

The Lucky Lawrences

... By Kathleen Norris ...

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WNU Service

CHAPTER VII—Continued

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And so downstairs to the dear familiar plates and lights, the peach tapoca and the blackberry punch, the eager conversation that was punctuated with laughter and supplemented by the books they always dragged in somehow, for reference or support.

"Wonderful to have it cold again!" Edith said.

"Wonderful!" Gail echoed. But it was not the autumn coolness that made her heart sing and float like a skylark. The secret was always with her, and when she forgot Dick for a second, it was delicious suddenly to remember him again. Gail had never had any feeling like this in her life before; she had never known that there was such a feeling.

"Dick," she thought. "Dick. Dick. Dick. Dick."

And at the realization that he might quite naturally come into the dining room, and sit there visibly under the rasping gaslight, she felt actually faint with ecstasy.

"You don't like Van as well as you did," Edith guessed shrewdly in the days that followed.

"No—but still I like him," Gail answered defensively.

They were in Ariel's room, and Ariel lying on her bed reading old magazines, on the Sunday afternoon following the accident. Outwardly, everything was as usual, but Gail was conscious of changes in the air. She had been asked by Van to dinner up at the Chipps the night before, and had declined. The thrilling prospect of shabby, quiet Dick Stebbins' company at the Lawrence house had made anything the Murchisons did or did not do unimportant.

Gail, in a cautious undertone as they washed the breakfast dishes, had reported to Edith that Ariel had called Van Murchison on the telephone at about ten.

"I think from what she said at the telephone—she talked very low," she had resumed, "I think that he wanted her to go off somewhere to lunch with him."

"The Chipps?"

"I couldn't tell."

"Gail, if I thought you didn't care, I'd pray about it!" Edith had said passionately. "Wouldn't it be wonderful!"

"I got a little fun out of it," Gail had analyzed the situation musingly. "I mean, I loved the excitement and knowing persons like the Chipps. But I never got—anything, really, out of Van."

"Abigail Lawrence, he adored you!"

"No, no—he liked me. I amused him. We were like two boys. Really we were," Gail had persisted as Edith began a significant smile. "He never put his finger tip on me—he doesn't make love! Or at least he didn't to me," she had finished, thinking aloud, feeling for words.

Upstairs in Ariel's room, they reverted to the subject.

"I like Van," Gail said. "But I think he's terribly giddy."

"What would you want him to be, a priest?" Ariel demanded unsympathetically.

"Don't you have the feeling he's always laughing at everything, Ariel?"

"No," Ariel answered stubbornly, scowlingly, "I don't."

"Oh, I do," Gail said patiently.

"I want to go away, Edith and Gail," Ariel presently said quietly. "Phil can make a fuss if he wants to. Or he can help me. I don't much care. But I'm going away from Clippersville."

They looked at her sorrowfully. She had said this many times before; she had been saying it in-

deed since her fourteenth summer.

But this was serious. Ariel had refused to return to school after the accident. Phil had talked to Mrs. Tripp, the principal. Mrs. Tripp had put the case plainly to Phil. Ariel Lawrence had been going too fast and too far for some time. A good boarding school, at her age. . . .

This had frightened Gail and Phil. They had not mentioned it to the others, least of all, Ariel. They had no money for boarding school, even supposing that Ariel would go.

But very probably Ariel would rebel. She seemed older, harder, colder, in these few days. The events of the past week had seemed to embitter her, to accentuate her familiar impatience with Clippersville and life in it.

Poor little butterfly, caught in the trap of poverty, pettiness, shabbiness, and general small-town ugliness! Ariel was only one of a thousand, a million, girls, all over the country who were dreaming of Hollywood, contracts, admiration, excitement.

"She'd not mind marrying a man like Van," Gail thought. "She'd know how to manage him. She wouldn't want more than he could give! . . . We seem to be growing up pretty fast all of a sudden."

She had grown up anyway. She was a woman now, because she loved a man. It made her feel sol-

THE STORY FROM THE BEGINNING

The luck that 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 a 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 though Gail and Edith feel she is not "respectable." 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 with Ariel. Next day Ariel admits she was there, and displays no remorse. Gail is gloomy as she considers the family's outlook. Ariel and the driver of another car are booked for manslaughter, as the result of an accident in which a child is killed. Dick Stebbins, who has been admitted to the bar, defends Ariel, and has the case against her dismissed. Gail suddenly realizes that she loves Dick and not Van.

emn, consecrated. It was quite unlike any feeling she had ever known before. Deeply, eternally, she was Dick's—for sorrow or joy, their two lives were indissolubly united.

She could even feel a little heart-ache for the girlhood she must leave behind her. Love, marriage, wifehood—these were solemn things. Gail experienced a premonitory pang. It was not all fun, saying good-bye to being giddy, free Gail Lawrence. It was not all fun, this strangely thrilling happiness, fear, and pain that inundated her heart.

They were still gossiping and idling comfortably in Ariel's room, and the old clock in the hall had struck three, in Sunday stillness, when a door slammed downstairs, and Gail, flushed and tumbled, descended to find Dick himself in the kitchen.

Going downstairs, her heart rose on wings, and she felt suffocated, but when she saw him her mood experienced a sudden chill. Dick had on the old tweeds he had bought at a sale two years ago; his pockets were full of packages.

Suddenly, seeing him so, commonplace and unexciting, in the darkened kitchen, Gail found him entirely uninteresting; her dreams melted into every day air, and she felt ashamed and confused. Dick Stebbins in one's dreams indeed; it was a desecration of their filmy fabric even to think of him in such a connection.

He was unloading various cans and packages from his pockets—deviled ham, cream, rolls, butter.

Gail felt as remote from him as if she had never seen him in her life before. He was nothing, no-

body; she disliked him because she had made a fool of herself over him in her own soul.

"Oh, are we picnicking?" she asked blankly.

"Aren't we?" he demanded, stopping short.

Her blood rose at once. Of course they would picnic! She began to put peeled tomatoes, lettuce, fish into a deep glass jar. Dick Stebbins! Why, he was the same country boy he had always been. Nice enough. The salt of the earth.

Dick came to stand beside Gail, the wrapped packages of coffee and sugar in his big hand, and she trembled and dared not look up.

They went up to the old dam, in the sweetness of the autumn afternoon, and built their picnic supper fire on the sunshiny shingle. Phil sat silent, utterly content, watching a fish line, his handsome, thick Lawrence brows drawn together as he pondered something that was far away from fishing. Ariel and Van Murchison were on the shingle.

Sam not being at home when the picnic expedition had started, a note had been left for him, pinned to the kitchen door. Van, arriving before Sam, had calmly read the note, and had sat down on the Lawrences' doorstep to await Sam's return. After which they had followed the others in Van's car, a circumstance that added the last touch of felicity to the occasion for Gail. She remembered her old efforts to attract Van, a few months ago, the sallies of wit, the constant attempt to amuse him.

Ariel made no such efforts—not she! She simply was, and Van trailed her helplessly, irresistibly. When Ariel went down to walk across the old boards of the dam,

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Van followed. Ariel, Gail noted, did not speak much; she never did. Van did all the chattering.

The little fire burned hotly in the windless air; long shafts of sunset were striking level upon the water now; the dam was a sheet of blue satin, twinkling in the light and slipping into exquisite jade and ultramarine shadows against the overhanging banks.

"Oh, we do have fun!" Edith commented luxuriously, lying on the flat hot stones as the meal finished.

There was silence in the group that was resting on the shingle in the dusk. A great owl floated low over the dam, and was gone; the creek rippled, rippled in the pause.

Clearing away all signs of the picnic in the fast-gathering dusk, Gail tried an experiment. Upon Dick's carrying off the coffee pot to throw the grounds away behind the trees, she rewarded him with a casual "Thank you, dear!" said in just the tone she used to Sam and Phil. Later she said again, "Take that, will you, dear?"

She couldn't remember whether she had ever called Dick "dear" before. If she had, it had not meant anything. Probably she had, for it seemed to make not the slightest impression on him tonight. If he had looked surprised she had planned to laugh quite naturally and say, "I thought I was talking to Sam!"

But there was no necessity for this explanation. Dick paid no attention to the affectionate monosyllable. Oblivious old Dick, she thought, who never dreamed that close beside him was a woman who

was thrilling with love and happiness and the need for him in this wonderful hour of autumn warmth and moonshine!

They walked, singing, down the steep, rutty half mile to the cars; Gail needed a hand now; the hand that gripped her was Dick's. She marveled that he could not feel the electric current that ran through the tips of the square, firm fingers.

Afterward she always remembered the night they went up to the dam. A hot night of moonshine and laughter and talk on the shingle above the dam.

Soon the weather changed and autumn came in, with October, in earnest. The leaves began to fall now, and the winds to blow. To Gail it was a thrilling time, this autumn filled with hints of change, of endings and beginnings. She was in love, and it was entirely different from what she had expected it to be. Far from giggles, rapture and excitement, it was a serious business; it made her feel grown up and responsible.

She could never love anyone else but Dick; it was all settled. Everything she thought now had to have him in it; the future had narrowed itself down to just Dick.

He had no money, he was country-bred, he was only the son of the people who rented the old Lawrence place over in Stanislaus—it did not matter. Gail, who had always felt that Clippersville limited and bound her, knew herself quite willing—ah! breathlessly willing!—to live contentedly in Clippersville forever, or out on the Stanislaus ranch forever; if Dick so decreed. What Ariel or Edith would think of this sudden altering of all her dreams was nothing; there was nothing anywhere, except Dick!

And meanwhile Van had established a more comfortable footing in the old Lawrence house than ever before, and while he and Ariel did not seem to be exactly flirting—exactly having an affair—there was a far more substantial base to their relationship than his friendship with Gail had ever known. Very quietly, in an almost bored tone, Ariel told her sisters in early November that Van was going east to get to work.

"No more college?"

"No, he wants to get into business. His father says he'll start him in the New Jersey plant."

"Then he won't come back to Clippersville?"

"Yes. He's going to be back for a week in January. That's—that's month after next!"

"He's coming back after her!" Edith said, when she and Gail were alone.

"Oh, Ede. It does look like it!"

Gail's imagination was off at full speed: Ariel married at eighteen to young Van Murchison; Edith and Phil and Sam living on here at the old house; herself and Dick. . . .

But this last snatched at her breath. Herself and Dick. People in the library would glance at her: "She's engaged; she's going to marry that young lawyer, Richard Stebbins."

Dick would have cases, and she would study every detail of every case and keep up with him. And she would have babies—babies tumbling about among the flowers.

It began to seem as if things were happening in Clippersville, after all. The sluggish current of Gail's life was stirred in many ways. It was not only that Phil got a raise, and that Van Murchison might marry Ariel. Sam was working for a scholarship, and might actually win a year at Columbia! Columbia university in New York. Gail was assistant librarian now, with the name "Abigail Lawrence" printed in gold on the library windows and a salary of fifty-five dollars a month.

And then Christmas was coming. Always exciting, it seemed doubly so this year. Dick was boarding with them now, for his mother had gone to Oregon to stay with a daughter newly widowed.

There was one cloud in the sky, to be sure. Gail and Edith acknowl-

edged its existence bravely one December evening when they asked Dick if he thought Phil really cared for Lily Cass.

"That's a hard question to answer," Dick said, with a faint frown and a sigh.

"Do you like her, Dick?"

"Well—she's not my type. But she's an awfully sweet little thing, really."

"Is she divorced, Dick?"

"No. But there's talk of it."

"If she were, do you believe Phil really would marry her?"

A pause. Then Dick asked slowly, "Would you girls care?"

"You've answered!" Gail said, with a brief, mirthless laugh.

"I suppose I have." Dick sighed again. "There—there never was anything wrong with Lily," he offered, doubtfully.

"No!" Gail agreed forcefully. "Except that he was as common as fruit flies, and ran with that terrible box-factory gang, and chewed gum in church, and talked way up in G major."

This rather finished Lily's case for the moment. But a little later Gail said apologetically, "I don't know why I got so wild about poor Lily. She certainly is having a rather tough time of it."

"I'll tell you!" Dick said eagerly. "Phil's the quiet sort. He loves Clippersville; he wouldn't change places with the President. Phil wants to stay here and develop the place, and he loves Lily—or if he loves her—" Dick floundered, turning red.

"We know he loves her; you needn't be so scrupulous!" Gail said with a dry little laugh. "I believe you'd stand up for Phil if he went out some night and cut somebody's throat!"

But she loved Dick for his loyalty none the less, and curried the mutton stew with one idea in her mind, "They all eat it, and he loves it curried!"

Gail, frantic to start tying bundles and mixing batters, had to spend the wet Monday in the library. She walked up to Muller's at five o'clock, not only to wait for Edith but to help her effectively



They Looked at Her Sorrowfully.

while she was waiting. Edith was in an exhausted whirl of last Christmas sales; Ariel also was there as one of her Christmas assistants, at two dollars a day.

Rain was twinkling and sparkling in the black night as the Lawrences came wearily, excitedly out and started for home. Ariel was very silent.

But Gail and Edith were gay. Christmas eve, at library and shop, was over, and nothing but fun and holiday ahead. Edith thought of the tissue paper and ribbons in her lower bureau drawer. She would begin wrapping and marking packages right after dinner; she had completely ruined herself on presents, as usual, and she felt the usual joy in her plight.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)