

A MAD PRANK

By THE "DUCHESS."

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

(Continued.)

"Yes. I'll be your parlor-maid for this occasion only."

CHAPTER V.

"Oh, I'm not in the humor for jokes," says Diana languidly.

"That's a good thing, for I'm in solemn, sober earnest. Though I confess I'm perusing myself. You know I told you I should not appear at luncheon to-day, and now I shall. Though not as Hilary, as Bridget."

"Put it out of your head. It is a mad idea. I shan't even let you think of it."

"Are you prepared to control my very thoughts then? 'Great is Diana,' we all know, but still I shall think of this thing, in spite of you. Look here, Diana, don't be foolish. This stranger is coming. It is essential, considering all things (my future prospects principally) with a little malicious grin at her sister,

"that you should put your best foot foremost, so as to make a first grand impression. But, unfortunately your 'best foot' is deserting you for a mere 'patron.' Bridget will certainly go to it or else remain here by your imperative orders, and sulk and drop all the dishes. Now, I shall not sulk, and I shall drop no dishes, and I have got my regimentals in my wardrobe upstairs."

"Jim would never consent to it, and then there are cook and nurse to be considered. Do you wish to have your name all over the county?"

"As for that—I shall send cook up to Oaklands to get us some eggs, once luncheon is nearly ready, and Ellen out with the children; for the rest, I know I can manage it. Now, don't make a fuss, Diana, darling. I assure you it is better to have me for a parlor-maid than nobody at all."

"Ah, here is Jim!" says Diana, rising and running to the window, and tapping vigorously. "Jim, come in. Come in here. I want to tell you something."

She tells him a great deal certainly, and Hilary tells him even more. It becomes plain to Jim that his wife is dying with fright about the want of a parlor-maid for this important occasion, so naturally he throws his influence on the side of Hilary—almost unconsciously, however.

"He'll never know me, Jim," cries Hilary.

"My good child, that's a large saying. He is going to stay in this part of the world for a month or so, so I expect he'll get to know you one way or another."

"He won't know me to-day, anyway."

"Except as the girl who swindled him out of two shillings last night."

"Oh, Jim!"

"Well, didn't you?"

"I think as you do," says Diana; "but he must meet her in a day or so, and then—what will happen then?"

"The crack of doom will be nothing to it," replies her husband solemnly.

"I really wish you would not just about it," says his wife, who is now evidently on the verge of tears.

"But Diana," anxiously, from Hilary, "what are you going to do at luncheon without a servant to attend table?"

"I don't know," tearfully.

"Well, as I told you, before, I do. I know all about it. I've drilled enough parlor-maids in my time to know how to hand round plates and things myself, and how to conduct myself generally. (The question is,) severely, "will you two know how to conduct yourselves?"

"This is an open aspersion upon our manners," says Jim. "Diana, are you going to submit to it?"

"Time is flying," says Hilary. "Am I to attend table or not? I shan't appear in any other character, so I may as well be of use to you as not. And really, Diana, don't see how you are going to manage things without Bridget. Jim, tell her I say do it. I," laughing in a suppressed sort of fashion, "have set my mind upon it. I want to see," with a little tilting of her nose, "what my future husband is like when he is off his guard."

"Oh! so that's your reason!" says Clifford.

"I know you will forget yourself, and call me Diana," says her sister.

"By-the-by, what's your name to be?" asks Clifford, turning to Hilary.

"Bridget, of course."

"For mercy's sake, Jim, if this awful affair is to be carried through, don't forget that," says Diana, who is plainly aggrieved.

"Well," nervously, "she hopes she may be able to appear."

Diana, who has really meant only to temporize, now seeing where her words have led her, controls with difficulty a mad desire to laugh.

"Afterwards? After luncheon? I hope so too," says Ker. "Of course I can quite understand how she feels about all this. It is very good of her not to have refused me at once, even without a trial. It seems unfortunate that we cannot meet."

He pauses.

"Yes, yes," says Diana vaguely. "What on earth is she going to say next?"

"The will was propitious," said Ker. "There was something that suggested madness about it. But it appears it is all right."

"You tried?" Diana tells herself she is absurd, but somehow a feeling of anger toward him rises now within her breast. He had tried to break the strange bond between him and Hilary. Pray where would he find an equal to Hilary? In her heart she has forgotten that as yet he has never seen Hilary.

"Naturally. First thing. When I came back to England I went straight to my lawyer. If the will could be upset—if the money could be divided between your sister and me—what a relief?"

"To Hilary—certainly!" very coldly.

"To both," frankly.

He is so entirely above board that in spite of herself she cannot keep from smiling. He does seem honest. And if so, and if heart-whole (as he had assured her last night, what a husband for Hilary! And now, with all her silly fooling, she will probably destroy her one great chance.

"Ah, you are honest! I like that!" says she earnestly.

Then she remembers that she herself is not very honest toward him, and her heart quails within her.

"Mr. Ker," says she suddenly, "I don't think you will be able to have any—any—talk with Hilary to-day, but if you will come and lunch with us again to-morrow—" She tells herself that whatever happens she will compel Hilary to see him to-morrow.

"You are very good," says he. "But the fact is, I must leave here to-morrow, for a week. I have some business in Dublin. I am afraid I shan't be back again until Thursday."

"The day of Mrs. McIntyre's fancy ball?"

"Yes, I hope I shall meet your sister there, at all events."

"There, beyond doubt! But you must not be so late as you were last night," says Diana, trying to carry it off with a high hand and ignoring his insinuation.

"Oh, I shall be early. And your sister—?"

"There is really no reason why you should not call her Hilary," says Mrs. Clifford, with a faint smile, "she is your cousin, you know."

Ker looks at her.

"Yes, of course. But such a strange cousin. A cousin who—" He stops and laughs involuntarily.

"I know," says Diana, laughing too. "Who ought to be—"

"It is dreadful!" says Diana quickly. "Dreadful for both of you. But at all events neither of you are in fault. You should both remember that when you talk it over."

"When we do!" Ker lifts his brows as if amused. "You—I beg your pardon—Hilary is, I am afraid, not anxious to talk it over. However, even if she is too fatigued to come down to-day you promise me we shall meet at the McIntyres'!"

"Certainly she will be there," says Diana, but a little faintly. Who could arrange for Hilary? She turns to him.

"You have a long leave, I hear. I hope when your visit at the Dysons-Moores' it at an end you will come here for a little while. It would give you and Hilary an opportunity of being better acquainted—of—"

"Making up our minds?" The young man laughs lightly. "Thank you very much. I shall be delighted to give Miss Burroughs the chance of seeing how—"

"Yes," says Diana. She leans forward. "How charming I am." At this they both laugh.

CHAPTER VI.

It is not until Ker has finished his salmon that, looking up suddenly, he finds his eyes met by those of the parlor-maid. Her eyes are quickly withdrawn, she is handing round the cold roast beef now, but his remain on her—moving as she moves. Where on earth has he seen her before? That he has seen her before he is positive, but where? He is also quite sure that when first he did see her, he did not realize that she was—was—What is she? Beautiful! Is beautiful the word?

He is obliged to take his eyes off her now, as she has come round and is standing almost behind his back.

"Potato, sir?"

Ker gives a little start. Her voice so low, almost as beautiful as herself!

"Thank you," says he. He feels as if he is apologizing to her for the trouble she is giving herself on his account. Then suddenly he pulls himself together and turns to Diana.

"I see I am not to have the pleasure of seeing your sister," says he with a slight smile.

"No. I am so sorry," says Diana, her eyes on her plate.

—and name; the mustard, bridget. She is strong. Very strong."

"Ah!" says Ker. Diana casts an indignant glance at her husband, but Clifford continues his repast with all the air of a saint. "I thought perhaps I was the cause of her staying away from luncheon."

"She never stays away from luncheon. She is at it now," says Clifford imperiously.

"Oh, I see!" Ker's tone, however, is a little vague. "She is fatigued no doubt after last night's dance, and is still upstairs."

"Is she, Di? I'm not quite sure. I quite thought I saw her a moment ago."

Hilary is at this instant standing just behind him at the sideboard.

"The fact is," says Diana, turning her delightful face that has now a very pink flush upon it to Ker, "that Hilary feels—a little nervous about—about—" She falters and breaks down ignominiously.

"I know," says Ker kindly. "I," laughing a little, "feel rather like that myself. And of course, a girl—it was a scandalous will. She hates to see me, and I—well, I don't hate to see her, of course—but I am afraid it seems quite impossible that we should ever like one another."

"That touch of Clifford's about the 'strength' of his future wife has modified still farther his weak desire to see the wife chosen for him by his dead aunt. "She is taking a little walk, I dare say?"

"Just a stroll," says Clifford, gayly. "A mere hint at a walk! About as far as round this table once or twice. She likes short walks. She," pleasantly, "is an awfully lazy girl."

Here there is a clatter of the spoons and forks on the sideboard.

"I don't think Hilary lazy," says Diana quickly. "What on earth does Jim mean by prejudicing this most desirable party against Hilary! Really, one can carry a joke too far!"

"Yes?" says Ker. He lifts his brows politely. It is plain to Diana that he is already extremely prejudiced against her sister! "I am so glad to hear I have not interfered with her in any way. I was afraid that perhaps she was avoiding me—"

"On the contrary, my dear fellow. I heard her express a determination to see you at once, at all hazards. Nothing it seemed would—"

"Spinach, sir!" says Hilary at his elbow, at this moment, in an awful tone. Ker looks up at her. Was that the soft, low voice that had offered him potatoes?

"No, thank you, Maria!" says Clifford, generally.

Poor Diana's eyes once more seek her plate. Maria, who is Maria? And he had been so warned about that "Bridget!" As for Hilary, she has retreated to the sideboard, and is standing there, her back turned to the room. Diana, glancing nervously toward her, is disgusted to see that she is shaking with laughter.

Ker is growing confused. He too has heard the later appellation, but, surely, Clifford had called this strange lovely maid Bridget only five minutes ago? He has hardly time, however, to wonder at this thing, when the "maid" herself is beside him.

"Claret, sir?"

"Have a bottle of ale, Ker?" says Clifford, hospitably.

"Well, thank you," says Ker, who is so shortly home from India that he still inclines toward that kindly drink.

"Some ale for Mr. Ker, Sarah," says Clifford, with an immovable countenance.

Here Diana breaks into the wondering silence that threatens to envelop them, with quite a rush of conversation. Has Mr. Ker been here—or there? Has he seen this, or that? We all know the conversations in the country where the guests are strangers. Ker answers her delightfully, pleasantly, but all the time his mind is on "Bridget—Maria—Sarah." His eyes are on her too! In fact, he cannot keep them off her! Where has he seen her before? All at once he knows!

She is the girl who had given him that glass of water last night at the ball.

She is trying to give him a glass of ale now, but with difficulty. She has got the corkerew into the cork, but crookedly—as girls always do—and consequently the cork refuses to come out. Clifford is talking vigorously about nothing in the world, and says nothing; but Ker, who is watching Hilary, grows gradually frantic. All that trouble for him! All that straining of her back, all that flushing of her face. Why, confound the beast! He half rises from his seat—he has, indeed, forgotten everything.

"If you will allow me," says he, his tone as careful as though he were talking to—a lady! If he only knew!

"Oh! can't you draw it?" says Clifford, springing to his feet. He had seen Ker's gesture, and is now a little shocked at seeing Hilary's dilemma. "Go on, I'll do it," says he, in a low tone.

Ker hears him. There is something so confidential in the tone, so—beyond friendly, that, for a moment, he stares. Then he looks at Diana, but Diana is breaking the little bit of bread beside her plate into small fragments with the most unconcerned air.

And now Clifford has come back to the table, and the beautiful parlor maid is pouring the sparkling ale into Ker's glass.

"My wife tells me," says Clifford, lightly, "that you have promised to give us a little of your time once your visit at the Moores' is at an end."

"I shall be very pleased, indeed, thank you. I'm rather out of it, in the way of friends now. I've been so long in India. It's awfully kind of you to think of me, and of course—" He hesitates.

"You would like to see Hilary," puts in Clifford. "I can quite understand it. Most fellows would yearn to see the girl their aunt had condemned them to marry. Why can't you see her?"

He stops here, and both Diana and Hilary grow pale. To them it seems a reflection on Mr. Ker's sight! To Ker, providentially, it seems only a reproach. Having given full time for the explosion of his missile, Clifford goes on again:—"I thought, Di, that Hilary was rather determined to appear at luncheon. She certainly said something about it. About attending. Do you remember? She was great on the attend—"

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