

she said, "that people might gossip if I received a lot of presents from Lord Lockington. But is there really any harm in his giving me things, when he never sees me, and when everybody knows he never sees anyone? Although I'd much rather not receive any presents at all, I don't see what harm there can be in my taking them, and, indeed, I shouldn't dare to refuse. And if he's ill and lonely, I think I can understand the kind feeling that makes him so generous to me."

The housekeeper moved impatiently. "And I think just as you do," she said; quickly, "that there's no harm in it at all, and I know, too, that you have to take his presents. It would look absurd and unbecoming not to."

"Then why do you look grave about it?"

"Well, the fact is, his Lordship had the name of being gay in his young days, so that the reputation has stuck, and it makes people curious and talkative even now in his older time. And, of course, he's not really old at all, only fifty-four or so."

"But isn't it true that he never sees anybody?"

"Quite true, but you can't always get people to believe that. You are almost sure to hear stories of his Lordship having been seen about, told by people who fancy they've seen him, or, perhaps, only pretend to have done so. So if he were to go on giving presents to you, and now that he's once begun he is most likely to continue, you may be quite sure there'd be gossip."

But Edna was too young and too simple to understand the importance of this.

"What does it matter what people say?" she asked, briskly, "since everyone in this house can prove that he's never spoken to me, or rather," her voice suddenly dropped a little, as she remembered that, after all, this was not the exact truth, "that if he's seen me I've never seen him?"

The housekeeper smiled. "But the truth is just what people never are ready to believe," she said.

Edna sighed impatiently. "What do you want me to do, then?" she asked.

Mrs. Holland's expression grew troubled again. "Well, though it's not a piece of advice I should care to give any young lady in a general way, still, placed in your peculiar position, I think I should say 'Don't tell anyone about the present.'"

It was Edna who looked grave this time. "I don't like having to keep secrets about a thing like that," she said. "It seems rather stupid, too, when I don't see what harm there is in it."

"Well, well, if I must tell you, I must," said Mrs. Holland, with resignation. "The fact is my Lady is of a very jealous disposition, not so much from affection—for I don't suppose they're much to each other now—but on account of his Lordship having a great deal of property that he's free to do what he likes with. They have no children, and the title and most of the land will go to a distant cousin. My Lady hopes to get the disposable property left to her, and whenever she thinks his Lordship is in communication with his heir she comes down—swoops down, I'm sorry to say his Lordship calls it—upon the Hall, to find out whether anything has happened to spoil her chances."

Edna listened, rather disgusted. "But if she's so anxious to get his property, why doesn't she come and stay with her husband and take care of him?" she asked straightforwardly.

The housekeeper drew herself up. "These lords and ladies are not like common people," she answered, with dignity, "who have to be all in all to each other because they haven't got much besides. It's more common, and more dignified, too, for each to go his own way or her own way, when their tastes are not the same. And, besides, well, for one thing—not that I wish to gossip—but his Lordship wouldn't stand it. He prefers to be alone, and he doesn't let my Lady see him, any more than anybody else. So how could she take care of him?" she added, triumphantly.

Edna looked puzzled. "But I suppose she is rich already?" she suggested presently.

"Oh, yes, what you would call rich. She has her allowance, and will have

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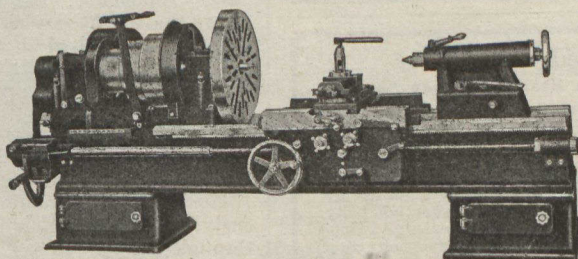
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