

of tense and thrilling silence, broken only by vague murmurs of profound and respectful sympathy.

"May I go on?" she inquired faintly.

"Please! Please!" they cried.

"You can see to what I am leading up?"

"We hardly dare to guess," they answered.

"I have only one alternative. I—I—perceive I must marry."

"You must," the six chorused unanimously.

Then with one accord they rose and formally proposed to her, all except Jack Leslie. They had to be quick and brief for fear they should be forestalled by somebody else.

"Be a marchioness," said the Marquis, the fraction of an instant ahead of Marshpool.

"Be my countess," snapped the latter, coming in a good second. And so on.

Then they stood and waited.

Jack Leslie retained his seat, and helped himself to a glass of port with exaggerated deliberation.

II.

"Oh, you are marvellously kind, but please don't stand," she cried; "I am sure any one of you would make me an efficient protector. I like you all, but I can't marry you all. Oh, do sit down, Marquis. If you don't, I shall have to stand up, too. Thank you. Thank you, Lord Marshpool. There, now we are comfortable again. I had no intention of provoking this generous outburst. I am overwhelmed. You do me too much honour, indeed you do."

There was another spell of silence, until the Marquis with a comprehensive bow to his fellow-guests said:

"May I speak for you all?"

"You may," they said. It seemed they had reached a deadlock, and all were glad and relieved that the Marquis should take the lead.

"Don't stand up," said Miss Milner quickly, as the Marquis once more prepared to rise.

"Thank you, I won't," he answered. He cleared his throat, and then: "Are we to understand you are willing to marry one of us who are here?"

"Yes," she said.

"But you feel unequal to making a choice?"

"I do. When personal merit is so equal, to choose one would be making an invidious distinction. Oh, why did I ever meet you all? Why didn't I meet only one? It is a terrible predicament."

"Pray do not allow yourself to be needlessly distressed," said the Marquis. "We will extricate you from your predicament. It is a very simple matter. We will draw lots for you."

"I am not sure that I like the plan," said Miss Milner quietly, and suddenly looked much less helpless, though perhaps even more dazlingly adorable.

"Don't you think it savours a little of disrespect?" she replied with decision.

"Then we'll abandon it and try to devise some other method," said the Marquis with grave courtesy.

"No doubt your instinct is right, no doubt. I can conceive I should dislike to be drawn lots for myself. I regret having suggested the idea. We all regret it."

"It was my fault, Marquis, my fault," she murmured disconsolately.

"Can you suggest any way out of the impasse yourself, dear lady?" asked Trevor Tressingham.

Then was broached a suggestion which for passing novelty had never been dreamed by any present.

"What do you say to tossing up for her, we might go odd man out," said Vincent Chudleigh genially. The chilling and stony silence in which his remark was received caused him to flush as red as a turkey-cock.

"There is certainly something in what Sir Vincent proposes," she said with one of her most winning smiles.

The others were positively aghast.

"My dear Miss Milner, you couldn't possibly allow yourself to be tossed up for," observed the Marquis in dignified horror.

"Appalling," said the Earl.

"No, I should decline to be tossed for, but Sir Vincent's notion of going odd man out has suggested another idea to me. By odd man out I understand a process of elimination which goes on till only one is left in. Am I correct, Marquis?"

"I believe so, but really it is so long since I—"

"Very well, let us try to devise some process of elimination which will leave only one," continued Miss Milner with pleading diffidence. "Who will start it? Who will set an example by eliminating himself? Who will be the first to retire

from the contest? Who will perform an act of self-sacrifice, if I may dare to call it so, and deprive me of the privilege of becoming his wife?"

She looked helplessly round at them all.

"I won't," replied the Marquis promptly; "here's a chance for you, Marshpool."

"Not much, thank you for nothing," said Marshpool.

"You don't catch me," said Lord William.

"Nor me," cried Lord Charles.

"I flatly decline to retire," said Tressingham, and Sir Vincent electrified them all by saying he was — if he would.

"Then there is no nobly disinterested soul amongst you?"

"Not to that extent, Miss Milner; you are trying us too high, you are putting too great a strain upon us," said the Earl, and the others at once agreed with him. "I couldn't in conscience do it," he went on, "for I feel that you would be much happier with me than with Hereward, or Winton, or Tressingham, or Chudleigh. A man can't go against his conscience."

The rest spoke to the same effect.

"Oh, please, please," cried Miss Milner, who had been sitting with her hands pressed tightly over her ears for the last five minutes. "Oh, please be quiet. I shall never forgive myself for having made you quarrel. It is my fault. I ought never to have made my unfortunate suggestion. Oh, do please stop talking, and try to be friends again."

And then it was that Miss Milner made the brilliant suggestion that won instant approval from everyone.

"Mr. Leslie, I want seven sheets of paper, seven envelopes, and seven lead pencils," she announced peremptorily. "Kindly obtain them for me."

Leslie went out and presently returned.

"Now distribute them, please."

He distributed them to each of her guests, placing the seventh sheet of paper, the seventh envelope and the seventh pencil beside her.

"I don't want these."

"You said seven."

"I am perfectly aware of what I said. These are for you. Be good enough to take them away and return to your chair."

He snatched up the articles and sat down.

"What's the game, Miss Milner?" inquired the irrepressible Major.

"Listen, please. I can't be drawn lots for, and I won't be tossed up for, and since none of you will cede your chance in favour of the rest, there is nothing for it but to decide the matter by the vote of the majority. I ask you to write down two names; first, the name of the man you consider will make me the best husband; then, underneath the first name, an alternative choice, the name of the man you consider next most suitable. I must request you to consider yourselves pledged to secrecy. Insert your vote in the envelope, and close the envelope. Mr. Leslie will bring the envelopes to me. I promise to abide by the decision of the majority. Is that clear? Do you agree?"

"I presume we may vote for ourselves?" said Charles Hereward.

"You may vote exactly as you please, but you must write two names, two different names."

The situation was most unusual. It contained all the elements of comedy and many of serious drama. To many of those present it must have suggested the famous casket scene in "The Mer-

chant of Venice" when foreign princes sued for the hand of Portia.

"You will examine the votes yourself?" asked Tressingham.

"Naturally."

"And when will you announce the result?"

"At once. I will send for the successful candidate to come to me."

"And the rest of us?"

"I will say good-night to the rest of you now." She rose, and the Marquis sprang to the door and held it open for her.

"Good-night to all but one," she said, and then she was gone.

III.

"Here you are, Leslie, here's mine." The Marquis licked his envelope, and stuck it down.

"And mine—and mine."

It had taken them much longer to vote than might have been expected. The first name had presented no difficulty, and they had all scribbled it off in a moment, but the second name had required a deal of thinking. In contrast to the rest, Jack Leslie finished his voting in about a second and a half.

"Don't be long, Leslie, we shall be anxious to know our fate," said the Marquis on a note of forced cheerfulness.

Leslie replied with a nod, collected the envelopes and went out.

The six men sat grimly silent, affecting to be unconscious of each other's presence.

The minutes dragged along with painful silence. It was like enduring lingering torture. Five minutes elapsed. Then ten. The strain became intolerable. At the end of ten minutes the Marquis spoke to the Earl.

"A feeling of very natural delicacy would, I think, prevent Miss Milner from announcing immediately the name of the happy man," he said, with a valiant attempt at a smile. "We must not be impatient. One hesitates to criticise one's hostess."

"Particularly as she may be one's own future wife," struck in the Earl.

"Certainly," continued the Marquis, with a bow to Hereward. "Certainly, but perhaps I may say this much, charming and gifted creature as Miss Milner is, dowered with every attraction, physical, mental, and material; one cannot hide from oneself that in matters of real difficulty she is extraordinarily helpless. What could be more strange than the present situation? I admit that we are all most eligible husbands. I admit the hardship of having to choose between us. Yet most women would feel some preference for one of us. If she wanted mere rank she would choose me. If she wanted rank with a spice of recklessness she would choose Marshpool. If she were fascinated by brilliant intellect she would choose Hereward. If personal beauty appealed to her she would choose Winton. If subtlety of wit and the prospect of playing a leading role in high politics possessed attractions for her she would undoubtedly choose Tressingham. If she were caught by the glamour of military heroism she would infallibly choose Chudleigh. It is very odd when you come to think of it that all these advantages weigh with her so equally that she can't make up her mind between us. It is a very curious case, a very curious case of a very helpless woman, if I may say so without offence."

It was a finely discriminative speech.

"I agree," said the Earl, "her helplessness is phenomenal, but don't you think that under the circumstances it is merely an additional charm?"

"I think so," said Lord William firmly.

"Oh, pray don't misunderstand me, I am not disparaging her," said the Marquis hastily. "I am in the highest degree sensible to the additional charm she derives from her helplessness. I go so far as to say that I should admire her less if she were—were different."

They all assented to this view, and then fell to silent rumination of such an extremely interesting point.

"Do you know we've been sitting here for upwards of an hour?" said the Marquis suddenly.

They had realised it, but they had been trying hard not to.

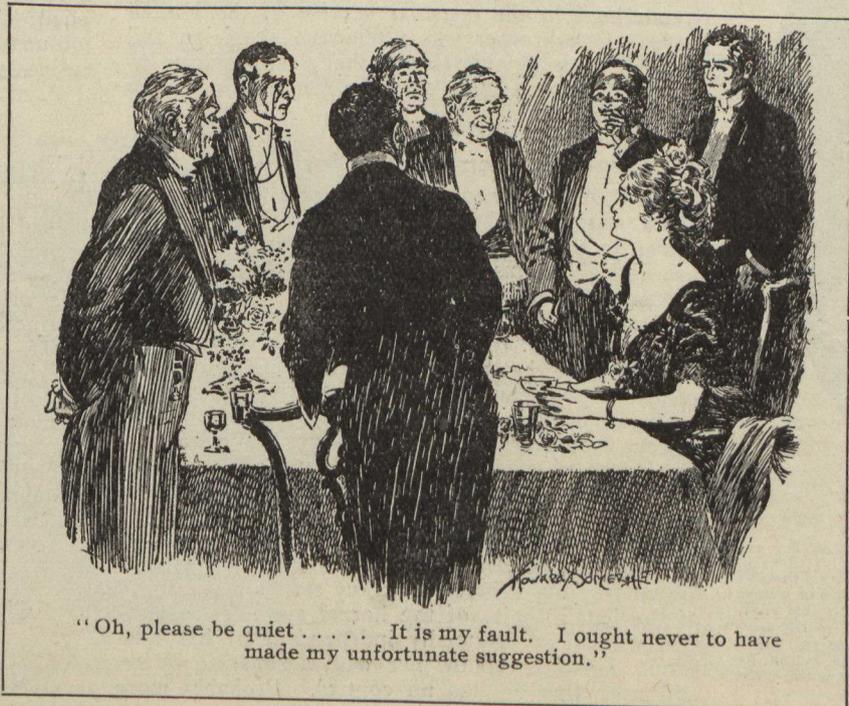
Tressingham rang the bell with some violence.

The butler and four footmen trooped in with surprising promptitude.

"Will you request Miss Milner to let us know how much longer she expects us to remain here?"

"Miss Milner will not appear again

CONCLUDED ON PAGE 30.



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