

## INDECISION OF ANGELIA.

BY HARRIET MOORE.

"It's perfectly absurd, Angela! You can't go on treating two men in this way. You must know which of them you'd rather marry!"

Angela Morse sat on the edge of a chair in the study to which her father had summoned her—a politely attentive and decidedly attractive little figure.

"But I don't," she said, raising a pair of ingenuous blue eyes. "If I did it would be so simple, except that I'd hurt the other one's feelings. I think Frank Curtis and Arthur Brace are two of the nicest men I ever met!"

Mr. Morse fidgeted irritably with his iron-gray moustache.

"That's all very well," he said; "but you're making perfect fools of the three of us. Curtis tells me he wants to marry you, and I say I've no objection, provided you are of the same mind. And then a day or two later Brace gives me to understand that Curtis tells him he—Curtis—has no right to prevent him from paying his addresses to you!"

"That's quite true," said Angela, encouragingly; "he hadn't."

"But you hadn't refused Curtis?" said the bewildered father.

"Why, no," said Angela. "I haven't refused Arthur Brace either—exactly. I just said I didn't know. 'You see, father,' she added, as Mr. Morse gave a sharp, impatient exclamation, 'it's like this. I like them both quite as much, I think, as I'll ever like any men. And I can't imagine anything nicer than hunting and motoring in the country with Frank; but when I go out to lunch or a matinee with Arthur, I think town's just the jolliest place in the world. It's such a pity one can't take them for alternate six months, like summer and winter residences.'"

"Look here, Angela," he said, "I don't mean to be hard upon you. You've had a queer bringing up for a girl—just Kelly and myself, and no mother to look after you; and it is natural, perhaps, that you're a bit—well—individual in some things. And, goodness knows, I'm not wanting you off my hands or anything of that sort. But when two decent, straightforward fellows come and ask me for my daughter, I'm hanged if they sha'n't have an answer one way or the other. So, mark me, you accept one of them a month from today, or else the matter's off as regards either for good and all. Do you understand?"

"Yes, father," said Angela. "I really will try," she added, penitently, as she got up from her chair.

"I should advise it," said Mr. Morse, grimly. "Just tell Kelly I want to speak to him, will you?"

Angela withdrew without further remark. She met Dr. Kelly in the passage. He was a tall, clean-shaven, rather taciturn man of about 40, and formed the third member of a somewhat incongruous household. Fifteen years before, when Mr. Morse and his orphaned child were staying in a hotel in a South Coast watering place, public sympathy was aroused by an accident to a pleasure boat, in which a young bride of a week lost her life. In the half-dazed bridegroom he had recognized an old college friend, and carried him off then and there to his own house in town. And when James Kelly spoke, at length, of future plans, both men had so far abandoned reserve as to admit that they should not dislike each other's permanent company. Apparently, the pleasurable emotion had lasted ever since. Certainly the idea of separation never occurred now, either to the successful stockbroker or the busy doctor, and would not have been entertained if it had.

"Father wants you," said Angela, a little breathlessly, as she almost ran into the doctor on leaving the study. "I didn't know if you'd come in."

"Just," said the doctor. "Colder than ever. Where is he—in here?"

"I suppose it was bound to come," said the doctor, enigmatically, when he had finished. "Both very decent fellows?"

"That's it. That's exactly it. Position, character, means, everything. I can't have 'em played with. It's almost incredible, but the child persists she doesn't know which she wants. I've given her one month from today to decide in, and then I put my foot down."

"Ah!" said the doctor, glancing involuntarily at his friend's ample, square-toed boot. "Well, if you don't want me any—"

"But I do," interrupted Mr. Morse. "I thought perhaps you'd speak to her. She generally seems to think a good deal of what you say."

"I?" said the doctor, in wonderment. "My dear chap, I—I don't believe in interfering in that sort of thing!"

"Well, if somebody doesn't I don't believe she'll know her own mind a bit better a month hence. You see, a word from an outsider, so to speak"—Mr. Morse brought out the word with a half-apologetic little laugh—"often has much more weight than anything a relation says."

"But what d'you want me to say?" asked the doctor, uncomfortably.

"Why—er—get at the state of her feelings somehow. You're used to questioning women, and all that. It's all rot, you know, she must have a preference!"

"But—why, it's seldom enough I even see her alone. She'd think it odd."

"Nonsense! Get her to drive you out, or something of that sort; and then give her a piece of your mind!" said Mr. Morse, with growing, easy cheerfulness.

That night, with the conversation stirring uncomfortably in his mind, he asked Angela if she would care to drive him six miles into the country in his dogcart on the following afternoon to visit a distant patient. Angela accepted with alacrity.

She was ready to time next day—a neat, compact little figure in a fur coat and dark toque, with becoming touches of scarlet. The doctor, as he came down the steps to see her rubbing a soft cheek caressingly against his horse's still softer nose, felt a sudden apprehension of the attitude of the two men who preferred suspense to a definite refusal. Then he frowned as he thought of the task before him.

"Poor little girl!" he said, involuntarily to himself.

Angela turned brightly at his approach.

"Be quick!" she said. "Don't let's miss a minute of this glorious afternoon!"

"Up you get, then!" said the doctor, smiling to note that both his proffered assistance and that of the waiting groom were disdained as she pulled herself adroitly to her seat. "Tisn't often I'm a gentleman at large. That'll do, Harris, thank you."

"Why d'you never let Harris drive you?" asked Angela, gathering up the reins.

"Well, as a rule, I prefer doing my own work. Sultan's skittish today. Hasn't been out for two days. You'll have to drive carefully."

"Dear thing," said Angela, as her favorite pranced and fidgeted before settling into a steady trot. "I sympathize with him. I'm in a wiggly mood myself!"

The words reduced the doctor to a sudden silence. Not until shops and private houses were fading into the cold haze of the day did he speak again. Then he rode straight at his subject.

"Angela," he said abruptly, "do you ever think of getting married?"

Angela turned a frank gaze upon him.

"I don't think of much else, just now," she said. "Has father told you about Frank Curtis and Arthur Brace, or were you speaking in the abstract?"

The doctor drew a breath, and tucked his half of a brown rug more closely about his person. Then he began to speak. He enlarged upon the dreaminess of a single life, and the advantages of finding a suitable partner, till Angela opened her eyes, and wondered how he had struggled through the last decade of years. He talked of the prudence of combining wealth with affection in marriage, where possible; of the thoughtlessness—to use no stronger term—that could presume upon the patience of two good men, of the anxiety from which her father was suffering; of the crisis in life in which one has to step forward alone and unaided, and choose this or that.

"You see, dear," he said finally, "you surely must have some feeling—Look out, Angela, look out! What are you doing?"

Angela was not doing anything. She was leaving action to Sultan who was raving and curvetting like some mad thing at the sudden, discordant hoot of a swiftly approaching motor car.

"Give me the reins!" shouted the doctor, leaning forward in his seat. "Quick, or we'll be—"

"Even as he spoke the terrified horse gave a plunge, which jerked then from the girl's grip. For a second they hung limply upon the splashboard, then, before the doctor had time to snatch them, slid down and trailed into the road, while Sultan broke into a mad gallop, shaving the motor car with its sublimely indifferent occupants by a bare couple of inches.

The first thing that flashed upon the doctor's mind was the conviction of his absolute helplessness. Then with a vague, desperate instinct toward protection; he flung an arm around Angela holding her by main force to her seat in the swaying, jolting vehicle.

"Keep still!" he shouted, "I can't reach the reins. Keep still, whatever you do. He'll stop at the corner!"

The word died on his lips. They were tearing widely toward a sharp turn in the road, and above the clatter of Sultan's hoofs and the clashing sound of the wheels, the regular hoot of a second motor car was faintly audible from the further side of the curve, coming nearer and nearer. In a flash the doctor saw the little form, still and erect as any statue within his arm, lying presently in a greater horrible stillness; and with the vision came an odd, rapid realization of a new life in the old grey house at Bayswater—life without a girl who made "sunshine in a shady place"—life without Angela. He started blindly upright.

"Keep still!" he shouted hoarsely again. "You—you sha'n't be hurt. I won't let you!"

The next second he was sprawling half over the splashboard, groping with difficulty after

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the trailing reins, while Angela held his coat as though it had grown to her hands.

"In two—no three seconds," she found herself thinking, in a kind of dazed calm, "I shall probably know what dying feels like. I think he'll be quite a nice person to die with. I—ah h h!"

It had come. One tremendous jerk, as Sultan, checked suddenly in his reckless career, swerved so sharply aside that the car poised itself for a moment on a single wheel, and then Angela knew that she was falling. The next second she had reached—not the frost hardened road, but something soft and yielding and human, that broke her fall, and stayed where it was—silent, motionless. The dogcart had righted itself, and Sultan stood, trembling from head to foot, as the motor car shot harmlessly past.

Angela got up, and put her hand to her forehead. No, she was not killed—at least she did not think, so—only feeling very queer and giddy. But Dr. Kelly!

She dropped on to her knees with a quick cry beside the still figure in the road, a sick, terrible fear at her heart. If this awful thing has happened, those silent, parted lips would never frame a sentence to her again.

"Oh," she cried wildly, in the rushing unconscious selfishness of a great grief, "speak. You mustn't be dead. You mustn't be! I—I couldn't do without!"

There was a sound of rapid footsteps behind her. The motorists had pulled up with all possible speed, and jumped from their car. And at that moment Jim Kelly opened his eyes.

"I—I don't understand," said Mr. Morse, feebly. "You and Angela—engaged? You!"

"Why not?" said Angela, fiercely.

It was the evening of the same day, and she sat on the hearthrug in her father's dining room, at the feet of a man who leaned back in an arm chair, white and shaken, but otherwise little worse for the fall which had stunned him.

"Well, it's a bit of a thunderclap," said the bewildered parent.—Home Chat.



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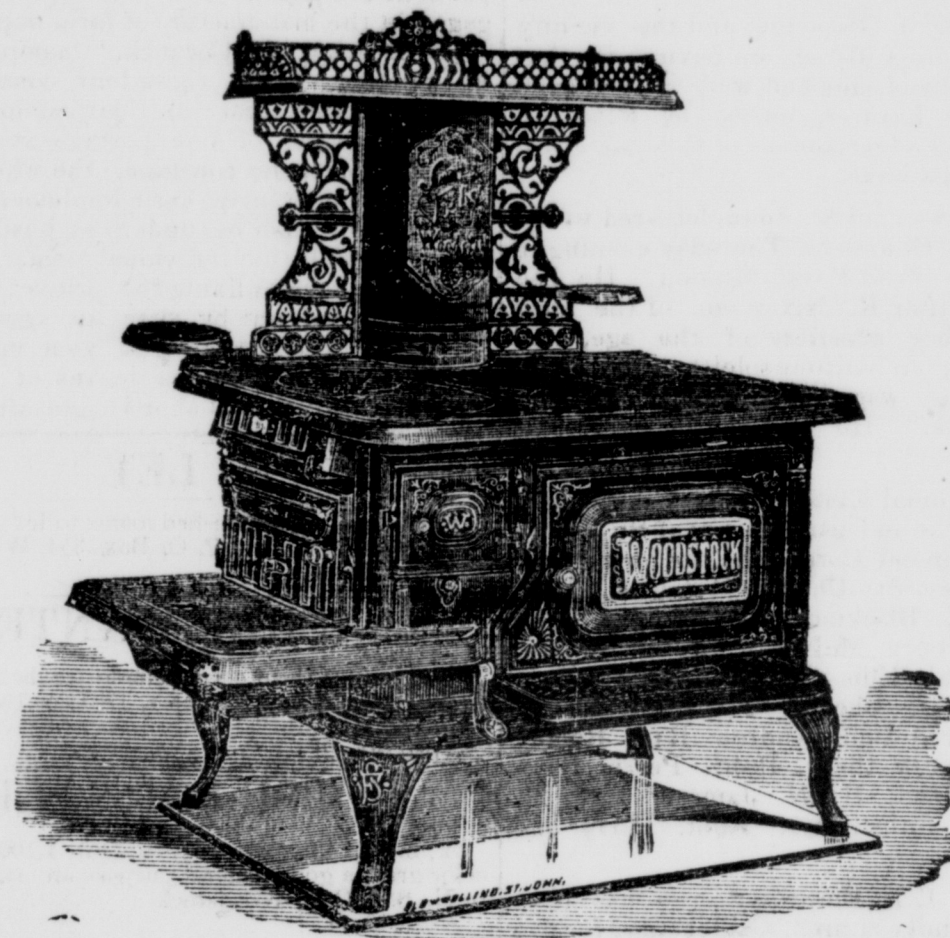
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