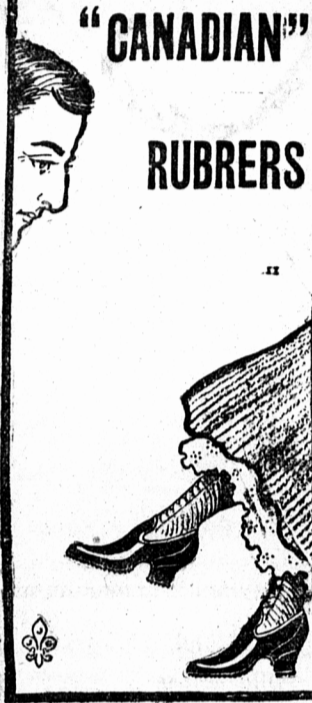




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**LOVE FOR AN HOUR IS LOVE FOREVER.**

BY AMELIA E. BARR  
 Author of "Friend Olivia," &c.  
 PUBLISHED EXCLUSIVELY BY THE GUARDIAN IN THIS PROVINCE

(CHAPTER VI—Continued.)

Certainly the conversation seemed to give Stephen pleasure. He evidently, at this uncertain hour, wished his son to know that he had never been without religious instincts and aspirations; and that he found the comforts of the God he had worshipped in secret to be sufficient for his extremity. Indeed, he was far more anxious and uneasy about the affairs of this life than about anything that was to come after it. He heard his wife's steps, and it recalled him at once to the actual.

"Go down to thy mother, Lance," he said. "She is a bit trying these days. Thou must be patient with her. We all have a weak side; mine is my mill; hers is her house; and mine, I'll be bound, is that bonny lass of Atherton's. Kiss me again. Eh! Lance—Lance! I can't help thinking of the days when thou wert a baby, and I carried thee on my shoulder, and next my heart. I can feel thy little hands yet about my neck, and he lifted his large, trembling hands, and drew his son's face down, and looked steadily into it, and said solemnly: "God bless thee, my dear, dear Lance!"

"My dear, dear father!"

"Thou wilt come a bit after me, but I shall find thee out in the next world. I shall know thee by thy loving eyes and thy likeness to my son, and by that sweet, sweet voice of thine. Leave me now. I'd like to be a bit by myself."

Lancelot met his mother on the stairs; he took her hand and walked to the parlor with her. As they went, she said, in a melancholy way: "There is a cup of tea ready, for thee."

The room was as spotless and orderly as if there was no sickness near the place. The birds twittered in the ivy outside, and the scent of the wall-flowers came in through the open window. The great change was in his mother's face. It had always been a grave face; it was now almost a hopeless one. Lance had never conceived of a human countenance so full of something that was superhuman—not pleasantly so.

"What do you think of your father?" she asked, with her eyes fixed upon the floor.

"I think he is very sick. What doctor has he?"

"Doctor Thorpe. He is as good as any."

"I would send to Leeds for the best in the town. I will go myself to-night."

"Nay, you won't. Your father is going to die. No one can help him."

"How can you talk so calmly of such a calamity, mother?"

"It will not be the vary best thing that could happen. The Bible says that no man lives or dies to or for himself; he lives to live for those behind him and those that come after him."

"What do you mean, mother?"

"If he would keep his fingers off Leigh House, then that live in its rooms unseen would keep their hands off him. Did he tell thee he was going to mortgage house and land to Joshua Newby? Her face had become scarlet, her eyes blazed; she was the incarnation of indignant wrong. "If he will worry them that are stronger than he is, he must sup the cup they mix for him. I hev told him—hev warned him—warned him, and better warned him."

"Mother, you let your affection for your family and your house run away with your best part. My father's life is worth all the old houses in the world."

"For God's sake, don't thee talk in that way! Whatever will I do? What's to be done, then?"

"Do the best possible to save father's life. I am going for another doctor."

"Thorpe knows. Thorpe has known him all his life."

"Still, I will have another doctor."

"As to likes."

She was now sullen and silent, and appeared to fall into a condition of hopeless indifference. Lance could not eat; he drank a cup of tea, and then rode into Leeds for advice. The physician he brought spoke of fever and of the man's gigantic strength, and the struggle there might be between life and death. Indeed, the patient was already delirious, and difficult to manage. For many days and nights Lancelot never left his father. In the land of the shadow of death, he kept close by his side. Sometimes the sick man called him frantically in cries full of suffering, and sometimes in the fearsome whispers of agonized terror.

"I am here, father! Close by your side. I will not leave you!"

In such assurances over and over, with exhausting monotonous repetitions, Lancelot passed many days of anguish and nights of anxious fear. For he had a highly sensitive nature, responsive to all unseen influences, and he could not escape either the one or the other.

At midnight, when his mother wandered restlessly from room to room, muttering indistinguishable words, falling upon her knees in speechless anguish, and the dying man whispered awfully from far, far off, the weight of untold years was upon Lancelot—indistinct memories—no thought embodied, but weight and power—and an obscure sense of the soul looking backward and forward through endless vistas. Then the atmosphere of the ancient rooms was heavy with life that breathed not; with powers that touched him to the quick, in moods which he had no sense to explain; with flashes of illumination from the inner side of life; vague terrors of nameless things; vague conceptions of times before this life began, and he seemed to miss his foothold in it and to fall

into dreams whose unutterable desolation cast a shadow over him, even in the summer sunshine.

Steadily the strong man marched to death. There was some wonder at the inefficiency of all remedies, and Doctor Thorpe questioned Lancelot sharply about the administration of them.

"Whether your father be conscious or unconscious, they must be given him regularly," he said. "They cannot be neglected."

"They are not neglected, sir. My mother watches the clock, and brings them at the very moment with her own hand."

"Your mother brings them?"

"Yes. This room is too dark to measure them with safety and absolute correctness. We were fearful they would be given in wrong quantities. Mother took them to the parlor. No medicines could be more carefully attended to."

The doctor said no more; he sat down and waited. In a short time Martha Leigh entered, with a glass in her hand. He took it from her and put it to his lips.

"Martha, this is plain water. Have you forgotten the drops? They are most important; they are life or death!"

He gave the cup back, and she left the room without a word.

"Look after the medicine yourself," he said to Lancelot. "Your mother is troubled and weary, you ought not to rely on her."

The words appeared to be kind and considerate words, but they were negated by the tone in which they were uttered. A fear he durst not think of came into Lancelot's heart. He was stricken for a moment dumb and motionless. The doctor had left the room; he was standing at the top of the stairs, looking, with a sorrowful uncertainty, back into it, when Lancelot approached him. Then he began to descend the steps, but the miserable young man arrested him.

"Doctor," he said, "you have known me all my life. What do you want to say?"

"Nothing but what I have said. Your mother is not fit to trust with the medicines. Drop the tinctures with your own hand. Do not ask me any questions, Lance. I have nothing to say to you."

"My father?"

"Is very ill. He will probably die before sunrise. I was going to tell your mother. I will leave the office to you."

"Is there no hope, sir?"

"It is too late to hope now. How

could you be so careless? Had I known! Had I suspected! Yes, I did wonder. How was it you never told me?"

He asked the question suspiciously, with a certain fierceness of manner, and then, shaking his hand free from Lancelot's, went from the house.

For a moment Lancelot stood where he left him. His face was scarlet. He trembled with anguish. If a stranger had heard him accused of a crime, they would certainly have said: "The man is guilty."

Recovering himself, he went back to the sick-room, shielded the candle again, looked tenderly at the prostrate figure lying with face upturned to heaven, white as clay, without sight, thought, or feeling, only not dead, and then, with passionate tears, he went to the parlor. His mother sat in the chair by the hearth. Her hands were dropped. She was gray and cold, and unresponsive to her son's entrance. He had hitherto respected this attitude. He thought it to be his mother's way of bearing sorrow, and not sorrow. He stood before her, and she looked up and then down.

"Mother, do you know that father is dying? He will not live another day. O mother! mother!"

"I told thee he would die. He had to die. It is his own fault."

"You want me to think that his forefathers killed him?"

"To be sure they did."

"Then I hate them all—every one of them, man, woman, or child, that hurt him! The dearest father, the noblest soul that ever lived! O father! My father! Lance would have died for you, as you would for him!"

"Wilt thou be quiet? It is a shame of thee, speaking thy own, and daring to say it too. Don't thee speak to me. I won't listen to thee."

"I tell you father is dying. The doctor says he is afraid he has not had his medicines. O God! O mother! mother!"

She had risen in her passion, but she sat down at his appeal and laughed in a low, miserable way, muttering to herself as she did so.

"What are you saying, mother?"

"I will tell thee, if it wants to know. I am saying that old Joshua Newby may come now with his papers. Thy father's hand will never sign Leigh away to him. He has been here every day for two weeks to get thy father's name. Thank God Almighty he will never get it now. Better a clay hand than a false hand!"

"Give me my father's medicines."

"Ay, thou can take them now."

"Oh, you cruel wife!"

"Rueful! Little thou knows. He's thou art in thy heart, and thy brain burning thee up bit by bit while thou art quiet and living? He's thou see what I hev seen, or heard what I hev heard? He's thou sat with the dead, and been sent to do their bidding and their will for them? Go thy ways, and don't thee dare to speak to me again till I know what thou art talking about."

"Do you know that Doctor Thorpe suspects you of letting my father die?"

She did not answer him a word. Her eyes were fixed upon his father's empty chair. A sudden breeze blew white shade sharply against the window and brought into the room the scent of wall-flowers. The little bell startled and hurt Lancelot; he never more could endure the woody perfume. He lifted the medicine vials and went upstairs. There are moments when all men weep. They may do it in secret, but none the less, they cover their faces, and their palms are wet with the bitter rain. And when Lancelot sat down again in the gloom of his father's death-bed, and saw the white, helpless figure, and thought of the "peradventure" that might have been, he broke utterly down. Low sobs shook him from head to foot; he buried his face in his hands and knelt down by the dear father who would know him no more in this world.

All night he kept his lonely watch, and all alone he helplessly witnessed the last struggle of the departing soul. He was unspeakably wretched, for he had realized the wrong done only when it was too late in any way to atone for it. The medicine vials accused him; he could not bear to touch them, he could not bear to see them. An awful stillness was in the house, a stillness pervaded by spiritual life. Lancelot felt it press upon him on every side, and he resented the intrusion. With his open face in his hands and recited over and over the verses of the twenty-third Psalm. His low, clear voice, solemn and tender, penetrated the heavy shadows of the room, and his mother, stealing without her shoes to the shut door, heard him say: "I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me."

Perhaps also the comfortable words went with the departing soul, for in those ineffable moments just before the dawn, Lancelot, looking into his father's face, saw a flash of parting intelligence, swift, and vivid as lightning.

"Father! Farewell, father," he whispered close on the dying man's lips, and instantly from some mysterious distance, in tones sweetly hollow, like muffled music, came the answer:

"Lance!—my dear lad!—Good-bye!"

Then Lancelot was holding a clay-coloured hand. He kissed it, and laid it across the quiet heart. For a moment he stood regarding the empty soul-case, the massive chest, the length and strength of limb, the large head—all the noble similitude of a man prostrated in the summer of life. "O harmless Death," thought Lancelot, as he softly left the dead man's chamber—

"Oh harmless Death! whom still the valiant brave,  
 Whise expect, the sorrowful in-vite,  
 And all the good embrace, who know the grave  
 The short dark passage to eternal light."

The words were uncalled; they came as if sent, and said themselves with sweet insistence, as he descended the stairs.

The house was still as a grave, the dawn was only breaking; he had a thought that his mother might be asleep in some upper room; but yet he went on to the parlor. She was sitting there, she was quite awake,

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she looked up at Lancelot with the inquiry in her eyes.

"Yes, he is dead! He is dead! O father! father!"

"Be quiet. He had to die. Do I make a moan about it? Call Dinah to make thee a cup of coffee. I am going to thy father now."

If he had been able to reproach her at this minute, he would not have done so. She looked at him with an air of defiance he had no heart to gainsay. He sat down, and Martha Leigh went at once to her dead husband. Lancelot heard her moving about, heard her opening drawers, heard her fling wide the sashes, heard her unlock a door little used, and go up the narrow stairs to the garret; and then a quick, sick fear came into his heart. Would she end her remorse by death? Would she follow her husband through the great sidereal spaces, and defend herself to him?

He was asking such questions as he sped rapidly after her. At the foot of the garret stairs they were answered. She had locked the door within, but he heard her imploring, justifying, speaking to the dead man and the living God in an agony of entreaty and protestation. At length she began to weep, to sob, to cry out, like a woman in strong physical pain might cry.

He stood still, with lips firmly set and face as white as death. If all had been silent, he would have broken open the lock, and gone to her. Death he must prevent, but suffering—Not. She ought to suffer. It was her only chance for salvation. Yet he watched with her—watched until he heard her slowly coming down the stair. Then he went to his own room and put away some things he valued, and packed a small trunk which he intended to take with him.

Among his music he found the song he had written, "To Francesca," rare Ben Jonson's rare love-song. He put it to his lips with passionate longing and distress. Never again would he hold her dear hand, and sing it to her smiles and kisses. He was the son of a woman who had—let her husband die. He could not say, he could not endure to think, the one awful word which yet lay in his deepest consciousness, which he passed by with shut eyes and forced oblivion. He was her son. How, then, could he be Francesca's lover? How could he ever hope to be her husband? The tenderness, the sweetness, the purity of the one woman stood afar off from the cruelty, the hardness, the earthliness of the other.

Yet his mother was his mother. Her blood beat in his heart; she was part and parcel of his personality. He could no more escape from her than he could alter the color of his hair, or take an inch from his stature. He told himself that he would not escape from her if he could; she was still his mother. He found it already possible to begin looking for excuses for her; physical reasons and extremities for her act; assuring himself, as a final and decisive cause, that his father still loved her. He had now supernatural insights, he would know the spring of her deliberate cruelty, he would have forgiven her; at least, he would wish him to protect her as far as it was possible.

How far that should be was the question Lancelot had now to answer. But his mind was in a tumult; he could not think. How, then, could he decide? In an hour his mother called him.

"There is a bit of breakfast ready," she said. "Thou had better eat, if it wants to act like a sensible man."

He wondered how he could bear to sit at the table and break bread with her. Perhaps she had thought of this difficulty; the table was only laid for him.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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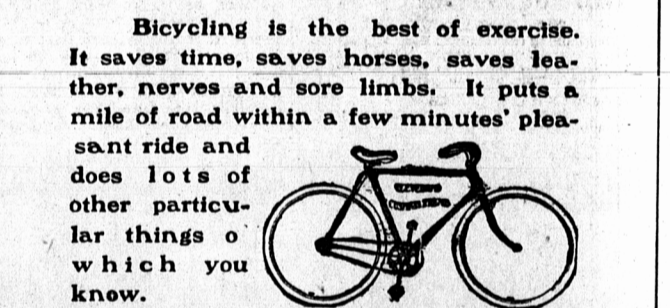
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