

THE HEALING

by Beth Slater Whitson

"I won't go, Ellen; I'll give up the ministry first!" The Reverend James Lawton stood on the hearthrug of the parsonage sitting room and looked half defiantly at his wife who lay curled up on an old-fashioned lounge in a nest of cushions that yet signally failed to conceal the tragedy of a twisted, misshapen body.

Up to the time of her illness, three years before-which had resulted in a seemingly incurable spinal trouble – Lawton had been the most promising young minister in the Conference to which he belonged. Since then, his popularity had steadily waned. Each year he had been given a poorer charge until at the close of the Annual Conference, two days previous when the appointments were read out, Lawton, with a feeling as of the earth closing about him, had heard himself assigned to a little mission away up, in the mountains-twenty miles from a railroad, and where the only guaranteed salary was the small appropriation made by the Conference board.

It had been a stunning blow to Lawton, who had expected to be returned to his present charge, at least, and had even entertained hopes of something better. The seeming injustice of sending a man of his ability to a place of such little importance – the kind of mission where "first year" preachers were customarily tried out – filled his soul with bitterness. And worst of all, the inhumanity of asking him to curry an Invalid wife to a place where she must necessarily be denied even the ordinary comforts of life.

Lawton was in a flaming state of rebellion by the time he reached home, and after telling his wife of the assignment, startled her by vehemently declaring his intentions of declining the appointment.

He doggedly repeated his determination like an angry small boy, and his wife suddenly smiled.

"Come over here, Jim," she commanded.

Lawton came and sat on the edge of the lounge, his face still grim. There was nothing humorous in the situation to him.

"Now let me talk for just five minutes without interruption." Ellen Lawton put out a pleading hand and touched her husband's. "It's like this, Jim," she began, "You have been steadily dropping behind in your work and in your studies because of me."

Lawton started a vigorous protest but she stopped him.

"Of course I know you have been too loyal to admit it even to yourself," she went on, "but it's true just the same. You have been spending too much time looking after my comforts and going about with me in search of new doctors. You haven't had sufficient leisure for your 'flocks' and consequently, they haven't wanted you back. Their dissatisfaction has reached the conference board of course, and that accounts for your being relegated to this backwoods mission."

"I refuse to be relegated," interposed Lawton quickly. "I'm not going!"

"Wait! I thought I was to have the floor for five minutes. You *are* going, Jim Lawton."

"I am *not*. It is two hundred miles across there and we'd have to drive through, for I positively haven't enough money to buy railway tickets, and besides, we would be twenty miles away at the nearest railroad station. I tell you, Ellen, I am not going. If they won't give me a circuit that will furnish us a decent, comfortable living, I'll chuck the ministry and do something that will!"

Ellen looked reproachful. "You know, Jim," she insisted, "that it isn't the ministry that is responsible for our present state. It is the big; fat, prosperous doctors who didn't discover they could do nothing for me until they had drained us of our last cent. All but the last one, Jim –" her voice faltered, "he was honest, at least, for he might have held out hope until we could get another fee together, and he only charged for telling the truth-"

Lawton's eyes filled. "Hush, Ellen," he pleaded. "I didn't accept his verdict as final, and anyway, even he acknowledged that Nature might do something."

They clasped each other's hands for a moment in wistful silence--the little woman with the crooked back, who knew herself to be the cause of her husband's failure--the strong man who had neglected duty for her sake.

It was Ellen who broke the silence. "When do we go, Jim?" she asked.

"We are not going at all, Ellen," Lawton insisted passionately. "I gave up a two hundred dollar a month job to go into a ministry that offered me a niggardly "twelve" and if they find they have nothing better for me than this, I am ready to stop."

"You'll do nothing of the sort, Jim Lawton," Ellen protested. "You will go to your mission and I with you. If you don't I'll – I'll go back home – so help me!" She laughed but her eyes were wet and troubled.

The anger in Lawton's face died suddenly. "You would let me drag you off to that out-of-the-world place," he cried, "where the owls hoot at noon-day, where the great shadow of the mountain is never lifted, and the silence is maddening!"

"I would find it restful," murmured Ellen.

"You think that because you know nothing about it, Ellen," Lawton rejoined. He got up and walked about the room restlessly.

"I taught a school in the mountains once," he continued presently, "and it was awful. The houses are so open you would never survive a winter in one of them, and I shall never forget the terrible oppressive loneliness."

"But I wasn't with you then," Ellen interrupted. "Now, you would be so busy taking care of your flock, Jim, and of me, you would never have time to be lonely."

Lawton was silent a moment. "The ignorance or those mountain people, too, is appalling, Ellen," he said at last.

"So much greater their need of a real teacher," she returned quickly.

"Are you in earnest, Ellen?" demanded Lawton, sitting down again and turning his wife's face to the light. "You can't be. O – It's simply out of the question," he finished impatiently.

"Very well, Jim," Ellen spoke quietly, "You will please pack my trunk, for I'm going back home. I refuse to live with a man who shirks his duty."

"You can't mean it, Ellen?" Lawton's voice was appealing.

"I can, and do mean it," she answered firmly. "Either we go to your mission or I so back home. Of course," she went on, "it won't be much of a loss to you – a poor – crooked – almost helpless creature like -"

Lawton stopped her with a hurting cry. "Ellen! How could you. O, how could you say that?" he reproached, taking the small, distorted body in his arms.

"We will go to the mission, Jim," she whispered.

"Of course, since you insist."

"Tomorrow?"

"We will start tomorrow."

Ellen gave a great Sigh of relief and lifted a lovely, mischievous face. "I was awfully scared for a moment, Jim," she confessed, "that you were going to consent for me to go home and I'd have been obliged to admit that I didn't want to."

"You spoiled child," smiled Lawton, sadly, "You deserve to be sent to a mountain mission."



A tired horse and two tired-looking people stopped before the one blacksmith.

A group of lanky mountaineers sat on empty nail kegs In front of the shop, whittling industriously, and when Lawton, halting, asked if some one of them could direct him to the place where the minister usually stayed. One of the lankest of the group came out and leaned on the buggy wheel.

"He jest stays about heah and thar amongst the folks," he drawled. "Air you the new preacher, mister?"

A look of dismay came over Lawton's face, at the announcement. He was travel-stained and weary, and the prospect of "staying around" was far from pleasing.

"Yes," he began with dignity, "I am the new –"

Ellen nudged him. "Preacher," she whispered.

"Minister," finished Lawton stubbornly. "and I would be very glad if you could tell me where I might possibly find board for my wife and-myself."

A twinkle came in the mountain man's shrewd blue eyes: "You might try down to old man Sam Hoganses, jest down the road. He's the store-keeper."

When, with a word of thanks, Lawton had driven on, the group behind became suddenly hilarious. "Won't old Sam be hoppin' mad?" one asked. "What'd you have agin the preacher, Jim?"

"Nothin'," acknowledged the one who had given the information, "exceptin' he called hisself a minister and his wife a tellin' him to say 'preacher', all the time."

The others roared again, but there was nothing malicious in their laughter. "He looks kinder diff'rnt from the tothers we've had," one remarked casually. "I'm sort'a sor'y you sent him down to Sam's. I guess I'll jest drop erround after supper an' see what he done."

Sam was passing a twist of home-made tobacco across the counter to a grizzled customer when the door opened. A bunch of loafers already sat about the store, and the new comer, drawing up an empty soap box, joined the little circle with a nod of greeting. He directed a stream of tobacco juice at the red-hot stove and winked slyly at the group.

"Say, Sam," he called, "I hear you air boardin' the new preacher."

"Who in th' hell acquainted you with that id'y?" Sam snorted. "Some low, cheap-minded cuss," he went on, "sent that thar parson down here a-knowin' my feelin's fer preachers in gen'ral. I'm a-layin' fer whoever done it, too. I wuz so dern mad I cuss't right b'fore the lady without a-thnkln', Ol' Mis' Loomis was in here and said she'd take'm to board and the feller didn't stay to make me no ans'er. He didn't show no si'n of fight, a'tall, Mat. Looks like these here dern preachers ain't got no sper'lt nohow. I jest--"

Sam didn't finish, for at that psychological instant the door opened again, and a man of about half his size came in like a young whirlwind and without a word, and before the gaping audience could recover from their momentary paralysis, he had given Sam, the mountain pugilist, the first thorough threshing of his life, and walked out with all the meekness of a lamb.

The onlookers sat in breathless, bewildered silence for a moment. "The new preacher!" one finally gasped.

The first Sunday of Lawton's pastorate, a curious crowd packed the little log church, many of them having come, as they frankly admitted to each other, to see the man who had "bested" Sam Hogan. Sam himself was conspicuously present in the third row from the front.

A crude people and a crude place of worship, thought Lawton.

Outside, in beautiful contrast, feathery pine branches brushed softly against the gray shingled roof, and the ground beneath was thickly carpeted with the fallen needles. The late autumn sunshine, filtering through the dense foliage, crept in through the small windows, making little puddles of gold in the dusky interior.

Suddenly the sight of Ellen's face in the congregation, shining with an expression of rapt spirituality, smote him with a sense of his unworthiness, and sent the hot, shamed blood to his face. And in that instant a miracle was wrought. *Lawton had a vision of service for the first time in his life.* For the first time he was able to see the ministry at this mountain mission in the light of a rare privilege. A willingness to serve in whatever capacity God might see fit to use him, was born in his heart, effacing the old desire for his own advancement, for the time being, at least. And, actuated by an unexplainable impulse, he closed the Bible which lay open before him, and stepping down from the little rude pulpit, began speaking slowly, as if carefully choosing and weighing each word.

"I came with the intention of preaching to you this morning," he said, meeting Ellen's questioning look, "but I feel that I cannot do it until I tell you something about the man I am, or was when I came among you. I was sent here because I had been remiss in my duty toward other churches that have been in my charge. I came unwillingly, for this was not the kind of church I thought I had been fitting myself for. I wanted one able to pay a large salary and furnish me all the comforts of life. I intended giving up the ministry but my wife refused to stay with me if I did so, and that is how I happen to stand before you today."

A look of amazement passed over the faces of the congregation.

"I came unwillingly," repeated Lawton, "but since I entered this house a different feeling has taken possession of me. I want to be one of you. I want to serve in any way possible."

He paused, and the silence became oppressive. Then suddenly, Ellen was standing, facing the mountain people, by his side – her affliction glaringly apparent even in the dusky room, but her face shining with the light of inspiration.

"Friends," she said in a sweet, low voice, "you are wondering what to do with a man who tells you he has failed in his duty. My husband neglected to tell you the more important part, though, -- why he failed. Look at me, friends," she commanded. "You will find it hard to believe, perhaps, but three years ago I was as strong and as straight in body as any one among you. For twelve long weeks I was ill with a dreadful fever and when it left me at last, I was all crooked and twisted as you see me now, and my husband has spent the better part of three years trying to find something or someone to

cure me. The last doctor we went to, told us there was no chance for me unless Nature did something, so we have almost given up all hope-but if we can be of use to some one, perhaps we shall both be able to forget my affliction. We -"

The listeners had been avidly drinking in every word, a look of dawning apprehension on their faces, and before Ellen could finish her sentence, a tall mountaineer rose with a look of mingled embarrassment and eagerness.

"Neighbors," he said, "we ain't the kind o' folks that want a minister a-ministerln' to us who has left his duty undone on purpose, but accordin' to my jedgment we ain't got that kind, and I rec'omend we git t'gether an' do a duty we bin a leavin' undone oursel's fer a long spell. Sam axed me to make a moshun we put up a house fer the preacher – ain't that so Sam?"

The speaker sat down, and to Lawton's intense astonishment, the storekeeper whom he had roundly flogged, rose and seconded the motion for the new house.

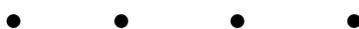
"Mister Preacher," he, continued, with a twinkle in his keen eyes, "we ain't had nothin' up here but white-livered preachers in sech a long while I had jest erbout lost respeck fer the perresh'n until you come erlong the tother ntght – and – and -" He paused and grinned shamefacedly. / ain't convairted and I ain't agoin' to jine no church," he resumed, presently, "but I'm agoin' to be one of the fellers what helps put up that house we air talkin' erbout – and I say right here, tomorrer's a good time as any to begin on it. What you say, neighbors?"

A dozen voices shouted agreement in unison, and before Ellen and Lawton could' recover from their bewilderment, the meeting had broken up of its own accord and they were surrounded by the most hospitable people they had ever known, all of them asking for a "visit" while the house was being "raised."

Lawton's eyes held a new light when he finally went out from the little church – the light of renewed faith.

A cabin of three rooms sprang up as if by magic – the mountain men working with the enthusiasm of children, and within two weeks Lawton and Ellen were snugly settled for the winter – their pretty bits of furniture objects of wonder and admiration to the simple, kindly people who had never been away from Pineville.

The first evening in the new home was marked by a steady stream of visitors, of whom none came empty handed, and when the last one had gone, the pantry was stuffed with good things – something of everything the mountain afforded, from a barrel of flour sent by Sam Hogan, to a bag of wild nuts brought shyly by a mountain child – had been left them, and Ellen and Lawton looked at the offering with swelling hearts.



It was autumn again and Ellen stood in the door of the mountain house, watching the road with eager eyes.

The first eight months of Lawton's ministry had passed tranquilly. Each week had brought them in closer touch and sympathy with the people, and each week had disclosed to them some new and lovable quality beneath the rough exterior of some mountain man or woman.

Daily the awkward mountain girls had taken turn-about slipping in unobtrusively and performing the household duties for Ellen, and she in turn, was soon interesting them in books and had begun teaching a little night-class, which grew until it tested the standing capacity of the small sitting room.

Lawton, who had spent a year in an agricultural college, frequently dropped into the nail-keg and soap-box circle and told them interesting things of methods employed for improvement of poor lands, and things he had learned about fruit growing – the principle occupation of the mountaineers. And they, to his secret surprise, listened eagerly and began applying some of the rules he gave them.

For eight months things ran on in this peaceful, happy fashion, then, suddenly, like the proverbial bolt from a clear sky, an epidemic of typhoid broke out, claiming victim after victim, and seemingly paralyzing the mountain people with fear.

Week after week, the one doctor, and Lawton and Ellen worked tirelessly; and day after day passed when Lawton and Ellen saw each other only at the bed-side of some sufferer, and then only to exchange a few words of dismay at the sight of a life slipping away in spite of their zealous efforts.

A month had gone by since the last case had convalesced, and Ellen, watching for Lawton, who had gone to attend conference a few days before, had a soft glow on either cheek, and there was a hint of excitement in her manner as she waited for her husband.

It was late when he came into view, driving the faithful horse which had brought them a year before.

"Jim," Ellen cried, before he reached the gate, "are we going to stay?"

Lawton, without stopping to tie his horse, came up the path on a run. "We are," he shouted boyishly – are you glad?" he questioned, kissing her, and looking at her in a puzzled way.

Of course," she smiled, "I wouldn't have changed this year for anything. Did they offer you another appointment, Jim," anxiously.

"Yes – Zionsburg – but I asked to be returned here."

Ellen's eyes grew big. "They'll be calling you to the Bishop's chair next."

Lawton laughed. "Your faith in me is wonderful, Ellen," he said, leading the way to the sitting-room, where a wood-fire blazed a welcome.

"I've some more news, Ellen," he continued, still holding her hand as they stood together on the hearth-rug. "Uncle Sam stopped me as I came through, and he's going to join the church – says he has found the light. He's a grand old character."

"It's wonderful, the ways of God," he went on, musingly, "I believe I was sent here to work out my own salvation, Ellen. I was an egotistical fool when I came."

Ellen put up a protesting hand.

"It's quite true," Lawton persisted, "but I'm a better man – I can even bear the thought of your affliction better and I was so rebellious."

Ellen drew her hand away and moving to the window, stood with the light of the sunset making a wonderful background. "Jim," she said softly, "before you say anything further, I want to call your attention to something still more wonderful than the change in you. A miracle has been slowly performed before your very eyes, and you have not seen it. Look at me closely. Jim," she commanded. And as Lawton stared – for the instant uncomprehending – she flung out her arms with a superb gesture of freedom and with a swift movement, lifted her slender shoulders and stood before him, marvelously straight and lovely in body once more.

"Ellen!" Lawton gasped, and stood in astonished silence.

"God sent us both here to be healed," Ellen cried triumphantly, coming swiftly to his suddenly outstretched arms.

From: People's Popular Monthly
Vol. 20, No. 11, Pg. 5
November, 1915