

Janie's Visitor

Lucy Maud Montgomery
1910

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JANIE'S VISITOR

L. M. Montgomery

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Mr. and Mrs. Franklin had gone to town early in the morning, leaving many charges with Aunt Rebecca and Janie. They did not expect to be back before dark, and Aunt Rebecca and Janie were to keep house.

“Now, Janie, you must be a very good girl, and do just as Aunt Rebecca tells you,” said Mrs. Franklin. “Don’t let the hens scratch up my pansy bed, Rebecca, and don’t leave the house alone.”

“Now for a good time,” laughed Aunt Rebecca, when they had gone; and she and Janie had it. Janie always liked to be left to keep house with Aunt Rebecca. Aunty was so jolly and kind, and knew just what little girls liked. They made some molasses taffy and pulled it; then Janie helped Aunt Rebecca shell the peas for dinner, and was told a delightful fairy tale as a reward. Then they had their dinner and what fun it was, just the two of them, sitting at the big table.

“It makes me feel so nice and grownup,” said Janie.

After the dishes were washed Aunt Rebecca said: “Do you think you can keep house by yourself for a little while? I want to go back to the clearing and pick a few raspberries. We can’t both go, because somebody must watch the hens.”

“I’ll sit out in the hammock and watch them,” said Janie. “I’ve got my new story book to read. I do think keeping house is such fun, Aunty.”

When Aunt Rebecca came out with her sunbonnet on and a pail in her hand, Janie was curled up in the hammock, deeply absorbed in the fortunes of the beautiful Princess Lollipop.

“I may not be back in time for tea at the usual hour, Janie,” said her aunt, “so I have put your supper on the dining-room table. You can eat it when you get hungry. Now don’t forget that you must watch the hens as well as read about your princess.”

Janie promised, and Aunt Rebecca departed. The Lollipop adventures were very fascinating, the hens behaved themselves well, and the minutes flew by so swiftly that very soon it was four o’clock.

“I believe I’m hungry,” said Janie to herself, “and as Aunty hasn’t come home I’ll go in and get my tea.”

She sprang out of the hammock and ran around to the kitchen door. Much to her surprise a man was standing there. He was very tall and dark, and his clothes were worn and dusty, and didn’t seem to fit him very well either. His black hair was closely cropped, and his eyes were hollow and restless. Just above one of them was a very peculiar scar. He gave a start when Janie popped around the corner, and his hand went furtively to his pocket.

“Good afternoon,” said Janie politely. She did not know him at all, but it would never do to forget her good manners.

“Good afternoon,” returned the visitor, looking down at her with an odd

expression. He spoke gruffly, and he still looked suspiciously at the corner around which she had come.

“I suppose you want to see father or Aunt Rebecca,” said Janie, gravely. “If it is father, you can’t, because he and mother went to town to-day and won’t be back until night. But if it is Aunt Rebecca you can, if you will wait a little while. She’s back in the clearing picking raspberries. Is it Aunt Rebecca?”

The man allowed himself a grim smile. “I guess it is Aunt Rebecca as much as any one,” he said.

“I thought so,” said Janie, confidently. “Gentlemen are always coming here to see Aunt Rebecca. Well, come in and sit down, please. I can talk to you until she comes—that is, if you’d like to have me,” she added, looking doubtfully up into the dark face.

It softened a little as she spoke. He turned and followed her into the kitchen.

“Yes, I guess I would. It’s so long since I’ve talked to a little girl, though, that maybe I’ve forgotten how. You look like one I used to know. How long do you think it will be before your Aunt Rebecca comes back?”

“Well, I’m afraid it will be a good while yet—not much before sunset. But you mustn’t sit down here. When people come to see Aunt Rebecca she always takes them into the parlor. This way, please.”

The man followed, this time with a smile on his face. Janie ushered him into the parlor, pointed to an easy chair, and pulled up the blinds. Then she sat down in front of him.

“Did you ever read the story of the Princess Lollipop?” she asked, gravely.

“No, I don’t think I ever did,” said the visitor.

“It’s a lovely story,” said Janie, with a sigh. “I’ve been out in the hammock all the afternoon, reading it. Do you like fairy stories?”

“Well, I haven’t read any for a good spell. I used to read them long ago to a little girl.”

Janie looked at him curiously, wondering what made his voice quiver like that.

“Was she your little girl?” she asked, softly.

The man nodded.

“Yes. She was just about your age. She had big blue eyes and long brown curls just like you. She—she died a long time ago.”

Janie slid from her chair, went across the room, and put her hand in his.

“O, I am so sorry. I’m really, truly sorry for you. And you have no little girl at all now?”

“No—none at all.”

“That must be dreadful. Would you like me to be your little girl just while you are here?”

“I guess so.”

“Well, then, you may lift me up on your knee, and I’ll kiss you. That’s the way father does when I’m his little girl. Yes, that’s right. I guess you used to lift your own little girl like that, or you wouldn’t know her so well. What was her name?”

“Minnie.”

“That is a pretty name. Mine is Elizabeth Jane Franklin, but everybody calls me Janie, and you may, too. Now, I’ll kiss you again. Your whiskers are a little in my way, but you are a very nice man, I think. You look tired. Did you walk far?”

“A right smart ways,” admitted the man.

“Dear me, then I expect you are hungry. Are you?”

“Kinder that way.”

Janie slid down.

“So am I. Aunt Rebecca put my supper all ready for me on the dining-room table, but of course there won’t be enough for two, so I must get something more. You’ll excuse me if I leave you alone for a few minutes, won’t you?”

“O, certainly. Don’t mention it,” said her visitor, politely.

“I think he’s a real nice man,” said Janie to herself, as she trotted around the pantry. “I like him very much. But he’s very shabby. It’s a wonder he didn’t dress up a little when he came to see Aunt Rebecca. They all do.”

“Tea is ready now,” she announced, reappearing at the parlor door. She put her hand in his and led him out through the hall. “I expect you’ll think I’ve been a dreadful long time, but I had to hunt about a good bit and climb on chairs to get the cakes down. Aunt Rebecca puts them away so carefully. Now you sit here, please. This is father’s chair. Will you please excuse me giving you a steel knife and fork? I looked for the silver ones, but they weren’t in the sideboard drawer. I suppose Aunt Rebecca has put them somewhere else.”

“Don’t mention it,” said her guest again.

Janie climbed into her chair and looked at him gravely.

“Will you say grace?” she asked.

The dark face opposite her turned crimson.

“I guess I’m out of practice,” he said, grimly. “It’s a good spell since I’ve done that. You’ll have to excuse me.”

“Then I must say it myself,” said Janie, reflectively, “and I’m not sure that I know just how, but it would never do to have our tea without some kind of a grace. Now fold your hands just as I do, and bow your head, and I’ll do the best I can. You won’t mind if I make mistakes, will you?”

“Not at all,” said the man, reassuringly.

Janie shut her eyes. “Dear God, please bless to our use the food we are going to—I mean about to eat, and forgive all our sins for Jesus’ sake. Amen.

There. That's a good deal like father says, if not 'zactly. Now, please help yourself, because my arms aren't long enough to reach across the table to you."

"I'll help myself," was the answer—and he did. Janie thought he must be very hungry indeed. She was hungry herself, so the meal was a silent one. When it was over her guest arose.

"Are you sure you have had enough?" asked Janie, politely. "Then we can go back to the parlor."

"Well, I guess if you'll excuse my going right away after meal-time I'll be moving on. There's so many people anxious to see me that I can't stay long in one place, you know."

"But aren't you going to wait and see Aunt Rebecca?" asked Janie in surprise.

"Well, no; I shall have to deny myself that pleasure. You can tell her how sorry I was."

He hesitated a moment, and then took a clumsy parcel wrapped in a newspaper out of his pocket and handed it to her.

"Give that to your father when he comes home, little girl, and don't open it until he does."

"Is it a present?" asked Janie.

"Well, no, not exactly," he answered with a grim smile. "But you can tell him he wouldn't have got it if it hadn't been for you. Now, will you kiss me good-bye before I go?"

"Of course."

The man stooped and lifted her in his arms. For a minute he held her closely, and kissed her forehead. Then he put her gently down.

"Good-bye, little girl," he said, huskily; "and God bless you."

Half an hour later Aunt Rebecca came home, just as Mr. and Mrs. Franklin drove in at the gate.

"Why, what brings you home so early?" cried Aunt Rebecca. "I didn't look for you for hours yet."

"Well, we didn't expect to be home this early ourselves," answered Mr. Franklin, "but we heard some news over at Valleyford that made us rather anxious, seeing that we'd left you and Janie here all alone. That notorious Dick Crawford escaped from the penitentiary at Wilmington three weeks ago. He's a tough character. They haven't been able to recapture him so far, but think that he can't elude them much longer. He's hiding around the country somewhere, and it was rumored that he was heading for these parts. So I thought we'd better come right home."

In her excitement over the bundles and parcels in the big wagon Janie forgot all about her mysterious visitor until the family were seated around the

tea-table. Then she remembered him.

“O, Aunt Rebecca, I forgot to tell you. There was a man here to see you this afternoon. He staid a good while and I got him his tea, and then he said he had to go, and I was to tell you how sorry he was.”

“Who was it?” asked Aunt Rebecca.

“I don’t know. He didn’t tell me his name. But he was a real nice man. He said he had a little girl like me once. And, O, yes, he gave me that parcel on the sideboard for you, father, and said to tell you if it hadn’t been for me you wouldn’t have got it. What did he mean, do you think?”

Mr. Franklin got up and opened the parcel with a puzzled air. Then he gave an exclamation that brought every one around him. There lay a dozen silver spoons, as many knives and forks, and a purse.

“Why, those are our spoons!” exclaimed Janie. “How did they come there?”

Mr. Franklin and his wife and Aunt Rebecca looked at each other.

“Janie,” said her father, “when did that man come and what did he look like?”

Janie told her story.

“And he was tall and black-looking,” she finally concluded, “and had such a funny mark over his left eye—like a big, three-cornered cut. And he looked so tired and dusty.”

“That was Dick Crawford,” said Mr. Franklin, in a husky voice. “There isn’t a doubt. To think of the risk you ran! And there are fifty dollars in that purse. I left it in the sideboard drawer. What an escape for you!”

“I’m sure he wouldn’t have hurt any one,” cried Janie, indignantly. “He was a real nice, kind man. And I promised I’d be his little girl in place of his own—she died long ago.”

“Bless your dear little heart! I suppose even Dick Crawford has a good spot left in his nature yet, and you found it. It’s a curious story, and we can’t be too thankful it has turned out as well as it has. But this is the last of leaving you home alone. I’ll never do it again.”

“Well, I think he was as nice as could be,” said Janie, stanchly. And she thinks so yet.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

[The end of *Janie's Visitor* by L. M. (Lucy Maud) Montgomery]