

L. M. MONTGOMERY

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CASTLE**

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CHAPTER I

If it had not rained on a certain May morning Valancy Stirling's whole life would have been entirely different. She would have gone, with the rest of her clan, to Aunt Wellington's engagement picnic and Dr. Trent would have gone to Montreal. But it did rain and you shall hear what happened to her because of it.

Valancy wakened early, in the lifeless, hopeless hour just preceding dawn. She had not slept very well. One does not sleep well, sometimes, when one is twenty-nine on the morrow, and unmarried, in a community and connection where the unmarried are simply those who have failed to get a man.

Deerwood and the Stirlings had long since relegated Valancy to hopeless old maidenhood. But Valancy herself had never quite relinquished a certain pitiful, shamed, little hope that Romance would come her way yet — never, until this wet, horrible morning, when she wakened to the fact that she was twenty-nine and unsought by any man.

Ay, *there* lay the sting. Valancy did not mind so much being an old maid. After all, she thought, be-

ing an old maid couldn't possibly be as dreadful as being married to an Uncle Wellington or an Uncle Benjamin, or even an Uncle Herbert. What hurt her was that she had never had a chance to be anything but an old maid. No man had ever desired her.

The tears came into her eyes as she lay there alone in the faintly greying darkness. She dared not let herself cry as hard as she wanted to, for two reasons. She was afraid that crying might bring on another attack of that pain around the heart. She had had a spell of it after she had got into bed — rather worse than any she had had yet. And she was afraid her mother would notice her red eyes at breakfast and keep at her with minute, persistent, mosquito-like questions regarding the cause thereof.

“Suppose,” thought Valancy with a ghastly grin, “I answered with the plain truth, “I am crying because I cannot get married.” How horrified Mother would be — though she is ashamed every day of her life of her old maid daughter.”

But of course appearances should be kept up. “It is not,” Valancy could hear her mother's prim, dictatorial voice asserting, “it is not *maidenly* to think about *men*.”

The thought of her mother's expression made Valancy laugh — for she had a sense of humour nobody in her clan suspected. For that matter, there were a good many things about Valancy that nobody suspected. But her laughter was very superficial and presently she lay there, a huddled, futile little figure, listening to the rain pouring down outside and watching, with a sick distaste, the chill, merciless light creeping into her ugly, sordid room.

She knew the ugliness of that room by heart — knew it and hated it. The yellow-painted floor, with one hideous, “hooked” rug by the bed, with a grotesque, “hooked” dog on it, always grinning at her when she awoke; the faded, dark-red paper; the ceiling discoloured by old leaks and crossed by cracks; the narrow, pinched little washstand; the brown-paper lambrequin with purple roses on it; the spotted old looking-glass with the crack across it, propped up on the inadequate dressing-table; the jar of ancient potpourri made by her mother in her mythical honeymoon; the shell-covered box, with one burst corner, which Cousin Stickles had made in her equally mythical girlhood; the beaded

pincushion with half its bead fringe gone; the one stiff, yellow chair; the faded old motto, "Gone but not forgotten," worked in coloured yarns about Great-grand-mother Stirling's grim old face; the old photographs of ancient relatives long banished from the rooms below. There were only two pictures that were not of relatives. One, an old chromo of a puppy sitting on a rainy doorstep. That picture always made Valancy unhappy. That forlorn little dog crouched on the doorstep in the driving rain! Why didn't *some one* open the door and let him in? The other picture was a faded, passe-partouted engraving of Queen Louise coming down a stairway, which Aunt Wellington had lavishly given her on her tenth birthday. For nineteen years she had looked at it and hated it, beautiful, smug, self-satisfied Queen Louise. But she never dared destroy it or remove it. Mother and Cousin Stickles would have been aghast, or, as Valancy irreverently expressed it in her thoughts, would have had a fit.

Every room in the house was ugly, of course. But downstairs appearances were kept up somewhat. There was no money for rooms nobody ever

saw. Valancy sometimes felt that she could have done something for her room herself, even without money, if she were permitted. But her mother had negatived every timid suggestion and Valancy did not persist. Valancy never persisted. She was afraid to. Her mother could not brook opposition. Mrs. Stirling would sulk for days if offended, with the airs of an insulted duchess.

The only thing Valancy liked about her room was that she could be alone there at night to cry if she wanted to.

But, after all, what did it matter if a room, which you used for nothing except sleeping and dressing in, were ugly? Valancy was never permitted to stay alone in her room for any other purpose. People who wanted to be alone, so Mrs. Frederick Stirling and Cousin Stickles believed, could only want to be alone for some sinister purpose. But her room in the Blue Castle was everything a room should be.

Valancy, so cowed and subdued and overridden and snubbed in real life, was wont to let herself go rather splendidly in her day-dreams. Nobody in the Stirling clan, or its ramifications, suspected this, least of all her mother and Cousin Stickles. They

never knew that Valancy had two homes — the ugly red brick box of a home, on Elm Street, and the Blue Castle in Spain. Valancy had lived spiritually in the Blue Castle ever since she could remember. She had been a very tiny child when she found herself possessed of it. Always, when she shut her eyes, she could see it plainly, with its turrets and banners on the pine-clad mountain height, wrapped in its faint, blue loveliness, against the sunset skies of a fair and unknown land. Everything wonderful and beautiful was in that castle. Jewels that queens might have worn; robes of moonlight and fire; couches of roses and gold; long flights of shallow marble steps, with great, white urns, and with slender, mist-clad maidens going up and down them; courts, marble-pillared, where shimmering fountains fell and nightingales sang among the myrtles; halls of mirrors that reflected only handsome knights and lovely women — herself the loveliest of all, for whose glance men died. All that supported her through the boredom of her days was the hope of going on a dream spree at night. Most, if not all, of the Stir-lings would have died of horror if they had known half the things Valancy did in her Blue Castle.

For one thing she had quite a few lovers in it. Oh, only one at a time. One who wooed her with all the romantic ardour of the age of chivalry and won her after long devotion and many deeds of dering-do, and was wedded to her with pomp and circumstance in the great, banner-hung chapel of the Blue Castle.

At twelve, this lover was a fair lad with golden curls and heavenly blue eyes. At fifteen, he was tall and dark and pale, but still necessarily handsome. At twenty, he was ascetic, dreamy, spiritual. At twenty-five, he had a clean-cut jaw, slightly grim, and a face strong and rugged rather than handsome. Valancy never grew older than twenty-five in her Blue Castle, but recently — very recently — her hero had had reddish, tawny hair, a twisted smile and a mysterious past.

I don't say Valancy deliberately murdered these lovers as she outgrew them. One simply faded away as another came. Things are very convenient in this respect in Blue Castles.

But, on this morning of her day of fate, Valancy could not find the key of her Blue Castle. Reality pressed on her too hardly, barking at her heels

like a maddening little dog. She was twenty-nine, lonely, undesired, ill-favoured — the only homely girl in a handsome clan, with no past and no future. As far as she could look back, life was drab and colourless, with not one single crimson or purple spot anywhere. As far as she could look forward it seemed certain to be just the same until she was nothing but a solitary, little withered leaf clinging to a wintry bough. The moment when a woman realises that she has nothing to live for — neither love, duty, purpose nor hope — holds for her the bitterness of death.

“And I just have to go on living because I can’t stop. I may have to live eighty years,” thought Valancy, in a kind of panic. “We’re all horribly long-lived. It sickens me to think of it.”

She was glad it was raining — or rather, she was drearily satisfied that it was raining. There would be no picnic that day. This annual picnic, whereby Aunt and Uncle Wellington — one always thought of them in that succession — inevitably celebrated their engagement at a picnic thirty years before, had been, of late years, a veritable nightmare to Valancy. By an impish coin-

chance it was the same day as her birthday and, after she had passed twenty-five, nobody let her forget it.

Much as she hated going to the picnic, it would never have occurred to her to rebel against it. There seemed to be nothing of the revolutionary in her nature. And she knew exactly what every one would say to her at the picnic. Uncle Wellington, whom she disliked and despised even though he had fulfilled the highest Stirling aspiration, "marrying money," would say to her in a pig's whisper, "Not thinking of getting married yet, my dear?" and then go off into the bellow of laughter with which he invariably concluded his dull remarks. Aunt Wellington, of whom Valancy stood in abject awe, would tell her about Olive's new chiffon dress and Cecil's last devoted letter. Valancy would have to look as pleased and interested as if the dress and letter had been hers or else Aunt Wellington would be offended. And Valancy had long ago decided that she would rather offend God than Aunt Wellington, because God might forgive her but Aunt Wellington never would.

Aunt Alberta, enormously fat, with an amiable habit of always referring to her husband as "he,"

as if he were the only male creature in the world, who could never forget that she had been a great beauty in her youth, would condole with Valancy on her sallow skin—

“I don’t know why all the girls of today are so sunburned. When *I* was a girl my skin was roses and cream. I was counted the prettiest girl in Canada, my dear.”

Perhaps Uncle Herbert wouldn’t say anything — or perhaps he would remark jocularly, “How fat you’re getting, Doss!” And then everybody would laugh over the excessively humorous idea of poor, scrawny little Doss getting fat.

Handsome, solemn Uncle James, whom Valancy disliked but respected because he was reputed to be very clever and was therefore the clan oracle — brains being none too plentiful in the Stirling connection — would probably remark with the owl-like sarcasm that had won him his reputation, “I suppose you’re busy with your hope-chest these days?”

And Uncle Benjamin would ask some of his abominable conundrums, between wheezy chuckles, and answer them himself.

“What is the difference between Doss and a mouse?”

“The mouse wishes to harm the cheese and Doss wishes to charm the he’s.”

Valancy had heard him ask that riddle fifty times and every time she wanted to throw something at him. But she never did. In the first place, the Stir-lings simply did not throw things; in the second place, Uncle Benjamin was a wealthy and childless old widower and Valancy had been brought up in the fear and admonition of his money. If she offended him he would cut her out of his will — supposing she were in it. Valancy did not want to be cut out of Uncle Benjamin’s will. She had been poor all her life and knew the galling bitterness of it. So she endured his riddles and even smiled tortured little smiles over them.

Aunt Isabel, downright and disagreeable as an east wind, would criticise her in some way — Valancy could not predict just how, for Aunt Isabel never repeated a criticism — she found something new with which to jab you every time. Aunt Isabel prided herself on saying what she thought, but didn’t like it so well when other people said what

they thought to *her*. Valancy never said what *she* thought.

Cousin Georgiana — named after her great-great-grand-mother, who had been named after George the Fourth — would recount dolorously the names of all relatives and friends who had died since the last picnic and wonder “which of us will be the first to go next.”

Oppressively competent, Aunt Mildred would talk endlessly of her husband and her odious prodigies of babies to Valancy, because Valancy would be the only one she could find to put up with it. For the same reason, Cousin Gladys — really First Cousin Gladys once removed, according to the strict way in which the Stirlings tabulated relationship — a tall, thin lady who admitted she had a sensitive disposition, would describe minutely the tortures of her neuritis. And Olive, the wonder girl of the whole Stirling clan, who had everything Valancy had not — beauty, popularity, love, — would show off her beauty and presume on her popularity and flaunt her diamond insignia of love in Valancy’s dazzled, envious eyes.