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LADY LARKSPUR

By MEREDITH NICOLSON

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(Continued from Last Week.)

"You have the fan with you; Montani jumped right out of his seat when you opened it in the theater."

This she received with more laughter; Montani amused her immensely, she said. She wasn't in the least afraid of him. Returning to the matter of the luncheon, she suggested the Tyringham.

"You know, I want very much to see Mr. Bashford's old home and the place all our veteran retainers came from. At one?—yes. Good night!"

Alice and Mrs. Farnsworth reached the Tyringham on time to the minute. As I had spent the morning on a bench in the park, analyzing my problems, I found their good humor a trifle jarring.

"You don't seem a bit glad to see us," Alice complained as she drew off her gloves. "How can any one be anything but happy after seeing that delicious 'Cock Robin'? It is so deliciously droll."

"I haven't," I remarked with an attempt at severity, "quite your knack of ignoring disagreeable facts. There was Montani right in front of me, jumping like a jack-in-the-box every time you flourished your fan. There's that fellow we've got locked up at Barton—"

"Just hear the man, Constance!" she interrupted with her adorable laugh. "We were thinking that he was only beginning to see things our way, the only true way, the jolly way, and here he cometh like a melancholy Jacques! We'll have none of it!"

"We must confess," said Mrs. Farnsworth condescendingly, "that Mr. Singleton is passing through a severe trial. We precipitated ourselves upon him without warning, and immediately involved him in a mesh of mystery. His imagination must have time to adjust itself."

They were spoiling my appetite; I was perfectly aware of that. I had ordered the best luncheon I knew how to compose, and they were doing full justice to it; but I was acting, I knew, like a resentful boy.

"I love you that way," said Alice as I stared vacantly at my plate. "But you really are not making yourself disagreeable to us—really he is not, Constance!"

Mrs. Farnsworth affirmed this. I knew that I was merely being rude, and the consciousness of this was not uplifting. At the luncheon hour the influx of shoppers gives the Tyringham a cheery tone, and all about us were people apparently conversing sanely and happily. The appearance of Uncle Bash's ghost in the familiar dining room would have been a welcome diversion. I was speculating as to just what he would say about his widow and the whole mess at Barton when Mrs. Farnsworth addressed me pleadingly.

"If you knew that we want you to play with us only a few days longer—three days, shall we say, Alice?—if you knew that then we'll untangle everything, wouldn't you be nice—very nice?"

In spite of myself I couldn't resist this appeal. I was more and more impressed by the fineness, the charm of Mrs. Farnsworth. When she dropped the make-believe foolishness in which she indulged quite as amusingly as Alice, she appeared to be a very sensible person. The humor danced in her eyes now, but her glance was more than an appeal; it was a command.

"If you knew that our troubles are not at all the troubles you're thinking about, but very different—"

"Please pardon me," I muttered humbly, and wished that Alice were not so bewitching in a sailor hat. It may have been the hat or only Mrs. Farnsworth's pleading tone that brought me to a friendlier attitude toward the universe and its visible inhabitants. The crowd thinned out, but we lingered, talking of all manner of things.

"We must come in again very soon," said Alice. "And next time we shan't run away, which was very naughty. I suppose when you begin a story you just have to keep it going or it will

die on your hands. That's the way with our story, you know. Of course it's unkind to mystify you; but you are in the story just as we are."

My mystification was certainly deep enough without this suggestion that I was a mere character in a tale whose awkward beginning aroused only the gravest apprehensions as to the conclusion. She looked at her watch and continued: "I'm so absurd—really I am, in ever so many ways, that no one would ever put me in a book. Everyone would say no such person ever existed! It's incredible! And so I have to pretend I'm in a story all the time. It's the only way I can keep happy. And so many people are in my story now, not only Montani and the poor fellow locked up at Barton—oh, what if he should escape! Constance, it would be splendid if he should escape!"

"You didn't finish your enumeration of characters," I suggested. "Is my part an important one or am I only a lay figure?"

"My dear boy," cried Mrs. Farnsworth, "you are the hero! You have been the hero from the hour the story began. If you should desert us now, whatever should we do?"

"If I'm the hero," I replied in her own key, "I shall begin making love to Alice at once."

Alice, far from being disturbed by my declaration, nodded her head approvingly.

"Oh, we had expected that! But you needn't be in a hurry. In a story like this one, that runs right on from day to day, we must leave a lot to chance. And there are ever so many chances—"

"Not all on the side of failure, I hope?"

"We must be going," she laughed. I wished she hadn't that characteristic little turn of the head that was so beguiling!

Folly rode with us all the way to Barton. If anything sensible was uttered on the drive, I can't recall it. Our talk, chiefly of knights and ladies, and wild flights from imaginary enemies, had the effect of spurring Flynn to perilous spurts of speed.

"Flynn has caught the spirit!" cried Alice exultingly. "Haven't you, Flynn?"



When I Showed Myself at the Window He Rose.

Flynn, turning to confirm this, caused the car to swerve and graze a truck piled high with household goods.

"We may elude the pursuing knights," I suggested, "but some village constable may take it into his head to pinch us."

"Oh, that would be lovely," cried Alice. "And we'll telegraph dear Mr. Torrence to come and bail us out."

We reached Barton at nine o'clock and after an informal supper I listened to Antoine's solemn reports as I walked to the garage. The prisoner had made no sign, he said, and nothing had occurred during the day.

"But there's this, Mr. Singleton, which you ought to know, sir. The old Tyringham people don't like the

goings on here. You'll admit it's a mighty queer. I don't complain, sir, but some of the boys threaten to leave, sir. And I look at it this way, that nobody understanding what the spying and bribes offered and taking prisoners is all about, is most peculiar. We got to know where we stand, that's what it's come to, sir. And the widow being flightylike and Flynn coming home and saying nothing, but shaking his head when we ask him where he's been— You see for yourself, sir, how it looks to us."

What he said as to the general aspect of things was true, but I didn't admit that it was true. Alice had converted me to the notion that I was a character in a story, a plaything of fate, and I lightly brushed aside Antoine's melancholy plaint.

"Any man of you," I said, "who leaves this property will be brought back and shot. Tell that to the boys!" Nevertheless, the perfect equality of the gentleman in the tool house when I visited him the next morning shook my faith a trifle in the story-book features of life at Barton. He

is an exemplary prisoner, the guard reported, and he had maintained the strictest silence in my absence. He ate, smoked, and read, courteously thanking the men for their attentions. That was all. When I showed myself at the window he rose and threw on the magazine he was reading and replied good naturedly to my inquiry as to how he was getting along. "I have no complaint except that the guards snore outrageously. The

poor old chaps will sleep, you know."

"If you're so badly guarded, why don't you escape?" I asked tartly.

"It would relieve your mind a lot if I should disappear?" he asked innocently.

"You are impertinent," I replied, irritated that he should have surmised that his presence was causing uneasiness.

"If you will come to your senses and tell me the meaning of your visits here, we may agree upon terms. As it stands, you're a trespasser; you tried to bribe a servant to rob the house. If you're at all familiar with criminal law in this country, you can estimate the number of years' imprisonment that will be handed you for these little indiscretions."

"If it's so plain, why don't you hand me over to the authorities?" he asked, provokingly cool.

"I'm giving you a chance to confess and tell who's back of all this. Tell me just why your confederate Montani is annoying Mrs. Bashford, and I'll turn you loose."

"If you wait for me to confess anything, you will wait forever," he replied. "I repeat that we are impelled by the same motives, you and I. I think I needn't enlighten you as to what they are."

"I shall be glad to hear your idea of my motives," I answered feebly.

"I shall be frank," he replied readily. "The reason you don't turn me over to the police is the very simple one that you don't want to embarrass the mistress of the house yonder by causing the light of publicity to heat upon her very charming head. You wish to save her annoyance, and possibly something much graver. I can see that you are impressed; but it ought to please you to know that I share your feeling of delicacy where she is concerned. And let me add that the Count Montani is animated by like feeling. So there we are, exactly on the same ground!"

"You haven't answered my questions!" I blustered to hide my annoyance at being thrust further into the dark. "You don't understand Mrs. Bashford," I went on hurriedly. "It is inconceivable that anyone should wish to injure her or that she could have committed any act that would cause her to be spied upon. She's tremendously imaginative; she indulges in little fancies that are a part of her charm!"

"Little fancies!" he repeated, hiding a yawn. "It's deplorable for a pretty woman to have an imagination; there's danger there!"

"Your philosophy bores me," I said, and left him. He had lied about the snoring of the guards—Antoine satisfied me of that—but I gave instructions to double the watch.

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scraping of their feet on the rough slope.

"How will that do?" asked Alice. "Beautifully," replied Mrs. Farnsworth. "Now go ahead from the beginning of the scene."

Cautiously drawing back the branches, I espied Alice striking a pose on a mammoth rock. She bent forward, clasping her knees, and with an occasional glance at what appeared to be an open book beside her, she began:

"You ask me who I am, my lord? It matters not at all who or what I am; let it suffice that berries are my food and the brook that sings behind me gives me drink. To be one thing or another is weariness. Would you ask yonder oak for a name, or trouble the wind with like foolish questions? No; it is enough that a tree is strong and fine to look upon and that a wind has healing in its wings."

With her head to one side and an arresting gesture, and throwing into her voice all its charm and a new compelling innocence and sweetness, she continued:

(To be continued.)

Jud Misses Him.

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