



CHAPTER VI.—Continued.

"A H!" says Ker. Dina casts an indignant glance at her husband, but Clifford continues his repast with all the air of a saint. "I thought perhaps I was the cause of her staying away from luncheon."

"She never stays away from luncheon. She is at it now," says Clifford imperturbably.

"Oh, I see!" Ker's tone, however, is a little vague. "She is fatigued no doubt after last night's dance, and is still upstairs."

"Is she, Di? I'm not quite sure. I quite thought I saw her a moment ago."

Hilary is at this instant standing just behind him at the sideboard.

"The fact is," says Diana, turning her delightful face that has now a very pink flush upon it to Ker, "that Hilary feels—a little nervous about—about—" She falters and breaks down ignominiously.

"I know," says Ker kindly. "I," laughing a little, "feel rather like that myself. And, of course, a girl— It was a scandalous will. She hates to see me, and I—well, I don't hate to see her, of course—but I am afraid it seems quite impossible that we should ever like one another." That touch of Clifford's about the "strength" of his future wife has modified still further his weak desire to see the wife chosen for him by his dead aunt. "She is taking a little walk, I dare say?"

"Just a stroll," says Clifford gayly. "A mere hint at a walk! About as far as round this table once or twice. She likes short walks. She," pleasantly, "is an awfully lazy girl."

Here there is a clatter of the spoons and forks on the sideboard.

"I don't think Hilary lazy," says Diana quickly. What on earth does Jim mean by prejudicing this most desirable *parti* against Hilary! Really, one can carry a joke too far!

"Yes?" says Ker. He lifts his brows politely. It is plain to Diana that he is already extremely prejudiced against her sister! "I am so glad to hear I have not interfered with her in any way. I was afraid that perhaps she was avoiding me—"

"On the contrary, my dear fellow. I heard her express a determination to see you at once, at all hazards. Nothing it seemed would—"

"Spinach, sir!" says Hilary at his elbow, at this moment, in an awful tone. Ker looks up at her. Was that the soft, low voice that had offered him potatoes?

"No, thank you, Maria!" says Clifford, genially.

Sensation!

Poor Diana's eyes once more seek her plate. Maria! Who is Maria? And he had been so warned about that "Bridget"! As for Hilary, she has retreated to the sideboard, and is standing there, her back turned to the room. Diana, glancing nervously toward her, is disgusted to see that she is shaking with laughter.

Ker is growing confused. He too has heard the later appellation, but, surely, Clifford had called this strangely lovely maid

Bridget only five minuets ago? He has hardly time, however, to wonder at this thing, when the "maid" herself is beside him.

"Claret, sir?"

"Have a bottle of ale, Ker?" says Clifford, hospitably.

"Well, thank you," says Ker, who is so shortly home from India that he still inclines toward that kindly drink.

"Some ale for Mr. Ker, Sarah," says Clifford, with an immovable countenance.

Here Diana breaks into the wondering silence that threatens to envelop them, with quite a rush of conversation. Has Mr. Ker been here—or there? Has he seen this, or that? We all know the conversations in the country where the guests are strangers. Ker answers her delightfully, pleasantly, but all the time his mind is on "Bridget—Maria—Sarah." His eyes are on her too! In fact, he cannot keep them off her! Where has he seen her before! All at once he knows!

She is the girl who had given him that glass of water last night at the ball!

She is trying to give him a glass of ale now, but with difficulty. She has got the corkscrew into the cork, but crookedly—as girls always do—and consequently the cork refuses to come out. Clifford is talking vigorously about nothing in the world, and sees nothing; but Ker, who is watching Hilary, grows gradually frantic. All that trouble for him! All that straining of her back, all that flushing of her face. Why, confound the beer!

He has risen from his seat—he has, indeed, forgotten everything.

"If you will allow me," says he, his tone as careful as though he were talking to—a lady! If he only knew!

"Oh! can't you draw it?" says Clifford, springing to his feet. He had seen Ker's gesture, and is now a little shocked at seeing Hilary's dilemma. "Go on, I'll do it," says he, in a low tone.

Ker hears him. There is something so confidential in the tone, so—beyond friendly, that, for a moment, he stares. Then he looks at Diana, but Diana is breaking the little bit of bread beside her plate into small fragments with the most unconcerned air.

And now Clifford has come back to the table, and the beautiful parlourmaid is pouring the sparkling ale into Ker's glass.

"My wife tells me," says Clifford, lightly, "that you have promised to give us a little of your time once your visit at the Moores' is at an end."

"I shall be very pleased indeed, thank you. I'm rather out of it, in the way of friends now. I've been so long in India. It's awfully kind of you to think of me, and of course—" He hesitates.

"You would like to see Hilary," puts in Clifford. "I can quite understand it. Most fellows would yearn to see the girl their aunt had condemned them to marry. Why can't you see her?"

He stops here, and both Diana and Hilary grow pale. To them it seems a reflection on Mr. Ker's sight! To Ker, providentially, it seems only a reproach. Having given full time for the explosion of his missile, Clifford goes on again:

"I thought, Di, that Hilary was rather determined to appear at luncheon. She certainly said something about it. About attending. Do you remember? She was great on the atten—"

Here Hilary lays down a plate before him with extreme vigour, and Diana begins to talk very fast.

Ker, with difficulty drawing his eyes from the parlourmaid of many names, enters into

the conversation with Diana, but presently Clifford strikes into it too.

"After all you must have seen Hilary," says he. "Last night I mean."

"No. Not at all. You see I came so late."

"But, my dear fellow, you *must* have seen her for all that. She was a most conspicuous figure."

"Conspicuous?"

"Yes. Her dress, you know. She—"

There was a sudden movement behind him.

"Your napkin, sir," says the parlourmaid, handing it to him with angry eyes.

"How was she dressed?" asks Ker.

"Well, you could hardly call it a magnificent costume, but certainly it was remarkable in its own way because so out of the common. And yet," meditatively, "so *in* it. You might see here," a pause that fills his wife with anguish, "and there and everywhere!"

"A rather ambiguous description," says Ker, laughing. "What was Miss Burroughs dressed as?"

"As—"

Here a plate falls with a crash to the floor. The parlourmaid is bending over the fragments.

"Accidents *will* happen," says Clifford, shrugging his shoulders amiably. "We were talking of Hilary, were we not? She has her little faults, you see."

"Cheese, sir?" says a voice at his elbow that *ought* to have reduced him to dust.

"No, thank you, Henrietta!" returns he blandly.

After this!—

Diana rises hastily from the table, and with a hurried smile to Ker, leaves the room. She is quickly followed by Hilary, and meeting in the safe seclusion of the drawing-room, they fall into each other's arms and give way to wild mirth!

"Oh! but it was too bad of him," says Diana. "He might have warned us, given us a hint. But to go on like that! Hilary, when he spoke of your 'attending,' I felt as though I *should* have to get up and go away."

"That wasn't half as bad as his attempt at the betrayal of my dress at the dance."

"Betrayal! He would never have betrayed you!"

"I suppose not. But yet—*hush!* Are they coming? I must hurry away and see about afternoon tea. I suppose he'll stay for that."

"Poor darling, you must be tired!"

"Tired!" Hilary throws out her arms tragically. "When it is for *him*!"

"Oh, Hilary!" anxiously. "That reminds me. What do you think of him? He is good-looking, isn't he?"

"You forget I saw him last night."

"Well! But now in daylight! I think one should always judge a person by daylight. And you—?"

"Think he looks just the same as he did at midnight."

"But Hilary, dearest, you can't forget—"

"That he said he should find it impossible ever to like me! No, I shan't forget *that*!"

(To be continued.)

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