

A Daughter of the Lodge

George Gissing

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For a score of years the Rocketts had kept the lodge of Brent Hall. In the beginning Rockett was head gardener; his wife, the daughter of a shopkeeper, had never known domestic service, and performed her duties at the Hall gates with a certain modest dignity not displeasing to the stately persons upon whom she depended. During the lifetime of Sir Henry the best possible understanding existed between Hall and lodge. Though Rockett's health broke down, and at length he could work hardly at all, their pleasant home was assured to the family; and at Sir Henry's death the nephew who succeeded him left the Rocketts undisturbed. But, under this new lordship, things were not quite as they had been. Sir Edwin Shale, a middle-aged man, had in his youth made a foolish marriage; his lady ruled him, not with the gentlest of tongues, nor always to the kindest purpose, and their daughter, Hilda, asserted her rights as only child with a force of character which Sir Edwin would perhaps have more sincerely admired had it reminded him less of Lady Shale.

While the Hall, in Sir Henry's time, remained childless, the lodge prided itself on a boy and two girls. Young Rockett, something of a scapegrace, was by the baronet's advice sent to sea, and thenceforth gave his parents no trouble. The second daughter, Betsy, grew up to be her mother's help. But Betsy's elder sister showed from early years that the life of the lodge would afford no adequate scope for her ambitions. May Rockett had good looks; what was more, she had an intellect which sharpened itself on everything with which it came in contact. The village school could never have been held responsible for May Rockett's acquirements and views at the age of ten; nor could the High School in the neighbouring town altogether account for her mental development at seventeen. Not without misgivings had the health-broken gardener and his wife consented to May's pursuit of the higher learning; but Sir Henry and the kind old Lady Shale seemed to think it the safer course, and evidently there was little chance of the girl's accepting any humble kind of employment: in one way or another she must depend for a livelihood upon her brains. At the time of Sir Edwin's succession Miss Rockett had already obtained a place as governess, giving her parents to understand that this was only, of course, a temporary expedient – a paving of the way to something vaguely, but superbly, independent. Nor was promotion long in coming. At two-and-twenty May accepted a secretaryship to a lady with a mission – concerning the rights of womanhood. In letters to her father and mother she spoke much of the importance of her work, but did not confess how very modest was her salary. A couple of years went by without her visiting the old home; then, of a sudden, she made known her intention of coming to stay at the lodge 'for a week or ten days.' She explained that her purpose was rest; intellectual strain had begun rather to tell upon her, and a few days of absolute tranquillity, such as she might expect under the elms of Brent Hall, would do her all the good in the world. 'Of course,' she added, 'it's unnecessary to say anything about me to the Shale people. They and I have nothing in common, and it will be better for us to ignore each other's existence.'

These characteristic phrases troubled Mr. and Mrs. Rockett. That the family at the Hall should, if it seemed good to them, ignore the existence of May was, in the Rocketts' view, reasonable enough; but for May to ignore Sir Edwin and Lady Shale, who were just now in residence after six months spent abroad, struck them as a very grave impropriety. Natural respect demanded that, at some fitting moment, and in a suitable manner, their daughter should present herself to her feudal superiors, to whom she was assuredly indebted, though indirectly, for 'the blessings she enjoyed.' This was Mrs. Rockett's phrase, and the rheumatic, wheezy old gardener uttered the same opinion in less conventional language. They had no affection for Sir Edwin or his lady, and Miss Hilda they decidedly disliked; their treatment at the hands of these new people contrasted unpleasantly enough with the

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memory of old times; but a spirit of loyal subordination ruled their blood, and, to Sir Edwin at all events, they felt gratitude for their retention at the lodge. Mrs Rockett was a healthy and capable woman of not more than fifty, but no less than her invalid husband would she have dreaded the thought of turning her back on Brent Hall. Rockett had often consoled himself with the thought that here he should die, here amid the fine old trees that he loved, in the ivy-covered house which was his only idea of home. And was it not a reasonable hope that Betsy, good steady girl, should some day marry the promising young gardener whom Sir Edwin had recently taken into his service, and so re-establish the old order of things at the lodge?

'I half wish May wasn't coming,' said Mrs Rockett, after long and anxious thought. 'Last time she was here she quite upset me with her strange talk.'

'She's a funny girl, and that's the truth,' muttered Rockett from his old leather chair, full in the sunshine of the kitchen window. They had a nice little sitting-room; but this, of course, was only used on Sunday, and no particular idea of comfort attached to it. May, to be sure, had always used the sitting-room. It was one of the habits which emphasised most strongly the moral distance between her and her parents.

The subject being full of perplexity, they put it aside, and with very mixed feelings awaited their elder daughter's arrival. Two days later a cab deposited at the lodge Miss May, and her dress-basket, and her travelling-bag, and her holdall, together with certain loose periodicals and a volume or two bearing the yellow label of Mudie. The young lady was well dressed in a severely practical way; nothing unduly feminine marked her appearance, and in the matter of collar and necktie she inclined to the example of the other sex; for all that, her soft complexion and bright eyes, her well-turned figure and light, quick movements, had a picturesque value which Miss May certainly did not ignore. She manifested no excess of feeling when her mother and sister came forth to welcome her; a nod, a smile, an offer of her cheek, and the pleasant exclamation, 'Well, good people!' carried her through this little scene with becoming dignity.

'You will bring these things inside, please,' she said to the driver, in her agreeable head-voice, with the tone and gesture of one who habitually gives orders.

Her father, bent with rheumatism, stood awaiting her just within. She grasped his hand cordially, and cried on a cheery note, 'Well, father, how are you getting on? No worse than usual, I hope?' Then she added, regarding him with her head slightly aside, 'We must have a talk about your case. I've been going in a little for medicine lately. No doubt your country medico is a duffer. Sit down, sit down, and make yourself comfortable. I don't want to disturb any one. About teatime, isn't it, mother? Tea very weak for me, please, and a slice of lemon with it, if you have such a thing, and just a mouthful of dry toast.'

So unwilling was May to disturb the habits of the family that, half an hour after her arrival, the homely three had fallen into a state of nervous agitation, and could neither say nor do anything natural to them. Of a sudden there sounded a sharp rapping at the window. Mrs Rockett and Betsy started up, and Betsy ran to the door. In a moment or two she came back with glowing cheeks.

'I'm sure I never heard the bell!' she exclaimed with compunction. 'Miss Shale had to get off her bicycle!'

'Was it she who hammered at the window?' asked May coldly.

'Yes and she was that annoyed.'

'It will do her good. A little anger now and then is excellent for the health.' And Miss Rockett sipped her lemon-tinctured tea with a smile of ineffable contempt.

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The others went to bed at ten o'clock, but May, having made herself at ease in the sitting-room, sat there reading until after twelve. Nevertheless, she was up very early next morning, and, before going out for a sharp little walk (in a heavy shower), she gave precise directions about her breakfast. She wanted only the simplest things, prepared in the simplest way, but the tone of her instructions vexed and perturbed Mrs Rockett sorely. After breakfast the young lady made a searching inquiry into the state of her father's health, and diagnosed his ailments in such learned words that the old gardener began to feel worse than he had done for many a year. May then occupied herself with correspondence, and before midday sent her sister out to post nine letters.

'But I thought you were going to rest yourself?' said her mother, in an irritable voice quite unusual with her.

'Why, so I am resting!' May exclaimed. 'If you saw my ordinary morning's work! I suppose you have a London newspaper? No? How do you live without it? I must run into the town for one this afternoon.'

The town was three miles away, but could be reached by train from the village station. On reflection, Miss Rockett announced that she would use this opportunity for calling on a lady whose acquaintance she desired to make, one Mrs Lindley, who in social position stood on an equality with the family at the Hall, and was often seen there. On her mother's expressing surprise, May smiled indulgently.

'Why shouldn't I know Mrs Lindley? I have heard she's interested in a movement which occupies me a good deal just now. I know she will be delighted to see me. I can give her a good deal of first-hand information, for which she will be grateful. You do amuse me, mother,' she added in her blandest tone. 'When will you come to understand what my position is?'

The Rocketts had put aside all thoughts of what they esteemed May's duty towards the Hall; they earnestly hoped that her stay with them might pass unobserved by Lady and Miss Shale, whom, they felt sure, it would be positively dangerous for the girl to meet. Mrs Rockett had not slept for anxiety on this score. The father was also a good deal troubled; but his wonder at May's bearing and talk had, on the whole, an agreeable preponderance over the uneasy feeling. He and Betsy shared a secret admiration for the brilliant qualities which were flashed before their eyes; they privately agreed that May was more of a real lady than either the baronet's hard-tongued wife or the disdainful Hilda Shale.

So Miss Rockett took the early afternoon train, and found her way to Mrs Lindley's, where she sent in her card. At once admitted to the drawing-room, she gave a rapid account of herself, naming persons whose acquaintance sufficiently recommended her. Mrs Lindley was a good-humoured, chatty woman, who had a lively interest in everything 'progressive'; a new religion or a new cycling-costume stirred her to just the same kind of happy excitement; she had no prejudices, but a decided preference for the society of healthy, high-spirited, well-to-do people. Miss Rockett's talk was exactly what she liked, for it glanced at innumerable topics of the 'advanced' sort, was much concerned with personalities, and avoided all tiresome precision of argument.

'Are you making a stay here?' asked the hostess.

'Oh! I am with my people in the country not far off,' May answered in an offhand way. 'Only for a day or two.'

Other callers were admitted, but Miss Rockett kept the lead in talk; she glowed with self-satisfaction, feeling that she was really showing to great advantage, and that everybody admired her. When the door again opened the name announced was 'Miss Shale.' Stopping in the middle of a swift sentence, May looked at the newcomer, and saw that it was indeed Hilda Shale, of Brent Hall; but this did not disconcert her. Without lowering her voice she finished what she was saying, and ended in a mirthful key. The baronet's daughter had come into town on her bicycle, as was declared by the short skirt, easy jacket, and brown shoes, which well displayed her athletic person. She was a tall, strongly built girl of six-and-twenty, with a face of hard comeliness and magnificent tawny hair. All her movements suggested vigour; she shook hands with a downward jerk, moved about the room with

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something of a stride and, in sitting down, crossed her legs abruptly.

From the first her look had turned with surprise to Miss Rockett. When, after a minute or two, the hostess presented that young lady to her, Miss Shale raised her eyebrows a little, smiled in another direction, and gave a just perceptible nod. May's behaviour was as nearly as possible the same.

'Do you cycle, Miss Rockett?' asked Mrs Lindley.

'No, I don't. The fact is, I have never found time to learn.'

A lady remarked that nowadays there was a certain distinction in not cycling; whereupon Miss Shale's abrupt and rather metallic voice sounded what was meant for gentle irony.

'It's a pity the machines can't be sold cheaper. A great many people who would like to cycle don't feel able to afford it, you know. One often hears of such cases out in the country, and it seems awfully hard lines, doesn't it?'

Miss Rockett felt a warmth ascending to her ears, and made a violent effort to look unconcerned. She wished to say something, but could not find the right words, and did not feel altogether sure of her voice. The hostess who made no personal application of Miss Shale's remark, began to discuss the prices of bicycles, and others chimed in. May fretted under this turn of the conversation. Seeing that it was not likely to revert to subjects in which she could shine, she rose and offered to take leave.

'Must you really go?' fell with conventional regret from the hostess's lips.

'I'm afraid I must,' Miss Rockett replied, bracing herself under the converging eyes and feeling not quite equal to the occasion. 'My time is so short, and there are so many people I wish to see.'

As she left the house, anger burned in her. It was certain that Hilda Shale would make known her circumstances. She had fancied this revelation a matter of indifference; but, after all, the thought stung her intolerably. The insolence of the creature, with her hint about the prohibitive cost of bicycles! All the harder to bear because hitting the truth. May would have long ago bought a bicycle had she been able to afford it. Straying about the main streets of the town, she looked flushed and wrathful, and could think of nothing but her humiliation.

To make things worse, she lost count of time, and presently found that she had missed the only train by which she could return home. A cab would be too much of an expense; she had no choice but to walk the three or four miles. The evening was close; walking rapidly, and with the accompaniment of vexatious thoughts, she reached the gates of the Hall tired, perspiring, irritated. Just as her hand was on the gate a bicycle-bell trilled vigorously behind her, and, from a distance of twenty yards, a voice cried imperatively

'Open the gate, please!'

Miss Rockett looked round, and saw Hilda Shale slowly wheeling forward, in expectation that way would be made for her. Deliberately May passed through the side entrance, and let the little gate fall to.

Miss Shale dismounted, admitted herself, and spoke to May (now at the lodge door) with angry emphasis.

'Didn't you hear me ask you to open?'

'I couldn't imagine you were speaking to me,' answered Miss Rockett, with brisk dignity. 'I supposed some servant of yours was in sight.'

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A peculiar smile distorted Miss Shale's full red lips. Without another word she mounted her machine and rode away up the elm avenue.

Now Mrs Rockett had seen this encounter, and heard the words exchanged: she was lost in consternation.

'What do you mean by behaving like that, May? Why, I was running out myself to open, and then I saw you were there, and, of course, I thought you'd do it. There's the second time in two days Miss Shale has had to complain about us. How could you forget yourself, to behave and speak like that! Why, you must be crazy, my girl!'

'I don't seem to get on very well here, mother,' was May's reply. 'The fact is, I'm in a false position. I shall go to-morrow morning, and there won't be any more trouble.'

Thus spoke Miss Rockett, as one who shakes off a petty annoyance she knew not that the serious trouble was just beginning. A few minutes later Mrs Rockett went up to the Hall, bent on humbly apologising for her daughter's impertinence. After being kept waiting for a quarter of an hour she was admitted to the presence of the housekeeper, who had a rather grave announcement to make.

'Mrs Rockett, I'm sorry to tell you that you will have to leave the lodge. My lady allows you two months, though, as your wages have always been paid monthly, only a month's notice is really called for. I believe some allowance will be made you, but you will hear about that. The lodge must be ready for its new occupants on the last day of October.'

The poor woman all but sank. She had no voice for protest or entreaty a sob choked her; and blindly she made her way to the door of the room, then to the exit from the Hall.

'What in the world is the matter?' cried May, hearing from the sitting-room, whither she had retired, a clamour of distressful tongues.

She came into the kitchen, and learnt what had happened.

'And now I hope you're satisfied!' exclaimed her mother, with tearful wrath. 'You've got us turned out of our home you've lost us the best place a family ever had and I hope it's a satisfaction to your conceited, overbearing mind! If you'd tried for it you couldn't have gone to work better. And much you care! We're below you, we are; we're like dirt under your feet! And your father'll go and end his life who knows where, miserable as miserable can be; and your sister'll have to go into service; and as for me '

'Listen, mother!' shouted the girl, her eyes flashing and every nerve of her body strung. 'If the Shales are such contemptible wretches as to turn you out just because they're offended with me, I should have thought you'd have spirit enough to tell them what you think of such behaviour, and be glad never more to serve such brutes! Father, what do you say? I'll tell you how it was.'

She narrated the events of the afternoon, amid sobs and ejaculations from her mother and Betsy. Rockett, who was just now in anguish of lumbago, tried to straighten himself in his chair before replying, but sank helplessly together with a groan.

'You can't help yourself, May,' he said at length. 'It's your nature, my girl. Don't worry. I'll see Sir Edwin, and perhaps he'll listen to me. It's the women who make all the mischief. I must try to see Sir Edwin '

A pang across the loins made him end abruptly, groaning, moaning, muttering. Before the renewed attack of her mother May retreated into the sitting-room, and there passed an hour wretchedly enough. A knock at the door without words called her to supper, but she had no appetite, and would not join the family circle. Presently the

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door opened, and her father looked in.

'Don't worry, my girl,' he whispered. 'I'll see Sir Edwin in the morning.'

May uttered no reply. Vaguely repenting what she had done, she at the same time rejoiced in the recollection of her passage of arms with Miss Shale, and was inclined to despise her family for their pusillanimous attitude. It seemed to her very improbable that the expulsion would really be carried out. Lady Shale and Hilda meant, no doubt, to give the Rocketts a good fright, and then contemptuously pardon them. She, in any case, would return to London without delay, and make no more trouble. A pity she had come to the lodge at all; it was no place for one of her spirit and her attainments.

In the morning she packed. The train which was to take her back to town left at half-past ten, and after breakfast she walked into the village to order a cab. Her mother would scarcely speak to her; Betsy was continually in reproachful tears. On coming back to the lodge she saw her father hobbling down the avenue, and walked towards him to ask the result of his supplication. Rockett had seen Sir Edwin, but only to hear his sentence of exile confirmed. The baronet said he was sorry, but could not interfere; the matter lay in Lady Shale's hands, and Lady Shale absolutely refused to hear any excuses or apologies for the insult which had been offered her daughter.

'It's all up with us,' said the old gardener, who was pale and trembling after his great effort. 'We must go. But don't worry, my girl, don't worry.'

Then fright took hold upon May Rockett. She felt for the first time what she had done. Her heart fluttered in an anguish of self-reproach, and her eyes strayed as if seeking help. A minute's hesitation, then, with all the speed she could make, she set off up the avenue towards the Hall.

Presenting herself at the servants' entrance, she begged to be allowed to see the housekeeper. Of course her story was known to all the domestics, half a dozen of whom quickly collected to stare at her, with more or less malicious smiles. It was a bitter moment for Miss Rockett, but she subdued herself, and at length obtained the interview she sought. With a cold air of superiority and of disapproval the housekeeper listened to her quick, broken sentences. Would it be possible, May asked, for her to see Lady Shale? She desired to – to apologise for – for rudeness of which she had been guilty, rudeness in which her family had no part, which they utterly deplored, but for which they were to suffer severely.

'If you could help me, ma'am, I should be very grateful – indeed I should'

Her voice all but broke into a sob. That 'ma'am' cost her a terrible effort; the sound of it seemed to smack her on the ears.

'If you will go into the servants' hall and wait,' the housekeeper deigned to say, after reflecting, 'I'll see what can be done.'

And Miss Rockett submitted. In the servants' hall she sat for a long, long time, observed, but never addressed. The hour of her train went by. More than once she was on the point of rising and fleeing; more than once her smouldering wrath all but broke into flame. But she thought of her father's pale, pain-stricken face, and sat on.

At something past eleven o'clock a footman approached her, and said curtly, 'You are to go up to my lady; follow me.' May followed, shaking with weakness and apprehension, burning at the same time with pride all but in revolt. Conscious of nothing on the way, she found herself in a large room, where sat the two ladies, who for some moments spoke together about a topic of the day placidly. Then the elder seemed to become aware of the girl who stood before her.

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'You are Rockett's elder daughter?'

Oh, the metallic voice of Lady Shale! How gratified she would have been could she have known how it bruised the girl's pride!

'Yes, my lady '

'And why do you want to see me?'

'I wish to apologise – most sincerely – to your ladyship – for my behaviour of last evening '

'Oh, indeed!' the listener interrupted contemptuously. 'I am glad you have come to your senses. But your apology must be offered to Miss Shale – if my daughter cares to listen to it.'

May had foreseen this. It was the bitterest moment of her ordeal. Flushing scarlet, she turned towards the younger woman.

'Miss Shale, I beg your pardon for what I said yesterday – I beg you to forgive my rudeness – my impertinence '

Her voice would go no further; there came a choking sound. Miss Shale allowed her eyes to rest triumphantly for an instant on the troubled face and figure, then remarked to her mother –

'It's really nothing to me, as I told you. I suppose this person may leave the room now?'

It was fated that May Rockett should go through with her purpose and gain her end. But fate alone (which meant in this case the subtlest preponderance of one impulse over another) checked her on the point of a burst of passion which would have startled Lady Shale and Miss Hilda out of their cold-blooded complacency. In the silence May's blood gurgled at her ears, and she tottered with dizziness.

'You may go,' said Lady Shale.

But May could not move. There flashed across her the terrible thought that perhaps she had humiliated herself for nothing.

'My lady – I hope – will your ladyship please to forgive my father and mother? I entreat you not to send them away. We shall all be so grateful to your ladyship if you will overlook '

'That will do,' said Lady Shale decisively. 'I will merely say that the sooner you leave the lodge the better; and that you will do well never again to pass the gates of the Hall. You may go.'

Miss Rockett withdrew. Outside, the footman was awaiting her. He looked at her with a grin, and asked in an undertone, 'Any good?' But May, to whom this was the last blow, rushed past him, lost herself in corridors, ran wildly hither and thither, tears streaming from her eyes, and was at length guided by a maid-servant into the outer air. Fleeing she cared not whither, she came at length into a still corner of the park, and there, hidden amid trees, watched only by birds and rabbits, she wept out the bitterness of her soul.

By an evening train she returned to London, not having confessed to her family what she had done, and suffering still from some uncertainty as to the result. A day or two later Betsy wrote to her the happy news that the sentence of expulsion was withdrawn, and peace reigned once more in the ivy-covered lodge. By that time Miss Rockett had all but recovered her self-respect, and was so busy in her secretaryship that she could only scribble a line of congratulation. She felt that she had done rather a meritorious thing, but, for the first time in her life, did not care

to boast of it.