

# **THE GROPER**

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The Groper by Henry G. Aikman

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**HENRY G. AIKMAN**

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BY

HENRY G. AIKMAN

*Armstrong, Harold Hunter*



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presch.

TO THE  
VIRGINIA

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TO  
ADA M.  
WHO HELPS ME KEEP ON GROPING

H. G. A.

753658





UNIV. OF  
CALIFORNIA

# THE GROPER

## *PART ONE*

### I

**L**EE HILLQUIT never quite lost the vivid impressions of that last Sunday afternoon at Chatham. Later on in life, he had only to close his eyes to visualise the whole familiar scene—and with it, all his delicate, soaring happiness.

Below them, at the foot of the hill—euphemistically known as Mount Phillis—Lake Chatham stretched off in the form of a casual letter S. Two miles north, at the very head of the lake, they could make out the town itself: its three church spires piercing the surf of green leaves; the cupola of the courthouse dominating the other downtown buildings; and off to the extreme right, the tall, brick smokestack of the Chatham Dairy Company.

Lee felt, rather than took direct note of, this sunlit panorama. All his conscious faculties—his whole being—were focussed upon the very pretty girl who sat at his right, a foot higher up the hill. Lee, half reclining on the grass, supporting himself on his elbow, looked up into her eyes and doubted if so wonderful a person had ever lived before.

Vera Wakefield did not return Lee's devotional gaze, but instead contemplated the lake below, with a preoccupied expression that seemed faintly wistful.

How profitless to set about describing an elusive personal charm! Details come easily enough: Vera's features, for example, were good, if not distinctive; her abundant, neatly coiffured hair, a light, lustreless brown; her eyes clear blue, yet indefinitely nebulous at times. She had a way of looking up at people—the white of her eye showing beneath the iris—with an effect of appealing trustfulness. Her skin remained brown with summer tan; and on each cheek were sprinkled a few honest freckles. But such *minutiae* lamentably fail to capture the real Vera. Very likely her attractiveness was partly compounded of her freshness, her youth, her flaming healthfulness—and partly of that vague air of smartness that most young American girls somehow achieve. Nothing could have been more informal than Vera's costume—low-collared blouse, navy-blue skirt, tan stockings and pumps; yet nothing could have suggested a more alluring trimness.

To an idealistic youth of twenty-three, however, all such speculation would have seemed worse than futile. Lee Hillquit could not possibly have analysed the emotion that suffused him. He only knew he loved Vera unreservedly—with a shy, spiritual sort of love.

At length, she broke the silence.

"To-morrow, at this time, you'll be in Detroit."

"Yes." Lee followed her gaze across Lake Chatham. "And I don't dare think how I'm going to miss you."

They watched a billowy white cloud—its scalloped edges sharply defined against the blue September sky—come swiftly up over the hills that bordered the west bank of the lake.

Abruptly, he took her soft, well-formed hand in his

"Are you going to marry me, Vera?" he asked.

He felt a quiver go through her hand and arm, and looked up into her face again.

"Well?" he queried.