

ZEKE SHARP'S COMPROMISE

By A. A. PATRICK

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Mrs. Miranda Bilks was a widow—that is to say, Mr. Bilks had suffered demise from the effects of a too hearty meal on peach cobbler, thus leaving his spouse, Miranda, and his daughter, little Miranda, to live as best they might off his none too generous estate, which same was comprised of an ax, a hoe, a spade, a pair of soles shoes and a pair of trousers, with sundry repairs fore and aft.

Mrs. Bilks therefore did not desert her calling, but continued to bend over the washub and rub and scrub from morning until night. And so the year slipped away, bringing Mrs. Miranda to middle age and crowning Miss Miranda with the dower of sweet sixteen.

I use the word "dower" advisedly, for it was about this time that Miss Miranda was thinking seriously of matrimony, and nothing under the sun had she but—just sweet sixteen. The real cause of her cogitations on so important a matter was to be found in

the person of one Zeke Sharp, a mild mannered, easy going widower with six children. Zeke was not burdened with



"YOU SHORE WOULD FILL THE PLACE," CONTINUED ZEKE.

Intellect. It was even supposed by his neighbors that he was entirely innocent of having any of that great force hidden about his anatomy.

This, however, mattered not, for he paid court to Miss Miranda with an assiduity that was marvelous. Indeed it was often only after clear and emphatic intimations from Mrs. Bilks, who looked upon his attentions to her daughter with extreme scorn, that he took himself off.

Far was it, though, from Mr. Sharp's intentions to be discarded and forgotten in such a manner, for he invariably returned the next day to renew his wooings with increased fervor. This state of affairs continued for some time.

At last Mrs. Bilks grew suspicious. There was a lurking fear in her mind that the association of Zeke and Miss Miranda was more congenial than she had believed, or, for that matter, more than they had cared to reveal.

To verify these suspicions Mrs. Bilks ensconced herself behind a door near where the couple sat in order that she might the better catch the drift of their conversation. What she heard satisfied her beyond question that she had surmised correctly. With much dispatch, therefore, she set aside the washub, doused the fire under the kettle with

water and, donning her best frock, hurried to the office of the county clerk, where, with a long pointed finger, she warned that gentleman not to be "givin' of any licenses to Miranda Bilks an' that rascalion Zeke Sharp."

Then she returned home in a very complacent humor with herself for having forestalled the elopers. She was hardly prepared, though, for the consequent developments, and it was with much surprise that she herself received a visit from Zeke Sharp.

Zeke tapped lightly on the front door. Mrs. Bilks answered the knock and coldly informed him that "Mirandy wasn't home."

"It be you I wuz a-wantin' to see, anyways," responded Zeke in a feeble voice.

At this piece of news Mrs. Bilks' eyes widened perceptibly as she regarded her caller for a moment. It wasn't necessary, however, for her to invite him in, for Zeke was already in and seated.

"I shore wuz sorry, Miz Bilks, 'cause you wouldn't let me an' Mirandy have them licenses." And Zeke sighed wearily.

"Licenses be fudged!" snapped Mrs. Bilks. "Things air a-comin' to a purty pass when a man wants to lope off with a gal 'tain't more'n sixteen an' ain't never baked bread ner stitched a stitch, much less tended to a house jam' full o' children, like you already got. Seems to me you'd a-picked a woman a little nigher yer own age an' one what knows how ter do somethin'."

Here Mrs. Bilks smoothed out a garment on the ironing board, took up an iron and worked industriously as she waited for Zeke to reply.

"That's jes what I come to see you about," replied the meek man. "You know if our wuz set me an' M'randy could go down to Hornetville right the licenses, Mirandy's a good gal an' I think a heap of her, but she's so young an' delicate-like I'm afraid she'd not set much store by the children, an' you know I want somebody that'll be a mother to 'em. I thought of you lots o' times, Miz Bilks, 'cause you're so chipper an' handy 'bout the house, but I didn't s'pose you'd care to take the 'sponsibility."

"I guess you never axed me," retorted Mrs. Bilks.

"You shore would fill the place," continued Zeke. "You're not more'n thirty-five."

"Jes' thirty-four, an' I guess they ain't many wimmen that can git aroun' as spry an' do as much work as me ner ther," flashed Mrs. Bilks proudly.

"If you wouldn't mind," went on Zeke, "we might as well hitch up an' try double harness awhile anyways."

"Now shore a-tally'n' sense," declared

the widow, "an' they ain't no use a-wastin' time if we're goin' to git married. I reckon that house an' them children air a-needin' attention bad 'nough now. I guess Mirandy 'll ride a high horse when she finds we're spliced."

Mrs. Bilks flushed to the roots of her hair.

Again the work was put aside, again the best frock was donned, and again the widow visited the county clerk's office, this time accompanied by Mr. Zeke Sharp. It was the latter who applied for the license for "Ezekial Sharp an' Miz Miranda Bilks." The clerk glanced at Mrs. Bilks and smiled. That lady blushed and hung her head, by which he inferred that she had withdrawn her former objections, and he wrote out the license in which the lady's name appeared as Miss Miranda Bilks.

If Mrs. Bilks had high hopes of being married a second time they were soon to be dashed to the ground, for on emerging from the office who should the couple encounter but Miss Miranda.

"Here's them licenses!" shouted Zeke as he caught the girl by the arm.

Mrs. Bilks stared at them in surprise. A moment later she came near fainting with amazement when the two suddenly vanished around a corner. She wheeled about and dashed into the clerk's office again, where a stormy interview took place.

"I'll have the law on you, sir!" she railed. "I told you not to be givin' them licenses to Mirandy an' that seal away! He told you miz, an' you writ 'em fer her, you tarnal scoundrel, you!"

"He said Miss Miranda," protested the clerk as he dodged behind a table.

Not far away the decamping parties were standing before a minister, who had commanded them to "join right hands."

"You lie!" screamed the widow. "He said miz!" And she made a dive after the retreating official.

Not far away the minister said, "I pronounce you man and wife."

As Zeke and his bride descended the front steps of the parsonage they must have heard sounds, which same emanated from the office, where the irate Mrs. Bilks was strenuously endeavoring to lay her hands on the clerk who made a mistake.

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