



Only a Beggar;

—BUT—

A Queen Among Women

CHAPTER XXVI.

There were some decent men in his set who watched his downward career with regret; and one or two of them had ventured on a remonstrance but had been met with so stern and fierce a rebuff that they had been effectually silenced.

"If Dalesford had made up his mind to go to the devil—and it looks as if he had—no man alive can stop him!" said Mortimer gravely. "Of course a woman's at the bottom of it. That engagement of his was broken off, you know; and he's taking it badly. Seems funny, seeing how many other fish there are in the sea; but—with a shrug of the shoulders—"Dalesford's just the man to want one particular fish, and run amuck if he doesn't get it. He seems to hate the sight of women, by the way—hush, here he comes!" he broke off, as Vane entered the card-room of the Apollo.

He was very white, there were black shadows under his eyes, and he looked thin and emaciated; but he was as erect as of old, and his eyes shone with an unnatural brightness—the baleful gleam of insomnia. He nodded to the men, and, going to a corner, lit a cigar and took up a newspaper. They let him alone for a time, then Mortimer crossed the room to him and asked him to play; and Vane, looking up at him as if awaking from a dream, rose and went to the table. Strangely enough, he usually won, and his luck was still with him this evening; but he seemed scarcely conscious of his good fortune, and played with phlegmatic, stolid calm and impassive countenance.

Now, while they were playing, a man entered the room from a door behind them, and, ordering a drink of the footman, glanced at the players. Two or three of Vane's party looked up at the man and then at Vane; for the newcomer was Desmond March. He appeared to be in excellent spirits; was carefully dressed, as usual, and sauntered across the room with his peculiar debonair and graceful gait. As he reached the table at which Vane was playing, he paused, nodded to the other men, and, regarding Vane with a cordial smile, behind which, however, lurked the suggestion of a sneer, said:

"How d'ye do, Dalesford?"

The men held their breath, and stared before them expectantly, but Vane raised his eyes for a moment; then, as if he had neither heard the greeting nor seen the man, he returned to his cards and went on playing. Desmond March drew a long

breath, smiled so that his white, even teeth showed between his lips; then, with a contemptuous shrug of the shoulders, went on to another table.

Vane's face had not moved by a hair's breadth; but a dull kind of rage was burning in his heart. It was the first time for years that Desmond March had dared address him publicly; how low he, Vane, must have sunk for March to have ventured to intrude upon him!

After an hour or so, during which time he could hear March's voice and low laughter quite plainly—and both voice and laughter held a note of triumph in them—Vane rose.

"I'm going," he said rather curtly. "Oh, stay for another hand, Dalesford," urged one of the men; but Vane shook his head.

"The room is too hot and—crowded. There are too many men here tonight."

There was something in his voice and in his manner which checked any further insistence, and they watched him as he went, looking neither to the right nor the left, out of the room.

Desmond March also openly watched him.

"My amiable cousin been losing?"

he said over his shoulder. "No? Doesn't like my company, is that it? Well, I'm not particularly keen about him; and, by— I don't think any of you will be afflicted by it long! Looks to me as if he were going either to the family vault or a private lunatic asylum. There's insanity on the maternal side of the family, you know."

The bitter remark was received in silence, for Vane was liked and trusted, and Desmond March was both disliked and distrusted; but presently Mortimer, as the party went into the smoking-room, said:

"March seems to have got on his feet again. I thought he was utterly stone-broke."

"Not a bit of it," retorted another man with a laugh. "He has got hold of that Bangs girl—a million of money, they say. Oh, no, no; Desmond March takes a lot of killing."

"Most curs can swim and are hard to drown," remarked Mortimer laconically.

Vane left the club and went along Pall Mall slowly, purposelessly. The night was early yet, and he dared not go home, for the solitude of his room was intolerable. How much longer would it be before Desmond March, the gentlemanly blackleg, stepped into his place? What did it matter? Life was over, ceased the day his eyes fell on Diana's letter of farewell. What did it matter who bore the old title and the historic name? Men were divided into two classes, the knaves and the fools, and there was little to choose between them.

There was a moon, but the sky was flecked by scurrying clouds, and he watched them, half conscious of the symbolism they conveyed: his life was hurrying on like these clouds to a last and greater darkness. Unwittingly his steps took the direction of the river, and, looking up, he found himself on the Embankment. The night was a bitterly cold one, and even the outcasts and homeless ones of the great city who generally find refuge on the hard seats had been driven to more sheltered spots; but Vane did not feel the cold; the feverishness of fast-lived days and sleepless nights was in his blood; and presently he dropped on to one of the seats and gazed moodily at the lights on the river. He was looking at one of the most beautiful and marvelous sights in the world, but he was blind to its marvel and its beauty, for he was seeing, dimly, vaguely, the face of the woman he had loved and lost.



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A policeman passed and glanced at him doubtfully; then, thinking it might be one of the members of the House of Commons, which was still sitting, he paced slowly on.

After a time Vane felt drowsy. The cold air, the swish-swish of the river as it lapped against the great stone wall lulled the overstrained senses, and, folding his arms across his breast, he fell into the first sound sleep he had had for weeks, for months.

Only a little while before Diana had risen from her typewriter, with a sigh, and had gone to her attic window and looked at the clouds driven across the moon. She had been working for many hours, her head was hot and throbbing, her hands stiff and aching. She opened the window, and the cold air seemed to woo her while it revived her.

It would be well if she got a little exercise before trying to sleep. Mechanically she put on her outdoor things—all too worn and thin for such a night—and went softly down the narrow stairs. Drawing her shawl closely round her, she passed out, walking quickly out of the dreary street on to the Embankment; but she was arrested by the sight of a small boy crouching in a corner of one of the recesses. He was awake and shivering with the cold, his head sunk on his breast, his hands clasped together, as if for warmth. Diana, with an inarticulate sob of pity, bent over him, and at her touch he started and shrank, thinking it was his natural foe with the perpetual "Move on!"

"No home, nowhere to go?" said Diana. "Oh, poor boy, poor boy! It is too bitter a night for you to sleep here; and it's too cold to sleep, isn't it?" She took some coppers from her purse—there was little else there!—and put them into his grimy hand.

"Run to the nearest lodgings, dear," she said.

The boy clutched the money and, staggering to his feet, drew his ragged coat together, stared at her, as if he thought he was dreaming, and without a word of thanks, shuffled—he was too stiff to run—across the road. Diana looked after him; then, with a sigh, walked on. The clouds had obscured the moon, and the darkness was relieved only by the mockery of a light which disgraces the greatest and richest city in the world; so that she was passing with but an inattentive glance the man who was asleep on the seat—indeed, she was quickening her pace, when suddenly the moon emerged, and its light fell full upon the face of the sleeper.

She knew him instantly. It was Vane. With a low cry she stopped, and, her hand pressed to her heaving bosom, gazed at him with unutterable love and pity.

This Vane, her Vane; this white, haggard-faced man! This emaciated figure the form she had loved!

The tears welled to her eyes, every fiber of her being called to him; and, by an ungovernable impulse, she sprang to him. But before she had touched him with her pitying, longing hands, she remembered. She stifled his name upon her lips and drew back. For his own sake, she must not wake him, must not let him see her; for she knew that if his eyes met hers, if he touched her, though only with a finger-tip, she could not leave him again, let whatever of shame and remorse follow.

She stood and looked down at him as a mother looks at her fever-wasted child, as a wife looks at her husband doomed to death, as a lover looks at the wraith of her dearest and best beloved.

Oh, God, how hard life was! How cruel, fate! That she should be with-

in touch of Vane, and yet not dare, for honor's sake, to wake him!

Stifling the cry of her heart, she crept nearer—even while she strove to fly—and, bending over him, touched his cheek with her lips; then, frightened, she flew like a guilty creature dreading detection.

Vane stirred slightly, and his lips moved.

"Diana!" he cried hoarsely. "Di—!" Then he awoke with a start and looked before him with dazed eyes and a strange sense of reality in his dream.

For fully five minutes he stared vacantly at the lights and shadows of the river. At last he rose, and, thrusting his cold hands into his pockets, went to the edge of the Embankment wall and gazed below. The cold, the intensity of the dream, the seeming reality of the touch of her lips was making his heart throb painfully. Suddenly the full consciousness of the unmanly part he was playing attacked him. God forgive him! All these months he had been sullying the memory of her love, had been seeking to drown in drink and dissipation the remembrance of the woman whose purity and goodness should have been sacred enough

to keep his life—wrecked as it was—sane and clean. Sane? Yes, that was it; he had been mad. But he was mad no longer. Something—what was it?—a prayer of hers uttered as he slept there?—had touched him, stirred his conscience to the depths, recalled the manliness to his heart; and he was alive to the shame the horror of his life since he had lost her.

With trembling hands he got out his case and lit a cigar; but he could not smoke. As he flung the cigar into the river the policeman returning on his beat spoke to him.

"Going home, sir? Bad night."

Vane looked at him strangely.

"Yes," he said; "I am going home."

Diana went swiftly, shaking and trembling with emotion, toward her lodgings; but suddenly she stopped. If her touch, her kiss had awakened him, and he should follow her! With a cry of fear and yet longing, she turned aside and went in the direction of the Strand. It was crowded by the people—the happy, laughing people—coming out of the theatres, some of them gaily on their way to supper; and, shirking from the noise and the excitement, she passed from the big thoroughfare into one of the quiet streets. A drunken man, lurching toward her, addressed some hiccupped words to her, but Diana scarcely saw or heard him. All her heart and mind had room for was the white, weary face she had seen in the moonlight.

Still walking on, absorbed and lost to place and time, she found herself on Waterloo Bridge. The crowd had melted, the bridge was empty, and she stood alone at the Strand end of it, breathing quickly and painfully.

As she stood a woman passed her; a thin, wraithlike figure with its head bent, its hands clutching its cape across its bosom. Diana glanced at her; there seemed something familiar in the thin face, the fragile form. In an instant, absorbed as she was, she remembered the girl she had spoken to in the crowd of applicants for the situation of drawing-mistress, the girl with the portfolio. With a shock of surprise and pity, Diana stood and looked at her, for the face that had passed by had been eloquent of want and despair.

(To be continued.)

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