THE VICARIOUS LOVERS

By EMERY POTTLE.

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THERE is no occasion to make excuses for Fanny and Fritz. When one is—or rather when two are frank and twenty, and, at the same time, complacently and conspicuously in love with each other, I am not aware that it is a condition in which excuses are properly made. Unquestionably they would themselves, I dare say, rudely resent any extenuation of their conduct. And any one else, as matters ultimately turned out, will not greatly be inclined to lay at their doors the obsolescent charge of indelicacy. Cecelia—Cecelia Francesca Purvis—and Lucius Prettyman did not.

To elaborate a bit—Fanny Denton and Cecelia Francesca shared together a battered apartment on the roof of a great, gloomy, rambling structure, devoted to the housing of courageously impecunious art students. I say on the roof, since the case was just that: they lived in an insecure-looking story which the thrifty owners of the building had hastily constructed on the top of everything to contain a new lot more courageous and more impecunious than the rest. Somewhere down the canal-like halls Fritz Allen also had a studio and Lucius Prettyman another.

In the daytime the four of them worked at an art school nearby. Cecelia did miniatures, in a very ladylike and miniature way; Fanny inclined to conventional designing; and as for Denton and Lucius, the former dashed out fictitious illustrations for his fictitious imaginings, while Lucius toiled worrisomely along in the "life class" and brooded deeply over the possibilities of large, depressing canvases devoted to the depicting of death scenes of famous generals, and like inspiring subjects.

Of a truth it cannot be said of Cecelia and Lucius that they were in the bloom of their youth, though, to be sure, Cecelia's spirit was innocently inexperienced to an appalling degree, and she was wont to clothe herself in garments of a limply artistic drapery, suggesting, in hue at least, the immortal, blithe Botticelli maidens. At any rate her soul was youthful and her nature unselfish and beautiful.

Lucius probably never was young. The unpliable strands of his nature seemed never to loosen. His high, pale brow betokened, in its concentrated little knot of lines above the nose, a spirit furrowed with the ploughshare of Serious Effort. . . . He moved in and out among his fellows, a gentle, shabby, good-tempered, abnormally shy creature whom all loved, when they were not consumed with a helpless rage at the ponderous precision of his mental and physical workings.

It was natural enough that the four of them, living together in the "Roost"—so they called the parlous top story—should be much in each other's company. Youthful art is not a peculiarly solitary profession; and, moreover, their frank poverty, and the franker attachment of Fritz to Fanny gave additional strength to their bond.

To Cecelia, the wooing of her roommate afforded a first-hand observation of what to her was the most thrillingly beautiful and complex emotion of the world. Fanny, herself, being somewhat practical even in the affairs of her heart, did not encourage Cecelia's sentimental out-breathings. So it happened that Cecelia fell into the habit of confiding the progress of the delicate footsteps of love to Lucius Prettyman.

The two men, of an evening, would drop into the studio of the girls—a very proper apartment, to be sure, with the beds converted artlessly into divans and all the feminine evidences hid in the closet. Lucius really was brought in the beginning by Fritz to divert Cecelia from the fascination of his methods with Fanny. And it generally turned out the two serious ones would early retire to the kitchen—an elastic apartment made by the folding of a screen about a little gas-stove—there to whisper and to cook up indigestible messes for refreshment; while Fritz and Fanny—well, it really is not our province to disclose the sweet story of their affections.

It was in late October when Fanny briefly apprised Cecelia that she was engaged to Fritz. Cecelia kissed her rapturously. "My dear, my dear," she cried softly, "isn't it wonderful!"

"O, I don't know," remarked her friend, sharpening a lead pencil judiciously. "Fritzie is a nice boy. And I'm sure he's very lucky to get me."

Cecelia was staggered. "Oh, Fanny! How can you! Oh, it seems to me love is the most beautiful—"

"O, yes, everybody gets it sooner or later, they say," broke in Fanny prosaically. "It takes an awful lot of your time, though. Heavens! I haven't done a thing in a month."

"Dear, how can you joke about it?" sighed Cecelia.

Fanny looked up in surprise. "Mercy, Cecelia, it's no joke. Lend me your gamboge, will you?"

Poor Cecelia, she was too bewildered to reply.

That same night Fritz lounged into Prettyman's room. Lucius was brooding solemnly over a pipe.

"Well, Lucy," Fritz let fall casually, "the little girl and I have hit it off."

"I beg your pardon," said Lucius uncertainly.

"Fanny and I, you know—engaged—'love, true love, undying,' grinned Fritz with appreciation.

Lucius rose with grave ceremony and put out his hand. "Allen, I—I congratulate you, sir, she's a splendid woman. You are a fortunate man."

"Sure, Lucy, that's the eye. She's a little peach. Guess we'll do the trick all right."

Prettyman sat down heavily. He could not grasp the insouciant Fritz's attitude.

"But——" he hesitated laboriously.

"You aren't going to cry about it, are you?" said his friend briskly, lighting a cigarette.

Lucius seemed about to reply; instead he lapsed into a mood of impressive thoughtfulness. After a long silence he stammered blushingly, "Ah—Allen—ah—did—you—ah—if you don't mind my asking—was it—ah—hard to do?"

"Was what hard?"

"Why, the—the—the asking her, Allen?"

Allen's eyes twinkled. "Well, old boy, it—it was harder not to, you know."

"Ah," ejaculated Lucius uncomprehendingly.

"Ever tried it?" confidentially remarked Fritz.

Lucius flushed. "No sir, I—I—I——"

"It's great," said Allen, as he departed, "you never can tell till you try."

Lucius Prettyman sat for hours that night alone in his room, scarcely conscious of the chilling atmosphere, musing modestly on the strange maddening ways of love. The result of his cogitations amounted to this: "I couldn't do it, I couldn't—I don't see how they do."

The next day he overtook Cecelia on her way home from the art school. For some reason they both flushed scarlet at sight of each other. It was very difficult to start any suitable topic of conversation. At length Cecelia timidly referred to the flames of the divine fire which now publicly lit the souls of Fritz and Fanny. The two discussed the situation evasively. They wondered if, after all, "their love was—— They seemed so—— Love, real love, was such a—— Yes, it was a noble, a——" But there was a new and discomforting element between Cecelia and Lucius that attracted and compelled, even while it distressed and bewildered. It was precisely as if these two onlookers somehow were vicariously assuming all the sweet confusion, all the tumultuous emotions, the modest ecstacies that Fanny and Fritz seemed not to undergo. Cecelia, indeed, took the conversation so seriously that she went to bed with a nervous headache.

Once the crucial hour of engagement was over, Fanny and Fritz had more leisure to look about them. They bore the rosy wreath of love with great composure. And since there is that in love—like misfortune—which dislikes singleness of experience, they presently cast about them to involve their unattached friends in a toil like their own.

"Wouldn't it be simply perfect if poor old Sissy and Lucy should fall in love with each other?" considered Fanny, one afternoon.

"Those two?" replied Fritz. "Why, there's no more chance——"

"Oh, isn't there! Watch them. Cecelia is a mush."

"But Lucy—why, you'd as soon think of a Methodist chapel playing on the beach at Coney Island, as Lucy in love."

"Pooh," retorted Fanny, airily, "he's mad about her. Don't tell me. When they're old and get it they're perfectly dotty. I've seen them."

"Have they said anything?" inquired Fritz, fascinated at Fanny's idea.

"Said anything! They don't dare."

Of a truth, it would seem that the astute Fanny had accurately diagnosed the situation of Cecelia Francesca and Lucius. Up to the time of the culmination of Fanny's romance, the two had taken each other's society in a grateful, unconscious freedom, but now their slighest encounter covered them with a dreadful confusion. They became tongue-tied, though the desire to talk was riotous within them. The embarrassment of Lucius, in especial, was distressing to observe. Cecelia clad herself in dull draperies of a somber hue—as if she were doing a penitential office for the soul of love. In fact, instead of performing the light-hearted service of cup-bearers to the young gods, Fanny and Fritz, they hung about funereally in corners.

This abysmal condition was, in the early stages, a delight to the lovers. They considered it an ephemeral affectation, due in part to age and in part to extreme inexperience. Therefore, to help matters along, they made jovial comments with ill-concealed meanings to Cecelia and Lucius—a form of diversion of so ghastly and so indelicate a character to the serious pair that Cecelia was wont to end the evening in a burst of tears. So brazen were the manifestation of affection on the part of the engaged ones, and so poignantly barbed were the insinuating arrows of their wit, Cecelia could no longer bring herself to comment upon the case to Lucius, while he, in turn, almost dreaded the sight of her.

They avoided each other. Prettyman no longer came of an evening to the studio of the girls. And Cecelia, anguished of heart, would retire alone to the kitchen, there to sniffle weakly, her ears stuffed with cotton that she might not hear the lovers. The very necessity, as they conceived it, that sundered their companionship, worked, as one might expect, to the incandescence of their as yet, unnamed emotions. Cecelia, in a gush of maidenly indiscretion, secretly painted from memory a miniature of Lucius—which on completion she hid. Prettyman left off the imaginary composition of battle scenes and let his mind wander to the delights of statuesque hours—with the face of Cecelia—washing their feet publicly on marble balconies.

When Fanny and Fritz were finally forced to the conclusion that their amorous devices to entrap their friends were resulting in apparent failure—for Fanny's intuitions, agile as they were, could not compass a concealed love, like the worm i' the bud—they were frankly annoyed.

"They're a pair of dubs," said Fritz, in irritation.

"Sissy is really the limit," acquiesced Fanny. "I'm sure we've done all we could to help the thing along."

"Oh, well, I move we shake them both. They're too old to fool with. They've had their chance." And with this Fritz closed the discussion.

A few day's later Fanny was alone in the studio, dressing to go out with Fritz. Discovering that at the moment she had no clean pocket-handkerchief, she resorted simply to Cecelia's stock. Rummaging through the latter's modest trunk for the article in question, she unearthed the miniature of Lucius.

"Well, my heavens!" she exclaimed. "The silly old thing." Whereupon she sat down abruptly and shrieked with laughter.

Fritz found her on the floor, the miniature in her hand, giggling. She held it out to him mutely, too overcome for words.

"Great goodness," he cried, "it's Lucy—Lucy, looking like a perfect lady of the 1830 type!"

"I ask you!" began Fanny, recovering speech. "I ask you! I found it in Cecelia's trunk. I was looking for a hanky. She did it!"

"The sly thing! Fan, this is great! What'll we do with it?"

"Do with it! 'Tisn't ours—we'll put it back. Sissy'd die if she knew we had seen it," said Fanny.

"Not on your life we'll put it back. Let's have some fun out of it."

"But Cecelia——"

"Cecelia nothing! She's fooled us. We'll fool her."

"Now, Fritzie—I won't stand for——"

"Oh, that's all right—it'll be the joke of our lives. Ah, say, don't fuss, think of the fun."

"Well," weakened Fanny, "it would be fun to do something with it."

"I'll tell you what! We'll do it up and send it to Lucius. He won't think of its being a josh, anyway. And he knows that no one but Sissy could possibly do a miniature of him."

"It's a sweet idea!" replied Fanny rapturously. "We'll do it now while she's away. . . . She must be crazy about him. Do you suppose he——"

"Well, he will be, if he isn't now, when he sees this!" assured Fritz.

The miniature forthwith was wrapped up delicately in white tissue paper and tied with a little white ribbon. "That's bully," declared Fritz joyously, "and I'll leave it in Lucius's room when he's out to-night—he's going to some beastly lecture on Art."

"Sissy's gone out for the afternoon and she's going to stay out for dinner, too, and the theater afterwards," reflected Fanny. "She has some grand friends who ask her once in awhile, you know. So we're perfectly safe. She won't miss the thing to-night. . . . It's really dreadful to do it, but it's so funny!"

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That evening at an hour when he judged Prettyman would have returned from his lecture, Fritz Allen wandered casually in upon him. Lucius seemed excessively confused at sight of his visitor. He thrust something hastily under a pile of papers on the table before him.

"What you hiding, Lucy?" began Fritz without hesitation.

"Nothing. I—I——"

"Oh, say, Lucy—I saw you now. What is it? Out with it. Can't you trust me?"

Allen made a sudden dash for the table. Prettyman tried to intercept him. He was too late. Fritz, warding him off with one hand, held up the miniature in the other, yelling with glee. "O, Lucy, O, Lucy! It's a picture of you!"

"Give that here," demanded Lucius, peony-red.

Allen regarded the little portrait critically. "It's mighty good, Lucy, it's fine. Who did it?"

"I—I—I——"

"Out with it!"

"I don't know. I found it here," confessed the reluctant Lucius. "I suppose it's a gift."

"Oh, tell that to the elevator-man! You can't fool me," giggled Fritz. "Naughty, naughty! Say, who did it, Lucy!"

Prettyman attempted dignity. "You needn't believe me if you don't care to. I found it here when I came home."

"Found it here, old man! You don't say so. That's funny!"

Allen sat down and eyed Lucius solemnly.

"It was here when I came home," repeated Lucius awkwardly. "I—It is very strange."

"Strange! I should say so. But—say, Lucius, there's only one person who could have done it."

"Allen, what do you mean?"

"Mean. Oh, you know. Cecelia Francesca Purvis! That's whom I mean."

Lucius was flooded with sentimental blushes. "Oh, no, I—Oh, no!"

"Sure she did, old boy. I—well, of course, I don't want to butt in on your affairs—well, it looks you know, as if——"

"Allen, I won't have you talk that way about a lady."

"Why, no offense, Lucy, I'm sure. It was mighty nice of her."

"You don't think, Allen, that she——"

"Well, Lucy, what I think is this: That girl is strong for you. Of course, if you don't care for her, why——"

It happens that way at times. The most reserved and timid of us reach a point when our doors are opened wide, when we speak with the tongues of men about the angels. It was so with Lucius Prettyman. He began to talk to Fritz. He talked wildly well. There was nothing hidden in him that wasn't revealed. Even the light-minded Allen became nervous and uncomfortable. And the burden of Lucius's song was always Cecelia, Cecelia, Cecelia. Fritz had a sickening feeling that the thing had ceased to be a joke.

"If you feel like all this you say you do, old chap," Allen got out lamely, "you ought to do something about it. I'd tell her."

"Oh, I couldn't. I don't think I could," stammered Lucius, cold with fear at the thought.

"I'll tell you what," Fritz suggested hopefully, "you write her a note and ask her to meet you in the Park to-morrow morning, and say you have something important to tell her. Don't mention the miniature—that would embarrass her. Just tell her you want to talk to her, and I'll slip it under the girls' door to-night."

"Would she?" Lucius got out in awed tones.

"Would she what?"

"Come—if I asked her?"

"Sure she would. Try her." Fritz was growing more confident. "You just write her. And I'll leave it at their room now."

Prettyman, between distracted love and awful self-abasement, after tearing up a dozen sheets of paper, managed to set forth his modest request.

"Fine," said Fritz heartily when the letter was submitted to his practised eye. "That'll draw her like a plaster, you know."

"Allen, I don't know how to thank you—for—for——" Lucius was wringing Fritz's hand in the excess of gratitude.

"GREAT GOODNESS," HE CRIED; "IT'S LUCY——"

With the letter in his hand, Allen hurried surreptitously to Fanny. He judged that Cecelia Francesca had not yet returned from her festal day. He rapped cautiously on the studio door.

"Who is it?" demanded Fanny, opening the door a hair's breadth.

"Me."

"Mercy, Fritz, you can't come in! I'm just——"

"Yes, I know, but there's something doing. I've got to talk to you, I don't want to come in. Can't you—say, Cecelia isn't there?"

"No. Wait a minute."

Presently the door opened wide enough to allow Fanny to put out her head. "What is it?" she inquired with excitement. "Did you give Lucius the——"

"That's it, I did. I've just been in his room. He's foolish about it. Sat and grinned at his picture like a monkey. Went on about Cecelia till it made me sick. He's all up in the air—says he loves her like anything. Oh, Lord."

Fanny was instantly impressed. "My goodness! What did you say!"

"I—I told him she was crazy about him. I think I did. He asked me what to do."

"What did you tell him?" demanded Fanny feverishly.

"Well, you know, I—I felt sort of rotten about it. He's so serious over the thing. I—say, Fanny, it looks to me like a mess."

"Stupid, what did you do?"

"I told him to write her a note asking her to meet him to-morrow in the Park—in the morning—and I said I'd leave it here for Sissy—she——"

"It is perfectly dreadful," gasped Fanny, "she sha'n't have that note."

"Sha'n't——"

"Certainly not." Fanny was decisive.

"But—why, you can't—you'll bust up their show if you don't let her——"

"Idiot! If Cecelia got that note the first thing she'd do would be to go and look at that old miniature. And it wouldn't be there. And she'd accuse me. And there'd be a sickening time."

"But Fan——" Allen was utterly confused at the turn of affairs.

"You've got to get that picture back, somehow. I don't care how. Give me that note. Give it to me. Cecelia sha'n't have it till you get the miniature."

"How in the deuce can I get it?"

"When is he going to meet her?" asked Fanny.

"At nine, I think."

"Well, while he's out then, you'll have to break into his place and steal it and bring it here. I'll put it back. Then I'll give Cecelia the note and say I found it on the floor."

"I can't see how that——"

"No, of course you can't. But I can. It'll be in her trunk, won't it? And she can't accuse me of having taken it—at least, not right away. I'll get out of it somehow."

"You're dreadfully virtuous all at once," retorted Fritz, sulkily.

"It's worried me all the evening—taking that picture. And I'd never have done it if it hadn't been for you!"

"Well, I like that! Who found it first, anyway, and——"

"Ssh! There's Cecelia coming. Don't you dare to argue with me. You've got to get the picture, Cecelia, dear, is that you? You must be tired to death. Come in and let's get to bed right off," sweetly finished Fanny, hastily concealing Prettyman's note in the folds of her robe de chambre.

In all probability the somewhat imperfect scheme of Fanny's would have worked in the fashion she anticipated had it not been for a reason of which she naturally, could have known nothing. It had been Cecelia's romantic custom, since the painting of the miniature, to take it from its hiding-place and to bid it the tender, whispered good-nights she might not properly bestow on the original. She did this in the kitchen at a moment when Fanny was under the impression that Cecelia was saying her prayers. In consequence, on this particular evening, Cecelia Francesca went to her trunk to perform the last sacred rite of what had been to her a peculiarly happy day. Her fingers, touching the familiar place, did not feel the miniature. She hurriedly dashed out the contents of the trunk, her bosom heaving with anxiety. She could not find the token. For a moment Cecelia stood petrified with shame and fear. Then suddenly the truth flashed in upon her. Fanny! She must have taken it. No one else could have. The gentle Cecelia shook with a torrent of anger, the like of which she had never known. Like a wild nocturnal avenger she flew at Fanny in her bed.

"How dared you!" she cried, snatching the bedclothing from the terrified conspirator. "O, how dared you!" She shook her violently. "Don't lie! I know you took it! You stole it! You—you—you thief! I hate you! Where is it? Where is it?"

Cecelia jerked the collapsing Fanny from her cot and towered above her, cowering on the floor. "It's cruel! How could you! Beast!"

Fanny essayed to speak, but Cecelia looked so tall and terrifying in the dim gaslight of the room that, for the life of her, she could not get out a word.

"Beast!" repeated Cecelia, with awful tragicality.

Fanny recovered herself slightly. "Cecelia," she quavered, "it was only a joke. I——"

But Cecelia's rage was spent. She sat down weakly on the trunk-top and sobbed. Long, shivering, dreadful, convulsive sobs. "O it's mean! Cruel! Fanny, how could you! O dear! O dear! O dear!"

To describe the mental state of Fanny is hardly necessary. She dared not speak, she lay wretchedly on her bed for half an hour, in her ears the monotonous moans of the girl over there on the trunk. Sometimes Fanny was enraged, sometimes repentant, sometimes hysterically tearful and sometimes full of nervous laughter. "I shall die if she keeps this up much longer," she assured herself. Finally she leaned from her cot, flung on a wrapper and slippers, tied up her head in a scarf and precipitately left the room. She ran straight to Fritz.

"Fritz, Fritz," she whispered, as she heard sleepy sounds within his quarters. "Fritz!"

"Fanny! What the—what is it? Are you ill?"

"Come out here, quick!"

In a moment the astounded Allen emerged, his head tousled and over his pajamas a bathrobe. "What on earth——"

"Don't talk. Cecelia's discovered that the picture is gone. She's made an awful scene. She nearly tore me limb from limb. I was so frightened I nearly died. She's sitting there now moaning and going on like a maniac. I never saw such a fool. We've got to do something."

"Do something," weakly repeated Fritz. "Do——"

"Right now. Do something. If you could hear her! My heavens, I never had such a time in my life."

"But wh—wh—what are you going to do?" he asked helplessly.

"I've thought it all out. There's just one chance to save our lives. You've got to go and get Lucius and tell him Cecelia wants to see him."

Allen gasped. "Lucy. But—O, my good Lord! But suppose——"

"You needn't suppose anything. There's just one chance! They're both silly about each other, and if he gets there and sees her, he'll try to comfort her and—go—now. Tell him to bring the picture, too."

The thoroughly confused Allen departed, rubbing his eyes. He found Lucius still sitting in a daze before his little table, the portrait in his hand.

"Say," Fritz began awkwardly. "Cecelia has sent for you. She wants to see you to-night—now. Don't wait. She's in a hurry!"

"Wants to see me?" asked Prettyman. "What——"

"Now—right off—in the studio. I don't know what for. Come on. Bring the miniature."

"But—but——"

"O, say, Lucy, the girl wants you. Come on." And he half dragged, half pushed the older man from his room, feebly protesting. Fanny stole behind them on tiptoe.

"Don't mind what she says," encouraged Allen at Cecelia's door. "You go in and make it all right with her!"

Without listening to Prettyman's vague ramblings and distressed protests, Fritz opened the door and shoved him in.

"Reach in and get the key and lock the door—on the outside," commanded Fanny at his elbow.

The key turned in the lock.

"Now, we'll have to stand here and wait and——" began Fanny.

"And pray," finished Fritz.

From within came low murmurs—then long silences—then again the murmurs. With chattering teeth and shivering limbs Fanny and Fritz waited—waited, it seemed to them, for hours. A few dwellers in the top-story passed them and stared curiously, but Fanny and Fritz were oblivious. After a long time they heard some one rattling at the door. Fanny drew a long breath.

"Open it," she directed. "For better or for worse."

Lucius Prettyman emerged. On his face was a sentimental smile of utter blissfulness.

"We—we're engaged," he grinned bashfully.

"Thank heaven, I can go to bed," remarked Fanny.

NEXT WEEK "The Proof of the Princess," By Henry M. Hyde.