

Just Chums.

By Martina Gardner Owen. Written for The Western Home Monthly.

WHICH man does Dicky prefer?" Aunt Margaret's usually serene voice held an exasperated note, perilously suggestive of thread-worn patience. "He likes them both," Constance returned wearily, swaying the hammock into motion with a tap of a daintily slipped foot. "Each is a general favorite among men. I've heard that that was an infallible test and I've asked Dicky a hundred times. It's always: 'They're both decent chaps, sis. Either would suit me for a brother-in-law. It's up to you. You are the one who must live with him, you know.'"

"Well," Aunt Margaret decided crisply, "I quite agree with Dicky. You say that each young man is well educated, can support you fitly, has irreproachable habits. Each has a similar taste to your own in art, literature and music. Each enjoys the same social life with which you mingle. I am glad that you have left the city for this month in my country home. To have you with me is a real pleasure, but I don't see

how I can help you to decide—between two diamonds of equal weight and brilliancy," she finished whimsically. "There comes Alice to take me to Elizabeth's lawn party," patting her brown hair into order with plump hands. "You are sure you won't come?"

"No," Constance returned languidly. "I've no taste for tea and chatter. I'll just—"

The telephone tinkled into her statement. Constance listened to the one-sided conversation.

"Hester Michels and Jerry Williams did you say? Why, how ridiculous! She is sixty-five if she is a day, and he is older."

"Yes, that's true. Sorry, Mr Roberts, but Alice has her trap at the door now. My niece would come I am sure."

"Yes, you may rely on her tact and kindness of heart—absolutely. I'll explain. Good-bye."

"It's the Rev. Mr. Roberts," she told her niece. "He says that Mrs. Roberts is away and that a couple has just called at the parsonage to be married. He wants someone for a witness."

"How interesting!" exclaimed Constance, springing from the hammock.

"Aunt Margaret surveyed the lithe young figure a bit doubtfully.

"He is a widower and she is a widow," she added. "Each has white hair. They are simple country folk, but two of the dearest and best hearted people I know. They should have married each other forty years ago. Instead, each chose a totally unsuitable mate. The opportunities for choice were not large in the sparsely settled country. At first this seemed absurd, but perhaps—I mustn't gossip with you any longer, child. Hurry along. Perhaps," sarcastically, "by the time you are as old as are Hester and Jerry you will be able to choose between your Albert and Burke."

Constance picked up her white parasol and started down the path. Impulsively she turned aside and broke a great spray of white roses from the bush which nestled close to her aunt's hospitable home. Then, holding the fluffy laces of her sheer white gown from the dust of the road she hurried along the grass carpeted path.

Anxiety was written large upon the Reverend Robert's kind countenance as she tripped up the parsonage steps.

"Jerry has gone for a license," he explained hurriedly. Mrs. Michels is there, in the room Mrs. Roberts has prepared especially for waiting brides. I believe it contains all of the necessities from rice powder to extra handkerchiefs," a smile flashed for an instant across his strong face. "They are two of my oldest parishioners. Don't—er—"

"Don't do or say anything to shadow the rose color of their dream?" Constance's brown eyes were sweetly serious. "My dear Dr. Roberts, would I strike a child who was offering me a blossom? Which door did you say?"

The young girl tapped lightly, then paused a moment on the threshold looking into the sweet, wrinkled face which turned from the mirror at this intrusion.

"I am to be one of the witnesses," she explained gently. "As Mrs. Roberts was away, the minister asked me to come in and to make sure that you had everything you wanted."

"That was kind of you, dearie," Hester's heart had warmed instantly to the sincerity which looked out from Constance's clear eyes. "I was wondering—my hair—"

"It's beautiful," Constance declared, "so soft and ripply. But it doesn't half show how pretty it is. May I take it down?"

Hester nodded mutely. Her bony fingers worked nervously in their white lace mitts. Constance's slim white hands busied themselves with pins and combs, but her eyes noted every detail of the ill-fitting grey gown which was so evidently Hester's own work. She felt something tightening at her throat as she loosed the ugly knot and saw the face framed in silver softness.

"I had to wear it that way when Ezra was alive," Hester said diffidently. She was half afraid of this beautiful young creature who belonged so manifestly to another world. But she gained confidence as she saw the look of understanding in the girl's eyes and went on:

"He was always wantin' everything shiny an' spic an' span. He was a terrible good provider an' he was never cross to me, but—"

"But what?" questioned Constance sympathetically as she brushed a long lock to shining lustre.

"But—perhaps you think it foolish for two such old folks to get married?" Hester asked the question timidly.

"I think," said Constance, evenly as she rolled a soft puff from a shining strand, "that we have a right to happiness during every moment that we are permitted to remain on earth." The matronly Mrs. Roberts, herself versed in the science of the troubled human heart, could not have inspired confidence more winningly.

"That's just what Jerry said, the meaning leastways, though he couldn't say it quite like that. Ezra meant well—but—we was never chums. He never told me nothin' about the day's work. If I tried to tell him 'bout the chickens or the bakin' he laughed and said he hadn't time for such nonsense. I used to dream of sittin' by the fire and talkin' with my man, but I never could. Mostly after supper he went to sleep on the old lounge. O, the years were so lonely!"

A long silence followed, broken only by the call of a bird to his mate and her far-away reply. Then Hester spoke again softly.

"Jerry, he never had a chum either. Maria was a smart housekeeper and she had his meals on time and the house so neat you couldn't find a speck of dust nowhere. But she never cared about—bein' chums."

The little brown bird had joined her mate in the apple tree and the air was vocal with their sociable twitterings.

Constance pinned the last ringlet in to place, fastened a spray of roses in the lace at Hester's throat, then she kissed the pink spot on each faded cheek.

"I think I hear voices," she said gently. "You are very sweet and bride-like now. Shall we go out?"

Hester lingered a moment like a shy girl. Then Constance opened the door and the old man with his gentle, love-transfigured face came eagerly forward to meet his bride.

All through the ceremony Constance sat as one entranced. As she listened to the minister's rich, full tones the June sunshine seemed to fade away. Instead of the cheerful room she seemed to see two people who walked gray, separate paths during a long, long day. But at last the ways met, the mists cleared and the clouds were transfigured with the splendors of a perfect sunset. The two went on down a primrose path

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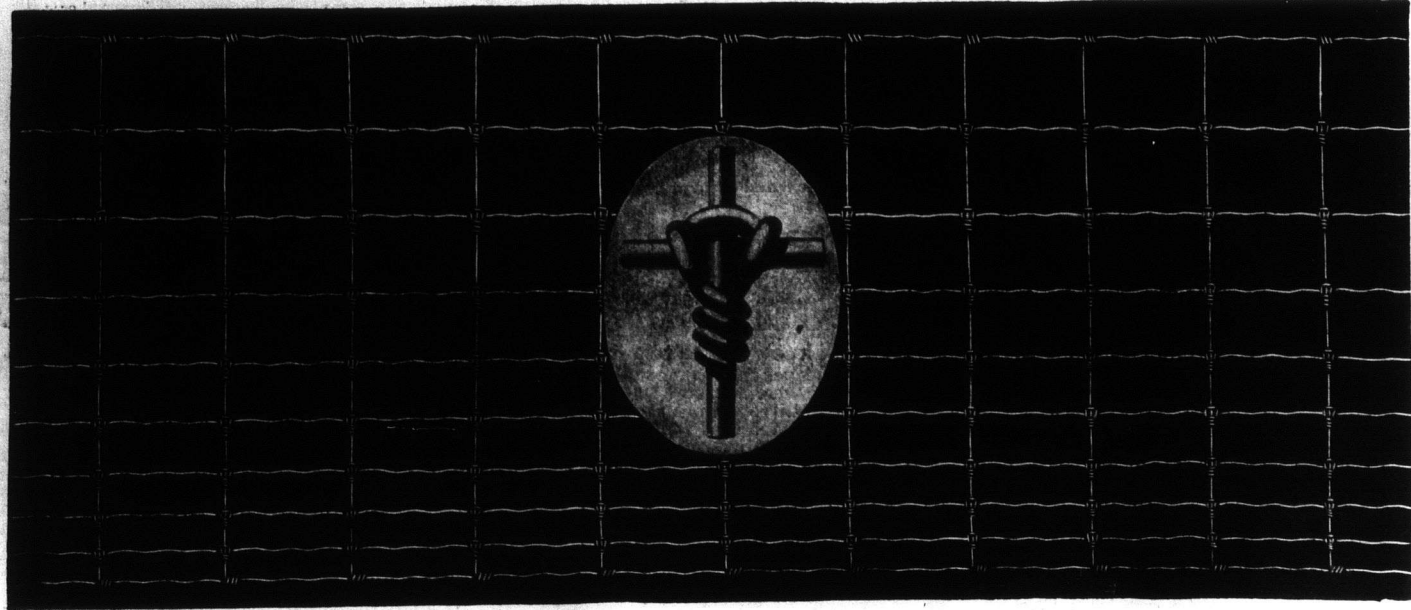
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