

**JOHN**  
A LOVE STORY  
VOL. II.

BY  
MRS OLIPHANT

## **Table of Contents**

CHAPTER XV.

CHAPTER XVI.

CHAPTER XVII.

CHAPTER XVIII.

CHAPTER XIX.

CHAPTER XX.

CHAPTER XXI.

CHAPTER XXII.

CHAPTER XXIII.

CHAPTER XXIV.

CHAPTER XXV.

CHAPTER XXVI.

CHAPTER XXVII.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

CHAPTER XXIX.

CHAPTER XXX.

JOHN.

## CHAPTER XV.

THERE is nothing so hard in human experience as to fit in the exceptional moments of life into their place, and bring them into a certain harmony with that which surrounds them; and in youth it is doubly hard to understand how it is that the exceptional can come only in moments. When the superlative either of misery or happiness arrives, there is nothing so difficult to an imaginative mind as to descend from that altitude and allow that the commonplace must return, and the ordinary resume its sway. And perhaps, more than any other crisis, the crisis of youthful passion and romance is the one which it is most difficult to come down from. It has wound up the young soul to an exaltation which has scarcely any parallel in life; even to the least visionary, the event which has happened—the union which has taken place between one heart and another—the sentiment which has concentrated all beauty and loveliness and desirableness in one being, and made that being his—is something too supreme and dazzling to fall suddenly into the light of common day. John Mitford was not matter of fact, and the situation to him was doubly exciting. It was attended, besides, by the disruption of his entire life; and though he would readily have acknowledged that the rest of his existence could not be passed in those exquisite pangs and delights—that mixture of absolute rapture in being with her, and visionary despair at her absence—which had made up the story of his brief courtship; yet there was in him a strong unexpressed sense that the theory of life altogether must henceforward be framed on a higher level—that a finer ideal was before him, higher harmonies, a more perfect state of being; instead of all which dreams, when he came to

himself he was seated on a high stool, before a desk, under the dusty window of Mr Crediton's bank, with the sound of the swinging door, and the voices of the public, and the crackle of notes, and the jingle of coin in his ears, and a tedious trade to learn, in which there seemed to him no possible satisfaction of any kind! When John had said—in that golden age which already seemed centuries past—that a clergyman's was the only work worth doing, he had meant, that it was the only work for mankind in which a man could have any confidence. He had said so, while in the same breath he had expressed his want of absolute belief; and the one sentiment had not affected the other. But here he found himself in a sphere where it did not matter to any one what he believed—where he was utterly out of the way of influencing other people's thoughts, and had none of that work within reach which seems almost indispensable to men of his training—work which should affect his fellow-men. So long as he knew that two and two make four, that seemed to be all the knowledge that was required of him. With a sense of surprise which almost stupefied him, he found that all the careful education of his life was as nought to him in his new sphere. If it did not harm him—which sometimes he thought it did—at least it was totally useless. The multiplication table was of more use than Homer or Virgil; and John's mind was the mind of a scholar, not of an active thinker, much less doer. He was the kind of man that dwells and lingers upon the cadence of a line or the turn of a sentence—a man not always very sure which were the most real—the men and women in his books, or those he pushed against in the public ways. "We are such stuff as dreams are made of." Fancy a man with such words in his mouth finding himself all at once a dream among dreams, gazing vaguely over a counter at the public, feeling himself utterly incapable of any point of encounter with that public such as his education and previous

training suggested, except in the way of counting out money to them, or adding up the sums against them. What a wonderful, wonderful change it was! And then to come down to this from that exaltation of love's dream—to jump into this, shivering as into an ice-cold bath, out of all the excitement of youthful plans and fancies, visions of the nobler existence, ecstasy of first betrothal! The shock was so immense that it took away his breath. He sat all silent, chewing the cud of sweet and bitter fancy for days together, and then got his hat and walked back to the shabby little rooms he had taken on the outskirts of Camelford, stupefied, and not knowing what he was about. What was he to do when he got there? He ate his badly-cooked and painfully-homely meal, and then he would sit and stare at his two candles as he stared at the public in the bank. He did not feel capable of reading—what was the good of reading? Nothing that he had within his reach could be of any use to him in his new career, and his mind was not in a fit condition for resuming any studies or seeking out any occupation for itself. When Kate made inquiries into his life on the Sunday evenings, he found it very difficult to answer her. What could he say? There was nothing in it which was worth describing, or which it would have given her, he thought, anything but pain to know.

“But tell me, have you nice rooms—is there a nice woman to look after you?” Kate would say. “If you don't answer me I shall have to go and see them some day when you are at the bank. I will say you are my—cousin, or something. Or perhaps if I were to tell the truth,” she added, softly, with her favourite trick, almost leaning her head against his arm, “it would interest her, and she would take more pains.”

“And what would you say if you said the truth?” said foolish John. Poor fellow! this was all he had for his sacrifice, and naturally he longed for his hire, such as it was.

“I should say, of course, that you were a nearer one still, and a dearer one,” said Kate, with a soft little laugh; “what else? but oh, John, is it not very different? That dear Fanshawe Regis, and your mother, and everything you have been used to. Is it not very, very different?” she cried, expecting that he would tell her how much more blessed were his poor lodgings and close work when brightened by the hope of her.

“Yes, it is very different,” he said, in a dreamy, dreary tone. The summer was stealing on; it was August by this time, and the days were shortening. And it was almost dark, as dark as a summer night can be, when they strayed about the garden in the High Street, which was so different from the Rectory garden. There were few flowers, but at the farther end some great lime-trees, old and vast, which made the gravel-path look like a woodland road for twenty paces or so. She could not see his face in the dark, but there was in his voice nothing of that inflection which promised a flattering end to the sentence. Kate was a little chilled, she did not know why.

“But you don’t—grudge it?” she said, softly. “Oh, John, there is something in your voice—you are not sorry you have done so much?—for nothing but *me*?”

“Sorry!” he said, stooping over her—“sorry to be called into life when I did not know I was living! But, Kate, if it were not for *this*, that is my reward for everything, I will not deny that there is a great difference. I should have been working upon men the other

way; and one gets contemptuous of money. Never mind, I care for nothing while I have you.”

“I never knew any one that was contemptuous of money,” said Kate, gravely; “people here say money can do everything. That is why I want you to be rich.”

“Dear,” he said, holding her close to him, “you don’t understand, and neither did I. I don’t think I shall ever be rich. How should I, a clerk in a bank? Your father does not show me any favour, and it is not to be expected he should. Who am I, that I should try to steal his child from him? Since I have been here, Kate, there are a great many things that I begin to understand——”

“What?” she said, as he paused; raising in the soft summer dark her face to his.

“Well, for one thing, what a gulf there is between you and me!” he said; “and how natural it was that your father should be vexed. And then, Kate—don’t let it grieve you, darling—how very very unlikely it is that I shall ever be the rich man you want me to be. I thought when we spoke of it once that anything you told me to do would be easy; and so it would, if it was definite—anything to bear—if it was labouring night and day, suffering tortures for you——”

Here Kate interrupted him with a little sob of excitement, holding his arm clasped in both her hands: “Oh, John, do I want you to suffer?” she cried. “You should have everything that was best in the world if it was me——”

“But I don’t know how to grow rich—I don’t think I shall ever know,” said John, with a sigh. Up to this moment he had restrained



himself and had given no vent to his feelings, but when the ice was once broken they all burst forth. The two went on together up and down under the big lime-trees, she gazing up at him, he bending down to her, as they had done in the old garden at Fanshawe when he confided his difficulties to her. He had thrust off violently that series of difficulties, abandoning the conflict, but only to let a new set of difficulties seize upon him in still greater strength than the former. And the whole was complicated by a sense that it was somehow her doing, and that a complaint of them was next to a reproach of her. But still it was not in nature, his mouth being thus opened, that John could refrain.

“I seem to be always complaining,” he said—“one time of circumstances, another time of myself; for it is of myself this time. Many a fellow would be overjoyed, no doubt, to find himself in the way of making his own fortune, but you can’t think how little good I am. I suppose I never was very bright. If you will believe me, Kate, not only shall I never make any fortune where your father has placed me, but I am so stupid that I cannot see how a man may rise out of such a position, nor how a fortune is to be made.”

“But people do it,” said Kate, eagerly; “one hears of them every day. Of course I don’t know how. It is energy or something—making up their minds to it; and of course though papa may look cross he must be favourable to you. John, you *know* he must. If I thought he was not, I should make him—I don’t know what I should not make him do——”

“You must not make him do anything,” said John. “You may be sure I don’t mean to give in—I shall try my best, and perhaps there may be more in me than I think. I suppose it is seeing you,

and being so far apart from you, that is the worst. Except to-night—if the Sundays came, say three times in a week——”

“I don’t think I should like that,” said Kate; “but seriously, you know, don’t you like to see me?—are you—jealous?” she asked, with a little laugh. The talk had been too grave for her, and she was glad to draw it down to a lower sphere.

“If I were,” he said, with a sudden glow of passion, “I should go away. I have never faced that idea yet; but if I were—jealous, as you say——”

“What?” she cried, with the curiosity of her kind, clinging to him in the fondest proximity, yet half pleased to play with her keen little dagger in his heart.

“That would be the end,” he said, with a long-drawn breath. And a thrill of excitement came over Kate which was more pleasurable than otherwise. Had she really stirred him up to the height of a *grande passion*? It was not that she meant to be cruel to John. But such an opportunity does not come in everybody’s way. She could not help wondering suddenly how he would feel under the trial, and how his sufferings would show themselves. As for his going away, she did not put much faith in that. He would be very unhappy, and there would be a certain satisfaction in the sight of his torments. Kate did not say this in words, nor was she conscious of meaning it; but in the mere levity of her power the thought flashed through her mind. For, to be sure, it would only be for a moment that she would let him suffer. When she had enjoyed that evidence of her own supremacy, then she would overwhelm him with kindness, prove to him how foolish he was ever to doubt her, give herself to him without waiting for anybody’s leave. But in the

mean time that strange curiosity to see how far her power went which is at the bottom of so much cruelty ran through her mind. It all went and came in the twinkling of an eye, passing like the lightning, and when she answered him, poor John had no idea what a sudden gleam of suggestion had come over her, or how far her imagination had gone in the time.

“But there is not going to be an end,” she said, in her soft, coaxing voice. “And you will put up with it, and with papa, and with a great many things we don’t like—won’t you? for the sake of a poor little girl who is not worth it. Oh, John! you know you committed yourself to all that when you saved my life.”

John was nothing loath to commit himself now to anything she asked of him; and as they strayed on under the dark rustling lime-trees, with nobody within sight or sound, and the darkness enclosing them, utter content came over the young man’s mind. After all, was not this hour cheaply purchased by all the tedium and all the disgusts of common life? And even the common life looked more endurable in this sweet gloom which was full of Kate’s soft breathing, and the soft rustle of her dress, and sense of her presence. She was so close to him, leaning on his arm, and yet he could see nothing but an outline of her by his side. It was thus she had been by him on the night which decided his fate—a shadow-woman, tender, clinging, almost invisible. “Kate, Kate,” he said, out of his full heart, “I wonder if you are a little witch leading me astray?—for it is always in the dark when I can’t see you that you are good to me. When we go in you will be kind and sweet, but you will be Miss Crediton. Are we shadows, you and I? or are you Undine or Lorelei drawing me to my fate?”

“You foolish fellow,” said Kate; “how could I be Undine and not a drop of water nearer than Fanshawe Regis? Don’t you see that when we go in papa is there? You would not like me to write up in big letters—“I have gone over to the enemy—I don’t belong to you any longer. You know, John, it would be true. I am not *his* now, poor papa, and he is so fond of me; but you would not like me to put that on a flag and have it carried before me; you would not be so cruel to papa?”

“I am a poor mortal,” said John, “I almost think I could be cruel. If you are not his, are you mine? Say so, you little Queen of Shadows, and I will try to remember it and comfort my heart.”

“Whose else should I be?” whispered Kate. And the lover’s satisfaction attained for a moment to that point of perfection which lasts but for a moment. His heart seemed to stop beating in that ineffable fulness of content. He took her into his arms in the soft summer darkness—two shadows in a world of shadow. Everything around them, everything before them, was dim with mist. Nothing could be more uncertain than their prospects, a fact which John, at least, had begun to realise fully. The whole scene was an illustration of the words which were so often in his heart. Uncertain gusts of balmy wind, now from one quarter, now from another, agitated the trees overhead. The faint twilight of the skies confused all outlines—the darkness under the trees obliterated every living thing—little mysterious thrills of movement, of the leaves, of the air, of invisible insects or roosted birds, were about them. “We are such stuff as dreams are made of.” But amid these shadows for one moment John caught a passing gleam of satisfaction and delight.

Mr Crediton was in the drawing-room all alone when they went in. Had he been prudent he would have gone to his library, as he usually did, and spared himself the sight; but this night a jealous curiosity had possessed him. To see his child, who had been his for all these years, come in with dazzled, dazzling eyes, and that soft blush on her cheek, and her arm, even as they entered the room, lingering within that of her lover, was very hard upon him. Confound him! he said in his heart, although he knew well that but for John he would have had no child. He noted the change which came over Kate—that change which chilled her lover, and went through him like a blast from the snow-hills—without any pleasure, almost with additional irritation. She is not even frank, as she used to be, he said to himself. She puts on a face to cheat me, and to make me believe I am something to her still; and it might almost be said that Mr Crediton hated the young fellow who had come between him and his child.

“It is such a lovely evening, papa,” said Kate, “we could scarcely make up our minds to come in. It is not the country, of course; but still I am fond of our garden. Even at Fanshawe I don’t think there are nicer trees.”

“Of course the perfection of everything is at Fanshawe,” he said, with a sudden sharpness which changed the very atmosphere of the room all in a moment; “but I think it is imprudent to stay out so late, and it is damp, and there is no moon. I thought you required a moon for such rambles. Please let me have a cup of tea.”

“We did very well without a moon,” said Kate, trying to keep up her usual tone; but it was not easy, and she went off with a subdued step to the tea-table, and had not even the courage to call John to help her as she generally did. Oh, why didn’t papa stay in

his own room? she said to herself. It is only one night in the week, and he should not be so selfish. But she took him his tea with her own hand, and tried all she could to soothe him. "You have got a headache, papa," she said, tenderly, putting down the cup on the table by him, and looking so anxious, so ingenuous, and innocent, that it was hard to resist her.

"I have no headache," he said; "but I am busy. Don't take any notice—occupy yourselves as you please, without any thought of me."

This speech was produced by a sudden compunction and sense of injustice. It was a sacrifice to right, and yet he was all wrong and set on edge. He thought that Kate should have perceived that this amiability was forced and fictitious; but either she was insensible to it, or she did not any longer care to go deeper than mere words. She kissed his forehead as if he had been in the kindest mood, and said, "Poor papa!—thanks. It is so kind of you to think of us when you are suffering." To think of them! when she must have known he was wishing the fellow away. And then Kate retired to the tea-table, which was behind Mr Crediton, and out of sight, and he saw her beckon to John with a half-perceptible movement. The young man obeyed, and went and sat beside her, and the sound of their voices in low-toned conversation, with little bursts of laughter and soft exclamations, was gall and wormwood to the father. It was all "that fellow," he thought: his Kate herself would never have used him so; and it was all his self-control could do to prevent him addressing some bitter words to John. But the fact was, it was Kate's doing alone—Kate, who was less happy to-night than usual, but whom his tone had galled into opposition. "No," she was whispering to John, "you are not to go away—not unless you want to be rid of *me*. Papa ought to be brought to his

senses—he has no right to be so cross; and I am not going to give in to him.” This was the nature of the conversation which was going on behind Mr Crediton’s back. He did not hear it, and yet it gave him a furious sense of resentment, which expressed itself at last in various little assaults.

“Have the goodness not to whisper, Kate,” he said. “You know it sets my nerves on edge. Speak out,” an address which had the effect of ending all conversation between the lovers for a minute or two. They sat silent and looked at each other till Mr Crediton spoke again. “I seem unfortunately to act upon you like a wet blanket,” he said, with an acrid tone in his voice. “Perhaps you would rather I went away.”

At this Kate’s spirit was roused. “Papa, I don’t know what I have done to displease you,” she said, coming forward. “If I am only to see him once in the week, surely I may talk to him when he comes.”

“I am not aware that I have objected to your talk,” said Mr Crediton, restraining his passion.

“Not in words,” said Kate, now fairly up in arms; “but it is not just, papa. It makes John unhappy and it makes me unhappy. He has a right to have me to himself when he comes. You cannot forget that we are engaged. I never said a word when you insisted on once a-week, though it was a disappointment; but you know he ought not to be cheated now.”

All this time John had been moving about at the further end of the room, at once angry to the verge of violence, and discouraged to the lowest pitch. He had cleared his throat and tried to speak a dozen times already. Now he came forward, painfully restraining

himself. "I ought to speak," he said; "but I dare not trust myself to say anything. Mr Crediton cannot expect me to give up willingly the only consolation I have."

"It is time enough to speak of giving up when any one demands a sacrifice," said Mr Crediton, taking upon him suddenly that superiority of perfect calm with which a middle-aged man finds it so often possible to confute an impatient boy. "I am sorry that my innocent remarks should have irritated you both. You must school me, Kate," he added, with a forced smile, "what I am to do and say."

And then he went to his room, with a sense that he had won the victory. And certainly, if a victory is won every time the other side is discomfited, such was the case at this moment. John did not say anything—did not even come to be comforted, but kept walking up and down at the other end of the room. It was Kate who had to go to him, to steal her hand within his arm, to coax him back to his usual composure. And it was a process not very easy to be performed. She moved him quickly enough to tender demonstrations over herself, which indeed she had no objection to, but John was chilled and discouraged and cast down to the very depths.

"He was only cross," said Kate; "when he is cross I never pay any attention. Something has gone wrong in business, or that sort of thing. John, dear, say you don't mind. It is not me that am making myself disagreeable: it is only papa."

But it was hard to get John to respond. Notwithstanding that Mr Crediton had retired and left the field open, and that Kate did all in her power to detain him, the young man left her earlier than



usual, and with a sufficiently heavy heart. Kate's father was seeking a quarrel—endeavouring to show him the falseness of his position, and make it plain how obnoxious he was. John walked all the long way home to his little lodgings, which were at the other end of the town, contemplating the dim Sunday streets, all so dark, with gleams of lamplight and dim reflections from the wet pavement—for in the mean time rain had fallen. And this was all he had for all he had sacrificed. He did not reckon Kate herself in the self-discussion. She was worth everything a man could do; but to be thus chained and bound, within sight, yet shut out from her—to be made the butt of another man's jealous resentment—to have a seeming privilege, which was made into a kind of torture—and to have given his life for this;—what could he say even to himself? He sat down in his hard arm-chair and gazed into the flame of his two candles, and felt himself unable to do anything but brood over what had happened. He could not read nor turn his mind from the covert insult, the unwilling consent. And what was to come of it? John covered his face with his hands when he came to that part of the subject. There was nothing to look forward to—nothing but darkness. It was natural that she, a spoiled child of fortune, should smile and trust in something turning up; as for John, he saw nothing that could turn up; and in all the world there seemed to him no single creature with less hope of moulding his future according to his wishes than himself.

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