

The Lady of Heville Court

A TALE OF THE TIMES.

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

CHAPTER XXII.—(Continued.)

Very different were Maude's sensations; for, notwithstanding Fanny's sisterly endeavour to eradicate from her cousin's mind the effect produced upon it by Aunt Barbara's insinuations, they had made quite as deep an impression on her as that lady could have desired. In spite of all that Fanny could do or say to rally her, and she had done and said a great deal that evening, Maude had remained silent and abstracted ever since, plying her needle with an industry that owed at least half its energy to her indignation, and revolving over and over again in her thoughts an endless variety of fears, doubts, and misgivings. Upon Aunt Barbara's return from Tim's cabin, in order to retire as far as possible from that lady's vicinity, Maude had seated herself at the piano, and hers had been the music that had greeted the doctor upon his arrival. The outer world little suspects the host of associations that lie in the strains over which young hearts have suffered themselves to dream. There was not an impromptu, or nocturn, or symphony that Maude Neville played that evening that had not for her a language of its own. As one plaintive air after another stole forth from the keys in deep, passionate, masterly chords, the reflections that had agitated her all the evening were remembered no more, and although apparently intent upon her music she wandered far, far away, in one of those airy daydreams that bright young spirits love so dearly to indulge in—dreams in which imagination, like a golden shuttle, gleams and glances through the warp and woof of the past and future, till it weaves them into a web of fact and fiction that to the dreamer's fancy seems a fabric of unmingled truth; dreams over which sage Matter-of-Fact shakes his head and groans, but which are perhaps, after all, only part of a process necessary to preserve the more delicate fibres of some natures from abrasion in their after-contact with the world; dreams, too, alas, at which the dreamer himself will smile in years to come, when his fairy tissue shall have grown worn and threadbare, and the objects over which he had cast it shall stand out in their native bareness and stern reality.

Maude's music and reveries were at length interrupted, much to Fanny's disappointment, by the entrance of a servant with the tea, and with it a message from Mr. Neville, informing them that the gentlemen would not join them that evening, as he had ordered coffee to be carried to the study. Maude was deeply relieved, the more so that Miss Barbara, finding it impossible to annihilate her adversary that evening, took herself off at once. About an hour later the servants came in and Fanny read prayers, after which, with many a fond kiss and earnest injunction to Maude, "not to think any more about aunt Barbara," she retired for the night. Maude soon after rose, and lighted her candle with the best possible intention of following her example. But, unstrung as she still felt, it was evident to her that sleep would be altogether out of the question, and her writing-desk at this moment chancing to catch her eye, she sat down instead, to write to Mrs. Carew.

No sooner, however, was the pen between her fingers than she realised how difficult was the task she had undertaken; for that very morning she had decided the long-wavering balance, and had resolved to become a Catholic, whoever and whatever it might cost her. Still it formed no part of her present intention to inform her old friend of the momentous step she contemplated, implying as it did a change, not only in her religious convictions, but in her plans, prospects, and everything else that concerned her. And yet to write in the old familiar strain of unreserve, with the consciousness of such a secret lying between herself and her adopted mother, was a task beyond her power, and seemed moreover a species of dissimulation from which her frank nature intuitively shrank. For at least one hour she sat weighing the pen in her fingers, and reading and re-reading the few words she had written. But after a while her thoughts left Mrs. Carew and wandered to a subject more perplexing still. To whom must she now turn for aid among the difficulties that would so soon rise around her? "For alas," said a rising sigh, "not now to Dr. O'Meara! In this question of religion he, of all others must be excluded, lest the world might see in his interference a confirmation of aunt Barbara's suspicions." And if it did, and gave its verdict accordingly, would there be any justice in it? Had one single thought of Richard O'Meara influenced her in her decision? So instantaneous, so clear, so honest a "No" flashed from every nook and corner of her conscience that she could not fail to be satisfied. No, with all her heart and soul she could say that only for the sake of the God who had founded His Church had she sought to return to it; only for the sake of the Lord and Master who has reared His tabernacle among the children of men had she desired to find it, and make it the home of her heart.

One half, at least then, of aunt Barbara's accusation had been false. Was there any truth in the second? Was she not totally indifferent to Dr. O'Meara, except as much as she was bound to him by ties of common gratitude? Very slowly an answer rose from the uttermost depths of her heart; and as it rose Maude grew troubled, like one who has raised a spirit in his own despite. And yet it was only a vague, trembling, incoherent little answer after all; one that would have remained contentedly buried in its native depths for ever had not her question summoned it to the surface. But shadowy as it was it bitterly upbraided her, and as she listened to its phantom voice Maude burst into tears.

But this fit of weakness was of short duration, for Maude's courage was too high to be easily cast down, and she soon turned her attention to the best means of repairing the evil. Something, it was evident, though she hardly knew what, must be rooted out; and, knife in hand, our little heroine set herself to the work of eradication. Barren, indeed, did half an hour's determination make the face of the

future look; but not for an instant did she waver in her resolution, until hardly a green leaf remained of all the verdure that had embellished her young life. No more brotherly confidences, no more playful raillery, no more leaning on the strong arm, or reliance on the strong will for support, no more softness or sentiment—nothing for the future but cool, calm, quiet, every-day civility.

With the firm satisfaction of a monarch who, having gained a victory over rebellious subjects, sheathes his sword with a forced indifference to their losses and his own, Maude joined her hands, and leaning her face upon them, looked out into futurity with hard resolute eyes that seemed to bid every remaining atom of womanly weakness defiance. She was sitting thus in the full flush of her victory, when the door suddenly opened, and Dr. O'Meara stood before her.

He had come for a book he had left that afternoon on the table, and naturally expecting that the ladies had long since retired, and that he should find the room in darkness, had brought a candle in his hand. For an instant he stood with it, raised high above his head, peering into the lighted room in a fashion truly ludicrous. The next he hastened forward with a laugh at his blunder, feeling and looking highly delighted at the unexpected chance thus afforded him of bidding Miss Neville good-night, and telling her his story about Tim and aunt Barbara. Never was man more utterly confounded than O'Meara at his reception. The faintest possible smile responded to his joyous laugh, a few nervous troubled words acknowledged his hearty greeting, and then Maude relapsed into silence, looking so unlike her usual self, that the doctor was fairly puzzled. All unconsciously she had started from her chair at his entrance, and for a few moments they stood facing each other, as though neither knew exactly what to say next.

O'Meara was the first to recover his usual equanimity. "You must pardon me if I have startled you, Miss Neville; but I need not say that I would have entered less unceremoniously had I imagined I was about to break in upon a young lady's meditations. I had no idea that you protracted them to such an hour as this. Do you not believe in "beauty sleep" he asked, trying in vain to recover his ordinary manner.

Maude now remembered for the first time that she was standing, and resumed her seat. "It is a thing I do not trouble myself much about," she replied, as she busied herself in replacing some papers in her desk; "but I am not often up as late as this. I stayed because I wished to write an important letter, and it is so much easier to collect one's thoughts when everything is quiet. The house has been so still I did not expect an interruption."

The moment after she would have given worlds to have unsaid the words, for in the momentary glance she took at him she saw they had touched him to the quick. She was right. Without another word he crossed the room for his book, and then, returning to the table, held out his hand and quietly bade her good-night. There was an agitation in his voice and a troubled look on his face that grieved her to the very heart; but with the resolution she had inherited from her father she stifled her regret, and coldly returned his salutation. As to the doctor, he walked home that night lost in perplexity, and with a shadow resting upon his heart as deep as the darkness that now lay upon the scene around him.

CHAPTER XXIII.

It was the second evening after the events recorded in our last two or three chapters, and a close, cloudy, and very sultry evening it was, such a one as often succeeds a day of sunshine and preludes a night of storm; when a strange stillness broods in the air, and when neither a leaf stirs on the trees, nor a ripple on the water; when the horizon glows with a lurid copperish tint, and bright little flashes of lightning dart from cloud to cloud; while the low muttering thunder keeps up such a continuous rumble in the distance, that it sounds like the voices of angry giants growling at each other in their dens among the hills far, far away.

It was between seven and eight o'clock, and Dr. O'Meara had just dined; that is to say, he had done as much towards dining as a man in such a temperature possibly could. This business concluded, he had pushed his chair back from the table, and entered into a speculation as to whether there could possibly be any better way of cooling a room than to set every door and window it contained wide open. When he had disposed of this question, by deciding that there was not, he turned to another, evidently a far more difficult one to solve than the last: should he or should he not go to the Glebe House? Hardly for one moment, since he had parted from Miss Neville two nights before, had he ceased to torture himself in trying to discover the cause of her altered manner towards him, and yet he felt that he was just as far from a solution of the mystery as ever. Should he seek her, and with all simplicity ask her the reason why? For a full quarter of an hour did the doctor sit weighing and re-weighing the pros and cons, without coming to a decision. Then he rose and walked into the garden, where he stood another quarter of an hour apparently watching his bees, but still revolving the question, and just as irresolute as ever. Suddenly a most substantial idea started up in the form of Professor Broadview. At any rate, whether he addressed himself or not to Miss Neville, he must go to the Glebe House: for had he not promised the old gentleman to lend him a certain treatise, and surely common politeness demanded that he should keep his promise? Yes, he would go. If he started at once he should get there before the storm; and then, perhaps, he might casually obtain a hint from somebody at the rectory that might help him to solve this most perplexing question.

In the full flush of this determination the doctor walked towards the house; but just as he reached the door a click at the garden gate made him turn his head. At first he only perceived a little ragged urchin fumbling with the lock; but when the next minute, Bob set the said gate open to its very widest extent and began touching his cap—or rather as much as remained of a cap—with great marks of respect to somebody still out of sight, he plainly saw he was to expect an arrival. Nor was he mistaken; for the moment afterwards the portly form of Father Donovan appeared in the gateway, mounted on his chubbist of ponies—Master Rory—and trotted briskly up the path.