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A WILLFUL WIDOW

By KATE M. CLEARY

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"So altogether I'm in a deuce of a fix," concluded Carruthers. He sprang to his feet, looking for all the world like a big, perturbed boy as he paced restlessly across the library floor. He was so well formed, with his straight shoulders and the fine, flexible lines of his body, that he appeared to be ten years younger than the thirty-five allotted him by the family Bible. Then his brown hair would curl even at thirty-five. "I understand," said Claridge. In truth, he did not understand at all. He had no children of his own. Indeed, he found the caprices of his fashionable wife quite sufficient to absorb his attention. But he liked Max Carruthers, and it did seem to him— "They're such adorable little things, Max! And you're so absurdly wealthy! If it were not for our house being closed for the summer and Cleo doing Ed rope for the seventh time I'd ask you to let us take the tots. One of those that a man with your money would have no difficulty in finding a person— "A rather desperate laugh interrupted him. "Ah, the persons who are willing to take care of my little people, Claridge, are the bane of my existence. I've advertised; I've met and talked with them; harples all. Some would undoubtedly give the children proper care as far as physical requirements go, but that isn't enough. I want to find some woman who would really love them for their own sake. "That ought to be dead easy," growled Claridge. "Of course I think so; but, then, they're my babies. I want some one who will give them a bit of mothering—kiss the place to make it well and that sort of thing. "I have!" exclaimed Claridge. He brought his fist down on the arm of his chair with a bang. "The most idyllic old home in the country that your eyes ever rested upon. It's a big, rambling house, almost covered with Virginia creeper. There's an immense, well kept lawn and clematis across the porch, and the house itself is just filled with the most delicious scents. The bedrooms are perfumy with lavender. And as for the food—why, it's something to set an anchorite sighing! "But what makes you think the possessor of this ideal home would welcome into it two rather lively children? If it's only a question of money— "Claridge shook his head. "Go slow! That's the difficulty—it isn't a question of money at all. And my powers of persuasion may be less effective than I think with Mrs. Varine, but I'll try. "Your friend is a widow, I presume?" Claridge smiled—a dry, slow, curious smile—his legal smile, Carruthers called it. "Yes; she happens to be a client of mine. Oh, yes!" he repeated, as though convincing himself of the fact. "She's a widow!" "When Carruthers called a few days later to ask if Claridge had heard from Mrs. Varine, the latter jumped up briskly. "It's all right, Max. You are to settle the question of payment with me. Mrs. Varine says she'd rather take nothing. She's very lonely, is awfully fond of children, and is delighted at the thought of having the youngsters with her during their vacation. You'd better take them down next Thursday. Oh, by the way, there's a condition. Mrs. Varine does not wish to meet you personally! "What's that?" cried Carruthers, aghast. "Well, she doesn't!" reiterated Claridge doggedly. "Maybe she has no reason but a woman's reason. Anyhow, she's entitled to her caprice. Her aunt, Miss Howard, will meet you on your arrival and show you over the place. "Queer," muttered Carruthers. He looked up sharply. "You say you know the lady—that everything is all right?" "I say she's one of the sweetest women God ever made and that you may bless your stars she is taking your children into her home—which means her heart!" He had spoken with warmth. Carruthers held out his hand. "Thanks, dear boy! You're a mighty good friend." It was at the close of a perfect June day when a little party reached Cedarville. A survey drawn by two fat white ponies met them. About two miles outside of town the driver turned off into a wide carriage road that wound up an avenue of elms and oaks till a turn brought in view a great sweep of emerald lawn, beds of scarlet geraniums, a fountain flashing in the golden light and a sleepy, old vine covered house that looked hospitable and picturesque. "Let us out, papa!" implored Eustace. "Is it fairland?" queried Dorothy in a timid, entranced whisper. The gentle, faded woman who received the travelers had a face like a cameo and appeared to harmonize admirably with her old fashioned surroundings. She showed Carruthers the rooms the children were to occupy—airy, immaculate rooms, with blossoms nodding in at the windows. She offered him luncheon, which he declined, apologized for the invisibility of her niece and appointed a day each week he was to come to visit the children. Already charmed by their surroundings, they let him go without a protest. When he came down the next week it was to find the two rosy, radiant

and ecstatic over their environment. He took them into town, bought them some small treasures and listened to their raptures about "Florence." She had made a mull dress for Dorothy; she had gone fishing with Eustace; she played the piano for them while they were having a game of hide and seek; low or loud as they were "hot" or "cold." And they were going to have a party one of these days, with luncheon served under the biggest oak. "But who is this lady who is so kind to you?" "She's just Florence!" they answered in chorus. "She's good as a real mamma, only she plays like she was just a little girl." Always he heard these tales, and always, it seemed, the playmate, Florence, was the center and source of their joy. Later in the season an important business summons made it imperative that if he were to see the children before his trip west he must run down at once. Walking up the avenue, he stopped short at the bend of the path, for on the velvet sward a game of tag was in progress. A slim, graceful young girl in a pink lawn gown was the pursued. "You're it, Florence!" cried Eustace triumphantly as he succeeded in touching the fleeing figure. And just then, as the victim paused, flushed, breathless, her copper gold hair loosened from its pins and falling in a bright shower below her waist, Dorothy caught sight of the newcomer and set up a halting shout. "It's papa! Here's papa!" she cried. The captive made one wild movement toward flight, but the victor manfully held on to her. And, after a laughing protest, she came over to Carruthers, where he stood bareheaded, his eyes gleaming with admiration, and held out her hand. "I've been doubly caught, I'm afraid, Mr. Carruthers! I did not dream you were coming today or I should not have been found engaged in such an undignified pastime. My name is Florence Varine." He leaned forward. "Mrs. Varine's daughter?" "No," she colored deliciously. "I am Mrs. Varine," she explained. "Impossible!" exclaimed Carruthers. He looked at her, amazed, mystified. Why, she could not be much over twenty! And Claridge had said that she was a widow! "I was a very distant relative of Mr. Varine's," she explained. "He wished to leave me his property, but there would have been contention and litigation on the part of others more nearly related were he to do so. But what he knew he was dying he asked me to marry him that he might legally will me all he possessed. He died an hour after the ceremony was performed. Mr. Claridge was present." "But," stammered Carruthers, "why didn't Claridge tell me? Why was I not to see you?" "Oh, I was afraid if you knew how young and irresponsible I was you would not let me have the children to take care of. Mrs. Claridge had told me what darlings they were, and I was so lonely down here. We've had such good times together." She paused, gathering up her shining hair. She looked at him with luminous gray eyes grown suddenly apprehensive. "You won't take them away, now that you know?" she entreated. "Assuredly not!" he made quick reply. "They are the most fortunate children in the world. For the first time since the death of their mother I have felt quite happy about them." It was astonishing how neatly the important business matters of Mr. Carruthers could be set aside. He grasped at the invitation to stay to dinner as though that meal were in truth to save him from starvation. And when he finally did discover that if he would catch his train back to the city he must exercise all haste it was with positive dismay that he left the three who stood on the terrace, waving him farewell. The next morning he walked into Claridge's office. "You'll have to take a run out and attend to that Montana matter, Claridge," he said. "I can't go." "Can't, eh? What's up? Something more important?" "Very much more important!" He was smiling like a boy, and his eyes were shining. "Fact is, I've not been seeing enough of Eustace and Dorothy. I'm going to take a room at the hotel down there—they tell me there's good fishing to be had—and I'll see more of the children." Claridge stared at him. Then he nodded and laughed. "You've seen that willful little widow down at Cedarville." "When he came in a few weeks later the tin of country wind and sun was on his cheek. He walked like a conqueror, with his head up, and his voice had a ring good to hear. "Congratulations," he commanded. "The children are going to have the loveliest mother in all the world!" Claridge gripped the other's hand warmly. "You're a lucky dog, Carruthers!" "I know it, Claridge. There isn't a king under heaven I'd change places with! And those children!" Claridge laughed leniently. "You infernal fraud!" he said. "A Wandering Minstrel. A musician out of work, are you?" said the housekeeper. "Well, you'll find a few cords in the wood shed. Suppose you favor me with an obligato." "Pardon the pronunciation, madam," replied the bright tramp, "but Chopin is not popular with me."—Philadelphia Ledger. Pleasantest Path Downward. Prosperity has ruined many a man, but if a fellow is going to be ruined at all that is the pleasantest way.—Philadelphia Record.

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