

The Lady in Muslin.

"You're sure, Gaunt, you've all you want within reach?" I said, coming back to his side with affectionate solicitude.

"Quite sure," he said, indifferently enough, and raising his eye-glass to survey my person, with perhaps just a touch of jealousy. "You're determined to do the thing in style," he added; "good luck."

"Good-bye," I replied with dignity.

I went along at a quick pace, the parcel under my arm, and soon arrived at the entrance of the cottage. As usual at that hour, all the blinds and awnings were closely drawn, and not a sound from living thing broke the stillness reigning around.

With rather a hesitating hand I gave a feeble ring, which received no answer; so, after patiently broiling in the sunshine for about five minutes, I rang again; another five minutes of patient suffering, then a rather more vigorous pull at the bell. Still no answer, till my patience exhausted, and my courage revived, I gave a tug which sent a good peal through the house.

This summons was answered by the Italian servant, who, evidently aroused from sleep, did not greet my appearance more civilly than usual. On presenting my card, and requesting to see his mistress on business, he gave me a sleepy, wary smile, and ushering me into a large well-shaded apartment, carefully closed the door on me.

I stayed there long enough to begin to feel a little nervous as to what I should say when in the presence of that mysterious lady, and how I should say it, and to listen eagerly to the closing and opening of doors, and the movement of feet along the uncarpeted floors, when the Indian returned, and with a lower bow than ordinary, requested me to follow him to his mistress's room.

He led me quite across the building to the room from which our interesting neighbour gave us nightly the pleasure of listening to her magnificent voice, and throwing open the door, admitted me into that mystic apartment. It was so closely shaded by Venetian blinds, that coming as I did from the glare of noon, it seemed like passing from day to night; the temperature was agreeably cool, and the sweet scent of flowers came not overpoweringly from the conservatory, which stood with its doors thrown open on one side of the room. The furniture was all of the lightest, airiest description; and the luxury of coolness seemed the only luxury admitted there, with the exception of a handsome rosewood piano, and a kind of sofa settee, from whose soft and abundant cushions my lady had evidently only lately risen, probably roused by myself from her usual midday slumbers.

I had time just to note all this, and to seat myself with studied ease on one of the chairs, when I heard a slight swishing in the adjoining room, and the door communicating opening slowly, in came the lady of the cottage—and—was it the lady at the railway station? The same filmy, cloudy style of dress, she had certainly; but then in summer most women affect that; she had also the same careless attitude and bearing; but then that profusion of blonde hair, worn drawn back from a brow that was particularly smooth and beautiful, and collected in the net at the back, gave a youthfulness to the face that was altogether wanting, and strikingly so, in that of my railway acquaintance. There was certainly a something which recalled her vividly; but then, curiously enough, in comparing the remembrance to the reality, the very peculiarities recalling her seemed to deny her identity. The expression resembled, but it certainly was not the same; the cast of the features, the complexion, resembled, yet were different, and I could no more have sworn to the lady at the railway station being identical with the lady at the cottage, than I could have sworn to the identity of the man in the moon.

I was so utterly bewildered with this strange resemblance, and non-resemblance, that as I stood bowing before her I almost forgot my errand, and in my curiosity lost sight of my embarrassment.

She stood before me in the shady light of the

apartment, calmly leaning one hand on the table, and waiting for me to speak, with the dignity of a queen giving an audience.

"I trust you will pardon my intrusion," I began politely; "I come to explain and apologize for a most unfortunate mistake on my part." As I spoke I pointed to the packet of books and unopened envelope, which I had laid on the table.

"Ah!" she exclaimed quickly, and snatching up the letter, she read hurriedly the address, flushing deeply, I don't know whether through anger or any other emotion.

"My name being so similar"—I began again; but I stopped short, for the lady was running her dark eyes with intense anxiety over the letter, and apparently utterly heedless of my presence.

When she had finished she laid down the paper on the table; her eyes and expression seemed to quiet down, and with a smile she said:

"Make no apologies, pray; I see this is pure mischance, which, however, harms no one. A lady's correspondence generally contains no very great intelligence."

As she spoke she looked into my face with the same steady eager gaze which recalled my railway acquaintance strongly, and an expression of triumph, which, however, was but momentary, giving place to one of doubtful inquiry, came suddenly, making the resemblance so perfect that once again I felt convinced of their identity.

I proceeded to make some remarks explanatory, apologetical, etc., during which the lady, or as I suppose I may call her now, Miss Owenson, turned over her magazines, lingered lovingly over the fashions, and merely condescended to fill up the pauses I made to take breath by short "Oh, yes-es" and "oh, noes."

When, however, I took my hat, preparatory to departure, she suddenly threw off her indifferent and ennuied manner.

"Some evenings ago," she said, "you sent in to me for some music; you or Mr. —, I forget your friend's name."

"Oh, yes, Gaunt admired the song you were singing," I replied, in my turn, assuming the indifferent and careless.

"He seems a great invalid," she said, in an interested tone, going toward a pile of books and loose music, and beginning to turn it over. "I was sorry not to be able to give him the information he required. However, yesterday, by chance, I came on the very piece. Do you think he would care to have it now?"

I was perfectly aware that Dick knew as much about music as he did of metaphysics, but I did not hesitate to accept my lady's civil offer with enthusiasm, and to prophesy Gaunt's unutterable pleasure at the possession of such a treasure.

"He's an uncommonly good-hearted fellow," I said, alluding to my friend; "but he makes an abominable patient."

"He seems to have plenty of occupation certainly," she replied, "and his little girl, too; I suppose he is a widower."

"His little girl!" I exclaimed, smiling in spite of myself, and noticing how earnestly the lady listened and how earnestly she seemed to examine my smile. "My friend is not married; little Cecile is his niece and god-daughter."

Miss Owenson half drew back a step, not in a surprised or startled manner, however, and she said "Oh," in a low tone.

Suddenly changing the conversation, she pointed to the conservatory.

"Have I not made the most of my time?" she said; "when I came here there were six little geraniums, and now look."

I followed her willingly enough among her flowers, and certainly she had reason to be proud of the show they made. They were arranged with great taste; and amongst them I found some rare exotics, that evidently belonged to the hand of her Indian servant, and, I could not help suspecting, of her own too.

Of course I admired, and behaved as a gentleman similarly placed should behave, and would behave, when he has a very vivid idea that he is in company with a handsome, romance-loving opera star; but to my surprise my compliments

and soft speeches fell on very stony ground. My companion neither encouraged nor rebuffed such, she simply disregarded them; only now and then she addressed me some pointed question, concerning my own life, Gaunt, or little Cecile, that at last I woke me to the certainty of what I had at first dimly suspected, viz., that the lady of the cottage was merely spinning out her conversation on flowers, music, etc., that she might have the opportunity and leisure for what in school days I used to call "pumping" me.

Such a conviction was not flattering; but my curiosity as to her reason for so doing being piqued, I conquered my desire to make my bow and dignified exit, and allowed her to continue her game for a little longer.

When I did at length make my adieu, she held out her hand—a very creamy, plump hand, I remarked—in a friendly manner. And I left her presence, having certainly seen her face, and won the race of Gaunt, but more than ever puzzled as to who and what she was.

All that I could announce with any certainty to my friend was, that Margaret Owenson, Esq., was one of the most peculiar but beautiful women I had ever seen.

VII.

FISHING IN THE BOUNDARY STREAM.

That evening we were prevented talking about my morning call by the presence of the celebrated surgeon who had undertaken the cure of Gaunt's ankle. His presence also prevented our usual attentive observation of our neighbour, very much to my annoyance, for Cecile came once privately to inform me that the lady, dressed in black silk, was walking about the garden, and that she had nodded to her (Cecile). Of course I considered this friendly demonstration entirely owing to my own conduct and "tact."

To my great satisfaction the surgeon found Gaunt's foot so far recovered that he no longer ordered such strict rest; he gave us leave to try a short walk in the garden the following day, prophesying from the present state of the ankle a now speedy recovery.

For the next few days, if the lady of the cottage cared to cast her eyes in the direction of our verandah, she must have found it very frequently deserted, Gaunt, only too glad to make as much of his freedom as he could, had hired a light chaise, with a pair of capital ponies, and these animals he kept in perpetual motion, bearing him and me about somewhere or other. Cecile generally was of our party, except when we drove to the town of — (which was tolerably often, both of us tiring of the picturesque), or when we visited an old acquaintance of Richard's whom he had discovered on some distant expedition quite by chance.

I noticed all this silently; for I kept most rigidly to our tacit agreement that I should not seek to penetrate Gaunt's secret; but nevertheless I noticed it.

I was becoming very much accustomed, however, to the mystery, and it ceased to harass me. I accepted Cecile's presence without further questioning, and became so accustomed to hear her call Dick "Uncle," while she addressed me more familiarly as Mark, that I had almost forgotten that it was *not*, all things considered, the most natural thing in the world.

I dare say a woman's penetrating eye, in watching Gaunt's manner and behaviour to the child, would have guessed with tolerable precision Gaunt's actual connection with her. To my mind he seemed to treat her very much as I did myself. She was not a pettable child, her greatest delight being to affect and be treated as the young lady. With a strange precocity, too, she appeared almost to understand that her position in our regard was strange and embarrassing; and, with true female delicacy, I have often noticed her remaining and evidently wearying herself in the garden for hours, rather than join us, when she fancied we were talking confidentially and didn't want her.

(To be continued.)