

# MADAM

A *Novel*

BY MRS. OLIPHANT

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**M A D A M.**

## CHAPTER I.

A LARGE drawing-room in a country-house, in the perfect warmth, stillness, and good order of after-dinner, awaiting the ladies coming in; the fire perfection, reflecting itself in all the polished brass and steel and tiles of the fireplace; the atmosphere just touched with the scent of the flowers on the tables; the piano open, with candles lit upon it; some pretty work laid out upon a stand near the fire, books on another, ready for use, velvet curtains drawn. The whole softly, fully lighted, a place full of every gentle luxury and comfort in perfection—the scene prepared, waiting only the actors in it.

It is curious to look into a centre of life like this, all ready for the human affairs about to be transacted there. Tragedy or comedy, who can tell which? the clash of human wills, the encounter of hearts, or perhaps only that serene blending of kindred tastes and inclinations which makes domestic happiness. Who was coming in? A fair mother, with a flock of girls fairer still, a beautiful wife adding the last grace to the beautiful place? some fortunate man's crown of well-being and happiness, the nucleus of other happy homes to come?

A pause: the fire only crackling now and then, a little burst of flame puffing forth, the clock on the mantelpiece chiming softly. Then there entered alone a young lady about eighteen, in the simple white dinner dress of a home party; a tall, slight girl, with smooth brown hair, and eyes for the moment enlarged with anxiety and troubled meaning. She came in not as the daughter of the house in ordinary circumstances comes in, to take her pleasant

place, and begin her evening occupation, whatever it may be. Her step was almost stealthy, like that of a pioneer, investigating anxiously if all was safe in a place full of danger. Her eyes, with the lids curved over them in an anxiety almost despairing, seemed to plunge into and search through and through the absolute tranquillity of this peaceful place. Then she said in a half-whisper, the intense tone of which was equal to a cry, "Mother!" Nothing stirred: the place was so warm, so perfect, so happy; while this one human creature stood on the threshold gazing—as if it had been a desert full of nothing but trouble and terror. She stood thus only for a moment, and then disappeared. It was a painful intrusion, suggestive of everything that was most alien to the sentiment of the place: when she withdrew it fell again into that soft beaming of warmth and brightness waiting for the warmer interest to come.

The doorway in which she had stood for that momentary inspection, which was deep in a solid wall, with two doors, in case any breath of cold should enter, opened into a hall, very lofty and fine, a sort of centre to the quiet house. Here the light was dimmer, the place being deserted, though it had an air of habitation, and the fire still smouldered in the huge chimney, round which chairs were standing. Sounds of voices muffled by closed doors and curtains came from the farther side where the dining-room was. The young lady shrank from this as if her noiseless motion could have been heard over the sounds of the male voices there. She hurried along to the other end of the hall, which lay in darkness with a glimmer of pale sky showing between the pillars from without. The outer doors were not yet shut. The inner glass door showed this paleness of night, with branches of trees tossing against a gray heaven full of flying clouds—the strangest weird contrast to all the warmth and luxury within. The girl shivered as she came in sight of that

dreary outer world. This was the opening of the park in front of the house, a width of empty space, and beyond it the commotion of the wind, the stormy show of the coursing clouds. She went close to the door and gazed out, pressing her forehead against the glass, and searching the darkness, as she had done the light, with anxious eyes. She stood so for about five minutes, and then she breathed an impatient sigh. "What is the good?" she said to herself, half aloud.

Here something stirred near her which made her start, at first with an eager movement of hope. Then a low voice said—"No good at all, Miss Rosalind. Why should you mix yourself up with what's no concern of yours?"

Rosalind had started violently when she recognized the voice, but subdued herself while the other spoke. She answered, with quiet self-restraint: "Is it you, Russell? What are you doing here? You will make it impossible for me to do anything for you if you forget your own place!"

"I am doing what my betters are doing, Miss Rosalind—looking out for Madam, just as you are."

"How dare you say such things! I—am looking out to see what sort of night it is. It is very stormy. Go away at once. You have no right to be here!"

"I've been here longer than most folks—longer than them that has the best opinion of themselves; longer than—"

"Me perhaps," said Rosalind. "Yes, I know—you came before I was born; but you know what folly this is. Mamma," the girl said, with a certain tremor and hesitation, "will be very angry if she finds you here."



“I wish, Miss Rosalind, you’d have a little more respect for yourself. It goes against me to hear you say mamma. And your own dear mamma, that should have been lady of everything—”

“Russell, I wish you would not be such a fool! My poor little mother that died when I was born. And you to keep up a grudge like this for so many years!”

“And will, whatever you may say,” cried the woman, under her breath; “and will, till I die, or till one of us—”

“Go up-stairs,” said Rosalind, peremptorily, “at once! What have you to do here? I don’t think you are safe in the house. If I had the power I should send you away.”

“Miss Rosalind, you are as cruel as— You have no heart. Me, that nursed you, and watched over you—”

“It is too terrible a price to pay,” cried the girl, stamping her foot on the floor. “Go! I will not have you here. If mamma finds you when she comes down-stairs—”

The woman laughed. “She will ask what you are doing here, Miss Rosalind. It will not be only me she’ll fly out upon. What are you doing here? Who’s outside that interests you so? It interests us both, that’s the truth; only I am the one that knows the best.”

Rosalind’s white figure flew across the faint light. She grasped the shoulder of the dark shadow, almost invisible in the gloom. “Go!” she cried in her ear, pushing Russell before her; the onslaught was so sudden and vehement that the woman yielded and disappeared reluctantly, gliding away by one of the passages that led to the other part of the house. The girl stood panting and excited in the brief sudden fury of her passion, a miserable sense of

failing faith and inability to explain to herself the circumstances in which she was, heightening the fervor of her indignation. Were Russell's suspicions true? Had she been in the right all along? Those who take persistently the worst view of human nature are, alas! so often in the right. And what is there more terrible than the passion of defence and apology for one whom the heart begins to doubt? The girl was young, and in her rage and pain could scarcely keep herself from those vehement tears which are the primitive attribute of passion. How calm she could have been had she been quite, quite sure! How she had laughed at Russell's prejudices in the old days when all was well. She had even excused Russell, feeling that after all it was pretty of her nurse to return continually to the image of her first mistress—Rosalind's own mother—and that in the uneducated mind the prepossession against a stepmother, the wrath with which the woman saw her own nursling supplanted, had a sort of feudal flavor which was rather agreeable than otherwise.

Rosalind had pardoned Russell as Mrs. Trevanion herself had pardoned her. So long as all was well: so long as there was nothing mysterious, nothing that baffled the spectator in the object of Russell's animadversions. But now something had fallen into life which changed it altogether. To defend those we love from undeserved accusations is so easy. And in books and plays, and every other exhibition of human nature in fiction, the accused always possesses the full confidence of those who love him. In ordinary cases they will not even hear any explanation of equivocal circumstances—they know that guilt is impossible: it is only those who do not know him who can believe anything so monstrous. Alas! this is not so in common life—the most loving and believing cannot always have that sublime faith. Sometimes doubt and fear

gnaw the very souls of those who are the champions, the advocates, the warmest partisans of the accused. This terrible canker had got into Rosalind's being. She loved her stepmother with enthusiasm. She was ready to die in her defence. She would not listen to the terrible murmur in her own heart; but yet it was there. And as she stood and gazed out upon the park, upon the wild bit of stormy sky, with the black tree-tops waving wildly against it, she was miserable, as miserable as a heart of eighteen ever was. Where had Madam gone, hurrying from the dinner-table where she had smiled and talked and given no sign of trouble? She was not in her room, nor in the nursery, nor anywhere that Rosalind could think of. It was in reality a confession of despair, a sort of giving up of the cause altogether, when the girl came to spy out into the wintry world outside and look for the fugitive there.

Rosalind had resisted the impulse to do so for many an evening. She had paused by stealth in the dark window above in the corridor, and blushed for herself and fled from that spy's place. But by force of trouble and doubt and anguish her scruples had been overcome, and now she had accepted for herself this position of spy. If her fears had been verified, and she had seen her mother cross that vacant space and steal into the house, what the better would she have been? But there is in suspicion a wild curiosity, an eagerness for certainty, which grows like a fever. She had come to feel that she must know—whatever happened she must be satisfied—come what would, that would be better than the gnawing of this suspense. And she had another object too. Her father was an invalid, exacting and fretful. If his wife was not ready at his call whenever he wanted her, his displeasure was unbounded; and of late it had happened many times that his wife had not been at his call. The scenes that had followed, the reproaches, the insults even, to which

the woman whom she called mother had been subjected, had made Rosalind's heart sick. If she could but see her, hasten her return, venture to call her, to bid her come quick, quick! it would be something. The girl was not philosopher enough to say to herself that Madam would not come a moment the sooner for being thus watched for. It takes a great deal of philosophy to convince an anxious woman of this in any circumstances, and Rosalind was in the pangs of a first trouble, the earliest anguish she had ever known. After she had driven Russell away, she stood with her face pressed against the glass and all her senses gone into her eyes and ears. She heard, she thought, the twitter of the twigs in the wind, the sharp sound now and then of one which broke and fell, which was like a footstep on the path; besides the louder sweep of the tree-tops in the wind, and on the other hand the muffled and faint sound of life from the dining-room, every variation in which kept her in alarm.

But it was in vain she gazed; nothing crossed the park except the sweep of the clouds driven along the sky; nothing sounded in the air except the wind, the trees, and sometimes the opening of a distant door or clap of a gate; until the dining-room became more audible, a sound of chairs pushed back and voices rising, warning the watcher. She flew like an arrow through the hall, and burst into the still sanctuary of domestic warmth and tranquillity as if she had been a hunted creature escaping from a fatal pursuit with her enemies at her heels. Her hands were like ice, her slight figure shivering with cold, yet her heart beating so that she could scarcely draw her breath. All this must disappear before the gentlemen came in. It was Rosalind's first experience in that strange art which comes naturally to a woman, of obliterating herself and her own sensations; but how was she to still her pulse, to restore her color, to bring warmth to her chilled heart? She felt sure that her misery,

her anguish of suspense, her appalling doubts and terrors, must be written in her face; but it was not so. The emergency brought back a rush of the warm blood tingling to her fingers' ends. Oh never, never, through her, must the mother she loved be betrayed! That brave impulse brought color to her cheek and strength to her heart. She made one or two of those minute changes in the room which a woman always finds occasion for, drawing the card-table into a position more exactly like that which her father approved, giving an easier angle to his chair, with a touch moving that of Madam into position as if it had been risen from that moment. Then Rosalind took up the delicate work that lay on the table, and when the gentlemen entered was seated on a low seat within the circle of the shaded lamp, warm in the glow of the genial fireside, her pretty head bent a little over her pretty industry, her hands busy. She who had been the image of anxiety and unrest a moment before was now the culminating-point of all the soft domestic tranquillity, luxury, boundless content and peace, of which this silent room was the home. She looked up with a smile to greet them as they came in. The brave girl had recovered her sweet looks, her color, and air of youthful composure and self-possession, by sheer force of will, and strain of the crisis in which she stood to maintain the honor of the family at every hazard. She had been able to do that, but she could not yet for the moment trust herself to speak.

## CHAPTER II.

THE gentlemen who came into the drawing-room at Highcourt were four in number: the master of the house, his brother, the doctor, and a young man fresh from the university, who was a visitor. Mr. Trevanion was an invalid; he had been a tall man, of what is called aristocratic appearance; a man with fine, clearly cut features, holding his head high, with an air "as if all the world belonged to him." These fine features were contracted by an expression of fastidious discontent and dissatisfaction, which is not unusually associated with such universal proprietorship, and illness had taken the flesh from his bones, and drawn the ivory skin tightly over the high nose and tall, narrow forehead. His lips were thin and querulous, his shoulders stooping, his person as thin and angular as human form could be. When he had warmed his ghostly hands at the fire, and seated himself in his accustomed chair, he cast a look round him as if seeking some subject of complaint. His eyes were blue, very cold, deficient in color, and looked out from amid the puckers of his eyelids with the most unquestionable meaning. They seemed to demand something to object to, and this want is one which is always supplied. The search was but momentary, so that he scarcely seemed to have entered the room before he asked, "Where is your mother?" in a high-pitched, querulous voice.

Mr. John Trevanion had followed his brother to the fire, and stood now with his back to the blaze looking at Rosalind. His name was not in reality John, but something much more ornamental and refined; but society had availed itself of its well-known propensity in a more judicious manner than usual, and rechristened him with

the short and manly monosyllable which suited his character. He was a man who had been a great deal about the world, and had discovered of how little importance was a Trevanion of Highcourt, and yet how it simplified life to possess a well-known name. One of these discoveries without the other is not improving to the character, but taken together the result is mellowing and happy. He was very tolerant, very considerate, a man who judged no one, yet formed very shrewd opinions of his own, upon which he was apt to act, even while putting forth every excuse and acknowledging every extenuating circumstance. He looked at Rosalind with a certain veiled anxiety in his eyes, attending her answer with solicitude; but to all appearance he was only spreading himself out as an Englishman loves to do before the clear glowing fire. Dr. Beaton had gone as far away as possible from that brilliant centre. He was stout, and disapproved, he said, "on principle," of the habit of gathering round the fireside. "Let the room be properly warmed," he was in the habit of saying, "but don't let us bask in the heat like the dogues," for the doctor was Scotch, and betrayed now and then in a pronunciation, and always in accent, his northern origin. He had seated himself on the other side of the card-table, ready for the invariable game. Young Roland Hamerton, the Christchurch man, immediately gravitated towards Rosalind, who, to tell the truth, could not have given less attention to him had he been one of the above-mentioned "dogues."

"Where is your mother?" Mr. Trevanion said, looking round for matter of offence.

"Oh!" said Rosalind, with a quick drawing of her breath; "mamma has gone for a moment to the nursery—I suppose." She drew breath again before the last two words, thus separating them

from what had gone before—a little artifice which Uncle John perceived, but no one else.

“Now this is a strange thing,” said Mr. Trevanion, “that in my own house, and in my failing state of health, I cannot secure my own wife’s attention at the one moment in the day when she is indispensable to me. The nursery! What is there to do in the nursery? Is not Russell there? If the woman is not fit to be trusted, let her be discharged at once and some one else got.”

“Oh! it is not that there is any doubt about Russell, papa, only one likes to see for one’s self.”

“Then why can’t she send you to see for yourself. This is treatment I am not accustomed to. Oh, what do I say? Not accustomed to it! Of course I am accustomed to be neglected by everybody. A brat of a child that never ailed anything in its life is to be watched over, while I, a dying man, must take my chance. I have put up with it for years, always hoping that at last— But the worm will turn, you know; the most patient will break down. If I am to wait night after night for the one amusement, the one little pleasure, such as it is— Night after night! I appeal to you, doctor, whether Mrs. Trevanion has been ready once in the last fortnight. The only thing that I ask of her—the sole paltry little complaisance—”

He spoke very quickly, allowing no possibility of interruption, till his voice, if we may use such a word, overran itself and died away for want of breath.

“My dear sir,” said the doctor, taking up the cards, “we are just enough for our rubber; and, as I have often remarked, though I bow



to the superiority of the ladies in most things, whist, in my opinion, is altogether a masculine game. Will you cut for the deal?"

But by this time Mr. Trevanion had recovered his breath. "It is what I will not put up with," he said; "everybody in this house relies upon my good-nature. I am always the *souffre-douleur*. When a man is too easy he is taken advantage of on all hands. Where is your mother? Oh, I mean your stepmother, Rosalind; her blood is not in your veins, thank Heaven! You are a good child; I have no reason to find fault with you. Where is she? The nursery? I don't believe anything about the nursery. She is with some of her low friends; yes, she has low friends. Hold your tongue, John; am I or am I not the person that knows best about my own wife? Where is your mistress? Where is Madam? Don't stand there looking like a stuck pig, but speak!"

This was addressed to an unlucky footman who had come in prowling on one of the anonymous errands of domestic service—to see if the fire wanted looking to—if there were any coffee-cups unremoved—perhaps on a mission of curiosity, too. Mr. Trevanion was the terror of the house. The man turned pale and lost his self-command. "I—I don't know, sir. I—I think, sir, as Madam—I—I'll send Mr. Dorrington, sir," the unfortunate said.

John Trevanion gave his niece an imperative look, saying low, "Go and tell her." Rosalind rose trembling and put down her work. The footman had fled, and young Hamerton, hurrying to open the door to her (which was never shut) got in her way and brought upon himself a glance of wrath which made him tremble. He retreated with a chill running through him, wondering if the Trevanion temper was in her too, while the master of the house resumed. However well understood such explosions of family

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