

Across the Range.

BY KATE WOODBRIDGE MICHAELIS.



I AM an American girl, married to an Englishman. He didn't marry me for money, because I hadn't a red cent; and I didn't marry him for title, because he hasn't one and never will have.

I never meant to marry a foreigner; my sister was an army woman, and I intended to "follow the drum," too. Guard mount was delightful, "hops" still better, and being quarreled about, best of all.

But Lucian came, saw, and conquered. He didn't dance, he didn't flirt, he talked little and studied much. After six weeks of dancing, flirting, and love-making men, a girl welcomes something else as a change. When Lucian told me that he had been sent out by the Royal Society to do some important work for them, when he stayed at home and made calculations while everybody else was having a good time, I was fascinated.

He was the only man I ever saw who I thought was too good for me, and I was proud and happy when he asked me to be his wife. It disturbed me a little that he didn't seem to know how to make love, but after we were married and he took me to my new home, I found that he did!

Lucian's mother is dead, but he has five unmarried brothers, a darling old aunt, and the dearest father in the world; as the one girl in the family, I have been absolutely spoiled ever since I became a member of it. The girls at home had pitied me because, as they said, American women have so much admiration, and then when they get to England have to take back seats, and they assured me I would find a great difference. I did; in America I had a front seat, in England I have a throne.

We had been married over a year when Lucian came in one day and sat down on the arm of my chair — there is a point, my sister sits on the arm of her husband's chair.

"Nelly," he said, in his sweet, deep voice, "would you come and live with me on an island that is almost a desert?"

I screwed up my mouth and considered. I might have said that it would be bliss to live with him on an island that was altogether a desert, but only one member of the family says such things, and I prefer listening to speaking.

"That depends," I said slowly; "why should we desert dad, and aunty, and the boys, and be Robinson Crusoes? Is there any real reason for it?"

"Yes."

"All right," said I; "what sort of a traveling dress do you suppose savages like, and what may your island call itself?"

"The savages must be exceedingly savage not to like any dress you wear, and the island calls itself Carruthers Land." (It doesn't, you know, but that is immaterial.)

"But why are we going?"

"They want me to go and get things ready for the Scientific Commission that is to go out in about six months to determine Solar G., and I'm going to take a chronometer to be acclimated."

Now I know little of those sublimated timepieces called chronometers, and less of the process by which, as I have since learned, their mechanism is so adjusted to a given climate as to register time accurately up to the fractional part of a second. As to Solar G., that was quite undreamed of in my philosophy. But I steered clear of such shoals by asking if our stay would probably last until the whole alphabet was determined, and so the matter was settled.

There was weeping and wailing when we broke the news to the family, and father wanted to keep me, but I only laughed at him for supposing I'd stay behind.

"It isn't Lucian, oh, dear, no," I explained; "it's just the fascinating savages, I do long to —"

"Turn their woolly heads," finished one of my brothers; he's very frivolous.

Never travel with an unacclimated chronometer if you value your peace of mind; it's too fatiguing. I once went with my sister, her three children, all under four years, and a sick maid, from New York to San Francisco and up to Portland by boat, and we

didn't work as hard as poor Lucian did going out to Carruthers Land on the steamer.

When the ship pitched Lucian guarded the chronometer; when the ship rolled Lucian guarded the chronometer; when the ship did neither Lucian guarded the chronometer. I might just as well have been traveling alone, for all the comfort I got out of my husband.

It had to be wound at just such a minute, it had to be swung in just such a way, and when it seemed likely to be seasick Lucian was on the verge of insanity. And whether it was jealousy or selfishness on my part, or whether I fancied neglect on my husband's, I don't know; but while I loved my husband I hated his chronometer as I've never hated anything before or since. And I not only hated it, but avoided every opportunity of making its acquaintance.

When we got to our desert island it was lovely, birds singing, flowers blooming, the sun shining mercilessly. A brown, handsome young Englishman was waiting to shake us by the hand when we landed, with an air of having parted from us last week, though he and Lucian, chums half their lives, hadn't met for ten years. Then there was a pale young American who fell upon our necks almost in tears; he had never seen us before. We forgave him his emotion, though, for he had been there less than five months, had achieved three attacks of fever, and been threatened with nervous prostration.

Lucian set to work at once to build piers, and stations, and huts for the Commission. Scientists all over the habitable globe were preparing to come to us, mooning over that dreadful Solar G. I lived in a bamboo house, built all on one floor, as, Richard Harding Davis to the contrary, notwithstanding, all real bamboo houses are; but what was good enough for me was unworthy that beast of a chronometer; so big stones were begged, borrowed, and stolen (from other islands), sunk in deep-dug foundations, and a palace erected for his Satanic Majesty, King Chronometer! I knew what it was like on the outside, but in spite of Lucian's repeated coaxings, I had never gone inside the door — indeed, I had never really seen my hated rival.

Our desert island was not a desert as concerned people; there

were on it a hundred or more Frenchmen, Englishmen, Americans, and Germans, a greater number of half and quarter breeds, and several thousands of natives, varying in shade from Spanish topaz to jet. A backbone of high hills led through the island, and on one side of that range lay our harbor, a mile or so away, landlocked, pretty, and placid, lying in the sunshine like a lady's mirror set in emeralds. On the other side was the Sea Station at the native settlement, and among the hills between, the Hill Station. At these two points the simultaneous observations were to be made if the Commission ever came, an event of which I grew more and more uncertain as month succeeded month with no sign of them.

At first I was patient enough — when I could forget the chronometer — but as it came near a year, I lost my appetite and my sleep, and was haunted by a fear that something was sure to happen to that diabolical thing before it got out of Lucian's hands. And I had plenty of time for such misgivings. I was practically a prisoner by daylight, for it was hard to get an escort, unsafe to cross the range without one, and I hated the very sight of a boat.

When at last came the news that the Commission had started, would arrive in a week, and after their work was finished would take Lucian and me home with them, I refused to credit the news until I should set foot on the homeward-bound ship. Lucian was away most of the time, going back and forth, making final arrangements, and I wandered about like a lost soul in heat such as I had never dreamed of. One afternoon, after spending an hour or so in the bath, I had just succeeded in falling asleep when I was awakened by the touch of Lucian's lips on mine, and started up to find him bending over me.

"I was a selfish brute to disturb you," he was saying, "but I couldn't go without a good-by."

"Go? Where?" I asked, only half awake.

"Across the harbor. I won't be back until Wednesday night, then I'll bring all the old fellows over to dinner. Lie down and go to sleep again."

And indeed I had already slipped back into my pillows, and was listening as in a dream to Lucian's footsteps as he crossed the room, when his voice at the door sent me bolt upright.

"Oh, I say, don't forget to wind the chronometer early Wednesday morning."

"Wind the chronometer!" For a moment the words meant nothing but a nightmarish weight on my yet half-awakened mind. The next I understood; I was on my feet and at the door. "Lucian," I cried frantically. But already he was far down the beach, whistling as he ran, and paying no attention to my cries. "Lucian," I repeated weakly, vainly; for now he had jumped into the boat, and the crew was rowing him away. And still I stood at the doorway, dazed, bewildered. Was Lucian insane? Wind the chronometer! I, who had never seen the chronometer — never invaded its sanctity — did not know whether it was wound with stem or key!

Thrusting my bare feet into slippers, I ran across to the Palace, opened the door with a fumbling hand and peered in. All that I could see was the long folds of a curtain, probably protecting the chronometer from profane eyes. Stealing carefully across the floor, I stretched out my hand toward the enveloping curtain. Then remembering the delicate mechanism there concealed, I drew away again, and hurried, panic stricken, back to the house. Lucian had said "early Wednesday morning." There was no need to tempt fate before then.

As a girl of fifteen I once spent a night alone with a croupy baby. But though that was my first experience with an infant at close range, the weight of responsibility didn't compare with that which grew upon me with every hour of the two days that followed. Did I try to sew? The stitches seemed to time themselves to the ticking of that incubus in the Palace. If I read, it was to find all the sentences running into one, "Wind the chronometer." Eating became a farce, sleeping the name of a custom long forgotten. And all the time my mind was straining vainly to bring out from some recess of my memory a word, a clue to guide me in my approaching ordeal.

A single hour of the hundreds I'd given to planning for books, music, gowns, to banish that kill-joy chronometer from Lucian's mind at times when he was off duty, — half an hour, ten minutes even, — might have made me for this once its master. And here was I its abject slave, alone, without any advisers except Henson,

my husband's kindly but ignorant old nurse, and a native servant. And as the latter couldn't swim, and our boat was gone, to send for Lucian was out of the question.

By Tuesday night I was so worn with the past two days' anxieties that I consented to stretch myself on my couch chair and rest. "Early Wednesday morning," Lucian had said. That meant probably not later than seven. Meantime the night was cooler, and a sense of peace stole over me. I slept fitfully, dreaming of home and repose. Once I roused to count the strokes of the clock — three ; that meant there were still four hours of respite. I drew a long breath of the sweet night air, and lay back, intending to keep watch until morning. But the stupor of exhaustion stole over me, and I slept again. When I awoke it was to broad sunshine and hot wind. It was nine o'clock !

Half frenzied, I sprang up, flung a wrap over me, and ran bare-footed to the Palace. Clutching frantically at the curtain, I snatched it away, almost tearing it from its fastenings. And then, for the first time in all those months, I saw the instrument around which centered my husband's whole career. There it stood, calm, remote. With a sudden fear, I bent low and strained my ears to listen.

The chronometer had stopped !

For a moment that seemed months long I stood there, seeing as in a vision the expedition a failure, the toil of three years wasted, Lucian's charge brought to naught. And I was the culprit ! I, the one person in the world who should have held up his hands —

With the swiftness of a wave a thought suddenly swept upon me, carrying me to the house almost without my will. At the Hill Station, under the charge of Lucian's friend, Courtenay Day, was another chronometer, one only half acclimated, to be sure, but still to me a chronometer. To the Hill Station I would hasten with ours — as I thought I was hurrying into my riding habit — I would ask Courtenay Day to wind and set it, and would bring it back before the misfortune was discovered. Then, of course, I would tell Lucian. Of the morality of the affair, the falsifying of records implied, my half-dazed mind made no more account than it did of the dangers of a ride that few men even dared ven-

ture on alone. The protests of Henson, when she took away the remains of my hardly touched breakfast, the broken remonstrances of Gobbo, the native servant, as he helped me mount the mule I had ordered saddled, sounded far away as the buzzing of flies.

That I was going to the Hill Station, that I was taking the chronometer—entrusted to Henson with infinite fears even for the moment of my mounting—was all that I would explain. Then trembling with an inward ague, but outwardly calm, I lifted the precious instrument from its harness with my left hand, gathered the reins with my right, and rode away.

Rode through rank tropic forests astir with strange noises, up scantily wooded slopes, out finally into a road glaring white in the equatorial sun—scenes to me alike as unreal as the painted scenery of a theater—rode finally with set teeth, and arm swollen, throbbing with its burden, but still rigidly extended. Rode as one rides for life—and more than life.

It was twenty minutes of ten when I left the house; it was after one when I reached the Hill Station. As I turned the bend that brought the house in sight, the aspect of the place struck me like a blow. Dropping my reins, I leaned forward, my eyes shaded. No, there could be no mistake. The door was shut, the heavy padlock hung from its hasp, the iron window shutters were closed and barred!

At that the stern tension of the morning suddenly snapped. Like a child I screamed, I sobbed; leaning from my saddle, I beat upon the barred door with my bare right hand till the knuckles bled. Then, as voice and strength ebbed, a terror of the silence smote me, and I turned my mule's head and rode away.

Where? I did not know, only to some one who could assist me in my fearful predicament. Before me the road stretched white and threatening. Panic stricken, I plunged into a forest path—only to find myself assailed by new fears—fear of the strange sounds and odors of the tropic jungle, of beasts whose stealthy movements I seemed to hear on every side, fears that finally communicated themselves even to my usually stolid mule, who quivered and snorted, and started at every sound.

And all the while in my almost paralyzed hand the chronometer lay like a ball of ice, the chill from it mounting slowly, slowly

to my head, creeping down to my heart, until at a sudden plunge of my mule shying from a swaying vine, I was thrown forward into what seemed a bottomless abyss.

When I opened my eyes there were lights flashing about me and my head was on Lucian's breast, while many figures were standing about us.

"Oh," I cried in agony, as his hand pressed my arm; then, remembering everything, "Lucian," I moaned, "I let it run down, I — have spoiled it all."

"My poor foolish child," he said softly, as I hid my face against him, "did you suppose that I would leave the chronometer in the keeping of my wife — my wife who knew nothing about it — wouldn't interest herself in her husband's work?"

"Why, that thing you have in your hand — let me take it, dear — is an old affair Courtenay put in the stand because he said it looked lonely without anything. It was broken two years ago. It couldn't be wound. I was so glad and happy to be done with my charge that I called to you, just in fun, knowing that you had never been in the chronometer house, and supposing that nothing would persuade you to go there. The real chronometer was in the boat, just going to the Sea Station when you looked after me. Couldn't you tell that that old thing was broken?"

"Lucian," I said solemnly, raising my eyes to his, "I've been an idiot!"

And so I was. But I've changed all that; I take some sort of interest in what interests my husband now, and the next time we go off on a chronometer expedition, the chronometer and I will be such excellent friends from start to finish that my husband will be the one who is jealous.

