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An Afternoon with Mr. Jenkins

L. M. Montgomery

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Sally Jane yawned. If thirteen years knew anything about such a word, Sally Jane was bored. Saturday was, she reflected, a rather stupid day at Linden Hall, especially when her aunts were away and she could not go down to the village. She was not allowed to go out of the home grounds when her aunts were away, and lately they had been more fussy than ever about this.

Sally Jane was very fond of her aunts, especially Aunt Edith; but she secretly thought they were entirely too fussy about it. She couldn't understand it. Surely a big girl of thirteen, who had been going to school for two years alone, even if she didn't altogether like going to sleep in the dark yet, didn't need to be cooped up at Linden Hall just because her aunts were going to town. They had gone that morning on the early bus, and Sally Jane felt sure they were worried. More than usual, that is, for they were always worried over something. Sally Jane didn't know what it was, but she had sensed it in everything they had done or said of late. It hadn't been many years ago, Sally Jane reflected, with the air of Mrs. Methusaleh recalling her youth, she could remember them being laughing and jolly, especially Aunt Edith, who was really very jolly for an old maid, as the boys in school called her.

They had laughed less and less these past two years, and Sally Jane had an odd feeling that this was somehow connected with her, although she couldn't understand how that could be. She wasn't a very bad girl. Not even Aunt Kathleen, who—perhaps because she was a widow—took a rather strict view of things, ever said she was a bad girl. Now and then, of course, but it was hard to be perfect. Why, then, did they worry about her? Maybe women had to worry. Men now—if her father had lived! But in that case she, Sally Jane, might not have been living at Linden Hall. That would be terrible. Sally Jane loved Linden Hall. She felt that she could never live anywhere else. When she said this to Aunt Kathleen one day her aunt had sighed and looked at Aunt Edith. She hadn't said anything, but Aunt Edith had replied passionately:

“I can't believe God could be so unjust. Surely, surely, He couldn't be so heartless!”

“S-sh!” said Aunt Kathleen warningly.

“She'll have to know some time,” said Aunt Edith bitterly. “The ten years will soon be up, and probably shortened for good behaviour.”

Sally Jane was hopelessly puzzled. What was it she would have to know some time, and in any case why should it all be “s-sh-ed” away? Aunt Kathleen had immediately begun talking about her music lessons and the possibility of securing Professor Harvey as a teacher. Now, Sally Jane hated the very thought of taking music lessons. She knew she hadn't a spark of music in her, yet she knew she would

have to. Nothing ever made Aunt Kathleen change her mind.

Sally Jane felt aggrieved. Aunt Edith had promised to take her to the lake that day, and they were to go on the bus. Sally Jane adored riding on the bus. She was to be allowed to ride a horse on the merry-go-round, too, another thing she adored. Then that morning there had been a letter for Aunt Kathleen. She had turned dreadfully pale when she read it, and had said something to Aunt Edith in a queer choked voice. Aunt Edith had turned pale, too, and they had gone out of the breakfast-room. After a little, Aunt Edith came back and told Sally Jane she was very sorry she couldn't take her to the lake after all. She and Aunt Kathleen must go to town on important business.

"You've been crying, Aunt Edith," Sally Jane had said, troubled. She got up out of her chair and hugged Aunt Edith, and the tears had welled up in Aunt Edith's sweet brown eyes again.

Aunt Kathleen was not crying. She was pale and stern and told Sally Jane shortly and unsympathetically that she must not go outside the grounds until they returned.

"Can't I just go down to the village?" Sally Jane had implored. She wanted to buy something for Aunt Edith's birthday to-morrow. She had saved a little out of her pocket money and she meant to spend it on a gift for Aunt Edith, but Aunt Kathleen had been inexorable.

Sally Jane did not sulk; she never sulked. She had, however, a rather dismal forenoon. She practised her music lesson, and oh, how she hated it! She ran races with Merrylegs. She undressed and redressed her dolls. She even made a mud-pie rather guiltily in the back-yard. She had never been actually forbidden to make mud-pies, but she knew Aunt Kathleen did not approve of them. She ate the lunch old Linda set out for her. She had also tried to talk to Linda, for Sally Jane was a sociable little soul, but it was one of Linda's grumpy days. After lunch she said that she had a headache and was going to bed. Sally Jane didn't see what she was going to do in the afternoon.

Well, she would go down to the gate and watch the buses and the cars go by. That wasn't forbidden, anyhow. She wished she had some raisins to eat. Every Sunday afternoon she was given a handful of big juicy purple raisins as "a Sunday treat," but this was only Saturday and when Linda had a headache there was no use asking for anything.

"What are you thinking of, sister?" asked a voice.

Sally Jane jumped. Where had the man come from? There hadn't been any sound, any footstep. Yet there he was, right by Sally Jane's side, looking down at

her with a peculiar expression on a handsome, sulky, deeply lined face. He wasn't a tramp—he was too well dressed for that—and Sally Jane, who was always feeling things she couldn't have explained, had an idea that he wasn't used to being so well dressed. The man's eyes were grey and smouldering and Sally Jane felt, too, that he was very cross about something, very cross; cross enough to do any mean thing that occurred to him. And yet there was something about him that Sally Jane liked.

"I was thinking what a splendid day it would have been for the lake," she explained rather stiffly, for she had always been warned not to talk to strangers.

"Oh! the lake. Yes, I remember it was always a fascinating spot for the small fry. Did you want to go there?"

"Yes. Aunt Edith was going to take me. Then she couldn't. She had to go to town on business."

"Oh. And is your Aunt Kathleen at home?"

Sally Jane thawed. This man knew Aunt Kathleen; therefore he was not a stranger and it was allowable to talk to him.

"No. She went, too."

"When will they be back?"

"Not till the evening. They went to town to see their lawyer. I heard them say so."

"Oh!" The man reflected a moment and then gave a queer inward chuckle. Sally Jane didn't like the sound of it, somehow.

"Are you a friend of Aunt Kathleen's?" she inquired politely.

The man laughed again.

"A friend? Oh yes, a very near and dear friend. I'm sure she'd have been delighted to see me."

"You must call again," said Sally Jane persuasively.

"It's quite likely I shall," said the man.

He sat down on the big grey boulder by the gate, lighted a cigarette with fingers that were strangely rough and calloused, and looked Sally Jane over in a cool, appraising manner.

"Whom do you look like, sister?" he said abruptly. "Your dad?"

Sally Jane shook her head.

"No. I wish I did. But I don't know what he looked like. He's dead, and there isn't any picture."

"There wouldn't be," said the man. He laughed again. Again Sally Jane didn't like it.

"My dad was a very brave man," she said quickly. "He was a soldier and he

won a medal.”

“Who told you that?”

“Aunt Edith. Aunt Kathleen won’t talk of him ever. Aunt Edith won’t either much, but she told me that.”

“Edith was always a bit of a good scout,” muttered the man. “You don’t look like your mother, either.”

“No, I can see that. I have a picture of mother. She died when I was born. Aunt Edith says I look like Grandmother Norris, *her* mother. I’m called Sarah Jane after her.”

“Are your aunts good to you?” asked the man.

“They are,” said Sally Jane eloquently. She would have said the same thing if they had not been. Sally Jane had a fine sense of loyalty. “Of course, you know, they’re bringing me up. I have to be scolded sometimes and I have to take music lessons.”

“You don’t like that?” said the man, amused.

“No. I haven’t any music in me, but I guess maybe it’s good dis . . . discipline.”

“You have a dog, I see,” said the man, indicating Merrylegs. “Good breed, too. I thought Edith and Kathleen never liked dogs.”

“They don’t, but they let me have one because I wanted one so much. Aunt Edith said Grandmother Norris liked dogs, so Aunt Kathleen gave in. She even doesn’t say anything when he sleeps on my bed at nights. She doesn’t approve of it, you know, but she lets him stay. I’m glad. Because I don’t like going to sleep in the dark.”

“Do they make you do that?”

“Oh, it’s all right,” said Sally Jane quickly. She wasn’t going to have any one imagine she was finding fault with her aunts. “I’m quite old enough to go to sleep in the dark. Only——”

“Yes?”

“It’s only that when the light goes out I can’t help imagining faces looking in at the window, pressed against the pane—awful faces—hateful faces. I heard Aunt Kathleen say once that she was always expecting to look at the window and see ‘his’ face. I don’t know whom she meant, but after that I began to see faces in the dark.”

“Your mother was like that,” said the man absently. “She hated the dark. They shouldn’t make you sleep in it.”

“They should, too!” cried Sally Jane. “I know I’m too big a girl to be scared of the dark, and Aunt Edith and Aunt Kathleen are bricks. I love them and I wish they

weren't so worried."

"Oh, so they're worried?"

"Terribly. I don't know what it's about. I can't think it's me, though the way they look at me sometimes——Do you see anything about me to worry them?"

"Not a thing. So your aunts are pretty good to you? Give you everything you want?"

"Everything that's good for me," said Sally Jane staunchly. "Only they won't have raisins in the rice pudding on Fridays. I can't imagine why. Aunt Edith would be willing, but Aunt Kathleen says the Norrises have never put raisins into rice pudding. Oh, are you going?"

The man had stood up. He was very tall, but he stooped a little. Sally Jane was sorry he was going, although there was something about him she didn't like, just as there was something she did. It was nice to have somebody to talk to.

"I'm going down to the lake," said the man. "Would you like to come with me?"

Sally Jane stared.

"Do you want me?"

"Very much. We'll ride on the bus, and the merry-go-round, and eat ice creams and drink ginger pop, and anything you like."

It was an irresistible temptation.

"But—but," stammered Sally Jane, "Aunt Kathleen said I wasn't to go off the grounds."

"Not alone," said the man. "She meant not alone. I'm sure she'd think it quite lawful for you to go with me."

"Are you quite sure?"

"Quite," said the man, and laughed again.

"About the money," faltered Sally Jane. "You see, I've only sixpence. Of course, I've got some of my pocket money, but I can't spend it; I must get Aunt Edith a birthday present with it. Still, I can spend the sixpence. I've had it a long time. Linda paid it to me one day for sitting still when my aunts were away. It was such hard work I never felt like spending it lightly."

"Sitting still is hard work sometimes," agreed the man. "But this is my treat."

"I must go and shut Merrylegs up," said Sally Jane, much relieved. "You won't mind waiting a few minutes?"

"Not at all."

Sally Jane flew up the driveway and disposed, rather regretfully, of a reluctant Merrylegs.

"It would be more convenient if I knew your name," she hinted timidly as they

waited for the bus.

“You may call me Mr. Jenkins,” said the man.

Sally Jane had a wonderful afternoon. A glorious trip on the bus, all the merry-go-rounds she wanted, and something better than ice cream.

“I want a decent meal,” said Mr. Jenkins. “I didn’t have any lunch. Here’s a café—the Jo-Jo Café. Shall we go in and eat?”

“The Jo-Jo is an expensive place,” warned Sally Jane gravely. “Can you afford it?”

“I think so.” Mr. Jenkins laughed mirthlessly.

The Jo-Jo was expensive and exclusive. Mr. Jenkins told Sally Jane to order what she wanted and never think of expense. Sally Jane was in a seventh heaven of delight. It had been a glorious afternoon; Mr. Jenkins had been a very jolly comrade, and now to have a meal at the famous Jo-Jo and order from the menu just as if she were grown up! Sally Jane sighed with rapture.

“Tired, sister?” asked Mr. Jenkins.

Sally Jane liked the way Mr. Jenkins called her “sister.” Mr. Black, the village grocer, who was quite a cinema fan, sometimes called her that, too, but not in just the same way, somehow—not as if they really were related.

“Oh no.”

“You’ve had a good time?”

“Splendid. Only——”

“Yes? What?”

“I didn’t feel as if *you* were having a good time,” said Sally Jane slowly.

“Well, if it comes to that,” said Mr. Jenkins, “I wasn’t. I kept thinking of a friend of mine, and it rather spoiled things for me.”

“Isn’t he well?”

“Quite well—too well. Too likely to live. And, you see, he doesn’t care much about living.”

“Why not?” asked Sally Jane.

“Well, you see, he took a lot of money that didn’t belong to him.”

“You mean he stole it?” queried Sally Jane, rather shocked.

“Well, let’s say embezzled. That sounds better; but the bank thought it sounded bad any way you pronounced it. He was sent to prison for ten years. They let him out when he had been there eight, because he behaved rather well, and he found himself quite rich. An old uncle had died when he was in prison and left him a lot of money. But what good will it do him? He’s branded.”

“I’m sorry for your friend,” said Sally Jane. “Eight years is a very long time. Haven’t people forgotten?”

“Some people never forget; his wife’s sisters, for instance. They were very hard on him. How he hated them! He brooded all those eight years on getting square with them when he came out.”

“How?”

“There is a way. He could take something from them that they want very much to keep. And he’s lonely, he wants companionship; he’s very lonely! I’ve been thinking about his future all the afternoon, but you mustn’t think I haven’t enjoyed myself. It has been something to remember for a long time. Now, is there anything else you want to do before we catch that five-o’clock bus back? You want to get back before your aunts come home, don’t you?”

“Yes. But just so they won’t be worried. I’m going to tell them about this, of course.”

“Won’t they scold you?”

“Likely they will, but hard words break no bones, as Linda says,” remarked Sally Jane philosophically.

“I don’t think they’ll scold you much, not if you get the start of them with a message I’m sending them by you. You got that present for your aunt’s birthday, didn’t you?”

“Yes, but there is one thing. I’ve got that sixpence yet, you know. I’d like to buy some flowers with it and go over to the park and put them at the base of the soldiers’ monument. Because my father was a brave soldier, you know.”

“Was he killed at the front?”

“Oh no. He came back and married mother. He was in a bank, too. Then he died.”

“Yes, he died,” said Mr. Jenkins. “And,” he added, “I fancy he’ll stay dead.”

Sally Jane was rather shocked. It seemed a queer way to speak of any one—what Aunt Kathleen would call flippant. Still, she couldn’t help liking Mr. Jenkins.

“Well, good-bye, sister,” said Mr. Jenkins, when they got off the bus at the gate of Linden Hall.

“Won’t I see you again?” asked Sally Jane wistfully. She felt that she would like to see Mr. Jenkins again.

“I’m afraid not. I’m going away, far away. That friend of mine—he’s going far away, to some new land, and I think I’ll go too. He’s lonely, you know. I must look after him a bit.”

“Will you tell your friend I’m sorry he’s lonely? And I hope he won’t be always

lonely.”

“I’ll tell him. And will you give your aunts a message from me?”

“Can’t you give it to them yourself? You said you were coming back to see them.”

“I’m afraid I can’t manage it, after all. Now listen carefully, because this is important. Tell them they are not to worry over that letter they got this morning. They needn’t go to their lawyer again to see if the person who wrote it has the power to do what he threatened to do. I know him quite well and I know he has changed his mind. Tell them he is going away and will never bother them again. You can remember that, can’t you?”

“Oh yes. And they won’t be worried any more?”

“No, they needn’t worry any more. Only there’s this! Tell them they must cut out those music lessons and put raisins in the Friday pudding and let you have a light to go to sleep by. If they don’t, that person might worry them again.”

“I’ll tell them about the music lessons and the pudding, but,” said Sally Jane staunchly, “not about the light, if it’s all the same to that person. You see, I’m getting to be a big girl now and I mustn’t be a coward. My dad wasn’t a coward. If you see that person, will you please tell him that?”

“Well, perhaps you’re right. I’ll tell him, anyway. And this is for you alone, sister. We’ve had a fine time to-day, and it is all right, as it happens, but take my advice and never go off anywhere with a stranger again. Most important.”

Sally Jane squeezed Mr. Jenkins’s hand.

“But *you* aren’t a stranger,” she said wistfully.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

[The end of *An Afternoon with Mr. Jenkins* by L. M. (Lucy Maud) Montgomery]