

# The Mesmeric Lady.

By FLORENCE WARDEN.

**H** ALLOA, Broughton, you are a swell!" cried Dr. Webley, one Sunday afternoon at Kearsborough, in the middle of August, as he came face to face with an old fellow-student of his at one of the big London hospitals.

"A change for the better, eh?" chuckled Dr. Broughton, a good-looking young fellow of two or three and thirty, as he stepped out of a smart motor-car which was standing in front of one of the best hotels and shook hands with his old friend.

When they last met, three years before, Broughton, unable to afford to buy a practice, had been practically starving in London.

"Awfully glad, old chap. How did it come about?" asked Webley.

"I married," explained Broughton, with a satisfied smile.

"Oh, I see. Married money?"

Broughton smiled still more and nodded.

"And what are you doing?"

"Oh," replied Dr. Webley, "I'm taking a practice up in Lancashire. Big population. It ought to be all right."

Dr. Broughton shook his head.

"I don't know enough about it," said he. "Those booming millions are no good to a doctor. They go to quacks, to whom they pay sixpence for a bottle of coloured water and a bread pill. Come and dine with us this evening. I want to introduce you to my wife."

But Dr. Webley excused himself, knowing that "money," when you have married it, has a habit of growing exceedingly unattractive.

This meeting and this warning went right out of his mind until, having taken up the Lancashire practice and found it very disappointing, he was suddenly reminded of Broughton's words when, as he crossed the market-place one autumn evening, he found himself wedged in the middle of an excited crowd, all pushing and squeezing to get to a large tent, rigged up in a corner, in front of which a brass band was playing.

He had already had thrust into his hand a glaring handbill which informed him that the MESMERIC LADY (in large capitals and followed by six notes of exclamation) was in the town for that night only, and would give advice to all sufferers "while under the influence of a mesmeric trance." Advice only, half-a-crown; advice and medicine, five shillings.

Dr. Webley was indignant. Out of curiosity he went inside the tent with the rest of the drugging crowd, and found that the stream waiting for treatment, and all ready with their crowns and half-crowns, vastly exceeded in number the patients that a whole month brought to await themselves of his own properly-qualified skill.

On a stage at one end of the tent was a large gilt arm-chair, in which a woman, dressed in fantastic Oriental costume, was sitting, with her head back and her eyes closed. A voluminous veil of white silk, embroidered in gold, was fastened on her head with a bandeau, from which a barbaric ornament of gold and pearl beads hung down to the middle of her forehead. This silk veil went all over the chair and hung down on each side of her head, but did not cover her face or her neck, which was hung with gold beads. Over this silk veil was one of some shimmering transparent material, which covered her face without concealing it.

As far as one could judge, the woman was young and hand-some, and her right hand, which held a glittering pencil, was white and delicate.

At each end of the stage was a flight of wooden stairs, and the stream of "patients" followed each other up the one and down the other as fast as they could be dealt with.

The procedure was as follows:—A hoarse young man, dressed in shabby red velvet and spangles, whom Dr. Webley took to be the husband and accomplice of the Mesmeric Lady, led the deluded victims, one by one, up to the lady's right hand, made him or her sit in a chair placed for the purpose, take up one brass-mounted end of a speaking-

tube which came through a small hole in the white silk veil, and describe his or her "symptoms" in a low voice, which was supposed to reach the Mesmeric Lady by means of a brass-mounted bell at the other end of the tube, conspicuously bound to her right ear by gold cords passed round her head and chin.

Each person was warned to be brief, and on being jugged at the elbow by the man in velvet as a warning that time was up, dropped the speaking tube or had it taken away from him, while the Mesmeric Lady, without opening her eyes, scrawled something upon a paper on the little gilt table in front of her.

Then the man in red advanced to the

him, someone knocked his hat off, and he would have stood a chance of some rough handling if the young man in the red velvet and spangles had not yelled out a hoarse threat to turn the lights out, and dashed the tumult with promptitude which spoke of experience.

His nearest neighbours, however, still continued to gibe at the doctor, though without any renewed attempt at violence.

"A fine one to talk of poisons!" cried one lad, in answer to an injudicious remark of Dr. Webley's about quacks and the harm they may do through ignorance. "I'll warrant, doctor, you'd like for to 'poison' 't lot of us, for coomin' to 't lady, instead o' coomin' to you!"



"He suddenly looked up, and the amazed Dr. Webley recognised the handsome features of Wilfred Broughton, M.D., Lond."

table, wrote a number on the paper, which he then gave to the "patient" in exchange for his money, and directed him to go down by the one staircase while he beckoned to the next sufferer to come up by the other.

When Dr. Webley reached the tent the five shilling patients were being treated, and they were to come round to the tent at an hour appointed to receive their medicine on giving their number.

To his rage and disgust, he reckoned on the takings during one half-hour, and found that the amount exceeded five pounds.

Then came a batch of half-crown patients, who brought money in at a rate even faster, since each sat no more than a minute, and was not accorded the privilege of having his pulse felt.

The doctor was amazed at the credulity which allowed these swarms of invalids, real and imaginary, to be satisfied when they got for their hard-earned silver nothing but two written lines of advice, with which, however, all appeared perfectly content.

At last his anger got the better of his prudence, and he broke out, to a sturdy-looking Lancashire man of forty or so who stood beside him in the crush, into invectives against the folly of the crowd, the inaction of the police, and the obviously fraudulent nature of the whole affair.

"Nay, nay, mister," said the man, good-humouredly. "It can't be fraud, seein' 't lady does us good. I've been treated myself by her a twelvemonth comin' Christmas, and no doctor never did me half the good as what she did. And so, says I, fraud or no fraud, it's all one to me, and when there's eight anis with me I waits till 't lady comes again to the market-place and away goes my half-crown."

But all his neighbours did not take the doctor's expostulations so good-humouredly; and when a group of rough lads recognised him, and tried to shout down his protest against the proceedings, there arose a jeering chorus around

"And if 'twas poison what 't lady give us, why aren't we all dead? I'd like for to hear him answer me that," said another.

The doctor thought it wiser to say no more, and presently the crowd shifted, and he found himself surrounded by fresh groups. By and by, braving the gibes of those who might recognize him, he mounted the platform himself and took his place in the patients' chair as one of a five-shilling batch.

Thrusting his hand through the hole in the white silk veil pointed out to him by the man in red, Dr. Webley felt his wrist held with a grasp which convinced him that, whatever might be the limitations to her medical knowledge, the Mesmeric Lady had felt enough pulses in her time to know the way to do it.

He proceeded to describe his symptoms through the speaking tube in the following manner:—

"I suffer from blood to the head and a violent acceleration of the heart's action when I see crowds of ignorant and foolish people trusting themselves and their ailments to unqualified persons. I suffer also from an inclination to call in the police to stop what I know to be a vulgar and impudent fraud upon the credulous."

Dr. Webley uttered these words in a low voice, but with great deliberation, and watched to see what effect they would have upon the woman.

To his surprise and disappointment, there was no change in the hoarse look of indifference which her handsome face had worn throughout the evening.

A thought struck him, and he gave the tube a jerk, the result of which convinced him that, in spite of the apparatus so ostentatiously attached to her right ear, the words uttered at his end did not reach hers at all.

He was intensely interested, and anxious to find out how the thing was worked. But the man in red was looking curious, and he now abruptly cut short the patient's sitting, with the intimation that time was up. He at the same time



"He walked suddenly out of the shade into the light cast by the little lamp that hung outside the carriage, and the woman uttered a scream."