



OR THE UNDERGROUND SYNDICATE

By MRS. C. N. WILLIAMSON, author of "The Princess Passes," "The Lightning Conductor," etc.

CHAPTER I.

Elspeth and Her Great Chance.

Elspeth Dean was almost ashamed to go again into the Agency to ask the same question: "Is there anything for me?" and to hear the same answer, "Nothing today." She hesitated at the door for a moment, but she had come out on purpose to make the call, and it was a confession of failure to steal away discouraged.

Elspeth hated to fail, so she summoned up her courage and marched in. The same young woman sat at the same desk, with the same rather wistful expression on her face. Elspeth would have envied her a little for her secure position in life, if it had not been for that expression. But Elspeth would not willingly have changed her's (which was attractive, even in a greynish lodging house mirror, with a crack across the middle) for that other, in spite of the material advantages which might go with it.

"Good morning. Is there"—she had begun as usual, when the young woman with the expression that Elspeth hated to see, said, with a nod toward the door, succeeded instantly by a furtive gaze of discouragement for the applicant who followed on Elspeth's heels.

A small boy in liver, sitting by the door in question, knocked, mentioned the name of Miss Dean, and after a murmur from some unseen, invited Elspeth to pass through.

Miss Smith, the manager of the Agency, looked up from a pile of letters. "Ah, Miss Dean, it's you, is it? I was expecting you," she remarked. "You generally come in about this time. How would you like to go up to Scotland, and be a kind of secretary in a big house?"

Elspeth's gray eyes opened. She had dreamed of nothing more exciting than a place in a London office, and it had appeared so good to her, and she had almost sure it would end in nothing, but she did not show her lack of faith in her attainments and her luck; she was far too shrewd a girl, in spite of her inexperience, to make such a mistake.

"I should like it, I think," she said with creditable calmness. "Exactly what would I have to do?"

"Well, it's not quite an ordinary secretarial position," replied Miss Smith. "You would have to take down the manager's letters from dictation, of course. Let me see, what's your rate per minute?"

"A hundred and thirty words is my average speed. I can do a hundred and fifty for a spurt."

"Good. But I believe you have only had home practice as yet."

"I used to work from my brother's dictation. He could hardly speak too fast for me."

"One doesn't lose one's head with one's brother. Whereas with strangers, and a great many strangers at whose beck and call you'd have to be, you'd find it different."

"If you think I am too inexperienced for the place," began Elspeth flushing. "Frankly, I do think you too inexperienced, but you seem a quick-witted, sensible girl, who ought to get on; and the manager of Lochrain Castle Hydro makes it a point that the person engaged shall be Scotch, well-educated, a lady, not over 35, and—er—possessing. You happen at this moment to be the only young Scotch woman on my books as a stenographer. Otherwise I should have preferred some one more experienced and nearer the age limit mentioned."

"In twenty-five," said Elspeth. "And look nineteen," said she helpfully. "Mr. McGowan wants some one at once. If you go, you'll have to start to-morrow. Can you do that?"

"Easily," replied Elspeth, who lived in one room, and whose worldly possessions would all go into a box not too large for use as a cabin trunk. "You say it isn't an ordinary place. What is there to do besides attending to the manager's correspondence?"

"His correspondence would probably be the least part of your work, as there's already a young man who helps with that; but he has other duties, bookkeeping and so on, and can't devote his whole time to correspondence. A local young woman was tried, but failed, and a new person is

wanted in a hurry, because there are guests in the hotel who need secretarial work done, and haven't brought their own secretaries. That is why I said you would have to be at the beck and call of a good many strangers; authors, clerical men, politicians, financiers perhaps—oh, all sorts of people."

"I think that would be very interesting," said Elspeth. "Yes," but distracting and confusing. People of that sort have odd ways, and are often impatient, and hard to please. You would need tact as well as presence of mind. However, it's a great chance. You couldn't have hoped for anything half as good, with your inexperience. Lochrain Castle Hydro is new as a hotel, opened only this season, and one of the finest in Scotland. The salary is two guineas a week, and you're sure to have presents. But mind, you must do us credit. I don't want Mr. McGowan to think I've made a mistake. That would be a bad advertisement for the Agency."

"I will do my best," said Elspeth, to whom a weekly two guineas seemed a fortune. She had lived on fifteen shillings a week for two years, since her father had

died, and her brother (now in Australia seeking his fortune) had insisted on giving her the whole of that father's pension as a Major in the Seventeenth Scottish Borderers. London, and her training as a shorthand writer and typist, had strained her resources, and for months she had been trying in vain for work, calling every day at several agencies.

In a few minutes everything was arranged, and Miss Smith was able to send a satisfactory telegram to the manager of the Lochrain Castle Hydro Hotel. Elspeth went home to her lodgings, packed up her typewriter, which she had bought on the "instalment plan," and all her other belongings. Her railway ticket was paid for by her new employer, and the next morning she was at Euston Station, one small unit in a crowd for the Scotch express.

When Elspeth was a little girl, she had been taken once to Scotland to see the place where she was born, but she had not been there since. Her father's people had never forgiven him for marrying a pretty girl somewhere beneath him in station, and absolutely penniless, therefore Elspeth knew nothing about them. Major Dean

had left his son and daughter at school in a suburb of London, when they were small, and later he could never afford to take Elspeth out to India. She had done a very little traveling in her life, and was much excited this morning. She had not dreamed that there would be so many people going by train, though she told herself—she might have thought of it, as Town was now "dead," and everybody running up to Scotland for what was left of August, and September.

Elspeth had a third class ticket, but the crush was so great that no place could be found for her. Neither was there anything left in the second class compartments, by the time the porter who had registered her box and taken charge of her baggage began to search for a seat. "You'll have to go first class, Miss," said he.

The girl demurred. "But they won't let me, and I can't afford"—she had begun, when the porter broke in reassuringly. "That's all right, Miss; they'll have to let you. There's no room in the third or second, and they're bound to carry you."

They hurried from door to door, but everything was full, until at last they came to a compartment occupied only by two ladies. To be sure the remaining seats were covered with small luggage, a couple of smart dressing-bags with gold monograms (one of them surmounted with a coronet) and a dust-coat or two. But the people going by train, though she told herself—she might have thought of it, as Town was now "dead," and everybody running up to Scotland for what was left of August, and September.

"These places all taken, madam?" he asked briskly of the elder lady, a very handsome woman, whose admirers would have pronounced her thirty-three, whose enemies would have placed her past forty. She glanced up from reading a letter, and stared haughtily at Elspeth and the porter.

"Yes," she began, when the girl who was with her interrupted. "Oh, mother, it is only one seat beside ours that is engaged, and we aren't quite sure about that."

The other frowned with vexation, and she did not look half so handsome, or nearly so young, when she frowned. "You are too ridiculous, Hilary!" she snapped, in a low but angry voice. Then, snatched, in a low but angry voice. Then, snatched, in a low but angry voice. Then, snatched, in a low but angry voice.

"Don't you see, the racks are already full of luggage, and we need the disengaged seat for our bags."

"Very sorry, madam, but this is the only compartment with a place free, and this lady must ride somewhere," replied the man, already beginning to find space for the gorgeous dressing bags in the racks.

"Impudent creature!" exclaimed the lady, flushing deeply under a delicate film of liquid powder, and a veil which heightened its flower-like effect. "I am the Countess."

"Oh, mother, don't!" implored the girl, her face—which Elspeth thought the prettiest she had ever seen—scarlet with humiliation and distress. "See, he is making room. We can't expect to have the whole compartment to ourselves."

The elder woman bit her lip and was silent, realizing, perhaps, that it was she who was on the point of making herself ridiculous. But she twitched aside her dress with such an air of disgust as Elspeth moodily passed to the seat which had been cleared by the porter that she was regarded as some inferior sort of animal.

"I am sorry," she said, looking straight at the girl, not at the woman. "Please don't be. It doesn't matter in the least," answered the beautiful creature, with a smile so charming that Elspeth's heart warmed to her. "I'm sure she's as nice as she's pretty," the typist said to herself, "though how she can be, with such a mother, is a miracle."

The intruder smiled a grateful answer, and then tried to appear oblivious to her traveling companions. She opened her handbag, which she had on her lap, and pretended to be deeply interested in its contents, but she could not help hearing their conversation. It was all but time for the train to start now, and the elder of the two ladies, appearing oblivious to the unwelcome third in the compartment, did not attempt to conceal her excitement.

"What a shame! I believe he's not coming," she exclaimed, looking eagerly out of the window. "Another minute, and it will be too late. I do hope Lady Melton's news wasn't a mistake or made up out of the whole cloth, and our time wasted. It would be like her. I always did think Maud Melton a cat."

"Mother, do be careful," whispered her daughter. "What do I care for a person of that sort?" asked the other, with a quick glance of contempt at pretty, plainly dressed Elspeth. "It's bad enough having her stuffed in with us, without having to think about her, and every word one speaks. She doesn't matter any more than one's maid matters; indeed, she is probably someone's maid. What is the use of spending a lot of money to travel first class, if third-class creatures are to be squeezed in, without paying a penny?"

"Here comes Mr. Kenrith," broke in the girl, as if thankful to make a diversion. Instantly an extraordinary change came over her mother. The handsome, though rather sharp features were softened with a charming smile, which irradiated her face as the rose of a sunset glow irradiates a bleak landscape in the north. The dark eyes sparkled, the frown that had drawn the straight black brows together was smoothed out. She looked suddenly at most girlish and prettily feminine as she patted her beautifully undulated auburn hair.

Elspeth, though angry, was interested, wondering what sort of man would appear. The name Kenrith sounded faintly familiar, as if she had heard it before, but if so she could not remember where. In another second her curiosity was satisfied. A tall, broad-shouldered man of about forty, with a nice brown face, was at the door.

"Here I am, just in time," said he in a pleasant voice, which proclaimed him from the north country. "May I really travel with you, Lady Lambart and Lady Hilary?"

"We are delighted. You won't let us be dull," replied Lady Lambart.

The new comer glanced at Elspeth, as if expecting to find that she was an acquaintance also, saw she was a stranger, and begging her pardon as he passed, took the unoccupied seat.

By this time the young typist knew why the name of Kenrith had sounded

familiar. She had never heard it, but she had read about it in the papers. There was a millionaire named John Kenrith, who was very charitable, and whose good works she had seen mentioned. If she remembered aright, he came from Leicestershire, and she wondered, if this nice, brown, rather ugly man was he. "If he is, I do believe this horrid woman is being sweet to him on account of his money," thought the girl, "for he doesn't seem her sort at all. I do hope he sees through her. He looks clever, but I suppose men never do see through handsome women, especially Countesses, and this evidently is one, because now I come to look at it, that's a Countess' coronet on her dressing bag."

Elspeth had brought a novel, and she tried to absorb herself in it, as the train rushed her on toward exciting new experiences; but the talk of her traveling companions would entangle itself with that of the characters in the book.

"It was such a pleasant surprise to hear, after we had made up our minds to go to Leicestershire, that you were going," said Lady Lambart. "I couldn't resist writing you a line, when I heard you were at the Carlton, to ask if there were any chance of your traveling by our train. Then, when I didn't get any answer!"

"I was away from town all yesterday, and only found your note when I got back to the hotel at midnight, too late to write; but of course I sent messenger the first thing this morning!"

"We must have already left. It is such a long drive, you know, and Hilary and I are late. Who would have dreamed of your going to Leicestershire? I thought of it because the air is so good, and it's been such a tiring season that it will be more restful for us both than a round of Scotch visits."

"I think I'm in great luck," said Mr. Kenrith. "You poor fellow, I suppose you really do think so," mused Elspeth. "Surprised, indeed! I wonder she dares say that, after what she must have known I heard when I first got into the carriage. What a scene there would be if I told!"

This idea struck her sense of humor so comically that she almost laughed aloud; but nobody was paying any attention to her. Kenrith looked her way occasionally, to be sure, but not curiously to see if she were listening. He was not saying anything that he need mind all the world hearing, and his glances toward Elspeth expressed only the interest that a warm-hearted man of an unusually kind and sympathetic nature would feel in a pretty young woman traveling alone, almost shabbily dressed, when her beauty ought to have been set off by charming things, such as Lady Hilary Vane wore. If he thought of her consciously, it was to say to himself: "Poor child! Girls like her have a right to everything that's brightest and best in the world. What an awful shame they can't all have it."

"You must have had dozens of invitations for this month and next," remarked Lady Lambart. "I had a few, but I'm not much of a hand for visiting," replied the girl modestly. "I know the man who has turned the old castle of Lochrain into a hotel. Indeed, I was able to help him a little, as he's a good fellow, and deserves success. That's one reason I'm going, and another is, I thought it would be a good quiet place for me to try my hand at writing a book. I've had time for some time, a dull thing you'd think it, but interesting to me; a new idea in socialistic schemes I want to work out."

"You are always thinking of others," exclaimed Lady Lambart. "I'm afraid I don't forget myself," smiled Kenrith. "I've just been making myself a big present. You know the old polio diamond? Well, I've got it—got it on me at this moment, if you—"

"Oh, Mr. Kenrith, you forget—wells have ears, even walls of railway carriages!" cried Lady Lambart. "You oughtn't to speak out such state secrets; except when you are quite, quite alone, with no trusted friends, and even then in a whisper."

Kenrith laughed. "Rather think I'm able to look after my private property, isn't it the first time I've carried about, and even now it isn't the only one I—"

"You really mustn't," she broke in. "You must seal your valuable to be locked safely up in a bank directly we arrive at our journey's end, or I shall not have an easy moment by night or by day."

"You are very kind, to take an interest," said the millionaire. "Elspeth's ears tingled. She said before I was of no more consequence than a servant, and now she takes me for a spy—or a thief," the girl thought. "I hope I don't look like either; but then, I suppose, it is imprudent of him to talk like that."

She remembered that among other things she had read of John Kenrith was the fact that he collected rare jewels, his one piece of self-indulgence. Now she had no longer a doubt of the identity of this Mr. Kenrith.

"By the way, you'll find another friend at Lochrain," remarked the Lancashire man, changing the subject. "Captain Oxford, whom I happened to run across last night and meant to spend a fortnight or longer at the hotel. That old wound in his arm is troubling him, it seems, and he thought the Hydro—"

"How very vexatious!" exclaimed Lady Lambart. "Her tone was so tremulous with surprise and annoyance that Elspeth glanced up in spite of herself."

Lady Hilary's lovely face was scarlet, and, though her big violet eyes were gazing at the flying landscape, Elspeth was too feminine not to be sure the girl felt the angry, suspicious flash her mother's eyes darted at her. The atmosphere of the carriage had suddenly become mysteriously electric.

"I thought he was a friend of yours," said Kenrith, innocently.

"Not at all. I consider him a most undesirable young man," returned Lady Lambart. "I hope, dear Mr. Kenrith, if he tries to force himself upon us at Lochrain, as he is almost sure to, that you will help me to—er—keep him in his place."

"What is his place?" Kenrith asked bluntly. "He's an officer and a gentleman, and a very good fellow as well as a brave one. That's my opinion of him."

"Well enough, from a man's point of view," said Lady Lambart, more gently. "But I'm a woman, and Hilary is a young girl, with no one to watch over us. We must be careful. Captain Oxford is dreadfully pushing, and of course he is nobly."

"So am I nobly."

"How like you to say that! But you had a name, even before you made it, whereas Oxford isn't his name, you know, or Laurence either. Really, old Miss Laurence, who adopted him when he was a wretched little fondling in some foreign place or other where she was visiting, gave him his surname because she lived in Oxford. And he hasn't a penny except the few trinkets he carried off from her."

I wonder how he manages to scrape along in the army."

"It's much to his credit that he's got on so nicely," said Kenrith.

"In his profession, yes; but of course he could never dream of marrying, at all events, any girl in the station to which he seems to aspire," replied Lady Lambart.

(To be continued.)



"This isn't the first jewel I've carried about."