

AMAD PRANK

By THE "DUCHESS."

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

(Continued.)

Ker laughs. His laughter, at all events, sounds heart-whole and very reassuring.

"There is nothing—nothing!" says he, with a little suggestive movement of his hand. "But your sister—that is more important."

"Oh, no! The man is always the more important. If he loves—"

"Well! If he does?"

He seems always a little amused, as if the whole thing is of no real consequence—treating it as a mere entr'acte as it were.

"I wouldn't do," says Diana. "If you had an affection elsewhere, and were still bent on this marriage with—my sister, you would always revenge the loss of your love on her."

"That sounds very tragical," says Ker. "However, there will be no revenge—because there is no prior attachment. That's the right name for it, isn't it?"

He picks up the fan that is lying on her knees and opens it. "Your sister is here to-night?"

"Yes—es. Not exactly here, but—some-where." She looks eagerly around, as if to see Hilary, and colors warmly. "Of course, you would like to be introduced to her. It is only natural. But—"

"Well, I should," says the young man frankly. "But if you think it better to wait; if it would annoy her—"

"You see, you came so late, and we shall be going directly, and—"

"If you would even point her out to me."

"I shall, of course, when I see her," says Diana. "But even if I don't there is plenty of time before us. Have you an engagement for to-morrow, or will you come and lunch with us?"

"Delighted," says Ker. "I don't think Mrs. Dyson-Moore has anything on for to-morrow."

"Have you told her anything about this extraordinary will?" asks Mrs. Clifford anxiously.

He shakes his head.

"I have not spoken of it to any one. Why should I? I expect it will come to nothing—that your sister will give me my cone without delay."

"You are hoping for that?" says Mrs. Clifford sadly.

"I am not, I am not, indeed. But the whole thing is so absurd, so impossible."

"And yet," regretfully, "it is such a great deal of money. It seems a pity to let it go."

"It does!" He seems made of frankness. Mrs. Clifford tells herself. He looks at her. "That's why I've come here."

"To see," with a rather offended glance, "if you would like Hilary?"

"That's a horrid way of putting it. To see if she would like me. But now that I have seen you—"

"Seen me?"

"I feel she will be too good for me." He pauses. "Is she—like you?"

At this moment it occurs to Diana that her new cousin seems distinctly inclined to enter into a mild flirtation with her. This annoys her the more, in that it denotes his utter absence of earnestness about this affair with Hilary.

"There were never two sisters so unlike," says she coldly. "As you will acknowledge when you see Hilary. And now if you know nobody here, can't I get you a partner? That young lady over there, the Swiss peasant, doesn't seem to be attached—"

At this moment, the Swiss peasant under view comes quickly up to Mrs. Clifford's side, and drops heavily on to the seat beside her.

"Oh, Mrs. Clifford, I feel so faint—so ill," says she, and indeed the pallor of her lips and cheeks speak for the truth of her assertion.

Diana turns hurriedly to Ker.

"Will you run downstairs, and bring me a glass of water? At once!"

"In a moment!" says Ker. He gets quickly through the people who throng the doorway, and so downstairs.

over at once, as if you were bound to marry him."

"I can't, I," defiantly, "won't. I'd rather die than see him. I—"

Clifford makes a quick movement. His eyes are on the stairs above him.

"I expect you'll have to die," says he. "For here he comes!"

"Oh, no!" says Hilary.

In fact Ker is running down the stairs at the top of his speed, to find that glass of water for the fainting Swiss peasant. Hilary has barely time to stand back from Jim, and give him a glance that warns him that eternal infamy will brand him if he now by one word betrays her, when Ker is in their midst.

Seeing a smart-looking maid (even at this hurried moment he notices that "beauty lies within her eyes") with an empty ice plate in her hand, that apparently she is just taking away from somebody, he rushes up to Hilary, and says in a breathless tone—

"A glass of water, please."

Hilary, after a second's shock, is equal to the occasion.

"A glass of water, sir?"

"Yes. And in a hurry, my good girl."

"You shall have it, sir."

She goes over to the buffet, procures the glass of water in question, and brings it back to Ker.

"Oh, thanks. A thousand thanks," says he, in a hurried way.

He seizes the glass, squeezes a florin into Hilary's hand, and is gone.

Hilary stands still for a moment, then subsides into the dark recess of a closed doorway, her brother-in-law following her.

"A nice beginning," says he wrathfully. "How do you think you are going to meet him after this?"

"He won't remember," says Hilary.

"Won't he? Don't you think somebody will tell him?"

"Tell him what?"

"That you were dressed as a parlor-maid to-night? And when he sees you, as he must, don't you think he will put two and two together?"

"Perhaps he has no head for mathematics," says Hilary, but even she feels that this is frivolous.

However, the discussion is brought to an end suddenly by Diana, who comes down the stairs to them with Peter Kinsella, and having dismissed that florid young Romeo, warns Hilary that if they don't go home at once they will probably be mixed up with the rank and file at the end.

This awful suggestion has its effect. Soon they are on their homeward way, and "At last," as Diana says, "can talk."

Clifford leads off the conversational ball in a light and airy fashion.

"Ker has just given Hilary two shillings," says he.

"What?"

Diana peers at him through the fast-growing brightness of the coming dawn. If he were not the most abstemious of men she would have told herself that perhaps there had been a last glass of champagne, but—

"Yes, I assure you," says Clifford. "I saw him do it. I don't think much of him, do you? Most fellows give the girl they are going to marry a ring or a bracelet, or a trally-wag of some sort, but I never heard of a two-shilling piece before. Perhaps it's fashionable! We're rather out of it down here, you know, so we mightn't know. But to me it sounds shabby."

"You must be mad," says Diana.

"It's Hilary who ought to be mad. I dare say she expected a ring, poor girl!"

"Hilary, what does this mean?" says Diana, turning to her sister.

"Oh! mean!" says Clifford. "That's the very word for it. A paltry florin! I'd fling him over. By-the-by, you have it with you, I suppose? You can show the melancholy coin to Di, can't you?"

"Don't mind him," says Hilary, who is choking with laughter. "But oh, Di, such a thing has happened! He came down the stairs to get a glass of water for some one—"

"That wretched Blake girl," gasps Diana, who now anticipates a catastrophe.

"And seeing me in cap and gown, thought I was an attendant. I couldn't resist the situation—I felt indeed as if I were in a situation, he took me so entirely bona fide, and I answered him. Called him 'Sir,' and got him the glass of water, whereupon he kindly pressed this," holding up the memorable florin, "into my hand!"

"Good gracious, what is to be done?" says Diana.

"You think I ought to return it?" Hilary mistakes her. "I shan't, however. I shall keep it as a precious relic; but wasn't it a great deal to give for a glass of water, Di? Wasn't it very extravagant of him? Do you think it would be safe to marry such a spendthrift as he has proved himself to be?"

"Oh, I'm not thinking of that at all," says Diana, in a voice of anguish. "And how you can make a jest of it—I am only remembering that I have asked him to lunch to-morrow, and that he is coming! When he sees you—"

"Sees me! Never!" cries Hilary, now thoroughly frightened. "Do you think I would face him after this? What on earth did you ask him for?"

"Why, for you!" says Diana in her solemn way.

Then was useless. Nothing in the world would tempt me to meet him to-morrow."

"But you will have to see him sooner or later."

"Then it shall be later, when he has forgotten all about—the glass of water."

"That wouldn't take him long," says Clifford. "I expect it has faded from his memory by this; what he may remember is," with evidently gloomy foreboding as to the miserliness of Ker's disposition, "the loss of his two-shilling piece!"

"Nonsense! I don't believe he'd ever think of that again," says Diana, who is highly incensed with her husband for even pretending to show up Ker to Hilary in a mercenary light; girls are so troublesome sometimes over the vaguest things.

"That's what I say," says Hilary, who is rather enjoying herself. "I told you I thought him a born spendthrift."

"Well," says Diana boldly, "I'd rather marry a spendthrift than a miser any day!"

"Which am I?" asks Clifford anxiously.

"Oh, you! You're nothing!" says his wife, who is a little indignant with him. At this, Clifford passes his arm suddenly round her, and brings her up close to him.

"Poor old girl! Look at her! Married to a hopeless nonentity!" says he, whereon they all laugh together, and peace is restored.

"Hilary, darling, you will appear at luncheon!" entreates Diana softly.

"No! No! Never!" says Hilary, with emphasis. "I—I couldn't!"

CHAPTER IV.

"Miss Kinsella is in the drawn-room, ma'am," says the cook.

It is next morning, and very early too, considering the dissipations of the night before. Diana and Hilary have only just got down stairs, and to be told, in their languid state, that that old gossip-monger is waiting to see them, seems more than can be endured. Mrs. Clifford stares at the cook.

"Why on earth didn't you say we were in bed?" says she, in an irate tone.

"I don't know, ma'am. I didn't know what you'd wish."

And of course she didn't, being pressed into upstairs service for the first time. The parlormaid had been in the lowest spirits since the post at eight o'clock came in, and had been quite incapable of doing anything ever since. The news the letter contained was that her aunt was a little bilious (the aunt lived in Tralee, and she had never seen her), and that there was to be a very big "pattern" held this evening in her own place, about five miles from her present situation. (A "pattern" means a dance on the highway where four roads meet, and where the peasants congregate on stated occasions to foot it gayly to and fro, with the assistance of some old piper—generally, and by preference, blind.) It had occurred, therefore, to her simple mind, that if she cried a great deal over her aunt, she might find a way to go and enjoy herself at the "pattern."

"Where is Bridget?" asks Diana, aluding to the parlormaid.

"She's crying, ma'am. She's had bad news, she says."

"Bad news?"

"About her aunt, ma'am. She's very bad, she says."

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that. And how is Bridget now?"

"The same way, ma'am. But she says she's sure her aunt is worse!"

"How can she know that?" asks Hilary.

"I don't know, miss."

Mrs. Clifford, who has served a long apprenticeship to Irish servants, and who has heard of the "pattern," rises abruptly, and turns to Hilary.

"Come, let us see Miss Kinsella. Let us get it over," says she. Together they enter the drawing-room.

"You're surprised to see me, me dear." Old Miss Kinsella comes to meet them with a beaming face. "An' so early too. But you know that your Bridget's aunt is also a cousin of my charwoman, an' she says she is very bad to-day."

"The charwoman?"

"Oh, no, Miss Burroughs, dear—your Bridget's aunt. And I hear that she wants Bridget very badly; and I knew you would want Bridget very little to-day, being so tired—"

"I think that is why we should want her," says Hilary, turning to the old "busybody" thankless, with a rather severe air.

"But when her aunt is dying," says Miss Kinsella, her old maid's curls swaying backward and forward in an angry fashion. Her face takes a lugubrious turn. "And when you have two other servants too, and when death is in question—"

"The cook and the nursery-maid hardly count," says Mrs. Clifford, "and, as a fact, I want a parlor maid very much to-day. I have people to luncheon."

"No, ye don't say so!" says Miss Kinsella, leaning forward, all delight and anxiety. She has forgotten her present crusade in her burning desire for gossip.

"An' who are they?"

"It doesn't matter," says Diana calmly. "What does matter is the going of Bridget."

"I should think," says Miss Kinsella, enraged at the refusal to gratify her curiosity, "that a luncheon-party should not count with the dying of an ancestral relative!" She doesn't know herself what this means, but it sounds splendid.

"When we're dying, we don't think of luncheons," says she, which certainly is an incontrovertible fact.

"Well, but you see we're not dying," says Hilary.

"Of course if Bridget's aunt is dying," says Mrs. Clifford, "she must go to her. However, I hope she will not lose her way there, and go to this 'pattern' instead."

"Oh! Mrs. Clifford, me dear, we shouldn't misjudge the poor. Of course I know very little about anything that's goin' on in herself (there isn't a thing goin' on in the neighborhood, touching door or rich, great or simple, that she doesn't know), bein' only a poor, desolate old maid."

"Oh! not so desolate Miss Kinsella!"

says Hilary, with mild irony. "You have got Mr. Peter, you know."

"Well, I have, me dear," says the old maid, brightening. "And it must be confessed by all that me nephew, Pether Kinsella, is a host in himself. But even Pether says I know nothing. You're not 'up-to-day,' he says to me. An' surely, Mrs. Clifford, that's a most extraordinary remark to make to me, who am out o' me bed at seven sharp every mornin' o' me life. But that's what he's always tellin' me. You're not 'up-to-day,' he says. I suppose it has some meanin', but faith I can't find it out."

Hilary is shaking with laughter; Mrs. Clifford comes to the rescue.

"It is slang," says she. "A silly expression. You must tell Mr. Kinsella not to talk slang to you. And 'date,' perhaps, is the word. Don't you think," with a view to changing the conversation, "that Mrs. Browne looked very well last night?"

"And her dress," says Hilary. "Oh! charming!"

"No such great thing," snaps Miss Kinsella. "Did ye look at her sleeves? Chinese silk—sd. a yard!"

"It looked all right," says Mrs. Clifford, wondering what Miss Kinsella is going to say of her dress at the next house she goes to.

"And Mrs. Dyson-Moore?" asks Hilary, mischievously. "What did you think of her dress?"

"Faith, there was nothing to think of," says Miss Kinsella promptly. "I couldn't see it."

"Oh! fie, Miss Kinsella!" says Hilary. "What an insinuation!"

"I thought she looked very pretty," says Mrs. Clifford vaguely, who is now wondering how to get rid of her.

"So did Meejor Blackburn, that big dragon from the barracks. Me dear Mrs. Clifford, I must tell you," leaning forward, and lowering her voice, and giving a glance over her shoulder at the door to see if it was firmly closed. "I'm the last one in the world to pry upon any one, as you know, me dear. But I went into one of the conservatories, just to see if the Chinese lanterns were burnin' all right, and sure enough, there she was, she an' the Meejor, looking bigger than ever, an' her hand clasped in his, behind her fan. They do say that is why she buys them big fans; just to hide behind with meejors."

"I don't think there is any real harm in her," says Mrs. Clifford, who had made several ineffectual attempts to stop this revelation, and who is now feeling very uncomfortable. "I am afraid, Miss Kinsella," nervously, "we are keeping you—and—"

"Not at all. Not at all, me dear. The day is young."

Hilary comes forward a step or two.

"Did you hear," says she impressively, "that Lady Bolton had a little daughter last night?"

"No? ye don't say so!" This is Miss Kinsella's formula. She rises instantly. "Poor dear young creature. I must fly to her. Good-by. Good-by." She hurries away, all sails set.

"Hilary," begins Mrs. Clifford, "who told you? I thought it wasn't expected until—"

"Nobody told me," says Hilary. "I merely asked her if she had heard it. I should have been surprised if she had. Because certainly I hadn't. But she's gone, anyway."

"Thank Heaven!" Mrs. Clifford sinks into a seat. "What is to be done about Bridget?"

"I know," says Hilary, stopping in the middle of the pas de quatre she has been dancing up and down the room with an imaginary partner. "I thought it all out while that old lady was gossiping with you."

"You know?"

(To be continued.)

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