

TO BICYCLISTS BENDING FORWARD.

Oh, youth, who bending forward, rides apace,
With melancholy stamped upon your face,
Pursuing pleasure with a frenzied eye,
Yet mocked by her, however fast you fly,
Are you aware how horrible you look?
No guy invented for a picture book
Was ever a more painful sight than thou,
Lord of the bent back and the anxious brow.

Oh, sit up straight and try to wear a smile?
Be less intent to pile up mile on mile.
Enjoy the prospect as you glide along,
The trees, the sunshine, and the robin's song.
To us who view you scorching day by day,
Bent on your bar in such an awkward way,
You are the homeliest thing on earth, my lad,
Oh, sit up straight and make the landscape glad!

LOVE IS CRUEL.

He walked restlessly up and down the corridor. Occasionally he stopped to look out of a window, but mechanically, without seeing anything definitely. The street lamps impressed themselves on his retina only as blurs of light. The passers-by were vague shadows. He was so full of his own thoughts, of his own anxieties, that he was for the time unconscious of things external. He consulted his watch. How slowly the minutes went! Surely it must now be over! Back and forth he strode, with knit brows and clenched hands, his footsteps soundless on the deep pile of the carpeting. As he passed that door he listened. There was a low murmur of voices from within, directions and commands given. Then came intervals of silence. Muffled noises and soft movements fell on the ear. He resumed his walk. Suddenly he started as if electrified. He had heard the feeble wail of an infant.

"Good God!" he said, "it is over!" but he dared not move nor enter the room. His heart throbbed with unaccustomed violence. Presently the door opened, and the doctor came out. He looked pale and worried.

"How is she?" asked John Marsden, moistening his dry lips as he spoke.

"It's a troublesome case," said the doctor, briefly.

"And—the child?"

"The child is all right."

"May I see her?"

"Not yet, please. I will send for you. Meantime, we shall probably want some more chloroform. Can you find a messenger at once?"

"I will go myself."

The doctor scribbled a few lines in his note-book, tore out the leaf, and John Marsden, hastily snatching his hat as he passed through the hall, disappeared into the night. He ran all the way to the chemist's and back. The doctor was still in the corridor waiting for his return. Through the half-open door behind him came a low moaning.

Marsden shuddered and turned away, his face convulsed by a spasm. The doctor entered and closed the door softly. Slowly, slowly, the minutes wore on. At last the doctor reappeared and beckoned to him.

"She wants to see you."

"Oh, let me pass!"

"Wait a moment. I must speak with you first—not here."

Marsden mechanically led the way to the dining-room, entered, raised the gas, then turned and faced the other man. One hand he rested on the table.

There was a moment's pause, as if the doctor did not know how to begin. A pulse beat heavily in Marsden's ears.

"She is very ill, Mr. Marsden."

"I knew that."

"Be a man. I feel for you—upon my soul I do! but I fear there is very little hope. Be prepared for the worst."

"I must see you at once."

"You will not agitate her? Any excitement would be fatal."

"I will not agitate her."

"Here, drink this"—and the doctor poured out a glass of brandy.

Marsden swallowed it and held himself more erect.

"Are you sure you feel able for it? otherwise you had better not go in."

"Of course I feel able!" said Marsden impatiently. "Let us lose no more time."

They entered the room above, treading softly, Nuala Marsden lay on her bed, pretty as a picture. Her eyes were bright with fever; a vivid spot of color burned on each cheek. Her dark curly hair framed her piteous small face. By the fire the nurse was occupied with the baby. At the foot of the bed stood the family doctor, watching the patient. As Marsden entered he looked up and advanced a step, as if in warning.

"Is it safe?" he said in a low voice to his colleague.

The famous specialist pursed his lips and shrugged his shoulders.

"Nothing matters much now," he replied softly. "She may as well have her wish."

"Will you go, please?" said the patient distinctly. "I want to speak to my husband."

John Marsden stepped quickly to his wife's side and fell on his knees. She smiled, and tried to raise her limp white hand that lay outside the clothes. He took it timidly, as if afraid of hurting her, and covered it with kisses. A sob rose in his throat and choked him.

Nuala, though feverish was quite conscious. Her mind was in that excited state that borders on delirium without touching it. She felt inclined to chatter on and on, saying all that occurred to her, as if that would relieve the pressure of surging thoughts. Unnatural activity of the brain, clearness of vision, a vivid comprehension of all she saw and felt, senses quickened almost to pain characterized her condition. The agony was over. She was dying without much suffering. To horrible strain and rending pangs that shook life on its throne, peace of body had succeeded. She hardly knew that she had a body. It felt numb. She was all mind, all perception, all intellect, and she wanted to speak in a torrent to pour out her ideas, her speculations, to her husband. Only her head, it seemed to John and her eager eyes were still alive. To this last stronghold vitality had retreated.

"John," she said with a wan smile, "it has killed me. I felt it would. Aren't you sorry? No dear!" as she saw his shoulders heave; "don't grieve. I am happy enough. At least I don't mind as much as I fancied I should."

The pain is nearly gone now, but I am so tired, so tired. I only want to rest, and sleep, and never never wake; but I can't just yet. I am thinking of so many things I went through all my life as I lie here—before I met you and since. Every little incident that I had forgotten years ago. Fancy! I remembered Dicky, my grief over Dicky—I told you about Dicky, my pet canary that died—poor, pretty Dicky!—and poor me! I am so young to die, John—don't you think it is a pity? Oh, it is a pity! I am so sorry for myself, but in a queer, vague way—I can't quite explain—as if it were someone else. It seems so hard to be punished just because we had a little joy—to be punished like this. Why did you let me? You knew—Greater love than this no woman hath, that she should give her life—What am I saying? Love and Death. Oh! this puzzles me. I'm glad it's not you, though—I should hate you to die—I should hate you to suffer; and yet—you love me. Don't you love me, John?"

"Before God, I do!"

"But not as you used. Not quite as you used. Oh, yes, tonight you do; but that is because I am so ill. You are sorry—it has all come back to you; but, I saw sometimes, it was not quite as much to you as it was to me; but men can't help that I suppose. They do not love as we do—they cannot spare—the child, of course. The child might have made up—perhaps—if I were to live; but I am dying—I feel it—and, anyhow, it was you I loved, not the child. I did not want it at all, except for your sake. Oh, John, dear, you think I am talking nonsense, don't you. But I'm not; my mind is quite clear—only funny, somehow. The ideas come so quick—just like an alarm running down, isn't it. It makes me say things whether I will or not. You know I never cared much to marry—not as other girls seem to. Though I didn't realize it, it always frightened me a little; and, if I flirted just for fun, I did not wish it to go deep. And then you came, and you were different from anyone else, and you compelled me somehow—dominated me somehow—and you wanted it, and then I wanted it too. To me it was like a dream—a beautiful dream. But you had loved before, and I had not—and you knew—how it would end. I suppose it must be like that. You see—I cannot out it well—a woman gives a man love; a man gives a woman experience. But for me love was a bigger thing than for you, and—oh, John, dear, do not think me unkind—I do not really mean it; it is only because I am so ill—and queer—and the thoughts come—and something makes me say them. I kept wondering, lying here, if you were worth it—worth dying for, and all that—a love that lasts so short a time, you see. And the lines about the moon came into my head, and I said them over and over—you remember—that it looks on many brooks, but the brook sees but one moon; and it seems somehow as if to men all women were much alike—so long just as they were pretty—and—and taking but a woman like me sees in the world only one man, and so it isn't fair on us, is it, if we can't change too. And then, if we meet the man he has the joy—oh! and we have the joy too; but—we have the suffering—and—and—of course, not everyone is worth it. We pay dear, dear—Her voice trailed away.—Sketch.

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