

MRS. ARTHUR

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BY
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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.

IT was like a dream when it was all over, so huddled up at the end, so seemingly causeless; the sudden outburst of accumulated dissatisfaction and failure breaking out in a moment, a storm out of a clear sky, as it were. There was no adequate reason for the catastrophe; greater troubles had been between them before, more violent disputes; perhaps it was that never before had there been any witnesses, nor had the menace ever before come from Arthur's side. When he left Underhayes, almost carried off by Durant, yet with many stings in his heart, which in time, at least, might slay the love that was still warm within him, Arthur could think of his married life only as a dream. Nancy had refused to see him. She would make no arrangement, listen to no terms, make no promises; indeed, she would not communicate with her husband or his friend except through her parents, and refused to say anything except that all was over, that she never wanted to hear Arthur's name again. The father and mother were without any question deeply distressed. Mrs. Bates was, on the whole, a sensible woman, who, though she might be disposed to back up her married daughter in a certain amount of folly and hot-headedness as to the honours and privileges which were "no more than what she had a right to," was yet horrified at the notion of practical divorce and disjunction such as this; and her husband not only shared this moral horror, but was profoundly excited by the idea of having his daughter, whom he had believed to be provided for, once more on his hands. All through that long Sunday, and for some days after, Durant did nothing but come and go between the two houses with proposals of

all kinds. If Nancy would not return, would she join Arthur in London and go to Oakley with him? If she would not go to Oakley, would she go to Vienna, where they could make a fresh start, having both, it was to be hoped, learned a tremendous lesson? To all these suggestions Nancy answered No. She kept upstairs, locking her door, when her husband himself came. No, she would do nothing. She would not go to his friends to be despised. She would not go abroad with him to be miserable. He knew how she hated foreign countries. She would not go home to him, or see him to discuss these questions. He could go where he pleased, she would not put herself in his way. She would not shame him among his fine friends. Nobody should say she was a burden on her husband. It is impossible to imagine anything more confused, more agitated, more feverish than the course of these painful days; but at last it became apparent even to Arthur that this could go on no longer. Many little indications of a state of things which he had never dreamt of, and which was fatal to the self-esteem which is in every man's bosom, worked on the poor young fellow's mind as much as the actual grievance of the moment. That he had been thought of as a good match was, perhaps, inevitable in the circumstances; but even that is not agreeable; and to know that your wife has gone to her father's house to complain of you, is an offence which few men could easily forgive. All this produced in Arthur's mind an impression of painful unreality in the past than which there is nothing more wounding, more bitter on earth. That love should fail and hearts change is bad enough; but that the love which you have believed in implicitly should never have existed at all, that your affection should have been regarded as a matter of worldly advantage, and your conduct discussed with others, what thought can sting more deeply? It destroyed not only Arthur's faith in his wife, but his faith in the life they had lived together. Hitherto

it had been her too great sincerity, her incapacity for feigning, he thought, poor fellow, which had been their rock ahead. And now was all insincere, was all feigned from beginning to end? His head seemed to turn, and the giddy world to go round with him, and that wrath “which works like madness in the brain,” the wrath which is half love, and which feels every injury with twofold aggravation of resentment, yet yearning, took possession of his mind. It was in this condition that he left Underhayes. Durant had made on Arthur’s behalf the most careful arrangements for Nancy with her father. She was to retain the villa if she chose, and the half of the allowance Sir John gave to his son. Arthur would have given the whole, had that been possible. As it was she would be well off, able to do as she pleased, according to her breeding, to help her family, to occupy an important position among them. The poor young fellow thought with bitterness that this would be more congenial to her than any elevation which could have reached her with him; and perhaps, indeed, there was some reason in this, for the elevations which could reach her as Arthur’s wife were, in a sense, humiliations. Everybody in his rank looked upon her with wonder, with curiosity and suspicion, as on a creature of a different race. Her actions were scrutinized, her little imperfections noted as they never would have been otherwise. Whereas as the richest member of the family, the one standing above them all at once by nature and by position, the family goddess and beauty, and most successful member, Nancy was looked up to and adored. Perhaps it was not wonderful that a young creature with no sense of duty in her, who had expected merely, as Arthur said, to be made happy, flattered, courted, and caressed in her marriage, and to whom such disappointment had come, should prefer the position in which she could regain a little of the self-pride and complacency which was natural to her. The first blow which assails that complacency, how

terrible it is! And Nancy had been beaten down, though she would not own it, by the sense of universal disapproval, by the failure even of her own confidence in herself.

And it would be impossible to describe the strange desolation and sense that all was over and ended, with which this self-willed and hot-headed girl woke to her misery on the morning after Arthur went away. The probation of the last few months had been very bad for Nancy. She was not altogether unworthy, as poor Arthur was inclined to think, of the higher opinion which had been formed of her; indeed it was the finer element in her nature which had led her astray in the final strain and trial. She who had been the superior of her family, who had been raised to the poetic heaven of a young lover's adoration, had after her marriage plunged at once into a bottomless abyss of inferiority and humiliation. It had begun upon her wedding-day with the vision of Lucy, in whom her jealous, suddenly enlightened eyes had seen at a glance so many differences, so many refinements unknown to herself—and with Arthur's objection to her salmon-coloured dress. Then her ignorance, her want even of the most elementary acquaintance with the world he was familiar with, was brought home to the alarmed, resentful girl on every side of her. The more she found herself wanting, the hotter had risen that suppressed fury in her heart against herself, her belongings, her breeding, and the new circumstances which brought out all their deficiencies. Pride first, and the vanity of flattered and self-admiring youth had risen wildly against the apparent need of improvement, of education and culture, which alone would have fitted her to be Arthur's wife; and if she rejected with proud disgust and self-assertion the idea of improvement in herself, what was there for it but to turn her back upon Arthur's world and drag him into her own, where she was at

her ease, where she was still the first, whatever happened? This, however, had not contented Nancy's mind. She had been no more satisfied here than elsewhere. The mere fact of withdrawing her husband into this village atmosphere, which he supported patiently or impatiently, according to the mood of the moment, but always with an effort, was in itself a confession of failure. She was unfit for the society of his equals; and he, was not he unfit for hers? None of these things had Nancy said to herself, but they were all surging within, pushing her on by their very tumult and unrest to ever more and more entire committal of herself to this foolish and wrong way.

Nobody knew better than she how foolish it was and wrong; but the more the conviction grew, the more ungovernable was her determination to be stopped by no one, to yield to no one, to assert herself as everybody's equal or superior, claiming in her own right all the consideration that a princess could command. She had never put these feelings into words, passionate and vehement though they were, nor had she anyone in the world to whom she could confide them. Poor girl! the conflict in her mind had often been beyond utterance; but she had clung desperately all through to that most variable and poorest of supports her personal pride. And this had driven her into all manner of follies, as has been seen, and into this culminating folly at last. She lay sleepless all the night through, and wept, thinking of Arthur. It would be better for him. No more would that anxious look come over his face, the look which had driven her wild and made her ruder and more self-assertive than ever, that anxiety as to her behaviour and her appearance which made her tingle with the consciousness that she was still Nancy Bates, and would still be judged as such, whatever might happen. He would not be troubled with Nancy Bates now. He would go

back untrammelled among his fine friends, where nobody made mistakes in dress, and where everybody knew as their A B C those things which were mysteries to her. He would be free; Nancy jumped up in her bed clenching her hands, her eyes heavy, her head hot, her brain almost mad with passion—he would be free! and she left here to be sneered at, and smiled at, and pointed at—a wife, a woman who had been forsaken. Then this furious sense of humiliation would melt, and burst forth into a sense of something better which she had concealed, which no one had ever known. She had been a failure; but who would love him so well as she did among all the fine people he might meet with? who would think of him so much? She, thinking of him, had brought little happiness to Arthur; her love had been as a fire which scorched and charred rather than one which warmed and gladdened—but still, if anything happened to him, if trouble came in his way, who would be faithful like his wife, faithful to death, ready to confront every danger for him; but that he would never know. The convulsions of feeling which she thus went through fortunately made Nancy ill. For a day or two she was feverish, and kept her bed, where she was waited on with sedulous care by her mother and sisters. They had never failed in kindness or affection, but they were now more anxious, more concerned than ever, for Nancy was still the great person of the family. She was rich in comparison with them. She had a house of her own—she was a lady. Numberless benefits might flow to them from her hands. This was not necessary to make these good people kind to their own flesh and blood; but still such considerations warm and quicken human feeling. They were not fond of Nancy for what she had to bestow, but the fact that she had something to bestow did not diminish their fondness. They hushed the house and kept it still, making Charley's life miserable, and the father's a burden to him, for Nancy's sake. It was her

nerves, poor thing, they said, and everything had to give way to Nancy's nerves—things hitherto unknown in the house.

When, however, Nancy came downstairs at last, after her bout of illness, she experienced not only the horrible sense of re-beginning which wrings the soul after any great calamity, but a sudden and fantastic increase of misery in the disgust which seized upon her for all her surroundings. Not only had she a new life to begin without Arthur, without hope, without any future widening of her horizon possible; but the home which she had sought so anxiously, and to which she had clung in opposition to Arthur and defiance of him, suddenly changed its aspect to her. She felt it the first afternoon when she came downstairs supported, though it was unnecessary, by her anxious mother, and was placed in the old easy-chair by the fire, which was burning brightly, though it was not necessary either, on this soft spring afternoon. She had scarcely sat down in the chair, which was her father's chair, close to the fire and to the little mahogany bracket on which he placed his rum-and-water, when this sudden loathing seized her. The afternoon sun was shining into the room, betraying dust where dust was not expected, showing the imperfections of everything—the old haircloth sofa in the corner, the not very clean carpet, the table covered with painted oil-cloth. Meanness, smallness, poverty seemed to have come into every detail. The air was too warm, and it was not fresh, but retained odours of the dinner, of the beer and cheese with which it had been concluded; for Mrs. Bates had not liked to open the window to chill the air for the invalid. What spell had fallen upon this room, which she had so longed for, and which she had returned to with such content? How mean it looked, what a contracted, paltry place, unlovely, unsweet! And it was to this that she had dragged Arthur! this was the thought that flew like an

arrow through Nancy's mind. They brought a little tray with tea, and hot muffins to tempt her invalid appetite, and Mrs. Bates was at once alarmed and vexed when she pushed it peevishly away and declined to eat.

“You all know I can't bear muffins!” cried Nancy, pushing it away rudely; and her own action made her sick with self-disgust as she noted unconsciously how rude, how ungracious and ungrateful it was. Yes, she was like the place, rude, ill-bred, not a lady! She could have cried, but she was too proud to cry, and instead of this innocent relief to her mind, became cross in her wretchedness and found fault with everything. “Oh, how hot it is!” she cried, “how can you live in this stifling atmosphere? One would think you were always having dinner, it is so stuffy—open the window for pity sake!” But when the window was open she began to shiver. “There is not a corner that is out of the draught,” she said. Nothing that they did pleased her. Sarah Jane's noisy ways, as she went sweeping about, knocking down a chair here and a footstool there, sweeping against the table, were insupportable, and Matilda's demure quietness not much better. Everything grated on Nancy. And this was where she had brought Arthur! and had been angry that he was not delighted; and now Arthur was gone never to be found any more. Oh, how her heart sank in her miserable bosom! Then came tea, the tray placed upon the oilcloth, and hot toast this time brought to her instead of the muffins. The room was full now, her father and Charley added to the group of women. Mr. Bates looked at her when he came in, sitting in his chair, with a “humph!” of disapproval. Was she not only to be a failure as far as all their hopes were concerned, but to occupy his place also and put everybody out? Nancy saw the look, and jumped up in hot resentment.

“Oh, you shall have your chair!” she cried, and retreated to the sofa, where her mother feared she would take cold, so far from the fire. “Cold!” cried Nancy, “I think I shall never be cool again. You don’t know how stuffy it is in this close little room.”

“Upon my word!” said Sarah Jane. “Nobody’s obliged to stay here. It is good enough for us, and so it might be for Nancy. I don’t see that she’s any better than the rest.”

“Oh, hold your tongue, Sarah Jane,” cried Mrs. Bates; “can’t you see that your poor sister is poorly and out of sorts?” But neither did she like to hear the parlour called stuffy. If it was good enough for the others, why was it not good enough for Nancy? And then the family settled to their evening occupations, and the lamp was brought in, which added the smell of paraffin to that of the tea. And then Mr. Bates had his rum-and-water; and Mr. Raisins came to visit Sarah Jane. He came in with a witty greeting to the family, which made them all laugh.

“Here we are again! and how was you all?” he said, with refined jocosity; and was making his way to the sofa, which was the lover’s corner, when he saw Nancy there, and drew up with a significant look of dismay and a prolonged whistle of surprise. Nancy could bear it no longer. She started up with a cry of anger, and flew up-stairs to her room, sick with disgust and misery.

“Do you like to see me insulted, mamma?” she said, when Mrs. Bates followed. “How can you endure that vulgar fellow? and how dares he show his insolence to me?”

“My dear,” said Mrs. Bates, “you must not be unreasonable. He did not mean to be insolent. If we have not the refinements you

have been used to, Nancy, still you mustn't forget the advantages of your old home—”

“Advantages!” Nancy murmured under her breath, but pride kept down the cry. Had not she sacrificed her life for these advantages, cast her own existence to the winds? She went to bed miserable, and cried herself to sleep.

This was but a melancholy beginning to the new life. When she heard afterwards the arrangements that Arthur had made for her comfort, her first impulse was to accept nothing.

“I am no wife to him,” she cried, “and why should I take his money? I will not take his money. What am I to Arthur now that he should maintain me? It is like taking charity.”

But here Mr. Bates came in, who had a certain authority in such matters, if not a great deal of influence in other ways. Mr. Bates would stand no nonsense. It was bad enough that the responsibility of his daughter, and her behaviour as a married woman separated from her husband, should fall upon her parents; but her support certainly should not, of that he was clear. And Nancy, fresh from all these conflicts and miseries, was cowed before her father, and dared not resist him, notwithstanding all her efforts to hold her own. She who had not yielded to Arthur's love and generosity, yielded to the tax-collector's practical decidedness. She could not help herself. And after a few days' growing wretchedness in this “home,” for which she had sacrificed so much, Nancy was glad to retire to the villa with the sensible Matilda for her companion, and begin again as she best could in such changed and fallen circumstances the career so perversely cut short. At least it was a relief to get away from the stuffy parlour, and the rum-

and-water, and the grocer's wit and courtship—all of which, heaven forgive her, she had called upon her husband to endure.

In two years from this time, strangely enough, the Bates family and almost all trace of them disappeared from Underhayes. Nothing had happened to them for all Nancy's lifetime till her marriage—nothing of an exciting kind. There had been neither misfortune nor great success in the house; but all had gone on with humdrum regularity, unexciting, unalarming. Mr. Bates had got a little mild promotion, and they had saved a very little money, and for the rest had eaten and drunk, and slept and woke, and all had been as if it might thus go on for ever. So flows the tranquil current of life, in many cases, for years and years, until at length the cycle of change commences, and all that has been done is undone. Nancy's marriage was the first family event, but it was followed in close succession by others. Charley went to New Zealand shortly after the separation between Arthur Curtis and his wife. Then a little after Sarah Jane married. Then Mr. Bates, in the midst of his tax-collecting, had an accident, and after lingering for a time died; and Mrs. Bates, a person of apparently robust constitution, both bodily and mental, developed all at once, to the amazement of her family and friends, an incapacity to live without the man whom she had not been very enthusiastic about, or devoted to, during his lifetime, and died in her turn, leaving her house desolate. Matilda, the only representative of the name, would have joined Charley in New Zealand but for her sister, to whom she had proved a discreet and faithful companion. After, however, the little house was cleared, and all the old furniture dispersed, sold, or laid up in the house of the Raisins' for their future use, the two elder sisters disappeared, no one, except, perhaps, Sarah Jane, who said nothing about it, knowing whither. The little parlour passed away, like all

the teas and dinners that had been consumed there, and the family existence ended. Notwithstanding the moving events that had been transacted in it, and the temporary link which had been woven between it and the upper classes of society, its history was all over like a bubble, like the snow on the mountain and the foam on the river. The same fate befalls small and great; but in the case of a tax-collector the conclusion is more complete than that which comes upon the higher classes, which Mr. Bates respected so much. Death, emigration, marriage, disappearance, thus followed each other in swift succession. Young Mrs. Raisins, blooming in her shop—where, however, her bridegroom did not permit her to appear to minister to the wants of a vulgar public, keeping her, on the contrary, in high happiness and splendour, and without requiring her to do anything, in her drawing-room above the shop—alone remained of the family in Underhayes. And as for Nancy, no one knew anything about her, nor where she had gone.

CHAPTER II.

EVERYTHING went on very quietly at Oakley during these two years. Arthur's visit at home was very brief, and not very lively. And if there was a temporary sense of relief in Lady Curtis's mind to know that he had escaped from the influence of "those people" and "that young woman," it soon disappeared in presence of Arthur's melancholy looks, and in contemplation of the painful position of a man so young, who was married, and yet not married, and whose path, accordingly, could not but be full of thorns and troubles. Such a position is dangerous and difficult in any sphere; but how much more in that to which he was going, where every temptation of society would surround the young man, and every freedom would be accorded to him! The mother and sister had many a discussion over him; but how difficult it was to question him on the subject, to pry into those arrangements of his which he did not care to reveal, or to ask anything about the final causes of the separation! Arthur, for his part, did not speak on the subject; when he arrived, at first, he had let them know, in a few words, that his wife and he had parted. "Don't ask me about it, for I can't tell you. I don't know how it is," he had said to his mother. "She will not conform to my way of living, and I cannot conform to hers—that is all. There is no blame; but how it happened, don't ask me, for I don't know." Lady Curtis respected the request absolutely, and inquired no more of him. But it is needless to say how interesting the subject was to her; and with what eagerness she endeavoured to get the information otherwise which Arthur would not furnish. Durant told her all that he knew personally, all that

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