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MADONNA MARY BY MRS. OLIPHANT.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

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BY

MRS. OLIPHANT.

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BERNHARD TAUCHNITZ

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MADONNA MARY.

CHAPTER I.

THE Cottage changed its aspect greatly after the arrival of the regiment, and it was a change which lasted a long time, for the dépôt was established at Carlisle, and Captain Askell got an appointment which smoothed the stony way of life a little for himself and his wife. Kirtell was very accessible and very pretty, and there was always a welcome to be had at the Cottage; and the regiment returned in the twinkling of an eye to its old regard for its Madonna Mary. The officers came about the house continually, to the great enlivenment of the parish in general. And Mrs. Kirkman came, and very soon made out that the vicar and his curate were both very incompetent, and did what she could to form a missionary nucleus, if not under Mrs. Ochterlony's wing, at least protected by her shadow; and the little Askells came and luxuriated in the grass and the flowers; and Miss Sorbette and the doctor, who were still on the strength of the regiment, paid many visits, bringing with them the new people whom Mary did not know. When Hugh and Islay came home at vacation times, they found the house so lively, that it acquired new attractions for them, and Aunt Agatha, who was not so old as to be quite indifferent to society,

said to herself with natural sophistry, that it was very good for the boys, and made them happier than two solitary women could have done by themselves, which no doubt was true. As for Mrs. Ochterlony herself, she said frankly that she was glad to see her friends; she liked to receive them in her own house. She had been rather poor in India, and not able to entertain them very splendidly; and though she was poor still, and the Cottage was a very modest little dwelling-place, it could receive the visitors, and give them pleasant welcome, and a pleasant meal, and pleasant faces, and cheerful companionship. Mrs. Ochterlony was not yet old, and she had lived a quiet life of late, so peaceful that the incipient wrinkles which life had outlined in her face, had been filled up and smoothed out by the quietness. She was in perfect health, and her eyes were bright, and her complexion sweet, and her hair still gave by times a golden gleam out of its brown masses.

No wonder then that her old friends saw little or no change in her, and that her new ones admired her as much as she had ever been admired in her best days. Some women are sweet by means of being helpless, and fragile, and tender; and some have a loftier charm by reason of their veiled strength and composure, and calm of self-possession. Mary was one of the last; she was a woman not to lean, but to be leant upon; soft with a touch like velvet, and yet as steady as a rock — a kind of beauty which wears long, and does not spoil even by growing old.

It was a state of affairs very agreeable to everybody in the place, except, perhaps, to Will, who was very jealous of his mother. Hugh and Islay when

they came home took it all for granted, in an open-hearted boyish way, and were no more afraid of anything Mrs. Ochterlony might do, than for their own existence. But Will was always there. He haunted the drawing-room, whoever might be in it at the moment; yet — though to Aunt Agatha's consciousness, the boy was never absent from the big Indian chair in the corner — he was at the same time always ready to pursue his curate to the very verge of that poor gentleman's knowledge, and give him all the excitement of a hairbreadth 'scape ten times in a morning. Nobody could tell when he learned his lessons, or what time he had for study — for there he was always, taking in everything, and making comments in his own mind, and now and then interposing in the conversation to Aunt Agatha's indignation. Mary would not see it, she said; Mary thought that all her boys did was right — which was, perhaps, to some extent true; and it was said in the neighbourhood, as was natural, that so many gentlemen did not come to the Cottage for nothing; that Mrs. Ochterlony was still a young woman; that she had devoted herself to the boys for a long time, and that if she were to marry again, nobody could have any right to object. Such reports spring up in the country so easily, either with or without foundation: and Wilfrid, who found out everything, heard them, and grew very watchful and jealous, and even doubtful of his mother. Should such an idea have entered into *her* head, the boy felt that he would despise her; and yet at the same time he was very fond of her and filled with unbounded jealousy. While all the time, Mary herself was very glad to see her friends, and, perhaps, was not entirely unconscious of