

A MAD PRANK

By THE "DUCHESS."

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

(Continued)

He lays it in her pretty palm holding the palm as he does so.

"I don't see any hole in it," says he, "and yet you promised to make one in it and hang it round your neck. I am afraid," laughing "you are faithless."

"Did I promise that?"

"Beyond all doubt. I can see you as you said it."

"Ah! then you did see me that time?" She casts a little, quick glance at him from under her long lashes, and tells herself that she has him at a disadvantage at least. "I'm glad of that. One doesn't like to be entirely overlooked, even when one is a housemaid."

"And such a housemaid!" returns he, "if she had thought to overwhelm him with reproach, she finds herself mistaken. He is calmness itself. He is evidently bent on nothing but the payment of the compliment and pretty compliments. This engages her. "Still you promised, you know," continues he, "to put a hole in it and hang it round your neck—forever! Don't you remember that?"

"My memory is a mere rag," says Hilary. "I find it impossible to keep it together. It isn't of the least use to me, yet people insist on saying that I ought to cultivate it."

"You don't remember, then?"

"I'm not sure—I have a mere glimmering. Was it that day when you told me to try and be a good girl?"

"When was that?" asks he, coloring, however.

"Ah!" triumphantly. "Whose memory is defective now?" She stands back, smiling at him in her pretty, irresistible way, yet with a touch of disdain, defying him, as it were, with her soft armory of eyes and lips. "On the avenue again. You recollect, surely! At the same time you told me my hands were too white, and you entreated me to bear in mind that Diana was a good mistress, and you begged me to—to"—she looks down demurely—"to desist from my fell designs on—poor old Jim!"

Ker regards her with mixed feelings. Perhaps anger is the strongest of them, yet there is a touch of fascination about her that makes itself felt, and keeps him beside her.

"And yet you call your memory a mere rag," says he with decided sarcasm. "Sometimes, sometimes!" airily.

"When you don't want to remember, I presume?"

"Not always. There," pausing and looking down, "is one thing I would rather not remember, and yet I do."

"And that?"

"Was something you said."

"I can quite believe it. You have already reminded me of several things I have said, that certainly under the circumstances you might have managed to forget."

There is distinct reproach in his tone. "It was none of those. It was worse, far worse. You said it at luncheon."

"To apologize would be worse than folly," says Ker. "I feel already that I have sinned beyond redemption, and yet I confess to a base anxiety to know my 'last crime.'"

"Well," resentfully, "I think you needn't have told Diana that you knew you would find it impossible ever to like me."

"Look here," says Ker indignantly. "I don't care what I said. To be taken at a disadvantage like that, and then be brought to book afterward—anything more unfair than that—"

"It is you who were unfair. You had never seen me, or thought you hadn't, and yet you had made up your mind to dislike me."

"I don't believe I made up my mind to anything. I thought of nothing but that confounded will that placed us both in so false a position. Why should I dislike you?"

"Why, indeed!" She pulls a little fragrant branch off the shrub nearest to her. "Well—don't you?" says she. She does not look at him.

At this instant a light high laugh resounds through the conservatory. It is coming toward them. It is a laugh once heard never to be forgotten. It is one of Mrs. Dyson-Moore's "properties."

She has turned the corner now, accompanied by a long-legged young man with evidently (and this is a sad reflection) more years than brains. Because the years are few.

"Oh! you here!" says she to Ker. "In this cozy corner! I might have known it!"

Something in her tones is offensive to Hilary. She draws a little aside, and plays carefully with a bit of foliage close to her.

"Your intuitive instincts are so strong, that of course you would," says Ker, smiling pleasantly.

"Such a scintillating look!" goes on Folly in her little click-clack way. "Miss Burroughs, have you got the monopoly of it?"

"For the moment," says Hilary calmly. "My cousin and I are resting for the moment."

"Your cousin! Ah, true!" She turns to Ker. "Fancy your finding a cousin down here."

"Not in the least more remarkable than finding a cousin down there!" says he, always quite pleasantly.

"The next time, don't forget," says she, as she moves away.

CHAPTER XII.

Thank heaven!" says Ker. "For what?" questions Hilary, who is not feeling as sympathetic as usual.

"For—" He checks himself abruptly. "Because we are once more alone."

"You must be tired," says she sweetly. "Do you really want to talk? Am I boring you? You have had a long journey, I know—"

"What nonsense!" says he. "As if I should mind a few miles by train." He has not altogether understood her. "Will you sit down here until the next dance begins?"

"It must be almost due now, and you have promised it to Mrs. Dyson-Moore."

"So I have." He would have added "worse luck," but civilization prevents him. "Still there is a minute or two left."

She makes no answer to this, and the silence growing a little oppressive, he breaks fresh ground.

"How fond you all seem to be of fancy balls down here!"

"Not always! But once a thing is started, you know what a run there always is on it. It becomes an epidemic. It is worse than the measles. It catches all the county!"

"We are certainly of the monkey tribe. Such imitative animals! But fancy-dress balls—they must be such a worry!"

"Not greater than others. Look at red hair. Let one woman preach a crusade on the becomingness of it, and all other women will dye their hair like mad. That must be a far greater worry than inventing a fancy ball. Because, at all events, the latter permits us—at least some of the fortunate ones of us—to show ourselves at our best for once in our lives."

"Ah! you can speak!" says he, "being one of the fortunate ones."

It is very ready and very delightful, of course. But to Hilary, in her present mood, it savors too much of the man of the world, of the word in season—of, in effect, hypocrisy.

"I wasn't thinking of myself," says she, quite calmly. "I am, of course, quite out of it. I should have liked to array myself in gorgeous apparel,"—here she smiles "but I hadn't a penny to do it with. I was thinking of Mrs. Dyson-Moore."

"It was very good of you," says Ker. His manner conveys to her the belief that he thinks it very good of her to waste a thought upon her at all, but this does not satisfy Hilary. Why didn't he say it?

"Good of me?" says she; a sudden desire to make him speak has driven her to this direct question.

"Yes. Why shouldn't you? Others will no doubt take this task out of your hands. Many others."

He laughs, and a vision of Mrs. Dyson-Moore's very short skirt comes once again before Hilary's eyes. Is he laughing at her? She turns her eyes suddenly on his.

"Are you a friend of hers?" asks she. "A friend? An acquaintance rather, and," meaningly, "a guest."

"Ah, I see! Your lips are sealed."

"They would be certainly if there was any cause for sealing." He smiles and gives himself a slight shake.

"Have we not had enough of 'Folly' for one evening?" asks he, with a rather comic smile.

"I don't see how I have been foolish," returns she, willfully misunderstanding him. She gives him a little return smile, however, as she says it, which betrays her knowledge of his meaning, and at once he feels that "peace with honor" has, for the moment at all events, been restored.

"You foolish! Never," says he. "Not even—when—I—"

"Not even then. One can forgive you for keeping up the masquerade under our peculiar circumstances."

He regards her steadily, as if wishing her to understand that there is meaning in his words—a desire to approach the delicate subject of the will. Hilary colors faintly, and trifles with the corner of her apron.

"I suppose you wanted to study me?" says she, a little daringly.

"Ah! That was what was so unfair. I know it now. Why should I study you when you had no opportunity of studying me?"

"Yet I had, I had," says Ker gayly. He laughs as if remembering.

"But not as if you saw me as my proper self."

"Your—other self was not to be despised. And how do you look when you are your proper self?"

"So do I. It was 'forgive me.'"

"No, it wasn't. It was 'A glass of water, sir.'"

Hilary blushes hotly. "That was not an introduction at all."

"And was the other?"

"No. After all," with a little embarrassed laugh, "I don't think you have ever been introduced to me."

"We must get your sister to do it to-morrow. I may call to-morrow?"

"I hope you will come to luncheon. Diana will be very glad to see you."

"And you?"

"I shall be very glad, too."

"Thank you. I suppose Diana wouldn't allow me to be butler to-morrow?"

"Certainly not," laughing and looking a little confused.

"I'll ask her, however. It would do me good to wait on you this time."

"Hilary lifts her eyes to his."

"I wish," begins she. "Mr. Ker, I wish you would forget all about that stupid prank of mine."

She is looking bravely with this new earnestness within her shining eyes, with this soft touch of sadness on her beautiful lips.

Ker drops into the chair beside her. "I'll do anything you wish," says he in a low tone, "if you will call me—Fred."

"Fred! Is that your name? Oh! I couldn't call you—Fred. It would be impossible." She rises quickly to her feet.

"Why, it is only a week ago since I first saw you."

"What has that got to do with it?" He too has risen. "Why can't you, of all people, call me by my name? You might remember that I am your—"

He pauses—purposely perhaps. Hilary groans crimson. What is he going to say? "My? My?" stammers she. Her glance has grown cold. She is intensely angry with him, partly because of her unlucky blush, partly because he has been the author of it.

"Your—cousin," answers Ker softly. If he had been going to say something else, her sudden touch of hauteur has prevented him.

"The next dance is beginning," says Hilary, still with her manner distinctly changed. "Mrs. Dyson-Moore will be waiting for the door."

"You will give me another later on?"

"I am afraid not. My card is quite full."

"Then, till to-morrow," says he, indifferently as it seems to her.

"I shall tell Diana you are coming."

"Our dance, Miss Burroughs," says a gay Hussar at this moment.

CHAPTER XIII.

"Good heavens, Hilary! Here's Miss Kinsella!" says Diana, in the hurried, subdued voice we all know, when destruction is descending upon us. She pounces upon her work—a frock for the youngest darling—and makes a rapid flight from the window where she has been sitting, into the middle of the room. It is more a movement of impulse than anything else.

"That means two hours!" says Hilary tragically, stopping short in her arrangement of the flowers in the vases.

"And he is coming at one. You told him the hour."

"He knows it. I say, Di," with a sudden gleam of hope, "let us say we are out."

"Too late. I saw her, and she saw me, as she came up the avenue."

Hilary falls back in her chair. At this moment a loud rat-a-tat-tat is heard at the hall-door.

"I suppose there is no safe and sure way of murdering any one?" says Hilary gloomily.

Here the door is thrown open, and Miss Kinsella enters, with all the signs of storm about her, followed by Clifford, who had met her just outside.

"I came in thus early, my dear Mrs. Clifford," cries the old maid, "because I felt I must speak to ye!"

Hilary's heart stands still for a moment. Is it anything about her? About that luncheon—or Ker?

"About what, Miss Kinsella?" asks Diana anxiously.

"Why, about Pether?"

Hilary's heart gives a great rebound. She comes quickly forward. She takes old Miss Kinsella's hand, and positively beams upon her, to Diana's intense astonishment.

"Tell us!" cries Hilary.

"Well, Pether—ye know me nephew, Pether Kinsella—ye saw him last night? eh? ye did not, didn't ye?"

"Diana, I hope you will be able to say yes to that," says Clifford solemnly.

"This, I must inform you, is a most important case."

"Yes, yes, of course we saw him," says Hilary enthusiastically. She is feeling so obliged to this old lady. "He was a sort of scow, wasn't he?"

"A Highland chieftain," says Clifford, correcting her severely. "Of the very first water!"

"Ye're right! Ye're right!" cries old Miss Kinsella, her curls vibrating with excitement. "A Highland chief he was, an' lovely he looked! I couldn't take me eyes off him all night. A matter, my dear, that made him a thrille mad. You know he will have his little flirtatious ways sometimes!"

"We know! we know!" says Clifford sadly.

"Flirtatious, but not indecent," says Miss Kinsella, blushing a bright orange. "Well, an' what will you think, my dear Mrs. Clifford, when I tell ye that they put him down in the list of characters for Mrs. McIntyre's fancy-dress ball, an'—"

"He did, me dear. But Pether was so flabbergasted by that time, that he couldn't remember what he was, so he told the man that he had 'no character,' and that the 'mistress knew him well!'"

Here Hilary gives way, and bursts into a peal of laughter, followed by Diana, who has been growing hysterical.

"Miss Kinsella, I hope you will pardon this reprehensible merriment on the part of my wife and my sister," says Clifford solemnly. "No doubt hysteria has a good deal to do with it. No one could hear your harrowing tale without being deeply moved. As for me—"

Here, his voice beginning to shake treacherously, he subsides behind his handkerchief. "When I think of Mrs. McIntyre's face when she heard that," says he. "Such an asperion on her character!"

"Oh, but, me dear, there's worse to come," says Miss Kinsella, tearfully, rather pleased with the sensation she is so evidently creating. "It seems that that scamp of a footman gave me nephew Pether's message straight to Mrs. McIntyre this morning, when she was looking over her list. An' now I hear they're goin' to take revenge on me poor nee hew, and are goin' to put him in all the papers as 'Thady, ye gander.' As if," here Miss Kinsella begins to sob wildly, "Pether would go anywhere without his breeches!"

"It's frightful," says Clifford, who ought to be ashamed of himself.

"You know the old lines, don't ye, Mrs. Clifford, me dear?"

"Oh, Thady, ye gander, Ye're like a Highlander, For want of yer breeches, For want of yer breeches!"

The old lady chants them in a shaking voice.

(To be continued.)

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