

FORWARD

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DIPLOMAS

By
Sally Campbell



THE day's work was over at last. Nathan Dunbar might lounge against the bars of the pasture lot at his ease. Hard, distasteful work it was, as he was telling his own rebellious soul now for the hundredth time.

"But I have done it all. I have not shirked a stroke. Nobody can say that I have dallied or dodged or tried to run. Ever since I knew that it had to be, I have accepted the inevitable. It doesn't seem to me the sort of life that I am much fitted for, but if it has to be, I am going to do the best I can."

He was thinking of the day two months ago when he had put all his books in the bookcase in his father's empty office and turned the key on them.

"There!" he had said; "you are dead." "And I haven't seen the back of one of them since. When man is forbidden to eat of the tree of knowledge he'd better not stand and watch it. Eve made that mistake some time ago."

Nathan moved, restlessly. His sister Gertrude had come through the twilight and stood beside him. Her heart was full of sympathy with his disappointments. But he was not ready for her sympathy. He resented it.

"What a lovely evening it is!" said Gertrude, for want of something better.

"Is it?" he answered. "I hadn't noticed. Well, everything is finished here, I believe. I may as well go in."

They went down the lane together, Gertrude talking a little of indifferent matters, and Nathan hardly responding. He was glad, when they got to the house, to find that a neighbor had come to see Gertrude, so that he was left alone again.

"Girls," he thought, "don't care for some things as men do. Gertrude used to talk and plan about going to college more than I did. To hear her, one would have imagined that she was altogether bound up in the idea. But months before father died she cooled off, considerably, and since then she has just about forgotten that she ever cared to go. It was simply a fad with her, no doubt; and she was ambitious for a 'career.' When she had to give it up, it wasn't like giving up a part of herself. She merely stopped thinking about it, and turned her mind to something else. A very sensible way, I am sure."

Nathan ended with a deep sigh, which held perhaps a tinge of superciliousness toward Gertrude, and more than a tinge of conspiracy toward himself.

"I can't take it quite so lightly, but I hope that I am enough of a man to bear my lot without whining."

As Nathan sat on the side porch, the murmur of voices came to him from the front where Gertrude was entertaining her visitor. He could hear a little of what they were saying.

"What is not dress goods is small local tittle-tattle," said Nathan to himself, with supreme masculine scorn. "I suppose that girls can't be serious for any length of time. One would think that Gertrude had been through enough lately to set her mind upon something rather more solid."

By and by there was silence on the front porch, and soon after Gertrude appeared in the moonlight.

"I didn't know," began Nathan, "that

so many things could be said about bounces and gores as you and Laura have just been saying."

"Didn't you?" responded Gertrude. "You are still ignorant, then, for we said just as many last night and probably shall say as many to-morrow."

"Do you never tire?"

"Well, you see Laura is going to have a new dress. That does not occur every day, by any means; it is what the historians call epochal. So I would not for the world fail to give her my best advice. I wish the dear, pretty little creature to look her best in her new heavyery."

Nathan was silent for an instant. Perhaps he was thinking of how Joe Bond—the hired man on the next farm—had asked his opinion in the village store last week on the subject of neckties, and of how impatiently he had shaken off the question. Joe was an honest, hard-working fellow; if anybody deserved to have a tie to please him, it was he.

"Also," said Nathan, after his pause, "you were talking about your neighbors. Please don't become a gossiping character."

"I'll not," promised Gertrude, easily. "We didn't pry into anybody's closet nor bring out a single skeleton. It was very innocent gossip."

"Innocent!" Nathan snorted. "That word may not cover a multitude of sins, but it covers a fearful lot of iniquities. It is about as bad, I think."

Gertrude gave him a quick look.

"Have you forgotten Laura's grandmother?" she asked, a little coolly. "I always make a point of saving every item of interest for the poor old lady. Hearing the news is her only excitement in life. It is a great lift to Laura when I can add something to the budget which she takes home; I tell it to her in a sentence or two, and I'll spin it out into a long, interesting story. It is really artistic. Laura is so thoroughly nice to her grandmother. I love her for it."

"I never exactly thought of its being a fine art to make a small idea fill a big space," said Nathan, whose ill-humor was in no way appeased by finding himself in the wrong. This sometimes happens.

"Nathan, you are cross," said Gertrude. "I am going to seek better society."

She left him, and in a few minutes he heard her reading aloud to his mother. The windows were open, and the air was

still; he readily recognized the words of the wisest of books. Nathan's conscience uneasily reminded him that for the last sad weeks he had hardly looked into his Bible. Then, with a sharp pang that swallowed up the other, he realized that, wrapped in his own moody thoughts, he had held himself aloof from his mother's grief and loneliness, and that Gertrude had been her comforter.

"I have put my first duty on a girl," he acknowledged. "I have been a coward. It isn't anything of an excuse for me, but the fact is, that when a fellow has so many different things on his mind, as I've had, it is awfully easy for him to forget everybody's troubles but his own."

When the reading had stopped, Nathan went in and sat with his mother for half an hour. They talked but little, but it was a good half hour for them both.

As Nathan went upstairs to bed, he saw a light shining under the door of the little unused hall room. Wondering what this could mean he turned the knob and looked in. Gertrude was

desire for years and years. You believe that I ought to give my whole mind, as you do, to the new responsibilities that have come to us. But I don't know how, Nathan; indeed, I don't!

She stopped, out of breath.

"But," said Nathan, who had scarcely heard her, persisting in finishing the sentence which he had begun, "I thought that you had forgotten about college; that you didn't care."

"Care!" echoed Gertrude. Then she was abruptly silent.

"Nathan," she said, after a minute, "it isn't that I mean to run away from the work that you and I are to do together. I wish to do it; it interests me, and I am prouder than I have ever been of anything that I have a real part in it. But when it is over for the day, and I have time to spare, why, then the dear, happy dream that father put into our minds when we were children whispers to me, and I have to run off and play that it is all coming true some day. Fortunes do drop out of the skies, now and then, and you can't deny it," she ended, with a faint return of her usual blithe speech.

"What if you knew that it never would come true?" demanded Nathan. "That you and I were destined to end our days as clodhoppers on this one spot of earth? What then?"

"Even then," said Gertrude, after a minute's thought, "I think that it would be worth while to know a little. We may be destined to stay here always, but we shall not be destined to be clodhoppers unless we choose it. Providence doesn't do that."

"What does?"

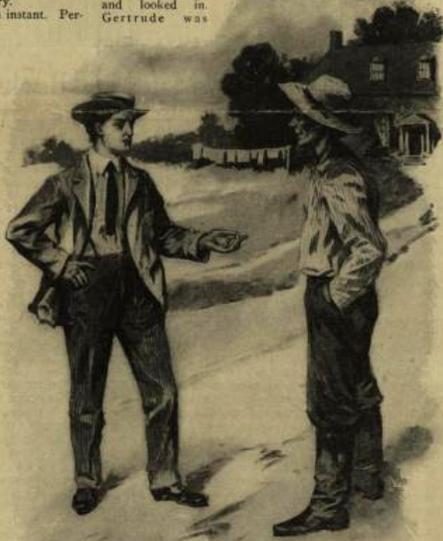
Gertrude laughed. "We are getting upon deep questions, aren't we? I don't mean to say that everybody can study Greek and Latin, and they can't. But 'life is more than meat.' None of us need have a little, narrow, clodhoppering soul, unless we consent to it ourselves."

Nathan made no reply for a considerable time. He sat by the table with his chin in his hand and his brows drawn together, as he gazed at the *Anabasis* which lay open upside down to him. Gertrude watched him, anxiously.

"The fact is," he said, at length, very deliberately, "that I have not only been a coward, but I have been a fool. It seems as though I might have consented myself with one part or the other."

"Why, Nathan," cried out Gertrude, with indignation, "what are you talking about? You have been splendid! I just glory in you! Everybody says that it is wonderful how you have shouldered the care of the family and gone on with everything as if you had been trained to it. I love to hear them praise you; but, Nathan, nobody knows, as I do, how much you have given up without a word."

"I haven't, indeed, said many words



"JOE'S BROAD FACE HAD EXPANDED INTO A DELIGHTED SMILE."

there, sitting by a table which was covered with books.

"Why, Gertrude, what are you doing?"

asked Nathan. "That word

"What do you suppose?" retorted Gertrude, flushed and vexed, as though discovered in wrong-doing. "Why do people always ask that stupid question?"

Nathan was looking over the books. There was something that was almost like dismay in his face.

"But"—he began.

"Oh, I know!" interrupted Gertrude, brusquely. "I know that you think it isn't any use; that I never can go to college now; that I ought to put all that aside as though it had never been my one

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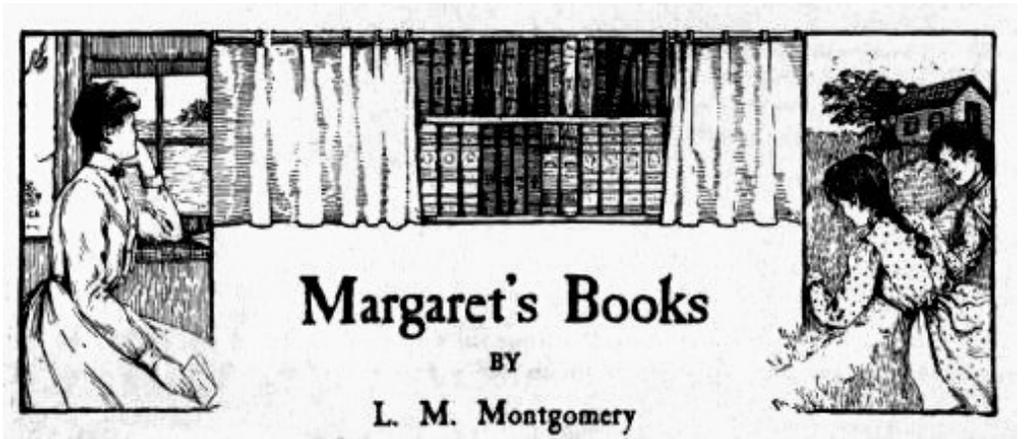
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Margaret's Books

L. M. Montgomery

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Margaret Hartley put down the letter which she had been reading and looked, in a somewhat homesick fashion, out through the window of the little log schoolhouse across the prairies that were dull and gray in the late autumn weather. It was the noon hour, and Margaret had eaten her dinner out of the little tin pail in which Mrs. Murray always put it up, and smiled when she thought how Bert and Patty would laugh to see her. But Bert and Patty and home were far away.

The little schoolroom with its shabby desks and tattered maps was very quiet. The younger scholars were playing down by the spring under the willow bluff. In a corner of the room a group of five girls, all of whom were as old as Margaret herself, were poring intently over a paper which Lizzie Ryan and Sue Robertson held between them. Now and then, the silence was broken by a long-drawn sigh of excitement from one of the quintette, or a whispered question as to whether they all had finished the page.

When Margaret had read and re-read her letter, she found time to wonder in what the big girls were so interested. Generally during noon hour they lounged about the schoolroom and discussed Lindsay gossip with a zest which made their teacher half sorry and half contemptuous. The contempt, however, was always checked when she remembered that these girls had nothing else to talk about. With so little to broaden or beautify their bare, narrow lives, it was small wonder that this one's marriage and that one's "beau," this family scandal and that family quarrel, filled up their thoughts and conversation.

Sometimes Margaret tried to talk with them about books and art, and the great events and discoveries of the busy age. The girls listened with an almost pitiful interest, but they could not discuss that of which they knew and understood nothing, and the result was a rather dismal monologue. They were bright girls, too, eager to

learn and to make the most of their limited opportunities. There were many more like them in Lindsay who did not come to school, and Margaret would have liked to help them, but she did not know how.

Presently Margaret got up and went down the aisle to the corner where the girls sat. So absorbed were they in their paper, that they did not heed her approach, and she stood by Rosetta Carney's side, for a few minutes, unnoticed.

The paper they were reading was a cheap, illustrated one. The particular story over which Rosetta and her friends were poring was entitled, "Beautiful Dolores' Lovers, or The Mysterious Midnight Marriage at Haddington Hall," and the page was garnished with the picture of a wild-eyed young lady being carried off bodily by a young man with a magnificent mustache, presumably the villain, while a weird old crone exulted in the background.

Presently Rosetta, becoming aware of the teacher's presence, looked up, with flushed cheeks and over-bright eyes.

"O Miss Hartley, it is such a splendid story," she said, breathlessly. "I declare I can hardly wait from one week to another for it."

"O girls, why will you read such stories?" said Margaret. "They are absolute trash."

Surprise and wonder were depicted on her listeners' faces. Perhaps Louise Thompson, the oldest girl and best scholar in the school, understood her teacher's meaning more clearly than the others, for she colored slightly and said, in a somewhat resentful tone, "We've nothing else to read, Miss Hartley. People here are thankful for any kind of reading matter when winter comes. Rena's aunt, down East, sends her this paper, and she hands it all round. I don't see any harm in these stories."

"There may be no positive harm in them," said Margaret, gently; "but they are silly and exaggerated, and present very distorted views of life. I don't like to see my girls reading them."

"Mother reads them," said Rosetta Carney, sullenly, "and she thinks they are just splendid."

Margaret was silent. She went back to her desk, and the girls, after a few doubtful whispers, returned to the history of beautiful Dolores' lovers, of whom she seemed to have so many that the greatest mystery was how their historian ever managed to keep track of them all.

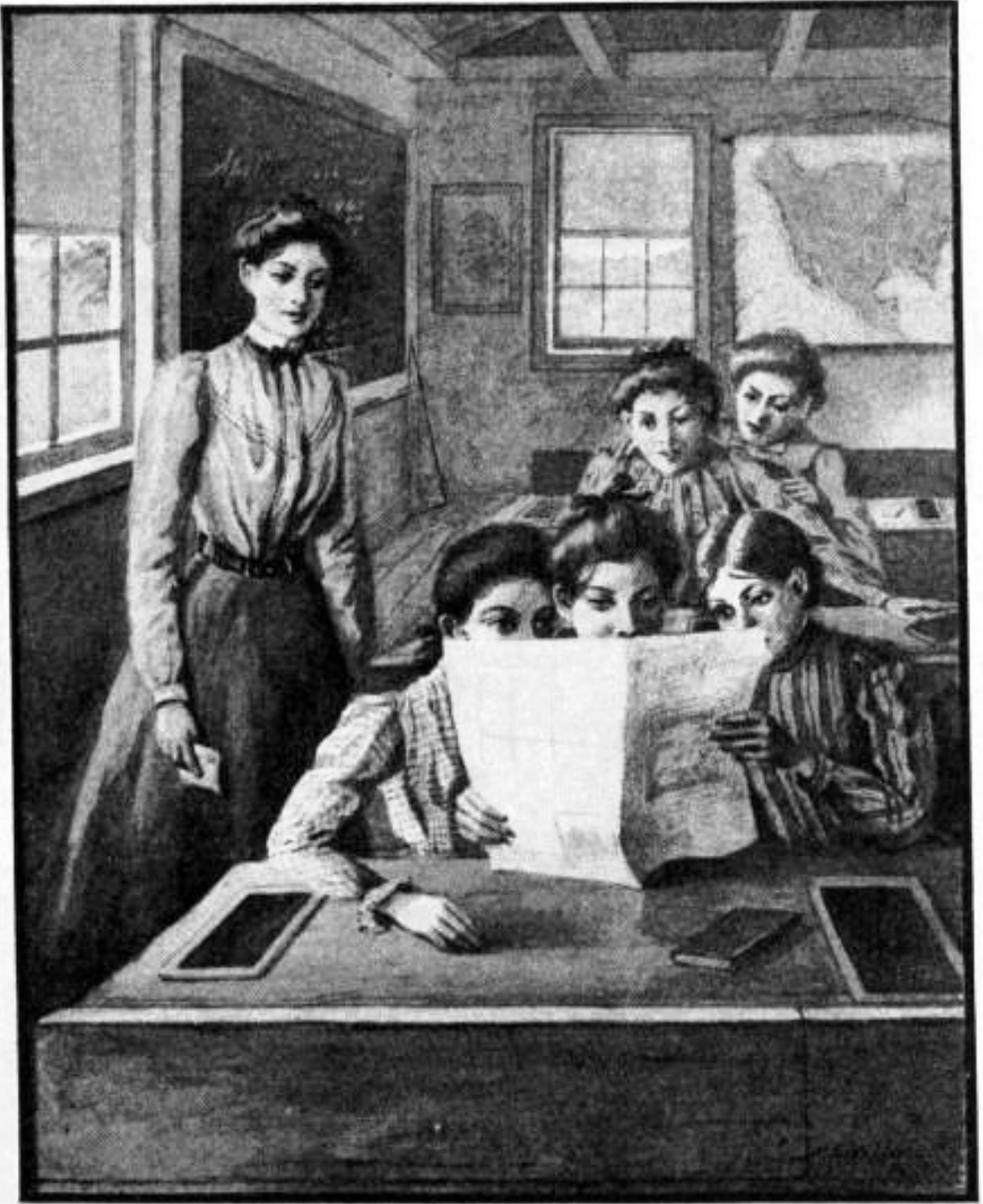
Louise Thompson alone had lost her interest. That evening she walked home with Margaret and reverted, somewhat shamefacedly, to the noon incident. "I suppose, Miss Hartley, you think we are very foolish girls to get so interested in

those stories. But they are kind of exciting when you get into them—and we’ve nothing much to read”—

“I understand,” said Margaret, sympathetically. “But, Louise, I really think it would be better not to read anything at all than to read that trash. It isn’t wholesome.”

“But it’s so dull here,” pleaded Louise. “You don’t know how dreadful it is in winter—the long evenings with nothing to do. We wouldn’t want those papers if we had anything better.”

That evening, when Margaret was sitting alone in the room, an idea came to her that made her frown and look wistfully at her bookcase. It was a big one and well filled with dainty volumes in the choicest bindings. She sat down before them and looked them over—histories and biographies, volumes of poems and essays, books of travel and exploration and science, together with the best fiction of the master story-tellers. The bookcase contained the very cream of her “down East” library.



“SO ABSORBED THAT THEY DID NOT HEED HER APPROACH.”

“I hate to do it, but I will,” she said.

The next day was Saturday, and Margaret went to town on her wheel. She brought back a bottle of mucilage and as much brown paper as she could carry. By night all the volumes in her bookcase were swathed in stout covers, and a blank book, with spaces ruled for entry, had been added to them.

Monday afternoon in school, Margaret made an announcement which created quite a sensation and sent ripples of excitement all over Lindsay before night. It was to the effect that she intended to open up a small, circulating library with her books, and any one who wished could get a book on Saturday afternoons at her boarding house.

The idea was a success from the start. Every Saturday afternoon there was a crowd of eager applicants at Mrs. Murray's. Not only the girls and boys, but their fathers and mothers, came for books. At the noon hour, Margaret no longer found it difficult to talk with her girls. They were all ready and eager to discuss what they had read, and ask for explanation concerning things they had not understood.

A sort of informal literary club sprang up in Lindsay. Margaret wrote home, and Bert and Patty sent up dozens of old magazines and reviews that were new to the Lindsay people. Louise Thompson was a valuable and active assistant in Margaret's enterprise, and it would have been hard to say which was the more alert and interested. When the spring came, and Margaret's thoughts turned homeward, she made another little sacrifice, cheerfully.

"I'm going to leave these books here for the club," she told Louise. "They will serve as a nucleus for a good library. When I go home I will send you papers and magazines, regularly. The rest depends on yourselves."

"Rosetta and I have been talking the matter over," said Louise, brightly, "and we have lots of plans."

"Next winter," said Margaret, "I advise you to form yourselves into a literary society with a constitution, meet regularly in the schoolhouse for discussion, and charge a small membership fee to cover expenses. New ways and ideas will come to you all the time. I think there is no fear of your lapsing back to midnight murders and gruesome mysteries."

"No; I think not," said Louise, frankly. "You know my brother Jack used to read those stories, and he was awfully discontented. He grumbled all the time about the dull life here, and slaving to no purpose, and all that. He wanted to go away to some big city. Well, he doesn't talk like that at all now, and he's real well satisfied. He was reading the Oregon Trail last night, and he thought it just splendid."

When Louise had gone, Margaret went to her bookcase and looked at the well-read volumes and eloquent gaps with satisfied eyes.

"I'm so glad I did it," she said. "I'm ashamed now to think how hard it was at first."

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

[The end of *Margaret's Books* by L. M. (Lucy Maud) Montgomery]