

AMAD PRANK

By THE "DUCHESS."

Author of "Lady Verner's Flight," "The Hoyden," "Lady Patty," "A Conquering Heroine," Etc.

(Continued.)

"Conspicuous?"

"Yes, Her dress, you know. She—"

There was a sudden movement behind him.

"Your napkin, sir," says the parlor-maid, handing it to him with angry eyes.

"How was she dressed?" asks Ker.

"Well, you could hardly call it a magnificent costume, but certainly it was remarkable in its own way because so out of the common. And yet," meditatively, "so in it. You might see it here," a pause that fills his wife with anguish, "and there and everywhere!"

"A rather ambiguous description," says Ker, laughing. "What was Miss Burroughs dressed as?"

"As—"

Here a plate falls with a crash to the ground. The parlor-maid is bending over the fragments.

"Accidents will happen," says Clifford, shrugging his shoulders amiably. "We were talking of Hilary, were we not? She has her little faults, you see."

"Cheese, sir?" says a voice at his elbow that ought to have reduced him to dust.

"No, thank you, Henrietta!" returns he blandly.

After this—

Diana rises hastily from the table, and with a hurried smile to Ker, leaves the room. She is quickly followed by Hilary, and meeting in the safe seclusion of the drawing-room, they fall into each other's arms and give way to wild mirth!

"Oh! but it was too bad of him," says Diana. "He might have warned us, given us a hint. But to go on like that! Hilary, when he spoke of your 'attending,' I felt as though I should have to get up and go away."

"That wasn't half as bad as his attempt at the betrayal of my dress at the dance."

"Betrayal! He would never have betrayed you!"

"I suppose not. But yet—hush! Are you coming? I must hurry away and see about afternoon tea. I suppose he'll stay for that."

"Poor darling, you must be tired!"

"Tired!" Hilary throws out her arms tragically. "When it is for—him!"

"Oh, Hilary!" anxiously. "That reminds me. What do you think of him? He is good-looking, isn't he?"

"You forget I saw him last night."

"Well! But now in daylight! I think one should always judge a person by daylight. And you—"

"Think he looks just the same as he did at midnight."

"But Hilary, dearest, you can't forget—"

"That he said he should find it impossible ever to like me! No, I shan't forget that!"

CHAPTER VII.

He refuses to stay to afternoon tea, however. Having waited until four o'clock, presumably on the chance of seeing the young woman who has been meted out to him as laide, he rises abruptly.

"I fear there is no chance of my seeing your sister to-day?"

"I'm afraid not," says Diana with hesitation. "But if you will wait for tea—" she hesitates again. What she was going to say or hint was, that if he did wait, perhaps Hilary might then have come in from her supposed walk. But the hypocrisy is too much for her. And yet, would it have been a lie? If he does stay, most undoubtedly he will see her face to face.

"Thanks, I'm afraid I can't stay any longer," says Ker a little stiffly, to her intense relief. He looks at her for a moment, and then says shortly, "Have you a photograph of her?"

"A photograph of Hilary!" Diana's tone is faint. The ground seems to have opened up beneath her feet. She casts a terrified glance round her, to the tables, the cabinet, the chimney-piece. If there should be one of Hilary's here, and he should notice the likeness!

A wave of thankfulness sweeps over her as she sees that the little stands on which Hilary used to smile and look grave, and ponder over impossible baskets of flowers, have all been carefully removed.

"I think I ought to have one," says she uncertainly. "Upstairs, perhaps. If you will forgive me a moment—"

"Certainly," says Ker, who is looking at her with some surprise. Her evident discomfort has struck him. What kind of girl is this Hilary Burroughs? What mystery surrounds her? Yet, Mrs. Dyson-Moore, when he had questioned her cautiously, had assured him she was pretty, charming, and all the rest of it.

Diana leaves the room hurriedly, glad of arranging her thoughts and her next lie, as she tells herself somewhat bitterly. Hilary had no right to lead her into this sort of thing. Why, if the children only knew! Good gracious! it would demolish them forever. They would read her lectures for the future!

Ker, left to his own resources, moves mechanically toward the window. Why should Mrs. Clifford refuse to let him see a photograph of her sister? Is she ugly? Nobody could take Mrs. Dyson-Moore's opinion of any one. She would probably call you ugly if you were pretty, just for spite, or pretty if you were—if you were—

What a strange-looking parlor-maid. She's pretty, if you like! Odd he hadn't thought much about that last night, but he had remembered her when he had seen her again. Where on earth had Mrs. Clifford picked her up? He could swear she was never born a parlor-maid.

And, by Jove! There she is!

There she is indeed! Out there in the garden, just where the shrubbery begins; with her charming head in delicate relief against the green of the Laurels behind it, with her lips apart, and her eyes smiling—and her arm tucked in the most unmistakably confidential fashion into the arm of—her master!

Ker stares, as if disbelieving his own senses. Is that Clifford, or one of the men? A groom, perhaps. There is, how-

ever, no mistaking Jim Clifford, the strong, kind, manly face, the broad shoulders, the goodly length of limb.

"Good Heavens! If his wife were to see him now," says Ker, in a horrified tone. Involuntarily he glances toward the door! If she should come back, and by some ill chance go to the window, and look out—and—

He looks out again himself hurriedly. The "guilty pair," as he has already designated them, are now fast disappearing through the shrubbery. The last glance he gets of them tells him that they are both convulsed with laughter.

He has had but a short acquaintance with Clifford certainly, yet in that time he had learned to regard him as an essentially honest man; a thoroughly good fellow. So much for appearances. Never will he trust in them again. He would have staked his life on Clifford's probity, yet here he is holding a clandestine meeting with his own parlor-maid, in his own grounds! What a despicable hypocrite! Ker had noticed one or two little touches between him and his wife at luncheon, that had seemed to betray a thorough understanding between them—a thorough and lasting affection; and now, what is he to think of those delicate "touches"?

He remembers now that there had been other "touches" too, by no means "delicate" apparently. That sudden upspringing of Clifford to help her to open that bottle of ale. His tone when he did so: "Go on. I'll do it!" It was a low tone, but familiar, terribly familiar.

Low, of course, for fear his wife should hear him. It suggested a confidential secret existing between them! A secret! Was it a criminal secret? The more than confidential walk through the shrubberies says "yes" to this.

No doubt the assignment there had been arranged beforehand. This would account for Clifford's withdrawal from the drawing-room half an hour ago. He had muttered something to his wife on going, something about a visit to one of the farms—but of course he was bound to make some excuse, to give an explanation, however vague, for his going.

Of course he knew that this would be a safe opportunity to meet that—that beautiful girl!

Ker would have liked to apply some bad epithet here to the parlor-maid, but somehow it does not come to him. It all savors so strongly of a low intrigue, that the word strikes upon his brain, but it seems impossible to connect the word in intrigue with her. Her face rises before him—the eyes so clear—the brow so open—the lovely, happy lips.

And yet, this evidence!

He pulls himself together angrily! Certainly something ought to be done! Diana should be told! But then, who is

to tell her? Ker, with a sudden pang, acknowledges that it would be impossible for him to draw vengeance down upon the parlor-maid.

At this instant Diana returns.

"I'm so sorry," says she calmly. "But there is no photograph of Hilary to give you."

This is an ambiguous sentence. It might mean anything! "No photograph to give him." She evidently means to convey the idea that there is not one to give. But to Ker, now, with his suspicions thoroughly awakened, it conveys only the thought that there may be many, but not one for him to see.

He expresses a polite regret, says goodbye to his hostess, and having been accompanied by her to the door in the friendliest fashion, leaves the house.

He has hardly gone one step beyond the hall-door when Hilary thrusts her charming head out of the dining-room door.

CHAPTER VIII.

"He's gone?" questions she.

"Thank Heaven! Oh, Hilary, what a day we've had!"

"And by no means 'cheap,'" says Hilary, who really is hopelessly frivolous. "No, no indeed! All I've suffered! I wouldn't do it again for anything. Hilary, I've counted them up, and I think I told him four decided lies. And the worst of it is, I think he suspects something."

"What makes you think that? Nonsense, Di! There was nothing. I'm sure I think I was the best parlor-maid you have had for years."

"Still I'm sure he has found out something. His manner was quite changed before he left. A little stiff, and he kept looking at me in the strangest way. He asked for your photograph."

"What?"

"Yes. For your photograph. It was quite natural. Why shouldn't he ask for it? But when he did, I assure you my heart sank. I thought I should have fainted, but providentially some one had removed you."

"Don't talk as if you were an 'Irish Inevitable,'" says Hilary, with reproach. "I hope I shan't be removed in their way. As a fact I took all my photos out of the room myself. It occurred to me that he might see one of them."

"How you think of things!" says Diana with admiration. "Nevertheless," descending once more into the lowest depths, "when he went away he left us full of suspicions."

"Is that all he left us?" says Hilary with a disgusted air. She glances round her and at this moment her eyes fall upon the umbrella stand. "You have wronged him," cries she. "The noble creature! I know he would leave us something worth having. Behold his stick!"

"There it is! A good, serviceable-looking stick of cherry-wood, with a thin band of silver round the neck of it."

"How could he have forgotten it?" says Diana. "Did you ever hear of man forgetting his stick before? His gloves if you like, or—"

"His hand?"

"Nonsense. He is going away for a week, and will want it. I suppose I had better send it over to the Dyson-Moore's."

"Why, he can't be gone beyond the

"Then I think it abominable of you," spoken sternly, "to betray her in that sort of way."

"I won't do it again, sir. I won't, indeed!"

Her voice is quite stifled now. She is plainly in floods of tears. Ker begins to feel quite sorry for the poor, misguided girl. No doubt Clifford is greatly in fault. This pretty creature has only wanted one word from a friend—a real friend—to show her the iniquity of her ways, and waken her to a sense of her ingratitude toward a kind mistress.

"I'm glad to hear you say that," says he, "and—"

He pauses. Somehow Diana's sad fate recurs to him again. How is she to be defended against a bad husband, and this so evidently easily-led girl? "I wish," says he impulsively, "that you would try to be a good girl."

"I'll try," says Bridget, who now seems suffering.

"That's right," says Ker heartily. "And you won't tell missus, sir?"

"You know that," says he a little stiffly. Is she only despondent, after all, of getting off scot-free? Her face, now open to his inspection, the handkerchief having been lowered, help to this idea. It is just as it was before it went behind the flag of distress, lovely, bright, pale-pink.

"I'd like to shake hands with you over that, sir."

The lovely parlor-maid holds out her hand to him and perforce he feels that he must take it.

What a very white and delicate hand! He looks at it as it lies within his own. "Never does a stroke of work if she can help it evidently. Leaves all to poor Diana," decides he.

He rests his eyes on hers.

"It seems to me, Bridget, that you are not a very industrious girl," says he austere.

"But why, sir?"

"Your hands. Look at your hands."

Bridget looks at them. She spreads them abroad, indeed, as if examining the offending members with great interest.

"Are they too white, sir?" asks she at last.

"Much too white."

"You," thoughtfully, "would like them to be brown?" She holds them up before Ker's eyes. They look pale as paper in the sunlight.

"I don't know what I want," says Ker angrily. He turns upon his heel and leaves her.

CHAPTER IX.

"What a time you have been!" cries Diana, meeting her upon the door-steps and drawing her into the breakfast-room.

"You saw him?"

"Yes."

"You spoke to him?"

"Oh, yes, yes."

"You—?"

"Were scolded by him!" Hilary drops into a chair.

"Scolded by him?"

"Actually scolded!"

"I don't believe a word of it," says Diana, who as a rule is really the most polite creature in the world.

"Well, you may. He scolded me terribly. So terribly that I still tremble beneath the wrath of his denunciations. I don't think, Di, I could live out my life with a man whose eloquence lay that way."

"I wish you'd explain," says Diana anxiously.

"And yet," continues Hilary, following out her own late train of thought as if not hearing her sister, "I should like to marry him, if only—for revenge!"

"Nonsense, Hilary! I believe you are laughing. I—Why, what did he say to you?"

(To be continued.)

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