

IV. Little Joscelyn

"It simply isn't to be thought of, Aunty Nan," said Mrs. William Morrison decisively. Mrs. William Morrison was one of those people who always speak decisively. If they merely announce that they are going to peel the potatoes for dinner their hearers realize that there is no possible escape for the potatoes. Moreover, these people are always given their full title by everybody. William Morrison was called Billy oftener than not; but, if you had asked for Mrs. Billy Morrison, nobody in Avonlea would have known what you meant at first guess.

"You must see that for yourself, Aunty," went on Mrs. William, hulling strawberries nimbly with her large, firm, white fingers as she talked. Mrs. William always improved every shining moment. "It is ten miles to Kensington, and just think how late you would be getting back. You are not able for such a drive. You wouldn't get over it for a month. You know you are anything but strong this summer."

Aunty Nan sighed, and patted the tiny, furry, gray morsel of a kitten in her lap with trembling fingers. She knew, better than anyone else could know it, that she was not strong that summer. In her secret soul, Aunty Nan, sweet and frail and timid under the burden of her seventy years, felt with mysterious unmistakable prescience that it was to be her last summer at the Gull Point Farm. But that was only the more reason why she should go to hear little Joscelyn sing; she would never have another

chance. And oh, to hear little Joscelyn sing just once--Joscelyn, whose voice was delighting thousands out in the big world, just as in the years gone by it had delighted Aunty Nan and the dwellers at the Gull Point Farm for a whole golden summer with carols at dawn and dusk about the old place!

"Oh, I know I'm not very strong, Maria." said Aunty Nan pleadingly, "but I am strong enough for that. Indeed I am. I could stay at Kensington over night with George's folks, you know, and so it wouldn't tire me much. I do so want to hear Joscelyn sing. Oh, how I love little Joscelyn."

"It passes my understanding, the way you hanker after that child," cried Mrs. William impatiently. "Why, she was a perfect stranger to you when she came here, and she was here only one summer!"

"But oh, such a summer!" said Aunty Nan softly. "We all loved little Joscelyn. She just seemed like one of our own. She was one of God's children, carrying love with them everywhere. In some ways that little Anne Shirley the Cuthberts have got up there at Green Gables reminds me of her, though in other ways they're not a bit alike. Joscelyn was a beauty."

"Well, that Shirley snippet certainly isn't that," said Mrs. William sarcastically. "And if Joscelyn's tongue was one third as long as Anne Shirley's the wonder to me is that she didn't talk you all to death out

of hand."

"Little Joscelyn wasn't much of a talker," said Aunty Nan dreamily. "She was kind of a quiet child. But you remember what she did say. And I've never forgotten little Joscelyn."

Mrs. William shrugged her plump, shapely shoulders.

"Well, it was fifteen years ago, Aunty Nan, and Joscelyn can't be very 'little' now. She is a famous woman, and she has forgotten all about you, you can be sure of that."

"Joscelyn wasn't the kind that forgets," said Aunty Nan loyally. "And, anyway, the point is, I haven't forgotten HER. Oh, Maria, I've longed for years and years just to hear her sing once more. It seems as if I MUST hear my little Joscelyn sing once again before I die. I've never had the chance before and I never will have it again. Do please ask William to take me to Kensington."

"Dear me, Aunty Nan, this is really childish," said Mrs. William, whisking her bowlful of berries into the pantry. "You must let other folks be the judge of what is best for you now. You aren't strong enough to drive to Kensington, and, even if you were, you know well enough that William couldn't go to Kensington to-morrow night. He has got to attend that political meeting at Newbridge. They can't do without him."

"Jordan could take me to Kensington," pleaded Aunty Nan, with very unusual persistence.

"Nonsense! You couldn't go to Kensington with the hired man. Now, Aunty Nan, do be reasonable. Aren't William and I kind to you? Don't we do everything for your comfort?"

"Yes, oh, yes," admitted Aunty Nan deprecatingly.

"Well, then, you ought to be guided by our opinion. And you must just give up thinking about the Kensington concert, Aunty, and not worry yourself and me about it any more. I am going down to the shore field now to call William to tea. Just keep an eye on the baby in chance he wakes up, and see that the teapot doesn't boil over."

Mrs. William whisked out of the kitchen, pretending not to see the tears that were falling over Aunty Nan's withered pink cheeks. Aunty Nan was really getting very childish, Mrs. William reflected, as she marched down to the shore field. Why, she cried now about every little thing! And such a notion--to want to go to the Old Timers' concert at Kensington and be so set on it! Really, it was hard to put up with her whims. Mrs. William sighed virtuously.

As for Aunty Nan, she sat alone in the kitchen, and cried bitterly, as only lonely old age can cry. It seemed to her that she could not bear it, that she MUST go to Kensington. But she knew that it was not to be,

since Mrs. William had decided otherwise. Mrs. William's word was law at Gull Point Farm.

"What's the matter with my old Aunty Nan?" cried a hearty young voice from the doorway. Jordan Sloane stood there, his round, freckled face looking as anxious and sympathetic as it was possible for such a very round, very freckled face to look. Jordan was the Morrisons' hired boy that summer, and he worshipped Aunty Nan.

"Oh, Jordan," sobbed Aunty Nan, who was not above telling her troubles to the hired help, although Mrs. William thought she ought to be, "I can't go to Kensington to-morrow night to hear little Joscelyn sing at the Old Timers' concert. Maria says I can't."

"That's too bad," said Jordan. "Old cat," he muttered after the retreating and serenely unconscious Mrs. William. Then he shambled in and sat down on the sofa beside Aunty Nan.

"There, there, don't cry," he said, patting her thin little shoulder with his big, sunburned paw. "You'll make yourself sick if you go on crying, and we can't get along without you at Gull Point Farm."

Aunty Nan smiled wanly.

"I'm afraid you'll soon have to get on without me, Jordan. I'm not going to be here very long now. No, I'm not, Jordan, I know it. Something

tells me so very plainly. But I would be willing to go--glad to go, for I'm very tired, Jordan--if I could only have heard little Joscelyn sing once more."

"Why are you so set on hearing her?" asked Jordan. "She ain't no kin to you, is she?"

"No, but dearer to me--dearer to me than many of my own. Maria thinks that is silly, but you wouldn't if you'd known her, Jordan. Even Maria herself wouldn't, if she had known her. It is fifteen years since she came here one summer to board. She was a child of thirteen then, and hadn't any relations except an old uncle who sent her to school in winter and boarded her out in summer, and didn't care a rap about her. The child was just starving for love, Jordan, and she got it here. William and his brothers were just children then, and they hadn't any sister. We all just worshipped her. She was so sweet, Jordan. And pretty, oh my! like a little girl in a picture, with great long curls, all black and curly and fine as spun silk, and big dark eyes, and such pink cheeks--real wild rose cheeks. And sing! My land! But couldn't she sing! Always singing, every hour of the day that voice was ringing round the old place. I used to hold my breath to hear it. She always said that she meant to be a famous singer some day, and I never doubted it a mite. It was born in her. Sunday evening she used to sing hymns for us. Oh, Jordan, it makes my old heart young again to remember it. A sweet child she was, my little Joscelyn! She used to write me for three or four years after she went away, but I haven't heard a word from her for long

and long. I daresay she has forgotten me, as Maria says. 'Twouldn't be any wonder. But I haven't forgotten her, and oh, I want to see and hear her terrible much. She is to sing at the Old Timers' concert to-morrow night at Kensington. The folks who are getting the concert up are friends of hers, or, of course, she'd never have come to a little country village. Only sixteen miles away--and I can't go."

Jordan couldn't think of anything to say. He reflected savagely that if he had a horse of his own he would take Aunty Nan to Kensington, Mrs. William or no Mrs. William. Though, to be sure, it WAS a long drive for her; and she was looking very frail this summer.

"Ain't going to last long," muttered Jordan, making his escape by the porch door as Mrs. William puffed in by the other. "The sweetest old creetur that ever was created'll go when she goes. Yah, ye old madam, I'd like to give you a piece of my mind, that I would!"

This last was for Mrs. William, but was delivered in a prudent undertone. Jordan detested Mrs. William, but she was a power to be reckoned with, all the same. Meek, easy-going Billy Morrison did just what his wife told him to.

So Aunty Nan did not get to Kensington to hear little Joscelyn sing. She said nothing more about it but after that night she seemed to fail very rapidly. Mrs. William said it was the hot weather, and that Aunty Nan gave way too easily. But Aunty Nan could not help giving way now; she

was very, very tired. Even her knitting wearied her. She would sit for hours in her rocking chair with the gray kitten in her lap, looking out of the window with dreamy, unseeing eyes. She talked to herself a good deal, generally about little Joscelyn. Mrs. William told Avonlea folk that Aunty Nan had got terribly childish and always accompanied the remark with a sigh that intimated how much she, Mrs. William, had to contend with.

Justice must be done to Mrs. William, however. She was not unkind to Aunty Nan; on the contrary, she was very kind to her in the letter. Her comfort was scrupulously attended to, and Mrs. William had the grace to utter none of her complaints in the old woman's hearing. If Aunty Nan felt the absence of the spirit she never murmured at it.

One day, when the Avonlea slopes were golden-hued with the ripened harvest, Aunty Nan did not get up. She complained of nothing but great weariness. Mrs. William remarked to her husband that if SHE lay in bed every day she felt tired, there wouldn't be much done at Gull Point Farm. But she prepared an excellent breakfast and carried it patiently up to Aunty Nan, who ate little of it.

After dinner Jordan crept up by way of the back stairs to see her. Aunty Nan was lying with her eyes fixed on the pale pink climbing roses that nodded about the window. When she saw Jordan she smiled.

"Them roses put me so much in mind of little Joscelyn," she said softly.

"She loved them so. If I could only see her! Oh, Jordan, if I could only see her! Maria says it's terrible childish to be always harping on that string, and mebbe it is. But--oh, Jordan, there's such a hunger in my heart for her, such a hunger!"

Jordan felt a queer sensation in his throat, and twisted his ragged straw hat about in his big hands. Just then a vague idea which had hovered in his brain all day crystallized into decision. But all he said was:

"I hope you'll feel better soon, Aunty Nan."

"Oh, yes, Jordan dear, I'll be better soon," said Aunty Nan with her own sweet smile. "'The inhabitant shall not say I am sick,' you know. But if I could only see little Joscelyn first!"

Jordan went out and hurried down-stairs. Billy Morrison was in the stable, when Jordan stuck his head over the half-door.

"Say, can I have the rest of the day off, sir? I want to go to Kensington."

"Well, I don't mind," said Billy Morrison amiably. "May's well get you jaunting done 'fore harvest comes on. And here, Jord; take this quarter and get some oranges for Aunty Nan. Needn't mention it to headquarters."

Billy Morrison's face was solemn, but Jordan winked as he pocketed the money.

"If I've any luck, I'll bring her something that'll do her more good than the oranges," he muttered, as he hurried off to the pasture. Jordan had a horse of his own now, a rather bony nag, answering to the name of Dan. Billy Morrison had agreed to pasture the animal if Jordan used him in the farm work, an arrangement scoffed at by Mrs. William in no measured terms.

Jordan hitched Dan into the second best buggy, dressed himself in his Sunday clothes, and drove off. On the road he re-read a paragraph he had clipped from the Charlottetown Daily Enterprise of the previous day.

"Joscelyn Burnett, the famous contralto, is spending a few days in Kensington on her return from her Maritime concert tour. She is the guest of Mr. and Mrs. Bromley, of The Beeches."

"Now if I can get there in time," said Jordan emphatically.

Jordan got to Kensington, put Dan up in a livery stable, and inquired the way to The Beeches. He felt rather nervous when he found it, it was such a stately, imposing place, set back from the street in an emerald green seclusion of beautiful grounds.

"Fancy me stalking up to that front door and asking for Miss Joscelyn

Burnett," grinned Jordan sheepishly. "Mebbe they'll tell me to go around to the back and inquire for the cook. But you're going just the same, Jordan Sloane, and no skulking. March right up now. Think of Aunty Nan and don't let style down you."

A pert-looking maid answered Jordan's ring, and stared at him when he asked for Miss Burnett.

"I don't think you can see her," she said shortly, scanning his country cut of hair and clothes rather superciliously. "What is your business with her?"

The maid's scorn roused Jordan's "dander," as he would have expressed it.

"I'll tell her that when I see her," he retorted coolly. "Just you tell her that I've a message for her from Aunty Nan Morrison of Gull Point Farm, Avonlea. If she hain't forgot, that'll fetch her. You might as well hurry up, if you please, I've not overly too much time."

The pert maid decided to be civil at least, and invited Jordan to enter. But she left him standing in the hall while she went in search of Miss Burnett. Jordan gazed about him in amazement. He had never been in any place like this before. The hall was wonderful enough, and through the open doors on either hand stretched vistas of lovely rooms that, to Jordan's eyes, looked like those of a palace.

"Gee whiz! How do they ever move around without knocking things over?"

Then Joscelyn Burnett came, and Jordan forgot everything else. This tall, beautiful woman, in her silken draperies, with a face like nothing Jordan had ever seen, or even dreamed about,--could this be Aunty Nan's little Joscelyn? Jordan's round, freckled countenance grew crimson. He felt horribly tongue-tied and embarrassed. What could he say to her? How could he say it?

Joscelyn Burnett looked at him with her large, dark eyes,--the eyes of a woman who had suffered much, and learned much, and won through struggle to victory.

"You have come from Aunty Nan?" she said. "Oh, I am so glad to hear from her. Is she well? Come in here and tell me all about her."

She turned toward one of those fairy-like rooms, but Jordan interrupted her desperately.

"Oh, not in there, ma'am. I'd never get it out. Just let me blunder through it out here someways. Yes'm, Aunty Nan, she ain't very well. She's--she's dying, I guess. And she's longing for you night and day. Seems as if she couldn't die in peace without seeing you. She wanted to get to Kensington to hear you sing, but that old cat of a Mrs.

William--begging you pardon, ma'am--wouldn't let her come. She's always talking of you. If you can come out to Gull Point Farm and see her, I'll be most awful obliged to you, ma'am."

Joscelyn Burnett looked troubled. She had not forgotten Gull Point Farm, nor Aunty Nan; but for years the memory had been dim, crowded into the background of consciousness by the more exciting events of her busy life. Now it came back with a rush. She recalled it all tenderly--the peace and beauty and love of that olden summer, and sweet Aunty Nan, so very wise in the lore of all things simple and good and true. For the moment Joscelyn Burnett was a lonely, hungry-hearted little girl again, seeking for love and finding it not, until Aunty Nan had taken her into her great mother-heart and taught her its meaning.

"Oh, I don't know," she said perplexedly. "If you had come sooner--I leave on the 11:30 train tonight. I MUST leave by then or I shall not reach Montreal in time to fill a very important engagement. And yet I must see Aunty Nan, too. I have been careless and neglectful. I might have gone to see her before. How can we manage it?"

"I'll bring you back to Kensington in time to catch that train," said Jordan eagerly. "There's nothing I wouldn't do for Aunty Nan--me and Dan. Yes, sir, you'll get back in time. Just think of Aunty Nan's face when she sees you!"

"I will come," said the great singer, gently.

It was sunset when they reached Gull Point Farm. An arc of warm gold was over the spruces behind the house. Mrs. William was out in the barn-yard, milking, and the house was deserted, save for the sleeping baby in the kitchen and the little old woman with the watchful eyes in the up-stairs room.

"This way, ma'am," said Jordan, inwardly congratulating himself that the coast was clear. "I'll take you right up to her room."

Up-stairs, Joscelyn tapped at the half-open door and went in. Before it closed behind her, Jordan heard Aunty Nan say, "Joscelyn! Little Joscelyn!" in a tone that made him choke again. He stumbled thankfully down-stairs, to be pounced upon by Mrs. William in the kitchen.

"Jordan Sloane, who was that stylish woman you drove into the yard with? And what have you done with her?"

"That was Miss Joscelyn Burnett," said Jordan, expanding himself. This was his hour of triumph over Mrs. William. "I went to Kensington and brung her out to see Aunty Nan. She's up with her now."

"Dear me," said Mrs. William helplessly. "And me in my milking rig! Jordan, for pity's sake, hold the baby while I go and put on my black silk. You might have given a body some warning. I declare I don't know which is the greatest idiot, you or Aunty Nan!"

As Mrs. William flounced out of the kitchen, Jordan took his satisfaction in a quiet laugh.

Up-stairs in the little room was a great glory of sunset and gladness of human hearts. Joscelyn was kneeling by the bed, with her arms about Aunty Nan; and Aunty Nan, with her face all irradiated, was stroking Joscelyn's dark hair fondly.

"O, little Joscelyn," she murmured, "it seems too good to be true. It seems like a beautiful dream. I knew you the minute you opened the door, my dearie. You haven't changed a bit. And you're a famous singer now, little Joscelyn! I always knew you would be. Oh, I want you to sing a piece for me--just one, won't you, dearie? Sing that piece people like to hear you sing best. I forget the name, but I've read about it in the papers. Sing it for me, little Joscelyn."

And Joscelyn, standing by Aunty Nan's bed, in the sunset light, sang the song she had sung to many a brilliant audience on many a noted concert-platform--sang it as even she had never sung before, while Aunty Nan lay and listened beatifically, and downstairs even Mrs. William held her breath, entranced by the exquisite melody that floated through the old farmhouse.

"O, little Joscelyn!" breathed Aunty Nan in rapture, when the song ended.

Joscelyn knelt by her again and they had a long talk of old days. One by one they recalled the memories of that vanished summer. The past gave up its tears and its laughter. Heart and fancy alike went roaming through the ways of the long ago. Aunty Nan was perfectly happy. And then Joscelyn told her all the story of her struggles and triumphs since they had parted.

When the moonlight began to creep in through the low window, Aunty Nan put out her hand and touched Joscelyn's bowed head.

"Little Joscelyn," she whispered, "if it ain't asking too much, I want you to sing just one other piece. Do you remember when you were here how we sung hymns in the parlour every Sunday night, and my favourite always was 'The Sands of Time are Sinking?' I ain't never forgot how you used to sing that, and I want to hear it just once again, dearie. Sing it for me, little Joscelyn."

Joscelyn rose and went to the window. Lifting back the curtain, she stood in the splendour of the moonlight, and sang the grand old hymn. At first Aunty Nan beat time to it feebly on the counterpane; but when Joscelyn came to the verse, "With mercy and with judgment," she folded her hands over her breast and smiled.

When the hymn ended, Joscelyn came over to the bed.

"I am afraid I must say good-bye now, Aunty Nan," she said.

Then she saw that Aunty Nan had fallen asleep. She would not waken her, but she took from her breast the cluster of crimson roses she wore and slipped them gently between the toil-worn fingers.

"Good-bye, dear, sweet mother-heart," she murmured.

Down-stairs she met Mrs. William splendid in rustling black silk, her broad, rubicund face smiling, overflowing with apologies and welcomes, which Joscelyn cut short coldly.

"Thank you, Mrs. Morrison, but I cannot possibly stay longer. No, thank you, I don't care for any refreshments. Jordan is going to take me back to Kensington at once. I came out to see Aunty Nan." "I'm certain she'd be delighted," said Mrs. William effusively. "She's been talking about you for weeks."

"Yes, it has made her very happy," said Joscelyn gravely. "And it has made me happy, too. I love Aunty Nan, Mrs. Morrison, and I owe her much. In all my life I have never met a woman so purely, unselfishly good and noble and true."

"Fancy now," said Mrs. William, rather overcome at hearing this great singer pronounce such an encomium on quiet, timid old Aunty Nan.

Jordan drove Joscelyn back to Kensington; and up-stairs in her room Aunty Nan slept, with that rapt smile on her face and Joscelyn's red roses in her hands. Thus it was that Mrs. William found her, going in the next morning with her breakfast. The sunlight crept over the pillow, lighting up the sweet old face and silver hair, and stealing downward to the faded red roses on her breast. Smiling and peaceful and happy lay Aunty Nan, for she had fallen on the sleep that knows no earthy wakening, while little Joscelyn sang.