

**My Lady's Money**

**By**

**Wilkie Collins**

AN EPISODE IN THE LIFE OF A YOUNG GIRL

PERSONS OF THE STORY

Women:

Lady Lydiard (Widow of Lord Lydiard)

Isabel Miller (her Adopted Daughter)

Miss Pink (of South Morden)

The Hon. Mrs. Drumblade (Sister to the Hon. A. Hardyman)

Men

The Hon. Alfred Hardyman (of the Stud Farm)

Mr. Felix Sweetsir (Lady Lydiard's Nephew)

Robert Moody (Lady Lydiard's Steward)

Mr. Troy (Lady Lydiard's Lawyer)

Old Sharon (in the Byways of Legal Bohemia)

Animal

Tommie (Lady Lydiard's Dog)

## 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 RT. 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 high-flown 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 the 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 ever presumed to see 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 cannot 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 upwards, 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 in 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 towards 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 further 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, in the matter of age, 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 downwards 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 arrayed her short, clumsy figure in colors that were far too bright for a woman of her ages. 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 everyday 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.