

LORD LOCKINGTON

BY FLORENCE WARDEN

CHAPTER V.

IF Edna had felt small and lonely before, when she sat alone in the great hall at the piano, and when she was first introduced to the grandeur of her two rooms and her maid, what were her feelings when, entering by a door which was held open for her by the solemn and disagreeable Revesby, she found herself in an enormous apartment with a

lofty open roof of carved oak and high walls covered with family portraits, in which she felt herself to be but a speck, an insect, an insignificant atom of humanity amid the stately splendours of centuries.

How could she eat, alone and in such state, under the faces of rows upon rows of ladies with farthingales and stomachers, the artificial smiles of more ladies in floating draperies and high-piled hair, and the stern looks of gentlemen in armour beside their horses, gentlemen in ruffs and long gowns, gentlemen in white wigs and swords.

Edna glanced a frightened glance towards them, but kept her eyes away from the still more alarming living occupants of the room, the impassive, disagreeable butler, the consumptive footman she had already seen, and a second, more imposing, with a deep voice and an air of world-weariness which was impressive and superior.

These three men were all in liveries which, though black and very quiet, seemed amazingly splendid to the inexperienced girl.

She felt that if she could once get through the ordeal of eating with creditable indifference to her surroundings, in the presence of these portraits and those servants, life, even in Lockington Hall, would have no further terrors for her.

Even at that moment, when she was so fully occupied with her own novel sensations, she was struck by the strange appearance of the dining-table, which had been reduced to the smallest dimensions of which it was capable, but which was even thus about seven feet square.

Under the lofty, beamed roof and in the enormous room this table looked like a postage-stamp. It was gracefully arranged with flowers and fruit, with peaches and pears, roses, ferns, and chrysanthemums.

"From the gardens and hothouses, ma'am," said the butler explained to her with dignified condescension.

Edna, although she had at the first moment experienced a feeling of alarm and of utter insignificance at the sight of so much state, presently recovered her self-possession and began to enjoy herself. She even, in her girlish mind, saw the humour of the thing, and imagined the letter she would write to her aunt, who would, she felt sure, think that she was "making up" when she told her about the magnificence of her surroundings.

When at last she was left alone to enjoy her peach by herself, Edna indulged in a scrupulous examination of all round her, such as had not been possible while she was conscious of three pairs of observant eyes about her.

She thought that the room must be something like that in which the king dined, and she felt sure that she had seen no finer paintings than those by which she was surrounded in any collection she had ever visited.

The splendid beams of the roof, the harmonious tints of the tapestries which hung as curtains before the three windows, struck her with a sense of delight. It was all so handsome, yet so subdued, so unlike the upholsterer's magnificence of the houses of such rich people as she had ever known.

There was something even about the old-fashioned cut-glass on the table, the sheen on the white cloth, the pattern of the spoons and forks, that seemed to her better, richer than anything of the sort she had seen anywhere else.

She was leaning forward to look more closely over the table at one of the pictures, which represented a taper-fingered lady with a flying, gauzy scarf about her shoulders and an attractive sweetness and charm about her willowy figure, when a slight noise from somewhere near the roof attracted her attention.

There was a lofty mirror in a heavy, carved, and

gilded frame over the mantelpiece, which was of white marble, elaborately carved, but discoloured by time.

She thought that the sound had come from that part of the room, and she scanned the wall curiously, without being able to discover anything to account for the noise.

But a moment later she was sure that she, caught a tiny flash of light, at once extinguished, from a space in the oak roof between two of the mighty carved beams which supported it.

What was it? In vain she half-closed her eyes and looked upward. There was nothing to be seen there to account for the fancy she had had that she had seen a faint flash of light appear and disappear.

But the fancy at once seized her that perhaps there was some opening, some door, some peephole hidden among the massive rafters, through which some unseen eye might be looking down at her.

This fancy she herself laughed at, and dismissed as ridiculous, telling herself it was only a consequence of her previous experience in the hall, when she had known that she was being listened to and watched, without being able to see or hear the listener and watcher.

But it was uncanny, haunting, all the same. And again and again, as she finished her pear with slow nibbles, admiring, wondering, examining all the time, she would cast her eyes up towards that place among the oak beams where she had seen, or fancied she saw, the faint flash of light, and asked herself whether Lord Lockington, the recluse, the invalid, had perhaps means to watch what went on in his establishment without being seen himself.

It was an odd fancy; but having already been surprised at what she saw and heard in the great hall, she was prepared to be further surprised in the great dining-room.

When she had finished, she rose from the table and walked to the door. But she had no sooner opened it than the butler came forward from some unseen doorway, and said:

"I will show you, ma'am, the way to the saloon."

And he led the way, Edna following, rather scared at the thought of finding herself in another enormous room which she would have all to herself, to a door quite near at hand, which he threw open.

Edna entered a room which seemed to her to surpass in splendour everything that she had ever seen, and to leave the glories of the great dining-hall in the shade.

The White Saloon was a fine apartment, entirely modernized, with white enamel furniture upholstered in pale tints, relieved by gold. Even the carpet was pale in colour, with blurred flowers in pale colours in the pattern. The only note of deeper colour was in the linings of the window curtains, which were of deep rose-colour. There were three pairs of these curtains now drawn before three lofty and wide windows, each of which had a deep window-seat filled with cushions to harmonize with the rest of the room.

A FIRE blazed at one end, but there was other warmth than that provided by unseen hot-water pipes. The light was electric, and came from little jets which hung from the bosses in the moulded ceiling, and from little sconces that hung round the walls.

The rugs in the room were all of white bear; and one of these, near the fireplace, looked so deep, and so soft, and so fluffy, that Edna felt how strongly tempted she would be, if she had not been so much restrained by her surroundings, to sit down and revel in its pleasant furriness.

As the butler opened the door, he said: "His Lordship thought you would like this the best of the drawing-rooms, ma'am. The others are beyond, to the left, but they are in darkness, and we don't usually take the covers off the furniture in them unless my Lady comes to the Hall. But if you would like to see them, I will turn on the light for you."

"Oh, no, thank you," said Edna. "This room is beautiful; I shan't want to see any other rooms than this."

Even Revesby, the disagreeable, seemed mollified by her gentle enthusiasm. He advanced into the room, and, drawing nearer to the fire a little table on which were some books and magazines, he said: "I'm afraid there's nothing very new here, ma'am."

These papers have been here since her Ladyship left. But there shall be some newer ones provided to-morrow. I'll see to it."

"Oh, thank you very much. They'll be quite new to me," said Edna, gratefully, as she advanced to the fire, seated herself in one of the softest and deepest armchairs she had ever seen, and took up a magazine, by which she learnt, as the date was August, that it was about two months since Lady Lockington had visited the Hall.

The butler stood respectfully at a little distance, and said: "If you will touch this bell"—and he pointed to an electric button in the wall—"when you wish to retire for the night, ma'am, you will find your maid waiting upstairs for you by the time you reach your room."

"Thank you," said Edna, in a very small voice, suddenly overpowered afresh by the state with which she was surrounded.

Then the butler retired, and she was left alone. Although she had taken up a magazine she could not see a word it contained, so much was she occupied by the novelty and strangeness of her new experiences.

Was she awake? She could scarcely be sure of the fact as she sat back, and blinked at the fire, and let her eyes wander round the splendid room, which made, she felt, such an absurdly handsome frame for the one small human picture in it.

She looked down at her own dress. How modest and simple it looked, now that she was in the midst of so much luxury!

The ladies who were here two months ago must have been dressed in costumes from Paris, with jewels that flashed and sparkled in the bright light. What a strange little figure she must seem, all alone in such handsome surroundings! How would she be able to live up to the requirements of such a position? What would there be left of the salary which had seemed so munificent, when she had bought but one or two dresses fit to be seen among these dainty tapestries and rich brocades?

She had scarcely let her thoughts wander in this direction for more than a few minutes when she again became conscious, this time without so much as hearing any sound at all, that she was being looked upon by unseen eyes.

She looked round her in alarm. She could not have told why this consciousness came upon her so suddenly, or how it was that it was so strong. In vain her gaze roved from one end of the apartment to the other, and to the upper part of the walls and the handsome ceiling.

She sprang from her chair, determined to find out if she were really being watched.

CHAPTER VI.

IN the first place Edna stood still in the very middle of the room, and looked slowly round her. She saw nothing, she heard nothing, however, to confirm her uneasy fancy that she was being looked at by unseen eyes; she began to recover herself a little, and to laugh and to tell herself that she had become fanciful and silly as a consequence of her fatigue and the excitement of the day's events.

There seemed to be no corner in the room from which she could be spied upon secretly. The lights were bright—there were no gloomy corners where things could remain half-seen. Large as was the saloon from end to end, there was nothing to obstruct the view; and, although there was a pretty Louis Quinze screen in one corner, a rapid examination which she made of it, peeping round it fearfully, as if in fear that a ghostly arm might wave about it as she did so, she found nothing behind it to justify her uncomfortable fancies.

It is true that the three windows had their curtains drawn, and that there would probably be a space behind these hangings where a person might remain concealed. But when she timidly lifted back one of these, she discovered, indeed, a wide space behind, the windows being each set in a bay, but no one was hiding there.

She was struck, however, by the cold look of the landscape, and of the wide river, which showed like a silver thread in the moonlight beyond the trees of the park. The sight was awe-inspiring, the sense of desolation, produced by it intense. Hastily Edna withdrew again into the room itself, with its lights and brightly-burning fire.

She could not now, however, rest satisfied until she had peeped into the space between the two remaining windows and their long curtains; but each time with the same result, and each time with the feeling, as she looked into that gloomy, dark space, that there was someone behind her in the room itself.

She began to have strange fears that this sense of loneliness, heightened by the fancy that she was followed and watched, would never leave her while

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