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The Marriage of Elinor

Mrs. (Margaret) Oliphant

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THE MARRIAGE OF ELINOR

BY

MRS. OLIPHANT

CHICAGO

W. B. CONKEY COMPANY

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THE MARRIAGE OF ELINOR.

CHAPTER I.

John Tatham, barrister-at-law, received one summer morning as he sat at breakfast the following letter. It was written in what was once known distinctively as a lady's hand, in pointed characters, very fine and delicate, and was to this effect: —

"DEAR JOHN, Have you heard from Elinor of her new prospects and intentions? I suppose she must have written to you on the subject. Do you know anything of the man?... You know how hard it is to convince her against her will of anything, and also how poorly gifted I am with the power of convincing any one. And I don't know him, therefore can speak with no authority. If you can do anything to clear things up, come and do so. I am very anxious and more than doubtful; but her heart seems set upon it.

"Your affect.

"M. S. D."

Mr. Tatham was a well-built and vigorous man of five-and-thirty, with health, good behaviour, and well-being in every line of his cheerful countenance and every close curl of his brown hair. His hair was very curly, and helped to give him the cheerful look which was one of his chief characteristics. Nevertheless, when these innocent seeming words, "Do you know the man?" which was more certainly demonstrative of certain facts than had those facts been stated in the fullest detail, met his eye, Mr. Tatham paused and laid down the letter with a start. His ruddy colour paled for the moment, and he felt something which was like the push or poke of a blunt but heavy weapon somewhere in the regions of the heart. For the moment he felt that he could not read any more. "Do you know the man?" He did not even ask what man in the momentary sick-

ness of his heart. Then he said to himself, almost angrily, "Well!" and took up the letter again and read to the end.

Well! of course it was a thing that he knew might happen any day, and which he had expected to happen for the last four or five years. It was nothing to him one way or another. Nothing could be more absurd than that a hearty and strong young man in the full tide of his life and with a good breakfast before him should receive a shock from that innocent little letter as if he had been a sentimental woman. But the fact is that he pushed his plate away with an exclamation of disgust and a feeling that everything was bad and uneatable. He drank his tea, though that also became suddenly bad too, full of tannin, like tea that has stood too long, a thing about which John was very particular. He had been half an hour later than usual this morning consequent on having been an hour or two later than usual last night. These things have their reward, and that very speedily; but as for the letter, what could that have to do with the bad toasting of the bacon and the tannin in the tea? "Do you know the man?" There was a sort of covert insult, too, in the phraseology, as if no explanation was needed, as if he must know by instinct what she meant—he who knew nothing about it, who did not know there was a man at all!

After a while he began to smile rather cynically to himself. He had got up from the breakfast table, where everything was so bad, and had gone to look out of one of the windows of his pleasant sitting-room. It was in one of the wider ways of the Temple, and looked out upon various houses with a pleasant misty light upon the redness of their old brickwork, and a stretch of green grass and trees, which were scanty in foliage, yet suited very well with the bright morning sun, which was not particularly warm, but looked as if it were a good deal for effect and not so very much for use. That thought floated across his mind with others, and was of the same cynical complexion. It was very well for the sun to shine, making the glistening poplars and plane-trees glow, and warming all the mellow redness of the old houses, but what did he mean by it? No warmth to speak of, only a fictitious gleam—a thing got up for effect. And so was the affectionateness of woman—meaning nothing, only an effect of warmth and geniality, nothing beyond that. As a matter of fact, he reminded himself after a while that he had never

wanted anything beyond, neither asked for it, nor wished it. He had no desire to change the conditions of his life: women never rested till they had done so, manufacturing a new event, whatever it might be, pleased even when they were not pleased, to have a novelty to announce. That, no doubt, was the state of mind in which the lady who called herself his aunt was: pleased to have something to tell him, to fire off her big guns in his face, even though she was not at all pleased with the event itself. But John Tatham, on the other hand, had desired nothing to happen; things were very well as they were. He liked to have a place where he could run down from Saturday to Monday whenever he pleased, and where his visit was always a cheerful event for the womankind. He had liked to take them all the news, to carry the picture-papers, quite a load; to take down a new book for Elinor; to taste doubtfully his aunt's wine, and tell her she had better let him choose it for her. It was a very pleasant state of affairs: he wanted no change; not, certainly, above everything, the intrusion of a stranger whose very existence had been unknown to him until he was thus asked cynically, almost brutally, "Do you know the man?"

The hour came when John had to assume the costume of that order of workers whom a persistent popular joke nicknames the "Devil's Own:" — that is, he had to put on gown and wig and go off to the courts, where he was envied of all the briefless as a man who for his age had a great deal to do. He "devilled" for Mr. Asstewt, the great Chancery man, which was the most excellent beginning: and he was getting into a little practice of his own which was not to be sneezed at. But he did not find himself in a satisfactory frame of mind to-day. He found himself asking the judge, "Do you know anything of the man?" when it was his special business so to bewilder that potentate with elaborate arguments that he should not have time to consider whether he had ever heard of the particular man before him. Thus it was evident that Mr. Tatham was completely *hors de son assiette*, as the French say; upset and "out of it," according to the equally vivid imagination of the English manufacturer of slang. John Tatham was a very capable young lawyer on ordinary occasions, and it was all the more remarkable that he should have been so confused in his mind to-day.

When he went back to his chambers in the evening, which was not until it was time to dress for dinner, he saw a bulky letter lying on his table, but avoided it as if it had been an overdue bill. He was engaged to dine out, and had not much time: yet all the way, as he drove along the streets, just as sunset was over and a subduing shade came over the light, and that half-holiday look that comes with evening—he kept thinking of the fat letter upon his table. Do you know anything of the man? That would no longer be the refrain of his correspondent, but some absurd strain of devotion and admiration of the man whom John knew nothing of, not even his name. He wondered as he went along in his hansom, and even between the courses at dinner, while he listened with a smile, but without hearing a word, to what the lady next him was saying—what she would tell him about this man? That he was everything that was delightful, no doubt; handsome, of course; probably clever; and that she was fond of him, confound the fellow! Elinor! to think that she should come to that—a girl like her—to tell him, as if she was saying that she had caught a cold or received a present, that she was in love with a man! Good heavens! when one had thought her so much above anything of that kind—a woman, above all women that ever were.

"Not so much as that," John said to himself as he walked home. He always preferred to walk home in the evening, and he was not going to change his habit now out of any curiosity about Elinor's letter. Oh, not so much as that! not above all women, or better than the rest, perhaps—but different. He could not quite explain to himself how, except that he had always known her to be Elinor and not another, which was a quite sufficient explanation. And now it appeared that she was not different, although she would still profess to be Elinor—a curious puzzle, which his brain in its excited state was scarcely able to tackle. His thoughts got somewhat confused and broken as he approached his chambers. He was so near the letter now—a few minutes and he would no longer need to wonder or speculate about it, but would know exactly what she said. He turned and stood for a minute or so at the Temple gates, looking out upon the busy Strand. It was still as lovely as a summer night could be overhead, but down here it was—well, it was London, which is another thing. The usual crowd was streaming by, coming into

bright light as it streamed past a brilliant shop window, then in the shade for another moment, and emerging again. The faces that were suddenly lit up as they passed—some handsome faces, pale in the light; some with heads hung down, either in bad health or bad humour; some full of cares and troubles, others airy and gay—caught his attention. Did any of them all know anything of this man, he wondered—knowing how absurd a question it was. Had any of them written to-day a letter full of explanations, of a matter that could not be explained? There were faces with far more tragic meaning in them than could be so easily explained as that—the faces of men, alas! and women too, who were going to destruction as fast as their hurrying feet could carry them; or else were languidly drifting no one knew where—out of life altogether, out of all that was good in life. John Tatham knew this very well too, and had it in him to do anything a man could to stop the wanderers in their downward career. But to-night he was thinking of none of these things. He was only wondering how she would explain it, how she could explain it, what she would say; and lingering to prolong his suspense, not to know too soon what it was.

At last, however, as there is no delay but must come to an end one time or another, he found himself at last in his room, in his smoking-coat and slippers, divested of his stiff collar—at his ease, the windows open upon the quiet of the Temple Gardens, a little fresh air breathing in. He had taken all this trouble to secure ease for himself, to put off a little the reading of the letter. Now the moment had come when it would be absurd to delay any longer. It was so natural to see her familiar handwriting—not a lady's hand, angular and pointed, like her mother's, but the handwriting of her generation, which looks as if it were full of character, until one perceives that it *is* the writing of the generation, and all the girls and boys write much the same. He took time for this reflection still as he tore open the envelope. There were two sheets very well filled, and written in at the corners, so that no available spot was lost. "My dear old John," were the first words he saw. He put down the letter and thought over the address. Well, she had always called him so. He was old John when he was fourteen, to little Elinor. They had always known each other like that—like brother and sister. But not particularly like brother and sister—like cousins twice removed,

which is a more interesting tie in some particulars. And now for the letter.

"MY DEAR OLD JOHN: I want to tell you myself of a great thing that has happened to me—the very greatest thing that could happen in one's life. Oh, John, dear old John, I feel as if I had nobody else I could open my heart to; for mamma—well, mamma is mamma, a dear mother and a good one; but you know she has her own ways of thinking— —"

He put down the letter again with a rueful little laugh. "And have not I my own ways of thinking, too?" he said to himself.

"Jack dear," continued the letter, "you must give me your sympathy, all your sympathy. You never were in love, I suppose (oh, what an odious way that is of putting it! but it spares one's feelings a little, for even in writing it is too tremendous a thing to say quite gravely and seriously, as one feels it). Dear John, I know you never were in love, or you would have told me; but still— —"

"Oh," he said to himself, with the merest suspicion of a little quiver in his lip, which might, of course, have been a laugh, but, on the other hand, might have been something else, "I never was—or I would have told her—That's the way she looks at it." Then he took up the letter again.

"Because—I see nothing but persecution before me. It was only a week ago that it happened, and we wanted to keep it quiet for a time; but things get out in spite of all one can do—things of that sort, at least. And, oh, dear Jack, fancy! I have got three letters already, all warning me against him; raking up trifling things that have occurred long ago, long before he met me, and holding them up before me like scarecrows—telling me he is not worthy of me, and that I will be wretched if I marry him, and other dreadful lies like that, which show me quite plainly that they neither know him

nor me, and that they haven't eyes to see what he really is, nor minds to understand. But though I see the folly of it and the wickedness of it, mamma does not. She is ready to take other people's words; indeed, there is this to be said for her, that she does not know him yet, and therefore cannot be expected to be ready to take his own word before all. Dear Jack, my heart is so full, and I have so much to tell you, and such perfect confidence in your sympathy, and also in your insight and capacity to see through all the lies and wicked stories which I foresee are going to be poured upon us like a flood that—I don't know how to begin, I have so many things to say. I know it is the heart of the season, and that you are asked out every night in the week, and are so popular everywhere; but if you could but come down from Saturday to Monday, and let me tell you everything and show you his picture, and read you parts of his letters, I know you would see how false and wrong it all is, and help me to face it out with all those horrid people, and to bring round mamma. You know her dreadful way of never giving an opinion, but just saying a great deal worse, and leaving you to your own responsibility, which nearly drives me mad even in little things—so you may suppose what it does in this. Of course, she must see him, which is all I want, for I know after she has had a half-hour's conversation with him that she will be like me and will not believe a word—not one word. Therefore, Jack dear, come, oh, come! I have always turned to you in my difficulties, since ever I have known what it was to have a difficulty, and you have done everything for me. I never remember any trouble I ever had but you found some means of clearing it away. Therefore my whole hope is in you. I know it is hard to give up all your parties and things; but it would only be two nights, after all—Saturday and Sunday. Oh, do come, do come, if you ever cared the least little bit for your poor cousin! Come, oh, come, dear old John!

"Your affect.

E— — —."

"Is that all?" he said to himself; but it was not all, for there followed a postscript all about the gifts and graces of the unknown lover, and how he was the victim of circumstances, and how, while other men might steal the horse, he dared not look over the wall, and other convincing pleadings such as these, till John's head began

to go round. When he had got through this postscript John Tatham folded the letter and put it away. He had a smile on his face, but he had the air of a man who had been beaten about the head and was confused with the hurry and storm of the blows. She had always turned to him in all her difficulties, that was true: and he had always stood by her, and often, in the freemasonry of youth, had thought her right and vindicated her capacity to judge for herself. He had been called often on this errand, and he had never refused to obey. For Elinor was very wilful, she had always been wilful—"a rosebud set about with wilful thorns, But sweet as English air could make her, she." He had come to her aid many a time. But he had never thought to be called upon by her in such a way as this. He folded the letter up carefully and put it in a drawer. Usually when he had a letter from Elinor he put it into his pocket, for the satisfaction of reading it over again: for she had a fantastic way of writing, adding little postscripts which escaped the eye at first, and which it was pleasant to find out afterwards. But with this letter he did not do so. He put it in a drawer of his writing-table, so that he might find it again when necessary, but he did not put it in his breast pocket. And then he sat for some time doing nothing, looking before him, with his legs stretched out and his hand beating a little tattoo upon the table. "Well: well? well!" That was about what he said to himself, but it meant a great deal: it meant a vague but great disappointment, a sort of blank and vacuum expressed by the first of these words—and then it meant a question of great importance and many divisions. How could it ever have come to anything? Am I a man to marry? What could I have done, just getting into practice, just getting a few pounds to spend for myself? And then came the conclusion. Since I can't do anything else for her; since she's done it for herself—shall I be a beast and not help her, because it puts my own nose out of joint? Not a bit of it! The reader must remember that in venturing to reflect a young man's sentiments a dignified style is scarcely possible; they express themselves sometimes with much force in their private moments, but not as Dr. Johnson would have approved, or with any sense of elegance; and one must try to be truthful to nature. He knew very well that Elinor was not responsible for his disappointment, and even he was aware that if she had been so foolish as to fix her hopes upon him, it would probably

have been she who would have been disappointed, and left in the lurch. But still— —

John had gone through an interminable amount of thinking, and a good deal of soda-water (with or without, how should I know, some other moderate ingredient), and a cigar or two—not to speak of certain hours when he ought to have been in bed to keep his head clear for the cases of to-morrow: when it suddenly flashed upon him all at once that he was not a step further on than when he had received Mrs. Dennistoun's letter in the morning, for Elinor, though she had said so much about him, had given no indication who her lover was. Who was the man?

CHAPTER II.

It was a blustering afternoon when John, with his bag in his hand, set out from the station at Hurrymere for Mrs. Dennistoun's cottage. Why that station should have had "mere" in its name I have never been able to divine, for there is no water to be seen for miles, scarcely so much as a duckpond: but, perhaps, there are two meanings to the words. It was a steep walk up a succession of slopes, and the name of the one upon which the cottage stood was Windyhill not an encouraging title on such a day, but true enough to the character of the place. The cottage lay, however, at the head of a combe or shelving irregular valley, just sheltered from the winds on a little platform of its own, and commanding a view which was delightful in its long sweeping distance, and varied enough to be called picturesque, especially by those who were familiar with nothing higher than the swelling slopes of the Surrey hills. It was wild, little cultivated, save in the emerald green of the bottom, a few fields which lay where a stream ought to have been. Nowadays there are red-roofed houses peeping out at every corner, but at that period fashion had not even heard of Hurrymere, and, save for a farm-house or two, a village alehouse and posting-house at a corner of the high-road, and one or two great houses within the circuit of six or seven miles, retired within their trees and parks, there were few habitations. Mrs. Dennistoun's cottage was red-roofed like the rest, but

much subdued by lichens, and its walls were covered by climbing plants, so that it struck no bold note upon the wild landscape, yet was visible afar off in glimpses, from the much-winding road, for a mile or two before it could be come at. There was, indeed, a nearer way, necessitating a sharp scramble, but when John came just in sight of the house his heart failed him a little, and, notwithstanding that his bag had come to feel very heavy by this time, he deliberately chose the longer round to gain a little time—as we all do sometimes, when we are most anxious to be at our journey's end, and hear what has to be told us. It looked very peaceful seated in that fold of the hill, no tossing of trees about it, though a little higher up the slim oaks and beeches of the copse were flinging themselves about against the grey sky in a kind of agonised appeal. John liked the sound of the wind sweeping over the hills, rending the trees, and filling the horizon as with a crowd of shadows in pain, twisting and bending with every fresh sweep of the breeze. Sometimes such sounds and sights give a relief to the mind. He liked it better than if all had been undisturbed, lying in afternoon quiet as might have been expected at the crown of the year—but the winds had always to be taken into account at Windyhill.

When he came in sight of the gate, John was aware of some one waiting for him, walking up and down the sandy road into which it opened. Her face was turned the other way, and she evidently looked for him by way of the combe, the scrambling steep road which he had avoided in despite: for why should he scramble and make himself hot in order to hear ten minutes sooner what he did not wish to hear at all? She turned round suddenly as he knocked his foot against a stone upon the rough, but otherwise noiseless road, presenting a countenance flushed with sudden relief and pleasure to John's remorseful eye. "Oh, there you are!" she said; "I am so glad. I thought you could not be coming. You might have been here a quarter of an hour ago by the short road."

"I did not think there was any hurry," said John, ungraciously. "The wind is enough to carry one off one's feet; though, to be sure, it's quiet enough here."

"It's always quiet here," she said, reading his face with her eyes after the manner of women, and wondering what the harassed look

meant that was so unusual in John's cheerful face. She jumped at the idea that he was tired, that his bag was heavy, that he had been beaten about by the wind till he had lost his temper, always a possible thing to happen to a man. Elinor flung herself upon the bag and tried to take possession of it. "Why didn't you get a boy at the station to carry it? Let me carry it," she said.

"That is so likely," said John, with a hard laugh, shifting it to his other hand.

Elinor caught his arm with both her hands, and looked up with wistful eyes into his face. "Oh, John, you are angry," she said.

"Nonsense. I am tired, buffeting about with this wind." Here the gardener and man-of-all-work about the cottage came up and took the bag, which John parted with with angry reluctance, as if it had been a sort of weapon of offence. After it was gone there was nothing for it but to walk quietly to the house through the flowers with that girl hanging on his arm, begging a hundred pardons with her eyes. The folly of it! as if she had not a right to do as she pleased, or he would try to prevent her; but finally, the soft, silent apology of that clinging, and the look full of petitions touched his surly heart. "Well – Nelly," he said, with involuntary softening.

"Oh, if you call me that I am not afraid!" she cried, with an instant upheaping of pleasure and confidence in her changeable face, which (John tried to say to himself) was not really pretty at all, only so full of expression, changing with every breath of feeling. The eyes, which had only been brown a moment before, leaped up into globes of light, yet not too dazzling, with some liquid medium to soften their shining. Even though you know that a girl is in love with another man, that she thinks of you no more than of the old gardener who has just hobbled round the corner, it is pleasant to be able to change the whole aspect of affairs to her and make her light up like that, solely by a little unwilling softening of your gruff and surly tone.

"You know, John," she said, holding his arm tight with her two hands, "that nobody ever calls me Nelly – except you."

"Possibly I shall call you Nelly no longer. Why? Why, because that fellow will object."

"That fellow! Oh, *he!*" Elinor's face grew very red all over, from the chin, which almost touched John's arm, to the forehead, bent back a little over those eyes suffused with light which were intent upon all the changes of John's face. This one was, like the landscape, swept by all the vicissitudes of sun and shade. It was radiant now with the unexpected splendour of the sudden gleam.

"Oh, John, John, I have so much to say to you! He will object to nothing. He knows very well you are like my brother—almost more than my brother—for you could help it, John. You almost chose me for your friend, which a brother would not. He says, 'Get him to be our friend and all will be well!'"

He had not said this, but Elinor had said it to him, and he had assented, which was almost the same—in the way of reckoning of a girl, at least.

"He is very kind, I am sure," said John, gulping down something which had almost made him throw off Elinor's arm, and fling away from her in indignation. Her brother— —!! But there was no use making any row, he said to himself. If anything were to be done for her he must put up with all that. There had suddenly come upon John, he knew not how, as he scanned her anxious face, a conviction that the man was a scamp, from whom at all hazards she should be free.

Said Elinor, unsuspecting, "That is just what he is, John! I knew you would divine his character at once. You can't think how kind he is—kind to everybody. He never judges anyone, or throws a stone, or makes an insinuation." ("Probably because he knows he cannot bear investigation himself," John said, in his heart.) "That was the thing that took my heart first. Everybody is so censorious—always something to say against their neighbours; he, never a word."

"That's a very good quality," said John, reluctantly, "if it doesn't mean confounding good with bad, and thinking nothing matters."

Elinor gave him a grieved, reproachful look, and loosened the clasping of her hands. "It is not like you to imagine that, John!"

"Well, what is a man to say? Don't you see, if you do nothing but blow his trumpet, the only thing left for me to do is to insinuate