

A Question
of
Acquaintance

Lucy Maud Montgomery
1929

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A Question of Acquaintance

*Old Sourmug and a change of heart, as
recorded by the author of "Anne
of Green Gables"*

By L. M. MONTGOMERY

Illustrated by ROBB BEEBE

The fiddle was at the bottom of it all. If Dr. James Dimma had not been awakened in the "wee sma's" by the sound of a violin on the porch of Miss Jackson's bungalow next door he might have forgiven Arthur Binns for other things. For looking like a movie star; for asking him ten days before, "Caught anything yet?" when Dr. Dimma had been on the lake for three mortal hours without a bite; for—most unforgivable thing of all—being evidently poor and certainly unknown.

But to be wakened out of a sound and much needed sleep at three o'clock a.m. by such ungodly caterwauling was too much. Yes, by gad, far too much. Something had to be done about it. Where the devil had Miss Jackson gone, and why had she left this jackanapes in her house while she was away? Had she left him? He had come there the day after she had gone. Perhaps she didn't know a thing about it. He might be a bank bandit. Likely he was. Nobody but a bank bandit would play a fiddle on the porch at three o'clock in the morning. And Merle was getting too friendly with him—far too friendly. Hadn't he seen her throwing a rose at the fellow over the hedge the night before? To be sure, Merle threw roses at everybody. But to throw them to an unknown nobody who probably hadn't a doctor in his family for generations back! No, this must be put a stop to at once. Merle could have her own way about the boys she played round with up to a certain point, but there was a limit. No more roses—no more going off to play golf together at

the Sangamo Club. There had been two weeks of this, but it was going to stop. Dr. Dimma hadn't the least doubt that it would stop when he said so. Merle was the most docile, the most pliable of girls. She had always done what he told her to do. She would, he hadn't the least doubt, eventually marry Clark Fairweather when he told her to. No girl in her senses would dream of refusing Clark. Oodles of money, a pedigree equal to the Dimmas' for antiquity, a hard-working fellow with a professional chair waiting for him. To be sure, he wasn't a doctor. Dr. Dimma sighed as he pulled off his purple-and-orange pyjamas, rolled them into a savage ball, and hurled them on the floor. That would be too much good luck for such a contrary world.



“It isn't his fault that he's good-looking. And . . . and you've no idea how divinely he can kiss!”

Dr. Dimma worshipped his own profession. No other counted for much in his eyes. He had always hoped Merle would marry a doctor. To have a son-in-law with whom he could discuss germs and operations and cancers would have been the height of bliss in his eyes. And there had been no lack of candidates. Merle could even have had Cleaver Robinson, whose researches into various elusive bacilli had already put him in the limelight. To be sure, poor Cleaver looked rather like a magnified bacillus himself. No wonder Merle couldn't bear him. Dr. Dimma was not an unreasonable parent. But there was no fault to be found with Clark Fairweather personally,

and it was high time Merle stopped her shilly-shallying with all the boys in Sangamo and settled down.

And no more roses over the fence. He'd see to that at once. Was he growing roses to see them wasted that way on a fellow who couldn't tell a Gloire de Dijon from a cabbage rose? Weren't they enough trouble and worry without that? He didn't see why he wasted time and energy over the beastly things. Slugs—and spiders—and blight—and mildew! Any man was a fool who made a hobby of rose-growing. Any man was a fool to give his daughter so much of her own way. He'd show her!

And Dr. Dimma, who worshipped Merle and would have died if he couldn't grow roses, went down to breakfast in an atrocious humour with everything and everybody, and determined to make them feel it.

To make thing worse, Merle was ten minutes late and told him his watch was wrong. It infuriated Dr. Dimma ever to be told his watch was wrong. He pounded the table and glared at her. Not that Merle cared. She was not in the least afraid of her father, though she had spent the most of her young life luring him to make up his mind as she wanted it made up, and explaining away his insulting remarks to her friends. Even now, behind his glare his pride in her was fairly sticking out of his bulging blue eyes. Not another girl in Sangamo was a patch on her. That trim, shining little black head of her! Those black eyebrows like little wings! Those fan-lashed velvety eyes! That dimple just below the red delightful mouth of her! That creamy throat above the linen collar of her pretty green sweater! A thoroughbred, every inch of her! Acres of family behind her. Showed her knees too much, of course. But at any rate they were knees that could be shown.

"My watch isn't wrong," he shouted. Dr. Dimma always believed that if he contradicted loud enough, people would be convinced. "Here I am, worn out after a sleepless night, and in a hurry to get down to the hospital. Do you realize that I have an important consultation at ten? And you keep me waiting for hours for my breakfast!"

Merle didn't ask why he didn't go ahead without her. She knew no meal had any pleasure for him if she were not facing him across the table. To him she was not only Merle—she was youth, beauty, mystery, romance—everything that had deserted the life of a rotund, bald-headed, elderly doctor. Instead, she went round and kissed him.

"Now, Daddy dearest, don't be cross," she pleaded.

Generally this placated the doctor. He liked to feel that his womenkind felt the need of placating him. But the iron had bitten too deeply. A fiddle at three o'clock played by a nobody! "Caught any yet?"

"Never mind standing there in a skirt that is a sheer impertinence. Go and sit down."

Merle sat meekly enough. Trouble of some kind was brewing. Perhaps she, too, had heard the fiddle! And understood better than the doctor what had been played.

“Did I,” said Dr. Dimma impressively, “see you throwing a rose at that fellow next door last night?”

“You’re only asking that for rhetorical effect, Daddy,” said Merle coolly. “Of course you saw me throw a rose.”

Dr. Dimma snorted ironically.

“Of course,” he mimicked. “Well, this has got to stop.”

“What has got to stop?”

“Everything—everything. I won’t have you running round with that fellow. We don’t know him.”

“I do,” said Merle.

“Ah, you do. What do you know about him, miss? What’s his pedigree?”

“Daddy dear, he isn’t a horse. He’s very nice. He plays a beautiful game—such a pity you don’t care for golf, Daddy—and—and—perhaps he’s your future son-in-law. So you really ought to know him.”

Dr. Dimma glared at her and banged the table. He knew Merle was only trying to tease him, but still!

“Son-in-law! No, thank you!” The doctor’s sarcasm was terrible. “No son-in-law for me who plays the fiddle when decent people should be asleep.”

“But, Daddy, he was overseas and he’s been subject to insomnia ever since. Besides, it helps him to think.”

“Oh, blame everything on the war. That fellow never smelled powder. As for thinking—don’t tell me he thinks. A he-doll like that couldn’t even try to think.”

“You’re unjust, Daddy. It isn’t his fault that he’s good-looking. And—and,” Merle added dreamily, “you have no idea how divinely he can kiss!”

Dr. Dimma almost choked over the mouthful of coffee he had just taken in.

“What do you know—has he dared—has he dared—”

“Daddy, you’ll have apoplexy. Now, dearest, stop spluttering. I haven’t made up my mind yet that I really want him. But he’s such a relief after Clark.”

“What’s the matter with Clark?” glared Dr. Dimma. “He’s clever and rich and good-looking, isn’t he? And he’ll make you an affectionate husband.”

“An affectionate husband. Oh, Daddy, you’re so Victorian,” groaned Merle. “Affectionate husbands are outmoded. We like the cavemen. The

only thing I really have against Clark is the fact that his face demands side-whiskers a generation too late.”

“Look here, Merle, I’m serious and I want you to be. You’ve got to stop associating with this—this—”

“His name is—”

“I know his name. It’s all I do know about him, except the self-evident fact that he’s an idler and a—”

“He’s been—”

“Not a word. The Dimmas have been in Sangamo for six generations. You’ll be good enough to remember what I say, Merle. I mean every word of it. And you’ll find I’m firm.”

Merle stood up. It was time to put an end to the interview. She felt a little anxious, though she didn’t show it. There had been one or two times in her life when she couldn’t wheedle her father. When Dr. Dimma really did make up his mind on any point, he had never been known to change it. And she knew his reverence for ancestry and pedigrees only too well.

“You’d be more convincing, Daddy love, if you weren’t so cross. Being a tyrant isn’t being firm, you know. Now, don’t let’s quarrel this lovely morning.”

“Merle, remember what I say—”

“Of course I’ll remember it. How can I help remembering when you’re shouting at me like that? And glaring! You’re such a nice-looking father when you don’t glare. I’ve tried to bring you up properly, darling, but I can’t seem to break you of glaring. Now, run along to your little hospital. I’m going out to the club with the Benson girls. We’re the committee for the dance tomorrow night, you know.”

Dr. Dimma snorted again. He didn’t approve of the Benson girls—though their pedigree equalled the Dimmas’. But for that matter he approved of none of those silky sophisticated creatures Merle ran with—snaky, hipless things, with shingle bobs, and mouths that looked as if they had been making a meal of blood, and legs that might as well be naked; who powdered their noses publicly with the engaging unconcern of a cat washing its face in the gaze of thousands. Where were the girls of yesteryear? Girls that were girls—ah! But times had changed. Still, had a father no rights at all? This was all it came to—all your years of sacrifice and care. They flouted you—just flouted you in their slim insolence. Well, he’d show them—he’d show her, the darned little fool, playing fast and loose with a man like Clark Fairweather. It was time somebody brought her up with a round turn, even an outmoded father who had worshipped her and slaved for her, and was now told for his reward that a man he objected to could kiss divinely!

One morning two weeks later Dr. Dimma, who had had a sick call in the night and was very tired, decided to make a morning of it in bed. He told Merle so, rather grumpily, when she came in to see him. Being tired, even after such a night, meant that he was growing old, and he didn't like it. Especially when he had no son to carry on his work. Or son-in-law. Dr. Dimma groaned. But he looked proudly at Merle, who was off to the club again on committee work about another dance. The whole world, reflected Dr. Dimma, was dancing mad. But Merle was looking especially pretty in a smart little hat of black velvet pulled down over her laughing eyes, with two tiny winglike things sticking up at the sides as if black butterflies had alighted there. Hats had degenerated like everything else, but he rather liked this one of Merle's.

"I won't be home till after the dance, Dad, but I've told Mrs. Mason just what to get for your lunch. You're to have tomato and watercress salad if you're good and, of course, you're dining with Janes. I hope you'll have a lovely rest. What nifty pyjamas, Dad! New ones? I never saw such wonderful pyjamas."

"Where have you seen so many pyjamas?" said Dr. Dimma testily.

"On the counters," retorted Merle, crushing Dr. Dimma's vulgar mind, and tripped off jauntily.

Dr. Dimma looked after her proudly. She was a good little scout. She had taken his decree concerning Arthur Binns like a thoroughbred. There had been no more roses and golf. To be sure, she had asked him prettily two days ago if he couldn't see his way clear to knowing his neighbours. But the doctor flattered himself he had made his final decision clear to her. And she had behaved very well about it—very well.

The doctor slept the sleep of the just all the morning, had his lunch served to him in bed by Mrs. Mason, who had waited on him and adored him for twenty years, ate his favourite salad, gave Mrs. Mason a genial permission to spend the afternoon with a friend, and decided he would stay in bed till four. That would give him just time to dress and get down to the hospital in time for that consultation with Dr. Janes at five. Secretly, Dr. Dimma was inordinately proud of being asked to consult with the great Janes, who was indubitably the most eminent neurologist in the province.

What was that? At a bound Dr. Dimma was out of bed and at the window. Gracious Peter! Pigs in his rose garden—pigs—three of them. Where on earth had they come from? Up from that back street where the Kellys lived. Pigs—he'd show them . . .

The doctor flew downstairs and out over the lawn in a tantrum. The pigs saw him coming and, not liking orange-and-purple pyjamas perhaps, rushed

madly through the open gate in the hedge between the doctor's property and Miss Jackson's. The doctor pursued them bravely. It wouldn't do to chase them into Miss Jackson's garden and leave them there. The terrified porkers tore around her house, through her vegetable garden, and made their escape through a hole in the paling behind the garage. The doctor turned in triumph. He'd teach those miserable Kellys a lesson. This was what came of living just outside the town limits where people could keep any kind of nuisances. By gad, he'd move, that he would. Never mind if he had lived at Beechurst all his life and his father before him. Sentiment was all very well—but fiddles—and pigs—and nobodies from nowhere who had never heard of a streptococcus and probably thought the violet ray was the name of a girl. Who had left that gate open? Who—it was at this point the doctor saw the dog.

Saw him so near that the whole world seemed filled with him. A bulldog—the hugest and ugliest bulldog Dr. Dimma had ever seen. A dog who evidently had a quiet taste in pyjamas.

Dr. Dimma turned, and stood not on the order of his going. The door of Miss Jackson's garage was open, and Dr. Dimma dashed in, with the dog an inch behind. There was a ladder set up against the beam of a floorless little loft, and Dr. Dimma sprinted up it as nimbly as a pussycat, pyjamas and all. He not only climbed it, but scrambled off it onto the beam. Ordinarily dogs could not climb ladders, but who knew what a devil like this could do? The doctor was taking no chances. If the dog attempted to climb the ladder he would hurl the ladder to the floor.

The dog, however, showed no inclination to climb the ladder. He sat down on his haunches and looked up at the doctor, sitting above his head in those violent pyjamas. There was a look about him that Dr. Dimma did not like—the look of a dog with any amount of spare time.

Here was a fix! How on earth was he to get down? Well, the only thing to do was to yell. Somebody would hear him—Mrs. Mason—no, Mrs. Mason had gone, and anyway he didn't want the poor old lady chewed up by the dog. That Binns nobody? Was the dog his? Dr. Dimma suddenly realized his pyjamas. In his early wrath and late terror he had not thought of how he was dressed. Still, pyjamas or no pyjamas, he must get down. So he yelled.

A young man was standing in the garage door—a tall young man, with grey eyes and a tremendous mop of red hair. An amused young man, leaning nonchalantly against the jamb and looking not at the doctor, but at his pyjamas.

“Look here, sir,” said the doctor, as soon as he got enough breath to say it, “I want you to call off your dog.”

“Why should I?” the young man said coolly.

The doctor stared at him. “Why should you? Why—why—”

“Yes, why should I?” repeated the young man. “There have been tramps around here lately stealing chickens.”

“Tramp, tramp. Do you take me for a tramp—or a chicken thief?”



“I don’t care what your name is. I know what you are, to play a cowardly trick like this on an old man.” “An old man? With those pyjamas? Tut, tut!”

“One never knows. Or you may have escaped from Dr. Mayberry’s private asylum. Those pyjamas of yours rather lend strength to that theory. Anyhow, I understand that I haven’t the pleasure of your acquaintance and I’m not taking any chances.”

Dr. Dimma stared at Arthur Binns for a moment or two and, not being a stupid man, understood several things at once. So Merle had told him already. And this was his revenge.

“Young man—”

“My name is—”

“I don’t care what your name is. I know what you are, to play a cowardly trick like this on an old man.”

“An old man? With those pyjamas? Tut, tut!”

“Mr. Binns, this has gone far enough. Be good enough to call off your dog at once. I’ve an important consultation at five.”

Mr. Binns shook his red head slowly and sorrowfully.

“The asylum, beyond doubt. I thought so as soon as I saw those pyjamas. Keep an eye on him, Alphonso. He may be violent.”

Alphonso was keeping two eyes on him. Mr. Binns turned and walked away.

“Hey, you!” shouted the doctor incredulously. “You’re not going to leave me here!”

The lean red fox—aye, that was the name for him—turned.

“I must. I can’t have strangers prowling about my aunt’s garage. If I knew you, of course, it might be different.”

Dr. Dimma knew perfectly well what was being put up to him. And he had no intention of surrendering. No, he would die there first, pyjamas and all.

“I’m going down that ladder,” he announced defiantly. “And if your dog injures me you will be held responsible for the consequences.”

“Oh, but that wouldn’t bring you back to life,” smiled Mr. Binns. “I really wouldn’t advise you to try climbing down the ladder. Alphonso is by way of being a one-man dog. Why not, instead, try enlarging the circle of your acquaintance? I’m a decent lot. I go to bed early at least once a week, and I never say anything to my friends’ faces that I wouldn’t say behind their backs. What say?”

“My dear young man”—oh, the contempt Dr. Dimma put into the words—“when I say a thing I mean it.”

“So do I. We have at least that much in common,” and Mr. Binns walked away. Before he disappeared he turned and said, “If you should happen to change your mind, I’ll not be far off.”

Dr. Dimma took a handkerchief out of his pyjama coat pocket and wiped his damp brow. What a devilish predicament! And that appointment with Janes at five! He must not miss it—by the nine gods of Clusium he must not. But how could he get down? There was no way but by the ladder. It was all very well to talk of going down the ladder, but the doctor knew he couldn’t do it. People were sometimes literally torn to pieces by dogs, weren’t they? Hadn’t he read not long ago of a dog killing a man by biting into his jugular vein? He wished he did know Arthur Binns—and his whole family.

The doctor put a foot on the ladder and Alphonso made a most blood-curdling sound. The doctor hastily drew his foot back, while perspiration sprang out of every pore. There was a lot of silence. It was frightfully hot in the loft. He could hear laughter somewhere down the back street. How dared anybody laugh? And that young devil was playing his fiddle! Everything seemed to be going on as usual outside. It was indecent that it should be so. Why didn’t somebody miss him? But who was there to miss him—poor old Dr. Dimma who was of no importance to anyone—except a few miserable sick people who would die if he didn’t get to see them. Why didn’t somebody come? People were always somewhere else when you wanted

them, and when you didn't you just fell over them. Why was his daughter getting up dances at the Sangamo Club, instead of being home looking after her poor old father who was perishing of thirst in Miss Jackson's garage? He was thirsty. How many hours could that devil of a dog hang on? Would he never get thirsty? Why had he told the S.P.C.A. to get after old Dan Kelly for kicking his dog? No doubt the dog deserved to be kicked. Every dog did—just for being a dog.

Wasn't that a queer throbbing in the back of his neck? He must be calm. Yes, even though Janes—Dr. Dimma gave himself up to hate, and hated everything living or dead. He hoped Alphonso would take mange, distemper, worms, be run over by a truck, and poisoned with strychnine. He invented several more terrible deaths for Alphonso and for his master. How delightful it would be to have Arthur Binns tied to a stake, and amuse oneself throwing sharp hatchets at him! Why had Cesare Borgia been so misunderstood?

He had a sudden wild pang of hope when a black cat walked calmly through the garage. Surely Alphonso would chase the cat—any proper dog would. Kipling said so. But Alphonso continued to squat on his hambones, with his bandy legs planted in front of him, and his unwinking eyes fastened on the purple-and-orange pyjamas, until the cat had vanished. Well, he had never had any opinion of Kipling.

Every time Dr. Dimma squirmed, Alphonso made that dreadful sound. So the doctor tried to keep perfectly still. The narrow beam was not a comfortable place to sit. His left leg went to sleep. It was an infernal sensation. How long had he been there? It must have been hours. Janes would never forgive him! Suppose he fell asleep or fainted from hunger and tumbled off the beam. Suppose he had a stroke of apoplexy or a heart failure. Suppose the dog went mad this hot day. But still it never occurred to Dr. Dimma that he knew Arthur Binns.

Again he felt a faint flicker of hope. Through the tiny window at the end of the loft he could see a portion of his own front walk. A lady came up it. Surely—surely—when she found no one at home and the front door wide open, she would have the sense to investigate a bit. Then she turned her head. Even at that distance Dr. Dimma knew her and shrank into himself. The abominable Mrs. Slocum—the awful she-reporter of the *Sangamo Banner*. His pet aversion—the only woman on earth he really detested. Mrs. Slocum, who persisted in talking to him glibly of compulsion neuroses and anxiety neuroses and inferiority complexes and such like new-fangled twaddle. Mrs. Slocum, who went in for spiritualism, and believed she had a “spirit love” on “the other side.” Mrs. Slocum, who wrote up everything, big and little, for her infernal “column.” What on earth was she after? If she should find him! Dr. Dimma would have sat on that beam forever—he

would have run the gauntlet of forty Alphonso's rather than have Mrs. Slocum's small, pale, watery eyes light upon him in his pyjamas perched on a beam in Mrs. Jackson's garage. Suppose it got into the paper! Ridicule would be his portion all the rest of his life. He dared not draw a free breath for half an hour after he had seen her going back down the walk.

Really, that dog's eyes would be sprained! Had he ever moved them once? Dr. Dimma tried to outstare him—hadn't he read something somewhere about the power of the human eye over animals? No animal can continue to look a human being steadily in the eye. All pish-posh. Alphonso gave back stare for stare. Dr. Dimma tried "willing" him to go and "willed" hard. Alphonso merely grinned at him. Wasn't there some Master Word which if uttered would make a dog fawn at your feet? Scat—no, that was how you talked to cats.

It must be long after five now. Janes would have given him up in wrath and contempt. Never would he have the chance of such an honour again. And no doubt the Kelly pigs had returned and were rooting up his finest roses. Dr. Dimma groaned and once more felt for his handkerchief to mop his face. It was not in his pocket—it had slipped to the floor, but his fingers encountered a small scrap of paper torn from a Toronto periodical he had been reading two nights ago. A paragraph about some new rose. But on the reverse were some "society" items, and one of them leaped out and caught Dr. Dimma's staring eyes.

Dr. A. W. Binns, the author of the famous monograph on tropical diseases, is spending the summer months in his aunt's cottage in Sangamo, where he hopes to be able to finish his essay on tuberculosis, to be entered for competition for the Carmody prize open to the world. The distinguished young Canadian, who has already won such laurels for himself and such honour for his native land, has accepted a position in Johns Hopkins and will take up his duties this autumn, etc., etc.

Dr. Dimma almost fell off the beam. He knew Arthur Binns at last! The excited yelp that he emitted could have been heard half a mile. It brought Binns to the garage door in a second.

"Feel any better acquainted with me now?" he drawled. "Think you know me?"

"Know you," bellowed the doctor, "I've known you for years. Author of that amazing monograph on tropical diseases. What do you mean by never

telling me you were A. W. Binns?”

“Oh!” Dr. Binns saw the clipping waved in Dr. Dimma’s agitated hand. “So that’s what brought you to a nodding acquaintance. Well, I’m not much to advertise, and I didn’t think Merle would be any more likely to fall in love with me because I wrote that monograph.” He did not add, “And I thought you needed a lesson,” but perhaps it would not have mattered much if he had.

“You could have saved me a very uncomfortable afternoon if you hadn’t been quite so modest,” grunted Dr. Dimma. “Lucky that clipping happened to be in my pocket. I’d have sat here till kingdom come before I’d have knuckled down to you otherwise. Now, hadn’t you better call off that—your dog?”

“Alphonso,” said Dr. Binns, “this is a good friend of ours. Call it a day.”

Dr. Dimma could have sworn he saw Alphonso wink at him. He did not care. He was too wild with excitement and delight to care for anything like that. What a distinguished face that fellow had! What a chin! What incredible luck that Merle had captured him! Merle, the little fool, who hadn’t yet made up her mind that she “really wanted” him! Heaven grant him patience! “My son-in-law, Dr. A. W. Binns”—oh, he would die of pride!

“You’d better come down, sir, Alphonso won’t touch you now. He’s really a broth of a dog. You’ll think so when you know him better.”

Dr. Dimma had his doubts about this. He felt he knew Alphonso quite well enough now, and he still felt he would enjoy spanking him with a board. But henceforth even Alphonso was sacrosanct.

“I’ll come down if I can restore the circulation,” he said, rubbing his leg. “By the way, what time is it? I had an appointment with Janes at five.”

“It’s a quarter to five,” said Dr. Binns. “Five minutes for you to dress—ten for me to take you there. We’ll make it, though we may have to knock over a few foolish pedestrians.”

Dr. Dimma crept down the ladder more slowly than he had gone up it, keeping a wary eye on Alphonso. Then he held out his hand to Dr. Binns.

“I suppose you’ll tell this as a good joke everywhere for years,” he said ruefully.

“Oh, no,” said Dr. Binns, taking his hand. “We’ll keep this in the family. I don’t want my father-in-law held up to ridicule. You see, Merle and I were married yesterday afternoon.”

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

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[End of *A Question of Acquaintance* by L. M. (Lucy Maud) Montgomery]