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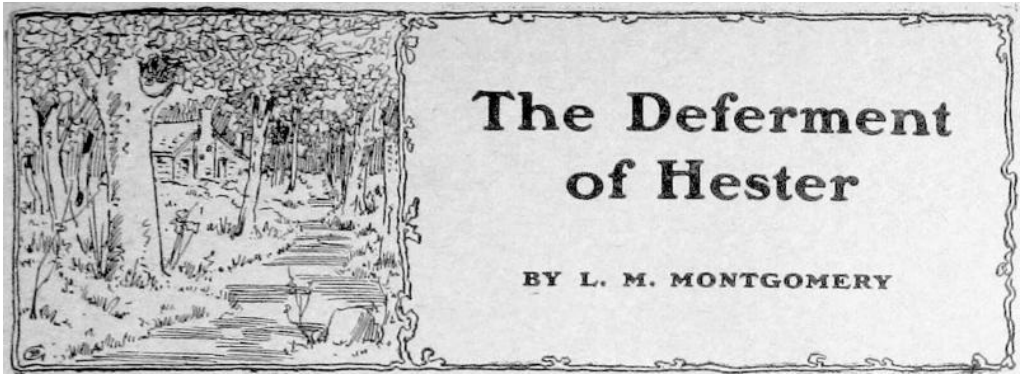
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The Deferment of Hester

L. M. Montgomery

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The Deferment of Hester

BY L. M. MONTGOMERY

I knew it was Hester as soon as I stepped off the train. It is not often that a stranger answers to our preconception of her, especially when said preconception has no better foundation than the shifting-sand of two very brief business letters; but Hester did.

A tall woman, but not over tall; stoutish, yet with a certain restraint of outline suggestive of a thrifty soul who was not going to be over lavish even in the matter of *avoir-dupois*; dressed in a palpable second-best, with a hat chosen less for vain adornment than for qualities that would wear well; a knot of soft, crimped brown hair with a thread or two of gray in it, and a sunny face with full-blown red cheeks and brisk brown eyes. I liked her.

When I had been prospecting about for some place in which to spend my vacation, a young woman whom I had met at a slum-mission committee-conference told me she had boarded the preceding summer at Hester Sweet's, Wayside, Valley Road, and could conscientiously recommend it. I made a note of the recommendation, not so much because of her conscience as because I took a fancy to the name of Hester Sweet. So I wrote to the latter, using the young-woman-of-the-slum-committee's name as a sort of reference. This was a false move because, as I discovered later on, Hester did not like the young woman aforesaid; but luckily she liked my handwriting and, moreover, had had a sister Sally who had died young. For which excellent reasons Hester agreed to take me in for the months of July and August.

"I suppose you're Miss Jordan," said Hester briskly. "I'm real glad to see you. My, you don't look a mite like I expected. I made sure you'd be fair—my sister Sally was fair—and you're real dark complected. Well, well, we're all as we're made, to be sure."

Before we had driven a mile Hester had implored me not to call her Miss Sweet, and I had bargained with her to call me Sally. We were chums from that moment.

Valley Road was four miles from the station, and Wayside was the name of Hester's place. I gurgled with satisfaction when we reached it. The house was small and white and low eaved, set down in a most delightfully picturesque little hollow that dropped away from the road. Between road and house was an apple orchard and flower garden all mixed up together. Poplars, stiff, prim Lombardies, stood about it, and the front-door walk was bordered with clam shells. There was honeysuckle over the parlor windows and ivy over the front door and moss on the roof. It was the sort of house I had seen in happy dreams, but I had never hoped for such good luck as spending the summer in one.

When Hester showed me up to my room I was ready to cry for joy. The ceiling was low and sloping, and the floor sagged, and there was such an odd cornery window with small panes curtained by a white muslin frill; the ivy made it so dim I could hardly see my way about, and there was always a little swish sounding through it from the poplars outside. I thought it all delicious and said so. Hester loved me for it, just as she had hated the slum-mission-committee young woman because the latter had said so much shade was unhygienic and objected to sleeping on a feather bed. Now, I glory in feather beds, and the more feathery and unhygienic they are the more I glory.

Hester's cooking, too, deserved to be ranked among the fine arts. She concocted such rich, lovely, plummy things. She told me it was such a comfort to see me eat; she had been so afraid that I would be like the slum-mission young woman who wouldn't eat anything but fruit and hot water for breakfast, and tried to make Hester cook on scientific principles. Just as if anyone could make doughnuts on scientific principles! Hester's doughnuts were the very apotheosis of doughnuts and she didn't even go by a recipe. It is such a delight in these enlightened days to stumble on one of those genuine, old-fashioned cooks, who don't care a bit if they ruin your digestion so long as they can give you feasts of fat things.

Wayside was quiet and dreamy. There was nothing to do and I did it thoroughly. Nevertheless, I did not object to mild dissipation, and when Hester asked me to accompany her to the Thursday night prayer-meeting I agreed with alacrity.

Hester blossomed out like the rose to attend that prayer-meeting. I was amazed. She wore a pale blue lawn dress with a design of pansies in it and more ruffles than I should ever have suspected economical Hester to be guilty of; also a white straw hat with pink roses and ostrich feathers on it. I thought she put them on because prayer-meeting was the only social function Valley Road had, but later on I discovered

another motive.

Valley Road prayer-meetings were essentially feminine. The men seldom went—not because they were irreligious but because they regarded the prayer-meeting as a woman’s affair. There were thirty-two women present, two half-grown boys, and one solitary man besides the minister. Hester and I sat up in the front seat. She enjoyed herself hugely, leading the singing and answering the Bible-class-lesson questions before any of the other women could get their mouths in shape to do so. But I found it a little dull and betook myself to studying the aforesaid solitary man who sat facing us in a corner and looking dismally out of place.

He was not handsome or young or graceful; he had remarkably long legs—so long that he had to keep them coiled up under the seat to dispose of them—and he was stoop-shouldered. His hands were big and his hair wanted barbering and his beard was rather unkempt. But I liked his face; it was kindly and honest and tender; there was something else in it, too—I couldn’t decide just what, and it was this that interested me. I was in pursuit of that elusive quality all through prayer-meeting. Finally I concluded that this man’s ancestors had suffered and been strong and it was made manifest in his face; there was a sort of patient, humorous endurance in his expression that indicated he would go to the stake if need be but would keep on looking pleasant until he really had to begin squirming. I rather wondered what he went to prayer-meeting for when it was so plainly unfashionable for his sex; but I found out later on. He went for the same reason that Hester put on her pansy-dress—a motive as old as Eden.

When we went out it was a bright moonlight night. As Hester and I walked down the road this one solitary man came up to us and said:

“May I see you home, Hester?”

Hester took his arm as prim and shy as if she were only sixteen.

“Miss Jordan, permit me to introduce Mr. Douglas,” she said with awesome politeness.

Mr. Douglas was lovely. He nodded and said:

“I was looking at you in prayer-meeting, miss, and thinking what a nice little girl you were.”

I like to be told I’m a nice little girl because I’m really too tall; and I was so much obliged to Mr. Douglas that I dropped discreetly behind soon after and left him and Hester as much alone as I could, considering that there were cows on the road.

I was delighted to find that Hester had a beau. I had been sincerely pitying the man who had missed marrying her. Hester would have made a paragon of a wife—cheery, economical, tolerant, and a very queen of cooks—and it was flagrant waste

on Nature's part not to have arranged matters better. I was glad to see that they were coming out all right after all.

The next day Hester told me that John Douglas had asked her to take me up to see his mother.

"She's bed-rid most of the time and never goes out of the house," Hester explained, "but she's powerful fond of company and always wants to see my boarders. I told him we would run up some evening, soon."

We thought of going up that evening, but later in the day Mr. Douglas called on his mother's behalf to ask us to tea at "Uplands" the next afternoon. Accordingly, we sallied forth the following day at a good early country-hour. It was a hot day, and Hester, between excitement and a black cashmere dress, looked as if she were being broiled alive. I had entreated her to wear her lawn, but she was firm in her refusal.

"Old Mrs. Douglas would think it terrible unbecoming and frivolous," she explained. "John likes that pansy-dress, though," she added wistfully.

Dear Hester! I could have hugged her; she was so much of a woman.

"Uplands," the old Douglas homestead, was about half a mile from Wayside, cresting a windy hill. The house itself was a picturesque, comfortable farmhouse, old enough to be dignified, and girdled with maple groves and orchards. There were big trim barns behind it and everything fairly screamed snugness and prosperity at us as we went up the lane. Whatever the patient endurance in Mr. Douglas' face meant it didn't mean debts and duns.

John Douglas met us at the door. He squeezed Hester's hand—I saw him do it although I pretended I didn't. Then he towed us into the sitting-room. There his mother was enthroned in an armchair.

I had expected old Mrs. Douglas to be tall because John was so leggy. She wasn't; she was the tiniest mite of a woman I ever saw and might have posed as a grandmother-doll. She was dressed in an old-fashioned black silk, with a fluffy white shawl over her shoulders. Her hair was wavy snow-white, surmounted by a love-of-a-lace cap. She had soft pink cheeks and mild blue eyes and a mouth like a baby's. This all sounds attractive; but I simply didn't like old Mrs. Douglas one bit, although I could only give a Doctor Fell reason. The minute I saw her she made me think of a fat white kitten I once had that would purr on your lap by the hour and then, when you weren't looking, dig her claws into you.

"How do you do, Hester?" purred Mrs. Douglas. "I'm so glad to see you again, dear," and she put her face up to be kissed.

Hester gave her a hearty smack and introduced me.

“I am very glad to meet you, Miss Jordan,” said the white kitten. “My son has been singing your praises until I’m half-jealous. It is very kind of you to come and see an old woman like me.”

I said something polite, and then we all sat down and talked.

Mrs. Douglas made Hester sit by her and patted her hand all the time. She certainly seemed very fond of her, and I was glad, for Hester’s sake. We had a pleasant time. John Douglas was a good talker, and the old woman kept up her end of it valiantly. Hester didn’t say much but sat and smiled, looking horribly uncomfortable in that black cashmere. She reminded me of a peony that was being slowly choked to death.

Mrs. Douglas asked Hester to pour the tea and Hester turned redder than ever and did it. After tea Mrs. Douglas smiled benevolently and told John to take “dear Hester” out into the garden and get her some roses.

“Miss Jordan will keep me company while you are gone, won’t you?” she said, so sweetly that if I had been a proper sort of girl I would have kissed her on the spot and been delighted. But I felt grumpy, somehow, so I just said “Certainly,” as stiff as I knew how.

Mrs. Douglas settled into her armchair with a sigh.

“I’m a very frail old woman, Miss Jordan. For over twenty years I have been a great sufferer. For twenty long weary years I’ve been dying by inches, Miss Jordan.”

“And enjoying it,” I thought uncharitably.

“There have been scores of nights when they’ve never thought I’d live to see the dawn,” Mrs. Douglas went on solemnly. “Nobody knows what I have gone through, nobody but myself. Well it can’t last very much longer now. My weary pilgrimage will soon be over. It is a great comfort to me to think that John will have such a good wife to look after him when his mother is gone—a great comfort.”

I did thaw out a little then.

“Hester is a lovely woman,” I said warmly.

“Lovely! A beautiful character,” assented Mrs. Douglas. “And a perfect housekeeper—something I never was. My health would not permit it. I am indeed thankful that John has made such a wise choice. I hope he will be happy. He is my only son, Miss Jordan, and his happiness lies very near my heart.”

“Of course,” I said stupidly. I wanted to go upstairs and pinch myself for being so horrid and suspicious. Just then John and Hester came in and soon after we went home.

“Come and see me again soon, dear Hester,” said Mrs. Douglas lovingly. “You

don't come half-often enough. But then I suppose John will be bringing you here to stay all the time one of these days."

I happened to glance at John when his mother said this and I am positive I jumped. I have known ever since just exactly what a man looked like when they gave the rack the last turn of possible endurance. I thought he must be ill and I hurried poor blushing Hester away.

"Isn't old Mrs. Douglas a sweet woman?" said Hester as we went down the lane.

"H—m," I said. It is a very useful thing to say at times.

"She's been a terrible sufferer," said Hester feelingly. "She takes terrible spells. It keeps John all worried up. He's scared to leave home for fear his mother will take a spell and nobody but the hired girl there. Sometimes I've thought"

Here Hester stopped short. I didn't ask her what she thought. It is one of my few merits that I let people stop when I see they want to.

Three days later I found Hester crying.

Tears and Hester seemed so incongruous that I was thoroughly scared.

"Oh, what is the matter?" I cried anxiously.

"I'm forty to-day," sobbed Hester.

I didn't laugh. I thought being forty might be a good reason for crying. While I was casting about for something comforting to say Hester added with a big gulp:

"And—and—John Douglas won't ask me to marry him."

Here was tragedy with a vengeance! I tried lamely to cheer and encourage.

"Oh, but he will," I said soothingly. "You must give him time, Hester. Perhaps"

"Time!" said Hester with indescribable scorn. "He has had twenty years. How much time does he want?"

Twenty years! I felt dizzy.

"Do you mean to say that John Douglas has been coming to see you for twenty years?" I gasped.

"He has," said Hester, "and he has never so much as mentioned marriage to me. And I don't believe now that he ever will."

"Tell me all about it, Hester," I implored.

I thought it better for her to talk than cry. Besides, I was eaten up with curiosity.

"I believe I will," said Hester, wiping her eyes. "I've never said a word to a mortal about it, but it seems to me that I've got to talk it over with someone at last or bust. Not that there's much to tell.

"John Douglas began to go with me twenty years ago; it was before mother

died. I was real pleased, for he was the likeliest young man for miles around. Well, he kept coming and coming and after a spell I began making quilts and things. But he never said anything about getting married and just kept coming and coming. There weren't nothing I could do”

“Why didn't you give him some hints—strong hints?” I interrupted.

“Hints! I've given him hints strong enough to stand alone. I've done most everything short of popping the question myself. But he never paid no more attention to them than if he had been deaf. Mother died when we had been going together for eight years. I thought then maybe he would speak up, seeing as I was left all alone in the world. He was real kind and feeling and did everything he could for me, but he never said marry. And that's the way it's been going on ever since.

“People blame me for it. They say I won't marry him because his mother is so sickly and I don't want the bother of waiting on her. Why, I'd love to wait on John's mother! But I let them think so. I'd rather they'd blame me than have them know I don't marry John because he won't ask me. That is so dreadful humiliating. But why doesn't he ask me to? Seems to me if I only knew his reason I wouldn't mind it so much.”

“Perhaps his mother doesn't want him to marry anybody,” I said slowly.

“Oh, she does. She's told me time and time again she'd love to see John settled before her time comes. She's always giving him hints—you heard her the other day. I thought I should have dropped through the floor.”

“It's beyond me,” I said helplessly.

And it was. Then I grew angry.

“You should have more spirit, Hester. Why didn't you throw him over long ago?”

“I couldn't,” said poor Hester, pathetically. “You see, Sally, I've always been awful fond of John. He might just as well keep coming as not, for there never was anybody else I wanted to come, so it didn't matter.”

“But it might have made him speak out like a man,” I cried.

Hester shook her head.

“No, I guess not. I was afraid to try, anyway, for fear he'd think I really meant it and just go. I suppose I'm a poor sperrited creature but that is how I feel. And I can't help it.”

“Oh, you could help it, Hester,” I urged. “It isn't too late yet. Take a firm stand. There are a dozen ways you can let John Douglas know that you are not going to put up with his shilly-shallying any longer. I'll back you up.”

“I dunno’,” said Hester, hopelessly. “I dunno’ if I could get up enough spunk.

Things have drifted so long. But I'll think it over. I must go and make some biscuit now. I'm an old fool to be sitting here crying at my age. But I wouldn't mind so much if I only knew his reason."

"Perhaps it's just because he's too shy," I said.

But I didn't believe it or Hester either; John Douglas was not at all shy.

Really, I felt disappointed in him. I would never have thought he was the sort of man to play fast and loose with a woman's feelings for twenty years. He certainly ought to be taught a lesson, and I felt that I would have enjoyed being the teacher. I beamed with delight when, just as we were starting for prayer-meeting the next night, Hester informed me that she meant to take my advice and show some "sperrit."

"When John Douglas asks me to-night if he can see me home, I'm just going to tell him he can't," she said. "I'm not going to be trodden on any longer."

I told Hester she was right, and all through prayer-meeting I looked at John Douglas with a stony, exultant glare in my eyes.

"My good man," I was thinking joyfully, "you are going to get the snub you deserve to-night."

It was moonlight again—bright as day. As we stepped over the grass up came John Douglas and asked Hester if he might see her home.

Hester looked frightened but resolute.

"No, thank you," she said icily. "I know the road home pretty well alone. I ought to, seeing as I've been traveling it for some forty years. So you needn't trouble yourself, Mr. Douglas."

I was looking straight at John Douglas as she spoke, and I saw the last twist of the rack again. Without a word he turned and made off down the road. He went so fast that he was almost out of earshot before I regained speech.

"Stop! Stop!" I screamed wildly after him. I didn't care who heard me. "Mr. Douglas, stop! Come back!"

He heard me and he did stop. I flew down the road after him, caught at his arm and fairly dragged him back to Hester.

"You must come back," I sobbed. "It's all a mistake. Mr. Douglas; it's all my fault. I made Hester do it. She did not want to, but it's all right now—isn't it, Hester?"

He had got back to Hester by this time, and without a word she took his arm and they started down the road. I hung behind and mopped my eyes, and when I got to Wayside I sneaked in at the front door and straight up to my room, although I was as hungry as a wolf. But after John Douglas had gone Hester brought me up a

perfectly lovely lunch and I sat up in bed to eat it.

“Well, you are a nice person to back one up,” said Hester sarcastically.

“Oh, I couldn’t help it, Hester,” I said feebly. “I just felt as if I’d stood by and seen murder done. I had to run after him.”

“Oh, I’m just as glad you did,” said Hester, turning a furious red. Hester never blushed; she just turned red. “If you hadn’t done it, I would have had to. When I saw John Douglas making off down the road, I just felt as if every little bit of joy and happiness that was left in my life was going with him. It was an awful feeling.”

“Did he ask you why you did it—or anything?” I ventured.

“No, he never said a word about it,” said Hester dully.

I was not without a feeble hope that something would come of our effort after all, but nothing did. John Douglas came and took Hester driving and walked home from prayer-meeting with her as he had been doing for twenty years, and as he seemed likely to do for twenty years more. I made one more frenzied effort in Hester’s behalf.

One evening, when John came to take her out driving, she couldn’t go because she had company, so she made me go instead.

It was just the chance I wanted. I led the conversation up to the desired point, although John kept veering off with malice aforethought. I know he suspected what was coming, and then I asked him plump and plain why he and Hester didn’t get married.

“There was a man down Osborne way that made quite a fortune minding his own business,” said John.

It looks horrid, written out; but it didn’t sound so very bad the way John Douglas said it, there was such a twinkle in his eye and such a comical twist to his mouth. I only felt snubbed, not insulted. I sulked for ten minutes, and then I had to laugh. I forgave him and we were good friends again.

I did not tell Hester about this, and I strictly followed the example of the Osborne man thenceforth.

One afternoon in mid-August Alec Ford came driving down Wayside in hot haste for Hester.

“They want you at Uplands, quick,” he said. “I really believe old Mrs. Douglas is going to have the satisfaction of dying at last after practising at it for twenty years.”

Hester flew to get her hat.

“Is Mrs. Douglas worse than usual this spell?” I asked.

“She’s not half as bad,” said Alec solemnly, “and that’s what makes me think it’s

serious. Other times she'd scream and throw herself all over the place. This time she's lying still and mum. When Mrs. Douglas is mum she is pretty sick, you bet."

I was alone until dark and had to get my own supper. It was just twilight when Hester came home.

"Mrs. Douglas is dead," she said wearily. "She died just a few minutes after I got there.

"She just spoke to me once, 'I suppose you'll marry John now,' she said. It cut me to the heart, Sally. To think John's mother thought I wouldn't marry him because of her! I couldn't say a word either—there were other women there. I was thankful John had gone out."

Hester began to cry drearily, but I brewed a hot drink of ginger tea—to be sure, I discovered afterwards that I had put in white pepper instead of ginger, but Hester never noticed the difference—and made her go to bed. I could see she was all tired out and nervous.

On the evening after the funeral we were sitting out on the front steps at sunset. Hester wore that unspeakable black dress and looked her worst, what with her eyes and nose all red from crying. We didn't talk much. Hester felt dreadfully blue and dumpish, and I couldn't get her cheered up, so I held my tongue. There are times when people resent being cheered up.

All at once the gate-latch clicked and there was John Douglas. I had never dreamed of his coming that night, or I would simply have made Hester array herself in purple and fine linen, for I would have hoped that their first meeting under the new conditions would be the psychic moment and that black cashmere dress might have daunted a man forever.

John Douglas walked straight over Hester's geranium-bed and Hester stood up. I stood up, too; I wore a light pink dress and I am not a small girl by any means, but John Douglas never saw me any more than if I had been a mosquito.

The very first words he said were:

"Hester, will you marry me?"

The words shot out as if they had been wanting to be said for twenty years and just had to be said now before anything else.

Hester's face was so red from crying that it couldn't turn any redder, so it turned a most unbecoming purple.

"Why didn't you ask me before?" she said slowly.

"I couldn't," said John. "She made me promise not to; mother made me promise not to. Twenty years ago, just when I'd begun going with you, she took a terrible spell. We thought she couldn't live through it. She implored me to promise that I

wouldn't ask you to marry me while she was alive. I didn't want to promise such a thing, even though we all thought then she couldn't live very long—the doctor gave her six months. But she begged it on her knees, sick and suffering. She hadn't no spite against you, but she just didn't want another woman there while she was living. She said if I didn't promise she'd die right there and I'd have killed her.

"So I promised. And she's held me to that promise for twenty years though I've gone on my knees to her in my turn to beg her to let me off."

"Why didn't you tell me this?" said Hester chokingly. "Oh, why didn't you tell me?"

"She made me promise I wouldn't tell a soul," said John huskily. "She swore me to it. Hester, you'll never know what I've suffered these twenty years. But you'll marry me for all, won't you, Hester? Oh Hester, won't you? I've come as soon as I could to ask you. Oh Hester, won't you?"

He had got hold of her hand and was looking up into that plain, commonplace, middle-aged woman's face as if it were a glorified angel's.

At this moment I came to my senses and realized that I had no business there. They didn't notice my departure at all because they had forgotten my very existence.

I didn't see Hester until the next morning. She came in to wake me up and sat on the edge of my bed and told me all about it. She had forgotten that I had been standing beside her and heard it all and I let her forget.

"That, cruel, relentless, deceitful old woman!" I cried.

"Hush! She's dead," said Hester solemnly. "If she wasn't—but she is! I could never have believed it of her. But I'm happy at last, Sally. And I wouldn't have minded waiting so long a bit if I'd only known why."

"When are you to be married?" I said.

"In September. Of course it will be very quiet. I suppose people will talk terrible. They'll say I made enough haste to snap John up as soon as his poor mother was out of the way. John wanted to let them know the truth but I said, 'No, John, she was your mother after all, and we'll keep the secret between us and not cast any shadow on her memory. I don't mind what people say, now that I know the truth myself. It don't matter a mite. And we'll never,' I says to him, 'we'll never mention it to each other again, John. Let it all be buried with her.' I said I'd have to tell you because I'd been talking the matter over with you, but it wouldn't go any further."

"Oh, I won't tell it," I agreed grumpily.

I wanted to publish it far and wide and clear Hester from the charge of selfishness, but, of course, I had to promise to hold my tongue since she wished me to. And I thought she was a good soul and much more forgiving than I could have

been in her place.

“You must come out to see me married,” said Hester. “I won’t have any other guests. But John thinks there never was the like of you. You must spend every summer with us after this until you get married yourself. And I hope you will get as good a husband as John.”

“I’d deserve to if I waited twenty years for him,” I answered.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

[The end of *The Deferment of Hester* by L. M. (Lucy Maud) Montgomery]