

The LUCKY LAWRENCES

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WNU Service

By KATHLEEN NORRIS

CHAPTER VI—Continued

—11—

"I didn't mean to do it!" she whispered, her mouth trembling, her face crinkling into tears. And then in sudden irritation and disgust she exclaimed, "Gail, Gail, I'm going to be sick!"

"I thought so!" Gail sprang across the room. She and Edith had an arm apiece about the convulsed, slender little figure as they rushed it to the familiar sanctuary of the upper rooms.

Ten minutes later Gail went with Dick to the police station.

"I think it would look—better, to have one of you girls along," Dick suggested. Sam was left with Ariel; Edith and Phil went to call at the stricken home of the dead child.

"I'm—I'm terribly sorry about this," Dick presently admitted reluctantly. "I ought to warn you. This Miller, the man who was driving the other car, might ask for a jury trial."

"Oh, Dick, no!" Her voice was weak with terror.

"He might. If he can exonerate himself, or prove that Ariel was even partly in the wrong."

Her heart pounded, raced—pounded again. They were getting out of Dick's car now at the City hall.

"Dick, will they find out that she was at Monterey with those boys?"

"They might."

"They shan't! I'll have her lie," Gail said fiercely. "Dick, don't you see that with every one here—every one in Clippersville—she'll be ruined! They'll think she's the sort of girl who runs around to hotels with boys," Gail began, in an agony.

"If the case against Miller is strong enough they may dismiss the charge against Ariel," Dick pursued after a moment. "Shall we—" he moved his head toward the building—"shall we go in?"

"Just a moment!" Gail had caught at his hands. "Are you sure we can't save her—can't say that Buddy was driving?" she stammered, delay in him.

"Not that way. But if they send for an assistant district attorney from San Jose—if they do," Dick said, "I know them all down there, and I'll do what I can to keep the questions down. But you see, Gail, the trouble is in getting into a mess like this," he offered tolerantly.

"Oh, I know, I know!" She beat her palms together. "Oh, what a fool a girl is!" she whispered frantically. "What possessed her, Dick?"

"Oh, I don't know." He was silent, and they stood without speaking for a moment, in the dark outside the courthouse. "She wanted a good time," he said. "She's—of course, she's beautiful. Well, come on." He touched her arm. "Let's go in."

There were bare, dangling lights, a man at a flat-topped desk, benches, fences, gates, men in uniforms coming and going, murmurs.

"Hello, Tex. Hello, Joe. Good-evening, Sergeant!" Dick said. He glanced at Gail. "This is Miss Lawrence's sister," he added.

"Sorry to have your sister mixed into this, Miss Lawrence."

"Oh, it's terrible!" Gail said in a trembling voice.

"Hear that the little girl died?" the sergeant asked Dick.

"Yes, we heard that. Very sad. Terrible for them!"

"The young lady had no license," Walsh said, glancing up from his papers at Gail. "It's an awful thing, you know, if a man can't take his wife and child out for a run," shaking his head, mumbling his words.

But he was kinder, and she knew it.

"Your little sister, hey?" he presently asked.

Her little sister, yes, she answered, suddenly shaken by tears. She went away, and sat on a desolate bench, and Dick talked to the sergeant. The atmosphere of the dreadful place oppressed Gail like a pall, and she had to keep telling herself that this ordeal, like every other, would soon be over.

She started as Dick sat down beside her.

"Made a hit with the sergeant," he murmured; "he's been very decent!"

Gail went back to the desk, and smiled with blue eyes filled with tears.

"Thank you so much, Sergeant Walsh."

"Now, you have your sister here at ten o'clock day after tomorrow, see?" the man said. "It's too bad to have a little girl mixed into a thing like this!"

"Oh, I know it," Gail murmured thickly, heartsick. He was probably thinking that his little girl never would run about Sunday roads with intoxicated boys, she reflected bitterly.

Dick took her away through the nail-studded doors and the smelly hall.

"Dick, what kind of a fool is a girl," Gail began passionately—"what kind of a fool is a girl to let herself in for this sort of thing?"

"Well, that's what you wonder!" he commented mildly.

"I don't know what we would have done without you," she said, wondering.

"I haven't done anything," Dick answered promptly.

Gail went on with her musing, not so much about Ariel now as about Dick. He seemed a very rock of strength tonight; she felt a passionate regret for all the times she had thought slightly of him.

treated him carelessly. Buddy Ralsch, Larry Barehl, and Dorothy Camp had all failed Ariel. But big, homely, awkward, loyal Dick had not, and never would fail, any of the Lawrences. Gail felt puzzled, somehow.

She was even aware of a little self-consciousness with him tonight for the first time in her life. It was as if she had never seen him before. When they went back into the old kitchen, and he half sat and half leaned against the table in his usual way, she found herself studying him—fascinated by his ease, and his quick, emphatic use of words, and his adequacy in this crisis.

"What's the worst that can happen to Ariel, Dick?"

This was Edith from the arm of Phil's chair, where she sat leaning against him.

"What I think'll happen," Dick said, reflecting, "is that the charge against Ariel will be dismissed, and that she'll be retained as a witness. But there may be damages—from Moss."

"Oh, dear!" Gail wailed. She looked at Phil. "Another mortgage, just as we were clear!" she said philosophically.

"No, I wouldn't mortgage the place again," Phil said deliberately. "I'd borrow on my insurance policy this time."

"Phil, are you insured?" asked both sisters, surprised and impressed.

"I took out some a little while ago." His colorless skin, as clear as a girl's, flushed suddenly. He looked at Dick and laughed a little uncomfortably.

Dick gave Gail a look full of significance and understanding.

"Phil's insured himself because he wants to marry Lily!" Edith said to Gail when they were alone, later.

"I know it."

"This," Edith said solemnly, "is

real trouble, Gail."

"I know it," Gail agreed again.

Lying in bed, she went over the whole bewildering panorama. The incredible had happened: this was real trouble. This was disgrace.

But she could not quite forget a new note, a new thread of friendship and happiness that had somehow come of it all. Dick's sternly concerned face as he first listened to Ariel's story, the authority with which he had assumed command of the situation, and his manner in the police station—definite, unfrightened, and friendly—all these seemed to create a new Dick, or rather to put an unknown person in Dick Stebbins' place. Protecting—self-reliant—devoted to the Lawrences.

A spasm of sheer pity for Ariel stirred Gail. Poor little Ariel, hot and tired and frightened, trying to drive a car through the Sunday traffic with a couple of heavy, half-intoxicated boys for her only companions. It was horrible.

Gail brought her eyes resolutely to her book. But instead of the printed lines there rose before her inner vision the picture of a hard, lean, serious young man leaning over a police sergeant's desk. Dick Stebbins was in the kitchen again, awkward, earnest, adequate. She was in the courtroom with Dick Stebbins.

She closed her book, put out the light. Soon she was floating, drifting, sinking, and rising on a sea of dreams.

CHAPTER VII

THE big courtroom was very hot. Gail could hardly believe that this tense, dark, dirty place of fear and shame had been in existence yesterday and last year, and would be going on through all the years with the happy, marketing world so near and uncaring.

Phil and Edith were with her; the fifth Lawrence, white and frightened, and looking less than her seventeen years, was inside the fence. Dick was with Ariel.

Dick and Ariel talked to the judge, who looked from face to face seriously, biting his lips as he listened. Gail prayed wildly. Then Ariel and Dick came down and joined the others.

"The case against Ariel is dismissed," Dick whispered. "So far so good! Miller was drunk," he explained, his words barely audible, barely formed with his lips. "He's been arrested before. Ariel's fined fifteen dollars for driving without a license."

"You mean they're not going to try her for anything, Dick?"

"The case is dismissed."

They couldn't believe it. Their eyes moved solemnly toward each other.

"We can't—Ariel and all—we can't go, Dick?"

"Sure you can."

Five minutes later the Lawrences, scared and white, but beginning to breathe again, were out in the street. Ariel's ordeal was over.

Dick brought the verdict to Gail.

THE STORY FROM THE BEGINNING

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. Phil suggests inviting Lily Cass, his sweetheart, to supper. Gail and Edith feel she is not "respectable," and are in a quandary. Gail goes with Van to a house party at Los Gatos with the Chipps, his uncle and aunt. She is received coldly. At a roadhouse Gail sees a drunken man helping Ariel into a roadster. Next day Ariel admits she was there, and displays no remorse. Gail is gloomy as she considers the family's outlook. She again accompanies Van to Los Gatos for a week-end visit. She meets his mother, who is very distant. Ariel and the driver of another car are booked for manslaughter. Ariel was driving at the time of the accident, although she had no license.

at the library, late that afternoon.

"The jury wasn't out fifteen minutes. Guilty. They say Miller'll get five years."

"Dick, is that the end of it?"

"The end!"

"Oh, my G—d, I am grateful!" Gail whispered, tears in her eyes.

Phil went up to tell Edith. And Van Murchison took Ariel off for a drive. "He's going to have her home well before six," Dick reported.

"Could you dine with us, Dick?"

"Not tonight. I'm going over to Stanislaus, to see Mother. Gee," Dick added youthfully, after thought, "I wish you could get Ariel to stop running with that bunch of rotters!"

"Oh, she's cured now," Gail predicted. "When it's too late," she added sadly. "Well, we've been fools."

"I don't see that you've been a fool," Dick protested, surprised. Gail laughed, a little fluttered, looked down as she stamped a book, looked up.

She looked straight into his face, noted the line of jaw, the wide-apart wide-open gray eyes. Her eyes fell to the big hand on the desk, with his old cap in the fingers.

"Dick, how are we ever going to thank you?"

"Oh, cut it!"

"And you know," she said, leaning toward him, looking at him with her heavy brows anxiously knitted—"you know what a child she is, Dick? You don't think people will remember this against her, Dick?"

"Oh, I suppose the old tabbies will whisper about it, for awhile."

"She'll just have to live it down," Gail said, wondering if her words had any meaning.

"Oh, sure."

He still lingered. Their heads were close together. Gail wondered what he would do, what the dull, browsing occupants of the library would do, if she suddenly kissed him on the temple.

He looked up, with his kindly grin.

The waters of the great sea were drawing her—drawing her away from solid ground. Gail was deeply, subconsciously aware of a fear that she would betray herself.

"Suppose," she thought, smiling her mysterious smile at him, "he suddenly leaned across here, and caught at my hands, and said, 'I love you!'"

"What's the matter?" Dick asked. "Nothing. I just felt—a little—giddy. Reaction, I suppose."

For twenty minutes after he went away she knew neither where she was, nor what she was doing or saying.

Then she went up to Muller's and joined Edith, and they walked home together, happy, exhausted, grateful. Gail hugging her amazing, strange new secret to her heart as if it were a living thing.

Ariel came in a few minutes after dinner preparations were under way, and both older sisters glanced at her fearfully.

"Did you have a nice drive, darling?"

"Oh, heavenly!" Ariel said, with a weary sigh and a sober face.

"Couldn't bring Van back to supper?"

"Didn't think to ask him."

"Do you like him?" Gail asked encouragingly.

"Oh, he's darling," Ariel said list-

lessly. "Not that it makes any difference," she added bitterly.

"Ah, don't say that, dear!" Both sisters dreaded this mood, when she would be resentful and dark for awhile, and end up with hysterical laughter, hysterical tears, and physical collapse.

"Well, why should it matter in this jay place! You don't suppose Van'll stay here one minute longer than he has to, do you?" Ariel demanded angrily. "I'm sick of it! Sick of it!" she said, in a sullen undertone.

Sam came in and lighted the gas above their heads; dusk had deepened almost into darkness.

"Sam, you're an angel!" Edith said gratefully.

"I suppose, jail or no jail, we eat sometimes?" Sam asked by way of



"Your Little Sister, Hey?"

answer, kissing the back of Gail's neck where the thick, tawny tendrils of hair curled up like a baby's hair. "Listen. There's a swell film at the Liberty tonight. Want to go, Ariel?"

"No, thanks," Ariel began to answer steadily, but her voice shook suddenly, and her words came in a rush. "I don't want to go and have every old, church-going, psalm-singing, cake-sale-making old woman in this town pointing me out," she said in a low tone. "I don't want my clothes to come from Muller's any more, I don't want sodas at Dobblins', and dances at Oddfellows' hall. I'm sick to death of this whole place, and this house, and being poor! I'm not going to stand it, either. I'm going down to Hollywood if I have to walk there, and I'm going—"

"Ah, sweetheart, you'll only make yourself ill!" Gail pleaded, close beside her now, sitting on the arm of Ariel's chair, with one arm about the younger sister's shoulders. "Don't get yourself all wrought up. Listen, darling—listen. If the Whites do give a fancy-dress party, and we give a birthday party—"

She stopped, for Ariel, looking at her with a trembling laugh of scorn, broke as suddenly into tears, and was laughing and crying in the familiar manner before any one of them could attempt to divert her. Guided by Gail, she stumbled from the room and upstairs, sobbing incoherently and now beginning to feel wretchedly sick—cold, hot, nauseated, dizzy.

Gail turned down the wide old bed and flattened the pillows; she carried a fresh nightgown to the poor little convulsed figure, kept an arm about the shaking shoulders. She lowered the shades, lighted a bead of gas, slipped the hot rubber bag comfortingly in between the old linen sheets.

And all the while her heart sang on a strengthening note, "Dick—Dick—Dick." It was good to be twenty-three, and to have Dick in the world! Gail felt that she had never been so near to Ariel, never had loved her so dearly.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)