

The Lady of Heville Court

A TALE OF THE TIMES.

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

CHAPTER XXXIII.—(Continued.)

As soon as Fanny's toilette—never a very elaborate one—was completed, she hurried to Maude's room. After tapping gently, she entered, and found her cousin slowly pacing the floor, trying to recover some part, at least, of her wonted equanimity. Gently Fanny called her by her name, and stole her arm round her waist; but Maude's only reply was a burst of tears.

"Maude darling," whispered Fanny, more softly still, "what is the matter? I cannot tell you how I have been longing to ask you; but I was afraid to come in. Why did you run out of the drawing-room so quickly?"

There was no answer.

"Listen, Maude. Hitherto we have had no secrets from each other. Shall we begin now—now that we have only three more short days to spend together? Will you not tell me what it is that grieves you, and let me comfort you for the last, last time?"

Who could resist such a petition, especially as the little pleader enforced it with kiss after kiss? Certainly not Maude; and, seated on a sofa, veiled by the quiet twilight, she whispered the story of her conversation with the doctor.

"Poor Dr. O'Meara!" said Fanny, as she concluded. "Do you know, Maude, I always suspected this. You may depend upon it, darling, that was the reason he left Ballycross so suddenly. I understand it all now."

"Yes," said Maude faintly; "he says so himself."

"Poor Dr. O'Meara!" repeated Fanny. "Well, Maude, you ought to feel highly honoured. I have never in my life met a man who so perfectly realises my ideal of what a man should be. How truly I wish you could return his affection! But I suppose these things are beyond our power to control."

The head beside her bowed so very low, and the clasp on her arm was tightened so suddenly, that a light broke upon Faany, notwithstanding the increasing darkness.

"I cannot imagine," she continued, after a short pause, "how you can be indifferent to him; and to tell you the truth, Maude, I do not think you are. I begin to suspect that you like the doctor quite as much as he likes you."

Once more there was silence; but though the grasp on her arm grew tighter than ever, Fanny tried in vain to catch a glimpse of the face beside her.

"After all, though," she observed at length; "I suppose in these days the worth of a man and the direction of a woman's affections are only looked upon as dust in the balance. Whom Maude Neville loves or does not love signifies little. It is the proud, rich, and beautiful heiress of Neville Court who has to be considered; and she looks upon Richard O'Meara as in every way unworthy of her."

A sarcasm from the sweet lips of Fanny Neville was something so unusual that its very novelty gave it effect. No sooner were the words uttered than an indignant repudiation of such sentiments burst from her cousin's lips. It was followed by a speech, very incoherent certainly, and yet in sum and substance the same as Portia's, declaring that

"for him
She would be trebled twenty times herself;
A thousand times more fair, ten thousand times
More rich";

and yet, even then, consider that she had given nothing, or very little, in return for the treasure of such a man's affection.

What more she might have said was suddenly cut short by the dinner-bell; and after bathing her eyes, and applying a little friendly *poudre de riz* to certain tell-tale marks on her cheeks and brow, Maude descended, with her usual quiet and stately step, to the dining-room. As may well be imagined, there was plenty to talk about, and as there were four persons to maintain the conversation, three of whom were in excellent spirits, besides Maude and the doctor, the unusual abstraction of the latter passed unnoticed. Both, however, were greatly relieved when Mrs. Carew rose; and as soon as the ladies found themselves outside the dining-room door, Maude hurried away from the others, ran up-stairs, and again took refuge in her own room. Such unusual conduct naturally excited Mrs. Carew's attention, and as soon as they had reached the deawing-room, Fanny told her all. She had just finished her story when the object of it entered the room, looking very calm and quiet, though exceedingly pale; and a few minutes after, the sound of approaching footsteps told them that the gentlemen had risen from table, and were about to leave.

"Never in my life have I seen a more lovely moonlight evening," exclaimed Father Donovan, as, followed by his nephew and O'Meara, he entered the drawing-room. "Truly to-night we may say 'the heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament His handiwork!'" Notwithstanding all the lights that are burning at this end of the room, it shines quite plainly through the white blinds at the other; you must all come and look at it," and as he spoke he crossed the room and drew one of the blinds up. They all followed him as he had desired, and for a few moments stood grouped round the window, looking out upon the landscape that stretched away before them, beautiful as dreamland in its soft silver radiance.

Maude, who was longing to get away from everybody in the world, was the first to steal out of the circle, and Fanny soon followed and seated herself beside her. She had just proposed a game of chess, thinking it might serve to divert her cousin's thoughts from the subject that engrossed them, when Father Donovan approached and

asked Maude to play him that beautiful little impromptu that had charmed him so much. She rose to comply with his request, and in a moment the moonlight and everything else were forgotten by Fred, who was an ardent lover of music, and who, the instant he heard his uncle's words, bounded across the room and opened the piano. As we have already said, Maude was an exquisite performer, and her listeners, at whose request she played piece after piece, stood beside the piano, one of them at least lost in admiration. Not so Richard O'Meara; for, though Maude played a piece so well remembered that its plaintive melody had often haunted him during the last three years, so insensate did he seem to have grown that he never even turned his head or gave the slightest indication of attention. With his arms folded and his head slightly bent, he stood in the calm white rays of the moonlight, so still that, had not the quiver of his lips betrayed the deep emotions struggling in his breast, one might have said that he was the statue of a man.

"Dr. O'Meara," said a gentle voice beside him.

He turned and started, for he thought they had all long since left the window and that he was standing there alone.

"Dr. O'Meara,"—and, as he turned, the soft, dark eyes of Mrs. Carew looked into his,—"I wish to say a few words to you about something you said to Maude this afternoon."

For an instant the doctor drew himself up, and an almost haughty expression curled his lip that seemed to say, if he had committed himself, he would not be called to account for it by a third person. In an instant, however, the emotion had passed away, and the doctor, bowing his head in reply to her, quietly waited for what was to follow.

"You will, I fear, consider it strange that I should thus allude to a matter that I know must be a very painful one; but I do so because I see that thus alone I can prevent a serious misunderstanding. I hear from Fanny that you gave Maude to understand this afternoon that she has long been the object of your deepest affections. Will you tell me in plain, candid terms what the barrier is that lies between you?"

"My dear Mrs. Carew, need you ask?" cried the doctor. "What have I to offer Miss Neville in exchange for all that she is and has? A many-sided barrier of disparity lies between us, to say nothing of a still greater one—her indifference to me."

"Supposing both these barriers could be removed," suggested Mrs. Carew, with a smile that the doctor felt inclined to resent as misplaced and tantalising in the extreme.

"Forgive me if I say that such a supposition is simply an idle one."

"Still, for supposition's sake, let me make it," returned Mrs. Carew, with the same smile.

"Then, of course, you insist on supposing a happiness too great for words to utter or for—" His voice became suddenly choked with emotion and he could say no more.

"I am afraid you are beginning to think that I have sought you only to trouble you, Dr. O'Meara; but you must believe better things of me," said Mrs. Carew kindly. "First of all, let me say that, with regard to your first barrier, it is nothing more nor less than a myth. Hush! I know what I am saying," she continued, as the doctor tried to interrupt her. "You must first hear what I have to tell you, and then I will let you say what you choose. Four years ago, when Mr. Neville and Maude were visiting me in London, he and I had many conversations about her, and one morning he startled me by the following speech:—'It seems to me that every member of our family is at the present moment on the *qui vive* to find a suitable match for Maude. What they are in such a hurry for, I cannot imagine. I am sure at present the poor child is much better as she is; but their ideas are very different from mine. I should like to see her married to a good, plain, sensible man, who would take the estate in hand, as my brother, Sir Morcar, did, and make it what it was in his time. Now, with them, the great point is either rank or wealth, or the *summa bonum* both combined. To judge by the specimens they have lately proposed to me, I should say that my relations must have been searching the highways and byways of society for rich and well-born rascals. Fortunately, the child is in her old uncle's care, and with his consent she shall have none of them. Her father married for love, why should not she?' He then proceeded: 'There is a man living at Ballycross that, were it not for his religion, is just the one I would choose for her husband. He is very good, highly intelligent, and reaches, in short, my standard of a man. His descent is as good as her own, for he comes of a good old Catholic family that once owned a far wider domain than hers, but whose attachment to their religious faith made them poor, and afterwards kept them so. He is certainly not rich, but what does Maude want with money? It is, to my mind—and so it was to my brother's—one of the greatest privileges of wealth that it allows its possessor to wed without an eye to the main chance, as it is called, and, unfortunately, too often is, in these degenerate days. I like sometimes to fancy this marriage, though it is only the idle dream of a foolish old man. For it could never take place unless O'Meara would turn Protestant; and you might just as soon expect Croagh Patrick to pay London a visit. She should not have him without, for I hold mixed marriages in utter abhorrence, as the fruitful source of every evil; but if their religion were the same, and Maude liked him, if I had my will Dr. Richard O'Meara should be her husband.'" Here Mrs. Carew paused, for Maude's music had suddenly died away to a symphony so soft and low that it was difficult to speak without being overheard. After a time, the player struck up a grand triumphant march, and Mrs. Carew continued: "It seems to me that words such as these, spoken by one who was Maude's legal guardian and natural protector, are more than sufficient to justify me in saying that your first barrier was a myth. Of the second you mention, I can, of course, say nothing. Whether or no it exists, you must learn from the lips of Maude herself. I think I need hardly advise you to learn your fate as soon as possible, or remind you of the old adage, 'faint heart never won fair lady.'"

The rapid revulsion of feeling experienced by Richard O'Meara during Mrs. Carew's speech might have been read in the change of his countenance. We leave both to the imagination of our readers,