CHAPTER XXXIX

The street in which the lecture hall stood began to wear the air of being a centre of interest some time before the doors of the building were opened. People who had not been able to obtain reserved seats wished to arrive early. The lectures which had begun by being popular had ended by being fashionable. At the outset an audience of sober, religious tendencies had attended them, but after the first one had been delivered other elements had presented themselves. There had been a sprinkling of serious scientific men, a prominent politician or so, some society women whose faces and toilettes were well-known and lavishly described in the newspapers. On this last night the audience was largely of the fashionable political world. Carriages drove up one after another and deposited well-dressed persons who might have been expected that night to appear at certain brilliant social functions, and who had come to hear "Repentance" instead.

"He has always had good audiences," said a member of the Committee of Arrangement, "but he has never had one like this--in Washington at least. There is the Secretary of State with his wife and daughter. I believe the President is to be here. He has awakened an enormous interest. The house will be literally crammed. They are filling the aisle with seats already."

Baird was in the small retiring-room which had been arranged for his

convenience. His journey had somewhat fatigued him, and he was in the physical and mental condition to feel glad that this lecture was to be the last of the series. He was going back to Willowfield, though he was not to remain there. He had received a call from an important church in New York and had accepted it. He was endeavouring to make arrangements that Latimer could be near him. On his return this evening he had found a letter he had been expecting. It referred to Latimer, and he was anxious to talk it over with him. He wished he would come in, and felt a little restless over his delay, though he knew they would have time to say but few words to each other before it was time for the lecture to begin. He walked up and down the room looking down at the green carpet and thinking, his thoughts wandering vaguely to the little pursuant of the herd claim and the letters he had wanted to deliver. He smiled faintly, remembering the small frame in the over-large clothes and the bucolic countenance with its over-sharpness of expression.

The member of the committee looked into the room.

"They are beginning to turn people away from the doors," he said. "Half the Cabinet is here--I never saw such an audience."

As he went away smiling, someone passed him in entering the room. Baird, who was smiling also, changed his expression of courteous appreciation to a smile of greeting, for the man who had entered was Latimer.

He advanced, holding out his hand.

"I am glad you have come," he began to say. "I wanted at least a word with you before I went on."

Then his smile died out, leaving blank amazement which a breath's space later was alarmed questioning. He recalled later how for a second he stood and stared. Latimer's face was white and damp with sweat. Its lines were drawn and sunken deep. His eyes were fixed on the man before him with something which had a ghastly resemblance to an unsteady smile which
was not a smile at all. He looked as if illness--or death--or madness had struck him. He did not seem a sane man, and yet a stillness so deadly was expressed by his whole being that it seemed to fill the small, neat, business-like green-room.

Baird strode towards him and seized him by the shoulder.

"What is it? What is it? What is it?" he cried out.

Latimer's face did not alter in a line. He fumbled stiffly in his breast-pocket and held out some pieces of yellowed letter-paper--this being done stiffly, too. He spoke in a hoarse whisper. It seemed to search every corner of the room and echo there.

"See!" he said. "These are two letters. A man wrote them to a poor, half-mad child twenty years ago."

The door opened, and the member of the committee looked in again, radiant with exultation.

"The audience waiting in such breathless silence that you might hear a pin drop. Two thousand of them, if there's one. Ten minutes to eight."

"Thank you," answered Baird.

The door closed again and he stood looking at Latimer's rigid hand and the papers.

"They were written to Margery," went on Latimer. "Stamps found them in a chink in the logs. She had hidden them there that she might take them out and sob over and kiss them. I used to hear her in the middle of the night."

Baird snatched them from his hand. He fell into a chair near the table and dropped his face upon the yellowed fragments, pressing them against his lips with awful sobbing sounds, as if he would wrest from them the kisses the long-dead girl had left there.

"I, too!" he cried. "I, too! Oh! my God! Margery!"

"Don't say 'God!'" said Latimer. "When she was dying, in an agony of fear, she said it. Not that word! Another!"

He said no other--and Latimer drew nearer to him.

"You wrote them," he said. "They are written in your hand--in your words--I should know them anywhere. You may deny it. I could prove nothing. I do not want to prove anything. Deny it if you will."

Baird rose unsteadily. The papers were clutched in his hand. His face was marred by the unnaturalness of a man's tears.

"Do you think I shall deny it?" he answered. "It is true. I have sat and listened to your talk of her and thought I should go quite mad. You have told me of her tortures, and I have listened. I did not know--surely she did not know herself--of the child--when I went away. It is no use saying to you--how should it be?--that I loved her--that I was frenzied by my love of her innocent sweetness!"

"No, there is no use," answered Latimer, in a voice actually void of emotion, "but I daresay it is true."

"There is no use in calling myself by any of the names invented for the men who bring about such tragedies. They are true of some men perhaps, but they were not true of me. I don't know what was true of me. Something worse than has ever been put into words perhaps, for I loved her and I have loved her for twenty years. I would have given up my career--my life, anything she had asked!"

"But when she found you had acted a lie to her----"

"It seemed to fill her with the frantic terror of a child. I dare not approach her. I think she thought she would be struck dead by Heaven. Great God! how I understood your story of her prayers. And it was I--it was I!"

He turned on Latimer with a kind of ferocity.

"You have crucified me!" he cried out. "Let that comfort you. You have crucified me by her side, that I might see her die--that I might hear her low little piteous voice--that I might see her throes and terrors. And I love her--and remember every look of her loving child's eyes--every curve and quiver of her mouth. Through all the years I have been crucified, knowing I had earned all that I felt."

Latimer moved across the room, putting the table between them. He went and stood by the mantel. A murmur of impatient applause from the audience came through the door.

"You loved her," he said, standing with his hand holding something in his breast. "And I loved you. She was the one brightness of my life when I was a boy and you were its one brightness when I was a man. You gave me a reason for living. I am not the kind of man to be my own reason. I

needn't tell you what you have been to me. You were the one man on earth I dared to confess to. I knew you would understand and that you knew what pity was."

Baird groaned aloud. He wiped the sweat from his forehead with his handkerchief as he listened.

"I knew you were the one man I could trust. I could trust you. I could confide in you, and talk to you about Margery. One day you said to me that you had learned to love her and that we might have been brothers."

"When I was left free I had but one thought," Baird said, "to return to her--to atone, so far as atonement could be--to pray of her upon my knees. But she was dead--she was dead!"

"Yes, she was dead, and I had no one left to talk to about her. You were my one comfort and support and friend."

He drew his hand out of his breast. Baird started and then stood quite quiet. The hand held a pistol.

"Are you going to kill me?" he said. "You know I asked you that once before."

"No," said Latimer, "I am not going to kill you. I am going to kill the man who loved you, and found you his reason for living. It's all done

with!"

"No! no!" shrieked Baird, and he hurled himself across the table like a madman. "No! You are not! No, Latimer! No! God! No!"

They were struggling together--Baird hung to his arm and tried to drag the pistol from his grasp. But it was no use; Latimer's long, ill-hung limbs were the stronger. His fixed face did not change, but he wrenched himself free and flung Baird across the room. He set the pistol against his heart and pulled the trigger. He gave something like a leap and fell down.

The door opened for the returning member of the committee and the impatient applause of the audience came through it almost a roar.

Baird was struggling to rise as if his fall had stunned him. Latimer was stretched at full length, quite dead.