

THE CHASTE DIANA

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CHAPTER XXI

PREFACE

“THE CHASTE DIANA.”

This romance of “The Beggar’s Opera” introduces many real persons but all imaginatively treated. Lord Baltimore, “The American Prince,” as he was called at the time in society, has come down to us with a reputation for heartlessness of which I have made the most, and it would be difficult for any novelist to exaggerate the whims of the famous and beautiful Duchess of Queensberry—or Queensbury, as I have preferred to spell her title, that being her own and (generally speaking) the contemporary method. The Duke of Bolton’s marriage I have antedated. My picture of the Royalties is fully sanctioned by history. As to the charming figure of Lavinia Fenton, it offers a wide field to the imagination, and will doubtless from time to time be filled in according to the man that draws it and the mind that conceives it, for there are few records. But what is known of her story is compatible with the picture I present.

E. BARRINGTON,
Canada.

THE CHASTE DIANA

CHAPTER I

IT was the winter season of the year 1727 and the great Mr. Rich, patentee and manager of the playhouse in Portugal Street, Lincoln's Inn Fields; was seated in his own parlour where he received the budding players of both sexes and made and marred careers like a very Fate. To Portugal Street come trembling beauties whose voices die in their throats as that piercing eye falls on them appraising every feature with no thought but how many guineas are like to be made on the strength of it. To Portugal Street, Lincoln's Inn Fields, come also the anxious dramatists from Grub Street, some with a cheap swagger that Mr. Rich quells on the instant, some with lank cheeks and threadbare cuffs and an entreaty for a hearing which is apt to provoke the great man's ire and contempt as he sits to receive his courtiers in a velvet coat and breeches, sober enough, but with a good bit of lace at the throat, and a wig handsomely curled about his shoulders. For whatever may be the standing of player-folk, and God knows it is none too high, Mr. Rich is minded that their manager shall win respect. What! hath not Mrs. Oldfield been received at Court in spite of blots on the scutcheon in the shape of two gentlemen—Mr. Mainwaring and his successor General Churchill, setting aside certain passages with Captain Farquhar, the gay dramatist, which might or might not be censurable? Yet, notwithstanding, the lady went where she would, and the Princess of Wales (willing to oblige this charming person) informing her that she had heard she was the wife of General Churchill, Mrs. Oldfield did but sweep the prettiest curtsey and reply, "So it is said, please your Royal Highness, but we have not owned it yet."

An example of coolness, thinks Mr. Rich, for all who would exalt the profession to follow. So there he sits, a gobbling turkey-cock of a man when crossed, kindly when humoured, his eyes very shrewd and keen between their layers of flesh. A choleric, genial, short-nosed man, himself the unrivalled Harlequin and a player after a fashion, he falls a little on the side of rudeness to inferiors lest he slip into that of servility to superiors, an uneasy matter but always to be kept in view.

On this evening he had done his day's work and routed not a few miserable pretenders to parts in the new raree-show shortly to be produced to the public. He had two companions—fine, careless easy gentlemen both, and almost as much at home behind the scenes as himself.

The one, lounging in an armed-chair was a young man of almost effeminate beauty. Disguise him in paint, powder and hoop, and you had a charming Lady Easy, with the absolute manner of bon ton, and should The Careless Husband be needed to play up to her Ladyship, as in the comedy of that name, the other young man dangling a pair of handsome legs from Mr. Rich's table was your very fit! None better! and in real life as careless a husband as any that ever trod the boards, perhaps not altogether by his own choice.

Permit me to present the first—fair, blue-eyed, and slender, a pretty man indeed, though with not too many inches to spare. Prodigious fine in velvet and embroidery, yet steel and fire under the graceful mask of languor. 'Tis the American Prince as they call him about town—my Lord Baltimore, a potentate after a fashion, since he holds by due succession the patent of Maryland in the New World, paying yearly as fee two Indian arrows at Windsor Castle every Easter Tuesday, and the more substantial rent of a

fifth part of the gold and silver ore therein found. A very great gentleman with his American principality, and the most fascinating bachelor in London, an arrant rake and favourite in all the boudoirs. Scarce a fine lady but aspired to be the American Princess.—But this tale will show his Lordship as he was and more words are not now needed.

The more masculine looking beau—a handsome grave brown man, is his Grace the Duke of Bolton, unwilling husband to my Lord Carberry's daughter and heiress, a lady as homely and sour as a withered crab-apple, and indeed 'tis more than rumoured that the ill-matcht pair parted after the wedding feast and a few ceremonies to mislead the public. It follows that his Grace is a mighty patron of the playhouse, whether at Lincoln's Inn Fields or in the Haymarket, and there is scarce a man in town whose judgment Mr. Rich would more willingly accept of the promise of a new tragedy or comedy Queen. Indeed he seeks that judgment at this moment.

And so my story begins.

“You will observe, your Grace,” said Mr. Rich, with an anxious brow, “that I stake not only my reputation but a vast deal of money on this venture. Stap my vitals, if I know whether I do well!”

“'Tis certain, Rich, you've done so ill of late,” says the American Prince, yawning over his gold snuff-box—“that you can scarce do worse. The farces you have gave us of late were more funereal than a dirge, witness ‘The Capricious Lovers’ that only Mrs. Mincemode saved from damnation the first night, and when you followed with ‘The Female Fortune Teller’ and capped it all with ‘Money the Mistress’—Lord save us, man, you left not a leg to stand on to your warmest friends.”

“ ’Tis very true,” interrupted his Grace of Bolton, “and were it not that Drury Lane was as dull as a Friends’ ranting house and so no rival, you had sunk altogether. But tell us, Richie, what like is this new stuff you have in hand? Has it ever a laugh in it or is it all snuffle?”

Mr. Rich, wincing somewhat at the “Richie,” pulled out a roll from his scrutoire and laid his hand upon it.

“Why, your Grace and your Lordship, there’s the point. I would to God I knew. ’Tis a case of triumph or calamity—no halfway house, for ’tis so damned unlike anything yet seen, that I can’t for my life tell whether I’m a fool or a wise man to have to do with it.”

“The author?” enquired my Lord Baltimore, scarce raising his eyelashes, long and golden as a girl’s.

“Why the author is Gay, my Lord, and ’tis writ under the influence of spite and disdain, a sharp enough pair of spurs to knock out what mettle is in a man.”

“Aha! I know the inmost of that business,” his American Highness laughed musically. “I’ll tell you the story, Rich. ’Tis worth a laugh. ’Twas his seeking preferment at Court and getting only the office of nurse-tender, bear-leader, call it what you will! to the youngest royal children, that put him out of love with the nobility and gentry. What hath he done for vengeance?”

“Why, my Lord, ’tis hard to describe. He hath writ a very droll—what shall I call it?—a farce, no!—a comedy? Yes, but ’tis more of a kind of an opera, so full of songs, only that the hero is a highwayman, and the ladies—why, the less said about the ladies

and their honesty the better. Newgate wench at best. 'Tis at least very original."

The Duke sat bolt upright.

"Original? Why that was Swift's notion," he cried, "Why, Richie, you must remember that Dr. Swift said the town was sick of Amorets and Bellarmines and all those brocaded perfumed cattle, and that if a manager had luck and courage and would stage a Newgate pastoral, the world and all that therein it would be a rabble at his heels applauding and pouring gold into his fists. Didn't he say that, and didn't I hear it with my own ears? And d'ye mean to tell me Gay has cribbed the notion?"

"Not a doubt of it, your Grace. But the fellow—stap my vitals if I can help laughing at the rogue! hath done it so arch—so comical—I don't know what I would say!—that I dare swear Swift himself will forgive him, and then rather that it would ill become his gown to set some of the jests on the stage, though he is not too retiring in his writings."

Lord Baltimore raised his fine-drawn eyebrows:

"Smutty, then, Rich?"

"Well, as to that,— So-so, and yet not too much, so, your Lordship. You are aware that the public demands a certain license and His Majesty rebuked his players for what he termed emasculating a comedy not so long since. 'Tis very hard to steer between Scylla and Charybdis, my Lord. But I think there's enough to please his Majesty and the public without disgusting the prudes."

"Have you the words handy?" demanded his Grace, "I'm not of those that believes smut takes the *pas* of wit. I know not how it is

but there's something in these brutalities sickens my stomach especially when a pretty woman's called upon to speak them."

"We don't find they rebel, my Lord Duke. In fact I've known one or two ask a little more pepper and mustard to season her part."

"Poor devils, they rant for their living—what can you expect?" says his Dukeship with easy contempt.

"Not altogether—as I think your Grace knows as well as most," says Mr. Rich with a somewhat gross twinkle in his eye, then hastened on as the Duke stiffened a little. "Be that as it may, we can't do without 'em, and God knows I'd sooner manage fifty men than one haughty slut like Mrs. Oldfield or Mrs. Cibber. But I think there to be little question that if my cast is what I desire, this venture of Gay's may take the town. Can either of your Lordships oblige me with a seductive Polly?"

"Pretty Polly!" mocked the American Prince, "Why I know a brace of pretty Pollys, Rich,—but they don't warble, no more than their namesakes. I take it your Polly must be tuneful?"

"Lord, Yes! your Lordship. She must have a voice like a thrush and the face of an innocent angel new strayed from Eden, and the heart of a little devil ("That should not be hard to find!" interpolated his Grace), and the abandonment of 'The Country Wife,' and the archness of Millamant, and the demureness of a cat after cream, and——"

"And in short the paragon doesn't exist." Lord Baltimore was yawning again, and flicking imaginary dust off his smoke coloured velvet. "Can't you dispense with her, Richie?"

“Why, I have sent a hue and cry through the provinces, and even through the purlieus of Drury Lane and St. Giles’s.”

“Faugh!” says his Lordship, “Well, I was ever obliging, Richie, and if I hear tell of a Venus with the appearance of Dian and the voice of Polyhymnia you shan’t lack for information. Are you for Lady Lansdowne’s drum, Bolton? There’s a fair widow there— Ah, Richie,—if beauty and rank and every elegant accomplishment would take the boards, you might find your heroine yet.”

Rich grinned:

“They take ’em at second-hand, your Lordship, running after our handsome players. But if you will deprive me of your company will you look in tomorrow about this time to know if I have trapped my quarry? If not, we must hang up the play for a better season.”

“What does Gay call his stuff?” asked the Duke, leisurely descending from the table.

“Why, ‘The Beggar’s Opera,’ your Grace. The name’s original too, if it do but take. There’s much in a title. If I can better it, I will.”

“You can’t better it,” says his Grace. “ ’Tis saucy, provocative, and runs off the tongue. What would you have more? What’s the heroine’s mellifluous name? Lindamira? Amoret?”

“Why no, your Grace—Polly Peachum. It hath a common or village sound to my ear. I doubt it takes!”

“You’re an old fool, Richie,” said the Duke. “Its commonness is its recommendation. Don’t all the fine world *s’encanailler* nowadays? There are as vulgar trollops at Court as any——”

“In St. Giles’s,” finished the American Prince. “True, O King,—and now, Richie, have our chairs called, and may the gods be good to thee and give such a Polly Peachum to thy embrace as ever the world hath seen. O the sweet name! I protest it tastes of peaches hot in the sun. I can see her lips like two cherries—her eyes blue as summer seas, her voice like the gurgling and purling of a brook, her arms round and smooth as Parian marble. O Richie—Richie, you old devil, what images have you raised! If you find her not, I’ll go search her myself.”

“Your Lordship hath but to sit still and whistle,” cries Rich, “to have all the pretty charmers come running to you like a flock of hens! There’s a scene somewhat like it in Gay’s opera, where Macheath the highwayman—who needs not even to whistle, has them running all about him, and each with a baby on her arm.”

“That’s comical!” says the Duke laughing, “and does pretty Polly pipe her eye to see it?”

“Not she! your Grace! A delicate—or indelicate regret is all the stage directions admit of. She’s a fine pliable girl and after a little tiff with Lucy Locket comes to heel like a spaniel.”

He began humming in a rich throaty voice—

“Lucy Locket lost her pocket,
Kitty Fisher found it.”

“Kitty Fisher!” Both gentlemen burst out laughing.

“’Tis topical then, Rich!” says Lord Baltimore. “Why I guarantee it success, if so. Didn’t Aristophanes bring down the house, or was it the Acropolis at Athens, by laughing at all the wits and holding up the mirror to the pretty Aspasia? They’ll run in their thousands

to look into a mirror whoever holds it, were it their father the devil.”

Rich was all smirks and bows as they cloaked themselves to depart. He knew, none better, the value of the countenance of two such men—the very pink of fashion. Fashion is a capricious jade. Her aureole may or may not enhalo the head of rank. There were peers whom apart from their purses Mr. Rich might well afford to neglect, but not these two. What Lord Baltimore said the ladies would swear to, and were his Grace of Bolton to favour the production with his approval the play was made. Yes, even with the gallery, for so liberal were both these gentlemen in scattering their gold that there was not a chairman or footman or a gentleman’s gentleman in London town but had a lavish word for both, and doubt not that a gentleman’s gentleman also hath as much influence in certain circles as their Lordships in St. James’s. The manager himself escorted them to the door and stood there bowing obsequiously until they turned the corner. You might think there was not a care on his periwigged brow, so honeyed were his smiles. But ’twas very visible as he turned back to his parlour. The world had not used him well of late, nor could he forgive it unless ’twould send him a paragon for his Polly. He swore a little under his breath as he sat down again, running over in his mind the women available and their failings. ’Twas infinitely distressing, for in spite of his doubts to the two gentlemen he had little in his own thoughts but that here was a prize. ’Tis very seldom a manager himself is tickled by a jest or moved by a situation, yet sure enough Gay had performed this miracle with Rich. But the woman—curse her!—the woman! He sat down heavily—the corners of his full mouth drooping into the turkey-wattles of a lace cravat.

'Twas then a knock came to the door, and entered to him Mrs. Scawen, the lady whose office it was to keep his parlour sweet and clean, and announce and dismiss claimants to his attention.

“Not now, Mrs. Scawen,—not now! I'll not see another incompetent this night if I die for it. Lock the door and fetch me a pot of porter and oysters and send the fool to the devil.”

“But your Honour—your Worship!” cries Mrs. Scawen holding the door and intruding only half her stout person within it. “It isn't a fool, as I hope to be saved! It's a woman!”

“A woman and no fool!” says Mr. Rich, pulling out papers from his scrutoire, and indifferent enough, “Well, you should be a judge, Scawen, after all the fools you have seen come in at this door. None the less, send her to the devil. She won't have far to go.”

Mrs. Scawen advanced herself a step further and looked round the corner of the door.

“Why, your Honour, 'tis true I should know a fool by now and I give your worship leave to call me one if I don't. But this one is all obligingness and hath so pretty a way with her, and lips like cherries and a voice like a thrush or blackbird—”

His American Highness's description, you see, exact! Mr. Rich looked up.

“What did she give you to say this, you old harridan?”

Mrs. Scawen turned out her pocket—

“ 'Tis as bare as charity, your Honour, but for my huswife and the nutmeg for my mulled ale. No, 'tis the truth. Lips like cherries, and a voice like a thrush, and hair——”

“What like was her hair?” cries Mr. Rich “Cobwebs of gold— O, stow this rant, old woman, and get you gone and dismiss her. I’ll not see her. I’ll not see Helen’s self this night. Go, get the oysters.”

Mrs. Scawen curtsyed.

“They’re here, your Honour. Don’t I know your blessed habits by now? I don’t know who Mrs. Helen might be, but I know well that this young person is as pretty as her ladyship and to spare. She’ll draw all the gentlemen at the tail of her petticoat—no question but she will. ’Tis worth your Honour’s while to have a look.”

“ ’Tis worth my while to do and suffer anything to stop your tongue, Scawen. So have her in, and if she falls an inch short of your perfections I’ll dock you half a guinea next pay-day.”

The door closed swiftly, and there was a moment’s peace during which Mr. Rich helped himself to snuff and surveyed his silk hose with some satisfaction. He had no expectations about the coming applicant, but ’twas worth while to keep old Scawen in tune—she was a conveniency at all times and no end to her obliging compliance where he was concerned.

Female voices, one very low, were heard coming along the grimy little passage. The door opened and Mrs. Scawen flattened herself against the wall to give passage to a cloaked figure.

“Mrs. Diana Beswick,” she said, and took up her own post behind her master.

CHAPTER II

NOW this is the story of this woman—Diana Beswick,—who would have told her own story if she could, and indeed had the zest for it, for she pondered often over her life, finding it more strange than any written in any book. But 'tis to be thought she knew either too much or too little of her charming subject or had not the words at command. Let me set down her qualifications as a truth-teller and on these let her be judged.

Item. She was beautiful, and not beautiful only as a statue formed to excite admiration rather than love. Truly she wore the girdle of Venus for she was adorned with a thousand indescribable charms and graces as when a landscape is bathed in sunshine and all the pretty warblers sing and every flower spreads its coy bosom to the sun.

Item. She was an actress the most finished, and where she captured all opinion and led it whither she would, may it not be argued that such a lady was sometimes her own dupe also?

Item. From her skill in portraying the emotions of others, 'tis to be allowed she was certainly skilled in the art of fiction.

Item. She had the gift, with her eyes of sunshine and voice of music to make all believe her true as Truth's self even had she vouched for the Impossible.

I ask therefore, can such a woman tell the truth about herself even if she would? I leave it, as I said, to the world's judgment. But because her history is very moving, entertaining and marvellous, 'twere pity it were not set down.

For this was no honey-sweet beauty of April smiles and tears and fond abandonments and compliances. 'Twas this at times certainly, for every mood was natural to her and she adorned them all. But she wore each as she might put on her satin manteau and lay it away when it had served its turn. At other times you beheld a Dian, austere and chilly—"severe in youthful beauty," and desire was quenched in the frosty sparkle of her eyes and scorn winged its shafts from the bow of her lips smartly enough to disconcert not a few of the idle gentlemen who swore and drawled about her. And when she had them daunted—suddenly her Goddess-ship would slide down from her pedestal, and 'twas a young girl all hopes and fears and a dewy tremble on her eyelashes looking up into your face for encouragement and approbation. She was then perhaps most dangerous, for 'twas a natural movement to lay love at her tender feet for a stepping-stone amid the quagmires of life.

And here is the story of how two gentlemen did this, and their reward.

'Tis to be seen that a surprise awaited Mr. Rich when that hood should be lifted, for she wore it muffled about her face. She came up beside him and dropped her curtsey, and he bowed sitting and rather on the careless side, a way he affected with his suitors and suitresses. To Mrs. Oldfield and her like, who had made their way and topped their parts he could be deferential, otherwise he wasted no civility.

Seeing he awaited her speech, a low voice, sweet as dropping honey, emerged from the hood.

"I venture to present myself, Sir, in hopes you might have a small part unfilled in whatever new play you might think to produce

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