



**Only a Beggar;
—BUT—
A Queen Among Women**

CHAPTER XXI.

"Oh, it isn't true! It cannot be! Oh, God help me, God help me!" He gazed at her, as she stood with wild, dilated eyes and clasped hands, and his thick lips writhed and worked pittingly, remorsefully.

"Don't take on, dearie," he murmured in his guttural voice. "Don't fret about it. I'll— I'll take myself out of your sight. I'll go at once, and I'll never touch you again."

"Yes—go!" she gasped; then she wrung her hands. "But—but if you go, I—I must go. You—you are my father—"

"That's so, dearie," he said quietly, remorsefully. "It's the truth; you know that, feel that? How should I know Mary's—your aunt's portrait? How should I know you?"

"And—and where you go I must go!" she said with a shudder, scarcely knowing what she said. "Oh, God, it is cruel! Help me to think—to think of—"

Garling started and held up his hand. "Shh!" he whispered. "That's—that's a dog outside! My ears are quick. If—if he scents me—"

"Go—oh, go!" she panted. "Go, while there's time. And I—I, oh, what shall I do, what shall I do?"

Still listening, with his eyes turned sideways in a horrible fashion, he crept to her and laid his hand on her arm.

"Speak low!" he whispered in her ear, his hot breath on her cheek. "I'm going. You'll stay here. Don't be afraid! I'm not going to worry you. I've—I've seen you, and that's enough. Lord, how beautiful you are, and how—how grand! Like a young queen in—"

She shivered. How often had Vane used the same words!

"And, mind you, whatever happens, I hold my tongue. Not to a living soul while I'm living myself will I let on that I've found my daughter. No, no! I know what's due to you. I know the difference between us. And you can trust me, missie—Diana. Let me call you that once, I shall think of you by that name; I shall—"

His voice broke, and he turned away with a gesture of grief and despair that was not lacking in a kind of grotesque dignity. It was the father speaking in him.

Diana fought for calm, prayed for it.

"I—I must see you again," she said, with unnatural stillness, which belied the heaving bosom, the distraught eyes. "Can you—dare you—wait about the place, somewhere in the neighborhood, where I can meet you?"

He looked doubtful, and shook his head; then he drew himself up.

"That's—that's kind of you, missie. You want to see me again? I'll risk it. Yes, I'll risk it!" He thought a moment. "There's a little wood by the river, below the woodcutter's hut. If—if you're of the same mind to-morrow, I'll be there, miss, at seven o'clock in the morning." He saw her glance at the safe, and he nodded reassuringly. "That's all right. I'll fix things nice and neat, just as they were, and nobody'll know if they don't go to the safe. Will they be likely to?"

"No, I think not," she answered almost inaudibly.

"Right," he said with a nod. "Don't you be frightened an' upset, dearie. You won't see me again after to-morrow. You'll forget as such a man—"

He waved his thick arm with an action as of sweeping the gruesome fact of his existence away, and, turning to the safe, rubbed the spot on which he had been working with an oiled rag, then he carefully but swiftly, removed the filings from the floor, and, going to the window, as carefully pushed aside the bar, the bottom of which he had neatly cut through with a file. Then he paused and looked over his shoulder at the motionless figure, the white face, the eyes that followed his every movement as if she were fascinated by horror and loathing, and, drawing a long breath, he crept slowly, hesitatingly, toward her.

"Won't—won't you say 'good night,' just 'good night—father!'" he pleaded in a hoarse whisper. "I'd like to hear the word from you once, dearie! My little girl that I've thought of, dreamed of—"

She tried to speak, to say "good night," but her voice seemed frozen, and she flung up her hands and shrank from him.

With a gesture of apology, of hideous meekness, the meekness of a beaten hound, he turned from her, stepped on to the window-cill, and dropped from her sight. She heard the faint, very faint sound of the bar slipping back into its place, then all was silence.

How long she stood, staring vacantly before her, she did not know; but at last she started, awoke from the awful spell that held her, and, with a shuddering glance round the room, turned off the light and went upstairs. Her last steps were uncertain, faltering ones, she staggered as she shut and locked the door, then fell fainting across the bed.

When she came to the dawn was breaking, and the terrible reality of her position came crushing down upon her. She felt that but for the swoon her mind must have given way and that she would have passed into raving hysterics; even now, as weak and trembling, she sat up and hid her burning, aching eyes in her hand, she was assailed by the dread of brain fever, of some seizure in which she should reveal the horrible truth.

For in her heart, at the back of her throbbing brain, lay the conviction that the man had not lied, and that she was indeed his daughter.

At such moments the mind, like a slave too hardly pressed, revolts and refuses to perform its wonted task. She could not think, could not think even of Vane. She tried to do so, tried to picture the misery, the shame, that would overwhelm him and crush him as they were crushing her; but she could not see him clearly; she was moving, living, in a land of shadows, in a phantasmagoria too grotesque, too monstrous, for belief. She, Diana Bourne, Vane's affianced wife, the daughter of—

With unsteady steps she dragged herself to the washstand and bathed her face until the burning forehead felt as if it was bound in ice; then she slowly dressed herself, choosing one of her plainest dresses, and putting on a hat with a thick veil she again she looked at herself absently in the glass; was that white-faced woman with the dark shadows under her eyes, the strained lips, still quivering with horror, herself?

And she was going to meet the man whom she had last night detected in his vile work; she was going to meet—her father!

The clock chimed the quarter to seven, and with a start she looked

round the room, holding her head with her hands in the vain effort for self-possession, for concentration of mind. She moved to the dressing-table on which lay the jewels, the trinkets she had worn last night. They represented a large sum, they were the tangible evidence of the vast wealth she had considered hers—some of them spoke eloquently of Vane, of the earl, who had given them to her with loving words, loving caresses; but she shuddered as she looked at them, remembering those other gems which her father—her father!—had come to steal.

Half blindly she selected those which she herself had bought, and others which Aunt Mary had given her, found her purse, and put it and the jewellery into her pocket. She stood and looked round again, at the bed in which she had slept and dreamt of the man she loved! Oh, why did not her heart break at the thought of him? Was it because she could not think clearly? Then, lingeringly, she opened the door and passed out.

As chance willed it, Janet, her maid, came out of her room at the same moment.

"Oh, miss, are you dressed—are you going out?" she asked.

Diana fought for a calm voice, even succeeded in forcing a smile.

"Yes. I did not sleep very well last night, Janet," she said, and her voice sounded strangely in her own ears, as if it were the voice of some other person. "I—I was restless. I am going for a little walk." She paused, and Janet, with a lady's maid's eyes for details, set straight a lapel of Diana's jacket. As she did so, she felt Diana tremble.

"Why, you're trembling, miss," she said with concern. "Oh, do let me get you a cup of tea before you start."

"No, no!" said Diana quickly, and with a smile that she herself felt must be forced and unnatural. "I won't have any tea. I shall try and sleep when I come back. Don't disturb me."



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CHAPTER XXII.

She went down the stairs, feeling Janet's anxious eyes following her, and, crossing the hall, went out by the back door. It was a lovely morning, and the sun shone on the lawns and fell athwart the hills violet with heather and golden with gorse. The beauty of the scene was an added pang to her tortured heart; all her life she would remember that view which she and Vane—where was Vane?—why was he not by her side to help her, to sustain her?—had looked at together.

Slowly she passed through the shrubbery, glancing at the barred window of the strong room and shuddering as she averted her eyes, and, skirting into the path that led to the wood, quickened her pace. She must not keep him waiting. He was in danger, terrible danger; and he was her father!

She gained the little wood, paused to see if she had been seen, followed; then, threading her way among the thick trees, suddenly came upon him.

He was seated on a fallen tree, his square chin sunk in his hand, his eyes looking gloomingly, yet expectantly, before him. In that moment no detail of his appearance escaped her. She saw that he had changed his clothes, and was now dressed like a workman in his Sunday best; noticed the massive head, the thick limbs, the great hands, the short, stubby hair. And she asked God to forgive her—every fiber of her being shrank from him.

He heard her when she was some way off, and springing to his feet, held out his arms, his lined and rug-

ged face lit up with a smile of welcome. Of welcome!

Then, as he saw her wince and draw back, he let his arms fall to his side, and, with a gesture of resignation, motioned to her to sit down.

Perhaps only half consciously, Diana had been schooling, nerving herself for the ordeal; she was, in appearance at any rate, calm and unmoved; and she signed to him to seat himself beside her; he sank on the trunk of the tree, but at a little distance from her. It was Diana who broke the silence.

"Tell me—tell me everything," she said in a low voice, glancing at him for an instant, then fixing her eyes on the tree in front of her. "Keep—keep nothing back. I—I can bear it. You are my father?"

He inclined his head. "Yes; I'm your father," he said in his deep, guttural tones. "You've been wondering why I left you. I'd—I'd rather not tell you; but I've got to, I suppose."

He glanced at her, and she made a gesture of assent, almost of command. (To be continued.)



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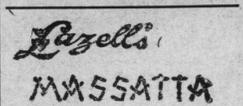
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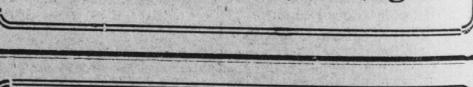


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