

## CHAPTER XII

The New England town of Willowfield was a place of great importance. Its importance--religious, intellectual, and social--was its strong point. It took the liberty of asserting this with unflinching dignity. Other towns might endeavour to struggle to the front, and, indeed, did so endeavour, but Willowfield calmly held its place and remained unmoved. Its place always had been at the front from the first, and there it took its stand. It had, perhaps, been hinted that its sole title to this position lay in its own stately assumption: but this, it may be argued, was sheer envy and entirely unworthy of notice.

"Willowfield is not very large or very rich," its leading old lady said, "but it is important and has always been considered so."

There was society in Willowfield, society which had taken up its abiding-place in three or four streets and confined itself to developing its importance in half a dozen families--old families. They were always spoken of as the "old families," and, to be a member of one of them, even a second or third cousin of weak mind and feeble understanding, was to be enclosed within the magic circle outside of which was darkness, wailing, and gnashing of teeth. There were the Stornaways, who had owned the button factory for nearly a generation and a half--which was a long time; the Downings, who had kept the feed-store for quite thirty years, and the Burtons, who had been doctors for almost as long, not to mention the

Larkins, who had actually founded the Willowfield Times, and kept it going, which had scarcely been expected of them at the outset.

Their moral, mental, and social gifts notwithstanding, there was nothing connected with the Stornaways, the Downings, the Burtons, and the Larkins of such importance as their antiquity. The uninformed outsider, on hearing it descanted upon, might naturally have been betrayed into the momentary weakness of expecting to see Mr. Downing moulder away, and little old Doctor Burton crumble into dust.

"They belong," it was said, with the temperateness of true dignity, "to our old families, and that is something, you know, even in America."

"It has struck me," an observing male visitor once remarked, "that there are a good many women in Willowfield, and that altogether it has a feminine tone."

It was certainly true that among the Stornaways, the Downings, the Burtons, and the Larkins, the prevailing tone was feminine; and as the Stornaways, the Downings, the Burtons, and the Larkins comprised Willowfield society, and without its society Willowfield lost its significance, the observing male visitor may not have been far wrong. If mistakes were made in Willowfield society, they were always made by the masculine members of it. It was Mr. Stornaway who had at one time been betrayed into the blunder of inviting to a dinner-party at his house a rather clever young book-keeper in his employ, and it was Doctor Burton

who had wandered still more glaringly from the path of rectitude by taking a weak, if amiable, interest in a little music teacher with a sweet, tender voice, even going so far as to request his family to call upon her and ask her to take tea with them. It was Mr. Downing, who, when this last incident occurred and created some sensation, had had the temerity to intimate that he thought the Doctor was entirely in the right; though, to be sure, he had afterwards been led to falter in this opinion and subside into craven silence, being a little gentleman of timorous and yielding nature, and rather overborne by a large and powerful feminine majority in his own household. Mr. Larkin was, it is to be regretted, the worst of the recreant party, being younger and more unmanageable, having not only introduced to public notice certain insignificant though somewhat talented persons in the shape of young men and women who talked well, or sang well, or wielded lively pens, but had gone to the length of standing by them unflinchingly, demanding civility for them at the hands of his own family of women in such a manner as struck a deadly blow at the very foundations of the social structure. But Mr. Larkin--he was known as Jack Larkin to an astonishing number of people--was a bold man by nature and given to deeds of daring, from the fatal consequences of which nothing but the fact that he was a member of one of the "old families" could have saved him. As he was a part--and quite a large part--of one of these venerable households, and, moreover, knew not the fear of man--or woman--his failings could be referred to as "eccentricities."

"Mr. Larkin," Mrs. Stornaway frequently observed, with long-suffering

patience, "is talented but eccentric. You are never quite sure what he will do next."

Mrs. Stornaway was the head and front of all Willowfield's social efforts, and represented the button factory with a lofty grace and unbending dignity of demeanour which were the admiration and envy of all aspirants to social fame. It was said that Mrs. Stornaway had been a beauty in her youth, and there were those who placed confidence in the rumour. Mrs. Stornaway did so herself, and it had been intimated that it was this excellent lady who had vouched for the truth of the statement in the first instance; but this report having been traced to a pert young relative who detested and derided her, might have had its origin in youthful disrespect and malice.

At present Mrs. Stornaway was a large blonde woman whose blondness was not fairness, and whose size was not roundness. She was the leader of all religious and charitable movements, presiding with great vigour over church matters, fairs, concerts, and sewing societies. The minister of her church submitted himself to her advice and guidance. All the modest members of the choir quailed and quavered before her, while even the bold ones, meeting her eye when engaged in worldly conversation between their musical efforts, momentarily lost their interest and involuntarily straightened themselves.

Towards her family Mrs. Stornaway performed her duty with unflinching virtue. She had married her six daughters in a manner at once creditable

to herself, themselves, and Willowfield. Five of them had been rather ordinary, depressed-looking girls, who, perhaps, were not sorry to obtain their freedom. The sixth had narrowly escaped being dowered with all the charms said to have adorned Mrs. Stornaway's own youth.

"Agnes is very like what I was at her age," said her mother, with dignity; and perhaps she was, though no one had been able to trace any resemblance which had defied the ravages of time.

Agnes had made a marriage which in some points was better than those of her sisters. She had married a brilliant man, while the other five had been obliged to make the best of things as far as brilliancy was concerned. People always said of John Baird that he was a brilliant man and that a great career lay before him. He was rather remarkable for a curious subtle distinction of physical good looks. He was not of the common, straight-featured, personable type. It had been said by the artistic analyst of form and line that his aspect did not belong to his period, that indeed his emotional, spirited face, with its look of sensitiveness and race, was of the type once connected with fine old steel engravings of young poets not quite beyond the days of powdered hair and frilled shirt-bosoms.

"It is absurd that he should have been born in America and in these days," a brilliant person had declared. "He always brings to my mind the portraits in delightful old annuals, 'So-and-so--at twenty-five.'"

His supple ease of movement and graceful length of limb gave him an air of youth. He was one of the creatures to whom the passage of years would mean

but little, but added charm and adaptability. His eyes were singularly living things--the eyes that almost unconsciously entreat and whose entreaty touches one; the fine, irregular outline of his profile was the absolute expression of the emotional at war with itself, the passionate, the tender, the sensitive, and complex. The effect of these things was almost the effect of peculiar physical beauty, and with this he combined the allurements of a compelling voice and an enviable sense of the fitness of things. He never lost a thought through the inability to utter it. When he had left college, he had left burdened with honours and had borne with him the enthusiastic admiration of his fellow-students. He had earned and worn his laurels with an ease and grace which would be remembered through years to come.

"It's something," it was once said, "to have known a fellow to whom things came so easily."

When he had entered the ministry, there had been some wonder expressed among the men who had known him best, but when he preached his first sermon at Willowfield, where there was a very desirable church indeed, with whose minister Mrs. Stornaway had become dissatisfied, and who in consequence was to be civilly removed, the golden apple fell at once into his hand.

Before he had arrived he had been spoken of rather slightly as "the young man," but when he rose in the pulpit on the eventful Sunday morning, such a thrill ran through the congregation as had not stirred it at its devotions for many a summer day. Mrs. Stornaway mentally decided for him upon the spot.

"He is of one of our oldest families," she said. "This is what Willowfield wants."

He dined with the Stornaways that day, and when he entered the parlour the first figure his eyes fell upon was that of Agnes Stornaway, dressed in white muslin, with white roses in her belt. She was a tall girl, with a willowy figure and a colourless fairness of skin, but when her mother called her to her side and Baird touched her hand, she blushed in such a manner that Mrs. Stornaway was a little astonished. Scarcely a year afterward she became Mrs. Baird, and people said she was a very fortunate girl, which was possibly true.

Her husband did not share the fate of most ministers who had presided over Mrs. Stornaway's church. His power over his congregation increased every year. His name began to be known in the world of literature; he was called upon to deliver in important places the lectures he had delivered to his Willowfield audiences, and the result was one startling triumph after another. There was every indication of the fact that a career was already marked out for him.

Willowfield looked forward with trepidation to the time when the great world which stood ready to give him fame would absorb him altogether, but in the meantime it exerted all its power of fascination, and was so far successful that the Reverend John Baird felt that his lines had indeed fallen in pleasant places.

But after the birth of her little daughter his wife was not strong, and was so long in regaining vitality that in the child's second year she was ordered abroad by the physician. At this time Baird's engagements were such that he could not accompany her, and accordingly he remained in America. The career was just opening up its charmed vistas to him; his literary efforts were winning laurels; he was called upon to lecture in Boston and New York, and he never rose before an audience without at once awakening an enthusiasm.

Mrs. Baird went to the south of France with her child and nurse and a party of friends, and remained there for a year. At the termination of that time, just as she thought of returning home, she was taken seriously ill. Her husband was sent for and went at once to join her. In a few months she had died of rapid decline. She had been a delicate girl, and a far-off taint of consumption in her family blood had reasserted itself. But though Mrs. Stornaway bewailed her with diffuse and loud pathos and for a year swathed her opulence of form in deepest folds and draperies of crape, the quiet fairness and slightness which for some five and twenty years had been known as Agnes Stornaway, had been a personality not likely to be a marked and long-lingering memory.



The child was placed with a motherly friend in Paris. For a month after his wife's death Baird had been feverishly, miserably eager to return to America. Those about him felt that the blow which had fallen upon him might affect his health seriously. He seemed possessed by a desperate, morbid desire to leave the scene of the calamity behind him. He was restless and feverish in his anxiety, and scarcely able to endure the delay which the arrangement of his affairs made necessary. He had not been well when he had left Willowfield, and during his watching by his wife's bedside he had grown thin and restless-eyed.

"I want to get home. I must get home," he would exclaim, as if involuntarily. His entire physical and mental condition were strained and unnatural. His wife's doctor, who had become his own doctor as his health deteriorated, was not surprised, on arriving one day, to find him prostrated with nervous fever. He was ill for months, and he rose from his sick-bed a depressed shadow of his former self and quite unable to think of returning to his charge, even if his old desire had not utterly left him with his fever. He was absent from Willowfield for two years, and when at length he turned his face homeward, it was with no eagerness. He had passed through one of those phases which change a man's life and being. If he had been a rich man he would have remained away and would have lived in London, seeing much of the chief continental cities. As it was, he must at least temporarily return to Willowfield and take with him his little girl.

On the day distinguished by his return to his people, much subdued excitement prevailed in Willowfield. During the whole of the previous week Mrs. Stornaway's carriage had paid daily visits to the down-town stores. There was a flourishing New England thrift among the Stornaways, the Larkins, the Downings, and the Burtons, which did not allow of their delegating the ordering of their households to assistants. Most of them were rigorous housewives, keen at a bargain and sharp of tongue when need be, and there was rarely any danger of their getting less than their money's worth.

To celebrate his arrival, Mrs. Stornaway was to give an evening party which was to combine congratulatory welcome with a touch of condolence for the past and assurance for the future.

"We must let him see," said Mrs. Stornaway, "that Willowfield has its attractions."

Its attractions did not present themselves as vividly to John Baird as might have been hoped, when he descended from the train at the depot. He had spent two or three days in Boston with a view to taking his change gradually, but he found himself not as fully prepared for Willowfield as he could have wished. He was not entirely prepared for Mrs. Stornaway, who hurried towards them with exultation on her large, stupid face, and, after effusive embraces, bustled with them towards an elderly woman who had evidently accompanied her.

"See, here's Miss Amory Starkweather!" she exclaimed. "She came with me to meet you. Just see how Annie's grown, Miss Amory."

Miss Amory was a thin woman with a strong-featured countenance and deep-set, observing eyes. They were eyes whose expression suggested that they had made many painful discoveries in the course of their owner's life.

John Baird rather lighted up for a moment when he caught sight of her.

"I am glad to see you, Miss Amory," he said.

"Thank you," she answered. "I hope you are as well as you look."

"We're so delighted," Mrs. Stornaway announced, as if to the bystanders.

"Everybody in Willowfield is so delighted to have you back again. The church has not seemed the same place. The man who took your place--Mr. Jeramy, you know--you haven't any idea how unpopular----"

"Excuse me," said Baird, "I must speak to Latimer. Where is Latimer, Annie?"

"Who is Latimer?" asked Mrs. Stornaway.

"Excuse me," said Baird again, and turning back towards the platform, he disappeared among the crowd with Annie, who had clung to his hand.

"Why, he's gone!" proclaimed Mrs. Stornaway. "But where's he gone? Why didn't he stay? Who's Latimer?"

"Latimer!" Miss Amory echoed, "you ought to know him. His family lives in Willowfield. He is the man who was coming home to take charge of the little church at Janway's Mills. He has evidently crossed the Atlantic with them."

"Well, now, I declare," proclaimed Mrs. Stornaway. "It must be the man who took his sister to Europe. It was a kind of absurd thing. She died away--the girl did, and people wondered why he did not come back and how he lived. Why, yes, that must be the man." And she turned to look about for him.

Miss Amory Starkweather made a slight movement.

"Don't look," she said. "He might not like to be stared at."

"They're quite common people," commented Mrs. Stornaway, still staring. "They live in a little house in a side street. They had very silly ideas about the girl. They thought she was a genius and sent her to the School of Art in Boston, but it wasn't long before her health failed her. Ah! I guess that must be the man talking to Mr. Baird and Annie. He looks as if he would go off in a consumption."

He was a tall, hollow-chested man, with a dark, sallow face and an ungainly figure. There were suggestions of both ill-health and wretchedness in his appearance, and his manner was awkward and embarrassed. Two human beings more utterly unlike each other than himself and the man who held his hand could not possibly have been found. It was Baird who held his hand, not he Baird's, and it was Baird who seemed to speak while he listened, while with his free hand he touched the hair of the child Annie.

"Well," remarked Mrs. Stornaway, "Mr. Baird seems to have taken a fancy to him. I don't think he's attractive myself. Are they going to talk to him all day?"

"No," said Miss Amory, "he is going now."

He was going. Baird had released his hand and he was looking in a gloomy, awkward way at Annie, as if he did not know how to make his adieux. But Annie, who was a simple child creature, solved the difficulty for him with happy readiness. She flung both her small arms about his ungainly body and held up her face.

"Kiss me three times," she said; "three times."

Latimer started and flushed. He looked down at her and then glanced rather timidly at Baird.

"Kiss her," said Baird, "it will please her--and it will please me."

Latimer bent himself to the child's height and kissed her. The act was without grace, and when he stood upright he was more awkward and embarrassed than ever. But the caress was not a cold or rough one, and when he turned and strode away the flush was still on his sallow cheek.