

A MAD PRANK

By THE "DUCHESS."

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

(Continued.)

"They sound sadly familiar," says Clifford. Both Hilary and Diana are beyond speech.

"Oh! to think of me spotless Pether being so treated," goes on Miss Kinsella, distractedly. "Mrs. Clifford, my dear, you're a great friend of Mrs. McIntyre's. I came to ask would you go up to her, and beg my nephew Pether off? You could explain to her, my dear, that he never meant it."

Inspiration seizes on Diana. "I'll tell you what I'll do," says she. "I'll give you a little note, and you must take it direct to Mrs. McIntyre yourself. You know you are a great favorite of hers, and she can refuse you nothing. I'll just explain the case, and you can do the rest."

"You couldn't come with me, my dear?" "I could," says Diana thoughtfully, "but I know I should spoil matters. You, who are so eloquent, dear Miss Kinsella, require no advocate."

The old maid brightens up perceptibly, and gives her head an airy little shake. "Eloquent! Yes, she has felt that all her life. But it is pleasant to see the fact acknowledged at last."

"Well, my dear, there's some truth in what you say," returns she modestly, "and I'll take the note. Whilst you're writing it, I'm thinking I'll tell you a little thing I said to that brazen creature, Mrs. Dyson-Moore. My gracious, Mr. Clifford, did he see her petticoats?"

"I tried hard," says Clifford. "I think, after a bit, I did."

"Scandalous! Scandalous!" Miss Kinsella uplifts her arms. "What did you say to her, Miss Kinsella?" asks Hilary.

"Just a word, my dear. No more. I went up to her when she was dancing with one of them stragglers from the barracks, and I asked her wouldn't she like the loan of a kilt? It struck me," says Miss Kinsella thoughtfully, "that she was a little short with me, when I met her at supper afterward."

"You?" begins Clifford, "but—"

At this moment a loud knock at the hall door is heard.

"Who's that?" demands Miss Kinsella, eagerly.

"Some friend, no doubt," says Diana carelessly. "Now, here is the note. You ought to take it at once. You know if the account is sent to the papers—"

"I know," Miss Kinsella is peering out of the window that commands the hall door. "Why—if it isn't that young man that is staying with Mrs. Dyson-Moore."

"Is it? Very likely. You really ought to see about that at once, if your nephew—"

"Is he coming to see you now, or Miss Burroughs?"

"Both—oh," desperately, "is a sort of cousin of hers. But if you don't—"

"A cousin? You don't say so. On the mother's side, or the father's?"

"The father's. No, the mother's—I assure you the first—"

"Then, let me see, his name should be—"

"I'll see you to the gate, Miss Kinsella," says Clifford genially, conveying the old lady safely out of the room just as Ker enters. Miss Kinsella manages to give him a good stare, however, as they pass each other.

CHAPTER XIV.

Luncheon is over; it had proved in the beginning rather a trial to Diana, who could not forget that other luncheon, in which Hilary had played such a leading part. But Clifford had said something about it, to which Ker had responded with an utterly unembarrassed air, and then they all laughed. So it had ended.

After luncheon Ker had asked Hilary to show him the pretty garden outside, a glimpse of which could be caught from the dining-room windows, and she had put on a big straw hat, picturesque to the last degree, and brought him out—here.

"After all," says Ker, "I suppose we had better talk about it."

They are sitting in the little arbor by this time (all overgrown by trailing roses), and a slight pause had come in the rather hurried conversation that up to this has been carried on between them.

"About—?" Her tone is a little faint. Her pretence at ignorance poor indeed.

"I know it is hard for you," says he hurriedly, "but it has to be done, you see, and you must only try and forgive me. Of course, you have only to say one word, and I'm off to India again to-morrow, and that blessed £18,000 a year may go anywhere you like for all I care. If only your refusal of me would give it to you, I should feel contented. But as it is—"

"Or," says she slowly, looking on the ground, "if your refusal to marry me—"

"Well, I haven't refused," says he, tracing a pattern in the gravel with his stick.

"Well, neither have I," says she with a queer little laugh.

"Now, what do you mean by that?" He gets up and stands looking at her.

"Oh, I don't know what I mean. Don't stand there staring at me."

She gets up too, and, turning from him, begins to pull a few buds from a long-suffering rose-tree near.

"Was ever any girl placed in so harried a position?" says she at last, in a very distressed tone. "Never, I think! And what makes it worse for me is, that I feel as if I was in fault."

"No, no; you haven't think that. Surely neither of us is in fault."

"Of course," pulling off another offensive bud, "I could say that 'one word' you spoke of a moment ago, but," she now turns and looks fairly at him, "it seems such a great deal of money to throw away."

"It does of course."

"To absolutely sacrifice it as Diana says—hesitatingly. "Still I can't bear the idea of your marrying me only because I am worth—so much."

"That applies equally to both of us," returns he gravely.

...and all girls he has ever met, she seems the most reasonable as well as the most beautiful, and the most—etc., etc.

CHAPTER XV.

Half through the night Hilary lies awake, thinking—thinking always of this new momentous step she is about to take. Asking herself shall she take it? Is it advisable? Is it too late to withdraw?

Does she like him? Like him, that is, well enough to marry him? That is the question.

Of course, love is out of the question. Here her thoughts wander a little—wander afield indeed, and lose themselves in a recollection of his eyes—so dark and earnest; his mouth—so firm, so kind, his hair—how well it sits upon his head, and what a godly head it has to sit upon!

She recovers herself here, with an angry start, and comes back to her question. The bare liking she has for Mr. Ker—it must be the very barest liking, considering how little she has seen of him—would that be strong enough to enable her to live out her whole life with him? Would it entitle her to accept him? He must be considered as well as she. And would it be justice to him or to herself to thus embark on a voyage that would last all time—all time for them certainly—without some sure thing to go upon?

It is a most vexed question. And there are so few days given in which to think of it. That miserable will has rushed them into a corner. Only a month in which to decide the woe or the welfare of two lives! Does she like him well enough? As usual, the first thought

comes back again. And he—does he like her? He had hesitated about coming early to-morrow.

When she wakes, to-morrow is here, christened by another name. A very lovely to-morrow too. All blue sky and tender warmth, mellowed by the singing of innumerable birds.

Three o'clock has come and gone. The clock strikes four. Hilary, who had put on her prettiest frock an hour ago, for evidently no purpose whatever, is now feeling a little angry. A little, to the outsiders. Inwardly she is raging.

Presently she comes down ready dressed for a walk.

"You are going out, Hilary?" says Diana, in dismay. "But—Frederic?"

"Well, what of him?" says the girl, turning upon her sharply. "After all, Di, I feel I have laid myself open to this sort of thing. So put an end to it, once and for all. Please tell Jim I would not marry Mr. Ker, if he were to go on his knees to me."

"Is this quite wise?" falters Diana. "Oh! wise! He is wise if you like."

"You mean, darling—"

"That he detests me!"

"Hilary!"

But Hilary is gone.

Up-up the hill she runs, delighting in the energy that eases her of half the angry pain that is desolating her heart.

In this fresh place, the air is full of twittering of birds—of new-blown breezes. She is feeling so low down in the world—so dejected—that this evidence of joy and hope in Nature comes to her as a tonic. She is not in touch with Nature at this moment, it is true, and yet the sweetness of it restores her in a measure to her usual state of mind.

She had reached an outstanding bowlder on the hill, and resting there for a moment, looks first to the lovely sky, and then behind her.

Behind her is Ker—advancing toward her with rapid strides.

"I'm afraid," exclaims he, as he comes up with her, "I'm awfully late. So—"

"I'm sorry to see you so dreadfully out of breath," says Hilary courteously—icily. "It really would not have mattered, with a distinctly hostile smile, 'if you had not come—' she hesitates—she would have given anything to say 'at all,' but the rudeness is too much for her—'until a little later.'"

Ker stares at her.

"I tried my best," says he—the first warm friendliness of his tone gone—a friendliness so near to love—"but—"

"It is sometimes hard to get away." Her lip curls involuntarily.

"Sometimes! Especially when—"

He has been about to mathematize the train, which had been fifteen minutes late, but she interrupts him.

"I quite understand. You really must not apologize to me. There is no reason why you should."

"Certainly there is reason," says he, with quiet determination. "I told you I should be with you by three, and it is now considerably later than that. I owe you an apology—so far."

"I'll tell you off," returns she, calmly. "A guest is often tied more or less."

"Mrs. Dyson-Moore, however, was not the cause of my being late."

"No?" The disbelief conveyed in this word is very faint and hardly reaches Ker, who has gone off on another solution of this mystery.

Good Heavens! Fancy her being so riled over a mere trifle like this. Even supposing he had been late, without going to Cork at all, need she have taken it like this? A fellow has lots of things to keep him sometimes. Only yesterday he had told himself she was the most reasonable girl in the world, and now—

They are coming down the hill again and he finds after getting out of his disagreeable reverie that she is saying something.

"Of course Mrs. Dyson-Moore would not be the cause of anything disagreeable. She is altogether charming, I've been told."

The meaning in the emphasis is clear. "Is she?" says Ker abruptly.

"You should hardly be the one to ask that question. You are in a position to know—you who are staying with her—whether she comes under that name or not."

"Pon my word I haven't thought about it," says Ker impatiently. Hilary throws up her head. Contempt takes possession of her. Was ever preparation clearer? She is preparing another topic of conversation—the all-absorbing Home Rule bill for choice—that will take her as far as the hall-door (still a good half-mile away), where she hopes the good oak door will close against him, and bar him out of her life forever, when suddenly he takes the initiative.

"What's the matter with you?" asks he.

The question is so blunt, so unexpected, that it leaves her without speech for a moment, but with a considerably heightened color.

"With me?"

(To be continued.)

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After making some purchases in one of the large stores she drew the bills out of her pocketbook and calmly said to the clerk, "Lend me your scissors, and I will pay you," thereupon cutting off a bill. The astounded clerk at first refused to receive such money from so open a manufacturer of currency, but finally the matter was explained.—Boston Record.

Wouldn't Do In Kentucky.

"Now," said the lecturer on natural science before a Kentucky audience, "we will suppose a region in which nothing existed but water."

"No! no!" replied a dozen indignant voices at once. "We will suppose nothing of the kind."—Atlanta Constitution.



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