

**JOHN**  
A LOVE STORY  
VOL. I.

BY  
MRS OLIPHANT

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**JOHN.**

## CHAPTER I.

I DO not know how to begin this story otherwise than by a confession that I cannot describe its very first scene. It was a scene such as happens very often in romance, and which a great many writers could describe to the life. I know who could do it so well that you would think you saw the accident—the plunge of the frightened horse, the sudden change in the sensations of the rider from voluntary progress on her own part to a gradual confused wild mad rush past of trees and houses and hedgerows, and all the whirling level green of the country round—the flash before her eyes—the jar—the stillness of insensibility. Many writers whom I know could make a great point of it; but I never was run away with by my horse, and I do not know how it feels. Therefore I will begin where the excitement ends, and take up my story from the moment when Kate Crediton opened her eyes, without any notion where she was, with a thousand bells ringing in her ears, and awful shadows of something that had happened or was going to happen flitting about her brain—and by degrees found that she was not on her horse, as she had been when last she had any acquaintance with herself, but lying on a sofa with a sense of wetness and coolness about her head, and the strangest incapacity to move or speak or exercise any energy of her own. She began to hear the voices and to feel the things that were being done to her before she was capable of opening her eyes, or indeed had come to herself. There was a soft splash of water, and sensation as if a sudden shower had come over her face, and then consciousness struggled back, and she began to divine what it was.

“Where am I?” she said, faintly, in her great wonder; and then her father came forward, and with tears in his eyes implored her not to stir or speak. And there was another man who was dimly apparent to her, holding her hand or her pulse or something; and at her feet a pair of anxious, astonished eyes gazing at her, and somebody behind who was sprinkling something fragrant over her head, and shedding the heavy hair off her forehead. She had fainted, and yet somehow had escaped being dead, as she ought to have been. Or was she dead, and were these phantoms that were round her, moving so ghostly, speaking with their voices miles off through the plaintive air? But she could not put the question, though she was so curious. She could not move, though she was the most active, restless little creature possible. All the bells of all the country round were booming dully in her ears; or was it rather a hive of bees that had clustered round her with dull, small, murmurous trumpeting? The mist went and came across her eyes like clouds on the sky, and every time it blew aside there was visible that pair of eyes. Whom did they belong to? or were they only floating there in space, with perhaps a pair of wings attached?—a hypothesis not inconsistent with Kate’s sense that after all she might have died, for anything she could say to the contrary. But the eyes were anxious, puckered up at the corners, with a very intent, disturbed, eager look in them, such as eyes could scarcely have in heaven.

“She will do now,” Kate heard some one say beside her; “let her be kept quite quiet, and not allowed to speak—and you may continue the cold compress on the head. I think it will be best to leave her quite alone with Mrs Mitford. Quiet is of the first consequence. I shall come back again in an hour and see how she is.”

“But, doctor,” said the anxious voice of Mr Crediton, “you don’t think——”

“My dear sir, there is no use in thinking anything just now. I hope she will be all right again this evening; but pray come with me, and leave her quiet. At present we can do no good.”

I do not mean to say that this connected conversation penetrated to the poor little brain which had just received such a shock; but she heard it, and caught the name, Mrs Mitford, out of the mist, and her mind began vaguely to revolve round the new idea so oddly thrown into it. Mrs Mitford?—who was she? The name seemed to get into the murmurs of the bees somehow, and buzz and buzz about her. The big eyes disappeared; the sense of other moving living creatures about her died off into the general hum. But for that, everything now was still, except just one rustle behind her at her head. And sometimes a hand came out of the stillness, and dropped new freshness on her forehead; and once it lingered with a soft half caress, and shed back the hair once more, and there came to her the soft coo of a voice as the buzzing became less loud. Yes; the bees began to hum away to their hives, farther and farther off into the slumberous distance. And this?—was it the wood-pigeons among the bees?

Thus it will be seen that poor Kate had received a considerable shock; but yet, as she was young, and had unfathomable fountains of life and energy to draw from, she had quite come to herself by the evening, as the doctor hoped. Her father was allowed to come in for ten minutes to see her, and almost wept over his child, though that was not by any means his usual frame of mind; and Mrs Mitford emerged from the darkness at the end of the sofa and sat by the side of her charge, and even talked to her sometimes in

that voice which was like the wood-pigeon's coo. But who was she? and whose were those two eyes which had floated in the curious cloudy darkness? Perhaps it was because of the general state of confusion in which she found herself that Kate's mind was so occupied with those eyes, thinking whom they could belong to, and who Mrs Mitford could be, who was taking charge of her so simply, as if it was the most natural thing in the world. As the evening darkened, an uncomfortable sense that she ought to get up and get ready to go home came over her. And she did not want to go home. To lie there quite still, full of dreamy wonderings, which were half pleasant, half confusing, seemed all she was fit for. The very idea of raising herself, of putting her foot on the ground, seemed to bring back all those buzzing bees—and yet night was coming on, and that of course would be the necessary thing to do.

It was almost dark when, for the second time, her father came to the side of her sofa. He came very softly, and hushed her when she first attempted to speak. "Not a word, my darling," he said—"not a word; you must not talk."

"But I must," said Kate, though even her own voice sounded at least five miles off. "Papa, must not I get up and go home?"

"You are not able," he said, stooping over and kissing her. "Don't trouble yourself about that. Mrs Mitford has promised to take charge of you till you are better. You must lie quite quiet, and not think of anything till you get well."

"I am—pretty well," said Kate, "and who is Mrs——?" She stopped, for there was a shadow behind Mr Crediton, who could only be Mrs Mitford herself, and Kate's sense of courtesy was not gone, though she was so strangely confused. Then she gave a little

exclamation of surprise. "I am still in my habit," she said, with vague wonder, "though it is almost night!"

"We are going to get you out of your habit presently, my dear," said Mrs Mitford. "Say good-night to your father, for we must send him away. You will soon know who I am, and all about it; but you must not talk to-night."

And then, before she knew how, she was released from her warm clinging dress, and laid, all white and fresh and cool, in a cool, soft, shaded bed, where the confusion gradually deepened round her. Kate could have vowed she had never slept at all, but had been all the while sensible of the strangeness and stillness of the place—of now and then a sound and touch that felt like the embodiment of the silence—of a faint glimmer of light in the darkness—of sometimes a wandering breath of air, as if the window had been opened; and the sense of some one by her all the while. But yet, no doubt, she must have slept; for it became apparent to her all at once that day had returned—that the morning air was coming in, and the whole dim chamber was flooded through and through with light,—light which was not sunshine, and yet looked like the essence of sunshine. She seemed to herself to look up all at once out of the soft darkness which had prevented her from identifying anything, to see this daylight room all bright and clear, with its pictures and its furniture, and a bright-faced soft-eyed woman who stood by her bed-side, no longer a shadow among the shadows. Such soft eyes, though they were no longer young, a complexion so softly, sweetly tinted, a look that caressed every young creature it rested upon:—If this was Mrs Mitford, it was very pleasant to be left in her charge. She had a little tray in her hands, white-covered, with fragrant tea and delicate bits of dry toast. Kate, not knowing how it was that she had woke so suddenly

to this pleasant spectacle, tried to start up, with her usual impetuosity, but fell back again immediately, with her head all buzzing and confused, as it had been on the previous night.

“Oh dear! what is the matter with me?” cried Kate, so much overwhelmed by her sensations that she forgot civility.

“Nothing very much, I hope, my dear,” said Mrs Mitford; “but you are not well enough to jump up like that. You had a bad fall yesterday; but you have slept so well all night——”

“Oh no—I think not,” protested Kate; and then it suddenly occurred to her how ungrateful she was. “I am sure you were sitting up with me,” she said. “It is so very good of you; and I don’t even know—my head is so strange.”

“You shall hear all about it in time,” said her cheerful nurse. “You have only to keep quiet, that is all, and take some tea, and be content to be an invalid. Is that hard? But it might have been so much worse; and oh! we have such reason to be thankful, my dear!”

Kate did not say anything, but she gazed so, throwing all her awe-stricken thoughts into her eyes, that the kind woman answered the thought as if it had been spoken.

“Yes, you might have been killed—and my John too. Thank God, you are both safe! But you must not ask any more questions. You must let me settle your pillows for you, and try to take some tea.”

“My John!” who was that? another mysterious new being in this world of darkness. Kate gazed imploringly at her new friend, whom she had identified and made out. But Mrs Mitford’s

attention was fixed on the pillows, which she piled up cunningly behind the patient to support her. "Is that comfortable?" she asked. "It does not make you giddy to sit up like that? and here is your breakfast, and a rose with the dew on it from my—from the garden," she added, after a little momentary pause. Kate's mind was very much confused, it is true, but still her woman's wit had not so much deserted her but that she could make out that broken sentence. It was "my John," no doubt, that her friend had been about to say, and why then could not she say it without hesitation? An involuntary smile stole over Kate's face; she put up the rose to hide this smile, taking in all its freshness and dewiness and perfume into her young being. Evidently John was not without discrimination—and Kate, we are obliged to confess, was the kind of girl to like the rose all the better coming to her in this half-mysterious way, than if Mrs Mitford had but gathered it in the garden as she took her morning walk.

"It is very sweet; and it is so kind of—you, to bring it me," said Kate, with a little gleam of habitual mischief waking in her pretty eyes. "But oh! my head feels so strange, I can't make it out."

"Perhaps you had better not talk any more, but lie down again as soon as you have had your tea," said Mrs Mitford; and she only smiled upon Kate's further attempts to enter into conversation, and shook her head. When the little tray had been removed, and the pillows lowered, Kate was left with her rose, in a not unwilling quiet. After all, curious though she was, she did not feel able to talk: her head still felt, as she said, very strange. The bees were not so far off but what they were ready to come back when she stirred. On the whole, it was best to lie back and keep quite still, and watch her nurse moving about the room. She had a grey alpaca gown, which shone with pretty *reflets* like silk, but did not rustle to vex

the invalid's nerves; and a little white cap that set off her soft rose-tints. Kate lay and wondered how she had managed to keep that lovely soft complexion—and then why she wore a cap, which so few people do nowadays. Certainly Mrs Mitford had no need to wear it; she had plenty of hair, though it was beginning to be touched by grey, and Kate was sufficiently a young woman of her time to know that no hair now needs to grow grey unless its owner chooses. And then she wondered how old Mrs Mitford was. She might not have been any more than forty, and yet she might be ten years older than that—it was hard to say. She went about softly, not quite noiselessly, which is as hurtful to the nerves as boisterousness, but with just sound enough to make you aware she was there. And it was so *nice*, Kate thought, to have her there. Her pretty rose ribbons, which brightened the grey dress, were not so pretty as the softer roses on her cheeks. Kate was all lilies and roses herself, and she could not but gaze with a sympathetic admiration at the woman so much older than herself, who still retained this special loveliness. She looked like Methuselah to Kate, and yet she was so pretty. “Shall I be as pretty, I wonder, when I am as old?” the girl asked herself; and once more was surprised by a smile at the quaint, strange, incomprehensible thought. Kate Crediton fifty, but still possessed of a pretty complexion, and considered a nice-looking woman of her age! The idea was so odd that into the quietness there bubbled up a little sudden fountain of laughter, of which, as soon as she heard it, Kate was so infinitely ashamed, that even her rose did not suffice to hide the colour which blazed up into her cheeks.

“Laughing, my dear!” said Mrs Mitford, though not without a little anxiety, drawing near the bed. “What has amused you?” And she came quite close, and touched Kate's forehead softly with her

hand, and gazed at her, with just a touch of dread lest her mind was wandering, which the girl guessed somehow, and which instantly sobered her thoughts.

“I was thinking how funny it is to be lying here so comfortable, and you taking care of me as if I belonged to you, and not to know where I am, nor—anything about it. It is all so queer.”

“It is not half so queer as you think,” said Mrs Mitford, smiling; “you will find it is quite natural when you are a little better. But we must not talk till the doctor comes. He gave orders you were to be kept perfectly quiet. Perhaps he will relax when he sees how well you are, if you keep quite quiet now.”

“When will he come!” said Kate, with a sigh of impatience; and then in her hasty way she put up her face, as well as she was able, to her kind nurse. “I wonder if mamma was like you,” cried the motherless creature, with a few tears which came as suddenly as the laughter. It was Kate’s way; but Mrs Mitford did not know that, and was wonderfully touched, and kissed her, and bathed her face, and smoothed her hair, and did a hundred little tender offices for her, making her “nice,” as an invalid should look.

“My hair was much the same colour when I was your age, and I had just such heaps of it,” the kind woman said, combing out and caressing those great shining coils.

“I shall be just the same-looking woman when I am old,” was the comment Kate made to herself; and the thought almost made her laugh again. But this time she had warning of the inclination, and restrained herself; and thus the morning wore away.

When the doctor came he pronounced her a great deal better, and Kate lay wondering, and listened with all her ears to the conversation that went on in hushed tones near her bed-side. “Not light-headed at all?” said the doctor; “not talking nonsense?” “And oh,” cried Kate to herself, “if I did not talk nonsense, it is the first time in all my life!” “Oh no, she has been quite rational—quite herself,” said Mrs Mitford; and Kate, exercising intense self-control, did not laugh. If she had ever been called rational before, it would not have been so hard; and how little they must know about her! “It is rather nice to be considered sensible,” she said within herself; but she could not suppress the laughing mischief in her eye, which the doctor perceived when he turned round to feel her pulse again.

“She looks as if she were laughing at us all,” he said. “Miss Crediton, tell me do you feel quite well? able to get up this moment and ride home?”

“I am very well when I lie still,” said Kate; “but I don’t want to go home, please. *She* is not at home; I am obliged to call her *she*, which is very uncivil, because nobody will tell me her name.”

“I can do that much for you,” said the doctor. “This is Mrs Mitford of Fanshawe Regis; and I can tell you you were in luck to be run away with close to her door.”

“You don’t need to tell me that,” said Kate. “Please, Mrs Mitford, will you kiss me, now we are introduced? I am Kate Crediton—perhaps you know; and I am sure I don’t know why I did not talk nonsense all last night, for they say I always do at home.”

“But you must not here,” said the doctor, who was an old man, and smiled at her kindly,—“nor chatter at all, indeed, for several days. See how it brings the blood to her face! If you will be very good you may see your father, and ask—let me see—six questions; but not one word more.”

“Is papa still here?” cried Kate.

“That is one,” said the doctor; “be careful, or you will come to the end of your list, as the man in the fairy tale came to the end of his wishes. He is waiting to come in.”

“Have I only five left?” said Kate. “Please, let him come in. I shall ask him how it all happened; and then I shall ask him where we are—that is three; and when he is going home; and what is the matter with me that I must lie here—and then——” She had been counting on her fingers, and paused with the forefinger of one hand resting on the little finger of the other. Mrs Mitford had gone to the door to admit Mr Crediton, and Kate was alone with the old doctor, who looked at her so kindly. She laid back her head among the pillows, a little flushed by talking; her pretty hair, which Mrs Mitford had just smoothed, had begun to ruffle up again in light little puffs of curls. She lay back, looking up at the doctor like a certain Greuze I know of, with fingers like bits of creamy pink shells, half transparent, doing their bit of calculation. “And then,” she added, with a long-drawn breath, half of mischief, half of fatigue, “I will ask him who is ‘my John’?”

“Has she been talking to you about my John?” said the doctor, amused; and Kate gave a little nod of her pretty head at him, where she lay back like a rosebud upon the pillows. It was too late to answer in words, for Mrs Mitford was coming back from the door,

followed by Mr Crediton, who looked excited and anxious, and had something like a tear in the corner of his eyes.

“Well, my pet, so you are better!” he said. “That is right, Kate. I have had a most miserable night, doctor, thinking of her. But now I hear it’s going to be all right. It is not, of course, for any special virtue in her,” he said, turning round to them with a strained little laugh when he had kissed her, “but one has all sorts of prejudices about one’s only child.”

“Yes, indeed. I know very well what it is to have an only child,” said Mrs Mitford. “You could not find more sympathy anywhere in that particular. When there is anything the matter with my boy, the whole world is turned upside down.”

Kate looked at the doctor with an inquiring glance, and he gave her a little confidential nod. The eyes of the young girl and the old man laughed and communicated while the two foolish parents were making their mutual confessions. “Is that my John she is speaking of?” asked Kate’s eyes; and the doctor replied merrily, delighted with his observing patient. To be sure there had been a grave enough moment on the previous day, when these two lives first crossed each other; but this was how the idea of him was formally introduced to Kate Crediton’s mind. It was a foolish, flighty, light, little mind, thinking of nothing but fun and nonsense. Yet even now it did cross the doctor’s mind, with a momentary compunction, that the business might turn out serious enough for poor John.

## CHAPTER II.

IT was nearly a week before Kate was permitted to leave her bed, and during that time she had learned a great deal about the economy of Fanshawe Regis. She lay among the pillows every day a little higher, with her natural colour coming back, looking more and more like the Greuze, and listened to all the domestic revelations that flowed from Mrs Mitford's lips. The kind woman was pleased with so lively a listener, and thus there gradually unrolled itself before Kate a moving panorama of another existence, which the girl, perhaps, had not sufficient imagination or sympathy to enter fully into, but which interested her much in bits, and amused her, and to which she lent a very willing ear. Sometimes the door of the room would be opened, and Kate would hear the footsteps in the house of which she was now a recognised inmate, but which she knew nothing of. There was one solemn step that creaked and went slowly, gravely, up and down stairs, as if life were a weighty ceremonial to be accomplished very seriously, which was evidently the step of Dr Mitford, the Rector of Fanshawe Regis, and rural dean; and there was a lighter springy masculine foot, which came to the very door sometimes with flowers and letters and books for the invalid, and which Kate did not need to be told was "my John." In the languor of her illness, and in the absence of other objects of interest, this step became quite important to Kate. She was not, we are obliged to confess, by any means a very good young woman. She was a spoiled child, and she had been born a flirt, which could scarcely be said to be her fault. From three years old to nineteen, which was her present age, it had been the occupation of her existence to prey upon mankind.

Whether it was sugar-plums she played for or hearts had not mattered very much to her. She had put forth her wiles, her smiles, her thousand little fascinations, with a spontaneous, almost unconscious, instinct. It was necessary to her to be pleasing somebody—to be first in some one's regard, whoever that some one might be. Before she had been half a day under Mrs Mitford's care, that good soul was her slave; and when that innocent little bit of captivation was complete, and when the doctor, too, showed symptoms of having put on her chains, Kate felt her hands free, and longed for the hunting-grounds and the excitement of the sport. John was the most likely victim, and yet she could not get at him, being chained up here out of reach. It filled her invalid existence with a little touch of excitement. She sent him pretty messages in return for his roses, and listened to all his mother's stories of him. Not that John in himself interested the girl. He was her natural victim, that was all, and she smiled with a vague satisfaction at thought of the mischief which she knew she could do.

The life she lived in her room in this strange house of which she knew nothing, yet with which she was so familiar, was the strangest amusing episode to Kate. After the first two days Mrs Mitford kept by her less closely, and a fresh country housemaid, full of wonder and sympathy and admiration for the pretty young lady, came into the room as soon as she was awake to put it in order for the day. Lizzie had a round fresh apple-blossom face which pleased Kate's eye, and was full of that wondering worship for the creature so like herself in age and nature, so infinitely above her in other matters, possessed of so many incomprehensible fascinations and refinements, which one young woman so often entertains for another. There had been great calculations in the kitchen about Kate's probable age and her beauty, the colour of her

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