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CHAPTER VII.

"Not much," he retorted, "but I'm quite willing to learn. Perhaps you'd give me a lesson, Lady Mabel?"

"Thanks; I've got something better to do than teach schoolboys," she retorted scornfully.

"Schoolboy! Why, you are only just out of the nursery yourself!" remarked Bertie.

"Here, you two, if you want to quarrel, go down on the walk; I want to smoke a cigarette in peace and quietude," said Dalesford, and, taking Mabel by the shoulders, he pushed her laughingly down the steps, and trundled Bertie after her; and their fresh young voices ascended to him, as he leaned against the balustrade and smoked thoughtfully. Suddenly, he straightened himself, and turned. Diana, who had been playing an accompaniment for the squire's daughter, was moving past the window.

"Won't you come into the fresh air, Miss Bourne?" he asked her.

Diana glanced round. The ladies were gathered about the rector, discussing a threatened bazaar, and Diana wanted to listen, and join in; but, after a moment's hesitation she went out.

"Moon's late to-night," he said. "I'm afraid they're boring you, aren't they?" He jerked his head toward the chattering group.

"Oh, no," she replied. "They are talking about the most interesting things. But," with a smile, "I don't suppose you consider them so."

She glanced up at him, as she spoke, and noticed the hint of world-weariness in his handsome face, that touch of sadness which indicates satiety and the fact that Vanity Fair for all its seeming joyousness, is but a tiresome business, a feast of Dead-Sea fruit.

"I dare say," he assented reflectively. "I'm afraid I'm rather difficult to interest. Don't think me a sentimental boomer, please. But, you see, a man of my age has run through most of his interests."

"A man of your age," said Diana, glancing up at him with a quiet smile. "Are you so old? Not much older than I, surely?"

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He laughed down at her rather grimly.

"Old in experience and—" "Sin" he was going to say; but checked himself. She looked so girlish, so pure, in the starlight that fought with the more garish light streaming through the window, that he shrank from the word, from the vein of thought that it might lead to. For the first time in his life, he wished that that he had led a different kind of life, that he could meet this virginal purity of hers on equal ground. Bertie's voice, as he squabbled amicably with Mabel, just below them, struck on him accusingly. He was once as free from vice and guile as the boy there!

"What a lovely view!" said Diana, presently.

He woke, with something like a start, from his reflections. "You can see it better from the end of the terrace," he said. "Shall we go and look at it?"

They walked there, side by side, and he pointed out the spire of the church, the chimneys of Rivermead.

"This is my father's favorite view," he said. "He is coming here next week. I should like you to know him. He is—he hesitated a moment—"one of the last of the old brigade. He would like to know you; and I think you'd get on together; though, Heaven knows, you haven't much in common—what have you dropped?" he broke off, as Diana bent down, as if searching for something.

"My rose," she said. "Bertie Selby gave it to me—they have beautiful roses at the rectory—and I mustn't lose it."

He paced back on the terrace, and found it.

"Here it is," he said. "Let me try and fasten it more securely."

"Thanks. I can do it," she returned; and she essayed to pin it into the bosom of her dress; but the pin missed it, and the bud fell to the ground. She tried again, with like ill success.

"Tut! tut!" she clicked, between her teeth. "It will slip!"

Dalesford started, and caught her arm.

"By Heaven!" he exclaimed, between his teeth. "You are the girl—it has come upon me like a flash! You are the girl that saved me that night at Wedbury!"

Diana looked up at him, with a smile of amusement, which faded as she saw the sudden palor and earnestness of his face.

"I was waiting to see how long it would be before you knew me, Lord Dalesford," she said.

His hand fell from her arm, but his dark eyes were still fixed on her, with a startled, an intense, gaze, as if he were recalling the past; as if, at that moment, a link were being forged between that past and the present.

"I am—a fool!" he said, at last, and with a strange, deep note in his voice. "I ought to have remembered you the other night. And I have never forgotten you. No, never! How could I? But—but—he looked at her with a puzzled frown—"how does it happen that you are here, at Rivermead? You were the schoolmistress at Wedbury? Yes? What does it mean?"

Diana's heart beat fast. If she obeyed the impulse of the moment, she would have told him the whole truth. But she shrank from it.

"My—my father died, and left me some money," she said falteringly.

He drew a long breath, and nodded. "I see! You are the same girl. I saw you only indistinctly. I was—I had been drinking. I—I beg your pardon. But that explains why I did not recognize you. And I have thought of you so often."

"Yes?" said Diana wonderingly.

"Yes! There is scarcely a day or a night that I haven't thought of you," he said almost grimly. "How brave you were! Fancy a girl, a mere girl, cutting in between two men, and risking a blow, a deadly blow! And you saw my wound—I've got the scar still—and—oh, the whole affair is stamped on my memory! I've never forgotten it, thought of it often! And here you are—an acquaintance, a friend; may I call you a friend?"

Diana looked up at him with a smile.

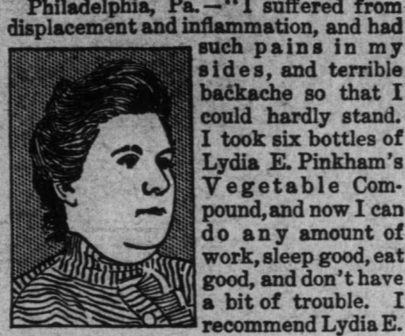
"Yes; if you wish, Lord Dalesford."

"A friend!" he repeated, with a subtle note of satisfaction. "And you live at Rivermead, close here; and you're dining here to-night! By George, I can scarcely realize it!"

He drew nearer to her, and looked

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down at her, with a kind of subdued eagerness, of pleasure, of delighted surprise.

"And we are friends. We can meet, you and I! Miss Bourne, I've laughed at the long arm of coincidence as a convenient invention of the novelists; but here we are, aren't we? You and I!"

"Yes," said Diana, smiling, though her heart was beating fast, for his tone of delight and satisfaction affected her strangely.

"And we are going to be real friends? I am staying here. Aunt Selina keeps a room for me—bless her! And I shall see you now and again, every day. What? Don't say 'No!'—the girl who rescued me in that plucky way that night! Good Lord, I can scarcely realize it! Let me look at you!—I beg your pardon! But it seems so unreal, so impossible!"

He asked her, by a gesture, to turn to the light flowing from the window, and smiling—and blushing a little—she did so.

"Yes! It's the same! I thought I should never see you again. I meant to do so, but"—he paused a moment—"but you are a schoolmistress no longer. I'm glad you have taken Rivermead, that your father left you some money. I hope he left you a great deal."

"Enough to live upon," said Diana, with downcast eyes.

"Yes? I'm glad! And to think you are the girl I have dreamed of, that I have longed to thank as you ought to have been thanked—"

He caught her hand, and raised it toward his lips; but Diana snatched it back.

"You never discovered who it was that attacked you that night?" she asked, with a novel shyness, for he was regarding her intently, as if he were more engaged with her than her question.

"No," he said, absently. "Some footpad."

Diana shook her head. "Highway robbery is out of date. It belongs to the medieval novel. Is there anyone who would be benefited by your death, Lord Dalesford?"

"No; there's no one—excepting my cousin, Desmond March," he added mechanically.

"Desmond March?" said Diana. "What kind of man is he?"

Dalesford laughed. "The kind of man of whom you can have no conception, you pure, sweet woman angel—I beg your pardon, Miss Bourne. He's a—raff of the most pronounced type. Oh, don't misapprehend me! He's the pink of perfection, the glass of fashion, and the mold of form—have I got that right? I'm bad at quotations. Oh, no; my esteemed cousin, Desmond March, is above highway robbery and assassination—what a noise those young people are

making; they will have Aunt Selina upon them presently! And you are the girl who dressed my wound that night! Yes, Aunt Selina, here I am! Mabel! Oh, she is talking astronomy with young Selby. We must go in, I suppose," he said, in a low voice to Diana. "You and I have a—shall we call it a secret?—between us."

CHAPTER VIII.

Diana leaned back in the carriage, as she and Aunt Mary drove home from Shortledge, and looked at the moon dreamily, and with a shadowy smile on her parted lips, for she was feeling strangely happy.

Every one, from Lady Selina downward, had been kind to her, and this, her first introduction to society, had been an extremely pleasant one. As usual, these people of high birth had proved simple-mannered and kindly natured. But it was not Lady Selina's graciousness, nor Lady Mabel's outspoken admiration and girlish affection which suffused Diana's spirit with the warm glow of happiness.

It was the few minutes on the terrace with Lord Dalesford, his joy at his recognition of her, his delight at their meeting, at the idea of friendship between her and him. Why, she asked herself, should he be so glad to meet her again, to find that she was the girl who had come to his rescue that night, which, in the altered present, seemed so far off, so vague, so unreal?

A vain girl would have found the reason without any difficulty, but Diana was singularly free from vanity, and she let the question go unanswered, while she asked herself another: Did she like Lord Dalesford, to be pleased at meeting her again? Did she want the friendship he had almost claimed?

She told herself that she ought to be indifferent to his pleasure, that she ought not to accept, or yield to, the friendship he offered; and that between Lord Dalesford and herself there was a big social gulf; and that, if there were not, he was not the kind of man whom a young girl should take for a friend. But, though the voice of wisdom and prudence strove to make itself heard, something whispered that, notwithstanding his reputation, and the faults with which rumor liberally endowed him, she could not help feeling pleased with his pleasure, and—yes, gratified by his reminder that there was a secret between them.

(To be Continued.)

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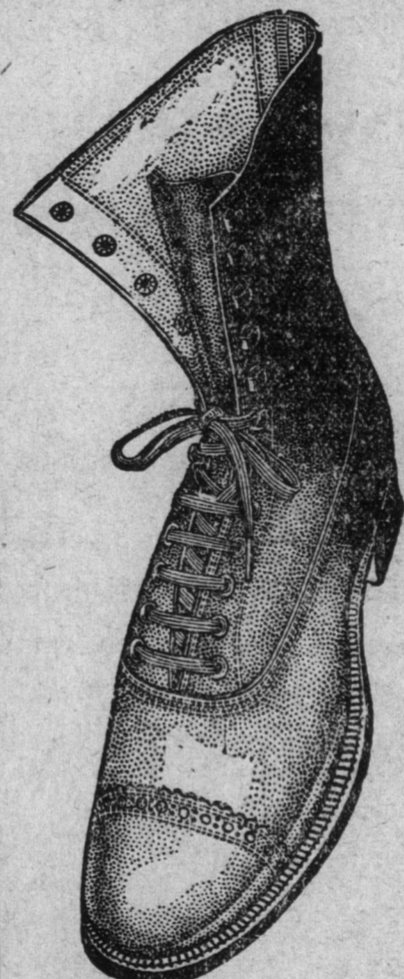
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