



CHAPTER II.—Continued.

This defection on 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, of 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 he—"

"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 anyone—"it is detestable to me to seek 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.

Ker laughs. His laughter, at all events, sounds heart-whole and very reassuring.

"There is nothing—nothing!" says he, with a little suggestive movement of his hand. "But your sister—that is more important."

"Oh, no! The man is always the more important. If he loves—"

"Well? If he does?"

He seems always a little amused, as if

the whole thing is of no real consequence—treating it as a mere *entr'acte* as it were.

"It wouldn't do," says Diana. "If you had an affection elsewhere, and were still bent on this marriage with—my sister, you would always revenge the loss of your love on her."

"That sounds very tragical," says Ker. "However, there will be no revenge—because there is no 'prior attachment.' That's the right name for it, isn't it?"

He picks up the fan that is lying on her knees and opens it. "Your sister is here to-night?"

"Ye—es. Not exactly here, but—somewhere." She looks eagerly round, as if to see Hilary, and colors warmly. "Of course, you would like to be introduced to her. It is only natural. But—"

"Well, I should," says the young man frankly. "But if you think it better to wait; if it would annoy her—"

"You see, you came so late, and we shall be going directly, and—"

"If you would even point her out to me."

"I shall, of course, when I see her," says Diana. "But even if I don't, there is plenty of time before us. Have you an engagement for to-morrow, or will you come and lunch with us?"

"Delighted," says Ker. "I don't think Mrs. Dyson-Moore has anything on for to-morrow."

"Have you told her anything about this extraordinary will?" asks Mrs. Clifford anxiously.

He shakes his head.

"I have not spoken of it to anyone. Why should I? I expect it will come to nothing—that your sister will give me my *congé* without delay."

"You are hoping for that?" says Mrs. Clifford sadly.

"I am not. I am not, indeed. But the whole thing is so absurd, so impossible."

"And yet," regretfully, "it is such a great deal of money. It seems a pity to let it go."

"It does!" He seems made of frankness, Mrs. Clifford tells herself. He looks at her. "That's why I've come here."

"To see," with a rather offended glance, "if you would like Hilary?"

"That's a horrid way of putting it. To see if she would like me. But now that I have seen you—"

"Seen me?"

"I feel she will be too good for me." He pauses. "Is she—like you?"

At this moment it occurs to Diana that her new cousin seems distinctly inclined to enter into a mild flirtation with her. This annoys her the more, in that it denotes his utter absence of earnestness about this affair with Hilary.

"There were never two sisters so unlike," says she coldly; "as you will acknowledge when you see Hilary. And now if you know nobody here, can't I get you a partner? That young lady over, the Swiss peasant, doesn't seem to be attached—"

At this moment, the Swiss peasant under view comes quickly up to Mrs. Clifford's side, and drops heavily on to the seat beside her.

"Oh, Mrs. Clifford, I feel so faint—so ill," says she, and indeed the pallor of her lips and cheeks speak for the truth of her assertion.

Diana turns hurriedly to Ker.

"Will you run downstairs, and bring me a glass of water? At once!"

"In a moment!" says Ker. He gets quickly through the people who throng the doorway, and so downstairs.

CHAPTER III.

"What see you there

That hath so cowarded and chased your blood
Out of appearance?"

Now Hilary had gone down these stairs five minutes before with her partner—a magnificent cow-boy—to get an ice, and is standing near the buffet enjoying it, and looking prettier than usual (which is saying a great deal) in her cap and gown, when she feels a touch on her arm.

Looking round she sees Jim.

"Our dance, I think," says he, taking advantage of the fact that the cow-boy is a stranger from the Barracks at Clonbree, whereupon the cow-boy bows to Hilary, and retires from the scene.

Jim regards her with a reproachful eye.

"Still urging on your wild career!" says he, "with Nemesis at hand—and the sword of Damocles about to fall—and all the rest of it."

"What do you mean, Jim?"

"He's come!"

"He?"

"Your future Lord!" says Clifford, with the biggest L on record.

"Oh, no! Not really!"

"My good girl, I've been staring at him for the past two minutes. He was talking to Diana, and evidently cross-examining her about you. At least I *hope* it was that. To me it seemed as if he was cross-examining Diana about herself. I'll have a cross-examination of my own with her later on."

"You won't tell him I'm here?" says Hilary, in a tone of frightened entreaty.

"Not I. But Diana will. And after all, Hilary, why shouldn't you get it over at once? It isn't as if you were bound to marry him."

"I can't. I," defiantly, "won't. I'd rather *die* than see him. I—"

Clifford makes a quick movement. His eyes are on the stairs above him.

"I expect you'll have to die," says he; "for here he comes!"

"Oh, no!" says Hilary.

In fact Ker is running down the stairs at the top of his speed, to find that glass of water for the fainting Swiss peasant. Hilary has barely time to stand back from Jim, and give him a glance that warns him that eternal infamy will brand him if he now by one word betrays her, when Ker is in their midst.

Seeing a smart-looking maid (even at this hurried moment he notices that "beauty lies within her eyes") with an empty ice plate in her hand, that apparently she is just taking away from somebody, he rushes up to Hilary, and says in a breathless tone:

"A glass of water, please."

Hilary, after a second's shock, is equal to the occasion.

"A glass of water, sir."

"Yes. And in a hurry, my good girl."

"You shall have it, sir."

She goes over to the buffet, procures the glass of water in question, and brings it back to Ker.

"Oh, thanks. A thousand thanks," says he, in a hurried way.

He seizes the glass, squeezes a florin into Hilary's hand, and is gone.

Hilary stands still for a moment, then subsides into the dark recess of a closed doorway, her brother-in-law following her.

"A nice beginning," says he, wrathfully. "How do you think you are going to meet him after this?"

"He won't remember," said Hilary.

"Won't he? Don't you think somebody will tell him?"

(To be Continued.)