

"fainthearted lucy"

by

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*"Fainthearted Lucy" is Sheelagh Russell's prize-winning entry in the Sir Charles G.D. Roberts Memorial Prize for the best short story submitted by a UNB student.

It was not the sea that frightened her. She placed great faith in statistics. "Just think," she would say, "eighty-five per cent effective. But that fifteen per cent - I think it should be investigated." Or, at municipal election time, she would quite accurately calculate just who would vote for whom. Yes, and statistics gave no reason to fear a shipwreck in Frank's case. It was the unknown disaster, the unplanned-for event, which worried her. Whether it was a ship disappearing from the face of the earth, or the broken shell of her best cranberry-glass vase scattered on the floor a day after she had worn out her last broom, the unexpected annoyed Lucy and her sense of the proper way of things. But she never could discourage him from going.

Just before his last voyage, a visit to his former superior in Heidelberg, he had begged her to accompany him. He had no power before her tears, but was even weaker in her silence. "Ah, the Black Forest, the Rhine, wiener-schnitzel, yodelling! Where was it your mother came from? Glockstadt, nicht wahr?" The mention of the insulting fictitious name, he thought, would bring out some little fire in her, something he could face without fear, but she traced a design on the lace tablecloth as she spoke.

"No, I will not go."

"Ah, my little Hun, my countess!" He was determined to find some reaction. "Damn it, Lucy, can't you even curse a little? Get mad! Look, we'll even go to Russia, Siberia, if you like!"

This last suggestion brought a hardness to Lucy's watery eyes, a quiver to her long-fingered hand. "I'm going." He touched her hair gently as he shut the heavy winter door.

Lucianna and Jemima Rievenskov were as different as two sisters could be when Frank had first met them, and had remained so to the present day. They were being introduced, through the elderly Rievenskovs, an aunt and uncle who had left Russia years before, to Montreal society. Just as Jemima was the social success, the bright and witty, her strangeness only increasing the effect of her desperate gaiety, Lucy was the dismal failure. Her bitter lips refused the few offers she was made, and her coldness became a mask to emphasize her wretchedness.

"Come with us, Lucy, we've plenty of skates!" Peter Vanderneuw was, in the general feminine opinion, the best-looking, most charming of the upward-moving young men. "Pity," they said, "it's pity that makes him do it," and they added another quality to his long list of credits. But still, perhaps there was something else, some icy mystery, some eastern tint of melancholy, for hadn't Frank Doyle been trying to see her?

She was a fool to refuse, but there seemed to be no envy in her voice, no grace in her scorn. "No, I shall be busy," she said, but more was read into her words.

No mention was ever made then of their parents, and never would be until months after Frank's marriage to Lucy. Even then Lucy would reveal little of it; he let it for the most part be her secret. "They are gone, Frank Doyle," she whispered to her mirrored reflection as she coiled her coarse black hair. "Gone and we are here, where there is food for the poor, and no hatred for the rich, where mansions are not afraid of hovels." That night he heard her cry out in her sleep. "Who is it?" he asked. "The rotten hungry souls that wait in the night for my mother."

His voice boomed out at the slight figure opposite him, as his amused wonder turned to uncertain taunts. "Well, I'm almost of a mind to ask the widow Bailey, or," here he pinched her bony elbow, "or better yet, the Misses St. John. You know, any other woman would be jealous?"

Her narrow cheeks forced out the words. "Jealous? Oh yes, I will be jealous when you go and get yourself killed over in some Godforsaken country that is not even civilized?" The anger was forced, her fears were not. "Ah," she thought, "will the world never be big enough for you? This room is already too much for me!"

"Lucy, Lucy, come with me. You know I'd never go willingly without you. I've seen the snow too often alone."

She shook her dark head stiffly, her lips trembling. "In the snow they are not alone." She ran to the frost-covered window. "First come the drunken farmers, then the soldiers, and then...the wolves." As she collapsed in dry sobs, his giant arms drew her back into the warmth.

Frank had never been able to reach her, his little Lucy. Just as his great size had become a curious local topic, so had Lucy's timidity. But his hearty laugh joined the secret smiles at the incongruity of the pair.

Frank Doyle had reached his present height and weight long before his McCill medical school days, but his profession enabled him to keep the expanse covered in the most expensive and most fashionable manner Drummondville had ever seen. His appearance at any social function always afforded the residents a chance to remark at how each inch of his jaunty brown derby matched exactly each yard of his brown tweed trousers, and how each feature of the miles between, from dark-striped tie to gold watch chain, added to the effect of tasteful elegance.

The citizens also knew, though they were more likely to lick their private wounds quietly behind closed doors, that not one of them was free of Dr. Francis Doyle's acid tongue and teasing laughter. With a knowledge of human weakness as sharp as his knowledge of anatomy, he would never fail to apply the proper poison to each sore point.

Sarah St. John had blushed and scolded as he prodded her into place beside Stuart Mac-



Fetrick. "Now Stu," "here's a little lady who's been with you since you called her 'my little grammar school.'" The old farmer and glared beneath coarse brows. "You scowl at me, you old hayshaker, but them all, ladies or no ladies present it was I treated you for that night. By the way, I hope you took care!"

But he was never more than they publicly excused his behavior. In a world of little, more tender people, he remembered his gentle care of the family illness.

Frank's profession allowed him to make frequent ocean crossings to the Old Country to search for a conference on veterinary medicine, now to France, a paper in bearing the names and addresses of Ferron's old school chums. Lucy needed him on these journeys, but when he was in her room, seeking assurances from her, she would leave to visit the telegraph office, anxiously awaiting news of disaster.

"Hey, Lucy, leave me alone. I'll look at you would sober him up. But he's more in need of an angel than he hasn't already seen one!" Frank stepped from the sleigh when his wife bent slightly forward, then disappeared into the snow beside the dark-dressed woman. As she was, she was a limp, dead weight. Frank and Jemima to carry back to the house.

For years afterward, his noisy joking, spread through Drummondville the story of his Lucy's disgrace.

"Now, you wouldn't look at her, but Lucy there, she's gone to the castiron. Might be going into the business, isn't that right, countess?" Lucy would finger the lace on her dark velvet dress and feel the company's laughing eyes.

"Oh yes, she's one of them. Handles bodies, doesn't even flinch at a shot of whisky. Of course, she's a bit out, but doesn't flinch. There's more to Lucy than meets the eye. Never knew her."

With this, Lucy would nod, as Frank saw the approaching tears and help her gently from the room.
