

LUCY LAVERNE.

HER LIFE-STORY, AS RELATED TO ME ONE EVENING IN THE MOONLIGHT.

BY ANNIE MERRILL.

I have long been one of nature's lovers, and confess also that human nature has ever possessed a certain amount of fascination for me. I love to wander away alone that I may hold intercourse with trees and rocks; but it is with the waterfalls, which I find in the spring-time coursing and gurgling down the mountain side, that I stay and talk the longest, for there is nothing in nature which so holds me as the sound of water in motion; and sometimes, when standing beside the falls which break the peaceful flow of the beautiful winding Zanthé, I feel as though I were not alone, but that a mighty spirit speaks to me from the rushing waters.

Our village, though not enterprising, is much loved for its natural beauties. A mountain, which might fittingly be called a tree-covered plateau, rises away in the north, and is so wide in its extent that it serves as a protection from severe winter winds. Zanthé, a charming river, narrow and birch-bordered, flows through the village and affords excellent boating, its current being slow. The falls, of course, are a possible source of danger; but I have never yet heard of any one being carried over them.

Oh! if I were only a man, I have often thought, how I would wander away through fields and woods and float away over Zanthé. As it is, I often stray off to the forest, though not without my pet St. Bernard dog, which I call "Bernardo"; but he is, like man, of a roving disposition, and I find that he has left me, very often when I wish him most,—at one time, perhaps, when I think I hear Indians after me, who turn out to be white hunters, or at another when I am sure I hear rattlesnakes rustle the dead leaves. If I wished, I could be confident that the disturbance was caused by mischievous squirrels, with which the forest abounds; but there is a certain fascination about indulging the fancy that it is something to inspire terror in the breast of an unprotected woman.

My fancies were always of a peculiar nature, for I remember when a little girl of climbing up on the old nurse's lap and screaming, "Oh! the bears and wolves and lions are after me. Here they come! Don't you see? The room is full!" I thought her imagination extremely dull, for she flatly declared she did not see one; but immediately after said crossly, which I now see was very inconsistent, that if I did not quiet she would throw me down among them. It is certainly a brave act to frighten one's self with terrifying fancies when in strong arms and perfectly secure from any earthly harm, and, when I say earthly, I mean that lightning, a heavenly power, could destroy one even in the arms of a Hercules.

At another time, when I was fifteen or sixteen, I remember being chased by a large but equally harmless dog, who was bent on having a frolic with me; but to such an extent did I allow my imagination to carry me, that I sprang up into a tree and climbed up limb after limb, until safe from the disappointed dog, and, as I sat there looking down at him, fancied he was a huge lion just waiting and anxious to devour me; and then, as though a deliverer had been sent me, I saw a man coming towards the tree with shouldered rifle, but felt greatly mortified as he drew near to recognize in him the friend and tormentor of my girlhood days, Monteith Meredith, who I knew would make all sorts of fun of me.

Closer he came, and, when he looked up at me, it was with mischievous eyes. He always seemed to read my actions in a way that was provoking to me, and fearful lest he should guess why I had assumed the present attitude, I was busily planning an excuse, such as—that I had climbed up that I might obtain a fine view of the surrounding country; but, ere the words were uttered, he checked me by saying:

"Well, little girl, I suppose you have been pretending the bears were after you as usual."

"Certainly," I replied, perhaps too audaciously, "and I shall not descend this tree till they leave!"

He doffed his hunting cap, and with the remark "Be it so!" uttered contemptuously, tramped away, the dog at his heels, which I afterwards learned was his lately acquired possession.

Three years passed and a lovely afternoon came. The sun had sent its red gold shafts of light dancing merrily over Zanthé's rippled bosom as I floated away in my canoe "Hebe."

Alone with nature. How much that means to nature's lover! When they two understand each other and when no words are necessary to convey thought from mind to mind. Ah! those delightful moments. I could drift forever with the goddess by my side!

I closed my eyes and drifted—drifted—drifted—until I heard the rumbling and seething of the falls I knew could not be far away; but so happy was I that for more than a passing moment I felt as though I would love to be carried over, as though there would be only grandeur in such a death. On I drifted, never once opening my eyes until I felt a sudden whirl.

I was confident of being between two worlds, yet not a pang of regret had I at leaving earth; but the shock caused me to open my eyes, only to see that I was still some distance from the falls and my canoe stranded on the shore at Zanthé point.

Human nature seemed envious of nature's influence over me and tore me from her by grasping my canoe-head and drawing it up on the beach, for, when I looked, Monteith Meredith stood before me, horror strongly marking his features, probably because of my recklessness. He had been obliged to step into the water in order to reach me; but fortunately, having had on high hunting boots, no harm resulted.

Wherever I went and whatever happened, my old tormentor was on hand to tease me; but on this day he did appear to be in one of his teasing moods.

Human nature seemed to win an instantaneous power over me, for, not till that moment, as I looked up into a pair of thoughtful gray eyes, did I realize how much earth and her friends still meant for me.

Monteith's expression of alarm changed to one of great gentleness, as he told me of his little sister who had been ill for several days, for she was one of his idols.

"Will you come and see her?" he asked. "She is very lonely and said this morning that she wished I would bring you."

What could I do but consent, and—what did I wish to do?

He extended his hands that I might alight from the canoe, and I sprang away I cared not whither. Having drawn up my canoe where it would be hidden by willows, we began our walk towards his home, and, while we walked, discussed my possible and probable state of mind at the time of my blind rush towards death. He asked if I had been unhappy and intended ending my life. I laughed and explained that my life had been an exceptionally happy one, and that it was probably my great trust in nature and her movements which made me willing to follow wherever she led, even to transformation.

"Ah! but Miss Lucy," he said in reply, "does it not amount to selfishness when carried to such an extent? Have you not friends who need you?"

Even though Monteith provoked me when in his teasing moods, I felt more at ease with him, for, when grave and earnest, he possessed an amount of influence over me which made me angry, so I showed my desire to change his mood by endeavoring to quarrel with him. The quarreling was easy, though the changing was not.

"Might I not about as well be in the form of a spirit wandering through this sinful earth trying to exert a good influence over my 'friends of other days'—as is at least possible—as to stay by myself from year to year and seldom hold intercourse with any living soul besides mother and little sister, as some young man I know of does? Is it not the grossest selfishness when his society is sought after, and when he is actually begged to go out to dine or attend evening parties and do his share in making the usually dull evenings pass pleasantly? Is it not, I say, the height of selfishness to refuse to grant what these poor beggars ask?"

I was even surprised at myself—as was seldom the case—for becoming so heated, and felt that I was using an amount of reproach which would only be justifiable in one who had received a personal slight, whereas, on the contrary, I was talking to a young man who had even overlooked the absence of the formality—invitations, and had come to our place very, very often.

I watched his face as my words flew, and the only evidence that he paid any heed to my tirade was the ever increasing look of sadness there depicted.

"O! we are always quarrelling," he said, desperately, not replying to what I had said.

"Is it to be so always? I make resolves nightly that I will never disagree with you again, but when day comes and we meet, you excite the combative in my nature and compel me to say much that I afterwards regret. Come," he said, extending his hand and looking so noble, "shall we agree to end this discord?"

We paused under the shade of an old oak. I hesitated. It was a great temptation to lay my hand in his open palm, for what a difference that one act would have made in our future; but I loved freedom and independence dearly and resolved not to be bound under covenant to measure my words when speaking with any one, and especially one with whom it was so much fun to quarrel!

I ignored both the hand and the question, though it was hard, and said, as I gathered a handful of everlasting flowers which grew in the field we were passing through:

"Isn't it provoking that such sweet little innocent flowers should ever have been called *Antennaria plantaginifolia*?"

"I know of circumstances which are more annoying," he replied quietly, but just as effectively; "but you will not turn me from my purpose, even though you speak of a plant so terrifying as the Scotch thistle. I am not so easily baffled, little girl."

On he marched, fearlessly to lay siege to my heart; but I was not without my defence—a strong will. That was my protection, and it suddenly, as though by magic, made me able to steel my heart against the invader, and to all appearances I was as careless as one who cared nothing for him. Even though he had long ago won my combined respect and admiration, and though the siege was unnecessary, because the besieged had long before surrendered in effect if not by word, yet I was not willing to give up my freedom even for him, and though my heart was gone, I still retained possession of my hand.

The siege continued—"con furio." Yet even at such an awe-inspiring time, I could not hide an amused smile as a mental picture of the practical side of married life arose mockingly before me. I saw myself standing in a small six by eight kitchen beside a rough board table. Clothed

in a worn print wrapper, the sleeves of which were rolled up to the elbow, I was busily engaged making bread, while at the open doorway knelt Monteith industriously chopping kindling wood.

The vision was altogether too ludicrous, and had the galls awaited me in the next field, I could not have repressed a laugh; but I quickly asked forgiveness for my rudeness, and lest he should think me irreverently laughing at his warm words, felt compelled to show him the funny picture, and our laughs mingled as we viewed it. Still undaunted, he took up the old thread.

"Do you love me, Lucy? Will you marry me?"

"Your first question I decline to answer. To your second I say *no*!"

The last clause I meant to be very emphatic, but Monteith looked as though he had won instead of lost, for I could detect nothing but contentment in his countenance, which sorely wounded my vanity, and he replied in the most provokingly indifferent manner:

"Very well, Lucy, be it as you will." And it was his turn to make an irrelevant remark, something about the daisies, I think.

This was my first proposal, and I had a half-formed idea that Monteith would faint when I gave him my answer, thus I was not a little startled at his cool way of viewing it; and suddenly something told me that perhaps he knew the real state of my mind and determined to have his revenge by never giving me an opportunity to change the monosyllable. So thinking that my fear might easily be correct I returned to the subject, that I might make him aware that I did not care so much for him as he imagined.

"You are very interesting to me. I find pleasure in studying your character and disposition, in the same way that I enjoy investigating the nature of plants; but do not spoil our delightful friendship by talking of love. Go in to society and be like other people and you will be still more interesting."

I was well pleased with myself when I ended that little speech, and felt certain the desired result would be obtained, but I saw instead indications of a storm.

"Like other people!" he replied, and once more became himself—natural, tease-loving Monteith.

"Are you like other people? You who have often been found literally talking to trees and clouds and smiling at their fancied replies, no doubt; climbing trees to escape tame dogs, and, to cap the climax, trying to commit suicide. Ah! young lady, are you like other people?"

I felt my defeat, and the only way to rise from it, I knew, would be to remind him gently that village gossips had gone even so far as to call him crazy, but I crushed the thought as being mean and contemptible, and reasoned that any way in such a place, among such narrow-minded people, great genius was considered but eccentricity, talent was barely tolerated, and any winged creature desiring to soar to some grand sphere of thought through such close and fogged atmosphere, would almost surely fall back to earth stifled. We were at the castle door, and it was probably no misfortune that our conversation ended.

A few days after, not in the least terrified by my recent narrow escape, I wandered off again in my canoe, and drew up after a time on Fern Island, a circular piece of ground out from Zanthé point, and well covered with ferns. I had not been there long when I heard Monteith's silvery call in the distance. It contained eleven notes and was the sweetest signal I had ever heard. I think it must have been original with him, for I had never heard it used by any one else; but I knew every note of it, since I had heard it so often from his lips sounding through the forest and across Zanthé. I sent back a signal certainly more original than musical, and Monteith was soon shooting towards the island in his canoe.

"Hurrah for a race, little girl," he called gaily as he neared me. He seemed in excellent spirits that afternoon, and I made haste to join him, as I felt just in the humour for the diversion he proposed.

"Choose your limits," said he, and when all necessary arrangements were made and bow stood beside bow, the canoes appeared to possess life and seemed restless to begin the race.

"One, two, three," said Monteith solemnly, and our canoes went bounding away.

I was gloriously happy. There is nothing I so enjoy as a race over the water. It is far ahead of even a gallop across the fields. I was too full of delight to notice that my position, high up in the stern of the skiff, was very perilous; and, as Monteith was fast leaving me, I made a great effort to regain my place. I was more excited than wise, and at one desperate plunge of the paddle my canoe, bow in the air, leaped away from under me, and I was thrown backwards into the water. I think I must have screamed "Help! Murder!" ere I went down, for when I arose to the surface, Monteith was beside me in his canoe, ready to dive if necessary.

I grasped the side of his boat with both hands, which nearly had the effect of upsetting it, and without making any effort to rescue me, the occupant sat coolly looking at me. At first you may think it cruel that he should leave me in such a position, but he knew the water was very warm, and must have seen by my face that I was enjoying the adventure even as much as the race.

I think it was my apparent indifference at my condition which so annoyed him. So, when he thought me in a position of dependence upon his mercy, he said to me as though he were my master:

"Once more I ask you: Will you marry me? Say yes, or—desperately—"stay in the water!"