

## XII. The End of a Quarrel

Nancy Rogerson sat down on Louisa Shaw's front doorstep and looked about her, drawing a long breath of delight that seemed tinged with pain.

Everything was very much the same; the square garden was as charming bodge-podge of fruit and flowers, and goose-berry bushes and tiger lilies, a gnarled old apple tree sticking up here and there, and a thick cherry copse at the foot. Behind was a row of pointed firs, coming out darkly against the swimming pink sunset sky, not looking a day older than they had looked twenty years ago, when Nancy had been a young girl walking and dreaming in their shadows. The old willow to the left was as big and sweeping and, Nancy thought with a little shudder, probably as caterpillary, as ever. Nancy had learned many things in her twenty years of exile from Avonlea, but she had never learned to conquer her dread of caterpillars.

"Nothing is much changed, Louisa," she said, propping her chin on her plump white hands, and sniffing at the delectable odour of the bruised mint upon which Louisa was trampling. "I'm glad; I was afraid to come back for fear you would have improved the old garden out of existence, or else into some prim, orderly lawn, which would have been worse. It's as magnificently untidy as ever, and the fence still wobbles. It CAN'T be the same fence, but it looks exactly like it. No, nothing is much changed. Thank you, Louisa."

Louisa had not the faintest idea what Nancy was thanking her for, but then she had never been able to fathom Nancy, much as she had always liked her in the old girlhood days that now seemed much further away to Louisa than they did to Nancy. Louisa was separated from them by the fulness of wifeness and motherhood, while Nancy looked back only over the narrow gap that empty years make.

"You haven't changed much yourself, Nancy," she said, looking admiringly at Nancy's trim figure, in the nurse's uniform she had donned to show Louisa what it was like, her firm, pink-and-white face and the the glossy waves of her golden brown hair. "You've held your own wonderfully well."

"Haven't I?" said Nancy complacently. "Modern methods of massage and cold cream have kept away the crowsfeet, and fortunately I had the Rogerson complexion to start with. You wouldn't think I was really thirty-eight, would you? Thirty-eight! Twenty years ago I thought anybody who was thirty-eight was a perfect female Methuselah. And now I feel so horribly, ridiculously young, Louisa. Every morning when I get up I have to say solemnly to myself three times, 'You're an old maid, Nancy Rogerson,' to tone myself down to anything like a becoming attitude for the day."

"I guess you don't mind being an old maid much," said Louisa, shrugging her shoulders. She would not have been an old maid herself for anything; yet she inconsistently envied Nancy her freedom, her wide life in the

world, her unlined brow, and care-free lightness of spirit.

"Oh, but I do mind," said Nancy frankly. "I hate being an old maid."

"Why don't you get married, then?" asked Louisa, paying an unconscious tribute to Nancy's perennial chance by her use of the present tense.

Nancy shook her head.

"No, that wouldn't suit me either. I don't want to be married. Do you remember that story Anne Shirley used to tell long ago of the pupil who wanted to be a widow because 'if you were married your husband bossed you and if you weren't married people called you an old maid?' Well, that is precisely my opinion. I'd like to be a widow. Then I'd have the freedom of the unmarried, with the kudos of the married. I could eat my cake and have it, too. Oh, to be a widow!"

"Nancy!" said Louisa in a shocked tone.

Nancy laughed, a mellow gurgle that rippled through the garden like a brook.

"Oh, Louisa, I can shock you yet. That was just how you used to say 'Nancy' long ago, as if I'd broken all the commandments at once."

"You do say such queer things," protested Louisa, "and half the time I

don't know what you mean."

"Bless you, dear coz, half the time I don't myself. Perhaps the joy of coming back to the old spot has slightly turned my brain, I've found my lost girlhood here. I'm NOT thirty-eight in this garden--it is a flat impossibility. I'm sweet eighteen, with a waist line two inches smaller. Look, the sun is just setting. I see he has still his old trick of throwing his last beams over the Wright farmhouse. By the way, Louisa, is Peter Wright still living there?"

"Yes." Louisa threw a sudden interested glance at the apparently placid Nancy.

"Married, I suppose, with half a dozen children?" said Nancy indifferently, pulling up some more sprigs of mint and pinning them on her breast. Perhaps the exertion of leaning over to do it flushed her face. There was more than the Rogerson colour in it, anyhow, and Louisa, slow though her mental processes might be in some respects, thought she understood the meaning of a blush as well as the next one. All the instinct of the matchmaker flamed up in her.

"Indeed he isn't," she said promptly. "Peter Wright has never married. He has been faithful to your memory, Nancy."

"Ugh! You make me feel as if I were buried up there in the Avonlea cemetery and had a monument over me with a weeping willow carved on

it," shivered Nancy. "When it is said that a man has been faithful to a woman's memory it generally means that he couldn't get anyone else to take him."

"That isn't the case with Peter," protested Louisa. "He is a good match, and many a woman would have been glad to take him, and would yet. He's only forty-three. But he's never taken the slightest interest in anyone since you threw him over, Nancy."

"But I didn't. He threw me over," said Nancy, plaintively, looking afar over the low-lying fields and a feathery young spruce valley to the white buildings of the Wright farm, glowing rosily in the sunset light when all the rest of Avonlea was scarfing itself in shadows. There was laughter in her eyes. Louisa could not pierce beneath that laughter to find if there were anything under it.

"Fudge!" said Louisa. "What on earth did you and Peter quarrel about?" she added, curiously.

"I've often wondered," parried Nancy.

"And you've never seen him since?" reflected Louisa.

"No. Has he changed much?"

"Well, some. He is gray and kind of tired-looking. But it isn't to be

wondered at--living the life he does. He hasn't had a housekeeper for two years--not since his old aunt died. He just lives there alone and cooks his own meals. I've never been in the house, but folks say the disorder is something awful."

"Yes, I shouldn't think Peter was cut out for a tidy housekeeper," said Nancy lightly, dragging up more mint. "Just think, Louisa, if it hadn't been for that old quarrel I might be Mrs. Peter Wright at this very moment, mother to the aforesaid supposed half dozen, and vexing my soul over Peter's meals and socks and cows."

"I guess you are better off as you are," said Louisa.

"Oh, I don't know." Nancy looked up at the white house on the hill again. "I have an awfully good time out of life, but it doesn't seem to satisfy, somehow. To be candid--and oh, Louisa, candour is a rare thing among women when it comes to talking of the men--I believe I'd rather be cooking Peter's meals and dusting his house. I wouldn't mind his bad grammar now. I've learned one or two valuable little things out yonder, and one is that it doesn't matter if a man's grammar is askew, so long as he doesn't swear at you. By the way, is Peter as ungrammatical as ever?"

"I--I don't know," said Louisa helplessly. "I never knew he WAS ungrammatical."

"Does he still say, 'I seen,' and 'them things'?" demanded Nancy.

"I never noticed," confessed Louisa.

"Enviably Louisa! Would that I had been born with that blessed faculty of never noticing! It stands a woman in better stead than beauty or brains. I used to notice Peter's mistakes. When he said 'I seen,' it jarred on me in my salad days. I tried, oh, so tactfully, to reform him in that respect. Peter didn't like being reformed--the Wrights always had a fairly good opinion of themselves, you know. It was really over a question of syntax we quarrelled. Peter told me I'd have to take him as he was, grammar and all, or go without him. I went without him--and ever since I've been wondering if I were really sorry, or if it were merely a pleasantly sentimental regret I was hugging to my heart. I daresay it's the latter. Now, Louisa, I see the beginning of the plot far down in those placid eyes of yours. Strangle it at birth, dear Louisa. There is no use in your trying to make up a match between Peter and me now--no, nor in slyly inviting him up here to tea some evening, as you are even this moment thinking of doing."

"Well, I must go and milk the cows," gasped Louisa, rather glad to make her escape. Nancy's power of thought-reading struck her as uncanny. She felt afraid to remain with her cousin any longer, lest Nancy should drag to light all the secrets of her being.

Nancy sat long on the steps after Louisa had gone--sat until the night

came down, darkly and sweetly, over the garden, and the stars twinkled out above the firs. This had been her home in girlhood. Here she had lived and kept house for her father. When he died, Curtis Shaw, newly married to her cousin Louisa, bought the farm from her and moved in. Nancy stayed on with them, expecting soon to go to a home of her own. She and Peter Wright were engaged.

Then came their mysterious quarrel, concerning the cause of which kith and kin on both sides were left in annoying ignorance. Of the results they were not ignorant. Nancy promptly packed up and left Avonlea seven hundred miles behind her. She went to a hospital in Montreal and studied nursing. In the twenty years that followed she had never even revisited Avonlea. Her sudden descent on it this summer was a whim born of a moment's homesick longing for this same old garden. She had not thought about Peter. In very truth, she had thought little about Peter for the last fifteen years. She supposed that she had forgotten him. But now, sitting on the old doorstep, where she had often sat in her courting days, with Peter lounging on a broad stone at her feet, something tugged at her heartstrings. She looked over the valley to the light in the kitchen of the Wright farmhouse, and pictured Peter sitting there, lonely and uncared for, with naught but the cold comfort of his own providing.

"Well, he should have got married," she said snappishly. "I am not going to worry because he is a lonely old bachelor when all these years I have supposed him a comfy Benedict. Why doesn't he hire him a housekeeper,



at least? He can afford it; the place looks prosperous. Ugh! I've a fat bank account, and I've seen almost everything in the world worth seeing; but I've got several carefully hidden gray hairs and a horrible conviction that grammar isn't one of the essential things in life after all. Well, I'm not going to moon out here in the dew any longer. I'm going in to read the smartest, frilliest, frothiest society novel in my trunk."

In the week that followed Nancy enjoyed herself after her own fashion. She read and swung in the garden, having a hammock hung under the firs. She went far afield, in rambles to woods and lonely uplands.

"I like it much better than meeting people," she said, when Louisa suggested going to see this one and that one, "especially the Avonlea people. All my old chums are gone, or hopelessly married and changed, and the young set who have come up know not Joseph, and make me feel uncomfortably middle-aged. It's far worse to feel middle-aged than old, you know. Away there in the woods I feel as eternally young as Nature herself. And oh, it's so nice not having to fuss with thermometers and temperatures and other people's whims. Let me indulge my own whims, Louisa dear, and punish me with a cold bite when I come in late for meals. I'm not even going to church again. It was horrible there yesterday. The church is so offensively spick-and-span brand new and modern."

"It's thought to be the prettiest church in these parts," protested

Louisa, a little sorely.

"Churches shouldn't be pretty--they should at least be fifty years old and mellowed into beauty. New churches are an abomination."

"Did you see Peter Wright in church?" asked Louisa. She had been bursting to ask it.

Nancy nodded.

"Verily, yes. He sat right across from me in the corner pew. I didn't think him painfully changed. Iron-gray hair becomes him. But I was horribly disappointed in myself. I had expected to feel at least a romantic thrill, but all I felt was a comfortable interest, such as I might have taken in any old friend. Do my utmost, Louisa, I couldn't compass a thrill."

"Did he come to speak to you?" asked Louisa, who hadn't any idea what Nancy meant by her thrills.

"Alas, no. It wasn't my fault. I stood at the door outside with the most amiable expression I could assume, but Peter merely sauntered away without a glance in my direction. It would be some comfort to my vanity if I could believe it was on account of rankling spite or pride. But the honest truth, dear Weezy, is that it looked to me exactly as if he never thought of it. He was more interested in talking about the hay crop with

Oliver Sloane--who, by the way, is more Oliver Sloaneish than ever."

"If you feel as you said you did the other night, why didn't you go and speak to him?" Louisa wanted to know.

"But I don't feel that way now. That was just a mood. You don't know anything about moods, dearie. You don't know what it is to yearn desperately one hour for something you wouldn't take if it were offered you the next."

"But that is foolishness," protested Louisa.

"To be sure it is--rank foolishness. But oh, it is so delightful to be foolish after being compelled to be unbrokenly sensible for twenty years. Well, I'm going picking strawberries this afternoon, Lou. Don't wait tea for me. I probably won't be back till dark. I've only four more days to stay and I want to make the most of them."

Nancy wandered far and wide in her rambles that afternoon. When she had filled her jug she still roamed about with delicious aimlessness. Once she found herself in a wood lane skirting a field wherein a man was mowing hay. The man was Peter Wright. Nancy walked faster when she discovered this, with never a roving glance, and presently the green, ferny depths of the maple woods swallowed her up.

From old recollections, she knew that she was on Peter Morrison's land,

and calculated that if she kept straight on she would come out where the old Morrison house used to be. Her calculations proved correct, with a trifling variation. She came out fifty yards south of the old deserted Morrison house, and found herself in the yard of the Wright farm!

Passing the house--the house where she had once dreamed of reigning as mistress--Nancy's curiosity overcame her. The place was not in view of any other near house. She deliberately went up to it intending--low be it spoken--to peep in at the kitchen window. But, seeing the door wide open, she went to it instead and halted on the step, looking about her keenly.

The kitchen was certainly pitiful in its disorder. The floor had apparently not been swept for a fortnight. On the bare deal table were the remnants of Peter's dinner, a meal that could not have been very tempting at its best.

"What a miserable place for a human being to live in!" groaned Nancy. "Look at the ashes on that stove! And that table! Is it any wonder that Peter has got gray? He'll work hard haymaking all the afternoon--and then come home to THIS!"

An idea suddenly darted into Nancy's brain. At first she looked aghast. Then she laughed and glanced at her watch.

"I'll do it--just for fun and a little pity. It's half-past two, and

Peter won't be home till four at the earliest. I'll have a good hour to do it in, and still make my escape in good time. Nobody will ever know; nobody can see me here."

Nancy went in, threw off her hat, and seized a broom. The first thing she did was to give the kitchen a thorough sweeping. Then she kindled a fire, put a kettle full of water on to heat, and attacked the dishes. From the number of them she rightly concluded that Peter hadn't washed any for at least a week.

"I suppose he just uses the clean ones as long as they hold out, and then has a grand wash-up," she laughed. "I wonder where he keeps his dish-towels, if he has any."

Evidently Peter hadn't any. At least, Nancy couldn't find any. She marched boldly into the dusty sitting-room and explored the drawers of an old-fashioned sideboard, confiscating a towel she found there. As she worked, she hummed a song; her steps were light and her eyes bright with excitement. Nancy was enjoying herself thoroughly, there was no doubt of that. The spice of mischief in the adventure pleased her mightily.

The dishes washed, she hunted up a clean, but yellow and evidently long unused tablecloth out of the sideboard, and proceeded to set the table and get Peter's tea. She found bread and butter in the pantry, a trip to the cellar furnished a pitcher of cream, and Nancy recklessly heaped the contents of her strawberry jug on Peter's plate. The tea was made and

set back to keep warm. And, as a finishing touch, Nancy ravaged the old neglected garden and set a huge bowl of crimson roses in the centre of the table.

"Now I must go," she said aloud. "Wouldn't it be fun to see Peter's face when he comes in, though? Ha-hum! I've enjoyed doing this--but why? Nancy Rogerson, don't be asking yourself conundrums. Put on your hat and proceed homeward, constructing on your way some reliable fib to account to Louisa for the absence of your strawberries."

Nancy paused a moment and looked around wistfully. She had made the place look cheery and neat and homelike. She felt that queer tugging at her heart-strings again. Suppose she belonged here, and was waiting for Peter to come home to tea. Suppose--Nancy whirled around with a sudden horrible prescience of what she was going to see! Peter Wright was standing in the doorway.

Nancy's face went crimson. For the first time in her life she had not a word to say for herself. Peter looked at her and then at the table, with its fruit and flowers.

"Thank you," he said politely.

Nancy recovered herself. With a shame-faced laugh, she held out her hand.

"Don't have me arrested for trespass, Peter. I came and looked in at your kitchen out of impertinent curiosity, and just for fun I thought I'd come in and get your tea. I thought you'd be so surprised--and I meant to go before you came home, of course."

"I wouldn't have been surprised," said Peter, shaking hands. "I saw you go past the field and I tied the horses and followed you down through the woods. I've been sitting on the fence back yonder, watching your comings and goings." "Why didn't you come and speak to me at church yesterday, Peter?" demanded Nancy boldly.

"I was afraid I would say something ungrammatical," answered Peter drily.

The crimson flamed over Nancy's face again. She pulled her hand away.

"That's cruel of you, Peter."

Peter suddenly laughed. There was a note of boyishness in the laughter.

"So it is," he said, "but I had to get rid of the accumulated malice and spite of twenty years somehow. It's all gone now, and I'll be as amiable as I know how. But since you have gone to the trouble of getting my supper for me, Nancy, you must stay and help me eat it. Them strawberries look good. I haven't had any this summer--been too busy to pick them."

Nancy stayed. She sat at the head of Peter's table and poured his tea for him. She talked to him wittily of the Avonlea people and the changes in their old set. Peter followed her lead with an apparent absence of self-consciousness, eating his supper like a man whose heart and mind were alike on good terms with him. Nancy felt wretched--and, at the same time, ridiculously happy. It seemed the most grotesque thing in the world that she should be presiding there at Peter's table, and yet the most natural. There were moments when she felt like crying--other moments when her laughter was as ready and spontaneous as a girl's. Sentiment and humour had always waged an equal contest in Nancy's nature.

When Peter had finished his strawberries he folded his arms on the table and looked admiringly at Nancy.

"You look well at the head of a table, Nancy," he said critically. "How is it that you haven't been presiding at one of your own long before this? I thought you'd meet a lots of men out in the world that you'd like--men who talked good grammar."

"Peter, don't!" said Nancy, wincing. "I was a goose."

"No, you were quite right. I was a tetchy fool. If I'd had any sense, I'd have felt thankful you thought enough of me to want to improve me, and I'd have tried to kerrect my mistakes instead of getting mad. It's



too late now, I suppose."

"Too late for what?" said Nancy, plucking up heart of grace at something in Peter's tone and look.

"For--kerrecting mistakes."

"Grammatical ones?"

"Not exactly. I guess them mistakes are past kerrecting in an old fellow like me. Worse mistakes, Nancy. I wonder what you would say if I asked you to forgive me, and have me after all."

"I'd snap you up before you'd have time to change your mind," said Nancy brazenly. She tried to look Peter in the face, but her blue eyes, where tears and mirth were blending, faltered down before his gray ones.

Peter stood up, knocking over his chair, and strode around the table to her.

"Nancy, my girl!" he said.