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FLORENCE; OR, WIT AND WISDOM.*

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CHAPTER XXIII.

WE now return to our heroine. "Where are you going?" inquired Miss Murray of her niece, as the latter stood one morning before the mirror, adjusting her pretty pink bonnet.

"To call on lady Howard. As you have been complaining of head-ache I suppose 'tis useless to ask you to accompany me. I promise, however, not to remain long," and with a gay farewell she entered the carriage. Lady Howard, who was now transformed from the giddy, childish Cecilia Stanton into the elegant and dignified woman, received her with affectionate cordiality, and after kindly enquiring for Miss Murray, exclaimed:

"Oh! Miss Fitz-Hardinge, I have some news for you. Who do you think has arrived from foreign climes, so bronzed and martial looking that I could scarcely recognize him? You look puzzled; 'tis my cousin, Alfred Delamere."

"What! the Major Delamere you used to vaunt so much at school long ago?"

"The same," and young lady Howard merrily laughed. "He has been promoted to the rank of Colonel some time since. You remember how we used to sit for hours together talking about him. I, recounting his exploits, which I had learned from uncle Delamere, and you listening 'till we were both half in love with him."

"How absurd!" returned Florence, with a smile, whose mirth was somewhat tinged with melancholy. "We were but mere children then, and he a man already entered on the struggle of life; and yet those days were happy—happier than any we have known since. The arts and caresses, too, we employed to coax the journals

from our English governess, and then, in some corner of the play-ground, peruse with such trembling hearts the lists of killed and wounded, lest we should discover our hero's name among them. What portraits I used to draw of your cousin, in my own imagination; portraits, perhaps, as unlike the original as possible; for he, as yet, I have never seen—but all bright and faultless. Oh! I am really very anxious to see this gallant Delamere, and if his actual presence makes as deep an impression on me now, as his ideal one did on the school girl, I will have good cause to tremble for my boasted heart-freedom."

"Hush! Florence," rapidly ejaculated her companion, a vivid blush suffusing her cheek. Half divining the truth, Florence sprang round, and saw behind her a tall, middle-aged man, of foreign but elegant appearance, who had entered the room unobserved, whilst she was speaking. Lady Howard, who was almost convulsed with laughter, with great difficulty contrived to falter:

"Colonel Delamere, Miss Fitz-Hardinge," and the latter, overwhelmed with shame and vexation, bestowed on the new comer a bow, whose haughtiness must have somewhat counterbalanced the flattering effect of her preceding speech. After an inclination, low but almost equally cold, he approached lady Howard, and handing her a note, exclaimed in tones whose impressive and singularly musical accents sank deep into the heart of one of his listeners.

"Pardon my intrusion, Cecilia, but Mrs. Ellerslie made me promise to deliver it at once."

Lady Howard took it, and exclaiming: "Your pardon, dear Miss Fitz-Hardinge!" broke the seal. On her addressing the latter, Colonel Delamere's glance involuntarily turned in the