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Alverson & Groff

Improvised
By JOANNA SINGLE
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Because it was a moonlit summer evening and they were young, happy and carefree, they wore the infliction of Billy's music without throwing things at him. They liked Billy so much that even his joyous rendition of "Tusania" in a sweet but hardly accurate tenor voice to the twang of his guitar was received with patience, albeit neither man nor girl on the cushioned veranda ceased talking or laughing or flirting. They knew Billy would not expect that even from guests.

Billy looked out on the little lake to a boat that drifted in the white path made by the moon on the water, and wondered what James Stratford was saying to Stella. The wonder made him so wretched that he began an agonizing improvisation on the "Spanish Cavalier" with one of the guitar strings a bit fast. Then he noticed that Norma had come near to him, the only silent one there, sitting on the top step, her fair head on her hands, her elbows on her knees.

It struck him that Norma, poor child, needed comfort, too. By some sixth sense he knew that Jimmy whatever he was saying to Stella, he pondered miserably as to the reason Stella might have for suddenly evading him, Billy, and being conscienceless with the other man. She knew, too, that Norma and Stratford were lovers if not actually engaged. That made her behavior worse.

Then, to relieve his own pain, and add to that of those who were listening, he sang "The Spanish Cavalier," and then "In Old Madrid," and then "Tusania" over again. He knew only the three songs, which was fortunate, for had he known another he would have rendered that also. As it was, he finally put down the long-suffering instrument and tried to talk with Norma.

The girl answered briefly in such a queer, half-choked little voice that he

but I didn't suppose she'd try to break things up between Jimmy and me.

"He doesn't deserve you, Norma," began Billy angrily, and then remembered that he was criticizing Stella as well, he was silent awhile.

"I can't understand women's vanity, Norma, and I wouldn't believe a bit of her from anyone but you. You're too good a little friend and too truthful not to be believed. Let's help each other out. Does anyone but you know how you feel about Stratford?"

She shook her head. "Not a soul! I've been so ashamed of flirting with Jerry Peters just to hide my real feelings I'll stop or go straight home."

"You'll stay right here! Going would be a confession. Tell you, Norma, let's stay right by each other. You flirt with me—and I'll flirt with you, and we won't mind what anyone thinks. It may bring those two people to time. What do you say?" The girl nodded, but her heart was sore that James Stratford would yield to the aggressive, sparkling, almost malicious fascinations of Stella the moment she tried them on him. Billy was a comfort, and she told him so.

They went back to the others.

The next day he saw a queer change in the affairs of the young people, most of them out at Billy's summer home for a couple of months. Billy and Norma were always together inseparable.

As Stratford saw Norma so oblivious of him, he began to think of her more and more, wondering if Stella was, after all, the one girl for him! One morning he asked Norma for a walk, but she told him sweetly enough that she was golfing with Billy that day. No, she wouldn't go out on the lake in the evening—Billy wanted her to learn a new song.

Behind them stood Stella, a queer look on her quaint brown little face. Sauntering off to the garden, she managed to run against Billy—she was sweet and appealing and meek. She seemed to care anything of him, he was so busy with his duties of host. He would be glad when he wasn't so busy. She dimpled and sparkled, her old self to him, but somehow he could not rise to the old ready adoration of the girl. Loyal himself, he loved loyalty in another. It was not that he couldn't forgive, but he saw a lack of quality in her. She, to satisfy mere vanity, had hurt him, hurt Norma—and perhaps Stratford. Billy was grave. Courteously enough, he led her back to the house and started with Norma for the links.

On the veranda Stratford also was looking after them. Stella turned to him with a queer little laugh.

"Quite a case, don't you think, Jimmy?"

He frowned. Suddenly he didn't like her to call him "Jimmy," though he had begged her to do not very long before. Neither did he like the light tone about Norma. He made some excuse and stalked away by himself with his pipe.

Out on the links Billy and Norma golfed and laughed. They had sought comfort and had found it.

It was the evening that followed that Stella made a discovery. Billy and Norma had walked out on the moonlit beach and sat together on the sand watching a stiff breeze send the waves lapping up at the shore line. Billy put his arm over Norma's shoulder with a loving little movement.

A light laugh made them both start, but instinctively Billy kept his arm where it was. They looked up and saw Stella and Stratford, the latter walking unwillingly as though he wished he were elsewhere. Stella laughed again.

"What a charming little scene! I hope we do not interrupt? Is it real—or just improvisation, Romeo? She undressed Billy and was answered by him.

"Norma and I see real people—we don't improvise a theme like—love. It's real, isn't it, Norma?"

She nodded. Suddenly she knew that she and Billy loved each other deeply and sweetly, and that these other people and their little jealousies and weaknesses meant nothing to either of them. But there was still enough feminine malice in the girl to make her ask woe of Stella.

"And you? Am I to wish you—?"

Stratford broke in rather angrily: "Don't be absurd! Stella doesn't enjoy that any more than I do, and you know it! Won't you and Billy come back to the house with us?"

Having put himself on record, Stratford knew Stella would expect no more of him. What did she deserve? He told himself that everything was her fault. Hang girls, anyhow! He made for the smoking room and his worst pipe at the first possible moment. He leaned back and blew rings, and tried not to see Norma as a bride. That was a little too much for Stratford at that time.

Peculiar Albanian Duet.

Albanians used to practice a peculiar form of duet. Sir Richard Burton, who once commanded a corps of bashi-bazouks, writes that "the Albanian contingent, who generally fight when they are drunk, had a peculiar style of monomania. The principal attended by their seconds and by all their friends, stood close opposite, each holding a cocked pistol in his right hand and a glass of red or spirits of wine in the left. The first to drain his draft had the right to fire, and generally blazed away with fatal effect. It was never allowed to discourage this practice, but I insisted on fair play."

Not Always.

"Cases may be known by their effects."

"How about rich food producing a poor appetite?"

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