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[A Visit to a Flower Shop]

[Augusta, Georgia?]

A VISIT TO A FLOWER SHOP

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Miss Willie Jones, Proprietor (white)

Jones Flower Shop

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Cor. Clayton & College Ave.

Athens, Georgia

Florist

G.M.

A VISIT TO A FLOWER SHOP

Miss Smith's Flower Shop seemed more like a spring garden in full bloom than a business place when I came in out of the [bleek?] cold of a February day. There were flowers on every hand. Cut flowers were in wall baskets, vases, and tall standing baskets. Pots of blossoming plants were arranged on tables at the windows. A long table extending down the center of the room was laden with vases of cut flowers and potted plants, and tall palms added distinction to the attractive room. Across the back of the shop were huge refrigerators filled with cut flowers. For the convenience and comfort of customers a [settee] and a number of large chairs were placed near the wall where their occupants could have a good view of the flower-filled room as they waited.

The florist was talking with two young men, and as I waited bits of the conversation attracted my attention. The youths wanted her prices on corsages for their "dates" to wear to a dance. It seemed that they priced every variety of flower in her store before they finally selected orchids. After receiving her positive assurance that the flowers would be ready and delivered in ample time for the dance, they left.

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"Now, what can I do for you?" she asked. After I had explained that I wanted to know something of her life and her business experiences, she said, "I don't mind but I'll have to talk as I work, for the orders that came in the morning mail are yet to be gotten out. Most

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of them are for flowers ordered sent to patients in the hospitals here. Just come on back in the workroom with me.”

“Do you receive much business of that kind?” I asked.

“Oh yes,” she said. “These orders come in almost daily, and I appreciate mail orders. I'm proud of them, for I realize they mean that my customers have confidence in me. Why sometimes the orders simply state the price, leaving the selection of flowers to my taste. For instance, here's an order that came in this morning's mail from a woman in a nearby town that simply says for me to send a three dollar order of flowers to a friend in a hospital here. When I receive an order like that I do the best I can and send what I would want for myself. On this particular order I think I'll send pink carnations, for I think they are lovely in a sick room. Anyway, this order is an easy one for the sick woman is a good friend of mine, and I happen to know that carnations are her favorite flower.

“Very often new customers tell me that some of my old customers sent them to me. I try to let them know of my appreciation. One especially nice customer has sent me many new customers through her connections with several fraternal organizations, and 3 this has meant quite a bit of business for me. I had an opportunity not long ago to show my appreciation when she lost her brother in a nearby town. A good many orders came in for that funeral, but when she called me and asked me to fix her own offering, I asked her if I might make my own selection of flowers and design. She readily gave her consent saying, ‘You have never disappointed me yet.’ I used all white flowers in the casket spray that I sent, and it seemed to me that it was a really lovely offering. I wanted it to be especially so, but I was not expecting the many messages I received about those flowers. One was from the undertaker in charge of the funeral. He wrote me that they were often asked by the families that they served to order flowers for them. He said that all of the flowers that came from my shop had been beautiful and that this particular casket spray was the loveliest they had ever handled. He wanted to know if I would fill orders for his firm regularly. That request came from a much larger town than this one.”

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She left me momentarily to wait on a customer. As I waited, I looked over the little workroom. High stools were placed around the long work table. Built-in cabinets hold supplies and accessories. Conveniently at hand on a long rod at one side of the table was waxed paper, cellophane, and tissue paper to be used in packing flowers for delivery. A supply of tulle and ribbons in a wide variety of shades and colors was in a large cabinet with glass doors. A large and very business-like desk was evidence that this room was also used as her office.

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The florist was laughing when she returned to the workroom. "Poor boy," she said, "This is the third time he has been here today to look at those red roses. Tomorrow is his girl friend's birthday. She will be 20, and he wants to send her 20 red roses. Red roses are rather expensive at this time of the year, but he'll get them yet; he wants them so bad.

"Last week I had a large order for corsages for a valentine ball. They wanted sweetheart roses. I did have a time trying to get those sweetheart roses, but finally I found one place that said they could send me all I wanted, so I sent them a large order. It was delivered on the morning of the very day I was to deliver the corsages in the evening. When I unpacked that shipment I found a note saying they were sorry that they did not know they were out of sweetheart roses when they accepted my order, but they were sending some fine large roses and hoped I could use them. It was too late to try anywhere else, and then too I had already tried everywhere. Well, I just had to make the small roses out of the larger ones. Yes, you may be sure it was a job, but in this kind of work you come up against all sorts of difficulties. Our orders have to be delivered on the very hour, and to get out large orders we sometimes have to work day and night in order to have them ready in time. One thing we have to do is to be prompt in our deliveries. We would not last long in this business if we failed in timing a few deliveries."

"How long have you been in the flower business?" I asked.

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“Most all my life,” she promptly replied, “but I have only been in business for myself 16 years. It was a hard pull but I have 5 advanced from a very small beginning to the shop that you see now, and don't you think I'm not proud of it. I am more than proud of my establishment, although it still means work all the time. Why, I spent all of this morning writing checks for every bill that I owe. I meant to do that yesterday, but was just so busy I didn't have the time.

“To get back to how I started, it all came about through my love of flowers. We always grew lovely ones at our home. Father was not what you would call wealthy, but we had a good living and a large roomy home. There were six of us children and while we were still in school father lost ‘most everything he had except our home by going on notes for his friends. That has been a lesson to me in my business.

“We children had to stop school and go to work, and that is when I began to realize that we could make money out of our flowers. One of my sisters and I worked with the flowers, and we soon cleared enough to have a large greenhouse built for the hothouse plants. We planted every available bit of land around our home in flowers. We had many things to learn, but we kept at it until we did learn and built up a good business. We were both determined to see it through and we are both at it yet, although we no longer work together.

“A few years after we started, we built a swimming pool and a dancing pavilion on our place. This soon became a popular resort in the summer months. In addition to those who came/ simply for swimming and dancing, many picnic parties patronized our place. We kept the 6 pool cleaned out and had it cemented. It filled from a large spring. We were making good with it, as well as with our floral business, but when my sister got to where she left most of the hard work for me to do, our partnership was soon dissolved.

“One afternoon she was entertaining the Community Club. The boy that worked for us was helping me clean out the pool to make it ready for a social group that had rented it for the

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evening. When we finished scrubbing the cement bottom of that pool I was so tired that I set down on the bank to rest for a moment. Sister came walking up.

“What are you doing?’ she asked.

“resting, for I'm really tired out,’ I answered.

“Well,’ she said, ‘if I hated the country as bad as you do I'd get out of it. If you don't like this, why don't you get out and go in business for yourself?’

“That made me mad. I'd worked so hard to build up our business, and it really belonged to both of us together, but that's when I decided to get out and see if I couldn't do better. I came to town, rented a small place, and a friend went into business with me. That made my sister mad for she hadn't thought I really would take her at her word and get out. She did everything in her power to stop me. She even told the telephone company that they couldn't install a phone in my name or in the name of my new shop.

“A lawyer that I consulted asked me if the Smith Flower Company - that was the way sister and I had been listed in the directory 7 was incorporated. I told him it was not. Then he said, 'there's no way in the world that she can legally prevent you having a telephone in your own name.' So he called the telephone company and explained it. Pretty soon they were there to install my phone.

“We had built a nice large greenhouse together, and we owned a car together that we had been using to deliver our flowers. In fact, I had paid more on the car than she had, but, bless you soul, she went up in the air and wouldn't even let me use the car to deliver my orders until I could get another one.

“I've always detested the idea of giving up anything that I had started, so the more she tried to stop me, the harder I tried to get ahead with my new business, but it was hard. I had to build a new greenhouse that cost me \$2,500 and I had to buy another car, for

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those were two things that I had to have if I was to stay in business. Soon I started building my own residence. I would get a little done and then would have to stop and wait until I had more money. The contractor would say, 'Just let me go ahead and finish the house, and then you can pay me later.' I wouldn't consent to that for I always want to see where I am, and I didn't know then, the way my sister was trying to hinder my business, if I was going to be able to keep my shop going. In the fall of that year my partner asked me to use some of his money to finish the house so I could move in it before cold weather, for I would need someone there to see that the heat was kept properly regulated in my new greenhouse. Seeing that he was right about it, I did borrow the 8 money from him, had my house finished, and moved in before time to heat the greenhouse. But, let me tell you right now, I paid him back every cent by the early spring of the next year. Since then I have kept on making improvements on my home until now I have a lovely eight-room house, modern in every respect except for gas. Yes, it was tough going, but, as my partner said one day when I was unusually blue, 'remember that old saying, you can't keep a good women down.'

"My people continue to impose on me since I have worked and made good. In addition to improvements on my residence and its grounds, I have built several cottages. This might seem to be a jumbled-up story, but you'll soon see the connection in the impositions of my family, my cottages, and my business.

"Two young married men work for me. One of them is my nephew. I provide a house, lights, and water for each of those couples, and I guess I furnish their coal too, for my coal bill is not less than [\$17?] every two weeks. I pay them good salaries too, for our work is not like 'most any other kind of business on account of the irregular hours I'm compelled to require them to be on duty. There are times when we have to work day and night.

"My nephew is supposed to help me here in the shop when he is not busy out at my greenhouse and garden, and I especially count on him to help with deliveries, but half the time I don't even know where he is. His wife helps me in the shop in rush times, but I sure

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do have to pay her. In spite of the fact that I'm always doing 9 something for them, they do not offer to do anything for me unless I pay them for it.

"I'm always buying something for this nephew's two little children, but he and his wife don't appreciate what I do for them. I pay bills for things that I never see. He and the other young man that I hire to work out at my place just do pretty much as they please. Why, just let me get in a big rush here at the store and phone out there for them and what do you suppose I nearly always learn? They are usually gone fishing or hunting when I need them. They think because one of them is my own nephew they are privileged to do pretty much as they please. They even use my cars to make these pleasure trips in and charge the gas to me. I guess I'm just too easy on them.

"I own my business all by myself now. I started out in a very small place, and I have had to move twice because I needed more room for my business, for it has grown from year to year, and now I'm getting just about all the trade that I can take care of. That sister of mine thinks that I should do more/ /for my kinfolks than I do, but I can't see it that way, and, in fact, I don't see how I could do much more for them. True, I don't keep any of them in my own house any more. That just didn't work out well when I tried it; we couldn't get along together, but I do provide a house for one of my sisters and one for a brother and his family, and I help to feed them. Father and mother are both dead, and I am sure that/ I do as much for the remaining members of the family, as any of them do for each other, or for anyone.

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"All of them think they are keeping up with what I make through my nephew. What they don't know is that I have learned not to let him know about my financial affairs. He takes no interest in the work and in the problems of the shop and greenhouse and just will not look after the shop at all. Right now I need to get out and take a trip or a rest somewhere, but bad as I need rest I can't afford to leave my business to run itself."

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Someone came in the shop and the florist went to join the prospective customer. I noticed some pictures over her desk. They were pastel tinted pictures of lovely little girls, and one of a baby boy, but my attention was especially attracted to a photograph of a cemetery scene. It was the grave of a child, and beside it was a Christmas tree with all the decorations needed to make a child happy. A large illuminated star crowned the tree. Evidently someone had celebrated the birthday of Christ by the grave of a beloved child.

A triumphant smile of a good natured I-told-you-so style wreathed the face of the florist as she came back to the workroom, and sure enough her first words were:

“I told you so; that boy couldn't resist the red roses for his sweetheart. He came back and ordered them. Now he's so happy, and I hope she will be just as thrilled when she gets them, as he is over sending them.”

The next two customers were young men. One ordered talisman roses sent to a young woman, and the other wanted a pot of flowers 11 for a sick friend. She patiently and tactfully showed one pot of flowers after another, explaining its merits and giving prices until at last a choice was made. One customer followed another so rapidly that it was nearly two hours before she was at liberty to talk with me again.

She had just finished waiting on a rather shabbily dressed boy, but she was just as friendly and helpful in showing him her stock of flowers as she had been with the more prosperous looking visitors. When he had gone she said, “I wish I knew who that boy is. He comes in nearly every day just to look at my flowers. He really is a lover of flowers. I often give him a few for I imagine he can't afford to buy them. In some respects he's more of a child than a man, even if he is grown in size.”

She finished recording her orders for the morning, and I took the opportunity to ask about the pictures of the children, taking care to let her know of my interest in the one of the Christmas tree by a child's grave.

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“Those are all children of my nephews,” she replied. “This one,” she said, handing me the photograph of the eldest child, “is the one that is buried in that grave. She was my favorite. I love them all dearly, but she just seemed to think more of me. A few years ago she was accidentally killed by a truck just a few weeks before Christmas. How she did love Christmas trees! Every Christmas we keep a brightly lighted tree by her grave throughout the holiday season. She was a bright child and everybody loved her.” The tears were brimming in her eyes, but they were quickly wiped away as Miss Smith arose to greet the person who was entering the shop.

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I thought I detected a sudden stiffening of her manner as the person, who proved to be a salesman, attempted to interest her in the idea of giving him an order for supplies. “I don't need a thing,” she told him. He kept on urging. “How about some pots?” Again she replied, “No, I don't need a thing.” He flushed. “Aren't you ever going to forget about that old matter?” he argued. “I told you that I am not in need of anything,” she repeated more frigidly than before. His “thank you,” was in tones of annoyance and discouragement as he went out.

“I wish that man would stop coming in here,” she explained. He gave me a dirty deal on an order once, and I just won't forget about it. It was a rather large order, for hundreds of pots for one thing. There were pots of every size and the order totaled hundreds of dollars. Well, he proceeded to overcharge me on every item on that order. I found it out when a price list came in the shipment of goods. I guess I should have reported him, but I didn't. I just stopped giving any more of my business to him, and he does hate to miss the large orders he used to get from me. You see, I try to buy in large orders, for the larger the quantity ordered, the better price they give you, and then I keep an extensive stock on hand and watch it to be sure that I do not run out of anything.

“A good deal of my stock of supplies is stored at my house, but I'm going to have to stop keeping it there or make some sort of change in my system of handling it.” She laughed

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heartily, as she continued, "I always buy my [galax?] leaves and other foliage green 13 stuffs in large quantities, not less than one hundred pounds at a time, and keep it at the house, bringing it in with me in the mornings as I need it. Well, just before last Christmas one day when I had just about used up all we had here in the shop, I phoned to my house and told one of the boys to bring me in a supply. A few minutes later he called me back and said there was [none?] there. I sent him back to look again, but he couldn't find a [scrap?] of foliage. My nephew had come in the store and was standing by me as I phoned but he didn't say anything.

"When I went home that night I found that the boy had been right. I didn't have any foliage on hand. I couldn't imagine what in the world had happened to the supply I had stored away at home. Finally, after Christmas had come and gone, I found out what went with it. One day my nephew was boasting that his wife had sold more than a hundred dollars worth of these little Christmas flower pots at the dime stores. I realized then where my supplies had gone. No, they never said a word to me about it, never even mentioned it to me, but they don't pull as many things over me as they think they do. That nephew of mine thought he was smart when he built a cow stall, and had a cow in it before I knew anything at all about it because he had built a high trellis between my house and the cow stall." She laughed rather bitterly as she added, "They feel so sure they will get all I have when I'm gone that I guess they think they might as well us it now."

She waited on more customers and when she returned she said, "Trade has been rather dull today, but I guess I need a slack day occasionally for I have been in such a rush lately."

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Her hands were moving swiftly as she talked and when the orders were ready for delivery she phoned the number listed as her house. She waited impatiently for some time, finally the phone was answered by her nephew's wife who said he was not there. It was necessary that the flowers be delivered without further delay, so she called a taxi and

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made her deliveries. "Just see how it is," she said. "It's this way 'most all the time. People that I pay to help me think they can do me just any old way, but one of these days they'll go too far.

"Why last spring when it seemed like they were getting behind with the work out at my place, and I really don't like to overwork anyone, I got a settled man to go out there and help them until the rush was over. It was some special work. When he had finished and I was paying him off he said to me, 'Miss Smith, I don't like to tell things on other folks, but you just don't know how things are going on out there at your place. When I first went out there on this job they said I must heed their advice to 'see nothing, hear nothing, know nothing,' for as your nephew had been getting by, they didn't want me to tell on him and them.'"

Miss Smith's laugh was rather hollow as she said, 'I fired both of those couples last fall, for going off at a time when I needed them very bad. They didn't think I'd do it, but I did, and sent for another boy to work in their stead. Well, do you know what those two boys did? They went and told the other boy that I had changed my mind. Next morning when I came out to go to work, my nephew was there waiting in my car, and the other helper was already at work trimming the 15 hedges - or pretending to - and both of them were watching me close. They had good jobs and knew they couldn't do anyone else like they do me. Well, for a time they did fine after that, and I got more work out of them than I ever had before.

"I'll have to hire my nephew's wife to help me get out those corsages for the dance tomorrow, but I always have to pay her four or five dollars for every day that she works here. She is good help and really knows how to turn off the work, so she's worth what I pay her, but what annoys me is that she never offers to help me unless I ask her and then she is sure she'll get paid for it.

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“My family are always borrowing money from me, but they never pay it back. They wouldn't think of trying to do anyone else that way. I guess they just figure that I don't need it, but it just isn't fair, for I pay them well for all they ever do for me, and they have all the flowers they want, whenever they want them. I like to see them put flowers in their houses.

“It's the children that give me real pleasure running around the house when I'm at home. Without them to run in I would get mighty lonesome, especially on Sundays. I do my own cooking but I hire someone to come in and do the cleaning.

“Last Sunday one of my friends was visiting me and she said, ‘I knew you were crazy about flowers, but I didn't know that you were as bad off as you are. Do you know how many vases of flowers I have counted in your house today? Fifty-two, and I don't know how many more I might find if I hunted for them.’ This friend really likes my home, and it's natural that she should, for I do have a nice place. It's just outside the city limits, and it seems to me I've already mentioned to you about the cottages that I built on the place to rent. I don't have any trouble keeping those convenient little houses rented.

“The electric power lines go right by our place, so of course we have had everything wired for electricity. I use an electric pump to furnish water for the house and greenhouse and we have plenty of it. About the only thing we miss is gas to cook with, but we prefer to cook with electricity. While we live in the country, we have all the conveniences of city life, and as our place is on a paved highway we have no trouble in getting to town.

“I often come back in town at night to shows, as that is about all the recreation I have time for. I go to church on Sundays unless I have to work, but when a big funeral is on hand, I work harder on Sunday than on other days. Sometimes when I can get one of my helpers to stay at the house on Sunday, I get away for a whole day, and the change of scene always does me good. Those days-off are seldom, for you can never tell when someone will phone in an order on Sunday and want it in a hurry, and I am usually the one that has to stay there and tend to business.

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“I often think of what our old Negro cook told me once when I was little. She was trying to get me to do something that I didn't want to do. Well, after trying every other way she knew, she just turned me across her lap and gave me the only whipping I ever received.

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As she spanked me she was saying, 'some of dese days, youse gwine'er haf to do fer yo'self, and how's you gwine'er git along, lessen you larns how'“

“How right she was! I really have/ had to work, but in spite of all my handicaps, I've made a good living, and now I'm trying to lay aside enough to take care of me when I get to where I can't work. I have several very good investments in stocks, and that seems a better investment than building houses to rent, for there's something to be spent on repairing rented property all the time. Most of the renting class of people will not take care of a house, simply because it is not their own property.

“I do have a time with my social security payments and records. In fact, I still don't entirely understand them; I really don't know what it all means. I don't object to it, and I'm willing to do my part. It was just a little complicated at first, but my reports pass all right now, I guess, for I don't hear any more from them after I send them off.

“Last Sunday my sister wanted to know just how much insurance I'm carrying on myself.

“ ‘Not any at all,’ I replied.

“She was shocked and gave me a ‘raking over the coals,’ as our old cook used to say.

“ ‘Why should I carry insurance?’ I asked. ‘I have no husband or children of my own to leave it to, and I think I can take care of myself financially as long as I live.’ I guess they want all 18 they can get.

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“The first of this year I made a resolution not to lend any money to anyone during this year.”

“Have you kept that resolution?” I asked.

“I did for one day,” she said as she laughed heartily. “Maybe it was two days I kept it, and then my nephew and my other helper wanted \$10 each. Of course they got it. They know exactly how to get around me.”

After stopping to wait on customers again she came back to the workroom saying, “The rain is coming down in torrents, and I have to send out some of these flowers. Guess I'll have to use a taxi again for that nephew of mine has not come back yet and it's 'most time to close up the shop and go home. He knows I can't drive an automobile, so I'm pretty sure he'll get here in time to take me home. It's a good thing this hasn't been a busy day, for I couldn't have gotten hold of him if I'd needed him ever so much.”

I wondered why she spoke of business as dull, for she had worked hard all day. As I left, I stopped to thank her for giving me so much of her time, and I told her that the interview had been a most interesting and informative one for me. “I enjoyed talking to you,” she said, and added, “I'm glad you came in, for I don't like to be by myself.”

A man passed me in the doorway. Evidently he was her truant nephew, for I heard her greet him, “Where have you been all day?” As I walked down the street I wondered if he was able to present an excuse sufficiently plausible to satisfy the florist. It would certainly have to be a good one.