

A WOMAN'S INFLUENCE



BY LULU JAMISON

CHAPTER XV.—Continued.

The Colonel met them at the dining-room door, and Nell, approaching rather cautiously, gave him a half-expectant, half-questioning glance.

Her fears were quite groundless, however, for as soon as he had seen Margaret, and heard that she was going to leave them so soon, he had no thought for any one else.

"I don't know how we shall do without you," he said, bending over her with kindly affection. "Bertie told me you were going, and I have been anticipating my own loneliness. Have you grown tired of us so soon?" He took her face between his hands and regarded it with a gentleness in which variety of emotions found expression. "You are in a hurry to leave us, Margaret," he added, sadly.

"Ah, no," she hastened to answer, as her eyes grew dim and a painful flush overspread her cheeks.

The gentleman did not answer for a second, during which his face worked with feeling and a tender light filled his eyes.

"You are a brave girl," he said, rather unsteadily, at last; "a true, brave girl. Heaven will bless you as you deserve. Don't let that soundless come near me; I might be tempted."

"You are so hard on him, Colonel. Don't."

"Don't blame him, I suppose. Ah, Margaret, you are like the rest of your sex—always ready to defend the man who breaks your heart. Well, well, I'll not be hard on you for your sake, but when I think—Never mind, we'll miss you, child—ever one of us. Don't quite forget your old friends; you won't find the new ones half so true."

Again Margaret's eyes grew dim, and she found herself incapable of an answer.

Alie, noting her distress, broke in with some light remarks, which Nell took up, notwithstanding her uncle's decided presence, and discussed volubly.

Under this respite Margaret regained her self-possession, and began to speak quite calmly.

No further allusion to her going away was made during the meal, though each one seemed quite talkative. Nell particularly airing her opinions freely, and receiving no reproof for her temerity.

But when the time came to say goodbye, and Margaret was ready to go, the Colonel, disregarding the hand she held out to him, clasped her in his arms, and tenderly, almost reverently, kissed her brow.

"I know it would be hard," she sobbed, breaking down completely. "I knew this would be the hardest of all."

"No, it shan't be, Margaret," he said, putting her gently from him. "I do not wish to pain you, child, even for a moment. But I am very deeply moved to see you go from us under such circumstances. Your bravery and devotion will have its reward—be sure of that. Remember me when you need sympathy or advice, for I would not be worthy the name of friend if I could not show my affection in time of adversity as well as prosperity; and I know that not even your own father could be more anxious to help you than I am."

For many long days Margaret carried in her heart the memory of his kind words and sympathetic voice.

As she rode home through the winter afternoon toward the chain of beautiful hills which shun in the quiet, peaceful village, her fancy tinged with indescribable melancholy every surrounding object, and the melancholy lingered long after her eyes had ceased to look upon the scene that had engendered it.

CHAPTER XVI.

A NEW FRIEND.

"Margaret, I think I shall bring Wilson to dinner to-night. I met him yesterday and I asked about you. He has heard Bertie lauding you to the skies, and naturally he is anxious to see you again."

"Really, that is too bad of Bertie. I don't pose as a paragon, Brian, and indeed I don't care to be one. I do want to meet Dr. Wilson, though, and if you will only correct his false impression, I wish you would bring him this evening."

"I'll bring him, but I'll leave you to correct or prove his impressions. I know you'll be equal to the emergency in either case. You should really appreciate the compliment he pays you. I don't believe I ever heard him express a desire to meet any one before."

"Really? Why, I feel quite tame. I hope he isn't a cynic."

"Oh, no. It is rather indifference, I think. He isn't particularly sociable; that is, he doesn't care for visiting. People follow him up, though, like the deuce, and he's considered quite a catch in the matrimonial pond. Any number of anglers would be glad to land him. The power of money can see. Well, I must be off. I shall be home to lunch. Good-bye. You won't be lonely."

"No."

Every day Brian left Margaret with this question, and every day she answered "No," but always after he had gone she felt she had answered untruthfully. She was lonely—very lonely. She found so little to interest her—so little to fill the long dull mornings. Brian sometimes came to lunch, but as often he did not. Her afternoons were spent in seeing the sights of New York, shopping, or calling on her few friends, and her evenings at the theater, when Brian would take her; but more often at home alone when he had some engagement which he could not possibly defer.

From these engagements he would return late in the night, with the heavy, stumbling steps which told their own story, and which always struck so heavily on Margaret's heart, as she waited sleepless and anxious.

This was the record of the ten days she had spent in New York, and she seemed as far away from the reward the Colonel had promised her as when she left Elmwood.

Under other circumstances she could have been, not precisely happy, because she was too thoroughly a child of nature not to miss with an intensity few could understand, the restful, peaceful influences of her country home. Yet she could have found contentment in this charming little apartment, with its comforts and luxuries. Its situation was convenient and delightful, in the heart of the city, surrounded by places of interest and amusement, and near the various clubs, where Brian was fond of spending his time.

She was in the center of bustle and activity. From her window she could

very delightfully," he said, as if answering an argument in his own mind. "I fancy you must intend a long stay."

"Yes, it may be. That is, I don't know. I hope—It depends on circumstances, I think."

She spoke rather disconnectedly, and, anxious to divert any impression her words might make upon him, she hastened to add:

"Don't misunderstand me, please. I don't wish you to think I actually dislike the city. I find it interesting in many ways, but I have not that fascination which some people feel for it. I was born in the country, and all my associations hold the memory of green fields and bright skies. I think that brick walls and paved streets tire my eyes, and I feel a longing to rest them on something that is not here. Sometimes I am almost determined to go to Elmwood just for a day. It isn't far from here, you know; but then I remember that I should have to leave after the day was over, and that would be hard. So I think I must always put that thought aside. Brian is so different in his tastes; he likes this busy life. He finds the country dull and lonely, and Elmwood has not the same attraction for him that it has for me. He simply endures it, but I—well, I could live there forever, because it is home and—I love it."

The last words were spoken in a lower tone, but Wilson understood the meaning they held, and his next remark was in a more feeling vein.

"We will have to teach you to love New York for something more than its paved streets and brick walls. We Gothamites are very proud. We think that all things good and delightful are to be found in this great noisy city of ours."

Margaret smiled. "You have many desirable advantages, that is certain; but while you are proud of your wealth you should not forget your poverty."

"True. And we have enough of it. The condition of the poor in this city is miserable in the extreme, and perhaps, what is more incredible, the most opposite conditions of prosperity and want exist in such close proximity. I was most forcibly impressed with this fact a few days ago. I was passing along one of the streets just off from Fifth avenue. There were elegant mansions all around me, and handsomely dressed children playing under the eyes of watchful nurses. Yet a little further on I passed into a scene so different that I could scarcely credit the testimony of my eyes. Within an actual stone's throw of splendor and prosperity, poverty, misery, and sin were running riot. It is terrible to think of it. A physician whose practice lies amid such scenes is obliged to see so much of the heartaches of life."

"I suppose so," returned Margaret, with a sigh. "Such an experience wouldn't do for me at all; so much wealth on one side and so much want on the other would make me lose my faith in God. It is terrible to think of it. I know. I have taken myself to task for even thinking of it, but my sense of justice cannot be reconciled. There is some wise design, no doubt, in what seems so unfair, but—Tell me. Don't you feel like taking the world to pieces and making it over again?"

He smiled, amused at the question and its expression which accompanied it.

"I have often thought it might be changed to advantage, but I do not know that I could manage it successfully."

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

"He Laugh Best," etc.

Richard Crowder is one of the travelers who find a cordial welcome in Chicago at every visit, and he generally brings along the latest and happiest flights of imagination of the boys on the road, and frequently spins a tale as uniquely humorous as any of them, of his own invention. Here's his latest:

"Once frightened 200 colored people almost to death. They were holding a protracted meeting in a little tumble-down church near Nashville and the excitement ran high. I attended with some other bad boys, misbehaved and was fired out. I determined to break up the meeting. I procured some phosphorus, and the next night, before the crowd assembled, drew skeletons, death's heads and devils all over the walls. I then concealed myself in the loft, armed with a long hollow reed; while my companions, provided with sheets and masks, hid themselves in the grove in which the church was situated. That night the church was packed, and religious fervor reached its climax. The preacher was picturing the horrors of hell and the hideousness of its master, and the sinners were shivering with apprehension. Two large lamps, hung in the center of the low room, furnished the light, and by the help of the hollow reed I blew them both out. The preacher stopped in the middle of his exhortation. The walls blazed forth with horrors traced in burning, snaky outlines. There was a convulsive gasp, a scream from 200 throats and a stampede. The preacher went through a window, and, though a rheumatic, outran all his parishioners. Then my ghostly confederates appeared, uttering dismal groans. Scores of terrified blacks, unable to run, lay down and groaned with an agony of fear. The joke was too good to keep. My father heard of it. He was a Presbyterian divine and did not believe in trifling with sacred things. It is said that he laughs best who laughs last, and the colored best who laughs last, and the colored people came in on the subsequent half-assembly."

"Mrs. Leigh? I am not mistaken."

She held out her hand with a smile of welcome.

"No, you are not mistaken," she said, with the easy, gracious manner that made her personality so winning. "I am Mrs. Leigh, and you are Dr. Wilson, I know. I am very glad to meet you, and doubly glad to welcome you to my home, because I really cannot feel that you are a stranger, but rather an old friend whom we have heard of and talked of so often."

Her words excused him very much.

"You know me too highly," he answered, pressing the hand she offered him. "To be numbered among your friends is a privilege I esteem most deeply. Brian and I have been best friends of such long standing that the pleasure I feel of meeting his wife is twofold."

"I'm afraid you find his wife very brilliant," put in Margaret, flushing brightly, and seating herself in the chair he placed for her. "She must really ask your pardon for not being at home when you arrived. Her only excuse is that she could not get back so late out of town."

"She is fully excused," rejoined Wilson, meeting her smiling glance. "We got her home too late, though with a swift but critical glance, had taken in the pretty face and girlish form. Then he started forward with the half question, half assertion:

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