

Complete Story.

# "Diana Needs a Change."

"Yes," said Mrs. Vereker, in answer to a remark made by one of her visitors, "Diana does, perhaps, look pale. I think," rather drily, "that Diana needs a change."

And she glanced across the room to where her daughter sat on the window-seat in a listless attitude, listening to the conversation of a nice-looking boy who was nervously fingering an ivory paper-knife. She was a pretty, fair girl, with soft brown eyes, that could at times assume a very bored expression. Just now this expression was peculiarly intensified. Her mother's words reached her across the buzz of conversational platitudes that constitute an "at home" day, and she gave her fair little head an almost imperceptible toss.

Perhaps Mrs. Vereker's words conveyed more to her daughter than they appeared to do.

The guests thinned away. An obviously reluctant young man relinquished the paper-knife, and said his good-byes with a regret in no way reciprocated by Miss Vereker. She lay back idly in her corner of the window-seat, and contemplated the toe of a neat shoe. Presently she and her mother were alone.

"Diana," said Mrs. Vereker severely, "May I ask whether you intend to marry Sir Eustace Leigh?"

Diana smiled innocently. "He hasn't asked me to," she replied.

Her mother frowned. This was merely trifling.

"And you know the reason why he has never asked you," she said reproachfully, "when you snub the poor boy so unmercifully, as you do. And he is absolutely charming, and good-looking, and rich." She paused to watch the effect of this enumeration of Sir Eustace's charms. Apparently it was nil. Diana still smiled provokingly.

"I hate an idle man, and a rich man, and a man whose praise is in everyone's mouth," she said at length; "I think, if I ever marry, it shall be a poor man. It would be an interesting experiment."

Mrs. Vereker absolutely gasped. She had no words to combat these absolutely unexpected statements. Diana, brought up in the proverbial lap of luxury, whose helplessness was a by-word in her own family, to talk of poverty as "an interesting experiment!"

It was a subject of which Mrs. Vereker knew nothing, and therefore felt all the more strongly.

"I really think, Diana," she said as seriously as was compatible with a nature which took nothing seriously except the thought of poverty, "that you must be feeling run down, and in want of a change, to talk such absolute nonsense, my dear." And that evening she took counsel with her husband, the result of which was the following letter despatched to an elderly cousin, Miss Ursula Mortimer by name, who owned a little property in the Midlands.

"909, Cadogan Square.

"My Dear Ursula,—it ran—'I want you to do me a favour. Diana is looking pale and tired, and needs a change. It's impossible for me to leave town until we go home in July—I have so many engagements to fulfil, and there are yet four weeks to dispose of. Will you have the child with you? She is, as you know, devoted to you, and would rejoice at the prospect of a visit to Centreshire.

"Your affectionate cousin,

"ELEANOR VEREKER.

"P.S.—I suppose you have still the same neighbours, or lack of them? I have no wish for Diana to go into much society, it is quiet that she wants."

To which letter Miss Mortimer, a lady of keen perception and some

humour, despatched the following reply:—

"Glenallen, Centreshire.

"My Dear Eleanor,—I shall be delighted to have Diana here, and will expect her next Friday by the 5.30 train, on, I hope, a visit of some weeks. I can ensure her having perfect quiet and rest while with me, our only neighbours within twelve miles being, at present, the Thorntons, of Thornleigh. Miss Thornton is, as I think you know, an invalid, and tied to her sofa while her brother, who is a most estimable young man with red hair, spectacles, and a stammer, is entirely occupied with his horses and farms.

"Your affectionate cousin,  
"URSULA MORTIMER."

Diana expressed herself entirely satisfied with this plan. She was bored with London—"a girl in her second season," as Mrs Vereker would plaintively remark—and felt in no way inclined to fall in with her mother's and Sir Eustace's matrimonial wishes. She liked him; so much she admitted to herself whenever she seriously considered the subject, but she had no particular feeling about him, except that he was pleasant to talk to. If his devotion had been less obvious, it is probable that Sir Eustace might have obtained a kinder reception. Diana had grown careless over a prize so evidently within her reach. Absence from town for a while would put things in a different light. Diana would learn to appreciate, in the

solitude of Centreshire—a delightful spot that Mrs Vereker stigmatised as "deadly"—the good things she had left behind in London, Sir Eustace Leigh and the trilling distinctions appertaining to him in the form of a title and a prospective fortune, being amongst these good things. So argued to herself Diana's mother, and forthwith the girl started with her maid for Glenallen, and Sir Eustace's face was a study in complex emotions when next he called at Cadogan Square.

"It is so delightful to get out of town in this heat," remarked Mrs Vereker, cheerfully mendacious. "I feel sure my little girl will benefit by the change."

And as Sir Eustace Leigh walked disconsolately clubwards that evening, he felt that Mrs Vereker was perfectly right. London was hot, and horrible, and uninteresting, and full of fools that no fellow cared twopence about, and this foolish young man carried himself so disconsolately at the various parties he attended that evening that the hopes of more than one mother of marriageable daughters rose high. Such symptoms were unmistakable. Sir Eustace had fallen a victim to someone's charms. The question was—whose? Was it Rose, or Kathleen, or —? Only Mrs Vereker, smiling to herself with the smile of conscious knowledge, did not need to ask herself this question.

"We will walk over to tea at Thornleigh this afternoon," said Miss Mortimer, the day after Diana's arrival at Glenallen.

The girl assented without enthusiasm. It was not her first visit to Glenallen, nor, consequently to Thornleigh, and the Thornton family had not especially excited her. But, her mind being in a decided state of "laissez-aller," this visit seemed as suitable an occupation as any for a delicious June afternoon. And so they started across the summer-scanted fields.

"Do you call those suitable country shoes, Diana?" inquired her cousin

presently, with some amusement in her tone.

Diana glanced down at a dainty buckled shoe, which had started existence in Bond-street with a view to remaining within a twelve miles' radius of that spot, and which now found itself required to tread the uneven paths of a grassy Midland field.

The girl glanced from her shoe to her cousin's amused face. Miss Ursula Mortimer was tall and angular, and her shoes were of the type advertised as "our mannish model"; obviously, too, they were built for use before beauty. Her plain serge dress and mushroom hat seemed to have inherited the same business-like principles, and an enormous sun umbrella made Diana's dainty blue parasol look absurdly cockneyfied.

"I hate thick shoes," said the girl, with a tiny grimace. "I hardly ever wear them, even at home. Lillian does, but then she loves poking into the farms and places which I hate."

"And what happens, my dear (li, when it rains? Diana glanced up in surprise.

"When it rains?" she repeated; "oh, I never go out in the country when it rains."

Thornleigh was an attractive-looking old manor house, ivy-covered and gabled, which had been owned by Thorntons from time immemorial. The present owner was a bachelor, and lived there with his invalid sister, his senior by some ten years.

John Thornton's looks were not his strong point. He was an old-looking young man of eight-and-twenty, with hair and complexion of a dull red, while his eyes, which were strangely blue and honest, looked out on to a world which failed to discover their worth through the medium of smoked glasses. He was terribly shy in ladies' society, and while it was his sister's one wish to see him married, she had little hope of his ever summoning up sufficient courage to even attain to an engagement.

"And then, my dear Ursula," she would remark, in moments of confidence, "this property would go, at John's death, to a cousin about whom



Her daughter sat on the window-seat in a listless attitude.