The Lucky Lawrences

By Kathleen Norris

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THE STORY

CHAPTER I.—The luck that had brought the Boston Lawrences to California just as 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. The death of their poetic father forced the three eldest children to work so that Sam and little Ariel might continue their education. Phil, now twenty-five, had gone from high school to the iron works. Gail works in the public library and Edith in the book department of Clippersville's largest store. Besides their financial worries, seventeen-year-old Ariel is becoming more and more of a problem and Phil is fascinated by "that terrible" Lily Cass, whose husband has deserted her. She has three little children.

CHAPTER II.—Young Van 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 and Gail now has visions of the turning of the Lawrence luck. Dick Stebbins, Phil's best friend, has the run of the house. Ariel justifies her sisters' fear by sneaking out of the house at night for joy rides. She is almost detected on her return from one of them, but she hoodwinks the family and they think they have suspected her unjustly.

stopping at shop windows. A block before they reached their own corner the Lawrence girls took the footpath through the Morrison place, their hands linked, their voices murmuring along together with the easiness of lifetime intimacy.

"Should you be glad if he was in love with you, Gail?"

"Oh, heavens, I've only seen him once in five years!"

"No, but I mean—should you?"

Gail considered. "Yes, I think I would."

"I don't know that I want you to marry and go away from Clippersville, Sis."

"It mightn't mean that." Gail paused, on the fresh grass that was thickly set with poppies and buttercups, under the Morrisons' oaks. She broke into laughter. "Aren't we idiots! To have it all settled but the wedding day!"

"Yes, but it sometimes comes as suddenly as that, Gail."

"I suppose it does," her sister agreed. "I was thinking," she said after a pause, "that we might have Dick on Sunday—that's one more man, if we dance to the phonograph or have games. That's four men to three girls."

"And Ariel really doesn't count as a girl, because she's just a kid," Edith reminded her, approving this plan.

That night, while Edith sewed and Ariel played idly with pen and paper, Gail played solitaire. It had been her custom to do this ever since her father's death.

As she played she kept up a sort of monologue. Sometimes it was in the form of an argument, a dissertation. Often it was odd bits of poetry, or remembered scenes from Dickens or Poe or Stevenson, recalled word for word; most often of all it was improvised, in the form of a story or of biography.

Just how she had begun this she never could remember; it was a family institution now. Phil never went out when Gail started to play cards. Edith was her loyal prompter when Gail forgot a date in some dramatic tale of English history, or tried to remember the source from which some fantastic theory had sprung.

It was all heartening and happy, and especially wonderful to have the evening end with them all wandering upstairs at once, lights out below, everyone at home, safe and united. Gail saw the roses, still bright and fresh, in her room, and sat on the edge of her bed with one shoe on and the other in her hand, for a long, long time, dreamlug. It was not imagination then? Van Murchison had sent her those roses. He was coming to supper night after next.

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Saturdays and Wednesdays, every other month, Gail stayed at the library until it closed at nine o'clock. On these days Edith always came down at about six with a big sandwich and an apple, and Gail and she repaired to the dressing room where Gail devoured the collation, powdered her nose, exchanged the news of the day with her sister, all in ten minutes' time, and returned to the desk refreshed.

Alternate months she went home at noon on Saturdays and Wednesdays, but was on duty all day Sunday, opening the library at ten o'clock and remaining at the desk until five. Gail hated the Sunday duty, but the Saturday nights were for some mysterious reason eternally exciting. There was always a good deal of noise and traffic downtown, the theaters were packed, the streets gaily lighted, and the quiet, shadowy library seemed like a coign of vantage from which she watched the world.

On the particular Saturday evening that followed his arrival in Clippersville Van Murchison came in. Gail was busily stamping and dating, opening and shutting the covers of books, when a voice in the line asked anxiously:

"Have you a good book about cockroaches?"

She looked up on a wild rush of delight, and there he was, in dinner clothes, with a light overcoat on, but bareheaded. They laughed soundlessly together, and Gail sedately disposed of a dozen claimants before she was free to murmur with him for a minute.

"Oh, hello," she smiled. "D'you want a book?"

"Yes, I seem to need one. How about this one?"

She grinned at "Little Susy's Cousin Prudy."

"I think that would be about your number."

"I'll bet it's racy! I'll bet there's considerable matter that couldn't go through the mails, in this book!"

"Oh, sh-sh-sh-sh!" For they were both bubbling audibly with suppressed laughter.

"Well," said Van, "I'm going up to the Speedwells' for dinner."

"Who are they?"

"Well—Corom Barchi married a Spence, see? And one of the Spence girls married a Speedwell, see?"

"Oh—Burlingame?"

"Burlingame. And gosh, how I hate it!"

"You do?"

"Oh, Lord, yes!"

He regarded her curiously.

"D'you mean to say you'd like it?"

Gail composedly stamped a returned book, smiled at a faded woman with bare gray hair, and a wilted voile dress, and returned to the conversation.

"I imagine I would," she said.

"You don't go to dinners?"

"I haven't much chance."

"What'll you take to go to this one? I could do that—I could do what you're doing. Go in my place."

"Nonsense!" She laughed and shook her head. Van went away, leaving her with a feeling of contentment and completeness, a certain thrilled sense of being alive, of being pleased with everything.

Later, reading in bed, she told Edith Van had come in to see her.

"Gail, he didn't!"

"Oh, yes, he did."

"Oh, Gail," exclaimed Edith, "that's significant!"

"Well . . ." She wouldn't quite admit it. But she drifted off to sleep on the rosiest sea of hope and joy that ever a woman knows.

Van came to supper the next night, and everything was happy, unpretentious, and natural. The kitchen was just what a kitchen should be, when he arrived, a social place in which three pretty girls were busy and three rather clumsy men were trying to make themselves useful. Gail's biscuits were browned to a turn, and the famous Lawrence cheese-and-egg dish turned out perfectly.

They sat about the table until eight o'clock, and then Phil and Dick, after duly carrying handfuls of dishes into the kitchen, departed. Ariel began at the kitchen table her composition, and Edith generously forced Gail and Van away.

"No, please—it's nothing. I'll leave them all until morning anyway!" protested Edith. "You were going somewhere—go on!"

"We were just going for a run. We can perfectly well get these out of the way," Gail argued. But she did not insist. Somehow the dishes and the kitchen did look greasy and dull tonight; a little domestic drudgery was all right, but it would not do to disgust Van with too much of it.

She caught up a coat, and she and Van went out in the dusk to his roadster and rolled smoothly away from dingy Clippersville up into the fragrant hills where twilight still lingered, with the sweet smell of dew on dust and of meadows wilted under the long day's sun.

"How about Old Aunt Mary's?"

"What sort of a place is it? I've never been there."

"Oh, highly respectable!"

They went, accordingly, to Old Aunt Mary's, a low wooden shack on the Peninsula highway, with a greasy dance floor in the center, and greasy bare tables all about it. The air was thick with grease, for Aunt Mary's big frying kettles were right in full view; Aunt Mary and her colored assistants were also greasy.

But the music was good, and the floor good, and the whole scene so novel to Gail that she found it delightful. She and Van talked flippantly and with much laughter, as young persons who are just making each other's acquaintance usually do. Van even laughed when a chance question from Gail brought the conversation about to his own condition.

"But ought you be up so late? Oughtn't you be in bed, drinking acidophilus milk or something?" Gail demanded as the clock's hands moved to half-past nine.

Van crushed out his cigarette, smiled down at his own fingers, smiled up, with a glance into her face.

"My dear child, there's no more the matter with my lungs than with yours!"

"There's—what?" Gail demanded blankly.

"I haven't got con," Van reiterated. "I flunked out of college at Easter, that was all! Or no," he remembered, conscientiously, "I did have a heavy chest cold, coughing, all that. That was part of it, you see? I had to stay home a week at Christmas, and what not—"

In his incorrigibly gay manner he finished the sentence with a shrug.

"You're not sick at all!" Gail said, in so disappointed a tone that they both laughed outright.

They sat on, watching the dancers. Against the low open pine crossbeams of the roof cigarette smoke was rising blue and opaque. The music droned on, the saxophone whining above the other instruments; the crowd was thinning now, some of the tables were empty.

When the clock struck ten Gail said she must go home. Van made no protest; he seemed tired, too, willing to say good-night.

They were laughing again, driving home in the starlight. But at the Lawrence gate Gail was conscious that somehow their parting was going to be a little stiff and flat. Some minutes before they arrived she began to dread it. It would be stiff. It would lay a heavy bar upon the frothy gaiety of the evening.

But she could not save herself. She could not be suddenly flirtatious—amorous. She did not know how. Did he expect her to let him kiss her good-night? Did he even want to kiss her? She did not know.

Suddenly she felt like an innocent, awkward little girl. A sense of helplessness smote her. This happy evening must end on a high note, she must be equal to it. She must not say good-night like Edith saying good-night to one of the girls from the store—like a nice old lady saying good-night to a dear old friend.

But somehow she could not carry it. The wild thought of leaning above him for a second, when she moved to leave the car, and of putting a butterfly kiss on his bared head, crossed her flurried mind. But that would be idiotic—that was not the way girls kissed boys nowadays. They sank against the boys, their bodies limp, their painted mouths plastered against the boys' mouths. Such a girl at this moment would have her head on Van's shoulder.

While she confusedly considered it, they had reached the gate and she was out of the car, Van making no movement to get down. Gail went about to his side of the automobile, and stood looking up at him for a moment.

"Van, I've had a perfectly delicious time."

He moved the gas control idly to and fro on the wheel.

"Sure, it was fun."

His own voice seemed flat. Gail tried desperately for the hilarity of the earlier evening.

"As for your consumption, I shan't get over that for a long time!"

"My what?" he asked dully.

"Your fake consumption."

It was no use. Perhaps they were both too tired for talk, Gail thought.

A pause, brief, but much too long. Then Gail said, "Well, good-night! See you soon?"

"Oh, sure!" he said, and "Good-night!" and he was gone into the dark.

The girl made faces at herself as she went up the steps; she was conscious of a shamed sort of feeling of anti-climax. It was as if she had sold her birthright, somehow.

Actually, she had not compromised; there had not been a word or a glance all evening that might not have been exchanged by the most decorous of friends. But that was part of the trouble!

Or else she was tired; maybe that was it. The front door was open, a bead of gas wavering in the hot, odorous hallway. Edith came out from her doorway like an angel, cool and fragrant from a bath. She welcomed Gail as if from the wars.

"Darling, did you have a good time?"

"It was heavenly. We drove around for awhile, and then we went down to Old Aunt Mary's."

"Gail Lawrence! Was it wild? On Sunday night!"

"No, it was as calm as a mill pond. There were two policemen there, and a lot of nice college boys. Some of the girls looked rather—well, ordinary; but it was very quiet. Nothing rough."

"I thought it was the limit!" said the usually elegant Edith.

"It didn't seem to be."

"I wonder if you'd know the limit if you saw it, Gail," the younger sister said, with a sophisticated, fond smile.

"Oh, Edith, get off your foot!" Gail wanted to say. But she could not be mean to Edith tonight, when Edith had finished up the dishes, and stayed at home. So she [illegible] on with her un[illegible] coffee cup.

began to change; everything was all right.

"How long was Phil gone?"

"Oh, not long. 'Bout an hour."

"He didn't—" Gail paused.

"No, he didn't have time to see anybody. I don't believe he's so crazy about Lily Cass," Edith opined.

"He and Dick had to go over to the Iron Works, didn't they?"

"Yes. And, by the way, Dick's sleeping here, because he and Phil want to get up at five and go over and see an installation—or something—at Milpitas. They're going in Dick's car."

"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 puttering 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. "Do 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

"I Don't Believe He's So Crazy About Lily Cass."

deep black night gloom at the gate, kept returning to buzz about her like a midge, and spoil all the other recollections.

She put out her light, but her thoughts milled and milled unceasingly. What had happened to the gay, companionable mood of the earlier evening? What had made the parting so labored, so artificial?

"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 had 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?"

[illegible] three kids." Phil had

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

"You might try!" Phil's voice had been 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 Wibsers 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!"

"There'll prob'ly be tennis!" Ariel suggested.

"Oh, probably!" Gail was deep in dinner preparations; her tone sang.

"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, she will write?" began Edith, on an upward inflection.

"She may!" Gail agreed indifferently.

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

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

Gail was flushed and angry. Edith reasonable and cool. They talked at once, and Phil frowned faintly, smiled faintly, as he looked from one face to another.

"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 Ede'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.

Nothing more. The girls, as they cleared the table, avoided each other's eyes and presently began to talk lifelessly of other things.

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 Hemmett'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. Better anything than to spend one's evening darning the fraternal socks, as Edith was placidly preparing to do, or patiently to settle down to helping Sam with his correspondence school aviation work, like Gail.

The telephone rang.

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

"Peanuts, anybody?"

"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.

Edith matched socks thoughtfully, frowning at their stripes and selvages. The gas sang, and Dick stood up and lowered it.

Gail's thoughts rocked to and fro deliciously; she was writing a story. A woman—very beautiful but entirely unprincipled—carrying on a love affair under her husband's very eyes. . . .

"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, an almost contemptuous, smile.

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

The man laughed, and sprawled a placating great hand across the table.

"Aw, don't be mad, Gail."

"I'm not mad."

"Yes, you are! But what do you care what I think of the Murchison outfit? They don't."

"I only think, when you don't know a person, and that person has never done one thing against you—" the girl commenced stiffly.

"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 Chipps' 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!"

"Gail, she will telephone you!" Edith predicted fervently.

"I don't know." Gail was tired and blue.

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

"I put the lights out. Everyone 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.

[To Be Continued Next Week]