

THE SUNDAY BEE

MAGAZINE SECTION

VOL. 52—NO. 27.

OMAHA, SUNDAY MORNING, DECEMBER 17, 1922.

FIVE CENTS

The Tune Digger

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Ely Could "Dig Up a Tune" for Every Occasion; This Is the Story of a Melody From Beyond the Grave.

A RAW wind pelted over the snow flats to the north, flinging great clotted lumps of snow down from the barn roof and stack.

Lucien Mefford regarded the ragged sky with eyes schooled to the weather. "Big snow coming," he said.

A dog, part collie, part husky, beautifully ruffled, with small, keen eyes and a pelt as clean as a woman's hair, turned an exploring muzzle aloft.

"She's coming, Chinook," repeated Lucien. The dog leaped, all the husky in him alert. "Smell it? Smell that old she-wolf howling over the hill? She's got a blizzard in her teeth, pup, and wind in her whiskers. Come along—we better cover that wood in the shed."

With the dog at his heels, Lucien tramped the path, hip high with shoveled snow on either side, to the house. The house was little more than a shanty, half slabs, half tarrar paper nailed to planks with great glistening tin discs. On either side of the door the discs had been tacked to form two huge letters, six feet high, on the east an L, on the west an M. Ely had done that. Ely enjoyed a trick like that. He had laughed aloud as he nailed the shining tins into the M, which stood for Mefford, and the L, which meant Lucas.

"Ain't everybody can have their initials embroidered on their mansion, Loosh," Ely chuckled. "Your letter looks like you—swear it does. Sort o' square and determined with both feet on the ground. No curleques or foolishness. Me—I'm sitting down as usual. Feet stuck out in front of men. L looks like me, don't it? Ever think what a lot of devilment the letter L gets into? Laughing and loafing, and laziness and liquor—lying and love making?"

That was Ely. Red head and laughing brown eyes. Freckles on his nose like a boy. Coat always flying, cheeks red—too red.

Lucien Mefford stood still in the path and looked at the rust streaks like the mark of tears dripping down from the letter L. Unconsciously he reached a hand behind him and instantly the dog's cold nose found it. They stood, two furry statues in the snowy dusk, motionless, dreading—dreading to enter that lonely house.

On an impulse Lucien plunged out of the path and struck out into the pines, the dog wallowing after. It was very dark under the trees, but Lucien walked straight to the spot under a hemlock, where the snow was a trifle higher, bulking long and sloping.

Stolidly he set himself to kick away the white burden. With wet mittens and side-flung motions of his feet, he dug, the dog digging, too, and whimpering a little as he stopped to bite his chilled toes. The length of earth they uncovered was raw and new and patiently shaped with a spade. Frost had honeycombed it and crusted it with a riny enamel. A barberry bush, leafless and incredibly fragile in its nakedness, stood at one end, its branches shivering icily.

"Tomorrow I'll fix some kind of shelter out here," mused Lucien aloud. "I don't know why I haven't done it. He hated snow—Ely did. He was always worrying about things freezing and dy'ng in the woods, and the birds not getting anything to eat. Hanging up bones and shelling corn for the rabbits. Quit that, you pup!" Chinook had fallen to digging at the frosted patch of earth, scratching with his nails, whining dismally.

They wallowed back through their broken track, and Lucien unlocked the door of the house. The air they entered was ghastly chill, with a stale bone piercing cold, holding the odors of dead tobacco, cold soot, unalred clothing, and fried fat. Leaving the door open, Lucien tramped through the echoing room and lighted a lamp on the shelf over the stove. The room had the vague, desolate look of a place long kept immaculate and lately permitted to fall into slovenly disorder.

The stove was blackened and polished above it burned and rusty belly. Newspapers had been cut into scallops and put on the plank shelves, but the decorated edges were smoked and torn. The wooden bed on the west side of the room was neatly made up, the quilt tucked in carefully, the pillows standing stiffly against the headboard. But the cot on the opposite side was tumbled and loaded with a miscellany of abandoned property—a pair of soiled wool socks rolled into a ball, a shot gun and belt, a pound of six-penny nails lumped in a brown paper, a pile of ragged Canadian newspapers.

Lucien kindled a fire in the stove and instantly the first two lengths of pipe glowed red hot and the smoke of burning stove polish floated against the ceiling. The dog crouched in a waiting attitude, licking his cold toes, with one eye on the man. The man, too, had a transient air of waiting, a look of impermanency as though the house were no longer a fixed abode, but a place of brief, bewildered sojourn, and everything in the room shared this aspect. The table was littered with unwashed pans and plates on which half-eaten food was drying. The three chairs sat at different angles, turned as chairs are turned upon which one sits casually, but not as chairs upon which a weary householder may rest. A pipe lay on a shelf, cold, unlighted for weeks.

One knew the house for a place forsaken swiftly at dawn and occupied briefly and reluctantly at night. One knew, too, that this forlorn state was recent and that the two who shared it were dazed and wretched, helplessly uncertain how to go about altering it.

"The mess would have made Ely sick," Lucien mused aloud. "I know I bought more scouring soap and lye for him than any woman in Mahopac. We've got to clean it up somehow, pup, you and me."

He took off the fur coat and the muffling cap of coney with earflaps, and kicked out of his great felt boots and mackinaw, and instantly stood forth, amazingly slender, amazingly youthful, a lithe steel ramrod of a man with a sober, pallid face with dark hair looped across the forehead, and straight, thin, dead black eyebrows. His mouth was sensitive and sparingly molded over a chin built on an unyielding curve, and as he moved about the room his lips twitched nervously. Always he moved one-sidedly, keeping an averted shoulder toward the empty bed in the corner, always the haunted look lay in his eyes.

He heated a great pot of water and attacked the disorderly table, drying each dish awkwardly and at length, as though he were watched and were eager for approval. When every cup and pan was returned to the shelf, he shook out the red table cloth, turned a clean side up, and set the lamp in the middle. The cot was smoothed, the covers straightened, the gun hung up. Even the kindling was laid in an orderly row under the stove. And then, involuntarily, Lucien Mefford turned toward



—chanted, as a tortured penitent might say a misere.

the solitary bed, grinning triumphantly. But the grin died in a swift, contorted spasm of remembering anguish. He wheeled away and flung his arm over his eyes.

"God!" he whispered. "I'm always doing that. I'll take that bed out of here tomorrow."

The dog came crawling to him, prone, abject, muzzle upturned uneasily, passionate tail beating the floor. Lucien patted the white, narrow head.

"Just you and me, Chinook," he comforted. "Just you and me now."

Like a flash the dog leaped to the door, whining, ears up. The man turned away.

"No use, pup. You can't find him. No use to run yourself footsore all over these woods. You can't find him."

But the dog persisted, yelping, clawing at the planks.

"All right. All right. If you're bound to be a fool, go to it." He opened the door, letting in a gust of wind heavy with stinging snow. Instantly the dog was gone, flashing snow puffs marking his floundering leaps. Lucien watched till the tawny flurry vanished into the pines.

He prepared his supper indifferently and ate it reluctantly. Tea boiled in a tin basin, bread scorched before the stove, sausage sawed from a frozen muslin-covered billet and badly cooked. Lucien picked it with a fork and shoved away the plate.

"No use—I can't get used to it. I'll be loony directly, like Chinook—running around in circles in the woods. As soon as I hear from her I'll sell out and go back to Saganaw. I can't get used to this."

He crossed the room, carrying the lamp and unconsciously tiptoeing, as though he feared to waken a sleeper. On a shelf a picture was propped against a tobacco tin, a very new, very expensive photograph in a heavy brown folder. The face in the picture was that of a girl with heavy, fair hair, pinned above her brows, a face unsmiling, but strong and sweet, with mothering eyes and a small, firm mouth. The face was repeated a dozen times in small kodak pictures pasted upon the wall above the wooden bed, in a group framed beside a window, in a little water color framed with wall paper.

"She'll get my letter tomorrow. Lige took it down Sat-

urday and the train likely ran on Tuesday if the snow plows got through. I guess I ought to have written sooner."

Four weeks lay on his conscience, the four weeks during which the letter had been delayed. The ink had frozen and he could never remember to get any more at Mahopac. Then had come the snow and the temporary blocking of the roads. But these he knew were merely excuses, poor things with which he tried to hush his conscience. The real reason for the delay had been his own anguished inability to write down the truth which must go into the letter. A dozen nights he had sweated in misery over a store tablet ruled in red, trying to write the blunt, bald words. But now the letter was finally gone. She would get it at Little Travois tomorrow.

"First letter I've written in 11 years," thought Lucien.

Ely had been the scribe. Ely's budget of weekly letters had been a famous joke in Mahopac. Ely had "folks." Lucien had nobody. Nobody but Ely.

The girl in the picture returned his gaze steadily. Ely's girl—Pamela Brooke. The name had been a song in the slab and tar paper house. Even the dog had learned it from Ely's joyously babbling lips. "Pamela Brooke." Lucien said it over softly, as he had done sometimes in the barn or in the woods, when the name had been to him a shadow—a troubling, elusive shadow, reluctantly recognized, but coldly intangible—a shadow between himself and Ely.

Sweat came out on his brow now, as it did whenever he thought of that shadow. He wiped it away, tensely grateful for the narrow margin by which that shadow had remained a shadow, had never grown into a barrier.

"A half dozen times I came near telling him. A half dozen times I almost blurted out something. He was glad—glad. For now the shadow between himself and Ely was everlasting, a darkness which would not lift.

More snow was falling outside, sifting icily against the single window. The wind came and wailed at the door, thrusting cold, gray lips against every crack.

"Old fellow wants to come in and warm his nest," Ely had said whenever the wind mounded outside.

The dog had not come back. Lucien went to the door, held it against the gale, shouting hollowly. But his voice died, snatched off his lips like smoke. He made the door fast and took to pacing the room. Outside the pines swished and tittered like idiotic misers gathering snow in their arms, hoarding it greedily against the robber sun on the morrow. Lucien flung down in a chair.

"Four weeks. My God—four weeks. It's breaking me. I can feel it. And now—a big snow coming!"

Against the foot of the bed stood a guitar. He picked it up, turned the keys idly, plucking at the strings. Strange minor intervals sounded from the untuned instrument, disconnected fragments of melody as mournful and lone as the harping of the winds. Lucien fingered and experimented and then set the thing back against the bed.

"Can't even dig up a tune, Ely." His smile was rueful.

"That had been Ely's job, always—digging up a tune. 'Dig up a tune, Loosh,' he had counseled when the mill broke down in the middle of a pattern or the rabbits came out of the woods and cleaned off the flax, or a parching summer laid their corn low. 'Dig up some kind of a tune. She might be worse.' Always that way, Ely—even now. 'Dig up a tune, Loosh,' the neatly, almost solemnly made bed seemed to give forth a voice, very weak, but undaunted.

"Can't be done, Ely. Can't be done, boy!" That was the way they began—talking to themselves. "I'm getting it," thought Lucien. "I'm getting loony."

He sat up suddenly. There's that blame fool dog. Wonder how long before I'll be out, baying in the snow?"

Far down the road through the pine slashing he could hear the bay of Chinook, sharp as a shot, even against the trumpeting of the wind.

"He's got something. Somebody caught in the blow. Man—the way Chinook yelps. Lige Walker, maybe—late getting back."

He stoked the stove and opened the drafts so that the pipe glowed. The dog came nearer, his baying "Hau-oo! Hau-oo!" marking his progress as definitely as the whistle of an engine. Lucien went close to the door and listened.

"Horse! A pung. Lord, what a fool." He dragged on his heavy boots. A horse meant a stranger. No man who knew the country would start out in a sleigh on a night like this. He could hear the creak of the runners, the mad yelp of the dog bounding alongside, the plunging of a winded horse. He saw a lantern. He wondered how they had held it against the wind until he noted that it was an electric affair, with a white concave eye searching the white wilderness about the house. Lucien opened the door.

"Hey, you!" The wind tore down his throat as he shouted. Chinook came pelting, coat caked with hard driving snow, leaping with all four feet off the ground.

"What you brought in out of the woods, boy?"

The horse stopped, floundering a dozen yards from the house. A man called—Lige Walker. Lige Walker driving a pung. Crazy—plain crazy! Lucien scrambled into his coat and dragged the coney cap over his ears.

"Get inside, you—want to freeze to death?" he demanded, as he shoved the dog inside the door. He strode down the drifting path. "Lige, you damn fool, what you tryin' to do? Kill a good horse?"

Lige Walker, the garrulous and profane teamster, did not answer for a moment, then he cleared his throat nervously.

"Loosh, I got a lady here—"

Lucien froze in his tracks. "A lady?"

"She's came all the way from Little Travois to see Ely. I just brought her on out here—didn't figure it was gettin'