

THE PLAIN OF LUCRETIA MOORE.

Story of a Girl Who Was Always Late.

Oddly enough the very expression which was to prove, for so many months, the bane of Aldous R. Cunningham's existence, should have first attracted him in Lucretia's face.

It was a strange expression, hardly discontented, much less ill-tempered, although a less admiring observer than Aldous might have suspected these traits. A plaintive, appealing, injured expression—an expression of long habit; witness the little set wrinkles in the brow—but sufficiently new at the same time to give a not unpleasant droop to the prettily-drawn mouth.

Aldous R. Cunningham, an American actor in the flush of his first successful season in London, felt it was his right to learn more of the lady and her expression, because she was the only lady in Mrs. Barrington-Hill's crowded drawing-room who really interested him.

Mrs. Barrington Hill was communicative. She liked the quick, assertive, flattering manner of most popular guest.

"Lucretia Moore? Pretty? Yes, she is pretty—in a way—perhaps the prettiest woman in the room—Oh, Mr. Cunningham, how absurd you are! Miss Moore would be too pleased to meet you, I am sure. She is an actress, poor girl, when she can get anything to do! My husband says that she hasn't any envy or push. She certainly doesn't seem very unlucky; but it really doesn't matter, for her people are more than anxious for her to go home—Norfolk family; of course, she had to overcome a great deal of opposition before she could go on the stage at all!"

Thus Mrs. Barrington-Hill, in broken sentences to Aldous, as they made their way towards Miss Lucretia Moore.

"Opposition? They thought her unequal to making a hit, I guess?" said Aldous innocently. He had been introduced to so many young ladies with opposing families.

Mrs. Barrington-Hill gave a little shrug and presented him to Lucretia Moore. The American, with his clear, hawk eyes singularly softened and gentle, found himself listening, after five minutes, to an account of Lucretia's latest engagement on tour; she did not exactly assert, but she led him to suppose, that the manager of the company had been guilty of the blackest treachery. He felt very sympathetic, for it struck him that here, indeed, was a simple, unspoiled, frank girl; she told him her troubles at once—could there be a surer proof of immediate confidence? The conversation drifted to Lucretia's only London engagement, of two years before.

"I hope you had a good time then?" said Aldous. Lucretia shook her head and sighed.

"I was most unfortunate in my companions," she said. "They all seemed to have such good luck and they seemed so happy. I think it is my fate to be always a minute late, always given an unsuitable part, always grasping at opportunities as they slip away! My doom!"

"What a terrible word!" answered Aldous; almost adding, "for such perfect lips!"

Lucretia's eyes grew perilously bright. The American winced a little. He was impulsive and impressionable, but the prospect of being entertained with tears at Mrs. Barrington-Hill's party, at first frightened and immediately afterwards amused him.

"You must try your luck in America, Miss Moore," he said hastily, to avert the danger.

It was not a fortunate remark. Lucretia had been deliberately deprived of a magnificent opening only the week before—and by her best friend!

"Is that so?" was all Aldous had the courage to say.

"Yes," she answered solemnly. "We were both to see the same man on Tuesday. My appointment was at eleven, my friend's at half-past. I happened to be a little late—it was such a wretched day—and when I saw him at two o'clock, he had actually offered my friend the engagement!"

"Well, you see she was on time!" Aldous could not resist hinting.

"Oh, I understand! Punctuality is the essential quality for an actress! Talent, enthusiasm, adaptability, they go for nothing, I suppose?"

Lucretia resented his last words and showed it plainly. Aldous hastened to re-instate himself.

"Well, the man hadn't seen you."

"I'm not complaining. I never do!" said Lucretia quickly. "I only state a fact—my friend is accepted, I am rejected; everything else is merely accidental. It's very, very hard to bear!"

He agreed, with deplorable weakness, and determined to make the opportunity of seeing Lucretia Moore again, when her mood was a little less lachrymose.

But Aldous was unfortunate, for when he called on her "At Home" day, he found Lucretia regretting, with aggravating resigna-

tion, the fact that she had to move from her pretty Hampstead flat.

"But you told me that you considered this part of London too relaxing, although most people find it so healthy?" said one of the visitors.

"Yes, but I'm accustomed to it now," sighed Lucretia. She smiled on the young American actor. She felt, and told him, that he was more responsive and sympathetic than other people.

"All my friends go abroad, or get married, or drift into other worlds of thought and interest," Lucretia observed, when the other visitors were gone and Aldous still lingered on.

"Why not follow them a little way into the other worlds? You should just go ahead, Miss Moore. Life's a running race, it seems to me, and it all depends on whether you will be passed on the home stretch!"

"At the end of the race?" said Lucretia gloomily.

"Why, no, at the first heat!" answered Aldous.

"I find so many things are hollow, gloomy and bare!" were Lucretia's next words.

Aldous glanced round the room. It was both luxurious and simple; Lucretia was fully aware of the harmonious blending of color. A smaller room, used as a study, was seen through the inner door, with wide shelves of books, and an open, rosewood writing-table, and quaint old furniture. Lilies, carnations and Marechal Niel roses filled the air with perfume. A warm summer wind puffed through the pale-green silk curtains at the open windows. Looking up, Lucretia caught his eyes in a long mirror, which reflected her graceful figure and a ray of sunlight across her hair.

"Hollow! Gloomy? Bare? That's so!" repeated Aldous gravely. They both laughed. His look flashed from the reflection to the real face—it was delightful, entrancing, beautiful! But even while he wondered at this transformation, the old petulant expression came.

"You may well laugh! I was always misunderstood!" said Lucretia.

From that day forward they frequently met. Aldous R. Cunningham acted as sympathetic chorus to the continual chant of small troubles. At times Lucretia would forget her resignation and her own affairs. Then she was a capital companion. He lived for those rare half hours; but there was a certain capacity for judging and weighing character in Aldous, even where he was most interested, which saved him from total blindness in regard to the girl he was learning to love.

If they went to the theatre together—and Aldous snatched eagerly at that institution for the benefit of actors, the mid-week matinee—Lucretia always saw something in the performance to awaken a sense of injury in her mind. It was usually a conviction of how much better she herself would have played any of the principal parts.

Once she was reduced—as there was positively nothing else to complain about, and Aldous had proved himself especially charming—to gloom and envy by the gold and turquoise hat pins belonging to a lady in the stall just in front of her own.

Aldous made a mental note. On the following day Lucretia found herself in possession of gold and turquoise hat pins. She laid them beside his flowers and smiled. The recollection of the matinee was now harmonious and perfect.

"If only I had blue eyes!" said Lucretia, a minute later, with a little sigh, as she looked at the turquoise.

She was never quite happy with the American actor, for Aldous could not, try as he might, successfully obliterate his own personality, and that was the kind of companion Lucretia demanded—and thought she liked.

At the end of his London season Cunningham was to start immediately for New York. His farewell interview with Lucretia Moore commenced in a light, flippant vein. They both seemed to dread a silence.

Lucretia held her fate in her hand; but habit, habit, habit was too strong to be kept at bay. She began to compare his life with her own. The note he knew too well dropped into the music of her voice.

She hardly noticed, that words, so eagerly spoken a few minutes before, died from her lips. Her pretty plaint went on. He had heard it all so often! She looked drearily out of the window, in the full enjoyment of the melancholy minutes. Suddenly a firm, quick hand was clasped over hers, and, turning her head in amazement, she stared at Aldous, for there was the dangerous light of suppressed anger in his eyes. She tried in vain to release her hand.

"Just listen to me!" he began. "I want to make you see yourself, Lucretia! Say, you've seen yourself often enough! I know that! Your face, but not that little mind of yours! It's all puckered up like your forehead—your whole life is whine, whine, whine; kick, kick, kick!"

As a rule he spoke like an Englishman, but now the twang came into his voice. Lucretia still stared, and he still grasped her hand.

"You have everything on God's earth that makes for happiness—you're young, you're loved, you're beautiful; you're as dainty as a

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humming bird: you're as sweet as a Beauty rose. But it's all spoilt, you poor little fool! I guess I could have borne anything else—for I might have loved you, Lucy—but not this. I could bear temper, caprice, moods. I know I'm not half as good as you are—but you wear me out! you snap my patience, you drive me mad! Oh, Lord! Save any man from a woman with a grievance!"

She sprang to her feet, and they stood looking at each other in silence. He released her hand at last. She breathed quickly; her wide eyes, her open lips, even the scarlet in her cheeks expressed, as well as words, intense surprise.

His loud, uncontrolled voice had filled every corner of the room, and now it was all very quiet.

Lucretia never wavered in her steady gaze. It was as if he had awakened her from a troubled sleep and she was looking at him for the first time. The startled fear had left her face; she was not angry; she did not stir when Aldous drew nearer.

"Forgive me," he cried impulsively, and stooping down he laid his cheek against her hair and lifted her shaking hand to his lips.

"You might have loved me!" said Lucretia so softly that it sounded like a long sigh.

"I do! I do!" It was not in the nature of Aldous Cunningham to prolong the great minutes of his life. The half-whimsical, half serious mood that was usual with him quickly reasserted itself. With his arm caressingly thrown round Lucretia, he suddenly broke into the happiness of their talk with a laugh that made her look at him in surprise.

"For an hour we have both forgotten our troubles!" he cried.

"I shall never have one again," she answered, perhaps a little reproachfully.

"Dear love!" exclaimed Aldous. "Oh, yes, you will! So shall I. But after a time, my sweet Lucy, we shall be just as happy and a great deal happier than other people. Given a husband who means well, and a wife who is an angel—"

She stopped him quickly by laying her hands on his shoulders and answering, not the careless words, but the look in his eyes.

"You love me too well," whispered Lucretia.

"It's your last grievance!" said Aldous.

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ARTHUR WESTON.

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