LUCY MAUD MONTGOMERY

THE BLUE CASTLE

Lucy Maud Montgomery

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EAN 8596547390381

DigiCat, 2022
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Chapter I

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If it had not rained on a certain May morning Valancy Stirling's whole life would have been entirely different. She would have gone, with the rest of her clan, to Aunt Wellington's engagement picnic and Dr. Trent would have gone to Montreal. But it did rain and you shall hear what happened to her because of it.

Valancy wakened early, in the lifeless, hopeless hour just preceding dawn. She had not slept very well. One does not sleep well, sometimes, when one is twenty-nine on the morrow, and unmarried, in a community and connection where the unmarried are simply those who have failed to get a man.

Deerwood and the Stirlings had long since relegated Valancy to hopeless old maidenhood. But Valancy herself had never quite relinquished a certain pitiful, shamed, little hope that Romance would come her way yet—never, until this wet, horrible morning, when she wakened to the fact that she was twenty-nine and unsought by any man.

Ay, *there* lay the sting. Valancy did not mind so much being an old maid. After all, she thought, being an old maid couldn't possibly be as dreadful as being married to an Uncle Wellington or an Uncle Benjamin, or even an Uncle Herbert. What hurt her was that she had never had a chance to be anything but an old maid. No man had ever desired her.

The tears came into her eyes as she lay there alone in the faintly greying darkness. She dared not let herself cry as hard as she wanted to, for two reasons. She was afraid that

crying might bring on another attack of that pain around the heart. She had had a spell of it after she had got into bed—rather worse than any she had had yet. And she was afraid her mother would notice her red eyes at breakfast and keep at her with minute, persistent, mosquito-like questions regarding the cause thereof.

"Suppose," thought Valancy with a ghastly grin, "I answered with the plain truth, 'I am crying because I cannot get married.' How horrified Mother would be—though she is ashamed every day of her life of her old maid daughter."

But of course appearances should be kept up. "It is not," Valancy could hear her mother's prim, dictatorial voice asserting, "it is not *maidenly* to think about *men."*

The thought of her mother's expression made Valancy laugh—for she had a sense of humour nobody in her clan suspected. For that matter, there were a good many things about Valancy that nobody suspected. But her laughter was very superficial and presently she lay there, a huddled, futile little figure, listening to the rain pouring down outside and watching, with a sick distaste, the chill, merciless light creeping into her ugly, sordid room.

She knew the ugliness of that room by heart—knew it and hated it. The yellow-painted floor, with one hideous, "hooked" rug by the bed, with a grotesque, "hooked" dog on it, always grinning at her when she awoke; the faded, dark-red paper; the ceiling discoloured by old leaks and crossed by cracks; the narrow, pinched little washstand; the brown-paper lambrequin with purple roses on it; the spotted old looking-glass with the crack across it, propped up on the inadequate dressing-table; the jar of ancient potpourri made by her mother in her mythical honeymoon; the shell-covered box, with one burst corner, which Cousin Stickles had made in her equally mythical girlhood; the beaded

pincushion with half its bead fringe gone; the one stiff, yellow chair; the faded old motto, “Gone but not forgotten,” worked in coloured yarns about Great-grandmother Stirling’s grim old face; the old photographs of ancient relatives long banished from the rooms below. There were only two pictures that were not of relatives. One, an old chromo of a puppy sitting on a rainy doorstep. That picture always made Valancy unhappy. That forlorn little dog crouched on the doorstep in the driving rain! Why didn’t *some one* open the door and let him in? The other picture was a faded, passe-partouted engraving of Queen Louise coming down a stairway, which Aunt Wellington had lavishly given her on her tenth birthday. For nineteen years she had looked at it and hated it, beautiful, smug, self-satisfied Queen Louise. But she never dared destroy it or remove it. Mother and Cousin Stickles would have been aghast, or, as Valancy irreverently expressed it in her thoughts, would have had a fit.

Every room in the house was ugly, of course. But downstairs appearances were kept up somewhat. There was no money for rooms nobody ever saw. Valancy sometimes felt that she could have done something for her room herself, even without money, if she were permitted. But her mother had negatived every timid suggestion and Valancy did not persist. Valancy never persisted. She was afraid to. Her mother could not brook opposition. Mrs. Stirling would sulk for days if offended, with the airs of an insulted duchess.

The only thing Valancy liked about her room was that she could be alone there at night to cry if she wanted to.

But, after all, what did it matter if a room, which you used for nothing except sleeping and dressing in, were ugly? Valancy was never permitted to stay alone in her room for

any other purpose. People who wanted to be alone, so Mrs. Frederick Stirling and Cousin Stickles believed, could only want to be alone for some sinister purpose. But her room in the Blue Castle was everything a room should be.

Valancy, so cowed and subdued and overridden and snubbed in real life, was wont to let herself go rather splendidly in her day-dreams. Nobody in the Stirling clan, or its ramifications, suspected this, least of all her mother and Cousin Stickles. They never knew that Valancy had two homes—the ugly red brick box of a home, on Elm Street, and the Blue Castle in Spain. Valancy had lived spiritually in the Blue Castle ever since she could remember. She had been a very tiny child when she found herself possessed of it. Always, when she shut her eyes, she could see it plainly, with its turrets and banners on the pine-clad mountain height, wrapped in its faint, blue loveliness, against the sunset skies of a fair and unknown land. Everything wonderful and beautiful was in that castle. Jewels that queens might have worn; robes of moonlight and fire; couches of roses and gold; long flights of shallow marble steps, with great, white urns, and with slender, mist-clad maidens going up and down them; courts, marble-pillared, where shimmering fountains fell and nightingales sang among the myrtles; halls of mirrors that reflected only handsome knights and lovely women—herself the loveliest of all, for whose glance men died. All that supported her through the boredom of her days was the hope of going on a dream spree at night. Most, if not all, of the Stirlings would have died of horror if they had known half the things Valancy did in her Blue Castle.

For one thing she had quite a few lovers in it. Oh, only one at a time. One who wooed her with all the romantic ardour of the age of chivalry and won her after long

devotion and many deeds of derring-do, and was wedded to her with pomp and circumstance in the great, banner-hung chapel of the Blue Castle.

At twelve, this lover was a fair lad with golden curls and heavenly blue eyes. At fifteen, he was tall and dark and pale, but still necessarily handsome. At twenty, he was ascetic, dreamy, spiritual. At twenty-five, he had a clean-cut jaw, slightly grim, and a face strong and rugged rather than handsome. Valancy never grew older than twenty-five in her Blue Castle, but recently—very recently—her hero had had reddish, tawny hair, a twisted smile and a mysterious past.

I don't say Valancy deliberately murdered these lovers as she outgrew them. One simply faded away as another came. Things are very convenient in this respect in Blue Castles.

But, on this morning of her day of fate, Valancy could not find the key of her Blue Castle. Reality pressed on her too hardly, barking at her heels like a maddening little dog. She was twenty-nine, lonely, undesired, ill-favoured—the only homely girl in a handsome clan, with no past and no future. As far as she could look back, life was drab and colourless, with not one single crimson or purple spot anywhere. As far as she could look forward it seemed certain to be just the same until she was nothing but a solitary, little withered leaf clinging to a wintry bough. The moment when a woman realises that she has nothing to live for—neither love, duty, purpose nor hope—holds for her the bitterness of death.

"And I just have to go on living because I can't stop. I may have to live eighty years," thought Valancy, in a kind of panic. "We're all horribly long-lived. It sickens me to think of it."

She was glad it was raining—or rather, she was drearily satisfied that it was raining. There would be no picnic that

day. This annual picnic, whereby Aunt and Uncle Wellington—one always thought of them in that succession—inevitably celebrated their engagement at a picnic thirty years before, had been, of late years, a veritable nightmare to Valancy. By an impish coincidence it was the same day as her birthday and, after she had passed twenty-five, nobody let her forget it.

Much as she hated going to the picnic, it would never have occurred to her to rebel against it. There seemed to be nothing of the revolutionary in her nature. And she knew exactly what every one would say to her at the picnic. Uncle Wellington, whom she disliked and despised even though he had fulfilled the highest Stirling aspiration, "marrying money," would say to her in a pig's whisper, "Not thinking of getting married yet, my dear?" and then go off into the bellow of laughter with which he invariably concluded his dull remarks. Aunt Wellington, of whom Valancy stood in abject awe, would tell her about Olive's new chiffon dress and Cecil's last devoted letter. Valancy would have to look as pleased and interested as if the dress and letter had been hers or else Aunt Wellington would be offended. And Valancy had long ago decided that she would rather offend God than Aunt Wellington, because God might forgive her but Aunt Wellington never would.

Aunt Alberta, enormously fat, with an amiable habit of always referring to her husband as "he," as if he were the only male creature in the world, who could never forget that she had been a great beauty in her youth, would condole with Valancy on her sallow skin—

"I don't know why all the girls of today are so sunburned. When I was a girl my skin was roses and cream. I was counted the prettiest girl in Canada, my dear."

Perhaps Uncle Herbert wouldn't say anything—or perhaps he would remark jocularly, "How fat you're getting, Doss!" And then everybody would laugh over the excessively humorous idea of poor, scrawny little Doss getting fat.

Handsome, solemn Uncle James, whom Valancy disliked but respected because he was reputed to be very clever and was therefore the clan oracle—brains being none too plentiful in the Stirling connection—would probably remark with the owl-like sarcasm that had won him his reputation, "I suppose you're busy with your hope-chest these days?"

And Uncle Benjamin would ask some of his abominable conundrums, between wheezy chuckles, and answer them himself.

"What is the difference between Doss and a mouse?

"The mouse wishes to harm the cheese and Doss wishes to charm the he's."

Valancy had heard him ask that riddle fifty times and every time she wanted to throw something at him. But she never did. In the first place, the Stirlings simply did not throw things; in the second place, Uncle Benjamin was a wealthy and childless old widower and Valancy had been brought up in the fear and admonition of his money. If she offended him he would cut her out of his will—supposing she were in it. Valancy did not want to be cut out of Uncle Benjamin's will. She had been poor all her life and knew the galling bitterness of it. So she endured his riddles and even smiled tortured little smiles over him.

Aunt Isabel, downright and disagreeable as an east wind, would criticise her in some way—Valancy could not predict just how, for Aunt Isabell never repeated a criticism—she found something new with which to jab you every time. Aunt Isabel prided herself on saying what she thought, but

didn’t like it so well when other people said what *they* thought to *her.* Valancy never said what *she* thought.

Cousin Georgiana—named after her great-great-grandmother, who had been named after George the Fourth—would recount dolorously the names of all relatives and friends who had died since the last picnic and wonder “which of us will be the first to go next.”

Oppressively competent, Aunt Mildred would talk endlessly of her husband and her odious prodigies of babies to Valancy, because Valancy would be the only one she could find to put up with it. For the same reason, Cousin Gladys—really First Cousin Gladys once removed, according to the strict way in which the Stirlings tabulated relationship—a tall, thin lady who admitted she had a sensitive disposition, would describe minutely the tortures of her neuritis. And Olive, the wonder girl of the whole Stirling clan, who had everything Valancy had not—beauty, popularity, love—would show off her beauty and presume on her popularity and flaunt her diamond insignia of love in Valancy’s dazzled, envious eyes.

There would be none of all this today. And there would be no packing up of teaspoons. The packing up was always left for Valancy and Cousin Stickles. And once, six years ago, a silver teaspoon from Aunt Wellington’s wedding set had been lost. Valancy never heard the last of that silver teaspoon. Its ghost appeared Banquo-like at every subsequent family feast.

Oh, yes, Valancy knew exactly what the picnic would be like and she blessed the rain that had saved her from it. There would be no picnic this year. If Aunt Wellington could not celebrate on the sacred day itself she would have no celebration at all. Thank whatever gods there were for that.

Since there would be no picnic, Valancy made up her mind that, if the rain held up in the afternoon, she would go up to the library and get another of John Foster's books. Valancy was never allowed to read novels, but John Foster's books were not novels. They were "nature books"—so the librarian told Mrs. Frederick Stirling—"all about the woods and birds and bugs and things like that, you know." So Valancy was allowed to read them—under protest, for it was only too evident that she enjoyed them too much. It was permissible, even laudable, to read to improve your mind and your religion, but a book that was enjoyable was dangerous. Valancy did not know whether her mind was being improved or not; but she felt vaguely that if she had come across John Foster's books years ago life might have been a different thing for her. They seemed to her to yield glimpses of a world into which she might once have entered, though the door was forever barred to her now. It was only within the last year that John Foster's books had been in the Deerwood library, though the librarian told Valancy that he had been a well-known writer for several years.

"Where does he live?" Valancy had asked.

"Nobody knows. From his books he must be a Canadian, but no more information can be had. His publishers won't say a word. Quite likely John Foster is a nom de plume. His books are so popular we can't keep them in at all, though I really can't see what people find in them to rave over."

"I think they're wonderful," said Valancy, timidly.

"Oh—well—" Miss Clarkson smiled in a patronising fashion that relegated Valancy's opinions to limbo, "I can't say I care much for bugs myself. But certainly Foster seems to know all there is to know about them."

Valancy didn’t know whether she cared much for bugs either. It was not John Foster’s uncanny knowledge of wild creatures and insect life that enthralled her. She could hardly say what it was—some tantalising lure of a mystery never revealed—some hint of a great secret just a little further on—some faint, elusive echo of lovely, forgotten things—John Foster’s magic was indefinable.

Yes, she would get a new Foster book. It was a month since she had *Thistle Harvest,* so surely Mother could not object. Valancy had read it four times—she knew whole passages off by heart.

And—she almost thought she would go and see Dr. Trent about that queer pain around the heart. It had come rather often lately, and the palpitations were becoming annoying, not to speak of an occassional dizzy moment and a queer shortness of breath. But could she go to him without telling any one? It was a most daring thought. None of the Stirlings ever consulted a doctor without holding a family council and getting Uncle James’ approval. *Then,* they went to Dr. Ambrose Marsh of Port Lawrence, who had married Second Cousin Adelaide Stirling.

But Valancy disliked Dr. Ambrose Marsh. And, besides, she could not get to Port Lawrence, fifteen miles away, without being taken there. She did not want any one to know about her heart. There would be such a fuss made and every member of the family would come down and talk it over and advise her and caution her and warn her and tell her horrible tales of great-aunts and cousins forty times removed who had been “just like that and dropped dead without a moment’s warning, my dear.”

Aunt Isabel would remember that she had always said Doss looked like a girl who would have heart trouble—“so pinched and peaked always”; and Uncle Wellington would

take it as a personal insult, when “no Stirling ever had heart disease before”; and Georgiana would forebode in perfectly audible asides that “poor, dear little Doss isn’t long for this world, I’m afraid”; and Cousin Gladys would say, “Why, *my* heart has been like that for *years*,” in a tone that implied no one else had any business even to have a heart; and Olive—Olive would merely look beautiful and superior and disgustingly healthy, as if to say, “Why all this fuss over a faded superfluity like Doss when you have *me*?”

Valancy felt that she couldn’t tell anybody unless she had to. She felt quite sure there was nothing at all seriously wrong with her heart and no need of all the pother that would ensue if she mentioned it. She would just slip up quietly and see Dr. Trent that very day. As for his bill, she had the two hundred dollars that her father had put in the bank for her the day she was born, but she would secretly take out enough to pay Dr. Trent. She was never allowed to use even the interest of this.

Dr. Trent was a gruff, outspoken, absent-minded old fellow, but he was a recognised authority on heart-disease, even if he were only a general practitioner in out-of-the-world Deerwood. Dr. Trent was over seventy and there had been rumours that he meant to retire soon. None of the Stirling clan had ever gone to him since he had told Cousin Gladys, ten years before, that her neuritis was all imaginary and that she enjoyed it. You couldn’t patronise a doctor who insulted your first-cousin-once-removed like that—not to mention that he was a Presbyterian when all the Stirlings went to the Anglican church. But Valancy, between the devil of disloyalty to clan and the deep sea of fuss and clatter and advice, thought she would take a chance with the devil.

Chapter II

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When cousin Stickles knocked at her door, Valancy knew it was half-past seven and she must get up. As long as she could remember, Cousin Stickles had knocked at her door at half-past seven. Cousin Stickles and Mrs. Frederick Stirling had been up since seven, but Valancy was allowed to lie abed half an hour longer because of a family tradition that she was delicate. Valancy got up, though she hated getting up more this morning than ever she had before. What was there to get up for? Another dreary day like all the days that had preceded it, full of meaningless little tasks, joyless and unimportant, that benefited nobody. But if she did not get up at once she would not be ready for breakfast at eight o'clock. Hard and fast times for meals were the rule in Mrs. Stirling's household. Breakfast at eight, dinner at one, supper at six, year in and year out. No excuses for being late were ever tolerated. So up Valancy got, shivering.

The room was bitterly cold with the raw, penetrating chill of a wet May morning. The house would be cold all day. It was one of Mrs. Frederick's rules that no fires were necessary after the twenty-fourth of May. Meals were cooked on the little oil-stove in the back porch. And though May might be icy and October frost-bitten, no fires were lighted until the twenty-first of October by the calendar. On the twenty-first of October Mrs. Frederick began cooking over the kitchen range and lighted a fire in the sitting-room stove in the evenings. It was whispered about in the connection that the late Frederick Stirling had caught the cold which resulted in his death during Valancy's first year

of life because Mrs. Frederick would not have a fire on the twentieth of October. She lighted it the next day—but that was a day too late for Frederick Stirling.

Valancy took off and hung up in the closet her nightdress of coarse, unbleached cotton, with high neck and long, tight sleeves. She put on undergarments of a similar nature, a dress of brown gingham, thick, black stockings and rubber-heeled boots. Of late years she had fallen into the habit of doing her hair with the shade of the window by the looking-glass pulled down. The lines on her face did not show so plainly then. But this morning she jerked the shade to the very top and looked at herself in the leprous mirror with a passionate determination to see herself as the world saw her.

The result was rather dreadful. Even a beauty would have found that harsh, unsoftened side-light trying. Valancy saw straight black hair, short and thin, always lustreless despite the fact that she gave it one hundred strokes of the brush, neither more nor less, every night of her life and faithfully rubbed Redfern's Hair Vigor into the roots, more lustreless than ever in its morning roughness; fine, straight, black brows; a nose she had always felt was much too small even for her small, three-cornered, white face; a small, pale mouth that always fell open a trifle over little, pointed white teeth; a figure thin and flat-breasted, rather below the average height. She had somehow escaped the family high cheek-bones, and her dark-brown eyes, too soft and shadowy to be black, had a slant that was almost Oriental. Apart from her eyes she was neither pretty nor ugly—just insignificant-looking, she concluded bitterly. How plain the lines around her eyes and mouth were in that merciless light! And never had her narrow, white face looked so narrow and so white.

She did her hair in a pompadour. Pompadours had long gone out of fashion, but they had been in when Valancy first put her hair up and Aunt Wellington had decided that she must always wear her hair so.

"It is the *only* way that becomes you. Your face is so small that you *must* add height to it by a pompadour effect," said Aunt Wellington, who always enunciated commonplaces as if uttering profound and important truths.

Valancy had hankered to do her hair pulled low on her forehead, with puffs above the ears, as Olive was wearing hers. But Aunt Wellington's dictum had such an effect on her that she never dared change her style of hairdressing again. But then, there were so many things Valancy never dared do.

All her life she had been afraid of something, she thought bitterly. From the very dawn of recollection, when she had been so horribly afraid of the big black bear that lived, so Cousin Stickles told her, in the closet under the stairs.

"And I always will be—I know it—I can't help it. I don't know what it would be like not to be afraid of something."

Afraid of her mother's sulky fits—afraid of offending Uncle Benjamin—afraid of becoming a target for Aunt Wellington's contempt—afraid of Aunt Isabel's biting comments—afraid of Uncle James' disapproval—afraid of offending the whole clan's opinions and prejudices—afraid of not keeping up appearances—afraid to say what she really thought of anything—afraid of poverty in her old age. Fear—fear—fear—she could never escape from it. It bound her and enmeshed her like a spider's web of steel. Only in her Blue Castle could she find temporary release. And this morning Valancy could not believe she had a Blue Castle. She would never be able to find it again. Twenty-nine, unmarried, undesired—what had she to do with the fairy-like

chatelaine of the Blue Castle? She would cut such childish nonsense out of her life forever and face reality unflinchingly.

She turned from her unfriendly mirror and looked out. The ugliness of the view always struck her like a blow; the ragged fence, the tumble-down old carriage-shop in the next lot, plastered with crude, violently coloured advertisements; the grimy railway station beyond, with the awful derelicts that were always hanging around it even at this early hour. In the pouring rain everything looked worse than usual, especially the beastly advertisement, “Keep that schoolgirl complexion.” Valancy *had* kept her schoolgirl complexion. That was just the trouble. There was not a gleam of beauty anywhere—“exactly like my life,” thought Valancy drearily. Her brief bitterness had passed. She accepted facts as resignedly as she had always accepted them. She was one of the people whom life always passes by. There was no altering that fact.

In this mood Valancy went down to breakfast.

Chapter III

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Breakfast was always the same. Oatmeal porridge, which Valancy loathed, toast and tea, and one teaspoonful of marmalade. Mrs. Frederick thought two teaspoonfuls extravagant—but that did not matter to Valancy, who hated marmalade, too. The chilly, gloomy little dining-room was chillier and gloomier than usual; the rain streamed down outside the window; departed Stirlings, in atrocious, gilt frames, wider than the pictures, glowered down from the walls. And yet Cousin Stickles wished Valancy many happy returns of the day!

"Sit up straight, Doss," was all her mother said.

Valancy sat up straight. She talked to her mother and Cousin Stickles of the things they always talked of. She never wondered what would happen if she tried to talk of something else. She knew. Therefore she never did it.

Mrs. Frederick was offended with Providence for sending a rainy day when she wanted to go to a picnic, so she ate her breakfast in a sulky silence for which Valancy was rather grateful. But Christine Stickles whined endlessly on as usual, complaining about everything—the weather, the leak in the pantry, the price of oatmeal and butter—Valancy felt at once she had buttered her toast too lavishly—the epidemic of mumps in Deerwood.

"Doss will be sure to ketch them," she foreboded.

"Doss must not go where she is likely to catch mumps," said Mrs. Frederick shortly.

Valancy had never had mumps—or whooping cough—or chicken-pox—or measles—or anything she should have had

—nothing but horrible colds every winter. Doss' winter colds were a sort of tradition in the family. Nothing, it seemed, could prevent her from catching them. Mrs. Frederick and Cousin Stickles did their heroic best. One winter they kept Valancy housed up from November to May, in the warm sitting-room. She was not even allowed to go to church. And Valancy took cold after cold and ended up with bronchitis in June.

"None of *my* family were ever like that," said Mrs. Frederick, implying that it must be a Stirling tendency.

"The Stirling's seldom take cold," said Cousin Stickles resentfully. *She* had been a Stirling.

"I think," said Mrs. Frederick, "that if a person makes up her mind *not* to have colds she will not *have* colds."

So that was the trouble. It was all Valancy's own fault.

But on this particular morning Valancy's unbearable grievance was that she was called Doss. She had endured it for twenty-nine years, and all at once she felt she could not endure it any longer. Her full name was Valancy Jane. Valancy Jane was rather terrible, but she liked Valancy, with its odd, out-land tang. It was always a wonder to Valancy that the Stirlings had allowed her to be so christened. She had been told that her maternal grandfather, old Amos Wansbarra, had chosen the name for her. Her father had tacked on the Jane by way of civilising it, and the whole connection got out of the difficulty by nicknaming her Doss. She never got Valancy from any one but outsiders.

"Mother," she said timidly, "would you mind calling me Valancy after this? Doss seems so—so—I don't like it."

Mrs. Frederick looked at her daughter in astonishment. She wore glasses with enormously strong lenses that gave her eyes a peculiarly disagreeable appearance.

"What is the matter with Doss?"

“It—seems so childish,” faltered Valancy.

“Oh!” Mrs. Frederick had been a Wansbarra and the Wansbarra smile was not an asset. “I see. Well, it should suit *you* then. You are childish enough in all conscience, my dear child.”

“I am twenty-nine,” said the dear child desperately.

“I wouldn’t proclaim it from the house-tops if I were you, dear,” said Mrs. Frederick. “Twenty-nine! *I* had been married nine years when I was twenty-nine.”

“*I* was married at seventeen,” said Cousin Stickles proudly.

Valancy looked at them furtively. Mrs. Frederick, except for those terrible glasses and the hooked nose that made her look more like a parrot than a parrot itself could look, was not ill-looking. At twenty she might have been quite pretty. But Cousin Stickles! And yet Christine Stickles had once been desirable in some man’s eyes. Valancy felt that Cousin Stickles, with her broad, flat, wrinkled face, a mole right on the end of her dumpy nose, bristling hairs on her chin, wrinkled yellow neck, pale, protruding eyes, and thin, puckered mouth, had yet this advantage over her—this right to look down on her. And even yet Cousin Stickles was necessary to Mrs. Frederick. Valancy wondered pitifully what it would be like to be wanted by some one—needed by some one. No one in the whole world needed her, or would miss anything from life if she dropped suddenly out of it. She was a disappointment to her mother. No one loved her. She had never so much as had a girl friend.

“I haven’t even a gift for friendship,” she had once admitted to herself pitifully.

“Doss, you haven’t eaten your crusts,” said Mrs. Frederick rebukingly.

It rained all the forenoon without cessation. Valancy pieced a quilt. Valancy hated piecing quilts. And there was no need of it. The house was full of quilts. There were three big chests, packed with quilts, in the attic. Mrs. Frederick had begun storing away quilts when Valancy was seventeen and she kept on storing them, though it did not seem likely that Valancy would ever need them. But Valancy must be at work and fancy work materials were too expensive. Idleness was a cardinal sin in the Stirling household. When Valancy had been a child she had been made to write down every night, in a small, hated, black notebook, all the minutes she had spent in idleness that day. On Sundays her mother made her tot them up and pray over them.

On this particular forenoon of this day of destiny Valancy spent only ten minutes in idleness. At least, Mrs. Frederick and Cousin Stickles would have called it idleness. She went to her room to get a better thimble and she opened *Thistle Harvest* guiltily at random.

"The woods are so human," wrote John Foster, "that to know them one must live with them. An occasional saunter through them, keeping to the well-trodden paths, will never admit us to their intimacy. If we wish to be friends we must seek them out and win them by frequent, reverent visits at all hours; by morning, by noon, and by night; and at all seasons, in spring, in summer, in autumn, in winter. Otherwise we can never really know them and any pretence we may make to the contrary will never impose on them. They have their own effective way of keeping aliens at a distance and shutting their hearts to mere casual sightseers. It is of no use to seek the woods from any motive except sheer love of them; they will find us out at once and hide all their sweet, old-world secrets from us. But if they know we come to them because we love them they

will be very kind to us and give us such treasures of beauty and delight as are not bought or sold in any market-place. For the woods, when they give at all, give unstintedly and hold nothing back from their true worshippers. We must go to them lovingly, humbly, patiently, watchfully, and we shall learn what poignant loveliness lurks in the wild places and silent intervales, lying under starshine and sunset, what cadences of unearthly music are harped on aged pine boughs or crooned in copses of fir, what delicate savours exhale from mosses and ferns in sunny corners or on damp brooklands, what dreams and myths and legends of an older time haunt them. Then the immortal heart of the woods will beat against ours and its subtle life will steal into our veins and make us its own forever, so that no matter where we go or how widely we wander we shall yet be drawn back to the forest to find our most enduring kinship."

"Doss," called her mother from the hall below, "what are you doing all by yourself in that room?"

Valancy dropped *Thistle Harvest* like a hot coal and fled downstairs to her patches; but she felt the strange exhilaration of spirit that always came momentarily to her when she dipped into one of John Foster's books. Valancy did not know much about woods—except the haunted groves of oak and pine around her Blue Castle. But she had always secretly hankered after them and a Foster book about woods was the next best thing to the woods themselves.

At noon it stopped raining, but the sun did not come out until three. Then Valancy timidly said she thought she would go uptown.

"What do you want to go uptown for?" demanded her mother.

"I want to get a book from the library."

“You got a book from the library only last week.”

“No, it was four weeks.”

“Four weeks. Nonsense!”

“Really it was, Mother.”

“You are mistaken. It cannot possibly have been more than two weeks. I dislike contradiction. And I do not see what you want to get a book for, anyhow. You waste too much time reading.”

“Of what value is my time?” asked Valancy bitterly.

“Doss! Don’t speak in that tone to *me.”*

“We need some tea,” said Cousin Stickles. “She might go and get that if she wants a walk—though this damp weather is bad for colds.”

They argued the matter for ten minutes longer and finally Mrs. Frederick agreed rather grudgingly that Valancy might go.