

THE MAZE

A Story

By HARRIET LUMMIS SMITH

[Copyright, 1908, by Associated Literary Press.]

The maze was located a few rods from the hotel, its compact walls of evergreen rising ten feet high. The little opening, which revealed a narrow curving path, possessed the undeniable charm of mystery. But Lettice, recalling tales she had heard of tourists wandering for hours in those intricate windings, unable to find their way out, was inclined to be skeptical.

"It's so little," she criticised. "I imagined that a maze would cover acres."

Inwardly she felt convinced of her ability to walk triumphantly to the center and out again. She looked at the clock. It was three-quarters of an hour before the coaching party was to start. Bigger things than the conquest of a maze had been accomplished in that time.

Lettice stepped through the opening into the narrow path with its high, green walls, promising herself that she would turn back before there was any likelihood of losing her way. And almost on the moment she forgot that possibility. The path was very narrow, so narrow that the most amicable pair could not have walked abreast. The dense foliage of the evergreen was for all practical purposes impenetrable as granite. Overhead was the blue California sky, and the breeze was weighed with the odors of uncounted millions of blossoms.

"What a delicious place!" thought Lettice. The big outside world was no longer in evidence. She seemed to herself a solitary pilgrim, following life's winding paths, not knowing where they led, satisfied with a glimpse of the sky overhead and the odors of unseen flowers.

In this peaceful, almost philosophical, frame of mind Lettice turned a corner and came face to face with a young man. And the encounter was sufficient to work an immediate change in the current of her thoughts. She swayed against the wall of evergreen as if about to fall.

"Jack!" she murmured faintly.

"Lettice!" cried the young man, and his tones were rapturous.

As he advanced with outstretched hands Lettice drew herself up. A sudden amazing dignity radiated from her slight figure. An expression of extreme hauteur replaced her previous look of agitation.

"I beg your pardon," said Lettice, gazing at some indefinite object over the young man's head. "I am afraid you misunderstand me."

The young man might have replied that the break in her voice and her sudden pallor were sufficient excuses for the indiscretion into which he had been betrayed. He did nothing of the kind, however. He only stood and looked at her as if, even at her haughtiest, the sight of her rejoiced his eyes.

"If you will kindly let me pass," continued Lettice, and the young man obligingly flattened himself against the wall of foliage. But owing to the narrowness of the path her arm brushed his sleeve as she swept by, and something in the contact awakened her resolution. She felt the tears rushing to her eyes and her knees were unsteady.

Suddenly she decided that she hated mazes and all that pertained to them. She would hurry back to the hotel and lie down for a few moments before the coaching party. She was absurdly nervous and unstrung. Still, she excused her weakness on the ground that there is something disconcerting in the sudden apparition of a person whom you have every reason to believe thousands of miles away. If by any chance you have ever been engaged to the person in question, that, of course, adds to the complications.

Lettice quickened her pace. She walked with a rapidity that brought the color to her cheeks and rendered her breathless. She was reflecting that she did not realize she had followed the winding path so far, when she again found herself face to face with the young man whom she had met 10 minutes before. On this occasion, however, she did not cry "Jack!" nor give

similar indications of weakness. She drew back, and looked him over with an air divided between surprise and contempt.

"If you will allow me to say so," Lettice began, "I should hardly expect you to take advantage of the situation to dog my footsteps in this way."

"And if you will allow me to say so," returned Jack, with more spirit than he had evidenced on the previous occasion, "it is like your customary injustice to accuse me of such a thing. So far from dogging you, I am only interested in getting out of this wretched place."

"Perhaps you will allow me to pass then," said Lettice with great dignity.

"Certainly," Jack replied. Again he flattened himself against the evergreen, and again Lettice swept past him.

"Your customary injustice!" What a disagreeable phrase it was, and yet perhaps not undeserved. She had condemned him unheard. Possibly if she had given him a chance to explain, the last two years would not have been so difficult and sad. To smile when your heart is heavy, to laugh when sighs are crowding to your lips, to hide a bitter regret under the pretense of gaiety is not an easy program to carry out. Lettice gave way suddenly to the luxury of self-pity and the blinding tears ran down her cheeks.

Half an hour later a young man, flushed and frowning, came face to face with a young woman who held her handkerchief to her eyes. Both stood still. The only break in the silence was a little muffled sob, and at the sound the young man's face contracted as if he were in pain.

"Lettice!" he exclaimed. "O Lettice! Why are you crying?"

It was a moment before a stifled voice replied: "Because I can't find my way out."

"Is that all?" This time the silence was longer than before. "Is that all?" Jack hesitated. "Tell me, dear."

"No-o." The uncertain syllable was so faint that Jack bent his head to be sure. Then he put his hand gently over the girl's trembling fingers.

"Dearest, you wouldn't give me a chance to set myself right with you. My letters came back unopened. I went to see you and you had left for Europe the day before. You wouldn't listen!"

Lettice looked up at him. Through her tears something bright and beautiful looked out, like the sunshine sifting through the raindrops.

"I'll listen now," she said.

It was some time before the desirability of leaving the maze occurred to either, and then they could not agree as to the direction in which the exit lay. Lettice, however, was sweetly submissive.

"I've had my own way long enough," she said. "Now I'll follow you wherever you choose to take me." And Jack, who had found her bewitching even in her willfulness, could only doubly adore her in her enchanting new role.

A few minutes later they walked into a circular space, where a bench stood back against the hedge. The two looked at each other.

"We've got to the center," Lettice cried happily. "And now we're farther from getting out than ever." She regarded the bench with approving eyes. "It looks so comfortable," she said.

They were still discovering new charms in their circular paradise when an elderly man with stooping shoulders came into view.

"I beg your pardon," he said, addressing the pair on the bench. "But will you tell me how to get out of this confounded trap?"

The lovers looked at him and then at each other.

"We haven't the least idea," Lettice acknowledged in tones of extreme cheerfulness.

"The fact is," Jack confessed shamelessly, "we're not in any hurry to get out."

"I see, and I beg your pardon," said the elderly man. And he obligingly vanished. Again they were alone with their happiness and the mystery of the maze kept guard.