

AT THE MARQUERADE.

(Old City Darrick.) It was at the masquerade Where I pressed Dainty fingers of a maid— I was best!

L. A. L.

[All the Year Round.]

We colonists are apt to say that there is no twilight in New Zealand, when waxing sentimental over memories of the land of our birth, and recalling many a pleasant half-hour "between the lights."

But although we have no lingering dusk, sunset with us seems to have a peculiar beauty, and a tender power to steal into one's heart. Many a time have I, rough colonial as I am, stood, on my way home, to watch the fantastic clouds and colors of the sky as night drew on.

Such a sunset-glory lit up the whole sky and the scarcely heaving sea beneath, one autumn evening many years ago, as I was riding home on a tired horse after a hard day's pounding after the outlying sheep.

At that time I was about 30 years old, and had a snug billet as manager on one of Nelson and Clinton's great runs near Nelson. Five hundred a year, with unlimited grub, and a sufficiently weather-tight house on the station, was no bad thing for a penniless man with no interest, and I often plumed myself on my own good luck when I came across other fellows with twice my brains, and a little money, who could hardly pay for their bread and cheese.

"A beautiful sky, Sprightly," I said, patting my old chestnut as he carefully plucked his way down the face of a steep hill covered with manuka scrub and yellow ferns; "but wind to-morrow, and rain before to-morrow night."

Sprightly shook his head till the bridle rang, and stepped out at my voice. Winding down we went, till the interminable hill ended abruptly in a level reach of sand, along which he could canter for a couple of miles.

The sunset colors were fading from the high peaks we had left, but enough light lingered on the flat to give brilliant hues to the rocks which towered above our heads or lay like fallen giants in our path, while far out to sea, beyond the shad-d-w of the shore, stretched a long streak of amber.

I rode that way twice a week, as a rule, sometimes oftener, but never do I remember to have met a living creature to exchange good-night with till this particular evening, when no sooner had Sprightly started at a weary canter over the flat than I pulled him up short in sheer amazement, for there in front was a fellow dressed like a picture, riding at a foot pace just in the direction we were going in to.

"Who the deuce can it be?" was my first mental observation. "Ten to one it's some new chum come to spy out the land; though I'll answer that chap don't know a sheep when he sees it."

As I neared my unconscious friend I took in the fact that he rode his horse like a gentleman; that his saddle, bridle and saddle-bags were new and glossy; that, in fact, from his jaunty wideawake to his English-made boots, he was a new chum. Riding up alongside I observed a white collar and a pair of dog-skin gloves, which removed any lingering doubts as to the fact.

"Good evening, mate," I called out when I got up to the stranger; "going far to-night?"

"Not much farther, I hope," he answered, turning a face of almost girlish beauty upon me, and slightly raising his hat. "But that is a question I should be glad to ask you; that is if you know this part of the country well."

"Lived here these six years, and know every corner a sheep can hide in," I answered, rather grimly, contrasting his high-bred accents with my own colonialisms.

"Ah! then you can tell me where is this Wyke station?"

"This Wyke station," I replied in my crustiest manner, "is where I hope to be eating my supper in half an hour's time. And pray, sir, what may be your business there?"

The new comer turned to look more closely at me.

"Why, you must be—of course you must be—Ralph Westcott, the very man I am going to see."

"I am Ralph Westcott," I rejoined, seeing he paused, as if expecting me to say something.

"I thought so. Well, I am Fairfax Clint. How d'ye do! I am awfully glad to meet you on this dreary and interminable mudflat." So saying, he extended his hand with such a cordial gesture that I felt ashamed of my bearish manners, and gave him a hearty grip.

"You I was coming out?" he asked, as we resumed our journey. "Several mails back he wrote that you might possibly be sent out, but I never heard anything certain."

"Oh! well, you see, Westcott, the governor is getting old, and closer and more suspicious every day. Lately he won't even allow a fellow an opinion of his own. So one fine morning I got marching, or rather sailing orders, and here I am."

All this was said in the same quiet, rather bored manner which had set my back up before; still I could not help softening to the boy when I looked at his face and saw how unfit he would prove for station life.

"And what do you intend to do, Mr. Clint, now that you are here?" I asked, after a pause.

"Do? Oh, nothing that I know of. I suppose I shall stay with you till I get orders to start again. I'll go about with you, unless you don't want my company; and I suppose I must write a 'report' for the governor's benefit, every month, in which I hope you'll help me."

He laughed as if there was a joke somewhere, but for my part I felt rather put out. Here was a great baby sent out for me to take in tow, and yet all the time he was my "boss," and had to report on my management. I was a bit of an autocrat on my station, and resented this.

Fairfax Clint seemed to guess what I was thinking. "Look here, Westcott," he said, touching my horse's neck with his whip, and speaking in a more manly and earnest tone, which I liked better.

"My father's all wrong in this business. What's the use of his sending me out to overlook his runs, when I know less than a child about such things; but that's no business of mine, and still less of yours. Let us be friends while we are together. Forget that my name is Clint at all! Call me Fairfax, and fancy me a new hand you've just picked up to clean your boots and addle your horse. I can do both, I assure you."

All the while he had been speaking we had slowly climbed a steep hill, and now we were in the open, and I could see the sea. "My dear fellow, I never felt more astonished in my life, or more humbled, if you can understand. I did give Lal a talking to about a week ago, and a few shillings to rig out the kids afresh, but I had no notion that what I had said would have produced such a stupendous effect. And, to tell you the truth, Ralph, I felt ashamed to think how little one really tries to do, when I saw that poor girl coming up so bravely just for a few words of my own."

"Laugh! I honor you for it, only won't you find it awfully grind?"

"Why, yes, I'm afraid I shall," answered Fairfax, knocking the ashes out of his pipe and staring at the fire; and yet I can't look at a poor wretch like Lal without feeling uncomfortable. I suppose it's what persons call conscience, but I don't think I've taught these young savages, at any rate, what little I know myself."

So Clint's evening school began—began at the kitchen table after supper was over—the pupils being Alice Mahaffy, popularly known as "Lal," and her brothers Bill and Ted; and the schoolmaster being that ineffable fellow, Fairfax Clint.

Ted and Bill having grown up like young goats on the open hill-side, were sharp enough to all out-door signs and sounds, but hopelessly dense when it came to the alphabet. But Lal proved a wonder to herself and a source of pride to her teacher. Never was a girl so determined to learn what at first seemed perfectly incomprehensible and bewildering. Many a time have I gone to the kitchen to look on, and have seen Lal, with knit brows and flushed face, bending over her books, and muttering fiercely between her teeth: "I'll see it sometime, Muster Clint; let me try again! but I'm such a fool to-night."

One night, long after the little class had been dismissed, I found Lal crouching against the outer door in a wild fit of weeping.

"Halloo, Lal, what's up?" I asked, pulling her into the moonlight; "has your pedagogue been hammering you again? But no answer could I extract except a not very polite request to leave her alone, and wrenching herself out of my grasp, she ran and hid herself among the manuka.

This little incident would not have remained probably in my mind, but for the chance remark of our parson one Sunday shortly afterwards. I had been riding part way home with him after service, and as we went up the hill by the Mahaffys' hut, we came on Lal, lying asleep full length under a wild cherry tree, with her hands behind her head for a pillow, and an open spelling book beside her. She seemed to have closed herself to sleep for the long lashes resting on her cheek were wet and matted into little points, and she sobbed as we passed by.

"That poor child! I am afraid her mother ill-treats her," said Parson Hooper; "and what a pretty girl she is growing!"

Pretty! I was too struck with this new view of Lal to dispute it, and my companion passed on to other subjects, but as soon as I parted from him I rode back quickly to the spot where we passed the sleeping girl. But she was gone, and I had to ride home without deciding the question whether parson's eyes or mine had been mistaken. At the window door, however, I saw Lal, with her milk-can, waiting all Tom chose to find time to fill for her, looking cross-legged against the door-post, and looking moodily out at sea.

I walked up and took a critical survey. A long-limbed girl, with a very short and rather ragged stuff frock; bare feet, brown as berries; arms and hands to match; a good deal of brown hair, which lately she had taken to brushing and tying back with a scrap of faded ribbon; a thin face, with a flush of bright color in the cheeks; and a pair of brown eyes, which were always watchful and suspicious to me, but soft and wistful to Clint. My eyes, sharpened by the parson's careless remark, took note of all these points; and I summoned Lal sharply to me.

"Well, Mr. Westcott," coming unwillingly, and scowling at me with her straight, black brows.

"How old are you, Lal?"

"I've turned 15 last summer; but it ain't no business of yours, is it, Mr. Westcott?"

"Not much, perhaps; but you are growing a big girl, and ought to go to service somewhere. Wouldn't you like to go away from this dull place?"

"Go away from the station?" echoed Lal, looking up at me with her face as she raised her startled eyes to mine; "I couldn't do it! Besides, who'd like to have me for a servant?" she added, with a scornful little laugh.

"But if you'd like to try it, Lal, I could try for you." I went on, but she interrupted me fiercely.

"Look here, Mr. Westcott; I know I ain't a good girl, but I don't know as ever I did you any harm that you should try and drive me away; and I can't go, I can't, I can't! I should die if I couldn't never see his face nor hear him speak."

The frenzy of passion and excitement that possessed her, Lal had fallen on her knees and clutched my coat with both her hands, looking up with an agony of supplication, as if I could decide her fate. Here was a pretty situation for Ralph Westcott, manager, to stand in!

"Lal, my dear, don't be a fool," I uttered disjunctively. "What nonsense is like, but for Heaven's sake get up and behave yourself! There, that's better."

I said, as she dragged herself up on to her feet, and stretched out her hand mechanically for her milk can, which had rolled off the veranda. "Now, Lal, be a good girl, and go home, and make up your mind never to talk such nonsense again. You know Mr. Clint is a gentleman, and will be a very rich one when his father dies, and how could you for one moment suppose—"

Lal put up her hand with a pathetic gesture to stop me.

"Lord," she cried, with her bitter little laugh, which always made me angry; "it's you as is talking nonsense now! Don't you think I know he's set above us like the stars; and as if he could ever look at the likes of I. But that don't make no difference to me that I know of," she added, dropping all at once into a low tone of indescribable despair, and turning away. At this moment we both saw Clint returning with the dogs from a bath in the river. He stopped a moment to pick a peach as he passed through old Reuben the Maori's garden, but we heard his clear voice singing: "Then tell me how to woo thee, love; then tell me how to woo thee," as if in unconscious mockery at Lal's misery and pain. For once I felt really out of patience with Clint's beaming good humor.

"Go home, child," I cried, sharply, and Lal went without another word. I walked over the fence to meet Fairfax.

"Ralph, my boy, you look very glum? How delicious these peaches are," he added, feasting on another.

"Should I tell him Lal's secret, and beg him to show the wretched girl less kindness in the future?"

"Whether wisely or not, I spoke."

"Fairfax, I have been talking to that poor girl Lal. She is nearly grown up now, and I want her to go out to service."

"Whew! my prize pupil!" cried Clint, making a long face. "Well, my dear patriarch, and what will Miss Mahaffy say to your kind proposal?"

"Well, really, Clint, it's too absurd, and yet it's a pity for the poor little soul, too. The fact is that she has such a profound adoration for you that nothing will induce her to consent to it."

Clint looked amazed and then annoyed.

"Alas! alas! in this is to be the end of my philanthropic efforts?" he cried, at last. "You don't really mean, Ralph, that she won't go because—because—"

Upon my word, it's too preposterous. Well, Ralph," he went on, pettishly, after a pause, during which I lit my pipe and tried to look more comfortable than I felt, "what's a fellow to do now? Poor Lal! she tried so awfully hard to learn and get on. Perhaps you misunderstood her."

I shook my head.

"I don't pretend to understand these things, Clint, but it is a very real thing with her. How would it be for you to go on that visit to the Vernons you are always intending to pay? Stay a week or two, and I'll undertake to talk to Lal, and make her take a place at Dorald's farm, at five-week. I know they want a dairy hand."

So Clint agreed, and as the boat was going across next day for stores, we had no time to discuss and unsettle the matter. Lal, of course, saw the boat start, for she and her brothers were always moving before any one else on the run; and Clint waved his hand to her, and called out in his cheery way, "Good-by, young 'uns. Stick to your books, and I'll bring over some nice new ones when I come back." Ted hallooed out, "Good-by!" and no one but I noticed that Lal said nothing, but gazed with straining eyes after the boat till it had disappeared round the point, and the level rays of sunrise turned the gray sea to gold.

For my own part, I turned in to breakfast with a weight off my mind, for Lal certainly was a pretty girl, and though I believed Clint to be an honest young fellow enough, still there is something pleasant in being worshipped by the only girl about the station. So, altogether, I was glad to get Fairfax safely off on a visit to a neighboring station, where I knew the dashing Miss Vernons would soon give his thoughts a new direction.

Some weeks went by, very busy weeks, and I had begun to get used to being alone again, when I received a message from Clint that the next time the whaling boat went over to Nelson he would return by her, as a letter from his father had recalled him to England sooner than he had expected.

All the time of his absence I had seen little of Lal. She had given up coming to the station, always sending Ted instead; and I had really almost forgotten our scene in the veranda.

The day after I got Clint's message, however, I chanced to meet her as I rode home over the mudflat. It had been a dull, foggy day, but as evening closed in the wind began to rise fitfully, making a little sudden stir and moan, and then die away into an ominous silence. As I hurried sprightly along I overtook Lal, walking home slowly under a load of pipis she had been collecting for supper off the rocks. At first she seemed inclined to let me pass without recognition, but when I drew up, meaning to warn her of the coming storm, she ran to my side and laid her hand on my bridle.

"Isn't he never coming here no more, Mr. Westcott?" she asked, in such a despairing tone, I could not find it in my heart to scold her.

"Why, Lal," I cried, "how ill you look! What have you done to your cheeks and eyes?"

She shook her head impatiently, and repeated her question: "Is he never coming home?"

"Well—yes, child. He's coming to-morrow; but only to say good-bye. He will be off to England, and to all his friends there soon."

She scarcely seemed to hear the end of my speech.

"To-morrow?" she said, crouching down in a heap upon the seaweed-strewn beach and rocking herself to and fro. "Shall I see him to-morrow?"

"Lal!" I cried impatiently. She sprang to her feet.

"O, Mr. Westcott, don't scold me. Look here," and she pulled up her

ragged sleeve to show me her arm, wasted and shrunken. "I can't eat nor sleep, nor do half of the work I used to. I'm starving for a sight of his face, and what harm can it do him for me to be bappy just one day?"

Poor Lal! I was not a particularly soft-hearted chap, but the sight of her distress gave me a queer feeling in the throat, and I rode on without speaking.

The night set in as I expected, with sharp storms of wind and rain, and by the time I had got home and had done supper there was a high sea running.

"The boat'll never start to-morrow, Tom," I remarked, as, for company's sake, I turned into the kitchen for a smoke.

Tom looked doubtful. "I'd feel more sure o' that, sir, if old Peter had gone in her. He's a safe hand and a most overcareful; but young Peter is rash and won't wait for weather."

"Don't croak, Tom," I retorted; "besides, the weather may mend before midnight, when they'd be starting, and then Mr. Clint will be there, and he's sure to wait if there's any danger." But as Tom still shook his head and persisted in calling to mind all the shipwrecks he had ever been in, I gave up the argument and went to bed, telling him to call me at 6 o'clock if I wasn't stirring before.

It seemed to me that I had only just dropped asleep, when his voice at my side awoke me next morning. "Mr. Westcott, sir, it's 6 o'clock, and an awful nasty sea on. And I've been down twice to the beach, and can't see nothing of the boat."

"Get out, you old fool!" I roared. "You don't for one moment suppose they are anywhere but safe in Nelson harbor?"

Tom vanished, but I got up thoroughly uncomfortable all the same, and hurried down to the beach without waiting for breakfast.

The sea looked nasty, truly. A line of white breakers thundered over the rocks, and threw their spray high into the air; a thick spray hung over Nelson and hid the outlines of the coast, but here and there a white swirl of waters showed a dangerous spot to beware of. After a look round I was returning, when I spied a little figure sitting perched half way up the face of the cut, on a little shelter formed by a projecting ledge.

"Lal, you silly girl, come down! There's no footing for a bird there; and what good can you do? They've never started, I'm sure. Come and have some breakfast with Tom." But I might as well have shouted at the seagulls, for she never moved.

"When I came down again she was still there, dead to everything, except the thunder and the roar of the sea. The storm seemed to increase as the morning wore away, and even Tom had come around to my opinion that young Peter never could have put out in such a sea, when we were startled by a message from Lal. She had sent to say she saw something—driftwood it might be—still it was something.

Never, as long as I live, shall I forget the horror which clutched at our hearts at that blanched our faces as for a moment, Tom and I stared at one another while Ted breathlessly delivered the message.

Of course we followed him at once and stood again peeping out into the fog and spray.

"I see nothing, Lal," I shouted. "Whereabouts is it now?"

Lal for answer thrust out her long, bony arm. "There 'tis!" she cried; "and 'tis—Lord have mercy! 'tis our boat!"

Not one word more did any one say. Some half-dozen men, we stood there helpless, watching the little spot grow and grow till we could make it out as Lal did, to be our boat. Now she is down in the trough of the wave, now she rides on top, now she's near enough for us to make out the six dark figures in her! They are all there, thank God for that! Now we lose sight of her again, and I shout hoarsely to Lal, "All right," she pants; "they are safe past Split Rock, and they are going to beach the boat."

I clamber up on a fallen mass of rock and can see Lal is right. They are coming in on the breakers and will let the boat drive ashore. She will go to pieces, but it is their only chance.

We watch breathless, and no one speaks, although old Peter stands beside me, and he has two sons in peril. One tremendous wave dashes over the boat, and within our reach—not quite there are swept back, and the boat goes under. A moment more, and she re-appears bottom upward among the boiling waters, and with a wild shriek Lal springs from her watching place into the water beneath.

"Mad fool!" I cry, breaking into womanish sobs and rushing forward with an idea of doing something—anything. But old Peter lays a shaking hand on my shoulder.

"Don't see throw your life away, sir. She've got him by the hair, and if any one can live in such a sea, I'll back Lal."

"But your boys, Peter?" I gasp, completely knocked out of all self-command.

"I'm watching," said the old man, giving me a little shake in his suppressed excitement. "Nobody hasn't come up yet but Master Clint, and Lal have got her tight."

There isn't much more to tell. Out of all the six, only Fairfax was saved; though the bodies were washed ashore next day.

Lal, whose love gave her superhuman strength, had kept Clint's head away from the rock which crushed the life out of the other poor lads, and almost the next wave rolled both to our feet.

It took us a long time to unclasp Lal's hands, and I don't believe she ever knew that she really had saved the man she died for.

She was buried, when Parson Hooper came over the next Sunday, in Clint's little garden, with Peter's two sons and the other poor fellows; but it was many months before Clint could crawl out so far, or hear how his life had been saved.

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