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CHANDLER & BELL, KENT STREET, CHARLOTTETOWN.

The Guardian Short Story.

When Woman Guides The Plot.

By HENRY LINSLEY DOOLITTLE.

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The unusual is ever the most attractive. From his assortment of morning mail Bower first of all selected the one unbusinesslike envelope and hastily tore it open. He read softly, with rising elation:

My Dear Jimmy—Monday evening next, April 1, I am planning a little heart surprise party in honor of little sister's birthday. It won't be complete without one of her best friends, so please cut everything and come. I should have let you know sooner had I not expected to see you at the club reception last night. Where were you-out with the other girl? Anyway, Monday evening without fail. Your sincere friend,

GRACE LOUISE ELSTON.

"It wouldn't do to miss Marjorie's birthday—in memory of three years ago, if for no other reason," he meditated.

"Too bad she had to kick up such a fuss over nothing. How was I to blame? She must have waked up, or I never should have been invited. I wonder— But at that moment the pile of business letters caught his eye reprovingly.

Arriving early at the Elston home, he found the apartment ablaze with hearts. Large ones adorned the curtains and electroliers, while smaller tokens of the occasion were strewn about in picturesque profusion. Above the main doorway hung a flying Cupid, prince of romance.

The early arrivals had formed into interested groups. More than once Bower thought he heard the mention of some engagement, but upon drawing nearer he was met by a sudden change of subject and what seemed half-startled glances. At last he cornered his hostess.

"What does a heart party usually mean?" she parried, with a laugh that jarred strangely on his nerves. "Oh, there's Mr. Stanwood. I must see that he meets some of the out-of-towners," and she was gone.

Just then Marjorie entered. "Little sister," as he had once called her, looked very much grown up tonight. Bower was among the first to press forward with congratulations. "How many is it this time?" he quizzed in well feigned ignorance. "Let's see, three years ago it was nineteen. This time you throw double twos—sign of good luck."

She smiled in some embarrassment. "You have too good a memory, Jim. Can't you ever forget? After the teens a girl isn't so proud of her age."

He made way for the others with a tingling sensation of loss. After all, had it been so much her fault three years ago? At the other side of the room he caught sight of Miss Sherwood beckoning to him with parted lips. Mechanically he crossed to her side.

"I was never so stumped in my life," confided his companion. "You are an old friend of the family, Mr. Bower. Did Miss Elston tell you before tonight?"

"I was about as much in the dark as any one," he evaded.

"And did you see the ring?" she rattled on. "It's a perfect beauty!" Jim smiled to hide his suspicion. Those best wishes—were they as innocently attached to her birthday as he had supposed? He tried to recall her new friends, but none seemed to fit the case.

"Well, if you can't tell me any more about the man than that, I guess I'll hunt up some one who can." Miss Sherwood disappeared with a parting shot. "I always supposed you were the right bower in that game."

Miss Elston was passing the tally cards. "The head table is up there," she indicated, "and the booby at the other end. As there are two people short, the poorest couple at the last table will have to drop out each time until the next change. You'll find a consolation cozy corner in the conservatory."

Starting at the third table, Jim slowly advanced to the head and then as suddenly dropped to the other end. Marjorie was already there.

"Unlucky in cards"—she laughed. "You might have given a fellow a little warning," he grieved—"sort of chance to renew his option." But the sound of the bell cut short the conversation.

For the next ten minutes he played atrociously, now heaping hearts upon her score, now adding needlessly to his own. The other pair exchanged knowing glances. He couldn't have made a plainer bid for the cozy corner. Yet Marjorie seemed oblivious.

"Now tell me all about it," began Jim a few minutes later.

Marjorie hesitated. "There isn't so much to tell," she began slowly at last. "Clinton is a distant cousin of mine. He cares for me, and I care for him. He's well off—and generous—and good looking." She weighed each winning quality with a deliberation that hurt. "And, above all, he knows his own mind. Why shouldn't I love him?" she demanded, turning suddenly to her companion.

"Oh, don't mind me tonight," he deprecated. "It's just this: I can't seem to realize what it all means to me. We did have such good times once, Marjorie."

She started at the sound of her nickname, so dearly loved of old. "We were children then," reflectively. "And you promised to give me first chance if any one else came along," he pursued, drawing closer.

"Did I, really? How foolish of me!" she laughed. "Yet we were children

through it all. We even scrapped like children at the finish."

"Mostly my fault," he owned. Her laughing gray eyes glanced up to his.

"No, all your fault," she corrected. "Marjie, do you really love him?" demanded Jim.

She started violently. "Why, the idea—what a question! Here I came out for a friendly little talk with you, and you're proving a regular inquisitor. Do you suppose I shall ever marry a man I don't love? Not much!"

His arm crept softly around her waist.

"Haven't you any regard for honor?" she entreated. "We mustn't—I mean, you mustn't forget."

"Honor?" repeated Jim slowly. "No. What do I care for honor if I lose you, Marjie? Can't you see that I've loved you all the time and that it was just my infernal jealousy and pride that kicked up the trouble? Yes, I suppose we were children then, for children never stop to appreciate their happy comradeship till too late. But couldn't we be children again, Marjie—you and I—while all the rest are growing up? Do you remember, it was four years ago tonight that I met you—at the Prestons' box party?"

He drew her closer to him. Everything favored the contrite lover. The frames of the greenhouse plants blonded into a hazy perfume. The Japanese lanterns glowed softly with warm color harmony.

He gently turned her face from the shadow to the softly glowing light.

"Do you really love me, Marjie?" he repeated.

With a gesture of impatience—or was it of fright?—she arose and threw open a window. As she stood gazing into the night a distant hurdy gurdy struck up the much worn "Good Old Summer Time." He joined her.

"Do you remember the first time we heard it together down on the Jersey shore, Marjie?"

"Do it? Oh, what was I saying? It isn't fair," she implored.

Jim turned unsteadily from the freshening breeze to the heavy fragrance within. "Well, I guess it's goodbye, Marjie." He held out his hand.

"Oh, why couldn't I"—she breathed. He snatched her to him. "Marjie, look at me."

Slowly she raised her eyes, then as suddenly buried her face in her hands. "Oh, how could you?" she gasped, with a frightened cry.

Gently he stroked her hair. "I'll go away and wait if it will do any good," he began feverishly. "If you'll—oh, hang that engagement! Others have discovered their mistake and broken off before it was too late. Will it do any good if I wait? Tell me, Marjie. I must know."

Unresting, yet shaking violently, she rested her head against his shoulder, but only for an instant. There was a sound of moving chairs and approaching voices.

"May I come around tomorrow night?" he urged as he turned to the room.

She nodded carelessly, for steps were close at hand.

"We were just looking for you, Marjorie," said her sister. "It's time to cut the birthday cake. What has kept you two has-beens so busy out here? You'll be talked about."

"I was just outlining my future plans," answered Jim, following the girls to the card room.

"You're perfect dears, both of you," Marjorie was saying to Grace and Clinton an hour later. "Jimmy's such a dog in the manger. I know he cared for me, but that he'd never come to the point unless some one else butted in. It was such a joke to see how everybody thought Clinton was engaged to little me when big sister was it the whole time."

Grace sleepily consulted her watch. "It is getting very late," she commented. "Suppose you return my ring. From my first glimpse into the conservatory I should judge that yours will arrive in a day or two."

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