

The Sixth Proposal.

By Charles M. Mathews.

WHEN a young man has asked a girl at least six times to marry him, and she has every time in what may be termed the uncertain negative—which is to say that she has put him off without positively refusing him—the man, even as good-tempered and easy-going as Peter Findlay, may be forgiven if he should raise the siege of such a Laodicean fortress of a heart and march on to seek a campaign where the issue is likely to be more definite.

As a matter of fact, however, although the action taken by Peter Findlay might have been so construed by an observer, the person most nearly concerned, the young lady herself, regarded it as a directly opposite action. Gazing with surprise and with a rather piqued interest, such as she had never felt before, at the broad, rather stolid features of the young man, she said:

"So, Peter, you have hoisted your colors at last!"

"I don't understand you," said Peter Findlay.

At this Mildred Sommerville slightly shrugged her shoulders, which gleamed very fair through the meshes of her summer costume.

"Figures of speech aren't very much in your line, are they, Peter?"

"No, they are not," answered Peter simply, letting the scoff of her tone pass by. "What do you mean, in plain words?"

"Simply that you have taken the initiative for once, Peter, and struck out a line for yourself."

Findlay flushed through his deep tan.

"I have always been in the habit of following my own paths, except in my dealings with you, and now I have removed the exception."

"Indeed?" said the girl, with a laugh that was not altogether pleasant or natural. "Then I pity you, for you have entered a lonely path!"

"I can't help that, Mildred, if it must be so," said Findlay, and then there was silence between them.

Both stared at the sea, a blue, rough sea, tumbling in waves that streamed with white foam, lashed by a warm southeast gale. Findlay looked at once downcast and determined. The girl seemed serene; but inwardly a storm raged in her heart, even as through this bright, sun-drenched day, beneath the blue and almost cloudless sky, the wind of tempest blew. She was at once amazed, resentful, and, in a strange mood that she would not heed, even pleased.

Man and girl were sitting in a corner of the deep veranda of a summer cottage on a Massachusetts island, sheltered from the wind, and apart from a talkative group of young people who were watching a double-reefed schooner beating against the gale.

So snug and solitary was the corner that Peter Findlay, who saw no reason why he should not make love on a veranda in broad day ten feet from other people, had taken advantage of his tete-a-tete with Mildred Sommerville to put his sixth proposal—almost in the same tone, or so it seemed to the girl, as if he asked her to accept a bonbon. But there was no lightness in Findlay's offer; a great and deep seriousness animated and urged it forth. And to his few, plain words the girl had said:

"Why, Peter! And to think that there is a full moon tonight, and we were going to watch the breakers at Cape Blair!"

Findlay made an abrupt gesture of annoyance, and drew his sturdy form straight.

"Please don't laugh at this matter,"

he said almost sternly. "You have done too much of that already. You know that I love you. I ask you to be my wife, Mildred; will you answer me?"

His tone aroused emotion in the girl that she struggled to suppress. She had determined from the outset of their conversation to be perverse with Findlay. He had positively shouldered young Arthur Lyle away from her just when her talk with Lyle had become interesting, and such uncouthness ought to be punished. Besides, she was used to teasing her big, stolid lover, who had humbled himself before her dainty feet for so long. And she said:

"Oh, Peter, do please wait for that moon tonight!"

Findlay's face grew flushed and stern; his self-possession deserted him. He stammered, according to his wont when deeply moved, as he said:

"Nev—never mind the—the moon. I'm not going to be laughed at. I'll never say what—I've said today again until you—you yourself change things and tell me that I may!"

Mildred Sommerville's face flushed into scarlet, through which her eyes looked indignation, and something of fear, too, and utter surprise; but fighting hard to maintain the tone she had assumed all through the episode, she made the remark recorded above:

"So, Peter, you have hoisted your colors at last!"

During the long silence that ensued, the girl arose. It was impossible to keep up the verbal duel; she found her rapier of flippancy growing heavy in her defense; and her heart reproached her now for its use. Poor Peter was no fencer; too clumsy of hand was he. Suddenly she longed to say something to him in an honest vein; surely he deserved it. But what should she say? Tell him that—that she would strike her own colors, and say that he might speak again? No, she could not do that. Tell him honestly that he must never speak again? No, nor that—the words would not come. For perhaps the first time since she had known Peter Findlay—and they had played as children together—Mildred hesitated before him.

The voice of Arthur Lyle furnished a welcome relief from her dilemma.

"Oh, Peter, Mildred, do come out of that corner. We're all going for a swim; see the surf, it's glorious! Are you coming?"

"Yes, yes, indeed—I am, any way!" cried Mildred eagerly.

"How about you, Peter?" asked Lyle, a handsome boy, an athlete, a sparkling talker, popular with man and maid.

"Well, I don't know," said Findlay, in his slow fashion; "I hardly think it's safe, do you? I mean for girls. The surf is pretty heavy, and this gale is increasing. There's going to be rain before long."

His words excited laughter, and Mildred sent an almost scornful glance at him. How like him his words were—he was always so cautious and careful and slow!

"Oh, don't be afraid, Mr. Findlay!" cried a laughing girl; "Mr. Lyle or Bob Jackson will pull you out if you get too far!"

They were already in motion toward the beach.

"Don't promise too much, Jennie!" said Lyle. "Peter's a pretty heavy hand; but I guess he can look after himself."

"I can, Lyle," said Peter.

He followed the others. Since Mildred was determined on bathing, he would bathe, too. Mildred was walking by Lyle's side, around whom the other girls were clustering, and he was telling them of the surf bathing he had had at other beaches that summer.

"This isn't a circumstance to some of the beaches," he was declaring.



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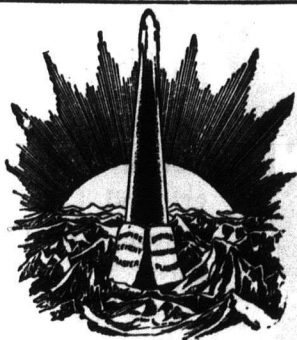
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