

THE CANADIAN COURIER



CHEERFUL CANADIANS PLAY CROQUET

Some of our wounded soldiers in the open-air hospital at Cliveden do not seem to be in much pain.

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The Beaton Family Group

*Another of Those Simple, Strong Stories that Read as Though Lifted Directly
From Human Experience*

L. M. Montgomery

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An air of excitement pervaded the Beaton homestead. The very ducks in the yard seemed to share it, as they waddled about and quacked nervously at the chubby little brown mare tied to the worn hitching-post.

Old Gyp sat bolt upright on the porch mat, aware that something unusual was going on, and watching with deep suspicion the young man in golf stockings and baggy knickerbockers, who was prowling about the garden with a queer, three-legged thing under each arm and a black box in his hand. Gyp knew it was his duty to keep an eye on this man.

Inside the house the excitement was intensified. Mr. Beaton was shaving himself at the small mirror that hung by the kitchen window—and this on a week-day. His married son, Archie, who lived on the adjoining farm, sat on the sofa, holding his hat. He was a tall, muscular man, looking very ill at ease in his Sunday suit of clothes and a high, stiffly-starched collar.

Dr. Norman Beaton was reading in the little front hall, which was blown full of subtly-sweet odours from the flower garden outside and the low-lying pine-lands beyond. “The doctor,” as all his old friends in Bloom Valley affectionately called him, was visiting home for the first time in six years. He was a frank-faced, well-made man, and justified his mother’s pride in her clever, handsome first-born.

In her little room over the front porch Lottie Beaton, the sixteen-year-old “baby” of the family, was curling her hair and getting herself into the new organdy gown which Celia had brought home for her. Her cheeks burned and her hands trembled with excitement. But the real interest centred in the spare room, off the parlor, where Mrs. Beaton’s two older daughters were getting “mother” ready.

Elizabeth was married, and lived down at “the corner.” She had driven over for the occasion, and, like Archie, was gotten up in her Sunday best. She was fussy and matronly, deferring much to Celia, who, with the glamour of city life and hospital experience about her, might be supposed more up-to-date than dwellers in country districts.

Celia wore her nurse’s uniform, which became her. She was a tall, fine-looking woman, with a marked resemblance to her brother Norman in her deep-set, dark eyes and strong features.

Mrs. Beaton did not look like any of her children. She was slight and reed-like, with sad, dark-blue eyes, and a touch of mysticism in her face—her inheritance from her Gaelic forefathers.

“Now, if father is ready, I think the rest of us are,” said Celia, pinning a cluster of pale yellow honeysuckle on her mother’s black silk shoulder. “I suppose Lottie hasn’t done primping yet, though. That child is growing very vain, don’t you think,

Elizabeth?”

Elizabeth nodded absently. She was not thinking of Lottie.

“Had I better stand or sit?” she enquired absently.

“The photographer will pose you,” said Celia, with the easy indifference of one to whom being photographed is an ordinary occurrence. “I am very glad it is such a good day. I hope the picture will turn out well. It is so seldom we are all home together.”

“You are not all home together now,” cried Mrs. Beaton, with a quick flush. “Alec is not here—my boy!—my darling!”

Celia glanced apprehensively at the open door. Elizabeth put out her plump hand and closed it.

“No, mother, we know,” she said soothingly. “We all wish Alec could be here. But he has not chosen to come back, or even to let us know where he is. He may be—he may not be alive. It is six years since he went. Don’t think of it to-day. We want you to look bright and happy.”

“It’s so easy to say ‘don’t think of it,’” said the mother, with tears in her eyes. “But a mother can’t forget. I’ve been thinking of Alec all day—my bonny boy! He ought to be here when all the rest of you are home to have our family group taken. I’ll never like the picture—he won’t be in it. I know he’s alive. If he were dead I would know it—I would have a sign. No; he’s living, and he’s wandering somewhere over the world, an outcast from his father’s door.”

“Don’t cry, mother,” said Elizabeth, gently, “and don’t let father hear you saying anything about it, because it would make him terribly angry and might spoil everything. You know he can’t bear for Alec’s name to be spoken.”

I know,” said Mrs. Beaton, wiping her tears. “That is the bitterest of all—that his father should hold anger against his son so long.”

“I think father’s anger with Alec is more because he has never come back and asked forgiveness than because of their quarrel,” said Celia, with the crisp, practicality that sometimes jarred on her mother’s more dreamy and imaginative nature. “If Alec were to come back, father would be the first to run and fall on his neck. But I hear Lottie calling. The photographer is waiting.”

Harry Richards, who had come up from the summer hotel to “take” the Beaton family, was a shy, nervous young fellow. When it came to posing them he was hopelessly embarrassed. Celia pityingly aided him with advice. At her suggestion the picture was taken at the curve in the lane, where it looped around the plum orchard, with the old grove of tall, slim white birches and bloomy dogwoods for a

background.

The father and mother sat in the centre, with Lottie in the grass at their feet. Dr. Norman stood easily on one side, Archie stiffly on the other. Elizabeth was placed behind her mother. Celia looked at the group and nodded a qualified approval.

“There! I think that is about as good as we can get. Family groups always have a stiff, made-to-order appearance, do what you will. We want a smile, mother; you’re looking too sober. That’s better! Lottie, rest your arm lightly on mother’s knee. I think we are all ready now, Mr. Richards.”

Celia walked erectly over the grass, pulling the straps of her white apron straight, and stood behind her father. The photographer levelled his camera, put in his plate-holder, and drew the slide.

“Now!” he said warningly, with eye and finger on the lever.

A moment’s breathless silence, a click, and the thing was done. Harry exposed two more plates, and then the Beatons were free. Mrs. Beaton, with a sigh of relief, hurried away to take off her black silk and get tea ready, while Celia and Norman marched Harry from place to place about the old homestead, that he might photograph their favorite nooks.

“I hope they’ll turn out well,” said the doctor, after Richards had gone. “I love all those old spots so fervently. As for our group, at best it will be incomplete. Poor Alec! I wonder where he is.”

“I cannot help thinking he is dead,” said Celia sadly. “It is six years since he and father quarreled so bitterly. If he were living I think some of us would have heard from him. You know what a strong, deep-rooted love of home and each other there is in all of us—always pulling at our heartstrings. I think it would have drawn Alec back before this.”

“I don’t know, Celia. Alec is like father—terribly determined. He vowed he’d never come back, and he was the lad to keep his word. It’s hard on mother. He should think of that. He was her favorite of us all, and no wonder—such a bright, bonny, high-spirited laddie.”

The next afternoon Dr. Norman wheeled down to the beach and returned with the photograph proofs.

“Only one of the group turned out well, Richards says,” he said, as he tossed the sealed envelope on the table. “They’re all there. Let’s have a look at them. Where’s father?”

Mr. Beaton and Archie were sent for from the swamp meadow. Elizabeth had also come up, tingling with as much secret excitement as Lottie, although she would

never have admitted it. The whole family stood around Mrs. Beaton as she put her spectacles on and took out the proofs.

She held the pictured group up before them. Then she gave a startled cry, and her delicate face went white as marble.

“Alec—Alec! My boy! He’s there! Look, father; look Celia! Oh, Alec!”

She reeled against Norman. Her husband was trembling.

“My son!” he said huskily. “Norman—Celia—what does it mean?”

There was awe on every face. Even practical Celia was thrilled with something akin to horror, as she looked at the proof on the table.

There, standing between and slightly behind herself and Elizabeth, was the pictured face and form of Alec Beaton. There could be no mistake. He looked older and graver, but otherwise there was little change from the curly-headed lad who, hot with resentment, had run away from home six years before.

“What does it mean?” said Celia blankly.

“It means that my son is dead,” said Mrs. Beaton, clasping her hands convulsively together. “It is a sign. I always knew it would come. Alec’s spirit was with us yesterday. Oh, my boy! My boy!”

Elizabeth led her mother from the room, followed by Lottie. Mr. Beaton pulled his hat low to hide the working of his face, and went slowly out of the kitchen with Archie. Celia and Norman were left alone.

“Norman, what does it mean?” repeated Celia in a troubled voice.

Norman picked up the mysterious proof. At first the innate mysticism of his nature and race had thrilled to the seeming supernatural. But now his shrewd common sense had reasserted itself.

“Why, it simply means that Alec was there yesterday and had his photo taken. I don’t understand how, of course. There’s a mystery somewhere, but it’s not a supernatural one, you may be sure.”

“Then you believe that Alec is alive?”

“Certainly—unless he has died since yesterday. This must be ferretted out. I’ll go to Richards first.”

The doctor mounted his wheel and rode down to the hotel again, but an interview with Harry Richards did nothing to solve the mystery. Harry said that he had been much surprised at seeing the figure of a fourth man standing between Miss Beaton and Mrs. Seaman in the group.

“I thought there had been only three, but concluded I must have been mistaken. Miss Beaton, you know, attended to the posing, and I paid little attention to it. The other plates were totally spoiled. Nothing can be seen on them.”

More puzzled than ever, Norman left the hotel and rode to the little railway station, six miles. Here he found his first clue.

“Yes, sir,” said the station master, “there was a stranger got off here yesterday. Came on the noon train and left again on the 7.30. He hadn’t any luggage. Thought he looked like your family—took him for one of the up-west Beatons.”

Norman nodded with satisfaction.

“That was Alec,” he thought. “Now to find him! For that I must go to Charlotteville.”

He pencilled a brief note to Celia and took the evening train for Charlotteville, a small town some twenty miles away. There were two hotels there, and Norman guessed that if Alec were really in the place and desirous of concealing his identity he would avoid the Carleton, which was kept by a cousin of his own. Accordingly Norman hastened to the other.

At the door he met his brother, valise in hand.

“Alec!” he said, putting his hands on the young man’s shoulders.

Alec Beaton started and blushed. “Norman!” he exclaimed.

“You surely weren’t going away again without coming to see us all—especially mother?” said Norman reproachfully.

“Yes, I was,” said Alec Beaton, half sullenly. “Father told me never to darken his threshold again.”

“He said it in anger, lad. And you said just as hard things to him—have you forgotten that? Best let by-gones be by-gones. Father is ready to. You’d have known that if you had seen his face to-day when he saw your photograph in our family group and thought, like his second-sighted forefather, that it was a ‘sign.’”

“So I was taken after all!” exclaimed Alec.

“Yes, and before we start for home—don’t squirm lad; I’m going back on the 7.30 train, and you are coming, too—I want you to explain how on earth you came to be in that photograph. I’m wildly curious.”

“It happened this way,” said Alec, leading the way to the waiting-room. “You see, Norman, I left home in a red-hot Highland rage, and even when I cooled off I couldn’t forget what father had said. I went out west to the mines—been knocking around there ever since. I was homesick most of the time—got so bad at last that I determined to come home, take a peep at the old place, and go away again, unknown to anyone. Don’t think I’d forgotten mother or the rest of you because I never came back or wrote. Never a day but I thought of you all. But you know what the Beaton obstinacy is.

Well, I came home. I got here yesterday morning, went out to the Brae station, and walked across country to Bloom Valley. I kept to fields and byways, not wishing to be seen, and finally found myself in the old birch woods along the lane. They were thick and shadowy, and I thought I could prowl about them unseen, and perhaps get a glimpse of mother. Besides, I loved those old woods. Do you remember how we used to play there when we were laddies, Norman, with our castles and robbers' caves and Indian ambushes? I struck the old foot-path that runs from corner to corner, and followed it out to the dogwoods. As I turned the corner abruptly you can imagine my surprise and dismay when I came upon you all, posed stiffly in front of the camera. I turned at once, and slipped noiselessly around the dogwoods but I suppose the photographer dropped his shutter at the very moment I stood there."

"And now," said Norman, "you're coming home, Alec—home to stay. Mother and father need you. Mother is mourning you as one dead to-night. Think of the light on her old face when she sees you alive and well—thanks to the mysterious photograph. Come, lad."

And Alec went.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

[The end of *The Beaton Family Group* by L. M. (Lucy Maud) Montgomery]