Coming of Age
by Ancor

There had been no question of Colin's health since his eleventh year when happiness and good exercise had set the crowning touches on their work of putting roses in his cheeks and some solid, boyish weight on his bones. By the time he was mostly grown and ready to be off to the grand school in Scotland, Colin himself sometimes forgot that there had ever been such a sickly, miserable creature as himself at ten years of age. Certainly none of his fellow students in Scotland would have guessed, to see the vivacious young man with whom they shared classes. But it was only among those who remembered that dying child and the Magic that had drawn him back to life that Colin was truly himself.

So it was that he spent his sixteenth birthday sequestered within the walls of the Secret Garden with only Mary and Dickon, a magnificent dinner spread out for them on a blanket beneath a flowering cherry tree just as they had used to do before Colin went away to school. The cook had outdone herself in honor of young Master Colin's return home on vacation, and the three of them paid their compliments to the meal in hearty fashion as they whiled away the hours with talk and laughter and the latest news.

"The food is not nearly so good at school," said Colin, when the dinner things had been cleared away, "but I am learning a great deal more than I could have from my tutors, and there is ever so much to do and see. The new research is quite exciting as well, although I cannot understand it all just yet. You know, Mary, I believe I shall really enjoy being a surgeon."

"I dare say you would have been as pleased with chemistry or physics if you'd put your mind to them," Mary noted.

"Oh, I still mean to study chemistry," said Colin airily, "and perhaps botany as well, if I can only find the time."

"Tha'll be a grand professor before tha's done, an' go round Europe lecturin' to the next crop o' young 'uns as means to make summat o' theirsel's," said Dickon admiringly. "Tha' takes to thy books as natural as th' wind to th' moor."
"Of course I do!" cried Colin, putting up quite a flash of his old arrogance, but only managing to maintain it for a split second before a delighted laugh bubbled through and spoiled the effect.

"Perhaps you'll remember your friends when you've become famous," retorted Mary rather archly, thinking with resignation of her own imminent removal to finishing school.

In fact, though Colin had dearly enjoyed his classes and the new friends he had made while in Scotland, he had never come near forgetting the Magic or the Secret Garden or his first and dearest friends; there in the sweet-scented dusk in the garden they had saved and that had in turn saved them, he felt very sure that there would never be any danger of forgetting.

"Aye, I'll remember," he said soberly, and reached to grasp their hands in his own strong fingers. "I'll remember thee always!"

"Tha' doesn't have to come every day, tha' knows," said Dickon, quite softly so as to not break the comfortable haze that had fallen over the cottage. Mother and the other children still living at home had gone out to tend the evening chores and milking, and their sudden absence left a well of quiet filled only by the moan of the wind round the chimney and the hoarse sound of Mary's breath as it went in and out of her weakened lungs.

He had known when she arrived that morning that the five mile walk had done her no good, but said nothing then because what was done was done and it would do more harm to send her back to the Manor than to let her rest and warm herself and perhaps ease a bit of the trouble from her mind for the day.

"If I didn't come here, I would have to stay home," said Mary, "and hear the wind echoing through a hundred empty rooms and think of Colin somewhere in Belgium where the fighting is. I think of him when I'm here, but they're not such lonely thoughts."

Then something seemed to occur to her and she drew herself straight on her chair by his bedside and added, rather stiffly, "If I am in the way, of course, I wouldn't mind staying home."

"Tha'rt allus welcome," he assured her, "It's only thy own health as sets me to frettin'. Five mile is a fair way to walk when tha's just recovered from pneumonia and' got nowt to cover thy head if th' rain should fall. Tha' mun see to thyself' some time, Miss Mary."

"I should much rather see to you," said Mary reproachfully, looking at the lump in the bedclothes where his injured leg stuck stiffly away from his body in its layers of wrapping. "The doctor said that I needn't lie down so often now and I shall take him at his word. Lying abed all day with nothing to do makes me think too much of how miserable and frightened I feel and I need good thoughts to summon the Magic, you will remember. It's better to keep busy -- and I do wish you would let me help with your exercises!" she burst out with sudden passion. "The doctor says if you work at them faithfully you might walk on that leg again as strong as you ever did!"

"Aye, an' I am workin' at them regular, Mary, don't tha' fear."

And yet would never walk without a limp, and be thankful to walk without much pain. The young Yorkshire doctor was a kind man who did his best to keep his patients in high spirits but he had a way of skirting around the edges of unpleasant possibilities rather than trying to prepare for them.
Dickon, with the self-awareness of the wild things he grew up amongst on the moor, had known since he was discharged from the Army that he was fearfully lucky just to have the leg still but that it could never again be fully strong or without pain. Indeed, this was the reason why he tried always to perform his exercises alone, or as near as could be managed. They hurt him dreadfully and he hated to see his pain echoed in the eyes of his mother and siblings. It is quite often easier to bear one's own pain than it is to see a loved one suffer and be unable to put them right, and so he simply kept what could not be changed to himself.

"It's true enow tha' should keep busy," said Dickon slowly. He was puzzling the thing out in his head, and Mary leaned eagerly forward to hear him. "An' the spring comin' on quick as tha' likes wi' me still abed an' most o' Mother's children gone to find work or wi' families o' their own to feed. How does tha' fancy doin' summat o' the tillin' an' plantin' in th' garden round the cottage?"

"The vegetable garden, you mean?" inquired Mary.

"Aye. Mother 'ud be rare pleased wi' th' extra set o' hands come sowin' time. An' that'll learn a bit for thy trouble, tha' will. Vegetables is a good thing to know."

"I should like that," said Mary quietly, but her hands clasped under her chin and her eyes glowed rapturously with the idea.

"But," Dickon raised a cautionary finger, "tha' mun promise to be more careful o' what days tha' comes an' to rest regular 'til thy lungs has grown sound again."

"Very well, I promise. I am glad you thought of it, Dickon. It is so much easier to think good thoughts when one is working in a garden."

The post traveling to and from the war front was neither swift nor reliable and ther was no way of knowing when Colin might have enough spare time to think the letter over and pen a proper reply, but still Mary couldn't help feeling rather cross that another day had gone with no word from France. She hated the furtive feeling tying knots in her stomach, and recognizing it as guilt only made her stubbornly feel even fiercer toward her absent cousin.

"I'm not sorry," she muttered to the great spreading heads of cabbage she was weeding around. "I'm not sorry a bit!"

Susan Ann looked up curiously from her row of turnips, her sturdy brown hands not pausing in mounding the dirt up around the roots and plucking the bugs from their leaves.

"What's got thee so bothered, Miss Mary? I thowt tha'd settled thy mind about our Dickon at last an' here tha'rt again, growlin' an' frettin' like a dog at a bone!"

"My mind was quite settled!" protested Mary, indignant, but she softened quickly at the girl's sharp look. "It still is, about Dickon. You know I wouldn't hurt him for all the world, or go back on my word to him."

"Then what? Isn't tha' happy?"

"No, I -- I'm too nervous to be happy and that has me in a temper. It's Colin, you see. Dickon and I wrote a letter to ask for his blessing on our engagement but there hasn't been a reply yet, and the longer it doesn't come the more frightened I am that he's angry with us and the angrier I feel that he..."
should be able to spoil everything."

"I reckon tha's feelin' extra poorly along o' how Mester Colin's still in th' war, then," said Susan Ann sympathetically. "Eh! I remember when our Dickon was away in th' fightin', sometimes I'd catch myself feelin' cheerful as a lark an' then be fair ashamed to think o' bein' glad when he was off in them awful places."

"If Colin were here I'm sure I could explain it properly, so that he would understand. But a letter isn't the same. I'm terribly afraid he'll read it and conclude that we are leaving him behind, out there in Belgium, and sha'n't care for him anymore when he comes home. And, well," admitted Mary shame-facedly, "I can't help thinking that if Colin and Dickon had both come home while I was still overseas and written to me asking that I be glad for them while they married off and got on with their lives without me, I don't know what I would have done. I rather think I might have felt hurt and spiteful."

"What does tha' plan to do if Mester Colin feels that way about th' engagement?"

Mary shook her head decisively. "I won't call it off. There's nothing wrong in it and I've no cause to feel guilty. Dickon says there's no great hurry, we could wait until we could make Colin see that this doesn't change our feelings about him. But Dickon is sure that Colin won't throw a tantrum about it, anyhow."

"P'raps he won't. He loves tha' both dear as anythin', a body can hear it in th' letters o' his tha' reads to Dickon, an' I doesn't think as he's anymore eager to hurt thee than tha's is to hurt him. Tha' mun not lose faith in 'im just cause th' post is runnin' behind, Miss Mary."

"I know you're right, Susan Ann, you and Dickon, and I'm even sure of it myself half the time. But it is hard to wait and not know for certain.

The ten shorthorn cows stood in a loose bunch in the sunny corner of the pasture, comfortably chewing cud while their shaggy little calves nosed hungrily under their flanks for their mid-morning snack. They were beautiful, well bred animals, dark roan, bought the year before with a portion of Mary's inheritance from her father and now as proud and solicitous as mothers could be of their offspring. They paused in their chewing every now and again to snuff luxuriously at their calves' woolly coats and grunt in contentment.

"Do you suppose it comes on a person as easily as it does on a cow?" inquired Mary suddenly, leaning her elbows on the fence and frowning at the idyllic scene.

"I suppose it does to some," answered Dickon. "I recollect as how Mother allus come on like that when she had a new babe in her arms."

"Oh, but I couldn't judge by Mother. I'm not a bit like her."

Even after a year of calling Susan Sowerby 'Mother' Mary's lips still curved swiftly when the word passed them and Dickon grinned to see her furtive pleasure. She had married into his family as much as she had married him and to see her immersing herself in the role of daughter one could see she had been yearning for it for some time.
"She was nobbut a lass when she had her first, I reckon she'd be able to tell thee what tha' wants to know about it. In wild animals an' birds th' motherin' instinct mostly comes on wi' th' young 'uns in spring an' they takes right to it but lots o' the kinds as is kep' by folk, cows an' sheep an' such, they'll need help sometimes figurin' what to do wi' their babies."

"What about people?" asked Mary, much interested.

"I couldn't tell thee as much about them. It seems more a matter o' leamin' an' keepin' a watch on the young 'un to know when he needs summat, less o' instinct an' more o' carefulness. Us older children allus helped Mother wi' th' littlest an' we did well enow just through lovin' 'em."

Mary became very quiet for a bit, staring fixedly out at the cows nursing their calves.

The pregnancy hadn't changed the fit of her dress much yet but the news had made Mary restless and worried. Having seen the coming of a good many brothers and sisters into the world and watched them grow into fine healthy adults Dickon was not as anxious as she about seeing to the baby's basic needs, but it would still be his own first child as well as hers and he could not assure her of things he was not certain of himself.

She had admitted that the things that worried her most had to do with her small experience of her own mother and the fear that such an aversion to parenthood might be hereditary. Only holding her baby in her arms and finding that she did love it could fully set that fear to rest, but Dickon had little doubt that she would be a good mother and had told her so.

"Martha wrote that both her babies were born rather purple and wrinkled," she said at last, thoughtfully. "But they're quite handsome now. The calves were all handsome when they were born and that doesn't seem quite fair, you know. Cows don't care about that sort of thing but I'm sure I should find it much easier to take to a stranger at once if they weren't so very plain."

"Tha' took to me," Dickon reminded her.

"I thought you were perfectly lovely!" argued Mary. "And anyhow I liked you long before we first set eyes on each other because Martha would tell about you sometimes."

Dickon laughed at that, easing himself down from the fence to stand by her outside the pasture. His leg had stiffened up, as it often did when he sat for too long, and he had to stretch it gingerly a few times before trusting his weight to it. He ruefully accepted when Mary offered her arm to lean on.

"Tha' loves as fierce as anybody I ever knowed, Mary," he said, kissing her mouth. "An' there's plenty o' time for thee to get to know th' little 'un afore it's birthed, tha'll be carryin' it about for many a month yet. Why doesn't tha' take today an' go talk things out wi' Mother? Set thy mind at ease."

"Won't you be wanting my help here?" she asked.

"Not today," Dickon said. "I'll manage for awhile."

"All right, then. But I'll be back for the evening milking."
"It looks just as I remember it," breathed Colin, looking round him in awe at the wild masses of ivy pouring over the walls, the golden daffodils and royal purple and white crocuses overspilling their borders, the veil of climbing roses hung over everything, bursting with green leaf buds ready to unfurl. There was the rose he had set in the ground with his own thin, faltering hands when he was ten years old. There was the snowy-blossomed plum beneath which he had sat in his wheeled chair, the day he had first seen the garden and known that he should live to be a man.

"I feel-- I feel as if it remembers me, as well," he confessed, a trifle shyly, for after all it is one thing to talk of Magic when one is a child in the company of inseparable friends, and quite another to do so as a grown man who has come through a war and is speaking to friends who for the past years have been known only through letters.

But Mary and Dickon didn't laugh at the peculiar fancy.

"The garden remembers everything," said Mary, and caught his hand in hers to draw him deeper into the warm, living greenness of the place.

Breathless, atremble with the gusts of fresh-scented air blowing in from the moor and the memories they evoked, Colin reached blindly with his free hand and was glad to feel Dickon's callused fingers slip into it and give him a friendly squeeze.

"How small I feel!" he gasped, sniffing up the scents exactly as he had as a child, the breeze heady with many thousands of spring blooms offering up their perfume. "But wherever are you taking me?"

"Come and see!" Mary laughed.

"Us've waited years for thy scientific opinion o' this," said Dickon, grinning broadly as he guided the three of them around a stand of tulips and between the slender boles of two flowering cherries to enter into a shady clearing tucked in amongst their roots. There, sitting with her bare feet in the grass and blossoms in her hair, sat a girl of about three years, who glanced up at Colin with the largest, friendliest hazel eyes he had ever seen. She started to her feet almost at once with a cry of pleasure and a wide smile splitting her round-cheeked face.

"Uncle Colin!"

They were Mary's eyes, Colin realized wonderingly, and Dickon's upturned snub of a nose and rust-colored curls.

"Rose!" he exclaimed, delighted to finally meet the girl her parents had written so many letters about, and when she held out her sturdy arms to him in invitation he didn't hesitate to swing her up into an embrace.

Rose stayed near at his side for the rest of the afternoon as he and Mary and Dickon renewed their friendship and spoke of all the things that had happened in the years since they had last seen each other face to face. Most of it they knew already through their frequent letters, but it was good to just sit and talk in the dappled shade of the cherry trees again.

Martha's husband had been killed in the war and so she was sharing expenses and a house with his sister in Northumberland. She wrote infrequently to all her family, complaining cheerfully that her
twin sons kept her busier than a robin in spring, but she seemed in good spirits.

All the surviving Sowerby children except for Elizabeth Ellen and Phil had married and started their own families.

"Them two's been too busy to think o' marriage, anyhow," explained Dickon. "'Lizabeth Ellen's still workin' wi' th' wounded soldiers at that big hospital in London, an' Phil's re-enlisted an' been posted to Africa."

"He's a bolder man than I," said Colin ruefully. "I was never so relieved before as I was when my discharge came through."

Archibald Craven had been back and forth to London throughout the war and was there now, having been the first to welcome his son back onto English soil. He was expected back at Misselthwaite the very next day.

"He told me that your leg had recovered nicely, Dickon, but even so I was surprised to see how well," Colin remarked. "I was afraid when I heard about the injury that your surgeon would have decided to save time by just amputating."

"So was I," Dickon laughed, rubbing gently at his leg. "It still troubles me of an evenin' or when the weather's turned about but I get around the farm well enow. An' the limp's not so bad as it was, neither."

Colin nodded, pleased. "How is the farm? Did you decide to increase your dairy herd?"

"We did," said Mary proudly. "We're making a profit on the first ten milkers and have five new cows ready to calve late this spring."

"I should like to see that," mused Colin. "Not only the farm, but the coming year here on the moor."

"I suppose you'll have to travel away soon enough, when you start your studies again," said Mary.

Colin was silent a moment, watching Rose shake white petals from her curls and aware of Mary and Dickon watching him in turn.

"I suppose I shall," he replied at last, with a reluctant smile. "But not this year. Perhaps next year I'll manage to tear myself away and get on with my work but you know I'll always return home when I have time free. I hope you can forgive my flitting and be glad to see me anyway."

Mary rolled her eyes to the heavens in a most unladylike fashion that made Dickon and Rose laugh.

"Colin Craven, we have been waiting for years to be all together again in the Secret Garden. You shall have to try harder than that to make us throw you out. Welcome home, you silly fool."

"Us'll be here whenever tha' comes," added Dickon. "An' tha'll allus be a welcome sight to us, Colin."

"I'm so glad," Colin sighed, then gave a little laugh. "You know, I've missed you both awfully and I - I only wish there were words to say how very glad I am to be home with you."
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