

The Lady in Muslin.

A philosophical mind seeks knowledge everywhere, and what knowledge is preferable to that of human nature? "Know thyself!" said the Delphic oracle.

"Now, the study of human nature," as I once remarked to Dick, "in the streets, in a ball-room, or at the opera, is perhaps not so stern or decorous as among the folios of the British Museum, but it is none the less the study of human nature. A well-disciplined mind peruses philosophical speculation everywhere and anywhere."

To which Dick replied—

"Of course it does. And it's much pleasanter to study here in this fashion than in those musty old libraries."

II.

DICK'S JUVENILE CORRESPONDENT.

The long vacation came at length, and as London grew emptier and emptier, and hotter and hotter, I began to shut up my books, nod over my writing, and think yearningly of country air and fishing rods, or, in my more energetic moods, of excursion trains and steam-packets, etc.

The last summer Gaunt and I had taken ourselves to St. Petersburg, and had found each other such good company and so conveniently paired—I being able to make people understand our various wants, and he to pay for them—that on our return we had engaged each other to repeat the attempt the following summer, and in our tour take in the capitals of Norway and Sweden.

During the last two or three weeks, however, Dick had been visibly less eager in planning our voyage; once or twice he had even vaguely hinted that perhaps he would not be able to go—still, he never told me out plainly that he wished to give up the journey, neither did he mention having formed any other plan for spending the long vacation. I was rather annoyed, therefore, to receive one morning a hurried scrawl from him to say that he was obliged to give up his cruise north, as business was taking him off that same day to Norfolk. He was extremely sorry, he added, and hoped I should find some more agreeable manner of passing the vacation.

Dick was a very good-hearted fellow, and not generally careless of others' convenience; and it was quite inconsistent with his character to thus coolly break his engagement and leave me to shift for myself.

"Such is the world!" I exclaimed to myself with a conremptuous smile, as I sat that melting morning over my eggs and coffee; "all miserable selfishness. His business indeed! and I should like to know what am I to do with myself."

Meteorological extremes are trying even to the most philosophically disposed. (I wonder if the philosopher would have stood absorbed in thought during twenty-four hours, with the temperature 10° below zero, or under the noonday sun of tropical India?) and when the affliction of a small unairy London apartment on a hot August morning is added to the disappointment of an agreeable journey gratis, a tired mind and a light purse feel considerably aggrieved. Mine did. I crumpled up Dick's note and tossed it into the grate, calling it "heartless" and himself "hollow," and for the future I vowed to forswear friendship.

After breakfast I set myself to the irritating task of arranging my pecuniary affairs.

Should I have to accept Brown's invitation to pass a fortnight with him in the Isle of Wight, the only one of the numerous invitations that, counting on my expedition north, I had not refused? or could I manage a continental trip on my own account? I had been lavish of expenditure lately, not expecting to have to provide for my holiday; so I thought drearily of Brown and the Isle of Wight, or, still more drearily, of a visit home to that very retired village in the fens where my infant eyes first saw the light.

Such meditation did not tend to relieve my angry feelings towards Dick, nor to restore that composure of mind which Epictetus so strongly recommends concerning matters over which we have no control; indeed, so irritating was the

combined effects of that letter and the high temperature, that, as I sat pondering over a heavy article I was forced to finish that morning for the "Magazine," and for which I had to refer to that respectable philosopher, instead of reading admiringly his remarks, I could not help distorting my features and calling him an "old fool!"

Alas! for the duplicity of man's nature! From his youth upwards had I known Richard Gaunt believed him to be the sincerest of mortals—the most open-hearted of friends!

That evening, having nothing particular to do, after the posting of a letter to Brown, accepting his invitation, I took a hansom and drove down to Dick's lodgings to fetch some books that I had left there. Perhaps I had also just a faint intention of gathering from Mrs. Briggs any information she might have as to the cause of Mr. Gaunt's sudden departure. Of course I had no idea of prying into his affairs by underhand means. I never dreamt of questioning Mrs. Briggs. Still, if she should drop any hint that to my wise head would be sufficient, why, there would be no harm—none whatever.

The blinds were all drawn and the windows of Dick's room were all closed. "He's off, at any rate," I muttered as I jumped from the cab and ran up the steps.

My knock was quickly answered by some faint efforts within, at turning a key or jingling a chain, and, after a moment or two the door was pushed slowly open, and, to my surprise, a little girl in a white muslin frock and pink sash danced through the aperture and caught hold of me. I was taken a little aback, particularly when the small young lady clasped her hands, exclaiming "Oh!" in a frightened tone, and then added, "I thought it was godpapa Dick."

I was not used to children, and I didn't quite know what to say or do. To take off my hat to that small white frock and pink sash would have been ridiculous; but to stoop down and caress the dignified little head that turned up its abashed face as blushing as any girl of eighteen, would have been impertinent. "No," I said, after a moment's hesitation, "I am not godpapa Dick, Who may he be? Is it Mr. Gaunt?"

The child turned immediately into the house. "Yes," she said, in a quiet tone; "but don't ask me questions, please."

I followed her into the hall, and was about to ascend the stairs when she turned, and, barring the way with her little flounced-out figure, said gravely, "I don't think you had better come up stairs. I don't think godpapa Gaunt wants me to see anyone."

I could not help smiling at the very simple manner in which Dick's evident confidante was exposing his secrets.

"Don't you," I answered, laughing; "and do you think I should see you better upstairs than here at the present moment?"

What the young lady would have replied was lost to me, for at that moment Mrs. Briggs came panting up from the domains below.

"La, miss! run up stairs now, do! there's a dear," she exclaimed, soothingly. "It's Mr. Gaunt's niece, sir," she added, turning to me. "Her and his sister came quite unexpected-like this morning."

"Oh, indeed!" I answered, looking towards the child, who stood perched on the stairs, listening with a strange earnestness to what Mrs. Briggs said.

"And so you are Dick's little niece," I added, smiling and remembering that Mr. Gaunt had neither brother, sister, or cousin within the sixth degree.

The little girl hung her head and replied by an inquiring look from her dark eyes.

"Mr. Gaunt's gone out with her sister, sir. He told me to say he was out to everybody, and not to let any gent into his room on account of Miss being there," Mrs. B. said, looking rather puzzled as she saw me begin to mount the stairs.

"But for me, Mrs. Briggs," I said, gently; "I am different, you know. I think I may go up."

"Well, sir, I know you're Mr. Gaunt's perticklerest friend; but them's my orders: p'raps you'll mention to Mr. Gaunt as I told you."

"Oh, yes! all right," I replied; "you won't be afraid of my sitting in the room with you, will you?" I asked in my kindest, most winning tones of the child.

"I shouldn't be afraid of you," she replied, gravely; "but you mustn't talk to me, because I promised godpapa not to answer anyone's questions."

"Very good: I will be most discreetly silent," was my answer; and with that understanding the little flounced figure bounded up stairs leaving me the path clear.

"Dick's niece!" thought I, as I threw myself into his arm-chair and gazed at the face, bending studiously over a number of "Punch," but looking up every now and then to cast a quick, sly glance at me.

Large, dark, creole eyes—unchildlike in the sadness of their expression—small, regular features, and curls of that blue-blackness that speaks of foreign lands.

Dick's niece! Dick's god-daughter!

There are strange things in this world—inexplicable, moral and physical phenomena; and perhaps the uncleship of Mr. Gaunt to this little nine-year-old lady was one of them. At any rate, as I sat there pondering over it, I mentally muttered the words with which I commenced this episode.

Richard Gaunt, the man who in his every word, every act, every sentiment, seemed to breathe openness and truth, whose very roughness and simplicity seemed to make a romantic mystery impossible!—to find him thus suddenly surrounded in inexplicable relationships, shook my faith in the whole human race.

I waited for half an hour, keeping most sacredly my agreement with my fair little friend; but my reflections grew gloomy, and I began to grow impatient at Gaunt's absence, when suddenly the child exclaimed, gravely—

"Why don't you smoke a cigar? We never used to mind smoke."

"We?" thought I, wondering if the young lady used the first person plural in a literal sense, or with a child's irreverence for grammar.

"Don't you? Why, what a sensible mamma you must have got, to have taught you that," I replied, proceeding to act upon her suggestion.

"Mamma didn't teach me," she answered simply. "Godpapa Dick is a long time coming, isn't he?" she added, sighing heavily; and pushing back her tiny hand through her curls, she leant her head upon it, and looked as sad and sentimental as any young woman far advanced in her teens.

"You're fond of your uncle, arn't you?" I said, rather amused; and she answered, "Yes, very," with an energy which shot sudden fire into her large eyes.

"Do you often see him?" I asked gently, my curiosity getting the better of my promise.

"Not very. Since I came here—I mean to England—I've seen him oftener; but before, I don't remember very well. It seems a long time ago, you see—a very long time. It was not then—no," she added dreamily. "I think I used to see mamma oftenest."

"And your papa, usen't you to see him?" I asked cautiously.

"No," answered the child, "never. I never saw him; I used to pray for him; I always used, because mamma told me to. She used to say, 'Cecile, if you don't pray God to bless your papa, God won't love you, or bless you.' So of course I did."

"Quite right," I said, approvingly. "And where is your mamma now; is she out with Mr. Gaunt?"

Cecile raised her head, and glanced up at me, the dreamy look quite disappearing from her eyes; and clasping her small creamy-looking hands together on her lap: "Don't ask questions, please," she said, in her childish, half-frightened manner. "You promised you wouldn't ask questions."

(To be continued.)