

# LORD LOCKINGTON

## BY FLORENCE WARDEN

### CHAPTER XXII.

EDNA started to her feet and put up her hands. But even at that moment she did not forget to lower her voice, so greatly did she dread disturbing the dying man in the next room.

"Please, please," she pleaded, "don't blindfold me again. Indeed, there's no need."

The voice she began to know so well answered gently, but firmly: "I want you to submit to it, though, and to go back as you came. It's not my wish or whim—it's someone else's."

Edna gave a little moaning sigh. "But when I know!" pleaded she. "I'm in the house of Mr. Kage, I'm quite sure. I was led through an underground passage that came out by the door in the little stone house in the park, and then by another shorter passage under the road outside."

"Well, whatever you know or whatever you fancy, you must, I think, be guided by me. And you may know why if you like. Lord Lockington wishes to be left in peace. As long as it is not known where he is, he is safe; but if it were known that he is very ill—dangerously ill—he would be subjected to a persecution which would disturb his last hours. At least, that is his own idea, and we are bound to humour it."

Edna sighed deeply. "Won't you then at least let me know now who you are? Mayn't I see you just once? And after that I'll go back blindfold, just as I came, without any more protests."

"Wait a little," said the voice. "That's all I can say."

"Are you Mr. Kage?"

"You shall know that and everything—very soon."

Coaxing her, leading her meanwhile, he had got her to the door, and now he was gently urging her towards the staircase. A voice which the girl recognized as that of someone she knew called out suddenly:

"My gracious!"

Her companion started, and so indeed did Edna. "Who was that?" she cried, as once more she instinctively put her hand to the bandage round her eyes.

"I don't know," said he, uneasily. "Someone has been playing the spy, I suppose! Never mind, you won't have to suffer long for your kindness."

This was said in a reassuring whisper in her ear. Edna was trembling, almost sobbing. The tension of her nerves was telling upon her, she almost felt as if to go through those long passages again would be impossible. For a moment she hung back, faltering.

"Oh, please—" she began in a hoarse whisper.

With an encouraging warmth of grasp, he laid his left hand upon hers, which was drawn through his right arm.

"Courage!" he said. "Courage! You're a brave girl, and the ordeal won't last long."

Putting strong constraint upon herself she conquered her nervous tremors, and allowed herself to be led down the staircase by the door into the room that smelt of the stable, and then down again into the shorter under-ground passage, once more they passed out into the open air, and then by the heavy wooden door into the long passage, damp and earthy, which now seemed, however, shorter than it had done before. Very little was said during the return journey either by the girl or her companion. And, being thus free to indulge her own thoughts, she tried hard to remember whose the voice was that she had heard just before leaving the house where she had conversed with the dying man.

It was a feminine voice, and this narrowed her search. A cold shiver passed through her when the remembrance flashed suddenly upon her of the occasion on which she had last heard it. For she remembered that it was the voice of Miss Woods, the dressmaker.

Then, indeed, poor Edna felt sure that a desperately hard time was before her. She knew how maliciously the dressmaker had spoken to her, and she had already guessed that Miss Woods was one of the spies employed by Lady Lockington to keep her informed of all that went on at the Hall

during her absence.

Here was a titbit of gossip to report to the Viscountess! That Edna had been smuggled into the house, and smuggled out again.

Edna sighed in despair at the thought. But after all, what difference could it make now? Lord Lockington was dying; her work at the Hall was over. It would be very unpleasant, certainly, to have to go through the ordeal of Lady Lockington's recriminations, and she felt sure they would be bitter; but the lady could do no more than be disagreeable, and if she should try to injure Edna's chances of getting employment elsewhere, there was always Mrs. Holland to go to for help, which she felt sure the housekeeper would not refuse when she knew the whole of the story.

And that she felt sure she would now soon be able to tell.

The thought of the scene she had just gone through was so distressing, indeed, that she dwelt but little upon her own personal griefs, great as they threatened to become; the sound of the pitiful voice, the touch of the kind hand acted like a spell upon her, filling her heart with tender compassion and awe.

Whatever she might have to go through—and the spiteful dressmaker would certainly make such a report as would subject her to some bitter attacks—she would be loyal to her generous friend, and Lord Lockington's hiding-place—if hiding-place it were—should be left undisturbed.

SUDDENLY Edna stopped short in the middle of the journey. "How long have we been—altogether?" she asked, abruptly.

"From first to last, I suppose we shall have been about an hour and a-half."

She drew a long breath. "They will have missed me, perhaps," she said. "I am usually only an hour in the old wing of the Hall."

"Who are 'they'?"

"There's the butler, Revesby. It is he who always leads me there and takes me away, and who brings me all Lord Lockington's messages."

"He's all right. He'd sooner cut off his right hand than betray his master."

"You're sure of that?"

"Quite sure."

Her companion spoke with confidence.

"But then there's Lady Lockington. She listens; she watches. I wonder whether she will have noticed how long I've been away?"

"We must hope not. Can you stand firm if you're badgered a bit?"

"Oh, yes, yes."

"It won't be for very long. I'm sorry you should have to run the risk, but—you won't repent it, I promise you."

"Oh, no, no! If it's Lord Lockington's wish that I should keep silent, I will, whatever they do to me."

"Pluckily spoken. Now here we are at the last flight of steps. You've been a good girl, a brave girl. I honour you for it. Heaven bless you!"

They were nearly at the top of the stairs, and her companion raised her hand to his lips.

"Now," said he, "I'll remove the bandage for you and let you through. And I hope you'll find they haven't noticed your absence."

The handkerchief was off by this time, and she was standing close to the wooden door as she knew by the hollow sound of it as her companion passed one hand in front, unlocked it, and gently pushed her through into the room, closing and locking himself in at once on the other side.

A low cry broke from Edna's lips. For the butler was waiting in the room for her, with a look of anxiety on his wooden face.

"My lady has been asking for you, ma'am," he said, in a troubled voice. "I've told her you were singing to his Lordship, but she don't seem to believe me. I've had a difficulty in keeping her out of here. This is the only way to his Lordship's quarters, and I'm afraid of her getting in and—trying to disturb his Lordship. Please go out as quickly as you can, ma'am, when we get to the end of the passage, and I'll lock the door again at once."

Edna bowed her head in assent, though she felt very doubtful whether they would succeed in satisfying a suspicious and jealous woman. Revesby probably knew everything, she thought, but was evidently to be trusted. She could give herself safely into his hands; and she followed him down

the passage, and waited in silence while he put his ear to the crack of the door, listening for sounds outside.

"I think all is clear, ma'am," he said, as he cautiously unlocked the door and peeped out, and made way for her to pass him.

Edna ran out, with a feeling of great relief, when she found that no one was lying in wait for her outside.

But she congratulated herself too soon. For she had not gone two steps further than the top of the stairs on the way to her own room when Lady Lockington's maid ran out towards her from the corridor which led to her mistress's suite of rooms, and said:

"Oh, Miss Bellamy, my lady would be glad to speak to you for a moment, if you please."

Edna saw at once, from the girl's manner, that something had been found out, and that her worst fears were about to be realized.

"I'll come to her Ladyship in two minutes," said she, instinctively glancing down at her shoes, which were in a very tell-tale condition, being plastered with mud and slime in spite of her hasty efforts to cleanse them on the mats she had passed.

The maid's eyes followed hers. "Oh, yes, I'll tell her Ladyship," she said, as she retreated, Edna felt sure, to give a clear account to her mistress of the heated and dishevelled condition in which she had seen the unhappy young musician.

Indeed, Edna had not known herself how very eloquent her appearance was of the sort of experience she had been through. But when she stood before her looking-glass, and saw how the bandage had disordered her hair, and noted the green marks of damp on her light blouse and on her hands, she gave herself up for lost.

It took some minutes to wash her hands and face, to change her shoes and her dress, and to rearrange her hair. So that it was quite ten minutes later when she came out of her own room, and going, reluctantly but desperately, to Lady Lockington's rooms, knocked, trembling, at the door of the boudoir.

Lady Lockington called out "Come in," in a rasping voice, and Edna, as she entered, saw a skirt disappearing through a doorway into an adjoining room, and was sure in her own mind that its wearer could be no other than the dressmaker, Miss Woods.

Lady Lockington, who was sitting in a deep arm-chair by the fire, was looking angrier than Edna had ever seen her.

"Where have you been passing the morning, Miss Bellamy?" she asked, harshly, without asking the girl to sit down.

"I've been in the old wing, Lady Lockington."

"Ah! And was it in the old wing that you got your shoes covered with mud and green slime, your hair disordered, and your dress wet and soiled?"

Edna, who was prepared for this onslaught, looked down and said nothing.

"Answer me, please."

"I'm afraid I have nothing more to say, Lady Lockington."

There was a flush on the lady's face underneath the powder, and a light in her eyes, which convinced the girl before her that, whatever she might say, she would have to leave the Hall before the day was out, or submit to treatment which would be unbearable. However, this was not of so much consequence now that she knew her work was over. Indeed, the thought of this, and of the sad scene which she had gone through, overpowered everything else in Edna's mind, and made her care comparatively little for the fierce attack to which she had to submit. The one important thing was to admit nothing, to give the angry lady no possible clue, if she could help it, to the fact that it was to Lord Lockington that she had been called.

"BUT that is not enough. I don't think you quite understand the importance of this, Miss Bellamy. You tell me you have been in the old wing all the morning. Do you mean that you have been playing and singing all the morning to Lord Lockington?"

"I'm afraid, Lady Lockington, that I can tell you nothing but what I have said," said Edna, desperately. "I was engaged to sing and play to Lord Lockington, and really, I think that, if he is satisfied with me, it ought to be sufficient."

"You are insulting!"

"Oh, no, I didn't mean to be that. But when I am sent for to do the work I was engaged to do—and when I do it to the best of my ability, and to the satisfaction of my employer—I think I ought to be safe from such a scene as this."

The girl looked up suddenly, her blue eyes flashing.

Lady Lockington was not prepared for such a  
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