

very well spare—her words; and will keep what she very much loves—her money!

'Oh, dear I' gasped Penelope Fitzlam, as if a shower-bath had descended upon her. 'You're so severe! so very severe, major! but who can it be, then, who gives away hundreds in our city and puts only initials? Let me see,' she continued, in a musing tone. 'P. L. S. There's the Devereux, and De Gange's and—'

'Spare your guesses, Miss Pen,—I have it,' said the major; 'it's Frances Lucy Staples, you may depend. I saw her full name to a cheque the other day, and made some other discoveries. Yes, yes; the little quiet body that you did not call upon because she was intimate with the Tiffanys, and who has never been invited to any of your fussy—pardon me—charity gatherings I mean.'

'But, nevertheless, one would not be rude you know, major,' said Miss Arrabella Fitzlam, the youngest sister, with a wintry smile wandering over her hard face, and making it look yet more cold and worldly, 'If this lady is rich, and unfortunately has no acquaintance but these Tiffanys—who no doubt, have fastened themselves on her—we must cultivate her. I shall call upon her to-morrow. But what makes you think she has given this sum of money to the Indian Fund?'

'Oh, because I know she is generous, if not rich. There's no one else among us—poor, proud puppets that we are—could or would afford a quarter the sum.'

'But,' persisted Mrs. St. Leger, with true wifely curiosity, 'tell us how it is she is so rich. Who is she?'

'A lady, my dear, who condescended to live usefully. She may not be exactly rich, but she has money, and she made it. A retired shop-keeper.'

'Oh, horrid! A tradesman is bad enough—that is, except as a tradesman—but a tradeswoman! Really, major, your "lady" soared at first like a balloon in your description, but your conclusion is quite a collapse.' A little, dry crackling sound, meant to be a laugh, followed this bit of Miss Penelope's oratory.

The major knit his brows, grasped his crutch-stick tight in his hands, and leaning forward on it, as he sat in his easy chair, answered:

'I repeat my words. Mrs. Staples, whose identity with a well-remembered friend of days long past I never discovered until I recently saw her Christian name, is, I repeat it, a lady who has lived usefully, I may add nobly—a great distinction—for one who has not had the joy or sorrow of near ties. Properly speaking she is still *Miss* Staples, though her age sanctions the more matronly title usually given her. It may be, ladies that, amid your studies in musty family records, and your careful adjustment, of etiquette and conventionalism—the CASTR prejudices of the West, are as arbitrary, and far more inconsistent, than those of the East—it may be that you have lost heart as well as head. If so, I keep my story to myself, if not—'

'Oh! pray, major,' exclaimed the usually quiet Mary Fitzlam, the second sister, 'tell us about her. If we are really so very wrong, set us right.'

'Ah! my dear major, do leave fault-finding, and tell us this story,' echoed Mrs. St. Leger.

'Well it's soon told ladies. Thirty years ago, or more, there was a rich old fool of a knight in Devonshire'—

The audience all laughed at this beginning, and Miss Penelope, who was not wanting in shrewdness, said, 'Happy Devonshire, if it is thirty years since they have had such a commodity as a rich old fool!'

'Oh! madam, spare your criticisms. The breed is not extinct in Devon, or elsewhere. This Sir John Polixphene's folly showed itself thus: being left a widower, he commenced a search after a second wife, and sought among ladies who were about the age of his first wife when he had married her forty years before. A rich young girl to whom he proposed laughed out so honestly at his preposterous offer, that for some time his folly was kept in check; but it broke forth again as he was visiting at the house of a medical gentleman in Exeter, whom I will call Dr. Hale. Now the doctor had a numerous young family—a little hundred, as we say—and he complained, as if his burden was not sufficiently great, an orphan sister of his wife's lived with them, who certainly did not add to the pressure. Poor thing! she had not an easy life, for she was a *fag* to the children, doing more than any nursemaid or governess, without wages, and yet was expected to keep up an appearance as a young lady, and not disgrace the family by appearing shabby, or libel it by looking melancholy. I don't say they were unkind. They were straitened in means, and had to make a smooth surface to the world, and very hard work that was for all, but most for the sister, who was overworked, underfed, and yet regarded as a favoured dependent. An elder sister years before had lived with Mrs. Hale, but being well-educated and high-spirited, she took flight to India, meaning to be a governess, or something of that kind; but the disgrace, as Dr. Hale called it, of such a step was prevented by her marrying a poor gentleman in the civil service there. Meanwhile the younger sister had grown up in bondage, and had no means, it seemed, of escape. She was finally taught, as girls were mostly then and so a genteel drudge she was, and knew pretty well the meaning of the word torture.'

'But imagine the sensation that was caused when old Sir John Polixphene looked in the face of this poor thing, and saw that it was very fair amid its pensiveness, and that her being grown out of her vamped-up frock was by no means a way to hide the graces of her form. But I'm not going to dwell on this ogreish love. The young girl shrank from him as a pure nature, revolted by hoary imbecility and folly, would and should. But the family, when they saw this monstrous infatuation of the old man's, were in ecstasies. Their little *fag* was instantly elevated into a person of consequence in the household, and "Don't tease darling Aunty so" was the new strange command to the children, who had always considered "Little Aunty" as their lawful property, as much as the nursery kitten that they pulled and pinched—only Aunty had no talons.'

'Shame, perhaps, kept Mrs. Hale from any explanation with her sister. She thought that the prospect of leaving a scene of toil, having a rich home, and being called "My lady" would overcome any natural repugnance the young girl might have to the man who could offer these advantages. So there came a day when, by the