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The House Party at Smoky Island

By L. M. MONTGOMERY

When Madeline Stanwyck asked me to join her house party at Smoky Island I was not at first disposed to do so. It was too early in the season, and there would be mosquitoes. One mosquito can keep me more awake than a bad conscience: and there are millions of mosquitoes in Muskoka.

"No, no, the season for them is over," Madeline assured me. Madeline would say anything to get her way.

"The mosquito season is never over in Muskoka," I said, as grumpily as anyone could speak to Madeline. "They thrive up there at zero. And even if by some miracle there are no mosquitoes, I've no hankering to be chewed to pieces by black flies."

Even Madeline did not dare to say there would be no black flies, so she wisely fell back on her Madelinity.

"Please come, for my sake," she said wistfully. "It wouldn't be a real party for me if you weren't there, Jim darling."

I am Madeline's favorite cousin, twenty years her senior, and she calls everybody darling when she wants to get something out of him. Not but that Madeline ... but this story is not about Madeline. It is about an occurrence which took place at Smoky Island. None of us pretends to understand it, except the Judge, who pretends to understand everything. But he really understands it no better than the rest of us. His latest explanation is that we were all hypnotized and in the state of hypnosis saw and remembered things we couldn't otherwise have seen or remembered. But even he cannot explain who or what hypnotized us.

I decided to yield, but not all at once.

"Has your Smoky Island housekeeper still got that detestable white parrot?" I asked.

"Yes, but it is much better-mannered than it used to be," assured Madeline. "And you know you have always liked her cat."

"Who'll be in your party? I'm rather finicky as to the company I keep."

Madeline grinned.

"You know I never invite anyone but interesting people to my parties"—I bowed to the implied compliment—"with a dull one or two to show off the sparkle of the rest of us"—I did not bow this time—"Consuelo Anderson ... Aunt Alma ... Professor Tennant and his wife ... Dick Lane ... Tod Newman ... Senator Malcolm and Mrs. Senator ... Old Nosey ... Min Ingram ... Judge Warden ... Mary Harland ... and a few Bright Young Things to amuse *me*."

I ran over the list in my mind, not disapprovingly. Consuelo was a very fat girl with a B. A. degree. I liked her because she could sit still for a longer time than any woman I know. Tennant was professor of something he called the New Pathology—an insignificant little man with a gigantic intellect. Dick Lane was one of those coming men who never seem to arrive, but a frank, friendly, charming fellow enough. Mary Harland was a comfortable spinster, Tod an amusing little fop, Aunt Alma a sweet, silvery-haired thing like a Whistler mother. Old Nosey—whose real name was Miss Alexander and who never let anyone forget that she had nearly sailed on the *Lusitania*—and the Malcolms had no terrors for me, although the Senator always called his wife "Kittens." And Judge Warden was an old crony of mine. I did not like Min Ingram, who had a rapier-like tongue, but she could be ignored, along with the Bright Young Things.

"Is that all?" I asked cautiously.

"Well ... Doctor Armstrong and Brenda, of course," said Madeline, eyeing me as if it were not at all of course.

"Is that—wise?" I said slowly.

Madeline crumpled.

"Of course not," she said miserably. "It will likely spoil everything. But John insists on it ... you know he and Anthony Armstrong have been pals all their lives. And Brenda and I have always been chummy. It would look so funny if we didn't have them. I don't know what has got into her. We all *know* Anthony never poisoned Susette."

"Brenda doesn't know it, apparently," I said.

"Well, she ought to!" snapped Madeline. "As if Anthony could have poisoned anyone! But that's one of the reasons I particularly want you to come."

"Ah, now we're getting at it. But why *me*?"

"Because you've more influence over Brenda than anyone else ... oh, yes, you have. If you could get her to open up ... talk to her ... you might help her. Because ... if something doesn't help her soon she'll be beyond help. You know that."

I knew it well enough. The case of the Anthony Armstrongs was worrying us all. We saw a tragedy being enacted before our eyes and we could not lift a finger to help. For Brenda would not talk and Anthony had never talked.

The story, now five years old, was known to all of us, of course. Anthony's first wife had been Susette Wilder. Of the dead nothing but good; so I will say of Susette only that she was very beautiful and very rich. Luckily her fortune had come to her unexpectedly by the death of an aunt and cousin after she had married Anthony, so that he could not be accused of fortune-hunting. He had been wildly in love with Susette at first, but after they had been married a few years I don't think he had much affection left for her. None of the rest of us had ever had any to begin with. When word came back from California—where Anthony had taken her one winter for her nerves—that she was dead I don't suppose anyone felt any regret, nor any suspicion when we heard that she had died from an overdose of chloral; rather mysteriously, to be sure, for Susette was neither careless nor suicidally inclined. There were some ugly rumors, especially when it became known that Anthony had inherited her entire fortune under her will; but nobody ever dared say much openly. We, who knew and loved Anthony, never paid any heed to the hints. And when, two years later, he married Brenda Young, we were all glad. Anthony, we said, would have some real happiness now.

For a time he did have it. Nobody could doubt that he and Brenda were ecstatically happy. Brenda was a sincere, spiritual creature, lovely after a fashion totally different from Susette. Susette had had golden hair and eyes as cool and green as flourspar. Brenda had slim, dark distinction, hair that blended with the dusk, and eyes so full of twilight that it was hard to say whether they were blue or gray. She loved Anthony so terribly that sometimes I thought she was tempting the gods.

Then—slowly, subtly, remorselessly—the change set in. We began to feel that there was something wrong—very wrong—between the Armstrongs. They were no longer quite so happy ... they were not happy at all ... they were wretched. Brenda's old delightful laugh was never heard, and Anthony went about his work with an air of abstraction that didn't please his patients. His practise had fallen off awhile before Susette's death, but it had picked up and grown wonderfully. Now it began dropping again. And the worst of it was that Anthony didn't seem to care. Of course he didn't need it from a financial point of view, but he had always been so keenly interested in his work.

I don't know whether it was merely surmise or whether Brenda had let a word slip, but we all knew or felt that a horrible suspicion possessed her. There was some whisper of an anonymous letter, full of vile innuendoes, that had started the trouble. I never knew the rights of that, but I did know that Brenda had become a haunted woman.

Had Anthony given Susette that overdose of chloral—given it purposely?

If she had been the kind of woman who talks things out, some of us might have saved her. But she wasn't. It's my belief that she never said one word to Anthony of the cold horror of distrust that was poisoning her life. But he must have felt she suspected him, and between them was the chill and shadow of a thing that must not be spoken of.

At the time of Madeline's house party the state of affairs between the Armstrongs was such that Brenda had almost reached the breaking-point. Anthony's nerves were tense, too, and his eyes were almost as tragic as hers. We were all ready to hear that Brenda had left him or done something more desperate still. And nobody could do a thing to help, not

even I, in spite of Madeline's foolish hopes. I couldn't go to Brenda and say, "Look here, you know, Anthony never thought of such a thing as poisoning Susette." After all, in spite of our surmises, the trouble might be something else altogether. And if she did suspect him, what proof could I offer her that would root the obsession out of her mind?

I hardly thought the Armstrongs would go to Smoky Island, but they did. When Anthony turned on the wharf and held out his hand to assist Brenda from the motor-boat, she ignored it, stepping swiftly off without any assistance and running up through the rock garden and the pointed firs. I saw Anthony go very white. I felt a little sick myself. If matters had come to such a pass that she shrank from his mere touch, disaster was near.

Smoky Island was in a little blue Muskoka lake and the house was called the Wigwam ... probably because nothing on earth could be less like a wigwam. The Stanwyck money had made a wonderful place of it, but even the Stanwyck money could not buy fine weather. Madeline's party was a flop. It rained every day more or less for the week, and though we all tried heroically to make the best of things I don't think I ever spent a more unpleasant time. The parrot's manners were no better, in spite of Madeline's assurances. Min Ingram had brought an aloof, disdainful dog with her that everyone hated because he despised us all. Min herself kept passing out needle-like insults when she saw anyone in danger of being comfortable. I thought the Bright Young Things seemed to hold *me* responsible for the weather. All our nerves got edgy except Aunt Alma's. Nothing ever upset Aunt Alma. She prided herself a bit on that.

On Saturday the weather wound up with a regular downpour and a wind that rushed out of the black-green pines to lash the Wigwam and then rushed back like a maddened animal. The air was as full of torn, flying leaves as of rain, and the lake was a splutter of tossing waves. This charming day ended in a dank, streaming night.

And yet things had seemed a bit better than any day yet. Anthony was away. He had got some mysterious telegram just after breakfast, had taken the small motor-boat, and gone to the mainland. I was thankful, for I felt I could no longer endure seeing a man's soul tortured as his was. Brenda had kept her room all day on the good old plea of a headache. I won't say it wasn't a relief. We all felt the strain between her and Anthony like a tangible thing.

"Something—*something*—is going to happen," Madeline kept saying to me. She was really worse than the parrot.

After dinner we all gathered around the fireplace in the hall, where a cheerful fire of white birchwood was glowing; for although it was June the evening was cold. I settled back with a sigh of relief. After all, nothing lasted for ever, and this infernal house party would be over on Monday. Besides, it was really quite comfortable and cheerful here, despite rattling windows and wailing winds and rain-swept panes. Madeline turned out the electric lights, and the firelight was kind to the women, who all looked quite charming. Some of the Bright Young Things sat cross-legged on the floor with arms around one another quite indiscriminately as far as sex was concerned ... except one languid, sophisticated creature in orange velvet and long amber ear-rings, who sat on a low stool with a lapful of silken housekeeper's cat, giving everyone an excellent view of the bones in her spine. Min's dog posed haughtily on the rug, and the parrot in his cage was quiet—for him—only telling us once in a while that he or someone else was devilish clever. Mrs. Howey, the housekeeper, insisted on keeping him in the hall, and Madeline had to wink at it because it was hard to get a housekeeper in Muskoka even for a Wigwam.

The Judge was looking like a chuckle because he had solved a jigsaw puzzle that had baffled everyone, and the Professor and Senator, who had been arguing stormily all day, were basking in each other's regard for a foeman worthy of his steel. Consuelo was sitting still, as usual. Mrs. Tennant and Aunt Alma were knitting pullovers. Kittens, her fat hands folded across her satin stomach, was surveying her Senator adoringly, and Miss Nosey was taking everything in. We were, for the time being, a contented, congenial bunch of people and I did not see why Madeline should have suddenly proposed that each of us tell a ghost story, but she did. It was an ideal night for ghost stories, she averred. She hadn't heard any for ages and she understood that everybody had had at least one supernatural occurrence in his or her life.

"I haven't," growled the Judge contemptuously.

"I suppose," said Professor Tennant a little belligerently, "that you would call anyone an ass who believed in ghosts?"

The Judge carefully fitted his fingertips together before he replied.

"Oh, dear, no. I would not so insult asses."

"Of course if you don't *believe* in ghosts they can't happen," said Consuelo.

"Some people are able to see ghosts and some are not," announced Dick Lane. "It's simply a gift."

"A gift I was not dowered with," said Kittens complacently.

Mary Harland shuddered. "What a dreadful thing it would be if the dead really came back!"

"From ghoulies and ghaisties and lang-legged beasties
And things that go bump in the night

Good Lord, deliver us," quoted Ted flippantly.

But Madeline was not to be side-tracked. Her little elfish face, under its crown of russet hair, was alive with determination.

"We're going to spook a bit," she said resolutely. "This is just the sort of night for ghosts to walk. Only of course they can't walk here because the Wigwam isn't haunted, I'm sorry to say. Wouldn't it be heavenly to live in a haunted house? Come now, everyone must tell a ghost story. Professor Tennant, you lead off. Something nice and creepy, please."

To my surprize, the Professor did lead off, although Mrs. Tennant's expression plainly informed us that she didn't approve of juggling with ghosts. He told a very good story, too—punctuated with snorts from the Judge—about a house he knew which had been haunted by the voice of a dead child who joined in every conversation bitterly and vindictively. The child had, of course, been ill-treated and murdered, and its body was eventually found under the hearthstone of the library. Then Dick told a tale about a dead dog that avenged its master, and Consuelo amazed me by spinning a really gruesome yarn of a ghost who came to the wedding of her lover with her rival ... Consuelo said she knew the people. Ted knew a house in which you heard voices and footfalls where no voices or footfalls could be, and even Aunt Alma told of "a white lady with a cold hand" who asked you to dance with her. If you were reckless enough to accept the invitation you never lost the feeling of her cold hand in yours. This chilly apparition was always garbed in the costume of the Seventies.

"Fancy a ghost in a crinoline," giggled a Bright Young Thing.

Min Ingram, of all people, had seen a ghost and took it quite seriously.

"Well, show me a ghost and I'll believe in it," said the Judge, with another snort.

"Isn't he devilish clever?" croaked the parrot.

Just at this point Brenda drifted downstairs and sat down behind us all, her tragic eyes burning out of her white face. I had a feeling that there, in that calm, untroubled scene, full of good-humored, tolerably amused, commonplace people, a human heart was burning at the stake in agony.

Something fell over us with Brenda's coming. Min Ingram's dog suddenly whined and flattened himself out on the rug. It occurred to me that it was the first time I had ever seen him looking like a real dog. I wondered idly what had frightened him. The housekeeper's cat sat up, its back bristling, slid from the orange velvet lap and slunk out of the hall. I had a queer sensation in the roots of what hair I had left, so I turned hastily to the slim, dark girl on the oak settle at my right.

"You haven't told us a ghost story yet, Christine. It's your turn."

Christine smiled. I saw the Judge looking admiringly at her ankles, sheathed in chiffon hose. The Judge always had an

eye for a pretty ankle. As for me, I was wondering why I couldn't recall Christine's last name and why I felt as if I had been impelled in some odd way to make that commonplace remark to her.

"Do you remember how firmly Aunt Elizabeth believed in ghosts?" said Christine. "And how angry it used to make her when I laughed at the idea? I am ... wiser now."

"I remember," said the Senator in a dreamy way.

"It was your Aunt Elizabeth's money that went to the first Mrs. Armstrong, wasn't it?" said one of the Bright Young Things, nicknamed Tweezers. It was an abominable thing for anyone to say, right there before Brenda. But nobody seemed horrified. I had another odd feeling that it *had* to be said and who but Tweezers would say it? I had another feeling ... that ever since Brenda's entrance every trifle was important, every tone was of profound significance, every word had a hidden meaning. Was I developing nerves?

"Yes," said Christine evenly.

"Do you suppose Susette Armstrong really took that overdose of chloral on purpose?" went on Tweezers unbelievably.

Not being near enough to Tweezers to assassinate her, I looked at Brenda. But Brenda gave no sign of having heard. She was staring fixedly at Christine.

"No," said Christine. I wondered how she knew, but there was no question whatsoever in my mind that she did know it. She spoke as one having authority. "Susette had no intention of dying. And yet she was doomed, although she never suspected it. She had an incurable disease which would have killed her in a few months. Nobody knew that except Anthony and me. And she had come to hate Anthony so. She was going to change her will the very next day—leave everything away from him. She told me so. I was furious. Anthony, who had spent his life doing good to suffering creatures, was to be left poor and struggling again, after his practise had been all shot to pieces by Susette's goings-on. I had loved Anthony ever since I had known him. He didn't know it—but Susette did. Trust her for that. She used to twit me with it. Not that it mattered ... I knew he would never care for me. But I saw my chance to do something for him and I took it. *I gave Susette that overdose of chloral. I loved him enough for that ... and for this.*"

Somebody screamed. I have never known whether it was Brenda or not. Aunt Alma—who was never upset over anything—was huddled in her chair in hysterics. Kittens, her fat figure shaking, was clinging to her Senator, whose foolish, amiable face was gray—absolutely gray. Min Ingram was on her knees and the Judge was trying to keep his hands from shaking by clenching them together. His lips were moving and I know I caught the word, "God." As for Tweezers and all the rest of her gang, they were no longer Bright Young Things but simply shivering, terrified children.

I felt sick—very, very sick. *Because there was no one on the oak settle and none of us had ever known or heard of the girl I had called Christine.*

At that moment the hall door opened and a dripping Anthony entered. Brenda flung herself hungrily against him, wet as he was.

"Anthony ... Anthony, forgive me," she sobbed.

Something good to see came into Anthony's worn face.

"Have you been frightened, darling?" he said tenderly. "I'm sorry I was so late. There was really no danger. I waited to get an answer to my wire to Los Angeles. You see I got word this morning that Christine Latham had been killed in a motor accident yesterday evening. She was Susette's second cousin and nurse ... a dear, loyal little thing. I was very fond of her. I'm sorry you've had such an anxious evening, sweetheart."

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