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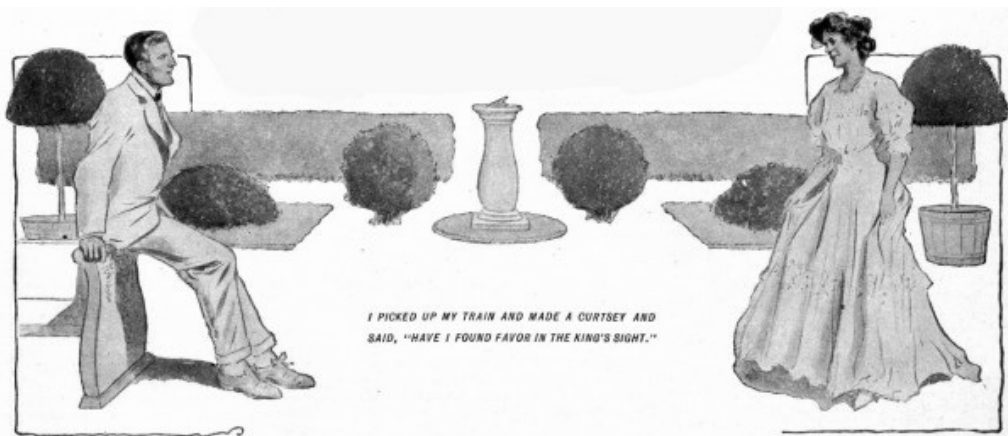
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In the Sweet O' the Year

L. M. Montgomery

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I PICKED UP MY TRAIN AND MADE A CURTSEY AND SAID, "HAVE I FOUND FAVOR IN THE KING'S SIGHT."



It is dear mid-spring and one must just be glad to be alive in such a fresh tremulous young world! I feel exactly as Eve must have felt in the garden of Eden before all the trouble began. I know just how new and wonderful everything must have seemed to her and how she must have thought that life could never be long enough to drain all the sweetness that was waiting for her on every side. I wonder if the early mornings were as delightful in Eden as they are here in our garden at Mount Holly—or as they are in that other garden over at Golden Milestone, just separated from ours by a demure little box hedge. I do not really believe that they could have been or Eve, poor thing, would never have even felt tempted to talk with serpents and go looking for forbidden knowledge. It would have been enough simply to have been alive on such mornings—such crisp, pale-purple mornings that creep up so whitely and freshly over the long shore fields and tiptoe into our gardens, as it were, with their fingers on their lips, bidding us be silent and enjoy, while the little milky-white blossoms come out on the cherry-trees and all the birches and poplars rustle and quiver with brand-new, golden-green baby leaves. To see the long shafts of sunrise sunshine striking down through the dark fir boughs and lying on the old stone bench where Stephen and I like best to sit, or on the little mossy mound where the tiniest of tiny ferns are unrolling themselves like little, curly-headed, green pixy folk waking up from a nap, is just to give you a feeling that is like a prayer.

Springs are always so new, too. No spring is ever exactly like any other spring. It has always something of its own to be its own peculiar loveliness. And then to watch the life coming back into the world and all the green things that you've loved

all your life poking their heads up as soon as the snow is gone, every one of them in the very spot you know where to look for it—why, it's just to stand by and watch a bit of creation. You feel like one of the morning stars of old that sang for joy.

I am sure I must be the happiest girl in the world at any time, even when the snowdrifts are big and glistening around Mount Holly and the birds have gone and the flowers are asleep away down under the whiteness, and all the trees are bare except the stanch old firs and spruces that never lose their greenness, just like good, true friends that are the same under all conditions; but I'm happier than ever in this, the sweet o' the year. I know when I am dead I shall sleep peaceably enough under the grasses through the summer and autumn and winter, but when the spring comes my heart will throb and stir in my sleep and call wistfully out to all the voices calling far and wide in the world above me.

I said so to Stephen this very afternoon as we sat on the old bench in his garden. I had gone over to show him my new dress. I always like to have Stephen see me in a new dress before anybody else; he can always tell me whether it's right or not and if it pleases him I feel that I can defy criticism. There is nobody else here to tell me. Dear old dad, with his nose buried all the time in a book doesn't study fashion plates. If he knows that girls wear dresses at all it's as much as he does. And old Martha, our housekeeper, who never wears anything but rusty black and thinks I'm a brand not yet plucked from the burning, isn't much better. So there's only Stephen; whenever I get a new dress I put it on and fly over to him. I can tell the minute he sees me by the look in his eyes whether he likes a dress or not before he says a word; and if he doesn't I simply go back to the house, take off that dress, and hand it to Martha to put in the next box her Ladies' Aid sends out west to the mission station. Martha thinks I'm wildly extravagant; but it all works together for good to the missionaries' wives who haven't to live up to Stephen's tastes and who, poor souls, must often be glad to get some frilly and fanciful and altogether unlike the sensible, ugly things the Ladies' Aid sends them.

I was very anxious about this particular dress. It was so pretty that I felt that it would break my heart if I had to send it away to the mission field so I fairly prayed that Stephen would like it. As soon as I came home this afternoon I put it on. It was a pale green thing—to suit the spring, you understand. I knew Stephen believed in a woman's dressing in harmony with the seasons—and it had such lovely clinging lines and the dearest, lacy, frilly sleeves just to the elbows. I did my hair in the way Stephen likes best—parted plainly and knotted low on the neck, with just a bit of a curl on my forehead, and I put a wee, pink house-rose over my left ear. I thought I looked rather nice, although my mirror always turns me green; so I slipped over to

the Golden Milestone garden and gave the call Stephen taught me ten years ago when he first came to live at Golden Milestone and I was a little girl of ten. We were chums from the very first and whenever I went into either of the gardens and gave that call Stephen would come out to me, the very best playmate that ever was, even if he were a grown-up man. It's a funny little call—like three clear bird-notes, the first just a medium pitch, the second higher, the third droning away into lowness and sweetness long drawn out.

I could see Stephen through the low, open window of his library; he was sitting by his table writing furiously at his new novel and he was all snowed around with scribbled pages. It's always very hard for me to realize that Stephen is a famous author; he's so nice and chummy and approachable. To read his books you would think he was somebody far too deep and clever for everyday people to know at all; and as for girls' dresses, you'd never dream he thought of anything but their souls and minds.

The minute he heard my call he dropped his pen and came running out. When he came to where the little red paths make a cross, he stopped and looked at me. I knew at that moment that no missionary's wife was ever going to frivol it in my green dress: he liked it—liked it immensely. But I wanted to hear him say so; so I picked up my train and made a curtsy and said, "Have I found favor in the king's sight?"

Stephen drew a long breath.

"You are the spring itself, Sylvia," he said. "Its very incarnation. I thought when I saw you standing there by that bench as I came across the garden that all the shimmer of young leaves and glow of young mornings and evanescent sweetness of young blossoms in a thousand springs had embodied themselves in you. Tell me, what is it like to be the soul of all the springs that ever were?"

I laughed because I was so happy. What Stephen said didn't make me vain. I knew it was all the green dress, but men, even clever men, can never understand this and it is just as well they don't. If I had worn a red dress had it been ever so pretty, Stephen would never have thought of comparing me to the soul of spring.

"I'm so glad you like my dress," I said—of course, he really didn't expect me to answer his question. I'm a very stupid little thing and can't talk up to clever speeches—"and I won't keep you from your work any longer. I'm sorry I had to interrupt you—but I *had* to. You see, it was an important question."

"Much more important than any work could possibly be," agreed Stephen, smiling with his eyes. Stephen always smiles so; his lips are mostly a little sorrowful and firmly set, but his deep gray eyes are always kindly and merry. Stephen is a very handsome man. I never tell him so, of course, but I think it every time I see him.

Today I noticed a gray hair in the dark curl over his temple. I'm afraid Stephen is working too hard over those books of his. What earthly use is fame and money if a man is going to turn gray at thirty-five? The trouble is that Stephen has nobody to look after him and make him rest and coax him away from work every once in so often and cosset him generally. All men need to be cosseted and clever ones most of all, or else their brains will run away with their comfort. When this book of his is finished I'm simply going to make him take a good long rest and let his gray matter lie fallow. Somebody has got to look after him and there is nobody but me. I wish I were older because then I should probably have more influence with him. He looks upon me merely as a little girl, I know. So he won't want to take my advice. Dear old Stephen! If he were my own brother I couldn't be fonder of him.

I don't know what has come over me. I don't feel a bit like myself. I never felt so before. There's a queer, horrid little ache in my heart and I'd rather cry than not, only crying won't do any good. I've nothing to cry for—I know that—and I don't see why I should want to. I don't even care about its being spring. Why, spring just seems commonplace. I must have caught cold in the garden to-night. I suppose I shall have to get Martha to make me a hot currant drink before I go to bed and I do so hate hot currant drinks. But I just feel that I'd like to do something I hate to do.

I oughtn't to feel so—I ought to feel proud and happy, since Stephen has honored me with his confidence. I try to feel so; but there's nothing except that horrid, funny ache that persists in aching. I want to tell somebody about it and be comforted and patted. But there's nothing to tell and nobody to do the patting.

This evening I was sitting at my window that looks out over the cherry copse down into the garden. It was such a pearl of an evening and there was such a dear little silvery moon—the merest baby moon—shining over the Golden Milestone birches. I was just wondering if Stephen were looking at that moon, too, from his den window when I heard his call from the garden. So I flung a white shawl over my shoulders and ran down and out. Martha called after me to put on my rubbers. I wish now that I had. I dare say I shouldn't feel as I do if I had taken her advice. But at the time it seemed perfectly impossible to fuss about rubbers with spring and a new moon and Stephen all waiting for me. Martha is such a sensible old soul. I wish I were sensible. I'm sure sensible people never have senseless aches like this.

Stephen was sitting on the stone bench in his corner of it and I sat down in mine. There was a great bed of daffodils in front of us, gleaming out in the pale, silvery twilight like golden stars. Behind us was a copse of dark fir and white cherry, and robins were whistling in it as they never whistle at any time save just in the sweet o'

the year.

Stephen didn't speak for a long while and neither did I. Stephen isn't one of those terrible people to whom you feel bound to talk all the time. We are such good friends we can be silent just as much and as long as we like. At least, it always has been so. But I believe that after this I shall want to talk madly the whole time when I'm with Stephen. It is dreadful to feel so.

Finally Stephen said, "May I tell you something, Sylvia?"

"Of course," I said. "Is it a secret?"

I liked the notion of Stephen telling me secrets—then.

"Yes, a very great and sweet and wonderful secret," he said, looking at a daffodil spike he held in his hand. His profile came out dimly against the white of the cherries and I loved to watch it. It's such a good, clean-cut profile, with a lovely chin and nose. "It is about the lady I love Sylvia. May I tell you about my love for her?"

If you believe me the ache came then and there. Everything seemed spoiled—moon and daffodils and spring evening. I suppose it was the cold striking in. I remember that I shivered. That is always the way with a cold; and it makes you feel so stupid and listless.

As for Stephen's secret, I must say it surprised me. I had never thought about his being in love with anybody. There is nobody around here. But then, of course, Stephen goes to the city every winter for a visit and he must meet dozens of lovely, clever women. The only wonder, when I come to think of it, is that he hasn't fallen in love with somebody long ago. But I had simply never thought of it. Then I realized that Stephen was waiting for an answer to his question. It surprised me that I wanted to say no. I didn't want to hear about her. I felt as if I were going to be horribly hurt some way or another. I ought to have felt proud and flattered to think that Stephen had chosen me for a confidant. But oh, how I wished he hadn't!

So I said, "Yes," dully and stupidly and shivered again. Stephen drew my shawl closer around me. The tenderness of his motion went through me like a knife. I thought of him gathering that other girl's shawl about her—of her sitting on that bench beside him—in *my* corner!

"Thank you," he said. "Did you ever suspect that I loved her, Sylvia?"

I shook my head.

"I loved her for years," he went on.

That seems worse than ever. If it had only just happened recently it really wouldn't seem so bad. But to think he had been caring for her all through these springs! Every spring seems spoiled now!

"I suppose she is very beautiful?" I said, because I had to say something.

"She is as beautiful as the spring," said Stephen softly. "Her eyes are like that star just over the tip of the fir, Sylvia. Her hair has the gloss of ripe nuts. Nothing was ever seen so white and curved as her throat. There is a spot just under her chin that I must kiss some day. And she is as good and sweet and true-womanly as she is beautiful."

That ache of mine kept getting worse and worse as he talked. I had to stop him so I asked the first question that came into my head.

"Does she—does she love you, Stephen?"

"I don't know," he answered. "I haven't told her yet of my love for her. I've—I've been afraid to. She is such a child still in many respects. Sometimes I think her heart is sleeping yet and I have been afraid to frighten her sweet friendship out of my life if I should speak to her of love. What do you advise, Sylvia? Shall I tell her that I love her?"

"Yes. I think you should," I said wearily. I felt, oh, so tired and old and experienced.

"Do you think she could ever care for me?" asked Stephen bending forward.

I stood up. I *had* to get away.

"I—I think she must," I said. "I'm sure she must. And now I think I will go in, Stephen. It seems so cold and chilly out here."

"Forgive me," he said, springing up. "I should have remembered that these spring evenings are rather damp yet. I'm afraid I'm a selfish creature. Come, I'll take you to your door. So you advise me to tell my dear lady everything?"

I nodded because I knew it was the right advice to give him. He slipped his arm through mine and we walked across his garden and ours. When we came to our door he stuck the daffodil he carried in my hair and said goodnight. I shall never care for daffodils again.

I hate that other girl! It's dreadful of me. I have been such a good friend of Stephen that I ought to be as fond of her as of him. But she will spoil everything when she comes to Golden Milestone. She will walk in the garden with Stephen and he will read his books to her before they are published and pick the first flowers for her and teach her the call—*our* call—and he will praise *her* dresses.

As for me, the missionaries will get my green dress after all. I shall never wear it again. Oh, I wish my mother were alive. I shouldn't feel so lonely and lost then. To be sure, there's daddy. But what would daddy know about an ache like this?



HE KNEW ALL ABOUT IT. HE IS SUCH A WISE OLD DAD.

He knew all about it. He is such a wise old dad. I never knew how wise before. I went to him last night. I had to go to somebody. He was in the library, poring over a book, but he looked up when I went in.

“Dear me, how much you are like your mother, Sylvia! Why, my little girl, what is the matter?”

I hadn’t said anything but I suppose my face looked funny.

“Oh, daddy, I’m so—so unhappy!” I said, “and I don’t know why—only I wish

it wasn't spring."

Daddy simply pulled me down on his knees and cuddled me. He knew just what I needed. I suppose mother must have taught him long ago for how could he have learned it out of his musty old classics?

"There—there—little girl. Now tell father all about it."

All at once I knew that I could tell him—and I did. I told him everything—about the dress and the new moon and Stephen's being in love.

"And, oh, daddy, everything is spoiled," I sobbed.

"So you love Stephen?" said daddy musingly.

I sprang right up on my feet.

"*Love Stephen!*" I cried. "Why, daddy, I don't—I don't—yes, I *do!*"

I knew it at last. I knew why my heart ached so and why I hated that other girl. I knew why all the promise and beauty had gone out of the spring—out of all springs. Oh, it was so terrible! Why hadn't I found it out before? It was so plain now that I saw it at last. I crept back into daddy's arms and buried my head on his shoulder.

Daddy talked to me. I shall never forget what he said—how wise and tender it was! He helped me to live through that terrible last night—he's going to keep on helping me. I've lost Stephen but I've found father and we're never going to lose each other again. I shall always live here with him and be his comfort and stay. I mean to be very careful and proud and never, *never* let Stephen know. I shall try to like his wife when he brings her to Golden Milestone but I shall not go there very much ever again.

I think this will be easier to bear when spring is over.

No, no, it won't—it never will! I shall just have this terrible ache all my life—this terrible emptiness! Nothing can fill it, not even daddy's love—nothing but Stephen's love and that belongs to another woman. I shall see her at his side and her love for him in her eyes. How can I bear that—how could any woman bear it? How could I ever have thought that this was the sweet of the year? It's the heartbreak of the year! And all the pale-purple mornings and stars of daffodil and songs of wind in the firs are just so many separate pangs of the heartbreak. I cannot bear these things because Stephen and I have loved them together—and I cannot love them apart!

But I shall not have to love them apart after all! We shall go on loving them together and loving each other just as long as there are fair mornings and fair springs and sweet wind-songs in this or any other world.

Oh, it's no use to say I'm *glad*. That word is too paltry. I feel humble and grateful and reverent—and so happy that I can hardly dare to believe it!

Last night I was sitting at my window again, wondering if it could only be

twenty-four hours since I had sat there and been happy. It seemed years; and oh, so lonely as that spring twilight was!

Then all at once I heard Stephen's call from his garden. I knew he was standing by the stone bench waiting for me. But for the first time I didn't answer the call. I didn't go out to him—I couldn't. It hurt me terribly not to go—but it would hurt worse to go. Stephen waited a little while and then came to the hedge gate and called again. Still I didn't go, although I had to grip my window sill tight and hard to keep from going. I hoped he would go away then but instead he came into our garden, stood just by my white tulip bed and called for the third time.

I went out to him then. I knew I had to. And I knew that I would have to go to him whenever he called me, to my life's end, no matter how much it hurt.

He whistled some gay little tune when he saw me coming but when I was near enough he just put out his hands and took mine and looked down at me in silence. I knew he was looking so at me although I didn't look up. I couldn't. I knew I could never let Stephen look into my eyes again.

Suddenly he drew me close to him and I felt his arms around me. It was only a second before I sprang back; but in that second I knew just what heaven must be like.

"You—you mustn't," I said chokily.

"Why not?" asked Stephen simply. "Don't you love me, Sylvia?"

I had never thought that Stephen could have been so cruel as to ask such a question. But the pain gave me a little courage or desperation or something and I threw up my head and looked at him indignantly.

"You have no right to ask me such a question," I said. "You, who love another woman!"

Stephen laughed.

"Who told you that I loved another woman, sweetheart?" he said.

"You, yourself!" I cried.

"No, not I. I told you I loved a woman—the dearest, sweetest, truest little lady that e'er the sun shone on. But I left it to your woman's wit to guess whom I meant. There is only one woman in the world I *could* mean. Didn't you know, Sylvia, that I meant yourself?"

"No—no," I said, feeling almost frightened at the joy that came surging into my heart like a great flood. "I didn't know—but oh, I'm so glad, Stephen. And I love the spring again—it was so terrible to hate the spring!"

Stephen gathered me into his arms again and tilted up my face and kissed me—

first right on the lips and then on my throat just under my chin.

“Now tell me that you love me,” he said.

“I love you with all my heart,” I said meekly, “but I didn’t know it before daddy told me, Stephen. Fancy daddy knowing that. All I knew was just that something was hurting me terribly and that the spring was spoiled. Oh, Stephen, I don’t see how you can possibly love me—*me*! You’re so famous and clever and I’m such a stupid, insignificant little thing.”

“Come over to our bench,” said Stephen, “and I’ll tell you what you are.”

So he told me—or what he thinks I am—sitting there in the sweet o’ the year. But what he said I shall not write down. There are some things that mustn’t ever be written down—only just in one’s heart. What Stephen said is written on mine and I shall read it there in the years of eternity.



TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

[The end of *In the Sweet O'the Year* by L. M. (Lucy Maud) Montgomery]