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The Story of a Love

L. M. Montgomery

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THE JUNE NIGHT

Moonlight must have an intoxicating quality. It is a fine, airy, silver wine, such as fairies may drink at their revels, unharmed of it. But when a mere mortal sips it, it straightway mounts to his brain and loosens all his old fair dreams and visions, to the undoing of his daylight common sense. To-night I feel that I dwell in a world of beauty and love, ruler by right of heirship and possession—a world shaped out of the moonlight and my sweetest fancies, and therefore a world wherein I may think of her, without doing violence to the sacredness of the thought of her.

I walk in the alleys of this old garden. The moonlight is lying on the grass, and a little invisible wind is tiptoeing all over it. All about me are roses, like sweet old songs set to flowering—roses white enough to lie in her bosom and red enough to star the soft dark cloud of her hair. It was among the roses I first saw her, in that, other old garden adjoining mine, just beyond the box hedge.

To-day two women asked me if I had ever really loved. One of them was a woman of the world who should have known better, and to her I made answer accordingly:

“Madam, a poet, such as you are good enough to term me, little as I deserve the name, should not love one woman personally because he loves all impersonally; your sex is to him a beautiful enigma, whose meaning he must ever seek and never find; and until he does find it he should not bind down his quest to the pursuit of one.”

She smiled as if she did not believe me, which was no more than I deserved, since I did not believe myself; but she asked no more questions.

The other woman was a mere child, tiptoeing wistfully on the brink of her birthright, and her question was that of a child who has not learned that it is unfitting to be curious. I honoured her just departing childhood with its meed of sincerity:

“I have loved, and love still, and shall always love,” I said gravely. And she, too, smiled as if she did not believe me. Yet I had told her the simple truth.

Here, in this wondrous white moonlight, I realise how truly I spoke. I love with a love too fine and untainted to be put into words; it should be put only into the most reverent thoughts. It is my delight so to think of Averil.

She is a woman now. She was a child when I saw her. Yet I do not think of her as a child. My love has kept pace with her unseen growth, in that land across the sea, walking into womanhood. It is as woman I think of her; as woman I shall meet her when our meeting comes, as come it must and will. Love must fulfil its own prophecy, and all that is my own shall come to me in the ripeness of time. I would not hasten it or rush impatiently to meet it.

Yet I have wooed her in my poems. I do not know if she has read them; but if she has she must know that I love her. She must know that I wrote them because of her and by inspiration of her; that I have crowned her my queen of song. Some day I hope to hear her tell me that she has understood. It is twelve years since I saw her. I was a boy of twenty then, a shy, awkward youth, knowing nothing of the real world, but much of the world of dream and fancy, with a heart virgin of any woman's image and lips virgin of any woman's kiss.

I had been wandering one evening in this garden and I had come to the box hedge that formed its boundary. There was a little gap in it where a footpath ran into the garden of our neighbour, and, standing there, I saw her wonderful face, turned upward to the sunset.

She was a child in everything save her eyes; only ten sweet years had gone to the making of her. The slender little figure, the thick braid of dark hair, the delicate brows, the parted, dimpled mouth—these were of a child. But her eyes, her glorious eyes, were a woman's eyes—the woman who was mine, with all their prophecy of the one whom I was to love, nay, whom I loved then, although knowing eyes, full of sweetness and graciousness and dream, foretold of her.

I knew the child must be Averil Sidney, the daughter of our neighbour. He was a man who preferred life abroad and lived there for the most part, leaving his estate to the mercy of housekeepers and stewards. His wife had died early in their married life, and her little daughter was brought up by her sister. Cecil Sidney was home for a brief sojourn; Averil had come to visit him; and I had met her thus in the rose garden.

She looked at me gravely, smilelessly, yet her whole expression was a smile, and there was sweet, beguiling laughter in her eyes. I, who had always loved children, and been at ease with them, found myself shamefaced and shy in her presence. Perhaps she saw my confusion. Those eyes must have read my very heart, for she broke a white, half-opened rose from its bush and held it out to me. I took it as wordlessly as she offered it; then someone in the house called to her, and she was gone. But at the curve of the walk she paused for a moment and looked back, with a little gesture of good-bye.

I have never seen her since; but tidings of her have drifted to me every year. I knew when she went abroad to join her father. They have lived in Europe for the past six years. All this time she must have been growing into the promise of her eyes; and my love has grown with her. It has consecrated every word I have written. My critics have tried to dissect my poems and find therein that "strange, elusive soul of love," which, they declare, animates them. Then they cannot find it. It is in her keeping, and can be made incarnate only in her loveliness.

I have heard that she is very beautiful; yet I have felt no jealousy, no fear of other men. She is not for any other; she belongs to me. I have the key of her heart, and it must remain a fair and tenantless chamber until I may enter it as an inheritance.

THE JULY NIGHT

I walk again in the moonlight. It is calm, like an untroubled silver sea, bearing softly on its breast a fleet of poppies; for the roses have gone, and the poppies have taken their places. But I cannot share the calm of the moonlight. I am shaken—tossed about with hope and fear.

I have heard to-day that Averil and her father are coming home. I shall see her again. But what shall I see? The Averil of my dreams, or another?

All my certainty has gone. I am distracted with doubts. Have I deceived myself all these years? Have I given myself over to the beguilement of a vain dream, and is the moment of a miserable awakening near? Perhaps Averil, the woman, has not fulfilled the promise of Averil, the child. I fear—I dread to meet her. If she be not *my* Averil, how shall I bear it? I shall have wasted my love and lavished my soul on a mere creation.

What do I know of her? Nothing, save that as a child she seemed to me the unfolded bloom for me alone. A poet's vain ideal, perhaps, destined to be shattered by contact with the real. She may be beautiful, but her beauty will be nothing to me if it is not the beauty I have dreamed of and worshipped.

What if, when we meet, her eyes express only a girl's coquetry or a stranger's indifference? I cannot, I will not believe it possible. Yet I shall dwell till our meeting in miserable suspense and doubt, which yet I shall shrink from exchanging for a still more miserable certainty.

How the poppies dance in the moonlight; the light-hearted, silken coquettes! I love them not. Yet if she should be like them, instead of if she should be a beautiful and scentless flower? Nay, it is impossible. I shall have faith in those remembered eyes.

THE AUGUST NIGHT

It is the time of lilies. To-night they are holding up their chalices of gold and crimson and frosty white to be filled with the moonshine. Now and then the air is sweet with their breath, as if the angels walked invisibly in this garden and swung censers of perfume in their hands.

I love the lilies, but I love the roses better. And she, my love, is like the white rose.

Last night the old house in the next garden blazed with light. I knew that this betokened the coming of Averil and her father. This morning I rose at sunrise and went for a walk, seeking calmness wherewith to face this day of destiny. I thought myself alone in a young world, but as I went down a wooded hill, all green with pines and breasting the east, I saw a girl at the curve of the path, looking down the long, dewy valley, abloom with the sunrise. Its light was all about and around her, smiting her bared dark head with a glory of delicate rays. As I drew near she turned and I knew her—Averil, my Averil, the Averil of my dreams and love! How fair, how very fair she was! And her eyes were unchanged, for they could not be more lovely than they had always been, nor could they be less.

“Averil,” I said, helplessly, foolishly, like a boy.

She held out her hand to me simply and joyfully.

“It is Paul. I am glad to see you. Why did you not come to welcome us home last night?”

“I was afraid to,” I said. “Averil, do you remember our first—our last meeting years ago in the rose garden?”

“I remember,” she said, a beautiful flush coming into her face.

“I feared to meet you again lest you had forgotten,” I said. “Because I have never forgotten, Averil.”

“I thought, from your poems, that you remembered,” she answered.

We walked home together over the pine path and the hill, and talked of many things such as all the world might have listened to. But underneath this commonplaceness was a gladness and a joy that spoke in tone and eye and smile.

Therefore to-night I walk in the moonlight, companioned with happiness. Beyond, in that other garden, Averil waits. And I go to join her.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

[The end of *The Story of a Love* by L. M. (Lucy Maud) Montgomery]