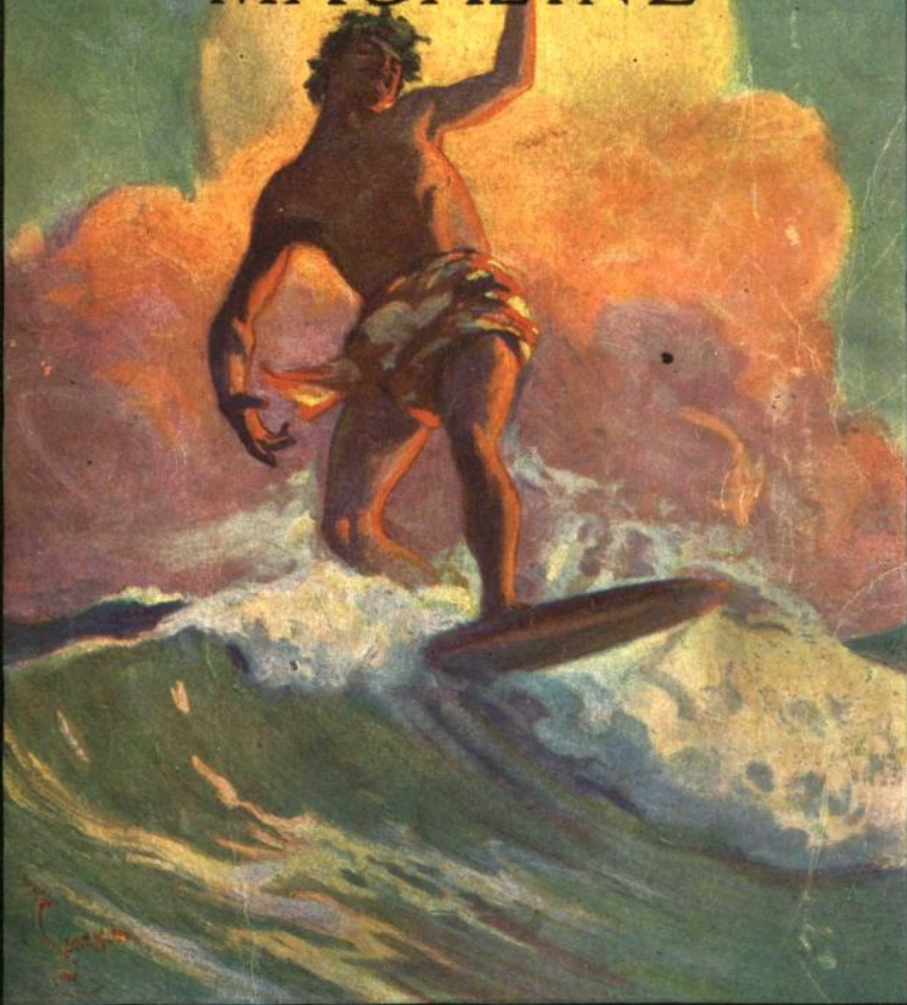


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EDITED BY CASPAR WHITNEY

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The Old South Orchard

L. M. Montgomery

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1911.

It is now more than seventy years since it had its beginning, when grandfather brought his bride home. Before the wedding he had fenced off the big south meadow that sloped to the sun; it was the finest, most fertile field on the farm and the neighbors told young Abraham King that he would raise many a crop of wheat in that meadow. Abraham King smiled, and, being a man of few words, said nothing, but in his mind he had a vision of the years to be, and in that vision he saw, not rippling acres of harvest gold, but great leafy avenues of wide-spreading trees, laden with fruit to gladden the eyes of children and grandchildren yet unborn. It was a vision to develop slowly into fulfillment. Grandfather King was in no hurry. He did not set his whole orchard out at once, for he wished it to grow with his life and history and be bound up with all of good and joy that came to the household he had founded. So on the morning after he had brought his young wife home they went together to the south meadow and planted their bridal trees. Those two trees were yet living when we of the third generation were born, and every spring bedecked themselves in blossom as delicately tinted as Elizabeth King's face when she walked through the old south meadow in the morn of her life and love.

That was the beginning of the famous King orchard. When a son was born to Abraham and Elizabeth a tree was planted in the orchard for him. They had ten children in all and each child had its birthtree. Every family festival was commemorated in like fashion, and every beloved visitor who spent a night under their roof was expected to plant a tree in the orchard. So it came to pass that every tree in it was a fair green monument to some love or delight of the past years.

We, the grandchildren of Abraham and Elizabeth, were born into this heritage. The orchard was old when we came to know it and, for us, was one of the things that must have existed forever, like the sky and the river and the stars. We could not think of a world without the old south orchard. Each grandchild—and there were many of us, both on the homestead where father lived and scattered abroad in far lands—had its tree there, set out by grandfather when the news of its birth was announced to him.

In our day there was a high stone wall around it instead of grandfather's split rail fence. Our uncles and father had built the wall in their boyhood, so that it was old enough to be beautiful with moss, and green things growing out of its crevices, violets purpling at its base in early spring days, and goldenrod and asters making a September glory in its corners.

Grandmother, as long as she was able, liked to go through the orchard with us, down to the farther gate, where she never omitted to kiss us all good-bye, even if we were to be gone for no more than an hour. She would wait at the gate, her sweet old

face all aglow, until we were out of sight; then she would visit Uncle Stephen's avenue before going back to the house.

"Uncle Stephen's avenue," as we always called it, was a double row of apple trees running down the western side of the orchard—a great green bowery arcade it was. To walk through it in blossom time was something not to be forgotten. It realized for us our most extravagant dreams of fairyland wherein we wandered under the gorgeous arches of kings' palaces over pavements of pearl and emerald. Heaven, we thought, must surely be an endless succession of Uncle Stephen's avenues in blossom that never faded.

Uncle Stephen was that first-born whose birth-tree stood nearest to the two gnarled old patriarchs in the center of the orchard. Father, who was one of the youngest members of the family, had but one remembrance of him—as a handsome youth of eighteen home from a long sea voyage, with all the glamor of faraway lands and southern seas about him. In Uncle Stephen the blood of a seafaring race claimed its own. He had none of grandfather's abiding love of woods and meadows and the kindly ways of the warm red earth; to sea he must go, despite the fears and pleadings of the reluctant mother, and it was from the sea he came to set out his avenue in the south orchard with trees brought from his voyage.

Then he sailed away again, and the ship was never heard of more. The gray first came in grandmother's brown hair in those months of waiting. Then, for the first time in its life, the old orchard heard the sound of weeping and was consecrated by a sorrow.

To us children Uncle Stephen was only a name, but a name to conjure with. We never wearied of speculating on his fate and harrowing our small souls with fearful imaginations concerning his last moments. He played an important part in many of our games and make-believes; he was always the good fairy who appeared mysteriously in the nick of time and rescued us from all difficulties. He was all the more delightful in that he never grew old like our other uncles. For us he was always the curly-headed youngster, with the laughing blue eyes, of the framed daguerreotype hanging up in grandmother's room. If he had ever come back in reality we would have expected him to look just like that. We all, I think, cherished a secret belief that he was yet living—probably on a desert island—and would some day return home, glittering with the gold and jewels of the pirate hoard discovered on the said island. To this day we middle-aged men and women who were the children of that old south orchard do not say "when my ship comes in" but "when Uncle Stephen comes home."

There was another spot in the orchard which had a great attraction for us, albeit

mingled with something of awe and fear. This was “Aunt Una’s seat,” a bench of mossy stone slabs arched over by a couple of gnarled pear trees and grown thickly about with grasses and violets. We never cared to play there—it would have seemed like desecration, but in our quiet moods we sought the old stone bench to dream. Aunt Una mingled in those dreams, but not after the fashion of Uncle Stephen, for there was no doubt concerning her fate. She had died thirty years before, on her twentieth birthday.

We children heard much of Aunt Una, for she was one of those people who are not soon forgotten, whose personality seems to haunt the scenes of their lives long after they have gone thence. She had been very beautiful, with a strange moonlight beauty of white skin and night-black eyes and hair, foreign to the fair, rosy King style of loveliness; a dreamy, spiritual girl, one of those souls who have no real abiding place in this world and only tarry for a brief while. She had been gifted with the power of expression, and a sort of journal she had written was one of grandmother’s treasures. She sometimes read portions of it to us, and so we seemed to make a very real acquaintance with Aunt Una. The book contained verses that appeared quite wonderful to us—indeed, I think even yet that they were wonderful—and bits descriptive of the orchard, blent with a girl’s dreams and longings. Her phrases lingered in our memories and the whole orchard seemed full of her. Besides, there was a bit of her romance connected with it.

Aunt Una had had a lover. This man was still living; he was little more than fifty, but we thought him very old because of his snow-white hair. He had never married, and lived some distance away. Every June, on Aunt Una’s birthday, he made a pilgrimage to the old orchard to see her tree, all ablow with never-failing blossoms, and sit on her bench. At such times we children were not allowed to go into the orchard, but we sometimes peeped over the wall and saw him sitting there, a melancholy, lonely figure. It gave us, I think, a deep and lasting sense of the beauty and strength of love which could thus outlive time and death. We were too young then to understand its full beauty. The romance of it appealed more strongly to us; we girls had our favorite dream of dying young and having our lovers come to visit our trees thirty years after.

But the orchard had happier memories. There had been a wedding in it for one thing—long before we were born. It was that of Aunt Iris, who had been a celebrated beauty. She was married in the orchard under the apple blossoms of June. We never tired of hearing grandmother tell of it. We had heard the story so often that we could picture it almost as plainly as grandmother herself—the lanes of white, fragrant trees, the gay dresses of the guests, the beautiful bride in her white

silk dress and old lace veil. It was a favorite game with us to enact it all over, and so coveted was the honor of playing the bride's part that it had to be settled by lot. Aunt Iris' pear tree, planted by the bride herself after the ceremony, was in our time a huge old tree just within the entrance gate. The most delicious pears that I have ever eaten grew on it. There are no such pears nowadays. I suppose they had a catalogue name, but the old south orchard had a nomenclature all its own, and we knew them as "Aunt Iris' pears."

There were many plum trees in the orchard, as well as cherries—great luscious ox-hearts and a sweet white kind—pears and quinces, but of course more of apple trees than of any other kind. Uncle Bob's tree was our favorite, because it bore a delicious, juicy, yellow apple with a streak of red on one side. There were two big trees—the twins' trees—which were given over to us entirely, because nobody except children could eat their big, green, dead-sweet apples. And there was a seedling tree which had come up unbidden in a sunny corner, the fruit of which we used when our games called for a "trial by ordeal." The apples of it were the sourest that ever grew; hard, bitter, unpalatable. The "ordeal" consisted in eating one of them in large bites without making a single grimace! Few of us ever passed it, but there was one who never failed—our little French cousin, Laure. She could munch those dreadful apples without so much as a change of expression on her little dark, elfin face. But then, Laure could do anything she attempted. We could never "stump" her, as our juvenile slang expressed it.

Every season brought new beauties to the old orchard. It would have been hard to say when we loved it best. In spring it was a rare spot; the grass was green there when everywhere else was only sere brown sod; the trees were in leaf and bud a full week earlier there than in other orchards. Summer brought ripe luxuriance of growth. Long ago grandmother had sown a little plot with caraway just inside the gate and it had spread half over the orchard. In July, when it came into blossom, the long arcades were white with its billowy waves that swayed and foamed in the moonshine of summer eves like seas of silver. One day a three-year-old baby wandered into the caraway thicket that met over her head, lay down in it, and went to sleep. When she was missed, great was the consternation in the house of King. Everybody turned out to search, distracted by direful possibilities of well and river. Search as they might they could not find her. It was sunset, with a mother in hysterics, before an answering gurgle came from the caraway in response to frantic calls. Father plunged over the stone wall and into the caraway where he came upon a rosy sleep-warm baby curled up in a nest of her own fashioning and very loath to leave it.

Autumn was, I think, the time we loved best, for then came the apple-picking.

What fun it was! The boys would climb the trees and shake the apples down until we girls cried for mercy. The days were crisp and mellow, with warm sunshine and a tang of frost in the air, mingled with the woody odors of the withering leaves. The hens and turkeys prowled about picking at windfalls, and our pet kittens made mad rushes at each other among the leaves.

Then came winter, when the orchard was heaped with drifts. It was a wonderful place on moonlit nights, when the snowy arcades shone like magic avenues of ivory and pearl and the bare trees cast fairy-like traceries over them. Uncle Stephen's avenue was a fine place for coasting, and when a thaw came, followed by a frost, we held high carnival there.

Any history of the old south orchard would be incomplete if it failed to mention the "King Bubble." This was a spring of peculiarly sweet, pure water which gurgled up in the southwest corner at the foot of a gentle slope. Grandfather had rimmed it round with a circle of hewn stones, and in this basin the water brimmed up like a great amber bubble until it found its way through ferns and mosses to the brook below. In our games the King Bubble played the part of every famous fount in song and story of which we had ever read—especially the well of Urda and Ponce de Leon's fountain of youth. On summer days, tired and warm, we would fling ourselves down on its fern-fringed brink and drink deep draughts from an old blue china cup which always sat on a little stone shelf below the brim and never chanced to be broken despite the dozens of careless little hands that seized it. To-day weary men and women all over the world think often of that spring and long for a cup of its matchless water.

Near the spring was a huge granite boulder as high as a man's head, straight and smooth in front, but hollowed out into natural steps behind. It also played an important part in all our games, being fortified castle, Indian ambush, throne, pulpit, or concert platform as occasion required. A certain gray-haired minister, famous in two continents for eloquence and scholarly attainments, preached his first sermon at the age of ten from that old gray boulder, and a woman whose voice has delighted thousands sang her earliest madrigals there.

"If you're a King, you sing," was a countryside proverb in those days, and certainly it was true of all the descendants of grandfather and grandmother. We all sang more or less, although none could equal Laure, and among the dearest memories of the old south orchard are those of the long, mellow twilights of summer Sundays, when old and young assembled in the orchard and sang hymns, grandfather beating time. How clearly the whole scene comes out on the wall of memory's picture gallery—grandfather and grandmother, father and mother, sitting

on Aunt Una's bench, while we children, with all Uncle George's brood from the next farm, sat on the grass around them. Two voices sound out for me above all the others—Laure's glorious and silvery, grandmother's sweet, quavering, tremulous. Dear old Grandmother King! How much she enjoyed those summer evenings of song!

Grandfather and grandmother used to walk much in the orchard on fine evenings, hand in hand, lovers still, lingering in Uncle Stephen's arcade or at Aunt Una's seat. Their devotion to each other was beautiful to see. We children never thought it a sad or unlovely thing to grow old with so fair an example before us. One summer grandmother grew very frail and could not walk in the orchard. Yet grandfather was the first to go; they found him sitting in his armchair on one afternoon, a smile on his fine old face and the sunshine making a glory of his white hair. Grandmother called him by name, but for the first time he failed to answer her.

They carried Grandfather King through the old orchard on his last journey. It had been his wish. Children and grandchildren walked behind him under boughs laden with the mellow fruit of trees his hands had planted. The next June Grandmother King was carried to him over the same way—the bride going once more to her bridegroom under the glory of their bridal trees.

I visited the orchard not long ago on a mellow afternoon. It did not seem much changed. Most of the old trees were standing; grandfather's and grandmother's were gone, but their places were filled with two flourishing young trees planted when the homestead boy had brought his bride home. Aunt Una's seat was there and Uncle Stephen's avenue; the King Bubble was as clear and sparkling as of yore—truly, it was a fountain of youth, for it never grew old. And at the big granite boulder children were playing "Ivanhoe" and besieging it valiantly with arrows and popguns. My best wish for them was that in the years to come the old orchard might hold for them as many sweet and enduring memories as it held for me.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

Inconsistency in hyphenation has been retained.

[The end of *The Old South Orchard* by L. M. (Lucy Maud) Montgomery]