

# A COMEDY OF LOVE

By Una Hudson

I HAVE often thought that I should like to know a real, live novelist—there is a question I would like to ask. I have observed that, in stories, people always read their letters at the breakfast-table—that is, when they don't have them in bed on a silver tray with their morning roll and coffee—and I wish to know how they manage it.

Now, in our town, a wise and beneficent government has so arranged that we—that is, the feminine part of us—get our mail half-way between breakfast and luncheon, or else we get it in the middle of the afternoon. And I should like to see my wife keep her letters for eighteen hours for the sake of reading them at the breakfast-table! In fact, I should like to see her keep them for even half an hour—it would be such an absolutely unique and unheard-of experience.

I am willing to admit that the present system of mail delivery has its advantages. For instance, it is possible to go to one's office in blissful ignorance of the contemplated visit of one's mother-in-law; and one does not have to remember all day that one's wife's aunt's second cousin fell down the cellar stairs and fractured her knee-cap. But it has also its disadvantages, for, by evening, the wife of one's bosom is apt to be in the effervescent state of a tightly corked bottle of champagne, and one's appearance is inevitably the signal for the withdrawal of the cork.

There are, fortunately, certain outward and visible signs whereby one is enabled to approximate the extent of the calamity, and, when my wife met

me at our front gate, with a letter in her hand, I knew the situation was one calling for all the tact and finesse at my command.

"Howard," she began, as soon as I was within hearing distance, "what do you think?"

Now, inasmuch as, where her affairs are concerned, I never permit myself to think, that was a wholly superfluous question. I made no attempt to answer it, and, indeed, I knew from experience that no answer was expected.

"Ruth writes," Barbara went on, vindictively twitching the letter from its envelope, "that she has postponed her visit to us for three weeks, but that Alberta will come on at once, and we may expect her to-morrow."

I was distinctly relieved. I had expected nothing less than an avalanche of poor relations, but Alberta—Alberta was the only daughter of Barbara's dearest friend. She was nineteen, presumably pretty, certainly charming as most young girls are, and I thought it would be decidedly pleasant to have her in the house, for I am fond of girls and we have no daughters of our own.

I failed to spot any calamity, but, undoubtedly, there was one, and I waited for Barbara to enlighten me.

"Of course, I shall love to have Alberta with us," she was saying, "but why couldn't Ruth come with her? It's such a great responsibility to look after some one else's daughter. She will be absolutely sure to fall in love with some one who is utterly impossible, and then what will Ruth say to me?"

I rather thought that Barbara was

borrowing trouble, but I wouldn't have said so for a good deal. Instead, I sympathized with her in a clumsy, masculine fashion that probably did not impose on her at all, and intimated that I was hungry and that possibly the dinner was growing cold.

When I came home the next night, I found Alberta established in the hammock on the front porch, and Barbara fussing over her in a way that would certainly have brought on nervous prostration had I been the victim of her solicitude. Alberta, however, seemed to enjoy it; still, she may not have—I have found that, where a woman is concerned, it is never safe to judge by appearances.

"It's Uncle Howard!" Alberta cried, as I came up the steps. "I know, because mama has his picture, and he looks exactly like it, only younger."

She got out of the hammock, and gave me her lips to kiss, and I fell an easy victim to her wiles. And with reason, for Alberta was very good to look upon, being a trifle below medium height, slenderly built, and very blond. She had big, appealing, blue eyes, small, clinging hands, and she wore a soft, frilly, blue frock that gave a glimpse of a round, white throat and very shapely arms.

She seemed a sensible young person, too, for when, at dinner, Barbara began making suggestions as to her entertainment, she begged us to take no trouble on her account. She would be quite content, she said, to spend her days with Aunt Barbara and her evenings with Uncle Howard.

"You know," she explained, with a most adorable smile, "mama has taught me to call you 'Auntie' and 'Uncle,' and I hope you will let me keep on doing it."

By the time dinner was over, we felt as though we had discovered a long-lost daughter, and I wished that I could adopt Alberta and keep her permanently in the family. But that, of course, was impossible, for a widowed mother might, not unnaturally, object to giving up her only daughter.

After dinner, Governor Allbright

dropped in, as he very often does, to smoke and spend the evening. Barbara is more than a little proud of our intimacy with the governor, but, to me, it seems simple and natural enough. But then I knew him when we were barefooted boys together—when he was plain "Bill Allbright" with freckles on his face and warts on his hands, and that, I suppose, somewhat influences the point of view. In the course of time, he shed the warts, outgrew the freckles, and became the "Honorable William H. Allbright." To me, however, he has always been, and always will remain, the same old "Bill." But I digress, and that, I am reliably informed, is, for a story-teller, the unpardonable sin.

Barbara, with an air that was distinctly proprietary, presented Alberta to the governor; and he, being a man of taste and discrimination, surrendered as promptly and unconditionally as I had.

That was the beginning, and before the evening was over it was easy to foresee the end. For Alberta, the minx, Alberta, who had declared she would be quite content with the society of Uncle Howard, flirted with the governor in the most open and audacious way. And he rose to her lure as does a trout to a particularly tempting fly. Really, such conduct in a man of his age was most reprehensible.

But worse was to follow, for the next morning, quite early, while we were at breakfast, in fact, there came a box from the florist's for Alberta. It was from the governor, of course, and was accompanied by a note inviting Barbara and Alberta to drive in the afternoon.

Alberta said he was "a perfect old dear," put her roses in Barbara's rose-jar, and went off to answer the note. But Barbara stared at me with a face grown positively rigid with apprehension.

"Oh," she wailed, "what am I to do? Who would have thought it? And at his age, too!"

I am afraid I said something about

"no fool like an old fool," and went off to my office very cross indeed. For Alberta was so busy with her roses and her note that she couldn't even take time to bid me good-bye.

The next morning, when I left the house, Barbara thrust a perfect sheaf of notes into my hands.

"Mail them," she ordered, tragically, "at once! I've invited every nice *young* man we know to call! Something must be done. He's old enough to be her father, and what will her mother say to me?"

I tried to comfort her with the assurance that, from a worldly point of view, Governor Albright was all that was desirable, but, when I spoke of money and position, Barbara silenced me, imperatively.

"He's *old*," she said, and her tone implied that age was the crime of crimes.

The young men came—a seemingly unending procession of them—and Alberta smiled on them all impartially, but refused to desert the governor. And the governor sent her bunches of flowers, and boxes of candy, and books, and magazines, and made an ass of himself generally. He all but lived at our house, and Barbara grew positively thin with anxiety.

"Oh, if only her mother would come!" was her ceaseless wail. And at last, after three weeks of incessant worry on Barbara's part, she came.

I do not feel myself equal to an adequate description of Mrs. Kinsale. It would require the facile tongue of a Frenchman to do her justice, and I know better than to get myself tangled up in the intricacies of the French language. Her coiffure was a marvelous work of art, and her gowns, Barbara said, were dreams. But it was her complexion and figure that chiefly excited my admiration. The first would certainly have made the fortune of some worthy person, could she have been induced to divulge the secret of where she procured it. And as for the second—I have seen ladies who affected the "straight front," but never, never

have I seen a front so mathematically straight as was Mrs. Kinsale's!

Mrs. Kinsale was a lady of resource and of action. Like a general, she surveyed the situation when Governor Albright made his regular evening call. And then she inaugurated a campaign that was sublime in its simplicity, and masterly in its effectiveness.

How it happened, neither Barbara nor I could have told, but, before the evening was over, it was Mrs. Kinsale who was singing the governor's favorite songs, and it was Mrs. Kinsale who sat in a shadowy corner and looked at prints and engravings with the governor. And when, finally, he took his departure, it was Mrs. Kinsale who followed him into the hall and murmured a sweetly spoken good night.

"He is a most charming man, your governor," she said to us, a moment later.

I never saw anything so obvious in all my life, and I wondered what Barbara's comment would be.

"Did you ever see anything like it?" she demanded, when at last we found ourselves alone in our own room. "And at her age, too!"

Then, after a pause, "Poor Alberta!" she said. And she kept on saying, "Poor Alberta!" at intervals, while she made her preparations for bed. "Poor Alberta!" was the last thing I heard before going to sleep, and, the next morning, as I struggled back to consciousness, "Poor Alberta!" came from Barbara's side of the bed.

"Why do you keep saying that?" I demanded, irritably.

"It's so perfectly terrible for her own mother to cut her out like that," Barbara said.

"Anyway," I retorted, sharply, "your responsibility is at an end. Now it is Alberta and her mother for it."

And again Barbara sighed, and began, "Poor—" But I covered my ears, and fled to my dressing-room.

That morning, the usual bunch of flowers came from the governor, but the accompanying card read, "Mrs.

Kinsale." And neither Barbara nor I dared look at Alberta.

In the evening, the governor and Mrs. Kinsale went to a concert, and Alberta complained of a headache, and retired to her room.

Barbara faced me with tragic eyes. "Oh," she whispered, "did you see the poor child's face when they went out together?"

But I had not seen Alberta's face, because I had been unable to nerve myself to look in her direction.

"We must do something! Oh, it's perfectly disgraceful!" Barbara cried, distractedly. "Get a man here to-morrow night to call on Alberta—the nicest man you know—two of them, if you can."

And I got one, the most sought-after man in town. But Alberta sat limp and white, one eye on her mother and the governor, and talked only in monosyllables.

After that night, the poor child kept to her room when the governor called, and steadily resisted all our well-meant efforts to amuse her. But, one night, she waylaid me on the stairs.

"They—they seem to like to be together," she began, timidly, pointing to the drawing-room, where, of course, her mother was entertaining the governor.

They certainly did seem to like to be together, but I did not propose to admit it.

"Don't you worry, my dear," I said, patting one of her little hands. "All-bright doesn't mean anything by it. He's—he's a bit fickle, you know."

"I never would have thought it," Alberta said. "He didn't, somehow, seem that kind of man."

"But he is," I said, decidedly. "I've known him ever since he was a boy, and he's as fickle as—as a weather-vane."

This was not strictly true, but I felt a bit savage, and didn't care how much I slandered him.

I had meant to comfort Alberta, but I seemed, somehow, to have failed. She kept on up the stairs dejectedly enough, and I hunted up Barbara, and

told her all about it. Her indignation knew no bounds.

"They're just breaking that poor child's heart," she declared, hotly. "Howard, why don't you tell the governor never, never to come here again?"

But this I refused to do. One should think several times before offending the governor of one's state—he has too many ways of getting back at one.

Things went from bad to worse. And then, at last, one evening after the governor had gone, Mrs. Kinsale came up and tapped on our door. Barbara went out, and they stood in the hall and whispered together for an interminable length of time. Then Barbara came back, and carefully closed the door.

"It has happened," she said, coming close to me and speaking in a tragic whisper. "They're engaged."

It was not entirely unexpected, but, none the less, I found myself with nothing to say except Barbara's "Poor Alberta!" And that, I thought, had been done to death; so I kept silence.

In the morning, Barbara refused to leave her bed.

"I'm ill," she said, "positively ill. I simply cannot endure to see that poor, dear child."

But, after breakfast, Alberta came to Barbara. Barbara told me about it afterward.

"I'm so sorry you're ill, Aunt Barbara," she said. "Do you feel well enough to hear a piece of news? Only think, mama is engaged to the governor!"

Then she began to laugh, hysterically, and Barbara just lay and stared at her, and couldn't think of a thing to say.

"Oh, it's just too good to be true," Alberta said, at last. "I have been so worried for fear she would marry some utterly impossible person who would just wreck her life. You can't think, Aunt Barbara, what a great responsibility an attractive mother is. Why, I've frightened away at least six un-

desirable men. And then, when I came here and met the governor, I knew he was just meant for mama, and I made up my mind that no matter what it cost me I would hold him till mama got here, and I did it. But you made it very hard for me, Aunty Barbara, when you invited in all those nice boys. It just wrung my heart to refuse their invitations for tennis and golf and rides and drives. But I had to do it, for I simply didn't dare to let the governor out of my sight. He's such an old dear—I don't see how he

has ever managed to live so long and escape matrimony.

"But now it's all settled, and at last I am free to do as I please. And, Aunty Barbara, do you think you can induce the boys to come back? That is, of course, when you're quite well again."

Barbara sat up among her pillows, and pulled Alberta down and kissed her.

"My dear," she said, "I'm well right now. And I think—yes, I am quite sure that we can get the boys back again."



## HELD BACK

I WOULD find my way through the dark to-night  
 Out to the open, out to the air,  
 If I could be certain of finding there  
 These slender grasses, that blur my sight  
 As I lie out here in the faint, grave light  
 Of a dead moon risen to haunt the night.

I would find my way through the dark to-night,  
 Fling off the burden, and wander free,  
 If I could but carry this book with me  
 That I hold, unread, in the late twilight  
 With its poems, like roses shut in from sight  
 Whose scent, light escaping, pervades the night.

I would find my way through the dark to-night,  
 Find it for once, find it for all,  
 If I could be certain to hold in thrall  
 And keep forever, as now, in sight  
 Her beautiful eyes, her eyes of light!  
 But we bring no memories through the night.

FANNY KEMBLE JOHNSON.



## THE SIZE OF IT

LITTLE ELMER (*with the bulging forehead*)—Papa, what is conservatism?  
 PROFESSOR BROADHEAD—Merely a polite name for stupidity, my son.