

ROYAL YEAST

Only a Beggar;
A Queen Among Women

CHAPTER IV.

"You—you put it somewhat bluntly," he said ruefully. "But—after a pause—you are right. Yes; you are right. It is an unpleasant way out of the difficulty; but, if there is no alternative, why—poor Vane must do it. But who is to tell him so?"

Mr. Starkey frowned. "If I may suggest, your lordship would be the proper person—"

The earl smiled grimly. "I may be the proper person—but I'm hanged if I do it! Now, you, my dear sir, you who know how extremely necessary the step is—"

Mr. Starkey gripped his thin, long hands behind him, and set his teeth. "Something must be done," he said almost defiantly. "And I see no other way of saving the estate from ruin. It is—forgive me if I speak plainly, my lord—"

"My dear fellow, you always speak plainly," murmured the earl, with a stifled groan.

"It is time Lord Dalesford married. I cannot forget that, if anything happened to him—"

"My dear Mr. Starkey, don't, for Heaven's sake—don't make matters worse by croaking!" implored the earl.

"That the title and estate—what there is left of it!—would pass to Mr. Desmond March," went on Mr. Starkey. "The mere thought of such a calamity—"

"Then, for Heaven's sake, don't let us think of it!" broke in the earl.

"And, speaking of Mr. March, my lord, reminds me that he has written to me again. It is a—well, threatening letter to me this time. He threatens that, if we do not send him the money he asks for, he will—well,

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come to the Hall for it, and demand it in person."

The earl shuddered visibly. "My dear Mr. Starkey, such a visitation must be warded off, at any cost. Send him five hundred pounds, and—tell him to go to the devil!"

"He has gone there long since, my lord," remarked Mr. Starkey grimly. "Five hundred pounds! I'm sure I don't know where I am to find—"

"Try him with two hundred and fifty," said the earl persuasively.

"And—Lord Dalesford, the plan I suggested?"

The earl rose and sighed.

"Pon my word, my dear sir, I couldn't tell him he must marry for money. You must. Not that it matters which of us undertakes the task. He wouldn't do it. He would laugh at either and both of us."

Mr. Starkey went to the door, but was arrested by a cough and a murmur from the earl.

"Oh, Mr. Starkey, I shall want a few hundred by the end of the week." The unfortunate steward opened his lips, shut them again; then, with something between a sigh and a groan said:

"Very well, my lord."

As he passed out, a footman came up, with a letter on a salver.

"For you, sir."

Mr. Starkey opened the letter, read it absently for a minute, then he stifled an exclamation, and nervously wiped the beads of perspiration which had started to his brow. Of course, it was a demand for money. He turned, as if with the intention of re-entering the earl's room, but hesitated, and, at last, with a gesture of despair, walked slowly and heavily down the great staircase, with Black Care close behind him.

CHAPTER V.

"Mr. Fielding, I wonder whether you would mind very much if I called you my Fairy Godmother?" said Diana.

Mr. Fielding leaned back in his cane rocking-chair, and smiled. He had had an excellent dinner, prepared by a cook of his own choosing, and was enjoying a mild—a very mild—cigar, through the smoke of which he was regarding, with intent appreciation, the beautiful girl reclining in the chair beside him.

They were seated on the terrace, under a broad veranda, which ran the length of what the house agent had called "the most recherche residence in Berkshire." Before them lay a lawn like green plush, broken here and there by beds of flowers, which rivalled the hues of the peacock that strutted about in the red glow of the sunlight. Beyond the lawn ran that most wonderful of all rivers, the placid, silver Thames, its deep blue broken by white spots—the swans that floated near the landing-stage. A pine wood rose behind the house, and filled the air with the delicious and health-giving odour of terebenthine. Noisy London might have been a hundred miles away, for the only sounds that broke the stillness were the cry of the peacocks, the rustle of the swans' wings, and the notes of the nightingale, who was just tuning up for his nightly concert.

"You shall call me what you like, Miss Diana," responded Mr. Fielding, with the affability he always displayed in Diana's presence.

"Thanks, very much!" said Diana laughingly. "And, really, the old lady in the red cloak and high poke hat, who appeared to poor Cinderella, and did the conjuring tricks with the melon and the mice, did not better deserve the title than you. Why, yes; I was just Cinderella. And you came and waved your wand, and—here I am! With my pockets full of money, with everything the heart of man—I mean woman—could wish for! It is marvelous, and you are the most effective Fairy Godmother that ever lived."

"You enjoyed yourself abroad, my dear?" he asked.

"Oh, yes, yes! I had, sometimes, dreamed of seeing all these wonderful things, but I never thought my dream would be realized. 'Enjoyed myself?' Yes, indeed! The days passed like a vision. I used to start awake at night, and ask myself if it could be true that I, Diana Bourne, was traveling on the Continent like a princess. It was so hard to realize that I could go where I liked, stay there as long as I liked, or move when I liked. That I was rich enough to

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put up at the palatial hotels, travel first-class—do you know, Fairy Godmother, that that little matter of first-class, instead of third, helped me more than anything else to realize the—the change that your wand had wrought for your Cinderella? Only the rich ride first-class, you know—and, then, to feel that I could buy anything I wanted—Ah, you can't understand the delicious thrill that used to run through me as I gazed into a shop-window, and coveted some of the things in it, and then suddenly And everywhere we were made and buy them without counting the cost!"

"And you bought a great many things?" he said, with a man-of-the-world's enjoyment of the naive confession made by the beautiful lips, half parted with the smile of happiness.

"Oh, dear, yes! All the things I didn't want. That's it, you know. To be able to buy the things you don't want! Whenever I saw anything that I thought Aunt Mary would like, oh, the joy of stalking in, and saying: 'I'll have that, please!' Poor aunt was frightened at first, and reproached me for extravagance; and I don't think she is quite resigned even yet."

"You traveled a great deal?"

"Oh, yes! However beautiful the place was, there always seemed to be a still more beautiful one a little farther on. Yes, we covered no end of ground. France, Germany, Switzerland, Italy—it would fill a geography. And everywhere we were made much of, and treated as if we were, indeed, princesses. It was the money of course—"

"Not altogether the money," he murmured smilingly, as he looked at the beautiful face, the graceful figure clad in its costly dress of black lace, upon which sparkled the few diamonds Aunt Mary had persuaded Diana to buy.

"And, at first, it seemed as if I could go on, and on, and on until I had gone right round the world; but, presently," she paused, and her eyes grew dark and dreamy—"but, presently, I—well, I was homesick; I wanted to see the white cliffs of old England, to hear the dear old Cockney twang, the broad, country drawl; to see the green fields—there are no green fields like those of England!—to hear the railway porters shrieking the stations by names quite unlike their proper ones; to breathe the London smoke, and hear the cows lowing as they turned home at milking-time. You see, I mixed it all up together—town and country. I wanted them both. I wanted Great Britain—England, Scotland, and Ireland! All of it!"

She drew a long breath, and looked wistfully, lovingly at the beautiful scene before her.

"I wanted—home! And then, when I felt as if I should die if I didn't get there, you—you Fairy Godmother—found me this beautiful house—why, it's a veritable fairy one! I could have cried aloud when you brought me here, and showed me this pretty place, with its gables and its broad eaves, its dainty rooms, and its lovely gardens!"

Mr. Fielding smiled, with self-satisfaction. "I had an idea that it was just the place you'd like, my dear."

"It's a dream!" said Diana rapturously. "To-morrow, I'm going to spend the whole day going over it; I haven't seen half of it yet! Janet, my maid—that's another thing I'm not quite used to yet; a maid, who insists upon helping me dress, and won't let me do my own hair, or mend a thing! Janet tells me that there are cows—actually cows! And a dairy! Do you think I shall be allowed to make the butter, Fairy Godmother?"

"I'm afraid not!" he replied laughingly.

Diana pretended to pout. "That's just the one drawback of being disgustingly rich. I find you can't quite do as you like. And the horses! There are the big—carriage horses; there's the dearest mite of a pony; I felt inclined to pick it up and kiss it! And I'm going to learn to ride. Yes! Years ago"—her voice grew softer, more dreamy—"I remember watching the ladies riding in the park. I was a tiny child, rather shabby—oh, very shabby, and—sometimes rather, oh, very hungry. And I used to watch then—not enviously, for that would have been absurd, but as if they were denizens of another world, as if they had come out of heaven just—for a ride, and were going back there. And now I am one of them!"

She was silent a moment.

"If—if I should ride in the park, and saw a shabby little girl looking at me, I should think of that other one, myself, years ago; and I—well, I should want to lift her onto the saddle beside me."

Mr. Fielding nodded, and he looked at her thoughtfully. He was not easily moved to sentiment, but very often he was touched by some such speech of Diana's.

"It's the quaintest, the prettiest village here," she went on. "The children were coming out of school as we drove through. And the people looked so nice, and prosperous—and touched their hats, and courtesied. Do you think—I wonder whether they would let me visit the school, and go and see some of the people? Do you think they'd mind?"

Mr. Fielding laughed. "My dear young lady, they'd be delighted. I'm sure. But"—with sudden caution—"you must be careful! They're certain to be always having measles, or whooping-cough, or something; they always do in healthy villages."

Diana laughed. "Oh, I'm afraid of I.D.'s," she said.

"I.D.'s?"

"Inspectors' abbreviation for Infectious Diseases," explained Diana glibly. "They're dreadful things; they close the school." She was silent for a moment or two, her thoughts wandering back to her own school, her own children there at Wedbury, and she recalled the pain of parting with them.

(To be Continued.)

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