

MRS. CLIFFORD'S MARRIAGE

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Mrs. Clifford's Marriage by Anonymous

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MARRIAGE**

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MRS. CLIFFORD'S MARRIAGE.

PART I.

CHAPTER I.

THE LADIES' OPINION.

"You don't mean to say she's going to be married—not Mary! I don't believe a word of it. She was too fond of her poor husband who put such trust in her. No, no, child—don't tell such nonsense to me."

So said old Miss Harwood when the dreadful intelligence was first communicated to her. The two old sisters, who were both charitable old souls, and liked to think the best of everybody, were equally distressed about this piece of village scandal. "I don't say anything about her poor husband—he was a fool to trust so much to a woman of her age," said Miss Amelia; "but in my opinion Mary

Clifford has sense to know when she's well off." The very idea made the sisters angry: a woman with five thousand a-year, with five fine children, with the handsomest house and most perfect little establishment within twenty miles of Summerhayes; a widow, with nobody to cross or contradict her, with her own way and will to her heart's content—young enough to be still admired and paid attention to, and old enough to indulge in those female pleasures without any harm coming of it; to think of a woman in such exceptionally blessed circumstances stooping her head under the yoke, and yielding a second time to the subjection of marriage, was more than either of the Miss Harwoods could believe.

"But I believe it's quite true—indeed, I *know* it's quite true," said the curate's little wife. "Mr. Spencer heard it first from the Miss Summerhayes, who did not know what to think—their own brother, you know; and yet they couldn't forget that poor dear Mr. Clifford was their cousin; and then they are neither of them married themselves, poor dears, which makes them harder upon her."

"We have never been married," said Miss Amelia; "I don't see what difference that

makes. It is amusing to see the airs you little creatures give yourselves on the strength of being married. I suppose *you* think it's all right—it's a compliment to her first husband, eh? and shows she was happy with him?—that's what the men say when they take a second wife; that's how you would do I suppose, if"——

"Oh, Miss Amelia, don't be so cruel," cried the little wife. "I should die. Do you think I could ever endure to live without Julius? I don't understand what people's hearts are made of that can do such things: but then," added the little woman, wiping her bright eyes, "Mr. Clifford was not like my husband. He was very good, I daresay, and all that—but he wasn't ——. Well, I don't think he was a taking man. He used to sit such a long time after dinner. He used to —— it's very wicked to be unkind to the dead—but he wasn't the sort of a man a woman could break her heart for, you know."

"I should like to know who is," said Miss Amelia. "He left her everything, without making provision for one of the children. He gave her the entire power, like a fool, at her age. He did not deserve anything better;

but it appears to me that Mary Clifford has the sense to know when she's well off."

"Well, well!" said old Miss Harwood, "I couldn't have believed it, but now as you go on discussing, I daresay it'll turn out true. When a thing comes so far as to be discussed it's going to happen. I've always found it so. Well, well! love has gone out of fashion now-a-days. When I was a girl, things were different. We did not talk about it half so much, nor read novels. But we had the right feelings. I daresay she will just be as affectionate to Tom Summerhayes as she was to her poor dear husband. Oh, my dear, it's very sad—I think it's very sad—five fine children, and she can't be content with that. It'll turn out badly, dear, and that you'll see."

"He'll swindle her out of all her money," said Miss Amelia.

"Oh, don't say such dreadful things," cried the curate's little wife, getting up hastily. "I am sure I hope they'll be happy—that is, as happy as they *can* be," she added, with a touch of candid disapproval. "I must run away to baby now; the poor dear children—I must say I am sorry for them—to have another man brought in in their poor papa's

place; but oh, I must run away, else I shall be saying cruel things too."

The two Miss Harwoods discussed this interesting subject largely after Mrs. Spencer had gone. The Summerhayes people had been, on the whole, wonderfully merciful to Mrs. Clifford during her five years' solitary reign at Fontanel. She had been an affectionate wife—she was a good mother—she had worn the weeds of her widowhood seriously, and had not plunged into any indiscreet gaities when she took them off; while, at the same time, she had emerged sufficiently from her seclusion to restore Fontanel to its old position as one of the pleasantest houses in the county. What could woman do more! Tom Summerhayes was her husband's cousin; he had been brought up to the law, and naturally understood affairs in general better than she did. Everybody knew that he was an idle fellow. After old Mr. Summerhayes died, everybody quite expected that Tom would settle down in the old manor, and live an agreeable useless life, instead of toiling himself to death in hopes of one day being Lord Chancellor—a very unlikely chance at the best; and events came about exactly as everybody had predicted. At