

His Last Refuge.

(By Ben Hurst.)

1.

It was one of those inconstant March days when a sudden sun-ray brightened the atmosphere for a moment, the dark clouds that swept the sky, herald of another shower. The warmth only to be effaced by one of those had more effect on Reginald's spirits than he himself suspected, he would have scoffed at the idea of being influenced by atmospheric changes, but the brief ray cheered his soul with a vague hope, as the cheerfulness of nature, during these eclipses, augmented its darkness and forebodings.

He walked as in a dream, and once found himself sighing aloud, so that the attention of the passers-by was attracted. On this occasion he stopped short in confusion, drew out his handkerchief and rounded the sigh into a cough. Then he went on again, disheartened at his lack of self-control. "What have I come out for?" he asked himself. "Am I going mad? What shall I gain by laying bare my wound?" He continued his walk, nevertheless, with that blind adherence to a foregone resolution born of the consciousness that no other course offered a chance of deliverance from the impending catastrophe.

A flood of sunlight burst upon him as the door opened to his ring. All at once he found himself face to face with the master of the house, who was drawing on his gloves preparatory to leaving it. In answer to his look of surprise which preceded the friendly greeting, the caller explained hastily:

"I have chosen a wrong moment. I see. But I also want to find Mrs. Whittaker. Is she at home? I need not detain you more than a few minutes."

"Half an hour, if you like," was the answer. "I was only strolling down to the bank, as usual. I am in no hurry, and my wife is not going out." He threw open the door and, laying down his hat, followed his visitor.

Reginald mechanically took the proffered cigar. He was confronting one of the hardest moments of his life. He felt that he was weak, and longed to put his arms on the table, rest his head on them, and groan; so he almost overrode the air of jaunty with which he said: "You expect me, no doubt, to ask for a loan? No, it is a greater favor that I have come to beg from Mrs. Whittaker. I dare say you are aware I was one of the many ardent admirers she possessed before you married her."

Whittaker laughed a hearty laugh that rang cheerily through the room. "I know it very well," he said, "and I can guarantee that she has a strong liking for you still. We were sorry to see so little of you since your marriage, and I can answer for it that she will be glad to do anything she can for you. Have a glass of wine?"

Reginald made a gesture of refusal. Had the dryness of his lips and his haggard mien prompted the invitation? Once more he made a fierce effort to throw off the lethargy that was threatening to overwhelm him. "Then you will not mind?—You will ask?" he said. "With the greatest pleasure in life," answered Whittaker. "My dear Barton, sit still. I shall ask Agnes to come here to you, and as I am going out you will be undisturbed."

Reginald rose as the door closed and began walking around the room. A little statue in a niche attracted his notice, and with the recollection of the Supernatural power which its presence evoked, he addressed a prayer to the Deity. Wilder of his destiny, the deity, Wilder of his destiny. "Why should I suffer?" he asked. "I am not a bad man."

He turned to encounter a tall vision of grace and elegance combined—clad in a soft creamy gown that seemed to make the sheen of her eyes more blue. Again he realized the difficulty of his task. Was it not profane, incongruous? They had been playmates and then intimate acquaintances; now they belonged to different sets, and saw little of each other.

She came forward with outstretched hand. "It is too long since we have met," she said cordially. "How people drift apart in this busy world. What are you doing? How is Mrs. Barton?"

"The answer to that question," he said slowly, "will be the explanation of my visit. Lilla is going to leave me." The blue of her eyes darkened to a deep violet and she kept them fixed on him but spoke no word.

"Yes," he went on, painfully. "As a last resource I come to you, to ask your help, remembering what you were—and are. I have nobody to turn to, of my own, in this huge city. Thank God, my mother is too far off to hear the rumor of my disgrace, for such she would consider it. We are old-fashioned people out there—but—she stood up—there shall be no rumor. I am determined, cost what it may, to have no divorce court proceedings. And besides, it can still be warded off, our separation. Lilla is not bad, at heart. You know her, thoughtless, perhaps, but straightforward all the same. Will you forgive my bringing all this to you? And will you help me?"

Mrs. Whittaker motioned to him to sit down. "You take things too tragically," she said. "Do not imagine that matrimonial disputes are your exclusive property. As we are here in confidence I may tell you that George and I have awful rows."

He smiled and made a deprecating gesture. "You did not threaten to leave him, however," he maintained. "Oh, well, that was perhaps because I could not," she suggested. "Your Romanism, I suppose?" he said.

She nodded. "You must not let Lilla even think," she resumed eagerly, "that you would ever consent to a separation. How can she dream of it, or mention such a thing?" "She actually believes it her duty," he said brokenly. "It is not, as you fancy, a mere quarrel. In fact, we don't quarrel, not more than other people."

Mrs. Whittaker looked incredulous. "What is it, then?" she asked. Again he stood up. "My wife believes she has developed a 'grande passion,'" he said with a pitiful attempt at a smile. "She tells me frankly, after mature consideration, that she never really loved me, and that now she has found the one great love of her life! She wishes to divorce and re-marry."

Mrs. Whittaker sank back in her chair. "Reginald," she gasped, using the old familiar name in forgetfulness of all else save his disaster. "Reginald, this must not be!" "No," he said, "it will not be. You will help me to bring her to her right mind. Let your poor alone for a time, and devote your charity to the rich who are as much in need of it. You have not asked the man's name?"

She made a gesture of disgust. "It does not matter," she said. "What shape the serpent takes. I am only thinking of Lilla."

"Remark," he insisted, "that neither of them is, as yet, to blame. He keeps away, and she has been quite open with me. Perhaps another man would release her at once, but—I love Lilla, and I know him for a fickle fool. I shall not give her up."

"Of course not," cried Agnes indignantly. "Your own wife! Oh, what a corrupt world we live in! Tell me what you wish me to do."

"George," said Mrs. Whittaker that evening, "he knows I have no secrets from you. Can you guess what brought Barton here to-day?" "I think I can," was the unexpected reply. "His wife has gone mad on the singer, Martini. Why do you look so shocked, Agnes? Isn't it that?"

"How crudely you put it," she said. "Is all the town talking of it, then? I didn't anticipate this." "Oh, well, it isn't quite so bad," he said reassuringly. "I happened to hear a lot of gossip lately."

"Men are always full of gossip," she said. "Well, we hear more of the world's news in our clubs than you in your confraternities, which is natural," he laughed. "But why are you so concerned? Are you going to take her up?"

"If I may," she answered dubiously. "If it is not too late?" George whistled a few bars of a popular air.

"No," he said at last. "It is certainly not too late, and who can overrate the influence of a good woman?"

"Mrs. Whittaker? Of course show her up at once," and the dainty apparition, shaking out her silk and lace, advanced to the drawing-room door to meet her visitor.

"What a rare distinction is this!" she cried, not quite sure how to address her visitor.

But Mrs. Whittaker decided the question by at once adopting the familiar tone that had existed between them at school.

"Whose fault is it, Lilla, mine or yours?" she asked. "But on this iniquitous globe, my dear, nothing is done without a selfish motive. Both you and I have as long a visiting list as we can well manage, but if you wanted me very badly you would find your way to my house as I have to yours."

"Such a great lady to want little me for anything!" exclaimed Lilla. "I feel very flattered. Quick! Tell me all about it."

Mrs. Whittaker threw back her head, unbuttoned the coat of her smart morning costume, and glanced round the room.

"What a lovely little nest you have, Lilla," she remarked. "I am thinking of leaving it," said Lilla curtly.

"Not really? You will hardly find anything more snug, at least in this quarter of the city. But let us to business. You have heard of my grand bazaar?"

"Rather! What a swell you have become, Agnes!" "Have I? Well, I have been working early and late but it is too much for me. I have enlisted many helpers, as you will have seen in the papers, but somehow there is a gap. The fact is, I want one energetic and—hem! well, attractive personality to work constantly with me, if you like, and I have come to beg you to be that person. This is, of course, if Mr. Barton makes no objection. He used to be a good friend of mine. Remind him of it."

"Well, thank you, Agnes. I must say that I envied the members of your committee. This is a great honor, but—just now—"

"Oh, be easy on that score!" interrupted Agnes. "It may not sound nice, but though I was always fond of you, Lilla, I am acting simply in the interests of my bazaar. Now, don't make a single objection, for I won't listen. You are going to drive at once with me to the Conventual Home and see the plans for yourself. Come along!"

"Agnes, you should know that I am on the eve of a change in—"

"Oh, bother moving!" cried the visitor, jumping up. "Do not refuse the first favor I ask of you after all the sums I did for you at school!" She stopped and they laughed simultaneously.

"I must run round to Jordan's to conciliate Annie, who will be vexed at my designating the flower-stall to

you," continued Agnes, "but the interests of the Home come before social amenities. You'll bring me in a pile of money, you will! I'll walk to Jordan's, and when you have got on your hat, get in to my carriage which is at the door and call for me will you? Bye-bye!"

She was gone in a whirl, and Lilla in a mixed mood of amusement, contrariety, and gratified vanity, found herself obeying orders.

Half an hour later they were driving through the park, chatting freely, commenting on others and being commented upon.

"See that creature!" exclaimed Agnes as a magnificent equipage dashed past. "She's divorced, and what's more, she has married again. But fancy her impudence! She expects people to bow to her as before!"

"And why not?" asked Lilla, a deep flush mantling her face. "There is no scandal connected with her."

"Oh, but she can't expect to be treated as if she had not a couple of husbands living, you know, at least not in refined circles," went on Agnes. "Oh, you would feel the same, Lilla."

"No, indeed," said Lilla. "Decidedly not. I am more tolerant, more broad-minded than you, Agnes. Divorce is honestest than continuance in a loveless marriage."

"What funny things you say!" laughed Agnes. "As if love were the only tie in marriage! Duty, which means stability, is the first obligation and love is secondary. But don't get me talking on such serious subjects, I beg. Until my bazaar is over I refuse to discuss anything else. By the way, how thoughtless I am! Have I wounded you by my wholesale condemnation of divorce? You have no divorced relatives, have you?"

"Ah, I thought not. You look much too fastidious ma chere, to be connected with anything of the sort."

"You are always the same, Agnes," she said. "With your hard and fast Roman Catholic rules you cannot be charitable."

"I have President Roosevelt on my side," smiled Agnes. "I do not see that the President is infallible," rejoined Lilla. "He is, sometimes," said Agnes. "When he sides with the Pope."

At which both laughed and dismissed the subject.

III.

"Well," asked George, after a month's continuous intercourse between the Barton and Whittaker families, "how is your mission succeeding, Agnes?"

"Oh, pretty well," said Agnes emphatically. "Only pretty well? So you have not brought her quite to her senses?"

"No, not quite. I am less clever than I thought," she confessed. "You see, at first I played to her vanity, her social ambition, her innate dislike to anything irregular or wrong. Then I tried to lessen that snake in her eyes; we met him—you know—at the fancy ball—and George—I told her I found him horribly vulgar. One can't deny he is handsome nor depreciate his voice—but I tried to make him appear ridiculous. This seemed easy, for he is inflated and bombastic, but somehow she seems to forget all that when he sings, and what is strange, the fascination lasts after the song is over."

"Has she acknowledged it to you, then?" asked George curiously. "Yes," admitted Agnes in a low tone. "I tried to escape her confidence as long as I could; but, all ways together as we were lately, it was impossible to put it off forever. Oh, George, I hate this contamination as much as you do, but I was part of the programme we agreed upon. And then speaking openly at last, I could appeal to her sense of honor, her obligations to Reginald, to loving and so faithful, her duty to God, her vow given before a minister of her creed—all that should keep a woman in the straight path."

"And here it was that you most lamentably failed," put in George, grimly. "Her vow is not binding either by her creed or the law of the land."

Agnes remained silent for a time. She stood up, went over softly to the toilet table where George was fumbling impatiently with his tie; removed it deftly from behind, and substituted a fresh one from the drawer.

"My dear," she said, when she arranged the tie to her satisfaction. "I fear I am a bad apostle."

"Look here, Agnes," was the reply. "There is no use in appealing to non-existent codes and beliefs. That woman has the law on her side. She can get a divorce for affected insurmountable aversion and legally marry her latest fancy at any time, keeping right with her church throughout. My darling, we can only keep away from such people. We can never get them to think and act as we do. Had we not better draw off in time? Already you have identified yourself too much with her."

Agnes sat down and began nervously buttoning and unbuttoning her gloves.

"What does it matter," she said, "if I could do any good? But you are so discouraging, George!"

"You forget, little woman, that we do not belong to ourselves only. We have a standard to uphold. Now, don't collapse when I tell you that Martini is to sing between the acts of the play for which Lilla was so eager to secure a box tonight."

"Then I won't go," exclaimed Agnes. "We cannot break off suddenly like that," he remonstrated. But prepare yourself for the worst. Reginald is inexplicable. She has again announced to him that she cannot live without Martini and still he says to me it will not come to divorce! Do not deceive yourself likewise, Agnes. Lilla will have what she wants."

"I am sick of life," said Agnes

wearily as they went down the stairs.

IV.

The first act was over, the lights still darkened in the house; softly mellowed on the stage, lit up the figure of the man who lifting up his voice, sang to Reginald Barton's wife.

The words were his own, the aria too, and, under cover of the sacred name of Love which they profaned, they dealt with passion—violent and ephemeral passion. His eyes were fixed on the box where Agnes, Lilla, and George sat in front, with Reginald behind in the shadow.

When he had finished, Agnes rose abruptly, complained that the piece was tiresome and proposed to return home.

But Lilla refused to stir and sat gazing at the fallen curtain, as if hypnotized. All through the representation Agnes watched in agony the empire exercised by the tempter on her unhappy friend and saw with despair that others had observed it too.

The glimpse of Reginald's face, impassible and stern as it was faintly outlined in the shadow, which met her gaze whenever, she turned her head, was added torture.

When the last notes had died away Lilla still made no move.

"Come, Lilla! Mrs. Whittaker is tired," her husband said sharply. Lilla rose as if in a trance and mechanically took the arm which George had somewhat imperiously offered. Before leaving the box, however, she leaned over to Reginald and said something in a low voice. George overheard, but without relinquishing her arm, he led her to a cab, helped her in and took his place beside her without a word.

"It is all no use," said Lilla. "This must end, and knowing you and your wife's tenets, Mrs. Whittaker, I feel out of place to thrust myself on your hospitality."

"You cannot expect me, Mrs. Barton, to conduct you to the green-room," said her companion sarcastically. "That is an unwarranted insinuation," said Lilla, loftily.

"I do not need to seek out Mr. Martini who leaves here this evening, and will not return until I am free to become his wife. I have just told Reginald that I will not again enter his house. Please allow me to drive straight to my aunt's."

"No, because it would fret my wife," said George coolly. "And will you really forget yourself so far, Mrs. Barton?"

"I shall follow the dictates of my conscience," announced Lilla. "My demand for divorce will be made to-morrow."

George Whittaker made a bow. "Allow me to forget it for this evening," he said, "and to show you all the respect due to Mrs. Reginald Barton."

In a cab following them Agnes sat silent. The sound of the horses' hoofs above the faint rumbling of the wheels was, to her, lugubrious. Never since has she remarked the same sound and watched the light flashing on the wet pavement without recalling the depression of that mournful drive.

"It is so late," Reginald remarked at last. "I had better leave you at your door and take Lilla straight home."

Agnes made no reply, for she, too, had overheard.

"We are all rather moody," he went on, "and we have trespassed too much on your good nature of late. Thank you, Agnes, for having so long warded off the blow. But there is no use in our intruding again to-night. Lilla's mind is made up."

"You must come in, supper will be waiting," said Agnes absently. "Desist, George and Lilla are already there."

The supper was a ghastly failure although Whittaker kept up a running commentary on the audience and the actors.

Barton tasted nothing, but drank off one glass of champagne. "Good-night, Lilla," said Agnes, with forced composure, as Lilla, pale and determined, rose to go.

"Good-bye, Agnes," was the answer. "I know it is good-bye to you, as well as to Reginald."

"No, Lilla," said Agnes retaining her hand and drawing her down beside her on the sofa.

"Think of your marriage vow," she murmured faintly.

"I have never forgotten it," answered Lilla haughtily. "I have been a true and faithful wife. Let Reginald speak. I could not live a lie. That's all."

"It is really not Lilla's fault," asserted Reginald. "It is all owing to the convenience of the law and that too fascinating Martini."

"Neither is he to blame," cried Lilla hotly. "He has behaved so nobly throughout, never approaching me since he knew I did not wish to upset my life. We only met by accident as Agnes knows. Our mutual inclination was due to fatality. And we have struggled against it."

Reginald laughed, and the laugh sounded genuine.

"Fancy a husband sitting down and listening to his wife commenting on her affection for another man!" he said to George. "Thank Heaven, I am a man of the world."

"There is no slur on your name," said Lilla majestically. "And neither is there on the name of Martini."

"What about the Ninth Commandment?" asked George roughly. "Oh, Mr. Whittaker would have all men celibates or saints," said Lilla sarcastically. "But where is the use of prolonging this discussion? I am sorry, Agnes, that you disapprove of my honesty in the whole affair."

"Yes," said Reginald. "One should look at things from a modern and rational point of view. My wife thinks she is right in—in—taking steps to enter on a second union—it is curious," he turned to Agnes with an apologetic smile, "what a disinclination I have to pronounce the ominous word Divorce! I will no

longer try to alter her decision. So there is no need to shock or trouble our friends any further. You may go, Lilla, and you may file your petition tomorrow."

"It is acting for the best, Reginald," exclaimed Lilla with exaltation. "You will also meet the happiness you deserve one day. At last, at last you recognize the truth that there is no greater immorality than the continuance of a loveless union!"

"You yield, Reginald, you!" cried Agnes indignantly. "Ah, you are all the same, and the good among you can down the bad."

"What can I do?" asked Reginald. "There is no use in my trying to oust a man like Martini who has all the charms and virtues that Heaven has denied to me. You are witness that I did my best, Mrs. Whittaker, and that only when I realized the impossibility of making a stand did I throw it all up."

"Good-bye, Agnes," replied Agnes, putting her hands behind her back. "May God forgive you!"

Lilla shrugged her shoulders and swept down the stairs.

It was George, not Reginald, who followed her.

"Allow me," he said, as he held the cab-door open after helping her in. Allow me to tell the future Mrs. Martini, now that she is no longer under my roof, that I think Reginald well rid of the perverse specimen of womankind he had the misfortune to make his wife!"

With that he banged to the door and left Lilla to savor the insult as best she might.

Upstairs he found Agnes overcome with grief.

"My God," she sobbed, "there is a woman gone out from our house—lost! lost! Oh, George, why have we not prevented it?"

"Don't fret, Agnes," he said, soothingly. "We have done our best. We could not conquer the evil tolerated by society and facilitated by the laws of the land. Individual efforts are fruitless. Legislation alone stems leprosy."

Reginald had been walking up and down the room. He came towards them now and took a hand of each.

"Thank you," he said humbly, "for all you have been to me. How you must despise me for clinging so long to a woman who had long since confessed that her heart was given to another! But no! Your views are my excuse, I know."

"She was your wife, your wife," sobbed Agnes. "Was it not your duty to cling to her? Oh, the strange world!"

"Go abroad and forget her," advised George.

"Good-night," said Reginald. "It is a comfort to know how happy you are and secure in your happiness."

They watched him down the stairs, Agnes grieving over his desolate return to the deserted home.

Worn out with sorrow and emotion she rose late next day, and came down to breakfast to find her husband still at home although it was past his business hour.

"Can it be Sunday?" she asked, "and are you waiting to take me to Mass? No, it is Thursday and you are loitering here. How demoralized we are! Everything is upset, but we must not lose sight of poor Reginald." She sat down and poured out a cup of tea. Then with her right hand still on the urn she stretched her left across the table to him, palm upward.

"You look so downcast, George!" she said.

He stooped and kissed the broad gold band on the third finger. Then he laid his cheek upon it and she felt the tears trickling through her fingers.

"George!" she exclaimed in alarm. "What is it? What is it?"

"How can I tell you?" he said brokenly. "Reginald shot himself this morning."

BRONCHITIS

Bronchitis is generally the result of a cold caused by exposure to wet and inclement weather, and is a very dangerous inflammatory affection of the bronchial tubes.

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