

A Dinner
of
Herbs

Lucy Maud Montgomery
1928

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“But—but,” said Robin Lyle blankly, “that is impossible, Myra.”

In the bright lexicon of Mrs. George Lyle there was no such word as impossible.

“Not at all,” she said briskly. “In fact, it’s necessary. The twins must have a room to themselves now. The boys will have Grandma’s room. So of course Gladys must room with you. That big west room is large enough for a dozen, I’m sure.”

There was a note of dissatisfaction in Myra Lyle’s voice. She had always been secretly resentful that Robin should have that big sunny room—the only room with a fireplace. Myra wanted it for a guest-room. But as long as Grandma Lyle lived one could do nothing about it. And in some matters George was stubborn, though generally his wife led him round by the ear.

Robin continued to look blank. Yet she said nothing more. She had not lived sixteen years under the same roof with Myra Lyle without learning the futility of saying anything—even when her mother was alive. And now that her mother was dead, there would be no check on Myra. George simply did not count—George who had always thought, thought still, and would continue to think, that Robin must be “brought up.”

Her silence and her blankness worried Myra a bit. Myra could not understand silence—could not understand anyone who did not think at the top of her voice and empty her feelings out to the dregs. Of course, Robin had always been a sly, secretive thing.

“Why should you mind sharing your room with Gladys?” she demanded, answering Robin’s silence. “I’d think you’d *like* to have a young life so near you to keep you from growing old.”

“I don’t mind growing old if I can be left to do it in peace,” said Robin. “I’m sure I won’t like rooming with a young girl.”

“Well, it won’t be for long. I think Irving Keyes will see to that.”

There was a smirk on Myra’s face which had the same effect on Robin that a dig in the ribs with Myra’s fat elbow would have had. In fact, she could not endure it. She turned and went out of the room, in silence. Myra sighed—she had “put up” with that for sixteen years. Then Myra smiled. Irving Keyes! And a widower always meant business. Myra went back to her sewing. Things were working out very nicely. Grandma was out of the way at last, and Robin would soon be off their hands. A good match too—one the clan would approve of! George had been foolish to think Robin had a notion of Michael Stanislaws—Michael, who was poor and hadn’t even the decency to be ashamed of it. Shell-shocked in the war, with a lean brown face scarred by shrapnel, and a leg that wasn’t much use, he was just baching it over at Owl’s Roost and pottering round his show dahlias, with two black cats

forever at his heels. No, no, Robin was no fool. But she must be told not to dilly-dally with her good fortune. Before her mother's death there had been some talk of Irving Keyes's interest in Blanche Foster, a handsome girl much younger than Robin. Myra found it hard to believe that anyone could prefer pale, old-maidish Robin to her. Yet, as Irving Keyes seemed to be blessedly inclined that way, Robin must be made to understand that she must not let him slip through her fingers—again. She would never have such another chance. A well-to-do merchant with the most expensive car in the village and a house with more ornamentation on it than any house in the country! Myra sighed and wondered why fate had given her only a farmer. She felt she would have shone as a general merchant's wife.

“As soon as Robin is married,” she decided, “I'll give Gladys the guest-room and have the west room done over.”

Robin went to her room—the only spot on earth she had ever been able to call her own. And, as always when she went into it, the peace and dignity and beauty of it seemed to envelop her like a charm. She was in a different world—a world where George and Myra could not quarrel or the hired girl be impertinent to her; and the everlasting noise and racket of the household died away at its threshold like the spent wave of a troubled sea. For years all that had supported her through the drudgery of days spent waiting on a querulous invalid was the certainty of finding herself alone in her dear room at night where dreams gave some mysterious strength for another day.

The north window looked down on leagues of rippled sea and distant, misty, fairy-like coasts. Between it and the sand-dunes was only a dwindling grove of ragged old spruces.

The west window looked out on Owl's Roost, with its orchard and garden, where First and Second Peter prowled darkly, and Michael himself played his violin at hours when all decent people should be in bed. Sometimes, too, he ate his slender meals in the orchard, under an enormous apple tree, never dreaming that Robin Lyle was watching him from her window and wishing shamelessly that she might play “Thou” to his crust of bread and jug of milk. Nor was the book of verse wanting. Michael read as he ate, propping his book up against the jug.

And now all this would be taken from her. She knew exactly what rooming with Gladys and her shrieking chums would mean. No more dreaming; no more shadowy hours of listening to Michael's stormy music in the orchard; no more early dawns watching the silent mysterious ships drift by the dunes to the harbour; never again alone with the night.

No, she could not endure it. Even sleek, prosperous Irving Keyes would be better than that.

“Life isn’t fair,” said Robin drearily, as if there was any use in saying it.

She went to the glass and looked at herself. She looked at her straight, black, bobbed hair, dark blue eyes and white, heart-shaped face; at her wide mouth quirked up at the corners so that she always seemed to be laughing even when very sad. And she thought of Blanche Foster’s red-gold hair and flashing black eyes and brilliant complexion. Blanche Foster, who had always made Robin feel old and dowdy and silly. It was amazing that Irving Keyes didn’t prefer her, but since he didn’t . . .

Robin shivered a little and sat down by the west window in the moonlight. The window was open, and the faint, cold, sweet perfumes of night drifted in—blent with the whiff of Michael Stanislaw’s pipe, neither faint nor sweet, but very alluring. Once, when she was eighteen, she had had a fleeting fancy for Irving Keyes—and he knew it. Even yet he was attractive—until he spoke. But his funny vulgar stories and his great haw-haws! And his love for practical jokes! He still thought it a joke to stick out his foot and trip somebody up. And he still thought it wit to call eggs cackleberries.

Irving Keyes had been heard to boast that he had got everything he wanted in life. And now he wanted Robin Lyle. Robin thought he would get that too, despite his roars of laughter and the jigarees on his house.

What else was there for her? Arnold Clive? No! She shivered again. Austere, religious Arnold with the face of a fanatic: high, narrow brow, deep-set intolerant eyes, merciless mouth—quite out of the question! And, after all, she liked Irving very well.

She looked over at Owl’s Roost. What a nice, gentle little old house it was; a nice lazy old house—a house that had folded its hands and said, “I will rest.” It had none of the Lyle efficiency and up-to-dateness about it, with a sly little eyebrow window above the porch roof and the magic of trees around it. She loved the trees around Owl’s Roost. There were no trees around George’s house. Myra thought shade unsanitary.

Michael was smoking his pipe at the fence with an orchard full of mysterious moonlit delights behind him. Robin wished she could go down and talk with him. She had sometimes talked with him over the fence. Not often, and yet she felt curiously well acquainted with him. They had laughed together the first time they had talked, and when two people have laughed—really laughed—together they are good friends for life.

Though Michael did not laugh much. If anything, he was bitter. But there was something stimulating and pungent about his bitterness—like choke-cherries. They puckered your mouth horribly, but still you hankered for them.

“I wonder what he is thinking of,” thought Robin.

She *knew* she only thought it. Yet a voice drifted up to her from the orchard.

“I’m thinking how very silvery that dark cloud must be on the moon side,” said the voice. “Come down here and help me watch it leaving the moon. It’s as good as an eclipse.”

Robin flew downstairs, out of the side door and along the brick walk, worn by many feet. Michael was hanging over the fence. First Peter sat hunched up beside him, and Second Peter smoothed about his shoulder. First Peter always let Robin stroke him, but Second Peter swore at her. Second Peter was not to be hoodwinked.

Robin stood beside Michael on the other side of the fence, where the moonlight would lie white as snow on the flagged walk when the cloud passed. She had never been through the fence. There was no gate between the Lyle yard and the old orchard, lying fragrant and velvety under the enchantment of night.

They stood there together in a wonderful silence until the cloud had passed.

“He who has seen the full moon break forth from behind a dark cloud at night, has been present like an archangel at the creation of light and of the world,” quoted Michael, whacking his pipe on the fence and putting it in his pocket. “Wasn’t it worth watching, Miss Lyle?”

If there was one thing she hated more than another, it was having Michael call her “Miss Lyle.” She hated it so much that she answered “Yes,” stiffly and unenthusiastically.

“It’s impossible to avoid the conclusion that something is bothering you,” said Michael. “Tell First Peter about it and I’ll listen in.”

A perfectly crazy impulse mastered Robin. She *would* tell him. She had to tell somebody.

“I can’t make up my mind which of two men to marry,” she said bluntly.

Michael was silent for an appreciable space. All the sounds audible were First Peter purring and a dog taking the countryside into his confidence two farms away. His silence got on Robin’s nerves.

“That wasn’t quite true,” she said crossly. “There *are* two—but there’s only one I could really consider possible. And the trouble is I *don’t* want to marry him—or anyone,” she added hastily, telling a second tarradiddle.

“Then why marry him?” said Michael. “Why marry at all if you don’t want to, in

this day of woman's emancipation?"

"The trouble is—I'm not emancipated," sighed Robin, wishing that First Peter would stop purring. It was outrageous that a cat should be so blatantly happy. Though why shouldn't he be happy? Couldn't he sit on Michael's shoulder and snuggle his nose against Michael's face? Wasn't he doing it now, darn him! Yet she was still talking on. "I'm twenty years behind the times. I'm thirty-three and I'm not trained to do anything. I've no special gift. I can't sew or teach or pound a typewriter. All I can do, or want to do, is keep house. And I *must* marry—or room with Gladys."

"Do you think Irving Keyes would be a more agreeable room-mate?" said Michael sarcastically—though she had not said anything about Irving Keyes.

"Well, he won't plaster my dressing table with powder—or raise Cain when he can't find his hairpins—or yell to Baal if he has chilblains—or look in the mirror the same time I do—*purposefully*," said Robin defiantly.

"I think I see what you're up against," said Michael, beginning to fill his pipe again.

"You don't—not fully—a *man* couldn't," snapped Robin. "Gladys will talk me to death about her beaus. Gladys thinks there's no fun in having a beau unless you can tell everybody about him and what he said and what he did. She'll laugh at my funny old pictures with big sleeves and hats high on the head. She'll come in and wake me up in the wee sma's. She'll insist on having the most awful silver pig with a blue velvet pincushion—on his back on my table. She'll bring her rampageous school chums in and chitter-chatter for hours. And everything will be either wonderful or priceless. I'll never be alone any more," concluded Robin pathetically.

"*That* gets me," said Michael. "And the alternative is Irving Keyes. A handsome fellow with gobs of money. Why don't you like him?"

"I do. But I don't feel like marrying him, for several reasons."

"For instance . . ."

"He likes bread thick, and I like it thin," said Robin flippantly. She felt she had been absurd in telling Michael as much as she had.

"Every proper man likes bread thick. I've no sympathy with you there."

"Our taste in jokes is entirely different."

"Ah, *that's* serious," said Michael, not sounding serious.

"And . . ." Robin looked at another cloud that was creeping over the moon. "I—I want someone else."

"Oh!" Second Peter snarled, as if he had been pushed aside with a foot.

"He's the only man in the world for me," said Robin, looking straight at Michael.

“That’s a large order out of approximately five hundred million men,” said Michael drily.

He began to smoke insolently. The cloud was over the moon, and the world was dark. Robin felt cold and old and silly and empty.

“I must go in,” she said.

“Wait a sec.” Michael was rummaging in his pocket. “Here’s something for your rose-jar.”

He handed her over a paper bag full of dried rose-leaves.

“All I can give any woman now—withered rose-leaves,” he said lightly. “Irving’s a good fellow. Perhaps you can teach him to laugh in the right place. I’d have a try.”

Robin went away for two weeks to visit a school chum two years older than herself whose daughter was engaged. She had not been away for a visit for ten years. When she came back, Michael asked her (still over the fence) if good wishes were in order.

“Not yet,” said Robin airily. She thought Michael looked tired and a bit old.

“I’ve promised to give him his answer today. *Write* it to him. I couldn’t say ‘yes’ face to face.”

“But I’m quite sure ‘yes’ is the best thing to say,” said Michael, stooping to tickle Second Peter’s ear. Second Peter snarled. You *couldn’t* hoodwink Second Peter.

“Of course it is,” said Robin piteously. “But the trouble is—I don’t *want* to say it—Michael.”

Somehow their eyes met. Eyes can say so much in just a second. At least Robin’s could. Michael’s didn’t say anything. She realized that he had looked into her heart, but that she had not even had a peep into his.

“I’m horribly poor,” said Michael slowly.

“But laughter would always be a guest in our house,” said Robin.

“I always have First Peter sleeping on the foot of the bed.”

“Why not Second Peter too?”

“Everything in my house is chipped or mended or torn.”

“We wouldn’t be afraid to use it, then.”

“I’ve got a temper, and shell-shock didn’t improve it. We’d fight often.”

“Husbands and wives have a right to fight now and then, haven’t they?”

“Getting up before breakfast and working between meals isn’t supposed to be to my liking.”

“After thirty-three years of George’s efficiency, a lazy man would be nice for a change.”

"I'm inclined to be a vegetarian."

"Better a dinner of herbs," quoted Robin.

"All the ready cash I have in the world just at present is ten dollars."

"Enough for a licence and a wedding ring," said Robin brazenly.

"Let's take a chance at it then," said Michael, looking at First Peter.

Robin laughed under her breath. She sobbed the next minute. She flung out her hands as if to push Michael and Peter and the fence a thousand miles away.

"Oh, my dear—my dear, how funny you are," she said. "Why, I wouldn't marry you if you were the last one of the five hundred million left alive in the world."

Michael's face was expressionless. He looked past her at Second Peter on an apple-tree bough, still refusing to be hoodwinked.

"Sorry," he said. "I thought you would like the idea. My mistake."

George Lyle scowled at Robin when she went in.

"Don't make a fool of yourself over Michael Stanislaws," he said bluntly.

"But isn't that just what I've done?" said Robin.

"What do you mean?"

"I've just refused to marry him."

"Thank heaven you'd enough sense for that," said relieved George.

There were five doors on the way to her room and Robin banged them all. Oh, so he pitied her! She had badgered him into asking her to marry him out of pity. Oh, she'd show him. She flew to her table—she would write Irving Keyes his answer on the spot.

"Cat, are you laughing?" Michael was saying furiously to Second Peter.

Robin went down to the mailbox ostentatiously after dinner to mail her letter. Michael was tying up his dahlias as she passed and waved his hand airily at her. Robin had to wave back because she hadn't been able to make up her mind as yet whether to hate or ignore him. She waved with the hand that held Irving Keyes's letter.

Michael had gone from the garden when she came back. He was sitting on his shaky verandah talking to a man who had presumably come in the smart green car parked in the lane. There was a pile of shabby old books on the chair between them. She could hear Michael laughing. She went up to her room—hers for one day more only—and sat down by the west window. The mailbox was hidden from her view by the wild cherry at the gate, but presently the postman's motor wheeled by. Robin shivered. Her letter was gone—irrevocably. At once a panic horror of her future seized her. Why had she? Oh, why had she?

At sunset Michael came to the fence and called her. Robin, deciding that you

should at least be civil to a rejected suitor, asked him from her window what he wanted.

“I’ve a sin on my conscience. Perhaps worse—a mistake,” Michael called back. “Come down and let me confess.”

Robin told herself she was not interested in Michael’s sins, but she went down. He was leaning on the fence and his cap was pulled down so far that she couldn’t see his eyes.

“Do you think Irving Keyes has your letter by now?” he said impertinently.

“He should have.”

“Well, he hasn’t. That letter is in ashes in my kitchen stove. I went down and took it out of the mailbox before the postman came. You can put me in the pen for that, I believe.”

Robin looked at Second Peter, who had the air of making up his mind to the inevitable.

“Why did you do that?”

“I found it was simply impossible to let you marry another man. Why did you refuse my heart and hand and my few insignificant worldly goods this morning?”

“I wasn’t going to be married out of pity.”

“Pity! Do you suppose I’ve committed a felony—or is it only a misdemeanour—out of pity? I’ve loved you ever since that first day we talked over the fence. But I’m so poor—and lame—and ugly.”

“You’re not ugly and not very lame and I don’t care how poor you are,” said Robin so shamelessly that Second Peter blushed for her.

Michael leaned over the fence and took her hand.

“I found out this afternoon that my old edition of *The Pilgrim’s Progress* is worth a thousand dollars. Shall we put the money in the bank for a rainy day or run over to Europe for our honeymoon in places I know over there? There’s a village in the Apennines—‘the cloudy Apennines’ . . .”

“Let us go to Europe,” said Robin recklessly. “Umbrellas have been invented since that proverb was.”

Second Peter was so disgusted at what followed that he stalked away bristling. But he had always known it—always expected it. You couldn’t hoodwink Second Peter.

“Did you read that letter?” Robin asked, before she went in to have it out with George and Myra.

“Of course not,” said Michael indignantly. “I may be a thief, but I’m not a sneak.”

“It’s a pity you didn’t,” said Robin coolly, “because if you had you’d have seen that I refused him.”

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