

Miss Honora

Stubbs was a Good Waiter!

And it Took Two Juveniles to Make Honora Appreciate Him

Matt—though to be sure it was a wintry sort of smile—and Matt watched the outfit drive off with the most curious expression on his face that he's ever worn! It was like as if he had just come to out of some kind of a trance and couldn't believe it had really happened—this adventure with Miss Honora and the orphans!

There was no doubt about it, Matt Stubbs had a way with him. Not a youngster in the village but would run to jump on the back of his car or buggy, and be certain of an invitation to "get right in," and go for a drive. He was queer in some ways but pretty human, far more human and approachable, the club agreed, than Honora. And it certainly was odd he had never married for he could have had his "pick" of the countryside. Of course he was homely as mud. But then, with a man that is never a serious handicap in the matrimonial race.

So the club's tongues and its needles clicked, fast and furious, all afternoon on the latest developments of this latest bit of choice local news, and strangely enough up on the hill Miss Honora's ears failed to burn. Perhaps she was too deeply engrossed in caring for the physical well-being of her small guests. They had made themselves quite at home, although they had scarcely been under her roof twenty-four hours. She liked their soft chatter and their truly French manner, half quaint, half gay, and altogether charming. Events had come upon them so quickly and they had lived so intensely these past few weeks, seen so many new sights, experienced such a motley crowd of new sensations one on the heels of another, that those first awful things associated with the Huns' invasion of their home town were now but a vague and diminishing memory—so merciful is life to the very young. The ugly dreams that had tortured them would not sear their little hearts any more. Already the pathetic questioning in their dark eyes was giving way to something that resembled happiness.

Some such thoughts as these busied themselves in the mind of Miss Honora as she "ran up" on the sewing-machine a pretty pink gingham dress for Edme and a blue Russian blouse for Marcel—the material had been in the house for weeks—while the children played outdoors, their merry laughter coming to her through the vine-shaded windows looking out on the garden.

She wondered when Matt would take it into his head to call for the boy. There were some items to be cleared up. For instance, what was that about a letter that would "explain" and where was the letter? How had he been able to keep the knowledge to himself that he was getting an orphan?

"Drat the man!" she exclaimed aloud. "If it had been anybody but him. . . . After all these years!"

Her lips drew to a straight and uncompromising line.

"I'll have just as little to say to him as I can," she reflected, bitterly. "He needn't think that just because I was forced to speak to him at the depot that that will establish a precedent for my future attitude."

And when he came she wouldn't unbend even to the extent of asking direct questions, but she'd find out what she wanted to, oh yes, indeed! One thing particularly must be made quite clear—Marcel being her Edme's brother, was entitled to as good a bringing up as Edme herself. The children came of a refined family. Matthew Stubbs was "well fixed" and had no ties whatever, so he was quite able to give the boy a gentleman's education. In her heart Miss Honora felt that Matt intended to do this very thing, but she mistrusted the clumsy, manlike way he would go about it. He was the soul of generosity but what in the world did the man know of such things as discipline and the new training for children? Discipline, huh! If he himself had had the benefit of a little more of that commodity in his own youth, he wouldn't have—well, he wouldn't have done some of the things he had. Matt had been "wild."

In the meanwhile, Miss Honora was placed in a peculiar situation. She was obliged to refer to Matthew as "the kind gentleman who is going to be a big brother to Marcel and who wants him to go and live in the big stone house where the collie pups are."

Once the boy asked her if she liked "Monsieur," and she had been compelled for diplomacy's sake to so far perjure herself as to nod affirmatively. Two days later Matt drove up to the lane-gate in his car.

"I'll take them for a spin first," he called to Miss Honora, who had come part way down the path in her stately way to inform him that the boy was crying at the idea of leaving Edme.

So she put both children into the tonneau and stood

watching the machine drive off, shading her eyes with her hand, and noting in a casual way that Matt was getting rather stooped.

MATT at the wheel meanwhile was doing his best to perform the double duty of guiding the car and endeavoring to understand the shrill French of his passengers, which in the form of a broadside of questions and exclamations assailed his ear without intermission. Occasionally Edme struggled with English.

"Mademoiselle Hall—the lady at the white house—says you are a kind,—a bon homme," she observed once.

"A—a what?" demanded Matt, turning about half-way, quickly.

"She likes you."

The car must have struck a culvert just then, else why should Matt have risen three inches out of his seat?

"She does, eh?" he growled, and the car narrowly missed skidding into the ditch. "She takes a funny way of showing it, then!"

But the children were exclaiming over the sight of a pond whereon a myriad young ducks were assembled.

Matt opened his lips, seemed about to speak, thought better of it apparently, and finally as they debouched upon a particularly smooth stretch of pike, opened the clutch and "hit her up" at thirty miles. The children screamed in delight.

When they arrived at Miss Honora's gate again Edme refused to get down without her brother. So Matt, signalling silently over their heads at Miss Honora that he would take them to his house and bring the little girl back, drove on, leaving that lady sorely provoked and standing bare-headed in the hot sun, for she had run out without a sun-bonnet.

"Matthew Stubbs is a perfect fool about children," she muttered, as she walked back to her verandah, "Letting them have their own way like that! He should put his foot down."

But evidently the foot-putting feat was beyond Matt, for as seven o'clock approached and still there was no sign of the car returning, Miss Honora was moved to go to the telephone and call Matt's house to ascertain whether he intended to keep Edme all night.

"Sorry," he growled, curtly. "Can't persuade the little beggars to separate. Better leave 'em here to-night and I'll run the little girl home in the morning."

Miss Honora almost stamped her foot. Hanging up the receiver with a snap she turned about to find Miss Elmira Gates standing in the open doorway, knitting-bag in arm.

"I declare, you look like you'd been givin' someone a piece of your mind, Honora," she observed, with her native shrewdness.

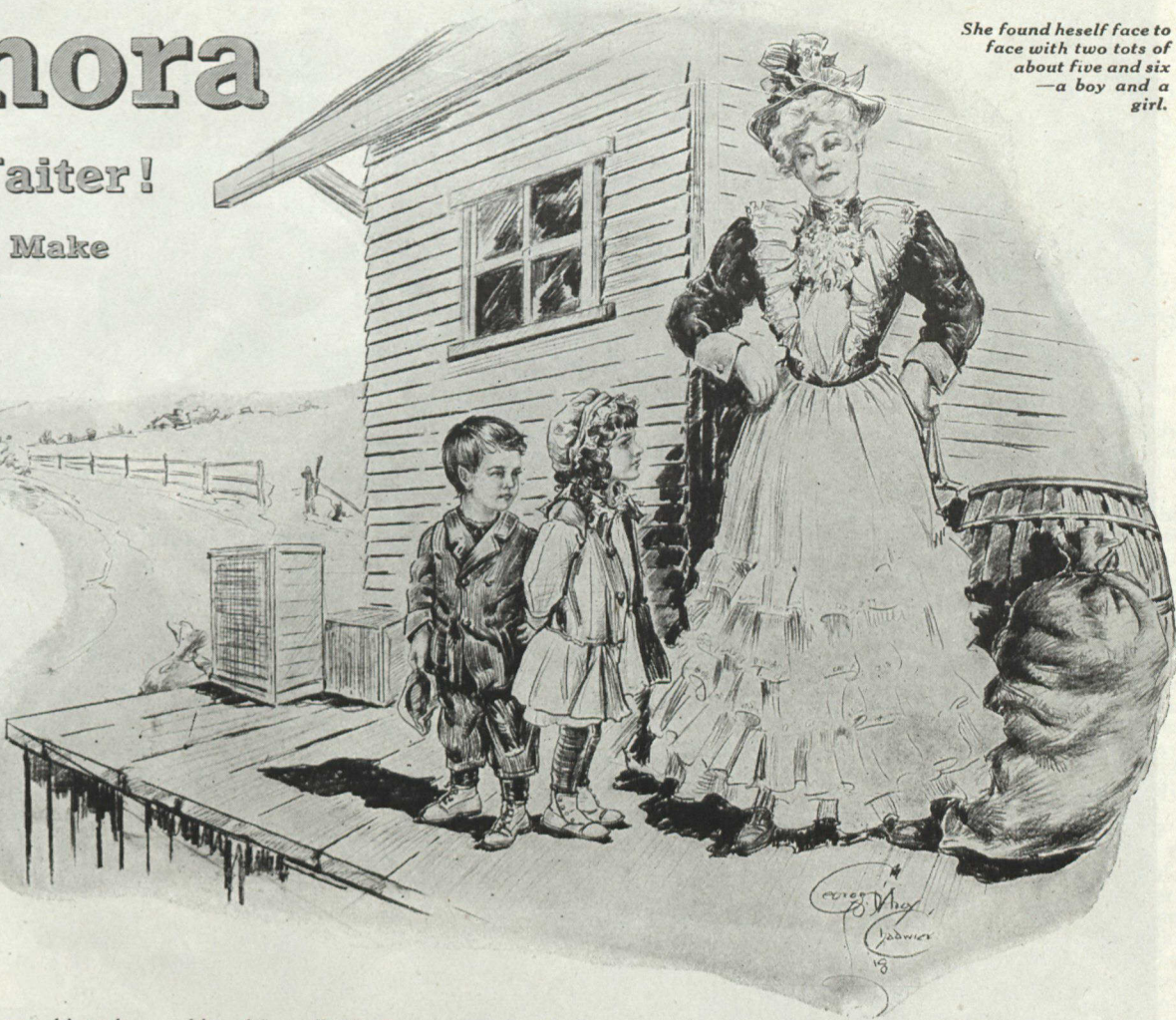
"You're wrong for once," returned Miss Honora, as she pulled forward a chair for her visitor. "Not but what I'd like to though—this particular person."

"Matt? Oh, I just guessed," and Miss Gates smiled with a deal of vinegary satisfaction. "Heard tell you two was getting real thick again, Honora. . . . What? You're not? Well, now don't it beat all how folks will talk! Why, some on 'em has got you engaged again an'—an' everythin'." I—

"Elmira," and Miss Honora's dignity of bearing was most impressive. "There are people who will make tales up out of whole cloth if they can't find anything else to—"

"Well, I didn't believe no sech thing, Honora, myself.

She found herself face to face with two tots of about five and six—a boy and a girl.



An' I'll tell you why: that pretty widow from over the river that's supposed to be a cousin of Matt's—Mrs. Parker or Parcher, or somethin'—"

"Porter," corrected Miss Honora, still very rigid.

"To be sure. (Sech a memory as I got.) Well, she come to pay a visit to Mis' Butler this mornin' an' she'll be here for like as not sev'ral weeks. You know she does fine sewin'. Mis' Butler has been expectin' her for over a month now—she always does her summer sewin' you know—an' of course it's no secret that she's been after Matt Stubbs for the last five years, or ever since she lost her husband."

"I don't see how it concerns me."

"No, of course not, Honora. I was just tellin' you though so's you'd know one of us at any rate don't put no stock in this here gossip regardin' you an' Matt. For I wouldn't be a mite surprised if she got him, an' before long too! She's a swell dresser an' you know the old sayin' that a mere man is helpless when a widow goes after his scalp—or his heart. They'd make a fine pair, too."

Miss Gates then adroitly changed the subject to that of the two interesting little strangers, and Miss Honora, much against her will, was obliged to explain their absence.

"Course, Honora, you can't deny that Matt had a way with him," remarked Miss Gates, as her needles flashed. "No wonder them kids are crazy over him, but I'll wager he'll find 'em a nuisance after the novelty wears off an' with him tryin' to court the widow, he'll find 'em harder to shake than a book-agent. Guess maybe you're wonderin' why I landed in so unexpected-like this evenin'. Well, it was all on account of the little whist drive Mis' Butler is havin' over to her place to-night for her visitor an' Matt. She wanted me to make up a fourth hand, but I says to myself, 'Elmira, you ain't goin' to play Jack-on-the-pinch for no flashy widow.' Besides, I wanted to finish this here sweater. So I made up the excuse that I was comin' up to see you. . . . No, 'tain't much more than a hen party. The rest is all married women an' most of 'em don't know one card from another."

The next morning quite early, as Miss Honora was baking in the outer kitchen Edme and Marcel came tumbling in upon her like a pair of small cyclones.

"Gracious sakes alive!" cried that lady, hastily removing her arms from the flour-bin, and trying to ward off their demonstrations of affection. "How comes it you're both back?"

When Edme could be made to understand, she explained in the charming broken English which tripped like musical water-drops from her little tongue that "Monsieur Stubbs had gone right away vite, vite, as he had to go driving back in what you call the countree."

"With the Widow Porter," reflected Miss Honora, knowingly.

Furthermore, it appeared that Marcel had behaved "tres mauvais," flinging himself on the ground and squealing and kicking and altogether behaving like "a naughty little pig" when the nice kind monsieur had tried to drive Edme back alone. Pups and swings and even the so pretty cakes with sugar on top had availed nothing. Marcel wasn't going to be parted from Edme.

"But what does Matthew propose to do about it!" exclaimed poor Miss Honora, dropping into a chair and fanning her heated face with an end of her crisp blue percale apron. "This foolishness has to stop somewhere, sometime."

She gave the children each a handful of cookies and sent them off to play.

"Of course we could be underhand and separate them by strategy," she said to herself, as she went to work again. "But somehow that doesn't appeal to me. I don't hold with treating children like that. Act honestly with them if you want them to do the same with you."

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