

The Lady in Muslin.

I.

IN WHICH RICHARD GAUNT DECLARES HIMSELF UNROMANTIC.

We were sitting comfortably in Dick's room, smoking our after-dinner cigars, and enjoying as much of fresh early summer air as is permitted to make its way through the open windows of London "first floors," talking the while in that easy fashion which is the result of intimacy, philosophical quietude of mind, a good dinner, and an excellent cigar.

If I recollect rightly, the leading subject of our conversation—though of course relieved by pleasant digressions, suggested by our employment—was, the spirit of the age.

"Practical, no doubt," I replied to a lengthy remark of Gaunt's on the unpoetical, unromantic leaning of the civilization of the nineteenth century. "Yet, after all, one can't be surprised at it. The time preceding the realization of desire is the time of imagination—of high-coloured expectations. The realization must needs be practical. I regard the present pitch of civilization as the realism necessarily resulting from the idealism of the chivalric ages. Perhaps to make another step we shall have to go through another poetic or ideal period higher in degree than the last, and so on."

Dick smoked on. He was not imaginatively inclined, so I was neither surprised nor discouraged at the composed silence with which he received an idea that, I flatter myself, *was* a little novel.

"You don't know much of Tennyson, Gaunt, do you?" I said, putting down my cigar, and taking a lately published volume of the poet from my pocket.

"No; can't understand him," was Dick's curt reply. "Never could understand any of your mysticisms. At college I always made a horrid hash of metaphysics, and all that kind of stuff."

"Yes," I replied, gently. I remembered my excellent friend had made a considerable hash of not only all such "stuff," but other practical kinds of knowledge, too, without, however, falling much in his own estimation.

"The only poet I ever read is Byron, and I skip him where he grows too—you know—up in the clouds," continued Dick, grinning pleasantly, and letting the fragrant smoke lazily get out of his mouth as it could. "As you said before, I belong to the age, and as a respectable inhabitant of the world in the nineteenth century, I concern myself with only the practical and the get-at-able; I never did a romantic or sentimental thing in my life."

I could quite believe it. As I looked in my friend's brown, rather stolid, countenance, I had not the least doubt of it.

He was a strongly-built, tall, powerful-looking fellow, with a large head, covered by thick, curly, brown hair, reddy-brown whiskers and moustaches hiding at least a third part of a face that was certainly not intellectual, either in outline or expression; but, then, there was something so hearty and honest in the dark full eyes, that, in looking in Richard Gaunt's face, the last thing you troubled yourself about was his intellect.

I am—well—I won't call myself an intellectual person; all I say is, that I am an admirer, and, I believe, understander, of Tennyson. I have a fondness for German literature, besides which I dabble in reviews and magazines; and I flatter myself the satire and sharp-edged wit which you, my dear reader, appreciate so well, are not the only weapons I could bring to defend myself, were my right to the title of a "literary man" disputed.

I only make this allusion to myself to throw a stronger light on the virtues of Mr. Gaunt. A man, I say, of my stamp, in looking at Richard's face, forgot to notice his want of intellect; and in those pleasant, kind eyes of his found something which made him forget his favourite synonym for a human being, "mind," and feel glad to call their possessor "friend."

We were silent after that candid declaration of Dick's, I pursuing a train of ideas that our conversation had suggested, Gaunt lazily employed in sipping his wine, puffing out his smoke, and watching his opposite neighbour, a young lady of artistic talents, who, seated at her piano, was giving us, or I suppose him, the benefit of some dreadfully high pitched songs, gratis.

"She didn't sing badly last night at Sadler's Wells," remarked Gaunt, breaking in on my reflections. "I think I shall go with Philipps, and sup with her next Friday. She's not bad-looking either, is she, Mark?"

"Not at all," I answered, dryly; "and I've no doubt, in a theatre, where full scope is given to her rather powerful voice, she is a charming singer; as a neighbour, I confess I should find her inconvenient."

Dick grinned again, in a little quizzical way, that was his nearest approach to the satiric.

"I understand you, my boy. Well, you know, it's one of the peculiarities of the age of 'Realism.'"

What "it" meant, I didn't enquire. I am a stern moralist, but I don't like discussing such cases of "it" with my friend Gaunt.

I took another glass of claret, and lighted another weed; Dick did the same, and drew his chair a little nearer the open window, for which he was evidently rewarded by some sign over the way, for he certainly smiled, and suddenly waved his cigar in a manner that was otherwise both objectless and absurd.

I made no remark. "*Chacun à son goût*" is my motto, with a mental shrug of the shoulder; but I drew back into the shade of the window curtain, and began sketching an article I meant for the next month's London *Society*, which should contain all the pith of the sentiments my friend's conduct awoke in me, regarding not only himself, but society in general.

I was disturbed by the postman's knock.

Mrs. Briggs herself—Dick was a favourite of hers—brought up the letters, and as my worthy friend happened at the moment to have his head stretched out of the window and his eyes quite engrossed by "over the way," she gave them into my hand, with a few pleasant remarks on my own healthful looks, etc.

Mrs. B. knew I was Gaunt's dear friend, so, like a skilful diplomatist, she cultivated my acquaintance with smiles and care, although, as I once overheard her say to some one who was making enquiries concerning me, she didn't know as if I was a "raal gent, for I wore boots as had been mended, only three shirts a week, and was a noospaper writer."

A man who takes letters in his hand, naturally examines them, and without any very prying curiosity I turned over the two envelopes and examined the writing and postmarks.

Both were from Blackheath, and to my surprise, instead of the manly handwriting of Dick's usual correspondents, one bore most unmistakably the direction of a lady's hand, and the other, to my still greater astonishment, the unsteady round characters of a child's!

Now, I knew Richard Gaunt's history and genealogy pretty well, and was thoroughly aware that he had neither sister, aunt nor cousin of any degree, in the feminine gender. The Gaunts were a singularly unprolific race, consisting most unbrokenly of a line of only sons. Indeed, I doubt if such a person as a *Miss* Gaunt had ever existed, in their family at least.

I turned over the letters meditatively, then I looked at my friend, who was in the act of pressing the tips of his fingers to his moustache in a very unmistakable fashion. "Richard," I exclaimed, sternly, a rather unkind idea concerning Mr. Gaunt's character suddenly dashing through my mind.

Dick popped his head back as if electrified.

"What the deuce is up?" he exclaimed, sharply. "Can't you let a fellow alone, Mark, to do what he chooses?"

"Here are two letters," I answered, serenely.

"Well! and what of that? Do you think that the arrival of a letter is such a rare and important

event that you must disturb a man just—just—ah!—she's gone!" added Dick, ruefully, looking again towards over the way. "Confound you, Mark!"

I was quite accustomed to compliments of this kind from my bosom friend, and I received his remarks with a philosophical silence, merely throwing him the letters.

Dick took them, crossly, but no sooner did he glance at the lady's handwriting than his eye lighted up with sudden interest. He hastily broke the seal, and turned eagerly to catch the few gleams of daylight that remained.

I felt puzzled. I had no idea that there was any secret in Dick Gaunt's life that was hidden from me. He was not a man for mysteries, and all his romances—if, indeed, his love-making could be termed as such—was most frankly exposed to the gaze of all who chose to look.

I roused myself from the kind of affectionate carelessness with which I generally regarded Dick's doings, and watched him curiously.

The first letter read, he carefully re-folded it, and then took up the other, which he examined with a smiling wonder, as if pleased, yet considerably puzzled, by it. He stroked and curled his moustache excitedly, screwed up his eyes, turned about the paper, and evidently did his best to possess himself of its contents. I could not help thinking that Dick's young correspondent must have some strong hold on his affections to induce him to give himself such evident exertion to make him or her out.

I looked very seriously at my friend, as, apparently despairing of success, he merely glanced at the fourth page, and then folding up the little blotty letter, slipped it with the other into his pocket. I waited a moment or two expecting some remark, but Dick neither returned my look nor spoke a word.

"I had no idea you had juvenile correspondents, Richard," I said, and in a pleasant confidence-inviting tone. With a cool, daring opponent like myself, I knew that he was a bad fencer, so I was quite prepared to see him start a little, look uncomfortable, and exclaim: "Eh!—oh! didn't you?" and then awkwardly attempt to act the natural and unembarrassed, by striking fuses and applying them to the wrong end of his cigar.

"I thought you had no female relations, Dick," I continued; "no bothering womankind, you once told me."

"But I didn't tell you I had no female friends, I suppose," Dick answered, gruffly.

"*Friends!* Oh, no, certainly. Don't you choose your friends rather young, though?"

Gaunt did not look up or reply, but even in the growing twilight I saw the phenomenon of Mr. Richard Gaunt *blushing*, whether with conscious guilt, shame or anger I knew not.

We smoked silently for at least half an hour after that, I feeling not exactly at my ease, Gaunt with a grimness that was his imitation of sulkiness.

Actually sulky he was not, for he answered civilly enough any questions I put to him, passing me the tobacco canister with his usual alacrity directly he saw that my pipe was empty, and suggesting brandy and water, as he always did, as soon as a certain time had elapsed from our finishing our claret; but he was not conversationally inclined; he smoked lazily and almost musingly; and I particularly remarked that it was in vain, our opposite neighbour seated herself at the open window in the full light of the lamp in her most becoming attitude. There sat Dick in his arm-chair, silent and grave, apparently quite oblivious of ever having felt the slightest interest in over the way, at any rate, quite unconscious of her presence.

How long this unsocial state of affairs might have continued, and whether my delicate silence might at length have melted Gaunt's grimness into friendly confidence, I cannot say, for we were suddenly disturbed by noisy boots and noisy voices on the stairs, and in came Philips, Brown and Smith, all smoking and all jovial, from a very late dinner, to make us join their expedition to—well—no matter where.

(To be continued.)