M A D O N N A M A R Y.

A Novel.

BY

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CHAPTER I.

MAJOR OCHTERLONY had been very fidgety after the coming in of the mail. He was very often so, as all his friends were aware, and nobody so much as Mary, his wife, who was herself, on ordinary occasions, of an admirable composure. But the arrival of the mail, which is so welcome an event at an Indian station, and which generally affected the Major very mildly, had produced a singular impression upon him on this special occasion. He was not a man who possessed a large correspondence in his own person; he had reached middle life, and had nobody particular belonging to him, except his wife and his little children, who were as yet too young to have been sent "home;" and consequently there was nobody to receive letters from, except a few married brothers and sisters, who don't count, as everybody knows. That kind of formally affectionate correspondence is not generally exciting, and even Major Ochterlony supported it with composure. But as for the mail which arrived on the 15th of April, 1838, its effect was different. He went out and in so often, that Mary got very little good of her letters, which were from her young sister and her old aunt, and were naturally overflowing with all kinds of pleasant gossip and domestic information. The present writer has so imperfect an idea of what an Indian bungalow is like, that it would be impossible for her to convey a clear idea to the reader, who probably knows much better about it. But yet it was in an Indian bungalow that Mrs. Ochterlony was seated—in the dim hot atmosphere, out of which the sun was carefully excluded, but in which, nevertheless, the inmates simmered softly with the patience

of people who cannot help it, and who are used to their martyrdom. She sat still, and did her best to make out the pleasant babble in the letters, which seemed to take sound to itself as she read, and to break into a sweet confusion of kind voices, and rustling leaves, and running water, such as, she knew, had filled the little rustic drawing-room in which the letters were written. The sister was very young, and the aunt was old, and all the experience of the world possessed by the two together, might have gone into Mary's thimble, which she kept playing with upon her finger as she read. But though she knew twenty times better than they did, the soft old lady's gentle counsel, and the audacious girl's advice and censure, were sweet to Mary, who smiled many a time at their simplicity, and yet took the good of it in a way that was peculiar to her. She read, and she smiled in her reading, and felt the fresh English air blow about her, and the leaves rustling—if it had not been for the Major, who went and came like a ghost, and let everything fall that he touched, and hunted every innocent beetle or lizard that had come in to see how things were going on; for he was one of those men who have a great, almost womanish objection to reptiles and insects, which is a sentiment much misplaced in India. He fidgeted so much, indeed, as to disturb even his wife's accustomed nerves at last.

"Is there anything wrong—has anything happened?" she asked, folding up her letter, and laying it down in her open work-basket. Her anxiety was not profound, for she was accustomed to the Major's "ways," but still she saw it was necessary for his comfort to utter what was on his mind.

"When you have read your letters I want to speak to you," he said. "What do your people mean by sending you such heaps of letters? I thought you would never be done. Well, Mary, this is

what it is—there's nothing wrong with the children, or anybody belonging to us, thank God; but it's very nearly as bad, and, I am at my wit's end. Old Sommerville's dead."

"Old Sommerville!" said Mrs. Ochterlony. This time she was utterly perplexed and at a loss. She could read easily enough the anxiety which filled her husband's handsome, restless face; but, then, so small a matter put *him* out of his ordinary! And she could not for her life remember who old Sommerville was.

"I daresay *you* don't recollect him," said the Major, in an aggrieved tone. "It is very odd how everything has gone wrong with us since that false start. It is an awful shame, when a set of old fogies put young people in such a position—all for nothing, too," Major Ochterlony added: "for after we were actually married, everybody came round. It is an awful shame!"

"If I was a suspicious woman," said Mary, with a smile, "I should think it was our marriage that you called a false start and an awful shame."

"And so it is, my love: so it is," said the innocent soldier, his face growing more and more cloudy. As for his wife being a suspicious woman, or the possible existence of any delicacy on her part about his words, the Major knew better than that. The truth was that he might have given utterance to sentiments of the most atrocious description on that point, sentiments which would have broken the heart and blighted the existence, so to speak, of any sensitive young woman, without producing the slightest effect upon Mary, or upon himself, to whom Mary was so utterly and absolutely necessary, that the idea of existing without her never once entered his restless but honest brain. "That is just what it is,"

he said; “it is a horrid business for me, and I don’t know what to do about it. They must have been out of their senses to drive us to marry as we did; and we were a couple of awful fools,” said the Major, with the gravest and most care-worn countenance. Mrs. Ochterlony was still a young woman, handsome and admired, and she might very well have taken offence at such words; but, oddly enough, there was something in his gravely-disturbed face and pathetic tone which touched another chord in Mary’s breast. She laughed, which was unkind, considering all the circumstances, and took up her work, and fixed a pair of smiling eyes upon her perplexed husband’s face.

“I daresay it is not so bad as you think,” she said, with the manner of a woman who was used to this kind of thing. “Come, and tell me all about it.” She drew her chair a trifle nearer his, and looked at him with a face in which a touch of suppressed amusement was visible, under a good deal of gravity and sympathy. She was used to lend a sympathetic ear to all his difficulties, and to give all her efforts to their elucidation, but still she could not help feeling it somewhat droll to be complained to in this strain about her own marriage. “We *were* a couple of fools,” she said, with a little laugh, “but it has not turned out so badly as it might have done.” Upon which rash statement the Major shook his head.

“It is easy for you to say so,” he said, “and if I were to go no deeper, and look no further—— It is all on your account, Mary. If it were not on your account——”

“Yes, I know,” said Mrs. Ochterlony, still struggling with a perverse inclination to laugh; “but now tell me what old Sommerville has to do with it; and who old Sommerville is; and what put it into his head just at this moment to die.”

The Major sighed, and gave her a half-irritated, half-melancholy look. To think she should laugh, when, as he said to himself, the gulf was yawning under her very feet. “My dear Mary,” he said, “I wish you would learn that this is not anything to laugh at. Old Sommerville was the old gardener at Earlston, who went with us, you recollect, when we went to—to Scotland. My brother would never have him back again, and he went among his own friends. He was a stupid old fellow. I don’t know what he was good for, for my part;—but,” said Major Ochterlony, with solemnity, “he was the only surviving witness of our unfortunate marriage—that is the only thing that made him interesting to me.”

“Poor old man!” said Mary, “I am very sorry. I had forgotten his name; but really,—if you speak like this of our unfortunate marriage, you will hurt my feelings,” Mrs. Ochterlony added. She had cast down her eyes on her work, but still there was a gleam of fun out of one of the corners. This was all the effect made upon her mind by words which would have naturally produced a scene between half the married people in the world.

As for the Major, he sighed: he was in a sighing mood, and at such moments his wife’s obtusity and thoughtlessness always made him sad. “It is easy talking,” he said, “and if it were not on your account, Mary—— The fact is that everything has gone wrong that had any connection with it. The blacksmith’s house, you know, was burned down, and his kind of a register—if it was any good, and I am sure I don’t know if it was any good; and then that woman died, though she was as young as you are, and as healthy, and nobody had any right to expect that she would die,” Major Ochterlony added with an injured tone, “and now old Sommerville; and we have nothing in the world to vouch for its being a good marriage, except what that blacksmith fellow called

the ‘lines.’ Of course you have taken care of the lines,” said the Major, with a little start. It was the first time that this new subject of doubt had occurred to his mind.

“To vouch for its being a good marriage!” said Mrs. Ochterlony: “really, Hugh, you go too far. Our marriage is not a thing to make jokes about, you know—nor to get up alarms about either. Everybody knows all about it, both among your people and mine. It is very vexatious and disagreeable of you to talk so.” As she spoke the colour rose to Mary’s matron cheek. She had learned to make great allowances for her husband’s anxious temper and perpetual panics; but this suggestion was too much for her patience just at the moment. She calmed down, however, almost immediately, and came to herself with a smile. “To think you should almost have made me angry!” she said, taking up her work again. This did not mean to imply that to make Mrs. Ochterlony angry was at all an impossible process. She had her gleams of wrath like other people, and sometimes it was not at all difficult to call them forth; but, so far as the Major’s “temperament” was concerned, she had got, by much exercise, to be the most indulgent of women—perhaps by finding that no other way of meeting it was of any use.

“It is not my fault, my love,” said the Major, with a meekness which was not habitual to him. “But I hope you are quite sure you have the lines. Any mistake about them would be fatal. They are the only proof that remains to us. I wish you would go and find them, Mary, and let me make sure.”

“The lines!” said Mrs. Ochterlony, and, notwithstanding her self-command, she faltered a little. “Of course I must have them somewhere—I don’t quite recollect at this moment. What do you

want them for, Hugh? Are we coming into a fortune, or what are the statistics good for? When I can lay my hand upon them, I will give them to you," she added, with that culpable carelessness which her husband had already so often remarked in her. If it had been a trumpery picture or book that had been mislaid, she could not have been less concerned.

"When you can lay your hands upon them!" cried the exasperated man. "Are you out of your senses, Mary? Don't you know that they are your sheet-anchor, your charter—the only document you have——"

"Hugh," said Mrs. Ochterlony, "tell me what this means. There must be something in it more than I can see. What need have I for documents? What does it matter to us this old man being dead, more than it matters to any one the death of somebody who has been at their wedding? It is sad, but I don't see how it can be a personal misfortune. If you really mean anything, tell me what it is."

The Major for his part grew angry, as was not unnatural. "If you choose to give me the attention you ought to give to your husband when he speaks seriously to you, you will soon perceive what I mean," he said; and then he repented, and came up to her and kissed her. "My poor Mary, my bonnie Mary," he said. "If that wretched irregular marriage of ours should bring harm to you! It is you only I am thinking of, my darling—that you should have something to rest upon;" and his feelings were so genuine that with that the water stood in his eyes.

As for Mrs. Ochterlony, she was very near losing patience altogether; but she made an effort and restrained herself. It was not

the first time that she had heard compunctions expressed for the irregular marriage, which certainly was not her fault. But this time she was undeniably a little alarmed, for the Major's gravity was extreme. "Our marriage is no more irregular than it always was," she said. "I wish you would give up this subject, Hugh; I have you to rest upon, and everything that a woman can have. We never did anything in a corner," she continued, with a little vehemence. "Our marriage was just as well known, and well published, as if it had been in St. George's, Hanover Square. I cannot imagine what you are aiming at. And besides, it is done, and we cannot mend it," she added, abruptly. On the whole, the runaway match had been a pleasant frolic enough; there was no earthly reason, except some people's stupid notions, why they should not have been married; and everybody came to their senses rapidly, and very little harm had come of it. But the least idea of doubt on such a subject is an offence to a woman, and her colour rose and her breath came quick, without any will of hers. As for the Major, he abandoned the broader general question, and went back to the detail, as was natural to the man.

"If you only have the lines all safe," he said, "if you would but make sure of that. I confess old Sommerville's death was a great shock to me, Mary,—the last surviving witness; but Kirkman tells me the marriage lines in Scotland are a woman's safeguard, and Kirkman is a Scotchman and ought to know."

"Have you been consulting *him*?" said Mary, with a certain despair; "have you been talking of such a subject to——"

"I don't know where I could have a better confidant," said the Major. "Mary, my darling, they are both attached to you; and they are good people, though they talk; and then he is Scotch, and

understands. If anything were to happen to me, and you had any difficulty in proving——"

"Hugh, for Heaven's sake have done with this. I cannot bear any more," cried Mrs. Ochterlony, who was at the end of her powers.

It was time for the great *coup* for which his restless soul had been preparing. He approached the moment of fate with a certain skill, such as weak people occasionally display, and mad people almost always,—as if the feeble intellect had a certain right by reason of its weakness to the same kind of defence which is possessed by the mind diseased. "Hush, Mary, you are excited," he said, "and it is only you I am thinking of. If anything should happen to me—I am quite well, but no man can answer for his own life:—my dear, I am afraid you will be vexed with what I am going to say. But for my own satisfaction, for my peace of mind—if we were to go through the ceremony again——"

Mary Ochterlony rose up with sudden passion. It was altogether out of proportion to her husband's intentions or errors, and perhaps to the occasion. *That* was but a vexatious complication of ordinary life; and he a fidgety, uneasy, perhaps over-conscientious, well-meaning man. She rose, tragic without knowing it, with a swell in her heart of the unutterable and supreme—feeling herself for the moment an outraged wife, an insulted woman, and a mother wounded to the heart. "I will hear no more," she said, with lips that had suddenly grown parched and dry. "Don't say another word. If it has come to this, I will take my chance with my boys. Hugh, no more, no more." As she lifted her hands with an impatient gesture of horror, and towered over him as he sat by, having thus interrupted and cut short his speech, a

certain fear went through Major Ochterlony's mind. Could her mind be going? Had the shock been too much for her? He could not understand otherwise how the suggestion which he thought a wise one, and of advantage to his own peace of mind, should have stung her into such an incomprehensible passion. But he was afraid and silenced, and could not go on.

"My dear Mary," he said mildly, "I had no intention of vexing you. We can speak of this another time. Sit down, and I'll get you a glass of water," he added, with anxious affection; and hurried off to seek it: for he was a good husband, and very fond of his wife, and was terrified to see her turn suddenly pale and faint, notwithstanding that he was quite capable of wounding her in the most exquisite and delicate point. But then he did not mean it. He was a matter-of-fact man, and the idea of marrying his wife over again in case there might be any doubtfulness about the first marriage, seemed to him only a rational suggestion, which no sensible woman ought to be disturbed by; though no doubt it was annoying to be compelled to have recourse to such an expedient. So he went and fetched her the water, and gave up the subject, and stayed with her all the afternoon and read the papers to her, and made himself agreeable. It was a puzzling sort of demonstration on Mary's part, but that did not make her the less Mary, and the dearest and best of earthly creatures. So Major Ochterlony put his proposal aside for a more favourable moment, and did all he could to make his wife forget it, and behaved himself as a man naturally would behave who was recognised as the best husband and most domestic man in the regiment. Mary took her seat again and her work, and the afternoon went on as if nothing had happened. They were a most united couple, and very happy together, as everybody knew; or if one of them at any chance moment was perhaps less

than perfectly blessed, it was not, at any rate, because the love-match, irregular as it might be, had ended in any lack of love.

CHAPTER II.

MRS. OCHTERLONY sat and worked and listened, and her husband read the papers to her, picking out by instinct all those little bits of news that are grateful to people who are so far away from their own country. And he went through the births and marriages, to see "if there is anybody we know,"—notwithstanding that he was aware that corner of the paper is one which a woman does not leave to any reader, but makes it a principle to examine herself. And Mary sat still and went on with her work, and not another syllable was said about old Sommerville, or the marriage lines, or anything that had to do with the previous conversation. This tranquillity was all in perfect good faith on Major Ochterlony's side, who had given up the subject with the intention of waiting until a more convenient season, and who had relieved his mind by talking of it, and could put off his anxiety. But as for Mary, it was not in good faith that she put on this expression of outward calm. She knew her husband, and she knew that he was pertinacious and insisting, and that a question which he had once started was not to be made an end of, and finally settled, in so short a time. She sat with her head a little bent, hearing the bits of news run on like an accompaniment to the quick-flowing current of her own thoughts. Her heart was beating quick, and her blood coursing through her veins as if it had been a sudden access of fever which had come upon her. She was a tall, fair, serene woman, with no paltry passion about her; but at the same time, when the occasion required it, Mary was capable of a vast suppressed fire of feeling which it gave her infinite trouble to keep down. This was a side of