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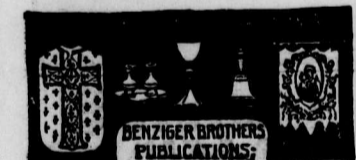
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LADY JANE.
CHAPTER XXVII.

THE LITTLE STREET SINGER.

It was Christmas Eve, and very nearly dark, when Mrs. Lanier, driving up St. Charles Avenue in her comfortable carriage quite filled with costly presents for her children, noticed a forlorn little figure, standing alone at a street corner. There was something about the sorrowful looking little creature that moved her strangely, for she turned and watched it as long as she could discern the child's face in the gathering twilight. It was a little girl, thinly clad in a soiled and torn white frock; her black stockings were full of holes, and her shoes so worn that the tiny white toes were visible through the rents. She hugged a thin faded shawl around her shoulders, and her yellow hair fell in matted, tangled strands below her waist; her small face was pale and pinched, and had a woe-begone look that would melt the hardest heart. Although she was soiled and ragged, she did not look like a common child, and it was that indefinable something in her appearance that attracted Mrs. Lanier's attention, for she thought, as the carriage whirled by and left the child far behind, "Poor little thing! she didn't look like a street beggar. I wish I had stopped and spoken to her!"

It was Lady Jane, and her descent in the scale of misery and had been rapid indeed. Since that night, some four months before, when Madame Jozain had awakened her rudely and told her she must come away, she had lived in a sort of wretched stupor. It was true she had resisted at first, and had cried desperately for Pepsie, for Mam'selle Diane, for Gex—but all in vain; Madame had scolded and threatened and frightened her into submission. That terrible midnight ride in the wagon, with the piled-up furniture, the two black drivers, who seemed to the child's distorted imagination two frightful demons, Madame angry, and at times violent if she complained or cried, and the frightful threats and cruel hints of a more dreadful fate, had so crushed and appalled the child that she scarcely dared open her pale little lips either to protest or plead.

Then the pitiful change in her life, from loving care and pleasant companionship to utter squalid misery and neglect. She had been suddenly taken from comparative comfort and plunged into the most cruel poverty. Good Children Street had been a paradise compared to the narrow, dirty lane, on the outskirts of the city, where Madame had hidden herself; for the wretched woman, in her fear and humiliation, seemed to have lost every vestige of ambition, and to have sunk without the least effort to save herself, to a level of those around her.

Madame had taken a terrible cold in her hurried flight, and it had settled in her lame hip; therefore she was obliged to lie in her bed most of the time, and the little money she had was soon spent. Hunger was staring her in the face, and the cold autumn winds chilled her to the marrow. She had been poor and in many bitter straits, but never before like this. Now she dared not let any one know of her whereabouts, and for that reason the few friends that she still had could not help her. She was ill and suffering, and alone in her misery. Her son had robbed and deserted her, and left her to her punishment, and, for all she knew, she must die of starvation. Through the aid of the negro Pete, she had parted with nearly everything of value that she had, and, to crown her cruelty and Lady Jane's misery, one day when the child was absent on a begging expedition she sold the blue heron to an Italian for two dollars.

The bird was the only comfort the unhappy little creature had, the only link between the past and the miserable present, and when she returned to her squalid home and found her only treasure gone, her grief was so wild and uncontrollable that Madame feared for her life. Therefore, in order to quiet the child, she said the bird had broken his string and strayed away. After this, the child spent her days wandering about, searching for Tony. When Madame first sent her out into the street to sing and beg, she went without a protest, so perfect was her habit of obedience, and so great her anxiety to please and conciliate her cruel tyrant. For, since the night when Madame fled from Good Children Street, she had thrown off all pretenses of affection for the hapless little one, whom she considered the cause of all her misfortunes.

"She has made trouble enough for me," she would say bitterly, in her hours of silent communion with her own conscience. "If it hadn't been for her mother coming to me, Raste wouldn't have got locked up for thirty days. After that disgrace he couldn't stay here, and that was the cause of his taking my money and running off. Yes, all my trouble has come through her in one way or another, and now she must sing and beg or she'll have to starve."

Before Madame sent her out, she gave Lady Jane instructions in the most imperative manner. "She must never on any account speak of Good Children Street, of Madelon, of Pepsie, of the d'Hautreves, of Gex, or of the Paichoux or of any one she had ever known there. She must not talk with people, and, above all, she must never tell her name, nor where she lived. She must only sing and hold out her hand. Sometimes she might cry if she wanted to, but she must never laugh." These instructions the child followed

to the letter, with the exception of one. She never cried, for although her little heart was breaking she was too proud to shed tears.

It was astonishing how many nickels she picked up. Sometimes she would come home with her little pocket quite heavy, for her wonderful voice, so sweet and so pathetic, as well as her sad face and wistful eyes, touched many a heart, even among the coarsest and rudest, and Madame might have reaped quite a harvest if she had not been so avaricious as to sell Tony for two dollars. When she did that she killed her goose that laid golden eggs, for after the loss of her pet the child could not sing; her little heart was too heavy, and the unshed tears choked her and drowned her voice in quivering sobs.

The moment she was out of Tante Pauline's sight, instead of gathering nickels, she was wandering around aimlessly, searching and asking for the blue heron, and at night, when she returned with an empty pocket, she shivered and covered into a corner for fear of Madame's anger.

One morning it was very cold; she had had no breakfast, and she felt tired and ill, and when Madame told her to go out and not to come back without some money, she fell to crying piteously, and for the first time begged and implored to stay where she was, declaring that she could not sing any more, and that she was afraid, because some rude children had thrown mud at her the day before, and told her not to come into the street again.

This first revolt seemed to infuriate Madame, for reaching out to where the child stood trembling and sobbing she clutched her and shook her violently, and then slapping her tear-stained little face until it tingled, she bade her go out instantly, and not to return unless she brought some money with her. This was the first time that Lady Jane had suffered the ignominy of a blow, and it seemed to arouse her pride and indignation, for she stopped sobbing instantly, and wiping the tears resolutely from her face, shot one glance of mingled scorn and surprise at her tyrant, and walked out of the room with the dignity of a little princess.

When once outside, she held her hands for a moment to her burning face, while she tried to still the tumult of anger and sorrow that was raging in her little heart; then she gathered herself together with a courage beyond her years, and hurried away without once looking back at the scene of her torture. When she was far enough from the wretched neighborhood to feel safe from observation, she turned in a direction quite different from any she had taken before. The wind was intensely cold, but the sun shone brightly, and she hugged her little shawl around her, and ran on and on so swiftly and hopefully.

"If I hurry and walk and walk just as fast as I can, I'm sure to come to Good Children Street, and then I'll ask Pepsie or Mam'selle Diane to keep me, for I'll never, never, go back to Tante Pauline again."

By and by, when she was quite tired with running and walking, she came to a beautiful, broad avenue that she had never seen before. There were large, fine houses, and gardens blooming brightly even in the chilly December wind, and lovely children, dressed in warm velvet and furs, walking with their nurses on the wide, clean sidewalks; and every moment carriages drawn by glossy, prancing horses whirled by, and people laughed and talked merrily, and looked so happy and contented. She had never seen anything like it before. It was all delightful, like a pleasant dream, and even better than Good Children Street. She thought of Pepsie, and wished that she could see it, and then she imagined how enchanted her friend would be to ride in one of these fine carriages, with the sun shining on her, and the fresh wind blowing in her face. The wind reminded her that she was cold. It pierced through her thin frock and scanty skirts, and the holes in her shoes and stockings made her ashamed. After a while she found a sunny corner on the steps of a church, where she crouched and tried to cover her dilapidated shoes with her short skirts.

Presently a merry group of children passed, and she heard them talking of Christmas. "To-morrow is Christmas; this is Christmas Eve, and we are going to have a Christmas-tree." Her heart gave a great throb of joy. By to-morrow she was sure to find Pepsie, and Pepsie had promised her a Christmas-tree long ago, and she wouldn't forget; she was sure to have it ready for her. Oh, if she only dared ask some of these kind-looking people to show her the way to Good Children Street! But she remembered what Tante Pauline had told her, and fear kept her silent. However, she was sure, now that she had got away from that dreadful place, that some one would find her. Mr. Gex had found her before when she was lost, and he might find her now, because she didn't have a domino on, and he would know her right away; and then she would get Mr. Gex to hunt for Tony, and perhaps she would have Tony for Christmas. In this way she comforted herself until she was quite happy.

After a while a kind looking woman came along with a market-basket on her arm. She was eating something, and Lady Jane being very hungry, looked at her so wistfully that the woman stopped and asked her if she would like a piece of bread. She replied eagerly that she would. The good woman gave her a roll and a large, rosy apple, and she went back to her corner and munched them contentedly. Then a fine milk-cart rattled up to a neighboring door, and her

heart almost leaped to her throat; but it was not Tante Modeste. Still, Tante Modeste might come any moment. She sold milk way up town to rich people. Yes, she was sure to come; so she sat in her corner and ate her apple, and waited with unwavering confidence.

And in this way the day passed pleasantly and comfortably to Lady Jane. She was not very cold in her sheltered corner, and the good woman's kindness had satisfied her hunger; but at last she began to think that it must be nearly night, for she saw the sun slipping down into the cold, gray clouds behind the opposite houses, and she wondered what she should do and where she should go when it was quite dark. Neither Tante Modeste nor Mr. Gex had come, and now it was too late and she would have to wait until to-morrow. Then she began to reproach herself for sitting still. "I should have gone on and on, and by this time I would have been in Good Children Street," said she.

She never thought of returning to her old haunts or to Tante Pauline, and if she had tried she could have not found her way back. She had wandered too far from her old landmarks, so the only thing to do was to press on in her search for Good Children Street. It was while she was standing at a corner, uncertain which way to turn, that Mrs. Lanier caught a glimpse of her. And what good fortune it would have been to Lady Jane if that noble-hearted woman had obeyed the kindly impulse that urged her to stop and speak to the friendless little waif! But destiny intended it to be otherwise, so she went on her way to her luxurious home and happy children, while the desolate orphan wandered about in the cold and darkness, looking in vain for the humble friends who even at that moment were thinking of her and longing for her.

Poor little soul! she had never been out in the dark night alone before, and every sound and movement started her. Once a dog sprang out and barked at her, and she ran trembling into a doorway, only to be ordered away by an unkind servant. Sometimes she stopped and looked into the windows of the beautiful houses as she passed. There were bright fires, lights, pictures and flowers, and she heard the merry voices of children laughing and playing; and the soft notes of a piano, with some one singing, reminded her of Mam'selle Diane. Then a choking sob would rise in her throat, and she would cover her face and cry a little silently.

Presently she found herself before a large, handsome house; the blinds were open and the parlor was brilliantly lighted. A lady—it was Mrs. Lanier—sat at the piano playing a waltz, and two little girls in white frocks and red sashes were dancing together. Lady Jane pressed near the railing, and devoured the scene with wide, sparkling eyes. They were the same steps that Gex had taught her, and it was the very waltz that he sometimes whistled. Before she knew it, quite carried away by the music, and forgetful of everything, she dropped her shawl, and holding out her soiled, ragged skirt, was tripping and whirling as merrily as the little ones within, while opposite to her, her shadow, thrown by a street lamp over her head, tripped and bobbed and whirled, not unlike Mr. Gex, the ancient "professeur of the dance." And a right merry time she had out there in the biting December night, pirouetting with her own shadow.

Suddenly the music stopped, a nurse came and took the little girls away, and some one drew down the blinds and shut her out alone in the cold; there was nothing then for her to do but to move on, and picking up her shawl, she crept away a little wearily, for dancing, although it had lightened her heart, had wasted her strength, and it seemed to her that the wind was rising, and the cold becoming more intense, for she shivered from time to time, and her bare little toes and fingers smarted badly. Once or twice, from sheer exhaustion, she dropped down on a door-step, but when she saw any one approaching she sprang up and hurried along, trying to be brave and patient. Yes, she must come to Good Children Street very soon, and she never turned a corner that she did not expect to see Madelon's little house, wedged in between the two tall ones, and the light gleaming from Pepsie's small window.

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