

**Only a Beggar;  
—BUT—  
A Queen Among Women**

CHAPTER XV.

It is given to few of us, alas! to taste the perfect happiness which fell to the lot of Diana. There were times in which she stopped short in the middle of a walk, or what she was doing, to ask herself what she had done to deserve such bliss; why she, of all the women in the world, should have been chosen as a favorite of fortune.

Only a little while ago, she had been a country school-mistress, passing rich on eighty pounds a year, "with light and firing;" she was now "a great lady," and more than this, ah, more than this! the betrothed of a man whom she regarded as the noblest, the prince of men. Saving for her wealth, she was a mere nobody, an insignificant person, and yet she had been received by the great Wrayborough family not only favorably, but with something like enthusiasm.

The earl led the way. He had been immensely taken with her on the day of the betrothal, on the occasion when Mr. Fielding had announced her wealth; and the admiration and liking grew into love. The qualities which had won Vane's heart won his father's, and it seemed as if the earl could not see too much of her.

He stayed on at Shortledge, so that he might be near her; and every day he had her up there, or paid a visit to Rivermead. He would call for her to go for a drive with him in the stately barouche, would sit on the



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lawn, watching her and Vane playing tennis against Bertie and Mabel; but what he liked best was to recline in the stern of Diana's favorite skiff, while she pulled slowly up the river or drifted down it, her hands crossed on the sculls, her lovely face bent forward to listen to him.

And he was never tired of talking to her; sometimes of himself, and his youthful days, but more often of Vane; of how he had won this race, or the other, or gained the prize for the high jump, or stalked an almost impossible stag under almost impossible circumstances.

He was proud, too, of her, and found a peculiar delight in witnessing the effect her beauty and grace made upon the friends to whom he introduced her.

"The girl's unique," he said to Lady Selina. "She ought to be bourgeoisie—middle class, but, marvelous to say, she is nothing of the kind; on the contrary, she is aristocratic from the crown of her beautiful head to the soles of her dear little feet. Until I saw Diana, I did not believe in nature's gentlemen and gentlewomen; but I do now. She has converted me. The solution of the enigma lies in the fact that she is so exquisitely natural. She has never done anything she has never entertained a thought of which she should be ashamed. Her modesty disarms criticism; her womanly dignity, her innocence and purity would carry her, unharmed, and unstained, through the rabble of Comus. In short, I have not had the pleasure of meeting an angel, but, given a pair of wings on those beautiful white shoulders of hers, and Diana would fully come up to my ideal of one. And, with all this, she is going to bring money into the family, I don't wonder that Vane sometimes looks as if he were confused and bewildered by his good fortune. He must very often ask himself whether it isn't all a dream."

Needless to say, Vane was delighted at his father's affection for Diana. "Upon my word," he said to her, "I am half inclined to be jealous. If he had seen you before I did, you might have been the Countess of Wrayborough, and my step-mother. Sounds nice, doesn't it, dearest? It's delicious to hear him talking about you, to see the air with which he alludes to 'my future daughter-in-law.' He's as proud as if he'd invented you—and he takes all the credit of our engagement. I don't know whether he's spoken to you about our marriage, but this morning he asked me when it was to be, remarked that he was an old man—as if the governor could ever be old!—and that the only thing he wanted was a daughter. May I tell him, dearest, when I can give him one?"

Diana looked startled, and shook her head. "Oh, not yet, Vane—not for a long time. We are so happy! I want this time to last; I don't want to change it."

"All right," he said. "You'd better tell him so. But, seriously, dearest, don't keep me waiting long. I'm happy, so happy, that sometimes I find myself laughing at nothing at all; but all the same, I want you to myself, and want you very badly."

There were other reasons, besides Diana's reluctance to break the spell of this betrothal period, why the marriage could not take place at once. A great heiress is not nearly so much the mistress of her actions as ordinary and less fortunate girls; there were business arrangements to be made in connection with her vast wealth; settlements to be drawn up, legal questions to be considered and decided; and lawyers are, of all the sons of men, the most slow and procrastinating; and Mr. Fielding declared, in a tone of finality, that the wedding could not take place for some months.

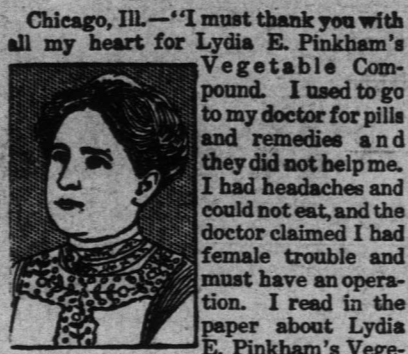
Vane was indignant, the earl almost as much so; but they both knew that it was as useless to oppose Mr. Fielding's decision as to run their heads against a brick wall.

It was now the time of the year when Vane and his father usually went up to Glenaskel for the shooting and stalking; and it was the earl who proposed that Diana should accompany them.

"Your Aunt Selina must come up there, and run the place, and act as chaperon." Lady Selina, who generally went to Hopburg for the season, stifled a groan; but Mabel, who was

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In the room, uttered an exclamation of delight.

"Oh, Uncle Edward, how jolly! I love Glenaskel! And I may shoot, mayn't I, Vane?"

"Oh, have you been invited?" asked the earl, with an innocent air of surprise, but there was a kindly wrinkle in his eye; and Mabel knew that she was safe.

"Don't let's have a mob, sir," said Vane. "Three or four guns will be enough. What about young Selby? I think Diana would like to have him."

"Oh, then, certainly he must come," responded the earl, in a matter-of-fact voice. "Let me see, Diana can have that south suite of rooms."

"Really, Edward, I think you might leave that to me," remarked Lady Selina.

"Quite so, quite so, my dear Selina!" he assented hastily and apologetically. "But I should like her to be quite comfortable, and they are the sunniest rooms, you know, with the best view; you can see the river and the forest. By the way, the rooms will want doing up and refurbishing. Will you see to that, or shall I, Vane?"

Vane laughed. "I'll see to that, sir," he said.

The earl nodded. "Have everything very nice; don't spare expense. Let me see, what would be the best color for her? Something with roses in it. You might sound her—delicately, you know, Vane. No, no; I'll do it myself. I'm better at that kind of thing than you are. I shall like it to be a surprise to her."

He was always planning a surprise for her. One day, it would take the shape of a charming pony phaeton, with a couple of miniature Exmoors;

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the next, some costly piece of jewelry, which he had chosen with anxious care; on another, an exquisitely bound book, or a volume of music.

It was a liberal education in old-world courtesy to see him presenting her with the orchid from his button-hole; or leaning over her, his face wreathed with smiles, as she examined and exclaimed over one of his presents. And with what loving pride Diana wore the costly gems or the simple flower when she went out to dinner, with Vane, and the old man worshipping in her train, as if she were a princess, or something still rarer in womanhood.

Little wonder that she almost feared to break the spell. One thing only marred her perfect happiness—Mrs. Burton's health. Ever since she had fainted, on the afternoon of the earl's visit, Mrs. Burton had been weak and ailing, and Diana had been anxious about her. The doctor who had been called in said that there was nothing serious the matter, that it was a nervous trouble, which rest and quiet would dispel; but, though Mrs. Burton kept almost entirely to her own room, she did not recover her strength.

Diana sat with her for hours, and tried to interest her in the life that was going on about her; but she could not be roused from the state of apathy into which she had fallen; and while Diana was talking or reading to her, she lay back in her chair, her hands tightly clasped, her eyes fixed vacantly on the window.

It had been arranged that Mrs. Burton should accompany Diana to Glenaskel, but she was, evidently, not well enough to go, and Diana proposed to give up the visit, and remain with her; but Mrs. Burton was so agitated by the mere suggestion of such a sacrifice on Diana's part that Diana was compelled to yield, and to promise that she would go alone, if her aunt were not well enough to go with her. She would not hear of Diana giving up the most important invitation for her sake; and became so excited when Diana offered to do so that the doctor impressed upon Diana the necessity of letting the sick woman have her way.

One day, the earl and Diana were seated on his favorite spot on the terrace at Shortledge, talking of Glenaskel, and of the happy time they were going to have there. On the preceding day, he had artfully learned from her her favorite color—it was his own, old rose—and Vane had gone up to London to see the decorators. He had been charged by the earl to spare no expense.

(To be Continued.)

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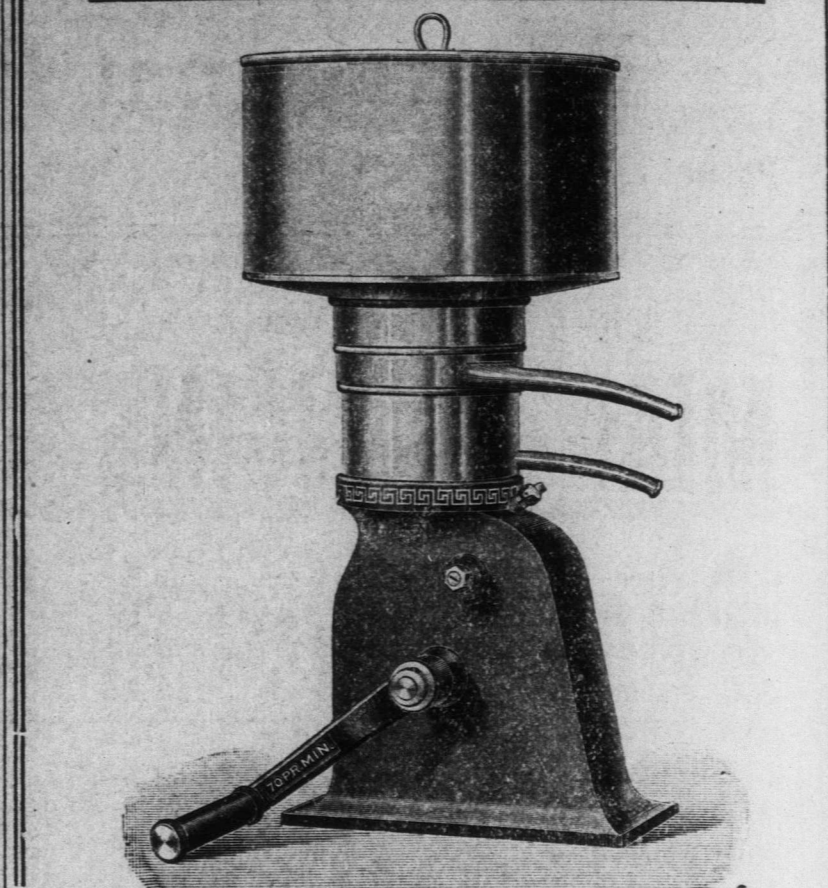
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