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of course," she went on, with severity, "has any right to dictate to him about it."

Astonished and rather chilled, Edna sat back. "Do you mean to say," she said, leaning back and speaking in an awestruck whisper, "that it is really true, then, that if I were to stay here twenty years I should not see him?"

"That is the absolute truth."

The girl looked troubled and even shocked.

"And Lady Lockington—what is she like?" she asked, by a sudden revulsion of thought.

"Oh, well, her Ladyship is quite different, quite. She is fond of gaiety and life. She resents—if I may speak confidentially to you—that attitude his Lordship has taken up; and it is possible that, if she were to find you here, and to find that his Lordship was glad you were here, and that he liked your music, it's possible, I say, that she might not be nice to you—not nice at all."

Edna looked frightened. "But why?" she asked.

"Well, it's difficult precisely to say. But my Lady has been a great beauty—of course, she's very handsome still," she added, hastily. "And she's one of those ladies that don't quite take to younger ladies who—who—"

Mrs. Holland stopped. It was evident that she found a difficulty in telling Edna that Lady Lockington disliked pretty, young women.

Edna laughed a little, slyly. "Do you mean she wouldn't like me," she said, "because I'm not ugly enough?"

"I shouldn't like to say that," said the housekeeper, quickly. "But perhaps my Lady is inclined to be one of those who think that a wide mouth, a speckled skin, and eyes that don't look in the same direction, are an incentive to good conduct in a woman."

Edna looked puzzled. "But what difference does it make whether my eyes are a pair or not," she asked, shrewdly. "if there's no one to see me?"

Mrs. Holland was beginning to grow tired of this conversation.

"It's not for me to look into her Ladyship's mind," she replied, with dignity. "I only spoke to warn you, in case she were to turn up unexpectedly, as she sometimes does, to be prepared for what might be—I only say might be—a little unpleasantness."

Edna sighed. The outlook was dreary indeed. She was to pass her days entirely by herself; she was to play and sing, unapplauded, unencouraged, never sure whether she were giving pleasure or the reverse. And, for a change, she must look forward to an unexpected meeting with a lady who would be disagreeable to her for no better reason than that she did not come up to the standard of ugliness Lady Lockington thought proper in a dependant!

Mrs. Holland, evidently anxious to bring the conversation to an end, rose to her feet.

"There are other little things I may have to tell you another time," she said, "but I don't wish to depress you on your first evening."

This was not encouraging, and Edna's heart sank still lower. That Christmas holiday she had mentioned had not been promised her, and she did not like to refer to it again.

But if she were to have to spend Christmas all by herself, and eat roast beef and plum pudding, and pull crackers with nobody to share those conventional joys with her, Edna felt, as she saw the ample person of Mrs. Holland retreat through the doorway into the hall, that she would be lonely indeed!

And as she heard the measured tread of the housekeeper in the hall, Edna almost thought she must run after her and call her back.

She could not go back to solitary state even for so much as another ten minutes. So she pressed the electric button which, she had been told, would be the signal to take Susan upstairs to attend to her, when she suddenly was seized with a fancy that she saw one of the window-curtains move.

It was that of the window in the corner of the room on the left-hand side, the furthest from the angle of the house.

With her fingers still on the button she watched, her eyes starting, her breath coming fast.

This time she was sure of it; the cur-

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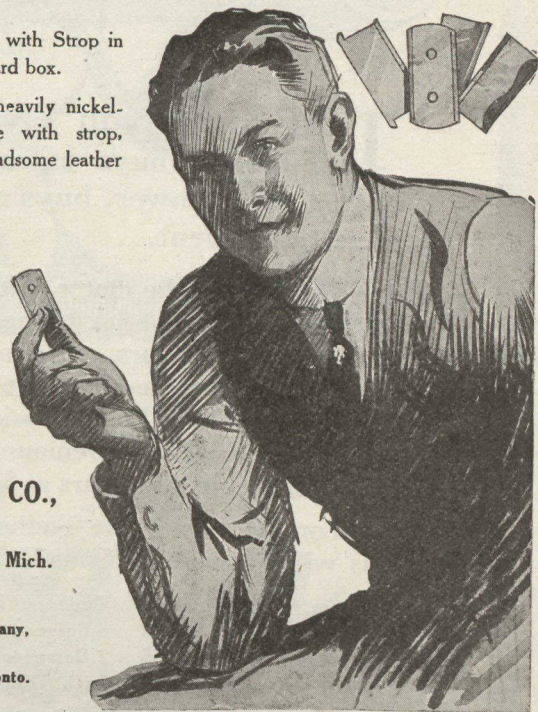
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