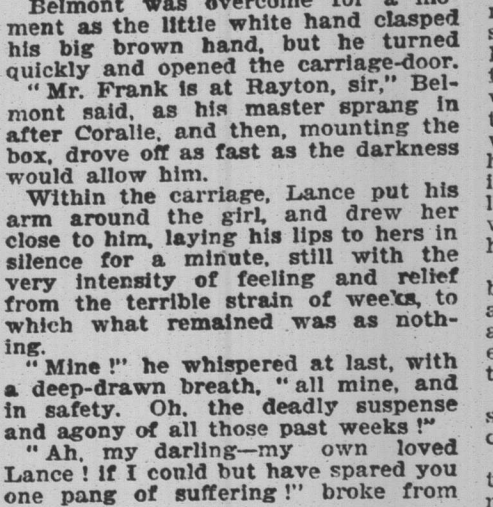


ANSWERED IN THE WARDER

By the courtesy of George Munro & Sons, New York



Belmont was overcome for a moment as the little white hand clasped his big brown hand, but he turned quickly and opened the carriage door.

"Mr. Frank is at Rayton, sir," Belmont said, as his master sprang in after Coralle, and then, mounting the horse, drove off as fast as the darkness would allow him.

Within the carriage, Lance put his arm around the girl, and drew her close to him, laying his lips to hers in silence for a minute, still with the very intensity of feeling and relief from the terrible strain of the day which was now over.

"Mine?" he whispered at last, with a deep-drawn breath, "all mine, and in safety. Oh, the deadly suspense and agony of all those past weeks!"

"Ah, my darling—my own loved Lance! If I could but have spared you one pang of suffering!" broke from Coralle.

In that moment all the depth and passion of love in the woman's heart went out to him; it was she who would her clinging arms about his neck; she who covered his cheeks and lips with kisses, and for the first time the ecstasy of being soothed, consoled, where her heart was given, realizing fully the exquisite joy of being all in all to the one being who was her all. She was his strength, as he was hers.

"My heart's treasure!" Lance said, softly, and she nestled to him, neither of them speaking or moving, till at length, all too soon, it seemed, the gleam of lights ahead told Lance that they were near to the place and time of parting.

"There is Rayton Junction," he said, "to part us for a few days; but we are still alone"—he drew from his fourth finger a magnificent diamond and rubied ring that had never worn till to-night, and put it on her finger—"wear this betrothal-ring from Lance, my darling, for now you can, and now one sweet farewell before we reach—"

"Here you are, thank Heaven!" said a familiar voice, and Frank threw open the door. "Dear old Frank! It's all right. Is the train in yet?"

"Standing at No. 1 platform, so we can take our places."

"Please do let me help you, Mr. Lance. Please do, sir!" pleaded Dorothy. Lance laid his hand on her shoulder with grateful kindness, but was immovable.

"No, my dear; forgive me, but a woman's name is too precious, and too easily tarnished, to be lightly risked, and I must guard yours as I would my own Coralle's. All this night's work may have to be mentioned in law court, and I can not be obliged to say that you were with me after my return."

"Mr. Lance, you are a right-down noble gentleman!" Dorothy energetically whispered, with heightened color, but speaking eyes.

"Chut! You little goose! It's simple right. Get you to bed. Good-night once more."

"You deserve such a wife as Miss Coralle, sir! Good-night, and Heaven bless you both!" said Dorothy, as she went away quickly and silently.

And Lance Darrell stood alone in that midnight hour, with that one thought before him—that lay-figure.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

With brain and heart and every sensitive nerve strung to the highest tension, Lance Darrell stood now as if the spirit of his dead that trooped around him.

"Fancy's misty light, Giggling shapes and shadowy loom, Horror that creeps through the night."

All the vividly weird dread and intense shuddering from that inanimate thing that had haunted him from the moment he had started back at the sight of it, standing in its awesome, lifeless life before him—all the strange feeling, so strangely verified, that it would be a grim part in his life—all the added horror of the weird, grim work before him now swept up with his very soul in an almost overmastering tide in this hour of his utter loneliness, bereft even of the beloved being for whom months had been his constant hourly care.

He pulled himself together, as it were, by a strong mental effort, and looked around the room. How blank it looked! And yet how terribly like the dead, how dead, and how dead, as he turned quickly to the door.

"I am weak!" he muttered, in fierce self-reproach. "It must be done, and at once."

He passed into the corridor, listened, and stole into his own apartment, turning all the gas into full blaze; then Lance crossed straight to the dress closet, unlocked, and drew the deal box out into the room.

Without a moment's pause he unlocked the lid, and threw it back with quickened pulse.

A soft old shawl was all his gaze rested on, and he drew it out, and laid it on the bed, being pinned under the head.

Sweet, thoughtful Rose! She had foreseen and spared the shock of his first seeing the death-like image of his love lying in the narrow case that imagination might well transform into a coffin. The womanly forethought went to Lance's heart in that trying hour.

He would not pause, but instantly put one arm under the head and shoulders, the other under the middle of the body, lifted it up, and laid it on the bed at full length. Then he loosed the shawl, drew it off, and suddenly shrunk back a step, the blood surging back on his heart, the cold drops of moisture standing on his brow, as his strained gaze rested for the third time on that lay-figure, stretched before him in that familiar white robe, the white hands folded on the breast, the gray hair of mortality on the fair young face—so like, so terribly like, the dear form and face of his darling, and yet only a mockery of the death it was to simulate.

And he must touch it, take that lifeless similitude into his arms, and bear it into those now desolate rooms in which he had so often carried Coralle. He could feel, hear the mad beating of his heart as he stood, and Lance, resolutely mastering his feelings, bent over the lay-figure and lifted it in his arms with what mental effort he best knew.

In the deadly stillness of that weird midnight time he bore his awesome burden through the corridor into Coralle's deserted chamber and laid it carefully on the bed, which Dorothy had prepared ready as for a corpse.

Frank would scarcely have known his bright Madcap Lance in the stern, self-suppressed man stooping over that lifeless form, as he drew it close and straight the creamy folds of the robe, and tied lightly under the moulded chin of a first-class carriage form, as he bore her to her room.

Then he got back to his room, looked up the deal box again, and lay down to sleep for a few hours.

It was just a little past seven, and Dorothy was dressing, and Lance, with her collar, when she drew a soft tap at the door. She went at once and opened it. Of course it was Lance; but his face startled her.

"It is all ready," he said, in a deep, stern whisper; "and I am going now, and I must guard yours as I would my own Coralle's. All this night's work may have to be mentioned in law court, and I can not be obliged to say that you were with me after my return."

"She won't go, sir. She'll be afraid, and refuse."

"She shall not," he said, setting his teeth. "Go you and tell the servants; they know the story. Or she will try you too much, my poor girl, leave it to me, when I have told Mrs. and Mr. Mortimer."

"No, indeed, sir; you've quite enough to bear. I'll go at once. I'll do anything for you and Miss Coralle."

"Thank you for both," and went away to rouse the woman who, to all intents and purposes, was Coral Guise's menial servant.

Her rooms lay on the north side of the mansion; but Lance quickly traversed gallery and corridor, his hand on the door-knob, and he unlocked the door, and stepped into the room.

"Come in, Elizabeth," called a drowsy voice.

"It is not your maid, but I—Lance Darrell," he called, through the night.

He heard a stifled little cry, that was a strange mingling of expectancy, fear, and triumph; he stepped back at the sound of feet across the carpet, and a husky voice at the door.

"I'll be quick and join you in the next room."

The next room was her boudoir, and for once in her life Aldyth was not ten minutes in getting on clothes and an elegant robe, and she came in hurriedly, excitedly, toward the man awaiting her.

"Have you come to tell me, as it were, 'that—that—'?"

"She is dead!" said Lance in a hoarse whisper; but in his dark eyes flashed a fierce light, that he reared his own way. "She died at midnight. It was useless to arouse any one, for Dorothy has done everything. Come with me, Aldyth, and see the body."

But Aldyth started back with a cry of fear.

"You frighten me when you are so cruel!" she gasped. "I'll come, then, if I must. Lance, I am not afraid."

He made no answer, but only loosed his grasp to put her hand on his arm and lead her from the room to that other chamber. No one could have seen her fear, much less kissing, the white cold brow of the (seeming) corpse of her victim.

"I shall keep the room door locked," he whispered, as he put the key in, and opening the door, drew the quivering guilty woman into the half-darkened apartment.

She paused beside the bed near the feet, almost as white as the sheet.

Darrell's hand thro' half back, revealing the pallid, exquisite face and folded hands of the lay-figure; but as he stood with folded arms as if in hard endurance, he kept his eyes covertly watching his trembling but remorseless companion; it was the superstitious, vaguely terror-struck shrinking of the murderer from his victim, which is perhaps the toll to itself that conscience exacts from all but the coarsest of mortals.

beyond that, it was that heathenish kind of dislike to the mere presence of death and mortality, which must needs be long and hard to bear.

"Well," he said, eagerly, as he entered. "It is answered shortly, and the funeral, as I said—twelve on Tuesday; and I shall leave by the 3.15."

"My dear Lance, I love you! I shall do without you even for a short time?"

"That look and manner of hers, bold, free, blinding, sickened the man always, and just now it was unbearable."

"This is no time for love-making!" she burst out, half angry, half afraid.

"Don't I, Aldyth? If all this business does not try you much, it does me; you forget, with covert irony, 'that she had to have you, and you had to have only weeks; you have lived so long with murder—I but a short span, and you must bear with my weakness.'"

"Unless what?" he said, under his breath.

"Unless, perhaps," Aldyth added, tremulously, "a little older she looks. I fancy so."

Lance, intensely relieved, answered boldly:

"Ay, it is not fancy, but simply the result of natural effects after death; that which makes the old presently appear the young, and the young presently appear the old."

As he said this he replaced the sheet with a smile of bitter irony, as Aldyth instantly burst into a fit of laughing.

forever, he had scarcely perhaps realized until it actually came upon him. To Lance Darrell's noble heart it was cruel pain to inflict grief, to his deep and reverent nature the enforced mockery of so sacred and solemn a mystery was death, and his hallowed rite, was the worst part of all his desperate action—the only part that made his bold, reckless spirit shrink, though never for one moment falter—that was not in Lance Darrell.

"It must be gone through," he muttered, setting his teeth as he unlocked Black Prince and rode off at full speed. "The end sanctifies the means; but if there is wrong, it surely lies on the murderer's part."

As the registrar's office did not open till ten, he rode first to old Mr. Blagrove, the undertaker, who had buried both Coralle's parents. He came out to the rider.

"Ah, sir," he said, shaking his gray head, "you don't need to tell me your errand, for both your face and black suit tells it. We've all feared it, doctor, this two weeks past. So young, so good, so true, and so brave a man, and Doctor Darrell's horse still, man, for he's skeery. Come in, sir. Dear, dear! the tolling of the passing-bell will go through the roof of my head."

Lance shivered at the bare thought of what that sound would have been to him had it been for a reality.

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