

By Helen Topping Miller

The Tune Diggers

Ely Could "Dig Up a Tune" for Every Occasion; This Is the Story of a Melody From Beyond the Grave.

A RAW wind pelted over the snow flat to the north, flinging great clotted lumps of snow down from the barn roof and stack.

Lucien Mefford regarded the ragged sky with eyes schooled to the weather. "Big snow coming," he said.

A dog, part collie, part husky, beautifully ruffed, with small, keen eyes and a gait as clean as a woman's hair, turned an exploring muzzle aloft.

"She's coming, Chinook," repeated Lucien. The dog leaped, all the husky in him alert. "Smell it? Smell that old she-wolf howling over the hill? She's got a blizzard in her teeth, pup, and wind in her whiskers. Come along—we better cover that wood in the shed."

With the dog at his heels, Lucien tramped the path, hip high with shoveled snow on either side, to the house. The house was little more than a shanty, half shabs, half tattered paper nailed to planks with great glistening tin discs. On either side of the door the discs had been tacked to form two huge letters, six feet high, on the east an L, on the west an M. Ely had done that. Ely enjoyed a trick like that. He had laughed aloud as he nailed the shining tins into the M which stood for Mefford and the L which means Lucas.

"Ain't everybody can have their initials embroidered on their mansion, Loosh," Ely had chuckled. "Your letter looks like you—swear it does. Sort of square and determined with both feet on the ground. No curlicues or foolishness. Me—I'm sitting down as usual. Feet stuck out in front of me. L looks like me, don't it? Ever think what a lot of devilment the letter L gets into? Laughing and loafing, laziness and liquor—lying and love making?"

That was Ely. Red head and laughing brown eyes. Freckles on his nose like a boy. Coat always flying, cheeks red—too red.

Lucien Mefford stood still in the path and looked at the rust streaks like the mark of tears dripping down from the letter L. Unconsciously he reached a hand behind him and instantly the dog's cold nose found it. They stood, two furry statues in the snowy dusk, motionless, gazing—dreading to enter that lonely house!

On an impulse Lucien plunged out of the path and struck out into the pines, the dog wallowing after. It was very dark under the trees, but Lucien walked straight to the spot under a hemlock, where the snow was a trifle higher, bulging long and sloping.

"Tomorrow I'll fix some kind of shelter out here," mused Lucien aloud. "I don't know why I haven't done it. He hated snow—Ely did. He was always worrying about things freezing and dying in the woods, and the birds not getting anything to eat. Hanging up bones and shelling corn for the rabbits. Quit that, you pup!" Chinook had fallen to digging at the frosted patch of earth, scratching with his nails, whining dismally.

They walked back through their broken track, and Lucien unlocked the door of the house.

One knew the house for a place forsaken swiftly at dawn and occupied briefly and reluctantly at night. One knew, too, that this forlorn state was recent and that the two who shared it were dazed and wretched, helplessly uncertain how to go about altering it.

"This mess would have made Ely sick," Lucien mused aloud. "I know I bought more scouring soap and lye for him than any woman in Mahopac. We've got to clean it up somehow, pup, you and me."

He took off the fur coat and the muffling cap of cony, with earbats, and kicked out of his great felt boots and mackinaw, and instantly stood forth, amazingly slender, amazingly youthful, a lithe steel ramrod of a man with a sober, palish face with dark hair looped across the forehead, with straight, thin, dead black eyebrows. His mouth was sensitive and sparingly moulded over a chin built on an unyielding curve, and as he moved about the room his lips twitched nervously. Always he moved one-sidedly, keeping an averted shoulder toward the empty bed in the corner, always the haunted look lay in his eyes.

The dog came crawling to him, prone, abject, muzzle upturned uneasily, passionate tail beating the floor. Lucien patted the white, narrow head.

"Just you and me, Chinook," he comforted. "Just you and me now."

Like a flash the dog leaped to the door, whining, ears up. The man turned away.

"No use, pup. You can't find him. No use to run yourself footsore all over these woods. You can't find him."

But the dog persisted, yelping, clawing at the planks.

"All right. All right. If you're bound to be a fool, go to it." He opened the door, letting in a gust of wind heavy with stinging snow. Instantly the dog was gone, flashing snow puffs marking his floundering leaps. Lucien watched till the tawny flurry vanished into the pines.

He crossed the room, carrying the lamp and unconsciously tiptoeing, as though he feared to awaken a sleeper. On a shelf a picture was propped against a tobacco can, a very new, very expensive photograph in a heavy brown folder. The face in the picture was that of a girl with heavy, fair hair pinned above her brows, a face unsmiling, but strong and sweet, with mothing eyes and a small firm mouth. The face was repeated a dozen times in small kodak pictures pasted upon the wall above the wooden bed, in a group framed beside a window, in a little water color framed with wall paper.

"She'll get my letter tomorrow. Lige



"Loosh, I got a lady here—"

took it down Saturday and the train likely ran on Tuesday if the snow plows got through. I guess I ought to have written sooner."

Four weeks lay on his conscience, the four weeks during which the letter had been delayed. The ink had frozen and he could never remember to get any more at Mahopac. Then had come the snow and the temporary blocking of the roads. But these he knew were merely excuses, poor things with which he tried to hush his conscience. "The real reason for the delay had been his own anguished inability to write down the truth which must go into the letter. A dozen nights he had sweated in misery over a store tablet ruled in red, trying to write the blunt words. But now the letter was finally gone. She would get it at Little Travols tomorrow.

"First letter I've written in 11 years," thought Lucien.

Ely had been the scribe. Ely's budget of weekly letters had been a famous joke in Mahopac. Ely had "folks." Lucien had nobody. Nobody but Ely.

The girl in the picture returned his gaze steadfastly. Ely's girl—Pamela Brooke. The name had been a song in the slab-and-tar-paper house. Even the dog had learned it from Ely's joyously bubbling lips. "Pamela Brooke," Lucien said it over softly, as he had done sometimes in the barn or in the woods, when the name had been to him a shadow—a troubling, elusive shadow, reluctantly recognized, but coldly tangible—a shadow between himself and Ely.

"Four weeks. My God—four weeks! It's breaking me. I can feel it. And now—a big snow coming!"

Against the foot of the bed stood a guitar. He picked it up, turned the keys idly, plucking at the strings. Strange minor intervals sounded from the untuned instrument, disconnected fragments of melody as mournful and lone as the harping of the winds. Lucien fingered and experimented and then set the thing back against the bed.

"Can't even dig up a tune, Ely." His smile was rueful.

That had been Ely's job, always—digging up a tune. "Dig up a tune, Loosh," he had counseled when the mill broke down in the middle of a pattern or the rabbits came out of the woods and cleaned off the flax, or a parching summer laid their corn low. "Dig up some kind of a tune. She might be worse. Always that way. Ely—even now. 'Dig up a tune, Loosh.' The neatly, almost solemnly made bed seemed to give forth a voice, even weak, but undaunted.

"Can't be done, Ely. Can't be done, boy!" That was the way they began—talking to themselves. "I'm getting it," thought Lucien. "I'm getting loony."

He sat up suddenly. "There's that blame fool dog. Wonder how long before I'll be out baying in the snow?"

Far down the road through the pine slushing he could hear the bay of Chinook, sharp as a shot, even against the trumpeting of the wind.

"He's got something. Somebody caught in the blow. Man—the way Chinook yelps. Lige Walker, maybe—late getting back."

He stacked the stove and opened the drafts so that the pipe glowed. The dog came nearer, his bugling "Hau-oo! Hau-oo!" marking his progress along the woods road as definitely as the whistle of

an engine. Lucien went close to the door and listened.

"Hey, you!" The wind tore down his throat as he shouted.

Chinook came pelting, coat caked with hard-driven snow, leaping with all four feet off the ground.

"What you brought in out of the woods, boy?"

The horse stopped, floundering, a dozen yards from the house. A man called—Lige Walker. Lige Walker driving a pung. Crazy—plain crazy! Lucien scrambled into his coat and dragged the cony cap over his ears.

"Get inside, you—want to freeze to death" he demanded as he shoved the dog inside the door. He strode down the drifting path. "Lige, you damn fool, what you tryin' to do? Kill a good horse?"

Like Walker, the garrulous and profane teamster, did not answer for a moment, then he cleared his throat nervously.

"Loosh, I got a lady here—"

Lucien froze in his tracks. "A lady?" "She's come all the way from Little Travols to see Ely. I just brought her on out here—didn't figure it was goin' to light in and snow so bad. We been on the road since 3 o'clock."

A lady! Pamela Brooke. Four weeks—that was it—the four weeks he had delayed that letter.

Apology was in Lige Walker's voice, and something else—panic. Lige had not told her, had not told Ely's girl who had come all the way from Little Travols.

"Ah—you better come in." Lucien hardly knew his own voice. It had a flat, far-away quality, like that of a man talking in his sleep. The girl climbed down numbly. She was bundled to shapelessness in many coats. Lucien recognized the old moth-eaten beaver belonging to the station agent at Mahopac as the outer covering.

"I'm stiff," she said in an even, melodious voice. "Ely is better?"

Lucien flamed with hot agony. It had been hard enough to write it down—but this—

He began feebly. "Ely—Ely—"

Lige Walker eagerly assisted. "Yes'm. Ely—now Ely—"

They moved toward the house. "He is better?" insisted the girl.

Lucien could not speak. He opened the door. And just then the gust blew out the light, but even as the flame died he saw her face, knew that she had noted that solemnly empty bed.

She clutched the door posts on either side, her hands lost in great fur gloves.

"Ely is dead?"

Lucien nodded, the agony in his eyes only faintly less than her own.

"I wrote you a letter—but the snow has been so bad. The trains weren't running—there wasn't any mail—"

"No," she repeated dully, "there wasn't any mail."

Lige Walker broke in, eager to smooth the sharp angles of the situation. "I could 'a' told you down yonder at Mahopac, ma'am. I could 'a' told you Ely was gone. But I thought mebbe Loosh would ruther break the news himself. Been four weeks now, ain't it, Loosh, since Ely was took? That's it—four weeks. Just 'fore the big snow come, I recollect—cold spell come along and froze the ground six foot deep. Loosh certainly took care of Ely mighty grand, ma'am. He was a friend

and a father to that boy. Some of us come out and set up long to'rd's last, but Loosh never left him a minute. Held his head when his breath got short—and Ely he says—"

"My God, Lige—shut up!" This from Lucien, who was white with anguish.

The girl had sunk into a chair, where she huddled, a shapeless bundle of fur, with a fair tress of hair straying out and two eyes burning like blue flames in a face as white as death. She stared straight in front of her while the two men looked on miserably.

"I knew," she said dully, after a little. "All the way up—somehow—I knew. After the letters stopped coming—I knew. But I kept on hoping—you can't stop hoping, even when you feel it's no use. Thank you for being kind to him."

Lucien's straight brows drew down. "Kind to him?" he repeated. "Kind to Ely?"

"I guess you don't know about Loosh and Ely, ma'am," volunteered Lige Walker. "They been like brothers—twin brothers, you might say, ever since they come up here to this piece of timber. I guess if you'd seen Loosh standing there when he was fillin' up the—"

"Lige!" warned Lucien sharply. He turned to the girl. "Nobody loved Ely better than I did," he said. "We shared everything, Miss Brooke. He was all I had—"

"And you let him die!" A desolate agony was in her voice, but to Lucien Mefford's ears, made too keen by grief and pride and solitude, the tremor of her words was scorn, the flick of a flash, the flash of blue, bitter fire. He stiffened.

"Good God!"

He drew back a step, shivering a little, his black brows bent. Then he inclined his head stiffly.

"This house is yours, Miss Brooke. It is yours as it was Ely's. I am sorry for what has happened—but it cannot be helped. Please make yourself comfortable. We better see about your horse, Lige."

In the stable Lige Walker relieved his mind. "Ely woulda played hell marrin' that girl, now wouldn't he? Buckin' a half section of raw stump land with a white-fingered woman like that—and him chugin' up his guts half the time."

"What the devil did you bring her up here for—and not tell her?"

"Gosh, how could I tell her—her lookin' through me that way she's got, like I was a cold draft out of the north or something equally insignificant? Callin' me 'my good man,' orderin' me to drive her to Ely Lucas' place immediately. Where'd Ely pick up an icebreg like her?"

"Ely came out of the provinces after the war. His people had money—lost most of it, I guess."

"Yeah—but Ely didn't give you a mouthful of high and mighty talk. If he wanted anything he'd yell out: 'Hi, you old son of a gun!—same as anybody. She was mighty look back when I told her it was 14 miles up here on shoes, and the roads all blowed to hell with drifts higher than the devil can spit. Did you know Ely was fixin' to get married?"

"Yes, he told me." Lucien thought with a dull pang of the times that Ely had tried to tell him; tried to plan the future, dream about his boyish dreams of Pamela Brooke. "She'll make this shack a home, Loosh. And you'll be a brother to both of us." Always Lucien's own grudging silences had chilled Ely's con-

fidences. Always the shadow had fallen. The memory hurt.

"What you goin' to do with her, Loosh?"

"She can have what was Ely's. I guess he would have wanted her to have it."

"I guess Ely hadn't told her much about you. She got a notion you was some kind of a hired hand—somebody Ely's befriended and helped out. She was took back when I told her you owned this half section."

"The land was mine, but the money was Ely's. Half of everything was his—half of everything." Lucien's voice held a dead level. But into his soul a barb had been thrust, rending, poisoning. In every fiber he was loyal to Ely, but doubt began to work like a toxin, brewing swift, insidious decay. He tramped out of the barn and wallowed through the welter of the blizzard to the drifted planks beneath the hemlock. There he leaned his head against the sadly singing tree and let wretchedness possess him. This was a new pain—jealousy—and doubt.

"You're a fool!" he scoffed at himself. "You're about as romantic as a crosscut saw!"

But in the hollow core of his heart, in that aching, empty place which had been Ely's, a wall persisted. If he, Lucien, had owned a girl what could he have written to her that would not have been colored with Ely, red and brown and laughing with Ely? Had he mattered so little, then, in the boy's life?

"Loosh, you're a damn fool," he scorned. "You're acting like a fool woman. He was all you had—and you were only a little part of what he had—and wanting to be all!"

It was always that way. Out of every two there must be one who loves deepest, gives most. He walked back to the house, beating against the wind.

Within Pamela Brooke still sat beside the stove. She had not taken off her wraps.

"The big snow is here, Miss Brooke," Lucien told her. "You may have to stay for some time. You will have this room. Lige and I will bunk in the lean-to."

On the fourth day Lige tightened his snowshoes relentlessly. "I got to get back to my woman," he argued. "Mebbe I can get old Charlie Fishtall's squaw to shoe down here and chaperon you, Loosh—but I ain't going to stay another day. The crust holds—and it's likely to thaw and rot hell out of everything tomorrow. Old Mandy Fishtall's a right good cook, too, if you can keep her from spittin' on the griddle. That's what a feller needs in this country, a good fat squaw that can swing an ax and butcher a beef and make good mash whisky. Ain't no place for queens to queen it. That gal ought to go back to London and board in Buckingham palace. It'll be April 'fore you can take her out in a pung. Wouldn't be so dumberous for you if she was like some women—but a fish-blooded, stony-faced critter like her—"

"You watch your like, Lige! She belongs to Ely!"

"All right. Don't get hot about it."

When Lige had floundered away, Lucien lingered about the barn till the swift, steely dark fell. Reluctantly he tramped to the door, between the dogged M and the laughing L. Within was warmth and light—to which men have for ages returned with gladness. But Lucien felt an alien, defensive aloofness. He opened the door reluctantly. He had composed a formal speech in the barn and he began it, doggedly, but Pamela Brooke cut him short.

"How long will this snow last, Mr. Mefford?" she asked quietly.

"This is January. We may have a thaw—and then the roads may be closed till April."

"Very well." She stepped from behind the table and lifted the coffee pot from the stove. "We will have supper now. It is ready."

"It is not necessary for you to cook."

"I shall do my part." He saw with amazement that she had dressed herself in some of Ely's clothes—an old pair of corduroy knickerbockers, a flannel shirt, army puttees and a sweater.

Lucien braced himself. "I may as well tell you. I am not pleasant to live with, like Ely. I can't talk—or sing or laugh—or dig up a tune like he could. I'm sorry—I'll try to make things as easy for you as I can. I've sent for an Indian woman. She ought to get down tomorrow."

Strange days—all alike as so many black crows sulking by. Icy, silent days, made of glaring snowblind mornings, pale frozen noons and bitter nights. The place about the house swayed and cracked like shot. A rabbit crept under the hemlock and died, rigidly, and Lucien hid it beneath a drift before he remembered that it no longer mattered to Ely how many little creatures froze and died in the woods.

Old Charlie Fishtall's squaw did not come. The cold settled deeper, merciless. The girl was still, self-sufficient, proud. They moved about the house like two formal shadows, and sat at the red covered table with the warmth of the lamp between them. Lucien's eyes held doggedly upon his plate. Pamela Brooke's round chin lifted, her look level and undaunted.

A dumb devil brooded in Lucien's breast, sulky and sour, which he fostered, since by the unlearned notions it brewed it stole strange, troubling thoughts which crept into his brain—slew them almost before they were born.

The thing which was happening to Lucien was infernal, but, not knowing this, he fought it with moods and surly silences and smolderings of temper until at times lightning flashed in Pamela Brooke's eyes and her lips parted in anger before her cool inhibitions prevailed.

"I hate you!" she said to him one lowering morning. "I wonder if you know how utterly intolerable you are?"

"Thank you." His tone held an even scorn. "I know it very well."

"You seem to boast. Is it such an accomplishment to be a beast?"

"There are times when it is an accomplishment to be a beast." And Lucien, arching with a curious and furtive be-

wilderment, hardly knew how truly he spoke.

The thaw came with the waning of the moon. A sinister, rotting mildness undermined the snow heaps, making the paths rivers and the woods a quagmire where even the rabbits sank cozily, leaving chill pools of black water in their tracks.

"If it freezes it's all right," said Lucien. But it did not freeze. Instead came fresh snow, loose and soft and clinging, lying on every twig and stem like a covering of baby fur. Lucien tramped down to the mill to look at the roof, returning at dark. He found an empty house, cold and dark. Pamela Brooke was gone.

As he followed the wide, awkward track of Ely's old snowshoes Lucien tried not to think. Out of the curious mire of his thoughts he chose one and clung to it because it was loyal and stupid and therefore safe. She was Ely's. He must bring her back because she was Ely's. Not for a white throat or soft hands or eyes that mothered and then somehow lighted a lamp and closed a shutter in his face. For Ely.

He found her a hundred yards from the house, thigh deep in a sodden drift, chilled and soaked, but undismayed.

"I find you are right," she said coolly. "I did not last a quarter of a mile. If you'll take these off my feet I think I can get out myself."

"Be still," ordered Lucien suddenly, his brows thunderous. "Take hold of my shoulders."

He gave her mustard tea and rather bad whisky when they returned to the house. "I apologize for everything," he said with difficulty. "Don't leave this house again."

She smiled faintly for the first time since she had come from Little Travols. "He told me you carried Ely—that swearing man. I didn't believe it then, but I do now."

"I carried him, at the last—alone."

"Will you show me some time—where—"

"When the snow melts."

"Ah, but I shall be gone then."

At midnight came rain, slicing down the roof, trickling in a black rill beneath the door. Lucien moved into the upper bunk in the lean-to, and set his boots high off the earthen floor. It was then that he heard a call. For an instant he thought it was Ely calling again—"Loosh! Loosh!"

Then he knew that it was Pamela Brooke. He leaped down from the bunk, snatching on his outer clothes. In the flicker from the stove he saw her lying, very bright-eyed, her hair tumbled, flame in her cheeks.

"Something seems to be wrong here." She wore a brave and ghastly shadow of a smile.

Lucien counted the wiry leap of her pulse, marked the rasp of her breathing. Instantly it seemed to him that the dreary weeks of winter were wiped away like frost on a pane, that this was Ely lying here grumbling at the pain in his gassed lung. He knew what to do. All the clutter of medicines, so futile with Ely, were still on the shelf. He brought them all out, mended the fire, opened the window wide.

"Cover your ears," he counseled. "We'll fight this with oxygen."

At dawn she was coughing with every breath, writhing a little with pain, biting her lips. Lucien made hot coffee and held her while she drank it, his arm thrilling under her shoulders. The clean part of her bright hair lay very near to his lips, and before he knew scarcely what he did a tingling madness fired him and he pressed his mouth hard against the soft gold of it. And at that moment Pamela Brooke lifted her eyes and looked into his face. What he saw in that look sent Lucien stumbling out to the hemlock tree, blind with a curious, monastic self-condemnation. For the first time he owned to himself the sin of his own soul. He was a thief—coveting what was Ely's. And because he had seen a melting of the scorn in Pamela Brooke's eyes he knew what manner of a thief he was.

"God knows, Ely," he declared to the blackened, rain-washed mound, "I didn't want it to happen. God knows that." He fought the thing out in the dragging, bitter hours that passed, fought it first with pretense. "This is Ely," he said to himself when Pamela Brooke burned with fever and fought for breath and he held her upright all night, with the old mackinaw of Ely's pinned under her chin. "This is Ely, sick. I've got to take care of Ely." He fought it with the old dumb stubbornness until the cruelty of it made him sick. Fever had made Pamela a babbling. "Talk to me, Loosh," she pleaded constantly. "Tell me about—hib."

And so Lucien told over and over the anguished story of those two months after the gripe had found the weakened tissue in Ely's gassed lung. Every word, every whisper of Ely's she wanted, and Lucien chanted them as a tortured penitent might say a miserere, searching for absolution and finding it nowhere. But when the fever left her and she grew stronger he gave it up. He had been built four-square, with both feet on the ground. Deception was not in him. He could not act, could not pretend. He came in from the mill and flung off his coat, standing forth very lithe and slender and stern, with his black brows drawn down.

"The road is open," he said to Pamela Brooke. "In a week or two—as soon as you are strong enough—I'll take you down to Little Travols. They found old Charlie Fishtall's squaw under a drift—she'd been frozen a long time, I guess. And you can't stay here—I guess you know—I care—too much."

She was still. Her eyes looked at him, mothered him, lighted a lamp, and—so Lucien dared to believe—did not draw down a baffling shutter to bar him out. Her lips grew gentle.

"But first," she said after a little, "you'll show me—where—"

The snow was gone when at last he