

The Lady in Muslin.

There was something wonderfully taking in the half-simple, half-theatrical manner of this child; and I should have felt myself to be quite a brute if I had not responded to her entreaty, and desisted from questioning her.

I tried to make her acquaintance in some other manner. I showed her my favourite pipe; and she condescended to draw near, and took no small delight in tucking the weed into it, with her taper tiny fingers. After that we became more intimate and confidential, and I began to flatter myself that I must have some peculiar talent for winning infantine friendship; for unaccustomed as I was to children, I suited so well to little Cecile's taste, that in another half-hour she was sitting on a stool, just in front of me, chatting most happily, and wasting my tobacco, endeavouring to make cigarettes, and quite making love to me, after her own fashion.

The door opened upon us whilst we were in that position, and in walked Richard Gaunt!

He started back; little Cecile jumped up. I never moved, but I looked up with, I fancy, a very satirical smile.

"I have been making friends with your juvenile correspondent," was my first exclamation; "your charming little niece and godchild, my dear Dick."

Dick's eyes for an instant lost that pleasant, kind look which I have mentioned to you as being his chief attraction. He looked absolutely angry.

"I don't understand this," he said, in a low, growling voice.

"Nor do I," I answered.

"There are some cases——" Dick began, still in the same disagreeable tone.

"There are," I interrupted. "You seem annoyed at my presence, Gaunt. Good evening! Let me assure you, however, that this visit is purely one of chance. Good night!"

I took up my hat and was striding towards the door, when little Cecile came springing after me.

"No," she exclaimed, "don't go—wait a moment. You see, I told you godpapa Gaunt didn't want any one to see me. It was my fault, godpapa, not his," she added, turning to Gaunt, and stretching out her hands with dignified gesticulations, and growing quite flushed with the energy with which he spoke: "quite my fault; and he hasn't asked me any questions."

There was something so ridiculous in the mediation of the little white-frocked, gesticulating figure standing between us two, angry, bearded men—in the protection she extended to the one, while unwittingly she increased the embarrassment of the other—something so very out of the way, and uncommon to either of our experiences, that we both paused;—I smiled, Dick smiled.

"That's right!" Cecile exclaimed, approvingly.

"That's right, godpapa, don't be angry."

"You needn't be in such a hurry, Mark," Dick said gruffly, and turning away.

And I went back to my seat. I should have been sorry to quarrel with Richard Gaunt.

III.

CIGAR CONFIDENCES.

I went back to my seat, and resumed my cigar. Dick stood leaning against the mantelshelf, stroking his moustache meditatively. Cecile sat herself on the footstool, which, however, she took care to draw to a distance from my fauteuil, and contemplated us both gravely. This tableau lasted at least twenty minutes.

"Mark," exclaimed Dick suddenly, after Cecile had been confided to Mrs. Briggs's maternal care for the night, and we two sat by the open window, puffing away in our usual luxurious, silent, and easy fashion, at our cigars; "Mark, I should like to know your opinion, as a man of principle and education, as to whether one's word of honour, once engaged, may still be regarded as subject to the contingencies of after circumstances?"

I was a little startled by this sudden question. Richard Gaunt and casuistry was an association of ideas that had never entered my mind, and I was quite unprepared to receive it.

"My opinion on such a matter," I began, however, after a moment or two's hesitation, "is that undoubtedly, or at least—I paused—knocked the ashes from my cigar. "Such a question, my dear Dick, I can scarcely answer as a generality. Cases of conscience must be argued according to their individual character. To answer that a promise once given must be kept at all hazards, accords little with the liberal morality of the age; but on the other hand, to declare that the keeping of a solemn engagement depends on circumstances, or chances of the future, proclaims a very lax moral indeed."

My friend smiled. He evidently triumphed in the idea that he puzzled me.

"Contingent circumstances," I continued loftily, with a slight sneer in return for Mr. Gaunt's smile, "according to some, might read 'convenience,' you know."

"Exactly," Dick answered quickly, and sitting bolt upright. "That's the deuce, Mark!" he added emphatically.

Had I been of an energetic disposition, I believe during the unusual excitement of the few minutes that followed, I might have made Dick's little secret my own. I could see it was seething and frothing up in him, like a small Vesuvian eruption, and nothing would have eased him more than to let out the lava springs in a good gush. But there I sat, lazily watching the evening light fade from the patch of sky visible above the opposite houses; listening to the distant hum of the busy world, which lay beyond our quiet street, and which came up, not disagreeably, through the heavy evening air; and in the quietude of my enjoyment, I felt a little secret superiority, that led me to criticise my friend's emotion with the eye of a philosopher, rather than sympathize with it, with the feeling of a friend.

As Dick sat there, biting now his nails, and then his pipe; now pulling his moustache, and sighing like a furnace, I regarded him with that serene satisfaction with which a cat looks at a mouse, which she considers so safely within her power as merely to require her to lift her paw, and give it a tap to make all secure.

I played with my mouse too long.

Mrs. Briggs suddenly popped her head into the room and said that she couldn't persuade Miss any ways to go to sleep, or even to undress, till she had spoken again to her uncle; so would Mr. Gaunt be kind enough to step up stairs for a minute?

Dick went reluctantly.

When he returned, three minutes after, his excitement was over, he resumed his chair and employment gravely.

"Mark," he exclaimed, after a short silence, "suppose a man binds himself by a promise to keep a secret for a certain period; suppose that through after-events the divulgence of that secret to a third party, while it could do no possible wrong to any one concerned, would greatly relieve and free from an embarrassing position the man so engaging himself, would he be very dishonourable to break his promise?"

"It depends on the nature of the embarrassment," I replied. "Should it be merely a matter of personal consequence, strict morality would demand the keeping of such a promise."

Gaunt was silent.

"Suppose," he began again, "that the promise had been given more to ease the weak fears of a dying mind than being of itself important or necessary?"

"A promise is a promise," I answered, shortly.

Gaunt leant back in his chair, and for more than half an hour the only sound that broke the stillness of the room was his vigorous puffing at his meerschaum.

As the silence continued, and I saw Richard's face grow more and more frowning and determined looking, I almost repented my severe morality.

"After all," thought I, as curiosity again resumed her sway, "there are some cases which bear milder and more liberal treatment."

"I suppose, Gaunt," I said, quietly, "your question had more or less connection with your relationship to little Cecile?"

"Of course," he answered, shortly; "but we've settled the point; don't let us bring it up again."

Dick, like many unintellectual people, is extremely obstinate, and by that tenaciousness of his seldom fails to carry the day; so I dropped the subject. The solution of the mystery, I felt, was at present distant.

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Two days after, when I called at — Street, Mr. Richard Gaunt had left town, and Mrs. Briggs did not know his address.

A week after I was leading a truly rural life with my friend Brown, in the Isle of Wight.

The site of Brown's lodge, as my friend termed his place, must have been chosen with a regard to the strictest seclusion. It was distant from even a village, not to mention any of those gay, bustling towns where it was possible to pass at least one's morning hours without dying of ennui. It fronted the sea, and the nearest approach to anything lively that occupied the long hours of daylight was watching the ships that appeared in the offing through a large telescope fixed on the lawn of Brown's lodge.

My friend was a botanist and naturalist, and in the pursuit of his pet sciences he found the time pass gaily enough. He would spend whole hours delightedly in diving in shady damp dells and ditches after weeds and flowers. With patient gladness he would watch the ebbing of the tide, and then, with his nether garments tucked up above his knees, his feet bare, he would dabble in the wet sand among the rocks, peep about in crevices and holes, and come back to me with horrid jelly-looking things in his hands, quite radiant with scientific delight.

Of course I had no objection to his finding pleasure in such trifles, but at the same time I did think that, as a companion, he was a bore, and, as a host, frightfully deficient.

Even his library partook of his nature: it was all about flowers and animals; the very magazines he took in were on these subjects. I remember asking him, one wretchedly wet evening, in the fulness of my despair, if he had not got some of the new light literature. He brought me, with the highest eulogiums, "Life in Normandy."

"An excellent work," I said, dolefully, laying it aside, however; "my friend reviewed it in the S— R—."

"Ay, yes, a capital review, wasn't it?" answered Brown.

"He called it simple, homely and unaffected," I answered languidly; adding "that though books on cookery, angling and natural history are apt to be wearisome to persons who don't care about zoology or angling, this was an exception to the rule. I recollect the article well. — must have been very kindly disposed when he wrote it. Thank you, my dear Brown. I've no doubt that — was right, and that, though I am not an amateur in cookery, etc., I shall find 'Life in Normandy' highly interesting."

I pushed the book gently from me, settled myself comfortably on the sofa, and went to sleep.

The next morning, the rain was still falling. I rose languidly from my bed, and looked out of the window.

Nothing was to be seen but a dirty, discontented-looking sea, damp sands (for the tide was out), and desolate-looking rocks. Not a vestige of a human being, except where a large drab umbrella, bobbing about like an excited mushroom, indicated that Mr. John Brown was again in pursuit of science.

To my satisfaction, on the breakfast table I found a heap of letters, amongst which I eagerly seized one bearing Dick Gaunt's splashy writing. It had travelled about a little, evidently, by the different directions and post marks; and on opening it, I found the date to be four days back.

It was a short scrawl, telling me he had met with an accident which kept him to the sofa; that he was awfully disgusted with his solitary life; and that if I was not too agreeably engaged, he wished I would pay him a visit.

(To be continued.)