

The Gossip of Valley View

L. M. Montgomery

It was the first of April, and Julius Barrett, aged fourteen, perched on his father's gatepost, watched ruefully the low descending sun, and counted that day lost. He had not succeeded in "fooling" a single person, although he had tried repeatedly. One and all, old and young, of his intended victims had been too wary for Julius. Hence, Julius was disgusted and ready for anything in the way of a stratagem or a spoil.

The Barrett gatepost topped the highest hill in Valley View. Julius could see the entire settlement, from "Young" Thomas Everett's farm, a mile to the west, to Adelia Williams's weather-grey little house on a moonrise slope to the east. He was gazing moodily down the muddy road when Dan Chester, homeward bound from the post office, came riding sloppily along on his grey mare and pulled up by the Barrett gate to hand a paper to Julius.

Dan was a young man who took life and himself very seriously. He seldom smiled, never joked, and had a Washingtonian reputation for veracity. Dan had never told a conscious falsehood in his life; he never even exaggerated.

Julius, beholding Dan's solemn face, was seized with a perfectly irresistible desire to "fool" him. At the same moment his eye caught the dazzling reflection of the setting sun on the windows of Adelia Williams's house, and he had an inspiration little short of diabolical. "Have you heard the news, Dan?" he asked.

"No, what is it?" asked Dan.

"I dunno's I ought to tell it," said Julius reflectively. "It's kind of a family affair, but then Adelia didn't say not to, and anyway it'll be all over the place soon. So I'll tell you, Dan, if you'll promise never to tell who told you. Adelia Williams and Young Thomas Everett are going to be married."

Julius delivered himself of this tremendous lie with a transparently earnest countenance. Yet Dan, credulous as he was, could not believe it all at once.

"Git out," he said.

"It's true, 'pon my word," protested Julius. "Adelia was up last night and told Ma all about it. Ma's her cousin, you know. The wedding is to be in June, and Adelia asked Ma to help her get her quilts and things ready."

Julius reeled all this off so glibly that Dan finally believed the story, despite the fact that the people thus coupled together in prospective matrimony were the very last people in Valley View who could have been expected to marry each other. Young Thomas was a confirmed bachelor of fifty, and Adelia Williams was forty; they were not supposed to be even well acquainted, as the Everetts and the Williamses had never been very friendly, although no open feud existed between them.

Nevertheless, in view of Julius's circumstantial statements, the amazing news must be true, and Dan was instantly agog to carry it further. Julius watched Dan and the grey mare out of sight, fairly writhing with ecstasy. Oh, but Dan had been easy! The story would be all over Valley View in twenty-four hours. Julius laughed until he came near to falling off the gatepost.

At this point Julius and Danny drop out of our story, and Young Thomas enters.

It was two days later when Young Thomas heard that he was to be married to Adelia Williams in June. Eben Clark, the blacksmith, told him when he went to the forge to get his horse shod. Young Thomas laughed his big jolly laugh. Valley View gossip had been marrying him off for the last thirty years, although never before to Adelia Williams.

"It's news to me," he said tolerantly.

Eben grinned broadly. "Ah, you can't bluff it off like that, Tom," he said. "The news came too straight this time. Well, I was glad to hear it, although I was mighty surprised. I never thought of you and Adelia. But she's a fine little woman and will make you a capital wife."

Young Thomas grunted and drove away. He had a good deal of business to do that day, involving calls at various places—the store for molasses, the mill for flour, Jim Bentley's for seed grain, the doctor's for toothache drops for his housekeeper, the post office for mail—and at each and every place he was joked about his approaching marriage. In the end it rather annoyed Young Thomas. He drove home at last in what was for him something of a temper. How on earth had that fool story started? With such detailed circumstantiality of rugs and quilts, too? Adelia Williams must be going to marry somebody, and the Valley View gossips, unable to locate the man, had guessed Young Thomas.

When he reached home, tired, mud-bespattered, and hungry, his housekeeper, who was also his hired man's wife, asked him if it was true that he was going to be married. Young Thomas, taking in at a glance the ill-prepared, half-cold supper on the table, felt more annoyed than ever, and said it wasn't, with a strong expression—not quite an oath—for Young Thomas never swore, unless swearing be as much a matter of intonation as of words.

Mrs. Dunn sighed, patted her swelled face, and said she was sorry; she had hoped it was true, for her man had decided to go west. They were to go in a month's time. Young Thomas sat down to his supper with the prospect of having to look up another housekeeper and hired man before planting to destroy his appetite.

Next day, three people who came to see Young Thomas on business congratulated him on his approaching marriage. Young Thomas, who had recovered his usual good humour, merely laughed. There was no use in being too earnest in denial, he thought. He knew that his unusual fit of petulance with his housekeeper had only convinced her that the story was true. It would die away in time, as other similar stories had died, he thought. Valley View gossip was imaginative.

Young Thomas looked rather serious, however, when the minister and his wife called that evening and referred to the report. Young Thomas gravely said that it was unfounded. The minister looked graver still and said he was sorry—he had hoped it was true. His wife glanced significantly about Young Thomas's big, untidy sitting-room, where there were cobwebs on the ceiling and fluff in the corners and dust on the mop-board, and said nothing, but looked volumes.

“Dang it all,” said Young Thomas, as they drove away, “they’ll marry me yet in spite of myself.”

The gossip made him think about Adelia Williams. He had never thought about her before; he was barely acquainted with her. Now he remembered that she was a plump, jolly-looking little woman, noted for being a good housekeeper. Then Young Thomas groaned, remembering that he must start out looking for a housekeeper soon; and housekeepers were not easily found, as Young Thomas had discovered several times since his mother's death ten years before.

Next Sunday in church Young Thomas looked at Adelia Williams. He caught Adelia looking at him. Adelia blushed and looked guiltily away.

“Dang it all,” reflected Young Thomas, forgetting that he was in church. “I suppose she has heard that fool story too. I'd like to know the person who started it; man or woman, I'd punch their head.”

Nevertheless, Young Thomas went on looking at Adelia by fits and starts, although he did not again catch Adelia looking at him. He noticed that she had round rosy cheeks and twinkling brown eyes. She did not look like an old maid, and Young Thomas wondered that she had been allowed to become one. Sarah Barnett, now, to whom report had married him a year ago, looked like a dried sour apple.

For the next four weeks the story haunted Young Thomas like a spectre. Down it would not. Everywhere he went he was joked about it. It gathered fresh detail every week. Adelia was getting her clothes ready; she was to be married in seal-brown cashmere; Vinnie Lawrence at Valley Centre was making it for her; she had got a new hat with a long ostrich plume; some said white, some said grey.

Young Thomas kept wondering who the man could be, for he was convinced that Adelia was going to marry somebody. More than that, once he caught himself wondering enviously. Adelia was a nice-looking woman, and he had not so far heard of any probable housekeeper.

“Dang it all,” said Young Thomas to himself in desperation. “I wouldn’t care if it was true.”

His married sister from Carlisle heard the story and came over to investigate. Young Thomas denied it shortly, and his sister scolded. She had devoutly hoped it was true, she said, and it would have been a great weight off her mind.

“This house is in a disgraceful condition, Thomas,” she said severely. “It would break Mother’s heart if she could rise out of her grave to see it. And Adelia Williams is a perfect housekeeper.”

“You didn’t use to think so much of the Williams crowd,” said Young Thomas drily.

“Oh, some of them don’t amount to much,” admitted Maria, “but Adelia is all right.”

Catching sight of an odd look on Young Thomas’s face, she added hastily, “Thomas Everett, I believe it’s true after all. Now, is it? For mercy’s sake don’t be so sly. You might tell me, your own and only sister, if it is.”

“Oh, shut up,” was Young Thomas’s unfeeling reply to his own and only sister.

Young Thomas told himself that night that Valley View gossip would drive him into an asylum yet if it didn’t let up. He also wondered if Adelia was as much persecuted as himself. No doubt she was. He never could catch her eye in church now, but he would have been surprised had he realized how many times he tried to.

The climax came the third week in May, when Young Thomas, who had been keeping house for himself for three weeks, received a letter and an express box from his cousin, Charles Everett, out in Manitoba. Charles and he had been chums in their boyhood. They corresponded occasionally still, although it was twenty years since Charles had gone west.

The letter was to congratulate Young Thomas on his approaching marriage. Charles had heard of it through some Valley View correspondents of his wife. He was much pleased; he had always liked Adelia, he said—had been an old beau of hers, in fact. Thomas might give her a kiss for him if he liked. He forwarded a wedding present by express and hoped they would be very happy, etc.

The present was an elaborate hatrack of polished buffalo horns, mounted on red plush, with an inset mirror. Young Thomas set it up on the kitchen table and scowled moodily at his reflection in the mirror. If wedding presents were beginning to come, it was high time something was done. The matter was past being a joke. This affair of the present would certainly get out—things always got out in Valley View, dang it all—and he would never hear the last of it.

“I’ll marry,” said Young Thomas decisively. “If Adelia Williams won’t have me, I’ll marry the first woman who will, if it’s Sarah Barnett herself.”

Young Thomas shaved and put on his Sunday suit. As soon as it was safely dark, he hied him away to Adelia Williams. He felt very doubtful about his reception, but the remembrance of the twinkle in Adelia’s brown eyes comforted him. She looked like a woman who had a sense of humour; she might not take him, but she would not feel offended or insulted because he asked her.

“Dang it all, though, I hope she will take me,” said Young Thomas. “I’m in for getting married now and no mistake. And I can’t get Adelia out of my head. I’ve been thinking of her steady ever since that confounded gossip began.”

When he knocked at Adelia’s door he discovered that his face was wet with perspiration. Adelia opened the door and started when she saw him; then she turned very red and stiffly asked him in. Young Thomas went in and sat down, wondering if all men felt so horribly uncomfortable when they went courting.

Adelia stooped low over the woodbox to put a stick of wood in the stove, for the May evening was chilly. Her shoulders were shaking; the shaking grew worse; suddenly Adelia laughed hysterically and, sitting down on the woodbox, continued to laugh. Young Thomas eyed her with a friendly grin.

“Oh, do excuse me,” gasped poor Adelia, wiping tears from her eyes. “This is—dreadful—I didn’t mean to laugh—I don’t know why I’m laughing—but—I—can’t help it.”

She laughed helplessly again. Young Thomas laughed too. His embarrassment vanished in the mellowness of that laughter. Presently Adelia composed herself and removed from the

woodbox to a chair, but there was still a suspicious twitching about the corners of her mouth.

“I suppose,” said Young Thomas, determined to have it over with before the ice could form again, “I suppose, Adelia, you’ve heard the story that’s been going about you and me of late?”

Adelia nodded. “I’ve been persecuted to the verge of insanity with it,” she said. “Every soul I’ve seen has tormented me about it, and people have written me about it. I’ve denied it till I was black in the face, but nobody believed me. I can’t find out how it started. I hope you believe, Mr. Everett, that it couldn’t possibly have arisen from anything I said. I’ve felt dreadfully worried for fear you might think it did. I heard that my cousin, Lucilla Barrett, said I told her, but Lucilla vowed to me that she never said such a thing or even dreamed of it. I’ve felt dreadful bad over the whole affair. I even gave up the idea of making a quilt after a lovely new pattern I’ve got because they made such a talk about my brown dress.”

“I’ve been kind of supposing that you must be going to marry somebody, and folks just guessed it was me,” said Young Thomas—he said it anxiously.

“No, I’m not going to be married to anybody,” said Adelia with a laugh, taking up her knitting.

“I’m glad of that,” said Young Thomas gravely. “I mean,” he hastened to add, seeing the look of astonishment on Adelia’s face, “that I’m glad there isn’t any other man because—because I want you myself, Adelia.”

Adelia laid down her knitting and blushed crimson. But she looked at Young Thomas squarely and reproachfully.

“You needn’t think you are bound to say that because of the gossip, Mr. Everett,” she said quietly.

“Oh, I don’t,” said Young Thomas earnestly. “But the truth is, the story set me to thinking about you, and from that I got to wishing it was true—honest, I did—I couldn’t get you out of my head, and at last I didn’t want to. It just seemed to me that you were the very woman for me if you’d only take me. Will you, Adelia? I’ve got a good farm and house, and I’ll try to make you happy.”

It was not a very romantic wooing, perhaps. But Adelia was forty and had never been a romantic little body even in the heyday of youth. She was a practical woman, and Young Thomas was a fine looking man of his age with abundance of worldly goods. Besides, she liked him, and the gossip had made her think a good deal about him of late. Indeed, in a

moment of candour she had owned to herself the very last Sunday in church that she wouldn't mind if the story were true.

"I'll—I'll think of it," she said.

This was practically an acceptance, and Young Thomas so understood it. Without loss of time he crossed the kitchen, sat down beside Adelia, and put his arms about her plump waist.

"Here's a kiss Charlie sent me to give you," he said, giving it.

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