

ago. He doesn't take any interest in shooting or anything else now."

"He couldn't shoot if he's an invalid?" said Edna.

Mrs. Holland threw at her a quick look. "No, of course he couldn't," she said, quickly, with an air of being tired of the subject.

Edna walked on again in that mood of puzzled silence so usual with her now, and made no attempt to learn any more from her companion concerning her employer.

The church to which they were wending their way was an old one, stone-built, with a square tower and three aisles. It was of fair size, and was well filled with a typical country congregation such as Edna was surprised to find within so few miles of a great city.

She sat with the housekeeper in the Hall pew, which was comfortably cushioned and very large, and Edna could not help noticing, as the pew was placed at right angles to most of the other pews, the intense interest with which she, as a stranger, was regarded by the rest of the congregation. Whenever her eyes turned in the direction of the body of the church, she was sure to find somebody else's eyes fixed upon her.

Of course, this was really not very surprising, considering that the parish was a country one, where everybody knew everybody else, and especially considering the singular circumstances of life at the Hall, as known by everyone.

Still, Edna was rather disconcerted by the great amount of attention she excited, and she would willingly have escaped another ordeal which awaited her when service was over.

A lady, who had occupied a pew opposite to that of the Hall, was standing outside the church porch surrounded by her children and speaking and nodding to so many members of the congregation as they passed out that it was easy to discover she was the vicar's wife.

Indeed, just as Edna came out in the porch, Mrs. Holland whispered in her ear: "That's Mrs. Eastham, the vicar's wife. She's sure to speak to you."

And, indeed, Mrs. Eastham may almost be said to have pounced upon Edna and her companion as they came out.

"Ah, Mrs. Holland, how do you do?" said the vicar's wife, who was a very homely-looking lady in sidespring boots, white stockings, and the sort of clothes which might be expected to correspond with those details. "And so this is Miss Bellamy. I suppose? How do you do?"

And thus abruptly introducing herself, Mrs. Eastham, shaking Edna by the hand, and dexterously whisking her out of the pathway into the long grass between the graves, went on: "I must introduce you to Mr. Eastham. Mrs. Holland, may we take her home to dinner with us?"

"I'm sure she'd be delighted," said the housekeeper.

Edna tried to look as if she were, without much success.

Seven pairs of rather uninteresting light eyes, those of the vicar's family, were fixed upon her with so much interest that it was difficult to imagine that she would have a very lively time at the vicarage.

Then the vicar came out, and Miss Bellamy was introduced by his wife to a tall, grave, elderly man with a pleasant face, a manner which was too cold, but dignified and refined, and a strong Lancashire burr in his speech.

Edna had to walk between the two elders, and she found the ordeal a trying one, as, although without impertinence, they were evidently anxious to know all about her engagement, and thought it a curious one.

But it was when they had reached the vicarage, a pleasant old house with large windows and good gardens, that the worst part of her suffering commenced.

In the short interval before the early dinner, Mrs. Eastham, in the pleasantest and kindest way, took her to a corner of the drawing-room, as far as possible from the children, who were talking to their governess and a Sunday school helper from a neighbouring house, and plied her simply and straightforwardly with questions.

"And so you never see Lord Lockington?" was an important one.

"I don't think he ever sees anyone," said Edna.

"But you know he listens to your playing?"

"Oh, yes, and he accompanies my singing on the organ in the next room."

"Indeed! And do you have to live all by yourself?"

"Yes, but I don't mind it."

"Do you have to go out for walks by yourself?"

Here again was the very question which Miss Woods had insisted on so strongly. Almost wearily Edna replied:

"This is the first time I've been outside the park walls."

"And your parents are dead, you say?"

"Yes."

"And your aunt takes care of you?"

"Yes."

"Did she come up here with you?"

"No. It was too long and expensive a journey."

"Will you go home for Christmas?"

"I don't know. I haven't been told yet."

"Because, you don't mind my saying so, and I don't want our talk to reach the ears of my daughters; but Lady Lockington comes down here sometimes for Christmas, and she brings very curious people with her, and I think you had better arrange to leave the Hall before they come."

"I shall have to do what Lord Lockington wishes," said Edna, simply.

"Well, it's better, in such a thing as that, to have a mind of one's own. Both the vicar and I think you will do well to avoid the visit of Lady Lockington and her friends if you can."

"Thank you," said Edna. "It's very kind of you to advise me."

But she did not feel grateful. She felt aggrieved at the sort of attention she appeared to excite, malevolent in some quarters, and apparently impertinent in others. For certainly, as far as her experience of the Hall had been, she had had nothing to complain of.

"It's a very strange situation for a young girl to have taken at all," Mrs. Eastham went on.

"When you have to earn your living, you have to take what you can," replied Edna, simply.

"Well, but I should have thought that a governess's situation in a nice family—"

"I don't think I know enough to teach," pleaded Edna. "And I shouldn't like it either."

"It's not so much what one likes as what is right and proper," said the vicar's wife, rather primly. "And if you couldn't teach older pupils you could have begun as a nursery governess."

Edna said nothing to this. But her bosom swelled with resentment at this suggestion, which would have been repudiated so vigorously, as she felt sure, if it had been made in regard to one of the speaker's own daughters.

On the whole Edna found little enjoyment in her visit, for the dinner was a terrible meal, in which all sat in solemn silence, save for a few perfunctory remarks which the vicar's wife felt bound to address from time to time to her two visitors, and for their own spasmodic attempts to keep up some sort of conversation in the circumstances.

She felt a thrill of joy when the time for Sunday school arrived, and she was free to go back to the Hall, after answering evasively a question as to whether she would like to take up some work in the Sunday school or in the parish in the future.

Edna felt chilled and heartsore as she went back along the country road to the park gates, and was glad when she reached them.

CHAPTER XIV.

IF the Viscount was silent, at least he could be kind, and he was certainly generous. And Mrs. Holland, although she might show herself easily offended, was in the main very warm-hearted and friendly.

But the people at the vicarage seemed to her cold, curious, and unsympathetic. The light eyes of the children had pierced her with their glances like so many arrows, and the somewhat aggressive curiosity of the vicar and his wife had been harder still to bear.

She felt herself grow happier even at the sight of Revesby's wooden face when he opened the door. And when she got upstairs to her own room, she threw herself into a chair before the fire and warmed her hands and looked round her at the pretty, bright room, with a delightful feeling of being at home again.

She had become cold and miserable



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