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"So, my nephew is returned," said Dr. Beaufort, taking off his spectacles, and laying aside the letter he had been reading. "What will he do at home?" This remark was addressed to a stout, rosy, matronly looking woman of fifty, who was seated by the fire knitting, and who acted in the double capacity of companion and housekeeper to the reverend gentleman.

"Humph!" responded Mrs. Orams, without raising her eyes from her work. "Do? why, he will do as most 'young people' do in his circumstances; cut a dash as long as his money lasts, and when it is all gone depend upon his wealthy relations to pay his debts."

"He's an extravagant dog; but I can't think so harshly of poor Harry. No, no, Mary Orams; the half pay of a lieuten-tenant in the army is but a trifle, a mere trifle. I must allow him something yearly to keep up his place in society." This was said in a hesitating under tone, and with a timid glance at the housekeeper, whose countenance, now pale, now red, betrayed considerable marks of agitation.

"Oh, your reverence may do as you please with your money, but I am sure, if I were in your place, I would never deprive myself of my little comforts to encourage a young man in his idle and expensive habits. If his half-pay is not enough to support him, let him do as many better men have done before him, — join Don Pedro at Oporto."

"'Tis a hard alternative," said the doubting but compassionate doctor.

"Not at all, sir," replied the crafty Mrs. Orams. "He's
a fine young man; let him try his fortune in matrimony, and
look out for a rich wife."

"Nonsense," said the doctor, whilst a frown drew his
gray bushy eyebrows so closely together that they formed a
shaggy line across his wrinkled forehead. "The boy would
never be so absurd. In his circumstances 'twould be mad-

ness. Pshaw! he's too sensible to think of such a thing."

"But young people will think of such things," replied
Mrs. Orams, frowning in her turn; for well she knew the
aversion the doctor had to matrimony.

"And old people too," said the doctor, with a bitter

smile; "in which they show their want of wisdom."

"I hope, sir, you don't mean me by people. I am not an
old woman. It is my own fault that I am single. The foolish
respect I entertained for your reverence," she added, adroit-

ly applying her handkerchief to her eyes, "made me reject
many advantageous offers. But I thought it better to enjoy
the company of a clever man, and contribute to his domestic
comforts, than to be the mistress of a house of my own."

"You were a wise woman, Mary Orams," said the doc-

tor, greatly softened by this piece of flattery. "A married life
embraces many cares. We are free from them. Our rest is
unbroken by the squalling of children and nocturnal lec-
tures. You may bless God that you are what you are."

"Indeed, Dr. Beaufort," said Mrs. Mary, in a sulky
tone, "I never trouble the Almighty by blessing him for such
small mercies; and since we are upon the subject of mar-
riage, I think it right to inform you that I have received an
offer of marriage just now, and to convince you that I am
neither old, nor ugly, nor despised, I think I shall accept it."

"What do you mean, Mrs. Orams?" said the aston-

ished old bachelor, sinking back in his chair, and staring the
housekeeper full in the face.

"To marry."

"You are not in earnest?"

"Quite serious."

"A woman of your years, Mrs. Orams?"

"Pray, sir, don't mention my years."

"Oh, I forgot; but what in the world can induce you to

marry?"
"I wish to change my condition; that's all."
"Are you not comfortable here?"
"Why yes, tolerably comfortable; but one gets tired of the same thing forever. Besides I don't choose to be despised."
"Despised! Who despises you?"
"Your nieces, and their mother."
"Mrs. Harfor d and her daughters?"
"Yes. They are jealous of the good opinion your reverence entertains for your poor servant. There's not one of them will speak a civil word for me; and this fine Mr. Henry, you are so fond of, the last time he was at home, had the impudence to call me, a respectable woman, a toady, to my face. He might as well have called me a bad woman at once. I have been insulted and ill-treated by the whole family, and rather than be thought to stand in their way, which your reverence well knows is not the case," continued Mrs. Orams, casting a shrewd glance at the alarmed old man, "I will marry and leave you; and then you know, sir, I shall no longer be a servant, but have a house of my own."

"And who is to be your husband?"
"Only Mr. Archer, Squire Talbot's steward," said Mary, simpering, and looking down into her capacious lap. "Your reverence can make no objection to him. He is a regular church-goer, and never falls asleep in the midst of your reverence's sermons, as most of the other parishioners do. 'Tis true he is somewhat advanced in years; but who can attend to an old man's comforts as well as his wife? What hireling can take such an interest in his welfare, and all his domestic concerns? Gray hairs are honorable as Solomon says; and he has plenty of money withal."

Dr. Beaufort groaned aloud during Mary's eloquent harangue on the advantages to be derived from the Archer connexion, which he suddenly cut short by exclaiming, in mournful tones, "And what am I to do when you are gone, Mrs. Orams?" for he perceived with no small alarm, that the affair was likely to prove of a more serious nature than he had at first imagined.

"Do, sir! Oh, sir, there's plenty to be had in my place."
"Ah, Mrs. Orams! for the last twenty years I have
depended solely on you for my little comforts" —

"La, sir, surely 'tis not more than ten?"

"Twenty, Mrs. Orams. Twenty long years you have been the mistress of this house. What can you desire more? Nothing has been withheld from you. Your salary is ample; but if you think it less than your services merit, I will make an addition of ten pounds per annum. I will do anything, make any sacrifice, however painful to my feelings, rather than part with you." Mrs. Orams leaned her head upon her hand, and affected an air of deep commiseration. "I see the idea of leaving me distresses you, Mary."

"True, sir," whined forth Mrs. Orams; "but I cannot loose such an excellent opportunity of bettering my condition."

"But who will cook for me?" said the doctor, in a tone of despair.

"Money will procure good cooks."

"And nurse me when I have the gout?"

"Money will buy attendance."

"It is but a joke," cried the old bachelor, brightening up. "The thing is impossible. You cannot have the heart to leave me."

"Bless me, Dr. Beaufort," said Mary, bustling from her seat; "I am tired of leading a lonely life. Mr. Archer has offered me a comfortable home, and as I see no prospect of a better, to-morrow, if you please, we will settle our accounts." She sailed out of the room, and the old man sunk back in his easy chair, and fell into a profound reverie.

For twenty years Mrs. Orams had humoured the doctor, and treated him as a spoiled child, attended to all his whims, and pampered his appetite in the hope of inducing him to pay her disinterested services by making her his wife. But if Mrs. Orams was ambitious, the parson was proud; he saw through her little manoeuvres, and secretly laughed at them. The idea of making such a woman as Mary Orams his wife, was too ridiculous; and not wholly dead to natural affection, the indolent divine looked upon his widowed sister, her son, and her pretty, unpretending daughters, as his future heirs. But what weak mind can long
struggle against the force of habit? Mrs. Orams, step by step, insinuated herself into her master's favour, and made herself so subservient to his comforts that he felt wretched without her. Year after year she had threatened to leave him in the expectation of drawing him into making her an offer of his hand. Matrimony was the parson's aversion, and year after year he increased her salary, to induce her to remain in his service. This only stimulated her avarice to enlarge its sphere of action. He was rich, and old, and infirm, and why might she not as well enjoy the whole of his property as a part; and she lost no opportunity of weakening the hold which the distressed Harfords had upon his heart. She hated them, for they were his natural heirs; were pretty and genteel, and young, and disdained to flatter her, in order to get their uncle's property. The return of Lieutenant Harford frightened her. He was, in spite of all her lies and mischief making, a great favourite with his uncle. The frequency of his visits might in time diminish her power, and render her company less indispensable. Mary was resolved to make one last desperate effort on the heart of her obdurate master, and in case of failure abandon his house and services for ever.

Two hours had elapsed since she had quitted the room, but the doctor remained in the same attitude. His head thrown back, and his hands tightly folded over his portly stomach. At length with a desperate effort he put forth his hand, and rung the bell. The footman answered the summons.

"Any thing wanted, sir?"
"John, send up Mrs. Orams."

A few minutes elapsed, the doctor thought them hours, the handle of the door slowly turned, and the comely person of Mrs. Orams projected itself into the room, her countenance flushed to a fiery red by leaning over the kitchen fire.

"Dinner will be ready, sir, in half an hour. If I leave the kitchen just now, that careless Irish hussy, Sally, will be sure to burn the meat."
"Let it burn," said the doctor, with an air of ludicrous
solemnity. “I have no appetite just now.”

“La, sir, I hope your reverence is not ill?”

“Not ill, Mrs. Orams, but only a little queerish. Sit down, I have something to say to you.” Mrs. Orams took a seat. The doctor drew close up to her, and screwing his courage to the pinch, said, in a hurried voice, “You leave me to-morrow?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And you wish to be married.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Have you any objection to marry me?”

“Oh, la, sir, not in the least,” replied Mrs. Orams, courteysing to the very ground.

“Then I will marry you myself, Mary; for, to tell the plain truth, I cannot live without you. Now go and send up the dinner.”

Mrs. Orams courtesied still lower, and with eyes sparkling with triumph left the room, in obedience to her future lord’s commands, without uttering a single word. Avarice, revenge, and pride were alike gratified.

The sequel is curious. After Mary Orams had attained the long-coveted dignity of Mrs. Dr. Beaufort, she attended less to the doctor’s gustativeness, and more to her own; she ate more, and cooked less; the consequence was, that fat and indolence increased so rapidly, that before Don Pedro entered Lisbon, the newly promoted Mrs. Dr. Beaufort expired one morning of obesity, in her easy chair, leaving the distressed doctor a widower in the first year of his nuptials. He has lately followed his spouse to the tomb, and, after all, the poor Harfords not only came in for all their uncle’s property, but for his wife’s savings, a destination certainly little anticipated by herself or any of the young branches of the family.

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Lady’s Magazine and Museum improved ser. and enlarged 9 (1836): 241-43. As Chapter II, “Of all Fools, Old Fools are the Worst,” in “Matrimonial Speculations,” Literary Garland ns 3 (1845); under original title in Flowers of Loveliness for 1852 (1851).

Susanna Moodie