

The Lady in Muslin.

"Where do you think I have been?" Margaret said, as, throwing aside her bonnet, she came and sat down opposite me by the fire.

"Perhaps to the cottage again," I answered quietly.

"A very good guess—'tis even so," she replied, with a peculiar kind of frankness—more its imitation, I fancied, than the genuine article, however. "I dare say," she continued in the same tone, "that my conduct puzzled you last night; this morning shall I be able to explain it without puzzling you more?"

"Probably not," I answered serenely. "Miss Margaret Owenson delights in mysteries, I know." "And suppose that mystery and manœuvring are forced on Miss Margaret Owenson—that no choice is left her?"

"Mystery and manœuvring for what?"

Instead of answering my question, Margaret Owenson gave me a quick look, as much as to say, "You are quite mistaken if you think to surprise me," then, leaning back in a very becoming attitude, she played coquettishly with her chain.

"Suppose," she said, suddenly looking up with the same coquettish air, "suppose all the mystery and manœuvring were smoke—the prank of a wild girl who has too much freedom and boldness, and enough money at her command to gratify her every whim.

"Suppose," I answered in my turn, "that I have my opinion in the matter, and wear such good spectacles that no one can throw dust in my eyes?"

"In that case Margaret Owenson bows to Mark Owen," she replied, inclining her head, but with a quick colour mounting in her cheeks.

We were both silent for some moments, both evidently pursuing our own peculiar train of thought, till, tiring of the occupation, and fancying Margaret's silence was a delicate hint, that our "quiet talk" was over, I rose and put out my hand.

"Don't be in such a hurry," she exclaimed, in an utterly different tone. "I have not asked you to pay me this early visit to act a comedy." "Mr. Owen," she added, flushing, but speaking frankly, "I think you are one of those men whom it is more easy for women of my stamp to turn into friends—true, earnest friends—than lovers."

I was a little taken aback by this very candid address, and for once in my life I felt the blood rush hotly to my face, and even tingle my finger-ends. I remembered a dream or two I had had of that beautiful face before me, some very ugly feelings I had experienced towards Gaunt, when they retired to that horrid conservatory, leaving me to my solitary cigar; and I forgot in that moment all my philosophical reasoning, and the absurdity of love and love-making, also all my calm denunciations of unfeminine boldness and feminine coquetry. Words trembled on my lips—that—well now I am glad I did not utter them. In the folly of that moment I believe I took that fair, pretty hand in mine, for it certainly clasped mine, when on the blood retreating to its proper place, I resumed my usual colour and reasonable tone of mind; and I remember I felt embarrassed what to do with it, as I tried to reply in a quiet, proper manner—

"Perhaps you are right."

"If I did not feel sure of it," Margaret answered gravely, "I should not dare ask what I am about to do."

Some very insane jealousy was roused by her first words and the tone in which she spoke them. I said, sarcastically—

"You would not of Gaunt, for instance?"

Margaret looked up at me with a pained, surprised glance, and flushed crimson.

"No," she said, "certainly not—least of all him. Can you not see—have you not perceived?" she continued, after a slight pause, and in an anxious tone.

"Only too much," I answered, still sarcastically.

Miss Owenson shook her head.

"If you wish to go," she said, coldly, "I will not detain you."

I took up my hat.

"I may as well say good-bye now," I said; "probably I shall return to London at once. My friend is sufficiently well to be able to dispense with my assistance, and he, no doubt, will find amusement enough to make my departure rather acceptable than to be regretted."

Margaret Owenson regarded me for a moment with a smile so intensely quizzical, that, angry as I was, I could not help feeling I was making a great fool of myself.

"You really are most provoking," I muttered.

"And you most unreasonable," she answered. "Sit down and listen quietly to what I have to say, then go to London if you choose, and be as sulky and disagreeable to poor Mr. Gaunt as your manly dignity shall think proper."

She half pushed me back in the arm-chair, and then, with the freedom that was at times as repulsive as at others it was winning and attractive, she drew a light chair beside me, and leaning carelessly on the arm of mine, she laid her fingers lightly on my hand.

"Answer me frankly. Have you told Mr. Gaunt anything of your seeing me in the cottage yesterday afternoon, or of my begging your silence last night?"

"Nothing. I keep honourably even unworded engagements, Miss Owenson."

"I do not doubt it. One other question. Are you in the secret of Cecile's relationship to Mr. Gaunt?"

I started. "Secret?" I exclaimed.

"Let us be frank for once," she resumed, in a tired voice. "I see as plainly as you do that there is a secret. Perhaps I may know more of it than you do—perhaps even more than Richard Gaunt himself. Answer me frankly. Are you in his confidence?"

"Such a question—" I began, hesitating.

"Is very simple and easy to answer," she interrupted; merely a Yes or No. I only ask a monosyllable of you."

The eagerness with which she spoke flashed in her eyes, and witnessed to the truth of her words that she was acting no comedy.

"Of what consequence can it be?" I exclaimed.

"That I alone know," she answered, still earnestly. "Yes or no?"

"Well, then, No. I know nothing of this secret, if secret there is."

"And yet you are his most intimate friend! He has told me himself that you were as brothers together," Miss Owenson said, and as she spoke, she rose from her chair and stood before me in an unusually excited manner.

"All this," she continued, "confirms me in my opinion. Will you confer a great favour on me—one that aids the wronged at least to defend themselves? I only ask you to be silent on all that has passed between us, both concerning the cottage last night and our present interview."

I hesitated. "In binding myself to that I know not what wrong I may be doing Gaunt," I said. "Events may so occur that these very trivial circumstances may assume some importance."

"I ask you as a favour," she said, throwing herself again in her seat in the most pleading manner; "or, if you will not promise me definitely, only grant me this, that before you tell him you will let me know."

"The very importance you attach to such trifles makes me more unwilling to promise," I said. "Only last night your conduct about the portrait made him anxious to penetrate the mystery with which you surround yourself. How do I know but that these circumstances might assist him materially in so doing; and if that is the case, am I acting fairly, or even honourably, to my friend?"

Miss Owenson followed with earnestness every word as I uttered it.

"And he is anxious, then, to penetrate the mystery? And it was my conduct concerning the portrait that aroused his suspicions," she exclaimed eagerly.

"I do not undertake to answer for Gaunt," I replied.

Margaret looked at me earnestly, yet half doubtfully.

"Well, well; I do not wish to cross-examine either you or him; all I beg of you is to grant my request. It seems to me not a very difficult one to grant, in spite of your conscience. I ask you merely to let me know when you communicate these stories to your friend, and to delay it as long as possible. I am a stranger to you," she added, "and I know the manner in which I have made and carried on our short acquaintance cannot entitle me to your highest opinion. Still, when I give you my word of honour that my object in coming here, and acting as I do, is to shield the wronged and the innocent, you may take it as that of a lady of no mean birth. All I want," she added, passionately, "is to defend the rights of natural justice."

I looked at her, extremely puzzled; there was no acting in her manner—no assumed emotion in the anger that illumined her whole countenance; she continued in a softer tone: "Were I to tell you the story I could tell, I mistake you greatly, Mr. Owen, if you would not be the first to aid the wronged. Richard Gaunt himself—she paused, rose again to her feet, and then walked impatiently away. When she came back, there were large tears filling her beautiful eyes. "Can you not promise me this?" she said in a low, tremulous voice.

What man ever stood firm before a beautiful woman's tears?

I took the hand she had laid on mine, and saying, "You may trust me—I cannot refuse you, Margaret," I bent down and kissed it earnestly. It was the first time I had ever done such a foolish thing; and I rushed away disgusted with my own folly and rashness.

(To be continued.)

THE ARCHIVES OF CANADA.

WHAT A FOREIGNER THINKS OF THEM.

At the meeting of the American Historical Association, held at Washington, D.C., the president of the Association, Dr. W. F. Poole, of Chicago, delivered a most interesting address at the opening session on the evening of the 26th of December in regard to Canadian Archives, which we extract from the address. Dr. Poole said: On the second topic which I proposed to consider, namely: The sources and facilities for the study of Northwestern History—I will first call your attention to the invaluable collection of original documents in the Canadian Archives at Ottawa, Canada, under the care of our associate, Mr. Brymner, whom we have with us, and who later in our session will speak to us concerning this collection.

A large portion of these documents relate to the early History of the Northwest, then a part of Canada. Some of them have been used by Mr. Parkman; but as a collection, it is but little known to writers on Western History. It covers the period from the early settlement of Canada to recent dates, and is especially rich in documents of the last century relating to the West, in reference to which our national and state archives are very weak. The intelligence with which these documents have been collected, arranged and catalogued in print is most creditable to the Canadian Government and to its accomplished archivist. Mr. Brymner has printed nine annual reports, comprising up to the report of 1887, nearly 2,000 pages, and in his report for 1888, nearly ready, about 600 pages. The Bouquet Papers, in 30 volumes, and the Haldimand Papers, in 232 volumes, are among the most interesting in the collection. Colonel Henry Bouquet was the ablest and most brilliant British commander in the French and Indian war, and the hero of the Battle of Busby Run. His life has never been written, and here is the material for the work. Sir Frederick Haldimand came to America as lieutenant-colonel in 1757; was in Amherst's army at the