

HELD IN TRUST.

CHAPTER III.

EGLISTONE ABBEY.

(Continued.)

The whole place was misty with driving rain, the sky sullen and lurid; every now and then there was the glare and dazzle of sudden lightning, the tree-tops looked gray and indistinct, the river ran molten, the cattle herded together under the projecting eaves, lowering their discontent with their sweet breath full on Robert Ord's face. Across the green space rose the gray old ruins; some birds had taken refuge in the great bare east window, and twittered and trimmed their wet plumage. Loose stones and mortar tumbled down the yawning chimney where Miss Maturin stood shaking out the folds of her dress and looking wistfully at him.

She had on a little straw hat, and she had tied it in gipsy fashion over her face, with a broad black ribbon; her face was pale, if possible, and there was a red swollen look about her eyes as though she had been weeping. He thought her even plainer than he had yesterday; but he could not deny that her expression was very sweet.

She eyed him timidly for a few minutes before she could summon up courage for her simple question.

Do you think we shall have to wait long, Mr. Ord? I mean is the rain nearly over?

Over? well no. I am afraid there is no chance of our leaving here for another three-quarters of an hour or so he returned, moving his arm for a moment from the dripping window-sill.

Three-quarters of an hour! she exclaimed, in a tone of such genuine dismay that he smiled grimly in spite of his own discomfort.

I am sorry that you are so uncomfortable, but the fact is we can not help ourselves.

Mr Tracy told me that he thought it would not rain, or I would never ventured so far, she continued as though distressed at the awkwardness of her position.

Mr Tracy was a bad prophet, then, he replied coldly; and then he turned himself again as though to study the prospect.

I was right, and he hates me, she said to herself mournfully; and he was so gentle with me yesterday before he knew all; and then, with the courage of sudden impulse which comes some times to the weakest and most timid woman, she determined that at all cost she must speak to him. She had had a final interview with Mr. Tracy that morning, and had gathered much in spite of the lawyer's guarded speech. She knew that Robert Ord had been bitterly disappointed, that there had been hard words said, and harder things thought than were ever likely to come to her knowledge. And as she looked at the rigid lines of the handsome face before her, and remembered the frowning words with which he had addressed her, she felt that her task would not be a pleasant one; but none the less did she resolve that she would ask his forgiveness for being the innocent cause of his wrong. I must meet him again and again, as I must meet all of them, she thought. Oh! if I could only soften him, if but one of them would look kindly on me and be my friend I, think I could bear it better, and then in her impulse she moved a little closer to him.

Mr. Ord, I must speak to you, she began; but as he turned round she stopped, scared by the very sternness of his face.

I am quite at your service, he returned; but not looking at her nevertheless. Yes, I know; but then there are some things so hard in the telling.

Some things—Well—yes.

But none so hard as this. Do you know, Mr. Ord, when you spoke to me last night I was almost dumb before you. I remember it well, Miss Maturin. You questioned me then, but I could not answer you; I felt almost desperate when I thought of all that there was to tell. Mr. Ord, shall I ever be able to tell you how grieved I am for what has happened?

Then the blackest frown that had ever been seen on Robert Ord's brow gathered there again. She had dared to speak on that subject to him—to him!

Oh, Mr. Ord!

Well, what now? he asked haughtily.

Because I can see it in your face, because I can feel it here, putting her hand on her heart; because I know, as well as though I had heard them, all the bitter things you have said and felt. Do you think I blame you? Not I. You have been cruelly wronged, you and all of them; but your suffering is nothing compared to mine. She spoke passionately, but without any idea of defending herself; for the anger of his look stung her beyond endurance. Her spirit was fairly roused now.

You know that if it had been in my power this thing should never have happened to you.

Then he remained absolutely silent.

Oh, Mr. Ord, this is too cruel, when

you know how wretched, how utterly wretched, all this terrible money has made me. And then she broke down, and for a moment wept before him as though she were heart-broken. Do you not think that if I could undo it I would? God knows that it is not my fault that all this trouble and wrong have come upon you.

I accuse you of nothing, Miss Maturin. He was wishing himself most earnestly away by this time. No appearance of innocence on her part could alter his opinion, so he told himself; but something of the hard bitter humour was oozing away. In reality he was gentle at heart, and he could not bear to treat her churlishly. She might be what he thought her, but he could not bring himself to tell her his suspicions.

I cannot regard you as innocent. In my own mind I think there must have been undue influence at work, or my aunt would never have left you all her money. Ah, you shrink from me. Why did you make me tell you this?

You believe this—you believe this of me, Mr. Ord?

I have thought so, and I think so still; but I am grieved that you oblige me to speak so plainly. I do not wish to be churlish to a lady. I think that you were young and friendless and needed help, and the position was one of great temptation. We were strangers to you, and under a cloud; you were hardly aware of the moral wrong you were doing; you might only have coveted a small portion of my aunt's wealth. I can quite believe you are sorry now for what has happened, but how can such sorrow avail us?

You believe this of me? she repeated in the same tone, but he never forgot the look with which she said it; it haunted him long afterwards—there was no anger, but the incredulous sorrow in her eyes moved even him to compassion.

Miss Maturin, do let us say no more.

There is nothing more to be said, she answered wearily, and her hands dropped to her side as she spoke. I must bear it I suppose. I cannot defend myself, for you would not believe my word; you have not believed all that Mr. Tracy has told you, of how I have worked and watched for you. Nothing could exceed the hopelessness with which she said this. I am sorry all this has occurred.

Then for a moment the colour came into her pale face.

Are you sorry, Mr. Ord? Well, that is something. No, I will not let this imputation crush me; I will not, I will not. I don't think you quite know what you have done, being a stranger, but I forgive you; you have almost broken my heart, but you have given me an object in life.

How so, Miss Maturin? Ah! you do not know me; I am a poor creature, but I can be very patient. I will not call Heaven to witness my innocence, for you would not believe my words; but I will never rest, I will never cease from striving day after day, and year after year, till I remove this suspicion. Mr. Ord, it will be my one, my only thought.

You heap coals of fire on my head, he returned, but the sarcasm somehow failed him.

Once more she looked at him with that mild reproach in her eyes.

Yes, the time will come when you will own that you have wronged me; it may be years hence, but I know it will come, when you will surely own it.

Be assured that I shall not delay coming to see you if any such taking back of words be necessary.

No, I know you will not; I can see that you are true, though you are so terribly hard; and then she moved away from him, and he saw a look in her face as though she was heart-broken.

I hope I am having a very pleasant day, on the whole, thought Robert Ord bitterly, as he walked up and down among the brick-heaps: he had done his work—she had forced him to do it; but the result did not satisfy him. What good was it to him that he had convicted her of her sin if she would not own that she had sinned? He had grappled with her, and she had glided from him with a look of reproach which haunted him against his will; do what he would, he could not banish a certain feeling of remorse as he thought of it.

These were not pleasant thoughts, as he stumbled over the brick-heaps, among the mouldering passages. How he loathed the whole place with an impatient loathing that recurred to him in future days! He could always recall that scene, it was so vivid in his memory—that desolate dwelling, with the strips of plaster clinging to the damp mouldering walls; the gaping window-frame, the broad green level, and gray rains misty with driving rain; the dull thud of horned heads striking impatiently against the doorway; and always motionless, always the central figure in that picture, the tall figure in the clinging black draperies: he could see the curve of the long neck, the small head bent slightly forward, the fluttering of the thin hands; could almost hear the monotonous tones of the low murmuring voice. Yes, the time will soon come when you will own that you have wronged me. When and how did that time come to Robert Ord?

The rain was ceasing now; he had just become aware of the fact, and wonder-

ing how he was to break the silence and open his lips to speak to her, when she relieved him of his embarrassment.

The rain is over now, I believe, she said, turning round to him. There was not a trace of colour in her face, but her calmness was wonderful: all the tremor, the nervous agitation that had so disturbed him yesterday, had left her; she looked like one who had unexpectedly received a deadly blow, but who was rallying from it. Her perfect self-possession astonished him.

The storm has not turned its back upon us yet, he returned, trying to speak with equal sangfroid, but, if you are willing, we will take advantage of this lull; to which she briefly assented, and in another minute they were walking side by side along the high road and under the dripping trees, greatly to his surprise, for he had expected her to decline his escort; but he did not know her.

There was another awkward silence, which neither attempted to break, and then he took courage and relieved himself of a perplexity.

Miss Maturin, after what has passed there can hardly be very cordial feelings between us, as it is impossible for me to consider myself otherwise than injured; but still, as I said before, you may not have anticipated all these consequences. I do not wish to judge you harshly. I feel sorry that you compelled me to speak.

A dim smile flitted across her face, more mournful than any tears.

Do you mean there can be peace between us? I certainly do not wish it otherwise, Mr. Ord.

Neither do I, he returned hastily. What is done, is done. I have no wish to make your position unbearable. I suppose we can always exchange the civilities of strangers?

I have no intention whatever of avoiding you, Mr. Ord.

You could not if you wished, he returned piqued by her perfect indifference. Bryn and Kirkby Vicarage are too close together.

Yes, I know, she answered, with a shiver. Do you think I forget what lies before me? If you will let me come amongst you, I will come; if not, I will bide my time. I do not mean to shun any of you. Why should I? I have done nothing of which to be ashamed—all such shunning will be on your side.

I cannot answer for it that we shall be very cordial, Miss Maturin.

Of course not. Do you think I expect it? Of course you will make my life bitter amongst you. But then I do not mean to blame you. You are very unjust. You do not know how to be merciful. But I can wait my time. And after that he had nothing to say.

It was a strange dreary walk, and one which they were not likely to forget. It was a relief when they had left the river behind them and were treading the well-worn pavement of the High Street; and still more a relief when they had reached the portico of King's Arms. And then they parted.

I suppose I may not offer you my hand, Miss Maturin? he said, with some feeling of compunction, as she turned her white wistful face to him.

No, Mr. Ord, you may not; you must never offer it to me again till you have taken back all you have said—till you have cleared me from this terrible imputation. And then, when she had said this, she left him and went in.

CHAPTER IV.

MEG.

In a well-known suburb of London—a suburb so widely known that its very name will bring a flood of reminiscences to many of us—there is a retired and pleasant thoroughfare called Chatham Place.

The glory of Hackney is departed. The traces of past grandeur are fast fading away from its sunny old streets. The monster tide of fashion that has set in during late-years has swept family after family westward. The wealthy citizens who lived in these great brick mansions, dwelling not figuratively but in reality under their fig trees, pleasant old places set in the midst of shady gardens, have long ago migrated, each man according to his several degrees of consequence and ambition—some to the sun-baked pavements of West-End squares and streets; a few to the humbler precincts of Russell Square; while others, less ambitious, and pining for green fields and country lanes, have sought out dwelling-places for themselves at Hampstead or Highgate, never dreaming that those fields would soon lie low, and those leafy lanes be trodden under foot, under the ever-advancing needs of increasing population. Alas! for those brick-and-mortar paradises; those long winding streets, modernised and uninteresting, where not so many years ago the children loitered in the narrow lanes to gather hawthorn and sweetbrier roses, or dabbled knee-deep in fields of golden buttercups; where the blackbirds and the thrushes used to sing in the early mornings, and in summer the air was full of the sweetness of new-mown hay. Now one walks as a stranger through the old spots, remembering as in a dream some favourite clump of trees or well-worn stile where a glittering gin-palace now flanks the path, or a labyrinth of intersecting roads branch into endless

lines and divisions of undeviating and hopeless uniformity.

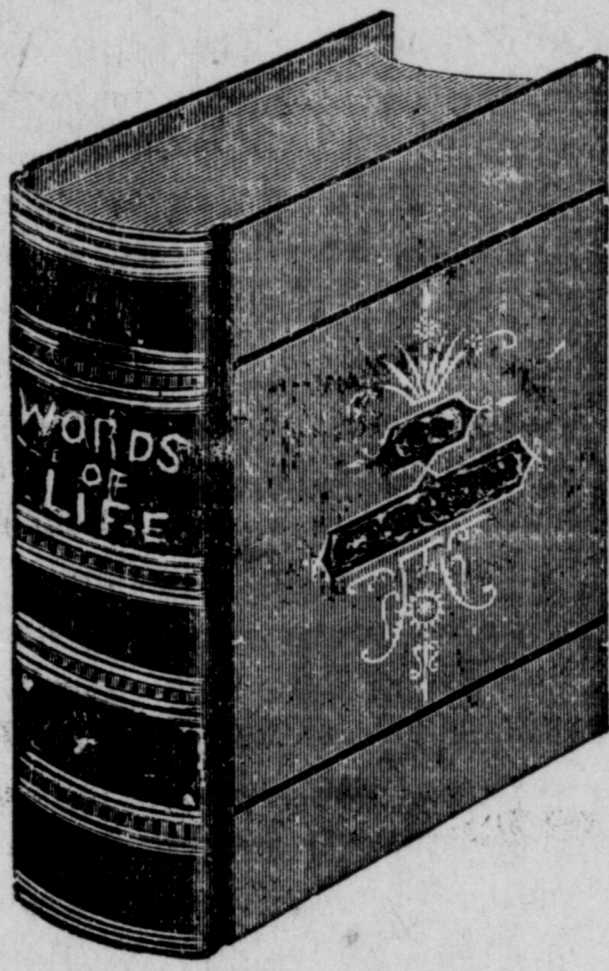
But though such glory as it once possessed is departed from Hackney, there is still a pleasant air of repose and quiet about its old familiar streets. Here and there some of the old families still linger clinging fondly to bygone associations, and despising the tyrannies of fashion. The whole place is a little oppressive and heavy in its respectability. There is monotony in its aspect—one day resembles another—but one feels a dim sort of tenderness for it nevertheless: one is haunted by a desire to linger long in the shady churchyard, where the old church-tower and the church are so strangely dissevered, and where one walks down the flagged path under the trees, with the dead lying on either hand, and the children plucking daisies out of the rank grass, or playing on the gray discoloured gravestones.

Branching off from the churchyard, and passing under the railway bridge, one finds oneself in Chatham Place. Here quiet would become dreariness save for the hum of voices proceeding at set hours from the great schoolhouse. It is impossible to connect life and activity with Chatham Place. The houses are dull and obscure, standing back in long gardens, with great gates that swing solemnly backward and forward. The winnons are long and narrow, and scarcely require the adjuncts of wire blinds. But they look pleasantly on a long strip of triangular green, where a few sheep and cows are always browsing, and beyond which lies Homerton Terrace. There are few trees, but plenty of dust and sunshine. There is no deafening traffic to jar one's nerves. All the knockers are bright as gold, and the one stone step is conspicuous for its whiteness. Few footsteps crunch in the long gravel-path. Here again respectability and monotony go hand in hand.

In one of these houses, many years before the events we have recorded took place, lived Mrs. Carruthers, Rotha Maturin's friend—or Meg Browning, as she was then.

Meg, as she was always called—for never in all her days had any one been known to call her by her baptismal name of Margaret—Meg lived with her father and mother in one of these shady houses in Chatham Place.

(To be Continued.)



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