

OMBRA

BY
MRS. OLIPHANT

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OMBRA

Simon. ... 'Your tale, my friend,
Is made from nothing, and of nothings spun—
Foam on the ocean, hoar-frost on the grass,
The gossamer threads that sparkle in the sun
Patterned with morning dew—things that are born
And die, are come and gone, blossom and fade
Ere day mature has drawn one sober breath.'
Philip. 'Tis so; and so is life; and so is youth;
Foam, frost, and dew; what would you? Maidens call
That filmy gossamer the Virgin's threads,
And virgins' lives are woven of threads like those.'
The Two Poor Maidens.

NEW EDITION

LONDON CHAPMAN AND HALL (LIMITED) 193
PICCADILLY. 1880.

POPULAR TWO SHILLING NOVELS.

BY MRS. OLIPHANT.

MAY
FOR LOVE AND LIFE
LAST OF THE MORTIMERS
SQUIRE ARDEN
OMBRA

THE DAYS OF MY LIFE
HARRY MUIR
HEART AND CROSS
MAGDALEN HEPBURN
THE HOUSE ON THE MOOR

MADONNA MARY

LILLIESLEAF

LUCY CROFTON.

London: CHAPMAN & HALL (LIMITED),
193 Piccadilly.

THIS book was written by the desire and at the suggestion of a dear friend, to whom it would have been dedicated had Providence permitted. But since then, all suddenly and unawares, he has been called upon to take that journey which every man must take. Upon the grave which has reunited him to his sweet wife, who went before, I lay this poor little soon-fading handful of mortal flowers. H. B. and E. B., faithful friends, wheresoever you may be in His wide universe, God bless you, dear and gentle souls!

OMBRA.

CHAPTER I.

KATHERINE COURTENAY was an only child, and a great heiress; and both her parents had died before she was able to form any clear idea of them. She was brought up in total ignorance of the natural life of childhood—that world hemmed in by the dear faces of father and mother, brother and sister, which forms to most girls the introductory chapter into life. She never knew it. She lived in Langton-Courtenay—with her nurse first, and then with her governess, the centre of a throng of servants, in the immense desolate house. Even in these relationships the lonely child did not find the motherhood which lonely children so often find in the care of some pitying, tender-hearted stranger. Her guardian, who was her father's uncle, an old man of the world, was one of those who distrust old servants, and accept from their inferiors nothing more than can be paid for. He had made up his mind from the beginning that little Kate should not be eaten up by locusts, as he said—that she should have no kind of retainers about her, flattering her vanity with unnecessary affection and ostentatious zeal; but only honest servants (as honest, he would add, as they ever are), who expected nothing but the day's wages for the day's work. To procure this, he allowed no one to remain long with his ward. Her nurse was changed half a dozen times during the period in which she required such a guardian; and her governess had shared the same fate. She had never been allowed to attach herself to one more than another. When any signs of feeling made themselves apparent, Mr. Courtenay sent forth his remorseless decree. 'Kate shall never be any woman's slave, nor any old servant's victim, if I can help it,' he said. He would have liked, had that been practicable, to turn her

into a public school, and let her 'find her level,' as boys do; but as that was not practicable, he made sure, at least, that no sentimental influences should impair his nursling's independence and vigour. Thus the alleviations which natural sympathy and pity might have given her, were lost to Kate. Her attendants were afraid to love her; her often-changed instructresses had to shut their hearts against the appeal of compassion, as well as the appeal made by the girl's natural attractiveness. She had to be to them as princesses are but rarely to their teachers and companions—a half-mistress, half-pupil. An act of utter self-renunciation was required of them before ever they set foot in Langton-Courtenay. Mr. Courtenay himself made the engagement, and prescribed its terms. He paid very liberally; and he veiled his insolence under the garb of perfect politeness. 'I do not wish Miss Courtenay to make any friends out of her own class,' he would say. 'I shall do my utmost to make the temporary connection between my niece and you advantageous to yourself, Miss —— . But I must exact, on the other side, that there shall be no sentimental bonds formed, no everlasting friendships, no false relationship. I have seen the harm of such things, and suffered from it. Therefore, if these should be your ideas——'

'You wanted a governess, I heard, and I applied for the situation—I never thought of anything more,' said quickly, with some offence, the irritated applicant.

'Precisely,' said Mr. Courtenay. 'With this understanding everything may be decided at once. I am happy to have met with a lady who understands my meaning.' And thus the bargain would be made. But, as it is natural to suppose, the ladies who were willing to take service under these terms, were by no means the highest of their class. Sometimes it would happen that Mr. Courtenay received a sharp rebuff in these preliminary negotiations.

‘I trust, of course, that I shall grow fond of my pupil, and she of me,’ said one stouter-hearted woman, for example. And the old Squire made her a sarcastic bow.

‘Quite unnecessary—wholly unnecessary, I assure you,’ he said.

‘Then there is nothing more to be said about it,’ was the reply; and this applicant—whose testimonials were so high, and were from such ‘good people’ (meaning, of course, from a succession of duchesses, countesses, and families of renown), that Mr. Courtenay would, he confessed, have given ‘any money’ to secure her services—got up with impatience, and made him a curtsey which would, could she have managed it, have been as sarcastic as his bow, but which, as it turned out, was only an agitated and awkward obeisance, tremulous with generous rage: ‘such an arrangement would be quite impossible to me.’

And so poor Kate missed a woman who might have been a kind of secondary mother to the forlorn child, and acquired a mercenary dragon instead, who loved nobody, and was incapable of attracting love.

The consequences of this training were not, perhaps, exactly such as might have been expected. Kate’s high spirits and energetic temper retained a certain ascendancy over her circumstances; her faults were serious and deep-rooted, but on the surface she had a *gaieté du cœur*—an impulsive power of sympathy and capacity for interesting herself in other people, which could not but be potent for good or evil in her life. It developed, however, in the first place, into a love of interference, and consequently of gossip, which would have alarmed anyone

really concerned for her character and happiness. She was kept from loving or from being loved. She was arbitrarily fixed among strangers, surrounded with faces which were never permitted to become familiar, defrauded of all the interests of affection; and her lively mind avenged itself by a determination to know everything and meddle with everything within her reach. Kate at fifteen was not mournful, despondent, or solitary, as might have been looked for; on the contrary, she was the very type of activity, a little inquisitive despot, the greatest gossip and busy-body within a dozen miles of Langton-Courtenay. The tendrils of her nature, which ought to have clung firm and close around some natural prop, trailed all abroad, and caught at everything. Nothing was too paltry for her, and nothing too grand. She had the audacity to interfere in the matter of the lighted candles on the altar, when the new High-Church Rector of Langton first came into power; and she interfered remorselessly to take away Widow Budd's snuff, when it was found out that the reason she assigned for wanting it—the state of her eyes—was a shameful pretence. Kate did not shrink from either of these bold practical assaults upon the liberty of her subjects. She would no doubt have inquired into the Queen's habits, and counselled, if not required some change in them, had that illustrious lady paid a visit to Langton-Courtenay. This was how Nature managed itself for her especial training. She could no more be made unsympathetic, unenergetic, or deprived of her warm interest in the world, than she could be made sixty. But all these good qualities could be turned into evil, and this was what her guardian managed to do. It did not occur to him to watch over her personally during her childhood, and therefore he was unconscious of the exact progress of affairs.

Old Mr. Courtenay was totally unlike the child whom he had undertaken to train. He did not care a straw for his fellow-creatures; they took their way, and he took his, and there was an end of the matter. When any great calamity occurred, he shrugged his shoulders, and comforted himself with the reflection that it must be their own fault. When, on the contrary, there was joy and rejoicing, he took his share of the feast, and reflected, with a smile, that wise men enjoy the banquets which fools make. To put yourself out of the way for anything that might happen, seemed to him the strangest, the most incomprehensible folly. And when he made up his mind to save the young heiress of his house from the locusts, and to keep her free from all connections or associations which might be a drag upon her in future times, he had been honestly unconscious that he was doing wrong to Nature. Love!—what did she want with love?—what was the good of it? Mr. Courtenay himself got on very well without any such frivolous imaginary necessity, and so, of course, would Kate. He was so confident in the wisdom, and even in the naturalness of his system, that he did not even think it worth his while to watch over its progress. Of course it would come all right. Why should he trouble himself about the details?—to keep fast to this principle gave him quite enough trouble. Circumstances, however, had occurred which made it expedient for him to visit Langton-Courtenay when Kate completed her fifteenth year. New people had appeared on the scene, who threatened to be a greater trouble to him, and a greater danger for Kate, than even the governesses; and his sense of duty was strong enough to move him, in thus far, at least, to personal interference on his ward's behalf.

At fifteen Kate Courtenay was the very impersonation of youthful beauty, vigour, and impetuous life. She seemed to dance

as she walked, to be eloquent and rhetorical when she spoke, out of the mere exuberance of her being. Her hair, which was full of colour, chestnut-brown, still fell in negligent abundance about her shoulders; not in stiff curls, after the old mode, nor *crêpé*, according to the new, but in one undulating, careless flow. Though she was still dressed in the sackcloth of the school-room, there was an air of authoritative independence about her, more imposing a great deal than was that garb of complete womanhood, the 'long dress,' to which she looked forward with awe and hope. Her figure was full for her age, yet so light, so well-formed, so free and rapid in movement, that it had all the graceful effect of the most girlish slenderness. Her voice was slightly high-pitched—not soft and low, as is the ideal woman's—and she talked for three people, pouring forth her experiences, her recollections, her questions and remarks, in a flood. It was not quite ladylike, more than one unhappy instructress of Kate's youth had suggested; but there seemed no reason in the world why she should pay any attention to such a suggestion. 'If it is natural for me to talk so, why should I try to talk otherwise? Why should I care what people think? You may, Miss Blank, because they will find fault with you, and take away your pupils, and that sort of thing; but nobody can do anything to me.' This was Kate's vindication of her voice, which rang through all Langton-Courtenay clear as a bell, and sweet enough to hear, but imperative, decisive, high-pitched, and unceasing. When her uncle saw her, his first sensation was one of pleasure. She was waiting for him on the step before the front door, the sunshine surrounding her with a golden halo, made out of the stray golden luminous threads in her hair.

'How do you do, uncle?' she called out to him as soon as he appeared. 'I am so glad you have made up your mind to come at

last. It is always a change to have you here, and there are so many things I want to talk of. You have taken the fly from the station, I see, though the carriage went for you half-an-hour ago. That is what I am always telling you, Giles, you are continually half-an-hour too late. Uncle, mind how you get down. That fly-horse is the most vicious thing! She'll go off when you have one foot to the ground, if you don't mind. I told old Mrs. Sayer to sell her, but these people never will do what they are told. I am glad to see you, Uncle Courtenay. How do you do?"

'A little bewildered with my journey, Kate—and to find you a young lady receiving your guests, instead of a shy little girl running off when you were spoken to.'

'Was I ever shy?' said Kate, with unfeigned wonder. 'What a very odd thing! I don't remember it. I thought I had always been as I am now. Tell Mrs. Sayers, Tom, that I have heard something I don't like about one of the people at Glenhouse, and that I am coming to speak to her to-morrow. Uncle, will you have some tea, or wine, or anything, or shall I take you to your room! Dinner is to be at seven. I am so glad you have come to make a change. I *hate* dinner at two. It suits Miss Blank's digestion, but I am sure I hate it, and now it shall be changed. Don't you think I am quite grown up, Uncle Courtenay? I am as tall as you.'

He was little, dried-up, shrivelled—a small old man; and she a young Diana, with a bloom which had still all the freshness of childhood. Uncle Courtenay felt irritated when she measured her elastic figure beside the stooping form of his old age.

'Yes, yes, yes!' he said, pettishly. 'Grown up, indeed! I should think you were. But stop this stream of talk, for heaven's sake, and

moderate your voice, and take me in somewhere. I don't want to have your height discussed among your servants, nor anything else I may have to say.'

'Oh! for that matter, I do not mind who hears me talk,' said Kate. 'Why should I? Nobody, of course, ever interferes with me. Come into the library, uncle. It is nice and cool this hot day. Did you see anyone in the village as you came up? Did you notice if there was anyone at the Rectory? They are curious people at the Rectory, and don't take the trouble to make themselves at all agreeable. Miss Blank thinks it very strange, considering that I am the Lady of the Manor, and have a right to their respect, and ought to be considered and obeyed. Don't you think, uncle——'

'Obeyed!' he said, with a laugh which was half amusement, and half consternation. 'A baby of fifteen is no more the Lady of the Manor than Miss Blank is. You silly child, what do you mean?'

'I am not a child,' said Kate, haughtily. 'I am quite aware of my position. I may not be of age yet, but that does not make much difference. However, if you are tired, uncle, as I think you are by your face, I won't bore you with that, though it is one of my grievances. Should you like to be left alone till dinner? If you would let me advise you, I should say lie down, and have some eau-de-Cologne on a handkerchief, and perhaps a cup of tea. It is the best thing for worry and headache.'

'In heaven's name, how do you know?'

'Perfectly well,' said Kate, calmly. 'I have made people do it a hundred times, and it has always succeeded. Perfect quiet, uncle, and a wet handkerchief on your forehead, and a cup of my special tea. I will tell Giles to bring you one, and a bottle of eau-de-

Cologne; and if you don't move till the dressing bell rings, you will find yourself quite refreshed and restored. Why, I have made people do it over and over again, and I have never known it to fail.'

CHAPTER II.

MISS COURTENAY, of Langton-Courtenay, had scarcely ever in her life been promoted before to the glories of a late dinner. She had received no visitors, and the house was still under school-room sway, as became her age, consequently this was a great era to Kate. She placed herself at the head of the table, with a pride and delight which neither her cynical old uncle nor her passive governess had the least notion of. The occurrence was trifling to them, but to her its importance was immense. Miss Blank, who was troubled by fears of being in the way—fears which her charge made no effort to enlighten—and whose digestion, besides, was feeble, preferred to have the usual two o'clock dinner, and to leave Kate alone to entertain her uncle. This dinner had been the subject of Kate's thoughts for some days. She had insisted on the production of all the plate which the little household at Langton had been permitted to retain; she had the table decked with a profusion of flowers. She had not yet discretion enough to know that a small table would have been in better taste than the large one, seated at opposite ends of which her guardian and herself were as if miles apart. They could not see each other for the flowers; they could scarcely hear each other for the distance; but Kate was happy. There was a certain grown-up grandeur, even in the discomfort. As for Mr. Courtenay, he was extremely impatient. 'What a fool the girl must be!' he said to himself; and went on to comment bitterly upon the popular fallacy which credits women with intuitive good taste and social sense, at least. When he made a remark upon the long distance that separated them, Kate cheerfully suggested that he should come up beside her. She took away his breath by her

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