

Startled by the unexpected appearance of the object of her reflections, half terrified lest he had read in her changing countenance, that he himself was the object of them, Florence stammered forth some indistinct reply, whilst the hue of her cheek deepened to scarlet. A momentary silence followed, whilst she inwardly anathematized the perverse fate by which she ever appeared to him in so unfavorable and awkward a light. Seeming not to notice her embarrassment, the Colonel attentively drew an ottoman towards her, for she was standing, and exclaimed:

"If I might solicit any favour on so short an acquaintance, Miss Fitz-Hardinge, I would ask you to enlighten me concerning the names of some of our guests. A stranger in London, all those faces, with two or three exceptions, are unfamiliar to me."

Here was a wide field for Florence to display her polished wit, her brilliant powers of satire, but despite her efforts, she could not throw off the singular feeling of restraint that her companion's presence imposed upon her. In a calm, and what she considered most sickeningly tame manner, did she give the required information; passing but a few simple remarks on one or two individuals of the party—remarks whose inoffensive nature Lord St. Albans himself could not have quarrelled with. Suddenly Colonel Delamere asked with a look of interest:

"Who is that very graceful looking woman, speaking to lady Howard?"

"That is one of our stars. The youthful widow of Sir Delmour Melton. The artist who took her portrait said, that he had never in the course of his life, met with a more faultless face. Is she not very lovely?"

"She is indeed; but is beauty her only attraction?" he asked, with a slight smile, as he noted the rapid animation with which the lady was conversing.

"By no means. Lady Melton's powers of wit equal even her personal charms. You cannot imagine how delightful her conversation is, so sparkling, so witty; and then, her talent for mimicry is matchless." The former expression of Colonel Delamere's face instantly changed to one of cold contempt.

"Thank you, Miss Fitz-Hardinge, you have warned me in time. I do not think Lady Melton and I will be ever more intimately acquainted."

"But why?" she asked.

"Simply because, if there is a character I sovereignly detest, it is that of a sarcastic wit. One of that unfeeling class from whose jests, home, family religion, nothing is sacred; one who watches the weaknesses and sorrows of poor

human nature, not to advise or to comfort, but to confer additional misery by adding to other pangs the galling one of mockery. Such a character, reprehensible in any sex, is surely doubly so in woman, in her from whom we expect nothing but gentleness and delicate compassion. Do you not entirely agree with me, Miss Fitz-Hardinge?" and he fixed his earnest, meaning glance, on Florence's burning face.

"I think you view the matter in rather a serious light!" she at length returned, endeavouring to disguise her confusion. "When carried to such an excess as you have described, of course 'tis wrong, nay sinful; but when merely directed against trifles, it may prove a source of mirthful, as well as innocent amusement."

"Yes, to all save the unfortunate individual who happens to be the victim of the wit! Oh! I am certain that, in your heart, you not only disapprove, but detest, such a quality."

Florence looked up, and saw in her companion's eyes, the same strange, inexplicable expression, which had once before puzzled her; but, without waiting to conjecture its meaning, she boldly returned:

"I was never more in earnest in my life, Colonel Delamere, and with good reason, for 'tis my own character I am defending."

"Impossible!" he rejoined, with an accent of incredulous surprise, which a lurking smile in the corner of his mouth somewhat contradicted. "Impossible! They told me so, but I would not for one moment believe them!"

"And so you came to learn from your own proper experience. Well, do you intend now to shun me as religiously as you have resolved to do poor Lady Melton?"

"Excuse my soldier frankness, but I fear, Miss Fitz-Hardinge, if the same cause existed, I would. My own observation, however, and the sentiments of Lady Howard, convince me it is otherwise."

His countenance had again become grave, and the light repartee that had risen to Florence's lips died away, for her heart told her it would be ill received. Somewhat to her relief, lady Howard came up just then.

"What are you doing here," she gaily asked, "gazing so sentimentally at the star-light? Come, Colonel Delamere, can you not prevail on Miss Fitz-Hardinge to grant you her hand for a dance? that is, if you have not quarrelled already, for I am rather apprehensive that your mutual views on some topics are too widely opposed to permit of harmony long reigning between you."

"We can scarcely decide on that point so soon, fair cousin," he smilingly rejoined, as Florence