

CHAPTER XVI

This was before Margery went to Boston to try to develop her gift for making pretty sketches. Her father and mother and her brother strained every nerve to earn and save the money to cover her expenses. She went away full of innocent, joyous hope in the month of May. She boarded in a plain, quiet house, and had two rooms. One was her workroom and studio. She worked under a good-natured artist, who thought her a rather gifted little creature and used to take her to look at any pictures that were on exhibition. Taking into consideration her youth and limited advantages, she made such progress as led him to say that she had a future before her.

She had never deserted Sue Chapman after that first morning in which she had gone to her rescue. Janway's Mills was bewildered when it found that the Reverend Lucien Latimer's sister went to see Jack Williams' deserted sweetheart, and did not disdain to befriend her in her disgrace. The church-going element, with the Nottingham lace curtains in its parlour windows, would have been shocked, but that it was admitted that "the Latimers has always been a well-thought-of family, an' all of 'em is members in good standin'. They're greatly respected in Willowfield; even the old fam'lies speak to 'em when they meet 'em in the street or at Church.

"Not that I'd be willin' for my Elma Ann to 'sociate with a girl that's

gone wrong. Maybe it's sorter different with a minister's sister.

Ministers' families has to 'sociate out o' charity an' religion; go to pray with 'em, an' that, an' read the Scripture to make 'em sense their sinfulness an' the danger they're in."

But Margery did not pray with Susan Chapman, or read the Bible to her. The girl held obstinately to her statement of unbelief in a God, and Margery did not feel that her mood was one to which reading the Gospel would appeal. If she could have explained to her the justice of the difference between Jack Williams' lot and her own, she felt they might have advanced perhaps, but she could not. She used to go to see her and try to alleviate her physical discomfort and miserable poverty. She saved her from hunger and cold when she could no longer work at all, and she taught her to feel that she was not utterly without a friend.

"What I'd have done without you, God knows--or what ought to be God," Sue said. "He didn't care, but you did. If there is one, He's got a lot to learn from some of the people He's made Himself. 'After His own image created He them'--that's what the Bible says; but I don't believe it. If He was as good and kind-hearted as the best of us, He wouldn't sit upon His throne with angels singing round an' playin' on harps, an' Him too much interested to see how everything sufferin' down below. What did He make us for, if He couldn't look after us? I wouldn't make a thing I wouldn't do my best by--an' I ain't nothin' but a factory girl. This--this poor thing that's goin' to be born an' hain't no right to, I'll do my level best by it--I will. It sha'n't suffer, if I can help

it"--her lips jerking.

Sometimes Margery would talk to her a little about Jack Williams--or, rather, she would listen while Susan talked. Then Susan would cry, large, slow-rolling tears slipping down her cheeks.

"I don't know how--how it happened like this," she would say. "It seems like a kind o' awful dream. I don't know nothin'. He was common--just like I am--an' he didn't know much; but it didn't seem like he was a bad feller--an' I do b'lieve he liked me. Seemed like he did, anyways. They say he's got a splendid job in Chicago. He won't never know nothin' about what happens."

Margery did not leave her unprovided for when she went to Boston. It cost very little to keep her for a few months in her small room. The people of the house promised to be decently kind to her. Margery had only been away from home two weeks when the child was born. The hysterical paroxysms and

violent outbreaks of grief its mother had passed through, her convulsive writhings and clutchings and beating of her head against the walls had distorted and exhausted the little creature. The women who were with her said its body looked as if it were bruised in spots all over, and there was a purple mark on its temple. It breathed a few times and died.

"Good thing, too!" said the women. "There's too many in the world that's got a right here. It'd hev' had to go to ruin."

"Good thing for it," said Susan, weakly but sullenly, from her bed; "but if it's God as makes 'em, how did He come to go to the trouble of making this one an' sendin' it out, if it hadn't no right to come? He does make 'em all, doesn't he? You wouldn't darst to say He didn't--you, Mrs. Hopp, that's a church member!" And her white face actually drew itself into a ghastly, dreary grin. "Lawsy! He's kept pretty busy!"

When she was able to stand on her feet she went back to the mill. She was a good worker, and hands were needed. The girls and women fought shy of her, and she had no chance of enjoying any young pleasures or comforts, even if she had not been too much broken on the rack of the misery of the last year to have energy to desire them. No young man wanted to be seen talking to her, no young woman cared to walk with her in the streets. She always went home to her room alone, and sat alone, and thought of what had happened to her, trying to explain to herself how it had happened and why it had turned out that she was worse than any other girl. She had never felt like a bad girl. No one had ever called her one before this last year.

Three months after the child was born and died, Margery came back to Willowfield to spend a week at home. She came to see Susan, and they sat together in the tragic little bare room and talked. Though the girl had been so delicately pretty before she left home, Susan saw that she had become much prettier. She was dressed in light, softly tinted summer

stuffs, and there was something about her which was curiously flower-like. Her long-lashed, harebell blue eyes seemed to have widened and grown lovelier in their innocent look. A more subtle mind than Susan Chapman's might have said that she seemed to be looking farther into Life's spaces, and that she was trembling upon the verge of something unknown and beautiful.

She talked about Boston and the happiness of her life there, and of her work and her guileless girlish hopes and ambitions.

"I am doing my very best," she said, a spot of pink flickering on her cheek; "I work as hard as I can, but you see I am so ignorant. I could not have learned anything about art in Willowfield. But people are so good to me--people who know a great deal. There is one gentleman who comes sometimes to see Mr. Barnard at the studio. He is so wonderful, it seems to me. He has travelled, and knows all about the great galleries and the pictures in them. He talks so beautifully that everyone listens when he comes in. Nobody can bear to go on with work for fear of missing something. You would think he would not notice a plain little Willowfield girl, but he has been lovely to me, Susan. He has even looked at my work and criticised it for me, and talked to me. He nearly always talks to me a little when he comes in, and once I met him in the Gardens, and he stopped and talked there, and walked about looking at the flowers with me. They had been planting out the spring things, and it was like being in fairyland to walk about among them and hear the things he said about pictures. It taught me so much."

She referred to this friend two or three times, and once mentioned his name, but Susan forgot it. She was such a beautiful, happy little thing, and seemed so exquisite an expression of spring-like, radiant youth and its innocent joy in living that the desolate and stranded creature she had befriended could think of nothing but her own awkward worship and the fascination of the flower-like charm. She used to sit and stare at her.

"Seems so queer to see anyone as happy an' pretty as you," she broke out once. "Oh, Lawsy, I hope nothing won't ever come to spoil it. It hadn't ought to be spoiled."

A month or so later Margery paid a visit to her home again. She stayed a longer time, but Susan only saw her once. She had come home from Boston with a cold and had been put to bed for a day or two.

One morning Susan was in Willowfield and met her walking in a quiet street. She was walking slowly and looking down as she went, as if some thought was abstracting her. When Susan stopped before her, she looked up with a start. It was a start which revealed that she had been brought back suddenly from a distance, as it were a great distance.

"Oh, Susan!" she said. "Oh, Susan!"

She held out her hand in her pretty, affectionate way, but she was

actually a little out of breath.

"I'm sorry I came on you so sudden," Susan said, "I startled you."

"Yes," she answered, "I was--I was thinking of things that seem so far off. When I'm in Willowfield it seems as if--as if they can't be true.

Does anything ever seem like that to you, Susan?"

"Yes," said Susan. One of her hopeless looks leaped into her eyes. She did not say what the things were, but she stared at Margery in a helpless, vacant way for a moment.

"Are you well, Susan, and have you got work?" asked Margery. "I am coming to see you to-morrow."

They spoke of common things for a few minutes, and then went their separate ways.

Why it was that when she paid the promised visit the next day and they sat together in their old way and talked, Susan felt a kind of misery creeping slowly upon her, she could not in the least have explained. She was not sufficiently developed mentally to have been capable of saying to herself that there was a difference between this visit and the last, between this Margery and the one who had sat with her before. Her dull thoughts were too slow to travel to a point so definite in so short a length of time as one afternoon afforded.

"Your cold was a pretty bad one, wasn't it?" she asked, vaguely, once.

"Yes," was the answer. "It made me feel weak. But it has gone now. I am quite well again."

After that Susan saw her but once again. As time went on she heard a vague rumour that the Latimers were anxious about Margery's health. Just at that time the mill hands gossiped a good deal about Willowfield, because the Reverend John Baird was said to be going to Europe. That led to talk on the subject of other Willowfield people, and the Latimers among them. In the rare, brief letters Margery wrote to her protégée, she did not say she was ill. Once she said her brother Lucien had quite suddenly come to Boston to see how she was, because her mother imagined she must have taken cold.

She had been in Boston about a year then. One afternoon Susan was in her room, standing by her bed forlornly, and, in a vacant, reasonless mood, turning over the few coarse little garments she had been able to prepare for her child--a few common little shirts and nightgowns and gray flannels--no more. She heard someone at the door. The handle turned and the door opened as if the person who came in had forgotten the ceremony of knocking. Susan laid down on the bed the ugly little night-dress she had been looking at; it lay there stiff with its coarseness, its short arms stretched out. She turned about and faced Margery Latimer, who had crossed the threshold and stood before her.

Susan uttered a low, frightened cry before she could speak a word.

The girl looked like a ghost. It was a ghost Susan thought of this time, and not a flower. The pure little face was white and drawn, the features were sharpened, the harebell-coloured eyes had almost a look of wildness; it was as if they had been looking at something frightening for a long time, until they could not lose the habit of expressing fear.

"Susan," she said, in a strange, uncertain voice, "you didn't expect to see me."

Susan ran to her.

"No, no," she said, "I didn't know you was here. I thought you was in Boston. What's the matter? Oh, Lawsy, Margery, what's happened to make you look like this?"

"Nobody knows," answered Margery. "They say it's the cold. They are frightened about me. I'm come to say good-bye to you, Susan."

She sank into a chair and sat there, panting a little.

"Lucien's going to take me to Europe," she said, her voice all at once seeming to sound monotonous, as if she was reciting a lesson mechanically. "I always wanted to go there--to visit the picture

galleries and study. They think the climate will be good for me. I've been coughing in the mornings--and I can't eat."

"Do they think you might be going into--a consumption?" Susan faltered.

"Mother's frightened," said Margery. "She and the doctor don't know what to think. Lucien's going to take me to Europe. It's expensive, but--but he has managed to get the money. He sold a little farm he owned."

"He's a good brother," said Susan.

Suddenly Margery began to cry as if she could not help it.

"Oh," she exclaimed. "No one knows what a good brother he is--nobody but myself. He is willing to give up everything to--to save me--and to save poor mother from awful trouble. Sometimes I think he is something like Christ--even like Christ! He is willing to suffer for other people--for their pain--and weakness--and sin."

It was so evident that the change which had taken place in her was a woeful one. Her bright loveliness was gone--her simple, lovable happiness. Her nerves seemed all unstrung. But it was the piteous, strained look in her childlike eyes which stirred poor Susan's breast to tumult.

"Margery," she said, almost trembling, "if--if--if you was to go in a

consumption and die--you're not like me--you needn't be afraid."

The next moment she was sorry she had said the crude thing. Margery burst into a passion of weeping. Susan flew to her and caught her in her arms, kneeling down by her.

"I oughtn't to have said it," she cried. "You're too ill to be made to think of such things. I was a fool not to see--Margery, Margery, don't!"

But Margery was too weak to be able to control her sobbing.

"They say that--that God forgives people," she wept. "I've prayed and prayed to be forgiven for--for my sins. I've never meant to be wicked. I don't know--I don't know how----"

"Hush!" said Susan, soothing and patting her trembling shoulder. "Hush, hush! If there is a God, Margery, He's a heap sight better than we give Him credit for. He don't make people a' purpose, so they can't help things somehow--an' don't know--an' then send 'em to burning hell for bein' the way He made 'em. We wouldn't do it, an' He won't. You hain't no reason to be afraid of dyin'."

Margery stayed with her about half an hour. There was a curious element in their conversation. They spoke as if their interview was a final one. Neither of them actually expressed the thought in words, but a listener would have felt vaguely that they never expected to meet each other again

on earth. They made no references to the future; it was as if no future could be counted upon. Afterwards, when she was alone, Susan realised that she had never once said "when you come back from Europe."

As she was leaving the room, Margery passed the bed on which the small, coarse garments lay. The little nightgown, with its short sleeves stiffly outstretched, seemed to arrest her attention specially. She caught at Susan's dress as if she was unaware that she made the movement or of the sharp shudder which followed it.

"Those--are its things, aren't they, Susan?" she said.

"Yes," Susan answered, her sullen look of pain coming back to her face.

"I--don't know--how people bear it!" exclaimed Margery. It was an exclamation, and her hand went quickly up to her mouth almost as if to press it back.

"They don't bear it," said Susan, stonily. "They have to go through it--that's all. If you was standin' on the gallows with the rope round your neck and the trap-door under your feet, you wouldn't be bearin' it, but the trap-door would drop all the same, an' down you'd plunge--into the blackness."

It was on this morning, on her way through the streets, that Margery dropped in a dead faint upon the pavement, and Miss Amory Starkweather,

passing in her carriage, picked her up and carried her home.

Susan Chapman never saw her again. Some months afterwards came the rumour

that she had died of consumption in Italy.