

In Connection with the De Willoughby Claim

By

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CHAPTER I

High noon at Talbot's Cross-roads, with the mercury standing at ninety-eight in the shade--though there was not much shade worth mentioning in the immediate vicinity of the Cross-roads post-office, about which, upon the occasion referred to, the few human beings within sight and sound were congregated. There were trees enough a few hundred yards away, but the post-office stood boldly and unflinchingly in the blazing sun. The roads crossing each other stretched themselves as far as the eye could follow them, the red clay transformed into red dust which even an ordinarily lively imagination might have fancied was red hot. The shrill, rattling cry of the grasshoppers, hidden in the long yellow sedge-grass and drouth-smitten corn, pierced the stillness now and then with a suddenness startling each time it broke forth, because the interval between each of the pipings was given by the hearers to drowsiness or heated unconscious naps.

In such napping and drowsiness the present occupants of the post-office were indulging. Upon two empty goods boxes two men in copperas-coloured jean garments reclined in easy attitudes, their hats tilted over their eyes, while several others balanced their split-seated chairs against the house or the post-porch and dozed.

Inside the store the postmaster and proprietor tilted his chair against the counter and dozed also, though fitfully, and with occasional restless changes of position and smothered maledictions against the heat. He was scarcely the build of man to sleep comfortably at high noon in midsummer. His huge, heavy body was rather too much for him at any time, but during the hot weather he succumbed beneath the weight of his own flesh. Hamlin County knew him as "Big Tom D'Willerby," and, indeed, rather prided itself upon him as a creditable possession. It noted any increase in his weight, repeated his jokes, and bore itself patiently under his satire. His indolence it regarded with leniency not entirely untinged with secret exultation.

"The derndest, laziest critter," his acquaintances would remark to each other; "the derndest I do reckon that ever the Lord made. Nigh unto three hundred he weighs, and never done a lick o' work in his life. Not one! Lord, no! Tom D'Willerby work? I guess not. He gits on fine without any o' that in his'n. Work ain't his kind. It's a pleasin' sight to see him lyin' round thar to the post-office an' the boys a-waitin' on to him, doin' his tradin' for him, an' sortin' the mail when it comes in. They're ready enough to do it jest to hear him gas."

And so they were. About eight years before the time the present story commences, he had appeared upon the scene apparently having no object in view but to make himself as comfortable as possible. He took up his quarters at one of the farm-houses among the mountains, paid his hostess regularly for the simple accommodations she could afford him, and, before

three months passed, had established his reputation and, without making the slightest apparent effort, had gathered about him a large circle of friends and admirers.

"His name's D'Willerby," Mrs. Pike would drawl when questioned about him, "an' he's kin to them D'Willerbys that's sich big bugs down to D'Lileville. I guess they ain't much friendly, though. He don't seem to like to have nothin' much to say about 'em. Seems like he has money a-plenty to carry him along, an' he talks some o' settin' up a store somewhars."

In the course of a month or so he carried out the plan, selecting Talbot's Cross-roads as the site for the store in question. He engaged hands to erect a frame building, collected by the assistance of some mysterious agency a heterogeneous stock consisting of calicoes, tinware, coffee, sugar, tobacco, and various waif and stray commodities, and, having done so, took his seat on the porch one morning and announced the establishment open.

Upon the whole, the enterprise was a success. Barnesville was fifteen miles distant, and the farmers, their wives and daughters, were glad enough to stop at the Cross-roads for their calico dresses and store-coffee. By doing so they were saved a long ride and gained superior conversational advantages. "D'Willerby's mighty easy to trade with," it was said.

There was always a goodly number of "critters" tied to the fence-corners, and consequently to business was added the zest of society and the interchanging of gossip. "D'Willerby's" became a centre of interest and attraction, and D'Willerby himself a county institution.

Big Tom, however, studiously avoided taking a too active part in the duties of the establishment. Having with great forethought provided himself with a stout chair which could be moved from behind the counter to the door, and from the door to the store as the weather demanded, he devoted himself almost exclusively to sitting in it and encouraging a friendly and accommodating spirit in his visitors and admirers. The more youthful of those admirers he found useful in the extreme.

"Boys," he would say, "a man can't do more than a thousand things at once. A man can't talk a steady stream and do himself justice, and settle the heftiest kind of questions, and say the kind of things these ladies ought to have said to 'em, and then measure out molasses and weigh coffee and slash off calico dresses and trade for eggs. Some of you've got to roust out and do some clerking, or I've got to quit. I've not got the constitution to stand it. Jim, you 'tend to Mis' Pike, and Bill, you wait on Mis' Jones. Lord! Lord! half a dozen of you here, and not one doing a thing--not a derved thing! Do you want me to get up and leave Miss Mirandy and do things myself? We've got to settle about the colour of this gown. How'd you feel now, if it wasn't becoming to her complexion? Just help yourself to that plug of tobacco, Hance, and lay your ten cents in the cash drawer, and then you can weigh out that butter of Mis'

Simpson's."

When there was a prospect of a post-office at the Cross-roads, there was only one opinion as to who was the man best calculated to adorn the position of postmaster.

"The store's right yere, Tom," said his patrons, "an' you're right yere. Ye can write and spell off things 'thout any trouble, an' I reckon ye wouldn't mind the extry two dollars comin' in ev'ry month."

"Lord! Lord!" groaned Tom, who was stretched full length on the floor of the porch when the subject was first broached. "Do you want a man to kill himself out an' out, boys? Work himself into eternal kingdom come? Who'd do the extra work, I'd like to know--empty out the mail-bag and hand out the mail, and do the extra cussin'? That would be worth ten dollars a month. And, like as not, the money would be paid in cheques, and who's goin' to sign 'em? Lord! I believe you think a man's immortal soul could be bought for fifty cents a day. You don't allow for the wear and tear on a fellow's constitution, boys."

But he allowed himself to be placed in receipt of the official salary in question, and the matter of extra labour settled itself. Twice a week a boy on horseback brought the mail-bag from Barnesville, and when this youth drew rein before the porch Big Tom greeted him from indoors with his habitual cordiality.

"Light, sonny, 'light!" he would call out in languidly sonorous tones; "come in and let these fellows hear the news. Just throw that mail-bag on the counter and let's hear from you. Plenty of good water down at the spring. Might as well take that bucket and fill it if you want a drink. I've been waiting for just such a man as you to do it. These fellows would sit here all day and let a man die. I can't get anything out of 'em. I've about half a mind to quit sometimes and leave them to engineer the thing themselves. Look here now, is any fellow going to attend to that mail, or is it going to lie there till I have to get up and attend to it myself? I reckon that's what you want. I reckon that'd just suit you. Jehoshaphat! I guess you'd like me to take charge of the eternal universe."

It was for the mail he waited with his usual complement of friends and assistants on the afternoon referred to at the opening of this chapter. The boy was behind time, and, under the influence of the heat, conversation had at first flagged and then subsided. Big Tom himself had taken the initiative of dropping into a doze, and his companions had one by one followed his example, or at least made an effort at doing so. The only one of the number who remained unmistakably awake was a little man who sat on the floor of the end of the porch, his small legs, encased in large blue jean pantaloons, dangling over the side. This little man, who was gently and continuously ruminating, with brief "asides" of expectoration, kept his eyes fixed watchfully upon the Barnesville Road, and he it was who at last roused the dozers.

"Thar's some un a-comin'," he announced in a meek voice. "'Tain't him."

Big Tom opened his eyes, stretched himself, and gradually rose in his might, proving a very tight fit for the establishment, especially the doorway, towards which he lounged, supporting himself against its side.

"Who is it, Ezra?" he asked, almost extinguishing the latter cognomen with a yawn.

"It's thet thar feller!"

All the other men awakened in a body. Whomsoever the individual might be, he had the power to rouse them to a lively exhibition of interest. One and all braced themselves to look at the horseman approaching along the Barnesville Road.

"He's a kinder curi's-lookin' feller," observed one philosopher.

"Well, at a distance of half a mile, perhaps he is," said Tom. "In a cloud of dust and the sun blazin' down on him like thunderation, I don't know but you're right, Nath."

"Git out!" replied Nath, placidly. "He's a curi's-actin' feller, anyway.

Don't go nowhar nor hev nothin' to say to nobody. Jest sets right down in that thar holler with his wife, as if b'ars an' painters wus all a man or woman wanted round 'em."

"She's a doggoned purty critter," said the little man in large trousers, placidly. He had not appeared to listen to the conversation, but, as this pertinent remark proved, it had not been lost on him.

His observation was greeted with a general laugh, which seemed to imply that the speaker had a character which his speech sustained.

"Whar did ye see her, Stamps?" was asked.

The little man remained unmoved, still dangling his legs over the porch side, still ruminating, still gazing with pale, blinking eyes up the road.

"Went over the mountain to 'tend court to Bakersville, an' took it on my road to go by thar. She was settin' in the door, an' I see her afore she seen me. When she hearn the sound of my mule's feet, she got up an' went into the house. It was a powerful hot mornin', 'n' I wus mighty dry, 'n' I stopped fur a cool drink. She didn't come out when fust I hollered, 'n' when she did come, she looked kinder skeered 'n' wouldn't talk none. Kep' her sunbonnet over her face, like she didn't want to be seen overmuch."

"What does she look like, Ezry?" asked one of the younger men.

Mr. Stamps meditated a few seconds.

"Don't look like none o' the women folk about yere," he replied, finally.

"She ain't their kind."

"What d'ye mean by that?"

"Dunno eggsactly. She's mighty white 'n' young-lookin' 'n' delicate--but that ain't all."

Tom made a restless movement.

"Look here, boys," he broke in, suddenly, "here's a nice business--a lot of fellows asking questions about a woman an' gossiping as if there wasn't a thing better to do. Leave 'em alone, if they want to be left alone--leave 'em alone."

Mr. Stamps expectorated in an entirely unbiased manner. He seemed as willing to leave his story alone as he had been to begin it.

"He's comin' yere," he said, softly, after a pause. "Thet's whar he's comin'."

The rest of the company straightened themselves in their seats and made an effort to assume the appearance of slightly interested spectators. It became evident that Mr. Stamps was right, and that the rider was about to dismount.

He was a man about thirty years of age, thin, narrow-chested, and stooping. His coarse clothes seemed specially ill-suited to his slender figure, his black hair was long, and his beard neglected; his broad hat was pulled low over his eyes and partially concealed his face.

"He don't look none too sociable when he's nigher than half a mile," remarked Nath in an undertone.

He glanced neither to the right nor to the left as he strode past the group into the store. Strange to relate, Tom had lounged behind the counter and stood ready to attend him. He asked for a few necessary household trifles in a low tone, and, as Tom collected and made them into a clumsy package, he stood and looked on with his back turned towards the door.

Those gathered upon the porch listened eagerly for the sound of conversation, but none reached their ears. Tom moved heavily to and fro for a few minutes, and then the parcel was handed across the counter.

"Hot weather," said the stranger, without raising his eyes.

"Yes," said Tom, "hot weather, sir."

"Good-day," said the stranger.

"Good-day," answered Tom.

And his customer took his departure. He passed out as he had passed in; but while he was indoors little Mr. Stamps had changed his position. He now sat near the wooden steps, his legs dangling as before, his small countenance as noncommittal as ever. As the stranger neared him, he raised his pale little eyes, blinked them, indulged in a slight jerk of the head, and uttered a single word of greeting.

"Howdy?"

The stranger started, glanced down at him, and walked on. He made no answer, untied his horse, mounted it, and rode back over the Barnesville Road towards the mountain.

Mr. Stamps remained seated near the steps and blinked after him silently until he was out of sight.

"Ye didn't seem to talk none, D'Willerby," said one of the outsiders when Tom reappeared.

Tom sank into his chair, thrust his hands into his pockets, and stretched his limbs out to their fullest capacity.

"Let a man rest, boys," he said, "let a man rest!"

He was silent for some time afterwards, and even on the arrival of the

mail was less discursive than usual. It was Mr. Stamps who finally aroused him from his reverie.

Having obtained his mail--one letter in a legal-looking envelope--and made all other preparations to return to the bosom of his family, Stamps sidled up to the counter, and, leaning over it, spoke in an insinuatingly low tone:

"She was bar'foot," he said, mildly, "'n' she hadn't been raised to it--that was one thing. Her feet wus as soft 'n' tender as a baby's; 'n' fur another thing, her hands wus as white as her face, 'n' whiter. Thet ain't the way we raise 'em in Hamlin County--that's all."

And, having said it, he slipped out of the store, mounted his mule, and jogged homeward on the Barnesville Road also.