



by MARGARET E. SANGSTER

SECOND INSTALLMENT

SYNOPSIS . . . "Prelude" . . . "Love lightly." Mrs. Church warned gently, and Ellen wondered why? Posing for her talented mother, first as a new baby, then a bubbling child, then a charming young girl, Ellen had lived always in a make-believe land of beauty. Of the outside world her knowledge was meager. At 17 years of age, posing in the garden, Ellen at last is learning the story of her mother's broken life, the stolen kiss, marriage—then years of loneliness, waiting for the husband to return Mrs. Church is now telling Ellen of the father . . .

GO ON WITH THE STORY:

"Your father was away when I made my discovery. He'd been away for several weeks on something that he called a 'big deal.' I was expecting him home the very night that I saw the doctor and I planned to tell him all about you, at once. So I sat in the garden and waited for him, and watched for his train. And finally I saw it—the train that should have brought him to me—sweep across the valley below the house. I saw it stop at the station, and I saw it go on again. And I waited, with my soul full of the news I had to tell—I waited to give him the tidings of his son (for I thought, darling, that you were going to be a boy!) but he didn't come, although I waited all of that night. . . . And the next day, when I got the message that told me he wasn't coming back, ever, I went upstairs, and into my room and locked the door. And I sat down and began to knit a blue sweater for you. And I whistled, hard, as I knitted. I haven't whistled since—and I certainly never whistled before, Ellen! That's why, I guess, you were a girl. . . . A boy wouldn't have had any use for a mother who whistled so badly. . . . A boy—"

All at once Ellen's mother had stopped talking. Her voice had dwindled away into a funny, tragic silence. And Ellen saw her face go oddly white, felt her hand go chill and limp. It was then that Ellen, starting to her feet, saw her mother's head sag forward. "I'm going for the doctor," she half sobbed. "Your chest. . . . Is it your heart, darling? Is it—"

Ellen's mother had rallied. Her smile was less wan than it had been. "My heart?" questioned Ellen's mother. "Oh— nonsense! Indigestion, no doubt. Something I— even then she managed a trifle of gaiety, "something I ate as a child, no doubt! I'm quite well, now. . . ."

It didn't occur to Ellen in the weeks that passed, to ask her mother for the details of what had happened to her father. In her mind she had a vivid impression of some major calamity—of a train wreck or an automobile disaster. Only a calamity could have kept her father from her mother at such a time, she was sure!

And then, perhaps a month later, the special delivery letter arrived. It was the boy from the postoffice who brought the letter. Because her mother was at work she had signed for it, and dismissed the boy, before she spoke to the woman who painted so absently.

"It's a letter," she said, " a special delivery for you. I guess it's about the drawing you sent away last week. We were expecting some word."

With a start her mother came back from the land of her own creation, to reality. With listless hands she took the envelope from her daughter, and slit it open. Ellen watched her mother idly—so idly that at first she could scarcely believe what her eyes were seeing! For, as she stood watching, she saw her mother change completely and dreadfully. More dreadfully than she had changed on that other day, weeks before. In a minute she saw a lovely, white-haired woman become a broken, shriveled, parchment-cheeked figure.

"You're ill!" Ellen cried, as she started forward. "Was there bad news in the letter? You're upset—"

But when the answer came it wasn't an answer. For Ellen's mother, her hand again pressed to her breast, was rising. And as she rose to her feet, she was looking beyond Ellen. She swayed slightly—and then, as if she couldn't help it, she sat down again. But her voice was steady, though toneless, when she spoke.

"It's that indigestion, I guess," she said, gaspingly. And then—"Bring me my check book, dear. . . ."

Ellen didn't speak. She sensed a desperation in that toneless voice, a need of hurry. Turning, she ran into the house, scamped to the desk where the check book lay. She brought it, and a fountain pen and stationery, to her mother, and watched as her mother's shaking hand wrote a check—wrote it to what, in Ellen's knowledge of the family finances, was an alarming amount. It was only after the check was carefully made out to a strange name, and as carefully blotted, that the woman spoke again.

"Ellen," she said, "dear. Get your hat and take this, at once, to the post-office in the village. And send it special delivery, and register it."

Ellen, even in the face of her mother's tragic hurry, couldn't quite grasp the seriousness of the letter. Her mother's sudden illness seemed so much more important. "Too bad I didn't ask the boy to wait," she said. "He could just as well have taken the letter back."

"I couldn't," said her mother with a great effort, "have trusted it to anyone else, this letter! You'd have had to take it, anyway. . . . And I'm glad—remember that, always, Ellen!—that is just about all the money I have. I'm utterly grateful that there was enough. And—I don't want a doctor. I'm not ill. I'm never ill. . . ."

She rose again. She turned heavily away, toward the house. And Ellen, with no other word, but clutching the envelope, went out of the garden and started toward. She walked so fast that she didn't have time to wonder about anything. But she reached the post-office with a good margin of minutes, and followed her mother's instructions soberly, and started back home.

The way back led past the doctor's square white house. He wasn't in. But she left a message with the doctor's aged housekeeper—who eyed her with a frank curiosity—and hurried on.

"Mother'll be cross," she told herself, as she scuffed her feet along in the dust of the road—"because I've asked the doctor to stop by. But she can't go on, having these funny spells! I wonder who the letter was from."

The letter! Ellen couldn't help being curious about it—couldn't help feeling that it held the elements of mystery. It didn't, of that she was sure, relate to business, for what business dealings could have to do with such a large check? It must be something strange and ominous. It might almost go back, across the years, to her father. And yet. . . .

The house lay in the last light of the setting sun, it was her world. Its four walls bounded all of her life, and her childhood, and her fragile store of experience. It was her home—surrounded by her garden.

Down the path she went, with its border of fading beauty, in through the wide opened door. In the hallway she paused for a moment before a dim mirror and automatically fluffed her hair. Suddenly, without knowing why she did it, she was calling wildly, was running toward the stairs. Screaming—"Mother! Mother darling! Where are you? Where are you—"

There was no answer, only a whispered echo from the quiet rooms. Ellen, with the cold fingers of dread touching her heart, found herself running up the flight of stairs that led to the second floor.

Ellen knocked, not too softly, upon the panel of her mother's door. And then when she heard no sound from within, she jerked the door open and paused, panting, upon the threshold.

At first, as she stood there, she

knew a great sense of relief. It was as she had supposed—her mother was lying on the bed, resting! As she tiptoed across the room, Ellen thought that her mother was really asleep. For her lips were smiling very beautifully, with their old magic; and her eyes were softly closed—it was as if, in truth, she were the sleeping beauty.

At first Ellen thought her mother was asleep. And then suddenly she knew completely and utterly, and with an overwhelming sense of aloneness, that her mother was not sleeping!

Perhaps it was something in the sweetness of her mother's smile. Perhaps it was something in the chill magic of the room. But Ellen knew surely. . . . And yet, knowing, she did not touch that still figure, and neither did she cry out. Instead she walked very close to the bed. And as she came close, she saw that her mother's fingers held a letter, ever so slightly crumpled. It was the letter that had come only the space of a few hours ago.

Ellen, scarcely knowing what she did, reached over and took the letter from her mother's hand. She smoothed out its wrinkles very methodically, and read.

And then, suddenly, she was lying on the floor, beside her mother's bed, sobbing out all of her heartache and her disillusionment and her pain.

For the letter, written with brutal frankness, in an untaught hand,

was from a woman. A woman who told of a man's death in a cheap lodging house in another state. "Toward the last," wrote the woman, "he spoke of you, often. But still and all, there wasn't any reason why he should have seen you! He'd stopped loving you—and he did love me. Maybe he thought you were well to do—and, at the end, he hadn't anything. And after all, you were his wife, for there was never any divorce. And now that there's no money for funeral expenses—well, of course, if you want charity to bury him. . . . But a grave and a marker and all the rest—" here she named a sum of money, a sum that Ellen had seen her mother write upon a check.

"I don't suppose, though," the letter ended, "that it matters much, now. Only he was sort of proud, always. . . ."

Ellen, sobbing, understood at last. But Ellen was never to know the details of her father's final degeneration, or of his death, or of his burial. All that she ever knew was that the last check her mother had written was returned, duly endorsed by some distant firm of undertakers, to the bank.

She never knew the final chapter of her mother's tragic story! But she did know, at last, why her mother had crept away from the city, from people—why she had tried to shield her only child from cities, and from people.

The darkness, creeping ghostlike

into a room of sadness and death and despair, brought with it a swift memory of the garden, the garden as it had been a month before.

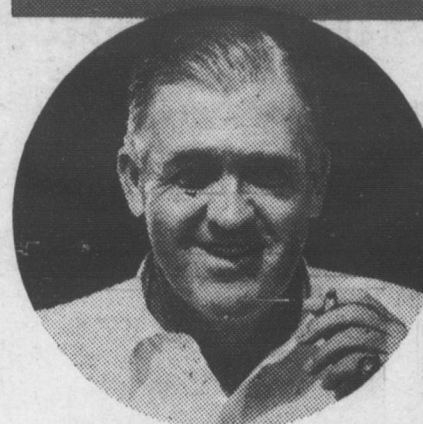
Through that darkness Ellen could hear the approaching rumble of the doctor's Ford. But she was aware of it subjectively. The only actual sound that she heard was the echo of her mother's voice, speaking. Saying—"Love lightly. Don't get intense

about love. Don't give anything . . . Take everything, but don't—"

Oh, it had been a magnificent lie! Ellen's hand, wet with her own tears, reached up to touch her mother's chill fingers that had been clenched upon a cruel letter.

Continued Next Week
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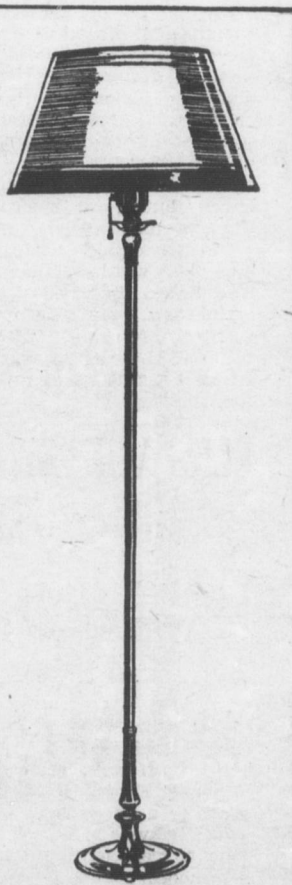
The lamp in this demonstrator is equipped with a lever which enables you to adjust the amount of light falling on the seeing task. This lever is moved slowly from left to right until the illumination is most comfortable for the task. The flap which covers a Sight Meter is then turned over and the illumination which your eyes have selected is measured accurately and scientifically.

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