

A MAD PRANK

By THE "DUCHESS."

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

CHAPTER I.

Today, that "gay philosopher," has been upon the world with quite a charming air. His sighs are balmy, and his smiles frequent. It is evidently in a glad and glorious mood, as well it may be, having just been highly decorated by that splendid general, the sun, who marshals us through most of our happiest hours, and who is now shining with all his might upon the long, old-fashioned windows of Diana's home.

"What a day!" says Diana's sister, looking up from the pile of lilac calico lying on her knees. It is the kind of calico, both in color and texture, that one associates in one's mind with a servant's morning work—determined in its shade, but pretty for all that, and striped; little lines of dark violet running over the lighter ground.

"Yes—heavenly!" says Diana, whose married name is Clifford. She speaks rather absently, as if finding it difficult to lift her mind from the making of the little mob-cap at which she is so diligently stitching. The glance she gives upward, as if in answer to Hilary's rapturous sigh, is purely mechanical, though she evidently wishes it to be understood that she too acknowledges the heavenly glories that are lighting up the trim lawn outside, and are rendering the garden an earthly paradise. But in a second her eyes fall to her task again.

"The idea of your wearing this!" says she, giving a contemptuous twist to the delightful little cap. "And that"—with an equally contemptuous pointing of her forefinger to the lilac mass lying in Hilary's lap—"at the biggest fancy-dress ball we have had here for ages, when at any moment you might be mistress of £18,000 a year."

"At any moment I might not, also," says her sister with a little laugh. "And even if I were the mistress of it, there would be a master too. That takes all the gilt off the ginger-bread. In the meantime—smoothing out the folds of the lilac skirt with a fond hand—"I shall wear this. A housemaid's dress is a fancy one—for every one except the bona fide housemaid—and as it is inexpensive, and as pennies count, I have chosen it. Provisionally, at a ball of this kind one can be as bizarre, as eccentric, as one likes."

"Still," says Diana, with a regretful sigh, and a swift glance at her lovely sister, "I had always imagined you as—" "Oh, I know," with amused impatience, "Joan of Arc."

"Certainly not," indignantly. "As 'Morning.' You would have looked beautiful as 'Morning.'"

"I shall look divine as Sarah Jane," says Miss Burroughs, with calm conviction. She lifts the calico skirt with daintily careful fingers—it is as yet only tacked together—and regards it with an admiring eye.

"Jim would have liked to give you something better," says Mrs. Clifford, leaning forward, with her elbows on her knees and the cap between both her hands. Her tone is plaintive. "He says you are too absurd, too proud—"

"Jim is the dearest brother-in-law in all the world," says Hilary, unreserved affection in her voice. "That is why I am not going to let him beggar himself and the chicks for me."

"What nonsense! A mere gown—" "Well, this is a mere gown, too. And I'm sure it will suit me. Do you know, Di," flinging down the half-finished dress and going to a long mirror let into one of the walls, "last night an awful doubt arose in my mind. I felt that the dress would suit me so admirably—so altogether—that I began to think that perhaps I was to be the manner born—that Nature had meant me to be a real Sarah Jane."

"She peers at herself in the glass, leaning a little forward, poised, as it were, on her toes, and with her hands clasped behind her back. The glass gives her back a very exquisite reflection—softly smiling dark-blue-eyes, a mouth a little quizzical, but tender too, and a strong, firm chin, a forehead low, broad, and earnest, and such hair!—hair that shines like burnished gold. Not the dead-gold hair we know of, nor the crispy hair that never seems at rest, but a mixture of both these, looking always as if half an hour ago it had come out of a warm, sweet bath, and was growing brighter and brighter through the sun rays that have dried it."

"No, I don't like it now," says she, turning away, and letting her slim figure drop once more into her lounging-chair. "But when I have the cap and gown on, I know I shall look the thing. Humiliating thought!"

"There won't be a girl in the room like you," says Diana affectionately. "Ah! that's my saving clause!" wittily misunderstanding her. "Housemaids will be a rare quantity. I expect I shall be unique—I shall perhaps be that astonishing thing at a fancy ball—the only one of my kind in the room. I shall therefore—solemnly—create a sensation."

"You will do that anyway," says Mrs. Clifford. She looks at her sister a little disconcertedly. "I'm sure I don't know what they will all say of me. That I went in silk attire myself, and brought you as Cinderella."

"To find a Prince?" "Your Prince! why, he's found," says Diana. "He is almost sure to be at the ball. Oh, I, slowly, 'tell you' I met old Miss Kinsella yesterday, and she said Mrs. Dyson-Moore told her she expected

him on the afternoon of the late ball. "The night of the ball!" A startled look springs into Hilary's eyes. But in a moment she recovers herself. "The late train! Ten! He will be too tired to go anywhere."

"He may wish to meet you." "A girl he has never seen?" "A girl he must either marry, or lose £18,000 a year."

"What a detestable will!" cries Hilary, springing to her feet, and beginning to pace up and down the room. "Iniquitous I call it. What on earth had I ever done to Aunt Charlotte that she should insist on bringing me into an affair of this kind? Why could she not choose some other niece? Some other nephew and niece, who knew each other?"

"There would have been less wisdom there. People who know each other! That's generally fatal! When strangers meet there are possibilities."

"There are indeed, and very unpleasant ones. I feel certain," stopping short to regard her sister with an effective eye, "that Frederic Ker is the very last man in the world I should ever care to marry."

"Of course, if you have made up your mind beforehand—" "I haven't made up my mind about anything."

"Not to look at him." "You are wrong there. I'm dying to look at him—from a distance!"

"It is such a great deal of money to throw away," says Mrs. Clifford with a sigh. Money with her is not too plentiful. "Who says I'm going to throw it away?" cries Hilary gayly. "Perhaps I am going to seize it. And perhaps it is he who will throw it away after all. He may not like me! He—may reject me! He—" she turns once more to the mirror as if to gain support from it. "Immortal gods! what an awful thought!" says she. "I confess," in a stricken tone, "it never occurred to me before."

"Well, it needn't occur now," says Diana, her fair, handsome face lighting. "And you needn't pretend you think it." "But it's so serious, Di. If I refuse to marry my cousin Frederic, or if he refuses to marry me, £18,000 a year goes to 'The home for lost animals—the dogs.'"

"Well, it is in your own hands." "Don't let us think of it till after this dance, anyway," says Hilary. "We have a little breathing-space left us."

"Not if he is there!" "Oh, he can't be! Coming by that late train!" She lets her hands fall into her lap again, the needle sticking up in dangerous proximity to one of her pretty fingers, and looks at her sister anxiously. "If he should come to the dance, Di—of course," with eager conviction, "he won't; but if he should, promise me you will not introduce me to him, or get any one else to do it."

"But if he asks me?" "How can he! He doesn't know you either."

"He could get an introduction. Mrs. Dyson-Moore might—" "Not she. She will be taken up with herself and her admirers. Now promise."

"Well, I promise. But is it wise? Ought you not to meet him at once, and—"

"Marry him," sarcastically. "No, I think not. I must have time. And, above all things, I want to enjoy this dance."

"Mrs. McIntyre is giving an after fancy ball the week later; you will have to meet him there."

"Sufficient unto the day," says Hilary recklessly. "And who knows he may not have left long before that? I have made up my mind not to meet him at this first ball, at all events."

Diana looks at her sister with a certain concern. "I wish you would try to like him," says she. "He means so much to you."

"Exactly as much as I mean to him. Don't look so forlorn, with an irresponsible laugh. 'I'm going to try and like him as hard as ever I can. Harder even, if it will please you. Do you suppose I too cannot see all the bonbons that are to be got out of £18,000 a year?'"

"I believe you are as blind as a bat," says Diana with some indignation.

CHAPTER II.

"I say, can't you hurry up a bit you two girls?" cries Mr. Clifford from the hall below. "It's a quarter to ten already, and there are five miles to drive."

"Coming! Coming!" calls Mrs. Clifford in a muffled tone from above. It is plain to her husband that she has something in her mouth. Can it be hairpins? If so, experience has taught him that another good half-hour will not see her downstairs. She has elected to dress in Hilary's room to-night, which is large and lofty, so that he cannot be sure of her progress toward perfection. As a rule he is a long-suffering man, but now his feelings overcome him. He springs up the stairs three steps at a time, and having beaten a lively tattoo on Hilary's door bursts it unceremoniously open.

"If you think," begins he, "that you'll be there before 'God Save the Queen,' you—"

"Oh, there you are, Jim," cries his wife thankfully, dropping pearls, like the angelic girl of old, out of her mouth, in the shape of a little brooch. "Come here and settle this thing on my head, and put this brooch in at the side. Hilary is in such a hurry! Her cap had to be done all over again." She pauses

to give him the brooch, and then says anxiously: "How am I looking, Jim?" "Right down lovely!" says Jim, who is a delightful husband; so delightful indeed that his wife has never fully realized how very much more comfortable she might be if Providence had only given him a little more money.

"Oh, nonsense!" says his wife, coloring and making a would-be-indignant little grimace at him. "Am I passable—that's all I ask?"

But in truth she is looking all he had said—a charming Marie Antoinette—in a gown made by her own clever fingers out of some old gowns that had belonged to some of the dead and gone Clifford dames when the fortune of their house was at its height. Diana has the fingers of a ready worker, and has got herself up to perfection, with very little expense. Great outlay being impossible with her and her husband at any time, she has yet managed, so far, to keep herself in touch with the world around her—on a very limited income. A difficult matter always, but not impossible, when one is of acknowledged good birth in one's own country, and has common sense and cleverness.

Hilary has helped her a good deal, though not in any pecuniary sense, having a bare pittance of her own—sufficient only to dress her. But she has given

much time and love to the three children, and has been a source of comfort in many ways. She had come to the Cliffords on the death of her mother—that had left her entirely orphaned—and had lived very happily with them a calm, uneventful existence, until three months ago, when a strange chance fell into her life.

An old aunt had died and had left her enormous fortune to be equally divided between Hilary and a nephew (a cousin unknown to Hilary), on the condition that they should marry each other. This odd will had lifted the girl suddenly to a high plane, in spite of the insecurity of the whole thing, and the hateful condition.

The "hateful condition" in all probability will be at this ball to-night.

It is growing late. The flowers are beginning to droop a little. The music is growing lower—more tender; the ball has come to that point where every one can safely declare that the evening has been a great success. The stewards have been indefatigable. They had looked after everybody. Even Miss Boring, that old-established wallflower, has had one quadrille. Somebody had basely manoeuvred Peter Kinsella into the position of her partner, much to the indignation of his aunt, old Miss Kinsella, who, like Satan, has been going to and fro all the evening, making herself most fearfully unpleasant. She has made a point of going into all the sitting-out places under pretence of seeing that the lampshades are not taking fire—in reality to turn them up, and spoil all the pretty flirtations. Miss Kinsella is the village Tyrant—the Terror of the county. Closed doors and barred windows do not keep her out, and her tongue is as a sharp sword.

She has a fine, strong Irish brogue that "you could hang your hat on," as Jim said in a moment of exasperation—and one great affection.

Peter is the affection, and to see him dancing with Miss Boring, "that distracted old maid," as I regret to say she calls poor Miss Boring, has filled her withered breast with rage. "Pether," fagged out in splendid equipments as a red-haired Romeo, was surely worthy of a better fate! That he fled precipitately at the end of the quadrille gave his aunt some small consolation.

Supper is over. So are the supper dances. The usual programme has been again restored to its place. The fiddlers are in great form now, having been let loose one by one, to go into a room behind them, where an ample supper has been arranged by the committee for these most principal components of the evening's joys. Once more they are all in their places, prouder of mien than when they left, and eager to begin upon their instruments once more.

Sweeter, wilder, shriller ring the notes. They seem to carry all before them. The dancing is indeed at its height when Diana Clifford, entering the ball-room with old General Weekes, is accosted at the doorway by a small, very much bearded and bedizened Amazon, whose petticoats are as nearly up to her knees as the laws of the land permit. She is quite a young woman and very pretty, and smiles at Diana out of two handsome dancing eyes, thickly blackened about the lids, and with two lips as red as vermilion can make them. She is followed by a bevy of young men, conspicuous among whom is one, very tall and dark, who is looking rather intently at Mrs. Clifford. This young man is in plain clothes.

"Haven't been able to get a word with you all the evening," says Mrs. Dyson-Moore, in her excited, fast little way, and with a great deal of action. "Where have you been hiding yourself, and with whom? Better not ask that, I suppose. I want to introduce a friend to you."

She gives a rapid glance over all her attendant swains, so rapid that Diana fails to know which among the crowd is the particular friend in question. "He's staying with me, you know. Says he wants to meet you. Mutual acquaintances, I suppose?"

Here she matters hurriedly, "Mr —" (Diana does not hear the name) "Mrs. Clifford," and storms away again, with her train no whit decreased, as during her pause with Diana she has managed to annex the old general.

This defection of the elderly warrior's part leaves Diana alone, gazing blankly into the face of the tall young man in plain clothes, who is looking not a little amused.

"My name is Ker," says he pleasantly. "Frederic Ker. We are cousins, I think." Diana makes a little movement. The bolt has fallen then! This is the unwelcome suitor. This is Hilary's fate.

A second later she has sufficiently recovered herself to acknowledge that, so far as appearance goes, Hilary's fate is by no means to be despised. Frederic Ker, if not exactly an Adonis, is uncommonly good-looking. He is a smart, well-

set-up young man, or about twenty-eight, with dark gray eyes and a very handsome head.

"I only arrived five minutes ago," says Ker, still looking rather amused. "I had wired to Mrs. Dyson-Moore to tell her not to trouble about me, but to go on to her dance, and that, if I had the energy, I would follow her there. I knew I should have the energy. You will understand why."

"You wanted to see my sister?" says Diana, regarding him closely. "Yes. The energy all lay in that. You can imagine I had some curiosity."

Mrs. Clifford would have answered this leading question naturally enough, but that the light, almost quizzical character of his tone annoys her. "She feels curiosity too," says she, a little coldly.

"Ah! But not so strong as mine. I am here—looking for her. But she—" "She certainly is not looking for you," says Mrs. Clifford, dropping gracefully into the seat behind her.

"Don't be angry with me," says Ker, taking a modest corner of the lounge, and looking at her with beseeching eyes. "I would, believe me, be well out of all this."

"You mean—?" "That," with extraordinary courage, but the most perfect air—an air to disarm any one—it is detestable to me to see marriage with—"

He hesitates. His eyes, however, are perfectly frank. Diana is conscious of the fact that she admires him. There certainly is something honest about him. "Go on," says she. "I know. With a woman you do not love."

"With a woman who does not love me! That makes a stronger case." "I don't know that. But," says Diana anxiously, "if there is no love on either side—for any outsider—any third person—" She breaks off and looks at him earnestly. "You are heart-whole?" asks she.

(To be continued.)

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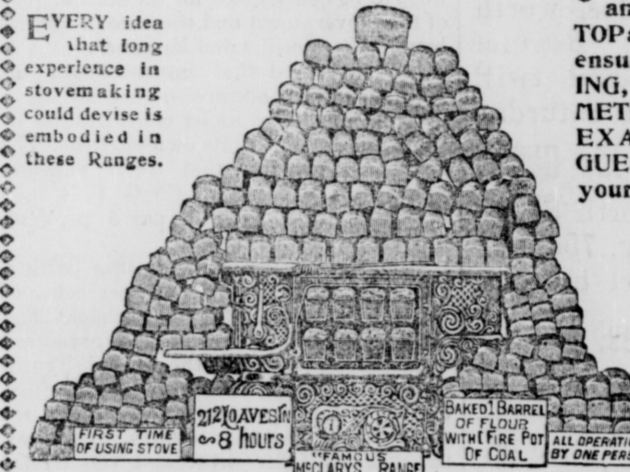
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