

THE HOUSEKEEPER



AUGUST

10 Cents A Copy

The Housekeeper Corporation, Minneapolis, Minn., U. S. A.

1909

*** A Distributed Proofreaders Canada eBook ***

This ebook is made available at no cost and with very few restrictions. These restrictions apply only if (1) you make a change in the ebook (other than alteration for different display devices), or (2) you are making commercial use of the ebook. If either of these conditions applies, please contact a FP administrator before proceeding.

This work is in the Canadian public domain, but may be under copyright in some countries. If you live outside Canada, check your country's copyright laws. IF THE BOOK IS UNDER COPYRIGHT IN YOUR COUNTRY, DO NOT DOWNLOAD OR REDISTRIBUTE THIS FILE.

Title: The Life-Book of Uncle Jesse

Date of first publication: 1909

Author: L. M. (Lucy Maud) Montgomery (1874-1942)

Date first posted: May 25, 2017

Date last updated: May 25, 2017

Faded Page eBook #20170547

This ebook was produced by: Alex White & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <http://www.pgdpCanada.net>

The Life-Book of Uncle Jesse

L. M. Montgomery

Illustrator unknown.

First published *The Household*, August 1909.

This short story was adapted into Chapter 7 of *Anne's House of Dreams*.

The Life-Book of Uncle Jesse.

By L. M. Montgomery.



"I THINK, MARY, I'D FIND LOST MARGARET THERE."

"I THINK, MARY, I'D FIND LOST MARGARET THERE."

Uncle Jesse! The name calls up the vision of him as I saw him so often in those two enchanted summers at Golden Gate; as I saw him the first time, when he stood in the open doorway of the little, low-eaved cottage on the harbor shore, welcoming us to our new domicile with the gentle, unconscious courtesy that became him so well. A tall, ungainly figure, somewhat stooped, yet suggestive of great strength and endurance; a clean-shaven old face deeply lined and bronzed; a thick mane of iron gray hair falling quite to his shoulders; and a pair of remarkably blue, deep-set eyes, which sometimes twinkled and sometimes dreamed, but oftener looked out seaward with a wistful quest in them, as of one seeking something precious and lost. I was to learn one day what it was for which Uncle Jesse looked.

It cannot be denied that Uncle Jesse was a homely man. His spare jaws, rugged mouth, and square brow were not fashioned on the lines of beauty; but though at first sight you thought him plain you never thought anything more about it—the spirit shining through that rugged tenement beautified it so wholly.

Uncle Jesse was quite keenly aware of his lack of outward comeliness and lamented it, for he was a passionate worshipper of beauty in everything. He told mother once that he'd rather like to be made over again and made handsome.

"Folks say I'm good," he remarked whimsically, "but I sometimes wish the Lord had made me only half as good and put the rest of it into looks. But I reckon He knew what He was about, as a good Captain should. Some of us have to be homely or the purty ones—like Miss Mary there—wouldn't show up so well."

I was not in the least pretty but Uncle Jesse was always telling me I was—and I loved him for it. He told the fib so prettily and sincerely that he almost made me believe it for the time being; and I really think he believed it himself. All women are lovely and of good report in his eyes, because of one he had loved. The only time I ever saw Uncle Jesse really angered was when someone in his hearing cast an aspersion on the character of a shore girl. The wretched man who did it fairly cringed when Uncle Jesse turned on him with lightning of eye and thunder cloud of brow. At that moment I no longer found it hard to reconcile Uncle Jesse's simple, kindly personality with the wild, adventurous life he had lived.

We went to Golden Gate in the spring. Mother's health had not been good and her doctor recommended sea air and quiet. Uncle James, when he heard it, proposed that we take possession of a small cottage at Golden Gate, to which he had recently fallen heir by the death of an old aunt who had lived in it.

"I haven't been up to see it," he said, "but it is just as Aunt Elizabeth left it and she was the pink of neatness. The key is in the possession of an old sailor living near by—Jesse Boyd is the name, I think. I imagine you can be very comfortable in it. It is built right on the harbor shore, inside the bar, and it is within five minutes' walk of the outside shore."

Uncle James' offer fitted in very opportunely with our limp family purse, and we straightway betook ourselves to Golden Gate. We telegraphed to Jesse Boyd to have the house opened for us and one crisp spring day, when a rollicking wind was scudding over the harbor and the dunes, whipping the water into white caps, and washing the sandshore with long lines of silvery breakers, we alighted at the little station and walked the half mile to our new home, leaving our goods and chattels to be carted over in the evening by an obliging station agent's boy.

Our first glimpse of Aunt Elizabeth's cottage was a delight to soul and sense; it looked so like a big gray seashell stranded on the shore. Between it and the harbor was only a narrow strip of shingle and behind it was a gnarled and battered fir wood where the winds were in the habit of harping all sorts of weird and haunting music.

Inside, it was to prove even yet more quaint and delightful, with its low, dark-beamed ceilings and square, deep-set windows by which, whether open or shut, sea breezes entered at their own sweet will. The view from our door was magnificent, taking in the big harbor and sweeps of purple hills beyond. The entrance of the harbor gave it its name—a deep, narrow channel between the bar of sand-dunes on the one side and a steep, high, frowning red sandstone cliff on the other. We appreciated its significance the first time we saw a splendid golden sunrise flooding it, coming out of the wonderful sea and sky beyond and billowing through that narrow passage in waves of light. Truly, it was a golden gate through which one might sail to “faerie lands forlorn”.

As we went along the path to our little house we were agreeably surprised to see a blue spiral of smoke curling up from its big, square chimney; and the next moment Uncle Jesse (we were calling him Uncle Jesse half an hour after we met him, so it seems scarcely worth while to begin with anything else) came to the door.

“Welcome, ladies,” he said, holding out a big, hard, but scrupulously clean hand. “I thought you’d be feeling a bit tired and hungry, maybe, so when I came over to open up I put on a fire and brewed you up a cup of tea. I just delight in being neighborly and ’tain’t often I have the chance.”

We found that Uncle Jesse’s “cup of tea” meant a veritable spread. He had aired the little dining room, set out the table daintily with Aunt Elizabeth’s china and linen—“knowed jest where to put my hands on ’em—often and often helped old Miss Kennedy wash ’em. We were cronies, her and me. I miss her terrible,” and adorned it with mayflowers which, as we afterwards discovered, he had tramped several miles to gather. There was good bread and butter, “store” biscuits, a dish of tea fit for the gods on high Olympus, and a platter of the most delicious sea trout done to a turn.

“Thought they’d be tasty after traveling,” said Uncle Jesse. “They’re fresh as trout can be, ma’am. Two hours ago they was swimming in Johnson’s pond yander. I caught ’em—yes, ma’am. It’s about all I’m good for now, catching trout and cod occasional. But ’tweren’t always so—not by no manner of means. I used to do other things, as you’d admit if you saw my life-book.”

I was so hungry and tired that I did not then “rise to the bait” of Uncle Jesse’s “life-book”. I simply wanted to begin on those trout. Mother insisted that Uncle Jesse sit down and help us eat the repast he had prepared, and he assented without undue coaxing.

“Thank ye kindly. ’Twill be a real treat. I mostly has to eat my meals alone, with the reflection of my ugly old phiz in a looking glass opposite for company. ’Tisn’t

often I have the chance to sit down with two such sweet purty ladies.”

Uncle Jesse’s compliments look bald enough on paper; but he paid them with such gracious, gentle deference of tone and look that the woman who received them felt that she was being offered a queen’s gift in kingly fashion.

He broke bread with us and from that moment we were all friends together and forever. After we had eaten all we could, we sat at our table for an hour and listened to Uncle Jesse telling us stories of his life.

“If I talk too much you must jest check me,” he said seriously, but with a twinkle in his eyes. “When I do get a chance to talk to anyone I’m apt to run on terrible.”

He had been a sailor from the time he was ten years old and some of his adventures had such a marvelous edge that I secretly wondered if Uncle Jesse were not drawing a rather long bow at our credulous expense. But in this, as I found later, I did him injustice. His tales were all literally true and Uncle Jesse had the gift of the born story teller, whereby “unhappy, far-off things” can be brought vividly before the hearer and made to live again in all their pristine poignancy.

Mother and I laughed and shivered over Uncle Jesse’s tales, and once we found ourselves crying. Uncle Jesse surveyed our tears with pleasure shining out through his face like an illuminating lamp.

“I like to make folks cry that way,” he remarked. “It’s a compliment. But I can’t do justice to the things I’ve seen and helped do. I’ve got ’em all jotted down in my life-book but I haven’t got the knack of writing them out properly. If I had I could make a great book, if I had the knack of hitting on just the right words and stringing everything together proper on paper. But I can’t. It’s in this poor human critter.” Uncle Jesse patted his breast sorrowfully; “but he can’t get it out.”

When Uncle Jesse went home that evening mother asked him to come often to see us.

“I wonder if you’d give that invitation if you knew how likely I’d be to accept it,” he remarked whimsically.

“Which is another way of saying you wonder if I meant it,” smiled mother. “I do, most heartily and sincerely.”

“Then I’ll come. You’ll likely be pestered with me at any hour. And I’d be proud to have you drop over and visit me now and then too. I live on that point yander. Neither me nor my house is worth coming to see. It’s only got one room and a loft and a stovepipe sticking out of the roof for a chimney. But I’ve got a few little things lying around that I picked up in the queer corners I used to be poking my nose into. Mebbe they’d interest you.”

Uncle Jesse’s “few little things” turned out to be the most interesting collection of

curios I had ever seen. His one neat little living room was full of them—beautiful, hideous, or quaint, as the case might be, and almost all having some weird or exciting story attached.

Mother and I had a beautiful summer at Golden Gate. We lived the life of two children with Uncle Jesse as a playmate. Our housekeeping was of the simplest description and we spent our hours rambling along the shores, reading on the rocks, or sailing over the harbor in Uncle Jesse's trim little boat. Every day we loved the simple-souled, true, manly, old sailor more and more. He was as refreshing as a sea-breeze, as interesting as some ancient chronicle. We never tired of listening to his stories; and his quaint remarks and comments were a continual delight to us. Uncle Jesse was one of those interesting and rare people who in the picturesque phraseology of the shore folks, "never speak but they say something". The milk of human kindness and the wisdom of the serpent were mingled in Uncle Jesse's composition in delightful proportions.

One day he was absent all day and returned at nightfall.

"Took a tramp back yander,"—"Back yander" with Uncle Jesse might mean the station hamlet or the city a hundred miles away, or any place between—"to carry Mr. Kimball a mess of trout. He likes one occasional and it's all I can do for a kindness he did me once. I stayed all day to talk to him. He likes to talk to me, though he's an eddicated man, because he's one of the folks that's *got* to talk or they're miserable, and he finds listeners scarce round here. The folks fight shy of him because they think he's an infidel. He ain't *that* far gone exactly—few men is, I reckon—but he's what you might call a heretic. Heretics are wicked but they're mighty interesting. It's just that they've got sorter lost looking for God, being under the impression that He's hard to find—which He ain't, never. Most of 'em blunder to Him after awhile I guess. I don't think listening to Mr. Kimball's arguments is likely to do *me* much harm. Mind you, I believe what I was brought up to believe. It saves a vast of trouble—and back of it all, God is good. The trouble with Mr. Kimball is, he's a leetle *too* clever. He thinks he's bound to live up to his cleverness and that it's smarter to thrash out some new way of getting to heaven than to go by the old track the common, ignorant folks is traveling. But he'll get there sometime all right and then he'll laugh at himself."

Nothing ever seemed to put Uncle Jesse out or depress him in any way.

"I've kind of contracted a habit of enjoying things," he remarked once, when mother had commented on his invariable cheerfulness. "It's got so chronic that I believe I even enjoy the disagreeable things. It's great fun thinking they can't last.

‘Ole rheumatiz’, I says, when it grips me hard, ‘you’ve *got* to stop aching sometime. The worse you are the sooner you’ll stop, perhaps. I’m bound to get the better of you in the long run, whether in the body or out of the body.’”

Uncle Jesse seldom came to our house without bringing us something, even if it were only a bunch of sweet grass.

“I favor the smell of sweet grass,” he said. “It always makes me think of my mother.”

“She was fond of it?”

“Not that I knows on. Dunno’s she ever saw any sweet grass. No, it’s because it has a kind of motherly perfume—not too young, you understand—something kind of seasoned and wholesome and dependable—just like a mother.”

Uncle Jesse was a very early riser. He seldom missed a sunrise.

“I’ve seen all kinds of sunrises come in through that there Gate,” he said dreamily, one morning when I myself had made a heroic effort at early rising and found him on the rocks half way between his house and ours. “I’ve been all over the world and, take it all in all, I’ve never seen a finer sight than a summer sunrise out there beyant the Gate. A man can’t pick his time for dying, Mary—jest got to go when the Captain gives his sailing orders. But if I could I’d go out when the morning comes in there at the Gate. I’ve watched it a many times and thought what a thing it would be to pass out through that great white glory to whatever was waiting beyant, on a sea that ain’t mapped out on any airthly chart. I think, Mary, I’d find lost Margaret there.”

He had already told me the story of “lost Margaret” as he always called her. He rarely spoke of her but when he did his love for her trembled in every tone—a love that had never grown faint or forgetful. Uncle Jesse was seventy; it was fifty years since lost Margaret had fallen asleep one day in her father’s dory, and drifted—as was supposed, for nothing was ever known certainly of her fate—across the harbor and out of the Gate, to perish in the black thunder squall that had come up suddenly that long ago afternoon. But to Uncle Jesse those fifty years were but as yesterday when it is past.

“I walked the shore for months after that,” he said sadly, “looking to find her dear, sweet, little body; but the sea never gave her back to me. But I’ll find her sometime. I wisht I could tell you just how she looked but I can’t. I’ve seen a fine silvery mist hanging over the Gate at sunrise that seemed like her—and then again I’ve seen a white birch in the woods back yander that made me think of her. She had pale brown hair and a little white face, and long slender fingers like yours, Mary, only browner, for she was a shore girl. Sometimes I wake up in the night and hear

the sea calling to me in the old way and it seems as if lost Margaret called in it. And when there's a storm and the waves are sobbing and moaning I hear her lamenting among them. And when they laugh on a gay day it's *her* laugh—lost Margaret's sweet little laugh. The sea took her from me but some day I'll find her, Mary. It can't keep us apart forever."



"I LIKE TO MAKE FOLKS CRY THAT WAY," HE REMARKED.

I had not been long at Golden Gate before I saw Uncle Jesse's "life-book", as he quaintly called it. He needed no coaxing to show it and he proudly gave it to me to read. It was an old leather bound book filled with the record of his voyages and adventures. I thought what a veritable treasure trove it would be to a writer. Every sentence was a nugget. In itself the book had no literary merit; Uncle Jesse's charm of story telling failed him when he came to pen and ink; he could only jot roughly down the outlines of his famous tales and both spelling and grammar were sadly askew. But I felt that if anyone possessing the gift could take that simple record of a brave, adventurous life, reading between the bald lines the tale of dangers stanchly faced and duties manfully done, a wonderful story might be made from it. Pure comedy and thrilling tragedy were both lying hidden in Uncle Jesse's "life-book",

waiting for the touch of the magician's hand to waken the laughter and grief and horrors of thousands. I thought of my cousin, Robert Kennedy, who juggled with words in a masterly fashion, but complained that he found it hard to create incidents or characters. Here were both ready to his hand; but Robert was in Japan in the interests of his paper.

In the fall, when the harbor lay black and sullen under November skies, mother and I went back to town, parting with Uncle Jesse regretfully. We wanted him to visit us in town during the winter but he shook his head.

"It's too far away, Mary. If lost Margaret called me I mightn't hear her there. I must be there when my time comes. It can't be very far off now."

I wrote often to Uncle Jesse through the winter and sent him books and magazines. He enjoyed them but he thought—and truly enough—that none of them came up to his life-book for real interest.

"If my life-book could be took and writ by someone that knowed how it would beat them holler," he wrote in one of his few letters to me.

In the spring we returned joyfully to Golden Gate. It was as golden as ever and the harbor as blue; the winds still rollicked as gaily and sweetly and the breakers boomed outside the bar as of yore. All was unchanged save Uncle Jesse. He had aged greatly and seemed frail and bent. After he had gone home from his first call on us mother cried.

"Uncle Jesse will soon be going to seek lost Margaret," she said.

In June Robert came. I took him promptly over to see Uncle Jesse, who was very much excited when he found that Robert was a "real writing man".

"Robert wants to hear some of your stories, Uncle Jesse," I said. "Tell him the one about the captain who went crazy and imagined he was the Flying Dutchman."

This was Uncle Jesse's best story. It was a compound of humor and horror, and though I had heard it several times I laughed as heartily and shivered as fearsomely over it as Robert did. Other tales followed; Uncle Jesse told how his vessel had been run down by a steamer, how he had been boarded by Malay pirates, how his ship had caught fire, how he had helped a political prisoner escape from a South American republic. He never said a boastful word but it was impossible to help seeing what a hero the man had been—brave, true, resourceful, unselfish, skillful. He sat there in his poor little room and made those things live again for us. By a lift of the eyebrow, a twist of the lip, a gesture, a word, he painted some whole scene or character so that we saw it as it was.

Finally, he lent Robert his "life-book". Robert sat up all night reading it and came to the breakfast table in great excitement.

“Mary, this is a wonderful book. If I could take it and garb it properly—work it up into a systematic whole and string it on the thread of Uncle Jesse’s romance of lost Margaret it would be the novel of the year. Do you suppose he would let me do it?”

“Let you! I think he would be delighted,” I answered.

And he was. He was as excited as a schoolboy over it. At last his cherished dream was to be realized and his “life-book” given to the world.

“We’ll collaborate,” said Robert. “You will give the soul and I the body. Oh, we’ll write a famous book between us, Uncle Jesse. And we’ll get right to work.”

Uncle Jesse was a happy man that summer. He looked upon the little back room we gave up to Robert for a study as a sacred shrine. Robert talked everything over with Uncle Jesse but would not let him see the manuscript. “You must wait till it is published,” he said. “Then you’ll get it all at once in its best shape.”

Robert delved into the treasures of the life-book and used them freely. He dreamed and brooded over lost Margaret until she became a vivid reality to him and lived in his pages. As the book progressed it took possession of him and he worked at it with feverish eagerness. He let me read the manuscript and criticize it; and the concluding chapter of the book, which the critics, later on, were pleased to call idyllic, was modeled after my suggestions, so that I felt as if I had a share in it too.

It was autumn when the book was finished. Robert went back to town but mother and I decided to stay at Golden Gate all winter. We loved the spot; and, besides, I wished to remain for Uncle Jesse’s sake. He was failing all the time; and after Robert went and the excitement of the book-making was past he failed still more rapidly. His tramping expeditions were over and he seldom went out in his boat. Neither did he talk a great deal. He liked to come over and sit silently for hours at our seaward window, looking out wistfully toward the Gate with his swiftly-whitening head leaning on his hand. The only keen interest he still had was in Robert’s book. He waited and watched impatiently for its publication.

“I want to live till I see it,” he said, “just that long—then I’ll be ready to go. He said it would be out in the spring—I must hang on till it comes, Mary.”

There were times when I doubted sadly if he would “hang on”. As the winter wore away he grew frailer and frailer. But ever he looked forward to the coming of spring and “the book”, *his* book, transformed and glorified.

One day in young April the book came at last. Uncle Jesse had gone to the postoffice faithfully every day for a month, expecting it; but this day he was too feeble to go and I went for him. The book was there. It was called simply, “The Life-Book of Jesse Boyd,” and on the title page the names of Robert Kennedy and

Jesse Boyd were printed as collaborators.

I shall never forget Uncle Jesse's face as I handed it to him. I came away and left him reading it, oblivious to all else. All night the light burned in his window and I looked out across the sands to it and pictured the delight of the old man poring over the printed pages whereon his own life was portrayed. I wondered how he would like the ending—the ending I had suggested. I was never to know.

After breakfast I went over to Uncle Jesse's house, taking some little delicacy mother had cooked for him. It was an exquisite morning, full of delicate spring tints and sounds. The harbor was sparkling and dimpling like a girl; the winds were playing hide and seek roguishly among the stunted firs, and the silver-flashing gulls were soaring over the bar. Beyond the Gate was a shining, wonderful sea.

When I reached the little house on the point I saw the lamp still burning wanly in the window. A quick alarm struck at my heart. Without waiting to knock I lifted the latch and entered.

Uncle Jesse was lying on the old sofa by the window, with the book clasped to his heart. His eyes were closed and on his face was a look of the most perfect peace and happiness—the look of one who has long sought and found at last.

We could not know at what hour he had died; but somehow I think he had his wish and went out when the morning came in through the Golden Gate. Out on that shining tide his spirit drifted, over the sunrise sea of pearl and silver, to the haven where lost Margaret waited beyond the storms and calms.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

[The end of *The Life-Book of Uncle Jesse* by L. M. (Lucy Maud) Montgomery]