



Only a Beggar; BUT A Queen Among Women

CHAPTER X.

"Vane, your father has arrived—there he is! You must come!"

"Sorry! Couldn't possibly," he returned regretfully. "Couldn't leave Miss Bourne. She'd be torn to pieces by these young savages—they've lured her on to 'touch'! You go, Aunt Selina, and tell him I'm engaged in preserving an amiable young lady with a monomania for spoiling children," he added coolly; and, without waiting for her remonstrances, he went after Diana, who, indeed, appeared to be in the kind of peril he had intimated.

"Excuse me," he said, after they had been martyred for some time, and she paused, breathless, but laughing and happy; "Isn't there something about the laborers being worthy of their hire? Isn't there any tea left for the victims who have been butchered to make this Roman holiday?"

"Oh, I beg your pardon! I am so sorry!" she exclaimed remorsefully. "I forgot! I'll get you some!"

"You'd do nothing of the sort," he declared. "Strange and incredible as it may seem, I wasn't on this solitary occasion, thinking of myself, but of you. I've been under your orders all the afternoon; now it's my turn. You will sit under that tree, away from this ravaging horde, and I'll bring you some tea, and—things."

"Oh, must I? Well! Not all at once, dears!" for the children all wanted to skip over the rope held by dear Miss Diana and his lordship. "Two—well, three at a time. Oh, swing it faster, please, Lord Dalesford; this isn't nearly fast enough, is it, children?"

It was at this moment that a carriage came along the road by the green. It was bringing Lord Wrayborough from the station, on his visit to Shortledge—a visit that had been postponed from day to day because it was always impossible to keep the car to a date. Lady Selina had left word with the butler, that, if his lordship's telegram announcing his coming should arrive while she was out, it should be opened, and the carriage sent for him.

Hence it was that, all unsuspecting, his lordship was being driven past the green swarming with children, shouting and yelling as if their lives depended on it.

The earl leaned forward in the carriage, and surveyed the scene through his eye-glasses with a smile of wonder and satisfaction—and thankfulness that he was not in their midst. But, suddenly, he deserted Lady Selina, seated on a form, with Tubby—still yapping—on her lap, and his smile broadened to one of cynical amusement. Then, still more suddenly, the smile gave place to a stare of wonder and amazement.

Could that be Vane at the end of that skipping-rope? Impossible! Vane at a school treat! And yet—yes it was Vane! The eye-glasses dropped from his nose, and he sank back, with something between a sigh and a groan.

"The boy's gone mad!" he said to himself. Then he snatched up his glasses again, and scanned the figure at the other end of the rope; and, as he looked, the smile which had begun to reappear died out suddenly, and his eyes grew keen and his brows rose.

"Ah, yes, I see!" he muttered. "Yes, mad, indeed!"

"Shall I stop, my lord?" asked the footman. "Lady Selina is there?"

"No, no!" replied the earl grimly. "I fear I should be de trop. Say; stop for one moment, just by the post here. One moment only, please; then drive on."

At the spot he had indicated he knew that he could see the face of the young lady distinctly. He did see it, looked long and keenly at it; then, as he motioned them to drive on, he fell back, and murmured, with a chuckle:

"By Jove, he's got a good excuse for his madness!"

"Good gracious, here's Edward!" exclaimed Lady Selina, who caught sight of him as the carriage drove off; and, with Tubby under her arm, she hurried up to Dalesford.

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on this objection. Did she love him? That was the question.

"Speak to me," he said, at last, after an unendurable silence. She raised her eyes.

"I—I can't!" she said, almost piteously. "I—I am trying. But I can't! I—I don't know. No; I did not guess, did not suspect. I—thought it was just because you were amused, that—oh, I did not think! And I cannot think now!"

He took her hand, but, rising, she drew it from his eager grasp. "No. Do—do not touch me. I want to think, to be sure."

"If you're only not sure you don't care for me—" he said, catching at the straw; but she shook her head.

"No. Don't say any more, Lord Dalesford. I—can't answer you. I don't know. I want to think, to be sure," she repeated, with a long sigh, as of one driven to bay, and seeking escape.

Dalesford was a gentleman, as well as a lover. He rose, and looked at her—she was pale, and his lips were set straightly.

"I don't want to badger you," he said rather grimly. "I'll wait. But not long. I couldn't!" desperately. "I'll give you until to-morrow morning. And—and, for God's sake, let it be 'Yes,' if you can, for I feel as if my life were at stake! And fit it! We'll go back now. No; I won't badger you, Diana!"

"No," she said, with a movement of her head. "I—I will go alone."

"You shall," he said; and, with an inclination of his head, he stood aside to let her pass, and watched her, with all his heart in his eyes, as she moved away from him, leaving him with so keen a sense of loss that his heart sank in fear and apprehension.

He did not come in to dinner until the soup was on the table, and all of them—and, be sure, the earl was included—noticed how grave and preoccupied he was; but the earl greeted him with cheerful light-heartedness.

"Vane, you are looking fit!" he said, as he extended a white, bejeweled hand to the son he loved, and for whose future he was, at that moment, trembling. "The sight of you is the best tonic I know. Selina, I have to thank you, no doubt, for Vane's bucolic air of health and contentment. Early hours, and the soothing charm of your society, to say nothing of Mabel's"—he bowed to that young lady, with his most delightful air of old-world courtesy and worship of her sex and years. "I really think I shall have to remain with you for a month, at least. I've always been convinced that the air of this place is the purest and most bracing."

And so on.

He talked—he and Mabel—all through dinner in so light-hearted, careless, and bantering a tone that no one, not even Vane, suspected that he was filled with dread.

"Yes, my dear Babel, you shall row me on the river to-morrow; and we will go and see your new friend, Miss Bourne—my dear Selina, Mabel has talked of no one else since I arrived. I assure you!—and we will have a good time!"

List of Unclaimed Letters Remaining in the G. P. O. to Oct. 28th, 1914.

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