

# The Little Black Doll

L. M. Montgomery

Everybody in the Marshall household was excited on the evening of the concert at the Harbour Light Hotel—everybody, even to Little Joyce, who couldn't go to the concert because there wasn't anybody else to stay with Denise. Perhaps Denise was the most excited of them all—Denise, who was slowly dying of consumption in the Marshall kitchen chamber because there was no other place in the world for her to die in, or anybody to trouble about her. Mrs. Roderick Marshall thought it very good of herself to do so much for Denise. To be sure, Denise was not much bother, and Little Joyce did most of the waiting on her.

At the tea table nothing was talked of but the concert; for was not Madame Laurin, the great French Canadian prima donna, at the hotel, and was she not going to sing? It was the opportunity of a lifetime—the Marshalls would not have missed it for anything. Stately, handsome old Grandmother Marshall was going, and Uncle Roderick and Aunt Isabella, and of course Chrissie, who was always taken everywhere because she was pretty and graceful, and everything that Little Joyce was not.

Little Joyce would have liked to go to the concert, for she was very fond of music; and, besides, she wanted to be able to tell Denise all about it. But when you are shy and homely and thin and awkward, your grandmother never takes you anywhere. At least, such was Little Joyce's belief.

Little Joyce knew quite well that Grandmother Marshall did not like her. She thought it was because she was so plain and awkward—and in part it was. Grandmother Marshall cared very little for granddaughters who did not do her credit. But Little Joyce's mother had married a poor man in the face of her family's disapproval, and then both she and her husband had been inconsiderate enough to die and leave a small orphan without a penny to support her. Grandmother Marshall fed and clothed the child, but who could make anything of such a shy creature with no gifts or graces whatever? Grandmother Marshall had no intention of trying. Chrissie, the golden-haired and pink-cheeked, was Grandmother Marshall's pet.

Little Joyce knew this. She did not envy Chrissie but, oh, how she wished Grandmother Marshall would love her a little, too! Nobody loved her but Denise and the little black doll. And Little Joyce was beginning to understand that Denise would not be in the kitchen chamber very much longer, and the little black doll couldn't *tell* you she loved you—although she did, of course. Little Joyce had no doubt at all on this point.

Little Joyce sighed so deeply over this thought that Uncle Roderick smiled at her. Uncle Roderick *did* smile at her sometimes.

“What is the matter, Little Joyce?” he asked.

“I was thinking about my black doll,” said Little Joyce timidly.

“Ah, your black doll. If Madame Laurin were to see it, she’d likely want it. She makes a hobby of collecting dolls all over the world, but I doubt if she has in her collection a doll that served to amuse a little girl four thousand years ago in the court of the Pharaohs.”

“I think Joyce’s black doll is very ugly,” said Chrissie. “My wax doll with the yellow hair is ever so much prettier.”

“My black doll isn’t ugly,” cried Little Joyce indignantly. She could endure to be called ugly herself, but she could not bear to have her darling black doll called ugly. In her excitement she upset her cup of tea over the tablecloth. Aunt Isabella looked angry, and Grandmother Marshall said sharply: “Joyce, leave the table. You grow more awkward and careless every day.”

Little Joyce, on the verge of tears, crept away and went up the kitchen stairs to Denise to be comforted. But Denise herself had been crying. She lay on her little bed by the low window, where the glow of the sunset was coming in; her hollow cheeks were scarlet with fever.

“Oh! I want so much to hear Madame Laurin sing,” she sobbed. “I feel lak I could die easier if I hear her sing just one leetle song. She is Frenchwoman, too, and she sing all de ole French songs—de ole songs my mudder sing long ’go. Oh! I so want to hear Madame Laurin sing.”

“But you can’t, dear Denise,” said Little Joyce very softly, stroking Denise’s hot forehead with her cool, slender hand. Little Joyce had very pretty hands, only nobody had ever noticed them. “You are not strong enough to go to the concert. I’ll sing for you, if you like. Of course, I can’t sing very well, but I’ll do my best.”

“You sing lak a sweet bird, but you are not Madame Laurin,” said Denise restlessly. “It is de great Madame I want to hear. I haf not long to live. Oh, I know, Leetle Joyce—I know what de doctor look lak—and I want to hear Madame Laurin sing ’fore I die. I know it is impossible—but I long for it so—just one leetle song.”

Denise put her thin hands over her face and sobbed again. Little Joyce went and sat down by the window, looking out into the white birches. Her heart ached bitterly. Dear Denise was going to die soon—oh, very soon! Little Joyce, wise and knowing beyond her years, saw that. And Denise wanted to hear Madame Laurin sing. It seemed a foolish thing to think of, but Little Joyce thought hard about it; and when she had finished thinking, she got her little black doll and took it to bed with her, and there she cried herself to sleep.

At the breakfast table next morning the Marshalls talked about the concert and the wonderful Madame Laurin. Little Joyce listened in her usual silence; her crying the night before had not improved her looks any. Never, thought handsome Grandmother Marshall, had she appeared so sallow and homely. Really, Grandmother Marshall could not have the patience to look at her. She decided that she would not take Joyce driving with her and Chrissie that afternoon, as she had thought of, after all.

In the forenoon it was discovered that Denise was much worse, and the doctor was sent for. He came, and shook his head, that being really all he could do under the circumstances. When he went away, he was waylaid at the back door by a small gypsy with big, black, serious eyes and long black hair.

“Is Denise going to die?” Little Joyce asked in the blunt, straightforward fashion Grandmother Marshall found so trying.

The doctor looked at her from under his shaggy brows and decided that here was one of the people to whom you might as well tell the truth first as last, because they are bound to have it.

“Yes,” he said.

“Soon?”

“Very soon, I’m afraid. In a few days at most.”

“Thank you,” said Little Joyce gravely.

She went to her room and did something with the black doll. She did not cry, but if you could have seen her face you would have wished she would cry.

After dinner Grandmother Marshall and Chrissie drove away, and Uncle Roderick and Aunt Isabella went away, too. Little Joyce crept up to the kitchen chamber. Denise was lying in an uneasy sleep, with tear stains on her face. Then Little Joyce tiptoed down and sped away to the hotel.

She did not know just what she would say or do when she got there, but she thought hard all the way to the end of the shore road. When she came out to the shore, a lady was sitting alone on a big rock—a lady with a dark, beautiful face and wonderful eyes. Little Joyce stopped before her and looked at her meditatively. Perhaps it would be well to ask advice of this lady.

“If you please,” said Little Joyce, who was never shy with strangers, for whose opinion she didn’t care at all, “I want to see Madame Laurin at the hotel and ask her to do me a very great favour. Will you tell me the best way to go about seeing her? I shall be much obliged to you.”

“What is the favour you want to ask of Madame Laurin?” inquired the lady, smiling.

“I want to ask her if she will come and sing for Denise before she dies—before Denise dies, I mean. Denise is our French girl, and the doctor says she cannot live very long, and she wishes with all her heart to hear Madame Laurin sing. It is very bitter, you know, to be dying and want something very much and not be able to get it.”

“Do you think Madame Laurin will go?” asked the lady.

“I don’t know. I am going to offer her my little black doll. If she will not come for that, there is nothing else I can do.”

A flash of interest lighted up the lady’s brown eyes. She bent forward.

“Is it your doll you have in that box? Will you let me see it?”

Little Joyce nodded. Mutely she opened the box and took out the black doll. The lady gave an exclamation of amazed delight and almost snatched it from Little Joyce. It was a very peculiar little doll indeed, carved out of some black polished wood.

“Child, where in the world did you get this?” she cried.

“Father got it out of a grave in Egypt,” said Little Joyce. “It was buried with the mummy of a little girl who lived four thousand years ago, Uncle Roderick says. She must have loved her doll very much to have had it buried with her, mustn’t she? But she could not have loved it any more than I do.”

“And yet you are going to give it away?” said the lady, looking at her keenly.

“For Denise’s sake,” explained Little Joyce. “I would do anything for Denise because I love her and she loves me. When the only person in the world who loves you is going to die, there is nothing you would not do for her if you could. Denise was so good to me before she took sick. She used to kiss me and play with me and make little cakes for me and tell me beautiful stories.”

The lady put the little black doll back in the box. Then she stood up and held out her hand.

“Come,” she said. “I am Madame Laurin, and I shall go and sing for Denise.”

Little Joyce piloted Madame Laurin home and into the kitchen and up the back stairs to the kitchen chamber—a proceeding which would have filled Aunt Isabella with horror if she had known. But Madame Laurin did not seem to mind, and Little Joyce never thought about it at all. It was Little Joyce’s awkward, unMarshall-like fashion to go to a place by the shortest way there, even if it was up the kitchen stairs.

Madame Laurin stood in the bare little room and looked pityingly at the wasted, wistful face on the pillow.

“This is Madame Laurin, and she is going to sing for you, Denise,” whispered Little Joyce.

Denise’s face lighted up, and she clasped her hands.

“If you please,” she said faintly. “A French song, Madame—de ole French song dey sing long ‘go.”

Then did Madame Laurin sing. Never had that kitchen chamber been so filled with glorious melody. Song after song she sang—the old folklore songs of the *habitant*, the songs perhaps that Evangeline listened to in her childhood.

Little Joyce knelt by the bed, her eyes on the singer like one entranced. Denise lay with her face full of joy and rapture—such joy and rapture! Little Joyce did not regret the sacrifice of her black doll—never could regret it, as long as she remembered Denise’s look.

“T’ank you, Madame,” said Denise brokenly, when Madame ceased. “Dat was so beautiful—de angel, dey cannot sing more sweet. I love music so much, Madame. Leetle Joyce, she sing to me often and often—she sing sweet, but not lak you—oh, not lak you.”

“Little Joyce must sing for me,” said Madame, smiling, as she sat down by the window. “I always like to hear fresh, childish voices. Will you, Little Joyce?”

“Oh, yes.” Little Joyce was quite unembarrassed and perfectly willing to do anything she could for this wonderful woman who had brought that look to Denise’s face. “I will sing as well as I can for you. Of course, I can’t sing very well and I don’t know anything but hymns. I always sing hymns for Denise, although she is a Catholic and the hymns are Protestant. But her priest told her it was all right, because all music was of God. Denise’s priest is a very nice man, and I like him. He thought my little black doll—*your* little black doll—was splendid. I’ll sing ‘Lead, Kindly Light.’ That is Denise’s favourite hymn.”

Then Little Joyce, slipping her hand into Denise’s, began to sing. At the first note Madame

Laurin, who had been gazing out of the window with a rather listless smile, turned quickly and looked at Little Joyce with amazed eyes. Delight followed amazement, and when Little Joyce had finished, the great Madame rose impulsively, her face and eyes glowing, stepped swiftly to Little Joyce and took the thin dark face between her gemmed hands.

“Child, do you know what a wonderful voice you have—what a marvellous voice? It is—it is—I never heard such a voice in a child of your age. Mine was nothing to it—nothing at all. You will be a great singer some day—far greater than I—yes. But you must have the training. Where are your parents? I must see them.”

“I have no parents,” said the bewildered Little Joyce. “I belong to Grandmother Marshall, and she is out driving.”

“Then I shall wait until your Grandmother Marshall comes home from her drive,” said Madame Laurin decidedly.

Half an hour later a very much surprised old lady was listening to Madame Laurin’s enthusiastic statements.

“How is it I have never heard you sing, if you can sing so well?” asked Grandmother Marshall, looking at Little Joyce with something in her eyes that had never been in them before—as Little Joyce instantly felt to the core of her sensitive soul. But Little Joyce hung her head. It had never occurred to her to sing in Grandmother Marshall’s presence.

“This child must be trained by-and-by,” said Madame Laurin. “If you cannot afford it, Mrs. Marshall, I will see to it. Such a voice must not be wasted.”

“Thank you, Madame Laurin,” said Grandmother Marshall with a gracious dignity, “but I am quite able to give my granddaughter all the necessary advantages for the development of her gift. And I thank you very much for telling me of it.”

Madame Laurin bent and kissed Little Joyce’s brown cheek.

“Little gypsy, good-by. But come every day to this hotel to see me. And next summer I shall be back. I like you—because some day you will be a great singer and because today you are a loving, unselfish baby.”

“You have forgotten the little black doll, Madame,” said Little Joyce gravely.

Madame threw up her hands, laughing. “No, no, I shall not take your little black doll of the four thousand years. Keep it for a mascot. A great singer always needs a mascot. But do not, I command you, take it out of the box till I am gone, for if I were to see it again, I might not

be able to resist the temptation. Some day I shall show you *my* dolls, but there is not such a gem among them.”

When Madame Laurin had gone, Grandmother Marshall looked at Little Joyce.

“Come to my room, Joyce. I want to see if we cannot find a more becoming way of arranging your hair. It has grown so thick and long. I had no idea how thick and long. Yes, we must certainly find a better way than that stiff braid. Come!”

Little Joyce, taking Grandmother Marshall’s extended hand, felt very happy. She realized that this strange, stately old lady, who never liked little girls unless they were pretty or graceful or clever, was beginning to love her at last.

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