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A MAD PRANK

BY THE DUCHESS.

CHAPTER XII. Continued.

“I DON'T know what else you could say, I'm sure,” disconsolately. “And I can't help thinking that I shouldn't have done it. Diana was very angry with me.”

“I am very glad you did it,” says Ker, with sudden earnestness. “It has made us friends much more quickly. It has taken the chill out of our introduction. Don't you see?”

“Yes, perhaps so.” She has seated herself in one of the chairs, and now leans forward to speak to him more earnestly.

She had so arranged her housemaid's gown as to have the sleeves tucked up to the shoulder, as though about to go in at once for a severe scrubbing match. This lets her lovely naked arms be seen in all their beauty. She rests them on her knees now and looks up at Ker.

“Do you know I never know what to say to a partner when first introduced to him?”

“I remember what you first said to me.”

“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 lovely with this new earnestness within her shining eyes, with this soft touch of shyness 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 first I 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 grows 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 you.” She moves toward the door of the ball-room. Ker follows her.

“You will give me another later on?”

“I am afraid not. My card is quite full.”

“Then, till to-morrow,” says he, in differently 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.

“The brain is like an oven, hot and dry. Which bakes all fancies, low and high.”

“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 flock 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 once. 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, no dear Mrs. Clifford,” cries the old maid, “because I felt I must speak to you.”

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 quick rebound. She comes quickly forward. She takes

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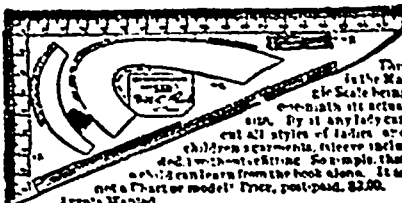
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