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**A Queen Among Women**

CHAPTER XXIII.

"But she's sleeping now, my lord, and I thought it better not to disturb her."

"Quite right," he said approvingly. "Don't wake her, Janet. She has been doing a great deal lately; far too much, I'm afraid. No, no, don't disturb her."

He wandered about the hall and the smoking-room with patient impatience; they came to tell him that the dog-cart was ready, and he nodded and went out, and stared at it in the way men have when they are waiting. Then he consulted his watch. It was a fairly long drive, the factor was a busy man, and it would be scarcely the thing to keep him waiting—novel consideration for Dalesford to display and perhaps the drive would be too long for Diana if she were tired and overdone. He would go up and suggest that she should go without her, and that she should keep her bed until he returned. Going up two stairs at a time, he stopped outside her door and listened. There was no sound within the room, and, concluding that she was still asleep, he sighed and went down again.

"Tell Miss Bourne that I thought it best not to disturb her, and that I will be back as quickly as possible," he said to the butler; got slowly into the dog-cart, and, with a wistful glance at her window, drove off.

It was past two o'clock before he got back, and the butler met him in the hall, and, with a grave face, said: "The earl would be glad if your lordship would see him in his writing-room."

Dalesford nodded, and strode quickly across the hall. At the drawing-room door he paused and looked in. He had failed to see Diana on the terrace; perhaps she was in there trying some music or reading; but the room was empty, and he went on to the earl's. The old man was seated in his chair with the paper, behind which he almost hid his face, as he said, with a cheerfulness which instantly struck Dalesford as forced: "Oh, you've got back, Vane. Have you—er—seen Diana?"

"No," replied Dalesford. "Where is she? She is not—ill?"

"No, no," said the earl quickly. "She—she is out somewhere; with Mabel and young Selby, very probably. Really—testily—these young people must not be allowed to—ramble about the place in this irrespons-

ble way, without leaving word where they are going; of course Diana is with them, but—Here is a telegram for you, Vane."

He handed it across the table, and Vane murmured "Thank you," but did not open the ugly envelope; he was too absorbed in Diana.

"She was asleep when I left this morning," he said. "She was to have gone with me; but I thought she was better resting." As he spoke he took out the telegram, and the words died on his lips, to be followed by a sharp exclamation.

"What is it, Vane? What is it?" demanded the earl quickly and nervously. "What a hideous invention the telegraph is! I've not yet got used to it. It seems to me that people should find time—"

"It is from Diana," said Vane almost to himself. "She is in London." "Diana—in London!" echoed the earl with amazement. "In London? Surely, Vane, there is some mistake."

"Listen, sir," said Vane; and he read the telegram aloud:

"I am going to London unexpectedly, and will write from there, Diana."

The earl frowned, but drew a breath of relief; Vane stood staring at the telegram with a surprise too keen to permit of reflection or conjecture.

"Tut, tut!" said the earl. "Gone to London, unexpectedly. What—?" "Mrs. Burton must be ill," said Vane, in a low voice. "And yet, no; Diana would have said so, would have been sure to say so."

"She must have heard some news, received some message," said the earl. "She has not been seen for hours; I can find no one who has seen her the whole of the morning—indeed, since last night."

Vane went to the bell and rang it. "Ask Miss Bourne's maid to come here, please," he said to the servant. "Ah, the maid!" exclaimed the earl. "Of course. How quick you are, Vane!"

"Where Diana is concerned—yes," responded Vane with a smile. "Janet will tell us all about it. Don't be alarmed, sir; there is no cause for anxiety."

"I'm not alarmed," retorted the old man irritably. "Good heavens, why should I be? There is nothing ominous in a lady going to town suddenly. Depend upon it, she has received an important communication from her modiste or the man who is making her boots." He laughed, and Vane nodded and smiled; but neither of them looked reassured; and Vane went to the window and drummed on the pane until his father got him away by asking him to look at a business letter he had received.

Presently Janet entered. She looked pale and frightened; for both the earl and Vane, though kind and cour-

teous to their servants as became their rank and breeding, were held in awe by them.

"Oh, Janet," said Vane, as casually as he could, "did your mistress leave any message for me?"

"No, my lord," replied Janet in a low voice. "I—I have not seen my mistress since she went out early this morning—"

"Early? What do you mean by early?" asked Vane involuntarily; and he would have recalled the hasty question, but it was made; and it seemed to be the last straw to Janet's endurance for she began to cry in a subdued fashion.

"A little before seven, my lord. I met my mistress ready dressed, coming from her room; she said—"

"Why do you cry?" asked Vane rather sternly, as she paused to check a sob. "There is no cause for alarm. Your mistress has wired to say that she had to go to London suddenly."

Janet fought with her agitation, and hastily wiped her eyes.

"Oh, I'm so glad, my lord! I—I mean that my mistress looked so ill this morning that I was afraid—that I thought something might have happened, some bad news—"

"You appear to indulge in singularly baseless apprehensions, my girl," broke in the earl reprimandingly.

"Lord Dalesford and I sent for you in case you could add anything to the information which the telegram gives us; a telegram is necessarily short. Your mistress had a restless night, and, waking with a headache, went out for a walk. She was better, I hope, when she returned?"

"I—I—don't know, my lord," replied poor Janet, ready to sink into the earth under the sternness of his voice and glance; for the earl, aware of her affection for Diana, had gener-

ally a smile and a kindly word for her when he met her. "My mistress did not come back."

"You told me that Miss Bourne was asleep when I asked for her after breakfast," Vane reminded her.

"Yes, my lord. I—I thought she had come back and gone to bed again. I listened at the door and did not hear her moving; and she had not rung. She had told me not to disturb her—and she sleeps so lightly that I was afraid to go in, to open the door, even."

"Has your mistress taken any luggage?" asked Vane as casually as before.

"No, my lord," replied Janet, beginning to threaten tears again. "That's—that's what upsetting me so. She must have gone to London without anything; and without me to take care of her—"

Vane nodded by way of dismissal, and Janet, fighting with another attack of tears, was leaving the room when the earl called her back.

"It is a very terrible thing that your mistress should make a journey to London, to visit some friends, without her luggage; but it is not so terrible as to serve as an excuse for your weeping, my girl. Be good enough to dry your eyes—and hold your tongue."

Then—the worm, especially the loving worm, will turn—Janet flashed an indignant glance at the grand earl. "My lord, I—I don't deserve it!" she said. "I—I never talk of my betters, especially of my dear mistress."

There was silence when she had gone, then the earl said:

"Seven o'clock; no telegram could reach here until half-past eight or nine."

"Th? What, sir?" Vane said. "No telegram? She may have met the man bringing one that came last night; she must have done so."

"Of course, of course!" exclaimed the old man, welcoming the suggestion. "Or—or one of the other maids. Janet being out of the way, may have taken it to her room."

"But she did not come back to the house," said Vane absently. Then suddenly he drew himself up and, with a hauteur he seldom displayed, said:

"Pon my soul, sir, we're discussing this little journey of Diana's as if there were some mystery in it. We are both rather absurd, don't you think?"

"Yes, yes; we are, Vane!" responded the earl, gratefully. "Deuced absurd! And it's all so explicable. The child met the man with a telegram saying that a relation was seriously ill—Mrs. Burton, very likely. Diana

may, in her flurry, have forgotten to put that in—"

"Yes. I think I'll run down to Rivermead—"

"No, no," said the earl, with a return to nervousness. "I would not. She may have gone somewhere else, in quite a different direction. The letter saying where she is will reach us to-morrow, and you can go to her and bring her back. You can take Mabel. Well, what is it? Come in!" he broke off testily, as some one knocked at the door.

Lady Selina entered. "Oh, sorry to disturb you, Edward; but have you heard anything of Diana?"

Vane looked at her calmly, even smiled, as he said, easily:

"Oh, yes. She has run up to town on some sudden business—she is going to be married, you know, Aunt Selina. And I am going up to-morrow to travel back with her. I'll take Mabel, please. Perhaps you will tell her that she's going?"

Lady Selina opened her lips, but changed her mind, and with a nod went out.

"Now, sir, we'll leave it at that," said Vane with quiet decision. "I think I'll take a gun or two and try that West Spinney. Something will have to be done with it, by the way, this winter; the cover wants thinning."

The two men talked about the West Spinney with unnecessary earnestness for some minutes, then Vane went out.

He shot until the light faded, then he tramped home and dressed and came down to dinner outwardly serene and smiling, but fighting with the dread, the shadowy fears that gathered about him. It was hard to be compelled to listen to, and answer, Mabel's questions; and as she followed him into the smoking-room with them, his restraint almost gave way, and, with a roughness unusual in his treatment of her, he bade her go and see about her packing—or flirt with Bertie.

"I shall have time for both, thank you, Vane," she retorted haughtily. "Good heavens, I hope no one will be so desperately in love with me as to become transformed by my temporary absence into a perfect bear. Bertie, shall we play just one game of billiards?" she asked that quite-willing young gentleman, and marched off with him, her head aloft, her "red-ripe" lips pouting.

Vane sat up late that night, smoking alone and hard, and thinking of Diana and her sudden journey. A cloud of darkness and gloom seemed to have fallen on the whole place; the hours dragged along with weary, tardy feet. Great heavens! what should he do if—if anything happened to her, if by some unimaginable cause she disappeared from his life!

Calling himself a nervous idiot, he at last went to bed—to lie awake and count the hours as he had counted them in the smoking-room. But he would not get up earlier than usual, and when he got down and went for his accustomed walk before breakfast, he could not stroll to meet the postman.

Indeed, when the letter-bag was placed beside him, he did not hasten to unlock it, but helped himself to some bacon before doing so, though there was already some on his plate. Mabel and Bertie were at the table, and he opened the bag and tossed them their letters. Among his was an envelope, a plain, cheap envelope, addressed to him in Diana's handwriting. He took it up, feeling Mabel's eyes upon him, but he could not open it.

"Diana—she has written?" asked Mabel eagerly.

(To be Continued.)

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