

Akin to Love

A February Tale for May Reading

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DAVID HARTLEY had dropped in to pay a neighborly call on Josephine Elliott. It was well along in the afternoon and outside long blue shadows from the tall firs behind the house were falling over the snow. It was a frosty day and all the windows were covered with silver palms. But the big, bright kitchen was warm and cosy, and somehow seemed to David more tempting than ever before—

and that is saying a good deal. He had an uneasy feeling that he had stayed long enough and ought to go. Josephine was knitting at a long grey sock with doubly aggressive energy, and that was a sign that she was talked out. As long as Josephine had plenty to say, her plump, white fingers, where her mother's wedding ring was almost lost in dimples, moved slowly among her needles. When conversation flagged she fell to work as furiously as if a husband and half a dozen sons were waiting barefooted for its completion. David often wondered in his secret soul what Josephine did with all the interminable grey socks she knitted. Sometimes he concluded that she put them in the home missionary barrels; again, that she sold them to her hired man. At any rate, they were warm and comfortable looking, and David sighed as he thought of the deplorable state his own socks were generally in.

When David sighed Josephine took alarm. She was afraid David was going to have one of his old attacks of foolishness. She must head him off in some way, so she rolled up the grey sock, stabbed the big, pudgy ball with her needles, and said she guessed she'd get supper ready.

David got up.

"Now, you're not going before supper," said Josephine, hospitably. "I'll have it ready in no time."

"I ought to go home, I s'pose," said David, with the air and tone of a man dallying with a great temptation. "Zillah'll be waiting tea for me—and there's the stock to 'tend to."

"I guess Zillah won't wait long," said Josephine. She did not intend it at all, but there was a scornful ring in her voice. "You must stay. I've a fancy for some company to tea."

David sat down again. He looked so pleased that Josephine went down on her knees behind the stove, ostensibly to get a stick of firewood, but really to hide her smiles.

"I suppose he's tickled to death to think of getting a good square meal, after the starvation rations Zillah puts him on," she thought.

But Josephine misjudged David just as much as he misjudged her. She had really asked him to stay to tea out of pity, but David thought it was because she was lonesome, and he hailed that as an encouraging sign. And he was not thinking of getting a good meal either, although his dinner had been such a one as only Zillah Hartley could produce. As he leaned back in his cushioned chair and watched Josephine bustling about the kitchen, he was glorying in the fact that he could spend another hour with her, and sit opposite to her at the table, while she poured his tea for him just as if—just as if—

Here Josephine looked straight at him with such intent and stern brown eyes that David felt she must have read his thoughts, and colored guiltily. But Josephine did not even notice that David was blushing. She had only paused to wonder whether she would bring out the blue plum or the green gage preserve, and, having decided on the gage, she took her piercing gaze from David without having seen him at all. But he allowed his thoughts no more vagaries.

Josephine set the small square table for two with her mother's wedding set of pale blue china, thin as an egg-shell. She used it because it was the anniversary of her mother's wedding day, but David thought it was out of compliment to him. And as he knew quite well that Josephine prized that blue china beyond all her other earthly possessions, he stroked his smooth shaven, dimpled chin with an air of a man who is offered a very subtly sweet homage.

Josephine whisked in and out of the pantry and up and down cellar, and with every whisk a new dainty was added to the table. Josephine, as everybody in Meadowby admitted, was past-mistress in the noble art of cooking. She felt an artist's pride in her table when she set the teapot on its stand and invited David to sit in. She sat at the head of it herself, with her smooth, glossy crimps of black hair, and cheeks as rosy clear as they had been twenty years ago, when she had been a slender slip of girlhood, and bashful young Dave Hartley had looked at her over his hymn book at prayer meeting and tramped all the way home a few feet behind her because he was too shy to go boldly up and ask if he might see her home.

All taken together, what wonder if David lost his head over the tea table, and determined to ask Josephine that same old question once more? It was eighteen years since he had asked her to marry him for the first time, and two years since the last. He would try his luck again. Josephine was certainly more gracious than he had ever remembered her as being before. When the meal was over Josephine cleared the table and washed the dishes. When she had taken a dry towel and sat down by the window to polish the blue china, David understood that this was his golden opportunity. He moved over and sat down beside her on the sofa by the window.

Outside the sun was setting magnificently, and David grasped at the sunset as an introductory chapter.

"Isn't that fine, Josephine," he said, admiringly. "It makes me think of that piece of poetry that used to be

in the 'old Fifth Reader when we went to school. D'y'e mind how the teacher used to drill us up in it on Friday afternoon? It began—

'Slow sinks, more lovely ere
his race be run
Along Morea's hills the set-
ting sun.'"

Then David declaimed the whole passage in a sing-song tone, accompanied by a few crude gestures, remembered from long-ago school boy elocution. Josephine knew what was coming. Every time David had proposed to her he had begun by reciting poetry. She twirled her towel along the last plate resignedly; if it had to come the sooner it was over the better. Josephine knew by experience that there was no heading David off, despite his shyness, when he had once got along as far as the poetry.

"But it's going to be for the last time," she thought, determinedly. "I am going to settle this question so decidedly to-night that there'll never be a repetition."

When David had finished his quotation, he laid his hand on Josephine's plump arm.

"Josephine," he said, huskily.

"I suppose you couldn't—could you, now?—make up your mind to have me? I wish you would, Josephine,—I wish you would. Don't you think you could, Josephine?"

Josephine folded up her towel, crossed her hands on it and looked her wooer squarely in the eye.

"David Hartley," she said, deliberately. "What makes you go on asking me to marry you every once in a while when I've told you times out of mind that I can't and won't?"

"Because I can't help hoping you'll change your mind through time," said David meekly.

"Well, you just listen to me. I will not marry you. That is in the first place, and in the second, this is to be final. It has to be. You are never to ask me this again under any circumstances. If you do, I will not answer you—I will not let on I hear you at all; but—" and Josephine spoke very slowly and impressively—"I will never speak to you again—never! We are good friends now, and I like you real well, and like to have you drop in for a neighborly chat as often as you like, but there'll be an end, short and sudden, to that, if you don't mind what I say."

"Oh, Josephine! ain't that rather hard," protested David feebly. It seemed terrible to be cut off from all hope with such finality as this.

"I mean every word of it," returned Josephine calmly. "You'd better go home now David. I always feel as if I'd like to be alone for a spell after a disagreeable experience."

David obeyed sadly and put on his cap and overcoat. Josephine kindly warned him not to slip and break his legs in the porch because the floor was as icy as anything; and she even lighted a candle and held it up at the kitchen door to guide him safely out. David, as he trudged sorrowfully homeward across the fields, carried with him the mental picture of a plump, sonsy woman in her trim dress of plum colored homespun and ruffled blue-check apron, haloed in by an aureole of candle light. It was not a very romantic vision, perhaps, but to David it was more beautiful than anything else in the world.

When David had gone, Josephine shut the door with a little shiver. She blew out the candle for it was not yet dark enough to justify artificial light to her thrifty mind. She thought the big empty house in which she was the only living thing, very lonely. It was so very still except for the slow tick of the "grandfather's clock" and the soft puff and crackle of the wood in the stove. Josephine sat down by the window, stretched her tired arms and yawned.

"I wish some of the Sentners would run down," she said aloud. "If David hadn't been so ridiculous I'd have got him to stay the evening—he can be good company when he likes—he's real well read and intelligent, and he must have dismal times at home with nobody but Zillah."

She looked out across the yard at the little house at the other side of it where her French Canadian hired man lived, and watched the purple spiral of smoke from the chimney curling up against the sunset sky. Would she run over and see Mrs. Poirier and her little black-eyed baby? No, they never knew what to say to each other.

"If 'twasn't so cold I'd go up and see Ida," she said. "As it is, I'd better fall back on my knitting for I saw Jimmy sticking through his socks the other day. How set back poor David did look to be sure, but I think I've settled that marrying notion of his once for all and I'm glad—glad of it."

She said the same thing the next day to Mrs. Tom



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Sentner who had come down to help her pick her geese. They were working in the kitchen with a big tub full of downy feathers between them, and on the table a row of dead birds which Leon had killed and brought in. Josephine was enveloped in a shapeless print wrapper and had an apron tied tightly round her head to keep the down out of her hair.

"What do you think, Ida," she said, with a hearty laugh at the recollection. "David Hartley was here to tea last night and he asked me to marry him again. There's a persistent man for you. I can't brag of ever having had many beaux, but I've certainly had my share of proposals."

Mrs. Tom did not laugh. Her thin, little face with its faded prettiness looked as if she never laughed.

"Why don't you marry him?" she asked fretfully.

"Why should I?" retorted Josephine. "Tell me that, Ida Sentner."

"Because its high time you were married," said Mrs. Tom decidedly. "I don't believe in women living single, and I don't see what better you can do than take David Hartley."

Josephine looked at her sister with the interested expression of a person who is trying to understand some mental attitude of another which is a standing puzzle to them. Ida's evident wish to see her married always amused her. Ida had married very young and for fifteen years her life had been one of drudgery and ill health. Tom Sentner was a lazy, shiftless, fellow. He neglected his family and was drunk half the time. Meadowby people said that he beat his wife, but Josephine did not believe that because she did not think that Ida could keep from telling her if it were so; Ida Sentner was not given to bearing her troubles in silence.

Had it not been for Josephine's assistance, Tom Sentners' family would have stood an excellent chance of starvation. Josephine practically kept them, and her generosity never failed or stinted. She fed and clothed her nephews and nieces, and all the grey socks, whose destination puzzled David so much, went to the Sentners.

As for Josephine herself, she had a good farm, a comfortable house and a plump bank account, and was an independent, unworried woman. And yet, in the face of all this, Mrs. Tom Sentner could bewail the fact that Josephine had no husband to look out for her. Josephine shrugged her plump shoulders and gave up the conundrum, merely saying ironically, in answer to her sister's last remark,

"And go to live with Zillah Hartley?"

"You know very well you wouldn't have to do that. Ever since John Hartley's wife died he's been wanting

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