

The Lady of Neville Court

A TALE OF THE TIMES.

BY THE AUTHOR OF "MARION HOWARD," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER XVII.—continued.

TAKE it off, this instant," she continued, making a lunge at the article in question.

"O me bades, me bootiful bades! You sha'n't have 'em, you sha'n't!" screamed Nora, resisting with all her might, and dancing with passion. In the scuffle the chain of the rosary—for such it was—snapped, and the little blue beads fell with a rattle on the ground. "O mother, she's broke me bades intirely, she has; my illigant bades that grannie gave me, whin ye fitched me wid ye to Neville Town yesterday afternoon," cried the child, sobbing bitterly; "and 'jist as the taylor had got Father Donovan to bless 'em. O, what will I do—what will I do?" and Nora wrung her little hands in childish grief.

If Nora had tried she could not have made a speech less *apropos* to the occasion, seeing that—as Biddy afterwards phrased it to her husband—"she wint and let two cats out o' the bag at wonst." It would be impossible to describe the glance of withering indignation with which Miss Barbara, relinquishing her hold of Nora, strode across the floor and confronted the mother.

"Very well, Mrs. Murphy; so you went to Neville Town yesterday afternoon, did you? Then pray how could you have heard Mr. Giles's sermon? And Nora goes to a school where the priest blesses beads, does she? I thought at the time how much truth there was in the story you trumped up about the influenza. Where's your husband?"

"Throth, my leddy, an' that's more than I can tell yiz," said Biddy, in utter dismay. Like her husband she had grown tired of the new way, and had quite countenanced the alteration he had seen proper to make with regard to the children's school. Still she had hoped that their recalcitration might have been kept a secret from Miss Barbara, and had already been spending in imagination the *doubleur* with which that lady's visit to them generally terminated. No longer able to deny the fact, she tried whines, excuses, and lies of every possible shade of blackness and whiteness. But it was all to no purpose; for with the air of one whose confidence has been betrayed Miss Barbara swept out of the cabin, and took the road towards the Glebe House.

In the meantime Tim, fancying that he had seen Miss Barbara depart about ten minutes before, was quietly sauntering homewards, still congratulating himself upon his escape, and greatly was he astonished when at a turn of the road he encountered her face to face. She immediately accused him with his recusancy, and after denials and equivocations innumerable Tim was compelled to acknowledge that he had been sending his children to the Catholic school, and not attended the Protestant Church for three Sundays, nor had even heard Mr. Giles's sermon. For a few minutes the resolution he had made after his conversation with his sister-in-law held good, and he tried to tell her that he liked the old faith better, but it was only for a few minutes. We will not enter into the details of the conversation that followed, characterised by shameless bribery on the one side, and cowardly yielding up of principle on the other, nor of the still more abominable bargain that concluded it. Suffice it to say that Miss Barbara went on her way rejoicing over a promise re-extorted, and that Tim Murphy entered his cabin with a hang-dog look on his face, but the price of a new pig in his pocket, which he started off and purchased that very afternoon.

CHAPTER XVIII.

The news of the arrival of Miss Neville at her uncle's house soon circled round the neighbourhood, and immediately every family of position within calling distance hastened to make her acquaintance. In Connaught morning calls are not the easy matters they are in London, seeing that it is less difficult to drive round a few squares than over a few mountains. Still "where there's a will there's a way," and every day a fresh carriage or horse party sauntered up the long silent drive; the house-bells pealed and the knockers rattaned; the servants put on the liveliness of old times; the very dogs woke up, and barked at the bustle. Then came dinner-parties, evening-parties, croquet-parties, given in honour of Miss Neville, besides all the other varieties of gaiety with which people in the country contrive to charm the monotony of their quiet lives. Though Mr. Neville kept as closely in his sanctum as he could, he was of course obliged to do something in return, and found himself at last sucked so deeply into this vortex of dissipation that he threatened to abscond altogether, and hide himself with the professor in a desert island. Not so Fanny; for although in the life of seclusion she had hitherto led the little maiden had declared over and over again that the world would never have charms for her, nobody seemed to enjoy this altered life of things more. Little by little a light stole into her eyes and roses into her cheeks; and her father only too happy at her improved looks and spirits, would rub his hands in his glee, and ever and anon kissing Maude, would tell her that it was all like the waking up of the castle in the old nursery tale, and that she was the fairy prince who had worked the wonderful change.

Whether or not the alteration in Fanny was to be attributed to her cousin's influence, we cannot say; but certainly in a very short time she seemed to have been transformed from a timid sensitive girl into an earnest energetic little woman, and nobody felt the alteration more sensibly than aunt Barbara. For though that lady still continued to hold the reins of government, the very domestics perceived that her real power had departed and that her throne was tottering. If she any longer had her own way, it was only on sufferance, and in things indifferent; for in every matter affecting the comfort of the household or the happiness of her father Fanny now insisted on having hers. Poor aunt Barbara! Little had she now to render life interesting; for Harry had gone to Harrow, and could no longer be scolded; Fanny had grown beyond her, and would no longer be

ruled; the domestics had begun to look from her to the latter for orders; even the very cottagers were growing independent, and getting wills of their own. Justly or unjustly Miss Barbara traced all her troubles to Maude, and regarded her accordingly; and grew so tired at length of the altered state of affairs that she only waited for an opening in some branch of the family, in which her talent for making people miserable might be turned to account, to take wing.

Much as Maude rejoiced in the renewed happiness of her uncle and cousins, she was not without her own secret little trials and worries. Who is? In London, nothing had been more wearisome to her high and generous spirit than the fulsome adulations of a crowd of fortune-hunters, who, measuring their attentions by the breadth of her estates, had successively pestered her for two whole seasons. She had fondly hoped that in leaving London society, she would leave them behind, and certainly none of them were hardy enough to follow her to Ireland; but she soon discovered that dandies, like dandelions, will flourish anywhere, and found men who, for their folly and foppery, might have been duplicates of those she had left at the West-end, awaiting her in Connaught.

The festivities held in her honour were opened by a magnificent ball given by a Mrs. Spencer Wetherby, an old friend of her father's family. As Miss Barbara had refused to act as chaperone, Mrs. Wetherby had invited Maude and Fanny to spend two or three days at her house; and as on the evening of the ball the doctor had dined there, he had enjoyed a good half hour's *tête-à-tête* with his fair friends before the arrival of the guests. With those arrivals, however, began the presentations; and little by little the doctor was thrown into the background, where he sat in shadow, watching Maude as she fitted to and fro in the dances. She was apparently lost in the happiness of the moment, she never once glanced, as he thought she would have done, at the corner where he sat. It is not a lively occupation for men who do not dance to sit and watch men who do, especially when the latter carry off the only women that the former think worth talking to in the room. After sitting an hour or two thus, O'Meara beat a retreat, and before half the evening was over, might have been found, with his pipe and whisky-toddy, comfortably stretching his legs before his own parlour fire at Killnew. But comfortable as he looked, his were not altogether pleasant reflections; for in the smoke-wreaths that curved gracefully above his head, the doctor saw ugly faces, and those were the faces of four of Maude Neville's partners. Partly from personal intercourse, partly from report, he knew these four men well, and understood exactly the arts and blandishments each intended to bring into the field, in a desperate endeavour to win her and her patrimony. The one, a ruined and jaded nobleman, would he knew point to his coronet, long since sullied and defaced by the vice of its wearer, but none the less a coronet for all that. Another, a large landed proprietor, an elderly man, who had long had his eye on the Neville estate, would he knew, whisper in gentle fatherly tones something about the advantage of joining lands already contiguous. A third, a profligate spendthrift of remarkably handsome person, would trust to his wealth of whisker to hide the poverty of his estate. While the fourth, the commanding officer of a regiment quartered in the neighbourhood, could only rely on his herculean proportions and the free-and-easy elegance that his impudence had enabled him to acquire, for success in an enterprise that could alone save him from exposure and ruin.

Such were the four worthies whom the doctor saw in the smoke, and who had that night entered the lists to compete for the fair white hand that held the title-deeds of Ballycross-cum-Neville Town. Yet what could he do? What command had he over Miss Neville's destiny? What right had he to shield or advise her? None absolutely none. He must leave her, as her mother had left her, to Providence.

One thing, however, he could do, and did. He refused every one of the invitations that, during the few following weeks, poured in upon him, so thick and fast that he began to think Ballycross was going mad. "Since I cannot hope to help or influence her under this ordeal, I will refrain from witnessing it," he said in a tragic whisper so tragic that we fear if our readers had heard it they would have looked round instinctively for a certain monster said to be green-eyed. But no monster was there; or if he was the doctor never saw him. For if, as he sat at home or circled round on his professional visits, ever brooding on the one subject, you had asked him why the rocks and the quicksands that beset this particular woman should be a matter of such deep interest to him, he would have answered you with all the frankness of his nature shining in his eyes, "For her mother's sake."

For fully a month the round of revelry lasted, as each family in the vicinity hospitably strove to outshine the rest in fêting the heiress of Neville Court. Night after night saw Maude the admired of all admirers. Night after night saw her wearied or teased by some one of her four persecutors—sometimes by all four together. Suddenly the regiment was ordered back to England; a circumstance that changed the captain's tactics, and forced him to the assault at once. What the lady's answer was on the occasion no one ever knew, though his horse, perhaps, guessed it pretty well from the treatment he received all the way back to his master's quarters. A few days afterwards the exquisite came to the point also, and received a reply that sent him biting his lips out of the ballroom, to be seen no more. After this Maude had comparative peace; though Lord ——— and the squire still held their ground. The money and ingenuity expended by these two individuals, in their endeavours to outshine each other, almost equalled what they had just before lavished on an election, with this difference, however, in the ultimate result, that where their member had not been returned, their presents were; and, deeply disgusted, both hobbled away—the squire to console himself with his money-bags, and Lord ——— to forget his chagrin in the excitement of the gambling-rooms of Paris.

(To be continued.)

"Katie King" writes to the *Cleveland (O.) Leader* as follows: "The church-going element here (Washington) is largely Catholic, and made up, too, of the wealthiest and most cultivated class."