The Fall of the Lion-Hearted.

By Bertha Easterbrooke Goodier.

"NO'M," the Egg-and-Butter Man spoke conclusively; "you won't find no sech 'nother hoss this side of Mason an' Dixon line."

"But he isn't black, nor chestnut with white feet!" Keen protest rang in my tone. I was so disappointed. I will tell you why.

Since girlhood I had dreamed of a proud moment when I, Mary Ellen Hicks, should find myself sole possessor of a horse. How I had envied "The Lady Arabella," as she pranced across the pages of my favorite romance on a "shining palfrey with four white feet." How I had thrilled to read of "Lord Chillingly" thundering past on his fiery black. My sorrow when Uncle Jonathan was gathered to his fathers might have been keener but for the legacy he had left me; "to be spent on luxuries," Uncle Jonathan had willed it, realizing, perhaps, that luxuries are few and far between in the life of a little "old maid" schoolma'am.

I had commissioned the Egg-and-Butter Man to find me such a horse, promising him twenty-five dollars for his trouble. Now he brought me a bay. I hadn't even thought of a bay. In silence I heard him through.

"You see, ma'am, blacks is too wild fer a lone woman to handle. As fer 'chestnut with white feet'—well, fact is, them as has 'em won't part with 'em. Better look this feller over. He's a purty color, an' no slouch. A lamb couldn't be gentler, an' scare?—why, Dick don't know what scare is. He'd eat hay off a traction-engine an' never prick up his ears. Wouldn't you, Dick?"

Dick snuggled up to the Egg-and-Butter Man's arm. He whinnied gently and regarded me with an engaging mildness. I put out one hand. The great neck arched for the caress. Softening, I went into the house, returning with an offering of sugar. It was pleasant to feel a soft nose mumbling my hand, and my heart warmed toward Dick. With the sunlight gleaming against his sleek, rounded sides; slender, well-turned legs, silky, flowing mane, he was, as the Egg-and-Butter Man declared, "no touch."

"Sound as a dollar. Stand without hitchin'. Dotes on women an' kids." More of Dick's virtues.

"Are you sure," I began impressively, remembering certain books drawn from the public library and conned with much care, "that he's sound of wind and limb?"

The Egg-and-Butter Man stared.

"He might have a 'spavin,' or a 'ring-bone,' or 'soedy toes,' or 'shaley hoofs,' you know," warming to my subject. "Are you sure he hasn't the 'blind staggers,' or the 'big head?'"—a disease, I had learned with dismay, as common among horses as mankind. "He might be a 'lugger,' or a 'cribber,' or stub his toe or balk."

"Or turn double-somersaults!"—with fine irony. "Now jest let me hitch him to that new phaeton you bought, an' take you fer a ride. That'll settle all difficulties, an' if you don't say you never drove behind a handsomer, easier-goin' equine, I'll take him back where I got him, an' not ask a cent for my trouble."

He certainly was handsome when incased in my new silver-mounted harness. Easy-going? Well, just a trifle too easy-going, yet this was not the worst of faults for the horse of a "lone woman."

The dream of the beautiful black died hard, yet within the week, Richard Cœur de Lion, filled every cranny of my lonely heart. I had rechristened him thus, for I bought him from a man named Lyon, and the title seems fitted to the noble animal that was soon my very own.

And since he was my own, I wanted to drive him myself. I resented the Egg-and-Butter Man's easy familiarity, "Git up har, Dick. Step lively!" I wanted to handle the long ribbons and feel the beautiful body responsive to my touch. I said so, in substance.

"Want to paddle yer own canoe, eh?" laughed my go-between. "Well, be careful an' don't go too near them street cars"—a parting warning.

"Now what," I questioned Richard, who was peaceably cropping the tender grass along my flower-borders, "did he mean by that? We've driven alongside dozens of cars. Why should I be careful?"

The question bothered me more than I cared to admit, and perhaps it wasn't all kindness that made me call out to a freckle-faced youngster passing by; "Want to go for a drive, Ben?"

Ben was over the wheel before the words were fairly spoken. He caught up the lax lines and shook them out, while I sank back against the soft cushions gratefully. Ben was frail and slender, yet I knew his wrists were like iron, for he had played in and out among the stalls of his father's livery-barn since babyhood.

We drove to my grocer's. While Ben went inside, I sat waiting, my eyes upon the great horse before me. Then I was conscious of someone by my side. I turned towards the little "ratty-faced" man, and stared coldly. I did not like his looks nor his manner of asking: "What are you doing with that horse?"

"It's my horse." For the life of me I could not keep back a note of pride nor a fond smile as I glanced at Richard. In the next instant the smile froze on my lips.

"Well, that's a runaway horse, and he'll go through a brick wall, once he's started."

My heart sank. There was something strangely convincing about this horrid man. Mr. Young had said to be careful! What could it all mean?

"Are you sure he ever ran away?"

"Ran away with Doctor Anderson a year ago. It was a close call, I tell you. Then there was a women over on Meridian Street only two months ago. My name's Newport, ma'am, but you don't need to believe me. Just drive around and ask the Doc. I tell you, that's a dangerous animal! I wouldn't let my wife go a block behind him." He turned abruptly and was lost in the crowd.

Ben found me huddled into the corner of my beautiful carriage, amid the ruins of my castle in the air. Gravely he heard me through. Ben was too old in matters equine; had been educated too liberally in the intricacies of the "horse-trade" to pass such warning by. "Might as well drive around to the Doctor's," was his verdict.

The doctor, we learned with dismay, had gone to a famous health-resort; would not be back for six weeks. His man had heard of the runaway, but couldn't identify the horse. Mrs. Bedford we found "at home" in a communicative mood.

"Yes'm, that's the very horse! Lord, how he did rear up, and prance 'round, and paw the air! Mr. Newport, he'd been here the day before—he told us how it'd be, but Sam—that's my husband—Sam just laughed. Tell you, when that horse commenced to cut up, Sam laughed out the other side of his mouth, and hustled back to Mr. Lyon's stable. Mr. Newport, he works for Mr. Lyon; he says they've sold that horse heaps of times, but it's always the same story—they have to take him back. Sam was glad enough to get rid of him for fifty dollars!"

"Fifty dollars! How much had you paid for him?"

"Seventy-five."

"You let them beat you out of twenty-five dollars?"

A light was dawning over me. I had paid one hundred and fifty dollars for Richard, Cœur de Lion. Then his value varied with the worldly status of the buyer.

"Oh, you see, Mr. Newport, he said 'twas like selling him to someone else, and we ought to be glad to get that much for a runaway."

"Now, what I'd like to know," I said, when Ben and I went on our way once more, "is what position in this affair Mr. Newport occupies?"

The boy grinned shrewdly. "Near as I can figure it out," he explained, "Mr. Newport is what is known to the profession as the 'capper,' while your friend, Mr. Young, is the 'barker.'"

"Surely you don't suspect Mr. Young!" I exclaimed in horror. The plot was thickening with a vengeance.

"You just see if he offers to refund the twenty-five, that's all," answered the worldly wise one.

"Well, we mustn't let all this spoil our drive, since it may be the last I ever take behind my beautiful Cœur de Lion." Now that I was likely to lose him, the great horse seemed very near to me.

He threatened to be even nearer a few moments later. I was in deathly terror lest he back over the dashboard into my lap. Starting as though the yellow car before us were some hideous, undreamed-of thing, Richard, the lamb-like, the easy-going, reared high in the air and waltzed along after a fashion better suited to the sawdust arena than a crowded street.

Ben rose also. He gripped the lines, and the way he laid on with my ivory-handled whip would have called out the humane society in full force. It subdued the Lion-Hearted. He resumed his normal attitude. Bent himself nearly double to gaze back upon us with eyes wherein surprise and injured dignity were plainly evident. He tried the experiment again that afternoon. Ben's remedy effected a change of heart each time.

"All you want is a good strong hand. He'd soon learn who's boss," the boy assured me.

"Thank you, but I haven't time to cultivate a strong hand," I replied, as I alighted before my door. I couldn't resist [illegible] forward to pet the great head bent so me[illegible]d I mourned as for one already lost:

"Oh, Richard, Richard, so [illegible] a're like all the rest of the world! You have to be true to your own nature, even if it is a runaway horse's. I had hoped to make you so happy, too, and be so happy myself. And now I'm to be a little 'lone' woman, just as I was before you came. Sometimes it's hard to be a 'lone' woman, Richard, though I wouldn't tell anyone but you."

These thoughts were in my mind next morning when Mr. Young came to tell me that if I didn't want Dick, he would send someone from the stables directly. Remembering Ben's words, I listened for some mention of the twenty-five dollars. When I heard none, another fragment of my faith in mankind crumbled off.

From my window I could watch Richard daintily grazing in my tiny back yard, with Doc, the old negro I had hired to care for him, standing near. I was thinking how empty that yard would seem without the graceful yellow form moving here and there, when a sharp knocking at my front door took me quickly toward it. There stood a man who carried the stamp of Ould Ireland on his broad face and a dilapidated straw hat in one hand.

"Good mornin', ma'am," said this individual politely. "I hear you don't like your horse."

"I don't." I said briefly, resenting his suavity.

"Now, what's the matter wid him? Me name's Murphy, ma'am, Timothy Murphy. I'm a partner of Mr. Lyon's. The[illegible] belonged to me, an' I know he's a good horse."

"Well, Mr. Murphy," I said," I bought the horse through Mr. Young from Mr. Lyon, but if he was your horse, I might as well negotiate with you. You refund me my money, take your horse, and end the matter."

"Oh, of course, if you ain't satisfied, ma'am, I'm willin' to do the square thing. I'll take him back and give you a hundred dollars."

"That you will not!" They had no ignorant woman to deal with this time. "You'll return the price I paid you, or I'll prosecute you and your partner to the full extent of the law!"

I hoped the man would feel the grasp of my iron hand. Evidently he did not.

"Much good that'll do you," he laughed. "If you got judgment agin me, you couldn't collect. I ain't worth a cent. I tell you, I'll take the horse and give you a hundred dollars, or you kin keep him an' make the best ye can of it. And that's the last word I've got to say to you, ma'am."

"And the last word I have to say to you, sir," my ire was rising, "is 'Good morning!'" And the door slammed.

As I watched him stride down the narraw path and out of the gate, suddenly my little stock of courage went seeping from my finger-tips. I had, as men say, put up a strong talk. Could I make my bold words good? One thing was certain, I would not give these men fifty of Uncle Jonathan's hard-earned dollars and the pleasure of cheating a "lone" woman besides. No one should ever say he had duped a "Hicks." We weren't that sort.

"To the full extent of the law!" I had said. Imagine a little schoolma'am going to law! Well, there was nothing else for it. I would consult with a lawyer, and that without letting the sun go down on my wrath. The hour for action was come! The tocsin had sounded!

A lawyer—yes. Well and good. But which lawyer? In all the great cityful I knew not one legal adviser on whom I might call—unless—oh, dared I? The quick blood flared to my cheeks at the thought.

In a flash memory swept aside my simple room, and I saw again the laughing girl who had lightly tossed away a good man's love. Poor, thoughtless girl! How could she guess that he would go from her door that night, never to return? What could she know of weary years, of the world that should some day stand between the paths of a successful man and a little old-maid schoolma'am? Ah, had she but known! The cry was in my heart. It rose to my lips. Almost fiercely I thrust it back. What had the Honorable James Lothrop to do with me or my life? He had forgotten ages ago. The dead past had buried its own dead!

Yet there was another picture in the swimming mist; a face, so boyish, so bronzed, so good to look upon; two keen gray eyes that sought my own so kindly. Ah, after all, what change could centuries bring to such as he? His manly, earnest voice rang in my ear: "Nell, if you ever need a friend, promise you'll come to me first of all."

My card will explain both questions.

Was it these words that made me take from its sweet-scented covering my best blue gown—the one with the ruffles of soft chiffon—and lift from the box a hat, girlish with its rosebuds and ribbons and lace? Or was it just a mad longing to hear that voice again.

I blushed furiously, then smiled a little—I could not help it—when at last I stood all in brave array. My mirror was very kind to-day, and what if one has left the last milestone of vanity far behind? Isn't it gracious to smile upon so kind a friend?

II

The ridiculous color did not leave my cheek as I rode down-town. It flamed to scarlet when at last I came to a massive, gold-lettered door that bore his name. I was sure the young man to whom I gave my card could hear my heart's wild thumping, and then, when he led me into the luxurious private office, suddenly the heart-beats ceased, and I could only stand, not daring to raise my eyes to those of the tall man beside the desk, gripping the back of his chair with fingers that had grown tense.

There was silence for a moment. Then his face lightened. "As I live, Nell!" he cried. "Who could have guessed it would be you masquerading under the nom de plume of 'Ellen Jane.'"

His grave eyes lingered upon me. "The world has treated you very kindly these twenty years," he declared. "Old Father Time hasn't been around with the silver threads he bestows so generously on me." It was like the old Jim—to say just the nicest thing.

We talked—of what I can scarcely tell. It was enough for me to sit opposite him and watch the sunlight as it slanted through the heavy velvet curtains, touching the iron-gray head gently. Presently stern propriety jogged my elbow. I had not come here to rehearse the past. All my resentment surged back as I thought of Murphy and the threat that I must make good. My lawyer, for he laughingly consented to act for me, listened attentively, but gave me little encouragement.

"You'd better take the money, Nell," was his advice, "the fellows are swindlers, that's sure, and they'll probably go on swindling to the end of the chapter; for, you see, you can't make Lyon responsible, as the horse was not owned in partnership, and it's undoubtedly true that the Irishman's not worth a sent. That's the way they work their graft. You'd better take the hundred."

"James Lawton Lothrop!" I sat up very straight, assuming my most awe-inspiring, pedagogical air, "I'm surprised! You, an American citizen. A representative of the law of our land. A man to whom your fellows point as the highest exponent of principle and integrity. You advise me to back down before a couple of footpads! Not if it takes Uncle Jonathan's last dollar."

"So that's the way of it? 'Millions for defense, but not one cent for tribute!' Plucky as ever, I see—but what are we to do?"

"My opinion of your ability as a lawyer is suffering a severe shock."

"And I'll have to get my thinking cap on, or you'll find out that I'm just a great bluff"—laughingly.

A thought that almost staggered me with its daring and deceit flashed into mind. I was up in an instant, crying: "That's it! Now, you've got it! Oh, I know we could carry it through. What a joke!"

"It?" My counsel was puzzled.

"The bluff, of course. Don't you see? You just go down there and 'bluff' them into giving up my money. Rear and tear. Scare them good."

The Honorable James arose also. "My good woman," he bent his brows severely, "I could have you arrested for 'contempt of court.' 'Rear and tear,' indeed. You have a fine idea of the dignity of the law. Besides that, if they don't scare, as the highest exponent of principle and integrity, I'd be in a rather embarrassing position."

"They'll scare," I told him confidently, and in the end he consented, though not at all sure in his own mind that he would be a "howling" success.

Messrs. Lyon and Murphy looked their surprise at seeing me so soon. The latter came forward with a bland smile, evidently forgiving the slight I had put upon him. "You've come for your money, ma'am. Very well, Mr. Lyon," indicating the rotund figure in the doorway, "will make out the check. A hundred, Lyon, you mind."

"He needn't trouble to." The tall figure that stepped forward quite hid my diminutive self from view. "Not until I have had a few words."

The men stared. They were unprepared for this.

"Who are you, an' what business is this of yours?" demanded Murphy.

"My card will explain both questions. This lady has retained me, and I am here as her attorney."

The name, blocked in correct type, was enough to quell the moneyed man of the firm. Mr. Lyon was not as courageous as his name would suggest, but it takes a good deal to intimidate a son of the Emerald Isle. Murphy assumed a bravado that made my heart sink.

"You're wastin' valuable time, sir. I made my offer to the lady, an' I made it fair and square. That horse is all right, I tell you, an' I'm a poor, hard-workin' man, an' can't lose money for every woman's whim. Lyon, he'll write the check——"

"No, he won't."

I jumped at the stentorian tone. Lyon jumped, too, and looked this way and that as for some avenue of escape. The time was evidently ripe for "rearing and tearing." The Honorable James might have been a terrible Turk, bearing down upon these unlucky horse-traders, with scimitar unsheathed. He was splendid—awful!

"No, he won't! Not till I've had my say. Now, my fine fellows, let me tell you one thing. You'll refund this woman's money—one hundred and fifty dollars, do you hear?—by twelve o'clock to-morrow, or I'll prosecute you to the full extent of the law, both civil and criminal. I'll see you landed in the penitentiary for endangering life by selling a runaway horse. I'll show you there's a law in this land that protects helpless women and children. I'll make an example of you that'll discourage others from trying the game for many years to come. There's too much of this business going on, it's got to come to a stop. I've had my eye on your establishment for a long time, and have been waiting for just this chance. Now, sir," wheeling suddenly on the trembling Lyon, "you may write that check when you please, but remember the hour I mentioned—noon to-morrow. Miss Hicks, pardon my subjecting you to this scene. The lines of the law do not always fall in pleasant places." And without so much as a glance toward the speechless men, he led me toward the waiting carriage.

"Well," he asked, when we were about the corner, "did they scare?"

"Did they scare?" I echoed, and then we both fell to laughing merrily.

"I'd like to see their faces when they find out that it was all a great 'bluff' that originated in the brain of a clever little woman."

Something in his tone made me glance quickly upward. Then I looked away, and sat more quietly.

It all came over me, as we drove through the shady streets; how pleasant it would be to have someone holding the reins with a strong hand; smiling down upon you and calling you "clever little woman" in that half-tender way. Somehow, the loneliness would be harder to bear now when the world claimed him again. This afternoon had been like a little glimpse of paradise. The sun was setting. The shadows lengthened. Why must it all end so soon?

At my white gateway I turned. "Won't you come in?" I said.

He held out his hand. "Not to-day, little woman," he said, "but if you'll repeat the invitation for—say, to-morrow afternoon—surely your lawyer would rejoice with you over your check. I hope you'll let me come many afternoons, Nell. It's been more to me than you can guess, this page out of the old life. I hope we will never close the book again. My days are busy ones, and some of them are very lonely. Won't you help to make them less so?"

What could I answer, but: "Why, yes, Jim. It would make me very happy and very proud, for, you see, my little Adamless Eden is lonely too."

When he was gone I did a very un-schoolma'amlike thing. Catching up my skirts, I raced through my tiny house; out of the back door into the yard, and quite regardless of chiffons and lace, fairly flung myself upon the arching neck of the magnificent Richard, Cœur de Lion, with a laugh that was half a sob, and a sobbing that was not all sadness.

"Oh, Richard, Richard, you're a bad, scheming old horse! You're hand in hoof with those tricksters, I know. You amble along like the most peaceable of nags till you've won a woman's confidence, then you go through your act and frighten her out of a year's growth. But I love you, you dear old cheat, because Richard, if it weren't for you, this afternoon would never have happened, and then *he* wouldn't be coming to-morrow. Yes, it's all your doings, Richard, and I'll never forget you—never!"

And I never have. The next morning, when Mr. Murphy, a meek and conciliatory Murphy—he had dipped his colors most ingloriously and stood upon my doorstep, check in hand with fully three hours to spare—led him away, I watched tearfully from my window till there was only a gleam of yellow amid the trees. So passed Richard, Cœur de Lion, out of my life; but I never forgot him.

I did not get my next horse through the kind offices of the Egg-and-Butter Man. Jim and I bought her together, and a nice bargain we made. Dolly's a dainty little creature, chestnut with four white feet, and we couldn't love her better, though on the slightest provocation she has been known to stumble and plough up the earth for yards with her nose, be the road level as a floor. But there is a strong hand at the reins now, and I am not a lonely woman any longer.

Next Week: The Portion of the Youngest By Mary Stewart Cutting