



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

CHAPTER XVIII.

She broke off, and he saw her eyes glisten with sudden tears; and he drew her out of the glitter and shimmer of the ballroom into one of the anterooms, closed the door, and took her to his breast.

"God give me the luck to keep you always as happy, my angel and my love!" he whispered passionately.

The light streamed through the windows before the ball was over; but at last the house-party stood in the hall listening to the last carriage as it rolled away.

"And now to bed, my child!" said the earl to Diana. "Vane, go with her to the corridor, and see that Mabel does not lure her to her room for a gossip. She must rest, rest! Good-night, my dear."

As he kissed her the diamonds in her hair flashed in his eyes, and he said: "The diamonds, my dear; better give them to me to look up for you. You'll want them for Lady Brandon's dance on Wednesday; after that, I'll send them to the bank."

Laughing and blushing, Diana, aided by Vane's caressing fingers, took off the jewels, and the earl collected them in a heap and bore them off to the safe in the small room adjoining his own.

On the Monday after the day of the ball, Desmond March was sitting over the pretense of a breakfast. The covers from the dishes had not been removed, and the toast he broke absent-mindedly felt between his fingers. They were trembling, his lips were ashen and drawn, and there were black shadows under his sunken eyes. His run of luck had broken down, and once more he was in the depths of despair. Beside his plate lay a scattered heap of letters, all of them demands, some of them threatening demands, for money. As he looked round the room with aching eyes—he had drunk heavily at the "supper club" on the preceding night—he remembered that the rent was overdue, and reflected that in a short time he would be homeless as well as penniless.

For the first time for weeks he thought of the patient, loving woman, whose faith he had betrayed, whose pitiful savings he had taken and squandered. To go to her now—no, not even he was equal to that. There was nothing but flight. But where to fly? Where? Absently, he picked up one of the papers which lay on the table; it happened to be a society journal, and as he turned the leaves wearily his eye caught an account of the great ball at Glenaskel. His face flushed and grew bitter as he read the successful effort of a reporter still dazed by the splendor he had witnessed from a corner

of the music-gallery.

Desmond March set his teeth upon the oath that broke from him. And all this—Glenaskel, Wrayborough, and how much more—might have been his. Diamonds—this girl of his cousin's, Daleford's, must have been smothered with them. Great heavens, and he, the next heir, was stone-broke, a defaulter, an outcast. Diamonds! Why a quarter of the sum they would fetch would tide him over his difficulties. And this girl was flaunting them, would lose them, very likely—he flung the paper from him and groaned.

His valet, to whom, of course, wages were due, knocked at the door and entered.

"The—er—person to see you, sir," Desmond March stared at him. "Eh? Oh, tell him to go to—!" Suddenly his face flushed, and he caught his breath. "Wait!" he called, as the valet was leaving the room. "I think I'll see him."

A moment or two later the valet ushered in Garling. The short, square figure, the rugged, heavily lined face, looked strangely out of place in the luxurious room, and the man stood awkwardly leaning on his thick stick and regarding, in silence, the aristocratic, pallid face of Desmond March with a mixture of deference and defiance, of apprehension and dislike.

"So you've turned up as usual," said Desmond March, leaning back and looking at Garling, under half-closed eyes. "It's as well you did; for I happen to want you."

"To want me?" said Garling, in his peculiar, husky voice. "What can you want with me? See here, Mr. March, I've come to tell you that this—this game can't go on. I'm tired of it. You took me by surprise the other night, and I caved in before I'd had time to turn round. Every Monday I've been here to—report myself—his rugged face grew red and his mouth hard and set—but I don't mean to do so again. I'm—I'm different to what you take me for."

Desmond March nodded toward the door.

"You can go. My man will follow you and give you in charge to the first policeman he meets. Or you can stay and undertake a job. I've got one for you. Which is it to be? Right," as the man, white to the lips, ground his teeth and remained standing. "Now, lock the door. Come here, sit down, and listen."

Garling took the chair and kept his eyes on March, as the slave eyes his master, whip in hand; and in slow, measured accents Desmond March set him his task.

In the middle of the recital Garling sprang to his feet, his eyes glowing, his teeth set.

"No, no!" he exclaimed hoarsely. "I won't do it! I can't! I've left that kind of work! For God's sake, say no more! I'll be no man's slave; I—!"

He shuddered. "I've had enough of convict life."

Desmond March leaned back and toyed with a paper cutter; but kept his eyes on his man.

"Oh, yes, you'll do it," he said. "Where's the risk to you—the Ironmonger, you know! But risk, or no risk, you'll do it. You'll take a commission, of course, and you can clear off when the job's done; for I shall have done with you for good and all. Hesitate, you—you convict, and, by God! I'll send you back to Portland!"

With a groan, Garling sank into his chair. Then he sprang up and paced up and down with heavy, dragging



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steps, his head bent, his brows knit; and Desmond March leaned back and watched him with a feigned calm that concealed a deep anxiety.

At last Garling stopped before his tyrant, and, glowering down at him, said hoarsely:

"If I do this—job, it's the last, you say? You'll have done with me—will let me go? You swear it? Swear it!" He laughed a laugh that sounded like the snarl of a dog. "You'd swear anything, you—you fine gentleman. I know. But, mind! you're driving me harder than you think! I'll do it; but—it's the last; unless it's the kind of job"—he looked at Desmond March with a sudden ferocity—"that I'll swing for!"

CHAPTER XIX.

It was noon on the morning following Lady Brandon's dance when Diana awoke to find Mabel sitting beside her bed, regarding her with a smile that was wistful as well as affectionate.

"Oh, I'm late; you're dressed, Mabel!" Diana exclaimed guiltily. "What is the time? So late? How long have you been sitting here? Is it anything you want, dear?"

"I've been here for the last half hour," replied Mabel. "I did want something, but I've forgotten what it is now. How beautiful you look when you're asleep, Diana! You've been smiling for the last five minutes. What were you dreaming of?"

Diana thought a moment, then blushed and shook her head.

"Dreams are silly things," she answered evasively.

"Yes; they're silly enough even when they're happy," admitted Mabel; "because they're only dreams, you see, and they mayn't come true. But yours are all safe enough," she added, with a mischievous smile and nod. "I'll ring for your tea. Oh, you mustn't think of getting up yet, for Vane has given me strict orders to see that you breakfast in bed."

"I've never done such a thing in my life that I can remember," urged Diana; but Mabel shook her head decisively.

"Them's my orders, miss; and I'm just old enough to know that it's better to obey 'em when Vane gives them. And here's the tray. Are you hungry?"

"Starving," said Diana, sitting up and flinging her long, tall of hair over her shoulders. "Is Vane down?"

"Down! Hours ago. Oh, he's quite the Industrious Apprentice now, since a certain young lady took him in hand and reformed him. He was up before the breakfast bell rang, seeing to the program for the day. He slaves at it as if he were a Cook's excursionist guide. Vane, who, last year, was the laziest man that ever drew breath! And that reminds me of what I wanted. It's that troublesome boy, Bertie."

"What has he been doing now?" asked Diana, with a smile, and a loving, whimsical glance at the pretty girl's face, as its owner, having seated herself on the bed, was snuggling against Diana and somewhat hampering her fork hand.

"Oh, nothing; it's what he wants to do. He wants me to ride over with him to the Holy Well."

"And you're going to do so, of course?"

"Well—I was; but Aunt Selina has suddenly discovered that I ought not to. She says I spend all my time with him—so absurd! I'm sure I don't! And she says she won't have me scampering about in country lanes with a young man; as if Bertie were a young man!"

"He's scarcely an old one," said Diana. "And you want me to come with you, I suppose, to play chaperon?"

Mabel nodded and grinned. "Yes; that's it, dear. You and Vane, of course. I thought—that is, Bertie thought—that we might get some lunch at the inn by the well and make a day of it. It would be awfully jolly—just us four. And we wouldn't interfere with you and Vane, you know. You could ride over so far behind—!" She wound up by giving Diana a hug, and, having got her way, ran off to inform her fellow conspirator of the success of their little plan for getting so many hours together.

that's it, dear. You and Vane, of course. I thought—that is, Bertie thought—that we might get some lunch at the inn by the well and make a day of it. It would be awfully jolly—just us four. And we wouldn't interfere with you and Vane, you know. You could ride over so far behind—!" She wound up by giving Diana a hug, and, having got her way, ran off to inform her fellow conspirator of the success of their little plan for getting so many hours together.

Diana came down in her habit and found Vane patiently waiting for her in the hall. He looked up as she came down the stairs, and his eyes greeted her with mute admiration.

"You beautiful angel!" he whispered, almost audibly; and he scarcely waited until the butler had discreetly withdrawn before he took her in his arms and lifted her off the last few steps. "I spend most of my time trying to decide in what dress you look most lovely. Diana. This morning I'm inclined to put my money on a habit; but I know that to-night I shall plunge on an evening frock. How well, how bright you look, my star! Yes; that's it—you are my star, dearest. Without you my life would be black as—"

"Now, when you two have quite done—don't let me hurry you," said Mabel, from the door, with exaggerated politeness. "but the horses have been waiting for hours, and Bertie says he thinks you must have mistaken this for a moonlight ride."

"This girl will be the death of me," declared Daleford, with mock despair. "Come on, then. But look here, Mabel, no larks; no giving us the slip with that fellow boy of yours. I have just been listening to of youth with a lifetime of love before the eyes of Lady Mabel Lashwood. And I've promised to keep an eye on you, young lady."

"Pooh!" retorted Mabel contemptuously. "You've only one pair of eyes, and you can't keep them off your young woman. Besides, as if I couldn't take care of myself!"

The four young people started, talking and laughing with the joyousness of youth with a lifetime of love before them; and presently, as Mabel had shrewdly foreseen, she and Bertie had left the other couple far behind, and were quarreling and flirting with a charming absence of restraint.

Daleford seemed even happier than usual that morning, and before they had ridden a mile Diana learned the cause.

(To be continued.)

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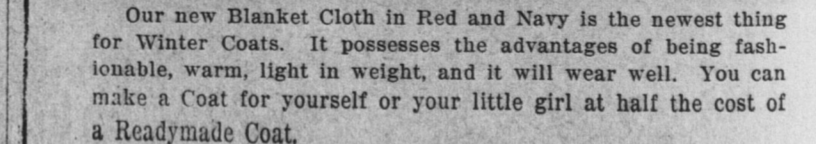
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