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Diana

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DIANA

BY

SUSAN WARNER,

AUTHOR OF

"THE WIDE, WIDE WORLD," "QUEECHY," ETC. ETC.

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MDCCLXXVII.

"Know well, my soul, God's hand controls
Whate'er thou fearest;
Round Him in calmest music rolls
Whate'er thou hearest.

"What to thee is shadow, to Him is day,
And the end He knoweth;
And not on a blinded, aimless way
The spirit goeth."

WHITTIER.

DIANA.

CHAPTER I.

THE SEWING SOCIETY.

I am thinking of a little brown house, somewhere in the wilds of New England. I wish I could make my readers see it as it was, one June afternoon some years ago. Not for anything very remarkable about it; there are thousands of such houses scattered among our hills and valleys; nevertheless one understands any life story the better for knowing amid what sort of scenes it was unfolded. Moreover, such a place is one of the pleasant things in the world to look at, as I judge. This was a small house, with its gable end to the road, and a lean-to at the back, over which the long roof sloped down picturesquely. It was weather-painted; that was all; of a soft dark grey now, that harmonized well enough with the gayer colours of meadows and trees. And two superb elms, of New England's own, stood beside it and hung over it, enfolding and sheltering the little old house, as it were, with their arms of strength and beauty. Those trees would have dignified anything. One of them, of the more rare weeping variety, drooped over the door of the lean-to, shading it protectingly, and hiding with its long pendant branches the hard

and stiff lines of the building. So the green draped the grey; until, in the soft mingling of hues, the light play of sunshine and shadow, it seemed as if the smartness of paint upon the old weather-boarding would have been an intrusion, and not an advantage. In front of the house was a little space given to flowers; at least there were some irregular patches and borders, where balsams and hollyhocks and pinks and marigolds made a spot of light colouring; with one or two luxuriantly-growing blush roses, untrained and wandering, bearing a wealth of sweetness on their long, swaying branches. There was that spot of colour; all around and beyond lay meadows, orchards and cultivated fields; till at no great distance the ground became broken, and rose into a wilderness of hills, mounting higher and higher. In spots these also showed cultivation; for the most part they were covered with green woods in the depth of June foliage. The soft, varied hilly outline filled the whole circuit of the horizon; within the nearer circuit of the hills the little grey house sat alone, with only one single exception. At the edge of the meadow land, half hid behind the spur of a hill, stood another grey farm-house; it might have been half a mile off. People accustomed to a more densely populated country would call the situation lonesome; solitary it was. But Nature had shaken down her hand full of treasures over the place. Art had never so much as looked that way. However, we can do without art on a June afternoon.

The door of the lean-to looked towards the road, and so made a kind of front door to the kitchen which was within. The door-sill was raised a single step above the rough old grey stone which did duty before it; and sitting on the doorstep, in the shadow and sunlight which came through the elm branches and fell over her, this June afternoon, was the person whose life story I am going to try to tell. She sat there as one at home, and in the leisure of one who had done her work; with arms crossed upon her bosom, and an air of almost languid quiet upon her face. The afternoon was quiet-inspiring. Genial warm sunshine filled the fields and grew hazy in the depth of the hills; the long hanging elm branches were still; sunlight and shadow beneath slept in each other's arms; soft breaths of air, too faint to move the elms, came nevertheless with reminders and suggestions of all sorts of sweetness; from the leaf-buds of the woods, from the fresh turf of the meadows, from a thousand hidden

flowers and ferns at work in their secret laboratories, distilling a thousand perfumes, mingled and untraceable. Now and then the breath of the roses was quite distinguishable; and from fields further off the delicious scent of new hay. It was just the time of day when the birds do not sing; and the watcher at the door seemed to be in their condition.

She was a young woman, full grown, but young. Her dress was the common print working dress of a farmer's daughter, with a spot or two of wet upon her apron showing that she had been busy, as her dress suggested. Her sleeves were still rolled up above her elbows, leaving the crossed arms full in view. And if there is character in faces, so there is in arms; and everybody knows there is in hands. These arms were after the model of the typical woman's arm; not chubby and round and fat, but moulded with beautiful contour, showing muscular form and power, with the blue veins here and there marking the clear delicate skin. Only look at the arm, without even seeing the face, and you would feel there was nervous energy and power of will; no weak, flabby, undecided action would ever come of it. The wrist was tapering enough, and the hand perfectly shaped, like the arm; not quite so white. The face,—you could not read it at once; possibly not till it had seen a few more years. It was very reposeful this afternoon. Yet the brow and the head bore tokens of the power you would expect; they were very fine; and the eyes under the straight brow were full and beautiful, a deep blue-grey, changing and darkening at times. But the mouth and lower part of the face was as sweet and mobile as three years old; playing as innocently and readily upon every occasion; nothing had fixed those lovely lines. The combination made it a singular face, and of course very handsome. But it looked very unconscious of that fact.

Within the kitchen another woman was stepping about actively, and now and then cast an unsatisfied look at the doorway. Finally came to a stop in the middle of the floor to speak.

"What are you sittin' there for, Diana?"

"Nothing, that I know of."

"If I was sittin' there for nothin', seems to me I'd get up and go somewheres else."

"Where?" said the beauty languidly.

"Anywhere. Goodness! it makes me feel as if nothin' would ever get done, to see you sittin' there so."

"It's all done, mother."

"What?"

"Everything."

"Have you got out the pink china?"

"Yes."

"Is your cake made?"

"Yes, mother; you saw me do it."

"I didn't see you bakin' it, though."

"Well, it is done."

"Did it raise light and puffy?"

"Beautiful."

"And didn't get burned?"

"Only the least bit, in the corner. No harm."

"Have you cut the cheese and shivered the beef?"

"All done."

"Then I think you had better go and dress yourself."

"There's plenty of time. Nobody can be here for two hours yet."

"I wouldn't sit and do nothin', if I was you."

"Why not, mother? when there is really nothing to do."

"I don't believe in no such minutes, for my part. They never come to me. Look at what I've done to-day, now. There was first the lightin' the fire and getting breakfast. Then I washed up, and righted the kitchen and set on the dinner. Then I churned and brought the butter and worked *that*. Then there was the dairy things. Then I've been in the garden and picked four quarts of ifs-and-ons for pickles; got 'em all down in brine, too. Then I made out my bread, and made

biscuits for tea, and got dinner, and eat it, and cleared it away, and boiled a ham."

"Not since dinner, mother?"

"Took it out, and that; and got all my pots and kettles put away; and picked over all that lot o' berries, I think I'd make preserves of 'em, Diana; when folks come to sewing meeting for the missionaries they needn't have all creation to eat, seems to me. They don't sew no better for it. *I believe in fasting, once in a while.*"

"What for?"

"What for? Why, to keep down people's stomach; take off a slice of their pride."

"Mother! do you think eating and people's pride have anything to do with each other?"

"I guess I do! I tell you, fasting is as good as whipping to take down a child's stomach; let 'em get real thin and empty, and they'll come down and be as meek as Moses. Folks ain't different from children."

"You never tried that with me, mother," said Diana, half laughing.

"Your father always let you have your own way. I could ha' managed *you*, I guess; but your father and you was too much at once. Come, Diana do — get up and go off and get dressed, or something."

But she sat still, letting the soft June air woo her, and the scents of flower and field hold some subtle communion with her. There was a certain hidden harmony between her and them; and yet they stirred her somehow uneasily.

"I wonder," she said after a few minutes' silence, "what a nobleman's park is like?"

The mother stood still again in the middle of the kitchen.

"A park!"

"Yes. It must be something beautiful; and yet I cannot think how it could be prettier than this."

"Than what?" said her mother impatiently.

"Just all this. All this country; and the hayfields, and the corn-fields, and the hills."

"A park!" her mother repeated. "I saw a 'park' once, when I was down to New York; you wouldn't want to see it twice. A homely little mite of a green yard, with a big white house in the middle of it; and homely enough *that* was too. It might do very well for the city folks; but the land knows I'd be sorry enough to live there. What's putting parks in your head?"

But the daughter did not answer, and the mother stood still and looked at her, with perhaps an inscrutable bit of pride and delight behind her hard features. It never came out.

"Diana, do you calculate to be ready for the sewin' meetin'?"

"Yes, mother."

"Since they must come, we may as well make 'em welcome; and they won't think it, if you meet 'em in your kitchen dress. Is the new minister comin', do you s'pose?"

"I don't know if anybody has told him."

"Somebody had ought to. It won't be much of a meetin' without the minister; and it 'ud give him a good chance to get acquainted. Mr. Hardenburgh used to like to come."

"The new man doesn't look much like Mr. Hardenburgh."

"It'll be a savin' in biscuits, if he ain't."

"I used to like to see Mr. Hardenburgh eat, mother."

"I hain't no objection—when I don't have the biscuits to make. Diana, you baked a pan o' them biscuits too brown. Now you must look out, when you put 'em to warm up, or they'll be more'n crisp."

"Everybody else has them cold, mother."

"They won't at my house. It's just to save trouble; and there ain't a lazy hair in me, you ought to know by this time."

"But I thought you were for taking down people's pride, and keeping the sewing society low; and here are hot biscuits and all sorts of thing," said Diana, getting up from her seat at last.

"The cream'll be in the little red pitcher—so mind you don't go and take the green one. And do be off, child, and fix yourself; for it'll be a while yet before I'm ready, and there'll be nobody to see folks when they come."

Diana went off slowly up-stairs to her own room. There were but two, one on each side of the little landing-place at the head of the stair; and she and her mother divided the floor between them. Diana's room was not what one would have expected from the promise of all the rest of the house. That was simple enough, as the dwelling of a small farmer would be, and much like the other farm-houses of the region. But Diana's room, a little one it was, had one side filled with bookshelves; and on the bookshelves was a dark array of solid and ponderous volumes. A table under the front window held one or two that were apparently in present use; the rest of the room displayed the more usual fittings and surroundings of a maiden's life. Only in their essentials, however; no luxury was there. The little chest of drawers, covered with a white cloth, held a brush and comb, and supported a tiny looking-glass; small paraphernalia of vanity. No essences or perfumes or powders; no curling sticks or crimping pins; no rats or cats, cushions or frames, or skeletons of any sort, were there for the help of the rustic beauty; and neither did she need them. So you would have said if you had seen her when her toilette was done. The soft outlines of her figure were neither helped nor hidden by any artificial contrivances. Her abundant dark hair was in smooth bands and a luxuriant coil at the back of her head—woman's natural crown; and she looked nature-crowned when she had finished her work. Just because nature had done so much for her and she had let nature alone; and because, furthermore, Diana did not know or at least did not think about her beauty. When she was in order, and it did not take long, she placed herself at the table under the window before noticed, and opening a book that lay ready, forgot I dare say all about the sewing meeting; till the slow grating of wheels at the gate brought her back to present realities, and she went down-stairs.

There was a little old green waggon before the house, with an old horse and two women, one of whom had got down and was tying the horse's head to the fence.

"Are you afraid he will run away?" said the voice of Diana gaily from the garden.

"Massy! no; but he might hitch round somewheres, you know, and get himself into trouble. Thank ye—I am allays thankful and glad when I get safe out o' this waggin."

So spoke the elder lady, descending with Diana's help and a great deal of circumlocution from her perch in the vehicle. And then they went into the bright parlour, where windows and doors stood open, and chairs had been brought in, ready to accommodate all who might come.

"It's kind o' sultry," said the same lady, wiping her face. "I declare these ellums o' yourn do cast an elegant shadder. It allays sort o' hampers me to drive, and I don't feel free till I can let the reins fall; that's how I come to be so heated. Dear me, you do excel in notions!" she exclaimed, as Diana presented some glasses of cool water with raspberry vinegar. "Ain't that wonderful coolin'!"

"Will the minister come to the meeting, Diana?" asked the other woman.

"He'd come, if he knowed he could get anything like this," said the other, smacking her lips and sipping her glass slowly. And then came in her hostess.

If Mrs. Starling was hard-favoured, it cannot be denied that she had a certain style about her. Some ugly people do. Country style, no doubt; but these things are relative; and in a smart black silk, with sheer muslin neckerchief and a close-fitting little cap, her natural self-possession and self-assertion were very well set off. Very different from Diana's calm grace and simplicity; the mother and daughter were alike in nothing beyond the fact that each had character. Perhaps that is a common fact in such a region and neighbourhood; for many of the ladies who now came thronging in to the meeting looked as if they might justly lay claim to so much praise. The room filled up; thimbles and housewives came out of pockets; work was produced from baskets and bags; and tongues went like mill-clappers. They put the June afternoon out of countenance. Mrs. Barry, the good lady who had arrived first, took out her knitting, and in a corner went over to her neighbour all the incidents of her

drive, the weather, the getting out of the waggon, the elm-tree shadow, and the raspberry vinegar. Mrs. Carpenter, a well-to-do farmer's wife, gave the details of her dairy misfortunes and success to *her* companion on the next seat. Mrs. Flandin discussed missions. Mrs. Bell told how the family of Mr. Hardenburgh had got away on their journey to their new place of abode.

"I always liked Mr. Hardenburgh," said Mrs. Carpenter.

"He had a real good wife," remarked Miss Gunn, the storekeeper's sister, "and that goes a great way. Mrs. Hardenburgh was a right-down good woman."

"But you was speakin' o' *Mr. Hardenburgh*, the dominie," said Mrs. Salter. "He was a man as there warn't much harm in, I've allays said. 'Tain't a man's fault if he can't make his sermons interestin', I s'pose."

"Mr. Hardenburgh preached real good sermons, now, always seemed to me," rejoined Mrs. Carpenter. "He meant right; that's what he did."

"That's *so!*" chimed in Mrs. Mansfield, a rich farmer in her own person.

"There was an owl up in one of our elm-trees one night," began Mrs. Starling.

"Du tell! so nigh's that!" said Mrs. Barry from her corner.

"— And I took up Josiah's gun and *meant* to shoot him; but I didn't."

"He was awful tiresome—there!" exclaimed Mrs. Boddington. "What's the use of pretendin' he warn't? Nobody couldn't mind what his sermons was about; I don't believe as he knew himself. Now, a minister had ought to know what he means, whether any one else does or not, and I like a minister that makes *me* know what he means."

"Why, Mrs. Boddington," said Mrs. Flandin, "I didn't know as you cared anything about religion, one way or another."

"I've got to go to church, Mrs. Flandin; and I'd a little rayther be kep' awake while I'm there without pinching my fingers. I'd prefer it."

"Why, has anybody *got* to go to church that doesn't want to go?" inquired Diana. But that was like a shell let off in the midst of the sewing circle.

"Hear that, now!" said Mrs. Boddington. "Ain't that a rouser!" Mrs. Boddington was a sort of a cousin, and liked the fun; she lived in the one farm-house in sight of Mrs. Starling's.

"She don't mean it," said Mrs. Mansfield.

"Trust Di Starling for meaning whatever she says," returned the other.

"You and I mayn't understand it, but that's all one, you know."

"But what *do* she mean?" said Mrs. Salter.

"Yes, what's the use o' havin' a church, ef folks ain't goin' to it?" said Mrs. Carpenter.

"No," said Diana, laughing; "I only asked why any one *must* go, if he don't want to? Where's the *must*?"

"When we had good Mr. Hardenburgh, for example," chimed in Mrs. Boddington, "who was as loggy as he could be; good old soul! and put us all to sleep, or to wishin' we could. My! hain't I eaten quarts o' dill in the course o' the summer, trying to keep myself respectably awake and considerin' o' what was goin' on! Di says, why *must* any one eat all that dill that don't want to?"

"Cloves is better," suggested Miss Gunn.

Some laughed at this; others looked portentously grave.

"It's just one o' Di's nonsense speeches," said her mother; "what they mean I'm sure I don't know. She reads too many books to be just like other folks."

"But the books were written by other folks, mother."

"La! some sort, child. Not our sort, I guess."

"Hain't Di never learned her catechism?" inquired Mrs. Flandin.

"Is there anything about going to church in it?" asked the girl.

"There's most all sorts o' good things in it," answered vaguely Mrs. Flandin, who was afraid of committing herself. "I thought Di might ha' learned there something about such a thing as we call *duty*."

"That's so," said Mrs. Mansfield.

"Just what I am asking about," said Di. "That's the thing. Why *is* it *duty*, to go to church when one don't want to go?"

"Well, I'm sure it was time we had a new minister," said Mrs. Salter; "and I'm glad he's come. If he's no better than old Mr. Hardenburgh, it'll take us a spell to find it out; and that'll be so much gained. He don't *look* like him any way."

"He *is* different, ain't he?" assented Mrs. Boddington. "If we wanted a change, we've got it. How did you all like his sermon last Sabbath?"

"He was very quiet—" said Mrs. Flandin.

"I like that," said Diana. "When a man roars at me, I never can tell what he is saying."

"He seemed to kind o' know his own mind," said Mrs. Salter.

"I thought he'd got an astonishin' knowledge o' things in the town, for the time he's had," said Mrs. Mansfield.

"I wisht he had a family," remarked Miss Gunn; "that's all I've got agin him. I think a minister had allays ought to have a family."

"He will,—let him alone a while," said Mrs. Boddington. "Time enough.
Who have we got in town that would do for him?"

The fruitful topic of debate and discussion here started, lasted the ladies for some time. Talk and business got full under weigh. Scissors and speeches, clipping and chattering, knitting and the interminable yarn of small talk. The affairs, sickness and health, of every family in the neighbourhood, with a large discussion of character and prospects by the way; going back to former history and antecedents, and forward to future probable consequences and results.

Nuts of society; sweet confections of conversation; of various and changing flavour; suiting all palates, and warranted never to cloy. Then there were farm prospects and doings also, with household matters; very interesting to the good ladies, who all had life interest in them; and the hours moved on prosperously. Here a rocking-chair tipped gently back and forward, in harmony with the quiet business enjoyment of its occupant; and there a pair of heels, stretched out to the farthest limit of their corresponding members, with toes squarely elevated in the air, testified to the restful condition of another individual of the party. See a pair of toes in the air and the heels as nearly as possible straight under them, one tucked up on the other, and you may be sure the person they belong to feels comfortable—physically. And Mrs. Starling in a corner, in her quiet state and black-silk gown, was as contented as an old hen that sees all her chickens prosperously scratching for themselves. And the June afternoon breathed in at the window and upon all those busy talkers; and nobody knew that it was June. So things went, until Diana left them to put the finishing touches of readiness to the tea-table. Her going was noticed by some of the assembly, and taken as a preparatory note of the coming entertainment; always sure to be worth having and coming for in Mrs. Starling's house. Needles and tongues took a fresh stir.

"Mis' Starling, are we goin' to hev' the minister?" somebody asked.

"I don't know as anybody has told him, Mis' Mansfield."

"Won't seem like a meetin', ef we don't hev' him."

"He's gone down to Elmfield," said Miss Gunn. "He went down along in the forenoon some time. Gone to see his cousin, I s'pose."

"They've got their young soldier home to Elmfield," said Miss Barry. "I s'pect they're dreadful sot up about it."

"They don't want *that*," said Mrs. Boddington. "The Knowltons always did carry their heads pretty well up, in the best o' times; and now Evan's got home, I s'pose there'll be no holding 'em in. There ain't, I guess, by the looks."

"What'll he do now? stay to hum and help his gran'ther?"

"La! no. He's home just for a visit. He's got through his education at the Military Academy, and now he's an officer; out in the world; but he'll have to go somewhere and do his work."

"I wonder what work they do hev' to do?" said Mrs. Salter; "there ain't nobody to fight now, is there?"

"Fight the Injuns," said Mrs. Boddington; "or the Mexicans; or the English may be; anything that comes handy."

"But we hain't no quarrel with the English, nor nobody, hev' we? I thought we was done fightin' for the present," said Miss Barry in a disturbed tone of voice.

"Well, suppos'n we be," said Mrs. Boddington; "somebody might give us a slap, you know, when we don't expect it, and it's best to be ready; and so, Evan Knowlton'll be one o' them that has to stand somewhere with his musket to his shoulder, and look after a lot o' powder behind him all the while."

"Du tell! if it takes four years to learn 'em to du that," said Miss Babbage, the doctor's sister.

"The Knowltons is a very fine family," remarked Miss Gunn.

"If the outside made it," said Mrs. Boddington. "Don't they cut a shine when they come into meetin', though! They *think* they do."

"It takes all the boys' attention off everything," said Mrs. Flandin, who was an elderly lady herself.

"And the girls"—added Mrs. Starling. But what more might have been said was cut short by Miss Barry's crying out that here was the minister coming.

