

IN LOVE'S DEAR THRALL:

A ROMANCE OF THE MUSKOKA LAKES.

CHAPTER I.

"WHO are they, I wonder? They are English, evidently. What a saintly face the tall one has!"

"Hasn't she? yet what a queenly air! Poor thing! she is young to be a widow. I wonder who they can be? Oh, here comes Mrs. M——; she'll be sure to know."

"True. Good morning, Mrs. M——, who are our new comers?"

"Oh, I heard all about them last night," said the lady addressed, with a nod, in the way of morning salutation, to each of her friends. "Frank Leighton knows them; he met them at the wharf as they got off the steamer, and he has just gone in with them to breakfast. Hasn't the young widow a divine face? She's a titled lady—what's this is her name? Mr. Leighton told me. Oh, yes, the Lady Mercedes Wilton."

"And who is her companion?—not a sister evidently."

"Oh no! she is no relation: they are merely travelling together, though they are old friends. She's the wife of the young fellow with the handsome beard, who is, I am told, an English barrister; and the old gentleman is her father. He is the Hon. Mr. Lewis, a gentleman of property in the north of Scotland, and Leighton says that he has come out to Canada to buy land in the North-West for his sons. His son-in-law is a Mr. Kinglake, who has also come out to make investments in Canada. Mr. Leighton met the whole party a few weeks ago at Quebec. I cannot learn much about the Lady Mercedes; but don't you recognize in her the kneeling figure in Leighton's picture of the interior of the French-Canadian chapel? I saw the likeness at once; Frank told me that he painted the face from memory, with the aid of a sketch he made at the *habitant's* wedding. Leighton will make a hit with that painting; the face of the kneeling figure of the widow reminds me of one of the most beautiful of the Madonnas."

"The Lady Mercedes, eh!"—observed one of the group Mrs. M——addressed. "What a pretty name and what a lovely face! No wonder your artist friend is smitten by her. Someone told me that Mr. Leighton seems bewitched since he began his new picture, and he has manifestly thrown all his art into the face of his kneeling Madonna."

"Yes, has he not?" was the rejoinder. "I should like to know her history. When Leighton gets to know them better, I'll no doubt find out."

"Oh, don't be too sure of that! Mr. Leighton won't tell you much if, as I suspect, he's in love with her. In that event, Mrs. M——, he'll give you little of his confidence."

"We shall see, dear," said the latter lady, who prided herself in possessing the artist's friendship, as she moved off to another knot of hotel guests on the now crowded verandah.

Such was the conversation that took place one bright July morning some two summers ago, among three of a group of Toronto ladies assembled after breakfast on the promenade galleries of "Maplehurst." That attractive Muskoka hotel, perched on the fir-clad heights overlooking the gleaming lake and distant village of Rosseau, seldom had gathered a larger or more fashionable crowd than was to be seen on the morning in question. The throng of visitors consisted chiefly of the fair sex, the goodly matrons and muslined femininity of Hamilton, Toronto, and the cities of the South, with a bevy of children, and a more than usually large proportion of budding womanhood and young girls just entering their teens. The morning was bright and warm, giving promise of a typical Canadian day; and the human interest in the scene was increased by the animation and high spirits, which were depicted on every face, and were emphasized by a buzz of small talk and, ever and anon, by peals of light laughter.

Frank Leighton, who was in part the theme of the above conversation, was a well-known figure in Muskoka watering-places, and his talents, both as an artist and a *littérateur*, had of recent years brought him prominently before the intellectual portion, at least, of the Canadian public. The young artist moved in good social circles, and he was a general favourite with both sexes. He was a Canadian only by adoption, though adoption with him—so much of a patriot was he!—meant a good deal more than birth with the mass of his undemonstrative fellow-countrymen. He belonged to a good old family in Westmoreland, and was born and brought up in the vicinity of the English lakes. At an early age he had the misfortune to lose his mother, and in his seventeenth year, his father marrying again, he and his brother left home and set out for British Honduras, where the two young men had relatives. There Frank, the younger of the two, spent but one year, when he parted with his brother and came north to seek his fortune in Canada. He had had a good education, and nature had endowed him with a decided taste, if not genius, for art. For awhile, like most new comers, he roughed it on a farm; but in his twentieth year he gravitated to the city, where he cultivated his talent for painting, eking out the slender allowance he had from his father, by giving drawing lessons and occasionally contributing to the English periodical press.

When, at Maplehurst, we make acquaintance with the young artist ten Canadian summers had flown over his head. In the interval, his industry, as well as his genius, had won for him a high place in native art circles, his special faculty showing itself in the delineation of historic

scenes from Canadian annals, some of his large canvases finding their way to the London Academy and the *Salon* at Paris. Not a little of his popularity, however, was due to his admirable social qualities, added to his good looks and cultivated manners. He had a fine mind, and a disposition so generous and genial that he made himself friends wherever he went. He had a charming way with women, whom he treated with pleasing deference, scrupulous honour, and chivalrous courtesy. Nor was there a trace of self-consciousness or affectation in anything he said or did. He was not only kind and tender-hearted, he was always disinterested and unselfish; and in manners no one could be more frank and ingenuous. Deep in his nature was implanted the love of woman; though women he admired with the intellect, not with the passions. Yet in this respect he was neither a pedant nor an anchorite. He had an abiding faith in the essential goodness of his fellowmen, and used to say that in the long run the nobler, and not the baser, characteristics of humanity would prevail.

Nothing, however, so touched Leighton's heart and soul as contact with a good and beautiful woman. Almost indescribable were his emotions when he caught the first glimpse of the Lady Mercedes Wilton. Hers was the face of his ideal of female beauty. It had pathos as well as loveliness. Round the mouth played the smiles of a sweet, sunny nature; and the large lustrous eyes were lit at once by the flashing steel of the intellect and emitted sparks from the smouldering fires of love. In appearance, the Lady Mercedes was a little above the medium height, though she was splendidly proportioned, carried herself majestically, and yet had a step as light and graceful as a fawn. By the most indifferent connoisseur of beauty, neither her face nor her figure could be passed unobserved; while her whole person bore the unmistakable marks of distinction.

When Frank Leighton first saw this vision of female loveliness, she had come, with her party, into the little French chapel in the suburbs of Quebec where a peasant's wedding was being celebrated. With what seemed to be more than a conventional respect for the place and the ceremony, the Lady Mercedes advanced to the group round the chancel-rail and knelt throughout the performance of the sacred rite. When the ceremony was over, she rose quickly from her knees, and retracing her steps, joined her friends at the entrance of the chapel. As she passed out, she noticed Leighton, who had entered silently at a side door, and now stood, sketch book in hand, half concealed behind a pillar. She gave a quick, convulsive start as her eyes met those of the artist, blushed deeply, and let fall her crape veil to hide evident emotion. What there was so visibly to disturb her, Leighton could not divine. So far as he knew, they had never previously met; and Leighton was not vain enough to suppose that there was about his person or appearance anything specially to attract a stranger. Her agitation, he concluded, was due to some painful memory. His impressions were deepened later on in the day when, all having returned to the hotel at which they were staying, he found himself more than once the object of the beautiful stranger's furtive but wistful gaze and indifferently-hidden interest.

Before nightfall the Fates seemingly decreed that the two people who had conceived so sudden an interest in each other should come together. After dinner the young artist excused himself in withdrawing from a conversation into which he had been drawn at the hotel porch, lit a cigar and strolled over to take his evening walk on Dufferin Terrace. Here he was shortly afterwards joined by the English tourists who had arrived that morning by the Liverpool steamer. Passing the group, who were evidently enjoying the superb view from the ramparts, the elderly gentleman accosted Leighton with some enquiry about Point Lévis, on the opposite shore. Leighton courteously satisfied the old gentleman and was about to pass on when further questions were simultaneously addressed to him, this time by the two ladies. These referred to other objects seen from the Terrace, and, answering the questions, the young artist was drawn into an animated conversation with the whole party, who manifested great interest in Leighton's rapid recital of the historical events connected with Quebec, the citadel and the régime of French dominion in the New World.

Leighton was well-read in Canadian history, knew its every legend and tradition, and had the gift of a minstrel-scholar in telling a story. In the walk back to the hotel he had in the Lady Mercedes an intelligent and interested auditor; and at her request he had to recount to the rest of the party several of the old Breton and Norman legends which had most interested her in the return to their night's quarters. It was far on in the evening when the party broke up, and day had nearly dawned before Leighton could get the lovely Mercedes out of his head, to enable him to snatch an hour or two's rest before breakfast.

The new day brought Leighton again into close contact with his English friends, all of whom seemed to wish to put themselves under his guidance during their brief stay at Quebec. The Lady Mercedes, though still cordial in her manner to the young artist, obviously desired to impose some restraint upon the suddenly sprung-up friendship, and left conversation with him pretty much to the other members of her party. Leighton understood and accepted the somewhat changed relations; and while he regretted that he could not presume to ask that there should be a return of the cordiality that marked the previous evening's intercourse, he was consoled by the conviction

that he had not lost favour in the Lady Mercedes' eyes. She still regarded him with marked interest, and much as she desired to do so, could not altogether conceal the fact. Only once during the day did he find himself for a few minutes alone with her, during which she talked of Leighton's profession, and her interest in it, and let fall the remark that her husband, too, had been an artist. Leighton was too well-bred to do more, at this stage of their acquaintance, than signify that he had heard the casually-dropped bit of personal history. He went on to speak of the attractive field there was in the Old World for the artist, and of the better rewards that there wait upon art-talent and industry; while she, on her part, spoke enthusiastically of the scope and variety which the New World opened to the genius and trained skill of American and Canadian painters.

Unluckily, the conversation was here interrupted by the return of the Lady Mercedes' travelling companions, who informed Leighton that they had decided to go on to Montreal by the evening boat and were sorry to have to take sudden leave of the young artist. They added, however, that they hoped to renew acquaintance with him at Toronto, where they expected to be in about three weeks, after a brief tour in the States. When they reached Toronto, they told Leighton that they would most likely take advantage of his suggestion to spend a week in the Muskoka Lakes, where, he had previously informed them, he usually spent a part of the summer. From Muskoka, whither Leighton was himself shortly about to proceed, he was apprised that the party would set out for the North-West, and, after a run through to the Pacific Coast, would then retrace their steps and go back to England. With this indication of the movements of the tourists, and an exchange of cards between the gentlemen, and with profuse thanks for the young Canadian's civilities from all of the travellers, the artist took leave of the group, after expressing the pleasure it would give him to meet them again, either at Toronto or at Maplehurst, on Lake Rosseau.

CHAPTER II.

THE reader already knows that all have again met by the waters of Muskoka, though he may not fully know in what turmoil of heart poor Leighton has been since he bid adieu at Quebec to the Lady Mercedes, and let his ardent glance modestly fall before the *spirituelle* face and tear-moistened eyes of the beautiful English widow. Leighton tried hard to disguise from himself that he was in love. It was true that, thanks to his own industry and to the professional reputation he had earned, he was now in a position to marry; but what did he know of her to whom his heart was now captive, save her surface beauty; and even if she were all he sought in a wife, why, he sternly asked himself, should *he* be the favoured of all suitors? Moreover, the fair Mercedes could not have been long a widow, and might not her heart be still in the grave? Such were some of the thoughts that perplexed the mind of Frank Leighton, as he walked with heightened colour by the side of the beautiful English gentlewoman, among the hotel guests at Maplehurst, on the morrow after her arrival with her friends.

To a few of his intimate acquaintances the young artist introduced the English travellers, and together for a week or more the new-comers enjoyed themselves hugely. The weather was glorious and each day there was sufficient wind for a sail. Every morning some little party was made up, and in concert the group of sail-boats explored the picturesque inlets and gleaming stretch of waters that gem the prettily-wooded basin of the Lakes of Muskoka. In Leighton's yacht were always to be found the Lady Mercedes with Mrs. Kinglake, her bosom friend and travelling companion. In a stroll in the odorous pine woods, or in a pull up the Nereid-haunted Shadow River, you would be sure to find the same happy company. Yet, in this idle dalliance daily with the woman he greatly loved, no word escaped Leighton indicative of his feelings. He saw that he was trusted by both women, who honoured him with their company, and he would not betray the trust; nor was it in his nature to be likely to do so. Soon, however, was there to occur an incident which brought the two chief figures in the drama of love more closely together.

Leighton had arranged with his English friends an excursion by water, down the lake to Port Sandfield, with a break at "Cox's," thence up Lake Joseph to Port Cockburn, and over the Parry Sound road to the island-gemmed shores of the Georgian Bay. A week was to be consumed in the trip. Before starting out on it, the two gentlemen of the English party wished to run down to Toronto to complete their arrangements for proceeding to the West. This they presently did, leaving the ladies to Leighton's care. The day before Mr. Lewis and Mr. Kinglake were expected to return, Leighton crossed over to Rosseau village to buy an extra trolly line for the ladies who were to join the expedition, and to fit up his boat's larder with such modest luxuries for the trip as the village afforded. He left Mrs. Kinglake and the Lady Mercedes cruising about with a young lad staying at the hotel, and a boatman from the village, in a small craft at the head of the lake. On his return to the Maplehurst wharf, Leighton received a message left for him by the ladies, to the effect that they had set off for Morgan's Bay, a large inlet a little way down the lake; but that they would return shortly. As he crossed over from the village, he noticed that a storm was blowing up, and he became a little