

# A MAD PRANK

By THE "DUCHESS."

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

(Continued.)

"What's the good of fencing?" says he. "I can see how changed you are since—since last we met." His pause has some-thing brought back to her the garden—his words—the pressure of his lips against her cheek. Her lovely color dies and she grows very pale! Oh! what a fool she had been!

"I am changed," says she in a low, but clear voice. "I have been thinking. You—with a swift glance at him—have given me time to think."

"If you mean that because I was a little late to-day?"

"Well, you were a little late!" She has stopped. She is tracing something on the ground at her feet. "The fact is, I have come to the conclusion that we have made a mistake."

"Well, then, I, if you will have it so, I am willing to bear all the blame."

"You prefer some one else?"

"No," with a frown. "There is nothing of that in it. But the mistake is there all the same."

"I wish you would place it."

"She hesitates for a moment, and then, as though compelling herself, goes on—'I think you wish to marry me, only because you cannot get this money unless you do.'"

"There is a long silence—then—'Except that I am sure you could not mean deliberately to hurt any one,' says he coldly. 'I should take that as a direct insult. I may say, however, that you are making a great mistake. I would not marry you unless I liked you, if you had the mines of Golconda.'"

"You are not, however, prepared to say you love me?" says Hilary, whose face is now quite colorless.

"I hardly know how I feel toward you," says Ker, which at this moment is perhaps as honest a thing as ever he said in his life. His anger leaves his judgment blind.

"Don't you?" Hilary smiles a rather

fugitive smile. "Then I'll tell you. You hate me!"

At this astonishing declaration, Ker, after a moment's angry pause, bursts out laughing. It is a very ironical laugh, and drives Hilary to the very limits of her temper.

"Any one can laugh," says she. "But for all that I tell you the truth. I will ask you one question. Would you choose me as your wife if you suddenly found that I had not a penny in the world?"

"Certainly," says Ker. But he is so angry now that his voice denies his assertion.

Hilary shrugs her shoulders. The shrug maddens him.

"Well, is that what you didn't want me to say?"

"I don't know that I wanted you to say anything."

"Look here," says Ker slowly, calmly, and full of the grand knowledge that he is now proving himself a thoroughly equitable creature, who has the power at any moment to put his temper beneath his feet, even when most incensed. "Let us talk this over calmly."

Hilary turns upon him.

"One would think," says she, her lovely face lighted up by the fire of a most just indignation, "it was I who was not calm."

"Of course, what I desire is that we should both be calm."

It is plain to earth and sky now that he, at all events, is anything but calm! "What I want," says Miss Burroughs with dignity, "is that you should keep your temper!"

"I? Keep my temper? I assure you it was never better under my control than at this present moment."

"Then all I can say is, I'm sorry for the other moments!"

This, of course, makes an end of all things.

Slowly, in dogged silence, they walk back to the house. Just before they reach it, Ker addresses her once more—"for the last time" is writ large on every word he utters.

"That is settled then?"

"I suppose so."

"I shall go back to India next week."

"No great hardship, is it? Most men like India."

"No wonder; it's about the best place going. Lots of fun and shooting. I have only one thing to regret, and that is that I ever left it." This is distinctly rude, but he sticks to it.

"It does seem a pity!" says Miss Burroughs calmly. If he had hoped to take a rise out of her he has failed signally.

She turns to him presently.

"I should like you to take back this," says she, holding out her hand with the florin in it. "It was such a stupid affair all through, was it not?"

"More than that?" coldly.

"Criminal!" with a rather mocking smile. "Well, I don't wish to be reminded of it then."

"Neither do I."

Taking the coin, he flings it into a bush on his right hand. All seems at an end, indeed.

They are within two yards of the hall-door now, and as Hilary turns to bid him an everlasting adieu Bridget rushes down the steps and up to Hilary.

## CHAPTER XVI.

"Oh, Miss Hilary, I thought you'd never come! the master is in such a state! What wid sendin' to the door for ye ivery munit and the ould man in the study?"

"Name ould man in the study?"

"Yes, miss. Raal ould! The mistress tould me to stand on the hall-door-step, an' bring ye in, when ye came, an' Mither Ker if he was wid ye. An' sure," with a merry glance from between her roguish Irish lids, "where would he be but there?"

"But"—Ker is standing a good way behind, "why, Bridget?"

"Faix, I don't know, miss. Barrin' it is the ould gentleman that's the cause of it. He's from London Town, I'm thinkin'; a sort of a grand sort of law man, an' it's something about a will, I think."

It is plain that Bridget has been applying her best ear to the keyhole of the study with great effect.

Hilary's face grow disturbed. She turns round and beckons somewhat haughtily to Ker. Her face is very white.

"It appears that there is a man here, a lawyer, acquainted with my—our"—reluctantly—"aunt's will, and he wishes to see you as well as me."

"But how—?" begins Ker.

She disdains reply, however, and leads him to Jim's study.

The interview is at an end. "The ould man" has gone back to London. He has brought strange news, however—strange enough to induce him, the second partner in the great firm, to come all the way to Ireland to explain it. A second will has been discovered, written by the old aunt, that entirely upsets the first terrible one, that would have destroyed or made the lives of two young people. This latter will is quite clear. Of the £18,000 a year, left by the old aunt, one half is to go to Hilary, the other half to Frederic Ker. There are no restrictions whatsoever.

Jim and Diana have gone to speed the old lawyer on his journey. They had begged him to spend a month, a night, a week, a day even, with them, so thankful were they for his intelligence, but all to no effect. Sadly they follow him to the door, sorry in that they can show no gratitude beyond words to the man who has delivered poor dear Hilary from her hateful dilemma. And she has been so good all through, poor darling, so anxious to do what was right (only because they had asked her), it was but an hour ago indeed that she had rebelled. She had found the task too hard for her. Now the task is at an end. Won't she be delighted!

Meantime they have left the study—and Hilary and Ker face to face.

A deadly silence ensues, quiet reigns within this room. Ker is looking out of the window, and Hilary is trifling with a book or two on the table. She has told herself she ought to go, but still—one or two words must be spoken. One should even bid the worst people adieu when one has spent an hour or so with them. One should never be rude.

"What a fortunate turn things have taken," says she, moving the books about a little indiscriminately.

"Very."

He comes back from the window, and faces her from the other side of the table.

"Yes. We are free." Her air is quite as cold as before, yet somehow he knows that there is a change in it, a subtle change.

"Entirely free."

"I'm so glad," says Hilary, with careful dignity. "Because, once having decided that a marriage between us would be madness, I felt that perhaps I was doing you an injustice."

"It is too good of you to trouble yourself so much about me."

"I was troubled myself, too; or, perhaps, I should not have thought so much—about you. You see, my refusal to marry you meant your losing a great deal of money."

"I am not so wedded to money as you seem to imagine."

"I did not accuse you of that. I," indignantly, "only accused you of being willing to marry me without loving me."

"And what did that mean?" He almost laughs at the absurdity of her reasoning. And in truth she has lost herself a little. She makes a petulant movement, and wisely turns the conversation.

"You are going back to India, then?"

"Yes."

"As soon as ever I can," icily. Then, with a sudden touch of anger: "Why do you ask me? Surely you, who have arranged my movements, are the one who must know most about them."

"I?" she looks up. "I to arrange your movements?"

"Yes, you!" He goes up to her and looks her deliberately in the face. "Will you tell me you are not sending me back to India?"

"At once?"

"As soon as ever I can," icily. Then, with a sudden touch of anger: "Why do you ask me? Surely you, who have arranged my movements, are the one who must know most about them."

"I?" she looks up. "I to arrange your movements?"

"Yes, you!" He goes up to her and looks her deliberately in the face. "Will you tell me you are not sending me back to India?"

"What are you saying?" says she, with an attempt at hauteur that fails her. To her horror she knows that she is trembling. "Who am I, that I should arrange your movements?"

"That is beside the question; though," with a quick look at her, "I could answer you. Will you tell me that you did not refuse me?"

"Ah! There was nothing to refuse!"

"There was me."

"You, but not your love."

"Both! Both! I swear it. I swear it now, Hilary, with a clear conscience, when there is nothing to prevent your believing it. I love you. There is no girl on earth like you, I think. I love you—speak to me!"

But Hilary cannot speak. She makes a very brave struggle, and then, suddenly,

like any silly boy, she runs up to his eyes and, to her everlasting shame, she knows that she has burst into tears.

Dear and blessed tears. They tell him all things.

Suddenly she feels herself caught in his arms. Her cheek is pressed to his. His love, on fire by reason of these tears, has now declared itself; that love, which he had half decided, has carried him past all control. Like a tide it rushes on, sweeping away all obstacles, dashing straight to the goal of its desires.

Hilary, in the midst of this whirl, loses herself a little. Instinctively she clings to him. From the very first she had felt a certain sympathy with Ker. Now she knows she loves him.

"Now what was it all about?" asks Ker five minutes later. "I think you needn't have been so very hard on me, just because I happened to be a bit late."

"Oh, no. We won't talk about it any more," says Hilary, smiling at him it is true, but letting a little sigh escape her. "Yes we will though. I can see by your eyes it is not all right yet."

"Well, I'll tell you the truth, Fred. I," blushing badly, "didn't like to think you had found Mrs. Dyson-Moore more attractive than me."

"Mrs. Dyson-Moore! Heavens and earth! a thousand Mrs. Dyson-Moore wouldn't have kept me from you. Why, I wasn't within a mile of her all day."

"Not?" faltering, "with her. Then where—?"

"I was in Cork, and that heastly train was of course slow. And—"

"Oh, Fred!" she springs to her feet. "Oh, what must you think of me?"

"I needn't tell you," laughing. "You know, I went up to Cork to get you this—"

"Why?—Where? Oh, here it is!" He pulls out a little case, opens it, and taking her hand, slips an exquisite diamond ring upon her engaged finger.

Hilary looks at him, and then, impulsively going nearer to him, lifts her head and kisses him.

"I oughtn't to take it. I oughtn't really," says she dejectedly. "I'm not worthy of it. All the time you were thinking of me, I—"

"You were thinking of me, too?"

"Yes, but how?"

"Never mind, you were thinking of me. That's the great point."

"I certainly was doing that—with a vengeance! What a lovely, darling ring! Do you know, Fred, I never had a ring in all my life before."

"I'm glad of that," says Ker in a low tone. "I'm glad my first gift to you has not been forestalled."

"Your first?" she pauses, and quite a distressed change grows on her face. "Oh, not your first! Fred—my florin! That was your first! Oh! how could you throw it away like that? Do you think we shall be able to find it again?"

"If not," laughing, "I can give you another."

"Oh, no. That or no other. I'm sure I know the spot where it fell, I—"

She stops short, and colors violently.

"You what?" He takes her hands and presses his lips to her palms. Perhaps he knows what is coming.

"I watched where it fell; I meant to go back and pick it up," says she bravely, but blushing, until the tears come into her eyes. "What? Even when you thought I was going away forever?"

"Yes."

"Not a bit of it," says Ker, closing his arms round her. "I'll tell you what you thought—what you knew—that nothing on earth would induce me to go away, so long as a shred of chance remained to me that you would still relent and marry me."

"I didn't know that. No indeed. I felt sure you didn't care—that you would go!"

"Well, you know now?"

"Yes, and I wonder at it," says she, still in an extremely abased frame of mind, "considering how bad I have been to you all along."

"I am a wronged man; I acknowledge that," says Ker. "As there was to be an alteration in the will, I wish all the money had been left to me."

"How greedy of you?"

"Not at all. Greediness has nothing to do with it. But such a will would have enabled me to prove to you the truth of some words I said to you to-day. Do you remember them? You asked me if I would marry you if you had not a penny in the world, and when I said 'Yes,' you wouldn't believe me."

"How could I?" reproachfully.

"But I said it."

"Yes—but in a tone."

"I meant it, however," says he earnestly. "Though I can't prove it. You have still—a penny!"

"No. No. Only a half-penny now," says she with a delightful little glance. "And you have the other half. It is like the old broken sixpence! Why," laughing, though a little shyly, "we must be lovers!"

"For life!" says he, in a low tone. He draws her to him.

Meantime Diana and her husband, in the morning-room, are discussing the late turn of affairs with great spirit.

"It is the most fortunate thing that could have happened for Hilary, anyway," says Jim.

"Yes. I always felt—I always knew her engagement with him would come to nothing."

"So did I," with disgust. "And after all it was a most confounded will!"

"You see, Hilary is not the sort of a girl to marry without love."

"I think any girl who could do it—"

"Oh, Jim, but I really think you rather advised her to do it at first."

"Not I. It was you who advised her. In my opinion the girl who could bring herself to marry a man simply for money's sake ought to get the sack!"

"My dear Jim! how dreadfully vulgar! That is what the servants say when—well—when one gives them warning—the sack, you know!"

"And the bowstring, I was about to add, when—with dignity—"I was interrupted. Really, Diana, the head of the house ought sometimes to be shown the consideration that—"

"Oh, bother!" says Diana, most irreverently. "Let us talk about Hilary—"

rather sorry that she won't marry Ker."

"Of course. She would be twice as well off then as she is at present. Women are never satisfied."

"And this from you!" says Diana, tragically. "But look here, Jim. I really think only for Mrs. Dyson-Moore she might have married him."

"You think she liked him then?"

"Well, I don't know. But that woman spoiled it all, however it was. She kept him away from Hilary to-day. There is no doubt about that. And at the McIntyres' dance you must have noticed how she flirted with him."

"She'd flirt with a broomstick."

"Nobody would mind a broomstick. The thing is that Hilary objected to her flirting with Mr. Ker."

"I think the question is whether Ker objected!"

"Nonsense, I'm sure—I'm positive that Fred is all he ought to be!"

"Then the sooner we buy him a pedestal at the public expense, and place him on it, the sooner we shall be doing a public duty. All he ought to be! Diana! how many times have you told me I was nothing I ought to be! And that familiar appellation, Fred! I object to it."

"Oh, Jim, dearest, I wish you would be serious, if only for five minutes. Somehow I had set my heart on this marriage; and now, because of this odious Mrs. Dyson-Moore, it is all over. She has made some mischief—"

"She's sure to be in it where mischief is brewing," says Clifford, with conviction. "Anyway, it is all over now, and I, for one, am perfectly certain Hilary wouldn't have looked at him. Girls are such fools!"

"Well," sighing, "perhaps so. She certainly treated him very cavalierly."

"Don't make yourself miserable over it, Di. From all I saw I think they hated each other."

"Yes, yes, I suppose so."

"They'd have led a most awful life!"

"It would have killed darling Hilary!"

"Or Ker! Man—brute as he is—has been known to die of ill-treatment. To my thinking, they are both well out of it!"

"Yes; it could never have done."

At this moment the door is pushed slowly open, and Hilary's charming head appears. Another head is looking in over hers. It is Ker's.

Mr. and Mrs. Clifford grows paralyzed. "Di—may we come in?" Hilary's voice is shy—her face is one soft, sweet blush.

"I—we," with a charming glance behind, "want to tell you—that—"

"That we are going to be married," says Ker, in the frankest, clearest way.

"Oh," says Diana, a little faintly—then she conquers her weakness, and suddenly finds herself embracing Hilary with extreme warmth.

"I am glad," says she, giving her hands to Ker, who, however, appears dissatisfied with them, as he stoops and kisses her cheek. "And so is Jim. We always desired this delightful solution of the difficulty—and now, when there is no difficulty, it is all the more delightful. In fact, Jim and I were just now saying—"

She catches Jim's eye, and breaks down ignominiously. What had they just been saying?

"Yes, it is a great surprise. No wonder Diana is overwhelmed," says Jim. "She was about to say we were just dwelling on—on the—"

he pauses ominously, and Diana's knees grow weak, "on the happiness that would be yours if you made up your minds to spend your lives together." His tone is sweetness and light itself.

"Dear old Jim!" says Hilary, affectionately. "She has not seen that Diana is growing apoplectic. Presently she carries away her new possession, with her for a stroll through the garden, and Diana and Jim remain once more face to face and alone."

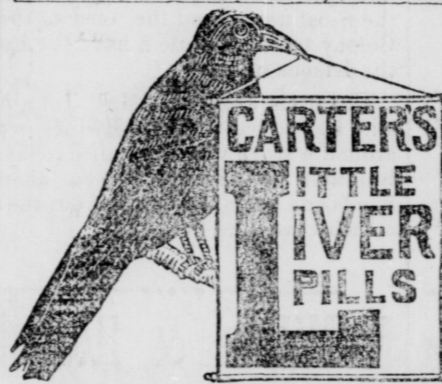
"Who'd have thought it?" says Diana, solemnly. "But, after all, I'm sure they will be happy! Hilary is such a darling, and he—seems so delightful, so kind, frank, I call him!"

"Frank! Nonsense, Diana. It isn't five minutes ago since you called him Fred!"

At this they both give way to subdued but uncontrollable laughter.

It was such a relief.

## THE END.



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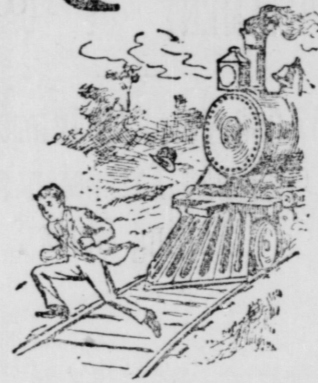
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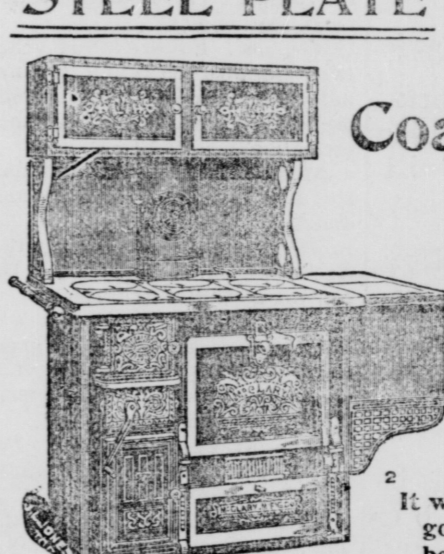
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