

## Lot 99

By Ada Radford

THE library in the house where I was born was a well aired and well dusted room, but the things we kept in it were so connected in the mind with dust and fustiness that it was difficult to feel happy there.

There were preserved fish of various kinds hanging from the walls, there was a large glass case of sea birds, one of many varieties of inland birds, cases of minerals, and, all over the mantel-piece, and on the shelves, there were little Hindoo gods, models of Keltic crosses, models of every imaginable thing from Cleopatra's needle to the Eddystone lighthouse.

As a child I hated this room. Although it was called the library there were few books in it. The writing-desk, where I was often sent to do my lessons, was horribly uncomfortable and in a bad light.

My lessons always took me a long time in this room, for although I hated being there, and longed to be away, and off with Lionel, the evil-looking gods, and the fishes glaring at me with their glass eyes, chained me to the spot. I never felt at home, and yet I remember that Aunt Lizzie had been all round the room with me, and had told me the history of every object, where father had bought it, and how much it had cost, and I could hear  
my

my voice, as a sound outside me, saying : "Yes, Auntie, did he really ?" and hers, like a nearer sound in answer, to my surprise : "My dear child, that's a trifle for a genuine antique."

How I hated those birds and fishes ! Not only were they dead, but the life had been dried, inflated, and stuffed out of them, and horror of horrors, glass eyes had been forced into their senseless heads.

And yet one day I heard Aunt Lizzie tell a lady she was calling on, that I was wonderfully intelligent. "It's the kind of mind I like," she said. "She's like our side of the family, she takes interest in external objects."

I can see Aunt Lizzie's bonnet now as she said it. The mauve that blondes used to wear, and on one side, a daring arrangement in imitation coral and sea-weed. Even in her bonnets Aunt Lizzie's personality shone out, and very marked were the personalities of what I now learnt was *my* side of the family.

It did not improve the library to my mind that Aunt Lizzie chose it as the place in which to hang large photographs of her brothers and sisters. They were striking people ; I felt it as a child when I met them, and now I am sure of it. Amiable, strong willed and capable, they indeed were always interested in external objects. They were a great contrast to the other side of the family, my mother's side, "your poor dear mother" as Aunt Lizzie always called her, although my father who was also dead was always referred to simply as John. Of my mother and her people I knew little, our grandparents were dead and my mother's only sister was married and had a large family of her own in Australia.

"I think your poor dear mother did wonderfully considering her people," I remember Aunt Lizzie once said to me. "They never got on. No common sense. Fortunately your mother married

married young, and altered a good deal. At first she had the most unpractical ideas. She would have no nurse for you children. She would tell her housemaid not to hurry home in the evening if she were enjoying herself. She thought of every one before herself; that's very pretty in a young girl, but it may be carried too far. John's influence steadied her. But I used to think that John was just the least little bit foolish about her, although I like to see a happy marriage; but really John gave one the idea that there was no one but Mary in the world. He sometimes neglected his own people. It was not your mother's fault, my dear; no one could have been more anxious to have us. John got an idea that she ought to have quiet, and insisted on it, and poor Mary died when you were six; and we might have brightened her last days much more than we did, but for John's obstinacy. Your mother was a most lovable woman. I was almost glad John never noticed her lack of common sense."

I had very little to remind me of my mother. I had been given a little packet of letters, of father's to her and hers to father, but I had burnt them unread; besides those I had nothing but a few little trinkets. Dainty, old-fashioned things; beautiful, although bought in the days of the worst taste. Little things that his sisters would not have looked at. I liked them. They strengthened a feeling I had that my mother had made her impression on one member of the family of dominant personalities, at any rate he had cared to know her mind and tastes, and I felt more gently towards the ladies and gentlemen who hung in the library with their marked features and heavy ornaments. To one of them the family qualities had not been everything, and a member of a family doomed as regards success had been made a close study of. Still I was oppressed in the library, the features of the uncles and aunts, the want of view from the window, the glass  
eyes

eyes of innumerable birds, the height of the room, or the combination of all these things, made my heart feel solid lead and my head a disused machine. And it seems to me now in looking back that whenever anything painful has happened to me it has happened in that room; if I have a nightmare I am there and every object is in its place; although last time I saw the most hated of them, they were together in a heap (lot 99), at the sale.

In that room I fought my first important battle and lost. I think I was too anxious to be calm and logical. I knew my brother's opinion of girls. I knew that he had had a legal training, and I knew that I had had no training. I wanted him to tell me whether it would be possible for my trustees to advance me some capital.

It would not have surprised him more if I had asked whether he thought it well that I should keep a tame tiger, but he only raised his eyebrows slightly. It was a possibility under the will, he said, if the trustees were prepared to take a certain amount of responsibility in the matter.

He sat at the desk, and I having put my tennis hat on one stiff backed chair took the other, as near the window as I could get. I told him that I wanted it for educational purposes, and he asked me what had been wrong with my education.

I told him that it had not left me in a position to maintain myself.

"Let us be practical," Lionel said, assuming the expression of one of his uncles on the wall; and he made a few notes on a bit of paper.

"When you are thirty," he told me next, "you will be independent,

independent, because that little property of mother's falls to you then."

I was nineteen.

"Thirty!" I said quietly. "I might as well be dead."

Lionel did not argue that point. He looked at me critically. I felt him notice my disordered hair and blue flannel blouse.

"You are pretty," he said judicially.

I was annoyed that I blushed, but I said in a sufficiently matter-of-fact tone: "But not very."

He acquiesced, and said, "It's difficult not to be pretty in this climate at nineteen. I don't think it will last."

"No," I broke in eagerly. "It's only complexion. Aunt Lizzie said so a few days ago."

Lionel looked a little surprised at my eagerness to go off, but I knew well that my looks were being weighed against the probability of my doing anything. His next words confirmed my suspicions.

"You'll marry," he remarked.

"Lionel," I said in a tone so emphatic that again he raised his eyebrows slightly, "I shall not marry," and I meant it.

Lionel smiled the smile of a man who has lived five years longer than the person he is speaking to, and that person his sister.

It was true that sometimes on our country walks I had wished that I were engaged, for Jack and Lionel would not stop long in beautiful places, and they would not let me pick things; if I said I wanted to, they would stuff my hands full of flowers and hurry me along. If I saw something pretty across a stream and waded for it, Jack would say: "Do come on, stupid! you're getting your feet wet!" and yet the bogs he'd have brought me through that very day! And I had thought vaguely, that the person I

was

was engaged to would not mind waiting for me, or be bored at loitering. But I never had these ideas indoors, and the knowledge that Lionel was weighing my chances drove all lingering romance from my head.

"I have never had an offer," I said, hoping that this statement would have due weight with him in his final decision.

Lionel's smile this time made me flush indignantly. I saw that he was laughing at me.

"Aunt Lizzie had had more than one before she was my age," I said coolly, "but I do not see what this has to do with the question."

"It has this," said Lionel, "whether we boys marry or not, we have our livings to get; you have not to, you have a home with Aunt Lizzie until you marry, and in any case just enough money of your own when you are thirty. It would be simple madness to touch your capital."

I felt completely crushed. I did not in reality know enough about our affairs to ask an intelligent question, and Lionel's last emphatic statement had made its impression. He saw that he had won.

"What had you thought of doing?" he asked now not unkindly.

"I thought I'd prepare myself to be a teacher," I said apologetically.

"Oh don't," he said. "You'd find it an awful grind, you wouldn't be half so jolly, and when we came home there'd only be Aunt Lizzie, or if you were here at all, you'd be half asleep and talking shop." I suppose I did not look convinced, for Lionel grew really distressed and his legal manner disappeared completely, and he said with what for him was a show of feeling, "We always said we'd stick together, Grace."

None

None the less that this was the first I had heard of it I was moved, my plans melted away. I held out my hand and renewed the compact, although vaguely I realised that it meant Lionel would go and I should stick.

If in my little bedroom there were no objects of interest, it was not Aunt Lizzie's fault, but my own.

Lionel had won and I had given up the idea of going away from home for the time being, but from that day I spent some hours every day in my bedroom studying, preparing, working for examinations, so that I should be ready—for what I hardly knew.

Aunt Lizzie expressed disappointment that I did not choose to do my work in the library, but on that point I was firm. I could hardly tell her that I disliked the birds and fishes; if I had, the statement would have been met with the same pained surprise as if I had told her I disliked the portrait of my uncle, the Rev. Samuel Bayley, that hung under the most surprising swordfish in the room. So I did not go into the matter. I simply told her that I preferred my own room, and every morning I found the maid had lighted the fire there and made it ready for me. I think no girl ever had an easier aunt to live with.

For more than a year I worked very hard; but I said nothing to Lionel about it, from a feeling I had that he might think it unfair of me.

Aunt Lizzie stood by me in this effort at doing some solid work. For I remember once, that an old friend of my mother's who took an interest in me, pointed out to us that it was a pity for a girl to be too clever, and to lose her opportunities.

Once I came into the drawing-room when she and Aunt  
Lizzie

Lizzie were engaged in eager conversation. I was going away again, but Aunt Lizzie kept me, saying, "We were saying nothing unsuitable for you to hear, my dear."

I guessed as I turned over a book on the table that this was hardly her visitor's opinion.

"The women of my family have never been dolls," asserted Aunt Lizzie.

Any one who knew the women of Aunt Lizzie's family would know that when she started from such a fundamental proposition she was ready for a keen argument.

"There is, I hope, something between a doll and a blue-stocking," tittered the other lady, and pointed out that while under proper guidance she thought it quite right that a girl should study, she thought it a great pity she should obtrude her knowledge in conversation. She thought that most unattractive, especially to gentlemen.

"I have never found," said Aunt Lizzie, "that knowledge and intelligence are unappreciated by the other sex. On the contrary——"

She broke off, she was so obviously in a position to judge that it would have been indelicate on her part to pursue the point she had made.

"I know they appreciate it," said Mrs. Merrit, with a curious stress on the word appreciate, "but down here in the country, at any rate, I don't think they like it in their wives;" and then we were told, with the little nervous giggle that I knew Aunt Lizzie thought detestable, that the girls Mrs. Merrit knew who got engaged first were not clever, not even pretty, but gentle and anxious to please.

"I have no wish for my niece to become engaged while her judgment is immature," said Aunt Lizzie. Mrs. Merrit would have liked to point out that by the time the judgment is matured  
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the complexion has gone off, but Aunt Lizzie with her handsome face, her few words, and the manner of her family, was frightening this eminently feminine little person.

I was amused at the conversation, but I turned rather wearily away. I wandered round the library, and finding no rest there, went out into the garden. Lionel had been at home so little lately. My time when I had done my work hung very heavily on my hands. I wanted to get away from home, where, I did not know or care. I was amused at Aunt Lizzie and the family. Of course I thought, of course I studied. Of course we weren't dolls, the women of our family.

What a curious emphatic way Aunt Lizzie had with her.

I was in the library with Lionel one evening. He was a full-fledged lawyer now, living at home with us in the old house. Latterly I had not seen much of him. He was out a great deal. I had fancied he seemed worried. But it was not our way to sympathise with each other. My standard of manners and expression of feeling had been learnt from my brothers. Lionel and I had even left off our good-night kiss. "It's rather a senseless form," I had said, and that settled it.

It had been a very hot day. Lionel sat at the desk writing, and I at the open window. I was oppressed and pining for air, but I had an unusual feeling that I must wait for Lionel to go into the garden with me.

"Grace, I want to tell you something."

My heart seemed to stop, for into our even lives something was coming.

I knew it, for Lionel's usually matter-of-fact voice was charged with feeling.

"Will you tell me in the garden?" I asked.

But no, he would rather tell me where we were. I cannot remember the words he used. I remember that I tried not to show how much I felt, and encouraged him quietly to talk. It was this: it seemed that Lionel was going to marry a girl I had never seen, a girl not in our social position, and I remember now in what a relieved tone he said:

"But I knew that you would not mind about that," and I only gathered gradually that there was something more than this. He did not think she was a girl Aunt Lizzie would receive; it was a marriage that would hurt his practice—perhaps a little separate him from friends.

Suddenly I had kissed Lionel, the first time for years. I do not know what I said; I had only one thought in the midst of my feelings—that he should feel that there was some one who would love her, some one who did not care what people said.

He stroked my hair and seemed touched and surprised at my warmth. In my heart was a great joy that a subtle barrier I had felt between us was gone. I asked no questions and had hardly any fears. He must love her, that was enough. He must be right. Only one thing would have broken my heart—if Lionel had not depended on me to love her too.

A few days later, although I had never seen her I fought Nelly's battle with Aunt Lizzie. And it seemed that I won, for in the evening I was able to tell Lionel that Aunt Lizzie had written to ask Nelly to stay with us, before their wedding which was to take place soon.

I see now that Aunt Lizzie did all in her power to save Lionel  
from

from this step, and I used all my strength and inexperience to hurry him.

"He loves her," I said, as if that settled the matter.

And there in her favourite room Aunt Lizzie enlightened me about the world I lived in.

Fierce indignation woke in my heart, and unreasoningly it was directed against Aunt Lizzie, none the less that I knew she was telling me facts. One moment I hated her for telling me, and the next I was hating her for not having told me before; and then myself for the way I took it.

Aunt Lizzie did not guess how much she was stirring me. I sat very quiet while she talked. I can remember her saying that many people, even the clergy, thought it right to chain a young man to his folly, to make him bear the consequences. In that she saw a lack of common sense. She would never be one to drive Lionel.

The only light I could stretch out into all this darkness was my love for Lionel. For better or worse, I had given him my hand over this marriage, and Aunt Lizzie, although she did her best to make me use my influence with him, might just as well have talked to one of the stuffed birds in the cases.

When she found it was useless, as regards Nelly's visit she gave in completely and graciously, and I knew her well enough to know that she would do her best to make it pleasant for her.

I have often thought since how well Aunt Lizzie bore with us both, with Lionel and me. For she was proud of Lionel, of his brains and his common sense, and in both of us up to this time she had seen the qualities of her own family, and now Lionel was on the brink of a piece of quixotic folly, and I was backing him up.

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In all that talk Aunt Lizzie did not once remind me of my youth and inexperience. She told me facts and she appealed to my common sense. However often she thought of her, she did not once mention my poor dear mother.

But I had only one clear idea in my head : the world was a hard cruel unjust place ; Lionel chose to defy it. No one I cared for should defy it alone.

I have often thought that Aunt Lizzie was not unjustly proud of the common sense of her family, but I have wondered if she ever knew how much I appreciated a quality she had that was not common sense.

It was some weeks after that scene in the library in which nominally I had come off victorious. Lionel's Nelly had been with us a week. Aunt Lizzie and I had never spoken of her since she came. Lionel and I had tried to once, but we never tried again and never shall.

I was alone in the library, the gloomy room. I tried to look forward. What was there in my life ? How I had wound it round Lionel and his happiness, and now it took all my strength to hide my bitter disappointment ! Lionel was entrapped—befooled. I had given him my word that I would stand by him and her. But what lifeless support !

I could not save him. The less I was with them the better. My heart grew heavier and heavier. Could Lionel with his keen sense mistake the tawdry little thing ? More painful was the thought that was beginning to take possession of me that he had not mistaken her ; he saw, and seeing had made up his mind.

Looking forward I could see nothing in my own life. Of what use was my love to Lionel ? Life and health were strong within

within me ; outside—nothing, nothing. I burst into tears ; unconscious that I could be seen from the garden, unconscious of everything but my own misery. All the objects in the room were blurred, Nelly's face was everywhere, and Lionel's voice when he first told me about her.

I became aware that some one was in the room and close to me. I started up in terror. It might be Lionel. Not only would he see me crying but he would know why, and then what use——

It was Aunt Lizzie, who had seen me from the garden and had come in quickly.

"Lionel and Nelly, dear, are coming down the path," she said, in a matter-of-fact, but rather hurried voice.

I rose quickly and stood out of sight. Aunt Lizzie had done me a great kindness. A week or two ago I had told her that I at any rate should love Nelly, that I was not chained by conventional ideas, that Lionel was and must be the best judge where his own feelings were concerned.

She must have seen my struggles to keep up for days. Now she had her enemy down she would not say a word, I knew. What humiliation she could she had saved me. I wanted her to know that I appreciated her generosity ; and as I stood at the door on my way upstairs, I made an effort to speak. Apparently she did not hear me, for she said in a vexed tone as she too left the room :

"In spite of all this education it will be a long time before we get any really nice feeling into the working classes. That new girl has taken a piece of old lace I left on my dressing-table—a piece that belonged to your grandmother, my dear—and she's actually starched and ironed it !"

The vivid light that any sudden change throws on the past may not be a true light, but I know that when Aunt Lizzie died, for a long time I saw our early life at home as one sees the scenes on the brightly lighted stage; the present as the dim faces around one, and the future not at all. My later friends, the ties I had formed, such joys and troubles as I had, claimed for a time a small share in my thoughts.

They were busied with scraps of Aunt Lizzie's talk; all I should ever hear now of my mother and father. Lionel, Jack, and I, children walking, learning, living together, and Aunt Lizzie in our midst, always treating us as rational, almost as grown-up, beings; the house, the garden, in which parts were always kept "as John left them, my dear," the seat he had put for "your poor dear mother," so sheltered, that in that western country, the year she died, she had sat out of doors in November.

I had had a happy childhood, except for vague depressions which I had never tried to account for. My lacks were too great for any child to grasp. Looking back, there are some things in my bringing-up for which I am most grateful.

It was with my brothers that I learnt to love Nature, so that it was not as a series of pictures one turns tired eyes on in the hope of finding rest and refreshment, but as some people love their homes. I learnt to live out of doors; we walked, we swam, we ate and slept, as it pleased us, in the open air. We did not go into the country in the July and August glare, and sit shivering by our fires in the other months. We watched the spring come in, and we tramped the winter through. Better than a cloudless summer day we loved a storm, and to be swept dry after it by the north-west wind.

There were bad times ahead of me, for I had made the mistake Aunt Lizzie made, in thinking that I had the stable qualities of  
her

her family. I am glad that she never knew how completely they failed me. But I would give, if I could, to any one else, who had painful surprises in store for them, the part of my life that I spent in the open air with my brothers.

And one other thing I am grateful for—that Aunt Lizzie treated me, long before I deserved it, as a rational being. I feel no compunction when I realise that I got this treatment entirely under false pretences. The features of her family—a boy's standard of outspokenness and endurance in external things—have taken in other people besides Aunt Lizzie. But this much she gave me of what she expected from me: that when I saw my failure, though there were many names by which it might have been called, I put them away and gave it the ugliest and the truest.

One of Aunt Lizzie's brothers was at the funeral. I had never seen much of Uncle Willie. We walked, after it was over, around the desolate garden, more desolate, I thought, because down there flowers linger into November that should be over and done with long before.

Uncle Willie took comfort in what seemed to me the strangest things; in the number of persons present at the burial, and in the fact that the mourning of some very distant cousins was as deep as our own.

One thing he regretted—that the house must be sold. "Neither of your brothers is in a position to buy it," he said regretfully, and then touched on their careers: Lionel's unfortunate marriage; Jack's absurd scheme, which had been broached to him to-day, and which he was glad, indeed, dear Lizzie had not lived to hear, of giving up the bar, where he promised to do well,  
for

for writing, if you please, using the little capital Aunt Lizzie had left him in the meantime.

I heard Uncle Willie's voice rather distantly as our feet sounded on the gravel, and felt a certain gratitude to him that, although his position might have justified it, he did not touch on my life or affairs. He simply told me that my new black was most becoming, and that I had managed to make every one as comfortable as possible on this sad occasion. I was relieved when he was gone, and mechanically I turned into the library, which I knew now would soon be dismantled, and although it was not from affection as of old, once there, my feet seemed rooted.

After a time, Lionel and Jack came in, and we stayed there, talking in our old quiet, undemonstrative way about the sale and the arrangements we had to make. I remember my relief when Lionel told me that if I did not want them, he and Jack would like the photographs of our uncles and aunts; and he told me, too, that Aunt Lizzie had said she thought I should like to have some of the things that father had bought.

"I don't want any of them," I said. "Wouldn't some museum be glad of these things?" and I pointed to the birds and the fishes and many other objects in the room.

I think Jack was a little shocked at my want of sentiment, but Lionel's smile, as he said: "You never cared for relics," took me back to our childhood, the time when we were such great friends.