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A TALE

BY

MARIA EDGEWORTH

WITH AN INTRODUCTION

BY

ANNE THACKERAY RITCHIE

ILLUSTRATED

BY

CARL SCHLOESSER

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INTRODUCTION

WHILE Waterloo was being fought, while Napoleon was sailing from Plymouth¹ a captive, while Europe was changing hands, the party at Edgeworthstown was leading its usual studious and social life, and corresponding and visiting, receiving guests and relations. We hear of letters from Joanna Baillie, 'so different from the fine or gossip style.' 'The authoress of *Pride and Prejudice* has been so good' as to send a new novel called *Emma*; Miss Edgeworth is also reading Cuvier's *Theory of the Earth*, 'written with such perfect clearness as to be intelligible to the meanest capacity,' says the sanguine lady. In July 1816 Maria writes to her aunt, Mrs. Ruxton, that 'Mr. Strutt and his son² have within these few minutes arrived. He wrote only yesterday that being at Liverpool he would not be so near Ireland without getting to Edgeworthstown. . . . I hope my father may be able to enjoy their company; but he was very ill all last night and this morning.' Mr. Edgeworth's health was breaking rapidly. He had rallied on his eldest son's return from his long captivity, but illness had again attacked him.

Ormond was not published until 1817. It was written

¹ Sir Charles Eastlake as a boy was there at that time, and painted the fallen monarch as he stood on the quarter-deck of the *Bellerophon*. The picture is now in the possession of Lord Rosebery.

² Afterwards the first Lord Belper.

during Mr. Edgeworth's last illness under special circumstances, but it is one of the most spontaneous of his daughter's books.

In a letter to a correspondent in after years, Miss Edgeworth, writing about *Ormond*, dwells upon the advantage of mental over written notes. 'The process of combination, generalisation, are best carried on in the head,' she says. 'As an instance,' she continues, 'I may mention King Corny, who is, I believe, considered more of a fancy piece than my usual common-life Dutch figures. The first idea of him was taken from the facts I heard of an oddity who lived in a remote part of Ireland, an ingenious despot in his own family, who blasted out of the rock on which his house was built half a kitchen, while he and his family were living in the house. He was so passionate that children, grown-up sons, servants and all, ran out of the house when he fell into a passion with his own tangled hair; a man who used in his impatience and rages to call at the head of the kitchen stairs to his servants, "Drop whatever you have in your hand, and come here and be damned." He was generous and kind-hearted, but despotic and conceited to the most ludicrous degree. He thought he could work Gobelin tapestry and play the harp better than any one living. . . . In working out King Corny from the first wrong hint I was obliged, one after another, to give up every fact. . . . I had to make him, according to the general standard of wit and acuteness, shrewd humour, and sarcasm of that class of unread natural geniuses, an over-match for Sir Ulick, who is of the more cultivated class of acute and roguish Irish gentlemen.'

The printer hurried on the printing for Mr. Edgeworth to see the volume completed on his birthday. This gave him the greatest satisfaction, and he lived to write a preface to it.

'In my seventy-fourth year,' he says, 'I had the satisfaction of seeing another work of my daughter's brought before the public; this was more than I could have expected, from my advanced age and declining health.'

The following touching extracts from Mrs. Edgeworth's history speak for themselves, and tell the story of *Ormond*'s production very simply and vividly:—

'On February 16th Maria read out to her father the first chapter of *Ormond* in the carriage going to Pakenham Hall to see Lord Longford's bride. It was the last visit that Mr. Edgeworth paid anywhere. He had expressed a wish to Maria that she should write a story as a companion to *Harrington*, and in all her anguish of mind at his state of health, she, by a wonderful effort of affection and genius, produced those gay and brilliant pages, some of the gayest and most brilliant she ever composed. The interest and delight which her father, ill as he was, took in this beginning encouraged her to go on, and she completed the story. The admirable characters of King Corny and Sir Ulick O'Shane, and all those wonderful scenes of wit, humour, and feeling, were written in agony of anxiety, with trembling hand and tearful eye. As she finished chapter after chapter she read them out, the whole family assembling in her father's room to listen to them. Her father enjoyed these readings so exceedingly as to reward her for the effort she made.'

'May 31, 1817.—This day, so anxiously expected, has arrived (Maria writes)—the only birthday of my father's for many many years which has not brought unmixed feelings of pleasure. He had had a terrible night, but when I went into his room and stood at the foot of his bed, his voice was strong and cheerful as usual. I put into his hand the 160 printed pages of *Ormond* which kind-

hearted Hunter had successfully managed to get ready for this day. How my dear father, in the midst of such sufferings, and in such an exhausted state of body, can take so much pleasure in such things, is astonishing. Oh, my dear Sophy, what must be the fund of warm affection from which this springs! and what infinite, exquisite pleasure to me! "Call Sneyd directly," he said, and swallowed some stirabout, and said he felt renovated. Sneyd was seated at the foot of his bed. "Now, Maria, dip anywhere, read on." I began, "King Corny recovered. . . ." Then he said, "I must tell Sneyd the story up to this." And most eloquently, most beautifully did he tell the story. No mortal could ever have guessed that he was an invalid, if they had only heard him speak.

'Just as I had here stopped writing my father came out of his room, looking wretchedly, but ordered the carriage, and said he would go to Longford to see Mr. Fallon about materials for William's Bridge. He took with him his three sons, and "Maria to read *Ormond*"—great delight to me. He was much pleased, and this wonderful father of mine drove all the way to Longford: forced our way through the tumult of the most crowded market I ever saw—his voice heard clear all the way down the street—stayed half an hour in the carriage on the bridge talking to Mr. Fallon; and we were not home till half-past six. He could not dine with us, but after dinner he sent for us all into the library. He sat in the arm-chair by the fire, my mother in the opposite arm-chair, Pakenham behind her, Francis on a stool at her feet, Maria beside them, William next, Lucy, Sneyd, on the sofa opposite the fire Honora, Fanny, Harriet, and Sophy; my aunts next to my father, and Lovel between them and the sofa.'

So it was that the 160 first pages of *Ormond* were read to

the assembled family. In the preface to *Ormond* Mr. Edgeworth takes leave of the world with cheerful self-possession. Though Mr. Edgeworth was failing rapidly, he kept up his interest in this world to the very last. Mr. Hare quotes his exclamation, 'How I do enjoy my existence!' Would that this were a more common saying among human beings.

Mr. Frederick Strutt has kindly let me see several letters written by Mr. Edgeworth on his sick-bed. They are written to the Mr. Strutt of those days in weak and straggling characters, but the spirit of them is courageous to the end. There are calculations, suggestions for machinery, for various improvements. Strength fails, but the cheerful spirit still lights up the hour; the sick man does not dwell upon his own infirmities, he is preoccupied by the life around him, by thoughts of his friends and children. The laws of life and matter still interest him as their echoes reach his sick-bed. The kindly old stoic is never so sympathetic as now, gallantly facing pain and the inevitable. 'The natural and happy confidence reposed in me by my daughter puts it in my power to assure the public that she does not write negligently,' he says. 'I can assert that twice as many pages were written for these volumes as are now printed. . . . Public critics have found several faults with Miss Edgeworth's former works. She takes this opportunity of returning them sincere thanks for the candid and lenient manner in which they are pointed out. . . . I bid you farewell for ever,' says the old man, in conclusion, and signs his name for the last time on 31st May 1817. On the 13th of June he died. 'The rest of that year was a blank,' writes his widow.

Miss Edgeworth was about fifty years old at the time of her father's death. The tears, she said, felt in her eyes like the cutting of a knife; she had overworked them, all the