

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, scion of a wealthy family, returns from Yale. Dick Stebbins, Phil's best friend, has the run of the Lawrence house. Ariel is sneaking out of the house at night for joy rides. Gail, who would marry Van, feels she is making no progress in his affections, regretfully concluding she is not his "type of girl." Phil suggests inviting Lily Cass to supper. Gail and Edith feel she is not "respectable," and are in a quandary. Van asks Gail to go for a week-end at Los Gatos with the Chipps, his uncle and aunt.

CHAPTER IV—Continued

A woman's voice, slightly amused, slightly surprised, very sophisticated, answered her. Van Murchison was with friends in Burlingame, and who was this, please?

Gail dared not reveal her identity. It was Mrs. Chipp herself, she suspected; it might have been the solution of her whole problem if she had been able to ask, easily, cheerfully, "Are you expecting me on that house party next week, Mrs. Chipp?"

But she could not do it. Instead she mumbled something that might have been a name and might not, and hung up the telephone with her heart pounding and her cheeks red. Moving about the quiet Sunday kitchen, busy with the eternal dishes and chairs, bread box and pudding bowls, she raged at herself for her cowardice.

"You fool! How I hate you! You poor fool!"

She gathered the dishes expertly. Wandering back and forth between sink and dresser, she put them one by one into a shining line on the shelf, soliloquizing as she did so.

"Burlingame, eh? I imagine I'd hate it. How can I say that?—I don't know anything about it! But I imagine—or rather, I should think a boy would hate it. I wish I hadn't telephoned. She didn't know who I was, though!"

"Well, why shouldn't I telephone her? No harm done!"

"Suppose she does tell him some girl telephoned, and he suspects it's me? What of it? Everybody is telephoning everybody else all the time."

Edith came in, flushed and pretty, from church.

"It's boiling out. It's going to be a marvelous day. What a day for a picnic!" with a long sigh.

"I know," Gail sighed, too.

They were halfway upstairs, loitering. A voice spoke from the doorway behind them.

"Any swell this morning, ladies?"

And instantly the day burst into bloom. Edith tactfully retreated to the upper regions; Gail came out on the front steps, in her dark blue kitchen apron. Van stood there grinning up at her.

He seated himself on the steps; Gail, in a wicker rocker, had her elbows on her knees, her hands clasped over her face.

It was heaven, sitting out in the shade with this big, tweed-clad young man. The violence of last week's hopes and fears had all faded away; it was enough to sit here together, without past or future.

"No golf today?"

"Oh, I could have played. But I don't play very well. The other fellows were all too good. Besides, my aunt wanted me; my cousins from Sacramento are here. It'll be rotten."

Gail laughed unsympathetically.

"We might take our supper and go up to the old dam at Cabin River," she said, as unexpectedly to herself as to him.

"How d'you get there?"

"End of the trolley line. And then walk."

He stayed about an hour, and they laughed continuously. So joyous, so unstrained, was this particular meeting that Gail presently could say, "What's this house party next week-end?"

"Oh, the usual thing!"

"Down at the Chipps' place?"

"Yep. Up in the Santa Cruz mountains, back of Los Gatos."

"How many will there be, Van?"

"Oh, about a dozen."

She couldn't—somehow—bring him to anything definite about the invitation. He seemed to feel that that was settled.

But Gail was in wild spirits when he went away, none the less. He had said, "I take you," in reference to the house party. His aunt must be perfectly cognizant of that. And she, Gail, had talked to him easily, unaffectedly, in her old gingham, and he had wanted to come and find her, and her jealousy of his Burlingame friends had been silly, and everything was all right again.

Dick Stebbins turned up with his reconstructed roadster and the picnic suddenly became a glittering reality. Edith and Gail, as they so loved to do, plunged into a glory of preparations. When Phil came in the usual picnic uproar set in; they couldn't all go in Dick's car obviously, but those that rode going could walk-and-trolley back. Phil thought he might borrow Jim Slake's car—it was an awful looking old thing, but it did move.

At four they were all off. They picnicked on the grassy plateau two hundred feet from the dam, looking down at the world, listening to the ripple and chuckle of the creek hidden in the redwoods behind them. The grass smelt of dew and pungent tar-weed; the redwoods were caught in solemn shade. Gail sat with her back braced squarely against a massive oak, Phil lay stretched with his head against her knee. The others were still eating in a desultory, protestant manner.

Suddenly, from where he lay like a dead body in the grass, Sam's young boyish voice rose pure and strong:

"There's a long, long trail a-winding..."

They all sang, even Ariel cutting herself off in the middle of a word to join. They sang for half an hour.

And when they got back to the dark old close odoriferous house, at ten o'clock, there was a message pinned on the kitchen door. It read:

"Crooks! Why didn't you wait for me?"

It was signed "V. M."

So that this was one of Gail's completely happy evenings. The day had been full of pleasantness and content. Everything was exactly as it should be.

Monday passed. No word from Van. No sign of Van. Gail began to hope fervently that the week-end party would be postponed. Her brain—her heart were sick of the constant surging back and forth of hope and fear.

That night Edith asked lightly, delicately, "Any news of our swain today?" and quite suddenly Gail told the desired lie.

"Yes. He and Mrs. Chipp came in—just for a minute."

"Oh, Gail, darling!" Gail felt her heart turn a little sick as she saw her sister's generous pleasure. "Oh, that makes it all right!" said Edith. "What'd she say about the week-end?"

"Well, just—just that she expected me."

After all, they might do just exactly that thing tomorrow, Van and his aunt, Gail reflected uncomfortably. They might easily make the lie merely an anticipation. She tried, meanwhile, to minimize it. "They only stayed for a second. He had probably parked the car right across the middle of the street!"

Ariel coming in, Edith instantly communicated the news, and then Gail knew it was too late to retreat. Innocent as the deception had seemed at first, it began to gather size and momentum like a rolling snowball.

The next afternoon Van stopped his flat, open, racy-looking roadster at the library at four o'clock, and Gail descended the steps. She looked charming in her old brown coat, the fox skin Mary Tevis had given Edith, her own brown hat, Ariel's best blouse with the frill, and new chamolai-skin gloves charged that day at Muller's.

Van leaped out to take her suitcase; they were laughing, delighted to be together again, as they stowed it in the rumble. Then Gail was where every girl loves to be, sunk into the comfortable slanted seat beside the man she likes, off for a holiday.

One thing had especially disturbed her among many small disturbances; it had not been a happy day. There had been the consciousness of her untruth about the invitation to begin with. There had been the allied



"I'll Be All Right," She Said With a Smile and a Nod.

disappointment of the fact that Mrs. Chipp had not neutralized the lie by coming into the library or sending a note. But these were minor considerations when compared to the disquieting effect of a conversation Ariel had had with her older sister just before Ariel had gone off to school that morning.

Ariel, after some interested questions regarding the day's plans, had said suddenly:

"Did you notice what happened to the Challenge last night?"

"No," Gail had said with a puzzled expectant glance.

"I got rid of it!" Ariel had announced in a conspirator's tone.

"Got rid of it? What for?"

"Because," Ariel had murmured, with a cautious glance about for possible eavesdroppers, "because it said that Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Chipp had gone down to their Los Gatos place on Tuesday and were opening it for the summer."

"Oh—" Gail had stammered, with a suddenly deepening color and a sickly laugh. "Oh—"

Her voice had dropped flatly. She, the mentor, the guide, the example of this little sister, had stood shamed and detected, trying to find amusing what was a most painful and humiliating moment.

"I don't blame you!" Ariel had said.

A quick protective instinct to add lie to lie had shaken Gail. But she

was too unused to falsehood. She had stood silent, presently saying in a troubled voice:

"I was sorry to—to have to do that. But it isn't—it isn't as if Phil were my father. He has no right—and Edith has no right—"

"Neither of them," she had recommended, with a little difficulty, "neither of them understands how much—how awfully one wants to go places—do things."

"Phil, who runs around with Lily Wibser!" Ariel had helped her scornfully. And the younger sister had given her a sudden, passionate kiss. "I love you, Gail!" Ariel had said quickly.

But this rare demonstration from cool little Ariel had brought no responsive happiness to Gail's heart. To have Ariel protecting her, abetting her in deceit, in dealing with what was not open and fair, had given her a wretched sensation that the solid ground was falling beneath her feet.

Even the scornful reference to Philip had alarmed her. After all, Phil was the head of the family; Phil was sacred. There was no law nor order anywhere if Phil was to be scorned.

Driving along the country roads that were smothered in spring beauty, Gail's spirits rose. Nothing could prevent her from having a week-end in a Los Gatos country house now. On Sunday evening she would join the family at the dinner table, on Monday morning she would be back at work, and everything would return to normal. But she would have this wonderful memory as so much pure gain.

She questioned Van as they drove along.

"Who else will be on this house party, Van?"

"On this souse party," Van responded cheerfully, "will be, first, mine host and his buxom wife, Dame Martha. They will draw the ale, heap oaken logs in the great fireplaces—"

"Oh, for heaven's sake, you idiot." His shout of joyous laughter.

"No, there'll be the Chipps," he began again seriously, "and three or four good auction players—they have to have those. They'll play all this evening, all tomorrow morning, all tomorrow night, and all day Sunday. In between games they'll eat, drink, and ask if anyone wants to swim badly enough to take the bother of undressing."

"Then there'll be Lucia Tevis; she's a cute kid; she's eighteen. She goes to Vassar next fall."

"Miss Mary Tevis' niece?"

"Yep. Then there's Mary Spence; she's from Boston, visiting Lucia; she's a keen girl, too. And Jim Speedwell and Fred Hunter—Fred's a polo man, but he broke his arm, so he's resting—and Bill Billings, and maybe his sister, and the Duchess—Lenore Phipps—Mrs. Phipps. She was Lenore Murchison."

They drove through Los Gatos, sleepy in late afternoon sun and ringed with wooded hills, and turned southwest on the boulevard that led to the ocean, twenty-six miles away. The car mounted slopes, rolled smoothly under mighty oaks, left the paved highway for a comfortable dirt road.

Under a loaded rose vine, on one of the porches, four persons were playing bridge. Gail, as she and Van approached, recognized one of these as her hostess.

Mrs. Chipp looked up at them sharply, and without changing her position concentrated her cards in her left hand and stretched a hand toward Van.

"Oh, hello, dear! How d'you do, Miss Lawrence?" she said, in a quick aside. "Van, they're all swimming, and there's nobody here to—Excuse me just one second, Hil-lyer," she interrupted herself, speaking to one of the players. "Van," she went on, "I'm not sure where the Duchess has put Miss—Miss Lawrence. But you take her up to the girls' cottage and just let her park herself somewhere until

the Duchess explains. Will you do that, like a darling?"

Resolutely, Gail would not let herself feel that it was rude, that it left everything unsaid, undone.

"I'll be all right!" she said, with a smile and a nod, walking off with Van. Mrs. Chipp made no answer.

Van led the way to one of the cabins, a brown, enchanting place with geraniums and lobelia in the window boxes, and a wide open door into a central sitting room.

"Take any of these rooms—gosh, they're all full of suitcases!" Van said, peering in at doorways. "Here—here's one—this must be you. Make yourself comfortable. Are you going to swim?"

"I think not. Not—well, maybe I will!"

She decided against the swimming, and walked out to meet Van, ten minutes later, looking her prettiest in a white frock, white shoes, a white hat.

The boy lingering in the garden path, waiting for her, was trim in a black bathing suit, with a towel across his shoulders.

Boys and girls wet and sleek as seals, were sprawled in the late sunshine on the grassy ramp beside the pool. They were drinking a pale yellow drink from tall ice-filled glasses; a cocktail shaker stood on the grass.

"You did not." "Quit that!" "Say, listen..." Gail heard, over and over again.

The girls, Lucia, Mary, and Lenore, murmured interestedly.

"Oh, come on," said the Duchess suddenly when there had been a good deal of this. "We'll never get dressed!"

Immediately they were all running down the path to the cabin, Gail with them. The only one who took any notice of her was the Boston girl, named Mary Spence, Mary spoke now and then kindly to Gail as they all began a flurry of dressing for dinner.

Gail, who was not going to change, sat on the upper porch step a few feet above the path and stared at the beauty and luxury of Far Niente as it lay on the slope below her, and pretended to be satisfied and absorbed in what she saw. She knew now that all the vague, shy fears she had felt in anticipating this visit were more than justified. She knew that Mrs. Chipp was not going to be nice to her, that the girls were entirely indifferent to her, and that she should not have come.

Her clothes were not right, her training was not right, her background was not right. She simply did not belong here, and they were all more or less conscious of it. This nice Mary Spence, herself a stranger in the group, was being cordial merely on general principles. It was nothing to her that these Californians had social distinctions between themselves; they were all the same to Mary Spence.

"I shall have to work!" Gail told herself grimly. She must work, talking, smiling, keeping herself occupied, for all this endless evening and all tomorrow and most of Sunday. It sounded like an eternity.

Suddenly she noted two of her companions in the cottage, Lucia and Lenore, walking with two boys named Bill and Jim, down the path to the house.

That left only Mary in the house, and if she also slipped away, Gail would have to go down to dinner, at some spot unknown, all alone. Her heart began to beat hard in nervous anticipation.

Presently a middle-aged woman came up the path toward her, and with a not unamiable half smile for Gail stood still, a few feet away, calling "Mary!" Gail recognized her as one of the card players.

"Yes, Mrs. Billings!" Mary called, putting her head out of the porch door.

"Mary, you know what I asked you to do?" the woman said.

"Oh, yes!" Mary answered.

"Will you do it now, dear?"

TO BE CONTINUED.