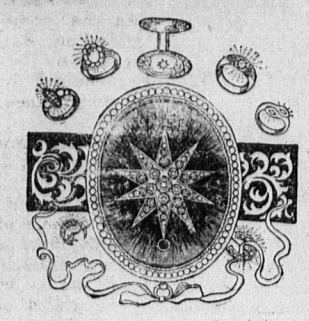

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THE GUARDIAN SHORT STORY

The Adaptability of Jimmy.

By Troy Allison.

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"I've waited for him long enough. I found a gray hair today." Elizabeth's voice was a comical reproduction of grief.

Jim Hartley interrupted the fascinating occupation of punching with his scarf pin a lace pattern around a leaf on the large rubber plant and looked at her reproachfully.

"You know you always have me to fall back on," he suggested placidly. "Of course I might not come up to your exact ideas of what a Prince Charming ought to be, but could you idealize me a little, eh, Elizabeth?"

"My dear boy, you don't seem to realize your—er—nose in the least! Now, could you imagine the prince

"YOU NEEDN'T SAY ANY MORE."

with such—a feature? As merely a nose, Jimmy, I'll grant it's the noblest Roman of them all, but it would look as much out of place on my prince as—as a Falstaffian front would on Romeo."

He eyed with honest admiration the death's head and crossbones he had punched in the center of the leaf.

"Your dainty and aesthetic prince would be grieved to hear your slight coarseness of expression, Elizabeth, my child. You are not supposed to refer to anatomical subjects."

She sniffed her disdain and, turning her back to him, put her little worn slippers against the steam radiator.

"You are so terribly prim, too, and so—absolutely expected! I have known you so long that I know you through and through. There is never any room for speculation. Maybe one could forget about your nose if you would ever do anything—unexpected!"

He did—immediately, and she arranged her rumpled hair, her eyes blazing at him angrily.

"James Hartley—I—never would have believed it of you! And to think I've known you six years."

A little startled at his own recklessness, he picked up a paper knife from her writing desk and commenced operations on the abused rubber plant with assumed nonchalance.

"You wanted me to do something unexpected," he suggested mildly.

"Any man might have done that," with withering sarcasm.

"Elizabeth Lent, I am more than shocked at such an admission, for I've wanted to try it for six years and have been too cowardly!"

She grew more confusedly angry.

"Make a joke of it if you like," she blazed. "It probably serves me right for thinking there was one man that could be trusted."

He turned abruptly and took his hat from the top of the piano.

"You needn't say any more." His face was pale with anger. "You've had me at your beck and call for all these years, and you never would take me seriously. As for jokes, my love for you has been a huge joke to you always. I'm tired of it—and if I'm never to be taken seriously we'll put an end to it all. I apologize most humbly for my recent rudeness," and he went out, closing the flat door with an unmistakable evidence of temper before she could realize that there had actually been a quarrel.

She stood up mechanically and commenced rearranging the furniture of the little parlor. She broke off the demolished leaves of the rubber plant and started to the dining room to put them in the wastebasket.

Her roommate sat at the dining table working on a sketch.

"Jimmy gone this early?" she asked in surprise.

"Not coming any more," answered Miss Lent, with studied indifference.

Frances Carson ran the background of the sketch into the Grecian face she had finished and let it drop on the table a hopeless blur.

"What have you done to Jimmy?" she demanded accusingly. "He's the best fellow I ever saw."

"Is he indeed?" Miss Lent dropped the leaves into the basket with a gesture of superior scorn. "Glad you think so."

The other woman commenced washing her paint brushes and threw the spoiled sketch in the basket on top of the leaves.

"You have treated him shamefully all these years," she said, looking squarely into the other's wrathful eyes. "You have been dreaming of heroes and ideals and in the meanwhile have been taking all and giving nothing to the best type of man that exists. I only hope that you haven't treated him so badly it's beyond making up."

Miss Lent started toward the bedroom door defiantly.

"He'll get over it and come back in a few days," she said, with calm assurance.

But Jimmy did nothing of the sort. Weeks passed, and Miss Carson found that she need cook only one chop for dinner, for the other was never touched. Elizabeth grew thinner and paler, and the doctor finally looked worried when he asked about her cough.

Frances Carson had never been a believer in the doctrine that it was good policy to let things drift. She believed in the judicious application of a helping hand. She watched her friend's listless face one night after dinner as she sat in the Morris chair, her book lying forgotten on her lap.

"Elizabeth, I can't bear to see you looking so wretched," she said, rising energetically. "I'm going out and get something else for your cough. And you simply must make up your mind to go to Florida for the rest of the winter, as the doctor advises."

She put on her coat and hat and went, not to the druggist's, but to the nearest telephone booth.

"Is that you, Jimmy?" she called when she had got her number.

"I may be a traitress, a villainess and everything else that indicates the double dyed feminine conspirator, but I couldn't resist the temptation of calling you up and telling you that you are an idiot.

"Don't get huffy! I've just cause for complaint. Did you know that Elizabeth has been too ill to go to her office for over a month?

"I thought you didn't. The doctor told me privately that he didn't believe she would stand the winter unless she could be induced to go south. No—hush—don't say a word to me. I'm not going back to the flat for two hours, and she is really too ill to be left alone. If anything happens to her while I'm away, it will be your fault. I left the key under the hall mat near our door. Before I ring off, I'll tell you I found your picture under her pillow when I was fixing her bed this morning. I left the bed unfixed, and she doesn't dream I saw it. So you see why you are an idiot. Goodby!"

When Elizabeth heard the key in the door half an hour later, she spoke without turning her head.

"You've tried nearly every brand of patent medicine on the market, Frances. I only hope this one will not be bitter to take."

"So do I"— Jimmy put a chair in front of her and sat down as calmly as if he had only been out of the room fifteen minutes.

She started to rise from her chair, but fell back from weakness.

"You've come back!" she said faintly.

"I've come back to make you take the doctor's prescription," he said boldly, thinking of the picture under the pillow. "You need managing, Elizabeth, and I'm going to see what I can do in that line. You are going to start to Florida tomorrow afternoon, and I'm going with you to keep off the alligators and things."

"But you can't!" she gasped, her face flushing, her eyes fixed upon his in a dazed fascination.

"I can do all manner of unexpected things," he said, taking both her hands; "for instance, I'm going to marry you at 2 o'clock tomorrow afternoon."

He looked at her triumphantly, felt the nervous grip of her fingers, but never relaxed his gaze.

The color wavered over her face and finally covered the wanness that had startled him when he first saw her.

"Jimmy, I wouldn't be the least bit angry now if"— she commenced in a whisper, and Jimmy's intelligence was entirely comprehensive.

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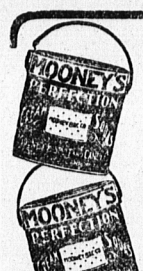

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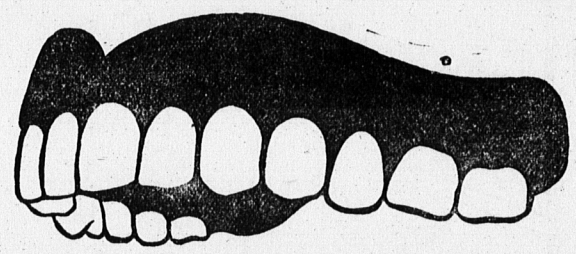

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