

**In Pursuit of a Lover.**

By Alice Louise Lee.

Never was there an uncle watched over with more solicitous care than was Bennett Henry, and when a certain disquieting though vague report reached his niece she promptly laid aside her palette, wrote to Jane to air the front rooms and started for Alldale a month before the close of the New York Art school.

When her uncle met her at the station his appearance confirmed her worst fears. He was smoothly shaven, his iron gray hair was closely cropped, his suit new and jaunty, while—crowning shock—his head was surmounted by a tall silk hat. Josephine Henry scarcely recognized him.

"How d'ye do, Josie?" this new looking uncle inquired in the old, big, hearty voice.

Josephine stopped short and stared. "Uncle Ben! Where is your beard?" Uncle Ben looked embarrassed. "Gone, Josie; gone in a tight shave. Cost a quarter."

"I hardly know you," continued Josephine, looking him over with uncertain eyes.

"Tell you what," Bennett Henry retorted in his jerky, good natured fashion, "I thought 'twas time I kept up with you. Gad! You're a stunner, Jo!"

And so she was. She was taller than the average woman and dressed to emphasize her height. Her large black hat sent its broad brim out over a face which was capable of many expressions, but the predominating one was pride. She carried herself proudly, her head well back, her figure erect, her step light. All her life she had cultivated the pose which best expressed her style—and expectations, for she was Bennett Henry's only heir and would continue such, provided he did not marry.

They came in sight of two white houses facing each other on opposite sides of the street. Josephine gave one glance at her uncle's house and bit her lips. Her uncle, exceedingly uncomfortable, picked at the fingers of his gloves and rattled on at random.

"Awfully sorry, Jo, you've come back to such a lonesome house. If you'd waited awhile longer your mother'd be back. Guess her sister is some better now. Mighty hard lines to be shut up in a sick room this hot weather. Well, I hope Jane will feed you well. If she doesn't you know where there's a boss cook and always a welcome."

Josephine turned in at the gate, saying coldly and ceremoniously, "Thanks, uncle; I am sure Jane and I will get along nicely."

Jane admitted her. On the threshold Josephine turned and glanced at the carpenters at work beautifying the house opposite. "Uncle is making quite a change, is he not, Jane?" she remarked carelessly, and the girl grinned knowingly as she replied, "Folks do say, Miss Josephine, as he's gettin' ready for a bigger change."

Josephine smiled calmly, but it was with a heavy and angry heart that she went upstairs to her own room. She sat down in front of the window without stopping to remove her hat.

Her uncle, being an easy going and jolly man, had shown alarming matrimonial symptoms before, but Josephine had always been enabled to check them by use of prompt and skillful measures.

She reviewed her maneuvers as she sat staring at the improvements across the street. There was evident need of prompt action on her part, but she was handicapped by a lack of knowledge. She had yet to learn for whose benefit these changes were being made. She began to pass in review all the eligible women in Alldale, with a possible obstruction plan in each case, until the rattle of wheels and the rapid thud of horses' hoofs aroused her.

It was her uncle in his high hat and gloves, driving a smart new trap. The vehicle rolled down the long street and disappeared, crawling slowly up the side of a mountain which rose sharply from the town, and then—a paralyzing fear seized Josephine. She dashed into her mother's room, seized a fieldglass which lay on the table and was back at her post in a moment, raising the glass with unsteady hands. Half way up the mountain side was perched a small brown house, standing out bare and unsheltered against the green. In front of that house Uncle Ben secured his horses and, sauntering up the steps with the air of one familiar with the place, sat down on the piazza. In a moment a woman came out of the house and joined him.

Josephine lowered the glass. Her cheeks were flaming, her hands were cold. That brown house was the last house in Alldale where she would have her uncle call; Ellen Beck was the last woman in Alldale that she would have had her uncle choose. She sat down and stared at the house across the way. Was she too late? Her anger rose hotly against her uncle, who knew that she and Ellen Beck had been rivals from the time that they contended for the spelling prize in the fifth grade until the previous year, when Jim Ashdown—Josephine gave a sudden exclamation.

An idea had shot above her mental horizon, carrying in its wake a plan, an obstruction plan.

When she arose there was a tight, unpleasant expression about her lips. The expression deepened as she unpacked her trunks. She carefully shook out the folds of a handsome ecru silk, one of Bennett Henry's latest gifts. Josephine looked exceedingly well in ecru, and her plans required that she should look and act exceedingly well, beginning with a church sociable to be held that very evening.

Alldale had never before seen Josephine at a church social. She had heretofore scorned them, but her campaign required her attendance at this one. She went prepared to cope with a situation which met her eyes as she entered the door of the church parlors. It was a situation in the form of a gay group centered around Mr. Henry and Ellen Beck.

Ellen wore a dress of some cheap material which she had made herself. It was made with a view to laundering easily, but the fabric was a delicate blue, which showed to the best advantage her fair skin and delicate color. A knot of crisp blue ribbon in her hair accentuated its softness and the occasional gleam of gold among the yellow strands.

"Hello, Jo!" cried her uncle, suddenly spying her. "Never thought of your coming. Thought you generally ignored church shows."

"Oh, you don't know me yet, uncle," responded Josephine, gayly advancing. She was the very spirit of graciousness, and her journey through the room was a royal progress. She astonished Mrs. Brown, her mother's most intimate friend and her own particular aversion, by a kiss.

She surprised Ellen Beck by the unaffected cordiality of her greeting. She caused her uncle's heart to swell with pride, and she fascinated Jim Ashdown by her vivacity.

But it was not until near the close of the evening that she permitted Jim to draw her aside. "Why didn't you let me know you were coming, Josie?" he asked reproachfully.

"Don't you like to be surprised, Jim?" Josephine murmured, with a bewitching glance.

After all, Jim, straight and handsome, with his merry eyes and the clean cut look about his mouth and chin, was the superior of any young man she had met in college or in New York.

"No, I don't like you to surprise me," he returned.

"I'm going to surprise you again tonight, Jim," she almost whispered.

The surprise came just before the company broke up. It brought a flush to Jim's cheeks and a queer expression to his eyes. "To please me, Jim," urged Josephine. "I want to see uncle tonight. You come down in the morning to visit me, but not now, please!"

There was a puzzled look on Ellen Beck's face a few moments later when Jim approached her; there was a heavy frown on Bennett Henry's face as the two left the parlors together, but Josephine's face was serene as she took her uncle's arm and they walked home together.

In her own room the girl combed out her hair in luxurious ease. Only a year ago Ellen Beck had loved Jim Ashdown. Josephine had reason to know that, and she believed that love had not grown cold. If she could open her uncle's eyes to the fact the victory would be hers. She laid down her comb and looked at herself in the mirror with a satisfied smile. It was only when she glanced below the glass at the portrait of her mother that her conscience was untended. Her mother was the one being on earth whom Josephine feared and revered, and it was with a feeling of relief that she reflected that the case of Bennett Henry versus Josephine Henry would be quietly decided before her mother's return.

In the morning Jim Ashdown called. Josephine received him on the broad front piazza, vine sheltered and perfumed with the scent of delicately tinted, overhanging apple blossoms. Jim had brought his horses.

"The day is too beautiful to stay indoors," he cried presently. "Come out for a drive, Jo."

Josephine shook her head languidly. She wore a long morning dress and reclined lazily in the hammock, a novel lying on its face beside her. She yawned. "I can't today, Jim. To tell the truth, I'm lazy. It got pretty hot in New York before I left, and this piazza never seemed so cool and pleasant before." Josephine yawned again and clasped her hands beneath her head. "I'm too lazy even to go out on an errand this afternoon, but I must unless"—she looked around in sudden animation—"you will be good enough to do it for me."

"Is it anything I can do?" began Jim awkwardly.

It's the simplest thing to do in the world," the girl interrupted. "It's not to match dress goods or buy ribbons or anything of the kind. Mamma left a book here to be returned, a borrowed book. Will you take it back?"

"Certainly," returned Jim, fingering his hat. "Where does it go?"

"Away up to Ellen Beck's—such a long walk," added Josephine. "I tell you I am lazy."

A few moments later Josephine occupied the piazza alone.

Her uncle appeared at the corner of the house. "Jim," he cried and then stopped abruptly. "I thought Ashdown was here."

"He was, but he has gone. He went up to Ellen Beck's," Josephine answered from behind her book, and Bennett Henry turned and strode away without a word.

That day was but the beginning. With great persistence, but with consummate tact and skill, Josephine monopolized her uncle's time and threw Jim Ashdown and Ellen Beck together. With secret exultation she watched Ellen's eyes kindle and her cheek flush whenever Jim approached. With equal skill she warded off all attempts on her uncle's part—and they were many—to approach the subject of either Jim or Ellen.

Her task was a peculiarly galling one to Josephine on account of its publicity as well as its dif-

ficulty. She was aware that the Alldale population was viewing her with marked interest.

It was one afternoon when the July heat and the people's curiosity, combined with the fear of ultimate failure, had got badly on her nerves that she met Mrs. Brown.

As has been hinted before, Josephine was not the warm admirer of Mrs. Brown that her mother was. Mrs. Brown assumed a right to pry into Josephine's affairs, which that young lady resented; hence when they met that afternoon Mrs. Brown calmly walked in where the other angels of Alldale feared to tread. She stopped and asked coolly:

"Well, Josie, how do you like your uncle's choice?"

Josephine's eyes blazed. Her cheeks flushed. She spoke with a peculiar icy deliberation which always characterized her tones when she lost her self possession. "My uncle's choice! If he knew her as well as I do he would see in her only defects to be endured where he now sees virtues!"

"Josie McHenry!" cried Mrs. Brown indignantly. Shame on you for speaking like that! And she shook one of Josephine's arms vigorously.

"I know," continued Josephine, with a sneer, "that she is a favorite of yours, but then you do not know her as well as I do. Good afternoon."

Ten minutes later, sitting in her room with hot cheeks and cold hands, she would have given weeks of her life to unsay those hasty, biting words. They would be repeated. If they should reach her uncle—Josephine set her teeth. If they reached her mother—The girl gave a quick gasp. That thought stung.

Her first fear was realized within a few days. She had not dreamed that her jovial uncle could look at her with such angry eyes. She had not imagined that he could intrench himself behind so high a barrier that she could not scale it, and Josephine trembled before his overwhelming flood of silent displeasure and scorn. Things were in this unexpected state when she received a letter from her mother, bearing the unwelcome news of her home coming.

When Josephine read this she went up to her room, lay down and turned her face to the wall.

Jane put her head in at the door. "Ellen Beck is downstairs, Miss Josephine. She wants to see you very particularly."

"Send her up," replied Josephine, dully wondering what Ellen Beck, of all people, should want of her.

When her caller entered she found the shades drawn and Josephine on the couch with a handkerchief, wet in camphor, held to her head. Ellen hesitated. "I am sorry your head aches," she said, with the uncertain air of one who does not know quite what to do. "Perhaps I'd better go away and come some other day, only"—

There was something in her manner which startled Josephine. "No, no," she exclaimed sharply. "Why should you go away? My headache is not severe, but I am coaxing it into good humor before mamma comes tonight."

"Is your mother coming tonight?"

"Yes." Ellen looked down a moment, playing with her handkerchief, and Josephine felt her heart give a leap which sent the blood crashing through her temples, for on the third finger of the other's left hand shone a diamond held by a slender circlet of gold.

Suddenly Ellen looked up. She spoke in hesitating, gentle tones. "I have come on a most delicate mission, Josephine, but I have not come voluntarily. Mr. Henry requested it as a favor to himself, and I cannot refuse his requests."

Josephine sat motionless, waiting, but her heart gave another suffocating leap.

"He has asked me to come to you with—what people are talk-

ing about and—what you"—Ellen paused confused.

Instantly Josephine's pride was in arms. To be humiliated, and by Ellen Beck, was indeed a new experience. Her tone was bitingly sarcastic as she said swiftly, "My uncle could have chosen a more welcome messenger."

Ellen's face showed no resentment. Instead an expression of pity stole over it as she glanced at her hostess. Her cheeks were flushed; Josephine's were white.

"I told him the same thing," she continued, "but he persisted in the request, and I came."

"Suppose," said Josephine icily, "you leave my uncle out of the question and tell me the object of your mission."

Ellen raised her head with a dignity which became her fair, earnest face. "I will," she replied in a spirited tone. "Your uncle wished to be relieved of the painful necessity of telling you that he considered your attitude toward your mother cruelly unjust and that your accusations against her are arousing great indignation in the town."

"My accusations!" interrupted Josephine. She sat up, gasping. Her white face flamed. "Are you insane, Ellen Beck? I think my mother is the noblest woman in the world!"

"So do we," continued Ellen quietly.

"Who has been telling contemptible lies about me?" demanded Josephine hotly.

"No one," said Ellen promptly. "You yourself have said the most contemptible thing that has been uttered, and you said it plainly to Mrs. Brown."

Josephine gave a cry and fell back among her pillows. Anger and utter bewilderment played over her face. Finally she burst out, "The remarks which I made to Mrs. Brown were made concerning—you!"

There was a pause. A light leaped into Ellen's eyes, and her tone thrilled with suppressed feeling as she said, "The remarks were aimed at your uncle's fiancée, who, as the whole town knows, is your mother."

"My mother!" The room swam before Josephine's wide eyes. A thousand incidents which she had misinterpreted adjusted themselves now. Her uncle's resentment when he had seen Jim with Ellen had been for his niece then, not for himself. Alldale's curiosity, Ellen's pity, her own cool rejection of her uncle's confidence—Josephine groaned aloud and covered her face with her hands.

Ellen arose. Words seemed to strangle her. "I understand you Josephine Henry, at last. Your uncle has aided me this summer in a financial matter which has necessitated frequent calls. I

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understand many things which have been puzzling to me before. Goodby."

Josephine glanced up. Ellen had opened the door. A gleam of sunlight from the hall window struck the third finger of her left hand. Then the door closed and left Josephine alone with her thoughts.

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