

## A MONTH TO LIVE

By Nina Harbour Champion.

This is the story about the final illness and death of her mother, Mary Caroline Lester Harbour, wife of Cyrus Harbour, in 1903, at Bishop, California.

Mother was born and bred with iron in her blood, the iron of generations of pioneer forbears. Abe Lincoln had not even been born when her mother's parents moved from Ninety-Six on the frontier of North Carolina to free soil, first in Ohio, then later in Illinois, for a time in Lawrence County in southeastern Illinois, where her mother was born, seventh in the family. Thence they moved to Tazewell County in central Illinois, as people always were moving where they thought the land would be better. About the time the Lincoln family built a log cabin in central Illinois her mother and a farmer—teacher named George Washington Lester, born 1807 in Kentucky, were married February 4, 1836 in western Illinois. His parents had moved there in their youth from Virginia. In 1843, as soon as a treaty with the Indians opened it for settlement, he made a trip alone to Davis County, Iowa to stake out a claim on new land, then returned to Illinois.

Mother's parents already had four children when, in the following year, they crossed the Mississippi on flat boats with a covered wagon, two ox teams, a cow, and a flock of sheep, to build a log cabin on a little wooded hilltop in the prairie grass of Iowa. With them from Illinois traveled the Drake family, which was to found Drake University. (The two sons of Grandma Lester's sister, Naomi Kirkham, married two sisters of Governor Marion Drake.) After more than a hundred years the log cabin in Davis County, Iowa, in which Mother was born, still stands and only this year did the old family farm pass into the hands of strangers---so close are we Americans still to the pioneers.

In a little tintype picture taken in 1867 when Mother was eleven she wears a dress of wool from her father's sheep, spun and woven by the women folk.

She died when I was twelve, but the courage and endurance with which she lived her last weeks made her a living legend of pioneer stamina.

At twilight on a July evening long ago, when I was twelve, my father gave me a terrible fright when he called to me suddenly, in an urgent tone of command I had never heard before, "Nina! Run quick and get Margaret Bell! Your Ma is dying! Wearing only a loose calico dress over summer muslin I skimmed with flying bare feet on a dusty country road as I had never run before, my heart gripped by the desperate need of getting help in time. It was only a short distance, half a mile, perhaps, over the creek bridge, past

the Turner farm house, and around the schoolhouse corner to the Bell house. A buggy stood in the yard, out of which Mrs. Bell had just stepped, and her youngest son, Ed, about 22, remained in his seat, about to drive the buggy back to the barn to unhitch the team horses. She saw me running, and they both waited to hear why I had been sent. I panted out the dread message I bore. Instantly Margaret Bell climbed back into the buggy the spring sent lurching down from her heavy bulk as she said, "Hurry, Ed". Ed turned the team expertly and reached for the whip. They were gone in a cloud of dust. They had left me behind! Never had I felt so forsaken. Searing fear consumed me. My mother would die before I ever got back. My legs ached, my head was thick, my breath was sharp pain, as I raced with the terror of death and the unknown. Would I never get home?

Mercifully, my mother was still alive, and Ed Bell was driving away fast to summon a doctor. We children stood around waiting uncertainly until Father came out of the bedroom and told us to wash our feet for bed. Bed, at least, was a familiar place, and we three girls huddled together for comfort until my sisters soon fell asleep. I was too overwrought to sleep.

Dr. Durrance arrived, and my listening ears caught puzzling snatches of words from the adjoining room. "Why didn't you come to me before this?" "I thought it was just my age." "Come to my office as soon as you feel strong enough. I'll examine you then." No one told me that my mother had suffered a hemorrhage after many months of distress.

Father got a neighbor girl to come in daytime to do housework and to wait on Mother while she remained in bed. It was a great event in our lives to have "help" come in, particularly as she was "Eye-talian" and a much greater novelty than Indians. Nita was a big, warm-hearted, cheerful girl, who sang at her work, and initiated me into rubbing out a dress of mine by turning one section after the other on the washboard.

Soon Mother was up and around, and Nita no longer came. To us children everything was all right again until the day Father took her three miles to town while we were at school, after which we were astonished to hear that Mother was going to San Francisco to a hospital. Until then, San Francisco had just been a dot on the map to me. Little did we dream that Mother was so ill that she had mercifully missed the clear inference to be drawn from the doctor's questions and advice. On Father fell the dread verdict of cancer, probably inoperable.

Mother had never traveled alone in her life and had only been on trains once in her life, when we had come out to California from Iowa. She had never been in a city or seen a hospital, but, ill as she was, she refused to let Father accompany her. He must stay with the children, or she wouldn't go at all!

They had once had a family of three boys, all of whom had been snatched by sudden death, with doctors powerless to help. The two older boys had died of diphtheria eight days apart when diphtheria blasted their school, and Father had gone to the funeral of one son while Mother stayed with the one who was dying. A single headstone marked their

graves in the little family graveyard where I had often played about while Mother brooded over three graves and told me about the three brothers I had never seen.. The third son had been too young for school and had slept in a different room until carried off to Grandma, so had escaped diphtheria, only to die within a year of cerebral meningitis. (I was born three months after his death.)

After this triple tragedy my parents had a second family of us three girls whom they watched with double zeal. So Mother insisted on going alone.

We were living on a farm in a remote mountain valley in Inyo County, California. Father drove us all in the surrey six miles to the nearest railroad station, where Mother kissed us all goodbye as she boarded the train. In our severely undemonstrative family this, in itself, was astonishing, as I did not remember ever seeing Mother kiss one of us. Near Reno she had to change from the narrow gauge mountain train to the transcontinental train for San Francisco. Her money I had seen her sew up in a petticoat pocket.

At the hospital the doctor, advised in advance of her arrival, told her to rest a few days before he examined her. Then he informed her that she had cancer and there was nothing he could do. If she had come earlier he could have operated. Now hospital care could only ease the pain and make her more comfortable. "How long do I have to live?" Mother inquired. The doctor looked at her appraisingly, a thin 90-lb. farm woman alone in a big city, three days from home. Mother looked back, "I want to know," she demanded. "I have a family to think about."

The doctor sensed the iron in her spirit and replied, "We don't usually tell patients that, but I will tell you. If you hadn't lived the hard farm life you have lived and worked outdoors you would be dead already. In your condition and with your constitution I think you have a month to live." As it turned out she was to live five weeks the extra week on her will power.

She refused to stay in the hospital any longer than necessary. "I want to be home with my family," she said. However, the expenses were more than had been anticipated and by slow mail we received a letter saying Father must send her \$50 more so she could come home, that the doctors couldn't do anything for her.

We children were happy that Mother would soon be home. Waiting in the hospital, Mother grew very lonely and homesick. Hospital fare was strange, unfamiliar and distasteful, but instead of complaining about it, she asked the nurse if she could go down to the kitchen and make herself some cornbread. The surprised nurse said she would have to speak to the cook about it. Mother's request was granted and she was conducted to the kitchen to mix and bake her own cornbread. The kind-hearted cook laid out all the ingredients she asked for, and she and the cook took a liking to each other and became good friends. When the doctor heard about this he gave orders that if there was anything Mother wanted to eat she could go to the kitchen any time she wanted to and cook it herself, anything that would taste good to her.

The day nurse was touched so deeply by Mother's simplicity and her silent endurance of pain and by her anxiety for the future of three little girls that she took Mother to see Golden Gate Park and the Cliff House and to have her first and only view of Seal Rocks and the great Pacific Ocean. Also the nurse took her to a city store and suggested articles to take back as presents for us girls, my souvenir of S.F. being a tooled leather belt. The nurse persuaded Mother to this trip after being permitted to read our painfully composed letters.

In due time the long days of waiting passed and Mother received the fare home. In parting the doctor asked if she had received good care. "The day nurse couldn't be better. That night nurse isn't thinking of anything but her young man, but when she forgot to give me my medicine I just took it myself, just the same." The nurse saw her to the station and made her promise to let her know how she got along.

When Mother was due back we girls were left to wait impatiently at home while Father fetched her from the station. It was not for us to share the intermingled gladness and desperate grief of that meeting which foreshadowed final parting. Never did we know of anything they said except that Mother reproached him bitterly for ever sending her to the hospital. "You knew it wasn't any use," she said accusingly. "I would never have gone if I had known I had cancer." "I did all I could for you," he replied.

I was making biscuits inexpertly to bake in a wood stove for supper when I was overjoyed to see Mother at last coming through the kitchen door. I flew to her and was startled at the way she kissed and hugged me so tight, as if she could never let me go. Her tears stunned me. Mother never talked much and seldom cried. I could have counted on my fingers the times I had seen her cry, for instance, when she said goodbye to her sisters when we left at the Belknap depot, when word came that her mother had died at 85. As she released me she dropped exhausted into a kitchen chair and my two little sisters, both bursting into tears and one bawling out loud flung themselves against her lap. She gathered them both in her arms just as Father followed her into the house and bade me finish up the supper quickly because Mother was tired. A watchful, helpful neighbor dropped in and with experienced hands soon had the meal on the table. "Help your mother first," she bade us, and we hungry children paused. How strange to wait on Mother first. Always she had helped us before herself. Then I noticed that Mother did not appear hungry at all and had to be urged to eat.

In the days that followed Mother went about her work as usual. We children did not know that she had refused to let Father engage Nita again. "I don't want any hired help," she told Father. "I don't want any outsiders in the house, I just want my own family."

She got all the quilt blocks which she had been making me piece off and on by hand for several years and sat down at the sewing machine and set them together. "Now you can finish it sometime," she said, and never knew I would finish it up one day to use in college. So she made our new school dresses and started us off to school, from which we came home each noon for a hot lunch, and for us life went on as usual. No, not as usual. Mother would sometimes nod over her knitting or mending and then she would

bid me watch the clock. "Wake me up in twenty minutes," she would say, "or I won't sleep tonight," and I would dutifully wake her up on the exact minute. What does a child know of pain in the night?

After she had cooked a wash boiler of sweet corn, cut the corn off the cob, and spread it on a table cloth to dry in the sun for winter she caught me with the mosquito net lifted, eating the corn with relish. How she did scold me for eating that corn instead of the usual corn at table, after all the work it had cost! What does a child know of woman's work? Of the last work of a doomed woman? She had me tag her while she made vinegar and put down kraut, to teach me what she could. The German strain which had come down to her through her mother and that mother's mother from a Rhineland forbear of colonial days made her an expert cook among pioneer women. Once a week she baked bread, filling the house with its mouth-watering fragrance, while we children were drawn as by a magnet to the kitchen to wait for a hot buttered bun dripping with comb honey, too, if we wished, from hives the Bells kept. To this day I can taste that honey, mingled of purple alfalfa bloom and the sage of the sand dunes.

There were peaches, plums, and pears to can, in generous half-gallon mason jars, and Mother's delicious tomato preserves to make from a special tomato whose seed she saved each year.

The doctor had given Mother some tablets which she put up by the big clock on the mantel. Only Father knew that they were morphine and that Mother refused to take any. "I want all my wits about me for what little time I have left to live," Mother declared. "I have a family to think about."

Her iron will held to the day she died. She suffered in silence. All I knew was that Mother did a most surprising thing. She took to sleeping all alone in the big feather bed in the front room, which was only used for company or for sickness because she didn't "want to keep Cyrus awake." Once I wakened in the dead of night and heard low voices. And Father took to leaving his work in the field and coming in at odd times in the day "for a drink of water". Once he found Mother soaking her feet in hot water and chided her for not telling him her feet had begun to swell.

From time to time letters arrived from the hospital day nurse, and Father would instruct me to write certain sentences about Mother to add to what I had to say about school or how many eggs we were getting.

Mother was no longer able to ride in the surrey to church on Sunday, even with a goose feather pillow to sit on. Except for Mrs. Turner, visitors tired her, and there was only one Mrs. Turner, whom she wished would come in oftener. Some last duties Mother felt she must discharge. For me she lifted gingerly and painfully the veil which separates childhood from womanhood and was relieved by my accepting it in silence. She starched and ironed all our white dresses and put them away for a time I did not understand.. She tried to prepare me for the approaching shock of her death by telling me that she "couldn't live long" and that I must always be a good girl and "take care of my sisters."

This meant nothing to me as long as Mother was still with us. What child ever understood death until it came? , although Mother had taken me to see a four-year old girl lying dead in a beautiful dress while her mother cried and cried.

Then came the noon when we reached home from school for dinner and found catastrophe. Mother was in bed! At eleven o'clock that morning a daughter of Margaret Bell's, Alice Breeding, had dropped in to see how Mother was. She found her slumped on the pantry floor. "Why Mary, what are you trying to do?" she asked.

"I want to make corn bread for Cyrus's dinner and I can't see to mix the meal."

Mother was so weak she was kneeling over the corn meal to mix it on the pantry floor, and her tears were running down enough to wet the meal. Alice bent down and lifted my little mother to her feet, then carried her to bed.

"You go to bed," she said comfortingly, "and I'll finish Cyrus's corn bread."

Then Father came in much earlier than usual for dinner, as Alice was trying to give her a morphine tablet from the mantel and was horrified to discover that Mother could not swallow even water, but Alice left the tablet on her tongue anyway and hoped it would dissolve. She finished cooking the noon meal and put it on the table, and we hungry children ate as usual. But afterward Father told us not to go back to school that afternoon.

My sisters played joyously outdoors on this unexpected holiday. In the quiet house I went to stand at Mother's bedside. She did not stir or seem aware of my presence, she who had always been responsive to our every need, even so late as that morning when she combed and braided my sisters' hair for school and told us which dresses to wear. Then, indeed, fear came upon me, till I remembered what I had read in my Bible,, "Ask and ye shall receive; seek and ye shall find."

Then I went alone into my room and asked God not to let my mother die. Never doubting I knew God would keep His word and my mother would not die.

Yet the house was ominously still, and no one thought to give me any work to do. Death seemed nearer and nearer, till I began to wish wildly that if it must come it would come quickly and be over. This thought horrified me till I fled from my thoughts to join my sisters in active play. The long afternoon nightmare in October drew to a close and at last we children were in bed and asleep, not knowing that Mother had slipped into a merciful coma.

Out of sound slumber we were summoned in haste by a voice which said, "Hurry and kiss your mother goodbye."

Joe and Ed Bell in their sturdy young manhood stood one on either side of the bed and one held a kerosene lamp high over the bed to light up my mother's face. Father was

kneeling by the bed and reached out an arm for me as I bent and kissed her lips. Her lips felt cold, and there was no response. Then my next younger sister kissed her, but our youngest sister, only seven, roused only half-awake, came only to the bedroom door to watch, then turned drowsily back to bed. Father was sobbing, and we began to sob with him. Joe Bell said, "She's gone," and the lamp was lowered. Father crossed the room to the mantel and stopped the clock, and it was then I realized that Mother had been working twelve hours ago and now she was dead.

Father hurried us all into one bedroom and closed the door while we heard the subdued sounds of neighbor women moving about as they washed the body and laid it out. Next day another neighbor woman wrapped my mother in a shroud of soft white wool, and Mother lay in a casket with the casket set on Father's pair of carpenter trestles in our front room. From time to time I went to stand by the casket on which were the words AT REST above Mother's folded work-worn hands. I had never seen her in white before, only calico and gingham on week days. Suddenly I realized that my mother had worked all the time and I had never seen her rest. Her eyes were closed; her spirit had fled; but now, at last, Mother could rest. This was not really Mother in the casket. Mother was gone.

So I wandered out into the October sunlight, where Mother's white petunias bloomed in fragrant glory. They were still alive, I thought, when Mother was dead.

The next day came and Aunt Mary and Annie were dressing us for the funeral. Nita was there in tears and hugged me up in her comforting arms. Then Mother was carried out of the home so dear to her, to be again in church for one last time, with so many people there that their faces were all a blur to me. Then the carriage ride to an open grave where there were mases of red and white and yellow chrysanthemums, and our minister saying, "Dust to dust and ashes to ashes, but he that believeth in me shall never die." Home afterward to an early supper which kind neighbors had prepared, then, finally, just Father and we three girls alone in the empty house, in the aching void which death leaves.

On Monday Father told us to get ready for school, the first I knew that he did not expect me to stay home from school to keep house. Only later did I learn the outcome of Mother's thoughts in those last weeks when she was face-to-face with death, took no morphine, and went about her work as usual. She had asked Father to promise that if he lived he would keep us girls together and see that we went to church and to school. To Father it seemed that, although he might have managed with three little boys, it would be impossible to bring up three little girls of 7, 10, and 12. And others must have thought so too, for after the funeral one neighbor with a girl my age offered to take me, a childless couple offered to take the middle sister, and an uncle and aunt offered to take the youngest. We could easily have been separated had Mother not insisted on that promise. Forty-six years later we three sisters bless the pioneer Mother whose insight and will decreed this task and the pioneer father whose intelligence and devotion fulfilled the task.

What of my child's prayer in the long ago, that Mother would not die? I knew she was at rest from pain. I knew that her spirit would never die. After my sisters were asleep I used to cry into my pillow from loneliness at night. Then a night came when I had cried myself asleep but felt, though my eyes were closed, my mother touch me on the shoulder, and in the instant of that touch I felt the glory of her presence.

Her magnetic touch comforted me and assured me of her happiness and of a love that transcended death. I was on the point of understanding the mystery of death when Mother's comforting touch pressed me into deep and happy slumber.

The valiant never taste of death but once. (a quote?)

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This report "ONE MONTH TO LIVE" was never dated by Mother. But in a sentence near the end beginning "Forty-six years later..." tells the reader that report was written in 1950, at which time Mother was 59 or 60. She was born Dec. 15, 1890.

My older sister, Lorraine Seeby, typed the original hand-written report in Sept. 1999.

I have re-typed her report on computer to facilitate the forwarding of it to family members and friends . via email attachment..

Lorraine is now 83, living in Aiken, So. Carolina.

Our brother Richard (Dick) Champion, died at 55, July 28, 1977

Our brother, Dale Harbour Champion, died July 24, 2008, age 81

Ninarose Champion Mayer,

Youngest child of Nina Harbour Champion

My age now is 75...

This project completed April 14, 2009