Love in Chief

BY ROSE K. WEEKES.

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CHAPTER IX.

WE TOOK SWEET COUNSEL TOGETHER

Lucian was a poor sleeper, hard to lull and easy to rouse, with a habit of waking at four in the morning and reading novels in bed; his good nights had six hours' sleep, his bad nights none. As a young man, he had innocently done his best to acquire the chloral habit, but years had taught him wisdom; his present panacea was bromide of potassium, of which, at times, he took a surprising quantity. But he shunned it whenever he could.

Excitements in the day usually entailed sleeplessness at night. After Dolly refused him Lucian was not surprised to find himself broad awake at one o'clock in the morning, with every prospect of remaining so. But the dark hours had long ceased to seem interminable; he lighted the gas, enshrouded himself in a gorgeous dressing-gown, in whose gay colours he took an artless pleasure, and devoted his mind to the Golden Novelettes, at a penny a number. Since Lucian's last illness, Farquhar slept in the dressing-room adjoining, and jauntily left the communicating door ajar; but Lucian had wisely shut it early in the evening, and was lost in solitude.

Towards dawn a voice came through that closed door, repeating the very name which was running in Lucian's thoughts. "Dolly, Dolly!" Lucian took it for the creature of his brain, and thought with joy that now he might legitimately take some bromide; but it came again, and was this time coupled with epithets which had never crossed Lucian's mind, still less his lips. He divined that something was wrong with Farquhar, and slid off his bed to see, taking a candle. Farquhar lay on his back, restlessly muttering, between sleep and delirium; his face was flushed and his skin dry. "Fever," said Lucian, and sat down to watch.

Fever taxings are not commonly coherent, nor do patients, except in books, relate at length the story of their lives; all that Lucian learned was some strange oaths, besides the fact that Farquhar wanted water. He supplied that desire liberally, and presently had the satisfaction of seeing Farquhar wake up and stare about him with the air of a man newly released from incubus.

"Fever, sonnez," said Lucian. "How did you pick up that?"

"In Africa. Yes, I'm let in for it occasionally—curse the place! I've had a pretty bad turn, I reckon. Where's that clinical?"

The thermometer when consulted climbed a hundred and three, and Farquhar decreed quinine. Hurrying off to prevent him in getting it, Lucian caught the tail of his robe in the fire-irons and dragged the fender half across the room before he could stop. He turned round and solemnly cursed it with a malediction exceeding that of the Cardinal Lord Archbishop of Rheims. Farquhar flung a pillow to speed him on his way, and Lucian stepped backward into the water jug.

When this contretemps had been arranged with the help of the towels, Lucian sat on the bed, a muffled figure with his bright eyes and brown face and draggle-tailed dressing-gown, the skirt of which he carefully spread over a chair to keep it away from his ankles.

"You ought to be in bed," said Farquhar, impatiently; "not sitting up and playing the fool with me. Phew! it's hot it is!"

"Oh, I'm not asking for any flowers on my grave," said Lucian. "I like doing it. And, look here, Farquhar, I don't want to be inquisitive, but have you been making love to Miss What's-her-name?"

Farquhar sprang up. "What's it to you if I have?"

"Something, seeing because I happen to have been making love to her myself."

"Yes, confound you! Living here on my charity, and by way of return you make love to my girl on the sly!"

"Farquhar, you whilit up and lie down," said Lucian, authoritatively.

Tormented with fever and worse tormented with jealousy, midway between love and friendship, Farquhar hesitated; but he finished by obeying. He flung up his scarred hand over his eyes and breathed deeply, longing for coolness. "Put that light out," he said, "it drives me wild. I'll be right enough to-morrow, but I'm ill now, and that's the fact. Ill! I'm parching!"

Lucian snuffed out the candle neatly between his finger and thumb—an intricate trick which has the advantage of killing the smell. "You been popping the question?" he asked, and dropped his long cold fingers across Farquhar's fore-head.

"Yes."

"Well?"

"I'm to wait three months."

"What on earth for?"

"She wants to consider my virtues and yours."

"Mine? Oh, I'm out of the running. I only put myself forward as a peradventure in case you didn't exist."

"You're not out of the running. I shouldn't wonder if she took you. She says she likes you better than me."

"You sure of that?"

"She told me so—the pert fool. I wished her in Hades."

"You've got it badly—and very badly; but I'd rather you didn't swear at her."

"Badly? Yes. But I'll tell you what's playing the mischief with me. I kissed her."

"She let you?"

Farquhar laughed. "Took me!"

"Oho, my reverend friend, you did did you?"

"I did. Heavenly sweet it was, too, where she'd got it from, Lord knows. The power to drive a man stark mad hold on, will you, you alcohol fool. That's meant for me, De Saumarez, not you."

"It's a fact," said Lucian, "I'd never could resist it like myself. After all, there's no harm in it, and it's mighty agreeable while both parties are willing, though I take it Miss Dolly was not."

"She wasn't. You're right there."

"Upon my word, I almost wish I could have a go myself."

A scratch was caught at while their Farquhar had been talking. He stood up, leap of light from the candle revealed face and was gone.

"My God," said Lucian, "and it's the truth."

Lucian got up, set the candle near him, and sank down on the bed. At first there shone again the lighted photograph of the open drawer, vague figure black against it; then he slid back to his pillow and lay still, and said through the darkness: "I'm damned if you shall."

"I'll be damned if you shall," was answered.

Truth cleared the air as it rarely does. They had been on the verge of the minute before—but now it was all Christian charity to ignore it.

"She's safe to choose you," Lucian argued. "She's no ambitious fool, I understand, and look at me! I don't know which is more revolting, my health or my prospects."

"Well, I won't be taken for money. You see here, didn't see you as a model and carve." He had begun granite-quarry in the Ardennes and I put you in as managing partner, and in three months you'd be talking differently."

"I bet you a shilling you'll go back on it if you do."

"Betting's contrary to Christian principles." They both laughed, and then Lucian said: "Seems to me you rather enjoy shamming virtuous, you cursed mate old humbug!"

"I do; hadn't you found that out?"

"I can believe virtue comes easier when it's a vice," said Lucian, meditatively, "but it strikes me very forcibly, somehow, that patient continuance in well-doing has undermined your principles. You'll feel pretty awkward at going to the deuce."

"Would I? If I had that girl in my power, I'd be handy enough."

"I deny it; but let that pass. Anyhow, if you had me in your power you wouldn't lift a finger against me."

"If you got between me and her—"

"You'd say, 'Confound you, my children!' and bite your thumb at us."

"For my own sake and not yours, then; I never did an unselfish thing yet."

"Oh, you are a liar," said Lucian. "Why do you tell such lies? And, look here; I've something serious to say to you. I won't put up with being told I live on your charity, not even when you're sick."

"I shall say what I please."

"And I shall go when I please."

"Oh, confound you!" said Farquhar; and he laughed and acquiesced.

As has been said, Dolly was at this time inclining towards Farquhar, but an episode of the next week set the rivals even again. She and Bernard accepted Mrs. Merton's invitation. She bought a book on etiquette and studied it, but was nervous, nevertheless. Bernard also studied the book, because he wished to avoid blunders, but he remained perfectly composed; a point illustrating the radical difference between their characters. Bernard took in to dinner a pretty, clever, well-bred, well-dressed girl of five-and-twenty, who had heard his story, was impressed by his looks, and took an interest in him, as she told Mrs. Merton. She tried to draw him out and put him at ease, and their conversation grew rather humourous ere she recognized her error.

Dolly's partner was a big, dark, heavy-featured man, with a low, soft, monotonous voice and tired eyes. Hugh Meryon was Hugh Meryon to Dolly, and he was nothing more; but at Monaco he was known as Gambling Meryon, for among gamblers his play was remarkable by reason of his extraordinary and fantastic luck. He was the son of a highly respectable dean, and had suffered a highly respectable education; but he was born to gamble as the sparks fly upward, and gamble he did, sacrificing all to his passion. He loved the excitement, not the money won, like Fox, who declared that his favorite occupation was playing and winning his second favorite playing and losing. His presence at Monkswell was due to Mrs. Merton's fondness for hocksheep, mustard with mutton, and other things which she should not have liked.

"I hear De Saumarez was to have come to-night," Meryon began, without preface, before the advent of the soup. "I'm awfully sorry he couldn't. I wanted to see him again. Do you know him?"

"Do you know him?" Dolly exclaimed, simultaneously.

"Oh yes; I used to know him pretty well, but I haven't seen him for nine years. But he's the sort of fellow one doesn't forget, besides I was there when his wife died."

"Did you know her? What was she like?"

"Awfully delicate and quite young and very pretty. De Saumarez was mad about her, wanted to lie down and feel caught he wasn't much good himself. You used to see him taking her out in a bath-chair and dodging the stones for fear they should jolt her. I'm boring you?" Meryon was diffident, and always expected to be found a bore; he had taken fright now at his own fluency, and induced Dolly inexpressibly by trying to talk about the weather, which he could not do. It was several minutes before she got him on the track again.

"What was wrong with Mrs. De Saumarez?"

"Consumption."

"He's afraid of that himself now."

"Is he? I expect he's caught it from her doctors say you can't tell be was always with her. But the queerest part of it all was the end."

"Yes?" said Dolly, softly. Meryon had forgotten her, and she thought it safer to let him forget lest he should shy again. The gambler went on simply enough, rather to amuse the pink-looking rather wild and asked me to play. I didn't want to; I didn't want to clean him out with his wife sick, and I knew my next streak of luck was about due. And once I begin I can't leave off the cards won't let you go till you've had their spell on. But he would have it. Forte we chose. I could tell every card in every game we played, and that was fifty-three; but that wouldn't interest you. Anyway, I've seen queer things in cards, but never anything so queer as that night's play. I dare say you've heard that gamblers say spades mean death. Well, the king of spades kept on handing up, and every time the black suit showed I sewed the board. He kept on doubling the stakes, and I lost my head, as I always do when we came to the end of the spell and counted on I found I'd won sixteen thousand of him; only fancy! He swore that Marguerite, his wife, you know, was provided for, but I didn't believe him for he was just as if he were for. So then he asked me to come in and see her and convince me. I went and I said I would, then and there, though I was a fool to begin in the morning. I was pretty queer for the cards had got into my head and I was counting the stars and multiplying them by the stones on the pavement and I was mad with myself besides, and I thought I might get her to take it back or some of it. Well he took me in and up. I didn't know where he was going till he threw open a door and there we were in her room, and there was she laid out on the bed, dead. Candles at the four corners and flowers all about. I never shall forget it." He shuddered and stopped.

And Mr. de Saumarez?"

"Oh, he was like a lunatic talking to her. He'd put by money for the funeral—that's what he meant by saying she was provided for. He hadn't ten shillings himself. I tried to get him to take some of it, went off after the funeral and I didn't see him again. I never have felt such a cur. I'd never touch a card—"

"And did you know your own?" Dolly asked, because she had nearly called him Hugh, and the subject was in fact growing interesting in the feelings of a phoenix.

"Yes, that's why I knew asked me to play. I couldn't refuse her."

"Then it was of your number?"

"Yes, but she wanted me to play specially. You see I had rather a name in those days. She was willing luck she'd backed, besides, she didn't quite understand."

"And afterwards?"

"Afterwards I just went on playing. It didn't seem worth while not to, you know," said the gambler, with his jaded smile.

CHAPTER X

WAS THAT THE LANDMARK?

Mrs. Merton possessed a touching credulity which could persuade the Heroes to Beckon with the hand and cold temporarily repair rifts in the world's ills so well that it would run up and down the social scale with not oil-lubricating disorder. When she brought up her women guests after dinner she gathered round the fire and gossiped like a school girls. Sitting next the hostess there with her shoes on the fire-hearth, scalding her face with a pretty cocked-hat fan, Bernard's pretty partner, while talking forth concerning flirtation, she cast from little features and a demure nose, adorable lifted and moved her head like a bird, for think, early fair was not stained, her eyes were gray and clear, and had a little innocent look, as those she was in nature and simple that had set her down as a great heiress. But concerning that her demure simplicity was of a kind that comes from Park Lane and Debrett.

"I detest flirtation," she was saying. "It is antagonistic to the vulgarity of flirtation. It may be fit for men, but not for women."

"Maybe, child," drawled her aunt-in-law, a plain but well-bred county matron with Hugh Meryon before to-day, and was not the friendless with him all the same.

"I was converting him," said Ella Merton. "He belongs to the Anti-Gamboling League, don't you, Angela?" and she had to be guided around him to lure him away.

"I always think that people are like cards—they lose interest when they're exhausted," murmured the short-eyed woman whom Dolly recognized as the lady in the black frills.

"Maud, don't be flippant," said Angela, and it disconcerted. "If you know Mr. Meryon you must know that he absolutely can't flirt. That's why I like him."

"I like flirting," said Maude; "it's so desperately interesting. Talking sense is such a desperate bore, you know. It's all very well for you, my dear girl; men'll listen to an angel that's on a visit to Worth. But with my sallow complexion it's simply suicidal."

"Men who flirt are no better than city clerks who kiss their best girls under the mistletoe at suburban tea-parties," said Angela, elevating her little pointed chin.

"Now, I like that kind of a young man," said Ella; "because, they don't exist. She won't talk like this when she's married, will she, Maud?"

"I never shall marry," Angela asseverated. "To decline a proposal is bad enough, but to accept one—horrible!"

"Don't see where the horrors come in," murmured Maud, placidly. "I suppose my sensibilities aren't fine enough. I've always enjoyed it."

"I dislike the ceremony of kissing," said Angela, throwing down the gauntlet.

"It isn't a ceremony, it's one of the rites of women," said Ella, dissolving into laughter.

Angela laughted too. She was in earnest, but not to the extent of becoming a bore. "I believe in the rights of women," she said. "Don't you agree with me, Miss Fane?"

"About kissing?" said Dolly, "I don't think it matters much; a kiss means nothing."

Angela looked rather horrified; Maud Prideaux smiled behind her fan; Mrs. Merton was frankly interested. "What a lovely original idea!" she said. "All the three-volumes novels sed to end with the three-volume novels used to end with fled snakes, and Lady Imogen felt the tide of love bearing her away and her hair came down. And in girls' stories it's the bell that rings down the curtain on the second scene. And you don't believe in it?"

"No," said Dolly, speaking in her swift, straightforward way. "A kiss is a touch and nothing more, neither pleasant nor the reverse. What I should dislike would be to be kissed against my will."

"You are quite a revolutionary, Miss Fane," drawled Mrs. Prideaux, "I shan't let my husband talk to you."

"With your sallow complexion it would be simply suicidal," Mrs. Merton agreed, smoothly.

Maud Prideaux's cynicism was pointed by the fact that she and her husband were notoriously devoted.

"I'd trust Lal anywhere," said Angela Laurenson, half to herself.

"Oh, Lal! but we all know that Lal's perfection. When's he coming, Angela? I wonder you exist without him," said Mrs. Prideaux. Angela coloured, but she stood her ground.

"To-morrow, I expect," she said. "I hoped he would be here to-night, but he said he might not be able to get off."

"Then we shall have to be on our best behaviour," Mrs. Prideaux was beginning, when the gentlemen, coming up, cut short the discussion.

In the solitude of her chamber, Dolly that night took her heart and mind to pieces, and diligently perquisited all their workings, pried into motives, dissected sensations, and probed like any surgeon. She wanted replies to two questions: first, why she was unnaturally indifferent to kisses; second, whether she preferred Lucian de Saumarez or Noel Farquhar. Her analysis left her little the wiser; she got few facts, because there were few to get. As Bernard would have accepted a kiss with unaffected composure, so Dolly in the same spirit could not understand the pother made about the matter; she was gifted with a masculine indifference, or, as Angela Laurenson would have phrased it, with no feminine modesty. Yet, when she turned to the second question, the thought of loving either suitor sent Dolly flying to unapproachable snow-peaks of virgin coldness, where the foot of no man ever had trodden or even would tread. Dolly married, loving and beloved, and mother of half a dozen children, would still have kept in her heart a shrine of vestal purity. Careless about the borders of her kingdom she might be, but the citadel was inviolable. She came out of her quest little the wiser, but with her mind made up.

She turned on her pillow and slept soundly till the dawn, blossoming like a golden rose between the clouds, shone in upon her lying between linen sheets with smell of violets, with all her chestnut hair twisted into one thick plait. The light roused her, and she was up in a trice and splashing in her tub of rain-water, then dressing rapidly, rolling up her hair in a knot, fastening on her blue dress and her plain white apron; in twenty minutes she was ready. Downstairs she went full ten minutes late, and annoyed with herself and consequently with Maggie, who had been late too for no reason, as Dolly told her, severely. Dolly laid the table for breakfast with a pot of wall-flowers in the middle; she fetched the coffee-pot, and put on the milk to boil in an enamelled saucepan, and refilled the shining kettle—all Dolly's pots and pans looked like silver. She sliced the bacon into the thinnest of thin rashers and set Maggie to fry it. Finally she went to the churn, where she should have been half an hour earlier, praying that the butter might come quickly. She stood at the open window, the sun looked across the sill; a brown bee hummed in, seeking the wall-flowers; the bacon sizzled, the churn gurgled and Dolly frowned.

"It's, miss," said Maggie, pausing with the frying pan aslant. "Yes, miss, there's a gentleman coming down the drive!"

"Hold the frying pan straight!" was Dolly's stern reply.

"Yes, miss," said the irrepressible one, starting, wide-eyed, "but he's coming to the window, and it's—"

"Go on with your work!" said Dolly, in such a tone that Maggie went on. A shadow fell across Dolly's hands.

"Good morning, Sister Dolly," said Lucian de Saumarez, leaning his elbows on the sill.

"Don't call me that; I'm not a Roman Catholic," said Dolly, not too graciously.

"No? I praise the pigs!"

"Why do you dislike them so?"

"I hate the doctrine of confession and the system of spiritual directors," said Lucian with unusual emphasis. "I call it mentally degrading—however, I didn't come here to talk theology. Is the agraciation Lucretian answer about?"

"Bernard'll be in to breakfast at half-past seven, if you mean him."

"Then I guess I'll wait. Hullo, Maggie, how's the headache?"

"Bettherin, sir," said the delighted Maggie, dropping a courtesy. "They're nearly thank you sir."

"Maggie go and dust the parlour; I'll see to the bacon," said Dolly. Maggie retired quite crestfallen and sad.

"Why did you send the child off? She won't doing any harm," said Lucian.

"I call her back and go myself, if you want to talk to her."

"I don't, I don't, you know I don't! But why are you so cross?"

"Because I was late!" said Dolly, candidly and laughed, and recovered her temper. "Why weren't you at the Merrons' last night?" Mrs. Merton said she looked you."

"I was looking after old Farquhar; he's been seedy." Dolly's lip curled. "He's always seedy. He had a touch of fever the night before last, and raved about you like old Boots."

"I should have thought that as a literary man you might find a better simile. I met a friend of yours there, Mr. Meryon."

"What? Gambling Meryon? You don't say," exclaimed Lucian. "I'll look him up. I haven't seen him since he won sixteen thousand off me at a sitting. Lordy! what a getting down-stairs that was!"

"So he told me."

"Did he favor the whole thing?"

"Yes."

"What about Marguerite?"

"Yes."

"Ah," said Lucian, and whistled a few notes. "Well?"

"I don't know what you mean," said Dolly, conscious that his bright inquisitive eyes were studying her face.

"Does it make any difference?"

"No. Yes," said Dolly. "I am very, very sorry."

"If I'd thought you'd take it that way," said Lucian, swinging himself up to a seat on the sill, "I'd have given you the whole history myself, and made it most awfully pathetic. I bet Meryon didn't pile it on half strong enough."

"You're perfectly callous!"

"My dear good girl, it's nine years now," said Lucian, "and there's no sentiment about me at my age. Hullo! whose have we here?"

Dolly looked up from the churn and saw a stranger coming up the path. He was a young man of six or seven and twenty, tall, fair, slender, very good-looking and most correctly dressed. At first glance Dolly saw a resemblance to her last night's acquaintance, Angela Laurenson. He had the same fair hair, the same dark-grey eyes, and the same delicate and colourless type of features, though his were more regular, his nose in particular, being accurately Greek; but the likeness appeared only in the outward mould, Angela's alertness being replaced by an air of languid tranquility. He was carrying his bag and a gold-headed cane and seemed to find the cane alone as much as he wished to support.

"I beg your pardon," he said; "could you direct me to The Hall?"

"Go back to our gates and turn to the right, straight on till you come to four cross-roads; take the left hand road up the hill, and you will see The Hall on your right, a white house among firtrees," said Dolly, who had the masculine power of concise explanation.

"About how far is it?"

"Two miles and a quarter."

"Thanks very much," said the stranger, with a resigned air, preparing to go.

"Been walking far?" inquired Lucian, who had not failed to notice the dust on his boots.

"From Wemborne. I missed my train and could get no cab," said the stranger, mentioning a junction, twelve miles away.

"Why, man, you must be dog-tired! Have you had any breakfast?"

The stranger smiled and shook his head.

"We shall be very glad if you will come in and share ours. It is ready now," said Dolly, simply.

"Thanks very much, I am particularly grateful, but I'm afraid I can't wait."

"Have some cider; I can recommend it," said Lucian, hospitably.

"Or a glass of milk," suggested Dolly, maternally careful of his health.

"You are very good," said the stranger, "I am rather thirsty."

"You'll have some cider, then?"

"No, no cider, thanks. But I should very much like the milk."

Dolly went away to fetch it, and the stranger's eyes followed her with involuntary admiration.

"What a confound nuisance, these Wemborne trains are!" said Lucian, who knew the time-table considerably better than the porters at the station. "They leave you two minutes to catch your connection, and then make the main-line train half an hour late!"

"I could have caught mine," said the stranger, with a hint of a smile, "if I had chosen to run for it. But it was such a fag, you know."

"You like walking twelve miles better than running twelve yards?"

"I don't know that I put it to myself in that form," said the stranger; "but I own that I don't like hurrying. I could take my time over the twelve miles, you see."

"You've done it in pretty good time," said Lucian. "Three hours, or less."

"Nearer eight, I fancy."

"You came by the early train?"

"Ye towers o' Julia!" was Lucian's irrelevant comment on this admission.

"I have an idea that I got lost in the dark," explained the stranger. "I seemed to meet the same duck-pond several times. Thank you very much. I am immensely obliged to you." He took from Dolly's hand the warm and foaming milk, drank it, and went on his way, walking, as Lucian now noticed, slightly lame, but gracefully still, as he went up the steep, stony path. Dolly said, watching him with softened eyes, as she sometimes watched Lucian: "He looks tired to death. I am sure he is not strong."

"Maternal soirit! You were born to be a nurse, Dolly."

"No. I never want to nurse women or children, but I am sorry for the men, especially when they are plucky, as he is. I wonder who he can be?"

"So do I," said Lucian. "I'd also like to know why he shied so violently at the notion of cider. I dare say we shall hear."

They left off talking by common consent. The entrance of the stranger had checked and turned their thoughts, and, strangely enough, seemed to dislocate their simple and friendly relation. Dolly took out her butter, pulled down her sleeves, and turned her attention to the bacon. When she broke silence it was to speak of a fresh subject, one which she had not meant to broach that morning, though it had been on her mind since the night before.

"Mr. de Saumarez, will you take a message from me to Mr. Farquhar?"

"With all my heart, only I've a kind of idea that he'd rather you told him yourself."

"No, but I would not. I don't wish to see him again for the present. I don't wish to see him for three months."

"Three months!"

"Yes."

"That's a long time, Dolly."

"Not long for what I want to do."

"Make up your mind?"

"Yes."

"I can't see why you shouldn't do that now. Farquhar's what I should call eligible building-ground; you might erect a cathedral on him, or you might run up a slave-market; anyhow, he'll be what you make him, Dolly."

"I certainly shan't make anything of him if you go on praising him. You ought to know that praise is the strongest of disqualifications."

"You're an unreasonable being. If you don't see him, how do you think you're going to know your own mind better three months hence than now?"

"I'm coming to that. I don't want to see him, but if he cares to write to me I'll answer his letters. That's what I want you to tell him."

"Glory!" said Lucian. "Then while he's away I'll walk in daily and praise him up to the skies. I think I read my titles clear to a gay time."

"I want you to go, too," said Dolly.

"Me? Oh, I'm a harmless individual; you needn't do that."

"But I want to put you both on an equality and judge fairly."

"Ah, but you'll never marry me."

The sincerity of conviction was in Lucian's voice; Dolly had that one fleeting glimpse into his fundamental creed. While he lived he would never give up hope, but behind it he nursed the certainty that no hope of his would ever find fulfilment; such indelible characters had fallen written upon his spirit. Dolly pitied him so much that she was almost ready to contradict his creed by the promise of herself. Almost, but not quite; the shadow of the change which she had felt that morning interfered to prevent her. Better to wait, she thought; better to deliberate and weigh, not act on the impulse of a mood. She did not speak, and Lucian's golden chance passed.

"I don't know whether I shall marry you or not," she said. "I'll write to you both; and at the end of the three months I'll let you know, if you still care. There's Bernard."

It was not Bernard, however; Bernard was very late that morning. For the space of half an hour those two, who felt that their interview should have been neatly rounded off by the entrance of a third person, who forced to make conversation in the regions of small talk. Real life is not often appropriate in its arrangement of incidents. Eight o'clock struck before Bernard walked in, large and calm and hungry. Lucian disburdened himself of his message, which was merely an invitation to play billiards.

"I guess Farquhar must be pretty sick of teaching me," said Bernard, cutting himself a round off the loaf; after which he supplied Dolly's needs. "But I suppose he knows his own business best. I say, did you see that girl who took me to supper last night?"

"Dinner, Bernard."

"Dinner, then. Did yo see her?"

"Yes, I did."

"Who was she?" asked Lucian.

"Miss Angela Laurenson."

"Pretty girl, very smart, woman's rights, little aristocrat; yes, I know. Go ahead, Colossus; what about her?"

"I guess the dude who ran me down's her brother. I met him again this morning," said Bernard—"that's all."

"Oh, what was he like?"

"Weedy looking chap in gray, with a drawl and a carpet-bag."

"I. L. Laurenson, Esq., Royal Artillery, Distinguished Service Order," said Lucian. "I know him, too, by name, as you would if you'd ever talked to Angela Laurenson for two minutes on end. She can't keep him out of the conversation."

"Does she call him Lal?" Dolly asked, curiously. Lucian nodded.

"Well, I guess I talked to her for two hours on end," said Bernard, cutting himself another slice from the loaf; "but she didn't mention him."

"What did you talk about?"

"Me," said Bernard, "and her. Pass me a couple of eggs, will you, Dolly?"

CHAPTER XI.

IN ARDEN.

The breast of a wooded hill, leaning towards water still as glass and green as malachite, confronted the Hotel des Boers, at Vresse-sur-Semois. Dark-green and silver, the valley lay below; a nightingale was singing in the dawn; and presently the gold eye of the sun, looking down through the high woods, shone on hills white with dew, spangling them with fiery drops, and changing into silver threads the little singing streams which tumbled down through bright-green dells to join the silent river. Mists cleared away like breath from a mirror, and there on the water a little ivory islet lay like an anchored dream; they had been cutting the hay, and from the grey swaths floated up the odours of Eden. Thus rose Lucian's first day in Arden, and he was up to see the dawn.

Farquhar had gone on some weeks before to complete his arrangements. Having been brought up by his Scotch relations near Aberdeen, he knew a good deal about granite, and on his first visit of inspection had pointed out that in texture, grain, and colour the stone of the Petit-Fays quarry resembled the valuable red granite of Peterhead. The owner simply laughed him to scorn, and went about lauding his scrupulous honesty at the expense of his sense in a fashion which afforded a subtle gratification to the person praised. Nevertheless, Farquhar persisted in buying the quarry, and soon proved himself right. At once he brought over new, modern machinery, and sent for skilled workmen from England. His design was to supply the Belgian market, which had heretofore been satisfied with Scotch granite. Paving-stones, better finished than those turned out by the primitive quarries of the Meuse; polished shop-fronts for the new suburbs of Brussels, especially the splendid streets near the Boulevard d'Anspach; these he could tender at lower prices than the Scotch dealers, for in Belgium labour is cheap and the cost of transport light, especially on the State railways. For the present he retained his English workmen, with the intention of replacing them by Belgians so soon as they had learned the niceties of their trade; and for this purpose he had already formed classes for instruction in polishing and sculpture. His manager, an American named Charlesworth, had the teaching of them, and Lucian had promised to give his services as well.

The quarry, which was already in full work, lay behind the bend of the Semois, just out of sight of the hotel. In Belgium one looks for the grubbily picturesque, for endless variations on the themes of dirt and art, rather than for the beauty of rock and wood and river; yet here in the south the streams run through the loneliest, loveliest valleys, abandoned to their kingfishers and great butterflies, and musical with little springs which run among the hills. The quarries are hardly eyesores. The approaches of Farquhar's were even picturesque; the intractable granite, interrupting with its fire-scarred shoulders the suave contour of the hills, had scattered rocks across the stream, which reared in a white ruff round each and raced away with plenty of noise and foam. The stately cliff which the quarrymen were labouring to destroy rose up behind from among trees. Lucian, who never loved his bed, by six o'clock had had his breakfast and was standing on the verge, looking down into the pit. It was unbeautiful; blackened like a hollow tooth by the smoke of the blasting, swarming with midget figures, the rock fell away down to the depth, where the blocks of granite were being split up for convenience of loading. The graceful, deliberate crane let sing its trucks to be filled, and also slowly raised each to its appointed bourn; the noise of the steam crusher, where the chips were being ground to powder for cement, went on continuously; the boring-machine was also at work; and four or five men, splitting up a large block of granite, were playing "The Bluebells of Scotland" by striking on drills of different tones.

Presently the whistles of a siren silenced the music, and with one accord the quarrymen left their work and took shelter. Five minutes later, detonation and strong reverberations shook the cliff; and when the smoke cleared, Lucian saw fresh boulders lying displaced from their bed, and a fresh scar graven upon the corrugated walls. So the work went on. Danger was always present; but the danger of the quarry is not like the loathsome sleuth-hound of disease which tracks down the potter and the worker in lead. It is a sudden and violent peril, which leaps out like a lion and strikes down its victim in the midst of life. Day by day the quarryman deliberately stakes against death the dearest of man's gifts; it is not surprising that for other stakes he is a gambler, too.

There was an accident even as Lucian watched. A young Belgian neglected to obey the warning of the siren, and was overtaken. After the fumes and smoke had cleared, his mates went down and found him lying unconscious, little injured, but stupefied by the poisonous gases which the explosion had set free. A crowd came together, Farquhar among them, barely distinguishable by the eye, though the tone of his voice came up with surprising clearness. The lad was carried away, and work went on again; but Lucian was now all on fire to join the toilers and take his share in their risks. Most excitable men fall disinterestedly in love with danger at least once in their lives; Lucian himself had done so once before, and had escaped a mad dog scare by picking up in his arms the supposed terror, an extremely depressed but perfectly sane fox-terrier. For this piece of uncalculated bravado he had consistently and correctly disclaimed the title of heroism, of course in vain. He turned now and marched gaily down the path, with the intention of falling to work at once; but mid-way down he encountered Farquhar, with Charlesworth, the quarry-master, and was stopped for introduction.

Smith Charlesworth was a huge man who would have balanced Bernard Fane upon a see-saw; he dwarfed Farquhar's excellent proportions. His bronzed countenance might have been hammered out of the granite which he surveyed, without any great skill on the part of the craftsman; but it inspired confidence. His slow, soft voice and deliberate movements built up the notion of strength; and Lucian had not heard him speak two sentences before he knew that he liked him. Here was a man whose calm courage was not at the mercy of his nerves; a man also of stern rectitude, by nature narrow, but broadened into tolerance by experience.

"Yes, it's a bad business about that young chap," he was saying; "but what can you expect? It was his own fault. They've got industry but no method. Here's Mr. Farquhar thinks they're going to turn out A1 copper-bottomed sculptors, but I guess he'll find his error. The haven't got it in 'em."

"Well, we've just got to put it in," said Farquhar, good-humouredly. He was on his best behaviour, saying not a word that was genuine, and consequently his conversation was dull.

"What do you think of the quarry?" Lucian asked.

"First rate." Charlesworth stepped to the edge of the pit and stood there calm as a rock, with the square toes of his big boots projecting into the air. He pointed to the dark buttress behind which the boring-machine was at work. "See that? That's the finest sample I've seen out of Scotland. You mark my words; in five years you'll be sending shipments right out to the States, and they'll take all you've got and ask for more. Mr. Farquhar's begun the right way; he's put plenty money in the concern and he'll take plenty out—always providing we don't get sent to kingdom come first."

Farquhar laughed at this last idea, but Lucian asked an explanation. The American impressed him as a very careful speaker, not given to random words.

"Well," said Charlesworth, stroking his chin, "these chaps here don't take to your Britishers, and that's the bed-rock fact."

"What's going to happen, do you think?"

"I guess we shall be running into some dirt before long."

"Most pacific nation in the world, the Belgians," said Lucian, cheerfully. "Been fought over so many times that they haven't a ha'porth of kick left in them."

"Yes; good square fighting's not in their line. It's the stab in the dark they go in for," said the American, drily. "Two-thirds of the continental anarchists hail from Brussels. I've run Dutchmen and I've run Kanakas, and I guess I can make out to put up with these stiff-necked Britishers of yours; but the Belgian mongrels are enough to make an oyster sick. However, the crew's not my affair; and if Mr. Farquhar's satisfied, why, so am I. And I hope I may be wrong."

Charlesworth was no croaker; having given his warning he left the matter, and they went down into the quarry talking of possibilities rather than of presentiments. Lucian could not see the grounds of his forebodings; the men seemed friendly, both with the manager and between themselves, and they were certainly all that is gracious to him personally. Lucian thought in French when he spoke to a Frenchman.

They stayed all day at the quarry, taking lunch in the engine-room on slim little sausages and beer. Later on, Lucian assisted at the modeling class, acting as interpreter for Charlesworth, who could not always find the right technical terms. He was a strict master, extreme to mark what was done amiss. "I've no opinion of soft jobs," he said to Lucian, who had stood listening to what seemed a very harsh rebuke for a very small fault on the part of an elderly English workman who had taken Lucian's fancy. "Keep them up to the mark, that's my motto. I never will tolerate scamping. Give me good work and I'll give you good wages; but if a man don't handle the tools the way he ought, why, he can go! and good riddance, say I."

"That's all right for you, with your confounded meticulous correctitude and exactitude, my friend," said Lucian, still vicariously sore; "but how would you feel if you know that the worst work they put in was head and shoulders better than the best work you put in?"

"I guess I should turn to and take a hand at something I could do."

Charlesworth turned and looked at him. Lucian, laughing, appeared hardened and insouciant, but the American was slow to judge. "Well, I don't say I'm right," he said; "and I don't say you're wrong. But I couldn't do with your way, and I guess you couldn't do with mine."

"There are nine-and-sixty ways of constructing tribal lays, and every single one of them is right," quoted Lucian, coughing.

"You toddle home; the siren will go in half an hour, and this air's bad for your cough," said Farquhar, coming up and putting his hand on Lucian's shoulder.

"Shut up, you prophet! you thing of evil! I haven't coughed once this day."

"There you err; I've heard you twice, myself."

"Well, that isn't once, is it?"

They laughed, and Farquhar shook him by the shoulders, apostrophising him as a fool. "It's reeking damp here by the water; you'll be laid up if you aren't careful."

"You want me to see your dinner's ready, that's what it is," said Lucian, going. Charlesworth looked at Farquhar. "Sick?" he said, with a backward nod.

"No constitution at all."

"I should put a bullet through my head if it was me," said Charlesworth, briefly. "This world's not made for incompetents." But, luckily for the peace of the quarry, Farquhar did not hear what he said.

Lucian went to the Hotel des Boers and flirted with Laurette, the charmingly pretty maid, as he smoked on the veranda. He shared Dolly's opinion that a kiss or two did not matter to any one, and he carried his views into practice, when she did not. This was not heroic, but Lucian had many commonplace failings which disqualified him for the post of hero. He was still living at Farquhar's expense; he had brought into this present undertaking nothing but his knowledge of modeling. Yet he accepted his position and was in the main content. The timely sale of a couple of short stories had permitted him to buy the clothes which he was wearing and to pay his journey over, otherwise he would have euphemistically borrowed from Farquhar. Little debts such as that galled him; but the main burden sat lightly on his shoulders, which was well; for, as he told himself with obstinate pride when visited by the pricks of self-contempt, he had consistently done his best and had failed not through his own fault.

The evening set the pattern of many evenings following. Charlesworth came in with Farquhar to dinner; he had been lodging at Petit-Fays, but now talked of transferring himself to the hotel, which, though as primitive as the pious farmers whose name it bore, was certainly cleaner than they. The dinner made Farquhar sigh for the flesh-pots of England; he permitted himself to be a bon-vivant, to tone down his excessive virtues. Sorrel soup, beefsteak which never grew on an ox, tongue stewed with cherries, and a baba made by the eldest son of the house, who was a patissier; this was the menu. Now a baba is a kind of sponge-cake soaked in rum and sweet as saccharine: Charlesworth would not touch it, Farquhar ate a morsel and did not want any more, but Lucian, with the whimsical appetite of an invalid, was only deterred from clearing the dish by Farquhar's solemn assurance that it would make him tipsy. Such was their meal, finished off by a cup of excellent strong black coffee, which they drank on the veranda as they smoked and talked. The night was dark, still, and starry; the huge, soft shadowy hills shut out all wandering airs, and the river passed them silent, gleamless. But close beside them a wooden trough guided down the water of a spring which rose among the moss of the steep hill-orchard, and the loquacious little fount made an irregular subliant accompaniment for their voices. Laurette's young brothers, shy, but friendly, hovered round the door listening to the strange foreign talking, anxious only to be allowed to be useful. The Ardennois are hospitable folk.

Farquhar was thinking of building a small house; he had interviewed a local architect, who proffered him weird designs for a maisonette after the style of the Albert Memorial, with multitudinous tourelles and pinnacles picked out in red and white and blue, and liberally gilded. Refusing this gorgeous domomicile, he was beset with advice from Lucian and from Charlesworth, each of whom professed to know something about architecture; though Lucian's counsels recalled the wise saw that a little knowledge is a dangerous thing, especially in ceilings, and seemed likely to afford a modern instance of a castle in the air. The talk became more personal. They were all travelers; Lucian the most inveterate, for he had wandered the world across. Farquhar could speak familiarly of Africa; Charlesworth of the States