

A MAD PRANK

BY THE DUCHESS.

CHAPTER XIV.—Continued.

He leaves her, well satisfied. He goes with a light and cheerful step up the road. How beautiful she is! How full of strong, young life. No silly fad. He could not have endured a silly fad, however pretty. For the first time in his life he knows himself to be honestly in love. And she—she will come to love him in time. He will be good to her. His life shall be *her's*. By the bye, why can't he get out of this luncheon at the Dyson-Moores' to-morrow? If he started by the morning train he could get to Cork by 11:30, and could there buy her a ring—all girls like a ring, and he would like to give her something. Of course, that would prevent his being with her at three o'clock as he had arranged. He could not possibly be there before four, but he could explain to her: and of all the girls he has ever met, she seems the most reasonable as well as the most beautiful, and the most—etc., etc.

CHAPTER XV.

"I have not that alacrity of spirit
Nor cheer of mind that I was wont to have."

Half through the night Hilary lies awake, thinking—thinking always of this now momentous step she is about to take. Asking herself *shall* she take it? Is it advisable? Is it too late to withdraw?

Does she like him? Like him, that is, well enough to marry him? That is the question.

Of course, love is out of the question.

Here her thoughts wander a little—wander afield, indeed, and lose themselves in a recollection of his eyes—so dark and earnest; his mouth—so firm, so kind; his hair—how well it sits upon his head, and what a goodly head it has to sit upon!

She recovers herself here, with an angry start, and comes back to her question. The bare liking she has for Frederic—Mr. Ker—it must be the very barest liking, considering how little she has seen of him—would that be strong enough to enable her to live out her whole life with him? Would it entitle her to accept him? He must be considered as well as she. And would it be justice to him or to herself to thus embark on a voyage that would last all time—all time for them certainly—without some sure thing to go upon?

It is a most vexed question. And there are so few days given in which to think of it. That miserable will has rushed them into a corner. Only a month in which to decide the woe or the welfare of two lives! Does she like him well enough? As usual, the first thought comes back again. And he—does he like her? He had hesitated about coming early to-morrow.

When she wakes, to-morrow is here, christened by another name. A very

lovely to-morrow too. All blue sky and tender warmth, mellowed by the singing of innumerable birds.

Three o'clock has come and gone. The clock now strikes four. Hilary, who had put on her prettiest frock an hour ago, for evidently no purpose whatever, is now feeling a little angry. A little, to the outsiders. Inwardly she is raging.

Presently she comes down ready dressed for a walk.

"You are going out, Hilary?" says Diana, in dismay. "But—Frederic?"

"Well, what of him?" says the girl, turning upon her sharply. "After all, Di, I feel I have laid myself open to this sort of thing. So put an end to it, once and for all. Please tell Jim I would not marry Mr. Ker, if he were to go on his knees to me."

"Is this quite wise?" falters Diana.

"Oh! wise! He is wise if you like."

"You mean, darling—"

"That he detests me!"

"Hilary!"

But Hilary is gone.

Up—up the hill she runs, delighting in the energy that eases her of half the angry pain that is desolating her heart. In this fresh place, the air is full of twittering of birds—of new-blown breezes. She is feeling so low down in the world—so dejected—that this evidence of joy and hope in Nature comes to her as a tonic. She is not in touch with Nature at this moment, it is true, and yet the sweetness of it restores her in a measure to her natural state of mind.

She had reached an outstanding bowlder on the hill, and resting there for a moment, looks first to the lovely sky, and then behind her.

Behind her is Ker—advancing toward her with rapid strides.

"I'm afraid," exclaims he, as he comes up with her, "I'm awfully late. So"—breathlessly—"sorry."

"I'm sorry to see you so dreadfully out of breath," says Hilary courteously—icily. "It really would not have mattered," with a distinctly hostile smile, "if you had not come—" she hesitates—she would have given anything to say "at all," but the rudeness is too much for her—"until a little later."

Ker stares at her.

"I tried my best," says he—the first warm friendliness of his tone gone—a friendliness so near to love—"but—"

"It is sometimes so hard to get away." Her lip curls involuntarily.

"Sometimes! Especially when—"

He has been about to anathematize the train, which had been fifteen minutes late, but she interrupts him.

"I quite understand. You really must

not apologize to me. There is no reason why you should."

"Certainly there is a reason," says he, with quiet determination. "I told you I should be with you by three, and it is now considerably later than that. I owe you an apology—so far."

"I'll let you off," returns she, calmly. "A guest is often tied more or less."

"Mrs. Dyson-Moore, however, was not the cause of my being late."

"No?" The disbelief conveyed in this word is very faint and hardly reaches Ker, who has gone off on another solution of this mystery.

Good Heavens! Fancy her being so riled over a mere trifle like this. Even supposing he had been late, without going to Cork at all, need she have taken it like this? A fellow has lots of things to keep him sometimes. Only yesterday he had told himself she was the most reasonable girl in the world, and now—

They are coming down the hill again, and he finds that after getting out of his disagreeable reverie that she is saying something.

"Of course Mrs. Dyson-Moore would not be the cause of anything disagreeable. She is altogether charming. I've—been told."

The meaning in the emphasis is clear.

"Is she?" says Ker abruptly.

"You should hardly be the one to ask that question. You are in a position to know—you, who are staying with her—whether she comes under that name or not."

"Pon my word I haven't thought about it," says Ker impatiently. Hilary throws up her head. Contempt takes possession of her. Was ever prevarication clearer? She is preparing another topic of conversation—the all-absorbing Home Rule bill for choice—that will take her as far as the hall-door (still a good half-mile away), where she hopes the good oak door will close against him, and bar him out of her life forever, when suddenly he takes the initiative.

"What's the matter with you?" asks he.

The question is so blunt, so unexpected, that it leaves her without speech for a moment, but with a considerably heightened color.

"With me?"

"What's the good of fencing?" says he. "I can see how changed you are since—since last we met." His pause has somehow brought back to her the garden—his words—the pressure of his lips against her cheek. Her lovely color dies and she grows very pale! Oh! what a fool she had been!

"I am changed," says she in a low, but clear voice. "I—have been thinking. You"—with a swift glance at him—"have given me time to think."


"If you mean that because I was a little late to-day—"

"Well, you were a little late!" She has stopped. She is tracing something on the ground at her feet. "The fact is, I have come to the conclusion that we have made a mistake."

"We?"

"Well, then, I, if you will have it so. I am willing to bear all the blame."

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