

# The Nature Lovers.

**L**ANCELOT JENKINS was a poet, but he was also "half-book" with a man on the Stock Exchange, which was perhaps a fortunate circumstance for Mrs. Lancelot Jenkins, a blue-eyed young lady named Lenore, who had an acquired taste for her husband's Muse, and a natural one for pretty frocks. But, though up-to-date in the matter of modes, Lenore was old-fashioned enough to make it the first duty of her life to love, honour and obey her husband, and for three years had shared his joys, sorrows, and fads—principally the lat-

he was "having" them, he decided they had better study the heavens in less congested districts. So they took the train out, and went for country tramps; but, unfortunately, the weather was bad, and Lenore caught a chill in consequence of coming home in wet boots, and while she was in bed, Lancelot went by himself to collect botanical specimens to discuss and dissect with her, and got fined twenty shillings and cost for trespassing.

"The fact is," he said bitterly, when reviewing the failure of their various attempts, "the great City is too strong

tage is fairly comfortable, but you will have to bring your maids, as we are giving ours a holiday.

"Yours ever,  
"TRIX."

"No," said Lancelot, with a look of dreary rapture. "Maids would be out of the picture; we'll give ours a holiday, too."

"Then shall we go?" said Lenore. "I was afraid you might not be able to get away."

"I'll take a fortnight now, and a week later—there's nothing doing," said Lancelot. "We will go back to nature and live like the birds and flowers, and serve our own simple needs."

"Of course," she assented, "and we can take a lot of tinned things, and it will be a rest to me to get away from the maids for a bit." Then her face fell. "But what about the Sausage?" she said.

"We'll take the Sausage with us," replied her husband, and she ran and kissed him, for a weight was lifted from her heart. The Sausage, a plump and elderly pug, had been her special pet since her thirteenth birthday, ten years ago. When Lancelot proposed to her, it was a case of "Love me, love my dog," and he had obeyed, and was really quite fond of the affectionate and wheezy little beast.

"The river," rhapsodised Lancelot, "runs at the bottom of the paddock. We will bathe when the sun is hot, and I will teach you to swim in a shadowy pool with mossy banks, and a sandy bed, while the nightingales sing around us and the sunlight dapples the water, through the whispering leaves."

"Yes," said Lenore, "and I must put some new white braid on my scarlet bathing-dress—and, Lancelot, I shall take nothing but tub frocks to wear, sage-blue linen ones, to blend with the summer foliage, and a broad pink ribbon for the Sausage, to match the pink-tipped daisies."

Lancelot closed his eyes. "Pink-tipped daisies," he mused, "on velvet swaid sloping down to the river, which winds like a blue girdle among the silver rushes."

"And a little thatched cottage in the background," said Lenore, "all our own for a fortnight!" And, being an irritative animal, she also closed her eyes, and leaning back her pretty head, swayed it from side to side in an ecstasy of anticipation.

It wasn't thatched, however—that was the annoying part—neither was it a cottage at all according to their ideas; and they were very disconcerted when, after the short railway journey from London, they found themselves staring disconsolately at a square, solid, eight-roomed house, red bricked and slate roofed. And worse was to come, for inside, instead of the red-tiled kitchen and little dainty-trimmed garret-bedroom they had fondly dreamed of, they found two luxuriously furnished sitting-rooms; white, blue, and pink bedrooms; bath—hot and cold, elec-

tric light, and—horror of horrors!—a telephone in the hall.

Lancelot's face went white with disappointment. "How shall I listen to Nature's voice with these obtrusive trappings of civilisation around me?" he thought.

"How shall I keep it all clean?" thought Lenore, to whom, by the way, luxuries were not such bugbears as she tried to make them. In any case, the gas stove in the kitchen was very convenient for tea-making, for she was hot and dusty with her journey, and put the kettle on to boil, while Lancelot strode off to find the river and a bathing-pool.

"I can't find just the sort of spot I had pictured," he said when he returned, "but I've found a pretty decent place, and when you're rested, we'll go and have a dip." Then he glanced at the tea-cups: it was twelve o'clock, for they had come by an early train, and, of course, real children of nature ought not to require a pick-me-up at mid-day. Still, as the weather was very warm and enervating, he made no objection, but refused a cup himself, though as a matter of fact he went into the next room and furtively mixed himself a whisky-and-soda.

Refreshed and feeling more appreciative of their surroundings, they went outside into the garden. It was a little too conventional for their taste, being the orthodox square of green surrounded by flower-beds. But a beautiful cedar stood in the middle of the lawn, and gently sloping hills, well wooded, stretched away on either hand. In fact, when Lancelot stood with his back to the cottage and watched Lenore in her sage-blue tub frock, with the sun shining on her fair hair, playing under the cedar with the pink ribboned Sausage, he began to feel the place was not so disappointing after all. But an ode to a river nymph had begun to spout in his brain, and he was anxious to get down to the water again, to collect local colour; and half-an-hour later, in a striped stockinette confection, he led Lenore, dainty and excited in her scarlet bathing-dress, across the paddock, followed by the Sausage, who sniffed the air suspiciously, as was natural in a dog used to asphalt pavements all his life.

"The river" was, conversely, as much a misnomer as "the cottage," for Lancelot could easily have jumped it in parts, if he had been an athlete instead of a poet, and it appeared only a few inches deep, for the muddy bottom could be plainly seen. But counselling patience to the disgusted Lenore, Lancelot led her farther on to a pool where the stream widened, and the banks grew steeper, and the bottom was quite invisible. Then with grin, resolute face he stood on the bank and threw up his arms.

"Don't dive," cried Lenore; "jump in, it's safer."

"No," he said, "I must dive. I've got an idea for a poem in which a shepherd plunges in the river and finds a naiad at the bottom, and I want to get local colour."

He did, and came up well plastered with it. Fortunately, he went in flat, or



They went on the leads every morning before breakfast and inhaled the odours from the chimneys of their neighbours.

ter, for until the events happened here chronicled, fortune had spared them any excess of sensation.

They lived in Tooting, and were rather sought after by their set, until Lancelot weighed the social resources of his suburb and found them wanting, and accompanied by Lenore, turned to culture. For a year they waded through much heavy reading and the study of foreign languages, but Mrs. Jenkins had a nervous breakdown, which suggested physical development as a substitute for mental, and under her husband's tuition she grey quite efficient with French clubs, until one sad morning a club slipped from her hand and blacked his eye in passing, and she vowed with tears she would never touch them again. However, they still persisted in "deep breathing drill," and went on the leads every morning before breakfast, and inhaled the odours from the chimneys of their neighbours, who were unfortunately addicted to the sausage habit, alternating with bloaters and bacon. But Lancelot found that, according to a medical weekly, deep breathing was apt to strain the heart, so he dropped the practice and became a Nature Lover, with the admiring and obedient Lenore still in tow. In Throgmorton-street he would suddenly lift his head to study sky effects, while Lenore felt bound to do the same thing in Tooting, so that when he said at dinner in the evening, "Did you see that sun-shaft strike a dun mass of cumulus at 2.55, and change it to molten copper?" she could reply in the affirmative. But one night he came home to find Lenore's straight, little nose cut and swollen, where she had run into a lamp-post, the result of sky-gazing; and as he was getting unpopular in the City by continually leading people to believe, first that there was an airship somewhere about, and next that

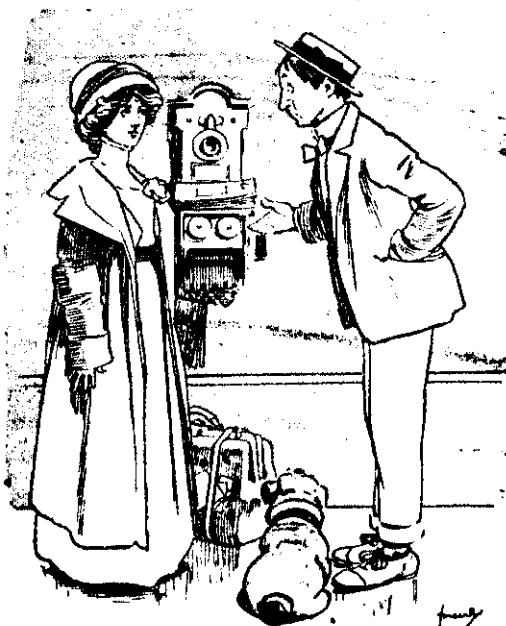
for us. It twines its tentacles round our reluctant limbs, and brings us back to bricks and mortar like boomerangs."

"Oh, no, dear! We were wet, and my fringe was out of curl, but we don't look quite as bad as that!" protested Lenore, whose general knowledge was shaky, and who was under the impression a boomerang was a kind of ape.

"Nature has many messages for me," said Lancelot, "but how can I hear them when I am so far away? No wonder my efforts are returned," and he looked viciously at a bundle of long envelopes on his writing-table. "They haven't the true ring. Ah, here's another of them. I expect," he added, as the postman knocked at the door. But it happened to be a letter for Lenore this time, from a frivolous woman friend, who had married an artist and lived in the country. Lancelot turned away indifferently, till a little cry from his wife recalled him, and she thrust the letter in his hands, and he read as follows:—

"Riverview Cottage, near Winterton, Bucks.

"Dearest Lenore,—  
"Are you and Lancelot still nature lovers? If so, perhaps you would like to come down here for a fortnight, and keep the cottage aired for us while we are in Paris. Otherwise we shall shut it up, so don't feel you must come to oblige us. It's a decent little place, with a river running at the bottom of the paddock, and not another roof to be seen for miles. That is my trouble; the country bores me to tears, and I am only too charmed to exchange its freshness, and cleanliness, and emptiness, for the life and rattle of the gay city. Tell Lancelot he can exercise his Muse undisturbed, except for the nightingales, which I think ought to be shot; they get on my nerves so terribly. The cot-



"And—horror of horrors—a telephone in the hall!"