

The Finished Story

L. M. Montgomery

She always sat in a corner of the west veranda at the hotel, knitting something white and fluffy, or pink and fluffy, or pale blue and fluffy—always fluffy, at least, and always dainty. Shawls and scarfs and hoods the things were, I believe. When she finished one she gave it to some girl and began another. Every girl at Harbour Light that summer wore some distracting thing that had been fashioned by Miss Sylvia's slim, tireless, white fingers.

She was old, with that beautiful, serene old age which is as beautiful in its way as youth. Her girlhood and womanhood must have been very lovely to have ripened into such a beauty of sixty years. It was a surprise to everyone who heard her called *Miss Sylvia*. She looked so like a woman who ought to have stalwart, grown sons and dimpled little grandchildren.

For the first two days after the arrival at the hotel she sat in her corner alone. There was always a circle of young people around her; old folks and middle-aged people would have liked to join it, but Miss Sylvia, while she was gracious to all, let it be distinctly understood that her sympathies were with youth. She sat among the boys and girls, young men and maidens, like a fine white queen. Her dress was always the same and somewhat old-fashioned, but nothing else would have suited her half so well; she wore a lace cap on her snowy hair and a heliotrope shawl over her black silk shoulders. She knitted continually and talked a good deal, but listened more. We sat around her at all hours of the day and told her everything.

When you were first introduced to her you called her Miss Stanleymain. Her endurance of that was limited to twenty-four hours. Then she begged you to call her Miss Sylvia, and as Miss Sylvia you spoke and thought of her forevermore.

Miss Sylvia liked us all, but I was her favourite. She told us so frankly and let it be understood that when I was talking to her and her heliotrope shawl was allowed to slip under one arm it was a sign that we were not to be interrupted. I was as vain of her favour as any lovelorn suitor whose lady had honoured him, not knowing, as I came to know later, the reason for it.

Although Miss Sylvia had an unlimited capacity for receiving confidences, she never gave any. We were all sure that there must be some romance in her life, but our efforts to discover it were unsuccessful. Miss Sylvia parried tentative questions so skilfully that we knew she had something to defend. But one evening, when I had known her a month, as time is reckoned, and long years as affection and understanding are computed, she told me her story—at least, what there was to tell of it. The last chapter was missing.

We were sitting together on the veranda at sunset. Most of the hotel people had gone for a

harbour sail; a few forlorn mortals prowled about the grounds and eyed our corner wistfully, but by the sign of the heliotrope shawl knew it was not for them.

I was reading one of my stories to Miss Sylvia. In my own excuse I must allege that she tempted me to do it. I did not go around with manuscripts under my arm, inflicting them on defenceless females. But Miss Sylvia had discovered that I was a magazine scribbler, and moreover, that I had shut myself up in my room that very morning and perpetrated a short story. Nothing would do but that I read it to her.

It was a rather sad little story. The hero loved the heroine, and she loved him. There was no reason why he should not love her, but there was a reason why he could not marry her. When he found that he loved her he knew that he must go away. But might he not, at least, tell her his love? Might he not, at least, find out for his consolation if she cared for him? There was a struggle; he won, and went away without a word, believing it to be the more manly course. When I began to read Miss Sylvia was knitting, a pale green something this time, of the tender hue of young leaves in May. But after a little her knitting slipped unheeded to her lap and her hands folded idly above it. It was the most subtle compliment I had ever received.

When I turned the last page of the manuscript and looked up, Miss Sylvia's soft brown eyes were full of tears. She lifted her hands, clasped them together and said in an agitated voice:

"Oh, no, no; don't let him go away without telling her—just telling her. Don't let him do it!"

"But, you see, Miss Sylvia," I explained, flattered beyond measure that my characters had seemed so real to her, "that would spoil the story. It would have no reason for existence then. Its *motif* is simply his mastery over self. He believes it to be the nobler course."

"No, no, it wasn't—if he loved her he should have told her. Think of her shame and humiliation—she loved him, and he went without a word and she could never know he cared for her. Oh, you must change it—you must, indeed! I cannot bear to think of her suffering what I have suffered."

Miss Sylvia broke down and sobbed. To appease her, I promised that I would remodel the story, although I knew that the doing so would leave it absolutely pointless.

"Oh, I'm so glad," said Miss Sylvia, her eyes shining through her tears. "You see, I know it would make her happier—I know it. I'm going to tell you my poor little story to convince you. But you—you must not tell it to any of the others."

“I am sorry you think the admonition necessary,” I said reproachfully.

“Oh, I do not, indeed I do not,” she hastened to assure me. “I know I can trust you. But it’s such a poor little story. You mustn’t laugh at it—it is all the romance I had. Years ago—forty years ago—when I was a young girl of twenty, I—learned to care very much for somebody. I met him at a summer resort like this. I was there with my aunt and he was there with his mother, who was delicate. We saw a great deal of each other for a little while. He was—oh, he was like no other man I had ever seen. You remind me of him somehow. That is partly why I like you so much. I noticed the resemblance the first time I saw you. I don’t know in just what it consists—in your expression and the way you carry your head, I think. He was not strong—he coughed a good deal. Then one day he went away—suddenly. I had thought he cared for me, but he never said so—just went away. Oh, the shame of it! After a time I heard that he had been ordered to California for his health. And he died out there the next spring. My heart broke then, I never cared for anybody again—I couldn’t. I have always loved him. But it would have been so much easier to bear if I had only known that he loved me—oh, it would have made all the difference in the world. And the sting of it has been there all these years. I can’t even permit myself the joy of dwelling on his memory because of the thought that perhaps he did not care.”

“He must have cared,” I said warmly. “He couldn’t have helped it, Miss Sylvia.”

Miss Sylvia shook her head with a sad smile.

“I cannot be sure. Sometimes I think he did. But then the doubt creeps back again. I would give almost anything to know that he did—to know that I have not lavished all the love of my life on a man who did not want it. And I never can know, never—I can hope and almost believe, but I can never know. Oh, you don’t understand—a man couldn’t fully understand what my pain has been over it. You see now why I want you to change the story. I am sorry for that poor girl, but if you only let her know that he really loves her she will not mind all the rest so very much; she will be able to bear the pain of even life-long separation if she only knows.”

Miss Sylvia picked up her knitting and went away. As for me, I thought savagely of the dead man she loved and called him a cad, or at best, a fool.

Next day Miss Sylvia was her serene, smiling self once more, and she did not again make any reference to what she had told me. A fortnight later she returned home and I went my way back to the world. During the following winter I wrote several letters to Miss Sylvia and received replies from her. Her letters were very like herself. When I sent her the third-rate magazine containing my story—nothing but a third-rate magazine would take it in its rewritten form—she wrote to say that she was so glad that I had let the poor girl know.

Early in April I received a letter from an aunt of mine in the country, saying that she intended to sell her place and come to the city to live. She asked me to go out to Sweetwater for a few weeks and assist her in the business of settling up the estate and disposing of such things as she did not wish to take with her.

When I arrived at Sweetwater I found it moist and chill with the sunny moisture and teasing chill of our Canadian springs. They are long and fickle and reluctant, these springs of ours, but, oh, the unnamable charm of them! There was something even in the red buds of the maples at Sweetwater and in the long, smoking stretches of hillside fields that sent a thrill through my veins, finer and subtler than any given by old wine.

A week after my arrival, when we had got the larger affairs pretty well straightened out, Aunt Mary suggested that I had better overhaul Uncle Alan's room.

"The things there have never been meddled with since he died," she said. "In particular, there's an old trunk full of his letters and his papers. It was brought home from California after his death. I've never examined them. I don't suppose there is anything of any importance among them. But I'm not going to carry all that old rubbish to town. So I wish you would look over them and see if there is anything that should be kept. The rest may be burned."

I felt no particular interest in the task. My Uncle Alan Blair was a mere name to me. He was my mother's eldest brother and had died years before I was born. I had heard that he had been very clever and that great things had been expected of him. But I anticipated no pleasure from exploring musty old letters and papers of forty neglected years.

I went up to Uncle Alan's room at dusk that night. We had been having a day of warm spring rain, but it had cleared away and the bare maple boughs outside the window were strung with glistening drops. The room looked to the north and was always dim by reason of the close-growing Sweetwater pines. A gap had been cut through them to the northwest, and in it I had a glimpse of the sea Uncle Alan had loved, and above it a wondrous sunset sky fleeced over with little clouds, pale and pink and golden and green, that suddenly reminded me of Miss Sylvia and her fluffy knitting. It was with the thought of her in my mind that I lighted a lamp and began the task of grubbing into Uncle Alan's trunkful of papers. Most of these were bundles of yellowed letters, of no present interest, from his family and college friends. There were several college theses and essays, and a lot of loose miscellanea pertaining to boyish school days. I went through the collection rapidly, until at the bottom of the trunk, I came to a small book bound in dark-green leather. It proved to be a sort of journal, and I began to glance over it with a languid interest.

It had been begun in the spring after he had graduated from college. Although suspected only by himself, the disease which was to end his life had already fastened upon him. The

entries were those of a doomed man, who, feeling the curse fall on him like a frost, blighting all the fair hopes and promises of life, seeks some help and consolation in the outward self-communing of a journal. There was nothing morbid, nothing unmanly in the record. As I read, I found myself liking Uncle Alan, wishing that he might have lived and been my friend.

His mother had not been well that summer and the doctor ordered her to the seashore. Alan accompanied her. Here occurred a hiatus in the journal. No leaves had been torn out, but a quire or so of them had apparently become loosened from the threads that held them in place. I found them later on in the trunk, but at the time I passed to the next page. It began abruptly:

This girl is the sweetest thing that God ever made. I had not known a woman could be so fair and sweet. Her beauty awes me, the purity of her soul shines so clearly through it like an illuminating lamp. I love her with all my power of loving and I am thankful that it is so. It would have been hard to die without having known love. I am glad that it has come to me, even if its price is unspeakable bitterness. A man has not lived for nothing who has known and loved Sylvia Stanleyman.

I must not seek her love—that is denied me. If I were well and strong I should win it; yes, I believe I could win it, and nothing in the world would prevent me from trying, but, as things are, it would be the part of a coward to try. Yet I cannot resist the delight of being with her, of talking to her, of watching her wonderful face. She is in my thoughts day and night, she dwells in my dreams. O, Sylvia, I love you, my sweet!

A week later there was another entry:

July Seventeenth.

I am afraid. To-day I met Sylvia's eyes. In them was a look which at first stirred my heart to its deeps with tumultuous delight, and then I remembered. I must spare her that suffering, at whatever cost to myself. I must not let myself dwell on the dangerous sweetness of the thought that her heart is turning to me. What would be the crowning joy to another man could be only added sorrow to me.

Then:

July Eighteenth.

This morning I took the train to the city. I was determined to know the worst once for all. The time had come when I must. My doctor at home had put me off with vague hopes and perhapses. So I went to a noted physician in the city. I told him I wanted the whole truth—I made him tell it. Stripped of all softening verbiage it is this: I have perhaps eight months or a year to live—no more!

I had expected it, although not quite so soon. Yet the certainty was none the less bitter. But this is no time for self-pity. It is of Sylvia I must think now. I shall go away at once, before the sweet fancy which is possibly budding in her virgin heart shall have bloomed into a flower that might poison some of her fair years.

July Nineteenth.

It is over. I said good-bye to her to-day before others, for I dared not trust myself to see her alone. She looked hurt and startled, as if someone had struck her. But she will soon forget, even if I have not been mistaken in the reading of her eyes. As for me, the bitterness of death is already over in that parting. All that now remains is to play the man to the end.

From further entries in the journal I learned that Alan Blair had returned to Sweetwater and later on had been ordered to California. The entries during his sojourn there were few and far between. In all of them he spoke of Sylvia. Finally, after a long silence, he had written:

I think the end is not far off now. I am not sorry for my suffering has been great of late. Last night I was easier. I slept and dreamed that I saw Sylvia. Once or twice I thought that I would arrange to have this book sent to her after my death. But I have decided that it would be unwise. It would only pain her, so I shall destroy it when I feel the time has come.

It is sunset in this wonderful summer land. At home in Sweetwater it is only early spring as yet, with snow lingering along the edges of the woods. The sunsets there will be creamy-yellow and pale red now. If I could but see them once more! And Sylvia—

There was a little blot where the pen had fallen. Evidently the end had been nearer than Alan Blair had thought. At least, there were no more entries, and the little green book had not been destroyed. I was glad that it had not been; and I felt glad that it was thus put in my power to write the last chapter of Miss Sylvia's story for her.

As soon as I could leave Sweetwater I went to the city, three hundred miles away, where Miss Sylvia lived. I found her in her library, in her black silk dress and heliotrope shawl, knitting up cream wool, for all the world as if she had just been transplanted from the

veranda corner of Harbour Light.

“My dear boy!” she said.

“Do you know why I have come?” I asked.

“I am vain enough to think it was because you wanted to see me,” she smiled.

“I did want to see you; but I would have waited until summer if it had not been that I wished to bring you the missing chapter of your story, dear lady.”

“I—I—don’t understand,” said Miss Sylvia, starting slightly.

“I had an uncle, Alan Blair, who died forty years ago in California,” I said quietly. “Recently I have had occasion to examine some of his papers. I found a journal among them and I have brought it to you because I think that you have the best right to it.”

I dropped the parcel in her lap. She was silent with surprise and bewilderment.

“And now,” I added, “I am going away. You won’t want to see me or anyone for a while after you have read this book. But I will come up to see you to-morrow.”

When I went the next day Miss Sylvia herself met me at the door. She caught my hand and drew me into the hall. Her eyes were softly radiant.

“Oh, you have made me so happy!” she said tremulously. “Oh, you can never know how happy! Nothing hurts now—nothing ever can hurt, because I know he did care.”

She laid her face down on my shoulder, as a girl might have nestled to her lover, and I bent and kissed her for Uncle Alan.