



CHAPTER VII.

"The true felicity of life is to be free from perturbations. To enjoy the present without any serious dependence upon the future."

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 will 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 table, 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 demoralise 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 anyone. 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 parlourmaid. *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 parlourmaid.

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 parlourmaid, 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 to 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 suggested a confidential secret existing between them! A secret! Was it a *criminal* secret? The more than confidential walk through the shrubberies says 'yes' to this.

No doubt the assignation there had been arranged beforehand. This would account for Clifford's withdrawal from the drawing-room half an hour ago. He had muttered something to his wife on going, something about a visit to one of the farmers—but of course he was bound to make some excuse, to give an explanation, however vague, for his going.

Of course he knew that this would be a safe opportunity to meet that—that beautiful girl!

Ker would have liked to apply some bad epithet here to the parlourmaid, but somehow it does not come to him. It all savours so strongly of a low intrigue, that that word strikes upon his brain, but it seems impossible to connect the word intrigue with her. Her face rises before him—the eyes so clear—the brow so open—the lovely, happy lips.

And yet, this evidence!

He pulls himself together angrily! Certainly something ought to be done! Diana should be told! But then, who is to tell her? Ker, with a sudden pang, acknowledges that it would be impossible for *him* to draw vengeance down upon the parlourmaid.

At this instant Diana returns.

"I'm so sorry," says she calmly. "But there is no photograph of Hilary to give you."

This is an ambiguous sentence. It might mean anything! "No photograph to give him." She evidently means to convey the idea that there is not one to give. But to Ker, now, with his suspicions thoroughly awakened, it conveys only the thought that

there may be many, but not one for him to see. He expresses a polite regret, says good-by to his hostess, and having been accompanied by her to the door in the friendliest fashion, leaves the house.

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

CHAPTER VIII.

"The upper skies are palest blue,
Mottled with pearl and fretted snow.
With tattered fleece of inky hue
Close overhead the storm-clouds go."

"He's gone?" questions she.

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

"And by nomeans 'cheap,'" says Hilary, who is hopelessly frivolous.

"No. No indeed! All I've suffered! I wouldn't do it again for anything. Hilary, I've counted them up, and I think I told him four *decided* lies. And the worst of it is, I think he suspects something."

"What makes you think that? Nonsense, Di! There was nothing. I'm sure I think I was the best parlourmaid you have had for years."

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

"What?"

"Yes. For your photograph. It was quite natural. Why shouldn't he ask for it? But when he did, I assure you my heart sank. I thought I should have fainted, but providentially some one had removed you."

"Don't talk as if you were an 'Irish invincible,'" says Hilary, with reproach. "I hope I shan't be removed in *their* way. As a 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!" says Diana with admiration. "Nevertheless," descending once more into the lowest depths, "where he went away he left us full of suspicions."

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

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

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

"His head?"

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

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

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

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

She would probably not have overtaken him, however, but for the fact that, finding his hand empty, and therefore awkward, he had discovered the loss of his stick and was returning for it.

(To be continued.)