

MRS. ARTHUR

VOL. I.

BY
MRS. OLIPHANT

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“Fie, fie! unknit that threat’ning, unkind brow,
And dart not scornful glances from those eyes.

.....
A woman mov’d is like a fountain troubled.”
TAMING OF THE SHREW.

“He breathed a sigh, and toasted Nancy!”
DIBDIN.

MRS. ARTHUR.

CHAPTER I.

“**I**S Mr. Curtis here?” said a voice at the door.

The door was so near the sitting-room that every demand made there was easily heard, and even answered from within; and, indeed, Mrs. Bates was in the habit of calling out an answer when it happened to be beyond the powers of the daughter or small servant who opened. But this question was one about which there was no difficulty. It was followed by a hearty laugh from the assembled family.

“I should think he was—rather!” said Charley Bates, the son; and “Ask Nancy,” said Matilda, the eldest daughter.

There was a considerable number of people in the little parlour—to wit, Mr. Bates in his big chair on one side of the fire, sipping rum-and-water, and reading a newspaper which was soft and crumpled with the usage of the day at the nearest public-house; and Mrs. Bates on the other, seated between the fireplace and the table, mending the stockings of the family. Charley was reading an old yellow novel behind his mother, and Matilda was making her winter bonnet with a quantity of materials in a large piece of paper on the table, which was covered with a red and green cloth. It was October, and not cold, but there was a fire, and a branched gas pendant with two lights, shed heat as well as light into the close little room. There was another daughter, Sarah Jane, who was coming and going about the table, now and then making incursions into the kitchen; and behind backs in the corner, on a black haircloth sofa against the wall, were seated the pair of lovers. No

one threw any veil of doubt on the fact that they were a pair of lovers—nor did their present aspect make this at all uncertain. They were seated close together, talking in whispers; one of her hands clasped in his, his arm, to all appearance, round her waist. Matilda screened them a little, having her back turned towards them, which gave, or might have given, a sense of remoteness to the pair, and justified their too evident courtship. Otherwise they were in full light, the gas blazing upon them; and it was scarcely possible to whisper an endearment which was not audible. *She* was a pretty girl, with brown hair, brown eyes, and a pretty complexion, in a somewhat showy dress, cut very much in “the fashion,” yet looking not at all out of place in the warm, crowded, stuffy parlour, full of hot air and gas, and the fumes of rum-and-water. She was Mrs. Bates’ second daughter, called Nancy, but preferring to be called Anna, and engaged to a young gentleman who was a pupil of Mr. Eagle the well-known “coach,” and had been for a year at Underhayes. He had been coming after Nancy Bates all that time, and at present they were engaged, and made love in the family parlour now that it was too cold to take long walks. Mr. Curtis preferred the walk, but Nancy liked the haircloth sofa. She was a good girl, and fond of her family, and she liked them to share her happiness. The family party were all moderately like each other, harmonious and happy, suiting their surroundings. There seemed nothing out of place among them, the bonnet-making, or the old yellow novel, or even the rum-and-water. But there was one great incongruity in the room, and that was the hero, the young lover, who certainly had no business there. He was dressed in an English gentleman’s easy morning suit, a dress in which there is less apparent pretension than any in the world perhaps, but which shows very distinctly the condition of the wearer. His presence in the room put the whole place out of harmony; it made the stuffy

comfort look squalid and mean; it rebuked the family ease and cheerfulness, the absence of all disguise, the frank family union. In his person another element came in, a something higher, which made all the rest more low. He was not the sort of person to sit with his arm round his *fiancée* in public, within reach of papa's rum, and mamma's joke. All the rest went perfectly well together; but he put everything in the wrong.

And the effect which he himself produced to every beholder, or would have produced had there been any beholders, was wrought upon himself by the sound of this voice at the door. It was a voice of modulation and tone different from anything here. Even his Nancy, though he was so much in love with her, young Curtis felt suddenly jarred and put out of tune by it; he dropped her hand instinctively, and got up confused, a sudden flush coming over his face.

"It is some one for me," he said, in sudden embarrassment. And again the family laughed more loudly than before.

"Any child could tell that, seeing as he's just asked for you," said Mrs. Bates; "and I'm sure any friend of yours is welcome. Find a chair for him, girls, if there is any chair free of your falals—and show him in, Sarah Jane."

"I think not; if you will excuse me I'll go to him," said the young man, hastily. "I might bring him—if you are so kind—another time."

"There's no time so good as now," said Mrs. Bates. "Don't be shy, don't be shy, my dear. You don't like him to find you with Nancy; but, bless my soul, the time won't be long that anyone will see you without Nancy—"

“Oh,” said Nancy herself, saucily, “if he’s ashamed of *me*—”

“Ashamed of you, darling! as if that was possible,” said the young man, stooping to whisper to her; “but it is a man, a college friend—I must go.”

While he stood thus explaining, with an anxious face, and his Nancy pouted and tossed her pretty head, the stranger suddenly appeared at the open door.

“This way, this way!” Sarah Jane had cried, delighted by the advent of another gentleman, and already wondering why Nancy should have all the luck, and whether one wedding might not bring another.

The new-comer was tall; he was short-sighted, with a pucker on his forehead, and a glass in his eye. He stood in the door, and hazily regarded the scene, not penetrating it, nor finding out his friend for the moment; but gazing somewhat vaguely, dazzled besides by the sudden light, into the small crowded space and the group of strange faces.

“Ah, there you are, Curtis,” he said at last, with a gleam of recognition; then turned to Mrs. Bates with an apology. “I hope you will forgive such an intrusion. I had a commission to Curtis, and I did not understand—I did not know—”

“Come in, Sir, come in,” said Mrs. Bates; “don’t think of apologies—we’re very glad to see you. Sit you down, Sir, and if you’ve just come off a journey, say what you would like, and it shall be got for you—a drop of beer, or a cup of tea, or a glass with my good gentleman. You see he’s making himself comfortable. And supper’s coming in about an hour. You can hurry it up a bit,

Sarah Jane,” cried the hospitable mother, “if the gentleman has just come by the train.”

“Thank you,” said the stranger, sitting down on the chair that had been cleared for him; “nothing to eat or to drink, thanks—you are too kind; but I may wait till Curtis is ready. I have got something for you, Arthur,” he said, turning again to his friend.

“Oh, have you?” said Curtis, dropping back upon the sofa, beside his Nancy, as there was nothing else to be done; but he did not take her hand again, or resume his former position. He sat very stiff and bolt upright, withdrawn from her a little; but young men and young women do not sit together behind backs for nothing, notwithstanding the gaslight; and his air of withdrawal took an aspect ridiculously prudish, and called attention. The family Bates looked curiously at the stranger, and he looked curiously at them. Neither was much acquainted with the *genre* of the other, and on both sides there was a half-hostile interest which quickened curiosity. But Matilda and Sarah Jane were not hostile. Their curiosity was warm with benevolence. If Nancy had done so well for herself, why not they too? He had dropped into their hands like a new prey. Their eyes brightened, the energy of enterprise came into their faces. A gentleman is a fine thing to girls of their condition, far finer in promise than in reality. The appearance of a second quarry of this kind turned their heads. Why should it not fall to one of them?

“You must have found it cold travelling, Sir,” said Matilda, wrapping up her bonnet in the paper. “October nights get chilly, don’t they? and Underhayes is a miserable little place if you have come from town.”

“I have come from the country,” said the stranger, with his short-sighted stare. He was slightly annoyed, to tell the truth, to hear it so clearly set down that he must have come from town. Did he look like a man to come from town in October?—not thinking that town meant everything that was splendid in Matilda’s eyes.

“Chilly!” cried Sarah Jane, eager to recommend herself. “I’m sure the gentleman thinks this room a deal too hot. Shouldn’t you say so, Sir? I can’t abide it; it gives me such a headache.”

“Come, girls, you needn’t quarrel,” said Mrs. Bates, in her round, good-humoured voice. “We’ll allow you your different ways of thinking. Your papa likes a warm fireside, don’t you, Bates? But I suppose the gentleman comes straight from the beauty and fashion, as it says in the newspapers.”

“Talking of the newspapers, Sir,” said Mr. Bates, putting down his, “what do you think of the present crisis? What’s things coming to? There’s Rooshia threatening in the East, and as for your Khedivys and that sort, I don’t believe in them. We’ll all be in a precious hobble if we don’t look out, as far as I can see.”

“There, there, Bates, none of your politics,” cried his wife; “once begin that, and nobody can get in a word—and the gentleman is just off a journey.”

Young Curtis sat uneasily while all this went on, like a dog in leash, watching his opportunity to start. The sudden insight which had come to him with the entrance of his friend upon this scene was strange, and very painful. He was very much in love, poor young fellow, and when a man is in love, it is curious how easily he can accept the circumstances of his beloved and find them natural. Matilda and Sarah Jane had only amused him before, as,

indeed, they amused the new-comer now; but the family changed its aspect entirely as the young man, who was almost a member of it, realized to himself how it must appear to his friend, and saw the whole scene, as it were, through Durant's eyes. Durant's eyes, however, staring vaguely upon this slowly comprehended new world, did not see half so clearly or so sharply as Arthur's saw through them. He gave double force and meaning to the other's observations, and beheld through him many things which the other did not see. Fortunately—and how fortunate that was Arthur did not venture to say to himself—Nancy, who was affronted, did not open her mouth. He adored her, and yet he was glad she was affronted, notwithstanding the pain it gave him. He could not bear to vex or alienate her for a moment, and yet he was thankful not to be obliged to see her too with his friend's eyes. But he saw all the rest, and the *ensemble* of the room, the village flirt Sarah Jane, and the lout Charley, and Mr. Bates with his slippers, and felt how stuffy it was, and the smell of the rum. His endurance had come to a climax when Mr. Bates began to talk a little thickly of politics. Once more he sprang to his feet.

“I know Durant has something to say to me,” he cried. “I think I must ask you to excuse me to-night, Mrs. Bates. Everything must give way to business.”

“Lord bless you, my dear, not of an evening,” said the genial woman. “Don't ye go. Supper's coming. You know all our ways, and I daresay your friend—Mr. Durant is it? and how do you do, Mr. Durant, now I know you?—I daresay he'll put up with us for your sake. Go you and hurry the supper, Sarah Jane.”

“We'll have to go, really,” said poor Arthur; and he stooped to his sullen love and whispered, “Don't be angry. He comes from

my father. Though I can't bear to leave you, darling, I must hear what my father says."

"Oh, indeed, your father!" said Nancy. "I see what it is; it is just what I have always told you. You're ashamed of me and my folks, as soon as you get hold of one of your fine friends."

"Durant is not a fine friend, he is like my brother—he will be your friend too," whispered the young man in an agony.

But Nancy only pouted the more.

"I don't want such friends. I have got my father and my brother to see to me. You needn't bring any of your fine gentlemen here."

Notwithstanding, however, the blandishments of Sarah Jane and Matilda, the stranger had risen too. He was much taller, and had a much finer figure than Arthur, the sisters thought, and he smiled, though his look was rather vague, staring as if he did not see them.

"You are very kind," he said, holding out his hand to Mrs. Bates, who hastened up to her feet too, to shake it with great cordiality. "I hope you will kindly repeat your invitation for another day, and that Arthur will bring me back, when I can take advantage of your hospitality; but I must not come among you under false pretences," he added, laughing, "for I know nothing about the rank and fashion—that is in Arthur's way rather than mine."

"Oh, Sir," said Mrs. Bates, bowing, "we know what gentlemen means when they speak in that high-minded way."

This speech was such a triumph of genial mystification and confidence that Durant stared still more, and hurried forth reduced to silence, feeling himself unable in his present puzzled condition to cope with such an intellect. Poor Arthur, trying to seize the hand of his beloved, trying by piteous looks to move her from her sullen offence, lingered a moment, but in vain.

“Never mind her,” said Mrs. Bates, “she will come to when you are gone. It’ll all come right to-morrow. Good night, and God bless you! I’ll see to Nancy; and you needn’t keep the door open and me in a draught,” she added querulously, “if you won’t stay.”

This quickened the steps of the lover, but though he was glad to get outside, and to leave the glare and odors of that room—so long his bower of bliss, so suddenly revealed to him in its real aspect—blown away, it is impossible to say how miserable he was at such a parting from the object of his love. It was she who opened the door for him on other occasions, lingered with him in the fresh evening air, and said “Good-night” a thousand times over, each time more sweetly than the time before. So at least the foolish young fellow thought. But she had not lifted her head even to give him a last glance; she had not said “Good-night!” at all; she had dismissed him with a cloud upon her face. How was he to bear it till to-morrow? and yet how glad he was that when all of them had talked and betrayed themselves, she had never brought herself under those painful disenchanting reflections from his friend’s eyes.

“Good-night, Arthur,” said saucy Sarah Jane; “and good-night, Mr. Durant. Be sure you bring him back to-morrow. You have promised mamma to come back morrow and have supper with us. Good-night, Mr. Durant.”

Durant replied to the “Good-night” with a suppressed laugh, and walked away into the darkness with Arthur following. Though the freshness of the night was so great a relief after the heat indoors, it was not genial, but penetrating and dull, with a shrewish touch, such as October often has; and the skies were dull with no moon, nothing but drifting clouds, and the street of the little town was not attractive. They walked on in silence together for some time, the stranger being occupied longer than was necessary in lighting his cigar; but he had no sooner managed this successfully than he threw it away again.

“Come to the inn, Arthur,” he cried; “it’s comfortless work talking here.”

CHAPTER II.

THE inn at Underhayes was not much to speak of, but the parlour in which the two friends talked was larger than Mrs. Bates's parlour, where all the family assembled and all their existence was past. Durant sat down at the table to consume a simple dinner, a hastily-cooked chicken, which he had ordered after his journey, and which was not so savoury as the supper which Mrs. Bates would have given him; nor was it so cheerful a meal. While he ate, Arthur Curtis paced back and forward at the other end of the room, which, with its bare carpet and scant furniture, was still less objectionable than the room they had left, the place where all his happiness had lain so long. Perhaps if the shock had come sooner some deliverance would have been possible, though at the cost of a heartbreak; but nothing was possible now except to carry out his engagement. Lewis Durant was both honourable and high-minded, yet he had come with no better intention than to prevent his friend from keeping his word, with very little regard for the word and none at all for the happiness of the other person who was chiefly concerned. Happiness of a girl who had entangled a young man so much above herself! what was that to anybody? If she should be robbed of her happiness, why, was it not all her own fault? But he had not been so injudicious yet as to broach this idea; he was approaching it gradually, "acquiring information" on the subject. Of course it was natural that any one so interested in Arthur's affairs as he was, should like to know all about it, and he had seen Lady Curtis herself he did not conceal from his friend, and the anxious mother was "in a great way."

“I’d like to take up satisfactory news, old fellow,” he said; “both for their sake and my own.”

“What do you call satisfactory news?” said Arthur. His mind was in an unexampled commotion. His old life and his new had come into active conflict, and he himself seemed to be the puppet between them. But in the midst of the excitement caused by this bringing back of all the habits of his former existence, the poor young fellow was miserable at the thought of having come away from his love without a kind word, without a look even, which could stand in the place of their usual Good-night.

“Well—it is difficult to speak in plain words between you and them. Of course you know that this can’t be expected to give them satisfaction, Arthur. They have not been led on step by step as you have—”

“What do you mean?” he said hastily. “Do you mean the vulgar sort of thing that every fool says, that *she* has been leading me on?”

“I certainly did not say so,” said Durant. “I mean they have not been used to all the circumstances like you. Your mind has become familiar by degrees with this family—with everything about them.”

“Say it out plainly; don’t mind my feelings,” said the other bitterly, “with the difference between Bates, the tax-collector’s daughter and Sir John Curtis’s son. Well! and what is the difference? All on her side; all in her favour. She getting nothing but additional beauty from all her surroundings, I—doing not much honour to mine.”

“I was not making any personal comparison, Arthur,” said Durant, cautiously; “I was saying only—what you will fully allow—that taken just by themselves, without that knowledge of personal excellence which I suppose you have;—that the difference of the circumstances—the difference of manners—well! cannot but startle—shock perhaps—your immediate friends.”

“That means that you are shocked and startled. Mr. Bates’s rum-and-water was too much for your delicate nerves,” said Arthur, with a sneer; “and yet you and I have seen worse things that we were not shocked at.”

“Arthur, do you want to quarrel with me? or can you suppose I should have come here, if I had felt the slightest desire or intention to quarrel with you?”

The young man did not answer for some minutes, then he threw himself into a chair by the table and concealed his face from the other’s gaze, supporting his head on his hands. “Don’t you think I know everything you can say?” he cried; “it is plain enough. They are not like us—there are things in them which even I don’t relish. Their ways are more homely, their manners more simple than we have been used to.”

“If it was only simplicity,” said Durant, shrugging his shoulders, and thinking of the blandishments of the Misses Matilda and Sarah Jane.

“Well,” said Arthur, with a sudden outbreak, “call it what you like, what disagreeable name you please, and then I ask you what have you got to say to *her*? It is she I am going to marry, not her family. What have you got to say to *HER*? She is the person to be thought of. Old Bates is an old tax-collector, and the mother a

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