

The LUCKY LAWRENCES

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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 Va 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. Van has supper with the Lawrences, dancing later with Gail at a roadhouse. She feels she is making no progress in gaining his affections, regretfully concluding she is not his "type of girl."

CHAPTER III—Continued

—5—

"Dick's car! Since when has he—"

"Isn't it killing! It's quite decent-looking, too. You know old Benstein, of the second-hand place down near the hill?"

"I know the place. Yes, and I kind of know the old man, too."

"Well, two cars collided out on the highway near there about three months ago, it seems, and old Benstein bought them—they were wrecks—for about fifteen dollars apiece. So he sent for Dick, it seems, and told him if he'd put the touring car in order he could have the roadster. Dick did Benstein's first, and he's been putting over his own for about six weeks. So last night he drove it in from Stanislaus, and put it in Joe Foster's garage, and Joe looked it over, and he says it's perfect, and he offered Dick two hundred dollars for it."

"Dick's so darn admirable," Gail said indifferently, opening her book, "that you expect him to break out rail splitting 'most any minute! I can just see him sweating over politics some day, and being on the losing side every time! 'Honest Dick Stebbins for governor! But I like old Dick!'"

"Oh, so do I," the younger sister agreed eagerly.

She went away, and Gail lay musing, her open book in her hands. The memory of her parting with Van, in the deep black night gloom at the gate, kept returning to buzz about her like a midge, and spoil all the other recollections.

"Why is it," Gail asked herself savagely, "that I can get along so beautifully with girls, and act like such a fool with boys? If he'd been a girl, tonight, I would have gone on talking, laughing, putting off coming into the house. I would have kept saying, 'Listen, I have to go in.'"

"Oh, well, what difference does it make! We'll all be dead in a hundred years!"

And so restlessly off to sleep, oddly baffled and dissatisfied after this marvelous day on which the dream had come true.

The next day she and Edith had real trouble to think about and to discuss as they walked to work.

In the first place, Sam had told them at breakfast that he, Sam, had been driving some boy's car without a license and had been fined fifteen dollars by Judge Gates.

"Oh, Phil paid it," Sam had said in his confident, little brotherly manner.

"How could Phil pay it?"

"Oh, he worked overtime all last month, you know. He had something coming to him."

"You oughtn't to have done it, Sam. You're such a fool!" the older sister said reproachfully, affectionately. She repeated the phrase to

Phil, when he came in late to report his expedition with Dick.

"You can't say that, Gail. It's natural for a kid to want to drive a car. Most kids Sam's age," Phil had reminded her temperately, "have their own cars."

So reasonable, so generous, such a rock of strength about a thing like this, it had been staggering to his sisters to have him add, with a little self-consciousness:

"I was thinking, when we were having Dick and Van Murchison to supper last night, why not ask Lily Wibser some time? She's an awfully sweet little thing—she's had an awfully rough deal."

Edith had felt every fiber of her being stiffen; Gail's hands had begun to tremble as she had said pleasantly, confusedly:

"Well, of course—if she'd like it, Phil."

"Why shouldn't she like it?" Phil had asked in a level, challenging voice.

"No reason why! Except—hasn't she rather young children?"

"Yep. She has three kids." Phil had been refilling his coffee cup.

"I don't think she'd come!" Gail had said, uncomfortable but determined.

"You might try!" Phil's voice had become level, composed. He had returned to his newspaper with no further reference to the subject.

His sisters, in utter consternation, had spoken since of little else.

"She's simply mesmerized him, that's all! It's just too horrible!"

"Gail, we couldn't ask her to the house!"

"I don't think we could."

They parted on the dubious note, deeply worried, as they had been worried so many, many times before about Sam, Ariel, Phil, in turn, about family finances, social complications.

"Just when I was—sort of—looking forward to Sunday-night suppers," Gail offered in parting, when they came to the Calle.

"Yes, I know!" Edith answered quickly.

"What on earth can we do, Edith, if Phil says anything more?"

"Well, have her, I suppose!"

"But she's simply—she's simply not respectable!"

"I know."

"I mean, everyone knows what those Wibers are, and the Cass boys are just gangsters!"

"I know," Edith conceded again anxiously.

They went their ways. Gail's thoughts went to Van, however, at intervals during that day and the next day. She began the girl's calendar: "It's only one full day since I saw him—it's only two full days—it's only the morning of the third day."

CHAPTER IV

IT BEGAN to seem like a dream to her that he and she had been laughing over the library counter last Saturday night, and that he had come to supper with the Lawrences, and that she had gone down the highway, beyond Dumbarton bridge, to Old Aunt Mary's for a late supper and dancing.

Edith asked, delicately, lightly, if there had been any telephoning during the day, and Gail became expert in careless replies.

And then quietly, indifferently, "Oh, yes! Van Murchison was in. It seems Mrs. Chipp is having a house party down at their place in the Santa Cruz mountains a week from this week-end, and she wants me to go!"

"What!" Edith ejaculated, incredulous. "Oh, Gail, aren't you excited?"

Gail laughed a little protestingly.

"But yes I am," she admitted honestly, "terribly excited! But of course they only want me because Van does. He probably asked his aunt to ask me!"

"Oh, for heaven's sake!" Ariel said impatiently and unexpectedly, in her husky tones. "For heaven's sake, what would you want her to ask you for—because mamma was a church member? You know very well you're not an intimate friend of hers. Why should she ask you? I'd much rather go a place because a boy wanted me than because his mother did!"

And laughing helplessly and a little shocked, Edith and Gail admitted that there was something in this view.

"I have everything," Gail said. "I have my blue velvet; I have my Christmas slippers; I have my white hat. I'll do my old linen up myself! It'll be fine for roughing—walking or anything. And I'll wash my sweater!"

"Did she come in, Gail, or did she write a note?"

An instant chill. Then Gail said casually, "Neither, my dear. She sent a message by Van."

There was a silence. Edith stood distressed and disappointed in the center of the kitchen. Ariel looked up alertly from her book. Gail went on busily with her cooking.

"Well, you won't think of accepting unless she does write, Gail?"

"My dear Edith, we are living in the Twentieth century, not in the good old days of Pamela and Evelina."

"Well, I'm very much surprised at you!" Edith said, trembling. Dinner was served in a sulphurous silence.

Phil, hungry, grumpy, and tired, noted at once that something was wrong, and his first question brought the whole thing down upon him in an avalanche.

"Phil, isn't it ridiculous in this day and generation to expect a person to send you an engraved invitation?"

"I didn't say an engraved invitation!"

"Because, I mean, everything's done so informally now, and people telephone invitations to weddings!"

"No, but listen, Phil! We've always held up our heads, and been known as girls who weren't cheap, who wouldn't jazz—haven't we, Phil? It's all we have—it's us," Edith, her eyes suddenly wet with tears, went on shakily.

Philip had championed Gail all her life, and she adored him as her unfailing authority. It was therefore like a blow in her face to have him say, judicially, over his pipe:

"I'm not so sure but what Edie's right, Gail. You aren't sure that Van Murchison—he's an awfully nice kid, and he's most amusing and all that, and he means well enough—but you aren't sure that this kid ever spoke to his aunt at all. How do you know?"

"Oh, listen, listen!" Gail said, managing a laugh, but inwardly seething with fury. "He didn't ask me to go to China! He asked me to go for two nights to Los Gatos—and I'm going! That's all there is to it!"

There was a full minute of dead silence during which her angry voice hung in the air. Then Ariel expelled a long, sighing breath, and Phil shrugged philosophically.

"You're of age," he said briefly.

Phil went out without another glance or words for his favorite sister. When Gail and Ariel chanced to be for a minute alone in the kitchen, Ariel seized the opportunity to say eagerly:

"Stick it out, Gail! If every one felt the way Edith does, no one

would have any fun at all! We'd all be old maids!"

Ariel's sympathy was very sweet. But it did not have the value of Edith's approval. On the contrary, there was something disturbing in this suggestion of a general mutiny against the Lawrence way of doing things.

Ariel had arranged with a boy friend that he should call her on the telephone at eight o'clock, and she should answer his call with a pleasant, dutiful "Oh, yes, Miss Hemmet?" Miss Hemmet was her mathematics teacher. She would then say to Gail, "Gail, I'm going over to Miss Hemmet's, and then I'm going to meet the crowd at the corner and go down to Sticky Dobbins' for some ice cream. I asked Phil, and he said, 'All right.'"

It was a risky game she was playing, but after all it was a game. Edith was playing no game at all, and Gail was demonstrating more forcefully every instant how little she knew of the rules.

The telephone rang.

"Take it, freshman!" Gail said to her younger sister. But Ariel



"What's the Excitement?"

needed no prompting; she was already halfway to the hall.

"Oh, thank you, Miss Hemmet. I will!" her sisters heard her say. She came back to her work with her transparent skin exquisitely flushed, and her strange eyes alight. "Gail, Miss Hemmet wants me to come over. And Phil said we could go to Dobbins' afterward."

"Oh, that's all right. Go ahead!" Gail said absently. Ariel faded from sight silently, was gone.

Later Dick Stebbins looked in at the kitchen door.

"Phil's gone," Gail said.

"I'll follow him up." But Dick came in instead. Gail noiselessly escaped into the dining room and secured her little playing cards. She came back to the kitchen table and began to play.

"Gail's going down to the Chipp place in Los Gatos next week-end," Edith said, out of a silence.

"Sat so?" Dick asked, looking up.

"Um-hum," Gail affirmed, nodding. She was grateful to Edith for taking it as a matter settled. Dick continued to regard her with an odd, almost contemptuous smile.

"You like all that sort of thing, don't you?" he asked.

"Well, I don't know that I like it especially. I don't know much about it," Gail answered, slightly nettled. "Never having been on a house party of this sort, I couldn't say I liked it or didn't like it," she went on pointedly.

"Meaning that I don't know what I'm talking about?" Dick asked, with a not-quite-good-natured laugh.

"Well—" Gail said, with a shrug which indicated that he was at liberty to put that interpretation upon her words if he would.

"It's only that I get such a kick out of it," Dick murmured, subsiding.

Gail tried her best to feel sorry for him.

Later she told Edith positively that she would not go to the Chipp's house party unless she heard directly from Mrs. Chipp.

"Oh, I am so relieved, dearest!" Edith breathed gratefully.

"No, it's not worth while," Gail said. She grew a little bitter, thinking about it. "It would be the best time I ever had, and if mamma had lived, or papa, I should take all this sort of thing as a matter of course," she said, with dignified resentment. "However, I can't—as Phil said, I can't put myself in a false position!"

They were still talking at one o'clock when Phil came upstairs.

"I put the lights out. Every one in?" he asked.

The sisters exchanged a look.

"Ariel must be! She went with the gang down to Dobbins' at about nine," Gail stammered. "She said you said she could, Phil."

"I said if she'd be back early!" Phil exclaimed. He crossed the hall, opened a door, and returned with an anxious and angry face. "Where is she, d'you suppose?" he asked.

"Well, she must be—oh, this is perfectly terrible, Phil! She must be still down there. We could telephone—"

"Listen, she can't get away with this!" Phil interrupted. "It's after twelve. Dobbins' closes at midnight."

"Tut-tut-tut-tut—" Gail began on a weary note, flinging the bed-clothes aside as Phil ran downstairs to the telephone and Edith fled to her room for more clothing.

Gail was all but dressed, and Phil returning from downstairs three minutes later, when Ariel appeared in the upper hallway, clad in pajamas and an old Japanese jacket of brilliantly colored cotton, with a pillow dangling in her hand and her soft, taffy-yellow hair in confusion.

"What's the excitement?" she demanded, looking like anything in the world rather than a girl who has been tearing, scared and chilly, across open country roads in a roadster exactly three minutes before. "It was so hot I thought I'd sleep down on the side porch, on the old sofa. But it's so lumpy—"

They all broke into excited laughter, reproaches. She should have told them!

Ariel looking sleepy, warm, bewildered, vanished into her room with a yawn. Nobody followed her to discover the clothes flung wildly here and there just as they had fallen when she had torn them off, or to kiss the cheek that was still so cold from night wind. Indeed, among the three elders in Gail's room there was even a feeling that injustice had been done little Ariel, who had run down to the drug store so innocently for a soda, after her lessons were done, and who had been home and in bed for almost three hours.

Phil produced two small round well-wrapped cakes of violet soap, and presented each girl with one.

"Peace offering," he said humbly, but with a little laugh in the corner of his eyes. "I was sort of—oh, rotten, about Gail's visit!" he said. "My dear old girl, Edie and I'd trust you to go with anyone you like to China—you know that. Why, we depend on you. You're the thing that has held us together all these years. You're the guardian angel of the Lucky Lawrences!"

Gail's heart swelled to bursting; she could not speak.

She made up her mind that she would not consider the Los Gatos week-end, unless some formal recognition of the invitation came from Mrs. Chipp. But this heroic mood oozed away when Friday passed, and Saturday passed, and there was no sight of Van, and no word from him. Gail bore it as long as she could, and then telephoned suddenly, reluctantly, on Sunday morning to the Chipp house to ask for Mr. Murchison.

TO BE CONTINUED