

ATWATER'S AUNT

A Story

By HARRIET LUMMIS SMITH.

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The two friends were sophomores in college when Atwater first showed Minturn one of his aunt's letters. Minturn read it with an appreciation that was tinged with surprise. He had aunts of his own who sent him occasional checks, and frequent budgets of advice, but their communications did not in the least resemble that of Atwater's aunt. It was a long letter, but Minturn was sorry when he reached the signature.

"I say," he remarked, as he folded the letter carefully and returned it to its envelope, "she hasn't forgotten that she was young once, has she?"

"You bet she hasn't," said the affectionate nephew heartily, and there the matter rested for the time. But when Atwater sprained his wrist at football practice, Minturn volunteered to write his usual weekly letter to his aunt.

Atwater made such hard work of dictation that Minturn finally dispensed with his assistance, and wrote the letters himself. He received a nice note from Atwater's aunt, thanking him for his kindness, and forthwith he developed a most surprising solicitude regarding Atwater's wrist, hinting darkly at any number of dreadful consequences that were likely to result from using it before it had fully recovered. When at length he could frame no possible excuse for writing Atwater's weekly letter to his aunt, he rallied his courage to make a proposition on his own behalf.

"The friendship of an older woman," wrote Minturn to Atwater's aunt, "a woman like yourself, who knows life and the world, whose mind is enriched by the culture of experience, without losing sympathy with youth, is an inestimable boon to a young man like myself." It was his best sophomore style, which had resulted in his appointment as *editor-in-chief* of the college paper. It proved equally effective with Atwater's aunt. She graciously agreed to his suggestion that they correspond.

It was rather singular that though their novel acquaintance soon ripened into a sort of intimacy, they did not meet. The vacation Minturn spent at Atwater's home, Atwater's aunt happened to be in Europe, and when the boys graduated she was ill and unable to be present at the commencement exercises. But the correspondence continued without a break. Minturn told Atwater's aunt a number of things he would never have thought of confiding to anyone else, and she advised him in his various dilemmas with the calm confidence of one who has lived through youth's turmoil and knows the peace that lies beyond. Minturn always thought of her as a woman whose smile had in it a certain wistfulness, on whose delicate face, under the gray hair, love and loss had left their unmistakable tracery. It was not necessary to go into tiresome details with Atwater's aunt. She always understood him.

Minturn had been in his uncle's law office nearly two years when something came up on which he felt the need of a woman's counsel. Moreover, it was something he could not very well trust to paper. His uncle had said to him on several occasions that it was time he was settling down, and Marguerite Foss had intimated the same thing, not in words, it is true, but by means of sidelong glances and unnecessary blushes.

Marguerite was a pretty girl. Minturn thought it a pity that she was so plump and had so much color. But he told himself, judicially, he might do worse. He wondered what Atwater's aunt would advise.

The legal quality of mind had not be-

come so much of a second nature with Minturn to preclude an occasional impulsive act on his part. When a letter came from Atwater's aunt, saying that she had noticed signs of mental perturbation in several of his recent letters, and delicately hinting at her readiness to be of service, Minturn suddenly resolved to answer it in person. He took the early train, and reached his friend's home in the golden lull of the summer evening.

Atwater was on the porch sitting in a hammock with a girl—a very pretty girl. If the cabman had been alive to his opportunity he might have given Minturn any change he pleased, for the young man was thinking of the girl in the hammock and how red and clumsy and countrified Marguerite would look beside her. With an odd pang he wondered if Atwater were engaged. There had been something in the attitude of the two not unlike the affectionate confidence of acknowledged lovers.

Atwater was down the steps before Minturn had time for further reflections. "Couldn't believe my eyes, old man," he roared. "To think of you dropping down on us in this fashion!" Then he pounded Minturn on the back and prodded him in the ribs, all of which is the masculine equivalent for cordiality. These courtesies having received attention, he seized Minturn by the arm and dragged him up the steps to the divinity of the hammock.

The girl had risen to her feet and was looking down with a conscious air that confirmed Minturn's suspicions. He was dejected by a sudden unworthy jealousy of Atwater, who, good fellow though he was, did not deserve such lavishness on the part of capricious fortune. He suspected a dimple back of the girl's demureness and wished impatiently that she would look up that he might know the color of the eyes shaded by the curling lashes. There was a long, silent pause which might have seemed awkward to an outsider, though not to Minturn, who was sufficiently occupied.

"Oh, I say," cried Atwater, who had been looking from one to the other in surprise. "I forgot you'd never been introduced. Why, Minturn, this is my aunt."

The dimple was there, just as Minturn had suspected, but a sudden, uncontrollable flush drowned it.

"There's no need of looking at me with such reproach," cried Atwater's aunt, in uttering defiance, "just because I haven't wrinkles and gray hair."

"No, she's an all-right aunt," Atwater assured him, "even if she doesn't quite look the part. She's 18 months younger than I am, aren't you, dear little Auntie?"

"But how," began Minturn, and then he paused uncertainly. He was trying to reconcile the worldly wisdom that had been his guide so long, with the pretty, girlish confusion of her averted face. A sudden sense of relief possessed him as he realized that it would not be necessary to ask her counsel concerning Marguerite.

When Atwater took him by the arm, Minturn said to him almost appealingly. "See here," he said. "I want to talk things over a little with your aunt. Just clear out like a good fellow, won't you?"

"Sure," said Atwater obligingly, and he departed. When he came back after an hour, the pair in the hammock looked at him with gentle reproach and proceeded to ignore him. Atwater went away again, and smoked his cigar on the back steps.

"Old Minturn will make a first-class little uncle," Atwater remarked philosophically as he blew rings of smoke up toward the stars. "And, besides, a pretty, marriageable aunt is too much of a responsibility for a young fellow like me."