

The Bliss of Solitude

Dorothy Canfield

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THE last time I came from Europe, although I was supposed to be in charge of my pretty young niece, I did not appear on deck until the last day of the voyage. I was tired, and I knew that Puss had plenty of acquaintances on board. She is the soft-eyed, appealing, helpless sort of girl who is always looked after. When I finally ascended to the upper world, I was, therefore, both surprised and remorseful to find her looking troubled and almost distressed.

"Why, Puss, dear," I said, with a pang of compunction for my neglect, "what is the trouble? You haven't been lonely, have you, without me?"

My niece looked at me strangely for a moment, and then said, with the oddest intonation:

"No, Aunt Mary, I haven't been lonely." The last word seemed to have some curious effect on her, for she repeated it. "Lonely? No, not a bit lonely!"

And then she frightened me by breaking out in a hysterical laugh, which ended in an equally hysterical fit of sobbing. I was so alarmed that I shook her roughly.

"Puss, stop, this minute — tell me what has happened!" I said in my sternest tones.

She only began to laugh again, choking and sobbing as she said through her handkerchief: "Well, then, I just will tell you what's the matter — so there!" She sat up, wiping her eyes, and began pouring out a rapid flood of narrative. "You see, Aunt Mary, last May — the 17th of May — Oscar Henderson asked me to marry him — you're the very first person I've told; but I don't care, I had to tell it to somebody! Well, it was the most solemn thing you can imagine — so different from just flirting, you know. I felt that I had come to a turning point in my life." She brought out the serious words with a defiant accent, as if she knew how incongruous they sounded from her child-like mouth. "I told him I couldn't decide such a terribly important thing right off, and he said to take all the time I wanted, for it was a life-and-death matter for him. I wanted to go off, by myself, think it all quietly out, and make up my mind seriously, you know, the way girls do in novels, after days of solitary thought. I never took any stock in that sort of thing when I used to read about it, but then I saw all at once how necessary it is. Why, at home, with father and the boys and little Maggie to look after, and the housekeeping to do, and such strings of callers, and all the girls on the block dropping in every minute, and so many engagements for a month ahead, I didn't have a single instant to myself!

"I tried to get a little leisure there at first, but it was no use. If I went for a walk in Central Park, I was sure to meet somebody I knew, or else one of the boys would want to go with me; and at the house the door-bell and the telephone ring all the time. I wasn't even alone in my own room, for ever since mother's death I've had Maggie there with me, to keep her from missing mother so much. I kept account, finally, and found that for a whole week I wasn't alone, by actual clock-time, quite three-quarters of an hour; and you can't decide the question of your life in that time, especially if it is all cut up into five-minute sections.

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"So I decided I'd go down to our country-house ahead of the family, and have a week there, quite by myself. Father thought it was something awful, my going off that way; but finally he gave in, on condition that one of the boys should take me down on the train. Our old caretaker met me at the station and drove me out to the house, telling me all the news of the village. I went up—stairs to my room, took off my things, and, for a few minutes — for five minutes at least — I was all alone. But when I went down—stairs, there, in front of the library fire, sat Sallie Prentiss — my best chum, you know — with such a pleased look on her face at the lovely surprise she had given me.

"'You old dear!' she said as she kissed me. 'Your father told me about how you felt you had to come here, alone, to put the house in order, and I just ran down to keep you company. We'll have a real good visit and be together every minute, just the way we used to in school.'

"Now, Aunt Mary, what could I do? Of course she stayed, and we were never out of each other's sight, and went back to New York on the same train. That evening I wanted to cry, I felt so discouraged; but I couldn't even do that for fear of scaring Maggie. Then the old life began. I slipped off to the golf-course in Summit, but there I ran into a whole party of old school friends, and had to go around and around the links with them. I went out to visit Cousin Mildred in Farmington, but she hadn't seen me for so long she wouldn't let me out of her sight. Actually, once, when my hair was being shampooed at the hair-dresser's was the only time I had when I wasn't talking or listening to somebody — and I'd like to see the girl who can make up her mind whether she is seriously marriage-in-love with a man while somebody is sluicing cold water over her head!

"I got perfectly distracted, with Oscar waiting, and with me more confused every time I looked at him. At last, one evening, I thought I saw the way out of it all. Sallie Prentiss came over to ask father if I couldn't join a party of girls who had graduated from our school, and were going abroad with one of the teachers. I jumped at the chance! I'd always been crazy to go abroad, but I didn't think of that at all. It only seemed to me a way of getting away from New York and all the hundred million people who wanted me to talk with them; so I teased father till he said I could go.

"Aunt Mary" — she paused with a solemn forefinger upraised — "if you ever want to be by yourself, don't go to Europe with a party of girls. Why, New York was a desert of solitude compared with that party! They're all a little bit older than I, and had been abroad before, and they promised one another — I overheard them, and felt like jumping overboard — that 'they wouldn't let dear little Puss get lonely and homesick.' Sallie said I'd always been with such a lot of people, so many brothers and cousins and aunts and things, let alone friends, that I'd find myself very homesick for them, and the girls must take special pains not to let me mope by myself.

"Well, of course I didn't draw a breath during the voyage that wasn't shared by the others. And when we landed in France, it was just as bad. Miss Hopper wouldn't let one of us so much as stick our noses out alone, because it wasn't proper, and one of the girls always roomed with me. The only time when I wasn't supposed to be ready to talk and be sociable was when I was writing letters. I tried to use that as a pretext, and would sit and just make my pen go without writing anything. But what satisfaction was there in thinking about Oscar, and whether I was in love with him or not, while I had to keep my pen jiggling up and down? I soon gave that up!

"Finally I gave up trying, and put it off until I sailed for the trip home. I knew the girls were going to stay over till a later boat, and I knew you liked to be still and quiet, and I thought I'd have long days of leisure all to myself. When I said good-bye to the girls in Liverpool, they asked me to say honestly if I'd been lonely or homesick, and you should have heard me! I just shouted, 'Well, I should say not!' They looked so pleased — dense things!

"The passenger list scared me a little — so many names on it of people who live right near us, and know me so well; but I thought maybe they'd be sick or something. I never dreamed folks could be so hatefully well! They knew me right away, and they've been laying themselves out to give me a good time. A good time!" She repeated the words with a bitterly ironic accent. "They've just tagged me around every waking minute. I declare, I've been

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ready to jump over the rail. There isn't anywhere you can go to get away from people on a ship. The Mason girls insisted the first night out that I should move my things into their big stateroom on the promenade deck and take the berth that Ella was to have, only she decided to wait over. I begged on my bended knees to be let off, but Mrs. Mason thought it was because I was afraid of being in their way, and she wouldn't listen to me. 'No, indeed, my dear,' she said in that overbearing way she has when she wants to be kind. 'Mary Helston's daughter is like one of my own. You must come and stay with us and be like a member of our family.' Well, I was!" my niece concluded savagely. "This is the first instant I've not had a Mason of some sort hanging around me. That eldest Mason boy, the one that's in Princeton, has been trotting after me all the time his sisters left me alone! And then you come up on deck" — she began to laugh wildly again — "and ask me if I've been lonely. Why, Aunt Mary, here we are actually coming into New York — we'll be there in a few hours. I promised Oscar I'd give him his answer on the pier, and I don't know any more what to say this 23d of September than I did on the 17th of May. How can I think with such an incessant humming and buzzing in my ears every minute? I'm afraid to see Oscar — I don't feel as if I'd really recognize him when I see him, I'm so rattled!"

She paused and I opened my mouth to speak, when a great change came over her pretty, worried face. She gazed down the deck with beaming, star-like eyes, and her lips parted in an incredulous, happy smile. When she spoke, her voice took on an indescribable cadence of amazed delight.

"Why, there he is now!" she exclaimed. "He must have come aboard with the customs officers. Oscar, here I am!"

It must not be supposed that she gave this information to satisfy any curiosity on my part. She was evidently only thinking aloud, for no one could have been more oblivious of my presence than she, as the young man came toward her, his hands outstretched in an eager gesture of welcome. She flung herself into his arms in a passion of content, and these were the astonishing words with which she greeted him, uttered with so heartfelt an accent as to leave no possible doubt of her sincerity:

"Oh, Oscar! I feel so lonely without you!"

Dorothy Canfield