

LADY MARY'S PROTEGE.

LADY MARY CATILINE, the youngest daughter of the Earl of Mount Primrose, was in her own graphic language "wretchedly badly off." By this she really meant that she endeavoured to live in a set composed principally of persons who were very much richer than herself, and she found her income hardly able to bear the strain. In earlier days she had been a very haughty and dignified dame, with a high sense of her position and a just appreciation of the fact that the only way by which her order could resist the encroachments and domination of the rising plutocracy was by remaining true to themselves, and by preserving intact the traditions and standard of conduct which had been handed down to them by their forefathers. Poverty had, however, made her acquainted with strange shifts, and hardened her outer integument until at last she stooped to trade on her position, and by her own acts supplied an excuse and an occasion for many of the encroachments which she had once so deeply deplored and resented.

She seemed to regard it as a natural and agreeable mode of increasing her income to act as *chaperon* to the daughters of people whose principal claim to be admitted to society at all lay in their wealth. She acquired a habit of "taking up" rich young men who were ready to be generous in the way of dinner-parties, theatre tickets, and costly presents to any kindly friend who would introduce them to really nice people and procure them invitations to really nice houses. She was always willing to strike up an acquaintance with people who were blessed with the good things of this life, and at one or two houses where the society was mixed, but the *cuisine* excellent, she was almost as regular a portion of a dinner-party as the plate, which was almost as new as her family was ancient.

In the year 189—, however, she advanced a step further. It happened that at the beginning of the season she found herself without what had become a necessary part of her limited establishment, namely a *protégé*. Unless this undesirable blank were filled up, she foresaw that she would be obliged to curtail her expenses without being able to fix on any portion of her annual expenditure which she was willing to surrender. The prospect was intolerable, and she set herself in earnest to meet the dilemma by prompt action.

After considering the prospects of the situation for some time with great perplexity, she decided to try what would be the effect of advertising in a certain fashionable organ. She had heard that such things were done, and if it were so, it was clearly useless for her to entertain any false delicacy on the subject. Other people were obviously to blame for having first introduced the practice. It seemed hard if she might not profit by it as well, and if ever circumstances rendered such a course of action justifiable, she was quite certain that the horrible emergency to which she found herself reduced, furnished her with an ample justification for extricating herself from it by almost any means.

After some care and thought she managed to concoct a suitable advertisement, setting forth that a lady of position and title, moving in the very best society, was willing to present and *chaperon* through the London season a young girl of property and personal attractions; and this paragraph duly appeared in the columns of the fashionable organ above referred to.

It excited a good deal of comment in various circles, and so many hard things were said with regard to the "Lady" in question that Lady Mary's ears ought to have tingled till they positively ached.

"Wonder who she is," quoth Reggie Montford to Ronny Cochrane and Bertie Gilbert, as they sat in the bow-window of a certain well-known club not far from Hyde Park Corner. They had exhausted their vocabulary of disgust and disapprobation, and their curiosity was excited.

"It would serve her right," observed Ronny Cochrane, referring vaguely to a suggestion which had been thrown out earlier in the course of the conversation by Bertie Gilbert.

By-the-bye, there never was a more remarkable contrast than each of the friends presented to each other. Ronny Cochrane was a tall, sinewy, red-haired, high-checked Scot, the eldest son of a Ross-shire laird, a noted golfer and untiring deer-stalker. Lord Reggie Montford was a big Life Guardsman, as dark as night, with a heavy black moustache, sleepy eyes, and curly hair. Reggie was never so happy as when he was in the saddle: he preferred hunting to shooting any day, and was great at tent-pegging, polo, and other equestrian sports. Bertie Gilbert was small and slight, fair-haired, and smooth-faced, by no means an athlete, and fonder of drawing-room sports than those of the field. He owned a very sumptuous flat in Mayfair, and used to give tea-parties. What constituted the link between him and his more virile friends was a question which usually perplexed strangers not a little. Intimate friends, however, knew that Ronny Cochrane and Bertie Gilbert were old school chums whose friendship dated back to the day when the younger, cleverer, and weaker boy was the fag-master of the bigger one, and helped him over the stiff fences of Latin prose and translations, while relying very much on the taller boy's big big shoulders and powerful arms to preserve a certain amount of respect for their weakly superior among the turbulent youths of the Lower School. Reggie Montford's friendship for Bertie was a much more simple affair. He was, in fact, in love with Bertie's pretty grey-eyed sister, whom her brother resembled as much as it is possible for a man to resemble a woman; and there was this in common between him and Cochrane, and the grey-eyed, golden-haired beauty flirted with them both most impartially, and ill-used and snubbed them both with the strictest and most uncompromising equality. But then she was an heiress, and pretty heiresses are apt to be wilful.

"It would serve her right, and would really be an excellent joke," laughed Reggie Montford, who did not imagine that Bertie was speaking seriously, or that Ronny Cochrane had taken him in earnest.

"The mother would be the real difficulty," observed Bertie reflectively.

"Surely an old woman would do for that," suggested Cochrane. "With a new gown and a veil, and the strictest injunctions to say very little, and leave everything to her brazen daughter. After all she has only one appearance to make. Are you sure of the daughter? That seems to me the weak part."

"Oh no," replied Bertie confidently. "I will back the daughter against the mother any day. Don't you remember how completely Miss Scott took in all the men at the Christ Church ball last year, and how furious all the women were? Well, don't you think that if any of them had suspected what she really was, they would have been only too glad to say so out of sheer spite?"

"Well, there is something in that," replied Cochrane, who in his heart did not very much like the idea which Bertie had proposed. He thought it rather "rough on a lady," and perhaps a trifle "low" in itself, but he never had been able to shake off the curious ascendancy which Bertie had always held over him. On the whole, however, he was glad that he was going to Scotland on the following day, and would therefore not be able to render any practical assistance to the scheme.

"It will probably be a mere question of money," said Bertie with a sneer. "I daresay that the 'lady' would present a Variety chorus-girl if she thought that she could do it without detection, and the chorus girl paid handsomely."

The number of answers to Lady Mary Catiline's advertisement was not very excessive. One was from an American person, who wrote in rather a tasteless manner, and referred to the financial portion of the arrangement in a blunt fashion which sounded very coarse. The second came from Manchester, and contained a query as to how much the lady of title "charged" for presentations. The third purported to come from "Tottie de Vere," and was couched in a very familiar and offensive strain. The address was St. John's Wood. This Lady Mary decided at once to be hoax.