CHAPTER XXX

In later years, one at least of the two men never glanced back upon the months which followed without a shudder. And yet outwardly no change took place in their relations, unless they seemed drawn closer. Such a secret being shared between two people must either separate or bind them together. In this case it became a bond. They spoke of it but little, yet each was well aware that the other remembered often. Sometimes, when they sat together, Latimer recognised in Baird's eyes a look of brooding and felt that he knew what his thought was; sometimes Baird, glancing at his friend, found his face darkened by reverie, and understood. Once, when this was the case, he said, suddenly:

"What is your feeling about--the man? Do you wish to kill him?"

"It is too late," Latimer answered. "It would undo nothing. If by doing it I could bring her back as she was before she had seen his face--if I could see her again, the pretty, happy child, with eyes like blue convolvulus, and laughing lips--I would kill him and gladly hang for it."

"So would I," said Baird, grimly.

"To crucify him would not undo it," said Latimer, looking sickly pale. "She was crucified--she lived through terror and shame; she died--afraid

that God would not forgive her."

"That God would not----!" Baird gasped.

Latimer's bony hands were twisted together.

"We were brought up to believe things like that," he said. "I was afraid, too. That was the damnable part of it. I could not help her. I have changed since then--I have changed through knowing you. As children we had always been threatened with the just God! The most successful preachers gained their power by painting pictures of the torments of hell. That was the fashion then," smiling horribly.

"It is a wonderful thing that even the fashion in Gods changes. When we were shut up together in the cabin on the hillside, she used to be overwhelmed by paroxysms of fear. She read the Bible a great deal--because sinners who wanted to repent always read it--and sometimes she would come upon threats and curses, and cry out and turn white and begin to shiver. Then she would beg me to pray and pray with her. And we would kneel down on the bare floor and pray together. My prayers were worse than useless. What could I say? I was a black sinner, too--a man who was perjuring his soul with lies--and they were told and acted for her sake, and she knew it. She used to cling about my neck and beg me to betray her--to whiten my soul by confession--not to allow her wickedness to destroy me--because she loved me--loved me. 'Go back to them and tell them, Lucien,' she would cry, 'I will go with you if I ought--I have been

wicked--not you--I have been shameful; I must bear it--I must bear it.' But she could not bear it. She died."

"Were you never able to give her any comfort?" said Baird. His eyes were wet, and he spoke as in bitter appeal. "This had been a child in her teens entrapped into bearing the curse of the world with all its results of mental horror and physical agony."

"What comfort could I give?" was the answer. "My religion and my social creed had taught me that she was a vile sinner--the worst and most shameful of sinners--and that I was a criminal for striving to save her from the consequences of her sin. I was defying the law of the just God, who would have punished her with heart-break and open shame. He would not have spared her, and He would not spare me since I so strove against Him. The night she died--through the long hours of horrible, unnatural convulsions of pain--when cold sweat stood in drops on her deathly childish face, she would clutch my hands and cry out: 'Eternal torments! For ever and ever and ever--could it be like this, Lucien--for ever and ever and ever?' Then she would sob out, 'God! God! God!' in terrible, helpless prayer. She had not strength for other words."

Baird sprang to his feet and thrust out his hand, averting his pallid face.

"Don't tell me any more," he said. "I cannot--I cannot bear it."

"She bore it," said Latimer, "until death ended it."

"Was there no one--to save her?" Baird cried. "Was she terrified like that when she died?"

"The man who afterwards took her child--the man D'Willerby," Latimer answered, "was a kindly soul. At the last moment he took her poor little hand and patted it, and told her not to be frightened. She turned to him as if for refuge. He had a big, mellow voice, and a tender, protecting way. He said: 'Don't be frightened. It's all right,' and his were the last words she heard."

"God bless the fellow, wheresoever he is!" Baird exclaimed. "I should like to grasp his hand."

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The Reverend John Baird delivered his lectures in many cities that year. The discussion they gave rise to had the natural result of awakening a keen interest in them. There were excellent souls who misinterpreted and deplored them, there were excellent souls who condemned; there were even ministers of the gospel who preached against the man as an iconoclast and a pagan, and forbade their congregations to join his audiences. But his lecture-halls were always crowded, and the hundreds of faces upturned to him when he arose upon his platform were the faces of eager, breathless,

yearning creatures. He was a man speaking to men, not an echo of old creeds. He uttered no threats, he painted no hells, he called aloud to that God in man which is his soul.

"That God which is in you--in me," he proclaimed, "has lain dormant because undeveloped man, having made for himself in the dark ages gods of wood and stone, demanding awful sacrifice, called forth for himself later a deity as material, though embodied in no physical form--a God of vengeance and everlasting punishments. This is the man-created deity, and in his name man has so clamoured that the God which is man's soul has been silenced. Let this God rise, and He will so demand justice and noble mercy from all creatures to their fellows that temptation and suffering will cease. What! can we do no good deed without the promise of paradise as reward? Can we refrain from no evil unless we are driven to it by the threat of hell? Are we such base traffickers that we make merchandise of our souls and bargain for them across a counter? Let us awake! I say to you from the deepest depths of my aching soul--if there were no God to bargain with, then all the more awful need that each man constitute himself a god--of justice, pity, and mercy--until the world's wounds are healed and each human thing can stand erect and claim the joy of life which is his own."

On the morning of the day he said these words to the crowd which had flocked to hear him, he had talked long with Latimer. For some weeks he had not been strong. The passion of intensity which ruled him when he spoke to his audiences was too strong an emotion to leave no physical

trace. After a lecture or sermon he was often pallid and shaken.

"I have things to say," he exclaimed feverishly to Latimer. "There are things which must be said. The spoken word lives--for good or evil. It is a sound sent echoing through all the ages to come. Some men have awakened echoes which have thrilled throughout the world. To speak one's thought--to use mere words--it seems such a small thing--and yet it is my conviction that nothing which is said is really ever forgotten."

And his face was white, his eyes burning, when at night he leaned forward to fling forth to his hearers his final arraignment.

"I say to you, were there no God to bargain with, then all the more awful need that each man constitute himself a god of justice, pity, and mercy--until the world's wounds are healed and each human thing can stand erect and claim the joy of life which is his own."

The people went away after the lecture, murmuring among themselves. Some of them carried away awakening in their eyes. They all spoke of the man himself; of his compelling power, the fire of meaning in his face, and the musical, far-reaching voice, which carried to the remotest corner of the most crowded buildings.

"It is not only his words one is reached by," it was said. "It is the

man's self. Truly, he cries out from the depths of his soul."

This was true. It was the man himself. Nature had armed him well--with strength, with magnetic force, with a tragic sense of the anguish of things, and with that brain which labours far in advance of the thought of the hour. Men with such brains--brains which work fiercely and unceasingly even in their own despite--reach conclusions not yet arrived at by their world, and are called iconoclasts. Some are madly overpraised, some have been made martyrs, but their spoken word passes onward, and if not in their own day, in that to-morrow which is the to-day of other men, the truth of their harvest is garnered and bound into sheaves.

At the closing of his lectures, men and women crowded about him to speak to him, to grasp his hand. When they were hysterical in their laudations, his grace and readiness controlled them; when they were direct and earnest, he found words to say which they could draw aid from later.

"Am I developing--or degenerating--into a popular preacher?" he said once, with a half restless laugh, to his shadow.

"You are not popular," was Latimer's answer. "Popular is not the word. You are proclaiming too new and bold a creed."

"That is true," said Baird. "The pioneer is not popular. When he forces his way into new countries he encounters the natives. Sometimes they eat

him--sometimes they drive him back with poisoned arrows. The country is their own; they have their own gods, their own language. Why should a stranger enter in?"

"But there is no record yet of a pioneer who lived--or died--in vain," said Latimer. "Some day--some day----"

He stopped and gazed at his friend, brooding. His love for him was a strong and deep thing. It grew with each hour they spent together, with each word he heard him speak. Baird was his mental nourishment and solace. When they were apart he found his mind dwelling on him as a sort of habit. But for this one man he would have lived a squalid life among his people at Janney's Mills--squalid because he had not the elasticity to rise above its narrow, uneducated dullness. The squalor so far as he himself was concerned was not physical. His own small, plain home was as neat as it was simple, but he had not the temperament which makes a man friends. Baird possessed this temperament, and his home was a centre of all that was most living. It was not the ordinary Willowfield household. The larger outer world came and went. When Latimer went to it he was swept on by new currents and felt himself warmed and fed.

There had been scarcely any day during years in which the two men had not met. They had made journeys together; they had read the same books and encountered the same minds. Each man clung to the intimacy.

"I want this thing," Baird had said more than once; "if you want it, I

want it more. Nothing must rob us of it."

"The time has come--it came long ago--" his Shadow said, "when I could not live without it. My life has grown to yours."

It was Latimer's pleasure that he found he could be an aid to the man who counted for so much to him. Affairs which pressed upon Baird he would take in hand; he was able to transact business for him, to help him in the development of his plans, save him frequently both time and fatigue. It fell about that when the lectures were delivered at distant points the two men journeyed together.

Latimer entered Baird's library on one occasion just as a sharp-faced, rather theatrical-looking man left it.

"You'll let me know your decision, sir, as soon as possible," the stranger departed, saying. "These things ought always to be developed just at the right moment. This is your right moment. Everybody is talking you over, one way or another." When the stranger was gone, Baird explained his presence.

"That is an agent," he said; "he proposes that I shall lecture through the States. I--don't know," as if pondering the thing.

"The things you say should be said to many," remarked Latimer.

"The more the better," said Baird, reflectively; "I know that--the more the better."

They sat and talked the matter over at length. The objections to it were neither numerous nor serious.

"And I want to say these things," said Baird, a little feverishly. "I want to say them again and again."

Before they parted for the night it was decided that he should accede to the proposal, and that Latimer should arrange to be his companion.

"It is the lecture 'Repentance,' he tells me, is most in demand," Baird said, as he walked to the door, with a hand in Latimer's.