

The Lucky Lawrences

... By Kathleen Norris ...

Copyright by Kathleen Norris

WNU Service

SYNOPSIS

The luck that had brought the Boston Lawrences to California just at the beginning of the gold rush seems to have deserted the present generation. From a 4,000-acre ranch, their holdings have shrunk to a small farm and the old family home in Clippersville. Phil, twenty-five, is in the iron works. Sam and seventeen-year-old Ariel are in school. Gail in the public library and Edith in the book department of Clippersville's largest store. Young Van Murchison, whose family owns a chain of flour mills, returns from Yale. He and Gail had been very close friends before he went away to college. Dick Stebbins, Phil's best friend, has the run of the house. Ariel is in the habit of sneaking out of the house at night for joy rides.

CHAPTER II—Continued

But there had been no disturbance upstairs, and after an interminable silence Ariel had opened the door again, noiselessly this time, and had slipped down through the overgrown garden, and into the deep green-black shadows at the gate. In a sky of clear dark blue millions of stars had been twinkling, and in the side lane, deeply rutted from winter rains, there had been two other stars, the watchful lamps of a shining low open car.

Ariel knew Buddy Raisch very slightly, but she knew, as all the town knew, that he was an overgrown big boy who had been in Stanford university for about three years and was still a sophomore. She knew what the scent of Buddy's breath signified, too. But she had settled in beside the driver with a little gasp of satisfaction and excitement.

Buddy had whispered, "Lissen, we're only going down the road a ways, and come back."

"That suits me," Ariel had said, unperturbed.

"You're a good little sport," Buddy had told her. They were out of hearing of the Lawrence house now, and he could move faster. He had stepped on the gas, and the car had shot like a projectile into the starry night.

CHAPTER III

THE next day, to all appearances, was like all the other Friday mornings of the year. Sam and Phil got away first of all, leaving a litter of coffee and cold toast on the kitchen table. Gail rushed down next, with her rich hair unwontedly flat and trim, and a kitchen apron replacing the office dress she too often wore into the kitchen.

Then Ariel, looking tired and seeming nervous, came down in a terrible hurry, as usual. As soon as she had departed for school Gail and Edith agreed that she had cried herself to sleep the night before.

"She's such a baby!" Edith said lovingly. Gail made no answer; her patient, level gaze went to far spaces. She mentally wrote and rewrote a suitably casual, yet cordial note of thanks to the sender of the roses.

She stopped at Muller's on her way downtown and bought a box of fine notepaper. The note itself was written at the library a few minutes later.

At the end of the note she added: "If you can, come and have supper with us very informally—oh, so very informally!—on Sunday."

She thought of this, all day long. "Come and have supper with us informally—oh, so informally!"

But at three o'clock she had something else of which to think, for the telephone in the library rang suddenly, and the voice on the other end demanded Miss Lawrence.

It was Van, cheerful and friend-

ly. What time was he to come to supper, and why put it off until Sunday? This was Friday.

"What the heck are you doing tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow's my Saturday at the library, until nine o'clock."

Gail could hardly bear the happy beating of her own heart as she hung up the receiver. She thought she would suffocate with sheer felicity.

She went home on winged feet, stopping to pick up Edith, to buy the dotted Swiss dress. Gail hesitated long over colors, finally deciding on a deep purple. It would be practical, and that shade was always lovely with the dull gold of the Lawrence hair.

This was one of their happy evenings. They strolled home through the shabby streets, admiring gardens, stopping at shop windows, their hands linked, their voices murmuring along together with the easiness of lifetime intimacy.

"Should you be glad if he was in love with you, Gail?"

"Oh, heavens, I've only seen him once in five years!"

"No, but I mean—should you?"

Gail considered. "Yes, I think I would."

"I don't know that I want you to marry and go away from Clippersville, Sis."

"It mightn't mean that," Gail broke into laughter. "Aren't we idiots! To have it all settled but the wedding day!"

"Yes, but it sometimes comes as suddenly as that, Gail."

That night, while Edith sewed and Ariel played idly with pen and paper, Gail played solitaire. It had been her custom to do this ever since her father's death.

As she played she kept up a sort of monologue. Sometimes it was in the form of an argument, a dissertation. Often it was odd bits of poetry, or remembered scenes from Dickens or Poe or Stevenson, recalled word for word; most often of all it was improvised, in the form of a story or of biography.

It was all heartening and happy, and especially wonderful to have the evening end with them all wandering upstairs at once, lights out below, every one at home, safe and united. Gail saw the roses, still bright and fresh, in her room, and sat on the edge of her bed with one shoe on and the other in her hand, for a long, long time, dreaming. It was not imagination then? Van Murchison had sent her those roses. He was coming to supper night after next.

Saturdays and Wednesdays, every other month, Gail stayed at the library until it closed at nine o'clock. On these days Edith always came down at about six with a big sandwich and an apple, and Gail and she repaired to the dressing room where Gail devoured the collation, powdered her nose, exchanged the news of the day with her sister, all in ten minutes' time, and returned to the desk refreshed.

Alternate months she went home at noon on Saturdays and Wednesdays, but was on duty all day Sunday, opening the library at ten o'clock and remaining at the desk until five. Gail hated the Sunday duty, but the Saturday nights were for some mysterious reason eternally exciting. There was always a good deal of noise and traffic downtown, the theaters were packed, the streets gaily lighted, and the quiet, shadowy library seemed like a coign of vantage from which she watched the world.

On the particular Saturday evening that followed his arrival in Clippersville Van Murchison came in. Gail was busily stamping and dating, opening and shutting the covers of books, when a voice in the

line asked anxiously:

"Have you a good book about cockroaches?"

She looked up on a wild rush of delight, and there he was, in dinner clothes, with a light overcoat on, but bareheaded.

"Oh, hello," she smiled. "D'you want a book?"

"Yes, I seem to need one. How about this one?"

She grinned at "Little Susy's Cousin Prudy."

"I think that would be about your number."

"I'll bet it's racy! I'll bet there's considerable matter that couldn't go through the mails, in this book!"

"Oh, sh-sh-sh!" For they were both bubbling audibly with suppressed laughter.

"Well," said Van, "I'm going up to the Speedwells' for dinner."

"Who are they?"

"Well—Corona Barchi married a Spence, see? And one of the Spence girls married a Speedwell, see?"

"Oh—Burlingame?"

"Burlingame. And gosh, how I hate it!"

"You do?"

"Oh, Lord, yes!"

He regarded her curiously.

"D'you mean to say you'd like it?"

Gail composedly stamped a returned book, smiled at a faded woman with bare gray hair and a wilted voile dress, and returned to the conversation.

"I imagine I would," she said.

"You don't go to dinners?"

"I haven't much chance."

"What'll you take to go to this one? I could do that—I could do what you're doing. Go in my place."

"Nonsense!" She laughed and shook her head. Van went away, leaving her with a feeling of contentment and completeness, a certain thrilled sense of being alive, of being pleased with everything.

Later, reading in bed, she told Edith Van had come in to see her.

"Oh, Gail," exclaimed Edith, "that's significant!"

"Well . . ." She wouldn't quite admit it. But she drifted off to sleep on the rosiest sea of hope and joy that ever a woman knows.

Van came to supper the next night, and everything was happy, unpretentious, and natural. The kitchen was just what a kitchen should be, when he arrived, a social



He Was Now Sitting on the Steps of the Cass Shanty.

place in which three pretty girls were pleasantly busy and three men were trying to make themselves useful. Gail's biscuits were browned to a turn, and the famous Lawrence cheese-and-egg dish turned out perfectly.

They sat about the table until eight o'clock, and then Phil and Dick, after duly carrying handfuls of dishes into the kitchen, departed. Ariel began at the kitchen table her composition, and Edith generously forced Gail and Van away.

"No, please—it's nothing. I'll leave them all until morning anyway!" protested Edith. "You were

going somewhere—go on!"

"We were just going for a run. We can perfectly well get these out of the way," Gail argued. But she did not insist. Somehow the dishes and the kitchen did look greasy and dull tonight; a little domestic drudgery was all right, but it would not do to disgust Van with too much of it.

She caught up a coat, and she and Van went out in the dusk to his roadster and rolled smoothly away from dingy Clippersville up into the fragrant hills.

"How about Old Aunt Mary's?"

"What sort of a place is it? I've never been there."

"Oh, highly respectable!"

They went, accordingly, to Old Aunt Mary's, a low wooden shack on the Peninsula highway, with a greasy dance floor in the center, and greasy bare tables all about it.

But the music was good, and the floor good, and the whole scene so novel to Gail that she found it delightful. She and Van talked flipantly and with much laughter, as young persons who are just making each other's acquaintance usually do. Van even laughed when a chance question from Gail brought the conversation about to his own condition.

"But ought you be up so late? Oughtn't you be in bed, drinking acidophilus milk or something?" Gail demanded as the clock's hands moved to half-past nine.

"My dear child, there's no more the matter with my lungs than with yours!"

"There's—what?" Gail demanded blankly.

"I haven't got con," Van reiterated. "I flunked out of college at Easter, that was all! Or no," he remembered conscientiously, "I did have a heavy chest cold, coughing, all that. That was a part of it, you see? I had to stay home a week at Christmas, and what not—"

In his incorrigibly gay manner he finished the sentence with a shrug.

"You're not sick at all!" Gail said, in so disappointed a tone that they laughed outright.

They sat on, watching the dancers. The music droned on, the saxophone whining above the other instruments; the crowd was thinning now, some of the tables were empty.

When the clock struck ten Gail said she must go home. Van made no protest; he seemed tired, too, willing to say good-night.

They were laughing again, driving home in the starlight. But at the Lawrence gate Gail was conscious that somehow their parting was going to be a little stiff and flat. Some minutes before they arrived she began to dread it. It would be stiff. It would lay a heavy bar upon the frothy gaiety of the evening.

But she could not save herself. She could not be suddenly flirtatious—amorous. She did not know how. Did he expect her to let him kiss her good-night? Did he ever want to kiss her? She did not know.

Suddenly she felt like an innocent, awkward little girl. A sense of helplessness smote her. This happy evening must end on a high note, she must be equal to it. She must not say good-night like Edith saying good-night to one of the girls from the store—like a nice old lady saying good-night to a dear old friend.

But somehow she could not carry it. The wild thought of leaning above him for a second, when she moved to leave the car, and of putting a butterfly kiss on his bare head, crossed her flurried mind. But that would be idiotic—that was not the way girls kissed boys nowadays. They sank against the boys, their bodies limp, their painted mouths plastered against the boys' mouths. Such a girl at this moment would have her head on Van's shoulder.

While she confusedly considered it, they had reached the gate and she was out of the car, Van making no movement to get down.

"Van, I've had a perfectly deli-

cious time."

He moved the gas control idly to and fro on the wheel.

"Sure, it was fun."

His own voice seemed flat. Gail tried desperately for the hilarity of the earlier evening.

"As for your consumption, I shan't get over that for a long time!"

"My what?" he asked dully.

"Your fake consumption."

It was no use. Perhaps they were both too tired for talk, Gail thought.

A pause, brief, but much too long.



"I Don't Believe He's So Crazy About Lily Cass."

Then Gail said, "Well, good-night! See you soon?"

"Oh, sure!" he said, and "Good-night!" and he was gone into the dark.

The girl made faces at herself as she went up the steps; she was conscious of a shamed sort of feeling of anti-climax. It was as if she had sold her birthright, somehow.

Actually, she had not compromised; there had not been a word or a glance all evening that might not have been exchanged by the most decorous of friends. But that was part of the trouble!

Or else she was tired; maybe that was it. Edith came out from her doorway like an angel, cool and fragrant from a bath. She welcomed Gail as if from the wars.

"Darling, did you have a good time?"

"It was heavenly. We drove around for awhile, and then we went down to Old Aunt Mary's."

"Gail Lawrence! Was it wild? On Sunday night!"

"No, it was as calm as a mill pond. There were two policemen there, and a lot of nice college boys. Some of the girls looked rather—well, ordinary; but it was very quiet. Nothing rough."

"I thought it was the limit!" said the usually elegant Edith.

"It didn't seem to be."

"I wonder if you'd know the limit if you saw it, Gail," the younger sister said, with a sophisticated, fond smile.

"Oh, Edith, get off your foot!" Gail wanted to say. But she could not be mean to Edith tonight, when Edith had finished up the dishes, and stayed at home. So she smiled, too, and went on with her undressing. Her mood began to change; everything was all right.

"How long was Phil gone?"

"Oh, not long. 'Bout an hour."

"He didn't—" Gail paused.

"No, he didn't have time to see anybody. I don't believe he's so crazy about Lily Cass," Edith opined.

"He and Dick had to go over to the Iron Works, didn't they?"

"Yes. And, by the way, Dick's sleeping here, because he and Phil want to get up at five and go over and see an installation—or something—at Milpitas. They're going in Dick's car."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)