

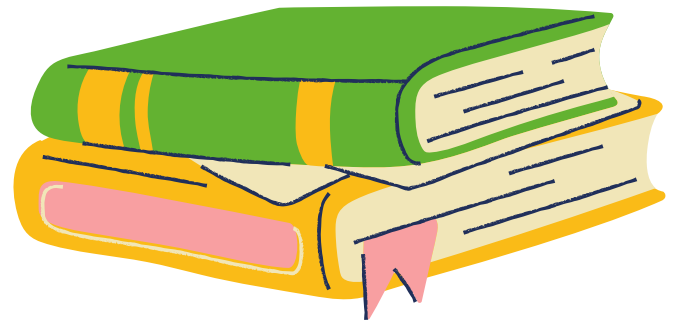


The End of a Quarrel

Let's fall like snow into a short story!

Read and discuss "The End of a Quarrel" by L. M. Montgomery.

This short story comes from the book "Chronicles of Avonlea," a collection of stories by the author of the "Anne of Green Gables" series. The stories are set in fictional Canadian villages all around Prince Edward Island.



After reading each poem, lead a discussion around the included prompt.

Let's begin!

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The End of a Quarrel

Part One

Nancy Rogerson sat down on Louisa Shaw's front doorstep and looked around. Everything was very much the same. The square garden was a charming hodge-podge of fruit and flowers, and goose-berry bushes and tiger lilies. Behind it 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.

"Nothing is much changed, Louisa," she said, propping her chin on her hands. "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 understand Nancy. She had always liked her in their old girlhood days, the ones that now seemed much further away to Louisa.

"You haven't changed much yourself, Nancy," she said, looking admiringly at Nancy's pink-and-white face and 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! 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."

Discuss: How would you describe Nancy?

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Part Two

"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, 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.

Nancy shook her head.

"No, that wouldn't suit me either. I don't want to be married. Look, the sun is just setting. I see he still has 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 sprigs of mint. Perhaps the exertion of leaning over to do it flushed her face. There was more than the Rogerson color in it, anyhow. Louisa thought she understood the meaning of a blush as well as the next one. All the instinct of a matchmaker flamed up in her.

Discuss: Do you think that Peter and Nancy used to be a couple?

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Part Three

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

"That isn't the case with Peter," protested Louisa. "He is a good match, and many women 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 looking afar over the low-lying fields to the white buildings of the Wright farm, glowing rosily in the sunset light when all the rest of Avonlea was in shadows.

"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 some 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 a half dozen children, and vexing my soul over Peter's meals and socks and cows."

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

Discuss: Do you feel bad for Nancy?

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Part Four

"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, candor 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! 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 quarreled. Peter told me I'd have to take him as he was or go without him. I went without him—and ever since I've been wondering if it was the right decision. Now, Louisa, I see the beginning of the plot far down in those placid eyes of yours. Strangle it, dear Louisa. There is no use in 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.

Discuss: Do you think that Louisa is going to try to set up Nancy and Peter?

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Part Five

Nancy sat long on the steps after Louisa had gone—sat until the night came down, darkly and sweetly over the garden. 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. 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. But now, sitting on the old doorstep, 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. "Why doesn't he hire 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, society novel in my trunk."

Discuss: Do you think that Nancy still has feelings for Peter?

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Part Six

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

"I like it much better than meeting people," she said to Louisa, "especially the Avonlea people. All my old chums are gone, or hopelessly married and changed, and the young set who have come up 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. Let me indulge my own whims, Louisa dear. 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.

Discuss: Do you think that Nancy and Peter spoke at church?

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Part Seven

"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."

"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 friendly expression I could assume, but Peter merely sauntered away without a glance in my direction. The honest truth is that it looked to me as if he never thought of it. He was more interested in talking about the hay crop with Oliver Sloane."

"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. But oh, it is so delightful to be foolish after being sensible for twenty years. Well, I'm going picking strawberries this afternoon, Lou. 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."

Discuss: Are you more of an introvert or an extrovert?

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Part Eight

"Nancy wandered far and wide that afternoon. 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.

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 nearby house. She deliberately went up to it intending to peep in at the kitchen window. But, seeing the door wide open, she went to it instead and halted on the step.

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 afternoon—and then come home to THIS!"

An idea suddenly darted into Nancy's brain. "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."

Discuss: What do you think Nancy is going to do?

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Part Nine

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.

"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. 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 center 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."

Nancy paused for a moment and looked around wistfully. She had made the place look cheery and neat and homelike. She felt that tugging at her heart-strings again. Suppose she belonged here, and was waiting for Peter to come home to tea. Suppose—Nancy whirled around and 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.

Discuss: What do you think Peter is going to say?

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Part Ten

"Thank you," he said politely.

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

"Don't have me arrested for trespassing, Peter. I came and looked in at your kitchen out of 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."

Discuss: Do you want Nancy to stay and eat dinner with Peter?

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Part Eleven

Nancy stayed. She sat at the head of Peter's table and poured his tea for 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 humor 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.

Discuss: Did you like this ending for the story?