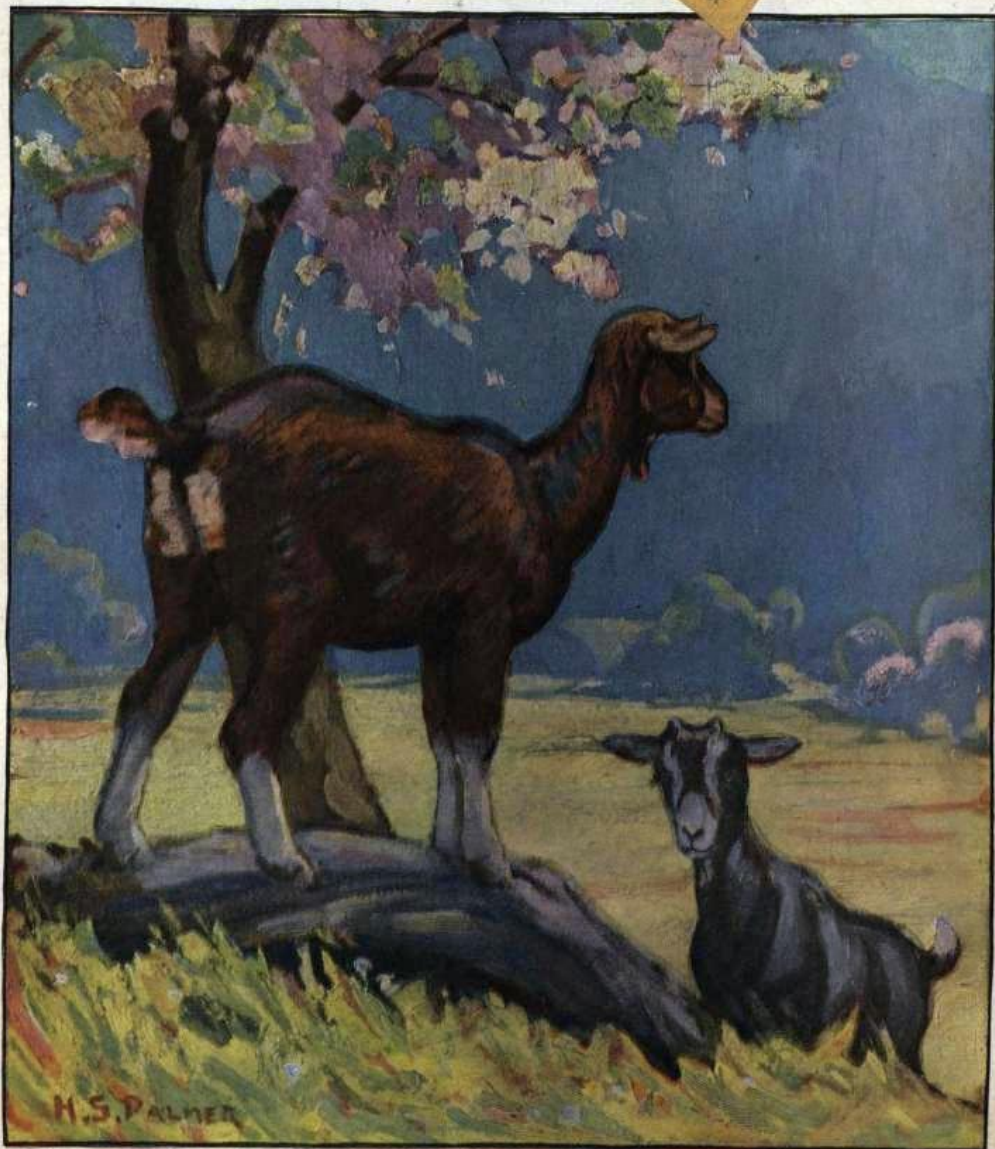


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The Bloom of May

The Story of An Old Apple Tree and Those Who Loved It

L. M. Montgomery

Author of “Anne of Green Gables,” “Anne of the Island,” and other stories.

Illustrations by G. W. L. Bladen omitted, no biographical information available.

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The apple tree grew in a big, green meadow by a brook. It was an old tree—so old that hardly anybody remembered when it had begun to grow. Nobody had planted it; it had sprung from some chance-sown seed, and had grown so sturdily and valiantly that Miser Tom's father had let it live when he discovered it. Now Miser Tom's father had been dead for forty years, and the tree was living still—a great, wide-branching thing, known to all the country round as “Miser Tom's apple tree.” Miser Tom cared nothing for it; the sour green apples it bore were fit only for pigs to eat; but, somehow, the countryside had a sort of prescriptive right to it, as it had to the little cross-lots road that ran past it; and though there were few things Miser Tom dared not do for the sake of making and hoarding, he never dared to cut down the tree or shut up the road.

In Maytime “Miser Tom's tree” was a wonderful thing. The blossoms were snow white, with no tint of rose, and they covered its boughs so thickly that hardly a leaf could be seen. It always bloomed; there were no “off” years for it. Old homesteads, sacred to the loves of the living and the memories of the dead, were all around it. Violets grew thickly in the grass at its roots, and the little cross-lots path ran by it and looped lightly up and over the hill—a little, lovable, red path over which the vagabond wandered, and the lover went to his lady, and children to joy, and tired men home.

Years before one of Miser Tom's hired men had built a little wooden seat under the tree. Miser Tom did not keep him long—he was lazy, it seemed—but the seat remained, and almost every hour of the day some passer-by would step aside from the path to rest awhile under the great tree, and look up into its fragrant arch of bloom with eyes that saw it or saw it not, according as they were or were not holden by human passions. The slim, pale girl, with the delicate air and the large wistful brown eyes, did not see it as she sat there with the young man who had overtaken her on the path. She had loved him always, it seemed to her; and there had been times when she thought he loved, or might love her. But now she knew he never would. He was joyously telling her of his coming marriage to another girl. She was so pale she could not turn any paler, and she kept her eyes down so that he might not see the anguish in them: she forced her lips to utter some words of good wishes, and he was so wrapped up in the egotism of his own happiness that he found nothing wanting; she had always been a quiet, dull little thing. When he was gone she sat there for a long time because she was too unhappy to move. “I shall hate this place forever,” she said aloud, looking up at the beautiful tree. She walked away full of bitterness when she saw two men coming along the path.

They turned in and sat down under the tree. One was the minister of the

community and the other a visiting friend, and they were deep in a profound discussion concerning the immortality of the soul. The friend was doubtful of it, and the minister desired greatly to convince him; but at the end his friend looked up with a smile and said:

“After all, John, this tree is a better argument than any you’ve advanced. When I look at it I feel I’m immortal.”

“That is better than believing,” said the minister, with a little laugh. They felt suddenly very near to each other. “Our love—our old friendship—of course it’s immortal,” he said. “It couldn’t be anything else. One knows that—here. I have wasted my breath.”

When they went away, two lovers came along the path through the blue of the afternoon. They held each other openly by the hand, as people dared to do on the by-path; and when he asked her, seriously, to sit for awhile on the bench under the old tree, she assented tremblingly, for she knew what he was going to say. She was very young and very pretty and very sweet—as sweet and virginal as the apple blossoms. When she said “Yes” to his question, he kissed her and both sat silent for joy. They hated to go away and leave the darling spot. “How I shall always love this dear old tree,” he said. “This place will always be sacred to me.”

The old tree suddenly waved its boughs over them as if in blessing. So many lovers had sat beneath it; it had screened so many kisses. Many of the lips that had kissed were ashes now; but the miracle of love renewed itself every springtime.

In the early evening came a little orphan boy on his way to bring home the cows from pasture. He was very tired, for he had been picking stones off a field all day, so he sat down for a few minutes to rest his weary little bones. He worked for Miser Tom, and no one who worked for Miser Tom ever ate the bread of idleness. He was a shy, delicate lad, and the other boys tormented him because of this. So he had no playmates and was often very lonely. Sometimes he wished wistfully that he had just one friend; there seemed to be so much love in the world and none of it for him. He liked the old apple tree; it seemed like a friend to him, a great, kindly, blooming, fragrant creature, reaching protecting arms over him. His heart grew warm with his love for it, and he began to whistle; he whistled beautifully, and the notes of his tune blew across the brook valley like drops of elfin sound. He was very happy while he whistled; and he had a right to be happy, for he had lived a good day, though he did not know that and was not thinking about it. He had done faithful work; he had saved a little bird from a cat; and he had planted a tree,—a little wild, white birch which he had brought home from the field and set out at the gate, Miser Tom giving a

surly assent because it cost him nothing. So the lad whistled blithely. Life was all before him and it was May and the world was abloom. Long after he had gone up the path to the pasture the echoes of his music seemed to linger under the tree. Many children had sat under it; the old apple tree seemed to love them.

At sunset an old man came to the dim, spring valley and sat for a while, seeing visions and dreaming dreams. He was an ugly old man, but he had very clear, beautiful, blue eyes, which told you that he had kept the child heart. His neighbors thought that he was a failure; he had been tied down to farm drudgery all his life; he lived poorly and was sometimes cold and sometimes hungry. But he dwelt in an ideal world of the imagination, of which none of his critics knew anything. He was a poet, and he had composed a great many pieces of poetry, but he had never written any of them down. They existed only in his mind and memory. He had recited them all a hundred times to the old tree. It was his only confidant. The ghosts of many springs haunted it for him; he always came there when it was in bloom. He was an odd, ridiculous figure enough, if anyone had seen him—bent and warped and unkempt, gesticulating awkwardly as he recited his poems. But it was his hour, and he felt every inch a king in his own realm. For a little time he was strong and young and splendid and beautiful, an accredited master of song to a listening, enraptured world. None of his prosperous neighbors ever lived through such an hour; he would not have exchanged places with one of them.

The next visitor to the tree was a pale woman with a pain-lined face. She walked slowly, and sat down with a sigh of relief. She had seen the old tree blossom-white for many springs, and she knew she would never see it again. She had a deadly disease, and her doctor had told her that day that she had only a few more weeks to live. And she did not want to die—she was afraid of death.

A young moon set behind the dark hills, and the old tree was very wonderful in the starlight. It seemed to have a life and a speech of its own, and she felt as if it were talking to her—consoling her—encouraging her. The universe was full of love, it said, and spring came everywhere, and in death you opened and shut a door. There were beautiful things on the other side of the door—one need not be afraid. Then suddenly she was not afraid any longer. Love seemed all about her and around her, as if breathed out from some great, invisible, hovering Tenderness. One could not be afraid where love was—and love was everywhere. She laid her face against the trunk of the old tree and rested.

She had not been gone long when old Miser Tom came himself, walking home from market, and sat down with a grunt. He was tired and he did not like it because

it meant that he was getting old. He had a thin, pinched, merciless mouth, and he looked around him with eyes that held nothing in reverence. All the land he could see around him belonged to him—or he thought it did. Really it did not belong to him at all, but to the old dumb poet and the little orphan who loved it. Miser Tom thought he was very rich, but he was horribly poor, for not one living creature loved him—not even a dog or a cat. His heart was poisoned and his thoughts were venomous because a neighbor had got higher prices at market that day than he had. He scowled up at the tree and wished he dared cut it down for firewood. It was no good—and it spoiled several yards of the meadow. Yet, even as he scowled, a thought came to him. What if he hadn't made money his god, and scrimped and starved mind and soul and body for it? What if, long ago, he had married the girl with whom he had sat here one evening in his youth? What if he had had a home and children like other men? It was only for a moment he thought thus—the next minute he was Miser Tom again, sneering at such questions. A lavish wife and a spendthrift brood—not for him. He had been too wise. That girl was no longer fair—she was a faded, drab, married woman, ground down with hard work, gnawing her heart out over the boy whose unknown grave was somewhere in France. Poor fool! Oh, yes, he had been wise. But he would not cut the old tree down—not just yet. It—it was a pretty thing, so white in the night's dim beauty. He would leave it be. After all, some shade enhanced the value of the pasture.

After Miser Tom had shuffled away, an old man and his wife came along the path and turned aside to rest. It was the anniversary of their wedding, and they had been spending it with their daughter in the village but now they were on their way home. They, too, loved the old apple tree.

"I sat here for a long time the night before our wedding day, Jean," the old husband said. "It was a small tree then, barely large enough to cast a shade, but it was as white as it is now. It was the first spring it had bloomed. There was no seat here then, so I sat on the grass under it and thought about you."

He began to dream of youth and his bridal day, murmuring bits of recollection aloud. But the old wife sat very silent, for it was not her wedding day she was thinking about, but her little first-born son, who had lived a year,—just one year. She brought him here once, when her tired old eyes had been young and eager and laughter-lighted, and had sat with him on the grass under the tree, and he had rolled over in it and laughed, and clutched at the violets with his little dimpled hands. He had been dead for forty years, but he was still unforgotten. She always felt that he was very near her here by the old tree—nearer than anywhere else, by reason of

that one day they had played together under it. When she went away she had an odd little idea which she would not have uttered for the world—of which she was even a little ashamed, thinking it foolish and perhaps wicked,—that she left him there, playing with the gypsies of the night—the little wandering, whispering, tricky winds, the moths, the beetles, the shadows—in his eternal youth under the white, enfolding arms of Miser Tom's old apple tree.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

[The end of *The Bloom of May* by L. M. (Lucy Maud) Montgomery]