

AMAD PRANK

By THE "DUCHESS."

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

(Continued.)

"Oh, you shall hear. I hope you'll like it. It's actionable, I think. You should be the one to prosecute."

"Yes—he—here Hilary's voice grows almost unrecognizable with laughter—'he accused me of missing love to—'"

"Who?"

"Jim!"

"Good Heavens! The man is mad," says Diana.

"Well, I was too polite to tell him that, but the fact is, I went into the garden after luncheon to pick a few laurels, and Jim was there, and of course we both talked over the luncheon."

"Well, my dear fiancée was in the window and saw the parlor maid of a few minutes ago in confidential intercourse with the master of the house. Of course he was amazed. After all, with a judicial air, 'I dare say under the circumstances that I should have been amazed too.'"

"How unfortunate that he should have seen you!"

"Yes, very. But that was not all. He accused me on the spot of being a disloyal servant to your royal highness."

"What on earth are you talking about?"

"About my future husband."

"Evidently thought I was behaving very badly toward you. Oh! Jim!" as Clifford enters the room, "come here."

"Jim, do you know what has happened?" says Diana. "Mr. Ker saw you talking to Hilary in the shrubberies, and he thinks—"

"That Hilary is in love with me," says Clifford. "Well," thoughtfully, "I can't blame him."

"Jim!" says Hilary.

"Well, my dear!"

"You know he must have thought—idiot though he is—that it was you who were in love with me!"

"Ah! Don't make him out a greater idiot than he is," says Clifford sweetly. Here Diana, who has been laughing a little, breaks into the discussion.

"It's all very well," says she, "but how are we going to meet him next week at Mrs. McIntyre's dance?"

"What!" exclaims Hilary. For the first time in all this wild adventure of hers she looks really stricken. "You don't mean to say he is going there?"

"Certainly he is. He told me so. He is going to Dublin on business to-morrow, but will be back in time for it."

"Oh! He'll never be back in time. What do you think, Jim?" turning to her brother-in-law, with much apparent courage, but evidently with a sinking heart.

"I don't know," says Clifford, with deep and depressing reserve, who feels this to be a likely moment in which to drop into dead-end gloom. "He was able to put in an appearance last time, though he arrived at midnight. I decline to give an opinion. One never knows what may happen. It is bad to be wildly previous."

"Oh! something will happen to prevent him," says Hilary. "It would be too much. How on earth could I meet him?"

"How indeed!" says Clifford, "after this base deception."

"You might stay at home," suggests Diana anxiously. "But I shouldn't like you to do that."

"Stay at home! From a dance! Never!" cries Hilary with decision. "If the worst comes to the worst, why I'll meet him, and give him a dance or two!"

"This audacity makes them laugh.

"I shall be the worst off," says poor Diana, sighing. "He will think me terribly to blame! And as for you, Jim, when he meets you—"

"When he does."

Mr. Clifford is now sitting in an arm-chair teaching a little terrier to beg for his bread.

"But, my dear Jim, you will meet him at the McIntyres?"

"Not if I know it. I'm going to play hide-and-seek that night in and out of the rooms—Sit up, Trot, can't you?—And I defy any one to catch me at that game once I put my mind to it. Oh, what a night I'm going to have! Such splendid exercise—"

"I think I'll play it, too," says Diana, with a rather faint laugh. "I don't believe I could meet him after this."

"I hope, Diana," says her husband severely, "that you will see your way to playing it with me."

"Oh, you can laugh," says Diana, growing rueful again, "but I know exactly how it will be. You and Hilary will be out of the way, and it will be left to me to explain to him this daring imposition."

She looks at Hilary, but that culprit's head is downcast, and no comforting words come from her.

"Well, look here," says Diana, taking a step forward, and growing subdued suddenly with a touch of spirit, "I won't do it. No. Nothing shall induce me. I've told him so many things already, that I can't tell him any more."

"You needn't!" says Hilary; she too is looking distinctly uneasy, but a smile breaks through the little cloud that dims the brightness of her face. "You can leave it all to me. I'll tell him. I'll explain. When he sees me as Bridget—"

"Oh, Hilary, you won't appear again in that dress!" pointing to the dress Hilary has worn during the luncheon.

"I shall, indeed. He—she stops short, "admires me in it," she was going to say, but found it impossible; she colors vividly, and says instead, "will probably have forgotten all about me."

"Oh, modesty, thy name is Woman!" says Clifford, who has now almost induced the terrier to wait for the infinitesimal part of a second before devouring the biscuit.

"I'm not going to be ashamed of anything," says Hilary perversely. "Why should I? I think I have been such a good girl all through. I have helped you out of your difficulty with your parlor-maid. I helped him to everything I could think of—I even gave him back his stick. What more does he want?"

"Nothing, I hope," says Clifford. "Or he must be the most unreasonable fellow alive. And I wouldn't marry an unreason-

sonable fellow if I were you, Hilary."

"As to marrying him, that is out of the question," says Hilary warmly. "There is only the question of putting myself straight with him. That I can easily do."

"Yes, I'm afraid the marriage question is at an end," says Diana sadly. "I told you, Hilary, that you should not have trifled with him in this way. And," sighing, "he would have been such a good match, too."

"Brilliant!" says Clifford. "Flery!"

"Don't, Jim! I really wish to speak seriously to Hilary. He would be a good match."

"Well, my dear, am I not agreeing with you there? A match of the finest quality, I call him; warranted to—"

Here a sound, evidently coming from the lower regions, attracts their attention.

"Cook has come back," says Diana hurriedly. "For Heaven's sake, Hilary, go and get that dress off before she sees you."

CHAPTER X.

The first three dances are at an end; Hilary, as she enters the ball-room, can see this by the card hanging near the musicians. She can see, too, after a hurried glance over the room, that the Dyson-Moores and their party have not yet arrived. The fourth is a waltz—she has arrived just in time for it—and she gets through it with a tall Crusader, enjoyably enough, but always with a sense that she is watching the doorways.

The Crusader, who is young and immensely in earnest over his waltzing, which like himself has not yet come to perfection, permits her, toward the close of the dance, to rest a moment, and in that moment she knows that her fate is upon her.

Her heart almost stops beating. Yes, there is Mrs. Dyson-Moore, and Ker with her. Mr. Dyson-Moore is here, too, struggling somewhat in the rear, poor man—and several other people, mostly men from the barracks in the next town. Hilary, however, sees only one man, and that is Ker: he is dressed as a Cavalier, and looks absolutely handsome, a thing one would not have quite expected from him. He is now standing talking to Mrs. Dyson-Moore, and it suddenly occurs to Hilary that that elastic person is wearing the triumphant expression of one who has just added another scalp to her belt. Is it Ker's?

He seems at all events thoroughly content with his present position, and in no wise eager to withdraw from it. All his attention seems to be indeed given to his hostess, who has discarded the Amazonian dress, and is now declaring herself to an admiring if slightly astonished crowd, as Folly! By this change she had added considerably to her charms, but unfortunately nothing to her skirts, the ends of which are to-night even perilously close to her knees. She has just whispered something to Ker, and Hilary, who has drawn back a little into the shadow of a curtain, can see that they are both laughing in an irrepressible sort of way.

Never was there so radiant a Folly—or so picturesque a one. She seems to gather a fund of joy from the sensation she is so evidently creating, and especially from the withering glances of old Miss Kinsella, who is staring at her through her gold-rimmed glasses from the distant doorway, with stern and open disapproval. Miss Kinsella always stands near the doorway wherever she goes; it gives one so much a better chance of seeing each new arrival, and the manner of the reception, and the gowns they wear, and who comes with them, etc. Nothing escapes Miss Kinsella.

Mrs. Dyson-Moore, who has been nodding and smiling at her from a low couch, with overflowing affection apparently, has now nearly gone into hysterics behind her fan over the return she has had. Her nods have been received with a stony glare, her smiles with a glassy eye. Hilary can see that Ker has gone behind the fan, too, and that now the fan is shaking.

Such a charming fan, and so big! What was it Miss Kinsella had said about her always having a big fan? To hide herself behind, was it? This is a big fan any way, and a delicious one too, all blue and gold. Indeed, Mrs. Dyson-Moore is a dream of blue and gold all through. A rather scanty dream it must be confessed, but a dream for all that. The few—very few—pieces of clothing that she wears, are made of blue and gold satin—a blue and gold cap rests upon her naughty head, and (perhaps to make up for her deficiencies elsewhere) she is literally covered with golden bells.

She tinkles as she goes!

A touch of burning envy saddens for a moment Hilary's heart. If she could have got a lovely costume such as that—not that of course—but something equally lovely—she might have shown up well to-night. There are one or two costumes in which she has often told herself—only herself—that she would be well—very well worth looking at. But any of them would cost at least ten guineas, and she—well, she hasn't got ten guineas. That's all it is a finished argument.

The fifth dance on the programme is the Lancers.

"A basely shame," mutters the Crusader, sotto voce, who thinks all dances should be waltzes, if only to oblige him.

The musicians have struck up the opening bars and there is a little stir through the room. Some are running away from the slow dance, others are running toward it. Hilary sees Mrs. Dyson-Moore rise from her seat and Ker with her. They take a step in the direction of the middle of the room. Plainly they are going to dance it—together.

She turns to her partner, and says a little hurried word or two, if Ker advances still further into the room he will probably see her, and as yet she seems unprepared for the fight. She moves toward the door nearest to her, with a view to escape. The Crusader, whose noble

else, seconds her efforts with all his might. At the doorway, however, she is stopped by a bluff and heavy old King Hal.

"Will you give me these Lancers, Miss Hilary?" asks Lord Emherst. "It is given to youth to be happy enough to bear you off in the fast dances, but perhaps you will spare an old man like me a little walk through."

The pleasant-faced old gentleman holds out his arm to her. It is impossible to refuse.

"I shall be delighted," says she, smiling.

She puts her arm through his. All at once, her courage returns to her. Yes, she will dance these Lancers and if Mr. Ker sees her, well—well, then, this embarrassing situation will be at an end. And she could hardly bring it to a finish in better company.

Lord Emherst is the one big man in the country and certainly the best beloved by all classes.

When she and he have taken their places, Hilary for the first time lifts her eyes. A sigh of relief welcomes the fact that her vis-a-vis is not Ker. A second later the relief is dead. Killed by another fact.

The man on her left hand is Ker!

He and Mrs. Dyson-Moore are dancing at the sides. In another moment or two she will have to place her fingers in his. He will turn her round. What will he say? Do? Nervousness seizes upon her. She is afraid to lift her eyes, but with the nervousness comes a strange uncontrollable sense of amusement. She feels that she would like to laugh, but dare not. Oh that luncheon!

The time has come. She turns and holds out her hands to him. For the first time to-night Ker's eyes rest upon her.

That dress! That face! His fingers close on hers mechanically. He is looking at her, but he sees only the avenue, the rhododendrons, the girl holding up her white hand for his inspection. That hand is lying in his now. He flushes a dark red.

The music restores him to his senses. Once again the steps are gone through—once again the parlor maid is holding out her hands to him. One hand is a little closed. It holds something. She opens it, and slips the something into his palm.

"Forgive me," breathes she.

It is the florin!

"It will be difficult," returns he. "I know you now. Your name is not Bridget."

"No."

"Nor Maria, nor Sarah, nor Henrietta."

"No."

She is ashamed of herself, but she does laugh.

"It is Hilary?"

"Yes."

She has returned to her place, but a little while later they are face to face again.

"Will you give me the next dance?"

She shakes her head.

"Engaged?"

"You will give me one, however? You owe me something."

"Do I? Very well, I'll pay it."

Another little chance comes.

"Let me see you after this?"

She smiles.

"Who is Miss Burroughs dancing with?" asks he, dropping back to his place with Mrs. Dyson-Moore.

"Lord Emherst. You know her?"

"Slightly. As a fact she is a sort of cousin of mine."

"Is she? Of course, I remember. You went to see the Cliffords one day when you were here a week ago. Some people say she's handsome."

"Not handsome?"

"No!" delightedly. "Well, I agree with you. And dowdy! My word, I'd rather stay at home forever than go about in a rig-out like that. I'm so glad you— with emphasis, and a lowering glance from under her blackened lids—"don't think her a beauty."

"As for that, I only said I didn't think her handsome."

"Well!"

"Strictly handsome people, you know, are seldom beauties."

"Oh, I see," with distinct offence.

"You think her then—?"

"A very pretty girl," says Ker.

"One could say that of every other girl one meets," says Mrs. Dyson-Moore, with a little offended hitch of the shoulder nearest to him.

The Lancers are over now. Ker, slipping through the crowd here and there, looks everywhere for Hilary. But in vain. Has she been avoiding him? When the next dance is in full swing, he looks for her in the ball-room, and sees her waltzing gayly in the arms of a Nephelopheles.

He stations himself doggedly in one of the doorways, and watches her. When the dance is over, she moves through it. He steps her.

"Miss Burroughs, you promised me a dance, I think."

"Yes!" She looks at her card. "I have nothing until the ninth. That" without looking at him, "is free. It is a polka, and I hate polkas. Will you have it?"

"Grateful for small mercies," murmurs he, bending over her card to scribble his name on it.

He looks at her as he gives it back.

"You will remember?"

It is plain he has little faith in her. Hilary gives him in return a strange glance.

"I always remember," says she.

CHAPTER XI.

"At last," says Ker. He comes up to her and holds out his arm. "This is the ninth."

"Is it?" says she, innocently enough. Though, to tell the truth, she has been quaking over the fact during the past five minutes.

"You hate polkas, I think you said," continues Ker. "So do I. We shall therefore have a chance of a nice long tete-a-tete in here!"

He leads her, in relentless fashion, into the conservatory close at hand, and up to the farthest end, where, behind some flowering shrubs, two vacant seats can be seen. He does not sit down, however, or ask her to do so either. He stands looking at her somewhat remorselessly.

"So!" says he, after a minute. And then: "Now what have you got to say for yourself?"

Here they both laugh. Hilary, it must be confessed, rather shamefacedly.

"Oh! I know—I know," says she, with a divine blush, "what you are thinking. And it is true! I am a fraud—a swindle." She covers her face with her hands, still laughing, and presently looks at him through her fingers. "But you mustn't say it."

"Thinking is good enough for me."

says Ker, with a shrug. He takes her hands from her face and brings them down. "What on earth made you do it?" asks he.

"I don't know. It was a whim—a prank. It came into my head, and so I had to do it."

"Do you always do everything that comes into your head?"

"Not always. But—" She breaks off. "After all I do know why I did it. You, with charming audacity, 'made me.' 'I made you!'"

"Yes. You. You! If you had not given me that florin, I should never have known that I looked like a real house-maid."

"Oh! come! That's very unfair," says he, coloring. "I didn't even look at you."

"More shame for you," demurely.

"However, that won't get you out of it! If you hadn't time to see me when I was giving you a glass of water, you had, at all events plenty of opportunities of seeing me when I was giving you your luncheon."

"That was far too confusing a scene to admit of calm judgment. How could one fairly class a girl who was called six or seven different names in the space of thirty minutes?"

"Ah! that was too bad of Jim. But even if that opportunity failed you another was given. I" with a little glance at him "gave it! You must have seen me when—"

She pauses.

"When you told me on the avenue that a glass of water given by you wasn't worth two shillings."

"Yes. You remember, then?"

"Who could forget such a libel?"

"You think it was worth it?"

"Certainly I do."

"Well then I'll take back that florin!" says she holding out her hand.

(To be continued.)

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