

himself to do the honors of the occasion.

When Jasper rose he discovered that the charming widow was a good half head taller than himself, and he felt it incumbent on him to straighten the little habitual stoop of his shoulders.

Calamity had entered unobtrusively, merely exchanging a "good evening" with her pseudo-flance. By the side of this brilliant plumaged bird she looked like a little brown sparrow. Meanwhile Mrs. Wood took possession of Mr. Titewadd and proceeded to entertain him in spirited style. The family drew away as if by mutual agreement. The widow was evidently desirous of making an impression on the well-to-do bachelor. And as Walter said "She had the goods." Divinely tall and fair with a melodious contralto voice, a voluptuous form and an imposing address, who could withstand her? She was attired in white and wore a long chain of corals and a corsage bouquet of June roses. Her hair was of that particularly golden hue so often sung about, and so seldom seen. The dainty feet which, as a matter of course, ought to have accompanied the rest of the vision, were concealed beneath the folds of her dress, which was so long as to boast of a considerable train. But they were only a small part of the altogether charming whole.

Jasper found himself making unfavorable comparisons between Mrs. Wood's figure and that of Calamity.

There was a scramble. Mrs. Wood, quite forgetting her dignity and station and bringing up at the head of the boys, until pushed back by Alec with a muttered threat. Notwithstanding the number of rehearsals she had had in managing her train, it insisted on thrusting itself forward and tangling up her feet. Worse luck, too. Something appertaining to her person had given way in that mad rush, and what or where it was she dared not guess.

"Oh dear!" she sighed. "I'm such a tomboy."

"Not at all, Mrs. Wood," said Jasper, "only high-spirited."

Whereupon, to cover the widow's embarrassment, he launched out into his favorite story. And then Mrs. Wood begged him to tell another. By the time he had retailed three of his "yarns," he was glowing with good-humor and self-appreciation. Then the widow herself recounted a few of her merriest tales, all pungent with the latest slang. Mr. Titewadd was becoming more enslaved with every passing moment. When refreshments came in he was most attentive. So also were the boys.

For assiduity in waiting upon the ladies Alec merited honorable mention, returning no less than five times with the same cake and "pressing" sandwiches upon her at intervals of every three minutes. Walter, after several trips around with the coffee, found his



At the Lake of the Woods.

All men like a "figger," and the widow was the happy owner of large—not to say ponderous—proportions. So the tete-a-tete proceeded in delightful manner. Scraps of conversation like the following floated out to the others:

"O, yes, I just adore the country! Heavenly!—Round here it's too sweet for anything. Oh, yes, of course I like the city—but if I could only spend the rest of my life on a farm! Do you? Well I should think you would be so accustomed to the country by this time, you wouldn't care to leave. Sing? Oh, I couldn't. I have a terrible cold. Play? Why certainly. Do you care for dance music?"

Alec and Walter were conferring in a distant corner, but both started when Mrs. Wood rose and minced across to the piano. She seated herself very cautiously and patted a stray curl into place with a hand upon which many rings glittered.

"I'm sadly out of practice," she simpered.

"Oh, just put your best foot foremost," Mr. Patton called out.

"Hit her up with a rag-time, old chap!" cried Walter, for which unguarded remark he was punished by a kick under the table from Alec.

Mrs. Wood played brilliantly. She had "an almost masculine touch," Mr. Titewadd thought. When she had executed ten or eleven "pieces" Calamity, who had been absent for a few moments, called in from the kitchen door:

"I want a boy out here to help carry in the tea."

self-possession deserting him, so he contented himself with leaning in lover-like proximity near Mrs. Wood's chair. From this vantage point he was guilty of making audible remarks concerning "style" and "slinging it over the rubes" and "where did she buy that hair," etc., etc.

"Oh, Mr. Titewadd!" gushed the object of that gentleman's admiration "You cannot imagine how I have enjoyed the evening. You are such a perfect listener. I don't know when I have met a man whose tastes and opinions were so like my own. We must be friends!"

"Very happy, I'm sure," returned the flattered Jasper.

"Shake," she proceeded, holding out a jewelled hand.

Jasper shook it limply, meanwhile casting an uneasy glance in Calamity's direction.

"I—er—I—it's—been a very enjoyable evening to me, too," he said.

"I envy you, Mr. Titewadd."

"Envy me?"

"Why, yes. Your life in the country, you know. Oh, to pass the remainder of one's days surrounded by green fields and waving grain, to be near a running brook, whose tinkling murmur—er—mingled with the songs of birds—"

"Oh, say, cut it out kid!"

The latter clause was addressed in a threatening whisper to Walter, who had administered a heavy punch to the speaker's arm.

"Why don't you settle somewhere near here then?" asked Jasper, taking

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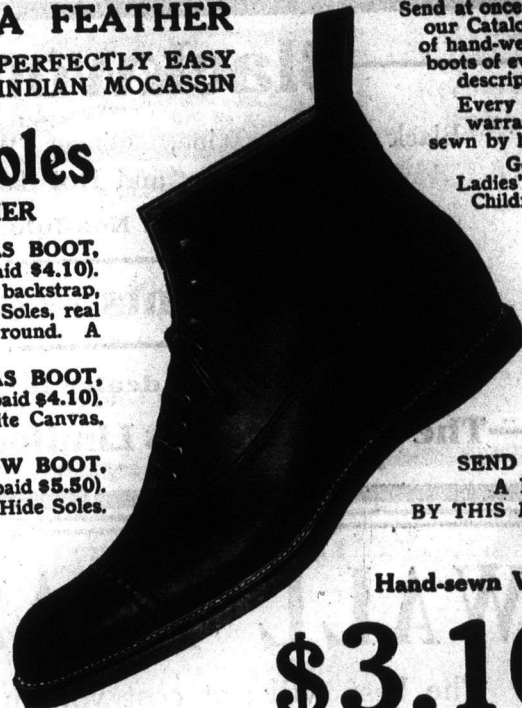
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