

CHAPTER XLI

The unobtrusive funeral cortège had turned the corner of Bank Street and disappeared from view almost an hour ago. In the front room of the house in which had lived the man just carried to his grave, the gentle old woman who had been his mother sat and looked with pathetic patience at Miss Amory Starkweather as the rough winds of the New England early spring rushed up the empty thoroughfare and whirled through the yet unleafed trees. Miss Amory had remained after the other people had gone away, and she was listening to the wind, too.

"We are both old women," she had said. "We have both lived long enough to have passed through afternoons like this more than once before. Howsoever bad other hours may be, it seems to me that these are always the worst."

"Just after--everything--has been taken away," Mrs. Latimer said now; "the house seems so empty. Faith," tremulously, "even Faith can't help you not to feel that everything has gone--such a long, long way off."

She did not wipe away the tear that fell on her cheek. She looked very small and meek in her deep mourning. She presented to Miss Amory's imagination the figure of a lovable child grown old without having lost its child temperament.

"But I must not complain," she went on, with an effort to smile at Miss

Amory's ugly old intelligently sympathetic countenance. "It must have been all over in a second, and he could have felt no pain at all. Death by accident is always an awful shock to those left behind; but it must scarcely be like death to--those who go. He was quite well; he had just bought the pistol and took it out to show to Mr. Baird. Mr. Baird himself did not understand how it happened."

"It is nearly always so--that no one quite sees how it is done," Miss Amory answered. "Do not let yourself think of it."

She was sitting quite near to Mrs. Latimer, and she leaned forward and put her hand over the cold, little, shrivelled one lying on the lap of the mourning-dress.

"Though it was so sudden," she said, "it was an end not unlike Margery's--the slipping out of life without realising that the last hour had come."

"Yes; I have thought that, too."

She looked up at the portrait on the wall--the portrait of the bright girl-face. Her own face lighted into a smile.

"It is so strange to think that they are together again," she said. "They will have so much to tell each other."

"Yes," said Miss Amory; "yes."

She got up herself and went and stood before the picture. Mrs. Latimer rose and came and stood beside her.

"Mr. Baird has been with me every day," she said. "He has been like a son to me."

A carriage drew up before the house, and, as the occupant got out, both women turned to look.

Mrs. Latimer turned a shade paler.

"They have got back from the funeral," she said. "It is Mr. Baird."

Then came the ring at the front door, the footsteps in the passage, and Baird came into the room. He was haggard and looked broken and old, but his manner was very gentle when he went to the little old woman and took her hands.

"I think he scarcely knew he had so many friends at Janney's Mills," he said. "A great many of them came. When I turned away the earth was covered with flowers."

He drew her to a chair and sat by her. She put her white head on his arm and cried.

"He was always so sad," she said. "He thought people never cared for him. But he was good--he was good. I felt sure they must love him a little. It will be better for him--now."

Miss Amory spoke from her place before the fire, where she stood rigidly, with a baffled look on her face. Her voice was low and hoarse.

"Yes," she said, with eager pitifulness. "It will be better now."

The little mother lifted her wet face, still clinging to Baird's arm as she looked up at him.

"And I have it to remember," she sobbed, "that you--you were his friend, and that for years you made him happier than he had ever been. He said you gave him a reason for living."

Baird was ashen pale. She stooped and softly kissed the back of his hand.

"Somehow," she said, "you seemed even to comfort him for Margery. He seemed to bear it better after he knew you. I shall not feel as if they were quite gone away from me while I can talk to you about them. You will spare an hour now and then to come and sit with me?" She looked round the

plain, respectable little room with a quiet finality. "I am too old and tired to live long," she added.

It was Baird who kissed her hand now, with a fervour almost passion. Miss Amory started at sight of his action, and at the sound of the voice in which he spoke.

"Talk to me as you would have talked to him," he said. "Think of me as you would have thought of him. Let me--in God's name, let me do what there is left me!"

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Miss Amory's carriage had waited before the gate, and when she went out to it Baird went with her.

After he had put her into it he stood a moment on the pavement and looked at her.

"I want to come with you," he said. "May I?"

"Yes," she answered, and made room for him at her side.

But he took the seat opposite to her and leaned back, shutting his eyes while Miss Amory's rested upon him. The life and beauty which had been such ever-present characteristics of his personality seemed to have left him never to return. Miss Amory's old nerves were strung taut. She had passed through many phases of feeling with regard to him as the years had

gone by. During those years she had believed that she knew a hidden thing of him known by no other person. She had felt herself a sort of silent detective in the form of an astute old New England gentlewoman. She had abhorred and horribly pitied him. She had the clear judicial mind which must inevitably see the tragic pitifulness of things. She had thought too much to be able to indulge in the primitive luxury of unqualified condemnation. As she watched him to-day during their drive through the streets, she realised that she beheld a kind of suffering not coming under the head of any ordinary classification. It was a hopeless, ghastly thing, a breaking up of life, a tearing loose of all the cords to which a man might anchor his existence.

When they reached the house and entered the parlour, she went to her chair and sat down--and waited. She knew she was waiting, and believed she knew what for. In a vague way she had always felt that an hour like this would come to them. They were somehow curiously akin. Baird began to walk to and fro. His lips were trembling. Presently he turned towards the rigid figure in the chair and stood still.

"It was not an accident," he said. "He killed himself."

"That I felt sure of," Miss Amory answered. "Tell me why he did it."

Baird began to tremble a little himself.

"Yes, I will," he said. "I must. I suppose--there is a sort of hysteric luxury in--confession. He did it because there was nothing else left. The foundations of his world had been torn from under his feet. Everything was gone." His voice broke into a savage cry. "Oh! in one short lifetime--the black misery a man can bring about!"

"Yes," said Miss Amory.

He threw himself into a chair near her.

"For years--years," he said, "he hid a secret." Miss Amory bent forward. She felt she must help him a little--for pity's sake.

"Was it the secret of Margery?" she half whispered.

"Did you know it?"

"When a woman has spent a long life alone, thinking--thinking," she answered, "she has had time to learn to observe and to work at problems. The day she fainted in the street and I took her home in my carriage, I began to fear--to guess. She was not only a girl who was ill--she was a child who was being killed with some horror; she was heart-breaking. I used to go and see her. In the end I knew."

"I--did not," he said, looking at her with haggard eyes.

There was a long pause. She knew he had told her all in the one sentence--all she had guessed.

"She did not know I knew," she went on, presently. "She believed no one knew. Oh, I tell you again, she was heart-breaking! She did not know that there were wild moments when she dropped words that could be linked into facts and formed into a chain."

"Had you formed it," he asked, "when you wrote and told me she had died?"

"Yes. It had led me to you--to nothing more. I felt death had saved her from what would have been worse. It seemed as if--the blackest devil--would be glad to know."

"I am the blackest devil, perhaps," he said, with stony helplessness, "but when I received your letter I was grovelling on my knees praying that I might get back to her--and atone--as far as a black devil could."

"And she was dead," said Miss Amory, wringing her hands together on her lap; "dead--dead."

She stopped suddenly and turned on him. "He killed himself," she cried, "because he found out that it was you!"

"Yes. I was the one man he loved--he had told his secret to me--to me!--the black devil. Now--now I must go to his mother, day after day,

and be her son--because I was his friend--and knew his love for
Margery--and of her sweetness--and her happy, peaceful death. He used to
talk to me for hours; she--poor, tender soul--will talk to me again--of
Margery--Margery--Margery--and of Lucien, whose one happiness I was."

"It will--almost--be--enough," said Miss Amory, slowly.

"Yes," he answered; "it will almost be enough--even for a black devil."

And he turned on his chair and laid his face on his folded arms and
sobbed like a woman.