

Summer Hostess -by- Lucy Poate Stebbins

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CHAPTER XXVII

Desperately Leslie glanced at the door. The key was in the lock. She was quick and had the supple wrist of a good tennis player. The child in her arms would help to screen her from the eyes of Erikas. In an instant she had removed the key, slipped out the door, and looked it on its owner. Erikas couldn't get out of the window because she was too big and, besides, she would have too much consideration for her plans. She would have to go through the passage and living room to her veranda, down many steep flights of wooden steps to the beach; then she must clamber up the bluff where the wild grass hung withered and brown and the sedge grass waved like a soft gray cloud. It wasn't until Leslie saw the Hardaway car that she realized fully how little help it would be to her. With Tony on her lap, she couldn't run the big machine into deep water off the end of the pier. No, and she wouldn't do it if Tony weren't with her. Two Vances had stepped out of life when its difficulties grew into an impassable thicket about their feet; she had never blamed them, but she would not follow their example. "You're in a tough spot, Leslie, old thing," she told herself heartily, "but remember; you can take it!" She looked in the direction of Rocky Point much as a solitary horseman gazes across the desert, dreading to see the outriders of an enemy tribe. Yet the downs held nothing which could threaten her peace. She remembered Erikas' cave and it seemed to her that hiding there would be to trust herself in the very heart of nature. Erikas had not betrayed her to the Orsins—there she had been unjust—nor would he lead the hunt to his cave even if his loyalty did not compel his silence because he set such value on his boyhood's refuge. If Huntleigh was a traitor—and there was everything to prove it—he would not think immediately of the cave. By the time he remembered it, she would have escaped. How? Somehow. In this exalted condition of mind, when reason played no part, she felt the strength to carry Tony to the world's end. If she had to descend the cliff's face which had frightened her into helplessness when Erikas was with her, she could have done it with the child in her arms. Fortunately she need not attempt it. Without difficulty, she found the narrow path which cut obliquely down the bluff. She had a moment's dazed wonder over the strength of her arms and the enormous number of schemes which had occurred to her and been rejected since she had locked Erikas in her house. As the track dipped sharply and she knew that she was out of sight of the cottage, she laughed breathlessly to think of the woman's amazement when she came up the bluff to find an empty car standing silent before her door. "She'll think the earth has opened and swallowed us up," thought Leslie, "and she'll be partly right." The path, if one could call by such a name the threadlike way ended in a confused rubble of rocks piled up by winter storms. Tony was half strangling her and it was difficult to see past his curly head and plant her feet securely on stones slippery with greenish moss. "Lovely ride!" he said, bringing out the words a syllable to a jolt. She had no breath to answer. Her first visit to the cave had been at low tide and even then the beach was only a few feet wide. Now it had almost disappeared and the water lapped close to the dark hole which was the entrance. She set Tony's little feet upon a rock. He squealed and lifted first one and then the other. It was the first time she had noticed that he was just as he had stolen from his crib, barefooted and in his pajamas. "Tony, lamb, I'm taking you to a swell place." He nodded approval. "A swell place. Yes, Auntie Les." She showed him the cave mouth. He looked doubtfully up at her. "Dark." "Of course it's dark. That's why it's fun, darling. Wriggle in, Mr. Eel. I'll follow." His big eyes widened and then narrowed as if drawn up by a puckering string. He shook his head dizzily. A melancholy howl was on its way. If it should rise above the beating of the waves, Erikas would discover them. "Auntie Les will go first," she said hastily. But she did not like to leave him out there even for a moment. What if he should run off in a panic before she could get out again? She crawled in backward so that she needn't lose sight of the child. He squatted down and stared solemnly. "Dark," he observed in a tone of grave foreboding. Why was he afraid of the dark? Had Noah or Mary Blunt frightened him? If only she had not been obliged to leave him to others! She had left him because it was necessary to earn money for his needs. If he had been with the Orsins, would he have been any better off? Didn't the whole problem resolve itself this way? The one who could do the best for Tony was the one with whom he ought to live. "This is no time to think of such questions," she told herself severely. Tony was a biddable child. He seized her arm, strong hands as she directed, and instantly was with her in the breathless darkness. Their hollow voices boomed. "Can't see to play," protested Tony. "If you'll wait a minute while I put stones in front of the door, I'll try to build a fire. That will be fun." "Fun," agreed the docile Tony. But she was disappointed when he added, "Maybe." It was disappointing not to find matches, nor had she brought a flashlight. It occurred to her that they were singularly ill-equipped refugees. For the moment there was nothing to do but keep Tony quiet. She sat on the packing box and held him in her arms. "I'm not having a good time," complained Tony. "I'll sing 'The Crooked Man.'" While she went through the verses she thought with surprised horror of this sinister place to which she had brought her darling. Her excitement had dropped to gray uncertainty. It would be impossible to stay long in the damp cave without food, fire, and warm clothing. Some plan must be fixed upon and as yet she could not think her way and Tony's out of that horrible darkness. The thought of Hunt's treachery stung like a blow on the cheek. She wouldn't have minded half so much if Erikas had betrayed her. For Erikas kept saying that the means wasn't important, or one's motive; only results counted. When anyone held that philosophy of life, you expected crooked dealings. But Huntleigh was, or rather seemed, so honest so incorruptible. If he proved false, how could she ever trust anyone? Presently she found a kind of explanation for his behavior. He had never approved of her conduct. His sympathies were with the Orsins. She had refused to employ him as her lawyer so that he did not owe her even the consideration of a lawyer for his client. Now she saw the childish folly of her flight. "It is the Vance in me," she thought. "The wild Vance. If I had been able to reason, I should have held my ground at Rocky Point and settled the matter on the spot. By running away I have accomplished nothing except to give my behavior in the past a darker air of guilt. I went into a panic, made off with the Hardaway car, quarreled with Mrs. Sanderson, kidnapped Tony and hid him in a musty cave. If I were a criminal, I should have done all these things. I've gained nothing since there is no possible way in which I can escape from the island with Tony. I think I'll go back to the cottage. If the car is still there, we'll ride to Rocky Point. If I must give him up, why should I torment the Orsins a moment longer?" Then she knew that she meant to give up Tony. If the Orsins proved that they would do better for the child than she could do herself, they should have him. For a long time she had been dreading the moment when she must reach this decision, but now that she had arrived at it she felt a wonderful relief. If Tony had not fallen asleep she would have started at once. Better so; for it might well be the last time she held him thus against her breast. The warm, relaxed little body was so sweet to hold. This bit of humanity was all she had left of Father, Mother, Presto, Elsie, and she must give him up. Perhaps when he was a man and went to college he would remember that he had an Aunt Leslie and pay her little visits. She would be quite old then, not far from forty. There was a clash of pebbles striking against one another. The cave mouth enlarged and brightened into an irregular circle of pale gold. A solid mass blocked the entrance. Who was coming? Erikas or Huntleigh? Friend or enemy? Whoever it was had not forgotten, as she had done, to bring a torch. The light played for an instant on the sleeping child but was at once discreetly dimmed. (To Be Continued)

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