



Only a Beggar;

—BUT—

A Queen Among Women

CHAPTER XII.

It was an unwise and unfortunate argument. Diana's face, that had been pale a moment before, now grew crimson, and a light came into her eyes which he had never before seen shining in them.

"You are unjust, Aunt Mary," she said, in a low voice, but it rang with a note of indignation. "You don't know him—you judge him by hearsay. And—and—if it were true, it would make no difference, it would not influence me."

"No difference? Would not—?" "No!" rejoined Diana, her face pale again now, but the light burning more brightly in her eyes. "If—if I loved him, nothing any one, or the world, could say against him would matter. It would not matter if—if he were really bad!"

Mrs. Burton stared at her with painful intensity.

"Are you mad, Diana?" she whispered.

Diana was silent a moment, as if she were thinking; then she looked up.

"No; it would not matter. Where her heart goes, there a woman must follow. She doesn't wait to ask herself whether the man is good, bad, or indifferent; she loves him, and that is enough." She panted a little, as under the strain of the emotion that thrilled through her words. "For better or for worse—ah, yes, that is it!"

She rose as she spoke and went to the window and looked out at the stars which were shining through the dusky night; and she still saw Vane's face, heard his voice.

Mrs. Burton sat with lowered head and twitching lips; then, with a deep sigh of despairful resignation, she said:

"I can say no more, Diana. You will follow your own will, I know; but—but—I have warned you!"

Diana went to her and put her arm round her neck.

"Warned me! Oh, why do you speak so sternly; why do you look on the dark side of everything—everything? Oh, forgive me, Aunt Mary! I have made you unhappy—I did not mean to do so! I know you love me! I did not mean to distress you!"

"No; it's not you," said Mrs. Burton, almost inaudibly. "Not you, Diana. It is—not your fault. What ever happens—" She rose and, putting Diana's arm from her, went out of the room.

Diana lay awake through the night, listening to the striking of the hours by the great clock in the turret at Shortledge, the house, where Dalesford lay—thinking of her, she wondered?

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ford lay—thinking of her, she wondered?

Mrs. Burton did not come down to breakfast. Diana went up to her room; but the door was locked, and in answer to Diana's tender inquiry, Mrs. Burton said that she had a headache and wished to be left alone.

With a sigh Diana went down and tried to eat some breakfast; but she could not; and her eyes strayed to the window and across the lawn to the river. How soon would he come? And her answer? Oh, her answer!

Presently she heard the dip of the sculls, the boat glided to the landing-place, and, pale and red by turns, she watched him come quickly across the lawn. Even in that moment her heart thrilled with pride. How tall and graceful, how handsome, he was. She had never seen any one like him—and he loved her!

She went through the open window to meet him, and he met her eyes raised to his for an instant, with an intent, questioning gaze.

"I am here," he said, in a low voice. "No; not the house—" as Diana turned. "Come into the garden."

He did not say "Will you come?" she noted. He spoke in the tone of a man on the brink of the most momentous hour in his life.

They walked side by side, but he leading the way, all the same, to a seat in the shrubbery overlooking the placid river, and with a gesture he motioned her to be seated.

"I have come for my answer, Diana," he said, gravely, quietly, but his eyes sought hers with an earnestness and eagerness that belied his apparent calm. "I love you—but you know that. Will you give yourself to me?"

Diana's heart throbbed, but she tried to still it; to answer the question put so masterfully, and yet so gently; but her aunt's words haunted her.

"Lord Dalesford, have you thought—have you considered the difference between us, the difference in rank?" He looked at her with faint surprise.

"What on earth has that to do with it?" he asked.

"Your people—" she said, in a low voice. "They will think of it, if you have not—"

"Let them think," he said, calmly, even with a smile. "I'm not asking you to marry my people. And you do them an injustice. Do you think they won't be proud of you, Diana?"

"Proud of me!" she echoed; but her heart glowed at his words, at the tone in which they were spoken.

"Why, yes!" he said. "Is that your only objection? Good heavens!" he laughed rather sadly. "I could find ever so many much stronger ones. Here's one of them. I'm not worthy of you, no man is; but I the least of all. My life—" His face darkened and he bit his lip. "But let the past go. Since I met you and loved you, I've been a different man. It rests with you whether I go back to—that fool's life again or not. You can make of me what you will. But you know that, too. Dearest—his voice broke and he flung himself beside her and caught her hand—"don't hesitate! Have some pity on me. It's life or death for me—this answer of yours. Let it be 'yes,' Diana, let it be 'yes!' I'm a bad lot, I know; but—but—" His voice failed him completely, and he sprang to his feet and caught her up to him. "But I love you, and I want you! And I'll spend the rest of my life in making you happy. No, no, it must be 'yes'; I'll not take no."

She felt his arms tighten round her; felt his lips on hers in a passionate kiss; and as they touched hers something seemed to go out from her soul to his. A moment before she thought that she had not known her own heart; but at the touch of his lips she was conquered, if the indescribable joy of surrender can be called vanquishment.

With a low cry he pressed her more closely to him, and she hid her face on his breast.

"Now, dearest!" he said, with infinite love, with the tender wistfulness of a man's passion, "tell me now!"

"Yes!" she murmured, raising her face and looking at him through veiled eyes.

"Dearest!" he whispered, his voice hoarse and trembling. "I—I can scarcely believe it. It seems too good



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luck to be true. Diana, give me one kiss, of your own accord, so that I may really know!"

It was the first time in her life that her lips had ever been raised to meet any man's; and, panting a little, she hung her head, longing yet dreading to bestow this sign of her heart's conquest. Then she slowly put her arms round his neck, and with her solemn, joy-lit eyes gazing into his, kissed him on the lips.

It is such moments as this that transform this transient world of ours into an earthly paradise and make life worth living. These two mortals sat side by side, hand in hand, rapt in a joy beyond the power of words to describe.

The man asked himself why Heaven had bestowed this angel upon him; the woman why this man, this kind of man, had bent down to love her, to raise her to his heart, his chosen, his mate.

Time glided by unheeded; the music of the river, the singing of the birds, the very rustle of the leaves made a harmony which sang of love divine, immortal. All the world lay between their hands; as they glanced at each other there flowed from their eyes a stream of electric sympathy, of mutual understanding, as if each had known the other since very childhood, as if they had been mated by Divine decree from the beginning of time; twin souls here in this garden beside the silver river, to flow, like it, until they were lost in the ocean of death.

"And you doubted, hesitated, kept me in doubt," he said, at last.

Diana hung her head, then raised her eyes to his.

"No. I never doubted," she said innocently. "I only thought I did. It seemed so marvelous, so—so—impossible that you—you should love me."

He laughed, but not loudly.

"Do you never look in the glass?" he asked. "Don't you know that you are one of the most beautiful women—"

"In your eyes," she whispered. "Oh, I'm glad you think so—glad!"

"And so—good! Good as gold!" he said, in a lower voice. "I think that's why I love you, Diana. Jolly name—Diana. And it fits you. You weren't easy to get, dearest! But nothing worth having is—my treasure!"

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She grew grave in a moment.

"That makes me remember—you calling me that. Your father—"

He drew her to him and pressed her warm, soft cheek against his.

"See here, Diana. My father will be delighted. He has always wanted me to marry. Good Lord! I should have done so many years ago, if he had his way. And as for you and him, why—"

—he laughed—"he simply worships beauty, and will make no end of a fuss over you. There's only one thing—" He paused a moment, and looked down at her with a smile.

"Tell me," she said.

"Of course," he responded. "No secrets, no concealment between us. We start on that basis, eh, dearest?"

"Oh, yes, yes!" assented Diana.

"Right. Well, look here; you haven't made much of a match of it. You might have married a duke—oh, yes, you might. If you'd run a season in town—Lord, how glad I am you didn't—there's no knowing how high you might have flown. But you're my bird now, the captive of my bow and spear. Where was I? Oh, yes," he went on lightly. "You have done very badly in a worldly sense, Diana. For we're as poor as Job. Fact!" as she stared at him. "Poorer than Job, for I don't remember that he was in debt. We are—up to our necks. You and I will have to economize. It will be love in a cottage, don't you know."

She looked up at him quickly and her lips moved. She was going to tell him that she was that hateful thing, a millonair's daughter. No, blessed! For could she not pour her money at his feet? A golden sacrifice on the altar of love. But she kept back the words. It was so sweet to be loved for herself alone, that she clung to the flattering fact, to the delicious picture of the love in a cottage, which his imagination had drawn.

"But we shall get on all right," he said easily. "We always have. And if we don't, who cares? Not I!"

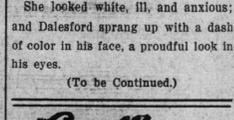
"Nor I!" she whispered, a little guiltily. She would tell him tomorrow.

They sat and talked—for even when their lips were silent their eyes were eloquent; and the subject never altered, though they rang an endless variation on it, until a shadow fell on the path before them, and they looked up and saw Mrs. Burton.

She looked white, ill, and anxious; and Dalesford sprang up with a dash of color in his face, a proud look in his eyes.

(To be Continued.)

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