CHAPTER XIII

The Stornaway parlours were very brilliant that evening in a Willowfield sense. Not a Burton, a Larkin, or a Downing was missing, even Miss Amory Starkweather being present. Miss Amory Starkweather was greatly respected by the Stornaways, the Downings, the Larkins, and the Burtons, the Starkweathers having landed upon Plymouth Rock so early and with such a distinguished sense of their own importance as to lead to the impression in weak minds that they had not only founded that monumental corner-stone of ancestry, but were personally responsible for the Mayflower. This gentlewoman represented to the humorous something more of the element of comedy than she represented to herself. She had been born into a world too narrow and provincial for the development of the powers born with her. She had been an ugly girl and an ugly woman, marked by the hopeless ugliness of a long, ill-proportioned face, small eyes, and a nose too large and high--that ugliness which even love's eyes can scarcely ameliorate into good drawing.

The temperament attached to these painful disabilities had been warm and strongly womanly. Born a century or so earlier, in a French Court, or any great world vivid with picturesque living, she would in all probability have been a remarkable personage, her ugliness a sort of distinction; but she had been born in Willowfield, and had lived its life and been bound by its limits. She had been comfortably well off--she had a large square

house with a garden, an income sufficient to provide for extremely respectable existence in Willowfield, but not large enough to allow of experiments with the outside world. She had never met a man whom she could have loved, who would have loved her, and she was essentially--though Willowfield would never have dreamed it--a woman who should have loved and mated. A lifetime of narrow, unstimulating years and thwarted instincts had made age treat her ill. She was a thin woman with burning eyes, and a personality people were afraid of.

She had always found an interest in John Baird. When he had come to Willowfield she had seen in him that element which her whole long life had lacked. His emotional potentialities had wakened her imagination. If she had been a young woman she knew that she might have fallen tragically and hopelessly in love with him; as an old woman she found it well worth her while to watch him and speculate upon him. When he had become engaged to Agnes Stornaway, she had watched him and secretly wondered how the engagement would end; when it had ended in marriage she had not wondered, but she had seen many things other people did not see. "He is not in love with her," had been her mental decision, "but he is emotional, and he is in love with her being in love with him. There is no foretelling what will come of it."

Baird had found himself attracted by Miss Amory. He did not know that if she had been young she would, despite her ugliness, have had a powerful

feminine effect on him. He used to go and talk to her, and he was not conscious that he went when he was made restless by a lack of something in the mental atmosphere about him. He could talk to her as he could not talk to the rest of Willowfield. She read and thought and argued with herself, and as a product of a provincial dogmatic New England town was a curious development.

"Were you once a brilliant, wicked, feminine mover of things in some old French court?" he said to her once.

They had been plunging deep into the solving of unsolvable problems, and she turned her burning old eyes on him as she answered.

"God knows what I was," she said, "but it was nothing like this--nothing like this--and I was not wicked."

"No," Baird replied, "you were not wicked; but you broke laws."

"Yes, I broke laws," she agreed; "but they were hideous laws--better broken than kept."

She had been puzzled by the fact that after his wife left him he had had a restless period and had seemed to pass through a miserable phase, such as a man suffering from love and longing might endure.

"Has he fallen in love with her because she has gone away?" she wondered;

"men are capable of it at times."

But later she decided mentally that this was not his special case. She saw, however, that he was passing through some mental crisis which was a dangerous struggle. He was restless and often away from Willowfield for two or three days at a time.

"To provide the place with orthodox doctrine once a week is more than he can bear, and to be bored to extinction into the bargain makes him feel morbid," she said to herself. "I hope he won't begin to be lured by things which might produce catastrophe."

Once he came and spent a long, hot summer evening with her, and when he went away she had arrived at another decision, and it made her wretched.

"He is lured," she thought. "I cannot help him, and God knows Willowfield could not. After this--perhaps the Deluge."

She saw but little of him for two months, and then he was called across the Atlantic by his wife's illness and left the place.

"Write to me now and then," he said, when he came to bid her good-bye.

"What can I write about from Willowfield to a man in Paris?" she asked.

"About Willowfield," he answered, holding her hand and laughing a little

gruesomely. "There will be a thrill in it when one is three thousand miles away. Tell me about the church--about the people--who comes, who goes--your own points of view will make it all worth while. Will you?" almost as if a shade anxiously.

She felt the implied flattery just enough to be vaguely pleased by it.

"Yes, I will," she answered.

She kept her word, and the letters were worth reading. It was, as he had said, her points of view which gave interest to the facts that unexciting people had died, married, or been born. Her sketch of the trying position of the unpopular man who filled his pulpit and was unfavourably compared with him every Sunday morning was full of astute analysis and wit; her little picture of the gloomy young theological student, Latimer, his efforts for his sister, and her innocent, pathetic death in a foreign land had a wonderful realism of touch. She had by pure accident made the child's acquaintance and had been strongly touched and moved. She did not write often, but he read her letters many times over.

Upon this evening of his home-coming she thought he had sometimes the look of a man who felt that he walked in a dream. More than once she saw him involuntarily pass his hand with a swift movement over his eyes as if his own touch might waken him. It was true he did not greatly enjoy the festivities. His occasional views of Mrs. Stornaway as she rambled among her guests, talking to them about him in audible tones, were trying. She

dispensed him with her hospitalities, as it were, and was diffuse upon the extent of his travels and the attention paid him, to each member of the company in turn. He knew when she was speaking of himself and when of her daughter, and the alternate decorous sentiment and triumphant pleasure marked on her broad face rasped him to the extent of making him fear lest he might lose his temper.

"She is a stupid woman," he found himself saying half aloud once; "the most stupid woman I think I ever met."

Towards the end of the evening, as he entered the room, he found himself obliged to pass her. She stood near the door, engaged in animated conversation with Mrs. Downing. She had hit upon a new and absorbing topic, which had the additional charge of savouring of local gossip.

"Why," he heard her say, "I mean to ask him. He can tell us, I guess. I haven't a doubt but he heard the whole story. You know he has a way of drawing people out. He's so much tact and sympathy. I used to tell Agnes he was all tact and sympathy."

Feeling quite sure that it was himself who was "all tact and sympathy," Baird endeavoured to move by unobserved, but she caught sight of him and checked his progress.

"Mr. Baird," she said, "we're just talking about you."

"Don't talk about me," he said, lightly; "I am not half so culpable as I look."

He often found small change of this order could be made useful with Mrs. Stornaway, and he bestowed this upon her with an easy air which she felt to be very delightful.

"He's so ready," she observed, enraptured; "I often used to say to Agnes----"

But Mrs. Downing was not to be defrauded.

"We were talking about those people on Bank Street," she said, "the Latimers. Mrs. Stornaway says you crossed the Atlantic with the son, who has just come back. Do tell us something about him."

"I am afraid I cannot make him as interesting to you as he was to me," answered Baird, with his light air again.

"He does not look very interesting," said Mrs. Stornaway. "I never saw anyone so sallow; I can't understand Annie liking him."

"He is interesting," responded Baird. "Annie took one of her fancies to him, and I took something more than a fancy. We shall be good friends, I think."

"Well, I'm sure it's very kind of you to take such an interest," proclaimed Mrs. Stornaway. "You are always finding something good in people."

"I wish people were always finding something good in me," said John Baird. "It was not difficult to find good in this man. He is of the stuff they made saints and martyrs of in the olden times."

"What did the girl die of?" asked Mrs. Downing.

"What?" repeated Baird. "The girl? I don't know."

"And where did she die?" added Mrs. Downing.

"I was just saying," put in Mrs. Stornaway, "that you had such a sympathetic way of drawing people out that I was sure he had told you the whole story."

"There was not much story," Baird answered, "and it was too sad to talk over. The poor child went abroad and died in some little place in Italy--of consumption, I think."

"I suppose she was sick when they went," commented Mrs. Downing. "I heard so. It was a queer thing for them to go to Europe, as inexperienced as

they were and everything. But the father and mother were more inexperienced still, I guess. They were perfectly foolish about the girl--and so was the brother. She went to some studio in Boston to study art, and they had an idea her bits of pictures were wonderful."

"I never saw her myself," said Mrs. Stornaway. "No one seems to have seen anything of her but Miss Amory Starkweather."

"Miss Starkweather!" exclaimed Baird. "Oh, yes--in her letters she mentioned having met her."

"Well, it was a queer thing," said Mrs. Downing, "but it was like Miss Amory. They say the girl fainted in the street as Miss Amory was driving by, and she stopped her carriage and took her in and carried her home. She took quite a fancy to her and saw her every day or so until she went away."

It was not unnatural that at this juncture John Baird's eyes should wander across the room to where Miss Amory Starkweather sat, but it was a coincidence that as his eye fell upon her she should meet it with a gesture which called him to her side.

"It seems that Miss Amory wishes to speak to me," he said to his companions.

"He'll make himself just as interesting to her as he has made himself to

us," said Mrs. Stornaway, with heavy sprightliness, as he left them. "He never spares himself trouble."

He went across the room to Miss Amory.

"Can you sit down by me?" she said. "I want to talk to you about Lucien Latimer."

"What is there in the atmosphere which suggests Latimer?" he inquired. "We have been talking about him at the other side of the room. Do you know him?"

"I never saw him," she replied, "but I knew her."

"Her!" he repeated.

"The little sister." She leaned forward a little. "What were the details of her death?" she asked. "I want to know--I want to know."

Somehow the words sounded nervously eager.

"I did not ask him," he answered; "I thought he preferred to be silent. He is a silent man."

She sat upright again, and for a moment seemed to forget herself. She said something two or three times softly to herself. Baird thought it was

"Poor child! Poor child!"

"She was young to die," he said, in a low voice. "Poor child, indeed."

Miss Amory came back to him, as it were.

"The younger, the better," she said. "Look at me!" Her burning eyes were troubling and suggestive. Baird found himself trying to gather himself together. He assumed the natural air of kindly remonstrance.

"Oh, come," he said. "Don't take that tone. It is unfair to all of us."

Her reply was certainly rather a startling one.

"Very well then," she responded. "Look at yourself. If you had died as young as she did----"

He looked at her, conscious of a little coldness creeping over his body. She was usually lighter when they were not entirely alone. Just now, in the midst of this commonplace, exceedingly middle-class evening party, with the Larkins, the Downings, and the Burtons chattering, warm, diffuse, and elate, about him, she stirred him with a little horror--not horror of herself, but of something in her mood.

"Do you think I am such a bad fellow?" he said.

"No," she answered. "Worse, poor thing. It is not the bad fellows who produce the crudest results. But I did not call you here to tell you that you were bad or good. I called you to speak about Lucien Latimer. When you go to him--you are going to him?"

"To-morrow."

"Then tell him to come and see me."

"I will tell him anything you wish," said Baird. "Is there anything else?"

"Tell him I knew her," she answered, "Margery--Margery!"

"Margery," Baird said slowly, as if the sound touched him. "What a pretty, simple name!"

"She was a pretty, simple creature," said Miss Amory.

"Tell me--" he said, "tell me something more about her."

"There is nothing more to tell," she replied. "She was dying when I met her. I saw it--in her eyes. She could not have lived. She went away and died. She--I----"

John Baird heard a slight sharp choking sound in her throat.

"There!" she said presently, "I don't like to talk about it. I am too emotional for my years. Go to Mrs. Stornaway. She is looking for you."

He got up and turned and left her without speaking, and a few minutes later, when Mrs. Stornaway wanted him to give an account of his interview with the Pope, she was surprised to see him approaching her from the door as if he had been out of the room.

His story of the interview with the Pope was very interesting, and he was more "brilliant" than ever during the remainder of the evening, but when the last guest had departed, followed by Mrs. Stornaway to the threshold, that lady, on her return to the parlour, found him standing by the mantel looking at the fire with so profoundly wearied an air, that she uttered an exclamation.

"Why," she said, "you look tired, I must say. But everything went off splendidly and I never saw you so brilliant."

"Thank you," he answered.

"I've just been saying," with renewed spirit of admiration, "that your crossing with that Latimer has quite brought him into notice. It will be a good thing for him. I heard several people speak of him to-night and say how kind it was of you to take him up."

Baird stirred uneasily.

"I should not like to have that tone taken," he said. "Why should I patronise him? We shall be friends--if he will allow it." He spoke with so much heat and impatience that Mrs. Stornaway listened with a discomfited stare.

"But nobody knows anything about them," she said. "They're quite ordinary people. They live in Bank Street."

"That may settle the matter for Willowfield," said Baird, "but it does not settle it for me. We are to be friends, and Willowfield must understand that."

And such was the decision of his tone that Mrs. Stornaway did not recover herself and was still staring after him in a bewildered fashion when he went upstairs.

"But it's just like him," she remarked, rather weakly to the room's emptiness. "That's always the way with people of genius and--and--mind. They're always humble."