

Two Stories

By Frances E. Huntley

I—Points of View

WHENEVER she recalled that incredible moment, she was conscious of a strange emotional excitement, that thrilled her with an exquisite poignancy, that set blushes momentarily flaming, that darkened her eyes, and parted her quick-breathing lips. She felt a little ashamed of the sensation, so that she wanted to put into words, to get somebody else's opinion on, what had occurred the evening before in the seductive corridor, where the lights were turned low nearly to extinction, and the scent of flowers penetrated and grew, till it took that keen metallic odour that seems almost tangible.

The scene, familiar to weariness, had held for her always a repulsion no less than an attraction; it seemed such a bid for playing at passion, and yet—commonplaces were so invariable there! Talk of the decorations, the floor, the guests, perhaps, as a rarer topic, the more or less uninteresting personality of her partner, minutely investigated—these had been the associations of the corridor: not that she had wished it otherwise, far from that; but . . . well! the feeling had been inexplicable, a mixture of relief and disappointment, that still there was so much to learn, that still it remained unlearnt.

And

And the teacher? For him, she had imagined herself fastidious, critical of shades of manner, almost impossible to please; and now, this morning! . . . It had been a man whom she hardly knew, but with whom she felt conscious of a strange intimacy. He, too, repulsed and attracted her at once; said things to her that in any one else she would have passionately resented, spoke to her with an almost obtrusive *sans-gêne*, did not even especially amuse her, and yet—his attraction was invincible. Directly she came into a ball-room where he was, she perceived him, freshly disapproved of him, smiled at him, disarranged her card to include his dances, and, the dance over, came to sit out, in a corridor such as that last night, all voluptuousness and allurements. . . . She raged at herself perpetually, and would talk, none the less, her wittiest and brightest, and glance gaily into the eyes that looked back at her with a somewhat *posé* cynicism.

Last night! Over and over again the scene recalled itself, and thrilled her with that curious tremor. . . . She longed for a clearer view of it, a cool, unswayed opinion . . . yet to tell! It would be schoolgirlish, typical almost of silly loquacious womanhood; that was her first thought, then came another: the woman of the world—the half-cynical, half-tender type that attracted her so strongly, that she had met with in one woman, and loved so dearly. Would *she* have told? Yes, she could fancy her, in her bright allusive way, with her wide roguish gaze, and enchanting suggestion of a brogue. . . . So, she *would* tell, and then, she laughed to think how much she was making of it; it was such a little thing after all, wasn't it? . . . But she wavered again. It would sound so crude, such a bald, almost vulgar, statement. For, when all was said and done, what had happened? . . . In the moment that she felt her cheek tinge itself again with that vivid pink, another memory came to her,
vaguely,

vaguely, as it seemed, unmeaningly—of a public ball she had once gone to (a rare thing with her, she didn't care enough for dancing to pay for it, she always said), a ball at which were to be seen many people of whose manners and customs she was entirely ignorant. A scene she had witnessed there! . . . the remembrance possessed her, a kind of unconscious cerebration, for which she could not account.

A corridor, once more almost deserted, save for herself and her partner, and, at the farther end, another couple, people she had never seen before; the girl, flaunting, ill-dressed, in a gown of insistently meagre insufficiency, her hair heaped into unmeaning shapelessness, nowhere an outline, a severity, a grave dainty coquetry; the effect was almost pathetic in its dull, bold cheapness. And the man!—hardly more, indeed, than a boy—he bore the huddled indistinctness, the look of imperfect detachment from the atmosphere, whose opposite we convey by the word “distinction.”

So, in a glance, she had seen them; and, with a kind of absent curiosity, had watched them while she talked . . . Quite suddenly the man slipped to the ground beside his partner's chair, and passed his arm familiarly, jocosely, round her unreluctant waist. A moment more and their faces touched, their lips met, in a kiss . . . one which, it was abundantly evident, was not of deep feeling, or even the expression of an instant's real emotion; no, there was an ineffable commonness, a painful coarsening of the action, visible even to unaccustomed eyes . . . it was “sport.” The girl had probably invited it; the man, more than probably, was not the first who had been privileged. . . .

She had felt revolted.

Her partner had made some contemptuous remark: “Can't they do it in private! If she likes being hugged——” The
mere

mere words had set her cheeks on fire, the careless, half-amused scorn of his tone, the matter-of-course for which he had taken it. She had rushed into one of her impetuous, heedless speeches :

“I would rather have a girl who has the *realness* in her to do something honestly wrong ! One can't call that ‘wrong’—no, too good a word. It's only futile, common. Oh, better the poor girls whose weakness has something real in it, some—courage, foolishness . . . But that sort !”

The ring of her voice sounded in her ears when she recalled the scene. It had stamped itself oddly on her memory, was always coming back to her, haunting her. . . .

The clear, tender pink still lingered on her cheek ; for, once more, the public ball forgotten, she had gone over that little episode in the corridor last night—in the deserted, solitary corridor. Why did it thrill her so ? She did not love the man who had thus surprised her—love him ! Why, her acquaintance with him was of the slightest ; and his feeling for her ? She could not conceivably delude herself about that ; it was very much the same, she divined, as hers for him . . . Then why *was* it ? He was the first who had ever kissed her—could that be it ?

At the time she had felt angry, but more hurt than angry ; hurt at his audacity ; it seemed as if he must have thought her a girl who very lightly “took a fancy” for a man, a girl who was easily attracted. . . . Some analogy was worrying her, something like it that had happened before, something she had read perhaps. . . . What could it be ? Why could she not remember ?

Great heaven ! the girl at the public ball, the girl who had let a man kiss her for sport ! “That sort !” . . .

Oh, no, no, there was no likeness, none, no analogy, no possible comparison. She, with her pride, and refinement, and high-flown romantic

romantic idealism in her theory that anything real was better than that futile fingering of edged tools. . . . And that wild-haired, cheap tawdriness. . . .

She writhed in restless, rebellious shame, her hands covered her face, where the soft rosiness was turning to thick suffusing scarlet. . . . After all, if any one had seen, it must have looked quite the same, quite, quite the same.

The thought was intolerable. What was she to do? How get some denial of this sickening suspicion. Tell her sister, ask her what she thought? Ah, no, no; now she could never tell . . . and, in the glass, it seemed to her that her eyes looked bold and glittering, and her hair, with its carefully followed outlines and burnished softly-curving richness, appeared shapeless, unkempt unconsidered . . . Her ball-gown! she tore it from the box where it lay in its fragrant mistiness . . . it was disgraceful, it was immodest almost, she would never wear it again, never dance again, never see that man again. . . .

And as she stood before the glass, with passionate quivering lips, and eyes burning with stinging unfallen tears, the strange delicious thrill stole through her once more, the roseate flickers glowed on her cheek, the kiss seemed to touch her once more with its lingering pressure. . . . Ah, surely there was a point of view, surely there was a difference?

She tasted in that moment something of the weakness of womanhood—its pitiful groping artificiality, its keen passionate realness.

II—Lucille

I CAN hardly expect you to understand me, I fear—for, if the truth be told, I understand myself not at all; and of Lucille, my comprehension is, at best, just not misapprehension: though of that, even, I feel at times uncertain enough.

Well, after this morning, I suppose I need not think about it any more. Need not! *must* not would express it better: the last word, so far as I am concerned in it, has been said; the curtain has rung down upon the little comedy-tragedy that I had (I might say) written, or, at any rate, conceived, entirely by and for myself; and it has left me, the author, in a puzzlement that is, to treat it lightly, extremely disconcerting. I can't help having the preposterous feeling that it is partly my fault that it has ended so, and of course, you know, it isn't, couldn't be!

If we *will* take our drama in real life, we must not expect the unexpected, we must—strenuously—remember that we are author and audience both, that we see the thing from the inside, that we must be prepared for things actually happening, just as they seem to be going to happen.

I suppose I thought I had thus reasoned it all out, but I see now that my vision was irrevocably warped, that I was looking out, with a playgoer's certainty of anticipation, for the unprepared—for the unexpected. . . . But (I meant to have said sooner) it occurs to me that, if I put it into words for you, if I reduce it, so to speak, to black and white, we may contrive between us to come to some sort of an understanding about it, to unravel at least one or two of the threads, to get, in short, an approximate idea of that slender humorous enigma whom we used to call Lucille Silverdale.

So

So now, if you are not alarmed at, repelled by, the prospect of a riddle, a puzzle—oh, but a very charming puzzle in brown hair and hazel eyes and sensitive contours . . . ?

Mrs. Silverdale, if she did not openly bemoan her fate, yet intimated tolerably plainly her resentment at the trick which nature had played upon her ; and, far from in sympathy though I felt with her, I could not deny that, from her point of view, there might be an excuse for her attitude. Her attitude ? But, in truth, that is hardly the word ; it was more a resigned recognition that there was no possible attitude to be taken up, a kind of mental huddle, a backboneless disapproval, an appallingly silent silence.

From the culprit herself, little aggression could be complained of ; Lucille was, perhaps, as much ashamed of her inconvenience, her *inconvenance*, as were the most robust-minded of her family ; but (it seemed to me) this very modesty, this very agreement with their envisagement of the situation, did but add an irritation the more to her personality.

Strange enough it was, too ; one is used to see it taken so differently, that perfunctory law whereby the ages free themselves from the muffling oblivion of mankind—that poking, freakish finger that heredity sticks in our eyes, as we peer anxiously to see if the veil be decorously thrown over all. The tears it brings—that mocking inexorable finger—are not always of those that purify our mental vision ; and of the Silverdales' sight, so far as that concerned itself with this slender, humorous maiden, it had made miniature havoc.

That, after all these dear mediocre centuries, he should re-assert himself—that ancestor, who in the days of Herrick and Suckling had held his own wittily, gloriously, with the best of them ! One might have hoped that decades upon decades of ignoring,

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of snubbing, would have quelled his ghostly essence, would have taught his undying part that at any rate it was not wanted among the posterity of his race. But (and the situation really had its pathetic side) here it was, with the *flair* of these uncanny insubstantialities, finding a welcome at last (though not perhaps of the most rapturous) in the great—great—oh, *je vous le donne en mille!*—in the thousandth great-niece, Lucille Silverdale, daughter and sister of, in abstract phrase, the Healthy Commonplace of the British Nation. It was rare enough, as I said—that shrinking from, that deprecation of, their sole title to distinction; one longed to trace it back to its source, to discover from what veil *that* impish finger had darted, whether, to add a quaintness the more, he, the wit, the sweet singer of that honeyed age, had been as unwelcome to his family circle as she, the somewhat unwilling inheritress of his genius, was to hers. But of that bygone blazon upon the Silverdale 'scutcheon, it would have been ill-advised, perilous to speak; to Lucille even the subject was painful, and in the most impracticable sort of way.

She did say to me once, in a moment of acute dejection, that in any other family she would probably have been the idol, insufferably thrust for worship upon every new-comer. "But as it is," she finished sadly, though with her unquenchable twinkle, "I am a skeleton, rattling my impossible bones, not in a nice musty hiding-place of my own, but in the comfortable, general family-cupboard, which they can't open without seeing me. And they have to open it every day—before visitors, too!"

If I laughed somewhat oppressively at her analogy, I daresay she divined part of the reason, and didn't wonder that her amazing comicality should have filled my eyes with tears. . . .

Well, skeleton or idol, she was sufficiently lonely. They were all so rudely healthy-minded, so full of the working-out of their
rosy-

rosy-cheeked conception of the *joie de vivre* (if it set one wondering and shuddering, that was one's own concern), so insistent in exuberance and jollity, that it was no marvel if they had little time, or inclination to make it, for a dreamer of dreams, a seer of visions, a hearer of the music of the spheres. Not that any of those would have been their definition of Lucille: to them, she was a sentimentalist, a "mooney." Yet, apart from the unnaturalnesses into which she would pathetically force herself, she had her soft appealing wildnesses, her gay roguish outbreaks, her bright apologetic materialnesses. . . .

Seeing it written there—*apologetic*—it comes to me with a flash of annoyed divination that Lucille was an incarnate apology. . . . I knew we should arrive at something, you and I; and I am proved right before I have really posed you my enigma. We are coming to it now: Why could she not have had the courage of her genius? I'm sure we see it often enough, oftener than enough, perhaps—the cocksure type of young man or woman, who has the courage of his or her talent. The courage! The brazenness, more aptly; don't we know them? and they are clever—oh, clever! Then why couldn't she be something like them, instead of being one desperate, appealing clutch at the commonplace? She would do violence to her most delicate feelings, and look absolutely complacent over it. Sometimes it made me swear, sometimes—for it had its humorous side, of course—it wholly amused me.

Haven't I heard her twanging a banjo, and singing, in that ethereal voice of hers, the last banalities? Haven't I seen her playing at hockey? Seen her! the smile she wore, the nervous conciliatory smile; the runs she took—of all futilities; the hits she made, or didn't make! Lucille's hockey was a triumph of failure. And she *would* say she liked it, afterwards: it was hard,

then, to repress one's ironic impulse—one felt that she deserved something. . . . But it wasn't at all that I found it a degradation, or even a derogation, for her to play hockey—that wasn't in the least my feeling. It was more an irritated kind of pity for her fatuity, her lack of humour.

Yet with humour she was otherwise fully equipped ; her eyes caught your flying sparkle, and rayed it off into immensity of fun. Her lips—they almost sparkled, too, so mobile, scarlet. Her very hands dimpled sometimes with laughter of rosy finger-tips, and suggestion. . . . In a mad moment, you might have imagined that her feet twinkled, too, in their small jewelled slippers, enjoying the joke like the rest ! . . .

And, after a scintillation like that, the girl would do or say something so irritating, so painfully, insistently, commonplace. . . . It was incomprehensible, that attitude of hers : she was, as I have told you, my Sphinx of every-day life.

An instance ? Oh, as to that, I could overwhelm you with instances. . . . Well, to take the first that occurs . . . and, indeed, it is typical enough, I suppose, for my purpose. . . .

I met them down the river one afternoon of last summer—all of them, Mrs. Silverdale, Mamie, Bella, Lucille, and, I think, one or two vague, familiar young men. Already I had divined that one of these last (I could barely distinguish one from the other) admired Lucille, and plumed himself hugely upon his good taste, which, to him, indeed, one could imagine, reflected itself almost as bad taste—the sort of bad taste that one implies in “caviare to the general”—with a perfect understanding of the difficulties of caviare.

This mental attitude of Lucille's admirer (I think his name was Willie Ruthven) produced in his demeanour a mingling of patronage, awe, and flippancy that formed an amazing whole. If
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it sometimes made me long to kick him, that was perhaps an excess of my feeling of championship for the lovely duckling of this complacently plain family . . . or perhaps it was that her gentle graciousness towards him seemed to me part of that irritating *apology* of hers. . . .

To-day, for example, she was sitting apart from the rest, learning, with his assistance, a banjo-atrocity of the newest, and assuming for histrionic completeness a parody of the vilest parody on speech :

“What I loiked about that party wos,
They wos all of ’em so refoined.”

She was chanting in that silvery thread of hers, while he held the music-sheet before her. And that was Lucille Silverdale! the “L. S.” of *A Trial of Flight*, that exquisite little sheaf of poems which, like fairy-arrows, had stirred the wings of many a shy emotion in our critical hearts—we of *The Appreciator*, most modern of modernities, most *connaissant* of connoisseurs! It was—well, it was ridiculous, of course, but wasn’t it painful, too, to see a genius so belittle the gift of the most high gods?—wasn’t it almost wicked, blasphemous?

They were encamped in a mist of greenness, their boat fastened to the long bough of a willow that pushed into the water; it made an ideal nook for happy lovers, and I wondered hotly if it realised its present indignity, as, eagerly invited by the rest, I drew in my canoe to their hiding-place. I hardly looked at Lucille and her Companion of the Banjo, nor did she say anything by way of welcome; she was, I gathered, too deeply absorbed in her musical studies. I hardly looked at her—but I saw her, more clearly than I saw any of the others: a slender, hazel-eyed incarnation of fragrant coolness, lying there, in white and yellow, among her gleaming blue-green cushions, while the sunbeams glinted off every

every part of the silver and polished wood of her banjo, and her pretty fingers, too, caught the rays on their rings and their rosy opalescent nail-tips. I could have shaken her where she lay : was she enjoying herself, did she like it . . . ?

“ Now, Miss Silverdale, you forgot your accent there ! ” corrected Willie Ruthven, in tones that subdued themselves to a growling tenderness—more could not be demanded of his gruff organ—and even while I inwardly blustered, I felt the humour of the moment steal over me irresistibly. *Modern love-making!* Should I do it for *The Appreciator* ? Love-making over that blatant ditty to the poetess of *A Trial of Flight!*

But Mamie was claiming my attention.

“ Mr. Transfield, are you good at riddles ? We have a book of them here—come and help us to guess them, they are such fun ! ”

Riddles—and a book of them ! . . . Well, I went and listened to these riddles ; of my help in guessing them, one can say little, nor, indeed, was much opportunity for distinction afforded. Like most posers of enigmas, Mamie had but one ambition : to give you the answer. . . .

“ And your sister, does she like riddles too ? ”

I asked it almost involuntarily, annoyed at their persistent ignoring of her (I don't know whether it was chivalry or—some other feeling, that incensed me so with her exclusion, her isolation . . .) ; and then, besides, a riddle—even of this kind—must remind me, must so inevitably suggest her to me. . . . I have not guessed that answer, either, and there was no Mamie to tell it me. . . . Perhaps there isn't any ? *Dieu sait!* . . .

“ Lucille—oh, *Lucille!* She never guesses anything, never even tries or listens ; too much absorbed in intellectual pursuits ! ”

“ For instance ? ” I queried, eyebrows irresistibly elevated in my

my glance at the couple in the bow . . . I caught her look for an instant . . . it seemed to say something, hope something . . . then her fingers swept over the strings, and once more she studied the Cockney dialect. . . .

“Anything is better than talking to the rest of us,” said Mrs. Silverdale, crossly ; to such good purpose was the girl’s martyrdom ! for martyrdom, I was sure of it, her eyes had but now implied. My heart swelled, my cheek burned, as usual. . . .

Of the rest of the day it needs not to tell you ; an epitome of it is there, in the banjo, the cushions, Willie Ruthven, the riddles, and the increasing crossness of the others. For, to add a hopelessness the more, one could more than guess that Mamie desired Willie for herself. . . . Bella, more fortunate, chattered intermittently with the other familiar vagueness ; and in our ears the strings incessantly tinkled, the Cockney dialect futilely twanged, Willie’s growling tendernesses reverberated. . . .

To Lucille I never once spoke.

But alone, all the way home, through the dusky gleaming of the water, I seemed to catch again that shy elusive glance, that appealing proud humility . . . that half-divined, wholly-lost answer. . . .

Well, that is all ! I wonder if I thought right ? I wonder if, in these halting half-apprehensions of mine, these unilluminative side-lights, this one meaningless—or significant ?—instance, I have succeeded in gaining, at least, your interest, your sympathy, for my Sphinx of South Kensington ? I wonder if I have helped you to an idea of her, at all corresponding to what she is ? And, more than all, I wonder can you divine (for I cannot) where it is that her weakness lies, what it is that makes her so spoil, so desecrate herself ?

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To me she is the riddle—shall I say, of my life ? I almost think that, without exaggeration, without affectation, I may call her so, for it is more than unlikely now that I shall ever know the answer. Oh, of course, you may say that she has answered it herself, and in the roughest black-and-white, the worst, the bluntest of type . . . for you saw, no doubt, as I did, that announcement in the morning's paper, that hateful, incredible juxtaposition of names : "Ruthven—Silverdale." . . .

But, you see, I *can't* get that look out of my thoughts, that flutter of the wings of her strange, sweet, mistaken soul . . . and I think, I can't help thinking, that Lucille has written out her *Apology* to the last word. . . .

And, in the name of Reason, what was the meaning of it all ? Oh, it sets my heart aching—but it makes me angry too . . . it seems as if—as if—it seems (confound it !) as if I had had something given to me to do—and hadn't done it. . . .

What do *you* think ? I hardly hoped you would understand, you know . . . but perhaps you do, and—do *you* think I could have done anything ? do *you* feel as if it had been, in any way, my fault ? It seems a preposterous, a presumptuous notion . . . but is there anything in it, do you think ? . . . I suppose it is useless to expect you to answer.