



## CHAPTER VIII.—Continued.

JUST as he comes to the clump of rhododendrons that hide the house from view, he sees a charming, little figure running toward him. *Such a figure.* Not of Fun certainly—though fun is quick in it, especially in the eyes and mouth, if veiled. A lovely thing she seems to him, all life, and that at its sweetest—with her soft hair flying loosely round her brow and her lips a little parted.

"Your stick, sir," cries she demurely, as she comes up to him. He had stopped on seeing her, as if studying the strange charms that belong to this strangest of all strange parlour-maids.

"Thank you," says Ker. He takes the stick mechanically, as if not thinking of it, and then says suddenly: "I think it was you who gave me that glass of water last night."

His tone is cold, even severe.

"Yes, sir," returns the maid respectfully. "And it was you," with a little glance at him from under the long lashes, "who gave me"—hesitatingly and fumbling in her pocket—"this!"

She has brought out the memorable florin, and is now holding it up between her thumb and forefinger.

"Well?" says Ker.

"I have been thinking, sir," gazing with evident sadness at the florin, "that a glass of water is not worth two shillings."

An idiotic sense of gladness suddenly overcomes Ker. After all—even in spite of that scene in the shrubberies—she must be a good girl, an honest girl, one whose conscience forbids her to take more than her due. Such extreme delicacy of conscience is not common with her class. *Her class!* He is roused from his reveries by the good girl.

"Will you take it back, sir?" She is holding out the florin to him.

"Nonsense!" says Ker, colouring furiously.

"Then I may keep it?"

"Of course," frowning.

"Forever?"

"Forever and ever," says he, laughing now in spite of himself.

"Well, I shall," says the counterfeit Bridget.

"If only," with a sentimental sigh, and downcast eyes, "to remember!"

"To remember what?"

"Ah! never mind."

"But I do mind," says Ker, who has somehow forgotten for the moment that monstrous episode in the shrubberies.

"I'm sorry for that," placidly. "Well," with a respectful smile, "I shall keep it, sir, anyway—forever."

"Did anyone ever keep a two-shilling piece forever?" asks Ker, with some amusement.

"I shall!" says Bridget sweetly. "I'll make a hole in it, and hang it round my neck."

"That's very good of you," says Ker. "I shall like to think I was the giver of it."

All at once he pulls himself together. Memory has supplied him with a picture! Once again he sees this girl—this siren—with her arm in Clifford's, and her face uplifted to his in evident confidence. He can almost *hear* the light laughter with which she and he disappeared into the shrubbery. He can almost hear, too, he tells himself, with a return of his former indignation, the weeping of poor, pretty, faith-

ful Diana, when the truth, as eventually no doubt it will be, is laid bare to her.

"Look here," says he sternly, turning to the 'siren,' "I think I saw you just now, out there," pointing in the direction of the laurel-walks.

"Me, sir?"

"Yes, you."

"Perhaps I was gathering laurel-leaves, sir, for cook to put in the milk?"

"No, you were not," says Ker shortly, "you were talking to—your master!"

"Oh—I—"

She grows crimson so crimson, so undeniably embarrassed, that Ker for the second feels his heart stop beating. Yet why should it stop? This girl! She is guilty then! This hot blush must be one of shame. And yet to blush at all, is not that a sign of grace? It horrifies him to find presently that he is even at this last hour striving to condone the culprit's fault.

As a fact, Hilary is completely taken aback by his attack. She had not anticipated it. When laughing with Jim over the absurd situations at luncheon it had not occurred to either her or him that they could be seen from the drawing-room window. They had thought of Ker as being engaged with Diana. Hilary had really run out to get some laurel-leaves to put into the milk that is to make the children's rice for supper, and had there met Jim on his way to the farm that lay beyond the mill over there. They could not resist a hurried laugh over the luncheon, and so had been—discovered.

Her embarrassment, after a moment, gives way to other feelings. Having run lightly in her mind over the facts of the case, as they must seem to Ker, an overpowering sense of mirth makes her its slave. What had he thought? that she was flirting with Jim—poor old Jim—behind the mistress' back?

It seems too funny for anything.

With a view to having her amusement, she pulls out her handkerchief and buries her face in it. To Ker it seems that she is crying through fear, no doubt, he tells himself contemptuously. He feels no pity for her, that absolute untruth about the picking of the laurel-leaves for the cook has disgusted him. It was too *ready a lie!* He watches her as she stands with the handkerchief pressed against her eyes. A very pretty handkerchief of the very finest cambric.

"Poor Diana's, of course," he tells himself.

At this moment 'Bridget' glances at him from behind her shield.

"I hope you won't tell the mistress, sir," says she, in woebegone tones.

"*Is*—Why should I tell her?" says Ker, indignantly. "What I think so scandalous is, that there should be anything to tell her."

"Yes, sir."

She has gone behind the handkerchief again, and her shoulders are shaking. Evidently she is crying *hard*.

"To me," says Ker, a little softened by this evidence of contrition, "your mistress seems both good and kind."

"Oh, yes, she is, sir; she is, indeed. You can't think *how* kind."

"Then I think it abominable of you," spoken sternly, "to betray her in that sort of way."

"I won't do it again, sir. I won't, indeed!"

Her voice is quite stifled now. She is plainly in floods of tears. Ker begins to feel quite sorry for the poor, misguided girl. No doubt Clifford is greatly in fault. This pretty creature has only wanted one word from a friend—a real friend—to show her the iniquity of her ways, and waken her to a sense of her ingratitude toward a kind mistress.

"I'm glad to hear you say that," says he, "and —" He pauses. Somehow Diana's sad fate recurs to him again. How is she to be defended against a bad husband, and this so evidently easily-led girl? "I wish," says

he, impulsively, "that you would *try* to be a good girl."

"I'll try," says Bridget, who now seems suffocating.

"That's right," says Ker, heartily.

"And you won't tell missus, sir?"

"You know that," says he, a little stiffly. Is she only desirous, after all, of getting off scot-free? Her face, now open to his inspection, the handkerchief having been lowered, helps to this idea. It is just as it was before it went behind the flag of distress, lovely, bright, pale-pink.

"I'd like to shake hands with you over that, sir."

The lovely parlour-maid holds out her hand to him and perforce he feels that he must take it.

What a very white and delicate hand! He looks at it as it lies within his own.

"Never does a stroke of work if she can help it evidently. Leaves all to poor Diana, decides he.

He rests his eyes on hers.

"It seems to me, Bridget, that you are not a very industrious girl," says he, austere.

"But why, sir?"

"Your hands. Look at your hands."

Bridget looks at them. She spreads them abroad, indeed, as if examining the offending members with great interest.

"Are they too white, sir?" asks she, at last.

"Much too white."

"You," thoughtfully, "would like them to be *broken*?" She holds them up before Ker's eyes. They look pale as paper in the sunlight.

"I don't know what I want," says Ker, angrily. He turns upon his heel, and leaves her.

## CHAPTER IX.

"She hath a heart as sound as a bell, and her tongue is the clapper. For what her heart thinks her tongue speaks."

"WHAT a time you have been!" cries Diana, meeting her upon the door-steps and drawing her into the breakfast-room. "You saw him?"

"Yes."

"You spoke to him?"

"Oh, yes, yes."

"You—?"

"Were scolded by him!"

Hilary drops into a chair.

"Scolded by him?"

"Actually scolded!"

"I don't believe a word of it," says Diana, who, as a rule, is really the most polite creature in the world.

"Well, you may. He scolded me terribly. So terribly, that I still tremble beneath the wrath of his denunciations. I don't think, Di, I could live out my life with a man whose eloquence lay that way."

"I wish you'd explain," says Diana, anxiously.

"And yet," continues Hilary, following out her own late train of thought as if not hearing her sister, "I *could* like to marry him, if only—for revenge!"

"Nonsense, Hilary! I believe you are laughing. I—Why, what did he say to you?"

"Oh, you shall hear. I hope you'll like it. It's actionable, I think. You should be the one to prosecute."

"I?"

"Yes—he"—here Hilary's voice grows almost unintelligible with laughter—"he accused me of making love to—"

"Who?"

"Jim!"

"Good Heavens! The man is mad," says Diana.

(To be continued.)