

# A WOMAN'S INFLUENCE



BY LULU JAMISON

CHAPTER XII.—Continued.

The next morning Margaret received a note from the rector asking her to come to Mrs. Ivens, who was very sick. Waiting only for a hasty breakfast, and obeying Brian's instructions to wrap herself warmly, she departed on her errand of mercy.

Through the peaceful quiet of the Sabbath morning she made her way over the well kept road, until she reached the rector, an unpretentious little house, sitting back in an equally unpretentious garden.

A narrow, beaten pathway led to the modest entrance, and on either side of it were tiny borders of dead flowers, around whose lifeless stems the brown leaves clung convulsively.

Margaret's ring was answered by a tired-looking maid servant, who led the way into the poorly furnished little parlor. While she questioned the girl as to her mistress' condition Margaret's eyes traveled wistfully about the room, whose cheery homeliness not even the disillusionizing influence of poverty, could entirely dispel. Yet there was something vaguely pathetic in the worn chairs, the faded, almost threadbare, carpet; the few inexpensive ornaments, and the numerous makeshifts; little pretensions to comfort and luxury, which deft fingers had fashioned into pretty deceptive devices, all presenting the long and patient labor, thoughtful love, and tender self-denial, so often wrought into the possessions of the poor.

Upstairs in the front room she found the brave little woman who had been so ill only a few days before, stretched on a bed of weakness, the busy brain no longer worrying over the wants of a growing family, the tireless feet resting at last. Near the bed sat Mr. Ivens, the rector of the most unpopular church in S—. He was a man of many talents and attainments, but unfortunately for himself he lacked the self-confidence necessary to meet and overcome the difficulties of life.

Margaret knew and understood a nature so similar to her father's. She discovered the wealth of learning and nobility of soul hidden under an overmastering diffidence, and she admired the qualities which others could not see.

Now as she saw him, bowed by the shadow of a coming great sorrow, holding the nerveless hand that had smoothed so many difficulties for him, yet whose cheerful aid could never more be his, she felt her heart filled with a compassion no words could express.

He was so engrossed with his grief that he scarcely noticed her as she quietly glided to his place beside the bed, but Mrs. Ivens had heard the almost noiseless footsteps and opened her eyes wearily.

"Ah, it is you, Margaret," she said with a momentary flush of pleasure on her pale face.

Margaret nodded cheerfully, and laid her hand with a soothing tenderness, on the hot, throbbing head. "Does it ache much?" she asked.

"No, Margaret, only a little. Will you tell Mary to get the children ready for school? I should be up to do it myself, but I am very tired."

"I don't believe you ever admitted as much before," was Margaret's rather unsteady answer. "The children won't go to school to-day. It is Sunday."

"Sunday, and I lying here! James, why didn't you tell me? We had so much to do to-day."

Her eyes sought her husband's, but he was looking rather wistfully at Margaret.

Margaret read the unspoken language of that glance, and she found it very difficult to answer cheerfully.

"We are going to let you be lazy today, Ellen, so that formidable amount of work must wait for another Sunday. I intend to assert my authority, and, to begin, I'll sit here while Mr. Ivens eats some breakfast. Mary told me to send him down."

The gentleman took this hint, and, as obedient as a child, left the room. He knew that Ellen was safe and happy in Margaret's hands, and already he felt better for her cheerful, helpful presence.

Half-way down the stairs he was met by a preternaturally grave child of 8 years, whose wistful eyes gazed sadly into his. Evidently she had been waiting for him, for without a word she stole quietly to his side and allowed her hand to glide with reassuring sympathy into his.

In this silent way they reached the dining-room, where Mary had breakfast on the table, and three tots aged, respectively, six, four, and two seated in their high-chairs, waiting for papa.

Little wonder that Margaret's mind should be filled with painful thoughts of these babies, as she sat by their mother's bedside, and that her eyes became so misty when Ellen expressed such gratitude for her attentions.

"If you only knew how glad it makes me to do even a little for you," she said, with a struggle to speak calmly. "You see, it is so seldom I can be useful, that I am particularly proud now. If I had been poor, I believe I should have taken up nursing as a profession."

"Yes, but you need not do it now, Margaret. You don't know what it is to be poor. It is hard for him and the children."

The voice was full of pain.

"I have known," Margaret answered, "the pain and cruelty of it. The scales of life are so uneven. I have no more right to comfort and luxury than you have, and yet—. But I did not come here to talk on such dolorous subjects; I want to see you bright and cheerful."

"It is hard to be bright and cheerful, Margaret. Lying here with nothing to do, so many thoughts come to me. I'm afraid I have given up so often when I should have helped and encouraged James. Now it is so near Christmas and so much to do, while I am here helpless. You must help me to get well, Margaret. Help me to get strong. Why do you turn your eyes away? Is it because—. Ah! is it because you think I shall never be well again? Sometimes I have thought so too, and I have prayed that it may not be so, for James' sake and my own."

The weak voice broke, and Margaret, incapable of a word, could only press the hot hand between her own cool ones while her eyes burned with the tears she found so hard to withhold.

She was very glad when the rector came in a few moments later and she could leave the room to overcome her emotion and write the following note to Brian:

"DEAR BRIAN—Do not expect me

better. I have the carriage, and if you are ready—

"In a second, Brian. I will not keep you waiting long."

The time of waiting was spent by Margaret in the darkened room, where the rector sat by all that remained to him of a beloved wife.

She approached the still form and pressed a long kiss on the pale brow. She felt the rector's burning eyes upon her and she heard the hoarse words with which he turned to her.

"How am I to live my life alone?"

She longed for the power to comfort him, yet all the sympathy she could express seemed to hold the mockery of easy consolation.

"There are the children," she said in a low voice. "Four loving little hearts to make your life less lonely. And there is God. He sends the cross, and He sends the strength to bear it. We see so dimly. What seems so hard to us is often a kindness from our Father's hands. We must linger here in suffering and tribulation, but for her the crown has come before the cross had grown too heavy. Father, teach our hearts to say 'Thy will be done.'

Leaving the echo of her prayer behind her, Margaret joined Brian, with the four grave-faced children, upon whose childish minds the intangible shadow and silence had made such an equal impression.

She found it hard to meet the pathetic inquiry of those baby eyes, and she was quite relieved when she could give her new charge into the kindly care of the surprised Mrs. Davis. After this, she went to bed and slept for the remainder of the day, and when dinner time arrived her inclinations were so decidedly against rising that she could scarcely force herself to dress and join Brian.

"He'll find me rather doleful at best," she replied to the heavy eyes and pale, tired face which looked at her from the mirror. "I suppose I must try to be cheerful."

But her short talk with Elsie, just before dinner, did not tend to brighten her.

The child had spoken so earnestly of the great care her mother's death had left upon her, and expressed such a pathetic wish to grow bigger so that she could help papa more, that Margaret found it hard to answer calmly with these earnest eyes upon her.

"You are little, Elsie, yet you can help papa even now. These little feet can be tireless in his service, this dear face may always wear a smile for him, and this tender little heart may love and comfort him in every trouble."

"Little people, and big people, too, can only do their best."

"Poor little to," commented Brian, when Margaret repeated this conversation after dinner. "Let us not think of them any more to-night, Margaret. Let us try to be happy. I am so sorry our Christmas has been clouded. I got you this little remembrance, and I really have not had a chance to give it to you."

"Only a remembrance?" she asked, meeting her defiant eye. "I sha'n't carry you away by bodily force, though I don't think you should have your own way in every case. I have one request to make. Perhaps you will condescend to respect it. Don't kill yourself."

"I am not one of the killing kind," rejoined Margaret, going up-stairs. "Good-bye for the present. You may call to-morrow, if you will."

Brian did call to-morrow, and this second visit only confirmed the opinion expressed in his first. Mrs. Ivens was dying—from a special disease, but from gradual giving away of the vital forces. A life of care and anxiety, vexations and privations, and wearying struggles to make both ends meet, had told at last on the delicate constitution. Many who fall by the wayside are not less brave than those who reach the party's state, and, if the greatest heroes are those who bear life's burdens uncomplainingly, Mrs. Ivens might wear the crown of heroism.

Margaret was faithful to her trust. Others came and went, but she remained by the sick bed. Brian exhausted his efforts in vain, and even Christmas Eve could not tempt her to leave her friend.

"You tell me your hours are numbered. Let me stay until the end. It cannot be very long now."

And Brian said no more. Mrs. Ivens' hours were, indeed, numbered. The flame of life burnt fainter and fainter, and when the night of Christmas Eve passed into the dawn of Christmas Day, the angels of life and death crossed in their pathway, and the tired soul found the land of perpetual rest—the joys of an eternal morning. The incidents of those closing moments were indelibly photographed on Margaret's mind.

She had to be brave and strong for the sake of those so sadly bereaved. Mary had sobbed and the rector had bowed his head in anguish grief, but she had shed no tear. She had brought the solemn, awe-struck children to their mother's side; she had seen the kiss of infinite tenderness pressed upon each sad little face; her heart had echoed Elsa's cry of anguish when for the last time that little head was pillowled on a dying mother's breast; yet her eyes had been hard and dry, though the painful tightening at her throat had made her promise to be a friend to these motherless little ones, so hard to speak. And even now the tears would not come, though she had thought and thought until her mind was weary.

The sunshine lay all about her, the bright, glad sunshine of Christmas; on the floor, where the carpet looked so faded and worn; on the very spot that Elsa's fingers had摸ed so fondly and so patiently in their old busyness; on the old chintz sofa, where she was lying now, helpless, so thoughtfully, so tenderly, so unselfishly, she had made the heart wearier, though tender, unselfish love had made this house a home in all that gives that word its highest, holiest meaning, was forever stilled in its last sleep, and the tired, patient hands lay folded in the calm rest to be broken never again.

No one had been in. She had climbed to the beam, drawn up the rope, and put her head through the noose, or else climbed down the rope at the end, used to hold a lantern.

The room had been used for some of an entertainment, and had, hanging from a beam, a rope with a noose at the end, used to hold a lantern.

There was no way of getting up to the beam except by climbing the upright side beams and the monkey was weak from her illness; yet when the man came back in about a half hour, he found her hanging and dead.

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