

# The Power of the Will



by A.D. Reed

"Mary Ellen! You come right inside this house this minute!" There was a moment or two of silence. "Mary Ellen, I'm talking to you -- do you hear me?"

"What, Mama?" Mary Ellen's voice blew in like a lazy summer breeze.

"I said, 'Mary Ellen, you come right inside this house this minute! And I will not repeat it again. Now come inside. Right now, if you please, young lady!'"

Mary Ellen understood perfectly well the implications in Mama's tone of voice. When it sounded the way it just had, she knew Mama was prepared to continue repeating her injunction perpetually, as patient as a snake waiting to strike. Mama never did like to be disobeyed, especially by her own children, but she disliked even more to lose her temper. With an equanimity surpassing that of any other person I've seen before her or since, except just possibly Reverend Moore teaching Bible School summers, Mama just kept on calling until she was rewarded with the satisfaction of an obedient child.

"O.K. I'm comin'. In fact, Mama, I'm here."

"And half a day older than when I first requested you to be. Now would you please do me the courtesy of preparing yourself for public exposure? As quick as you can, if you please?"

Mary Ellen, I believe, was born contentious. After all, it was she who'd insisted we attend a performance of the acting company that was touring through. And it was she who presented us the information that tickets could be obtained for three dollars a seat, cash in advance, and presented us three tickets at the same moment. Nor had she lost her enthusiasm during the intervening weeks. I'll give her credit for that if it pains me, which it does. She had actually purchased a fashion magazine and planned out how to frivol herself up beyond recognition. It was my suspicion she hoped to catch the eye of a member of the troupe, whose picture appeared in the advertising posters tacked up to every wall and light post in town. A girl as willful and devious as Mary Ellen would find nothing more amusing than to try to pull the wool over all our eyes while having the time of her life with a perfect stranger. Just keep everybody fooled or guessing, that's the only reason I every figured out for her being such a two-faced thing.

"Head on up those stairs, please ma'am. There's a bath waiting for you, but it and I and Carolina can't wait forever."

"Yes ma'am," Mary Ellen martyred herself into saying. Then tracing her way upstairs with a grace surprising in her normally awkward and blue-jeaned fifteen-year-old self, she said, "Would you be insulted if I ask you to please leave me alone in the bathroom? I do think maybe I'm entitled to a tiny little bit of privacy."

Mama came out through the doorway barely ahead of the door. "I declare young lady you'll kill me yet," she called out as she headed for her bedroom to dress. "I wonder that I can be responsible for such a creature. I reckon the Lord willed it." She paused for a moment before adding quietly, "I hope He did."

By the time Mary Ellen came out of the bath, Mama was ready and I was aching to set out. The expectation of waiting in the August heat while that girl arranged herself for presentation to the world did not entice me. I and my clothes have always been subject to the ravages of perspiration, and I considered it unkind and completely typical of Mary Ellen to remain oblivious to my discomfort. I turned to Mama to express those very thoughts, anticipating a certain degree of commiseration from someone who's as put-upon by that girl as I am, if not more so; and wasn't I chagrined to hear her come to her defense!

"That sister of yours is bound to be the highlight of this afternoon, and I for one don't object at all to allowing her as much time as she wants to make herself perfectly attractive. Why, I don't believe I have ever known her yet to take an interest in her personal appearance. She's turning into a young lady, I declare. You'd almost suspect she'd arranged a tryst with one of the boys from school."

"Carolina, I am eternally thankful that you inherited my patience. Why I know CERTAIN INDIVIDUALS who you can no doubt form your own opinion who I'm talking about that they would no more be patient than I'll live to be a hundred and one years old."

I didn't say a word. Mama and Mary Ellen might be called the two most pig-headed females ever to appear on the face of this earth. I know for a fact that either one of them could outwait Job to get her way. Stubborn and uncompromising don't do them justice, let alone patient. But if Mama couldn't see through that child after fifteen years and nine months when she was up to something, she'd never see through her, say whatever I might.

Mary Ellen floated downstairs wearing what I can describe only as a chiffon garden. For every flower on the print of that dress she must have had a layer of chiffon underneath it, spreading it out like a bell. To me the print resembled some chair slipcovers that were featured in the preceding Christmas issue of House and Garden magazine. Mary Ellen likely enough ordered the matching cotton curtain material and sewed it into a dress herself. I can't take away from her she has a natural affinity for a needle and thread, although I would never ask her to condescend to mend a seam or sew a button on for me, bet your life.

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I lay claim to possessing a certain equanimity when faced with upsetting events, no doubt as a direct result of growing up with Mama and Mary Ellen. Between the two of them there has never been much peace, not since the moment Mama conceived that child and poor Daddy up and suffered a pulmonary embolism and died, in the throes of ecstasy.

"Well, if that wasn't the tackiest gathering of humanity I've ever encountered!" I said to Mama on the way out of the gym. "Fidgeting like it was a high school play, and not come straight from New York City."

"Daughter," she answered me, "you'd do well to remember that you are a member of this community and may very well be held accountable some day for the opinions you express about your neighbors, most of which are wrong, and the ones that aren't you shouldn't shout so loud that everybody can hear you. There are people close to you who may have to bear the consequences of your behavior, Caro."

Before I could even begin to formulate a reply, Mary Ellen chimed in as loudly as she could, "Tacky stares you in the face every morning when you look in the mirror," as if she were singing a song. I must have appeared disheartened by the prospect of her hopeless future, for Reverend Moore strolled up in his hearty way and asked me point blank, "Why are you looking so sad, Carolina? You must have enjoyed the play, didn't you? Look at Mary Ellen, she seems to have had a wonderful time."

I stayed quiet, only smiled at the Reverend my sweetest little smile, so that he knew better than to pursue the subject.

Mama said "Hmph." I reckon she had an inkling of what Mary Ellen was as pleased as she could be about. I'd noticed it, and I'll guarantee you everyone else who'd looked her way, which was everybody there, had noticed it too. There was something peculiar in that girl's behavior.

One of those high school boys, Jack Gilbert, didn't take his eyes off her the whole time, and I could see he was jealous of what she was ignoring him for. It was the boy in the play, from the posters, was who it was; she looked like she wanted to have him for dinner.

I looked really calmly at her and said to Reverend Moore, "She did, Reverend, she had a fine afternoon. Didn't you, Mary Ellen? What did you think of that play? Wasn't it just tragic?"

She continued to stare into space, smiling as if I hadn't asked her a peculiar question about a romance, and drawled, "Yeah, I guess so."

The only tragedy about that play was the actors in it, and I saw Mama dart Mary Ellen a real fast glance. What Mama had been paying more attention to than where Mary Ellen was looking was how that boy kept his eyes focused on her. Mama didn't like it one bit, as obvious as it was to the entire audience. As much as she wanted Mary Ellen, who she has considered the prettier of us to since day one, to grow up and start behaving like a young lady with nice boys to call on her, now that that girl had on a dress that told more than Mama ever could about how grown up she was, Mama began to realize that it wasn't only nice boys that would notice. And Mama could not on anybody's account consider a traveling actor a nice boy.

"Miss Spite," I whispered under my breath while the Reverend was paying attention to Mama, "that was a romance, it wasn't a tragedy, or didn't you know the difference?"

She whispered back, "Yes, I do, Miss High-and Mighty and I don't care."

"I know what, or who, you were thinking about the whole time, and I'll bet you don't want me to tell Mama, if she doesn't know already, which isn't very likely."

That worried her; so she got angry, which meant Mama would switch right over to her side against me, and she cried out, "Leave me alone." Mama heard, and flashed us both a warning look. Then she smiled back at the Reverend; and he kept right on talking as if he didn't notice a peculiar thing going on, which he probably didn't, being the naivest person ever entrusted with a flock of Believers.

Mama turned to me, nothing friendly on her face, and said in the friendliest voice she could come up with, "Why don't you girls get a head start on me and the Reverend and have dinner started by the time we arrive? You will join us for dinner, won't you, Reverend? I'm sure you could use a well-rounded meal. What have you been doing for food while Eulalie is away?" Eulalie being Mrs. Moore, who had gone to San Bernardino, California, to visit their daughter, who was my age and married with two children already, which Mama never let me forget. "I'll bet you haven't eaten a full-sized dinner in weeks!"

I wish I could honestly say that Mary Ellen was a tactful child. She said, "Oh, Mama, Reverend Moore's a gourmet cook, didn't you know that! I bet he cooks better than you do!" No doubt she did not realize that to say such a thing right in front of the two of them might embarrass the Reverend