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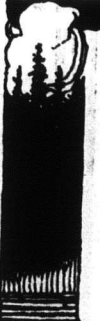
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"Only Jack"

Written for The Western Home Monthly by W. R. Gilbert

"WELL, Lena, all I can say is I think you're behaving very badly."

"Oh Aunt Emily, what nonsense! Why, Jack and I have been pals for goodness knows how long!"

"Yes, I know, but you can see as well as I can, that it goes deeper with him than that."

"Well, I can't help that, can I auntie?"

Lena looked up with a coquettish glance from the flowers she was arranging.

"Yes, you can—at least you might have played fair with him!"

Aunt Emily gave an extra vicious click with her knitting needles, and refused to discuss the matter further.

Only under extreme provocation did she ever interfere with the affairs of her niece. In this case the provocation had been supplied by Lena's outrageous flirtation with Jack Lawrence. Aunt Emily, though a confirmed spinster herself, had the greatest sympathy with any pair of lovers. But she loved fair play.

So she laughed. Pulling her hands away she drew back a step, and as she laughed she said gaily:

"Don't be silly, Jack. Why, of course I shan't wait for you or do anything half so sentimental. Let's drop it all and be the pals we've always been."

But as she looked up into his face she was amazed at the change she saw there. Jack looked as if someone had struck him. His face had flushed and there was anger in his eyes. When he spoke his voice was older, tenser, more vibrating than Lena had ever heard it.

"Then you mean you've—you've been playing with me?"

"Playing with you? What ever do you mean?" Lena tried to speak naturally, but even to herself her voice sounded artificial. Aunt Emily's words suddenly flashed across her mind: "At least you might have played fair!" She knew—her conscience told her—that she hadn't "played the game." She had felt pleased and flattered when she realized the change that had come over Jack



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Jack and Lena had been neighbors and friends since their young days, and Aunt Emily was quite ready to admit that, up till the last six months, Lena had been justified, in more or less "making a convenience" of Jack. Indeed she had grown so used to his comradeship, that to rely on it, had become almost a habit.

Six months ago Jack had accepted an excellent post in India. He was due to start in a month's time now. And it was during these last six months that his attitude towards Lena had changed.

It was patent to everyone—to Lena herself, to Aunt Emily, and to all their mutual friends—that Jack loved her. Lena had found it a little thrilling, quite a welcome variation in the more or less monotonous round of her days. And just to add to the excitement, she had "played up" to Jack, though she knew all the time that he was in deadly earnest.

This afternoon, as she strolled out into the garden to gather more flowers, Jack came towards her from the little wicket gate, that led from the garden to the meadow path.

"Lena, I want to talk to you."

"Talk away, then, while I clip this green stuff."

"I can't, Lena. Put all that stuff down."

He came towards her, and Lena was a little frightened when she saw the pallor of his face and felt the trembling of his hands.

"Lena, you do care for me, don't you? I love you dear. Will you wait for me till I come back?"

The words were crude in their sincerity, and for a moment Lena felt a responsive thrill. But then she looked up. This wasn't the romance she pined for. This was only Jack—her old pal—the boy she had played with, the young man she had "led on" just for a bit of fun. Oh, no, no, no! She could never marry him. She must get him back to the old friendly level.

in the last few months. She had understood quite well that he cared more deeply than she did. And now she was ashamed.

"Well, never mind. There it is!" Jack was speaking again. "I've been a fool that's all. I shan't come to see you again, Lena. This is good bye."

"Oh, Jack, don't say that. Let's forget this, and—perhaps you'll find someone heaps nicer in India."

"Would you like me to?"

"Why sure, Jack."

"Then I'll do my best. Good bye."

Without another word, he hurried away. The sarcasm of his parting words remained as a sting in Lena's mind for many a long day.

The months passed away and never once did Jack Ingle set foot inside the house or grounds of Meriton, Lena's home. Occasionally Lena met him in the village or at a neighboring function. Jack was cheerfully polite and apparently in excellent spirits. And Lena tried to think she was glad.

Just at the time he sailed for India, Lena's days and nights were filled with a round of garches. Her father, Colonel Frodsham, took her up to London, and she enjoyed "the time of her life." The women were very sweet to her and she had many admirers among the men. But, somewhat to her father's disappointment she did not seem inclined to marry any of them.

Though she would not confess it even to herself she missed Jack's companionship at every turn. She was hurt that he never wrote but she tried to persuade herself that she would have felt just as hurt if any other of her friends had treated her in the same way.

And so the time passed on till Jack had been away for three whole years. By this time Lena had found many new interests and made many new friends, so that the memory of her "chum" had faded a little and she had given up all hope of ever hearing from him.