

CHAPTER XV

The respectable portion of the population of Janway's Mills believed in church-going and on Sunday-school attendance--in fact, the most entirely respectable believed that such persons as neglected these duties were preparing themselves for damnation. They were a quiet, simple, and unintellectual people. Such of them as occasionally read books knew nothing of any literature which was not religious. The stories they had followed through certain inexpensive periodicals were of the order which describes the gradual elevation of the worldly-minded or depraved to the plane of church-going and Sunday-school. Their few novels made it their motif to prove that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter into the Kingdom of Heaven. Any hero or heroine of wealth who found peace of mind and married happily, only attained these objects through the assistance of some noble though humble unsecular person whose example and instruction led them to adopt unsecular views. The point of view of Janway's Mills was narrow and far from charitable when it was respectable; its point of view, when it was not respectable, was desperate. Even sinners, at Janway's Mills, were primitive and limited in outlook. They did not excuse themselves with specious argument for their crimes of neglecting church-going, using bad language, hanging about bar-rooms, and loose living. They were not brilliant wrongdoers and made no attempt at defending themselves or

pretending that they did not know they were going to perdition. The New England mind is not broad or versatile, and, having begun life in a Puritan atmosphere, it is not quick to escape its influence. Society at the Mills recognised no social distinction which was not founded upon the respectability of church-going and the observance of social laws made by church-goers; it recognised none because it absolutely knew of none.

The great world was not far from Janway's Mills, but they did not touch each other. Willowfield was near, Boston and New York themselves were not far distant, but the curious fact being that millions of human minds may work and grow and struggle as if they were the minds of dwellers upon another planet, though less than a hundred miles may separate them, the actual lives, principles, and significances of the larger places did not seem to touch the smaller one. The smaller one was a village of a few streets of small houses which had grown up about the Mills themselves.

The Mills gave employment to a village full of hands, so the village gradually evolved itself. It was populated by the uneducated labouring class; some were respectable, some were dissolute and lived low and gross lives, but all were uneducated in any sense which implies more than the power to read, write, and make a few necessary calculations. Most of them took some newspaper. They read of the multi-millionaires who lived in New York and Chicago and California, they read of the politicians in Washington, they found described to them the great entertainments given by millionaires' wives and daughters, the marvellous dresses they wore, the multifarious ways in which they amused themselves, but what they read seemed so totally unlike anything they had ever seen, so far apart from their own lives, that though they were not aware of the fact, the truth

was that they believed in them with about the same degree of realisation with which they believed in what they heard in the pulpit of the glories of the New Jerusalem. No human being exists without an ambition, and the ambition of Janway's Millers of the high-class was to possess a neat frame-house with clean Nottingham lace curtains at the windows, fresh oilcloth on the floor of the front hall, furniture covered with green or red reps in the parlour, a tapestry Brussels carpet, and a few lithographs upon the walls. It was also the desire of the owners of such possessions that everyone should know that they attended one of the churches, that their house-cleaning was done regularly, that no member of the family frequented bar-rooms, and that they were respectable people. It was an ambition which was according to their lights, and could be despised by no honest human being, however dull it might appear to him. It resulted oftener than not in the making of excellent narrow lives which brought harm to no one. The lives which went wrong on the street-corners and in the bar-rooms often did harm. They produced discomfort, unhappiness, and disorder; but as it is also quite certain that no human being produces these things without working out his own punishment for himself while he lives on earth, the ends of justice were doubtless attained.

If a female creature at the Mills broke the great social law, there was no leaning towards the weakness of pity for her, Janway's was not sufficiently developed, mentally, to deal with gradations or analysis of causes and impelling powers. The girl who brought forth a child without the pale of orthodox marriage was an outcast and a disgraced creature,

and nobody flinched from pronouncing her both.

"It's disgustin', that's what I call it," it was the custom for respectable wives and mothers to say. "It's disgustin'! A nice thing she's done for herself. I h'ain't no patience with girls like her, with no fear o' God or religion in them an' no modesty and decency. She deserves whatever comes to her!"

Usually every tragedy befell her which could befall a woman. If her child lived, it lived the life of wretchedness and was an outcast also. The outcome of its existence was determined by the order of woman its mother chanced to be. If the maternal instinct was warm and strong within her and she loved it, there were a few chances that it might fight through its early years of struggle and expand into a human being who counted as one at least among the world's millions. Usually the mother died in the gutter or the hospital, but there had been women who survived, and when they did so it was often because they made a battle for their children. Sometimes it was because they were made of the material which is not easily beaten, and then they learned as the years went by that the human soul and will may be even stronger than that which may seem at the outset overwhelming fate.

When the girl Susan Chapman fell into misfortune and disgrace, her path was not made easy for her. There were a few months when the young mill hand who brought disaster upon her, made love to her, and hung about her small home, sometimes leaning upon the rickety gate to talk and laugh

with her, sometimes loitering with her in the streets or taking her to cheap picnics or on rather rowdy excursions. She wore the excited and highly pleased air seen in young women of her class when the masculine creature is paying court. She spent her wages in personal decoration, she bought cheap feathers and artificial flowers and remnants on "bargain days," and decked herself with them. Her cheap, good looks reached their highest point because she felt the glow of a promotive triumph and her spirits were exhilarated. She was nearer happiness than she had ever been before. The other girls, who were mill hands like herself, were full of the usual rather envious jokes about her possible marriage. To be married was to achieve a desirable distinction and to work at home instead of at the Mills. The young man was not an absolute villain, he was merely an ignorant, foolish young animal. At first he had had inchoate beliefs in a domestic future with the girl. But the time came when equally inchoate ideas of his own manhood led him to grow cool. The New England atmosphere

which had not influenced him in all points, influenced him in the matter of feeling that the woman a man married must have kept herself respectable. The fact that he himself had caused her fall from the plane of decency was of comparatively small moment.

A man who married a woman who had not managed to keep straight, put himself into a sort of ridiculous position. He lost masculine distinction. This one ceased to lean on the gate and talk at night, and went to fewer picnics. He was in less high spirits, and so was the girl. She often looked pale and as if she had been crying. Then Jack Williams

gave up his place at the Mill and left the village. He did not tell his sweetheart. The morning after he left, Susan came to her work and found the girls about her wearing a mysterious and interested air.

"What are you whispering about?" she asked. "What's the secret?"

"Tain't no secret," was the answer. "Most everybody's heard it, and I guess it ain't no secret to you. I guess he told you when he made up his mind to go."

"Who?" she asked.

"Jack Williams. He's gone out to Chicago to work somewhere there. He kept it pretty dark from us, but when he went off on the late train last night, Joe Evans saw him, and he said he'd had the offer of a first-rate job and was going to it. How you stare, Sue! Your eyes look as if they'd pop out o' yer head."

She was staring and her skin had turned blue-white. She broke into a short hysteric laugh and fell down. Then she was very sick and fainted and had to be taken home trembling so that she could scarcely crawl as she walked, with great tears dropping down her cold face. Janway's Mills knew well enough after this that Jack Williams had deserted her, and had no hesitation in suggesting a reason for his defection.

The months which followed were filled with the torments of a squalid

Inferno. Girls who had regarded her with envy, began to refuse to speak to her or to be seen in her company. Jack Williams's companions were either impudent or disdainful, the married women stared at her and commented on her as she passed; there were no more picnics or excursions for her; her feathers became draggled and hung broken in her hat. She had no relatives in the village, having come from a country place. She was thankful that she had not a family of aunts on the spot, because she knew they would have despised her and talked her over more than the rest. She lived in a bare little room which she rented from a poor couple, and she used to sit alone in it, huddled up in a heap by the window, crying for hours in the evening as she watched the other girls go by laughing and joking with their sweethearts.

One night when there was a sociable in the little frame Methodist church opposite, and she saw it lighted up and the people going in dressed in their best clothes and excited at meeting each other, the girls giggling at the sight of their favourite young men--just as she had giggled six months before--her slow tears began to drip faster and the sobs came one upon another until she was choked by them and she began to make a noise. She sobbed and cried more convulsively, until she began to scream and went into something like hysterics. She dropped down on her face and rolled over and over, clutching at her breast and her sides and throwing out her arms. The people of the house had gone to the sociable and she was alone, so no one heard or came near her. She shrieked and sobbed and rolled over and over, clutching at her flesh, trying to gasp out words that choked her.

"O, Lord!" she gasped, wild with the insensate agony of a poor, hysteria torn, untaught, uncontrolled thing, "I don't know what I've done! I don't! 'Tain't fair! I didn't go to! I can't bear it! He h'ain't got nothin' to bear, he ain't! O, Lord God, look down on me!"

She was the poor, helpless outcome of the commonest phase of life, but her garret saw a ghastly tragedy as she choked through her hysterics. Who is to blame for and who to prevent such tragedies, let deep thinkers strive to tell.

The day after this was the one on which little Margery Latimer came into her life. It was in the early spring, just before the child had gone to Boston to begin her art lessons. She had come to Janway's Mills to see a poor woman who had worked for her mother. The woman lived in the house in which Susan had her bare room. She began to talk about the girl half fretfully, half contemptuously.

"She's the one Jack Williams got into trouble and then left to get out of it by herself as well as she could," she said. "She might ha' known it. Gals is fools. She can't work at the Mills any more, an' last night when we was all at the Sosherble, she seems to've had a spasm o' some kind; she can't get out o' bed this mornin' and lies there lookin' like death an' moanin'. I can't 'tend to her, I've got work o' my own to do. Lansy! how she was moanin' when I passed her door! Seemed like she'd kill

herself!"

"Oh, poor thing!" cried Margery; "let me go up to her."

She was a sensitive creature, and the colour had ebbed out of her pretty face.

"Lor, no!" the woman cried; "she ain't the kind o' gal you'd oughter be doing things for, she was allus right down common, an' she's sunk down 'bout as low as a gal can."

But Margery went up to the room where the moaning was going on. She stood outside the door on the landing for a few moments, her heart trembling in her side before she went in. Her life had been a simple, happy, bright one up to this time. She had not seen the monster life close at hand. She had large, childish eyes which were the colour of harebells and exquisitely sympathetic and sweet. There were tears in them when she gently opened the door and stood timidly on the threshold.

"Let me, please let me come in," she said. "Don't say I mayn't."

The moaning and low choking sobs went on, and in a very few moments they so wrought upon her, that she pushed the door farther open and entered the room. What she saw was a barren, common little place, and on the bed a girl lying utterly prostrated by an hysteric tempest which had lasted

hours. Her face was white and swollen and covered with red marks, as if she had clutched and torn it with her fingers, her dress was torn open at the bosom, and her hair tumbled, torn, and loose about the pillow; there was a discoloured place upon her forehead which was settling into a bruise. Her eyes were puffed with crying until they were almost closed. Her breast rose with short, exhausted, but still convulsive sobs. Margery felt as if she was drawn into a vortex of agony. She could not resist it. She went to the bed, stood still a second, trembling, and then sank upon her knees and put her face down upon the wretched hand nearest and kissed it with piteous impulsive sympathy.

"Oh! don't cry like that," she said, crying herself. "Oh, don't! Oh, don't! I'm so sorry for you--I'm so sorry for you."

She did not know the girl at all, she had never even heard of her before, but she kissed her hand and cried over it and fondled it against her breast. She was one of those human things created by Nature to suffer with others, and for them, and through them.

She did not know how long it was before the girl became sufficiently articulate to speak to her. She herself was scarcely articulate for some time. She could only try to find words to meet a need so far beyond her ken. She had never come in contact with a woman in this strait before.

But at last Susan was lying in the bed instead of on its tossed and

tumbled outside. Margery had done the nearest, simple things for her. She had helped her to bathe her face with cold water, to undress and put on her nightgown; she had prepared her narrow bed for her decently, and smoothed and wound up her hair. Then she had gone downstairs, got her a cup of tea, and sat by her and made her drink it. Then she set the room in order and opened the window to air it.

"There is a bruise on your forehead," she had said, as she was arranging the torn hair. "You must have struck it against something when you were ill last night."

"I struck it against the wall," Susan answered, in a monotonous voice. "I did it on purpose. I banged my head against the wall until I fell down and was sick."

Margery's face quivered again.

"Don't think about it," she said. "You ought not to have been alone. Some--some friend ought to have been with you."

"I haven't got any friends," Susan answered. "I don't know why you came up to me. I don't guess you know what's the matter with me."

"Yes, I do," said Margery. "You are in great trouble."

"It's the worst kind o' trouble a woman can get into," said Susan, the

muscles of her face beginning to be drawn again. "I don't see why--why Jack Williams can skip off to Chicago to a new, big job that's a stroke o' luck--an' me left lie here to bear everything--an' be picked at, an' made fun of, an' druv mad with the way I'm kicked in the gutter. I don't see no right in it. There ain't no right in it; I don't believe there's no God anyhow; I won't never believe it again. No one can't make me. If I've done what gives folks a right to cast me off, so's Jack Williams."

"You haven't pretended to love a person and then run away and left them to--to suffer," said little Margery, on the verge of sobs again.

"No, I haven't!" said the girl, her tears beginning to stream anew. "I'm not your kind. I'm not educated. I'm only a common mill hand, but I did love Jack Williams all I knew how. He had such a nice way with him--kind of affectionate, an'--an' he was real good-lookin' too when he was fixed up. If I'd been married to him, no one would have said nothin', an'--an' 'tain't nothin' but a minister readin' somethin' anyhow--marryin' ain't."