

Out of the Darkness

Robert was leaning against the mantelpiece with his back toward her; but she started at her entrance and raised his head, and then, after a moment's hesitation, held out his hand. It was not taken for an instant; perhaps Rotha hardly perceived it, but a bitter smile wreathed his thin lips at what he imagined was her pride.

"You need not have hesitated," he said sharply—the sharpness of pain, not anger. "I meant to have told you—never mind, it will keep; the thing is, that I have sent for you. I suppose I ought to thank you first for your kindness in coming to me. Some women would not have acted as you have, but I confess I am in no mood for mere courtesy tonight."

"Neither am I," returned Rotha quietly. His harsh words, his pale face only inspired her with pity. With an involuntary movement she went up a little closer and looked at him with straightforward, honest eyes. "You are in trouble, and you have sent for me," she said softly; "and now what can I do for you?"

"Stop," he said hoarsely. "I don't want pity—least of all from you. Pity her if you will. Good heavens, to think how she loves me, and that I blindfolded her! I am, have as good as murdered her!"

"Mr. Ord!" She is constrained to cry out his name, his violence is so terrible to her; and then, with a sudden pitiful impulse, she goes nearer and lays her hand on his arm.

"Have you sent for me to tell me this?"

"Yes, to tell you this—this, and anything else you like. Oh, you may humble me at your pleasure. I am a proud man if you will, but this is your hour of triumph. I would rather have you triumph over me than pity me. Why do you look at me like this, Miss Maturin? Do you think I am mad tonight?"

"I think you are," she returned softly. "God help you! Mad with pain and disappointment and remorse, you are cruel to yourself, cruel to me, to Belle, to everybody. Was it your fault that you were so blindfolded that you could not see the truth?"

"Yes," he returned, with a dogged sort of honesty; "it was my fault. I would not allow myself to be convinced. Is your memory so bad that you have forgotten our conversation down on the sands?"

She dropped her head sadly; she could not help it. Why should he recall those bitter months? "Humbled—ah, and had she not been humiliated then?"

"Well, I see you remember," he continued, watching her; "you do not convince me then. You would have saved her for me if I had only permitted it; and I let her fade before my eyes, brute that I was, rather than owe her preservation to you. No, do not stop me; if I did not know my motives then, I do now."

"No, no," she cried, putting out her hand to stop him. "Don't talk so—you must not talk so, it was this terrible prejudice against me that hardened you. I came between you and your happiness, and made you mad."

"More shame to me!" he retorted. But she put out her hand again to stop him.

"Ah, you are more cruel to yourself than you have been to me," she exclaimed. "If you mean that you have sinned against me, have I not forgiven it long ago? Mr. Ord, you have sent for me, but it is not Miss Maturin who has come to you now—it is the little sister, Gar's future wife, who prays you to be reconciled to her."

Her hands went out to him tremblingly as she uttered his name; she had forgotten everything at the sight of his terrible grief. If he were breaking her she did not remember it now. "Gar's brother! Poor Robert," he thinks he hears her say so softly. As he turns away and folds his arms over his breast something that would have been tears in other men glistens now in Robert Ord's eyes. Another moment and her hand rests on his outstretched palm.

"Forgive me if you can," he begins in a broken voice; but she stops him. "Hush! I understand you. There is no need to say anything more."

"There is every need, you mean. Do you think I shall spare myself? You told me that I must never come and offer you my hand till I would own that I had wronged you. I own it now."

"I know it—I can see it. Please spare yourself this," he repeated scornfully. "Oh, I have been so good to you—you may well ask me to do this. Because I envied you your possessions I must look upon your every act and word with a jaundiced eye. I must even sacrifice my poor Belle to my unnatural passion. Oh, you were right when you said you would rather die than touch my hand."

"I am touching it now; it feels like the hand of a friend, Mr. Ord, these things are all passed and over. I have forgiven them long ago. Why will you recall them?"

"To do you a tardy justice," he replied vehemently. "Because, God knows, I have done you a bitter wrong; because you were as innocent as a little child, and I was cruel to you."

"Not cruel—only hard, and hardest of all to yourself. You were wrong to

your better judgment, and now the scales have fallen from your eyes. Indeed it is all forgiven. You know me now, and you know I am your friend."

"My friend!" he muttered, "my friend!" A strange softness crept over his face, and then he turned it away and leant heavily against the mantelpiece; but at that moment something hard and bitter passed out of Robert Ord's heart forever.

By and by she knew why he had sent for her—not to tell her this, as he reiterates again and again, but to beg her on his knees, if needs be, to take Belle away. It is her last chance—only only chance, he affirms sadly. And Rotha slowly and generously grants the request. She cannot tell him what she has told Mary, that she believes it has come too late.

Mary came down presently to tell Robert that Belle was asking for him. "She is growing restless again and wonders what has become of you, dear. She knows now that Austin has told you everything."

Robert turned very pale. "I did not mean to have seen her tonight," he said. "I am half afraid of what I may say. I think you had better come up with me, Mary." And Rotha was left alone.

She might have been alone about twenty minutes when she heard Mary calling her, and went up at once.

"Belle wants to bid you good-night," began Mary cheerfully, as Rotha entered; but Belle's feeble voice interrupted her.

"No, not good-night. I want to speak to you, Rotha. Please come here." And Belle raised herself from Robert's arm and held out her hot hands to Rotha. How beautiful she looked with that hectic flush on her wasted cheek and her eyes burning with fever!

"Dear Rotha, come here. Tell him—Mary will not—that it is all no use, and that he must not send me away. Tell him it will kill me."

"I will tell you to remain here, Belle. Mr. Greenock and Dr. Chapman both said so."

"That is what he keeps saying. Oh, Rotha, ask him not. He knows that he is going in less than three months, and yet he never to be parted. It is not enough that I am never to see his wife, but he will not even let me see the last of him." And Belle flung herself down on the couch again as though her last hope were taken from her.

"For your own good—only for your good, Belle; it is your last chance. You know they said so."

"But they did not think so," she returned, in a voice of despair. "Rotha, does he think that I shall care to live when I am never to be his wife? Tell him to ask me anything but this."

"I cannot," he returned in a low voice. "Dear Belle, why will you persist in speaking as though there were no hope? Did not Dr. Chapman say that a winter or two at Montrose would set you up? Go with Miss Maturin in a fortnight's time, and I will come down to Devonshire to wish you good-by."

"Good-by!" she returned, in a bewildered voice; "it is not you who have to say good-by, surely?"

"Yes, for a little while; but it will not be long. I will promise you. Only do as the doctors tell you, and in six months or a year's time I will come over myself and take you home with me."

"Take me home! Only hear him," she returned, in a faint voice. "He is himself still. Dear Robert, why will you not understand that we must give it all up? I am your poor friend, dear, but I shall never be anything more to you."

"Dear Belle, do not refuse him; he means it for your good," exclaimed Rotha. "Look at him; you are breaking his heart." For, overcome by her words, Robert had covered his face with his hands. In another moment Belle had flung her thin arms round his neck. Never to her dying day did she forget the look of despairing love on her face.

"Oh, Robert, don't; anything but that. Dear Bertie, put down your hands, and let me see your face. Do not shake of your own love." He looked at her eagerly, almost hopelessly; but there was no answering gleam in Belle's eyes.

"For your sake? Yes, I understand. Kiss me, Bertie. I will go. No, not that name—that is what I used to call you; it must be Robert now."

"I like the old name and the old ways best, Belle."

"Do you, Bertie? Ah, there it is again. Are we alone, or is Rotha there?"

"I am here," said Rotha, coming gently to her side. "I am waiting to say good-night, Belle."

"Good-night," returned Belle, dreamily. "I thought I was alone with Robert, and the I was, oh, so sweet! You will have to carry me upstairs tonight, Bertie. Where is Mary? But, before her sister could be summoned to the room, Belle, exhausted by her emotions, had fainted away."

CHAPTER XXXIV.

It was the saddest Christmas Day that the inhabitants of the vicarage had ever known. Uncle Gar's absence was loudly lamented by the boys, who could imagine no holiday without their favorite playfellow and adviser, while it was felt as a very real loss by the

other members of the family. Mary especially missed the bright, unflinching spirits and helpful good-nature which had gone so far to make Gar's influence with the ladies, she had always called him her eldest boy, and had been very motherly and watchful over him, claiming a right to lecture him on all his shortcomings, to which Gar had submitted with a tolerable amount of patience. But even Gar's absence sunk into comparative insignificance beside the fact of Belle's falling health, and it was quite sufficient to note the vicar's grave looks and Mary's troubled face to see how heavily this new blow had fallen on them.

Rotha did not always go home at these times. Robert always looked for her, and expected her to be there. Since the day of their reconciliation, when he had owned and acknowledged her as a friend, Rotha had no reason to complain of his manner to her. As far as she was concerned he was an altered man.

He never met her now without a kind smile and a hearty grasp of the hand; if she stayed late at the vicarage, however tired and jaded he was, he would always walk up with her to her own door.

Others besides Rotha noticed the almost deferential respect which went out of all he addressed her; it seemed as though he were always trying to make amends for his past injustice to her. The vicar openly congratulated her on this happy condition of things, but Rotha just now was a little silent about the whole matter. If the truth must be told, she felt somewhat oppressed by it all; in her humility it was almost painful to feel herself so watched and considered.

It was almost a week since Garth had left—a long week, as it seemed to Rotha, sitting so patiently in Belle's sick-room day after day.

Rotha flagged a little in the heavy atmosphere which was natural, but she never complained of its dullness. It seemed a dreary exchange for the free happy life of the last few months, when Mary and she sang and laughed over their work and Garth and the boys came and sat at the vicarage; how she missed their boisterous excursions and their happy rambles, and the grand teas which Meg prepared to surprise them on their return!

One afternoon, however, after she sat listening to the faint click of her own and Mary's needles, broken now and then by low-voiced conversation while Belle dozed. Here was daily suffering to be witnessed—suffering borne patiently, indeed, but not the cheerfulness of real submission. Here was the languid body and quiet mind acting and reacting lamentably on each other—suffering which Rotha strove to lighten, but without success.

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MAY 24, 1907

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