

LORD LOCKINGTON

BY FLORENCE WARDEN

CHAPTER I.

STIFF and straight, and cold and formal, with a gold double eyeglass in her hand, Mrs. Holland, housekeeper to Lord Lockington, of Lockington Court, Lancashire, and Belgrave-square, sat on her chair in the agent's office, interviewing a long array of more or less unsuitable applicants for the post of private organist to his Lordship.

The head of the agency, a bustling, talkative, but withal capable, woman who fitted innumerable governesses, companions, lady secretaries, and housekeepers with situations in the course of the year, sighed when one after another of the young women whom she sent into the small room, where the austere-looking Mrs. Holland was reviewing and rejecting long lines of most desirable applicants, came out with the report that she "wouldn't do."

And at last the agent, instead of sending in more applicants, went herself to interview Mrs. Holland, and said, with an attempt at a smile but with some tartness, that she was afraid Lord Lockington must be difficult to please.

Mrs. Holland laid down her eyeglass and folded her hands with austere melancholy.

"Not only difficult," she said, with a short sigh, "but impossible, I'm afraid!"

The agent stared at her. "Then what is the use of seeing all these young ladies—whom I've sent for, mind you, and who have come up specially to see you—if you have quite made up your mind, as you seem to have done, that none of them will do?"

Mrs. Holland could not draw herself up, because she was already as erect as it was possible for her to be, but she looked as if she would have done so if she could.

"I came here," she said, coldly and with dignity, "in the hope that I might be able to find a young lady suitable to the position his Lordship offers. But to judge from the young persons whom I've had to see so many of this morning, I might have saved myself my journey from Lancashire. Why, there's not one of them that has so much as a pleasant voice in speaking and a good figure."

The head of the agency drew herself up and looked rather shocked. "What has a figure to do with playing the organ?" she asked, sharply.

The housekeeper looked slightly confused. "I said a pleasant voice and a good figure," said she. "I told you that what we wanted was a young lady of good appearance and manner, an orphan preferred, who could play the piano and the organ, read music at sight, and be able to sing, sing pleasantly, though need not necessarily have a magnificent voice."

The agent bent her head over one of her books, which she had brought in with her, and put her finger on one particular name. Then she looked up dubiously.

"I can't quite see," she murmured, "what you particularly want an orphan for!"

"Oh, I can tell you that," said Mrs. Holland. "His Lordship thought that a young lady with parents wouldn't stay with us. It's very dreary at the Hall—very dreary, indeed. She will have no companions except me and the dogs and horses. His Lordship has been an invalid for many years, and sees no one—no one whatever. She will never see him during the whole time she's there, if she stays there twenty years."

The agent looked puzzled. "What does he want an organist for, and one of good appearance, if he's never going so much as to see her?" she asked, incredulously.

"I didn't say he'd never see her, but that she'd never see him," retorted Mrs. Holland, with spirit. "Lord Lockington is old now, and a regular hermit, and never goes out or even lets himself be seen by

anybody. But for all that he's very particular, and he won't have anybody about who's not just as he likes them. His Lordship has the greatest confidence in me, and I shouldn't think of engaging anyone that I thought he wouldn't like the looks of."

The agent sat back on her side of the table. "You'll excuse me saying so," she said, "but people used to talk once about Lord Lockington, and they used to say—"

Mrs. Holland interrupted her diffident suggestion with an emphatic wave of the hand.

"All that was long ago," she said, shutting her eyes as if upon the long dead past. "I can assure you that there's never been anything of that sort to complain about in the life at the Hall for years and years. It may be that his Lordship was gay in his youth, but now a more quiet and regular gentleman—not to say nobleman—never lived; and you may rely upon me that any young lady who might choose to take this post would have nothing worse than what I must call deadly dullness to complain of."

"There's a Lady Lockington, isn't there? And



EDNA BELLAMY.

Drawn by F. Hans Johnston.

she doesn't reside at Lockington Hall?" said the agent, dubiously. "You must excuse my asking these questions, but I have to be particular when it is especially requested that the young lady engaged should be young and good-looking."

Mrs. Holland's expression became a trifle colder. "Oh, yes, there is a Lady Lockington, and she does not reside at the Hall. She is fond of life, and the dullness of the place kills her, she says. Besides—though it's not my place to talk of such things—they never get on too well together, and his being an invalid now hasn't made any difference to that. Rather the contrary."

Mrs. Holland pursed up her lips as one who should say that not one further syllable should be drawn from her. The agent looked down at her book.

"The salary's good, of course," she said, "and I suppose the duties are not too exacting, if only you could get the right person. Now, I'm sorry you didn't like Miss Wood. She's an orphan, and she is a most accomplished musician."

The housekeeper shook her head with decision. "His Lordship would prefer a young lady," she said. "This Miss Wood—if it's the lady with the

glasses and the prominent teeth?—is not young."

"Well, not so very, perhaps." The agent looked up. "There's a young lady coming here this morning about another engagement, one as companion to an old lady, who might have suited. She's very pretty, too pretty, I'm afraid, to care to be shut up in such a house as you describe."

"Can she play and sing?"

"She can play the piano, and she has a pretty little voice. I don't know about the organ. I fancy her father and mother are dead, too."

"Could you let me see her?" asked Mrs. Holland, eagerly.

"The salary is, of course, much higher than she would receive from the lady who thought of engaging her, but, on the other hand, really it seems a pity, she's so very pretty! And I scarcely think it would do."

"She would be quite safe with me," said the housekeeper. "If only she could stand the loneliness. I should like to see her."

The agent, fearing to lose this important client altogether if she failed to comply with her request, went out, promising that Miss Bellamy should be seen by her. And when, half an hour later, a little fair-haired, blue-eyed girl, with gentle manners and a fresh pink-and-white complexion, shabbily dressed but refined looking, came in and asked if she were in time for the appointment with Mrs. Robinson, the agent took her on one side, and told her that she had another and a better post to offer than that of companion to the old lady.

"It's to play the organ and sing for an old gentleman," said she.

Miss Bellamy looked rather frightened. "The organ!" cried she. "I don't think I could play well enough for that!"

"You have played it?"

"A little—to amuse myself—in my uncle's church. I can't play well."

"Well, you can play the piano, and perhaps you could practise on the village organ till you did better. Would you like to see the lady who's come about the matter? The salary is handsome—eighty pounds a year, and the house is a nobleman's."

Miss Bellamy looked frightened. "Oh, I'm sure I shouldn't do," she said. "Of course, he wants a really accomplished player. I—"

"Well, will you see Mrs. Holland and ask her what she thinks? She's his Lordship's housekeeper, and a most superior woman, as those people are," cooed the agent, caressingly, hoping to secure this prize, though she felt some scruples about the business.

Miss Bellamy, very diffident, very nervous, consented to be interviewed, and was introduced effusively by the agent to Mrs. Holland, who at once looked through her eyeglass in a manner which told the agent that she was satisfied that she had come to the end of her search.

"Well, Miss Bellamy," the housekeeper said, with a wintry little smile which was meant to be encouraging, "do you think you could stand being shut up from one year's end to another in a big house by the river's bank, with no companions but me and his Lordship's horses and dogs?"

Miss Bellamy, surprised at this address, when she had expected to be subjected to a searching catechism on the subject of her

acquirements, hesitated, drew a long breath, and said:

"Oh, I shouldn't mind that. I love dogs, and I should love horses if I knew anything about them, I know."

Miss Bellamy's pretty face looked prettier than ever as it dimpled into smiles.

The housekeeper nodded with instinctive approval. The girl stared at her in bewilderment.

"But," said she, timidly, "could I do what you want me to do? You haven't heard me play, and I'm afraid—"

"There's a piano. Will you play me something? And sing something?"

The housekeeper's face, under the influence of her triumphant belief that she had got hold of the right person, became flesh and blood, instead of looking, as it had done hitherto, as if carved out of wood.

Very timidly, panting with excitement, Miss Bellamy took off her well-worn gloves, and sat down to the piano. It was not an instrument calculated to show a player's powers to the best advantage. Neither was Miss Bellamy at her best. Indeed, the tears came into her eyes as, after having played a