

# The LUCKY LAWRENCES

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CHAPTER XI—Continued  
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"Was Dick at your boarding house?"

"Not even that!" Ariel said, with her scornful little laugh. "I tell you he never so much as put a finger tip on me!"

"But you saw him all the time?"

"Off and on. He wasn't in Los Angeles much. But he would turn up and ask me if I had money enough."

"What a friend!" Gail said under her breath.

Ariel made no response. She was looking about the old kitchen.

"I can stay here, Gail, in spite of the Wibser tribe?"

"Darling, of course! And they're not such a tribe," Gail answered, laughing with a touch of hurt and reproach. "Just Lily and the boys. And look—this is the baby. This is Gail."

"They named her Gail?"

"Lily would have it."

"You might know she'd take your name, Gail. I suppose she's more a Lawrence than us Lawrences!"

To this Gail could make no reply. She said tactfully, "It's a quarter to seven, Ariel, and it looks as if either Phil had to be at the shop tonight, or had gone to Lily's mother's. You and I'll have dinner anyway. But what a buzz when the marriage is announced!" with a sort of mild awe. "Let's go upstairs, Ariel."

Ariel sat on at the table, a mutinous, dark look gathering in her eyes.

"Everything's changed, and I miss Edith!" she burst out suddenly, laying her head on her locked hands and beginning to cry.

Gail came over to her, and bent down to crook an arm about Ariel's bowed head. Her own eyes were brimming.

CHAPTER XII

AFTERWARD they went upstairs, through the familiar halls and past the familiar doors, to talk desultorily, inconsequentially, of anything and everything. When a wall from the kitchen took Gail down there again on flying feet, Ariel, bare-headed and looking young, small, and tired again, came too, and then Lily, Phil, and the boys came in and there was a babel and confusion in which somehow Gail and Ariel managed a cup of tea.

When Gail went upstairs after dinner, supposedly to superintend the little boys' retiring, it was to be noted that she remained there some additional moments. When she came down she wore her newest gown, a simple, thin black velvet gown that left her slender brown arms bare and fell away in a long line from the straight column of her throat and the curve of her young breast. At the throat there was golden old lace, her mother's lace, and Gail wore tonight her mother's old cameo ring.

The tawny locks that had been bobbed three years ago were longer now and gathered in a cluster of curls at the nape of her neck. Gail rarely showed any color, but tonight there was a subdued sparkle and shine about her; her wide sweet mouth was burning scarlet, her sapphire eyes starry.

Phil, Lily, Sam, Ariel—they all sat in the room that had once been the lesser drawing room but that now had been changed into a living room.

The fireplace was opened, and logs crackled there. The boys' blocks and books were stored on the shelves, and a ring of comfortable shabby old chairs circled the hearth. Lily only listened tonight. She was a good deal older than Ariel, but she seemed a little afraid of her.

Gail was rather silent, too. She sat, slender, thoughtful, and tawny-headed, at Phil's knee on a cushion. Her square shoulders rested against her brother, her square fingers were locked, her eyes thoughtful, and her full underlip slightly bitten.

Sam drafted for tomorrow afternoon's Challenge the announcement that would take all Clippersville by surprise. Little Ariel Lawrence, Mrs. Vance Murchison, Ariel, listening, correcting, appeared the least concerned of the five.

There was a step at the side door, a gust of rain-sweet air penetrated to the sitting room. Gail had known this must come. She did not stir, except to raise her eyes to Dick Stebbins as he came in.

Phil did most of the talking. Dick talked, too, to Lily—to all of them except Gail. To her he did not speak directly until the clock struck ten and she got to her feet.

"Ariel, you must go to bed. You must be dead. Come on!"

"Are you coming back, Gail?" said Dick then, with a glance.

"I think not. We'll be talking," Gail said, with a smile, "all night."

"Tomorrow I'll have to hang around the hospital in the hope of seeing poor Willoughby."

"If he died, Dick," Phil asked, "would that kind of throw the monkey wrench into your plans?"

"Well, in a way. There are two or three other propositions I could follow up," Dick answered, unruffled.

He was the old Dick, and he was a new Dick, too. A quiet big man, very sure of himself. His manner, his voice were more authoritative than they had been. He had not worn a big belted coat three years ago, nor jammed big gloves into its pockets.

"Willoughby is doing the London work for his eastern firm," he said. "And there was some talk of my going with him."

"If you didn't, might you practice here, Dick?" This was Gail.

"I don't think so—not in Clippersville," he answered decidedly. "International law, you know . . ."

"Seen 'Caravan'?" he demanded abruptly, looking at Gail.

"You mean the big musical comedy?"

"Yep."

"No, I haven't. It's playing in Oakland tomorrow."

"I noticed that," said Dick. "Want to go up?"

They were all looking on, suddenly awakened, suddenly aware of the situation. But she could not see anything but the lean, homely kindly face that was smiling—just the hint of a smile—at her.

"I'd love it!" she said.

The great news rocked Clippersville breakfast tables the next morning, and Gail, walking to the library in the delicious autumn freshness after the rain, was assailed on all sides.

"The family knew she was married," Gail said, over and over again, hoping that this was not stretching the truth to the breaking point. "But they were both so young—and Van had no prospects—and then that unfortunate business of the bankruptcy came."

But Ariel's marriage was in second place for her. She was thinking all the while that it was almost nine o'clock, and that in eight hours Dick Stebbins was coming to the house to take her off for dinner and the theater in Oakland, 35 miles away.

She did not have to wait so long to see him. At about ten o'clock he walked into the library and came up to the desk. Gail saw his hulking figure in the entrance arcade, and her heart turned over com-

pletely, and the hand that was resting on her desk blotter trembled.

When he stood before her she reached both hands across the high desk.

"Dick, we couldn't say much before Lily last night. She's not to know everything. But how are we going to thank you for standing by Ariel, for saving her?"

"Why, that was all right!" he said, laughing a little awkwardly, flushing warmly.

"Ariel's only a child still, Dick; she can't appreciate it. But Phil and I do—I do, from the bottom of my heart!"

"I guess you know why I did it," he wanted to say. "I guess you know I was glad to do it!" was what she heard.

"That doesn't make it any less!" she told him.

"It's a nice town to get back to," he said, after awhile. "On a morning like this, with everything washed fresh and cool, there's something awfully friendly about it."

"And how's poor Mr. Willoughby?"

"Not so good."

"Mrs. Cantor," Gail said seriously, "told me that he had been told by the finest New York doctors that he would simply have to stop drinking and eating the way he was."

Dick listened respectfully to this and other Clippersville revelations. He had all his old simple, keen interest in Gail's point of view; he was especially concerned and amused over her reports of Lily and Ariel.

"They don't like each other?"

"Well, they're polite. But they have nothing in common!"

"No," he conceded, deeply struck. "I suppose not."

"But Lily makes Phil happy?" he asked anxiously, more than once.

"Oh, utterly! He's mad about her."

"And that's a cute baby!" Dick said, in satisfaction.

The autumn sun shone, and only the occasional fall of a yellow leaf through the crystal air indicated that the month was October and not May. The hills were transparent blue haze, all about the canyon and the dam, when the Lawrences took their lunch up there on a hot clear Sunday afternoon. Gail and Dick walked up the creek bed alone, after the meal. Both their faces were flushed and damp when they sat down presently on a great fallen redwood, up in the sweet shadowy woods, and smiled at each other.

"Gail," said Dick then, "do you know that you have grown to be the most beautiful woman in the world?"

Her blue eyes deepened oddly, like summer water touched by cloud shadow.

"If you say so—" she stammered, finding her voice with difficulty.

Neither one could seem to speak again. Dick stood up, and after a second Gail got to her feet, too, and turned as if she would have gone back down the trail.

"I guess you know what I've come back for, Gail," Dick said then. "you've always been the only woman in the world for me. But to come back and find you—what you've grown to be—with all the town—every one—more or less in love with you—"

He stopped, for Gail had come up close to him and was holding out her hands. Dick put his big arms about her, and crushed her against his heart, and they kissed each other.

It was half an hour after that first, deep kiss that shouts from the deserted party brought them back down the trail. Their hands

were linked as they followed the rushing stream back; it was four o'clock on an October afternoon, the sun was already sinking.

Hot light poured through the thinning foliage, and lay graciously among the red, twisted madrone branches, and on the shafts of the redwoods. The birds were all still now, but bees went by like bullets, and here and there bright-winged flies buzzed in weaving columns in the sun.

"And all that time—all that time, Dick, you cared?"

"Yep. But I didn't know it was going to be all that time," he said honestly. "It—sort of—went on, from day to day."

"I knew I cared," the girl said seriously.

Suddenly the two stopped on the rough trail and smiled at each other.

"This all seems like a dream," Dick confessed.

Sun-browned, her tawny hair in a little disorder, her blue eyes bright, she stood looking up at him



Dick Put His Big Arms About Her and Crushed Her Against His Heart.

without speaking—her man, the man who was to take care of her, stand by her, and love her, all her days.

"Dick, after all these years—after all the other girls—it's so strange to think of myself as engaged!"

"It's strange to me to think that, at last—" He stopped on a brief, odd little laugh. "That at last I've gotten Gail Lawrence!" Dick finished it boyishly.

"It's all so strange," Gail mused, her fingers clinging to his, the glory and beauty of the autumn woods about them. "I'll be Mrs. Richard Stebbins!" she said.

"Gosh!" the big man said, smiling down at her, small and square and tawny-headed, flushed with walking, radiant in this exquisite hour of fulfillment.

"It's all come out like a story," Gail decided contentedly. She jerked her head, with a sudden little touch of self-consciousness, toward the unseen picnicers. "They know," she said, with an abashed grin.

"I don't know why they know," Dick answered, surprised.

"Oh, they do! But let's have it—ours, for just a little while," the girl pleaded. "Let's not tell them today, anyway."

"You're the boss," Dick agreed, as they went on.

The others were making preparations for departure. It was four o'clock. Gail gave no sign as she began to help gather sweaters and cups; Dick said nothing. But Lily shot Phil a significant glance, accompanied by a brief nod, and Phil went up at once to his sister and caught her by the arm and turned her about.

Gail's innocent inquiring glance changed guiltily, and she laughed,

the rare hot color spreading over her face. In another second Phil had given a great shout, and Gail was laughing and crying in his arms, and Lily, leaping over her amazed children, had run to embrace Dick wildly.

If Mr. Willoughby lived, then Dick would duly depart with him in a few weeks' time, and instead of following up the London offer would establish himself somewhere in the East, possibly in Washington.

If his superior died, Dick would go east at once, and follow the same course.

In either case he and Gail would be married in—say eight months.

"Call it a year. It's safer, Dick." "Eight months. Maybe six." "That would be April or May!" "April or May."

He came soberly into the library, ten days after the picnic, to tell her that old Willoughby had quietly slipped away.

Gail's face paled a little.

"So it's no London?"

"No London."

"After all your work, Dick!"

"Oh, that! It'll come in, somehow, some day."

"But it does mean a fresh start?"

"In a way it does. But the thing I mind is leaving you."

"No help for it!" she said gallantly.

"I suppose not."

"I have something, you know," she said hopefully, after a pause. "Phil is fixing it all up now. Ariel wants money, and Sam and I would as soon wait. So it looks as if we might get the ranch, he and I, and he says he'd like to live there and farm it, and put out twenty acres of table berries. If he does, even though it might be some time . . . And then there's The Bells of Saint Giles!" she added, in increasing hope. Dick laughed.

"It'll all work out," he said, following the laugh with a faint frown. "But—it isn't just what I wanted to offer you, my darling."

The last word fluttered her senses, and she laughed excitedly.

"Besides, there may be a miracle!" she said.

Dick looked into the honest, shining, loving blue eyes so near his own, and lightly touched the square, capable hand.

"You're the miracle!" he said.

The phrase was destined to become a household word. For it was but a few days later that Dick came to the Lawrence house to dinner, late, and handed a telegram to Gail across the rice muffins and the old blue milk pitcher and the glass bowl of pink October roses.

"Read it aloud."

Dazedly, she obeyed. It was signed "George G. Leavitt."

"We would be glad if you could arrange to take Paul Willoughby's place, assuming full responsibility for London office. Can offer you assistant if desired."

"Dick!" She swallowed hard. "What does it mean?"

"It means being picked out of the ranks, and handed a field marshal's commission!" Dick said in a voice that shook.

"Congratulations!" Phil said, his handsome Lawrence face one glow of pride and satisfaction.

"But Dick—Dick—can you," Gail stammered. "I mean—are you sure? Without—without—"

"There's one thing I can't do it without!" Dick admitted, folding the telegram to put it back into his breast pocket.

"Money?" Sam asked.

"Nope." Dick looked at Gail, and all the others laughed. "I won't do it without my wife," he said simply.

"But gosh!" This was Sam again. "You'd have to be married right off!"

Dick said nothing. He looked at Gail.

"Gail could be married tomorrow, and get out like a fire horse!" Lily said, and they all laughed.

(TO BE CONTINUED)