My Lady of the Snows

By Beatrice Heron-Maxwell, Author of "The Skirts of Chance," Etc.

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MY little lady was a snow-child, as we say in Sussex, for she was born a week before Christmas, and the snow lay on her mother's grave before a month of her baby life was over.

I have always called her my little lady, though she says I am her adopted sister, and makes much of me in her own pretty way; but I know my place and have never presumed on it, from the day when old Sir Jaspar, angry that the child drooped and faded over her lessons and her play, sent down to the village for me to come and be a companion to her.

"Lucy," he said to me, "make Miss Ismay eat and laugh if you can; that's all I want you to do. It's bad enough she should be a girl instead of a boy; I don't want any more disappointment and trouble with her." For it seemed as if Sir Jaspar was vexed with Providence for this breach of faith with a Maturin, and could not forgive Miss Ismay for it. The Manor of Disley had belonged to the Maturins for centuries back, and always son had succeeded to father without a break until now.

Now, it would have to pass to one or other of Sir Jaspar's nephews, Felix and Hew, as like two peas to look at, but as different in nature as weeds are to flowers.

Sir Jaspar had no brother, only two sisters—twins—and these were their only two sons, born on the same day, though Mr. Felix was, they said, a few hours older than Mr. Hew; and they must have been about eight years old when Miss Ismay was born and Lady Maturin died.

Sir Jaspar took no manner of notice of them until they were grown up and out in the world, and then he sent for Mr. Felix, and made him take the name of Maturin, and come and live at the manor in idleness and dependence. Mr. Felix never liked this; he had a frank, high spirit, that chafed at sitting down and waiting for a dead man's shoes, and I believe if it hadn't been for Miss Ismay he would have shaken the manor dust from his feet much sooner than he did. She was only 16 when he came, and he treated her like a baby sister from the first, as gentle as could be to her; but I knew what she was to him, for I could see it in his face when he looked at her, only he was biding his time to tell her so!

"She is just the fairest thing on God's earth, Lucy," he said to me one day when we were both watching her, standing laughing in the snow, her head, like a little brown bird's all daintily ruffled, covered with the flakes.

She was a slender bit of a thing, with a clear pale face like her mother's family—her mother was a Chessom, and they are noted for their lovely white complexions—and dark eyes that might have been brown pansies with the dew on them. Such a little mouth, too, sweet and proud, with a touch of the Maturin's in its pride. Well, it was for her sake, I knew, that Mr. Felix kept the peace; for Sir Jaspar, always cranky with his antiquarian hobbies, was enough to provoke a saint, let alone a young man all fire and strength and enterprise.

But of a sudden Sir Jaspar took a new whim, and must needs send for his other nephew, Mr. Hew, and say he should have his choice of an heir betwixt the two cousins.

He snapped his fingers at Mr. Felix's right of precedence, and said he meant to have his own way this time. I never liked Mr. Hew. He had the same comely features, the same length of limb and breadth of shoulder as Mr. Felix, but his nature was different; it was mean and small, as you could tell from his voice, and a look that came in his eyes sometimes.

I have heard that there is a warp in the Sussex branch of the Maturins that comes out now and again—a sort of evil mood and twist of mind that spoils their physical well-being and makes them hard to live with. It shewed itself in Mr. Hew to all except his uncle, and he was unpopular within doors and without—no man more so in the whole country side. I have seen Miss Ismay shriink at a word of praise from him as though he had struck her; once when he took her hand and held it against her will, her face went red and white, and she cried to me to come to her. I told him he should be ashamed to distress his cousin so, and he turned on me with words I am not likely to forget. And when he left us my little lady was shaking all over, and she said: "I hate him, Lucy; I wish he had never come. We were so happy before."

But the difference that his coming made was felt all through the house, and presently there was nothing but strife between him and Mr. Felix; and at last he went, Mr. Hew did, to his uncle with some tales against his cousin, and Sir Jaspar believed him, though not a grain of truth was in them.

At last the end came. It was my little lady's seventeenth birthday, and we knew the snow would come, for it always did on that day, and she loved it.

The hills all round the house looked grey and bleak against a leaden sky, and a bank of heavy cloud over Disley Corner showed which way the storm would come.

Mr. Felix had sent for some flowers from Italy, anemones they were, for a present to Miss Ismay, because she loved to wear crimson flowers always; and she came to me, her face all flushed rose-pink and her eyes shining, with some of them pinned into her dress.

"Aren't they lovely, Lucy? Was it not good of Felix to remember what I like and send so far for them?"

She had a great box of them in her arms, and we put them in all the vases we could find, until her little sitting-room was gay with them.

"What did Mr. Hew give you?" I asked. She pointed to a box, unopened, on the table.

I took out a little brooch of diamonds and pearls, and asked her if she ought not to wear it.

"Not I," she said. "I wanted to give it back to him, but father was angry, so I dared not."

It was about an hour later that I was dusting Sir Jaspar's curio-table in the library—he would let no one but me touch it—when he came in, storming, and Mr. Felix after him.

He did not see me, and I was slipping past the screen to get to the door (for none of us cared to face Sir Jaspar if he was angry) when Mr. Felix shut it; and as they had both said more already than I ought to have heard, I felt too frightened to move, and stayed behind the screen.

"I tell you, sir," the old man was saying, "that you are a gambler and a profligate. I have ample proof of it, and when you deny it you are a liar—an insolent liar as well." There was dead silence for an instant, and then Mr. Felix said in a low voice: "No man—not even my mother's brother—shall have the chance of saying those things to me twice. The Manor ceases to be my home from to-day. My cousin can take my place here in the letter as in the spirit. Good-bye, sir."

There had been a soft tapping at the door which neither of them heard, and I trembled, for I guessed it was Miss Ismay.

She came in quickly, before he had finished speaking, and forgetting everything except the fear of losing him, she cried out: "No, no, Felix; you cannot leave us like this. Father, you do not wish him to go, I am sure; ask him to stay with us."

Mr. Felix crossed the room to her, and I saw the light that I knew come into his eyes.

She made a sweet picture as she stood there, leaning against the door, one hand grasping the handle of it and the other stretched out to her father.

He was speechless with rage, and Mr. Felix said to her quite quietly: "Ismay, your father has heard things about me that are not true. I have no proofs of my innocence, but some day I may be able to show him he does me an injustice. Until then I must go."

Sir Jaspar had found his voice by this time, and he said: "This is not a subject to discuss with her; she has no right to be here. Leave us, Ismay."

But she seemed to have more courage with him than ever before.

"Father," she pleaded, "won't you believe Felix? Surely you know he would not deceive you."

But Sir Jaspar waved her into silence, and Mr. Felix himself asked her to go, so with a little sob she turned and ran away. Mr. Felix was just following her when Sir Jaspar called him back.

"I forbid you to speak to her again," he said, and Mr. Felix bowed and went away.

I waited in a fever of impatience until Sir Jaspar was busy at his pigeon-holes in the corner, and then I slipped out and ran to find my poor little lady.

There was not a sign of her anywhere about, and when I went on to the terrace and called her there was no answer.

It was snowing fast now, crisp dry flakes like feathers, and I knew it would not stop until it had all come down. I felt I should be glad to get my little lady safely in and coax and soothe her.

Round the garden I went to all her favorite nooks and corners, and back to the house and out again after that, and still nowhere could I find her; and then as I passed through the stables I saw the dog-cart ready to start, and Mr. Felix's valise and Gladstone at the back.

He came out while I was there and said a few words of cheery good-bye to the men, and as soon as he caught sight of me he came and shook my hand.

"Good-bye, Lucy. Tell your little lady that I should have sought her out to say good-bye, but her father said no. I hope her next birthday will be happier than this. She has all the best wishes of my heart. Take good care of her; I trust to you for that." And then he swung himself up into the cart and was gone.

I followed slowly down the drive, and when I got to the lodge gates the under gardener's wife ran out to me, and said Miss Ismay had gone through them half an hour before, and she had not seen her pass back again.

Then I guessed where my little lady was, and I ran up the road towards Disley Corner as fast as my feet would carry me.

The snow was thick now, whirling all round me, and I could only see a yard or two ahead, and it troubled me greatly to think Miss Ismay was out in it.

Just at the bend of the road I came upon the dog-cart standing still, and the groom said "Mr. Felix is over yonder," with a lift of his elbow towards the Corner.

I could not see them, but I knew they must be in the dip at the top of the bank where the sunk fence ends. I climbed up, and the snow was so thick and blinding now that I could only just distinguish their figures even when I was close upon them.

He had both her hands in his, and he was saying: "I will come back some day, Ismay—if I live—when I can lift this weight of dishonor from me. Good-bye. I shall never forget you. Good-bye."

And then he lifted her hands to his lips. I cannot leave you here alone in the storm," he went on. "Let me drive you back."

The tears were raining down her cheeks, but she shook her head.

"I am quite safe," she said; "the snow never hurts me. Go, Felix, please go."

But still he said he could not bear to leave her. So then I went to my little lady and put my arms round her, and she turned and laid her pretty head on my shoulder.

"I am so glad you are here, Lucy," Mr. Felix said. "Be a sister to her. Take care of her." He kissed her hand again and went down the bank, and a moment after we heard the dog-cart wheels.

I took her home and tried to comfort her, for I saw how it was; she had learnt the secret that had been hidden in both their hearts until then. But from that moment we never had sight or sign of Mr. Felix, and he might as well have been buried on that day when he drove away in the snow storm.

Once, two years after, a rumor came that he was dead, killed in a frontier skirmish with some outlandish tribe, and Sir Jaspar looked a little ashamed of himself for some time after that; while Mr. Hew rejoiced, I could see, and thought that his way was clear and his inheritance certain at last.

Miss Ismay never spoke of him to either of them, but to me she often talked about Mr. Felix, and she wore always in a little locket round her neck some dried petals of the flowers he had given to her.

It was just the day before her birthday, three years after he went away, that she called me to her room.

"Look here, Lucy," she said, and her eyes were sparkling and her lips quivering, "I am certain this is Felix. Read it." She showed me a paragraph in the morning paper about a Mr. Felix Lawrence—those were his Christian names—who had just been rescued from captivity in the Soudan.

"Mr. Lawrence," it said, "made a daring entry into the citadel of Ames Pasha, one of the leading rebel chiefs, who as a renegade British subject has been specially inimical to his compatriots. He succeeded in rescuing two English officers who had fallen into the Pasha's hands, and who with his aid effected their escape, but he himself was captured by treachery, and has for five months suffered the greatest tortures and indignities at Ames Pasha's hands. In spite of this he has on several occasions contrived to send news to our troops, and not only to save them from disaster and defeat, but to give them such important information as enabled them to conquer the Pasha and crush the rebellion." "They gave him a banquet at the Cecil last night," said Miss Ismay, "and he made a brilliant speech. I am certain it is Felix." Mr. Hew happened to come in at that time, and he said with a sneer: "You credit my poor cousin with a marvelous power, then. A year ago we had authentic news of his death."

"I have never believed it," she answered, coldly, "any more than I believed the other lies that were told about him. Felix was incapable of anything mean or base; the baseness and cowardice were in the hearts of such calumniers."

He stared at her for a moment with a strange look. Then he said: "Listen, Ismay. I won't pretend to misunderstand you any longer. You love Felix and you hate me. But even if he were alive—and that is impossible—he should not stand between us. I mean to win you some day."

"Never," she said, proudly. "I would not marry you if my salvation depended upon it."

"But I have sworn that you shall," he answered, under his breath.

She smiled with disdain.

"The day that the manor is yours I leave it," she said; "but at present it is my home, and this is my own sitting room."

He could not stay after that, but he had a dark look on his face as he went away.

My little lady was restless all through that day, and she said to me: "I am sure it is Felix, and if it is Felix he will come to-morrow."

When the morning came she sat looking out into the garden with such a wistful gaze; I dared not hope that Mr. Felix would really come, yet she seemed so sure of it. It began to snow about 3 in the afternoon, and by 4 it was coming down so thick and fast that even the terrace was a foot or two deep with it.

I left her, when I went down to the housekeeper's room for my tea, nestled up in the window-seat, looking out at the storm. I fancied she was waiting for her cousin, though why she felt so certain that it was he I could not tell.

About 6 o'clock we heard wheels coming up the drive, and presently a loud ring at the front door.

"That's Mr. Felix's voice, Mrs. Mason," I said, started up; "he has come back safe after all." And I ran along the hall, thinking Miss Ismay would be there to greet him.

Sir Jaspar was standing at the library door, white and scared, and Mr. Hew and Mr. Felix were facing each other in the hall.

"We understood," said Mr. Hew, "that you were dead. This is a pleasant surprise."

"A good many things have been understood about me that were false," answered Mr. Felix, with a steady voice and look. "I have come to explain the mistake to my uncle."

He was brown and worn-looking, as thin as a lath, and with patches of gray in his hair, but any woman with a pair of eyes and a heart would have chosen him rather than Mr. Hew, all sleek contentment and red-and-white healthiness.

Sir Jasper came forward at that with both hands held out.

"I am glad to see you, Felix," he said, "and if I made a mistake and you can prove it, I shall be gladder still."

It did not surprise me, for I knew the old man had brooded over it in secret and repented of his harshness long since; and I believe he had begun to waver about Mr. Hew, who took his own way more every day.

Mr. Felix looked round, and you should have seen his tired eyes light up when they caught sight of me.

"Lucy," he cried, "how bonny you look! Where is your little lady?"

I went to find her, and while I was away they looked for her about the house, but she had gone—vanished as she did that day three years since.

Mr. Felix turned and went towards the door. He guessed, I knew, as I did, where she must be.

"My cousin must be found," he said. "I'll drive along the road."

The driver who had brought him from the station demurred at taking him.

"It's not fit for man nor beast," he said. "I was going to ask the Squire to let me bide here till the storm was by."

But Mr. Felix would not take no. "You shall have your price," he said, "but you must drive me back as far as Disley Corner."

Mr. Hew wanted to go, too, but Mr. Felix said peremptorily he would take no one but me and old Hicks, the butler.

I was wild with delight about my little lady, for if she had gone, hoping to meet him, and had waited at the Corner, how was it he had passed and never seen her?

We had to go at a snail's pace, for the snow was three feet deep in the middle of the road, and there were great drifts against the hedges that a horse might sink into and find it hard to get out.

Mr. Felix walked at one side of the road and Hicks at the other, with lanterns; and I, fevered with impatience, had to sit in the carriage, for they would not let me out.

At last we got to the Corner, and I would stay in no longer.

Oh! it was cruel; the wild wind and the driving, slashing snow, and I could scarcely keep my footing up the bank, waist-deep in the drift as I was. And just as I reached the top I heard Mr. Felix give a cry, and I nearly stumbled over him where he knelt, bending over a mound of snow and calling to Hicks to come and help him.

I snatched at the lantern, which he had set down, and held it up, brushing away the soft, wet flakes that clung and caked against the glass and smothered the light. And sure enough it was my little lady, lifeless and still, called to rest by the snow, as her mother had been.

Her dress and cloak were all sodden, and the hood clung to her white face; and when they lifted her, her hands fell limply down at either side.

They put her on the wide front seat of the carriage and wrapped her round in the rug, and I laid her sweet head on my shoulder and wound my arms about her, vainly trying to give my warmth and life to win back hers—so precious and so dear.

My heart felt all dead and frozen, like her. I couldn't have cried or spoken, or even prayed. I seemed to be shut in with my little dead lady, and a great black wall of despair round us both.

She must have waited and waited, sick at heart with longing (for Mr. Felix's train was an hour late and more) and the cold had numbed her so that she fell asleep there in the dip, and the snow drifted over her and made a shroud.

* * * * *

It seems now like a dream—the long, slow drive home, the silent group at the door, through which they carried her straight to the library and laid her on Sir Jaspar's great couch, opposite the fire.

And then Mr. Felix, keeping all out except Mrs. Mason and me, told us just what to do, until the doctor, for whom they had sent, should come; so that if any flicker of life remained—ah! what a mockery to think it possible, with that death-white face and those pale lips and fast-closed eyes—it might not go out altogether.

And like the waking from that awful dream comes back the moment when the miracle, for which at last I prayed, came true.

I felt her fingers flutter in mine, and I saw her eyelids quiver, and then a long, deep breath parted her lips.

I called softly to Mr. Felix to come, and when she opened her eyes they rested first on him.

She has told me since that her first thought was that she was dead and in heaven, and had found her cousin there.

A little tremulous smile came round her lips, and she said, faintly, "You were Felix Lawrence, were you not?"

He did not answer, only knelt beside her and signed to me to give him the warm milk and brandy which was waiting for her, and then he tended her like he used to in the old days, as if she were a baby-sister.

Presently she said again: "I knew that you were Felix Lawrence. You won't go away again, Felix?" And he answered: "Never more, if you will let me stay, Ismay."

And with that the life seemed to fly back into her face and the light into her eyes, and I, like the foolish thing I was, could choke back my sobs no longer, and had to run out into the hall, else she would have heard me and been startled.

Mr. Hew caught my arm—he was waiting there with Sir Jaspar for the doctor—and his face was all working, and he stammered: "Is there no hope, Lucy?"

"She is alive," I sobbed. "She has come back to us," and then I laughed and cried, and was quite demented for a while, until Mrs. Mason came to the library door and said that Miss Ismay wanted me, and I quieted down at that.

She was sitting up against the sofa cushions by that time, and Mr. Felix still kneeling beside her; and I never saw her look more radiant or more beautiful.

"Lucy," she said, "it seems too good to be true; he has come back, and it is just as I thought—he has done splendid things, and all the world is talking of him."

Mr. Felix laughed, and said I was not to believe a word of that, but she put her hands over his lips to stop him, and he kissed it.

And then—for there was no one beside me in the room—he took her in his arms and gave her his first lover's kiss; and he said to me: "Lucy, this is going to be my little wife, and that is the most splendid thing that could ever happen to me."

I never heard what passed between him and Sir Jaspar, but they were together a long time next morning; and then Mr. Hew, who had been keeping out of the way, was sent for, and he looked a different man when he came out, as indeed he had done ever since the night of Mr. Felix's return.

It was no grief, or surprise either, to any of us when Mr. Hew left the Manor a few days afterwards. He said he was only going away on a visit, but we knew well enough he would never darken the Manor doors again. His game was played out, and he had risked so much on it that he could not blame anyone but himself if he had cut the ground from under his feet.

He had put all his own faults and wrong-doings on to Mr. Felix's shoulders, and made his uncle believe that the gambling debts and the other troubles were his cousin's, when all the time they were his own.

Sir Jaspar would have been much more harsh with him, but Mr. Felix did not want that. He was quite content when his name was cleared. He had met a man on his travels who had told him what a scapegrace Mr. Hew was, and could give him proofs of it. But he would not have any quarrelling. Still Mr. Hew knew that he would never get anything more from his uncle, and he could not bear to look at Miss Ismay's happiness with Mr. Felix, and so he went, and no one missed him.

So my little lady is going to marry her first and last love; and she says it must not be until her next birthday, and then the snow must be falling, and she will be a "white bride."

Sir Jaspar is softened now. I think in his heart of hearts he is glad and proud that his nephew has done so well, and that there will be a Maturin worthy of the name to succeed him at the Manor.

For he is getting older, is Sir Jaspar, and it is time there should be someone else to take care of my little lady.

THE ARMY IN INDIA.

Memorandum Issued by the Commander-In-Chief.

The Commander-In-Chief in India has issued a very interesting memorandum on the forthcoming great manoeuvres at Delhi, of which the following are the main points:

While bearing in mind the valuable experience lately gained in South Africa, commanders will doubtless not be led astray into servile an imitation of the tactics that would have been impossible had he been opposed to an enemy possessed of cavalry and commanded by generals trained in the art of war as understood by civilized nations. Battles will have to be fought out in future as in the past and we may never see a repetition of Boer tactics, so our troops must be prepared to engage the enemy under all conditions of war. We must be prepared to meet counter attacks, and our dispositions must be made accordingly, and while the three arms are worsted with the most intelligent concerted action the full power of each, according to its role, under all conditions of war, must be developed. For the purpose of instruction, cavalry should be considered to be armed with rifles, which, it is hoped, will shortly be given them, and their dismounted fire should receive the same credit as infantry fire.

The chief points brought home to us in South Africa are in the very great importance of cover, both during the advance and while in action. Artillery must, however, remember that their first duty is to inflict loss on the enemy. (b) The very long ranges at which formed bodies are liable to suffer severly from artillery fire. (c) The assistance artillery fire, distributed over the positions held by the enemy, can afford to the attack by keeping down the infantry fire of the defenders.

As regard, (a), every possible use must be made to cover when advancing into action or changing position, as not only is loss thereby minimized, but, if not previously observed by the enemy, batteries may remain a long time in action when firing cordite and when under slight cover without their exact whereabouts being discovered. Every endeavour should therefore be made to obtain cover, whether natural or artificial, when in action and in motion. When cover has to be obtained by digging, the earth thrown out should, if possible, be hidden by bushes, etc., as newly-defined objects for the enemy to aim at. Natural cover, for this reason, even if it only consists of bushes, is sometimes preferable to gun pits, etc. As regards (b), the Boers taught us that formed bodies cannot approach within a very long distance of well-positioned artillery. The effective range of 5-inch breech-loading guns against large targets, such as columns, may be taken at from 8,000 to 10,000 yards, and with the present long-burning fuse, 10, 12 and 15-pounder field guns can bring effective shrapnel fire on an enemy at 6,000 yards, and 30-pounder batteris at 8,000 yards. At the peace manoeuvres the umpires will use their judgement of course, in crediting artillery fire with loss to the enemy when the distance of long range fire has been accurately ascertained and verified. The 6-inch Howitzer in consequence of its high trajectory, can fire over considerable heights. At 3,500 yards the slope of descent is 1 in 2.3, so that troops 3,00 yards behind the crest of a hill 400 feet high can be made to suffer severly if their position is known. The extreme range of 6-inch Howitzers is 5,000 yards.

"Willie did you thank Mr. Speedway for taking you to drive?" said the mother of a small boy, solicitously. No answer. The question was repeated. Still no answer.

"Willie! Do you hear me? Did you thank Mr. Speedway for taking you to drive?"

"Yes," whispered Willie, "but he told me not to mention it."—"Life."

CHRISTMAS SKETCHES

BY LOUIS WAIN.

CHRISTMAS SHOPPING.

IN GOOD SKATING FORM.

WE ARE HAVING LIVELY TIMES.

BLIND MAN'S BUFF.