

A Girl's Caprice

OR, THE RESULT OF A
FANCY DRESS BALL

CHAPTER VII.

He refuses to stay to afternoon tea, however. Having waited until four o'clock, presumably on the chance of seeing the young woman who has been meted out to him as a bride, he rises abruptly.

"I fear there is no chance of my seeing your sister to-day?"

"I'm afraid not," says Diana with hesitation. "But if you wait for tea—" she hesitates again. What she was going to say or hint was, that if he did wait, perhaps Hilary might then have come in from her supposed walk. But the hypocrisy is too much for her. And yet, would it have been a lie? If he does stay, most undoubtedly he will see her face to face.

"Thanks, I'm afraid I can't stay any longer," says Ker a little stiffly, to her intense relief. He looks at her for a moment, and then says shortly, "Have you a photograph of her?"

"A photograph of Hilary?" Diana's tone is faint. The ground seems to have opened up beneath her feet. She casts a terrified glance round her, to the tables, the cabinet, the chimney-piece. If there should be one of Hilary's here, and he should notice the likeness!

A wave of thankfulness sweeps over her as she sees that the little stands on which Hilary used to smile, and look grave, and ponder over impossible baskets of flowers, have all been carefully removed.

"I think I ought to have one," says she uncertainly. "Upstairs, perhaps. If you will forgive me a moment—"

"Certainly," says Ker, who is looking at her with some surprise. Her evident discomposure has struck him. What kind of girl is this Hilary Burroughs? What mystery surrounds her? Yet Mrs. Dyson-Moore, when he had questioned her cautiously, had assured him she was pretty, charming, and all the rest of it.

Diana leaves the room hurriedly, glad of a chance of arranging her thoughts and her next lie, as she tells herself somewhat bitterly. Hilary had no right to lead her into this sort of thing. Why, if the children only knew! Good gracious! it would memorialize them forever. They would read her lectures for the future!

Ker, left to his own resources, moves mechanically toward the window. Why should Mrs. Clifford refuse to let him see a photograph of her sister? Is she ugly? Nobody could take Mrs. Dyson-Moore's opinion of any one. She would probably call you ugly if you were pretty, just for spite, or pretty if you were—if you were—What a strange-looking parlormaid. She's pretty, if you like! Odd he hadn't thought much about that last night, but he had remembered her when he had seen her again. Where on earth had Mrs. Clifford picked her up? He could swear she was never born a parlormaid.

And, by Jove! There she is! There she is indeed! Out there in the garden, just where the shrubberies begin; with her charming head in delicate relief against the green of the laurels behind it, with her lips apart, and her eyes smiling—and her arm tucked in the most unmistakably confidential fashion into the arm of—her master!

Ker stares, as if disbelieving his own senses. Is that Clifford, or one of the men? A groom, perhaps. There is, however, no mistaking Jim Clifford, the strong, kind, manly face, the broad shoulders, the goodly length of limb.

"Good Heavens! If his wife were to see him now," says Ker, in a horrified tone. Involuntarily he glances toward the door! If she should come back, and by some ill chance go to the window and look out—and—

He looks out again himself hurriedly. The "guilty pair," as he has already designated them, are now fast disappearing through the shrubbery. The last glance he gets of them tells him that they are both convulsed with laughter.

He has had but a short acquaintance with Clifford, certainly, yet in that time he had learned to regard him as an essentially honest man; a thoroughly good fellow. So much for appearances. Never will he trust in them again. He would have staked his life on Clifford's probity, yet here he is holding a clandestine meeting with his own parlormaid, in his own grounds! What a despicable hypocrite! Ker had noticed one or two little touches between him and his wife at luncheon, that had seemed to betray a thorough understanding between them—a thorough and lasting affection; and now, what is he to think of those delicate "touches"?

He remembers now that there had been other "touches" too, by no means "delicate" apparently. That sudden up-springing of Clifford to help her open that bottle of ale. His tone when he did so: "Go on, I'll do it!" It was a low tone, but familiar, terribly familiar.

Low, of course, for fear his wife

should hear him. It suggests confidential secret existing there! A secret! Was it a secret? The shrubberies say to this.

No doubt the assignation had been arranged beforehand, would account for Clifford's drawal from the drawing-room an hour ago. He had something to his wife on going about a visit to the farms—but of course he was to make some excuse, to give a planation, however vague, for being.

Of course he knew that there was a safe opportunity to meet—
—that—beautiful girl!

Ker would have liked to see some bad epithet here to the maid, but somehow it does not strike him. It all savors so of a low intrigue, that the strikes upon his brain, but it is impossible to connect the wife with her. Her face is before him—the eyes so clear—so open—the lovely, happy smile—
And yet, this evidence!

He pulls himself together. Certainly something ought to be done! Diana should be told then, who is to tell her? Ker has a sudden pang, acknowledges that it would be impossible for her to draw upon the parlormaid.

At this instant Diana returns. "I'm so sorry," says she. "But there is no photograph of Hilary to give you."

This is an ambiguous sentence might mean anything! "No photograph to give him." She means to convey the idea that it is not one to give. But now, with his suspicions thus awakened, it conveys on thought that there may be a photograph, but not for him to see.

He expresses a polite regret good-bye to his hostess, and has been accompanied by her to the dining-room door, in the friendliest fashion, to the house.

He has hardly gone one step beyond the hall-door when he thrusts her charming head out of the dining-room door.

CHAPTER VIII.

"He's gone?" questions she.

"Thank Heaven! Oh, Hilary, a day we've had!"

"And by no means 'cheap' Hilary, who really is hopeless.

olous. No indeed! All I've done! I wouldn't do it again if I could. Hilary, I've counted up, and I think I told him I lied. And the worst of it is—

"What makes you think I think he suspects something?"

"Nonsense, Di! There was a time I'm sure I think I was the best parlormaid you have had for years."

"Still I'm sure he has found something. His manner was changed before he left. A stiff, and he kept looking at me in the strangest way. He asked for your photograph."

"What?"

"Yes. For your photograph was quite natural. Why should he ask for it? But when he did, sure you my heart sank. I thought I should have fainted, but practically some one had removed my feet."

"Don't talk as if you were Irish. Invincible," says Hilary with reproach. "I hope I should have removed in their way. As a matter of fact, I took all my photos out of the room myself. It occurred to me that he might see one of them."

"How you think of things! Diana with admiration. "Nevertheless," descending once more into the lowest depths, "when he went, he left us full of suspicions."

"Is that all he left us?" says Hilary with a disgusted air. "He glances round her and at this point her eyes fall upon the umbrella stand. "You have wronged me," cries she. "The noble creature knew he would leave us some worth having. Behold his stick!"

There it is! A good, serviceable looking stick of cherry-wood, with a thin band of silver round the top of it.

"How could he have forgotten it?" says Diana. "Did you ever hear of a man forgetting his stick behind his gloves if you like, or—"

"His head?"

"Nonsense. He is going away a week, and will want it. I propose I had better send it over to the Dyson-Moores."

"Why, he can't be gone beyond a gate yet," says Hilary. "I'll after him with it."

"Hilary, don't! No, you must besides he must be gone quite beyond the gate by this time. And sides—"

"I'll chance it!" says Hilary. "I'll catch up the stick, dart like a modern Atalanta through the draw, and is gone up the avenue before Diana has time to collect another argument."

She would probably not have overtaken him, however, but for

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