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MY LADY'S MONEY

By WILKIE COLLINS.

AN EPISODE IN THE LIFE OF A YOUNG GIRL.

PART THE FIRST.

THE DISAPPEARANCE.

CHAPTER I.

OLD Lady Lydiard sat meditating by the fireside, with three letters lying open on her lap. Time had discolored the paper and had turned the ink to a brownish hue. The letters were all addressed to the same person—"The Right Hon. Lord Lydiard"—and were all signed in the same way—"Your affectionate cousin, James Tollmidge." Judged by these specimens of his correspondence, Mr. Tollmidge must have possessed one great merit as a letter-writer—the merit of brevity. He will weary nobody's patience, if he is allowed to have a hearing. Let him, therefore, be permitted, in his own highflown way, to speak for himself.

First letter: "My statement, as your lordship requests, shall be short and to the point. I was doing very well as a portrait painter in the country, and I had a wife and children to consider. Under these circumstances, if I had been left to decide for myself, I should certainly have waited until I had saved a little money before I ventured on the serious expense of taking a house and studio at the west end of London. Your lordship, I positively declare, encouraged me to try the experiment without waiting. And here I am, unknown and unemployed, a helpless artist, lost in London, with a sick wife and hungry children and bankruptcy staring me in the face. On whose shoulders does this dreadful responsibility rest? On your lordship's!"

Second letter: "After a week's delay you favor me, my lord, with a curt reply. I can be equally curt on my side. I indignantly deny that I or my wife have ever presumed to use your lordship's name as a means of recommendation to sitters without your permission. Some enemy has slandered us. I claim, as my right, to know the name of that enemy."

Third (and last) letter: "Another week has passed and not a word of answer has reached me from your lordship. It matters little. I have employed the interval in making inquiries, and I have at last discovered the hostile influence which has estranged you from me. I have been, it seems, so unfortunate as to offend Lady Lydiard (how, I can not imagine); and the all-powerful influence of this noble lady is now used against the struggling artist who is united to you by the sacred ties of kindred. Be it so. I can fight my way upward, my lord, as other men have done before me. A day may yet come when the throng of carriages waiting at the door of the fashionable portrait painter will include her ladyship's vehicle, and bring me the tardy expression of her ladyship's regret. I refer you, my Lord Lydiard, to that day!"

Having read Mr. Tollmidge's formidable assertions relating to herself for the second time, Lady Lydiard's meditations came to an abrupt end. She rose, took the letters in both hands to tear them up, hesitated, and threw them back into the cabinet drawer in which she had discovered them, among other papers that had not been arranged since Lord Lydiard's death.

"The idiot!" said her ladyship, thinking of Mr. Tollmidge. "I never even heard of him in my husband's lifetime; I never even knew that he was really related to Lord Lydiard, till I found his letters. What is to be done next?"

She looked, as she put that question to herself, at an open newspaper thrown on the table, which announced the death of "that accomplished artist, Mr. Tollmidge, related, it is said, to the late well-known connoisseur, Lord Lydiard." In the next sentence the writer of the obituary notice deplored the destitute condition of Mrs. Tollmidge and her children, "thrown helpless on the mercy of the world." Lady Lydiard stood by the table, with her eyes on those lines, and saw but too plainly the direction in which they pointed—the direction of her check book.

Turning toward the fireplace, she rang the bell. "I can do nothing in this matter," she thought to herself, "until I know whether the report about Mrs. Tollmidge and her family is to be depended on. Has Moody come back?" she asked, when the servant appeared at the door. "Moody" (otherwise her ladyship's steward) had not come back. Lady Lydiard dismissed the subject of the artist's widow from further consideration until the steward returned, and gave her mind to a question of domestic interest which lay nearer to her heart. Her favorite dog had been ailing for some time past, and no report of him had reached her that morning. She opened a door near the fireplace, which led, through a little corridor hung with rare prints, to her own boudoir. "Isabel!" she called out, "how is Tommie?"

A fresh young voice answered from behind the curtain which closed the farther end of the corridor, "No better, my lady."

A low growl followed the fresh young voice, and added (in dog's language), "Much worse, my lady—much worse!"

Lady Lydiard closed the door again, with a compassionate sigh for Tommie, and walked slowly to and fro in her spacious drawing room, waiting for the steward's return.

Accurately described, Lord Lydiard's widow was short and fat, and perilously near her sixtieth birthday. But it may be said, without paying a compliment, that she looked younger than her age by ten years at least. Her complexion was of that delicate pink tinge which is sometimes seen in old women with well-preserved constitutions. Her eyes (equally well-preserved) were of that hard light-blue color which wears well, and does not wash out when tried by the test of tears. Add to this her short nose, her plump cheeks that set wrinkles at defiance, her white hair dressed in stiff little curls, and, if a doll could grow old, Lady Lydiard at sixty would have been the living image of that doll, taking life easily on its journey downward to the prettiest of tombs, in a burial ground where the myrtles and roses grew all the year round.

These being her ladyship's personal merits, impartial history must acknowledge, on the list of her defects, a total want of tact and taste in her attire. The lapse of time since Lord Lydiard's death had left her at liberty to dress as she pleased. She arranged her short, clumsy figure in colors that were far too bright for a woman of her age. Her dresses, badly chosen as to their hues, were perhaps not badly made, but were certainly badly worn. Morally, as well as physically, it must be said of Lady Lydiard that her outward side was her worst side. The anomalies of her dress were matched by the anomalies of her character. There were moments when she felt and spoke as became a lady of rank, and there were other moments when she felt and spoke as might have become the cook in the kitchen. Beneath these superficial inconsistencies the great heart, the essentially true and generous nature of the woman, only waited the sufficient occasion to assert themselves. In the trivial intercourse of society she was open to ridicule on every side of her. But when a serious emergency tried the metal of which she was really made, the people who were loudest in laughing at her stood aghast, and wondered what had become of the familiar companion of their every-day lives.

Her ladyship's promenade had lasted but a little while, when a man in black clothing presented himself noiselessly at the great door which opened on the staircase. Lady Lydiard signed to him impatiently to enter the room.

"I have been expecting you for some time, Moody," she said. "You look tired. Take a chair."

The man in black bowed respectfully, and took his seat.

CHAPTER II.

Robert Moody was at this time nearly forty years of age. He was a shy, quiet, dark person, with a pale, closely shaven face, agreeably animated by large black eyes set deep in their orbits. His mouth was perhaps his best feature; he had firm, well-shaped lips, which softened on rare occasions into a particularly winning smile. The whole look of the man, in spite of his habitual reserve, declared him to be eminently trustworthy. His position in Lady Lydiard's household was in no sense of the menial sort. He acted as her almoner and secretary as well as her steward—distributed her charities, wrote her letters on business, paid her bills, engaged her servants, stocked her wine cellar, was authorized to borrow books from her library, and was served with his meals in his own room. His parentage gave him claims to these special favors: he was by birth entitled to rank as a gentleman. His father had failed at a time of commercial panic as a country banker, had paid a good dividend, and had died in exile abroad, a broken-hearted man. Robert had tried to hold his place in the world, but adverse fortune kept him down. Undeserved disaster followed him from one employment to another, until he abandoned the struggle, bade a last farewell to the pride of other days, and accepted the position considerately and delicately offered to him in Lady Lydiard's house. He had now no near relations living, and he had never made many friends. In the intervals of occupation he led a lonely life in his little room. It was a matter of secret wonder among the women in the servants' hall, considering his personal advantages and the opportunities which must surely have been thrown in his way, that he had never tempted fortune in the character of a married man. Robert Moody entered into no explanations on that subject. In his own sad and quiet way he continued to lead his own sad and quiet life. The women all failing, from the handsome housekeeper downward, to make the smallest impression on him, consoled themselves by prophetic visions of the future relations with the sex, and predicted vindictively that "his time would come."

"Well," said Lady Lydiard, "and what have you done?"

"Your ladyship seemed to be anxious about the dog," Moody answered, in the low tone which was habitual to him. "I went first to the veterinary surgeon. He has been called away into the country; and——"

Lady Lydiard waved away the conclusion of the sentence with her hand.

"Never mind the surgeon. We must find somebody else. Where did you go next?"

"To your ladyship's lawyer. Mr. Troy wished me to say that he will have the pleasure of waiting on you——"

"Pass over the lawyer, Moody. I want to know about the painter's widow. Is it true that Mrs. Tollmidge and her family are left in helpless poverty?"

"Not quite true, my lady. I have seen the clergyman of the parish, who takes an interest in the case——"

Lady Lydiard interrupted her steward for the third time:

"You have not mentioned my name?" she asked, sharply.

"Certainly not, my lady. I followed my instructions, and described you as a benevolent person in search of cases of real distress. It is quite true that Mr. Tollmidge has died, leaving nothing to his family. But the widow has a little income of £70 in her own right."

"Is that enough to live on, Moody?" her ladyship asked.

"Enough, in this case, for the widow and her daughter," Moody answered. "The difficulty is to pay the few debts left standing, and to start the two sons in life. They are reported to be steady lads; and the family is much respected in the neighborhood. The clergyman proposes to get a few influential names to begin with, and to start a subscription."

"No subscription!" protested Lady Lydiard. "Mr. Tollmidge was Lord Lydiard's cousin, and Mrs. Tollmidge is related to his lordship by marriage. It would be degrading to my husband's memory to have the begging-box sent round for his relations, no matter how distant they may be. Cousins!" exclaimed her ladyship, suddenly descending from the lofty ranges of sentiment to the low. "I hate the very name of them! A person who is near enough to me to be my relation and far enough off from me to be my sweetheart is a double-faced sort of person that I don't like. Let's get back to the widow and her sons. How much do they want?"

"A subscription of £500, my lady, would provide for everything—if it could only be collected."

"It *shall* be collected, Moody! I will pay the subscription out of my own purse." Having asserted herself in those noble terms, she spoiled the effect of her own outburst of generosity by dropping to the sordid view of the subject in her next sentence. "Five hundred pounds is a good bit of money, though; isn't it, Moody?"

"It is indeed, my lady." Rich and generous as he knew his mistress to be, her proposal to pay the whole subscription took the steward by surprise. Lady Lydiard's quick perception instantly detected what was passing in his mind.

"You don't quite understand my position in this matter," she said. "When I read the newspaper notice of Mr. Tollmidge's death, I searched among his lordship's papers to see if they really were related. I discovered some letters from Mr. Tollmidge, which showed me that he and Lord Lydiard were cousins. One of those letters contains some very painful statements, reflecting most untruly and unjustly on my conduct—lies, in short," her ladyship burst out, losing her dignity, as usual. "Lies, Moody, for which Mr. Tollmidge deserved to be horsewhipped. I would have done it myself if his lordship had told me at the time. No matter; it's useless to dwell on the thing now," she continued, ascending again to the forms of expression which became a lady of rank. "This unhappy man has done me a gross injustice; my motives may be seriously misjudged if I appear personally in communicating with his family. If I relieve them anonymously in their present trouble, I spare them the exposure of a public subscription, and I do what I believe his lordship would have done himself if he had lived. My desk is on the other table. Bring it here, Moody, and let me return good for evil, while I'm in the humor for it."

Moody obeyed in silence. Lady Lydiard wrote a check.

"Take that to the banker's and bring back a £500 note," she said. "I'll inclose it to the clergyman as coming from 'an unknown friend.' And be quick about it. I am only a fallible mortal, Moody. Don't leave me time enough to take the stingy view of £500."

Moody went out with the check. No delay was to be apprehended in obtaining the money; the banking house was hard by, in St. James street. Left alone, Lady Lydiard decided on occupying her mind in the generous direction by composing her anonymous letter to the clergyman. She had just taken a sheet of note paper from her desk when a servant appeared at the door, announcing a visitor:

"Mr. Felix Sweetsir."

CHAPTER III.

"My nephew!" Lady Lydiard exclaimed, in a tone which expressed astonishment, but certainly not pleasure as well. "How many years is it since you and I last met?" she asked, in her abruptly straightforward way, as Mr. Felix Sweetsir approached her writing table.

The visitor was not a person easily discouraged. He took Lady Lydiard's hand, and kissed it with easy grace. A shade of irony was in his manner, agreeably relieved by a playful flash of tenderness.

"Years, my dear aunt?" he said. "Look in your glass, and you will see that time has stood still since we met last. How wonderfully well you wear! When shall we celebrate the appearance of your first wrinkle? I am too old; I shall never live to see it."

He took an easy chair, uninvited, placed himself close at his aunt's side, and ran his eye over her ill-chosen dress with an air of satirical admiration. "How perfectly successful!" he said, with his well-bred insolence. "What a chaste gayety of color!"

"What do you want?" asked her ladyship, not in the least softened by the compliment.

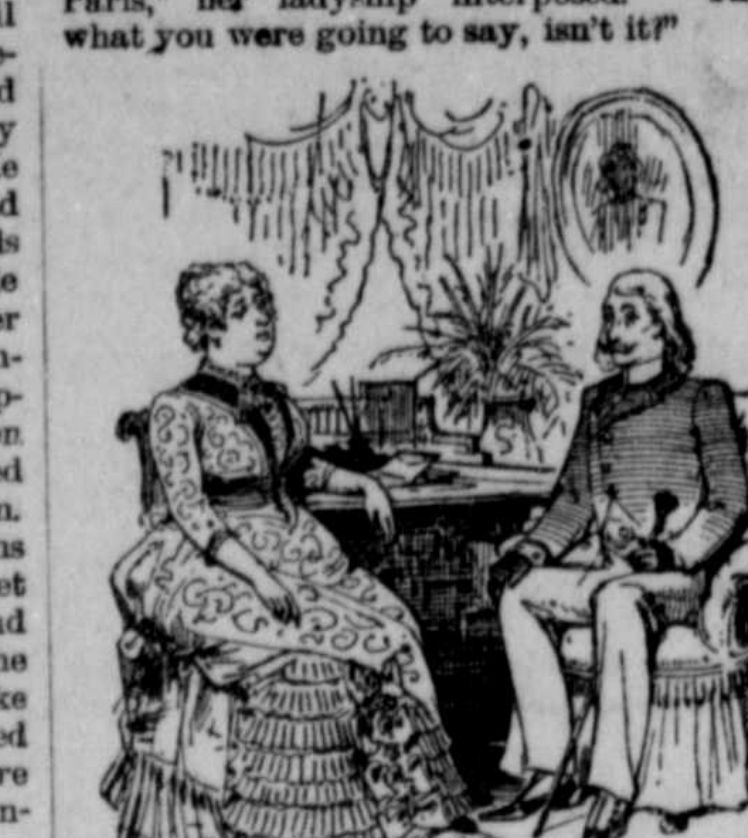
"I want to pay my respects to my dear aunt," Felix answered, perfectly impenetrable to his ungracious reception, and perfectly comfortable in a spacious armchair.

No pen-and-ink portrait need surely be drawn of Felix Sweetsir—he is too well-known a picture in society. The little, lithe man, with his bright, restless eyes, and his long iron-gray hair falling in curls to his shoulders; his airy step and his cordial manner; his uncertain age, his innumerable accomplishments, and his unbounded popularity—is he not familiar everywhere and welcome everywhere? How gratefully he receives, how prodigally he repays, the cordial appreciation of an admiring world! Every man he knows is "a charming fellow." Every woman he sees is "sweetly pretty." What picnics he gives on the banks of the Thames in the summer season! What a well-earned little income he derives from the whist table! What an inestimable actor he is at private theatricals of all sorts (weddings included)! Did you never read Sweetsir's novel, dashed off in the intervals of curative perspiration at a German bath? Then you don't know what brilliant fiction really is. He has never written a second work; he does everything, and only does it once. One song—the despair of professional composers. One picture—just to show how easily a gentleman can take up an art and drop it again. A really multiform man, with all the graces and all the accomplishments scintillating perpetually at his fingers' ends. If these poor pages have achieved nothing else, they have done a service to persons not in society by presenting them to Sweetsir. In his gracious company the narrative brightens; and writer and reader (catching reflected brilliancy) understand each other at last, thanks to Sweetsir.

"Well," said Lady Lydiard, "now you are here, what have you got to say for yourself? You have been abroad, of course. Where?"

"Principally at Paris, my dear aunt. The only place that is fit to live in—for this excellent reason, that the French are the only people who know how to make the most of life. One has relations and friends in England; and every now and then one returns to London——"

"When one has spent all one's money in Paris," her ladyship interposed. "That's what you were going to say, isn't it?"



"When one has spent all one's money in Paris," her ladyship interposed.

Felix submitted to the interruption with his delightful good humor.

"What a bright creature you are!" he exclaimed. "What would I not give for your flow of spirits! Yes; one does spend money in Paris, as you say. The clubs, the stock exchange, the race course; you try your luck here, there, and everywhere; and you lose and win, win and lose, and you haven't a dull day to complain of." He paused, his smile died away, he looked inquiringly at Lady Lydiard. "What a wonderful existence yours must be!" he resumed. "The everlasting question with your needy fellow-creatures, 'Where am I to get money?' is a question that has never passed your lips. Enviable woman!" He paused once more, surprised and puzzled this time. "What is the matter, my dear aunt? You seem to be suffering under some uneasiness."

"I am suffering under your conversation," her ladyship answered, sharply. "Money is a sore subject with me just now," she went on, with her eyes on her nephew, watching the effect of what she said. "I have spent five hundred pounds this morning with a scrape of my pen. And only a week since I yielded to temptation, and made an addition to my picture gallery." She looked, as she said those words, towards an archway at the farther end of the room, closed by curtains of purple velvet. "I really tremble when I think of what that one picture cost me before I could call it mine. A landscape by Hobbema; and the National Gallery bidding against me. Never mind!" she concluded, consoling herself, as usual, with considerations that were beneath her. "Hobbema will sell at my death for a bigger price than I gave for him—that's one comfort!" She looked again at Felix; a smile of mischievous satisfaction began to show itself in her face. Anything wrong with your watch chain?" she asked.

Felix, absently playing with his watch chain, started as if his aunt had suddenly awakened him. While Lady Lydiard had been speaking his vivacity had subsided little by little, and left him looking so serious and so old that his most intimate friend would hardly have known him again. Roused by the sudden question that had been put to him, he seemed to be casting about in his mind in search of the first excuse for his silence that might turn up. "I was wondering," he began, "why I miss something when I look round this beautiful room; something familiar, you know, that I fully expected to find here."

"Tommie?" suggested Lady Lydiard, still watching her nephew as maliciously as ever.

"That's it!" cried Felix, seizing his excuse, and rallying his spirits. "Why don't I hear Tommie snarling behind me? Why don't I feel Tommie's teeth in my trousers?"

The smile vanished from Lady Lydiard's face; the tone taken by her nephew in speaking of her dog was disrespectful in the extreme. She showed him plainly that she disapproved of it. Felix went on, nevertheless impenetrable to reproof of the silent sort. "Dear little Tommie! So delightfully fat, and such an infernal temper! I don't know whether I hate him or love him. Where is he?"

"Ill in bed," answered her ladyship, with a gravity which startled even Felix himself. "I wish to speak to you about Tommie. You know everybody. Do you know of a good dog doctor? The person I have employed so far doesn't at all satisfy me."

"Professional person?" inquired Felix.

"Yes."

"All humbugs, my dear aunt. The worse the dog gets the bigger the bill grows, don't you see? I have got the man for you—a gentleman. Knows more about horses and dogs than all the veterinary surgeons put together. We met in the boat yesterday crossing the channel. You know him by name, of course. Lord Rotherfield's youngest son, Alfred Hardyman."

"The owner of the stud farm? The man who has bred the famous racehorses?" cried Lady Lydiard. "My dear Felix, how can I presume to trouble such a great personage about my dog?"

Felix burst into his genial laugh. "Never was modesty more wofully out of place," he rejoined. "Hardyman is dying to be presented to your ladyship. He had heard, like everybody, of the magnificent decorations of this house, and he is longing to see them. His chambers are close by, in Pall Mall. If he is at home we will have him here in five minutes. Perhaps I had better see the dog first?"

Lady Lydiard shook her head. "Isabel says he had better not be disturbed," she answered. "Isabel understands him better than anybody."

Felix lifted his lively eyebrows with a mixed expression of curiosity and surprise. "Who is Isabel?"

Lady Lydiard was vexed with herself for carelessly mentioning Isabel's name in her nephew's presence. Felix was not the sort of person whom she was desirous of admitting to her confidence in domestic matters. "Isabel is an addition to my household since you were here last," she answered, shortly.

"Young and pretty?" inquired Felix. "Ah! you look serious, and you don't answer me. Young and pretty, evidently. Which may I see first, the addition to your household or the addition to your picture gallery? You look at the picture gallery—I am answered again." He rose to approach the archway, and stopped at his first step forward. "A sweet girl is a dreadful responsibility, aunt," he resumed, with an ironical assumption of gravity. "Do you know, I shouldn't be surprised if Isabel, in the long run, cost you more than Hobbema. Who is this at the door?"

The person at the door was Robert Moody, returned from the bank. Mr. Felix Sweetsir, being near sighted, was obliged to fit his eyeglass in position before he could recognize the prime minister of Lady Lydiard's household.

"Ah! our worthy Moody. How well he wears! Not a gray hair on his head—and look at mine! What dye do you use, Moody? If he had my open disposition he would tell. As it is, he looks unutterable things and holds his tongue. Ah! if I could only have held my tongue—when I was in the diplomatic service, you know—what a position I might have occupied by this time! Don't let me interrupt you, Moody, if you have anything to say to Lady Lydiard."

Having acknowledged Mr. Sweetsir's lively greeting by a formal bow, and a grave look of wonder which respectfully repelled that vivacious gentleman's flow of humor, Moody turned towards his mistress.

"Have you got the bank note?" asked her ladyship.

Moody laid the bank note on the table.

"Am I in the way?" inquired Felix.

"No," said his aunt. "I have a letter to write; it won't occupy me for more than a few minutes. You can stay here, or go and look at the Hobbema, which you please."

Felix made a second sauntering attempt to reach the picture gallery. Arrived within a few steps of the entrance, he stopped again, attracted by an open cabinet of Italian workmanship filled with rare old china. Being nothing if not a cultivated amateur, Mr. Sweetsir paused to pay his passing tribute of admiration before the contents of the cabinet. "Charming! charming!" he said to himself, with his head twisted appreciatively a little on one side. Lady Lydiard and Moody left him in undisturbed enjoyment of the china, and went on with the business of the bank note.

"Ought we to take the number of the note, in case of accident?" asked her ladyship.

Moody produced a slip of paper from his waistcoat pocket. "I took the number, my lady, at the bank."

"Very well. You keep it. While I am writing my letter suppose you direct the envelope. What is the clergyman's name?"

Moody mentioned the name and directed the envelope. Felix, happening to look round at Lady Lydiard and the steward while they were both engaged in writing, returned suddenly to the table, as if he had been struck by a new idea.

"Is there a third pen?" he asked. "Why shouldn't I write a line at once to Hardyman, aunt? The sooner you have his opinion about Tommie, the better—don't you think so?"

Lady Lydiard pointed to the pen-tray with a smile. To show consideration for her dog was to seize irresistibly on the high road to her favor. Felix set to work on his letter, in a large, scrambling handwriting, with plenty of ink and a noisy pen. "I declare, we are like clerks in an office," he remarked, in his cheery way. "All with our noses to the paper, writing as if we lived by it! Here, Moody, let one of the servants take this at once to Mr. Hardyman's."

The messenger was dispatched. Robert returned and waited near his mistress, with the directed envelope in his hand. Felix sauntered back slowly towards the picture gallery for the third time. In a moment more Lady Lydiard finished her letter, and folded up the bank note in it. She had just taken the directed envelope from Moody, and had just placed the letter inside it when a scream from the inner room, in which Isabel was nursing the sick dog, startled everybody. "My lady! my lady!" cried the girl, distractedly, "Tommie is in a fit! Tommie is dying!"

Lady Lydiard dropped the unclosed envelope on the table, and ran—yes, short as she was and fat as she was, ran—into the inner room. The two men, left together, looked at each other.

"Moody," said Felix, in his lazy, cynical way, "do you think if you or I were in a fit that her ladyship would run? Bah! these are the things that shake one's faith in human nature. I feel infernally seedy. That cursed channel passage—I tremble in my inmost stomach when I think of it. Get me something, Moody."

"What shall I send you, sir?" Moody asked, coldly.

"Some dry Curacoa and a biscuit. And let it be brought to me in the picture gallery. Damn the dog! I'll go and look at Hobbema."

This time he succeeded in reaching the archway, and disappeared behind the curtains of the picture gallery.

CHAPTER IV.

Left alone in the drawing room, Moody looked at the unfastened envelope on the table."

Considering the value of the inclosure, might he feel justified in wetting the gum and securing the envelope for safety's sake. After thinking it over, Moody decided that he was not justified in meddling with the letter. On reflection, her ladyship might have changes to make in it, or might have a postscript to add to what she had already written. Apart, too, from these considerations, was it reasonable to act as if Lady Lydiard's house was a hotel, perpetually open to the intrusion of strangers? Objects worth twice five hundred pounds in the aggregate were scattered about on the tables and in the unlocked cabinets all round him. Moody withdrew, without further hesitation, to order the light restoratives prescribed for himself by Mr. Sweetsir. The unclosed letter reposed in its place on the table.

The footman who took the Curacoa into the picture gallery found Felix recumbent on a sofa—to all appearance so completely absorbed in the Hobbema that he was quite unable to look at anything else.

He took the Curacoa mechanically, drained the glass at a draught, and held it out to be filled for the second time. "Don't interrupt me," he said, peevishly, catching the servant in the act of staring at him. "Put down the bottle and go!" Forbidden to look at Mr. Sweetsir, the man's eyes, as he left the gallery, turned wonderingly towards the famous landscape. And what did he see? He saw one towering big cloud in the sky that threatened rain, two withered, mahogany-colored trees sorely in want of rain, a muddy road greatly the worse for rain, and a vagabond boy running home who was afraid of the rain. That was the picture to the footman's eye. He took a gloomy view of the state of Mr. Sweetsir's brains on his return to the servants' hall. "A slate loose, poor devil!" That was the footman's report of the brilliant Felix.

An interval of some minutes elapsed, and at last the silence in the picture gallery was broken by voices penetrating into it from the drawing room. Felix rose to a sitting position on the sofa. He had recognized the voice of Alfred Hardyman saying, "Don't disturb Lady Lydiard, and the voice of Moody answering, "I will just knock at the door of her ladyship's room, sir; you will find Mr. Sweetsir in the picture gallery."

The curtains over the archway parted, and disclosed the figure of a tall, lean man, with a closely cropped head set a little stiffly on his shoulders. The immovable gravity of face and manner which every Englishman seems to acquire who lives constantly in the society of horses, was the gravity which this gentleman displayed as he entered the picture gallery. He was a finely made, sinewy man, with clearly cut, regular features. If he had not been affected with horses on the brain, he would doubtless have been personally popular with the women. As it was, the serene and melancholy gloom of the handsome horse breeder daunted the daughters of Eve, and they failed to make up their minds about the exact value of him, socially considered. Alfred Hardyman was, nevertheless, a remarkable man in his way. He had been offered the customary alternatives submitted to the younger sons of the nobility—the church or the diplomatic service—and had refused the one and the other. "I like horses," he said, "and I mean to get my living out of them. Don't talk to me about my position in the world. Talk to my eldest brother, who gets the money and the title." Starting in life with these sensible views, and with a small capital of five thousand pounds. Hardyman took his own place in the sphere that was fitted for him. At the period of this narrative he was already a rich man, and one of the greatest authorities on horse-breeding in England. His prosperity made no change in him. He was always the same grave, quiet, obstinately resolute man, true to the few friends whom he admitted to his intimacy, and sincere to a fault in the expression of his feelings among persons whom he distrusted or disliked. As he entered the picture gallery and paused for a moment looking at Felix on the sofa, his large, cold, steady gray eyes rested on the little man with an indifference that just verged on contempt. Felix, on the other hand, sprang to his feet with alert politeness, and greeted his friend with exuberant cordiality.

"Dear old boy! This is so good of you," he began. "I feel it; I do assure you I feel it!"

"You needn't trouble yourself to feel it," was the quietly ungracious answer. "Lady Lydiard brings me here. I come to see the house—and the dog." He looked round the gallery in his gravely attentive way. "I don't understand pictures," he remarked, resignedly. "I shall go back to the drawing room."

After a moment's consideration Felix followed him into the drawing room, with the air of a man who was determined not to be repelled.

"Well?" asked Hardyman. "What is it?"

"About that matter?" Felix said, inquiringly.

"What matter?"

"Oh, you know. Will next week do?"

"Next week *won't* do?"

Mr. Felix Sweetsir cast one look at his friend. His friend was too intently occupied with the decorations of the drawing room to notice the look.

"Will to-morrow do?" Felix resumed, after an interval.

"Yes."

"At what time?"

"Between twelve and one in the afternoon."

"Between twelve and one in the afternoon," Felix repeated. He looked again at Hardyman, and took his hat. "Make my apologies to my aunt," he said. "You must introduce yourself to her ladyship. I can't wait here any longer." He walked out of the room, having deliberately returned the contemptuous indifference of Hardyman by a similar indifference on his own side at parting.

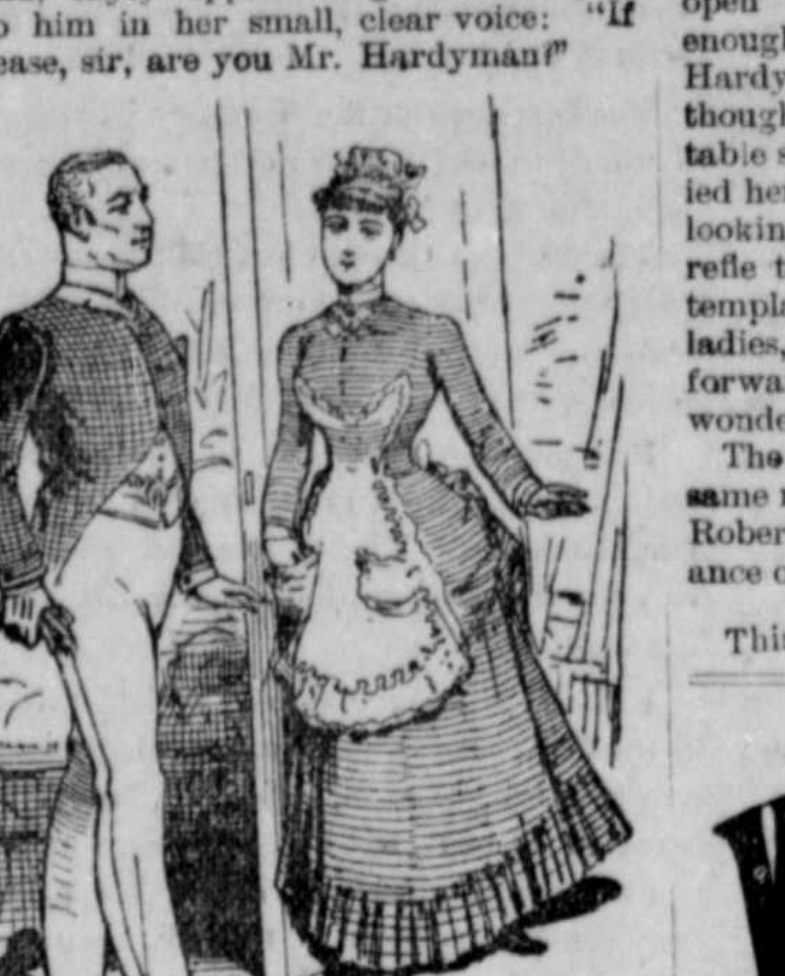
Left by himself, Hardyman took a chair and glanced at the door which led into the boudoir. The steward had knocked at the door, had disappeared through it, and had not appeared again. How much longer was Lady Lydiard's visitor to be left unnoticed in Lady Lydiard's house?

As the question passed through his mind the boudoir door opened. For once in his life Alfred Hardyman's composure deserted him. He started to his feet, like an ordinary mortal taken completely by surprise.

Instead of Mr. Moody, instead of Lady Lydiard, there appeared in the open doorway a young woman in a state of embarrassment, who actually quickened the beat of Mr. Hardyman's heart the moment he set eyes on her. Was the person who produced this amazing impression at first sight a person of importance? Nothing of the sort. She was only "Isabel," surnamed "Miller." Even her name had nothing in it. Only "Isabel Miller!"

Had she any pretensions to distinction in virtue of her personal appearance?

It is not easy to answer the question. The women (let us put the worst judges first) had long since discovered that she wanted that indispensable elegance of figure which is derived from the possession of waist and length of limb. The men (who were better acquainted with the subject) looked at her figure from their point of view, and finding it essentially embraceable asked for nothing more. It might have been her bright complexion, or it might have been the bold lustre of her eyes (as the women considered it) that dazzled the lords of creation generally, and made them all alike incompetent to discover her faults. Still, she had compensating attractions which no severity of criticism could dispute. Her smile, beginning at the lips, flowed brightly and instantly over her whole face. A delicious atmosphere of health, freshness and good humor seemed to radiate from her wherever she went and whatever she did. For the rest, her brown hair grew low over her broad, white forehead, and was topped by a neat little lace cap with ribbons of a violet color. A plain collar and plain cuffs encircled her smooth, round neck and her plump, dimpled hands. Her merino dress, covering but not hiding the charming outline of her bosom, matched the color of her cap ribbons, and was brightened by a white muslin apron coquettishly trimmed about the pockets, a gift from Lady Lydiard. Blushing and smiling she let the door fall to behind her, and, shyly approaching the stranger, said to him in her small, clear voice: "If you please, sir, are you Mr. Hardyman?"



"Are you Mr. Hardyman?"

The gravity of the great horse breeder deserted him at her first question. He smiled as he acknowledged that he was "Mr. Hardyman," he smiled as he offered her a chair.

"No, thank you, sir," she said, with a quaintly pretty inclination of her head. "I am only sent here to make her ladyship's apologies. She has put the poor, dear dog into a warm bath, and she can't leave him. And Mr. Moody can't come instead of me, because I was too frightened to be of any use, and so he had to hold the dog. That's all. We are very anxious, sir, to know if the warm bath is the right thing. Please come into the room and tell us."

She led the way back to the door. Hardyman, naturally enough, was slow to follow her. When a man is fascinated by the charm of youth and beauty he is in no hurry to transfer his attention to a sick animal in a bath. Hardyman seized on the first excuse that he could devise for keeping Isabel to himself—that is to say, for keeping her in the drawing room.

"I think I shall be better able to help you," he said, "if you will tell me something about the dog first."

Even his accent in speaking had altered to a certain degree. The quiet, dreary monotone in which he habitually spoke quickened a little under his present excitement. As for Isabel, she was too deeply interested in Tommie's welfare to suspect that she was being made the victim of a stratagem. She left the door and returned to Hardyman with eager eyes. "What can I tell you, sir?" she asked, innocently.

Hardyman pressed his advantage without mercy.

"You can tell me what sort of dog he is?"

"Yes, sir."

"How old he is?"

"Yes, sir."

"What his name is?—what his temper is?—what his illness is?—what disease his father and mother?—what——"

Isabel's head began to turn giddy. "One thing at a time, sir!" she interposed, with a gesture of entreaty. "His name is Tommie. We are obliged to call him by it, because he won't answer to any other than the name he had when my lady bought him. But we spell it with an 'ie' at the end, which makes it less vulgar than Tommy with a 'y.' I am very sorry, sir, I forget what else you wanted to know. Please to come in here, and my lady will tell you everything."

She tried to get back to the door of the boudoir. Hardyman, feasting his eyes on the pretty, changeful face that looked up at him with such innocent confidence in his authority, drew her away again from the door by the one means at his disposal. He returned to his questions about Tommie.

"Wait a little, please. What sort of a dog is he?"

Isabel turned back again from the door. To describe Tommie was a labor of love. "He is the most beautiful dog in the world!" the girl began, with kindling eye. "He has the most exquisite white curly hair and two light brown patches on his back, and, oh! *such* lovely dark eyes! They call him a Scotch terrier. When he is well his appetite is truly wonderful—nothing comes amiss to him, sir, from pate de foie gras to potatoes. He has his enemies, poor dear, though you wouldn't think it. People who won't put up with being bitten by him (what shocking tempers one does meet with, to be sure!) call him a mongrel. Isn't it a shame? Please come in and see him, sir; my lady will be tired of waiting."

Another journey to the door followed those words, checked instantly by a serious objection.

"Stop a minute! You must tell me what his temper is, or I can do nothing for him."

Isabel returned once more, feeling that it was really serious this time. Her gravity was even more charming than her gayety. As she lifted her face to him, with large, solemn eyes, expressive of her sense of responsibility, Hardyman would have given every horse in his stables to have had the privilege of taking her in his arms and kissing her

"Tommie has the temper of an angel with the people he likes," she said. "When he bites, it generally means that he objects to strangers. He loves my lady, and he loves Mr. Moody, and he loves me, and—and I think that's all. This way, sir, if you please; I am sure I heard my lady call."

"No," said Hardyman, in his immovably obstinate way. "Nobody called. About this dog's temper? Doesn't he take to any strangers? What sort of people does he bite in general?"

Isabel's pretty lips began to curl upward at the corners in a quiet smile. Hardyman's last imbecile question had opened her eyes to the true state of the case. Still, Tommie's future was in this strange gentleman's hands; she felt bound to consider that. And, moreover, it was no every day event in Isabel's experience to fascinate a famous personage, who was also a magnificent and perfectly dressed man. She ran the risk of wasting another minute or two and went on with the memoirs of Tommie.

"I must own, sir," she resumed, "that he behaves a little ungratefully—even to strangers who take an interest in him. When he gets lost in the streets (which is very often), he sits down on the pavement and howls till he collects a pitying crowd round him; and when they try to read his name and address on his collar he snaps at them. The servants generally find him and bring him back, and as soon as he gets home he turns round on the doorstep and snaps at the servants. I think it must be his fun. You should see him sitting up in his chair at dinner time, waiting to be helped, with his forepaw on the edge of the table, like the hands of a gentleman at a public dinner making a speech. But, oh!" cried Isabel, checking herself, with the tears in her eyes, "how can I talk of him in this way when he is so dreadfully ill! Some of them say it's bronchitis, and some say it's his liver. Only yesterday I took him to the front door to give him a little air, and he stood still on the pavement, quite stupefied. For the first time in his life he snapped at nobody who went by; and oh, dear, he hadn't even the heart to smell a lamp post!"

Isabel had barely stated this last afflicting circumstance when the memoirs of Tommie were suddenly cut short by the voice of Lady Lydiard—really calling this time—from the inner room.

"Isabel! Isabel!" cried her ladyship, "what are you about?"

Isabel ran to the door of the boudoir and threw it open. "Go in, sir! Pray go in!" she said.

"Without you?" Hardyman asked.

"I will follow you, sir. I have something to do for her ladyship first."

She still held the door open, and pointed entreatingly to the passage which led to the boudoir. "I shall be blamed, sir," she said, "if you don't go in."

This statement of the case left Hardyman no alternative. He presented himself to Lady Lydiard without another moment of delay.

Having closed the drawing room door on him, Isabel waited a little, absorbed in her own thoughts.

She was now perfectly well aware of the effect which she had produced on Hardyman. Her vanity, it is not to be denied, was flattered by his admiration—he was so grand and so tall, and he had such fine large eyes. The girl looked prettier than ever as she stood with her head down and her color heightened, smiling to herself. A clock on the chimney piece striking the half hour roused her. She cast one look at the glass as she passed it, and went to the table at which Lady Lydiard had been writing.

Methodical Mr. Moody, in submitting to be employed as bath attendant upon Tommie, had not forgotten the interests of his mistress. He reminded her ladyship that she had left her letter, with a bank note inclosed in it, unsealed. Absorbed in the dog, Lady Lydiard answered: "Isabel is doing nothing, let Isabel seal it. Show Mr. Hardyman in here," she continued, turning to Isabel, "and then seal a letter of mine which you will find on the table." "And when you have sealed it," careful Mr. Moody added, "put it back on the table; I will take charge of it when her ladyship has done with me."

Such were the special instructions which now detained Isabel in the drawing room. She lit the taper, and closed and sealed the open envelope, without feeling curiosity enough even to look at the address. Mr. Hardyman was the uppermost subject in her thoughts. Leaving the sealed letter on the table she returned to the fireplace and studied her own charming face attentively in the looking glass. The time passed, and Isabel's reflection was still the subject of Isabel's contemplation. "He must see many beautiful ladies," she thought, veering backward and forward between pride and humility. "I wonder what he sees in me!"

The clock struck the hour. Almost at the same moment the boudoir door opened and Robert Moody, released at last from attendance on Tommie, entered the drawing room.

This Story to be continued.]

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