



Only a Beggar; — BUT — A Queen Among Women

CHAPTER III.

To soothe her aunt, Diana made light of the letter, and treated it as quite an ordinary one; but she lay awake a greater part of the night wondering who Mr. Fielding was and what his communication could be.

They caught the early train from Lowminister, fortunately a quick one and, reaching London, took a cab to 106 Lincoln's Inn. During the journey Mrs. Burton had scarcely spoken and for a greater part of the time had sat with closed eyes; and as they approached the office her pale, wan face assumed an expression of dogged resolution, as if she were preparing herself for some ordeal.

A clerk in the outer office received them with solemn dignity, and went to announce their arrival to Mr. Fielding. The office was a very old-fashioned one, handsome but grimy. There were cobwebs in the beautifully moulded cornice; dust lay on the furniture and the rows of books; but the clerk had moved noiselessly; an air of silence, a hint of mystery, as if the place were haunted by the shade of dead and gone secrets, brooded over the building. Diana began to grow nervous, for the first time. The inner door—there were two, one being covered with thick baize—opened and the clerk, with a gesture and a bow, as if speech were golden and not to be wasted, ushered them in.

Mr. Fielding rose from his chair at the table, and looked from one to the other with a piercing gaze, which was masked behind a smile of welcome. There was a faint surprise as well as keenness in his sharp eyes, as if he had not expected to see so beautiful, so ladylike a girl. He was a middle-aged man with a clean-shaven face and thin, set lips, and his expression, when the smile had faded, was that of alertness, of watchfulness, as if he were on guard and standing ready to parry a thrust or deliver one. The hand he extended to the two ladies was soft but firm, and it closed over Diana's as if he were taking her into custody.

"I am delighted to see you, Miss Bourne," he said, in a low but soft voice. "And you, Mrs. Burton. You are looking extremely well," he added to the latter, "and not in the least changed since I had the pleasure of seeing you last." He uttered the conventional falsehood without a flicker of the eyelid, and waved them courteously to the chairs that had been placed for them by the clerk, so placed that the light fell directly on their faces, enabling Mr. Fielding to watch them easily. "I hope my letter did not alarm you. A lawyer's letter,

whatever its nature is, I know, never very welcome to a lady. You are still at Wedbury; still at the school? You see, I know your whereabouts, your movements." He smiled, and nodded at them both impartially.

"Oh, yes," replied Diana. "I am still schoolmistress there; and hope to remain so."

"Ah, yes," he assented, looking above her head and beyond her, his lids half lowered. "Let me see, they give you—your salary is—"

"Eighty pounds a year," said Diana, with modest pride. "And an extra sum for light and firing."

"An extra sum for light and firing," he repeated, quite gravely. "Just so; an extra sum for light and firing. And I take it that you are quite happy and contented?"

"Oh, quite, quite!" Diana assured him, her eyes glowing, her lips parted in a smile. "It is the dearest little school and the coziest little cottage. And the children—ah, well, I don't think that there are such dear, good children in any other part of England. I wish you could come down and see them. Perhaps you will some day? Wedbury is a very pretty place, and the scenery is famous."

"I am afraid it is very improbable that I should ever visit Wedbury; for if I went it would be to see you, Miss Bourne; and I do not think you will remain there much longer. I beg of you not to be alarmed," he added quickly, as Diana changed color.

"I was afraid the inspector had been making some complaints," she said, apprehensively.

"Not at all," he said. "I happen to know that everybody concerned appreciates your work. What I meant was that it is probable you will be leaving Wedbury at once and of your own accord."

"He paused for a moment, then he looked at Mrs. Burton. "Miss Bourne does not remember her father, I suppose?" he said softly. "Ah, no, it wasn't possible."

"My father died when I was quite a baby," said Diana, in a low voice.

"Just so," he assented; "at least so, for the best reasons, you were given to understand; but it was not quite accurate. As a matter of fact, your father died only a few months ago."

As he spoke, he filled a glass with water and unobtrusively placed it on the table within reach of Mrs. Burton; but she disregarded it, and sat, with white face, staring at the wall before her. Diana uttered an exclamation half of grief, half of surprise. She scarcely realized the significance of the communication, but was conscious of a sense both of injury and bereavement. Why had she been kept in ignorance of her father's existence; why had he never come to her, sent for her? As if he read the unspoken question in her face, Mr. Fielding said, in the same low, deliberate voice:

"Your father, Miss Bourne, was a somewhat singular man; he was eccentric and erratic—a man who was so fond of traveling that he could not remain for any length of time in one place."

While he was speaking, he was watching the elder woman, and, though his eyes were not turned to her, he managed to convey a warning, to put her on her guard. It was skillfully done, and Mrs. Burton was conscious of his intention, and sat rigid and stonelike.

While he was speaking, he was some years ago—he never returned—he was a poor man. He went to America, where he met with the trials and the opportunities which poor men find so abundant there. For some time, he endured the usual hardships of the man who is struggling to exist, and years elapsed before I heard from him. I was his lawyer."

He paused, and glanced openly at Mrs. Burton, and with a distinct warning.

"He was then at a place in South America called Chaqueta—rather a pretty name, evidently Mexican. At that period, it was quite a small place, and your father was, in the parlance of business, quite a small man; but Chaqueta grew, and so did your father. There are mines of various kinds in Chaqueta, and your father became connected with some of them. He engaged in other enterprises, and made money. From time to time, he forwarded me certain sums, to hand to Mrs. Burton, who had charge of you."

"I have kept an account," said Mrs.



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Burton hoarsely. "I have still some left; all that was spent was spent on Diana—"

"Aunt Mary!" exclaimed Diana, remonstratingly, the tears starting to her eyes.

"My dear lady," said Mr. Fielding quickly, "I am quite aware of that. I think I ought to tell you that I have kept myself acquainted with all the details of your and Miss Bourne's life since her father died—left England. I am quite sure you have been an efficient and affectionate guardian."

"Oh, yes—yes!" Diana broke in. "Aunt Mary has been all the world to me—mother, father, brother, sister—all the world."

"Quite so—quite so," said Mr. Fielding reassuringly and soothingly. "Let me see; where was I? Eighty pounds a year, I think you said, and light and firing? A nice little income—very nice. But, as I said, I think you will have to surrender it. As I told you, your father died three months ago." He tapped some papers on the table. "I have all the dates and particulars here, and will give them to you before you go, so that you may look them over quietly, and by yourself. He died—suddenly, but he had, fortunately, made his will. It was a very short one, on a sheet of weather-stained paper; but I am glad to say that it is quite valid. Glad to say, because—let me read it to you."

He took up one of the papers, and with a glance at Mrs. Burton, read aloud and impressively:

"I Benjamin Bourne, leave everything of which I am possessed, to my daughter, Diana Bourne, who lives in England, under the care of my sister, Mary Burton.

(Sgd.) "BENJAMIN BOURNE." Diana's eyes were full of tears. "My father! Oh, why did I not know him? Why did he keep away from me? He must have remembered me, must have been fond of me, to have left me this money."

Mrs. Burton did not speak. Mr. Fielding looked from one to the other silently, as if to give Diana time to recover from her very natural emotion. Then he said:

"As Mrs. Burton is aware, your

father's remittances ceased some time ago, and I feared that he had fallen into bad luck."

"I do not care—about the money," said Diana. "It is his thinking of me—"

"But there was some money," said Mr. Fielding. "You do not ask how much. I think you will be surprised when I tell you that it was a very large sum. In fact—eighty pounds a year, with light and firing I think you said, Miss Bourne?" he broke off, with a curious smile; "in fact, when your father died, he was interested in all, or nearly all, the flourishing concerns in this place with the queer name—mines, factories, land, house property. He died worth, as far as I can ascertain, considerably over a million of money."

Mrs. Burton drew a long breath, and clutched the arms of her chair, and Mr. Fielding, as unobtrusively as before, pushed the glass of water a little nearer to her. As for Diana, her still tear-dimmed eyes opened widely and her lips parted, as if she were amazed; indeed, she scarcely realized the significance of the lawyer's statement.

"A million of money?" she said, at last. "Do you mean that he left this money, all of it, to me?"

"That is exactly what I have been trying to break to you," responded Mr. Fielding, "and I trust I have succeeded in breaking it gently. Good news is often a greater shock than bad. And now you understand why it is not very probable that you will remain at Wedbury, teaching school at eighty pounds a year, and light and firing." He leaned back, and smiled, and rubbed his hands together with an air of satisfaction and enjoyment.

Diana put her hand to her brow, and shut her eyes. She was trying to realize this thing that had happened to her; but, for the moment, all that she could think of was that she was going to leave Wedbury, say goodbye to the children she loved.

"Let me think," she said. "A million of money. It belongs to me. Then we are rich!" She stretched out her hand, and clasped her aunt's, and smiled at her through a mist of tears. "Rich! Oh, Aunt Mary, the things I will buy for you!"

Mr. Fielding nodded approvingly.

"There are a few things better even than money," he said, with a smile. "And one of them is a loving and a tender heart. I congratulate you,

Miss Bourne, and you, Mrs. Burton—on its possession. Oh, yes, you can buy all sorts of things; in fact, there are not many that you cannot buy. And you want to begin at once. Of course, of course! Now, here, I can help you." He took some bank-notes from a drawer, as if he had put them there in readiness, as he had, and

held them out to Diana. "There is a little money to go on with. Of course, I will open a bank account for you. Presently, you will be spending a great deal of money. You will want to buy a big house, a large estate in the country, a house in London. I know of one in Park Lane that would just suit you."

Diana had pressed the notes into her aunt's hand, and she turned to Mr. Fielding, with a rather frightened air.

"A big house, an estate—a house in London?" she breathed.

He regarded her with a smile; then he glanced at Mrs. Burton. It was a questioning glance, and she answered it by a flicker of her eyelids and a twitch of her thin, pale lips.

"Ah, well; no, not at once," he said. "All that may come a little later. Just at first, you will like to become accustomed to this vast fortune of yours. Now, I wonder if I might venture to advise you?"

(To be Continued.)

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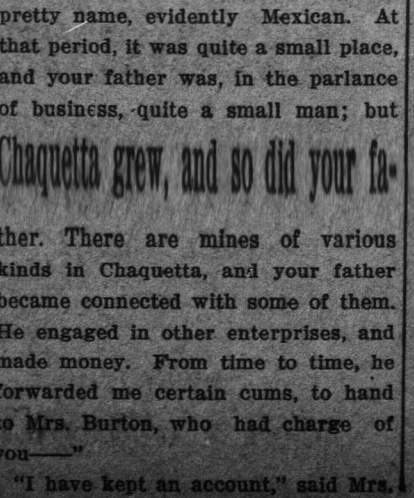
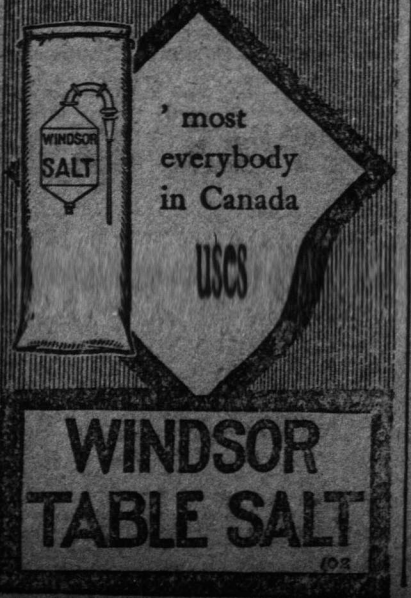
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