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The Love Story of Daphne North

L. M. Montgomery

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Daphne North walked up the post-office lane, under the aspen poplars, with her school books under her arm, apart from the other scholars. She never walked with them now; the oldest of them was only fifteen, and Daphne was eighteen. She resented having to go to school at all; but since go she must, she would not associate with children, she said.

“Daphne North’s hanging back so that the master’ll catch up with her,” said Maggie Bennett in a malicious undertone. Instantly two fourth grade boys who heard her broke out into whoops.

“Daphne North and the schoolmaster,” shouted one at the top of his voice. All the others laughed, as if he had said something exquisitely witty.

Daphne colored over oval cheek and clear-cut brow. This, she told herself vexedly, was what came of her mother’s insisting that she should go to school this year and study for the entrance examination of Thrasher Academy. Well, she would not have to put up with such impertinence much longer. The term would be ended in three weeks.

Neil Burnham was in the post-office kitchen, talking to Carrie Bedloe, when the school children huddled in, their exuberance toned down by awe of Mrs. Bedloe. Maggie Bennett, who found herself standing next to Daphne, nudged the latter meaningly. Daphne would not look at Neil, although she knew he was there.

When the others had gone Neil came to her.

“I have a team outside, Daphne. If you like I can drive you home.”

“Thank you, I’d rather walk,” said Daphne coldly.

A shadow fell over the young man’s frank, brown face. He said nothing more, but went out slowly.

“You should have gone with Neil, Daphne,” said Mrs. Bedloe, rebukingly. Mrs. Bedloe had a self-appointed mission to look after everybody in West Albion, from grandsires to babies. “It would be a great deal better than loitering home from school with Francis Elliot. People are talking about you, young lady.”

Daphne tossed her head pertly.

“West Albion folks have to be talking about somebody,” she said. “They’d die if they couldn’t gossip. If I don’t choose to drive home from school with Neil Burnham, it’s nobody’s business but my own.”

“Don’t get so mad, child, when a body speaks to you for your own good,” said Mrs. Bedloe provokingly.

“I’m not mad,” flashed Daphne. “And as for the talk, it all comes from jealousy. Don’t you think I know that?”

She snatched her mail from the postmistress’s hand and hastened out, her starry

eyes gleaming.

“I guess I gave her a slap there,” she thought triumphantly. “Carrie Bedloe is just crazy over Francis, and he won’t even look at her. Not much wonder—a big, fat thing like her.”

“What an awfully pretty girl! Who is she?” asked a woman who came out through the sitting room door as Daphne left the kitchen. She was a city cousin of Mrs. Bedloe’s.

“That’s Daphne North,” said Mrs. Bedloe impatiently. Daphne’s Parthian shaft had penetrated even her armor of self-complacency. “Pretty?—yes, far too pretty for her own good.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” said Mrs. Baxter indulgently. “Good looks are all right. I know some of our town girls who would give a good deal to have hair and complexion like that. Why, I never saw such beauty.”

“It’ll not do her any good. She’s so vain now that there’s no getting on with her. Not that it’s any wonder her head is turned. Strangers are always asking who that beautiful girl is. Her mother is queer, too. Not that you could put your finger on any one thing and say the woman wasn’t right there. But she’s different from other folks. She had an awful life of it with Will North. I guess it affected her intellecks a little. In some things she’s too strict with Daphne and in others too slack. Daphne is as good as engaged to Neil Burnham, and she’s flirting scandalous with the schoolmaster. A worthless fellow he is, too, in every way. The trustees are going to dismiss him at the end of the term. But he’s good looking if you like his style.”

“Why does Neil Burnham allow this girl to flirt with him, then?” asked Mrs. Baxter, who was always agog with curiosity over a love affair.

“Oh, Neil, he’s too soft for any use, that’s what’s the matter with him. He thinks Daphne and everything she does perfection. Didn’t you see how meek he took his snub to-day? I’d like to shake some sense into him. Daphne’s pretty, but it is all outside. She is just as commonplace and silly as she can be.”

As Daphne went down the lane, under its light-springing arch of emerald aspens, she saw the schoolmaster waiting for her on the bridge outside the Bedloe gate. Her dreamy face flushed with pleasure, and her heart began to beat quickly. How handsome and polished he was, she thought. How unlike that stout, sunburned Neil Burnham, with his big hands and homely ways!

Francis Elliott took her books and they strolled slowly up the long hill beyond the brook. Daphne’s golden head drooped like a flower beneath his compliments and ardent glances. How romantically he talked! Just like the heroes in her favorite novels! To the fascinated girl the walk home seemed far too short. They lingered at

her gate, talking together, and when they parted he lifted his hat with what Daphne called courtly grace.

“Au revoir, my princess,” he said meaningly.

Daphne hurried into the house with her head in a whirl. Her mother, a gaunt, dark woman with vivid eyes, met her at the door. She looked angrily at the girl.

“What do you mean by mooning half an hour on the public road with the schoolmaster?” she asked harshly. “There has been too much of this, Daphne. People are talking. Remember that you are to marry Neil Burnham.”

“I am not likely to forget it,” cried Daphne rebelliously, “when you fling it in my face, morning, noon, and night. I never was consulted in the matter. You and Neil arranged it all, clown that he is! I’m sick of the sound of his name.”

Mrs. North followed Daphne into the shabby little sitting room.

“You haven’t any business to talk that way, Daphne. What’s got into you? You’ll lose Neil if you’re not careful. He won’t put up with everything.”

“I don’t care. I don’t want him. I never did, but you were always so set on it. And I won’t be handed over to him like a chattel. So there, mother!”

“Daphne North, you’ve just clean taken leave of your senses. That smirking fool of a schoolmaster has bewitched you, I do believe. I’m tired of such nonsense. You are going to be Neil’s wife, so for pity’s sake try and behave yourself properly.”

“Mother, why are you so set on my marrying Neil?” asked Daphne petulantly. She had asked the question often before, but had never received any satisfactory answer. She did not expect one now; but Mrs. North sat down in her rocking chair and said:

“Because I want you to right the wrong I did his father. I am going to tell you the story, Daphne, and perhaps it will serve as a warning to you. When I was a girl, not a great deal older than you are—and pretty, too, though there ain’t any of that left now—Alec Burnham asked me to marry him. He was a young widower. His wife had died a year after they were married, and Neil was five years old. Alec was a good man and well-to-do, and I was proud to say yes. That was in the spring. We were to be married in the fall. We kept it a secret; nobody but my old aunt knew anything about it.

“Then your father came to the place, clerking in Gresham’s store. He was a handsome ne’er-do-well—that’s what he was. He began to court me, and I got infatuated with him and threw Alec over. Will North and I were married in the fall, and Alec Burnham never lifted his head after that. Aunt Mary told me I’d be sorry for it, and I was. If you knew what my life was with your father it would make you stop and think. And the way I treated Alec has weighed on my conscience ever

since. When Neil began to come after you I was heart-glad, for I saw a way to right the old wrong. And that is why you must marry Neil. And that's why I've slaved to keep you at school and give you a year at Thrasher to make you fitter to be his wife."

"You love Neil better than you do me," cried Daphne.

"No, I don't. But I do love him as if he was my own. I'm doing the best I can for you. Now, mind what I've said. If you come sauntering home with that worthless fellow again you'll stop going to school, academy or no academy. If he comes here to see you I'll shut the door in his face."

Daphne knew her mother meant every word. She ran up to her own little room under the eaves and flung herself on her bed, crying passionately. Her mother was unjust and prejudiced, she thought, bitterly. Some jealous tongues had been tampering with her. Perhaps Neil had said something. But she did not care; she would not give up Francis.

"I love him and he loves me," she sobbed into her pillow, "and nobody shall come between us. How can mother say such things of him?"

Daphne's tears did not last long; she was soon smiling again over her romantic visions. He had called her his "princess." Neil would never have thought of anything like that or have been able to say it gracefully if he had.

That night she refused to let Neil drive her from prayer meeting, and she walked home with Francis Elliott. She told him all her mother had said, feeling no throb of disloyalty in her shallow soul because of it.

When Mrs. North heard of this she made Daphne stay home from school, and accompanied her everywhere she went. Daphne tossed her head and submitted outwardly. In secret she continued to meet Francis Elliott. There were stolen walks and smuggled letters. The wilful girl was determined to go her own wilful way. The day after school closed West Albion was electrified to hear that Daphne North had run away with Francis Elliott.

When Neil Burnham heard it he went straight to the North cottage, his honest heart aching within him. Mrs. North met him, dry-eyed and stern lipped.

"Is this true about Daphne?" Neil asked huskily, his voice pale under its tan.

"Yes." The woman's voice was hard with anger. "She wasn't in her room this morning. She left a letter. If you want to see it, it's there on the clock shelf."

Neil took and read Daphne's poor, foolish, high-flown little note, written in the style of eloping heroines in sensational novels. She was going away to be married to the only man she could ever love, she wrote. She implored her mother to forgive her, and to ask Neil to forget and forgive her.

“What are you going to do?” he asked dully. He had loved Daphne North with his whole heart, and this blow left him feeling dazed for the time being, hurt and bruised in every fibre of his manhood.

“Nothing. She has chosen to go her own way, and she may tread it to the end without any further let or hindrance from me.”

“She is your daughter,” began Neil, but Mrs. North interrupted him.

“I have no daughter now. She has cut herself adrift from me. You need never mention her name to me again.”

“You are a cruel, unfeeling woman,” cried Neil in an unwonted burst of anger.

“It becomes you to stand up for her,” said Mrs. North bitterly. “She has made you a laughing stock, and yet you take her part.”

Neil stood up very straight, his honest eyes gazing steadily into Mrs. North’s hard ones.

“Who should take her part, if not I, when her own mother fails her?” he asked simply. “As for making me a laughing stock, nobody can do that but myself. If I had known that Daphne did not love me I would have freed her willingly. I love her still, and I would do anything in my power to serve her. Maybe she has done wrong in this matter, but that is not for me to judge.”

Neil left the unrelenting mother and went to Woodbury, the nearest town. Here he found that Daphne and Francis Elliott had been married at the house of the Methodist minister. With this assurance Neil went back to stem the tide of gossip and scandal in West Albion. It was beyond his power, but at least he stood rock firm in the current. Nobody dared cast a word at Daphne in his presence, after Scoville Parker had been knocked down for a sneer.

In due time another letter came from Daphne to her mother. She and her husband had gone out west. He had obtained a position in a business establishment in a western city. She was very happy. Would not her mother forgive her and write to her?

Neil heard of the letter’s arrival from Mrs. Bedloe. He went to Mrs. North and tried once more to intercede for Daphne. The mother was inexorable. She gave Neil the letter, and told him that she had packed up all Daphne’s belongings and would send them to her, but no word should go from her with them. Neil, finding all his pleading vain, wrote a letter to Daphne himself. He told her frankly of her mother’s attitude, but assured her that she would always find a true friend in him. If her mother relented in time he would let her know; and if she ever needed assistance of any kind he begged her to seek it in him.

Daphne wrote no more letters home, and as time passed on West Albion forgot

her. Mrs. North never mentioned her name. Neil Burnham lived his solitary life. Many a girl in West Albion would have been glad to have stepped into Daphne's shoes, and shrewd fathers and mothers made much of him, but nothing came of it. Mrs. Bedloe, whose Carrie was still unwedded, openly took him to task at last for not marrying and settling down—"doing his duty by his country," as she phrased it.

Neil made a humorous answer, with enough earnestness in it to silence her, and thenceforth he was looked upon as a confirmed old bachelor.

Once, yielding to his secret hunger to know if all was well with Daphne, he wrote to her; but, after many weeks, the letter came back to him from the dead letter office.

His curious friendship with Mrs. North continued unbroken. He went often to see her; she had no other visitors and lived like a recluse, but she always made much of Neil. Neil, who knew nothing of her old love affair with his father, often wondered why Daphne's mother had such a jealous affection for him.

At the end of ten years the long silence was broken. A letter came to Mrs. North from Daphne. Neil heard of it again at the post-office. Mrs. Bedloe, looking at him curiously, told him that at last Daphne had written to her mother.

"I knew the writing, though it is ten years since I've seen it," she said. "Daphne always wrote such a pretty hand."

Neil went from the post-office to Mrs. North and asked her for news of Daphne.

"Yes, the letter was from her. If you want to read it, it is on the clock shelf," said Mrs. North, as coldly as she had said it ten years before.

Neil, again in silence, took and read the letter, his heart beating until the thin sheets rustled in his shaking fingers. It was a pitiful letter enough. Daphne wrote that her husband had been dead for two years. She had struggled on for the sake of her child, but it had recently died, too. She was broken in health and spirit.

"I don't feel that I can keep up alone any longer, now that baby has gone," she wrote. "Oh, mother, won't you forgive me now and let me come back to you? I've been well punished for my disobedience and folly. Everything you warned me came true. If you could see me now you wouldn't know me I'm so changed."

Daphne ill! Daphne alone among strangers! Daphne free! Neil felt a sudden thrill of hope and joy.

"You'll write her to come home of course?" he said eagerly.

Mrs. North looked at him stubbornly.

"Not I. I have no daughter. I have told you so often enough."

"Have you any maternal feeling at all, woman?" exclaimed Neil in anger.

“No, not now. Daphne killed it all when she broke my heart. She has made her bed—let her lie on it.”

Neil wasted no more words in useless discussion. He folded the letter up and put it in his pocket.

“I guess I’ve the best right to this,” he said.

“What are you going to do?” Mrs. North asked.

“You’ll be told of it when I do it,” answered Neil, striding to the door.

“Wait a moment, Neil.”

Mrs. North went across the hall to her bedroom and presently returned with a small roll of money in her hand.

“Here,” she said, holding it out to him, “if you are going to write to Daphne send her this. Tell her I send it to her, not because she is my daughter, but just as I would give it to any stranger who was in need and asked me for help.”

For a moment Neil hesitated, his face darkening. Then he took the money and went out without speaking. Twenty-four hours later Neil Burnham left Albion Centre on the west-bound train. He was going to find Daphne. When he reached the city where she lived he found his way at once to the address given in the letter. It was a shabby boarding house in a shabby street. The landlady who answered his ring told him that Mrs. Elliott had not got home from work yet, and asked him to wait.

“You’ll be some friend of hers from down east?” she said, ushering him into the stuffy little parlor. “She told me she had written home. Her brother, maybe? No. Well, anyway, I’m glad somebody has come to look after her. She’s been fretting and grieving like to break her heart. It’s my opinion she ain’t long for this world. She’s working in Moore and Burgess’s big departmental store, and it is killing her by inches.”

Neil was glad when she took her voluble presence off. All he could think of was the fact that he would soon see Daphne.

When she came in he saw her in the dim hall light before she learned of his presence. It was Daphne—but a sadly changed Daphne. Only the eye of love would have known her—this pale, frightened-looking woman with the little scar on her cheek. Could that be Daphne—his pretty, violet-eyed Daphne of the old days? Life must indeed have gone hardly with her to bring her down to this. She stopped in the doorway with a little cry when she saw him.

“Neil!”

Neil strode across the room and caught her trembling form in his strong arms. She was his again and no mortal power should come between them now.

“Daphne, oh, Daphne, are you glad to see me?” he said. She was clinging to him

between laughter and tears.

“Oh, Neil, I never thought of this. Oh, indeed, I am glad! But mother—where is mother? Isn’t she well? Oh, tell me all the home news—I am starving for it.”

“Your mother is well, but she is hard against you yet. There, don’t grieve, Daphne. She’ll come round when you go home. It’ll be all right. I’ve come to take you back.”

“I can’t go back if mother hasn’t forgiven me,” cried Daphne piteously.

“Yes, you are coming back to my home and as my wife, Daphne,” said Neil decidedly.

She shrank away.

“Oh, Neil, no, no. It can’t be. It would be doing you a wrong.”

“Daphne——”

“No, no, wait—listen,” she cried wildly. “You must listen, Neil. I’m no wife for you—a broken down woman with all the life crushed out of her. I did you a bitter wrong once, Neil, but oh, I’ve been bitterly punished for it. I—I—he’s dead, Neil—but he broke my heart. Look at this scar; he struck me there once. Oh, Neil, it’s so good to see you—but it can’t be.”

“Daphne, listen to me now.” He took her hands and held them fast. “I’ve never loved but you, and I’ve always loved you. I’ll never marry but you. Perhaps you did me a wrong once, but you can’t mend it by doing a worse wrong now, and that is what you’ll do if you cast me out of your life again. You know I’m no hand to tell out what is in my heart. It was like that long ago when you thought me a blundering, clumsy lover—and so I was. But if you won’t marry me I’ll never go back to West Albion again.”

“Oh, Neil,” she still protested; but he drew her closer, eloquent for once, if never before or again.

“Come home with me, Daphne. There’s a long and happy life before you if you will but take it, my girl. The past is all behind and it shall never be cast up to you.”

“How true you are!” she sobbed. “Oh, Neil, what a blind little fool I was! You deserve a better wife than me.”

“I don’t. And I don’t want a better. I want you, Daphne. Haven’t I loved you ever since you were a child, toddling about the fields with me? You loved me once, before he came between us, and you will again. My little girl—my little girl.”

He drew her into his arms, close against that faithful, enduring heart of his.

“Yes,” said Mrs. Bedloe to Mrs. Baxter, who was again visiting her, “yes, Neil Burnham has got Daphne North at last. He went out west after her, and they were

married and arrived home two weeks ago. I was up to see her last night. My, but she's a changed woman! I'd never have known her—never. There's nothing left of her but her big eyes. Not but what she's picked up considerable since she came home, but she doesn't look any more like the Daphne North that went away than you do, hardly. To be sure, she's real improved in other ways. She isn't half as flighty and foolish as she used to be. As for Neil, you'd think he was eating and drinking sunshine. Between you and me, I think there were others who'd have made him just as good a wife as Daphne North; but there, since nobody but Daphne would do him, it's well that it's Daphne he's got at last! And considering how true he was to her, and how long he waited, I don't know but that it's kind of real fitting as it were, that things should come round like this."

"Is Mrs. North reconciled?" asked Mrs. Baxter. "Seems to me I heard she was terrible set against Daphne."

"Well, Mrs. North is queer and always has been. West Albion folks thought it was scandalous, the way she turned against Daphne. It's pretty hard when a girl's own mother casts her off. And it wasn't as if Daphne had done anything real wicked. She was just foolish, that was all. But Mrs. North vowed she'd never forgive her, and she stuck to that. Well, Neil went and brought Daphne home, and then, so they say, he stalked up and interviewed Mrs. North. Says he to her, 'Mrs. North, Daphne is down at my place. She's my wife. If you'll go down to see her and let bygones be bygones, well and good. If you don't I'll never darken your door again.' That brought her round. She knew Neil meant it, and she's always had the most unaccountable fondness for him. So she gave in—but it was in her own way. Says she, 'I'll go down and see her, Neil, but it's not because she's my daughter. It's because she's your wife. I'll love her and be her friend just as I would any woman you married. It is for your sake, not hers.' So there it is, and as everybody concerned is happy, let sleeping dogs lie, say I."



TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

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