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Only a Beggar;

A Queen Among Women

CHAPTER XXVIII.

As he spoke the earl entered; he had not been able to remain in bed. Vane turned to him as if suddenly nerved for a painful task.

"I have just been telling Mabel that there is no news of Diana," he said, in a low, dry voice. "And I have searched—" He paused. "Even if I had found her, I should have gained nothing but the relief from suspense. Diana will come back to us of her own accord or not at all. I know her. There is no more to be said, and—his voice broke for a moment, then he steadied it and went on bravely—"no more shall be said. Ask Aunt Selma, all our friends, to respect our silence, sir."

The earl bowed his head.

"My poor boy!" he murmured inaudibly. "But you are right, I too, know Diana, and feel that, while the cause of her flight remains, she will not come back to us. And—and—your plans, Vane? Have you made any; you're going abroad, perhaps?" he added with an attempt to hide his anxiety and dread; for the companionship of his son meant much to him.

"No," said Vane grimly. "I intend remaining with you, if you'll have me, sir?"

The earl checked the cry of joy and relief that sprang to his lips.

"Are you sure that it is—wise, Vane? Change of scene and—"

Vane smiled grimly. "I've tried it, sir," he said. "No; I will stay here and play my part—like a man, if I can. I've been behaving more like a hysterical woman up to now—beg pardon, Mabel; a woman would have known better than to seek forgetfulness as I have been seeking it. But that's done with." He made a gesture of renunciation. "That's a fool's game, and unworthy of—the woman I love and shall love till I die. No, no, I won't say any more!" he broke off, as the earl's lips twitched and his eyes filled with tears. "How are the birds this year? Bertie getting good sport? I wonder whether he has found any snipe in the lower marshes? There used to be a good many; but they fell off last season. That's the worst of draining. Shall we take

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a drive, sir, or aren't you up to it?" "Yes, yes; by all means!" responded the earl eagerly. "We'll meet Bertie Selby and pick him up. Where has he gone, Mabel?"

"To the western woods," she replied, as promptly as if she were his keeper. "He'll be so delighted. Don't be late for lunch. I'll tell them to have some of your favorite curry, Vane."

Happier than he had been for many a sad and weary month, the earl sat beside Vane and talked about the estate as they drove along the well-kept roads to the western lodge; but he talked and listened with an occasional sinking of the heart; for he saw that Vane's cheerfulness was only forced and assumed, and that the iron had eaten deeply into his heart. It was difficult for the father to realize that this thin, haggard-faced man with the grave, preoccupied air, was the Vane who had taken life so easily, as if the world had been made for him; and the sun bidden to shine that he might bask in the warmth and gladness of its rays.

Presently they heard the sound of a gun, and came upon Bertie. He exclaimed at sight of Vane, but he, too, saw that there was no good news, and abated the eagerness of his greeting. But Vane's manner plainly indicated that he wished to avoid any expression of sympathy, and Bertie quickly caught the proper tone.

They talked game all the way home, and through the lunch at which Lady Selma, who had received a hint from Mabel, bore herself as if nothing were the matter, and Vane had merely returned from an ordinary visit to town.

It was not until Mabel and he were alone that Bertie gave vent to his feelings.

"How shockingly ill and changed he is!" he said in an awed voice. "He looks years older, and—have you noticed his eyes?"

"Of course I have," said Mabel impatiently; "but I don't let him see that I have; and don't you. What we've got to do is to treat him as if nothing had happened. Not to fuss over him, mind! If there's anything Vane hates it is fuss; and at the first sign of it he would be off."

"I suppose it's all a question of time," remarked Bertie sadly.

"Oh, is it?" she retorted ironically. "How long do you think it would take a man to get over the loss of Diana?"

"I know how long it would take me to get over the loss of—you, Mabel," he said.

"Oh, do you? A few months, I imagine. But fortunately for you the question doesn't arise. You can't lose what you haven't got, you know."

"Oh, Mabel, if you'd only give me the right—" he pleaded.

"Now, don't talk nonsense," she caught him up. "I'm too busy—busy thinking of Vane, and wondering what I can do to help him; to think of anything else."

and he joined Mr. Starkey in planning economies and cutting down those expenses which might be spared without decreasing the comfort of the people on the estate.

Vane had always been popular, for the English tenant and laborer will regard his landlord and master with respect and affection even when that landlord and master is rather hard; and the Wrayboroughs had always been, if anything, too generous and lenient. Little wonder that the tenants and people's liking for "the young master," as they called him, grew to genuine affection when they found that he cared for their well-being and spent most of his time making their lives more prosperous and comfortable; so that Vane, as he rode or walked over the estate, met with a warm and hearty greeting from all; and especially from the children, who quickly came to look upon him as a friend—a friend, however, who was to be regarded with an affection mixed with awe.

Often, as he passed the little school, in which a new mistress reigned in Diana's place, he would turn back and look in at the children with a smile on his grave, sad face; and not seldom he would pick up some mite of a boy and give him a lift on Jess; or walk through the woods with two or three children as close to him as they could get, while he asked them about their lessons, their games, the birds' nesting, in the manner of a true though older chum.

They missed him when he went to visit the other estates; and when he returned, the news went round the village and was received with anticipatory joy.

Sometimes Mabel or Bertie accompanied him on his walks and rides; and Vane talked and laughed, if not with the debonair carelessness of old, with an assumption of cheerfulness; but he preferred solitude, and spent many hours of the day on Jess, or tramping through the covers with his gun. And it was then, when there were no eyes to see him, that he yielded to the spirit of sadness, the black shadow of memory that held him in thrall; it was at such times that he communed with the past, and his heart was filled with an aching longing for the girl whom he could not forget.

For the rest, he played his part, with a manly fortitude, and, though he would fain have lived to himself and his memory of the days that had fled, he did not shirk his social duties. At the earnest request of the hunt he took over the hounds, and did his duty by them; and it was, perhaps, when he was riding after a good fox, with a keen scent and an open country, that he found most relief from the black care that darkened all his days. He did not discourage the earl's natural desire to display hospitality, and dinners were both given and accepted—the old-fashioned dinners at which the earl shone so conspicuously; and Vane in genial courtesy would run a good second to his father. But when the guests had gone, Vane

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would stand in the hall and look out at the night with thoughts that wandered toward the dinners at which Diana had been the acknowledged queen; and long after the rest of the household had retired he sat up in the smoking-room with his pipe—the old brier he had so often smoked when Diana was by his side—and gave himself up to the past.

Where was she? Should he never see her, hear of her, again?

Sometimes he would go up to London, but his old haunts of folly and sin knew him no more. He would look in at his club for his letters, scarcely staying for half an hour, then wander about the streets, "the quiet streets of the poor, his head bent, but his eyes searching every woman's face; and now and again he would see a face and a figure that were like Diana's; but as he got nearer the resemblance would fade, and his heart would sink. On one of his visits he heard that the marriage of Desmond March with Miss Bangs had been fixed for an early date; but the news did not interest him. Indeed, nothing was really of interest to him; and his old friends, when he met them were chilled by the aloofness of his manner, and presently began to avoid him.

And all the time the loving hearts of Mabel and his father were aching for him. They saw that he was only playing a part, the part of the Spartan boy who strove to conceal the stolen fox that was gnawing at his breast. The earl had grave cause for anxiety; for he was too often assailed by the dread that Vane would never marry, and that the title would pass to Desmond March, the blackleg, the man whose evil reputation stank aloud in the old man's nostrils.

To women Vane was always courteous, far more courteous and well-mannered than he had been in the old days; but it was too evident that no one of them, be she as charming and beautiful as she might, could warm his bereaved heart with the glow of love.

"One doesn't love a Diana for nothing," said Mabel with womanly shrewdness. "There is no one like her; no one. Vane will never marry anyone else."

"It isn't likely," Bertie responded with warm concurrence. "Do you think that I could ever marry any one else but—but one person in the world?"

(To be continued.)



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