

The Closed Door

Lucy Maud Montgomery
1934

*** A Distributed Proofreaders Canada eBook ***

This ebook is made available at no cost and with very few restrictions. These restrictions apply only if (1) you make a change in the ebook (other than alteration for different display devices), or (2) you are making commercial use of the ebook. If either of these conditions applies, please contact a FP administrator before proceeding.

This work is in the Canadian public domain, but may be under copyright in some countries. If you live outside Canada, check your country's copyright laws. IF THE BOOK IS UNDER COPYRIGHT IN YOUR COUNTRY, DO NOT DOWNLOAD OR REDISTRIBUTE THIS FILE.

Title: The Closed Door

Date of first publication: 1934

Author: L. M. Montgomery

Date first posted: Sep. 17, 2015

Date last updated: Sep. 17, 2015

Faded Page eBook #20150915

This ebook was produced by: Alex White & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <http://www.pgdpCanada.net>

The Closed Door

L. M. Montgomery

First published 1934

Before Rachel had been at Briarwold a month there was a saying that whenever she went around a corner, she went into something. Hazel was a sweet thing with dove's eyes, whom everybody loved, but Rachel was a green-eyed bantling who had been touched with faery from birth. She had an elfin face and slim brown hands that talked as eloquently as her lips, especially when she was telling Cecil and Chris tales of man-eating tigers and Hindoo superstitions she had no business to know. Her devoted missionary parents would have died of horror if they had suspected she did know them. They thought they had protected her so carefully, but Rachel was one of those predestined creatures to whom strange knowledge comes and strange things happen. Very soon after she came to Briarwold she was telling the other children fading old stories of their ancestors . . . ivory-white women and gallant men . . . which they had never heard before . . . mystic wraiths of tales which came alive when Rachel touched them. Everything seemed to come alive when Rachel touched it. When she told the simplest incident it took on a colouring of romance and mystery. She was somehow like a window through which they peeped into an unknown world.

The things she knew! For instance, she knew that if she could only open a door . . . any door . . . quickly enough, she would see strange things . . . perhaps the people who had once lived in it. But she could never open it quite quickly enough. After she told them this every room with a closed door was full of magic for Cecil and Chris. What was going on inside? Even Jane Alicut tiptoed past it, and Jane was impervious to most subtleties. She was the daughter of the new housekeeper at Briarwold . . . a pudgy, blunt-spoken lass of twelve . . . the same age as Rachel. Cecil Latham was twelve too, and lived with his mother next door at faded, shabby Pinecroft. Chris, who matched Hazel with ten years of life, lived at Briarwold with Mr. Digby, whom she called Uncle Egerton, although he was only a second cousin of her dead mother. But though it was said they lived at these places this meant that they slept and ate there. They really did their living in the gardens and the pinewoods and the fields. Especially when Rachel and Hazel came. After India's burning suns Rachel could not get enough of the crystal homeland air and the long, green, rolling fields and the shadowy woods and the moonlight among the beeches. And of course the minute Rachel looked at the landscape she saw things none of the rest of them could.

Cecil and Chris had been good friends and had played together before Rachel came, but Chris was shy and timid and Cecil was shy and timid and they did not just hit it off. Rachel seemed to fuse everybody in an atmosphere of pixy laughter and companionship, and Hazel was like a soft strain of music in the background. So

Cecil was having the happiest summer he had ever known, and even the creeping shadow ceased to haunt him.

Rachel had not been at Briarwold two weeks before she found out what the shadow at Pinecroft was. She had been curled up in the wing chair in one corner of the porch when Egerton Digby was talking with his sister-in-law in the other. The chair's back was towards them and it did not occur to Rachel that they did not know she was there. It is by no means certain that she would have gone away if it had occurred to her.

She heard only snatches. Yet enough to know that Mrs. Latham was very poor and had recently become still poorer by reason of the failure of some company . . . that it was becoming doubtful if she could keep Cecil . . . certainly she could not educate him.

"It will come to this," said Enid Latham in a terrible voice, "I shall have to give him up to his father's people at last. They've always been determined to have him."

Rachel knew quite well, with that uncanny prescience of hers, that Cecil's mother did not like his father's people. To give Cecil to them meant giving him up forever.

"I wish I could help you," Egerton Digby said. "If I were not so wretchedly hard up myself . . . and Chris must be provided for . . ."

"You have done far more than you should already," said Mrs. Latham. "We have no claim on you."

"If you had the Peacock Pearl, as you should have had, there would have been no such problems for you," said Mr. Digby.

He spoke so bitterly that even a less acute child than Rachel might have known that he was touching on something unspeakably painful.

"I am sure that Nora never gave Arthur Nesbitt the pearl," said Mrs. Latham with a gentle firmness. "She was gay and heedless . . . my poor, beautiful Nora . . . but she wasn't wicked. I don't believe he was her lover, Egerton. I have never believed it and I never can."

"I have never believed it either," said Egerton harshly. "But I can't be sure . . . and my doubt has eaten into my soul all these years like a corroding rust. I suppose I loved her too much. And that quarrel we had the last night of her life . . . the last time I ever saw her. If I could undo it, Enid! But nothing can be undone. Life has beaten me."

I should like to see life beat me, thought Rachel.

"If she did not give Arthur Nesbitt the pearl, what became of it?" Egerton Digby went on.

“I think if Ralph had lived he could have told us something about that,” said Mrs. Latham. “He was furious because Uncle Michael left the pearl to me.”

Why does she hate to mention the name of Ralph, wondered Rachel. It sounds as if it blistered her lips.

“The pearl was an exquisite thing,” said Egerton dreamily. “There is some especial charm and mystery about the jewels of the sea. And its colour . . . a moonlight blend of blue and green . . . I never saw anything so lovely. Your Uncle Michael paid fifty thousand for it . . . and loved it more than he should. Perhaps that was why it brought misfortune.”

“It will kill me if I have to give Cecil up,” said Mrs. Latham.

“I would welcome death,” said Egerton Digby. “Perhaps on the other side of the grave I might find Nora . . . and know . . . and kiss our quarrel away.”

They talked longer but they dropped their voices, and Rachel heard nothing further. She thought a great deal over what she had heard. There was a mystery. She felt that she was standing before a closed door and that if she could open it quickly enough she would see things . . . Nora and the Peacock Pearl among them. The name and idea of the pearl captivated Rachel. She had heard stories of such things in India . . . rare mysterious old gems of beauty and desire.

I must find out all about it, decided Rachel.

She did not say a word to anybody of what she had heard. Rachel loved secrets. Besides, she was not going to worry Cecil any more than he was worried. But when Jane Alicut began to tell her things one night, when they were alone together in the twilight, Rachel let her talk. Rachel had already discovered how much could be found out just by letting people talk. Everybody was away from Briarwold, and Cecil was staying home because his mother had a headache, so it was an excellent chance for Jane to talk and she took it. Jane, on a lower plane, was as good as Rachel at finding out things. The crudity of her telling hurt Rachel, who loved to soften and beautify as she went along. Jane never suggested mystery. To her a spade was a spade, never a golden trowel which might turn up who knew what of treasure trove.

“I heard Ma talking to Mrs. Agar down in the village about it. Mrs. Agar told Ma everything. Mr. Digby’s wife was Mrs. Latham’s sister and they were dreadful fond of each other . . . Mrs. Latham and Mrs. Digby, I mean. I dunno if Mrs. Digby was as fond of her husband. Mrs. Agar said there were queer tales. She was a great beauty with a rope of black hair that fell to her feet. But she was a gay piece and Mr. Digby was jealous as jealous.

“She had a brother called Ralph who was as bad as they make ’em, but Mrs. Digby always stuck up for him and took his part. She seemed to love him more’n she loved anybody else. Then old Michael Foster . . . he was their uncle . . . up and died. He hadn’t much money but he had a big pearl that was worth a king’s ransom, Mrs. Agar said. He’d ruined himself to buy it. And he willed it to Mrs. Latham. Ralph was furious because he thought he should have got it. He said his uncle had promised it to him. He seemed to be sorter a favourite with the old man in spite of his goings-on. They had an awful quarrel over it, Mrs. Agar says. And then one night Mrs. Digby went home . . . her old home where Ralph and her father lived . . . to stay all night, and it was burned down and they were all burned to death in it . . . all three of ’em . . . yes, wasn’t it awful! And Mr. Digby nearly went mad. He’s never been the same man since, Mrs. Agar says. His hair turned white in a month. And there was a big to-do because the pearl had disappeared. It never was found either.

“Mrs. Agar says everybody thought Mrs. Digby was going to run away with Arthur Nesbitt and had given him the pearl. He was up to his eyes in debt. He went away after that and word came back that he had lots of money. A nice kettle of fish, wasn’t it? Mrs. Agar says the rich society folks are all like that.”

“But Mr. Digby isn’t rich,” said Rachel.

“No . . . he’s got poor since his wife was burned to death. He just let everything slide. And of course Mrs. Latham is as poor as a church mouse . . . everyone knows that. Mrs. Agar says his father’s people want Cecil. They’ve always hated her . . . they didn’t want Cecil’s father to marry her.”

“You are not to tell Cecil that,” said Rachel.

“Of course I won’t. I like the kid and I’m sorry for him. So’s Ma. I don’t want to hurt his feelings,” protested Jane.

“And I think you’d better not talk about that story to anyone,” continued Rachel austerely. “You’ve talked too much about it now.”

Jane stared. She had certainly felt that Rachel wanted to hear her talk. It wasn’t fair that she should be snubbed like that.

“I can hold my tongue as well as the next one,” she said sulkily. “You are good at listening, Miss Rachel.”

Rachel smiled . . . remotely . . . mysteriously.

“You would be surprised, Jane, if you knew what I can hear sometimes,” she said dreamily.

Rachel felt now that she knew all about the mystery . . . except the one thing worth knowing. The door was still closed. And she did not know how it was to be opened. She did not have the key. In this impasse Rachel betook herself to prayer.

For the daughter of a missionary, Rachel did not pray overmuch. Hazel prayed sweetly and innocently every night and morning, but Rachel made a special, mystic, alluring rite of prayer. She would not make it common. Neither did she kneel down. She stood in the garden by the sundial and lifted her face to the sky with upraised hands, facing God fearlessly.

“Please open the door,” she said, less as a request than as a statement of right. “Because,” she added, “you know that things can’t be right until the door is opened.”

Perhaps what followed on a certain afternoon, which none of the children ever forgot, was an answer to this prayer. You will not get any of those children to discuss it with you. Nobody will talk of it, not even Jane Alicut, who is now a stout matron with a bevy of her own children round her. She tells them many tales of her old playmates at Briarwold, but she never tells the story of that haunted afternoon. She would like to think she dreamed it. When she cannot believe that, she blames it on Rachel. Very likely with justice. I think if Rachel had not been with the other children that day, they would never have stepped through the closed door.

They were to go to tea with old Great-aunt Lucy down at Mount Joy. And they were to go by a short cut through fields and woods which none of them had ever traversed before, but which Uncle Egerton described so clearly that they were quite sure they could follow it. At first they went along the wood path back of Briarwold. They had never gone quite so far into those woods before. But they felt quite at home and very happy. The woods had a friendly mood on that day. They did not always have it. Sometimes they frowned. Sometimes they were wrapped up in their own concerns. But this day they welcomed the children. There were beautiful shadows everywhere. The mosses along the path were emerald and gold. They passed through a little glen full of creamy toadstools. They found a lovely green pool with ferns around it that nobody ever seemed to have found before. Rachel was quite sure that if they waited quietly a faun would come through the trees to peep at himself in it. But they had no time to waste for Great-aunt Lucy was fussy about punctuality.

Jane was with them. Great-aunt Lucy made a point of inviting Jane because she liked her. And Jane’s dog, who had no name because Jane could not find one which would suit everybody, was along too . . . a gay, light-hearted little mongrel who tore about in the woods and outran them, then sat on his haunches waiting for them to come up with him, laughing at them with his red tongue lolling from his jaws.

After the woods there was a meadow path that enticed them with daisies and

was jewelled with the red of wild strawberry leaves. Then came another stretch of woodland . . . a more shadowy place. The path ran along by a mysterious, fir-darkened brook. The children were never quite sure just when the feeling of something strange came over them. All at once they found themselves drawing closer together. Their light chatter failed them. Even Jane became very quiet. Rachel had been quiet all along that day, now that they came to think of it. She had walked a little apart . . . listening. She would never talk of it afterwards, so nobody knows what she was listening for or what she expected. Jane's dog was the only one of the party who kept his spirits up.

"Are you sure this is the right road?" whispered Jane nervously at last. She didn't know why she must whisper.

"It's the only road there is," said Rachel.

A little further on Cecil suddenly said, "If this is the right road, there's something wrong with it."

They stared at each other, beginning to be pale. Cecil had put their secret feeling into words.

"There is something wrong with it," said Rachel. "I've known that for some time. And I'm going to find out what it is."

They went on. It was just as well to go on as to go back, for the chill and fear were all around them now. They dared not stand still. They could not even whisper. Jane's dog had given up chasing imaginary rabbits but he trotted along sturdily, his tail curled saucily over his back.

All at once they were through the woods and out in the open. A lovely landscape of hill and meadow and homesteads spread below the hill on which they stood. They scrambled over the rotten fence and found themselves in an old, deep-rutted, grass-grown lane which ran down to join a road that went on until it reached the lake. But just beside them was a garden oddly shaped like a triangle, basking in the sunshine, full of flowers and bees and sleepy shadows. And at the tip of this garden triangle was a house.

None of them could recall having seen it before. It was a large, old-fashioned house, overgrown with vines, and the door was open. On the sun-warm sandstone step a cat was basking . . . a huge, black cat with pale-green eyes.

An odd hush lay over the windless place. Cecil remembered an old poem he had heard Uncle Egerton reading . . . a poem that spoke of a land "where the wind never blew." Had they come to it? What was this lost garden, so full of inescapable mystery? What was wrong with it?

He looked appealingly at Rachel.

“Where are we? I don’t see Aunt Lucy’s anywhere.”

“I’m going to that house to ask,” said Rachel resolutely.

Cecil did not know why he felt such a horror of doing this. He was ashamed to betray his cowardice before a girl, so he went along. They walked up the central path of the garden, past tulips and daffodils and bleeding-heart. Cecil knew what was wrong with the garden now. Tulips and daffodils and bleeding-heart had no right to be there . . . it was long past the time for them. He felt Chris’s cold little hand steal into his. At the very step Jane’s dog suddenly gave a low whine, turned and fled.

“I suppose he doesn’t like that cat,” said Jane, as if she felt called upon to explain his behaviour.

“Hush,” said Cecil . . . he didn’t know why.

Rachel knocked . . . but nobody came. The cat stared at them unblinkingly. The scent of lilacs came on the air, although this was late summer and lilacs are in spring. Never again, as long as he lived, could Cecil endure the scent of lilacs. Beyond they saw a large, square hall and on one side of it was a closed door.

Rachel went in and across the hall to the door. The others followed because following was a little less terrible than staying behind. They were all very cold now. Rachel’s thin shoulders were shivering. But she did a strange thing. She did not knock at the door . . . she simply set her teeth, turned the knob and went in.

For once she had done it quickly and silently enough.

They were in a beautiful, old-fashioned room. Two other people were also in it. A lady sat by a tea-table whereon were ivory candles in tall silver candlesticks and a bowl of violets. She was very beautiful. Her masses of black hair were held to her head by a golden band. She had a very fine, pale, creamy skin, and she wore a dress of black velvet with long, flowing sleeves of black lace. A great rose of dark-golden velvet was fastened to her shoulder, and the melting, pansy-hued eyes that looked at them were full of allurements and soft fire under the heavy fringing lashes.

A young man was standing by the window, playing with the tassel of the shade. He was handsome too, in a dark and splendid way, but the white hands that pulled at the tassel had terribly long, thin fingers. Cecil knew that he was in the presence of something very evil.

The young man left the window, took a cup from the table and came to the children. Cecil felt as if a dark chill night were coming towards him. But it was Rachel to whom the young man held out the cup. All the children saw the ring on his hand . . . or, rather, the three rings, fastened to each other by tiny gold chains, so that all three must be taken off or put on together. A diamond in one ring, a ruby in

another, an emerald in the third, each stone held in a dragon's mouth.

Rachel shook her head and turned away. Then the lady smiled.

"You are quite right not to take it," she said. "It would not have hurt you, but you would never have been quite the same again. And you are too different already for your own good. Besides, you would have forgotten us as soon as you went out."

She rose and came towards them also. Cecil was afraid that she was going to touch him, and he knew that if she did he could not endure it. But it was by Rachel she paused. A little quivering ruby of light fell for a moment on her white neck from the stained-glass window at the far end of the room. The young man stood apart with the window for a background. There was a sneer on his face. He looked like some beautiful fallen angel . . . dark, impotent and rebellious.

The lady bent her head and said something to Rachel in a very low tone. But they all heard it.

"Tell Egerton I loved him only . . . Arthur Nesbitt was nothing to me. As for that foolish quarrel of ours . . . one forgets such things here . . . only love is remembered. But I did take the pearl . . . for Ralph. He persuaded me that Uncle Michael meant him to have it . . . that he was childish and doted when he made the will giving it to Enid. But I had not given it to him. Tell Egerton he will find the pearl among the folds of my wedding gown in the locked box in the attic. I am glad you came and opened the door. So few people would have had the courage to open it. There will be rest now. But go . . . go quickly."

They went quickly. Once outside that terrible house, they ran blindly through the garden and down the lane. At the entrance to the wood-path they stopped and looked back.

There was no house. There was only a tangled enclosure with a growth of young trees in the centre among which were the ruins of burned walls.

"Let us go home," said Jane. "I don't care what Aunt Lucy thinks. I'm . . . I'm sick."

They got home somehow, running, stumbling, clinging together. When they got home nobody would say anything . . . could say anything . . . but Rachel. She had something to tell her Uncle Egerton and she told it, closeted with him in the library. Then she went out and flung herself down on the grass by the sundial, shaken with dreadful sobs.

"What did he say?" whispered Cecil.

"He wouldn't believe me at first, until I happened to mention the three rings the . . . the man wore. Then he said, 'The Rajah's rings . . . Ralph always wore them.' And he went to the attic."

“Was . . . was it there?”

“Yes. And he looked like . . . like a man who had got out of hell,” said Rachel.

Nobody was shocked. They had learned that afternoon, looking into Ralph Kilbourne’s eyes, more about hell than they had ever known before. They were too young to have learned so much . . . which was perhaps why they could never be got to say anything of it. Such things are not good for anybody to know.

“I will never open a closed door again,” shuddered Rachel.

[The end of *The Closed Door* by L. M. Montgomery]