CHAPTER XIV

She had renewed opportunity for remarking upon the generous humility the next morning when he left the house with the intention of paying his visit to Bank Street.

"He's actually going," she said. "Well, I must say again it's just like him. There are very few men in his position who would think it worth while, but he treats everybody with just as much consideration as if--as if he was nobody."

The house on Bank Street was just what he had expected to find it--small, unornamental, painted white, and modestly putting forth a few vines as if with a desire to clothe itself, which had not been encouraged by Nature. The vines had not flourished and they, as well as the few flowers in the yard, were dropping their scant foliage, which turned brown and rustled in the autumn wind.

Before ringing the bell, Baird stood for a few moments upon the threshold. As he looked up and down the street, he was pale and felt chilly, so chilly that he buttoned his light overcoat over his breast and his hands even shook slightly as he did it. Then he turned and rang the bell.

It was answered by a little woman with a girlish figure and gray hair.

For a moment John Baird paused before speaking to her, as he had paused before ringing the bell, and in the pause, during which he found himself looking into her soft, childishly blue eyes, he felt even chillier than at first.

"Mrs. Latimer. I think," he said, baring his head.

"Yes," she answered, "and you are Mr. Baird and have come to see Lucien, I'm sure."

She gave him her small hand with a smile.

"I am very glad to see you," she said, "and Lucien will be glad, too. Come in, please."

She led the way into the little parlour, talking in a voice as soft and kindly as her eyes. Lucien had been out, but had just come in, she fancied, and was probably upstairs. She would go and tell him.

So, having taken him into the room, she went, leaving him alone. When she was gone, Baird stood for a moment listening to her footsteps upon the stairs. Then he crossed the room and stood before the hearth looking up at a picture which hung over the mantel.

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He was still standing before it when she returned with her son. He turned slowly to confront them, holding out his hand to Latimer with something less of alert and sympathetic readiness than was usual with him. There was in his manner an element which corresponded with the lack of colour and warmth in his face.

"I've been looking at this portrait of your--of----" he began.

"Of Margery," put in the little mother. "Everyone looks at Margery when they come in. It seems as if the child somehow filled the room." And though her soft voice had a sigh in it, she did not speak in entire sadness.

John Baird looked at the picture again. It was the portrait of a slight small girl with wistful eyes and an innocent face.

"I felt sure that it was she," he said in a lowered voice, "and you are quite right in saying that she seems to fill the room."

The mother put her hand upon her son's arm. He had turned his face towards the window. It seemed to Baird that her light touch was at once an appeal and a consolation.

"She filled the whole house when she was here," she said; "and yet she was only a quiet little thing. She had a bright way with her quietness and was so happy and busy. It is my comfort now to remember that she was

always happy--happy to the last, Lucien tells me."

She looked up at her son's averted face as if expecting him to speak, and he responded at once, though in his usual mechanical way.

"To the last," he said; "she had no fear and suffered no pain."

The little woman watched him with tender, wistful eyes; two large tears welled up and slipped down her cheeks, but she smiled softly as they fell.

"She had so wanted to go to Italy," she said; "and was so happy to be there. And at the last it was such a lovely day, and she enjoyed it so and was propped up on a sofa near the window, and looked out at the blue sky and the mountains, and made a little sketch. Tell him, Lucien," and she touched his arm again.

"I shall be glad to hear," said Baird, "but you must not tire yourself by standing," and he took her hand gently and led her to a chair and sat down beside her, still holding her hand.

But Latimer remained standing, resting his elbow upon the mantel and looking down at the floor as he spoke.

"She was not well in England," the little mother put in, "but in Italy he thought she was better even to the very last."

"She was weak," Latimer went on, without raising his eyes, "but she was always bright and--and happy. She used to lie on the sofa by the window and look out and try to make sketches. She could see the Apennines, and it was the chestnut harvest and the peasants used to pass along the road on their way to the forests, and she liked to watch them. She used to try to sketch them too, but she was too weak; and when I wrote home for her, she made me describe them----"

"In her bright way!" said his mother. "I read the letters over and over again and they seemed like pictures--like her little pictures. It scarcely seems as if Lucien could have written them at all."

"The last day," said Latimer, "I had written home to say that she was better. She was so well in the morning that she talked of trying to take a drive, but in the afternoon she was a little tired----"

"But only a little," interrupted the mother eagerly, "and quite happy."

"Only a little--and quite happy," said Latimer. "There was a beautiful sunset and I drew her sofa to the windows and she lay and looked at it--and talked; and just as the sun went down----"

"All in a lovely golden glory, as if the gates of heaven were open," the gentle voice added.

Latimer paused for an instant. His sallow face had become paler. He drew out his handkerchief and touched his forehead with it and his lips.

"All in a glow of gold," he went on a little more hoarsely, "just as it went down, she turned on her pillow and began to speak to me. She said 'How beautiful it all is, and how glad--,' and her voice died away. I thought she was looking at the sky again. She had lifted her eyes to it and was smiling: the smile was on her face when I--bent over her--a few moments after--and found that all was over."

"It was not like death at all," said his mother with a soft breathlessness. "She never even knew." And though tears streamed down her cheeks, she smiled.

Baird rose suddenly and went to Latimer's side. He wore the pale and bewildered face of a man walking in a dream. He laid his hand on his shoulder.

"No, it was not like death," he said; "try and remember that."

"I do remember it," was the answer.

"She escaped both death and life," said John Baird, "both death and life."

The little mother sat wiping her eyes gently.

"It was all so bright to her," she said. "I can scarcely think of it as a grief that we have lost her--for a little while. Her little room upstairs never seems empty. I could fancy that she might come in at any moment smiling as she used to. If she had ever suffered or been sad in it, I might feel as if the pain and sadness were left there; but when I open the door it seems as if her pretty smile met me, or the sound of her voice singing as she used to when she painted."

She rose and went to her son's side again, laying her hand on his arm with a world of tenderness in her touch.

"Try to think of that, Lucien, dear," she said; "try to think that her face was never any sadder or older than we see it in her pretty picture there. She might have lived to be tired of living, and she was saved from it."

"Try to help him," she said, turning to Baird, "perhaps you can. He has not learned to bear it yet. They were very near to each other, and perhaps he is too young to think of it as we do. Grief is always heavier to young people, I think. Try to help him."

She went out of the room quietly, leaving them together.

When she was gone, John Baird found himself trying, with a helpless feeling of desperation, to spur himself up to saying something; but

neither words nor thoughts would come. For the moment his mind seemed a perfect blank, and the silence of the room was terrible.

It was Latimer who spoke first, stiffly, and as if with difficulty.

"I should be more resigned," he said, "I should be resigned. But it has been a heavy blow."

Baird moistened his dry lips but found no words.

"She had a bright nature," the lagging voice went on, "a bright nature--and gifts--which I had not. God gave me no gifts, and it is natural to me to see that life is dark and that I can only do poorly the work which falls to me. I was a gloomy, unhappy boy when she was born. I had learned to know the lack in myself early, and I saw in her what I longed for. I know the feeling is a sin against God and that His judgment will fall upon me--but I have no power against it."

"It is a very natural feeling," said Baird, hoarsely. "We cannot resign ourselves at once under a great sorrow."

"A just God who punishes rebellion demands it of His servants."

"Don't say that!" Baird interrupted, with a shudder; "we need a God of Mercy, not a God who condemns."

"Need!" the dark face almost livid in its pallor, "We need! It is not He who was made for our needs, but we for His. For His servants there is only submission to the anguish chosen for us."

"That is a harsh creed," said Baird, "and a dark one. Try a brighter one, man!"

"There is no brighter one for me," was the answer. "She had a brighter one, poor child--and mine was a heavy trouble to her. Why should we deceive ourselves? What are we in His sight--in the sight of Immutable, Eternal God? We can only do His will and await the end. We have reason which we may not use; we can only believe and suffer. There is agony on every side of us which, if it were His will, He might relieve, but does not. It is His will, and what is the impotent rebellion of Nature against that? What help have we against Him?"

His harsh voice had risen until it was almost a cry, the lank locks which fell over his sallow forehead were damp with sweat. He put them back with a desperate gesture.

"Such words of themselves are sin," he said, "and it is my curse and punishment that I should bear in my breast every hour the crime of such rebellion. What is there left for me? Is there any labour or any pang borne for others that will wipe out the stain from my soul?"

John Baird looked at him as he had looked before. His usual ready flow of

speech, his rapidity of thought, his knowledge of men and their necessities seemed all to have deserted him.

"I--" he stammered, "I am not--fit--not fit----"

He had not known what he was going to say when he began, and he did not know how he intended to end. He heard with a passionate sense of relief that the door behind them opened, and turned to find that Mrs. Latimer stood upon the threshold as if in hesitancy.

"Lucien," she said, "it is that poor girl from Janway's Mills. The one Margery was so sorry for--Susan Chapman. She wants to see you. I think the poor child wants to ask about Margery."

Latimer made a movement forward, but checked himself.

"Tell her to come in," he said.

Mrs. Latimer went to the front door, and in a few seconds returned. The girl was with her and entered the room slowly. She was very pale and her eyes were dilated and she breathed fast as if frightened. She glanced at John Baird and stopped.

"I didn't know anyone else was here," she said.

"I will go away, if you wish it," said Baird, the sympathetic tone

returning to his voice.

"No," said Latimer, "you can do her more good than I can. This gentleman," he added to the girl, "is my friend, and a Minister of God as well as myself. He is the Rev. John Baird."

There was in his eyes, as he addressed her, a look which was like an expression of dread--as if he saw in her young yet faded face and figure something which repelled him almost beyond self-control.

Perhaps the girl saw, while she did not comprehend it. She regarded him helplessly.

"I--I don't know--hardly--why I came," she faltered, twisting the corner of her shawl.

She had been rather pretty, but the colour and freshness were gone from her face and there were premature lines of pain and misery marking it here and there.

Baird moved a chair near her.

"Sit down," he said. "Have you walked all the way from Janway's Mills?"

She started a little and gave him a look, half wonder, half relief, and then fell to twisting the fringe of her poor shawl again.

"Yes, I walked," she answered; "but I can't set down. I h'ain't but a minute to stay."

Her clothes, which had been shabby at their best, were at their worst now, and, altogether, she was a figure neither attractive nor picturesque.

But Baird saw pathos in her. It was said that one of his most charming qualities was his readiness to discover the pathetic under any guise.

"You came to ask Mr. Latimer some questions, perhaps?" he said.

She suddenly burst into tears.

"Yes," she answered, "I--I couldn't help it."

She checked herself and wiped her tears away with the shawl corner almost immediately.

"I wanted to know something about her," she said. "Nobody seemed to know nothin', only that she was dead. When they said you'd come home, it seemed like I couldn't rest until I'd heard something."

"What do you want to hear?" said Latimer.

It struck Baird that the girl's manner was a curious one. It was a manner which seemed to conceal beneath its shamefaced awkwardness some secret fear or anxiety. She gave Latimer a hurried, stealthy look, and then her eyes fell. It was as if she would have read in his gloomy face what she did not dare to ask.

"I'd be afraid to die myself," she stammered. "I can't bear to think of it. I'm afraid. Was she?"

"No," Latimer answered.

The girl gave him another dull, stealthy look.

"I'm glad of that," she said; "she can't have minded so much if she wasn't afraid. I'd like to think she didn't mind it so much--or suffer."

"She did not suffer," said Latimer.

"I never saw nothin' of her after the last day she came to Janway's Mills," the girl began.

Latimer lifted his eyes suddenly.

"She went to the Mills?" he exclaimed.

"Yes," she answered, her voice shaking. "I guess she never told. After

that first night she stood by me. No one else did. Seemed like other folks thought I'd poison 'em. She'd come an' see me an'--help me. She was sick the last day she came, and when she was going home she fainted in the street, I heard folks say, I never saw her after that."

She brushed a tear from her face with the shawl again.

"So as she didn't mind much, or suffer," she said, "t'ain't so bad to think of. She wasn't one to be able to stand up against things. She'd have died if she'd been me. I'd be glad enough to die myself, if I wasn't afraid. She'd cry over me when I wasn't crying over myself. I've been beat about till I don't mind, like I used. They're a hard lot down at the Mills."

"And you," said Latimer, "what sort of a life have you been leading?"

His voice was harsh and his manner repellant only because Nature had served him the cruel turn of making them so. He was bitterly conscious as he spoke of having chosen the wrong words and uttered them with an appearance of relentless rigour which he would have made any effort to soften.

Baird made a quick movement towards the girl.

"Have you any work?" he asked. "Do you need help? Don't mind telling us. My friend is to take charge of your church at the Mills."

The girl interrupted him. She had turned miserably pale under Latimer's question.

"'Tain't no church of mine!" she said, passionately; "I h'ain't nothin' to do with it. I never belonged to no church anyhow, an' I'm leadin' the kind o' life any girl'd lead that hadn't nothin' nor nobody. I don't mean," with a strangled sob, "to even myself with her; but what'ud she ha' done if she'd ha' slipped like I did--an' then had nothin' nor--nor nobody?"

"Don't speak of her!" cried Latimer, almost fiercely.

"'Twon't hurt her," said the girl, struggling with a sob again; "she's past bein' hurt even by such as me--an' I'm glad of it. She's well out of it all!"

She turned as if she would have gone away, but Baird checked her.

"Wait a moment," he said; "perhaps I can be of some service to you."

"You can't do nothin'," she interrupted. "Nobody can't!"

"Let me try," he said; "take a note to Miss Starkweather from me and wait at the house for a few minutes. Come, that isn't much, is it? You'll do that much, I'm sure."

She looked down at the floor a few seconds and then up at him. It had always been considered one of his recommendations that he was so unprofessional in his appearance.

"Yes," she said, slowly, "I can do that, I suppose."

He drew a note-book from his breast-pocket and, having written a few words on a leaf of it, tore it out and handed it to her.

"Take that to Miss Starkweather's house and say I sent you with it."

When she was gone, he turned to Latimer again.

"Before I go," he said, "I want to say a few words to you--to ask you to make me a promise."

"What is the promise?" said Latimer.

"It is that we shall be friends--friends."

Baird laid his hand on the man's gaunt shoulder with a nervous grasp as he spoke, and his voice was unsteady.

"I have never had a friend," answered Latimer, monotonously; "I should scarcely know what to do with one."

"Then it is time you had one," Baird replied. "And I may have something to offer you. There may be something in--in my feeling which may be worth your having."

He held out his hand.

Latimer looked at it for a second, then at him, his sallow face flushing darkly.

"You are offering me a good deal," he said, "I scarcely know why--myself."

"But you don't take my hand, Latimer," Baird said; and the words were spoken with a faint loss of colour.

Latimer took it, flushing more darkly still.

"What have I to offer in return?" he said. "I have nothing. You had better think again. I should only be a kind of shadow on your life."

"I want nothing in return--nothing," Baird said. "I don't even ask feeling from you. Be a shadow on my life, if you will. Why should I have no shadows? Why should all go smoothly with me, while others----" He paused, checking his vehemence as if he had suddenly recognised it. "Let us be friends," he said.