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A Scheme That Failed

Illustrating a Romantic Trick Not to Be Ignored

By E. A. MITCHEL

Phoebe and I having become engaged, I considered it the proper thing for us to call on my aunt to receive her congratulations. My aunt never made calls herself and was fond of the age of either of us. Besides, it was understood that I was down in her will for the principal part of her fortune. Phoebe said that she would rather take a whipping than go to be inspected, but there was no way out of it, and she consented.

We had not long been settled before my aunt said to us: "There is a party of mine, Mabel Maryweather, whom I have brought to visit me for the season, and I wish to see her engaged before her return to her country home, where she seldom sees a man and consequently has no matrimonial opportunities. Tom Singleton has been attentive to her, and I believe that for some time they have been on the border of an engagement. I wish



"YOU FORGET THAT WE ARE JUST ENGAGED."

to bring the affair to a crisis as soon as possible, for spring is not far off. When the season closes I go for my annual trip southward and must send Mabel home.

"Now, I wish you two to help me in a little scheme I have in my mind to bring Tom and Mabel together. It is for me to get the four of you here, and you, John, I wish to be attentive to Mabel, while you, Miss — (I mean Phoebe), devote yourself to Tom. Each of the two incipient lovers will be frightened for fear of the loss of the other, and the match will be assured. Of course they are not to know that you two are engaged."

Both Phoebe and I received this proposition with a frown.

"But, Mrs. Perkins," Phoebe began, "you forget that we are just engaged, and—"

"Good gracious, Aunt Caroline, do you suppose you can make a dummy lover out of a man who has recently become a real one?"

"Now, don't be silly," scolded my aunt. "It is because you are engaged that I have selected you for my purpose. You both know that what situation you give elsewhere is simply to please me. You understand that the whole affair, so far as you are concerned, is the same as personating a character on the stage. The consequence is that there will be no jealousy on your part; you are simply to excite it in the others."

"Certainly not," said Phoebe. "What I was going to say was that, just having become engaged, why—"

"So long that it was necessary for me to help Phoebe out, I broke in. "What Phoebe means, Aunt Caroline, is that, having just become engaged, we might forget our parts and mix the thing all up."

Phoebe said nothing more. My aunt looked annoyed. I must keep the peace.

"Oh, we'll do what we can in the premises, aunt," I said. "Won't we, Phoebe?" I gave Phoebe a look as much as to say, "Leave it to me." So she said, "I suppose anything that my aunt wished would be cheerfully accorded to by her."

Everybody being satisfied, my aunt said to us that she would expect us to dinner on the following Wednesday, when we would meet Miss Maryweather and Mr. Singleton, and the curtain was to rise on the play.

On that first meeting my aunt assigned me to take Miss Maryweather to dinner, and Singleton was chosen to escort Phoebe.

I was between two fires. If I did not appear to be attracted by Miss Maryweather I would displease my aunt. If I did I would displease Phoebe. On one of these women hung a fortune which I had been brought up to consider my own in time. On the other hung my life's happiness. I considered to please my

aud. If I displeased my fiancée possibly the matter could be made up.

In order to feel free to act naturally I called to look at either my aunt or Phoebe, but gazed straight into the eyes of Miss Maryweather. I was quite in my element. The girl was pretty and attractive, and I confess that, as play actors have it, I began to feel the part. I talked a little about with my tongue upon ordinary topics, meanwhile saying tender things with my eyes. One trait in my character is when I set out to do a thing to do it for all it is worth. I began by attempting to make Singleton believe he was in danger of losing his girl and ended with the best job of love-making in the presence of others that I have ever accomplished.

What was going on at the table I didn't know. My aunt's voice I seldom heard; Phoebe's voice I did not hear at all. Singleton was evidently keeping up the conversation.

What I did not know then I learned afterward to my horror. Phoebe's eyes were upon me all the while, her expression growing every minute more lowering. My aunt observed both Phoebe and me. Singleton made frequent efforts to hold Phoebe's attention and, failing, finally gave it up to make random remarks to the hostess. I held Miss Maryweather's attention so closely that she was only partially aware of the strained conditions existing between the other three. As the dinner proceeded Phoebe's brows contracted more and more; the corners of her mouth were squared; her cheeks were red, and her eyes flashed fire. The worst of it was that I, ignorant of the situation, was piling on fuel every moment.

It must have been a great relief to Mr. Singleton and possibly my aunt when the dinner was finished and we arose from the table. I cast a glance at Phoebe, but at the moment she had turned and I did not see her face. I saw my aunt's and noticed that it was impassive. When we reached the drawing room Phoebe sitting with her back to me. Since I had become interested in the work my aunt had assigned me I continued to pursue it for all it was worth. My aunt suggested that I take Miss Maryweather to see the plants in the conservatory, and I did so. We remained there some time, and when we returned I saw my aunt chatting with Singleton. Phoebe was nowhere to be seen. I asked my aunt what had become of her.

"She has gone home," was the reply.

"Gone home?"

"Yes. She said she had a headache and telephoned for a carriage. She told me to say to you that since you were so pleasantly occupied she would not disturb you."

I knew that a bomb had burst which I had not heard. Miss Maryweather said something to Singleton, and, taking his arm, they walked away together, leaving me with my aunt, who told me what had occurred, finishing with the following announcement:

"And now, John, I have something to say to you. You know that I have provided for you in my will. In fact, I have left you the principal part of what I possess. I shall tomorrow add a codicil that if you marry this girl to whom you are engaged your share is to go to Peter Hickson."

"Good gracious!"

"I mean what I say."

I was presented from any further response by the return of Singleton and Miss Maryweather. Singleton said:

"We fear that we have been the innocent cause of a misunderstanding. Possibly it may tend to mend matters if we had intended to defer till just before Miss Maryweather's return home. Mine then a week ago I proposed to her. She has just given me a favorable reply, a response which she says she intended to give from the first. She hopes our engagement will dispense any hard feeling that has arisen this evening."

"I do hope, Mrs. Perkins," said Miss Maryweather, "that if anything has occurred during the evening to displease you you will pass it over and forget it for my sake. You have been so kind to me and I have been made so happy that I can't bear to have it all spoiled at the last moment."

My aunt's object having been accomplished, though her plan of its accomplishment was both unnecessary and a failure, she was much mollified. It remained to be seen how far her change of feeling would affect Phoebe. Furthermore it remained to be seen whether I would be able to effect a reconciliation between Phoebe and myself.

Before going to sleep that night I thought out my plan of procedure. I was still between two fires, my aunt and my fiancée. If I could not soften my aunt toward Phoebe I had better not soften Phoebe toward myself. I resolved to appear angry toward the latter till I could placate the former toward her. Miss Maryweather proved a blessing. She knew well all that had occurred and at once learned from my aunt her scheme. She besetted the good lady and at last won her over to a promise not to disturb me if I married Phoebe. So far so good. I followed up the advantage by telling my aunt that on no account, after what had happened, would I consent to marry Phoebe. This put the dear woman in a position of having by her scheme scheme torn apart a pair of lovers. She sent for Phoebe and told her my position. Instead of having to bend the knee to my fiancée she sent me an apology.

And so the matter was made up between us. My aunt became very fond of Phoebe and when we were married gave me out of my inheritance a house to live in.

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