

**GEORGE
MEREDITH**

DIANA OF THE
CROSSWAYS,
VOLUME 3

George Meredith
Diana of the Crossways. Volume 3

*http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=36096341
Diana of the Crossways – Volume 3:*

Содержание

CHAPTER XVIII	4
CHAPTER XIX	17
CHAPTER XX	31
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	35

George Meredith

Diana of the Crossways – Volume 3

CHAPTER XVIII THE AUTHORESS

The effect of a great success upon Diana, at her second literary venture, was shown in the transparent sedateness of a letter she wrote to Emma Dunstane, as much as in her immediate and complacent acceptance of the magical change of her fortunes. She spoke one thing and acted another, but did both with a lofty calm that deceived the admiring friend who clearly saw the authoress behind her mask, and feared lest she should be too confidently trusting to the powers of her pen to support an establishment.

'If the public were a perfect instrument to strike on, I should be tempted to take the wonderful success of my PRINCESS at her first appearance for a proof of natural aptitude in composition, and might think myself the genius. I know it to be as little a Stradivarius as I am a Paganini. It is an eccentric machine, in tune with me for the moment, because I happen to have hit it in the

ringing spot. The book is a new face appealing to a mirror of the common surface emotions; and the kitchen rather than the dairy offers an analogy for the real value of that "top-skim." I have not seen what I consider good in the book once mentioned among the laudatory notices—except by your dear hand, my Emmy. Be sure I will stand on guard against the "vaporous generalizations," and other "tricks" you fear. Now that you are studying Latin for an occupation—how good and wise it was of Mr. Redworth to propose it!—I look upon you with awe as a classic authority and critic. I wish I had leisure to study with you. What I do is nothing like so solid and durable.

'THE PRINCESS EGERIA' originally (I must have written word of it to you— I remember the evening off Palermo!) was conceived as a sketch; by gradations she grew into a sort of semi-Scudery romance, and swelled to her present portliness. That was done by a great deal of piecing, not to say puffing, of her frame. She would be healthier and have a chance of living longer if she were reduced by a reversal of the processes. But how would the judicious clippings and prickings affect our "pensive public"? Now that I have furnished a house and have a fixed address, under the paws of creditors, I feel I am in the wizard-circle of my popularity and subscribe to its laws or waken to incubus and the desert. Have I been rash? You do not pronounce. If I have bound myself to pipe as others please, it need not be entirely; and I can promise you it shall not be; but still I am sensible when I lift my "little quill" of having forced the note of a woodland wren

into the popular nightingale's—which may end in the daw's, from straining; or worse, a toy-whistle.

'That is, in the field of literature. Otherwise, within me deep, I am not aware of any transmutation of the celestial into coined gold. I sound myself, and ring clear. Incessant writing is my refuge, my solace—escape out of the personal net. I delight in it, as in my early morning walks at Lugano, when I went threading the streets and by the lake away to "the heavenly mount," like a dim idea worming upward in a sleepy head to bright wakefulness.

'My anonymous critic, of whom I told you, is intoxicating with eulogy.

The signature "Apollonius" appears to be of literary-middle indication.

He marks passages approved by you. I have also had a complimentary letter from Mr. Dacier:

'For an instance of this delight I have in writing, so strong is it that I can read pages I have written, and tear the stuff to strips (I did yesterday), and resume, as if nothing had happened. The waves within are ready for any displacement. That must be a good sign. I do not doubt of excelling my PRINCESS; and if she received compliments, the next may hope for more. Consider, too, the novel pleasure of earning money by the labour we delight in. It is an answer to your question whether I am happy. Yes, as the savage islander before the ship entered the bay with the fire-water. My blood is wine, and I have the slumbers of an infant. I dream, wake, forget my dream, barely dress before

the pen is galloping; barely breakfast; no toilette till noon. A savage in good sooth! You see, my Emmy, I could not house with the "companionable person" you hint at. The poles can never come together till the earth is crushed. She would find my habits intolerable, and I hers contemptible, though we might both be companionable persons. My dear, I could not even live with myself. My blessed little quill, which helps me divinely to live out of myself, is and must continue to be my one companion. It is my mountain height, morning light, wings, cup from the springs, my horse, my goal, my lancet and replenisher, my key of communication with the highest, grandest, holiest between earth and heaven—the vital air connecting them.

'In justice let me add that I have not been troubled by hearing of any of the mysterious legal claims, et caetera. I am sorry to hear bad reports of health. I wish him entire felicity—no step taken to bridge division! The thought of it makes me tigrish.

'A new pianist playing his own pieces (at Lady Singleby's concert) has given me exquisite pleasure' and set me composing songs—not to his music, which could be rendered only by sylphs moving to "soft recorders" in the humour of wildness, languor, bewitching caprices, giving a new sense to melody. How I wish you had been with me to hear him! It was the most AEolian thing ever caught from a night-breeze by the soul of a poet.

'But do not suppose me having headlong tendencies to the melting mood. (The above, by the way, is a Pole settled in Paris, and he is to be introduced to me at Lady Pennon's.)—

What do you say to my being invited by Mr. Whitmonby to aid him in writing leading articles for the paper he is going to conduct! "write as you talk and it will do," he says. I am choosing my themes. To write—of politics—as I talk, seems to me like an effort to jump away from my shadow. The black dog of consciousness declines to be shaken off. If some one commanded me to talk as I write! I suspect it would be a way of winding me up to a sharp critical pitch rapidly.

'Not good news of Lord D. I have had messages. Mr. Dacier conceals his alarm. The PRINCESS gave great gratification. She did me her best service there. Is it not cruel that the interdict of the censor should force me to depend for information upon such scraps as I get from a gentleman passing my habitation on his way to the House? And he is not, he never has been, sympathetic in that direction. He sees my grief, and assumes an undertakerly air, with some notion of acting in concert, one supposes little imagining how I revolt from that crape-hatband formalism of sorrow!

'One word of her we call our inner I. I am not drawing upon her resources for my daily needs; not wasting her at all, I trust; certainly not walling her up, to deafen her voice. It would be to fall away from you. She bids me sign myself, my beloved, ever, ever your Tony.'

The letter had every outward show of sincereness in expression, and was endowed to wear that appearance by the writer's impulse to protest with so resolute a vigour as to delude

herself. Lady Dunstane heard of Mr. Dacier's novel attendance at concerts. The world made a note of it; for the gentleman was notoriously without ear for music.

Diana's comparison of her hours of incessant writing to her walks under the dawn at Lugano, her boast of the similarity of her delight in both, deluded her uncorrupted conscience to believe that she was now spiritually as free: as in that fair season of the new spring in her veins. She, was not an investigating physician, nor was Lady Dunstane, otherwise they would have examined the material points of her conduct— indicators of the spiritual secret always. What are the patient's acts? The patient's, mind was projected too far beyond them to see the fore finger they stretched at her; and the friend's was not that of a prying doctor on the look out for betraying symptoms. Lady Dunstane did ask herself why Tony should have incurred the burden of a costly household— a very costly: Sir Lukin had been at one of Tony's little' dinners: but her wish to meet the world on equal terms, after a long dependency, accounted for it in seeming to excuse. The guests on the occasion were Lady Pennon. Lady Singleby, Mr. Whitmonby, Mr. Percy Dacier, Mr. Tonans; —'Some other woman,' Sir Lukin said, and himself. He reported the cookery as matching the: conversation, and that was princely; the wines not less—an extraordinary fact to note of a woman. But to hear Whitmonby and Diana Warwick! How he told a story, neat as a postman's knock, and she tipped it with a remark and ran to a second, drawing in Lady Pennon, and then Dacier, 'and me!'

cried Sir Lukin; 'she made us all toss the ball from hand to hand, and all talk up to the mark; and none of us noticed that we all went together to the drawing-room, where we talked for another hour, and broke up fresher than we began.'

'That break between the men and the women after dinner was Tony's aversion, and I am glad she has instituted a change,' said Lady Dunstane.

She heard also from Redworth of the unexampled concert of the guests at Mrs. Warwick's dinner parties. He had met on one occasion the Esquarts, the Pettigrews, Mr. Percy Dacier, and a Miss Paynham. Redworth had not a word to say of the expensive household. Whatever Mrs. Warwick did was evidently good to him. On another evening the party was composed of Lady Pennon, Lord Larrian, Miss Paynham, a clever Mrs. Wollasley, Mr. Henry Wilmers, and again Mr. Percy Dacier.

When Diana came to Copsley, Lady Dunstane remarked on the recurrence of the name of Miss Paynham in the list of her guests.

'And Mr. Percy Dacier's too,' said Diana, smiling. 'They are invited each for specific reasons. It pleases Lord Dannisburgh to hear that a way has been found to enliven his nephew; and my little dinners are effective, I think. He wakes. Yesterday evening he capped flying jests with Mr. Sullivan Smith. But you speak of Miss. Paynham.' Diana lowered her voice on half a dozen syllables, till the half-tones dropped into her steady look. 'You approve, Emmy?'

The answer was: 'I do—true or not.'

'Between us two, dear, I fear! . . . In either case, she has been badly used. Society is big engine enough to protect itself. I incline with British juries to do rough justice to the victims. She has neither father nor brother. I have had no confidences: but it wears the look of a cowardly business. With two words in his ear, I could arm an Irishman to do some work of chastisement: he would select the rascal's necktie for a cause of quarrel and lords have to stand their ground as well as commoners. They measure the same number of feet when stretched their length. However, vengeance with the heavens! though they seem tardy. Lady Pennon has been very kind about it; and the Esquarts invite her to Lockton. Shoulder to shoulder, the tide may be stemmed.'

'She would have gone under, but for you, dear Tony!' said Emma folding arms round her darling's neck and kissing her. 'Bring her here some day.'

Diana did not promise it. She had her vision of Sir Lukin in his fit of lunacy.

'I am too weak for London now,' Emma resumed. 'I should like to be useful. Is she pleasant?'

'Sprightly by nature. She has worn herself with fretting.'

'Then bring her to stay with me, if I cannot keep you. She will talk of you to me.'

'I will bring her for a couple of days,' Diana said. 'I am too busy to remain longer. She paints portraits to amuse herself. She ought to be pushed, wherever she is received about London, while

the season is warm. One season will suffice to establish her. She is pretty, near upon six and twenty: foolish, of course:—she pays for having had a romantic head. Heavy payment, Emmy! I drive at laws, but hers is an instance of the creatures wanting simple human kindness.'

'The good law will come with a better civilization; but before society can be civilized it has to be debarbarized,' Emma remarked, and Diana sighed over the task and the truism.

I should have said in younger days, because it will not look plainly on our nature and try to reconcile it with our conditions. But now I see that the sin is cowardice. The more I know of the world the more clearly I perceive that its top and bottom sin is cowardice, physically and morally alike. Lord Larrian owns to there being few heroes in an army. We must fawn in society. What is the meaning of that dread of one example of tolerance? O my dear! let us give it the right name. Society is the best thing we have, but it is a crazy vessel worked by a crew that formerly practised piracy, and now, in expiation, professes piety, fearful of a discovered Omnipotence, which is in the image of themselves and captain. Their old habits are not quite abandoned, and their new one is used as a lash to whip the exposed of us for a propitiation of the capricious potentate whom they worship in the place of the true God.'

Lady Dunstane sniffed. 'I smell the leading article.'

Diana joined with her smile, 'No, the style is rather different.'

'Have you not got into a trick of composing in speaking, at

times?'

Diana confessed, 'I think I have at times. Perhaps the daily writing of all kinds and the nightly talking . . . I may be getting strained.'

'No, Tony; but longer visits in the country to me would refresh you. I miss your lighter touches. London is a school, but, you know it, not a school for comedy nor for philosophy; that is gathered on my hills, with London distantly in view, and then occasional descents on it well digested.'

'I wonder whether it is affecting me !' said Diana, musing. 'A metropolitan hack! and while thinking myself free, thrice harnessed; and all my fun gone. Am I really as dull as a tract, my dear? I must be, or I should be proving the contrary instead of asking. My pitfall is to fancy I have powers equal to the first look-out of the eyes of the morning. Enough of me. We talked of Mary Paynham. If only some right good man would marry her!'

Lady Dunstane guessed at the right good man in Diana's mind. 'Do you bring them together?'

Diana nodded, and then shook doleful negatives to signify no hope.

'None whatever—if we mean the same person,' said Lady Dunstane, bethinking her, in the spirit of wrath she felt at such a scheme being planned by Diana to snare the right good man, that instead of her own true lover Redworth, it might be only Percy Dacier. So filmy of mere sensations are these little ideas as they flit in converse, that she did not reflect on her friend's ignorance

of Redworth's love of her, or on the unlikely choice of one in Dacier's high station to reinstate a damsel.

They did not name the person.

'Passing the instance, which is cruel, I will be just to society thus far,' said Diana. 'I was in a boat at Richmond last week, and Leander was revelling along the mud-banks, and took it into his head to swim out to me, and I was moved to take him on board. The ladies in the boat objected, for he was not only wet but very muddy. I was forced to own that their objections were reasonable. My sentimental humaneness had no argument against muslin dresses, though my dear dog's eyes appealed pathetically, and he would keep swimming after us. The analogy excuses the world for protecting itself in extreme cases; nothing, nothing excuses its insensibility to cases which may be pleaded. You see the pirate crew turned pious-ferocious in sanctity.' She added, half laughing: 'I am reminded by the boat, I have unveiled my anonymous critic, and had a woeful disappointment. He wrote like a veteran; he is not much more than a boy. I received a volume of verse, and a few lines begging my acceptance. I fancied I knew the writing, and wrote asking him whether I had not to thank him, and inviting him to call. He seems a nice lad of about two and twenty, mad for literature; and he must have talent. Arthur Rhodes by name. I may have a chance of helping him. He was an articled clerk of Mr. Braddock's, the same who valiantly came to my rescue once. He was with us in the boat.'

'Bring him to me some day,' said Lady Dunstane.

Miss Paynham's visit to Copsley was arranged, and it turned out a failure. The poor young lady came in a flutter, thinking that the friend of Mrs. Warwick would expect her to discourse cleverly. She attempted it, to Diana's amazement. Lady Dunstane's opposingly corresponding stillness provoked Miss Paynham to expatiate, for she had sprightliness and some mental reserves of the common order. Clearly, Lady Dunstane mused while listening amiably, Tony never could have designed this gabbler for the mate of Thomas Redworth!

Percy Dacier seemed to her the more likely one, in that light, and she thought so still, after Sir Lukin had introduced him at Copsley for a couple of days of the hunting season. Tony's manner with him suggested it; she had a dash of leadership. They were not intimate in look or tongue.

But Percy Dacier also was too good for Miss Paynham, if that was Tony's plan for him, Lady Dunstane thought, with the relentlessness of an invalid and recluse's distaste. An aspect of penitence she had not demanded, but the silly gabbler under a stigma she could not pardon.

Her opinion of Miss Paynham was diffused in her silence.

Speaking of Mr. Dacier, she remarked, 'As you say of him, Tony, he can brighten, and when you give him a chance he is entertaining. He has fine gifts. If I were a member of his family I should beat about for a match for him. He strikes me as one of the young men who would do better married.'

'He is doing very well, but the wonder is that he doesn't marry.'

said Diana. 'He ought to be engaged. Lady Esquart told me that he was. A Miss Asper—great heiress; and the Daciers want money. However, there it is.'

Not many weeks later Diana could not have spoken of Mr. Percy Dacier with this air of indifference without corruption of her inward guide.

CHAPTER XIX

A DRIVE IN SUNLIGHT AND A DRIVE IN MOONLIGHT

The fatal time to come for her was in the Summer of that year.

Emma had written her a letter of unwonted bright spirits, contrasting strangely with an inexplicable oppression of her own that led her to imagine her recent placid life the pause before thunder, and to sharp the mood of her solitary friend she flew to Copsley, finding Sir Lukin absent, as usual. They drove out immediately after breakfast, on one of those high mornings of the bared bosom of June when distances are given to our eyes, and a soft air fondles leaf and grass-blade, and beauty and peace are overhead, reflected, if we will. Rain had fallen in the night. Here and there hung a milk-white cloud with folded sail. The South-west left it in its bay of blue, and breathed below. At moments the fresh scent of herb and mould swung richly in warmth. The young beech-leaves glittered, pools of rain-water made the roadways laugh, the grass-banks under hedges rolled their interwoven weeds in cascades of many-shaded green to right and left of the pair of dappled ponies, and a squirrel crossed ahead, a lark went up a little way to ease his heart, closing his wings when the burst was over, startled black-birds, darting with a clamour like a broken cockcrow, looped the wayside woods

from hazel to oak-scrub; short flights, quick spirits everywhere, steady sunshine above.

Diana held the reins. The whip was an ornament, as the plume of feathers to the general officer. Lady Dunstane's ponies were a present from Redworth, who always chose the pick of the land for his gifts. They joyed in their trot, and were the very love-birds of the breed for their pleasure of going together, so like that Diana called them the Dromios. Through an old gravel-cutting a gateway led to the turf of the down, springy turf bordered on a long line, clear as a racecourse, by golden gorse covers, and leftward over the gorse the dark ridge of the fir and heath country ran companionably to the Southwest, the valley between, with undulations of wood and meadow sunned or shaded, clumps, mounds, promontories, away to broad spaces of tillage banked by wooded hills, and dimmer beyond and farther, the faintest shadowiness of heights, as a veil to the illimitable. Yews, junipers, radiant beeches, and gleams of the service-tree or the white-beam spotted the semicircle of swelling green Down black and silver. The sun in the valley sharpened his beams on squares of buttercups, and made a pond a diamond.

'You see, Tony,' Emma said, for a comment on the scene, 'I could envy

Italy for having you, more than you for being in Italy.'

'Feature and colour!' said Diana. 'You have them here, and on a scale that one can embrace. I should like to build a hut on this point, and wait for such a day to return. It brings me to

life.' She lifted her eyelids on her friend's worn sweet face, and knowing her this friend up to death, past it in her hopes, she said bravely, 'It is the Emma of days and scenes to me! It helps me to forget myself, as I do when I think of you, dearest; but the subject has latterly been haunting me, I don't know why, and ominously, as if my nature were about to horrify my soul. But I am not sentimentalizing, you are really this day and scene in my heart.'

Emma smiled confidingly. She spoke her reflection: 'The heart must be troubled a little to have the thought. The flower I gather here tells me that we may be happy in privation and suffering if simply we can accept beauty. I won't say expel the passions, but keep passion sober, a trotter in harness.'

Diana caressed the ponies' heads with the droop of her whip: 'I don't think I know him!' she said.

Between sincerity and a suspicion so cloaked and dull that she did not feel it to be the opposite of candour, she fancied she was passionless because she could accept the visible beauty, which was Emma's prescription and test; and she forced herself to make much of it, cling to it, devour it; with envy of Emma's contemplative happiness, through whose grave mind she tried to get to the peace in it, imagining that she succeeded. The cloaked and dull suspicion weighed within her nevertheless. She took it for a mania to speculate on herself. There are states of the crimson blood when the keenest wits are childish, notably in great-hearted women aiming at the majesty of their sex and

fearful of confounding it by the look direct and the downright word. Yet her nature compelled her inwardly to phrase the sentence: 'Emma is a wife!' The character of her husband was not considered, nor was the meaning of the exclamation pursued.

They drove through the gorse into wild land of heath and flowering hawthorn, and along by tracts of yew and juniper to another point, jutting on a furzy sand-mound, rich with the mild splendour of English scenery, which Emma stamped on her friend's mind by saying: 'A cripple has little to envy in you who can fly when she has feasts like these at her doors.'

They had an inclination to boast on the drive home of the solitude they had enjoyed; and just then, as the road in the wood wound under great beeches, they beheld a London hat. The hat was plucked from its head. A clear-faced youth, rather flushed, dusty at the legs, addressed Diana.

'Mr. Rhodes!' she said, not discouragingly.

She was petitioned to excuse him; he thought she would wish to hear the news in town last night as early as possible; he hesitated and murmured it.

Diana turned to Emma: 'Lord Dannisburgh!' her paleness told the rest.

Hearing from Mr. Rhodes that he had walked the distance from town, and had been to Copsley, Lady Dunstane invited him to follow the pony-carriage thither, where he was fed and refreshed by a tea-breakfast, as he preferred walking on tea, he said. 'I took the liberty to call at Mrs. Warwick's house,' he

informed her; 'the footman said she was at Copsley. I found it on the map—I knew the directions—and started about two in the morning. I wanted a walk.'

It was evident to her that he was one of the young squires bewitched whom beautiful women are constantly enlisting. There was no concealment of it, though he stirred a sad enviousness in the invalid lady by descanting on the raptures of a walk out of London in the youngest light of day, and on the common objects he had noticed along the roadside, and through the woods, more sustaining, closer with nature than her compulsory feeding on the cream of things.

'You are not fatigued?' she inquired, hoping for that confession at least; but she pardoned his boyish vaunting to walk the distance back without any fatigue at all.

He had a sweeter reward for his pains; and if the business of the chronicler allowed him to become attached to pure throbbing felicity wherever it is encountered, he might be diverted by the blissful unexpectedness of good fortune befalling Mr. Arthur Rhodes in having the honour to conduct Mrs. Warwick to town. No imagined happiness, even in the heart of a young man of two and twenty, could have matched it. He was by her side, hearing and seeing her, not less than four hours. To add to his happiness, Lady Dunstane said she would be glad to welcome him again. She thought him a pleasant specimen of the self-vowed squire.

Diana was sure that there would be a communication for her of some sort at her house in London; perhaps a message of farewell

from the dying lord, now dead. Mr. Rhodes had only the news of the evening journals, to the effect that Lord Dannisburgh had expired at his residence, the Priory, Hallowmere, in Hampshire. A message of farewell from him, she hoped for: knowing him as she did, it seemed a certainty; and she hungered for that last gleam of life in her friend. She had no anticipation of the burden of the message awaiting her.

A consultation as to the despatching of the message, had taken place among the members of Lord Dannisburgh's family present at his death. Percy Dacier was one of them, and he settled the disputed point, after some time had been spent in persuading his father to take the plain view of obligation in the matter, and in opposing the dowager countess, his grandmother, by stating that he had already sent a special messenger to London. Lord Dannisburgh on his death-bed had expressed a wish that Mrs. Warwick would sit with him for an hour one night before the nails were knocked in his coffin. He spoke of it twice, putting it the second time to Percy as a formal request to be made to her, and Percy had promised him that Mrs. Warwick should have the message. He had done his best to keep his pledge, aware of the disrelish of the whole family for the lady's name, to say nothing of her presence.

'She won't come,' said the earl.

'She'll come,' said old Lady Dacier.

'If the woman respects herself she'll hold off it,' the earl insisted because of his desire that way. He signified in mutterings

that the thing was improper and absurd, a piece of sentiment, sickly senility, unlike Lord Dannisburgh. Also that Percy had been guilty of excessive folly.

To which Lady Dacier nodded her assent, remarking, 'The woman is on her mettle. From what I've heard of her, she's not a woman to stick at trifles. She'll take it as a sort of ordeal by touch, and she 'll come.'

They joined in abusing Percy, who had driven away to another part of the country. Lord Creedmore, the heir of the house, was absent, hunting in America, or he might temporarily have been taken into favour by contrast. Ultimately they agreed that the woman must be allowed to enter the house, but could not be received. The earl was a widower; his mother managed the family, and being hard to convince, she customarily carried her point, save when it involved Percy's freedom of action. She was one of the veterans of her sex that age to toughness; and the 'hysterical fuss' she apprehended in the visit of this woman to Lord Dannisburgh's death-bed and body, did not alarm her. For the sake of the household she determined to remain, shut up in her room. Before night the house was empty of any members of the family excepting old Lady Dacier and the outstretched figure on the bed.

Dacier fled to escape the hearing of the numberless ejaculations re-awakened in the family by his uncle's extraordinary dying request. They were an outrage to the lady, of whom he could now speak as a privileged champion; and the

request itself had an air of proving her stainless, a white soul and efficacious advocate at the celestial gates (reading the mind of the dying man). So he thought at one moment: he had thought so when charged with the message to her; had even thought it a natural wish that she should look once on the face she would see no more, and say farewell to it, considering that in life it could not be requested. But the susceptibility to sentimental emotion beside a death-bed, with a dying man's voice in the ear, requires fortification if it is to be maintained; and the review of his uncle's character did not tend to make this very singular request a proof that the lady's innocence was honoured in it. His epicurean uncle had no profound esteem for the kind of innocence. He had always talked of Mrs. Warwick—with warm respect for her: Dacier knew that he had bequeathed her a sum of money. The inferences were either way. Lord Dannisburgh never spoke evilly of any woman, and he was perhaps bound to indemnify her materially as well as he could for what she had suffered.—On the other hand, how easy it was to be the dupe of a woman so handsome and clever.—Unlikely too that his uncle would consent to sit at the Platonic banquet with her.—Judging by himself, Dacier deemed it possible for man. He was not quick to kindle, and had lately seen much of her, had found her a Lady Egeria, helpful in counsel, prompting, inspiriting, reviving as well-waters, and as temperately cool: not one sign of native slipperiness. Nor did she stir the mud in him upon which proud man is built. The shadow of the scandal had checked a few shifty sensations rising now

and then of their own accord, and had laid them, with the lady's benign connivance. This was good proof in her favour, seeing that she must have perceived of late the besetting thirst he had for her company; and alone or in the medley equally. To see her, hear, exchange ideas with her; and to talk of new books, try to listen to music at the opera and at concerts, and admire her playing of hostess, were novel pleasures, giving him fresh notions of life, and strengthening rather than disturbing the course of his life's business.

At any rate, she was capable of friendship. Why not resolutely believe that she had been his uncle's true and simple friend! He adopted the resolution, thanking her for one recognized fact:—he hated marriage, and would by this time have been in the yoke, but for the agreeable deviation of his path to her society. Since his visit to Copsley, moreover, Lady Dunstane's idolizing, of her friend had influenced him. Reflecting on it, he recovered from the shock which his uncle's request had caused.

Certain positive calculations were running side by side with the speculations in vapour. His messenger would reach her house at about four of the afternoon. If then at home, would she decide to start immediately?—Would she come? That was a question he did not delay to answer. Would she defer the visit? Death replied to that. She would not delay it.

She would be sure to come at once. And what of the welcome she would meet? Leaving the station at London at six in the evening, she might arrive at the Priory, all impediments counted,

between ten and eleven at night. Thence, coldly greeted, or not greeted, to the chamber of death.

A pitiable and cruel reception for a woman upon such a mission!

His mingled calculations and meditations reached that exclamatory terminus in feeling, and settled on the picture of Diana, about as clear as light to blinking eyes, but enough for him to realize her being there and alone, woefully alone. The supposition of an absolute loneliness was most possible. He had intended to drive back the next day, when the domestic storm would be over, and take the chances of her coming. It seemed now a piece of duty to return at night, a traverse of twenty rough up and down miles from Itchenford to the heath-land rolling on the chalk wave of the Surrey borders, easily done after the remonstrances of his host were stopped.

Dacier sat in an open carriage, facing a slip of bright moon. Poetical impressions, emotions, any stirrings of his mind by the sensational stamp on it, were new to him, and while he swam in them, both lulled and pricked by his novel accessibility to nature's lyrical touch, he asked himself whether, if he were near the throes of death, the thought of having Diana Warwick to sit beside his vacant semblance for an hour at night would be comforting. And why had his uncle specified an hour of the night? It was a sentiment, like the request: curious in a man so little sentimental. Yonder crescent running the shadowy round of the hoop roused comparisons. Would one really wish to have her

beside one in death? In life—ah! But suppose her denied to us in life. Then the desire for her companionship appears passingly comprehensible. Enter into the sentiment, you see that the hour of darkness is naturally chosen. And would even a grand old Pagan crave the presence beside his dead body for an hour of the night of a woman he did not esteem? Dacier answered no. The negative was not echoed in his mind. He repeated it, and to the same deadness.

He became aware that he had spoken for himself, and he had a fit of sourness. For who can say he is not a fool before he has been tried by a woman! Dacier's wretched tendency under vexation to conceive grotesque analogies, anti-poetic, not to say cockney similes, which had slightly chilled Diana at Rovio, set him looking at yonder crescent with the hoop, as at the shape of a white cat climbing a wheel. Men of the northern blood will sometimes lend their assent to poetical images, even to those that do not stun the mind lie bludgeons and imperatively, by much repetition, command their assent; and it is for a solid exchange and interest in usury with soft poetical creatures when they are so condescending; but they are seized by the grotesque. In spite of efforts to efface or supplant it, he saw the white cat, nothing else, even to thinking that she had jumped cleverly to catch the wheel. He was a true descendant of practical hard-grained fighting Northerners, of gnarled dwarf imaginations, chivalrous though they were, and heroes to have serviceable and valiant gentlemen for issue. Without at all tracing back to its origin his

detestable image of the white cat on the dead circle, he kicked at the links between his uncle and Diana Warwick, whatever they had been; particularly at the present revival of them. Old Lady Dacier's blunt speech, and his father's fixed opinion, hissed in his head.

They were ignorant of his autumnal visit to the Italian Lakes, after the winter's Nile-boat expedition; and also of the degree of his recent intimacy with Mrs. Warwick; or else, as he knew, he would have heard more hissing things. Her patronage of Miss Paynham exposed her to attacks where she was deemed vulnerable; Lady Dacier muttered old saws as to the flocking of birds; he did not accurately understand it, thought it indiscreet, at best. But in regard to his experience, he could tell himself that a woman more guileless of luring never drew breath. On the contrary, candour said it had always been he who had schemed and pressed for the meeting. He was at liberty to do it, not being bound in honour elsewhere. Besides, despite his acknowledgement of her beauty, Mrs. Warwick was not quite his ideal of the perfectly beautiful woman.

Constance Asper came nearer to it. He had the English taste for red and white, and for cold outlines: he secretly admired a statuesque demeanour with a statue's eyes. The national approbation of a reserved haughtiness in woman, a tempered disdain in her slightly lifted small upperlip and drooped eyelids, was shared by him; and Constance Asper, if not exactly aristocratic by birth, stood well for that aristocratic insular type,

which seems to promise the husband of it a casket of all the trusty virtues, as well as the security of frigidity in the casket. Such was Dacier's native taste; consequently the attractions of Diana Warwick for him were, he thought, chiefly mental, those of a Lady Egeria. She might or might not be good, in the vulgar sense. She was an agreeable woman, an amusing companion, very suggestive, inciting, animating; and her past history must be left as her own. Did it matter to him? What he saw was bright, a silver crescent on the side of the shadowy ring. Were it a question of marrying her!—That was out of the possibilities. He remembered, moreover, having heard from a man, who professed to know, that Mrs. Warwick had started in married life by treating her husband cavalierly to an intolerable degree: 'Such as no Englishman could stand,' the portly old informant thundered, describing it and her in racy vernacular. She might be a devil of a wife. She was a pleasant friend; just the soft bit sweeter than male friends which gave the flavour of sex without the artful seductions. He required them strong to move him.

He looked at last on the green walls of the Priory, scarcely supposing a fair watcher to be within; for the contrasting pale colours of dawn had ceased to quicken the brilliancy of the crescent, and summer daylight drowned it to fainter than a silver coin in water. It lay dispieced like a pulled rag. Eastward, over Surrey, stood the full rose of morning. The Priory clock struck four. When the summons of the bell had gained him admittance, and he heard that Mrs. Warwick had come in the night, he looked

back through the doorway at the rosy colour, and congratulated himself to think that her hour of watching was at an end. A sleepy footman was his informant. Women were in my lord's dressing-room, he said. Upstairs, at the death-chamber, Dacier paused. No sound came to him. He hurried to his own room, paced about, and returned. Expecting to see no one but the dead, he turned the handle, and the two circles of a shaded lamp, on ceiling and on table, met his gaze.

CHAPTER XX

DIANA A NIGHT-WATCH IN THE CHAMBER OF DEATH

He stepped into the room, and thrilled to hear the quiet voice beside the bed: 'Who is it?'

Apologies and excuses were on his tongue. The vibration of those grave tones checked them.

'It is you,' she said.

She sat in shadow, her hands joined on her lap. An unopened book was under the lamp.

He spoke in an underbreath: 'I have just come. I was not sure I should find you here. Pardon.'

'There is a chair.'

He murmured thanks and entered into the stillness, observing her.

'You have been watching You must be tired.'

'No.'

'An hour was asked, only one.'

'I could not leave him.'

'Watchers are at hand to relieve you'

'It is better for him to have me.'

The chord of her voice told him of the gulf she had sunk in during the night. The thought of her endurance became a burden.

He let fall his breath for patience, and tapped the floor with his foot.

He feared to discompose her by speaking. The silence grew more fearful, as the very speech of Death between them.

'You came. I thought it right to let you know instantly. I hoped you would come to-morrow'

'I could not delay.'

'You have been sitting alone here since eleven!'

'I have not found it long.'

'You must want some refreshment . . . tea?'

'I need nothing.'

'It can be made ready in a few minutes.'

'I could not eat or drink.'

He tried to brush away the impression of the tomb in the heavily- curtained chamber by thinking of the summer-morn outside; he spoke of it, the rosy sky, the dewy grass, the piping birds. She listened, as one hearing of a quitted sphere.

Their breathing in common was just heard if either drew a deeper breath. At moments his eyes wandered and shut. Alternately in his mind Death had vaster meanings and doubtfuller; Life cowered under the shadow or outshone it. He glanced from her to the figure in the bed, and she seemed swallowed.

He said: 'It is time for you to have rest. You know your room. I will stay till the servants are up.'

She replied: 'No, let this night with him be mine.'

'I am not intruding . . .?'

'If you wish to remain . . .'

No traces of weeping were on her face. The lampshade revealed it colourless, and lustreless her eyes. She was robed in black. She held her hands clasped.

'You have not suffered?'

'Oh, no.'

She said it without sighing: nor was her speech mournful, only brief.

'You have seen death before?'

'I sat by my father four nights. I was a girl then. I cried till I had no more tears.'

He felt a burning pressure behind his eyeballs.

'Death is natural,' he said.

'It is natural to the aged. When they die honoured . . .'

She looked where the dead man lay. 'To sit beside the young, cut off from their dear opening life . . . !' A little shudder swept over her. 'Oh! that!'

'You were very good to come. We must all thank you for fulfilling his wish.'

'He knew it would be my wish.'

Her hands pressed together.

'He lies peacefully!'

'I have raised the lamp on him, and wondered each time. So changeless he lies. But so like a sleep that will wake. We never see peace but in the features of the dead. Will you look? They

are beautiful. They have a heavenly sweetness.'

The desire to look was evidently recurrent with her. Dacier rose.

Their eyes fell together on the dead man, as thoughtfully as Death allows to the creatures of sensation.

'And after?' he said in low tones.

'I trust to my Maker,' she replied. 'Do you see a change since he breathed his last?'

'Not any.'

'You were with him?'

'Not in the room. Two minutes later.'

'Who . . .?'

'My father. His niece, Lady Cathairn.'

'If our lives are lengthened we outlive most of those we would have to close our eyes. He had a dear sister.'

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.