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A Platonic Experiment

L. M. Montgomery

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between a man and a woman of anything like equal age and ordinary attractiveness a Platonic friendship is impossible—thanks to the laws of Nature.”

Dr. Dallas, having made this statement, looked around the table with a tentative ruffling of his plumage, as if he challenged anyone to an argument on the subject.

The majority of the boarders did not notice his remark. They were all hungry and indifferent to Mr. Dallas’ opinions. He was not popular among them, being a middle-aged man with a cynical turn and pessimistic views of life. Two faces, however, were turned protestingly towards him—Howard Elliott’s, whose previous mention of Platonic friendship had evoked Dallas’ remark, and a girl’s, who sat opposite Elliott, and flashed a scornful look at Dallas out of her brilliant hazel eyes.

“You don’t agree with me, Miss Chester,” he remarked affably.

“No.”

The monosyllable was defiant. Dallas laughed provokingly and shrugged his shoulders.

“And you?” he asked, turning to Howard Elliott.

“I certainly disagree,” returned the young man warmly. “I do believe in Platonic friendship. Why should it not be possible? I am tired of this outworn idea that a perfect friendship, untinted by love, is impossible between a man and a woman. It is sheer nonsense.”

“Have you ever proved it to be sheer nonsense?” asked Dallas imperturbably.

“I have. I have one woman friend at least for whom I have the most sincere and friendly affection. There is not a shadow of sentiment in our relations with each other. And I know many other instances.”

“Is the lady in question young—and pretty?” questioned Dallas, prudently avoiding the vagueness of the “other instances.”

Howard Elliott flushed impatiently.

“She is not very old,” he answered hesitatingly, “and—I have never thought about her looks.”

Dallas laughed aggravatingly.

“I thought as much. Don’t look so savage, my young friend. By the time you have reached my age you will have proved the truth of the trite proverb that things are not what they seem. I grant that under some circumstances, such as yours, a true and sincere friendship is possible between a man and a woman. Please remember the limitations of my first remark. I have been a participant in some of your so-called ‘Platonics’ in my day, too. They invariably led to something else. This is simply in the

nature of things, and you couldn't change it if you tried. In most instances the culmination of a Platonic friendship is marriage—or divorce. Miss Chester, there is a very decided tilt to that chin of yours which leads me to infer that my eloquence has not convinced you.”

“It has not, indeed,” said Madge Chester. “There is such a thing as Platonic friendship that does not end in love.”

“Have you ever proved it personally?”

“No-o. But I believe in it thoroughly.”

“Illogical, very. I dare say you do believe in all that pretty nonsense; it is pretty. I believed in it once myself. But time will teach you better.”

Madge Chester and Howard Elliott exchanged glances of baffled protest against his calmly assertive tone. The latter looked across the table at his *vis-a-vis* with new interest. He seldom felt interested in girls, he was too busy for that, he thought. He was a journalist by profession, and his belief in Platonics amounted to a fad. He had written a series of articles on the subject two years before which had attracted some attention, and had thoroughly convinced himself if no one else.

But he did feel a certain interest in Madge Chester, born, doubtless, of their mutual theory. After tea he followed her out to the garden and sat down by her under the maples.

“Do you like Mr. Dallas?” he asked.

“I detest him,” answered Madge, calmly. “He seems to assume that he must be right about everything and everyone else in the wrong. And it is so impossible to argue with him; he puts you down some way, and then looks around with that maddening smile of his, as much as to say, ‘Has any other person anything to say on this subject before I close it? If so, let him speak now or forever after hold his peace.’”

Elliott smiled.

“There is a great deal of latent antagonism towards Mr. Dallas in me,” he said. “I hope he has not converted you to his heretical doctrines.”

“Regarding Platonic friendship? No, indeed. I should dearly like to prove him in the wrong for once.”

“Let us do it.”

“How can we?”

“Let us be friends,” said Elliott calmly. “Let us have the courage of our convictions and squelch Dallas effectually.”

Madge Chester tapped her round chin reflectively with the tips of her slender fingers.

“It’s not a bad idea—if it is practicable. But I’m not sure of its success.”

“Don’t you thoroughly believe in your own theories, then?”

“Oh, I didn’t mean that,” cried Madge blushing scarlet. “What I meant was could we be real friends? We may not like each other well enough on closer acquaintance and friendship wouldn’t be possible if we didn’t.”

“No; but, I think we will. At least, there is no harm in trying. Will you?”

Madge Chester never took long to make up her mind.

“I will,” she answered frankly, holding out her hand. They shook hands gravely.

“Thus is our compact signed and sealed,” said Elliott. “We are to be firm friends without a shadow of sentiment or romantic nonsense about our friendship.”

“For the noble motive of ultimately discomfiting Mr. Dallas.”

“Well, we ought to find a pleasure in it, too. Of course Dallas is a motive.”

“It is delightful to think of putting him down for once,” said Madge vindictively. “It will be a great satisfaction.”

“What will be a great satisfaction?” questioned Dallas with lazy interest as he came around a clump of lilac bushes. He squared his back against a maple tree and looked at the two conspirators quizzically.

“I am neither a prophet nor the son of a prophet,” he went on, “yet I think I can tell what you two have been planning out here. You came here, hotly indignant with my humble self for having trampled on your pet Platonic corns, you have doubtless abused me freely in a well-bred way, and you have ended up with a formal compact to exploit your theories in your own intercourse and thereby completely crush me. Am I right?”

“I believe you have been eavesdropping,” said Madge sharply.

“My dear young lady, I never eavesdrop. I am only mapping out your probable line of conduct from my general knowledge of human nature. I was right, it seems. Well, I give you both credit for sincerity—a rare virtue in this posing age. Your experiment is very interesting. Don’t you want an umpire, though? Shall I act in that capacity? I promise to be strictly impartial. If, when you leave here, you can both say to me in all good faith, ‘We have been close friends; we like each other; we enjoy each other’s society; we are thoroughly congenial; but we are no more than friends and have no desire to be more’—if you can say this, I will haul down my flag and surrender unconditionally. If, on the contrary—”

“There will be no ‘contrary,’ ” interrupted Miss Chester coolly.

“I am sure you believe so. But we must consider all possibilities. If you cannot say that to me I will expect you to admit your defeat honestly. Is this to be our understanding?”

“Yes,” said Elliott promptly. “You see matters from your own standpoint, of course, and are incapable of judging them from ours. Meanwhile, let us drop all reference to the subject.”

[Extract Number One. From Howard Elliott's journal.]

It is a curious compact—I do not know how it will succeed. Dallas piqued us into it. Yet I think I rather like her. She is a college student and somewhat imbued with the “new” womanhood, I fancy. She is very pretty and seems like a jolly, good-hearted girl, clever enough to be entertaining and companionable but not too clever. There is no nonsense about her. Why should not this Summer friendship of ours be a mutually pleasant and profitable one? I am getting to be rather much of a recluse. This girl will rouse me out of myself and bring me into closer touch with my fellow creatures.

She has remarkably fine eyes—I could not help noticing them this evening. In color they are like the sunlit current of a woodland brook flashing over tawny pebbles but their expression is quite indescribable. I don't think I ever noticed a woman's eyes before.

[Extract Number Two. From Madge Chester's letter to a college chum.]

You will say it is very absurd, of course, but you know me of old, also my "everlasting theories," as you are pleased to call them. Well, I am going to test them. I have no fear of the result. I like Mr. Elliott thoroughly. He is such a straightforward young fellow, and not a bit spoiled or conceited. There is a great deal of fun in him, too, though in general he is quiet and reserved. He is not all handsome, but has such an interesting face and such brilliant, piercing steel-blue eyes. He is immensely clever, and writes a great deal I believe, or at least Mr. Dallas says so. We talk "shop" most of the time. I hold forth on college life and co-education and he discourses on journalism. How you and the girls will laugh over this and say, "Isn't that like Madge!" But, indeed, my dear, there is a method in my madness. I want to establish my theories to my own satisfaction, as well as other people's. Besides, it is really nice to have a friend you can be chummy with without his thinking that you are throwing yourself at his head.

[Extract Number Three. From Howard Elliott's journal.]

Miss Chester and I are getting on famously. Our friendship is perfect. I never met a woman like her before; she is never the same twice, yet she is always charming. The spice of "infinite variety" is hers to the full. We walk and row and ride together. We discuss our work and our ambitions. She is very clear-sighted and sympathetic, a friend worth making and keeping. That freakish idea of mine has borne unexpectedly good fruit, as unaccountable impulse often do when followed out. Yet there is not a trace of nonsense about our friendship. It is absolutely sexless.

Her beauty is a fresh surprise to me every time I see her. She looked like a dream vision to-night. We are going for a tramp over the hills to-morrow.



SHE HAS BEEN DOING HER BEST TO ATTRACT HIM

[Extract Number Four. From Madge Chester's journal.]

I don't like Mr. Elliott as well as I thought I did. He behaved hatefully to-day. We all went for a row across the harbor, and coming home through the dyke meadows he walked the whole way with Emma Hawley, who is a regular flirt. She has been doing her best to attract him all along, and is simply furious with me because she fancies I am her rival.

I don't want to monopolize him, of course, but he might have looked out now and then to see how I was enjoying myself. Of course, I don't care. It was not my suggestion that we should be comrades this Summer, and he is entirely welcome to Miss Hawley's society if he prefers it. Perhaps he regrets that he did not choose her for a friend instead of me. I shall be very cool to him to-morrow. He need not think he is indispensable to my enjoyment. He gathered a bunch of poppies for her, too. After that, of course, I wasn't going to wear the blue bells he had given me before we went; I threw them away, and replaced them by some field daisies Mr. Dallas gave me. I watched him after that—Mr. Elliott, I mean—to see if he noticed, but apparently he did not. I suppose he is getting tired of our friendship, and we were just beginning to have such nice times.

Mr. Dallas asked me if Mr. Elliott and I had quarrelled. That man does make me so cross.

[Extract Number Five. From Mr. Elliott's journal.]

I cannot imagine what I have done to offend Miss Chester. I certainly have offended her for she has treated me very coolly since yesterday. She wore Dallas' flowers coming home from the shore—what business has he to give her flowers?—and threw mine away. Dallas hung around her all day, too.

She may be tired of our experiment. Yet I never thought her capricious. Perhaps Dallas has been saying something to her. I must find out. He shall not come between us if I can help it.

What pleasant, companionable days we have passed! My theory is perfectly correct—Platonic friendship is possible. But why is she angry at me?

[Extract Number Six. From Madge Chester's letter to a college chum.]

The Summer is passing so quickly. In another month college will re-open. I have had a delightful time, thanks to Mr. Elliott. I knew you would tease me about him. Why can't you be sensible, Mary? I assure you we are nothing more than the best of friends.

We had a tiff last week. I felt annoyed because I felt sure he was trying to get up a flirtation with that odious Emma Hawley. But I suppose my imagination ran away with me. We are all right again now. I shall be very sorry when he goes. He has only another fortnight here. He is very clever and I am sure will succeed in life. I hope he will.

Mr. Dallas is as cynical as ever. I imagined he is a little piqued that Mr. Elliott and I have held our point so well.

[Extract Number Seven. From Mr. Dallas' notebook.]

I can generally see through a grindstone when there is a hole in it! But some people in this establishment cannot.

The little Platonic comedy still goes on. Miss Chester is serenely confident that she has proved her point and is gloating over my anticipated downfall.

Yet one day, when her co-theorist walked home from the shore with Miss Hawley—blonde, soft-eyed, brainless, different stamp from Miss Chester altogether—my lady grows very pale and dignified, adopts the “cool and severely classical” air, wears my daisies and throws Elliott's bluebells spitefully into the brook. Purely Platonic, of course! But I fancy Elliott had to work his way back into favor and he fidgetted a good deal under the process. Yet he, too, is blind. “What fools these mortals be!”

[Extract Number Eight. From Madge Chester's journal.]

Mr. Elliott goes away next week and I shall miss him very much. We have had such a pleasant Summer. He has seemed very quiet lately. I wonder if he will ask me to write to him. It will be lonely here when he goes—but I shall not be here much longer myself. I long now to get back to college and to my work.

I have a dreadful headache—I wonder what is the matter with me these days. I feel rather blue to-night. No sooner does one make a good, true friend whom one really values than one loses him again.

[Extract Number Nine. From Howard Elliott's journal.]

I go to-morrow. I cannot understand why I should feel so depressed about it.

I shall heartily regret to part with Miss Chester. Our friendship has been so pleasant. I shall ask her to correspond with me.

I do not want to drop out of her life altogether.

I had a letter from the editor of the *Caterer* to-day. He wants me to write an article on Platonic friendship for his magazine but I don't think I will—I have lost active interest in the subject. Of course, I believe in it just as firmly as ever but it is getting stale. Besides, nothing can be really proved. What is true for one person might not be for another.

Madge Chester was standing under the maples at sunset, looking steadily and unseeingly at the masses of scarlet poppies before her. Howard Elliott came jauntily across the lawn and said with overdone carelessness.

“Shall we go for a walk in the dyke meadows, Miss Chester—our last one? A pleasant finale to a pleasant vacation. Afterwards we must interview Mr. Dallas. The hour of our triumph is approaching. It is a comfort to think he will have to own himself in the wrong, isn't it?”

He did not explain why comfort should be needed nor did she ask. They walked silently across the lawn, between the ranks of flaunting poppies. Dallas, swinging in a hammock, watched them amusedly as they passed on to the dyke meadows, blossom-sown and sunset-lit. Neither spoke until they came to a low, straggling fence, half-buried in golden-rod and faint purple asters. In the cool air the dusk was struggling with early moonrise. Over the meadows, sweet and faraway, came the refrain of a song sung by some gay boaters on the harbor.

Elliott laid his hand over the girl's as it rested, white and small, on a mossy rail.

“I suppose we shall not see each other again for some time,” he said with studied composure. “I am sorry. This has been a—I have been—our experience has been a pleasant one. I think.”

“Oh, yes,” said Madge hurriedly. She turned away that he might not see the quiver of her lips.

“You must not forget me altogether, Madge,” he went on nervously. “We will correspond, will we not? I shall want to hear how you are getting along at college and I promise to write the most interesting letters about my work that I possibly can.

Perhaps we will meet again next Summer.”

“It is not likely,” answered Madge faintly. “I expect to travel abroad next Summer.”

There was another long silence. At last Madge turned with a little shiver.

“It is chilly here. I think I had better go in. You can tell Mr. Dallas yourself. I don’t care about meeting him—my head aches.”

Elliott held out his hand.

“Good-by,” he said.

“Good-by,” said the girl, with a little choke in her voice. Two irrepressible tears fell over her burning cheeks.

Elliott reached out wildly for her other hand.

“Oh, I will say it. I love you—I love you! I don’t care what Dallas or anyone says—only what you say. Don’t say that you can’t care for me.”

[Extract Tenth and last. From Mr. Dallas' note book.]

The pretty little comedy has had its inevitable ending. The two Platonic friends went off for a long stroll to-night, looking as if they were going to be hanged, and came back radiant and shamefaced. I let them down easy and spared them the necessity of owning up.

“Bless you, my children,” I remarked, paternally.

Miss Chester pouted and looked pretty. She is an independent little puss that, and could, I fancy, make it hot for Elliott if he ever tries Platonics with anybody else. I don't think he will, however. I imagine he is cured of that for good and all. Platonics, indeed! Stuff and nonsense!

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

[The end of *A Platonic Experiment* by L. M. (Lucy Maud) Montgomery]