

MSC 706

Suchan, E.

The Gods Are Mothers

CS

## THE JOKE

By Ruth Suckow, '14.

THEY were bosom friends—two pink-cheeked college girls—and as they went slowly down the street with arms entwined and red-capped heads bent close, little giggles and whispers and ripples of laughter betrayed the secret and delightful nature of their absorbing intercourse.

"Why, Jess, it doesn't seem possible," breathed one. "Peachy Smith!"

"True, nevertheless," the other replied, with a dramatic wave of her hand. "I have it from reliable sources and the winner of the Drake short story prize is none other than Dugald Warner Smith."

"Think of Peachy's writing a love story, of all things. Oh, Jess, did I ever tell you—" the two bright heads bent close again and more giggles ensued.

"But you couldn't know," Jess murmured comfortingly. "Peachy always tries the new girls, and for a while, until they find out who he is, they like him well enough. But I," she added impressively, "have known Dugald Warner from kindergarten up, and it has always been just the same. The girls despise him and as for the boys—well, they hoot when you mention his name."

"And yet he isn't bad-looking," said Helen thoughtfully. "There's really nothing bad about him at all."

"Bad!" cried Jess. "Goodness no! That's the trouble! Peachy is so awfully good—he's so—so worthy. I can remember how I hated him when mother used to tell me that Dugald was such a good boy. He always washed the breakfast dishes and helped his mother iron. I can't really explain it—"

"No, you can't explain it," Helen's brows knitted thoughtfully. "I don't know why it is, but Peachy Smith is just a joke."

"Oh, s-sh, s-sh!"

A tall boy, immaculately dressed, stepped past, lifting his cap with scrupulous politeness. His face, as he greeted them, was as absolutely expressionless as that of a stone image, while the peculiar, set look of the girls' mouths betokened the breathless, irrepressible giggles and half-laughing, half-reproachful "Oh, do you suppose he heard?" that followed.

As a matter of fact, "Peachy" Smith had heard. To be sure, he gave no visible sign, but deep down in his heart the words rankled. Yet it was not the words themselves—any thoughtless

school girl might speak them. The trouble was that Peachy knew that they were true.

Yes, they were true. From the day when his rapturous mother had sent him to kindergarten in a ruffled blouse that no other boy would have endured and with his long golden curls still uncut, Dugald Warner Smith had been a joke. The girlish beauty of his pink cheeks and long love-locks had soon changed the proud name of "Dugald Warner" to the much more fitting one of "Peachy," and they had but strengthened the conviction in the minds of his schoolfellows that their owner was that most despised of all creatures—a joke.

"A joke!" The words seemed to burn in the boy's mind, as with careful fingers he unlocked his door and stepped quietly into the empty house. He turned, as he entered, and for a moment stared silently at the two girlish figures tripping lightly along the frozen walk. It seemed to his sensitive mind that he could see their slender shoulders shake with half-repressed mirth, and as he watched them, little trills of laughter came faintly to his ears. It had always been so, he thought as he turned abruptly away, always laughter and careless contempt; and a little gust of anger deepened the pink of his cheeks. And yet it was characteristic of him that he did not vent his anger by a good, resounding bang of the door, but closed it softly, gently, with the quiet, almost lady-like manner that was habitual with him. In the same way, he took off cap and coat, hung the cap neatly on the rack, placed the coat carefully upon a hanger in the hall closet, inspected his shoes to be sure that no unseemly mud remained to defile the spotless floors

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Now, it was plainly five by the library clock and Dugald needed no bidding to tell him that five meant his daily duty of lighting the gas stove, patting the tea kettle on the fire, and bringing the fruit from the cellar. And yet—a thing unheard of in this most exemplary of sons—he merely frowned at the warning clock and sank into the comfortable depths of the Morris chair by the fire.

"A joke!" Unconsciously, his lips framed the words as he stared at the flickering flames. They explained it all—all the cool glances and giggles of the girls and the frank contempt of the boys. They explained his isolation from "the crowd," from its picnics and parties and gay little dances. Why, his sole social diversions had been class parties, a few invitations given as necessary payment, and the little surprises with which his too fond mother had afflicted him on several of his birthdays. All his life long, he thought with something approaching bitterness, he had been a mere hanger-on, in "the crowd" but never of it.

He had known this, of course, for a long time. He was naturally of a quiet retiring disposition, and during his stay in the grades, he had accepted the fact that he must not be rough, that he must not soil his clothes, that he must, in short, be a perfect lady, with quiet resignation. But with his entrance into High School, other desires had come. "The crowd" was formed, and to Peachy, entrance within its sacred circle seemed the height of bliss. At first, he had not understood; had hung around with the boys after school hours

and had sought to make friends with the girls. But repeated neglect on the part of the latter had soon taught him his lesson. The crowd had no open doors.

All the neglect and thoughtless cruelty of those High School days came into Peachy's mind as he sat there, staring gloomily at the smouldering fire. It was his well-known duty, as only son of the household, to replenish that dying fire, but for once he was utterly neglectful of it. All duties were overwhelmed in a flood of bitter thoughts.

"If I could only have gone into athletics," he muttered in vain regret. "A fellow can do most anything if he's an athlete. But mother—" He broke off almost angrily, for his mother had exclaimed with horror at the very thought of football and he had had no luck in basket ball or track.

"It'll never be any different. Just keep living along, never going with the fellows, never knowing any of the girls. Perhaps if I could have gone away to some other college—but mother! Not a thing to do but grind away and do housework. I might as well be a kitchen maid." Peachy kicked the iron of the grate almost savagely and then stared at the roughened place on his neat and shining shoe in perfect unconcern.

"It isn't fair—it isn't fair," the boy told himself. "I can't help it that I'm treated like a girl. I'm just as good as any other fellow. You'd think from the way the girls act that I was cross-eyed or crazy. Don't I look like other boys?"

He started up and with searching eyes, studied the gloomy face that stared back at him from the mantel mirror. Cheeks too pink, face a trifle too round, clothes smacking just a bit

too much of the band box—but that was all. There was nothing girlish, certainly, about his broad shoulders and good five feet eleven.

The quick opening of the door startled him and he turned guiltily away. A moment later, a little nervous, over-dressed woman came fluttering into the room.

"Oh, Dugald dear," she panted in a voice as fluttering as her manner, "I've had the most exhausting day at the club and I'm utterly worn out. Pull off this glove for me, won't you, darling?"

As her tall son bent and tugged away obediently at the refractory glove, she kissed him in her too-affectionate way and stroked his hair with her free hand. If the boy realized that his gushing little mother had made him the "joke" that he was, he certainly gave no sign of it.

"Have you put the teakettle on the stove, dear?" she chatted on. "Why, it is almost half-past five! Don't you—"

"I'll do it." Dugald turned away abruptly to the kitchen.

"Polly put the kettle on and we'll all have tea," he muttered.

The sound of lusty shouting came to his ears, and looking out of the kitchen window, he saw a bunch of college fellows go swinging down the street. Every now and then, one of them slipped on the treacherous ice and the others railed at him with shouts of laughter. Their faces were scarlet with the cold and as they went pushing and sliding along, they seemed to be having the best of fun. Dugald stared at them. All the other fellows were out having a glorious time, while he—well, he was doing what he had done all his life, put-

ting the teakettle on the stove when the clock struck half-past five.

The telephone bell rang sharply from the hall. Peachy hurried to answer it.

"Yes, this is—yes, sir.

"No, I can't guess, Mr. Brown.

"I have—why, I—I never thought of such a thing!

"Oh, thank you. It—it's certainly a surprise to me.

"Well, thank you."

He hung up the receiver and stared blankly at the telephone. After a moment, he got up and went dazedly into the library.

"Why, Dugald, love, what is it?" his mother asked in alarm.

Dugald stared at her. "Why, I never heard of such a thing! I can't believe it."

"But what?"

"I've won the Drake short story prize."

"My precious boy!" fluttered his mother. "Oh, how proud of you I am!"

Dugald laughed exultantly. "Why, I didn't even know I'd entered it. It strikes me all of a heap. Prof. Brown handed in one of my themes and it took the prize. Think of that, would you?"

"And it's quite a lot of money. Dugald?"

"Money!" Dugald answered. "I wasn't thinking of the money."

No, he wasn't thinking of the money. He was not even thinking of his success. He was thinking only that his chance had come at last.

All that evening Peachy's heart fairly sang. He whistled as he set the table (a thing unheard of) and sang all the foot-ball songs he knew. No boy who was a real factor in College life could know what that little success meant to Peachy. It meant the

"Tatler" staff, it meant the Annual Board, it meant that Peachy Smith was no longer a joke.

The Annual Board! His heart thumped as he thought of it. The election would be the following night, but could that coveted honor come to him? Yet could they possibly neglect the winner of the Drake short story prize? He gloated over the words. All that he had missed would come to him.

That night, as Peachy stood looking out at the frosty twinkling stars, another crowd of college men went noisily past. But this time, as Peachy watched them, there was no feeling of bitterness in his heart. A little warm feeling of comradeship had taken its place. He was going to be one of them.

The next day was a glorious dream to Peachy. In the first place, he had walked to school with Jack Brown, the most popular man in the Sophomore class, and Brown had heard of his success and said kind things to him. Brown was sure of a place on the Annual Board and Dugald had delightful visions of intimacy with him. Next came the President's public announcement of the prize in chapel and applause that followed. It was the first time that Peachy had ever been cheered in his life. If a slight, bewildered pause and a few little girlish titters preceded the cheering, he was for once unconscious of the fact. The whole day seemed one round of praise and hearty congratulations.

The day, however, was but a preparation for the evening. Then, Dugald felt, would come his real triumph. He hurried to that election as he had never hurried in his life, racing over the icy sidewalks at break-neck speed. Once he slipped, and when he arose there

were stains of mud on his immaculate coat which would once have filled him with horror. Now they were as nothing.

The room was already crowded when Dugald entered and a little flutter of excitement prevailed. A few people greeted Peachy and absent-mindedly congratulated him on his success, but it was plain that their thoughts were elsewhere. There was important business on hand for the Sophomore class.

Dugald sat down in the midst of a crowd of whispering, excited boys. They paid no attention to him and presently he allowed his eyes to wander about the room. It was a strange delight to him to mark the faces of the people whom he had always wanted to know and now would have the chance to for the first time.

The long and tiresome business of the election finally began. Peachy sat in nervous suspense. He had never longed for anything in his life as he did for this, and though he had no real fear of the outcome, his cold perspiring hands

twisted and untwisted and his breath came unevenly. He watched the tellers with eyes that did not see and would have given all he possessed for one look at those fascinating white slips which they handled so coolly. He longed for them to finish, but when they finally arose and laid a slip of paper on the president's desk, he was all unready. The president's voice as he spoke sounded miles away.

"The results of the election were as follows—" he began. He read thirteen names. The name of Dugald Warner Smith was not among them.

It was quite dark when the meeting finally ended and Dugald went slowly down the steps. A group of chattering girls stood near and he could hear their gay, excited voices quite distinctly.

"I wonder if anyone voted for Peachy Smith," said one.

A ripple of half-suppressed laughter echoed from the group.

"Oh, I suppose he does write pretty well," another said, carelessly. "But you know he's such a joke."



Ruth Suckow's first published  
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New Series

FEBRUARY, 1911

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