

The Goose Feud

Lucy Maud Montgomery
1906

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THE GOOSE FEUD

L. M. Montgomery

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If any one had ever told Mary Parker and me that the day would ever come when we would not speak to each other, we would have laughed the statement to scorn. We had been friends from babyhood. We lived next door to each other when we were girls, and when we married our homes were still side by side, so that we carried our friendship unbroken into our married life.

Our husbands were almost as intimate as we were. Our children played together as much at one place as the other. We had a little footpath past the barns and across the fields from house to house, and it was kept well trodden. Never a day passed but I went over to Mary's house, or she came to mine. We worked in partnership in nearly everything; nothing seemed complete to one unless the other was in it. We expected to go on like this till our deaths, and then be buried close together in the little graveyard.

One spring, when Mary and I were talking over our plans for the summer, she said she was going to try her hand at keeping geese. We had always kept turkeys before. I knew what kind of things geese were around a place, and I tried to talk her out of it. But she was quite set on it, so I gave it up; for I didn't suppose it mattered much. I even helped her select the eggs for setting, and the mother goose when she bought one. When every egg hatched out I was as pleased over her good luck as she was herself.

Mary's goslings were all right till they began to grow up, and then she began to have trouble. She put yokes on them, but that didn't prevent them from getting into the grain or wandering away to places where foxes could get them.

I thought to myself that she wished often enough she had kept to the turkeys, but she would never give in to that. Mary is pretty obstinate in a quiet way when she takes a notion.

We had our wheat in the barn field next to the line fence that year. It was the best field of wheat in Meadowby. We had had poor luck with our wheat for three years back, so that we were all the prouder of this. William took every man and woman who came to the place out to show them that wheat and expatiate on it. One day I found all Mary's geese in the wheat. They had been in a good while and had made a fearful havoc. I was mad enough, but I drove the geese home and calmly told Mary she must keep them out of our wheat.

She looked worried and said she was sorry; she would see it didn't happen again. She said she had had a real hard time to keep them out of their own grain—she couldn't very well keep them shut up all the time.

A week later I found the geese in again. It exasperated me more than I would have thought possible. I sent one of the children to take them home this time, and I sent a note to Mary, too. I know I'm inclined to be too rash and quick-tempered, and I suppose that note was not very conciliatory. But if Mary thought it was sharp she never let on, but was as friendly as ever.

One afternoon I was sitting in the kitchen, reading, when I heard steps on the veranda, as if some one were in a big hurry and very decided. I had just got up, when Mary came in without knocking. She hadn't a thing on her head, and her hair was all blown. She had her under lip between her teeth, and her eyes were snapping. In each hand she carried a half-grown goose, quite dead and all blood-stained.

Thinking it over now, I suppose she must have looked pretty ridiculous, but just then I was too much taken by surprise to notice that. She flung the geese down before me as hard as she could and said:

"There! I suppose that is your work, Lizzie Mercer!"

Her voice was just shaking with rage, and she looked ready to tear me in pieces. I never knew Mary had such a temper. I always thought her very quiet and gentle.

I knew the minute I saw those geese just what had happened as well as if I had been told. My oldest boy, Henry, had found those fatal geese in the wheat again, and had taken the affair into his own hands without consulting me, for he knew I wouldn't have allowed him to lay a hand on one of Mary's geese for anything, much as I hated to see them destroying the wheat. Henry was always too hot-headed, like his mother, and never stopped to think of the consequences of anything he did.

I was as sorry as any one could be to see how Mary's geese had been stoned and mangled. And if she had not spoken the way she did, so insulting, as if I were to blame for it all, I should have given Henry cause to remember it to his death, besides paying for the geese, of course. But Mary wouldn't listen to a word. She went on like a crazy person. She said things I couldn't endure, so I answered her back, and we had a dreadful quarrel. I'm not blaming Mary a bit more than myself. It makes me ashamed now to think of what I said. We stormed at each other over the dead bodies of those geese, getting more and more unreasonable. At last Mary bounced out in an awful temper, and left me in one just as bad. I kept angry all night. But when I grew calm again, I repented of my behavior and felt pretty bad about it. Mary and I had never quarreled before, so I didn't know how it was likely to end. I knew Mary was pretty stubborn. But I said to myself, that as Mary had begun the quarrel, it was her place to end it. I wouldn't give in first. But she made no sign, even though she must have found out that I was not really to blame about the geese.

I felt dreadfully over it for a long while, and then I got cranky and didn't care. I said if Mary could get along without me, I could get along without her. We never spoke all that summer. There were always plenty of friendly folks to tell me the things Mary had said about me, and keep me stirred up and bitter. It did not occur to me that they might have carried my remarks to her with a like result.

But I could not deny I missed her. It made my heart ache to look at the footpath and see it all overgrown with grass. As for the wheat, I grew to loathe the sight of it, and a goose made me feel savage.

At first our families took no part in the trouble. Our husbands laughed at us, and tried to coax us to make it up. They were as friendly as ever, and so were the children. They played together as usual, and I was better to Mary's children than my own. I used to give them cakes every time they came into the house, and Mary did the same when mine went over there. I believe I had a hope that the children might bring about a reconciliation in time, when another dreadful thing happened.

Our husbands fell out, too. They were discussing our quarrel over the line fence one day, and got into a dispute about it. Each one upheld his wife, of course. They had a dreadful time. Every old family scandal for the last three generations was cast up. They even taunted each other with long-forgotten school-day faults. O, I don't know what they didn't say. When William came in and told me what had happened I cried all night about it. I didn't know till then how much hope I had cherished things would come out right with Mary and me yet. But now I felt sure they never would.

The men were even more unreasonable than we were. They wouldn't even let the children go and come. The poor little things wouldn't speak to each other because their parents did not. I took that to heart more than anything. Nobody had talked much about Mary and me, but when it got to be a family affair people took it up. Somebody called it the "goose feud," and the name stuck. It had a double meaning, I've no doubt, and the poor dead birds were not the only geese meant.

The minister took in hand to better it, and he called one day. That didn't do any good. He seemed to blame me too much. I was too proud a woman to take it. Then they went to the Parkers with no better success.

The next Sunday he preached a sermon about neighbors and Church members living in harmony from the text, "Live peaceably with all men." He meant well, for a better man never lived. But it only made things worse. I felt that every one was looking at me to see how I took it, and that touched my pride. Mary looked hard enough to bite a nail in two when she went out of church. As for William and Frances Parker, they were so provoked at the minister that they wouldn't go to church for over two months.

Things went on like that for two years. It seemed to me more like fifteen. Sometimes I asked myself if our friendship had been all a dream. Nothing seemed real but our estrangement. I had given up all thought of making up. The thing had hardened too long. I got over missing Mary, pretty much, just as we get over missing some one dead, because it has to be got over.

There was no footpath now, and Francis Parker had put up a high snow

fence back of their house that shut it from us altogether. I thought many a hard thing about Mary, but I was honest enough to own up that it was as much my fault as hers.

It was two years in July since our quarrel, and the fall after that an epidemic of scarlet fever broke out in Meadowby. It was of the most virulent type. My children took it first, but they all recovered. But other people didn't escape so well. It was a sad time. There was hardly a house in Meadowby without some one dying or dead in it. It was more fatal among the children, of course. It made my heart ache to see all the new, little graves in the churchyard.

Some one told me that Mary was in a terrible fright lest her children should take it. She had seven; the youngest was four years old. They had all grown too fast and were delicate. People said Mary had got it into her head that not one of them would live if they took it.

Then the next piece of news was that Mary had it herself, and she was pretty low. The other women went to see her. I felt it was dreadful of me not to go. But my pride was too stubborn to bend. Then Fred, and the twins, and Lizzie—called after me—all took it at once, and Mary had to get up and wait on them before she was fit. She had no help, and there was none to be had in the village. The neighbors went in when they could spare the time but most had their hands full at home.

Nobody knows what I suffered in those two weeks. All my old love for Mary came back when I heard of her trouble, and I wanted to go right to her aid. But I could not bring myself to do it. Sometimes I spoke about going. William never said a word, either to discourage or encourage. I knew that he was ashamed of his fracas with Francis Parker long ago, and would have given almost anything to have it wiped out. But he was even prouder than I was. I knew he would never put out the hand of reconciliation, but he would not put hindrances in my way if I felt inclined to. I didn't go, however, though I kept thinking of it.

One morning Mrs. Corey called in on her way from Mary's, where she'd been all night. She said Mary's "baby," little Dora, was down with the fever, and was very bad. I didn't say much, but when Jane Corey had gone I went upstairs to my room and sat down on a trunk by the window. It was higher than the snow fence, and I could see right over to Mary's. The house looked so forlorn and desolate. The doctor's horse was tied at the gate. It was the second week in November and everything was gray and brown. I remember just how Mary's windows looked through the bare boughs of the garden.

I knew Mary was just wrapped up in Dora. If anything happened to the baby it would almost kill her. The tears came into my eyes as I pictured her bending over Dora's sick bed. I cried and cried, but I couldn't make up my

mind to go—I was afraid Mary would repulse me.

Just after tea Sophia Reed called in and said it was her opinion that Dora wouldn't live through the night. That decided me. As soon as Sophia had gone, I put on my bonnet and shawl and went out. Nobody knows how queer I felt. I stood for a spell on the veranda to collect my thoughts. I noticed every little thing. The air was quite sharp. The sky was curdled all over with little rolls of violet gray clouds, with strips of faint blue between. There had been a scud of snow in the afternoon and the ground was grayish white. It had melted about the door and was sloppy. The hens and turkeys were pecking around. The apple-trees were ragged brown, but the other trees were bare, and the leaves lay around in heaps, with snow in their crinkles. William was fixing the pump. He didn't say anything as I went by, though he must have guessed where I was going.

I went past the barns and struck into the old footpath. The little feathery heads of bleached grass stuck up wetly through the snow. Mary's turkeys were roosting on the snow fence. When I got to the door my heart was beating so that I could hardly breathe.

I opened the door and went in. A thin, dragged-out woman, with tears glistening on her cheeks, was stirring something on the stove. At first I could hardly believe it was Mary. She looked up as I opened the door. Those few seconds seemed to me as long as the two years that had gone. She just said, "Lizzie!"

Then she was clinging to me and crying. I soothed and petted her until she got calmer, and then I made her go and have a sleep, for she hadn't closed an eye for over thirty-six hours. By this time Henry was at the door. I had told him to come and get my orders if I didn't come back. I sent word to Annie that I wasn't coming home that night, and that she must look after things and get her father's supper.

Dora didn't seem any worse, in spite of Sophia Reed's forebodings. Mary woke up at 9 o'clock quite refreshed, and we sat up with Dora and talked everything over. Mary said I could have no conception of what she had suffered from remorse and loneliness. She said she'd started more than once to come over and make up, and then the memory of something those kind folks had told her I'd said would rise up and stop her. I believe her feelings were a pretty exact copy of my own.

About 12 Dora suddenly took a bad turn. I told Francis he must start right off for the doctor. Mary had borne up well, but now she seemed to lose all command of herself. She shrieked, and cried, and caught hold of Francis. She said he wasn't to think of going and leaving us two women alone with a dying child. She went on like that and we couldn't pacify her. Then, all at once, William walked in. I don't know how he knew the fix we were in. I believe he

must have been hanging around outside. He said he'd go for the doctor. Francis and he went out to the barn together to harness the horse. I never knew what they said, but the next day they were working together as if nothing had happened.

Mary and I had a serious time that night. It almost seemed that we would lose Dora. But just as a long, red streak showed itself against the eastern sky the doctor said the crisis was past and Dora would live. Mary and I knelt by the bed with our arms around each other. The reddish gold of the sunrise fell over Dora's white face like a promise of hope. In the tears of joy we shed over her living baby we washed out the last stain of bitterness from our hearts.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

[The end of *The Goose Feud* by L. M. (Lucy Maud) Montgomery]