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Gertrude (Chapter 23)

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GERTRUDE.

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We doubt not that our readers will readily pardon us for the late interruptions of Gertrude, when we assure them that they have been unavoidable; and inform them, that it will be concluded for the present in the next Messenger. There is a sequel to it, which the author may some day present to the Public, if they desire to have it.—[*Ed. Mess.*]

CHAPTER XXIII.

“I now clearly perceive, Oh Cyrus, that I have two souls.” Such was the exclamation of the Indian Prince, who, having betrayed the confidence of his benefactor, reflected, in remorse and amazement, on that something within him, which had overcome the promptings of his better nature.

There are few people in this world who have not had a like experience. In those who are not all evil, such a conflict is always going on; and none are so sensible of it, as they in whom the good principle habitually triumphs. But besides the strife between appetite and reason, which rages in the breasts of all men, there is another antagonism, which we find in those who have received one character from nature and another from education. Miss Bernard was one of these, and, though it rarely happens that the work of art is more perfectly accomplished than it had been in the training of that young lady, she was fated to prove that Nature, bury her as you may beneath mountains of habits and conventionalities, will occasionally, Enceladus-like, shake the mind as with a moral earthquake. The reader, who knows so much of

Miss Bernard's early history, needs only to be reminded, that, though perhaps essentially selfish in all the phases of her character, her taste for splendor and fashion, and her appetite for wealth, were qualities superinduced on a temper originally passionate and romantic. In her short conversation with Henry Austin, she had caught glimpses of high intellectual power, while the readiness with which he had periled his life for her safety, afforded incontestible proof of those moral qualities, which woman's instinct teaches her to seek in him who is to be her protector and the master of her fate. She had not so entirely renounced her designs on Harlston, but that her first thought, on discovering Gertrude's relation to Henry, was to avail herself of her knowledge in furtherance of her original scheme. Nothing was easier than to deprive the Colonel of all hope, perhaps all wish, to be the husband of Gertrude, and it might be to restore her to the object of her first love. That Henry had been her earliest choice, she could hardly doubt. She had seen too much not to suspect, that the poor girl had other and deeper causes of grief, than the mere pecuniary difficulties of her family. The clandestine correspondence gave an intimation of the character of these; and now, that she had discovered that the correspondent was one, whom any woman might love, whom a very prudent mother might not wish her daughter to marry, but who had had the best opportunities to make himself acceptable to the daughter, she could not doubt, that the relation between Henry and Gertrude was not very widely different from that, which the reader knows to have existed.

But the events of the last few weeks had done much to disgust Laura Bernard with the husband-hunting policy, to which, under her mother's influence, her life had been devoted. She had not actually loved Harlston, and she had experienced much mortification in the pursuit of her object. The wound her pride had received at the hands of Ludwell, required a peculiar treatment. Should she meet him at any future day, how effectually would he stand rebuked at seeing her the wife of a man recommended solely by his merit, and aiding and encouraging her husband's efforts in pursuit of honorable independence, by the same devotion which she had once felt for *him*! How, on the other hand, would he sneer and taunt her with her success, should she indeed succeed in captivating a man of great wealth. *He* himself was the only man she had ever truly loved; and the only anticipations she had ever cherished at all adequate and congenial to her ideas of happiness, had been those which accompanied her engagement with him. In this respect, all the training she had undergone, and all the intercourse with the fashionable world, had never wrought an effectual change in her tastes. She had always felt, that no man, destitute of certain qualities, a part of which Lud-

well undoubtedly possessed, and the rest of which she had fondly attributed to him, ever could be to her the object of that deep and passionate devotion, in which the heart rests satisfied and asks no more.

But of all men on earth, he was now the most hateful to her, and her mind ever brooded over the vow of vengeance, which she had uttered at their parting. But how to be revenged? In the distant land to which he had been sent, he was entirely beyond her reach. But might not something be done through her, in whom he took so deep an interest, and on whose account Miss Bernard herself had been treated with insult and outrage? Perhaps she did not permit herself to plan any positive mischief against poor Gertrude; but she could not endure the thought of her happiness. To see her the wife of Harlston, rolling in affluence and glittering in splendor was bad enough. But to see her happy in the arms of the man of her choice, the first and only man she had ever loved, and sharing with him the comforts and honors of an independence won by his own exertions—might not this be more intolerable? In the actual condition of Miss Bernard's mind, the latter picture presented to her the most satisfactory idea of happiness; and she had felt, more than once, since she left Washington, that, could she again meet with such a man, as she had supposed Ludwell to be; could she win his heart, and make him all her own, she would renounce all sordid views, and, throwing herself down the stream of passion, share with him her little fortune, and ask nothing in return but a place in his heart, and an interest in his hopes of wealth and fame.

Might not Henry Austin be such a man? In very gratitude she would have it so; and her imagination had been already employed in decorating him with all the attributes of a hero of romance. The generosity with which he came to her rescue; the readiness with which he conceived, and the boldness and vigor with which he executed his plan, were ever present to her mind. His figure, as in the moment of her extremest terror he had appeared to her eyes, was continually before her, with all the lineaments and bearing of a knight of the round table, or a paladin of the Court of Charlemagne. She had scanned his features as he slept. They were noble and symmetrical,—the broad, fair brow, the finely chiseled nose, the thin nostril, the short curled lip of that precise outline, which first suggested the form of Cupid's bow, these were the indications of spirit, gallantry and genius. Then came the broad, strong under-jaw and chin, betokening energy and indomitable firmness. He was certainly born to greatness. True she had never heard of him. How should she? The down of his cheek had hardly given place to the light brown whisker that shaded it. She would have been sorry to have had him one of those precocious youths, whose early cleverness

is a nine-days' wonder, and, with their names, is presently forgotten.

These were her thoughts as she bent over him while he slept. When he awoke and opened his large, calm, observant, thoughtful eye; when she heard his rich mellow voice, with its measured cadence, distinct articulation and tones hardly less varied and flexible than her own; when she observed the mixture of frankness and *retenué* in his manner, the freedom with which he spoke of himself, as far as his situation made it necessary to do so, and his silence as to all beyond that, and, above all, his care to avoid any allusion to his gallant feat, or to his sufferings, and the ready dexterity with which he parried any remark of her's pointing toward that subject, she felt convinced, that she saw before her one well worthy of that highest reward, which the heart of woman burns to bestow on him who has perilled his life in her service.

Full of such thoughts, Miss Bernard spent the night in wakeful impatience for the return of light, eager to resume her place by the bedside of the suffering hero of her waking dreams. But here the caution of the prudent mother interposed to admonish her, that all present danger having disappeared, there could be no sufficient excuse for her presence in the chamber of a young man confined to his bed. She was condemned, therefore, to restrain her impatience for some days, her fancy meanwhile dwelling on the highly wrought image that agitation and excitement had stamped upon her mind. Henry's merit must have been great indeed, if he lost any thing in her estimation, by the interruption of their intercourse, when, in her imagination, he was thus represented. I must leave to the fancy of my female readers the task of painting the images that flitted before her mind in the mean time.

In his letter to his father, Henry had been careful to mitigate his uneasiness, by assuring him that his hurts, though painful, were not at all dangerous, and that he was in the hands of a good surgeon and kind nurses. The consequence was, that the Doctor's affairs requiring his presence at home, ten days or more elapsed before he found leisure to visit his son. By that time Henry was in condition to sit up, and receive a visit from the ladies in his own chamber. Miss Bernard had as yet found no fit occasion for hinting at her acquaintance with his family, and her late sojourn at the house of Mrs. Pendarvis. She was curious to see the effect of such a communication, and she was impatient to make it. But she could not approach the subject, even in thought, without experiencing a degree of agitation unaccountable to herself. In her mother's presence, she could not venture upon it; and the old lady was never long enough absent from the room, to give her time to screw her courage to the proper pitch.

The Doctor's arrival put an end to her perplexity. The ladies were sitting with Henry when he

was announced, and immediately withdrew, that their presence might not embarrass the meeting of *the father and son*. Soon afterwards they returned, and Henry saw, to his surprise, that his father at once accosted Miss Bernard with all the cordiality of established friendship.

"Have you heard lately from our friends at Washington?" asked the Doctor, as soon as the form of presentation to the old lady was over.

"Not since I saw them. You, I presume, have news of them, and I hope that Mrs. Austin and my kind friend, Mrs. Pendarvis, and dear Gertrude are well."

"Gertrude has been quite ill," said the Doctor. "She was suddenly attacked with fever on the tenth of the month, and for some days was thought to be in great danger, but is now convalescent."

This intelligence was of course received with every manifestation of concern and sympathy, but the feelings of the young lady were not so deeply engaged, as to prevent her from observing the effect of this intelligence on Henry. The blood, which hastily mounted to his cheek at the name of Gertrude, instantly retreated, leaving a paleness far more livid than that of disease. She saw that he shaded his brow with his hand, and bowed his head with an expression of suffering, which his unsuspecting father might readily have attributed to pain. She observed, too, that he did not ask any particulars, and took no part in the conversation.

Perhaps it was a case of family discord: the very common case of coldness between a step-son and his father's second wife. But there was too much emotion for that, and indeed the Doctor soon dispelled all such ideas.

"I suppose," said he to Henry, "you have written to acquaint your mother with your situation. She heard of it first from me, and is exceedingly anxious about you. Indeed I half expected to meet her here; though I fear poor Gertrude has been too ill to be left."

"I have not yet been able to hold a pen," said Henry, not removing his hand from his face. His utterance was distinct, though his voice was choked, and a writhing of the body, which might be the effect of pain, accompanied the words. So the Doctor understood it, and forbore to press him with further questions; though, on the point of asking why he had not again used the pen of an amanuensis, who would doubtless have been glad to serve him in conveying intelligence of so much interest to her particular friends. But Miss Bernard herself had doubtless written, and Mrs. Austin must know all she could desire to know.

Miss Bernard had done no such thing. She felt, she scarce knew why, unwilling that Mrs. Austin and Gertrude should know any thing about the matter. The presence of the Doctor himself seemed almost an intrusion on the mysterious pleasure she began to feel in having Henry all to her-

self. Like Angelica with the wounded Medoro, she was averse to the thought, that any eye but hers should watch over him, that any hand but hers should minister to his comfort. She felt that his claim to her gratitude was absolute and exclusive, and the idea of some sort of reciprocal claim on him was the natural consequence. With her own consent, she would never have been absent from his side, and no want or wish of his would be for a moment unsatisfied. This readily extended itself from his bodily sufferings, endured for her sake, and which it was therefore her duty to soothe, to the manifest anguish of his mind, in which no thought of her was mingled. But even in infancy, woman learns that there is a healing balm in her lip, and in the same spirit in which she kisses her little brother's hurts to make them well, does she find her heart drawn out, at a more mature age, to shed the balsam of its love upon the wounds of those in whose sufferings she takes an interest.

In this spirit Miss Bernard waited impatiently for some opening for conversation on the subject of Gertrude, but Henry made none. Between him and his father it was no more mentioned, in her presence, during the short stay, which sufficed to satisfy the Doctor, that the health and comfort of his son were well cared for. When he went on to Washington, Miss Bernard was much alone with her patient, and diligently exercised her varied talents to relieve the weariness of his confinement. In this she was eminently successful. Henry was full of admiration of her beauty, her accomplishments, her powers of entertainment, and her never failing cheerfulness, set off as it was by occasional and well-timed manifestations of deep sensibility, and an ever ready sympathy in his sufferings. That all this was genuine, he could not at all doubt. That voice, in all its tones—in all its inflexions, so true to every sentiment she uttered, could not be mistaken. It was the very music of high thoughts, refined feelings, and delicate sensibility.

But though the admiration of Henry was awakened, and the tedium of a sick chamber much relieved, a deep gloom seemed settled on his mind, which all Miss Bernard's talent and address were vainly tasked to dispel. It sometimes softened into a tender sadness, but never for a moment brightened into cheerfulness. The tact of the young lady soon discovered that all attempts at mirth, however kindly taken, were unacceptable. He smiled, indeed he sometimes laughed, but the smile was ghastly, and the laugh unnatural and wild. To pass from misery to mirth was impossible. All that could be done, was to wile him away from his own woes, by inviting his sympathy to those of others, or presenting softened images of sorrow, and thoughts congenial to wretchedness less intense than his own. In this Miss Bernard succeeded, and she had the satisfaction sometimes

to see a tear quivering on his eye-lids, accompanied by a smile devoid of mirth indeed, but yet seeming to indicate, that the heart was not all withered, nor hope forever dead.

All this time she found herself unaccountably restrained from touching on the subject uppermost in her own mind, and, as she believed, in his. It might have occurred to one less absorbed than Henry, that there was something strange in her forbearance to allude to the only common friends of both parties. Could this be from a suspicion of the real state of his feelings, and a delicate regard to them? No such question occurred to Henry's mind. Indeed, in no way were Miss Bernard and Gertrude associated in his thoughts. The former had entitled herself to his esteem, friendship and admiration. But the latter, *as he remembered her*, stood alone an object like no other upon earth. As she *now was*, he could only think of her in amazed perplexity, incapable of comprehending the change of her conduct, but on the hypothesis of some inconceivable mistake in regard to his. Was it possible his letters had not reached her? No. Was it possible that any one had misrepresented him to her? No one. No one! Was it possible that one so pure, so disinterested, so simple in her thoughts, habits and wishes, had inhaled, in the first breath of the atmosphere of fashion, a taint infecting her whole nature, and producing a very gangrene of the heart? He was incapable of conceiving such a change. What then? Did she indeed love another, and that, as it would seem, almost at first sight? This was the only imaginable hypothesis; but even this left him at a loss to understand her conduct to him, who, if no more, had a claim to be considered and treated as a brother. Perhaps she shrunk from the task of disclosing to him the change of her feelings. She might have felt the difficulty of explaining it by words, and thought it best simply to manifest the result by her acts. Perhaps she thought to mitigate his sufferings, by giving him cause to think of her not with love, but resentment and disgust. This might be so. The embarrassment of her situation must account for the want of delicacy and decorum with which the affair had been managed. Instead of cultivating the angry feelings he supposed her to have wished to inspire, his utmost ingenuity was tasked, to devise excuses and palliatives for her conduct. It was all kindly meant. He was sure of it; and it was his duty not to requite this kindness, by any act, or word, that might add to her distress, or mar her bliss. He remembered his vow. His life was pledged to her service, in whatever way fate might enable him to serve her, and the great effort of his mind was to subdue himself to the necessary temper for the fulfilment of this high duty. In this effort he availed himself much of Miss Bernard's aid. Whenever, in the varied *gamut* of her conversation, she struck the key of high romantic sentiment, of tenderness, or

of passion, he encouraged her to pursue the strain. He endeavored to give her all his sympathy,—to enter into all her thoughts, to respond to them in a congenial spirit. In this he succeeded so far, that the deep, sad tones of his voice would sometimes tremble with emotion, and his eye would glisten, and his pale cheek would catch a momentary glow, and his words would pour forth in a strain of eloquence that went directly to the lady's heart. The effect with him indeed was momentary, and followed by that collapse which "leaves the flagging spirit doubly weak." With her it was more enduring. The conviction every day became deeper and deeper, that Henry Austin was the most gifted—the most estimable—the most amiable of men. What was there in her past life of which she thought with regret or shame, that she might not have escaped, had her lot been blended with that of such a man? And how could she doubt, that a kind providence had at last sent him to redeem her from the errors of her youth, and make her the estimable and happy being, which, in her romantic moods, she felt formed by nature to become.

"Facilis descensus"—but I beg pardon of the ladies for intending a quotation from a Latin poet, which does but express the hackneyed truth, that it is much easier to slide down hill, than to climb up again. He insinuates, moreover, a belief of not much value as being that of a heathen, but which unfortunately amounts to positive knowledge in this enlightened age, that the road to hell is precisely of this character. The poor wretch, who, relying on his own strength, endeavors at any time to retrace his steps, is apt to find some rolling stone under his foot, placed there, perhaps, by his own previous lapse. Miss Bernard was certainly a woman of many high and admirable qualities, and had her first step in life placed her in the same position toward such a man as Henry Austin, the impression made upon her character might have rendered her an honor to her sex. But it was now too late. It was in vain that the generous sentiments she was in the constant habit of uttering, without feeling their force or truth, were now echoed back to her from the lips of one whose every word entered into her heart. It was no longer in her power to act on the impressions thus made. How could she, when her first duty must be to unravel the web she had assisted to weave around poor Gertrude, and open wide the door to explanation between her and Henry. Of their mutual attachment, she had no doubt. She now saw plainly, that had she left things to take their natural course, Gertrude would have been no obstacle to her designs on Harlston. But she could not now even regret her error. She could no longer conceive, that success in her darling scheme could have been desirable to her. Still less did she repent it. On the contrary, she almost persuaded herself that her evil had been providentially overruled, and made instrumental to her own

good, and that to interfere with this wise and beneficent purpose of Heaven, by disabusing Gertrude's mind, would be presumptuous and almost wicked. In some such way, she may be supposed to have reconciled her conscience to a course of conduct, which she felt to be inevitable. When we have decided that we are unequal to the effort which duty demands, the most paltry excuse is often sufficient to silence the voice of self-reproach. So it was with Miss Bernard : and while under the influence of Henry's society, her mind struggled to free itself from the clogs that held it down to earth, she felt herself dragged down into the very deepest abyss of crime. She had no choice but to surrender him forever, or to carry out to its most fatal consequences, the deception, of which she had been, at first, the inconsiderate and almost unwilling instrument.

[*To be Concluded.*]
