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LOVE FOR AN HOUR IS LOVE FOREVER.

BY AMELIA E. BARR.

Author of "Friend Olivia," &c.
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CHAPTER IX.

It is very hard to believe what goes against our wishes; and it was almost impossible for Francesca to believe that Lancelot would now really leave England. There seemed to be such good and valid reasons for his remaining at home, that, in spite of his melancholy letters and their certain air of change, Francesca would not consider his exile as a likelihood.

One morning in October, Miss Loida and her niece were in the garden together. It was a fresh, frosty morning, with plenty of sunshine. The squire had gone into the village on electioneering business, and the ladies, in spite of the contradiction in their love affairs, were not unhappy. Miss Loida was talking with the gardener, and she had her hands full of the latest asters. Francesca stood on the terrace steps feeding her pigeons and laughing at the melting eyes they made to their perpetual song of "Love! Love! Love!" She was dressed in a gown of dark-blue cloth; it had little turned-over cuffs and collar of white linen, and the bright-brown ribbons of her straw hat fluttered about in the glancing sunlight. Her whole appearance, indeed, indicated a mood of serene pleasure—that delightful air of cheerful happiness which surrounds those who can enjoy life without the excitement of passion or appetite.

Now, as Francesca scattered the wheat, she looked toward the house, and saw a servant approaching her. He had the morning's mail on a salver, and he gave Francesca a letter, and then carried one to Miss Loida. Francesca's was from Lancelot. She finished giving the pigeons their breakfast with a little conscious hurry, and then went to the clematis arbor. Miss Loida had taken her letter into the house to read; Francesca was glad not to anticipate any interruption.

She sat down with the fateful square of paper in her hand and suffered her eyes to dwell with her anticipated pleasure. She was sure that every letter would bring her information of Lancelot's change of plans; she was quite sure this particular one was to set her heart at rest. In all her life she had no sorrows to anticipate, and she had been accustomed to have all her desires granted. It was inconceivable to her that Lancelot should not manage to make her happy in the way she desired. She had even begun to feel that he had carried delay in the matter quite long enough for her patience and pleasure. So she opened the envelope finally with that air of decision which contains in it a certain demand that expectation should be satisfied, and these were the words she read:

"Farewell, adorable Francesca! Farewell! Farewell forever! In an hour I shall leave England, certainly for some years, perhaps for the remainder of my life. I do not ask for your remembrance; let me be forgotten as soon as possible. For a girl of my fortune, I am too utterly inconceivable and unforeseen; and I would rather die than make you a sharer in it. Only believe that, though I suffer, I am innocent of all wrong in thought, word, or deed. It is misfortune that I can neither avert nor explain. If I say that I am broken-hearted, I say too little. I am compelled to put love from me. I am compelled to abandon hope. I retain life, only because it would be cowardly to resign it. Forget me so miserably. Forget the sweet hours we have passed together; all our innocent dreams; all our blessed hopes for the future. I am too wretched a man to remain in your thoughts. O beloved Francesca! My heart bleeds and breaks. Farewell forever."
LANCELOT.

She read the letter through, at first rapidly, then with a forced rigid deliberation, letting her eyes take in, with clear and positive certainty, every word and letter. She did not cry or faint, or evince any passionate sense of the crushing sorrow that had come to her. Some hot tears filled her soft, shining eyes, but they were not shed. She sat still, letting every miserable word smite her like a blow. Only yesterday she had wept with angry impatience because a careless servant had let loose into a cruel world of cats and boys a cage-bird canary. But to-day she had no tears for the anguish which had come to her own heart.

It was at first almost an impossible sorrow. She did not, she could not believe in it. Why should such grief come to her? "Am I awake?" she asked, with amazed and almost indignant incredulity. She had, also, a kind of painful shame in being so cruelly deserted. Why had not Lancelot come to bid her "Good-bye"? Surely there was no misfortune he could not tell her about. She felt that she was strong enough and loving enough to bear any misfortune, however great it might be, with him. Why had he not, then, trusted her?

Besides, there was an uncertainty about the letter which tortured her most of all. Lancelot said he was leaving England, but he did not say to what part of the world he was going. He did not ask her to write to him; he had even made it impossible for her to send him a letter. He said he was going away for years—that he might never come back. What conceivable misfortune could there be to drive a lover, a young man of family and wealth and fine prospects, forever from his home and his native land, especially when he declared himself to be an innocent and irresponsible victim?

She could not imagine one. Indeed, Francesca was singularly unable to imagine situations of sorrow or of evil fortune. The world had been

such a happy world to her. She had never supposed circumstances in which love could fail to comfort her, or hope be turned into despair. The first hour of the experience was stunning and stupefying, and she was only conscious of a dumb rebellion against some terrible suffering and deprivation.

When Miss Loida came to seek her niece, Francesca had for the first moment or two a sense of anger at any intrusion into the bitterness of her grief. But the real sweetness of her nature soon prevailed, for Loida was no silly intermeddler with another's trouble. She allowed the sorrowful girl to be still until she chose to speak. She knew that it was sufficient for Francesca to feel her at her side, and to be sure of her sympathy.

"I have had a bad letter, Aunt Loida—a cruel letter, I think."
"It is a cruel letter, Francesca. And if it hurts you to get it, what must poor Lancelot have suffered in the writing of it! Yes, indeed! One can feel the heart-break in every line."

"What can be the reason for it, aunt?"
"I cannot tell you. But I am sure Lancelot is not to blame in any way. Poor fellow! How he must be suffering! God help him!"
"I am suffering also, aunt."

"I know you are. Oh, I know you are! But you have your dear father to love and comfort you, and you have Aunt Loida to suffer every pang with you, and you have a good home and plenty of money, and many friends. Lancelot has just buried a father whom he idolized. He has no friends but you and me. For some reason—I am sure a good one, as far as he is concerned—he is homeless, friendless, without much money, and an exile from his own land and people, and above all, obliged by his love and honor to give back your love and allegiance. Can you conceive of a man in a more pitiable condition, of a man more worthy of sympathy and love? Yes, dear, I say love. If I were in your place I should love him ten thousand times more for his noble resignation and resolutions; I am sure they are noble. I would not believe the whole world against Lancelot's simple assertion, that he has done nothing worthy of his suffering. Would you, dear?"

"No, I would not."
"That is right. Then the sting is out of your sorrow. To love worthily, that is everything."
"But when he tells me not to love him—tells me to forget him—when he hid himself away from me so that I cannot even send him a letter, what am I to do?"

"Go on loving him all the more. Go on thinking about him all the more. Do everything possible to find out where he has gone to, and then send him the sweetest, tenderest messages you can write. That is what you ought to do. I am sure they are sure that we shall find him out. His mother will certainly know in a little time. Then, of course, she could tell you, because she would

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hope that you could bring him home; and, of course, she will want him home."

"She is a very strange woman, Loida."
"I dare say she is a very awkward and disagreeable woman; but, then, it is the mother in the woman you will have to deal with. All mothers are gentle and kind. I am sure. Everything will come right, Francesca—I am sure it will—and you will love each other when Lancelot comes back as you never could have loved had you not been separated. Ah, Francesca, all women, in one way or other, have to find out that of all the sorrowful things in life the hardest of all is loving."

And the girl was for the time consoled, because Loida understood that in the first hours of sorrow comfort must often consist in promising the impossible, and in asserting whatever is the desire of the wounded heart. Francesca wished to believe what Loida said; she therefore accepted her assurances and took what hope they promised her. Another course might have been more prudent and less kind. As it was, Francesca suffered very much. No one knew at the time how much, for the circumstances seemed to suddenly develop in her girl-heart a woman's reticence and noble restraint. For some days the affair was not spoken of again, and the squire noticed the pallor of his daughter's face and the singular stillness of her manner.

"Whatever is the matter with my little girl?" he said to Miss Vyner one afternoon. "She is either sick or in trouble. Is it about that young man, Loida?"
"Things are not very pleasant about him, are they, Rashleigh?"
"No, they are not. I am not to blame, am I, now?"
"I cannot say you are."

"Well, then?"
"Nay, brother, I never talked much about my own trouble; it is not likely I will talk of Francesca's. I dare say she will tell you sooner or later, whatever there is to tell."

"Has he gone away yet? Tell me that much."
Before Loida could answer, the door opened and Francesca entered. The squire looked kindly at her, and drew her chair close to his own. She sat down and laid her head against his big breast, and she began to cry. He was much moved. His voice trembled with the tears in it, as he said:

"Francesca! Why, honey! Why, joy! What ever is the matter?"
"Lancelot has gone away from England, father."

"He will come back, I'll be bound!"
"He says he will not come back. He gave me back my troth. He says I must forget him forever."

"The impudent rascal! He gave thee thy troth! My word, but he was never worthy of thee!"
word against Lancelot. It is because he is so noble, so honorable, so truly fond of me that he gave up our engagement. I want you to find out where he has gone to. He did not tell me."

"Nay, my dear, I will not do that. If he has gone, let him go; Francesca Atherton is not such a lass as to run after a sweetheart—prince or spinner."

"Father, dear, Lancelot was something more than a passing sweetheart. We had only one heart and one life between us. If anything happens to Lancelot, I shall die too."

"Nay, thou wilt not. Thou hast more sense than to break thy heart for any man. What if it is not maidenly to talk that way?"

"Father, I do not live in scraps and little bits as some women do; an hour of love and an hour of merry-making, a thought about marriage and so on—I love you with all my heart—I would not for one week give you up, father, to be queen of England. I love Lancelot in the same old-fashioned way. Lancelot has gone away because he has a misfortune he will not let me share. I want to find out where he has gone to, for I want to write to him and tell him I would gladly share all his misfortunes. Father, here is his last letter. Read it. Anyone may read the word of a love so broken hearted."

The squire took the letter with some reluctance, and only read it because Francesca's head upon his heart made her pleading irresistible. "It is a middling bit of despair," he said, when he had glanced at the contents. "Farewell." "And I must say the lady has done the very best thing possible under the circumstances."

"But what circumstances, father?"
"My dear, I do not know that I can say 'what circumstances.' I may have my suspicions, but I have no right to give them a name. It would never do to put suspicion into words; that might be the biggest wrong of all. But I will say this much: Lancelot is in no way to blame, I am sure. I hold him to be square and honorable as a man can be."

"Then find out where he has gone to, father."
"I'd rather not. Thou might write to him."
"Yes, I would write to him."
"It would not be kind of thee. Forget, and let him forget."
"No, I will not forget. He may forget, if he can. I will not forget. I will remember, and I will love him to the end of my life."
"Dear me! What stubborn stuff women are made of!" And he looked half reproachfully at Loida, who sat, with an expression of approval on her face, opposite to him.

"Brother," she answered, in reply to his accusing glance—"brother, it is a very good thing for men generally that women are made of stubborn stuff. I cannot think what men would do if women were not so made as to believe black was white, and stand to their conviction."

"To be sure! To be sure!"
"Father, you will find out for me where Lancelot has gone to. I cannot do such a thing as that for myself, can I?"

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