

### A RIDICULOUS MUDDLE.

#### How It Came Near Separating Two Loving Hearts.

Miss Lucy Meadows had two admirers, each of whom endeavored to court her while the other tried to do the same thing. The experience is not uncommon, but it is always exciting.

It is scarcely necessary to say that Lucy was like most other girls and enjoyed the excitement. At heart she was an honest maiden, but she was addicted to harmless flirtation. She gave each suitor a little encouragement, but not too much, and excused her conduct on the ground that she did not yet know which she liked the better.

In fairness to our heroine it must be confessed that her excuse was not a bad one, for her admirers happened to be as nearly equally desirable as they could be. Each was fairly good looking, each could make himself quite agreeable, each had average intelligence, each had a good business and attended to it in a commendable manner, and neither had any glaringly bad habits. By anxious mothers and prudent fathers they were both considered good catches for daughters.

To the young men the double courtship was not so pleasant as it was to Lucy. They were often on the tenterhooks and regarded each other with jealous eyes whenever they met. But fate had decreed that their charmer also should have her feelings not slightly disturbed after she had for some time contributed to their torment without any compensations of conscience.

Her punishment was meted out to her one winter evening. She had been to the theater with Jacob Walters, the suitor who at that time was to a small extent more in favor than his rival. The couple were strolling along watching for a horse car on which they could ride to Lucy's home. While they were chatting to their mutual satisfaction they became involved in a jostling crowd that was pouring out of another theater. The girl became separated from Mr. Walters, and hurrying forward in search of him in the indistinct light, found him, as she supposed, and linked her arm in his with that confident and affectionate touch which men like to receive from those whom they adore. She walked contentedly in silence for about a minute, when for the first time she raised her eyes to the face of her escort. She gave a little scream and quickly drew her arm from that of her companion. He was not Jacob Walters, but John Hutchinson, her other admirer.

"Oh, excuse me; I did not mean to."

"No excuse is needed. I am delighted, I assure you," replied Hutchinson, who had concluded from the charming manner in which she had attached herself to him that she intended at last to show a marked preference for him.

"Oh, what shall I do! How shall I explain my conduct?" she continued, not heeding his words.

"No explanation is necessary. Tell me," and he bent over her eagerly, "were you not about to reward my devotion when you were frightened by your own boldness. Oh, tell me there is hope!"

He attempted to place her arm in his and to walk as they had done when they met.

"You must not; you do not understand," she cried, as with a desperate effort she extricated herself from his grasp.

"What does all this mean?" was the inquiry in excited tones.

Jacob Walters was again by her side after an anxious search.

The rivals glared at each other. "It is none of your business," shouted Hutchinson, who proposed to show his sweetheart how doughty a champion he could be.

"You must not quarrel," exclaimed the girl as she ran between the angry men. Overwhelmed with distress, and confused in her mind, she extended her hands toward Walters.

"Forgive me," she cried. "It is all a dreadful mistake."

"Do you suppose I am a fool? You deserted me to go to my rival when you were bound by every rule of politeness to allow me to escort you home. Your conduct is amazing."

"Your language is amazing, also. I desire you to understand that I shall protect this young lady from insult," said Hutchinson with dignity.

Lucy turned toward him and said: "I beg of you to keep still. You do not know what you are talking about."

"Please enlighten me, then."

"Mr. Walters was escorting me home from the theater; we became separated in the crowd just before I met you. I searched for him and when I took your arm I thought you were he. You were the last person whom I desired to see under the circumstances."

"Thank you, I shall endeavor to avoid meet you hereafter."

Lucy saw her mistake, but knew not how to rectify it. Her intentions were good, but in her confused attempt to make a satisfactory explanation she had been guilty of a woeful lack of tact. Naturally at this disagreeable moment she turned to her other lover for sympathy.

"You at least must understand the situation and must know that I am not to blame," she cried, in appealing tones.

"I am not satisfied," he replied, gloomily.

pose that each of us shall solemnly promise the other never again to seek her hand in marriage."

"Your proposal suits me exactly."

They shook hands earnestly and vowed again and again to be faithful to their pledge. They were as friendly now as they had been hostile a short time before.

Meanwhile Miss Meadows also cherished anger. She resolved never to forgive either of her admirers. But at the end of a week her mood was somewhat conciliatory. She reflected that the young men must by that time realize that they had made fools of themselves and that she had done nothing of which she need be ashamed. She expected that they would soon seek her presence in a sheepish manner and she was prepared to show a gracious demeanor and to let bygones be bygones. But weeks went by and they did not call. She met them several times and they hurried by her and returned her greetings with cold, formal bows only. It was now her turn to be very unhappy, especially as it was revealed to her that she did greatly care for one of her former admirers, viz., Mr. Hutchinson. She knew now how to decide between the two, but alas, the opportunity to make such a decision might never return.

Mr. Hutchinson also became uneasy. He was astonished to find how deep his love for Lucy was and how futile were his efforts to overcome it. He bitterly regretted his pledge, but as he himself had been the first to propose the compact, he could blame no one but himself for making it and was under the strongest kind of an obligation to keep it.

The painful situation was soon further complicated by an act of Miss Meadows. She began to encourage a middle-aged widower named Slawson, who had long desired to show her marked attentions, but who had been prevented from doing so by her cold demeanor toward him while his two younger rivals were in favor. He was now filled with inexpressible delight because of the winning smiles which the charming maiden for the first time bestowed upon him, and he was so elated because of his unexpected success that he did not stop to inquire why she treated him with a cordiality that she had never before manifested. But unlike the infatuated Mr. Slawson, Lucy was not dominated by sentiment alone. She was as wise as a serpent, while seeming to be as harmless as a dove. She hoped that her gracious treatment of the widower would render Mr. Hutchinson jealous and cause him again to seek her society for the purpose of preventing, if possible, a third admirer from winning her affections.

The maneuver was skillful, but it only brought about a part of what she desired, and even of that part she was ignorant. Mr. Hutchinson was made desperately jealous, but the agreement with Walters, which, of course, was unknown to Lucy, prevented him from endeavoring to become reconciled to her.

Two months elapsed. Seemingly Hutchinson was determined to maintain his indifferent demeanor. Miss Meadows was discouraged. She believed that the young man did not reciprocate her love for him and she began to think that the best thing she could do would be to marry Mr. Slawson. To be sure, he was a widower twenty years older than herself, and had two daughters, each of whom was not much younger than she was, but he was also wealthy and lived in a fine house. Moreover, she rather liked him, and she adored her. She might do worse than to accept him as a husband.

At this critical time Hutchinson, unable longer to simulate indifference, resolved to tell Walters how he felt, although he feared that his former rival might still love the girl as much as he himself did. When the two young men next met Hutchinson, growing red in the face, broached the subject that was uppermost in his mind.

"I want to ask you," he said, in a blunt and desperate way, "whether you are willing to release me from keeping the compact by which each of us agreed not again to seek to marry Miss Meadows? I confess that I now love her more than I ever did. I suppose you may love her, too. I would like to be free to court the girl again, and of course if I had that privilege, you, too, would again have a right to show her attentions, provided you desired so to do. Let the better man win, I say, and if either of us is to win we must be lively, I tell you, for the widower is making alarming progress in the improvement of his opportunities, unless I am much deceived."

Walters laughed as the other spoke and looked at him in a peculiar way.

"I release you from your promise. Go ahead and may you have good luck."

Hutchinson was much surprised. "Can it be that you are no longer interested in Miss Meadows?" he asked, doubtfully.

"I am no longer interested."

"May I ask the reason?"

"Yes; confidentially I will tell you that I am now in love with another girl."

"I am so glad. I hope she will reciprocate your affection and that you will be very happy," said Hutchinson, as he ferretly shook the hand of his companion.

"She has already accepted me."

"Good."

At two o'clock in the afternoon of that day Mr. Hutchinson stood before Miss Meadows in the parlor of her home.

"Am I too late?" he asked.

"No; but you would have been one hour from now."

"What do you mean?"

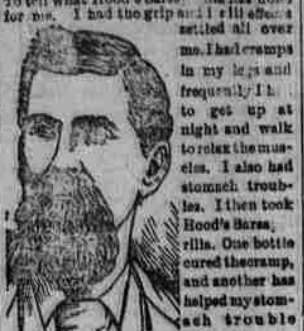
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"What will you say?"

"Had you not called, my answer would be yes."

"What will it be now that I have called?"

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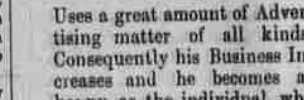
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JOHN H. MARKS, Administrator. SAM'L M. GARLAND, Atty. for Adm'r. Estate of Nancy Marks, deceased.

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