

GOLDEN DAYS

For
Boys
and
Girls



TO JANUARY 99						
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A Double Joke

L. M. Montgomery

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“Well, the sun is setting, so I suppose that signifies that we must be trudging. It almost takes the edge off a fellow’s fun to have to walk four miles to and from it!”

“You know you’d walk three times as far for as glorious an afternoon’s skating as we’ve had to-day, Phil, so what’s the use of growling? We always have to pay a certain price for our fun in this world, old fellow, and in this corner of it especially. For my part, I rather enjoy a tramp home over good roads on a night like this.”

A “night like this” was a clear, crisp winter evening, frosty and sharp without being unpleasantly cold. The sun was just setting behind a ridge of pine-fringed hills in the southwest, and the gleaming sheet of ice before the boys, covered with an intricate tracery of skate tracks, reflected all the tints of the sky that was a vast lake of cloudy crimson and melting crocus and transparent rose. Up on the hill behind them the spires and roofs of a small village came out with clearest darkness against the arc of color. It was named Forest Hill, but Phil Burgess and Bert Lawrence, who had been spending the afternoon in having what they termed “a glorious skate,” did not belong there.

They came from “over Ashbury way,” as the Forest Hillites would have said, with a fine inflection of disdain. Ashbury was a settlement about four miles east of Forest Hill, and was just as good as the latter in every particular, except, as Bert would have said, it was “overlooked when skating arrangements were made.” There wasn’t, in the length and breadth of Ashbury, any kind of a place for skating, unless the miserable little saucer of ice in Cole’s field could be called so. It served as a place for new beginners and girls to practice on, but for the real article the Ashbury boys were forced to betake themselves and their skates over to Crystal Lake, at Forest Hill.

There was no love lost between the Ashbury boys and the Forest Hill boys, and that famous ice had been the scene of more than one spirited brush between the two factions, in which victory perched now upon one standard and now upon the other with an impartiality that kept the balance pretty even. But Phil and Bert had had the ice all to themselves that day, and had enjoyed themselves immensely.

Bert, at the conclusion of his last sentence, sat down and dragged his skates off. Phil went off for a final twirl.

“I suppose it’s time we were going,” he said, regretfully, “but I’ll have one more spin anyhow.”

When it was over he rejoined Bert and the two chums started off across the snowy fields. On the crest of the hill Phil paused to look back and saw a dozen or so dark figures descending the opposite slope.

“Jing!” he exclaimed. “There are the Hillites now! Won’t they have a glorious

evening; it's going to be moonlight. I've a half notion to go back. What say, Bert?"

"Not I," declared his chum. "There'll be nobody over from Ashbury, and those Hillites are mad yet over the licking we gave them last week. We're in a huge minority and we'd be sure to get into a row."

"Don't know as I'd care if we did," said Phil, moving on, however. "I feel exactly like having some excitement—just in the mood for doing something wild!"

This, I am afraid, was not at all an uncommon mood for Phil, or Bert either, for that matter. They were in mischief every day of their lives, and although it was generally harmless, yet they were growing up into big boys now, and some of their pranks had gone rather too far. They were simply average boys, neither scamps nor saints, and their tricks were mostly the outcome of mere boyish thoughtlessness and spirits. Still, habit makes character after awhile, and Bert and Phil were at a somewhat critical period. As old Jim Carpenter, the Ashbury oracle, remarked sagely:

"Those two lads want a stopper put on them right off, before it gets too late." No body had as yet applied the "stopper," however, or seemed likely to. Their last escapade—untying and retying in a different place all the horses and carriages hitched to the church fence when a lecture was going on inside, so that when the people came out on a night so dark that it was dated from, the scene of confusion was one that made history—had been a good deal talked about. But no serious damage had been done, and as it couldn't be positively proved that it was they who did it, they got off scot free.

Old Jim Carpenter's theory was the correct one. Bert and Phil were in need of a little kindly and careful advice and repression just at this turning point in their teens. This they were not likely to get. Phil lived with a mummy-like old uncle, who concerned himself over nothing earthly but the making of money, and let his nephew grow up as he would; and Bert's father was an easy-going mortal, who found a refuge from all responsibility in the indisputable assertion that "boys will be boys."

"Nobody wants them to be turnips or cabbages," he said. "Bert's all right; he'll tone down in time. Bless me, I never saw anything so funny as old Johnny Stone flying around the other night hunting for that old sorrel nag of his."

The boys had walked two miles and were just entering on the strip of fir-woods that marked the boundary between Ashbury and Forest Hill, when a tinkle of bells behind them made them look around. A cutter with a solitary occupant was coming around a curve in the road, and Phil recognized the turn-out.

"There's Doctor Taylor coming, Bert, with that little mare he bought down at Oakvale last month. Take a good look at her as she goes past. I tell you she's a

dandy. She can just walk away from anything in Ashbury or Forest Hill, either. I'd give almost anything just to get a spin behind her."

Phil's wish was gratified more speedily and surely than wishes generally are in this work-a-day world. The little mare and the cozy cutter came to a prompt standstill, and the doctor called out cheerily:

"Jump in, boys. The cutter holds three."

Nothing loth, the boys jumped in and away they went at a speed that Phil declared next thing to flying.

"What do you think of Bonny Queen?" asked the doctor, proudly.

"Is that her name, sir? Well, I think it just suits her. I never saw anything to equal her before."

Phil spoke honestly. The little mare was a beauty—clean-limbed and satin-coated, with a record for speed which no horse in Ashbury could touch. The doctor smiled, well pleased.

"I'm as proud and fond of her as if she were one of my family," he said. "She's never had a blow in her life, and never will, I hope. I let nobody drive her but myself—she's rather a nervous little animal, and doesn't like strangers. Well, here we are at the Hall. There's a meeting of the shareholders here to-night, and I promised I'd attend. But I don't care about leaving Bonny Queen out this frosty night—and I haven't a blanket with me either. I guess I'll go on home."

But just at this juncture Squire Clay came along.

"Good evening, doctor. You're going to stay, of course."

"I am not sure," said the doctor, hesitatingly.

"You must," said Squire Clay, decidedly. "We can't do without you."

A few minutes' conversation aside resulted in the doctor's turning to the boys.

"It's only a mile to my place," he said, "and I want you to take the Queen home for me. Don't drive her too fast. Gordon is home and he'll attend to her. Will you?"

Would they! Well, they just guessed so! To drive Bonny Queen for a mile through Ashbury with everybody envying them—what a wind-fall!



“BONNY QUEEN WAS ON HER METTLE AND FAIRLY FLEW.”

“I wouldn’t trust a horse like that with those two for a good deal,” commented Squire Clay, when the cutter was out of earshot. “They don’t know what mischief to be up to next, either of them. It’s said they were at the bottom of that affair at the church the night of the lecture, too.”

The doctor looked troubled, but it was too late. Phil and Bert were already out of sight, and Bonny Queen was prancing along the road on her slender feet as if she knew her own value. It was a perfect night. The sunset glow still lingered in the west, and the moonlight was becoming brilliant. Every boy in Ashbury seemed to be on the road, and the sight of Phil Burgess and Bert Lawrence driving Doctor Taylor’s “Bonny Queen” made a sensation which our two heroes enjoyed to the utmost.

“I wish it were half a dozen miles, instead of one,” said Bert.

The remark was like a match to powder. Phil had not yet worked off his mischievous mood. Just before them was the corner where the road to Sevenoaks branched off at right angles. That, coupled with Bert’s remark, sent an idea scintillating through Phil’s brain with dizzying impulse.

“Let’s make it six miles,” he said, promptly.

“How?”

“Let’s just drive over to Sevenoaks Corner for the fun of it, before we take the

Queen home. The doctor will never know. It'll be a capital joke.”

Bert thought so, too.

“But what if the doctor should find it out?” he said, doubtfully.

“Oh, he won't—not for a while, anyhow. We can be back long before that meeting will be out, and the Taylor boys will suppose we've just come from the hall. Of course, it will leak out in time, but we'll have had our fun and all will be well over.”

And to put the matter beyond discussion, Phil turned Bonny Queen down the Sevenoaks road and gave her free rein.

Neither of the two boys stopped to think at all seriously over what they were doing. It was in their eyes “a good joke,” and there was fun to be had besides. But it was something a little worse than any of their past tricks, for there was a principle of honor involved in this. They were betraying their trust. But they did not see it in this light at all. They were enjoying themselves recklessly. To be sure, they felt a little anxious at first, but that feeling soon wore off. The evening was moonlit and frosty; Bonny Queen was on her mettle and fairly flew. Phil tingled with excitement to his very finger tips, and sent the mare along at a pace that would have broken the doctor's heart if he had seen it.

“Can't she just go, though! Bert, what wouldn't you give for a horse like that? Doctor Taylor doesn't half drive her—he's so afraid of hurting her. Won't we make a sensation at the Corner, though?”

Sevenoaks Corner was six miles from Ashbury; there was a store at the corner which was the evening rendezvous of all the Sevenoaks boys.

The place was in rather bad repute. Careful Ashbury fathers and mothers did not like to see their sons go over that way in the evening. The Corner boys were reported to be a tough lot. Phil and Bert had no business to be there, and they knew it; but they had scraped up an acquaintance with the boys there, and went over all too often. Phil had not underrated the sensation their appearance driving Doctor Taylor's celebrated “Queen,” whose fame had reached Sevenoaks, would make at the Corner. When they drew up before it with a curve and prance and a clash of silvery bells, the loafers in and around the store swarmed about them with noisy admiration and questions.

The boys told their story with gusto; in the eyes of the Sevenoaks contingent their exploit was regarded as a “cute trick.” No body in the crowd noticed a dark figure standing silently on the front porch of a house next to the store.

When the boys had finished their story and the Cornerites had looked the “Queen” over admiringly, Oliver Bates, the son of the storekeeper, said: “Well, tie up

and come in for a while, boys. You're cold—and in no great hurry, I suppose?"

Even Phil was a little dubious about doing this. Now that the first sparkle of excitement was over, he began to feel slightly uneasy, and he felt it would be risky to leave Bonny Queen unguarded at the mercy of all the rag-tag and bob-tail of Sevenoaks who might be skulking around. Phil suddenly realized that if anything should happen to the animal it would be a serious case for Bert and him.

But Oliver coaxed, and the Cornerites sarcastically inquired if he was afraid they'd put the mare in their pockets if he left her, and the end of it all was that Phil and Bert hitched Bonny Queen to the post and went into the store, while the dark, quiet figure aforesaid still lingered in the shadow of Mr. Bates' front porch.

The boys did not mean to stay long; but there was much to hear and relate. Mr. Bates was genial, and the store warm; and finally Oliver treated the crowd to peanuts and candy all around, so that it was all of half an hour or more before Phil and Bert bethought themselves of Bonny Queen, standing blanketless in the frosty air after her hot drive.

"It's time we were off," whispered Bert, anxiously. "If we don't hurry, the doctor will be home before we are, and we'll get into trouble. Come on, Phil."

"All right," responded Phil, as he demolished his last peanut. "I'm ready. Now for a two-forty spin back to Ashbury."

Out into the sparkling moonlight went the noisy crowd.

Bonny Queen was gone!

Phil and Bert stared dazedly at the post, at first quite incapable of realizing what had happened. Then the horror of it broke upon them.

"Bert," gasped Phil, in a voice utterly unlike his own, "where—is—the horse?"

It was a question Bert could not answer, nor anyone else, apparently. There did not seem to be a soul in sight around the corner except the crowd who had come out of the store. But the horse and cutter had vanished, leaving not a trace behind.

"She must have got loose and started home," said Oliver Bates, consolingly. "No body would have dared to take her."

Phil and Bert were not so sure of this. They knew that there were several toughs in Sevenoaks who were capable of having done it. What in the world was to be done? They found out just then the worth of corner friendship. Their hail-fellows-well-met of the past half hour melted away as if by magic. They had no desire to be tangled up in any Ashbury scrape about Doctor Taylor's horse. Oliver Bates was almost the only one who stayed to advise the alarmed boys.

"The best thing you can do is to go straight home," he said, "and see if the mare has gone home. If not, you can get help to hunt her up. But I think you'll find her

there.”

Phil and Bert looked at each other miserably. A six miles' walk home was not a pleasant prospect, certainly; but that wasn't a circumstance to the disappearance of Bonny Queen. Perhaps, if you had searched Sevenoaks and Ashbury and Forest Hill and all the outlying and adjacent districts and villages, you might possibly have found two limper, cheaper, more thoroughly frightened boys than Phil Burgess and Bert Lawrence just about that time, but I doubt it.

In their hearts the boys did not believe that Bonny Queen could have got loose of her own accord; she had been too well tied for that. But some Cornerite or other might have loosened her for a trick, and she might have gone home. At any rate, as Oliver said, there was nothing to do but go and see; so they started.

Neither of them ever forgot that walk.

“You can call it only six miles from Sevenoaks Corner to Ashbury, if you like,” said Phil to me afterwards, “but it was ten times six that night.”

They were too disgusted and scared to talk it over. In grim silence they tramped along, filled with gloomy forebodings. They had plenty of time to see their “joke” in its true light, with all its alarming possibilities.

When they finally reached the Ashbury road it was half-past nine o'clock. They decided to go straight to Doctor Taylor's, and took a short cut across the fields thereto.

There was a light in the stable yard, and as the boys rounded the corner of the shed they saw a sight that made their hearts give one wild bound of relief and amazement.

Before the carriage house door Edgar Taylor was unharnessing a horse from a cutter; and by the light of the lantern Gordon Taylor held, both Bert and Phil recognized Bonny Queen.

The boys, standing in the shadow of the shed, had not been noticed by the Taylors; and in the calm night they heard plainly what Edgar was saying to his brother.

“Those two smart boys drove up just as I came out of the house. I knew the Queen at sight, and you'd better believe I wondered what on earth they were doing there with her. They didn't see me, and when their cronies came out I heard the whole story. At first I thought I'd march right out and face them; then I thought of a better way, since they seemed to be so fond of a joke. When they went in and left poor Bonny Queen tied there—in a reek of perspiration, too, mind you—I just waited till all was quiet, took off her bells, and drove away.

“I called down at Kerdy's for a while, and then came home. I'll bet a hat those

chaps are feeling small enough to crawl through a knot-hole by now. It'll give them a jolly good scare, and they richly deserve it. They might have ruined Queen, driving her like that. But, luckily, she hasn't a scratch."

"Are you going to tell father?" asked Gordon.

"Not just now," was the reply. "It would worry him. He wouldn't believe but what she was hurt. He'll hear the story in a few days, of course, but it will be all over then. But I'll give those two boys a piece of my mind when I see them that they won't forget in a hurry"—and Edgar led the mare into the stable.

Outside, Bert looked at Phil and Phil looked at Bert.

"You could buy me for a cent," said the former.

"I'd give myself away for nothing," said the latter. "Let's go home."

And home they went. They did not do much talking, but there is every reason to believe they did some hard thinking. When they parted at Bert's gate, Phil said:

"We're a pair of fools, Bert.

"That's a fact, Phil. The joke's dead against us this time. I don't feel as if I wanted to play any more."

Of course in a day or so the story drifted over from Sevenoaks, and Phil and Bert were chaffed unmercifully. But they kept very quiet, and when Edgar Taylor met them and proceeded to give the promised piece of his mind, they took it so humbly and repentantly that he did not come down on them half as heavily as he had intended.

In due time the tale reached the doctor's ears, and horrified him not a little. But, as it was all well over, he said nothing, rightly deeming that the boys had been already well punished.

And they had. The "stopper" had been applied, with good results. Bert and Phil gave up playing jokes, and turned their attention to the cultivation of good behavior, which was the more easily done in that their visits to Sevenoaks Corner were cut short at once and forever. They never dared go there again, for the Cornerites would have tormented their lives out.

As Phil said, "Single jokes are funny enough, but when it comes to double ones, you don't appreciate the point quite so cheerfully."

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

[The end of *A Double Joke* by L. M. (Lucy Maud) Montgomery]