MRS. ARTHUR

VOL. II.

BY

MRS. OLIPHANT

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And dart not scornful glances from those eyes.
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A woman mov’d is like a fountain troubled.”
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“He breathed a sigh, and toasted Nancy!”
DIBDIN.

MRS. ARTHUR.

CHAPTER I.

ARTHUR CURTIS did not think of the letter which old Davies had given him till days after. It had been crushed up in the pocket of his coat, the sight of his sister, and all the contending emotions of the time having put it out of his head; and what could there be agreeable in such a communication at such a time? A final sermon to him upon his folly, a final admonition as to all the terrible consequences of his fault—he had, he thought, enough of these, and he had not cared to make himself miserable on his wedding-day with such a communication. It was not unmixed delight, even without that, though this was not a confession he made to himself, in words, at least. But the sight of his sister's writing half sickened him when he saw it eventually. To be told that the course you are pursuing is ruinous, when you are entirely delighted with that course, is bad enough; but to be told so when the first shock of doubt, the first sharp suspicion of a mistake, has come into your mind, is unendurable. Arthur had not, it may be supposed, allowed to himself that this was already the state of affairs within a few days after his marriage. He was the "happiest of men;" the society of his bride was sweet to him, and her tenderness gave him an exquisite, indescribable, all-penetrating delight, notwithstanding everything. Is the sudden shock of that absolute identification of two different people, the one with the other, ever for the first moment, a happiness unmingled? It was not, at least, to Arthur. And Nancy was not one of those compliant, sweet-tempered women who swamp their own habits and ways in those of their husbands. Arthur had known these habits intimately enough; but

the changed relationship brought such an entire change of aspect as was astonishing to himself. Heretofore he had been able to admire as piquant, or to laugh at as amusing, the roughnesses or simplicities of a breeding so different from his own; but suddenly an entire difference had come upon his feelings. Now that he was responsible for these peculiarities, they became alarming to him; he saw them with the eyes of other people, of his mother, his sister, of Durant even, who would wonder and be horrified to see Arthur's wife so conducting herself. She was no longer Nancy Bates, the girl for whom he was willing to risk the world—but a part of himself, in whom his own character, his own very being, was involved. This made the strangest difference in everything. He had already felt it beginning for some time, but it was in full force from the moment which changed the tax-collector's daughter into his wife. Thus he had felt, not amused, but irritated, when she made her appearance in that salmon-coloured "silk." That Mrs. Bates's daughter should wear the one fine and glistening garment she possessed to do honour to her bridegroom, and to dazzle the eyes of all beholders on her wedding-day, would there not have been in this a certain appropriateness in the midst of the inappropriateness, a *sancta simplicitas* which would have charmed him? But it became all at once much more apparent to Arthur that his wife ought to know better than to set out on a journey in a pink silk gown; though when he tried by all manner of deceptive arguments to beguile her into the choice of a more suitable dress, representing that the dark blue serge or dark brown merino in the shops would be warmer, more easy and comfortable, less liable to be spoiled, and every other false yet true reason for preferring it that he could think of, Nancy remained unconvinced.

“You shan’t make a dowdy of me, Arthur, I can tell you,” she said. “I didn’t get married to go about the world in these poor sort of clothes, like a dressmaker’s girl; and to France, where everybody dresses so well!”

This was during the two or three days they stayed in London on purpose, if the truth had been told, to get a suitable outfit for her; but only Arthur, not Nancy, was aware of this true motive for the delay.

“My dear girl, if they dress well it is by having suitable dresses for everything, not by being fine,” said Arthur, driven to his wit’s end.

“Fine! you mean that I am dressed up,” cried Nancy, her colour rising, “and that is hard, for it was all done to please you; I thought you would like to see me fine. I never used to mind what clothes I wore; but I—and mamma too—tried to make as good a show as ever we could, for your sake!”

What could Arthur do but protest that he loved her more, if that were possible, for the pains she had taken to please him, and thought the salmon-coloured dress lovely; but after a while he returned to the charge. “In France,” he said with the air of an authority, “they are great on having a dress for every different occasion. Their dresses for the morning they never wear in the evening, and their travelling dresses—”

“But goodness me!” cried Nancy, “what an extravagant way of going on! It may be all very well for duchesses and grand ladies; but that would never do for a poor girl like me.”

"You forget you are not a girl at all, much less a poor one," he said, pursuing his wiles, "but a married lady, my Nancy." Goodness me is not a pretty oath; he swallowed it however, not daring to attempt correction, with a secret grimace.

"Yes, that is all very well," she repeated, "but all the same we are poor enough. I shan't be a bit richer than I was. I may be grander, I don't know; for your folks have cast you off, Arthur, you mustn't forget that."

"Oh! my *folks*!" cried the unhappy one under his breath; the word hurt him, in spite of himself. He had not been so delicate once; but this was like a dig in the ribs to Arthur. It made him cry out, though he stifled the cry.

"No, I don't think much of what you say if that is French fashion," said Nancy, "English fashion is far better. Instead of fussing and changing all day long, and wasting one's time, it is so convenient just to pin in a bit of lace and double back the fronts, and there you have a lovely dress for the evening; that's what I like. No need to go and unpack one's boxes and get out another dress, it's done in a moment. You must allow, Arthur, that English fashion is best for that."

Poor Arthur! he thought of his sister's little simple toilettes, so fresh, so crisp, so plain! and he did not know—what foolish young man ever does know? that whereas the finery is an easy matter, these dainty sobrieties of garb are the highest quintessence of art. In novels, which are the chief exponents of young women to young men, and of young men to young women, has not the captivating humble bride always a spotless collar and cuffs ready for every

emergency, which make her exquisite on all occasions? Why had not Nancy the secret of that little collar and snowy cuff?

All this, however, is a digression from the letter which he found in his pocket, having thrust it away there on his wedding morning. He tore it open impatiently after this talk. Did not he know very well what must be in it? But it was better to glance at it and be done with it at once. He found it, however, something so very unlike what he supposed, that the little letter completely unmanned him and took his strength away. He read it first with so much surprise that he could scarcely comprehend its meaning, and when he had fully mastered it, burst out into an abrupt break of sound of the most unintelligible description.

"What is the matter?" cried Nancy; she was half frightened. She came to the door of the inner room in which she was, and looked out upon him, half dressed, wrapped in the shawl Matilda had lent her. "Are you laughing or crying?" Perhaps it had been a little of both; but at all events it had left the tears in his eyes.

"Look here," he said, with an unsteady voice, "this is the letter old Davies gave me on Tuesday;" and then he added in a lower tone, "God forgive me, I don't deserve it," with a half sob.

Very coldly Nancy took the letter. She knew by instinct what it must be. It was written in a rather illegible but pretty handwriting, not at all like, but somehow superior she felt to the pointed precision of her own.

"I am going to your wedding to-morrow, Arthur dear; not to see you, but to be there, that there may be some one that loves you all the same. That always goes without saying. We think that you may not have money enough to do all you want, so we have just

been to the bank to get this. Dear, dear Arthur, God bless you! Mamma shakes her head, but she says it all the same.

"LUCY."

And then there was added in another hand:

"Surely I say it, surely I must say it always. And God forgive you, oh, my cruel boy."

Nancy puzzled over this for some time. She began to read it aloud and read it wrong, so that it took a ridiculous sound; then laughed; while Arthur made a furious step towards her to seize it out of her hand. She grew serious then, which quickened her wits and made her finish her reading in silence. When she had done so she flung it to him, letting the two notes enclosed flutter to the ground, and without a word turned round and shut the door violently in his face. He caught the letter; but the two fifty pound notes lay between him and the door, crumpled by Nancy's angry fingers. He stood petrified for the moment, too much surprised to be either hurt or angry. Was this the way in which his wife received his first appeal to her sympathy? the first mention of those who, Arthur suddenly remembered, were next to herself the dearest to him in the world? Somehow he had forgotten this until now; but it suddenly gleamed upon him; a kind of revelation. Certainly it was so; his mother and sister, were they not his dearest friends, the most generous and kind? Was it possible that his wife could read this letter and not be touched? and yet she had tossed it at him, had crumpled up the notes like waste paper. Was this the attitude she meant to adopt towards his family? and he had been so tolerant of hers!

Nancy did not say a word on the subject when they met again. She looked as if she had been crying; but said nothing, plunging into some indifferent subject with unusual interest. But it was not reasonable that the husband of three days could bear the matter like this. He said something about "my sister's letter," as soon as he had a chance. "We shall have a little more money to spend now, thanks to my mother's thoughtfulness," he said.

"Oh, your mother!" she flung away from him, flushing crimson—a colour that meant anger as he already knew.

"Yes, my mother," he said, "why should not I speak of my mother? I never think it strange, Nancy, that you should think of yours."

"Mine!" she cried, turning back upon him with flashing eyes, "her thoughts have been as much for you as for me. She has been as kind to you as to me," (this set Arthur thinking; but what could he answer to it?) "but there is not a word of me in all that letter, not a word, though they knew I should be your wife when you got it."

"What could they say? They did not know you, darling, and I had been silly, I had not written to conciliate as I ought to have done; but to defy them. What could they say?"

"Say! it is just as good as if they had said, 'She is no more to us than the dirt under our feet.' They could not do anything against me or say anything against me, so they treat me as if I was not worthy to be noticed; oh, that is what they mean! they think if they keep that up they will bring you back to them again, and persuade you that I am not worth thinking of. Oh, I know women's ways!"

"You are mistaken, Nancy, I am sure you are entirely mistaken."

"A great deal you can tell! they will not show you what they are after. They will smooth you down and keep you not suspicious. Oh! I tell you I know women's ways."

"You don't know my mother and Lucy," he said, making an effort to stand against her, "they are not like the women you—"

"Not like the women I know? I knew you would come to that," she said violently. "Oh, I knew it the very moment I set eyes upon her; but not yet, not so soon as this." And Nancy, really wounded in her blaze of unnecessary wrath, burst into fiery tears. They were tears that might have been red hot, and scalded as they poured down in a very thunder shower. He had never seen such a torrent, and he stood thunderstruck; not melted as he had been before, when Nancy was moved in this way. Here too was a change. He stood still, he did not rush to her, and use all the blandishments he could think of to put a stop to the intolerable spectacle of her distress. He let her cry. He was confounded by the sudden outburst; and a sharp twinge of shame for her mingled with the pain she gave him. He was ashamed that *his wife* should be so unjust, so hasty in her judgment, so violent in her mistaken ideas. When he did go to her it was slowly, with a hesitation very different from the lover's rush. That she should be so foolish *now*, was not that something derogatory to him?

"Nancy," he said, "I cannot think how you can be so—unkind. Do you think I mean any offence to you, or that *they* mean any offence? Of course you know they wanted me to marry some one—better off; some one they knew."

“Oh, let me go,” she cried, choking with pain and rage together, “I will go back to my mother; and you can go to yours, of whom you think so much. What does it matter about a common girl like me!”

“I think you are trying to drive me mad,” he said, “have I ever wavered between you and my mother? but I see now where I did wrong; I should have gone to her and made a friend of her, instead of defying her. I should have taken you to her—”

“Taken me!” she jumped up and faced him, trembling with agitation and fury, “taken *me*! am *I* to be dragged about to people that don’t want me, to people that dare to despise me?”

“Nancy!”

“Nancy! that’s all you can call me now. I used to be your love and your darling; now we’re married, and I’m bound and can’t get free, and you call me Nancy! Oh! if it was all to do again, and I knew what I know now!”

“What on earth do you know now that you did not know a week ago?” he cried with an impatience beyond words; and yet he felt half inclined to laugh. That the impassioned creature who stood defying him, blazing in impulsive wrath, should resent the absence of those loves and darlings and tender words with which he had hitherto caressed her ears, so hotly as to desire to break every bond between them, struck him with a sudden sense of the absurdity of their quarrel. He went suddenly up to her and took her into his arms. “But you *are* my darling,” he said, “all the same; though you are the most unreasonable, the most quick-tempered, the most provoking. Sweet! what is everybody in the world to me compared with you?”

Thus the first quarrel terminated, though not without considerably more trouble. Nancy perhaps saw too the foolishness of this impossible struggle, and yielded after a certain amount of flattery, coaxing, and caresses. And the cloud blew over so completely that, much to his surprise he found himself able to persuade this despairing bride next morning to get the travelling dress he wished her to have, and to tone herself down generally, and make herself warm and comfortable and less fine. They crossed the Channel two days after, more lovers than ever; but no longer publishing their recent nuptials in their appearance, with Nancy's "silk" carefully packed at the bottom of her box, and herself in a dark blue gown and little plumed hat, looking more like Mrs. Arthur Curtis than Nancy Bates had ever done before. Arthur's heart beat high with pride and pleasure as they watched the white cliffs disappearing. Nancy not without a little natural sentiment, for she had never been out of England before, and it seemed a great thing to her to be out of her own country, and on the verge of a "foreign land." But fortunately the passage was a very good one, so that no less elevated feeling mingled with these tender regrets. He had her in his own hands now, the bridegroom said to himself; all her antecedents left behind, the home and relations happily got rid of, and all the influences of her new life around her to wean her from the past. And how tractable she had shown herself already, how willing to be convinced! a tender creature, who accepted his dictation sweetly two minutes after she had burst forth in rebellion against him; who had been indignant at his sister's letter (and it was, Arthur allowed to himself, nasty of Lucy, rather like a spiteful girl after all as Nancy said, not to mention her in that little note which was intended to be so gentle and peace-making), and then had forgiven it so frankly as to use part of the money that Lucy sent. This unreasonable, inconsistent,

foolish, generous, hot-headed, soft-hearted darling, could any man desire better than to have her wholly to himself to guide her wayward feet into the print of wifely, womanly ways? The mean little house, the poor form of existence at Underhayes (ungrateful young man! it had seemed an idyllic life, full of noble simplicity and poetry, when he knew her first) lay far behind, and while the probation lasted it would seem so natural that England itself should fade out of sight, and all that was past be forgotten; until by and by he should take his bride home a lady in every outward sign, as she was, he assured himself in heart. It is so easy in a young man's glowing fancy to work this change. Likewise it is very quickly done in many novels, and with wonderful facility and completeness; and, as has been said, where but from novels was Arthur to have acquired any experience in the treatment of cases like his own? All went well during that journey. It was a beautiful day of the early winter; warmly soft as November can sometimes be, by way of contrast to its ordinary miseries, the sea and the sky alike blue; and if the wind was cold, what there was of it, the sun shining so warmly as to neutralize the wind. And Nancy now at least was well defended and need fear no chill. Her cheeks glowed with the fresh breeze, her little outcries, half of alarm half of exhilaration, when the steamboat gave a small pitch which hurt nobody, delighted Arthur. She clung to him and steadied herself by him with both hands clasped on his arm, and had no thought, now that her moment of sentiment was over, of anything but the excitement of this novel world into which she was hastening. All the clouds that had been upon their horizon seemed to float away.

"I have been thinking," she said, when they got into the railway-carriage on the other side, and Nancy had got over her first amused wonder and bewilderment, "to hear everybody talking and

not to understand a word." They had a carriage to themselves, though that is not so easy to manage on the other side, and Arthur, delighted with his task, had begun to teach her little phrases in the tongue, which notwithstanding her much-talked-of previous studies was quite an unknown tongue to Nancy. "I have been thinking—"

"What is it? Something very grave indeed, judging from that serious face."

"Yes; something very important. I have always wished it, but they would never give in to me. Not that mamma did not think me quite right, but it is very difficult to break a habit in a family. But you must do it, Arthur; it is not such a very old habit with you."

"What is this great thing I am to do—give up smoking—take off my moustache?"

"Oh! no!" cried Nancy, horrified. "The nicest thing about you!" which pleased Arthur much, for it was still new enough to give him unfeigned and honest pride. "But I will tell you what it is. Nancy is so vulgar, so common, not a name for a lady; and it will not sound well here, abroad, where people have such pretty names. Call me Anna—I have always wished it. I was christened Anna Frances, you know."

"And I could not think who she was when they married me to her," cried Arthur. "I will call you what you like, my darling; but I like Nancy best."

Did ever young people start on a honeymoon expedition with a better understanding? He planned a hundred places to take her to, and things to do. The theatre every night!—How Nancy's eyes

sparkled! and the Louvre, of which she was quite willing to admit that it must be very fine, without knowing what it was; and the Tuileries gardens with the band playing, and the beautiful shops in the Boulevards. Even to hear of these delights was enough to charm any bride. They were to go everywhere, to see everything, to walk about and drive about always these two together—nobody to interfere with them; and the play every night! What could any bride desire more?