is but the development of some new charm. And now that I hope I have made the *amende* for my want of gallantry, I will run the risk of offending again, by saying that I almost wish that Miss Courtney had accompanied her good father to that quiet, tranquil and delightful home I have heard described.”

Home! Poor Gertrude! She had no home. Tranquil! Delightful! So it had been; but, even were she restored to it, it could be so no longer. Henry, the brother of her childhood, her guide to all truth, her exemplar in all excellence! Henry, from whose lips she had imbibed every just sentiment and generous feeling; Henry, the beloved of her trusting virgin heart, had proved mercenary and base, faithless and false! At the words of Harlston, all these thoughts came thronging to her mind. She tried to speak, she knew not what. Her voice cleaved to her throat, the light faded from her eyes, her cheek blanched, one tear, that she could not repress, welled up, and hung quivering on each trembling lid; and then, by a sudden revulsion, the blood remounted to her cheek, and spread itself in a deep crimson blush over her neck and brow. With it came enough of self-consciousness to make her aware of her actual situation, and enough of strength to bear her from the room. She left it with a tottering step, reached her chamber, and sunk down upon the first chair.

The first impulse of Harlston, when he saw her rise with difficulty from her seat, was to spring to her assistance; but he felt that he had no right to detain, and ought not to follow her. Miss Bernard should have accompanied her, but she was too much

astounded and bewildered to think of it. Her eyes did but follow her to the door, and then, casting them down, she sat in silence, wondering what all this might mean. Her face indeed bore all the tokens of sympathy and concern, while envy, hatred and malice, and all manner of uncharitableness, were in her heart. She felt it to be impossible that Harlston should fail to attribute what he had seen to mortification, at his avowed willingness that Gertrude should leave Washington, and that nothing could prevent him from speaking on so plain a hint except perhaps disgust at its plainness. She had seen so much of his fastidious delicacy, that she was inclined to place great reliance on this disgust, and her first thought was to leave the matter unexplained, and let it work out its own results. But a glance at his countenance completely undeceived her. She looked up, and there he stood, flushed, excited, full of eager hope; his eye flashing, his cheek glowing, his whole appearance plainly betokening that his next meeting with Gertrude would bring him to her feet, her avowed and accepted lover. Her plan of operations changed in a moment.

“Poor Gertrude!” said she, in her tenderest tone. “You little know, Colonel, how sore a nerve you touched just now.”

Harlston started as from a trance, and gazed on Miss Bernard, less in curiosity than in amazement, at her venturing any remark on such a subject. But the young lady, with imperturbable coolness, took a newspaper from the table and handed it to him, directing his eye to the advertisement of Dr. Austin’s property. The truth, and, as he supposed, the whole truth, flashed on him instantly. He saw too plainly that the emotion manifested by Gertrude was not, as he had fondly hoped, for him. He found himself at once thrown back to the position he had occupied an hour before. But he was not selfish enough to think only of himself. He saw that distress and ruin hung over those deservedly dear to her who was so dear to him, and he felt that it became him to think what might be best for them. Putting the paper in his pocket, therefore, he made his bow to Miss Bernard, and returned home to reflect at his leisure over the whole matter. The result of his reflections is already before the reader, in his letter to the good Doctor.

CHAPTER XX.

The ball, of which Miss Bernard spoke, was one of those parties, which, twenty years ago, were common at private houses. Harlston had little thought that Gertrude would be there, after what had passed in the morning, and he had as little disposition to be there himself. But circumstances happened to make it due to the lady of the house, that he should at least present himself, if but for half an hour. He went late, and, among the first

objects that met his eye, on entering the room, was the figure of Gertrude on the floor. Unobserved by her, he looked to see if any trace remained on her countenance of the agitation of the morning. All had vanished. She was indeed still pale, and his conscious eye could detect a something of tender languor in her ever ready smile. She was not perhaps gay; but she was cheerful, bearing, as woman must bear, and hiding, as woman must hide, in the depths of her heart, the feelings which might have disqualified her to contribute her due share to the pleasures of the evening. To men, this self-command seems almost miraculous. The rash and superficial call it hypocrisy and art. Deeper and more candid thinkers see in it much of benevolence and wisdom. This is the philosophy of Society, and, in this training, we find the compensation for all the artificialities and trivialities of fashion. In learning to smile in the midst of affliction, woman acquires the faculty of wiling away the cares and soothing the griefs of her husband. That most blessed gift of God to man, a cheerful, happy-tempered *lady-wife*, is what she is, not in spite of her artificial education, but in virtue of it. The happiness of the domestic circle owes as much to the conventions of refined society, as the brilliant fashionable assembly.

So thought Harlston, as his admiring eye followed Gertrude through the mazes of the dance. He was yet more struck with the entire freedom from embarrassment with which she met him. In this there was obviously no effort. She took no pains to conceal the gratitude she actually felt for the solicitude he had manifested on account of her health, and her whole manner plainly showed that in the perfect understanding between herself and him, she felt secure from misconstruction.

If, in this view of the matter, Harlston saw nothing to encourage his hopes, there was much to increase his admiration and fix his choice. Indeed, intoxicated as he had been in the morning, at the striking manifestations of a feeling in Gertrude, which, at first, he could attribute to nothing but his hold upon her affections, he was, in a calmer moment, better pleased at being undeceived. That he was an object of interest to her: that he had established himself firmly in her esteem: that she took pleasure in his society; and that, on the whole, he stood higher in her favor than any other who approached her, he could not doubt. As to any preengagement of her affections, how could he suspect any thing of the sort, in the case of one who manifestly had taken so lively an interest in every thing around her, and on whose open brow he had never detected a shade of care, until that terrible domestic calamity, to which he now attributed all the sadness he had witnessed of late. That he had not made much progress in her affections, was not to be wondered at, when her whole mind was absorbed in the misfortunes of her friends; and it was a new proof

of her disinterestedness, that the character of these misfortunes had not turned her thoughts more decidedly to him.

Thus it is that men of generous natures, who love as only men of such natures can love, reason on all that is said and done by her they love. There is a form of selfishness, and that not the least detestable, which takes the name of Love, and manifests itself in the eager pursuit of the object of desire, and the most engrossing devotion while under encouragement, which is instantly turned to malignant and implacable hatred when hope is gone. The passion of Harlston was not of that character; and he was better pleased to continue a while longer uncertain of his fate, than to be assured of success by any means, which might at all derogate from his profound conviction of the universal excellence of the woman of his choice. The reader may have little sympathy to spare for a lover of this unromantic character. But I must beg at least his forbearance on behalf of Harlston, until he has learned enough of his past history to understand the nature of his feelings.

To Miss Bernard he felt obliged for having undeceived him, and really grateful for the opportunity he had found, through her means, of affording essential aid to the good Doctor in his present difficulties. He approached her with more of cordiality in his manner than usual, and their conversation, of which Gertrude and the affairs of her family were the subject, assumed a kind and confidential tone. This did not escape the notice of Ludwell, who looked on from another part of the room, and was vexed to see how entirely Harlston suffered himself to be engrossed by Miss Bernard. He had been mortified at the view his friend had taken of the history of his affair with that young lady, and not the less so, because he felt it to be in a great measure just. He was therefore impatient for an opportunity to make him see her in her true character, and would hardly have been sorry that he should think worse of her than she deserved. While his self-love was thus piqued, his desire to save Harlston from the machinations of a mischievous woman, was increased by a favor recently bestowed. However the Colonel's esteem for Ludwell had been diminished, his desire so serve one who had been the companion and friend of his College life, was in no degree abated. His high standing with men in power had favored his application on behalf of one for whose capacity he was prepared to vouch unhesitatingly. He had not indeed procured such an office for Ludwell as he desired, but he had obtained for him a position in which his talents would have fair play, and his love of excitement might be reasonably indulged. In a few days he was to leave Washington, and he was now taking his last farewell of the gaieties of the place, under circumstances that doubled the exuberance of his spirits, and the recklessness of his temper.

I have said, that he was vexed at the apparent good understanding between Harlston and Miss Bernard; and this feeling was increased as an occasional glance of the eye from one and the other, told him that Gertrude was the subject of their conversation. Almost unconsciously to himself, and wholly unobserved by them, he gradually changed his position, and at length found himself near enough to overhear something of what passed between them.

"How beautiful she is!" said Miss Bernard, as Gertrude passed them in the dance. The tone was one which Miss Bernard alone could utter, and it went direct to Harlston's heart. "How beautiful!! I declare I cannot look on her without a feeling of inexpressible anxiety for the fate of one so lovely, so pure, so tender and confiding as she is, amid the snares of the selfish, artful and designing, who delight to prey on the happiness of such beings. Between the envy of her own sex, and the mercenary spirit which, at this day, so much governs the conduct of the other, and the cruel vanity which prompts them to win where they will not wed, and to engage affections but to trifle with them, nothing but a special providence can save her from suffering, perhaps destruction."

"Is there not something, Miss Bernard," said Ludwell, suddenly breaking into the conversation, "is there not something in Miss Courtney, that calls to mind your former friend, Miss Dabney? I have been often struck with it, and never more than in hearing you foreboding for Miss Courtney the very doom that befel the other. God forbid that she too should be the victim of insidious friendship."

This was the first time since Ludwell had parted from Miss Dabney, that he had ever named her in the presence of Miss Bernard. She had had no hint of his knowledge, or even suspicion of the part she had acted, and conscience alone gave meaning and point to his words. It is true that "Conscience does make cowards of us all," but it sometimes happens, that the first effect of alarm is to produce a show of something like spirit and resentment. So it was with Miss Bernard on this occasion. "I had not supposed," said she, with studied calmness, but in a slightly acrid tone, which at once arrested the attention of Harlston, "that Miss Dabney could be reckoned unfortunate, in escaping from a mercenary debauchee, to the arms of a man of high character and independent fortune."

"Ah!" said Ludwell, in the same quiet way, "you are not aware, then, that Miss Dabney lived long enough to be completely undeceived: to be fully convinced of the disinterested devotion of the man she loved, even when her thoughts most wronged him, and to learn that she who had represented him as a most profligate *roué*, thought him not unworthy to be taken to her own pure bosom. You are not aware that she sunk under the shock she received from the knowledge of these things;

that she fell a victim to that worst of all maladies, a broken heart, and that she died, imploring the forgiveness of the husband and of the lover, both of whom she had rendered miserable by the sacrifice of her own happiness."

I am not sure that Miss Bernard, under any circumstances, could have heard with composure this frightful history of the fate of one for whom she had professed, and perhaps actually felt, as much friendship as ladies in her situation generally permit themselves to entertain. She certainly was shocked at the intelligence, and a feeling of horror at her own part in the transaction forced her to look up, and fix her eyes upon the speaker. A glance from Ludwell toward Harlston suggested a new idea, and drew her attention instantly to him. In a moment the whole truth was plain before her. The looks of both gentlemen were full of meaning. They perfectly understood each other, and Ludwell had certainly disclosed to Harlston the full history of her crime and her disgrace. The stony gaze of horror instantly gave way to a flash of rage, and a crimson glow took the place of the ashy paleness of her cheek. But Ludwell alone saw the change, for, conscious of it, she suddenly buried her face in her hands and sunk back in her chair, in what to others might have seemed an agony of grief.

"This shocking story is too much for your sensibility, Miss Bernard," said Ludwell, in the kindest tone imaginable, "and the atmosphere of this room is intolerably oppressive. Permit me to lead you into fresher air."

He took her hand, and though she shrunk as from the touch of fire, she suffered him to lead her into another room and place her on a sofa. She murmured something about her carriage; it was ordered to the door, and again Ludwell offering his arm conducted her to it with an air of the most tender assiduity. He handed her in, and she threw herself back in the corner of the seat out of the glare of the lamp that flamed before the door. Ludwell was about to close the scene by wishing her a kind good night, when the Demon of mischief hinted that he had not yet tormented her sufficiently, and that he should see her home. But no sooner did he put his foot upon the step, than she started and thrusting her face into the opening of the door, met him with a look that might have repelled the boldest man. Her face was again of ashy paleness, her jet black hair hung over it in dishevelled wildness, and her eye glared with an expression of unearthly malignity. "Back! Back!" said she, in a deep hoarse whisper. "Fool! Fool! You have had your day. You have made me the victim of your treachery and the slave of your caprice, and the butt of your insolent sarcasm, and I have borne it. But it is now my turn. You have broken the spell of your power, and my revenge shall be worthy of my wrongs. Back! Back! Begone!!!"

[To be Continued.]