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By the Grace of Sarah Maud

L. M. Montgomery

Drawings by Maud Tousey (1881-1968).

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“Betty said ‘good-evening’ very icily and completely ignored the fact of Sarah Maud”

Nesbitt panted into the station—too late. The train, with its load of picnickers, was gone and there was no other train going west until late in the afternoon.

“Confound it,” he said blackly. “And confound Murchison,” he added, thinking of the acquaintance who had delayed him on the street to discuss a slight matter of business.

He was left—there was no blinking that fact. The selected picnic ground was fifty miles away, so that the wild notion that had crossed his brain of getting a team and driving thereto had to be dismissed. No, there was no picnic for him, and, as things had fallen out, much depended on that picnic.

Nesbitt left the station in a mood of sickening depression. All the hope and exhilaration of the morning had vanished. Betty would think he did not care—and Clark was on the train. For a whole day Clark could wander with Betty through romantic haunts, while he, Nesbitt, sulked in town. Only a fool could fail to make use of such a golden opportunity, and Clark was no fool.

“That is *my* role,” Nesbitt thought miserably.

He was in love with Betty Stewart. But Betty was independent. They had had

some tiffs with a resulting half coolness. Nesbitt had not been sure enough of his welcome to call for a fortnight. Then, with her usual caprice, Betty unbent. She had sent him a note the previous day inviting him to join a private picnic party to Maiden Lake.

“We will leave on the 10:15 train,” she wrote, “so be a good boy, stop sulking, and come with us. If you come I shall know how to be very nice to you, but if you don’t I shall know you are still sulking and I shall be nice—to other people.”

Nesbitt had not been sulking, take his word for it, he was merely on his dignity. That, of course, went to the winds at Betty’s beck. And this was the result—he was wandering homeward alone through the People’s Square behind the station and Betty and Clark were on their way to Maiden Lake.

Nesbitt sat down on a bench in the square and was about to give himself over to sulking in right good earnest, when he heard somebody crying. Some twisting of neck discovered a small girl of about eight or nine curled up on a bench across the walk behind him, with her face buried in her arms and the ragged sailor hat on her head shaking in the emphasis of her woe. She was sniffing in an unrestrained luxury of grief, evidently thinking herself alone.

“Hello,” said Nesbitt, who hated to see children or animals suffering, “it seems there is somebody besides myself in the world who is miserable after all. This must be seen to.”

He went over and sat down on the other bench.

“What is the matter, sissy?” he asked gently.

Sissy squirmed around with a start, revealing a freckled, tear-spotted face, and a very red little nose. She was not shy and she did not at all resent his intrusion into her private troubles.

“I—can’t—get to the—pickernic,” she said between sobs.

“Did you miss your train, too?” asked Nesbitt with a smile. He could still smile even in the wreck of all things, and his smile was very winning. It won Sarah Maud Molloy’s young heart on the spot.

“Train nothing. We wasn’t goin’ on a train. We was goin’ to ride out to Deerville in livery rigs—all Miss Beecham’s mission school kids. We was goin’ to have a bully time. Ice cream, you know. Oh, gee! And I can’t go!”

Sarah Maud’s pale blue eyes brimmed up with tears again.

“Won’t you tell me why?” implored Nesbitt. “That is—if it isn’t a secret, I’d like to know.”

“Say, you’re funny! ’Tain’t any secret. I hain’t got any dress but this,” touching the faded print she wore—“and Ma, she said at first I could go. And then the Jones kids got *new white* dresses for to wear and Ma, she says she won’t lemme go ’cause she can’t git me a new dress, and she ain’t goin’ to have the Jones kids better dressed than hern at a pickernic. And I just howled and Ma, she said she’d skelp me if I didn’t dry up, so I kem out here and I feel awful bad. I’d

gone to the pickernic 'thout any dress *at all* ruther'n miss it. I never was in the country afore and I wanted to see it."

"I'm very sorry for you," said Nesbitt gravely. "I can sympathize with you for I also have missed my picnic today."

"*Your* clothes look pretty good," said Sarah Maud, eyeing them critically.

"It's not a matter of clothes in my case—but the principle remains the same. Now, look here—but first what's your name?"

"It's a good one—Sarah Maud Molly."

"Very well, Sarah Maud, listen to me. We have both been disappointed—let us cool our disappointment and have a strictly exclusive picnic of our own. There's a train leaving in half an hour for the east. Come with me and we'll go out to the Junction and turn ourselves loose in the woods there. I don't know whether I can manage any ice cream, but we'll have heaps of good things."

Sarah Maud put her finger in her mouth.

"Say, are you bluffin'?"

"No, indeed! I'm in downright earnest. Go and ask your mother if she'll lend you to me for the day."

"Can't do that 'cause she's gone up to the North End to scrub for a woman and she won't be back till night. But she won't care. If you ain't puttin' up a job I'll go, Mister."

"It's a bargain. You wait here while I rush up town and invest all my loose cash in some ready-to-wear eatables. We've been unjustly cheated out of our picnic, Sarah Maud, but we'll get even with Fate yet."

Nesbitt, smiling at his own whim, hurried to the nearest fruit and confectionery store and soon came back, loaded with parcels. Sarah Maud was waiting for him. She pushed her carrotty hair back under her hat, scrubbed her face dry with her apron, and was ready to adventure forth on any quest with this astonishing new friend of hers.

"Gee, but you've got whacks of things!" she exclaimed. "What's them? Or'nges? Or'nges are the clear stuff. Gimme one to suck on the train. Ain't I glad you come along, though!"

"I'm not sorry myself," said Nesbitt. "You are what I really needed, Sarah Maud—a diversion."

"Ain't!" said Sarah Maud indignantly. "I'm Irish."

"Oh, it's all the same thing, dearie," he assured her. "Come, let us go away to Arcady now. Begone, dull care and haunting remorse, we'll daff the world and sneering rivals and over-dressed, triumphant Joneses aside for one day at least, Sarah Maud."

"You talk just like a crazy uncle of me father's," said Sarah Maud tolerantly.

They got on a lazy little freight train that took half an hour to crawl out to the Junction, a small village where the east and west roads branched off. When

Nesbitt left the train his eye caught the sign over a small restaurant near the station and he took Sarah Maud in and treated her to unlimited ice cream. Sarah Maud ate two saucerfuls and chattered blithely between rapturous gulps. Evidently Sarah Maud had no sorrow that ice cream could not cure.

Then they went away into the big beech woods beyond the village, following a winding forest path until they came to the banks of a brook, where they sat down and had another feast, Sarah Maud rummaging cheerfully in Nesbitt's parcels and squealing with delight over her discoveries.



“Sarah Maud rummaging cheerfully in Nesbitt's parcels and squealing with delight over her discoveries.”

“Say, ain't it great here?” she said, when they had finished their lunch, pillowing her elbows in the moss and looking up into the great, green arches above her. “These woods make me feel, I don't know how—like I do at Mass sometimes—all kind of solemn and happy-like. The country is all right, Mister.”

“Would you like to live out here?” asked Nesbitt.

Sarah Maud shook her head decidedly.

“Nope. It'd be too lonesome for a steady thing. I'd ruther people than trees. But for a day it's fine. Say, Mister, let's mosey on a bit. I want to see all that's to be seen.”

Accordingly they moseyed on. Sarah Maud seemed tireless and they rambled through woods and fields and country lanes the whole afternoon. They gathered

flowers and hunted for birds' nests and Nesbitt answered Sarah Maud's questions of which she asked a few thousand, more or less. The inquisition was wholesome for Nesbitt, he could not brood much over what might be doing at Maiden Lake when he had satisfied Sarah Maud's rapacious appetite for information about everything she saw.

It was sunset when Sarah Maud's legs gave out. Nesbitt sat her up on the gate of a wood lane on the hill above the Junction and they watched the sunset together while they waited for their train.

"It's been boss," said Sarah Maud with a deep breath of satisfaction. "I'll bet I wouldn't have had half as good a time if I'd gone with the other kids. Them Joneses would have put on too much side. I wisht I could go to a pickernic with you every week."

"Much obliged," said Nesbitt absently.

"You'd ruther gone to the other, though," said Sarah Maud shrewdly. "You've been thinkin' about it all time. Why? Did your girl go on it?"

"Yes," said Nesbitt, moved by a whimsical impulse of confidence in this red-headed mite of the slums. "And you see, Sarah Maud, the other fellow went, too."

"I savvy." Sarah Maud nodded comprehendingly. Then, desiring to comfort him and drawing on her own feminine possibilities, she added, "That needn't worry you. 'Cause she'll be so mad at you not comin' that she'll likely give him the cold shoulder and the marble heart for spite. See?"

"You're a comforting young woman, Sarah Maud. But—I'm afraid—you see, I think she is my girl but I'm not sure *she* thinks so."

"Does she want the earth with a gilt fence around it?" demanded Sarah Maud scornfully. "I'll bet the other fellow ain't half as good-looking as you. I wisht I was grown up."

"Thank you. I wish she had your excellent taste."

"I s'pose she's a good-looker?" queried Sarah Maud curiously.

"She is the most beautiful woman in the world, dearie. Look—do you see that little cloud away down in the northwest corner—that bright gold one? That is just the color of her hair. And do you see that sky in the southwest with that one clear star in it? Her eyes are as blue and tender as that sky, Sarah Maud. And those wild roses you picked by the brook today have never seen her face or they would not think it worth while to be roses."

"Say, but you've got it bad," commented Sarah Maud drowsily. Her red head nodded against Nesbitt's arm. He lifted her off the gate and carried her down to the station where a train presently rolled in. Nesbitt got on the rear car with Sarah Maud in his arms. Her head was cuddled on his shoulder and in one of her scrawny little hands she still clutched her big bouquet of wild roses and limp daisies.

Nesbitt had supposed the train was the freight they had come out on. He now

discovered that it was the western train and the car was full of the returning Maiden Lake picnickers.

Nesbitt's appearance was hailed with laughter and jests. He felt foolish but he looked nobly serene as he stalked down the aisle and dropped into the only vacant place in the car—beside Betty Stewart. He wondered why it was vacant. Where in the world was Clark? Then he saw Clark was down at the other end, scowling moodily out of the window.

Betty said "good-evening" very icily and completely ignored the fact of Sarah Maud. Nesbitt made the little red head more comfortable on his shoulder before he spoke. Then he said slowly:

"Did you take the trouble to wonder why I did not show up this morning?"

"I supposed you were not sufficiently interested in the picnic—or picnickers—to come," said Betty in an indifferent tone which had the effect of adding, "And then I dismissed the matter from my mind."

"I missed the train," said Nesbitt. "My watch was slow to begin with and then I met Murchison and he delayed me. You were gone ten minutes when I reached the station. I can't tell you how I felt about it. On my way back I found this baby crying in the People's Square because she couldn't get to a mission picnic. So I took her out to the Junction for an outing and I think she had a good time at least."

He paused in suspense. He expected Betty to give a cruel little laugh and make some satirical speech about his newly-fledged philanthropy. But Betty could always be depended on for the unexpected.

Her eyes softened. She gave him a look that gladdened him and said in a low tone, as she bent forward and gently pushed back the moist, sandy locks from Sarah Maud's flushed face.

"I think it was lovely of you."

Her touch, or the jerk of the train as it came to a standstill at the water-tank, wakened Sarah Maud. She lifted her head, rather dazed by the lights and strangers around her, and found herself looking into the face of the very prettiest young lady she had ever seen.

Sarah Maud sat upon Nesbitt's knee, pointed a brown finger at Betty and said sleepily but in a voice whose awful distinctness was heard to the farthest end of the car.

"Are *you* his girl?"

Nesbitt gasped and looked for the end of all things. At that awful moment he wished he had never seen Sarah Maud.

But Betty smiled again and said in a voice, low but equally distinct.

"Yes, dear, I am."

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

[The end of *By the Grace of Sarah Maud* by L. M. (Lucy Maud) Montgomery]