

The Lady in Muslin.

This letter was dated from Paris; and the writer requested an immediate reply. Gaunt had no idea of giving up the papers: the very fact of Mr. Huntingdon calling his wife "the person" strengthened him in his resolution to keep his promise; and he knew that Huntingdon could not demand them, unless he proclaimed his connection with Marie. So he allowed the letter to remain unanswered.

A second, however, following closely on the first, and more insolent and peremptory in its tone, made him determine to confront Cecil boldly and end the matter.

He therefore sent Mrs. Marsh to Paris with a letter from himself, stating that Mrs. Marsh, as Marie's nearest relation, was willing to hear any claim he might choose to make to the property of her late niece.

Mr. Huntingdon received his visitor with much more surprise and embarrassment than pleasure. He assured her he had no wish to interfere with Miss Marie Marsh's relations: all he desired was to know if Mr. Gaunt, who knew so well all his acquaintance with Marie, had her papers and letters in his possession. He did not claim them. He knew he had no right to them: he made no mention of the child.

The private interview that Mr. Huntingdon was conducting so courteously with his unwelcome guest happened to be suddenly broken in on by the entrance of a tall, fair-haired lady carrying a little boy of about two years in her arms. The child called out "Papa!" and Mrs. Marsh's surprise at Mr. Huntingdon's courtesy vanished immediately.

Mrs. Marsh very sensibly made inquiries as to who this lady was; and she brought back to Gaunt the intelligence that Cecil Huntingdon had married on his arrival in India—that is about sixteen months prior to Marie's death—a young lady of good birth and large fortune, and that he had a son and heir of two years old. Of course poor Gaunt felt anything but happy at such news. He must do something; and Dick hated action in such a matter.

With some difficulty he persuaded himself to go to Paris, face Cecil, and denounce him as a bigamist.

He arrived in Paris, found the hotel, but Mr. Cecil Huntingdon and family had left four days before for India *via* Marseilles.

Richard was not altogether sorry for this interruption of his plan.

After that a considerable time passed, and he heard no further news of Mr. Huntingdon, till our summer visit was suddenly brought to a close by Mrs. Marsh's recognition of Mrs. Huntingdon, and we found ourselves the dupes of her wild but successful scheming to gain possession of those important papers.

XVII.

AN INVITATION ON CHRISTMAS EVE.

Time passed on. Gaunt went to the continent; I stayed in my rooms, and led my bachelor life among my books and writings; and if it had not been for the occasional visit to Blackheath, and the warm welcome I always received from pretty little Cecile, I should soon have ceased to remember much about our summer's adventure, and the serious results it was likely to have had.

We had been so completely duped by the fascinating lady of the cottage that the subject was not one to be remembered with any pleasurable sensations. Even the lawyers had been amused at our expense; and I must confess that had it not been for my moral rectitude and affection for Cecile, I should very much have preferred that Mrs. Huntingdon should have been allowed to remain quietly in possession of her stolen property than that the world should get wind of the story.

I knew Gaunt had no great desire to appear in a court of justice against the lady, and I fancy there was a paradoxical satisfaction blended with his regret as months passed, and the beautiful thief still remained concealed, and the papers unrecovered.

It was a clear, quiet proper Christmas Eve. On the ground the snow lay white and hard: above, the stars twinkled frostily in the dark heavens: so at least my landlady told me. I was sitting with the curtains drawn snugly over the windows close by my blazing fire, much too warm and comfortable to think of making such observations for myself.

I was mentally congratulating myself on the clever dodge by which I had avoided the necessity of passing my Christmas with a rich old aunt in a dull country village, without endangering the legacy I expected, while I looked complacently forward to the morrow's dinner with a party of choice friends at Gaunt's rooms (he had just come home), when my door was thrown open, and my landlady summoned a gentleman "as wanted to speak to me."

A person dressed in black, and who kept his hat pressed over his eyes, entered with a solemn, dignified manner and advanced, but stood silently before me till the door had been safely closed.

He stood rather in the shade, and his hat and beard so concealed his face that I never noticed his oriental complexion and countenance, until he presented me, still without opening his lips, with a letter, and then the dark-skinned hand made me glance up curiously.

"Zemeide!" I exclaimed, startled; and then grasping his arm I sprang up, determined to call assistance and have him secured. The Indian neither attempted to shake off my grasp nor to resent my treatment; he looked quietly up at me with his black deep eyes, and said in good English:

"Read the letter, sir, at once."

"And give you time to escape?" I exclaimed. "Thief that you are."

"Escape!" he repeated in a tone the utter scorn of which I cannot describe. "Did I not come here of my own free will? Read the letter, Mr. Owen," he added, suddenly changing his tone to one of utter indifference.

I glanced at the envelope: there was no mistaking the clear handwriting; it had directed queerly twisted little notes to the White Horse Inn so often; then I glanced at the Indian. If I had detected the slightest indication in his expression that he guessed at the foolish thoughts that were then passing through my mind, I believe I should have knocked him down without an instant's hesitation.

He stood calm and unresisting, so I released his arm, and went and locked the door, keeping, however, my eye firmly fixed upon my guest.

"If this," I said sternly to him, tapping the letter, "does not contain information concerning those papers you have stolen, I shall not allow you to move from here but in the custody of a police constable." Zemeide deigned no answer to this pleasant piece of news, but stood quietly before me, while I broke the seal and read the note. It was very short, merely containing these words:

"DEAR MR. OWEN,—

If you will accompany Zemeide to my lodgings, you shall hear some intelligence that may be of use to your friends. I am in great trouble; so pray come quite alone.

"Yours,
"M.O."

The daring coolness, the almost impertinence of writing such an invitation to a person who she must know had discovered that he had been her dupe, was sufficient guarantee as to the authenticity of the letter.

To come alone, too! Did she fancy I should invite Gaunt to accompany me, and that we should drop in on her, as we used to do at Hazeldean; or did she know that the affair was in other hands, and that I might possibly bring a policeman with me, unless touched by the simple pathos of the sentence, "I am in great trouble?"

I pondered a minute or two. After all, if Margaret Owenson did know that Gaunt was pursuing the recovery of the stolen papers with determination, she was not too daring in writing that note to me. I could no more have faced the bright lady

of the cottage as "Avenger" than I could have flown.

"Gaunt's interest must be looked to," I muttered to myself as I folded up the scented paper. "I certainly must see this woman."

I rose up. "Does your mistress live far from here?" I said to the Indian.

"Half an hour's walk," he answered, laconically. "Let us go, then."

I took the precaution of thrusting my arm through Zemeide's as we went down stairs, and he offered no resistance.

It was a freezingly cold night, much too cold for romantic musings as we walked along. The tiny spark of sentiment that had been kindled at the unexpected sight of that handwriting soon went out, and as I stamped along the icy pavement I felt almost sorry that I had not carried out my first impulse at the sight of the Indian, and immediately given him in charge to the police, stayed by my warm fire, and left them to hunt out the rest of the affair.

As we hurried on, and began to wind about the handsome streets and squares of the west, the regret increased, and I dreaded the idea of meeting Miss Owenson almost as much as when that broiling August morning I had to make my acquaintance with her by apologies for opening her letters.

Zemeide led me on ruthlessly till we reached a house in — Square, up the steps of which he condescended almost to bound, an action evidently induced by his satisfaction at having so far accomplished his mission.

The door was opened by a butler in deep mourning, while beyond stood a footman ready in orthodox fashion to conduct us up stairs. Zemeide, however, with the air of a privileged person, passed them by, and saying in a low tone "Follow me, sir," conducted me up stairs.

The house was handsomely furnished and well lighted, and as we passed the drawing-room I saw two or three persons lounging on the sofas in that quiet lazy fashion which bespeaks "at home."

There was no romance about the house, nothing strange or mysterious; it was evidently occupied by a family in the well-to-do ranks of society, a commonplace set who would scout all connection with a lady of such ways and doings as our former friend of the cottage.

I thought of all this as I mounted the stairs behind the Indian, and at each step I took I grew more puzzled.

XVIII.

RESTITUTION.

As we reached the third floor, the door just opposite opened, and a young lady came out holding a lamp in her hand, which, as she held it up to cast its light on us as we ascended, also illumined her own face.

It was a handsome, bright-looking countenance, and under other circumstances I should have been startled at observing its strong resemblance to Margaret Owenson. As it was, I went so expecting to see or hear from her, that it seemed the most natural thing in the world to find myself face to face with evidently her near relation.

"I am glad you have come," she said, bowing slightly, as I reached the landing. "My poor cousin is in great distress."

As she spoke she opened a door close at hand, and, with an inclination of the head, invited me to enter.

After closing the door carefully, and setting the lamp down on the table, she moved a little away and coughed nervously. I noticed she was dressed in fresh deep mourning; and even to my stranger eye, her face looked worn and pale.

"I hope," I began, anxious to help her to a commencement, "that Mrs.—I mean Miss Owenson—is not ill."

"No," she answered, quickly, "not ill; but in great grief. She has asked me to see you, Mr. Owen, and tell you—indeed, I scarcely know how to begin this sad story."

(To be continued.)