



Only a Beggar; BUT A Queen Among Women

CHAPTER IV. "Does he?" responded Dalesford, with languid surprise. "Why on earth should he?"

"The earl laughed softly. 'I imagine that it is because he has long since discovered that it is of no earthly use his seeing me. Frankly, Starkey bores me. I feel for him, I sympathize with him. I would not be in his place for—double the salary he—doesn't get, as I told him the other day. The fact is, Starkey has the unpleasant knack of making me feel uncomfortable. He reminds me of Edgar Poe's raven that was always croaking 'Nevermore.' You remember? Charming poem. You don't read poetry, I think, Vane?"

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thing should happen to you—which Heaven forefend!—he must so succeed." Dalesford nodded reassuringly. "Nothing is going to happen to me, sir," he said. "I'm as hard as nails."

"I—really forget. He wrote to Starkey—again poor Starkey!—some little time ago, saying that he had—got on to a good thing" was, I think, his phrase, and that he only wanted a thousand pounds to make his fortune. Starkey, I believe, wrote and told him that we, the family generally, also needed a thousand pounds and wanted them very badly. I don't know whether that settled the matter, or whether it did not. Did not, I should imagine, from my past experiences of Desmond March's pertinacity."

"He's a bad lot, I'm afraid," remarked Dalesford, absently. "He is a very bad lot, indeed," assented the earl, with cheerful confidence. "Now, if he would take to riding a mare of uncertain temper—"

"My good Benson, did you not tell him that I had not yet come down?" the earl asked, with gentle reproach. "Yes, my lord; but one of the men had told him—"

"I think Lord Dalesford ought to know our position—exactly how we stand, my lord."

"Certainly! Ah, yes; let him have the figures, Mr. Starkey," as the steward took some papers from his pocket. "Perhaps he will understand them; I never do! Do they teach arithmetic at the public school now, Vane? I am sure they didn't in my time. But I beg your pardon, Mr. Starkey!"

"Things are very serious, Lord Dalesford," said Mr. Starkey, addressing the son, with intense gravity and earnestness. "The affairs of the estate were in a bad way when I came into the office. My father did his best."

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"Did his best; but the tide had begun to set, and he could not stem it, though he tried to do so. I have been trying as hard all my life, and I have failed, as he did, and with a stronger excuse, my lord, for the debts have been accumulating. Such encumbrances as ours are like a huge snowball that grows bigger and bigger the longer it rolls."

"Clever smile!" murmured the earl. "So apt and true."

"At one time we were able, with more or less difficulty, to raise money to pay the various interests, as they fell due; but, lately, the difficulty has been much greater, and I find it almost impossible to provide the large sum necessary to meet the accruing charges on the mortgages."

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"Then the revenue—I mean the revenue from the land, the estate generally—has been decreasing rapidly for years past. It has always been difficult to get the rent for the tenants"—he groaned—"have been, and are, under the impression that they need not pay until they choose, and cannot understand any pressure—"

"No, no; there must be no pressure, Mr. Starkey!" said the earl. "Bless my soul, they wouldn't understand it! It would be cruel—cruel to us, as well as to them. Why, my dear fellow, I should never be able to face them, never be able to ride over the place. Tut! tut! The mere idea of pressure calls up the distressing picture of the Ejected Tenant; smoking roof, family and furniture out in the road; women and children crying, and the men waving their hands, and cursing the landlord. No; no!"

"Exactly!" exclaimed Mr. Starkey, with mild exasperation. "My hands are tied—"

"My dear fellow, all our hands are tied!" retorted the earl cheerfully. "We live in democratic times—surely, you're not going, Vane?"

"I was, sir," said Dalesford, with a smile. "I don't understand politics, and I want to see how the mare is. Look here, Mr. Starkey; I quite understand that we're in a bad way, and I'm sorry, as much for your sake as ours. But we've always been in a bad way, haven't we, sir?"

"Certainly, always," said the earl, with prompt acquiescence. "And Mr. Starkey has always pulled us through, and always will. I'm sure. You see, you understand the whole thing, know the ropes so well. Take my advice, sir, and leave it all to Mr. Starkey."

"Very good advice. I will!" responded the earl. With a nod to Mr. Starkey, Lord Dalesford left the room. The earl looked after him, and sighed and smiled; he was fond, very fond, and proud, very proud, of his handsome, stalwart son.

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