

HELD IN TRUST.

CHAPTER XVI.

TREATS PRINCIPALLY OF TEARS.

(Continued.)

He had planned his visit none too early, and had a shrewd suspicion of how he would find matters. Mrs. Carruthers, as she met him in the hall on her way to church, looked grave enough to verify these suspicions.

I am so glad you are come, Mr. Ord, she said, warmly welcoming him. I can't think what is the matter with Miss Maturin to-day; she has scarcely spoken or eaten for hours, and she will not answer a single inquiry as to whether she be ill. Will you go to her? she added. The Vicar nodded. Mrs. Carruthers pushed open the door of the little sitting-room, and Mr. Ord entered unannounced. As usual the room was filled with evening sunshine; it slanted full on the pretty tea-table, from whence they had just risen; but Rotha still sat in her place with her empty plate before her. When the Vicar first saw her she had her two arms on the table; her shoulders had a weary stoop in them, and her face was hidden in her hands. The sound of the opening door evidently startled her; when she saw who it was she rose at once to her feet and remained standing.

I suppose you knew that I should come to you, he said gently.

No, Mr. Ord, I never expected to see you here again; and as she turned from him he saw that the newspaper lay half-hidden under her plate.

You thought I should not come to you in your trouble? he repeated reproachfully; you were wrong, you see. I hope you do not think I am less your friend because you are just now so sorely in need of one.

Her only answer was to turn hurriedly from him and burst into tears; covering her face with her hands, and pressing him to leave her, she wept as though her heart were broken. Good Christian as he was, his thoughts were very bitter against Ebenezer as he heard her sobs.

My dear Miss Maturin, hush! poor child, poor child! it has gone very heavily with you I fear.

Mr. Ord, it has been my death blow. Hush! you must not say that.

Ah! but it has, and here she struggled ineffectually with her emotion; it has been the deathblow to all my hopes. You will never know how I have planned and worked, and all I meant to do. Everything would have come right, I know, if they had let me stay here a little longer.

Stay here! at Bryn, do you mean?

Yes, it is my own, is it not? No one has the right to drive me away, have they? And I was beginning to love it so in spite of all, if I could only have stopped on here and worked as I was working I am sure people would have grown to believe in me. I have so prayed to be allowed to live it down.

You will live it down if you will only be brave over this.

I shall not try, she replied, turning very white. In the heat of the day my strength has failed. I am going away from here, Mr. Ord.

You know, of course that the conditions of the will oblige you to live at Bryn? he continued after a pause; pardon me if I remind you of what you know already—the clause is a binding one, I believe.

I have no intention to set it aside, she returned, with a little scorn. I know in leaving Bryn that I shall leave it a beggar, but anything will be better than these gilded chains; poverty cannot degrade me, though at first it will be hard to bear. We must go back to our teaching, Meg and I. Poor Meg, it is very sad for her, certainly.

I should think it sadder for you.

No, I am younger, and in spite of my sorrow I am not quite so hopeless. I shall go away from here, and in a few years perhaps I shall forget my troubles. When I next come, she added, with a bitter smile, your Convalescent Home will have got its new wing, and the Almshouse will have been built.

You mean that, in case of your refusal to live at Bryn, the money is to revert to the original purpose—at least to the purpose my aunt proposed herself after she had disinherited her lawful heir.

Yes, Mr. Ord; the Almshouses were much in her thoughts. I cannot think what induced her to give them up, unless indeed it were natural caprice.

Very likely, returned the Vicar quietly. Well, so it is your intention, Miss Maturin, to let the property go out of your hands and to resume your old drudgery of teaching—in short, to use your own expression, to leave Bryn a beggar?

That is my intention, certainly.

Have you any idea that by doing so you will at all alter the present state of feelings towards you?

No, she faltered; I have no hope at all of that kind.

Perhaps you are not aware that it may rather injure you than otherwise; some people are so unjust that they may hold it rather a corroboration of their suspicions than otherwise.

He touched her there—he saw her wince. I cannot help it, she answered despairingly. I have tried what I can do to remove it, but it is all no use; people must think of me as they will—it will be all over some day.

Yes, if we be not weary of well-doing; have you forgotten that?

I have forgotten everything, I think, she answered in a tired voice, putting back her hair from her face—such a worn young face it looked. Mr. Ord, when I think of Meg—poor Meg—I hate myself for being such a coward; but the sin is with them who are driving me to desperation.

That is true in one sense, but we may not rid ourselves of the responsibility of our own actions; if you carry out this intention, you will cause suffering to many.

You mean that poor Annie will miss me. I am afraid she will, but it will only be for a little time; what hurts me most is that the hospital will claim all the money, and I have been saving it all so carefully for him.

For him—the words had escaped her almost unconsciously. As soon as she had spoken them she shrunk back in uncontrollable confusion, and covered her face with her hands. Oh, Mr. Ord, she exclaimed, what have I said! I never meant any of you to know this.

He had scarcely understood her meaning at first, but now a certain quick brightness came into his eyes as he leant forward—he almost held his breath in the intensity of his surprise and suspense.

Do you mean that you are saving it for Robert? Don't be afraid to trust me, he continued pleadingly; you hardly know how important this all is—on my honour, as a gentleman and a clergyman, I will not betray your confidence.

You will not even tell your wife?

No, no; this shall be solely a matter between you and me—your words shall be as though they had not been spoken. Did I understand you to say that you had been keeping the money for him?

Yes, she returned, still hesitating; all of it that I could honestly spare from my necessities. Meg and I are used to live simply, you know; there is no sacrifice in the case—none. I know that I cannot make restitution in my lifetime, but, all the same, it makes me happier to think that it is all being saved up for him.

But, my dear Miss Maturin, you are much younger than Robert. Women on an average live longer than men.

Yes, happy women do, no doubt. I should be sorry to believe that in my case; but at least his children will have the benefit. The idea surprises you, perhaps, she continued, with a faint smile; it did Mr. Tracy; but it was the only thing that gave me any comfort.

It may be possible for some people to enjoy themselves at the expense of others, but this is not my nature.

I most thoroughly believe you: in giving up your property, therefore, you are making this noble intention of yours with regard to my brother, null and void. Never mind, the Convalescent Hospital will reap the benefit.

Oh! she said reproachfully. Why do you remind me of that? Are you going to make it as impossible for me to go as it is to remain?

I hope, indeed, that I shall succeed in making it impossible.

But why—why be so cruel?

Because Kirkby, and Kirkby Vicarage especially, cannot afford to part with you Miss Maturin—because they shall not part with you until they have acknowledged themselves to be in the wrong. Do not misunderstand me, and think I am saying this on account of what you have told me about my brother. In my own mind I think Robert will never derive any good from your money, or any one else's. No; I say this solely because I believe in you, and think you are an injured woman.

Before he had finished speaking she had risen to her feet, and was confronting him.

Mr. Ord, say that again, she panted.

What am I to say again? he asked.

What you said just now—that you believed in me, she replied, hardly able to get out the words in her agitation; and trembling all over.

Very well; I will repeat my words. I said that I believe in you, and I do. I believe that we have wronged you utterly and bitterly, and that you have never done this thing of which we accused you.

Thank God! was all she said; but, oh, the sparkling brightness of her face, and then a little astonishment mingled with her joy!

Well, he said, smiling, are you disposed to forgive me? I confess I hardly like to ask your pardon.

Then, in her sweet humility, she put that by.

But, Mr. Ord, I cannot understand it. Surely you did not come here this evening to tell me this? and her eyes dwelt for a moment on the offending *Herald*.

You mean that you cannot understand my sudden conversion. Well, I will tell you the truth. Just before I came here my brother asked if I were prepared to acquit you, and I told him No. At that time I certainly meant what I said.

Ah!

I knew how I should find you. When I came into your presence just now, and saw you bowed down with grief—my doubts were still heavy on my mind—they were there; but, to be candid with you, they were certainly lessened.

How so? she asked timidly.

Well, I had overcome my prejudice. Perhaps I should be right in saying that I was no longer disposed to be hardened against you. I had been proving you lately. I could not reconcile the fact that came before my eyes with Robert's suspicions, and every day I found it more difficult to doubt Annie's patient nurse and comforter. Do you understand me?

Yes she returned humbly: but I am afraid I was only working for your praise then.

It may be so; but it struck me you were laborious and self-denying. I knew you to be patient. When you talked to me, in your grief, about going away—and giving up everything—it was impossible not to believe you were in earnest. It is true I hinted that others might attribute such conduct to far different motives; but, in my own mind, then I began to see you were innocent.

Is that all?

No, it is not all. I suppose you managed to convince me by your own words. There, will that do? he added smiling.

Somehow he found it difficult to explain to her how his doubts really had been set at rest. How could he tell her that it had been those few unconscious words of hers that had carried conviction straight to his mind?

He wished now that he had not given her his word—that it were possible that others might share his knowledge—it would make his defence of her so much less difficult; but when he hinted at this wish she reminded him of his promise with a decision against which there was no appeal.

I could not stay here and look any of them in the face, she said in a frightened voice, when he suggested it. At that he smiled a little.

You are thinking better of your intended exodus then, Miss Maturin—you are not leaving Bryn now?

Of course I am not leaving it, she returned with energy. When you said you would prevent me, how could I know what means you would take? Do you think I would ever go away from Kirkby now that I have a friend here who believes in me?

Ah, so my argument has been successful, after all! By the bye, Miss Maturin, I have something to tell you, only all this has put it out of my head till now—do you know who has been taking up the cudgels in your defence? and he glanced meaningly at the obnoxious paper.

She shook her head. How can I know?

Well, I will tell you; it was Robert. Garton told me all about it, and I was very nearly as surprised as you are. Robert seems to have done his work well; Garton says the fellow fairly shook in his shoes. He has consented to write some sort of apology. I hardly know whether he will go so far as to retract entirely; so you see things are not quite so hopeless as you made them out half an hour ago.

I was going to ask you if you would do me a favor, he said presently, in his usual manner. I want your assistance in a little matter that I have to settle in the village. Do you think you are too tired to come with me?

Too tired! oh no, she returned with alacrity; but he hesitated a little when he saw her face.

Are you sure you are not? Well, perhaps it will be better to have it over. Put on your bonnet then while I stroll out in the garden for a breath of air.

CHAPTER XVII.

MRS. ORD HEARS ARTY HIS PRAYERS.

Rotha had acceded to the Vicar's request with alacrity.

I wonder what people will say to my red eyes, she thought. I declare I look as pale as a ghost; and a vision of Belle's beautiful face rose before her as she ran downstairs. The Vicar was standing in the doorway leading into the lane.

You have not been long, he said, with an approving smile, and then they walked down the road together.

She wished all Kirkby could have seen her walking beside him, her friend; she gave him wistful glances now and then, inexpressively touching. Down the white sandy road comes the Vicar, slow and ponderous. What a grand-looking man, Rotha thinks, as she looks up at him. He carries his felt hat in his hand as they come near the church. They can hear music through the open door.

The Vicar had gone over to speak to the vergers. He came back presently, and they retrace their steps.

Where are we going? asks Rotha, a little bewildered.

They had been walking up and down just to listen to the hymn, and now he has unlocked another door in the wall.

Open, Sesame. Do you not like wandering in a strange garden of an evening, Miss Maturin? Do you admire my fuchsias?

They are walking down a gravel-path; two ducks come waddling over the grass to Rotha's feet; a little white kitten, up in an apple tree, grins at her like a gargoyle as they pass. There are beds of scarlet geraniums and mignonette; a westerly trail clusters of gray grapes over a low bow-window; a passion-flower climbs over the porch. A sleepy voice sounds querulously from the upper regions.

Where am I? Why do you bring me here? cries Rotha in an uncertain voice.

I will tell you by and by, he answers, stopping to gather a great creamy rose, and slipping it between her fingers. At present we have to go upstairs. Don't be frightened, it will be over soon; and he draws her across the threshold.

Rotha gives herself up for lost now—they are stumbling up a dark staircase; more roses like the one she has in her hand came peeping through a little lattice-window all festooned with greenery. The sleepy voice they heard in the upper regions has descended, and is blowing through a tin trumpet.

Be quiet, Artie, you rogue; come and make friends with this lady. And Rotha bends down to an invisible curly head.

Mother, the lady has kissed my curls, shouts Artie, turning short round into an open door; she has, indeed, and I won't let Uncle Robert cut them off.

What lady? Hush! says his mother you are disturbing your aunt. Why, Austin! and then Mary rises in confusion. In the sudden stillness Rotha can hear the ripple of the water behind the sand-hills. Coming out of the light and glory, the room seems full of dusk corners—a black dress comes out of one; a tall dark man bows to her from a distance, there is a mass of white drapery glimmering somewhere. Rotha is conscious that she is crushing her rose between her fingers—the carpet is strewn with pale creamy leaves—one flutters on to Artie's curls; she feels she is white to the lips.

Mary, I have brought Miss Maturin to see you; make her very welcome, my dear; and, as he delivers himself of his little speech, he lifts his boy in his arms and smoothes him with kisses, and Mary takes Rotha's hand.

The Vicar has retreated to the rug, and is eyeing the white drapery rather doubtfully. Why, Belle, child are you ill? he asks kindly.

Hush! Austin, says Mary again, and she drops Rotha's hand and comes up to the sofa a little anxiously. Yes, Belle has been ill, but she is better now, and she whispers something into her sister's ear; but Belle colours and looks at Robert.

Will you not sit down, Miss Maturin? I think we can find you a chair.

Robert had brought her a chair—and now he has gone off somewhere. She can hear him whistling softly at a far-off window; he has taken no notice of Mary's whisper, and Belle still colours and hesitates.

It will be too late in another minute, says Mary, with a patient sigh; and then Belle gets up and crosses the room—a cold hand holds Rotha's for a moment, and the Vicar, with a pleased smile, presses his boy to him.

Do you know I have had no tea to-night, Mary, says the Vicar, rather solemnly. Let Miss Maturin go upstairs and take off her bonnet, my dear, and then we will have some tea together in your room.

Oh, Austin, I am so sorry I did not think of it before, she says remorsefully. She makes a little excuse to Rotha as they go up the dark stairs. Mother's rooms are always untidy, she observes, as she picks up a broken drum and a whole file of soldiers off the floor; the soldiers are oscillating on their zigzag parade; as Mary picks them up they drop off by twos and threes.

Let me help you, says Rotha, with a little laugh—and in another moment she is down on the carpet; in the dim light she can see faint patches and stains everywhere—some marbles crunch under her feet and roll under the bed. By and by Artie comes in with bare rosy feet and startles them.

Miss Maturin I am quite ashamed. Artie, come here and say your prayers.

A hushed feeling comes over Rotha as she sits down by the open window. By and by, when Deb is making the tea, and Artie is prattling after his prayers, she begins to have a dim consciousness why the Vicar has sent her upstairs.

I suppose tea is ready now, Mary observed, suddenly rising; then Rotha had put her hand on her dress very timidly to detain her.

Please do not go just yet, Mrs. Ord, I want you to know how good your husband has been to me. Then Mary sat down again directly.

(To be continued.)

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