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AN IMPOSSIBILITY.

BY E. M. BREDIN.

"I never had the least wish to call on Mrs. Smith," said Lady Lackton. "You know her, don't you?"

I owned the soft impeachment. I was paying a duty call, and trying to look as though I enjoyed it.

"One really must draw the line somewhere in a provincial town," said Lady Lackton, "and I draw it at terraces. People who live in a terrace are never worth knowing. I only called on Mrs. Smith on account of her violin. I hear that she plays really well."

I agreed meekly. "It is really exceedingly provoking!" Lady Lackton went on, with a portly sigh. "Let me see—are you coming tomorrow? I really had so many invitations sent out that I forgot who accepted and who declined."

"I accepted," I said, with reasonable humility.

"I invited Mrs. Smith," she continued. "But to-day, as ill-luck would have it, I met her out, with the most impossible person—a sister-in-law. She actually introduced her! And I was forced—really forced—to ask her to come too. You see," said Lady Lackton, with charming frankness, "I am depending a good deal on Mrs. Smith's violin, and it would be most inconvenient if she were to consider herself offended and fail me."

"Some people are so absurdly touchy," I murmured.

"Exactly," Lady Lackton agreed. "She might have seen—easily—that I was only asking her as a mere form. But she had not even the common decency to refuse! Most annoying! I assure you, dear Lord Robert, that she is quite impossible!"

"Does she drop her h's?" I asked—which was pure malice, for every one knows that Sir Joshua Lackton is a trifle shaky in that respect."

"I really didn't notice," said her ladyship, with dignity. "She was simply impossible—no style, badly dressed, badly turned out altogether. And she's coming!"

"You can ignore her," I suggested. I knew her system with impossibilities.

"I can't hide her," said Lady Lackton severely. "She does not take suggestions well from any one. Indeed I know that I have only my courtesy title to thank for the inestimable privilege of her confidence. It was most tactless of Mrs. Smith to introduce her at all, or to let her accept. No one has any idea who Mr. Smith was, and Mrs. Smith knows that I only asked her for the sake of her violin."

"She probably does," I agreed. As a matter of fact, Mrs. Smith and I are something more than acquaintances, and I know that she finds Lady Lackton as exhilarating as I do.

"I explained to her when I first called on her," Lady Lackton continued, "that my rule is never to call on people living in terraces. I explained that I was making quite an exception in her case. I believe she understood perfectly."

"I have no doubt she did," I remarked with conviction, and I rose to go.

"Oh, reverse, then, dear Lord Robert," said Lady Lackton, whose French is nearly as faultless as Sir Joshua's English. "I shall see you to-morrow?"

"I am looking forward immensely to coming," I assured her truthfully.

There are houses where one goes to see and be seen. There are houses where one goes to be amused. There are others—oh, base confession!—where one goes to be fed. But Lady Lackton's entertainments hold a

separate niche, of their own. She is a poor hostess and a painfully economical caterer. You are fairly certain to find yourself inextricably wedged beside your dearest foe, with a cup of lukewarm tea, a dense crowd behind and before, and no possibility of escape. Yet I never enter her doors without the liveliest anticipations of amusement, and I rarely go away disappointed. My wants are few and simple. Give me a convenient corner from which I can unobtrusively watch my hostess and her methods, and I ask no more.

I arrived late. The rooms were packed, and I could hear Sir Joshua proclaiming aloud in the distance that it was uncommonly "hot." As I paused, before attempting to force a way through the throng Lady Lackton descended upon me, flushed, perturbed, wrathful and attired in purple satin.

"I hoped," she cried, by way of greeting, "that you were Mrs. Smith! It is most provoking of her. Every one has arrived and there is no one to do anything. I really do think, considering everything, that she might have contrived to come early."

I understood perfectly. My mind's eye saw the ineligible little corner where the impossible sister-in-law should have been hidden away before the arrival of worthier guests.

"Oh, here she is at last! Really, Mrs. Smith, I thought you were not coming!" cried her ladyship in crescendo tones. She gave a limp hand to the culprit and two fingers to the impossibility.

"I am sorry to have been hindered," said Mrs. Smith in her gentle voice. "How do you do, Lord Robert? I—I think you have met my sister-in-law?"

"If you will kindly play at once," Lady Lackton began, fuming. "Oh, and Lord Robert, I want you—"

"I will take care of—of Mrs. Smith's sister-in-law with pleasure," I replied promptly, framing my sentence in that awkward fashion at an imploring glance from Mrs. Smith. I knew well enough that her ladyship had intended far otherwise. But, unmindful of her frowns, I piloted my charge to a convenient corner, procured her a half-melted ice, and then sat down and laughed with her. She was very plainly dressed in black, and no one took any notice of her; indeed, Lady Lackton was at the greatest pains to ignore her. We laughed in our corner until Mrs. Smith began to play, and then paused to listen. The rest of the throng seized that opportunity for conversation, and I could see our hostess, complacent at last, talking loudly to a florid female in black velvet, about two yards from the performer.

The long, hot afternoon wore away. Mrs. Smith was kept so constantly at work that I quite saw how awkward it would have been for Lady Lackton if she had failed to come. As for my companion and myself, we were left in hopeless disgrace in our corner, ignored in a masterly manner by our hostess, even when she passed so close as to brush us with the lowest flounce of her purple skirt. She rustled across in our direction presently, and stood talking across us to a sterner matron in black, who was noted for her diamonds and her good works.

"Really very annoying about the bazaar," said her ladyship.

"We had counted so much on the princess as an attraction," said the stern lady in a deep bass voice. "I don't know who to ask to take her place."

Lady Lackton shook her head and looked despondent.

"What about Lady Clara?" asked the stern lady with a gleam of hope.

But Lady Lackton, who reads The Morning Post as a religious duty, quenched it at once.

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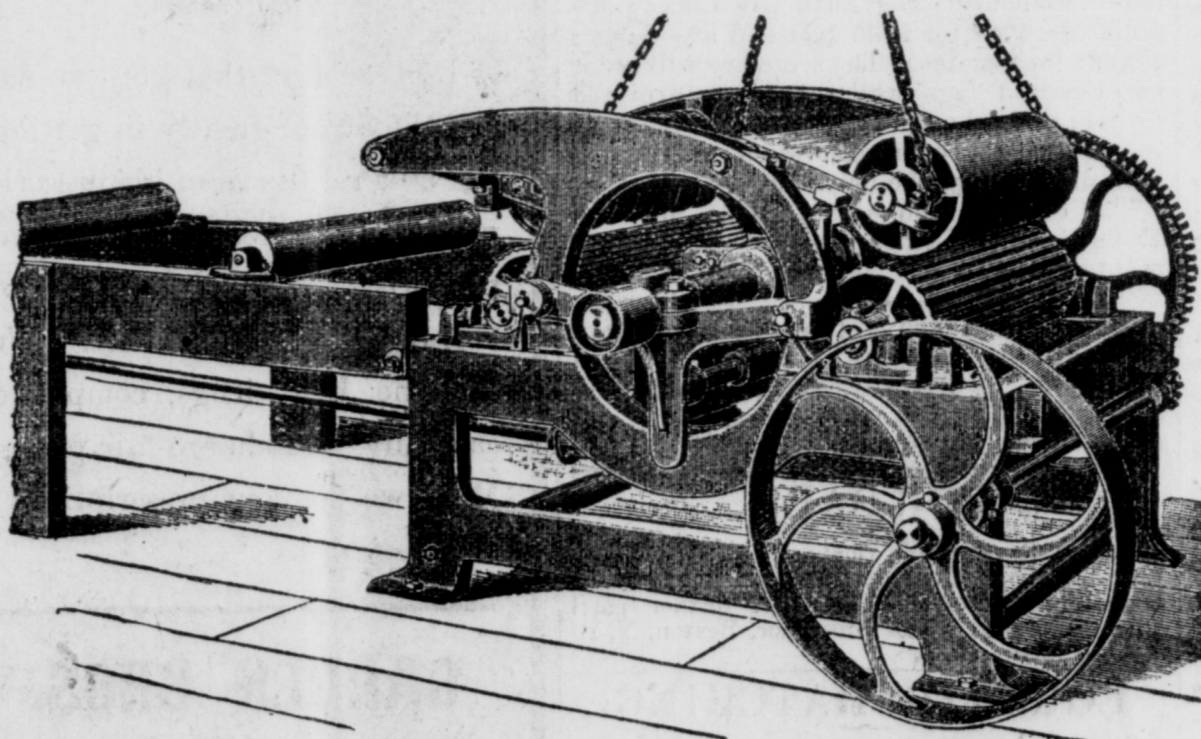
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"The Vere de Veres are in mourning," she said decisively.

"Of course, so they are!" said the stern lady, crushed again.

Lady Lackton was obviously running her mind's eye down an imaginary list of patronesses.

"Why not ask the dear duchess, the vice-president, you know?" she said at last with triumph.

"Would she come for a bazaar?" inquired the other cautiously. "I—I don't know her myself—"

"No!" said Lady Lackton with bland patronage. "Oh, I'll write. I don't mind in the least. She is always so very sweet and obliging that I'm sure she will come—if I write my self, that is I don't know so very much of her personally, but—"

"Oh, please don't disown me, Lady Lackton," said Mrs. Smith's sister-in-law. She stood up with a charming smile. "I'm afraid you didn't quite catch my name, perhaps; but I am the Duchess of Tadcaster. And I think I see my sister looking for me. Good-by!"

She melted away in the crowd, she was gone. The lady of good works had heard all, and was staring curiously from one to the other of us with the veiled joy of a gossip who had just lit upon a story worth telling. Lady Lackton, with a countenance rivaling her purple gown, caught my arm in a frenzied clutch, and was murmuring something hysterical about an ice.

"It is not true, she is really—" she gasped when we had gained the comparative solitude of the hall. "Why did you not tell me?"

"The late Mr. Smith had several sisters," I responded blandly. "I had no idea which it was until I met her here."

"I never knew!" Lady Lackton moaned. "How could I possibly guess? I—I think I ought to have been told! Smith is such—such a common name!" in a burst of anguish. "I never dreamt that the duchess had been a Miss Smith!"

"Duchesses are made, not born," I suggested soothingly.

"I knew nothing about Mr. Smith," Lady Lackton wailed. "No one ever mentioned him, so I supposed he was—he was—"

"Impossible," I interpolated cruelly..

"I imagined that none of her husband's people were presentable!" cried Lady Lackton, almost in tears.

"She has certainly no reason to be ashamed of her first husband's people, nor of those belonging to her second, I hope," I observed cheerfully.

"Her—her second?" gasped Lady Lackton. I launched my final thunderbolt. I smiled. "Mrs. Smith," I remarked, "has been good enough to promise to marry—me!"

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