CHAPTER III

Scarcely a month before the events described in the opening chapter took place, the stranger and a young woman, who was his companion, had appeared in the community. There was little that seemed mysterious about them at the outset. A long, uninhabited cabin, a score or so of yards from the mountain road, had been roughly patched up and taken possession of by them. There was nothing unusual in the circumstance except that hey had appeared suddenly and entirely unheralded; but this in itself would have awakened no special comment. The mystery developed itself from their after reserve and seclusion. They guarded themselves from all advances by keeping out of sight when anyone approached their cabin. The young woman was rarely, if ever, seen. The man never called at the post-office for mail, and upon the few occasions on which a stray human being crossed his path, his manner was such as by no means encouraged the curious. Mr. Stamps was the only individual who had seen the woman face to face. There was an unmoved pertinacity in the character of Mr. Stamps which stood him in good stead upon all occasions. He was not easily abashed or rebuffed, the more especially when he held in view some practical object. Possibly he held some such object in view when he rode up to the tumbled down gateway and asked for the draught of water no woman of the region could refuse without some reasonable excuse.

"'Tain't airs they're puttin' on, Cindy," he said to the partner of his joys and sorrows the evening after his ride over the mountain. "Oh, no, 'tain't airs, it's somethin' more curi's than that!" And he bent over the fire in a comfortable lounging way, rubbing his hands a little, and blinked at the back log thoughtfully.

They were a friendly and sociable people, these mountaineers, all the more so because the opportunities for meeting sociably were limited. The men had their work and the women their always large families to attend to, and with a mile or so of rough road between themselves and their neighbours, there was not much chance for enjoyable gossip. When good fortune threw them together they usually made the best of their time. Consequently, the mystery of two human beings, who had shut themselves off with apparent intent from all intercourse with their kind, was a difficulty not readily disposed of. It was, perhaps, little to be wondered at that Mr. Stamps thought it over and gathered carefully together all the points presenting themselves to his notice. The subject had been frequently discussed at the Cross-roads post-office. The disposition to seclusion was generally spoken of as "curi'sness," and various theories had been advanced with a view to explaining the "curi'sness" in question. "Airs" had been suggested as a solution of the difficulty, but as time progressed, the theory of "airs" had been abandoned.

"Fur," said Uncle Jake Wooten, who was a patriarch and an authority, "when a man's a-gwine to put on airs, he kinder slicks up more. A man

that's airy, he ain't a-gwine to shut hisself up and not show out more. Like as not he'd wear store-clothes an' hang round 'n' kinder blow; 'n' this feller don't do nary one. 'N' as to the woman, Lord! I should think all you'unses knows how womenfolks does that's airy. Ef this yere one wus that way, she'd be a-dressin' in starched calikers 'n' sunbonnets 'n' bress-pins, 'n' mebbe rings 'n' congrist-gaiters. She'd be to the meetin' every time there was meetin' a-showin' out 'n' lettin' on like she didn't know the rest on 'em wus seein'. It don't sound to reason that either on 'em is airy."

It had been suggested by a bold spirit capable of more extended flights of the imagination than the rest, that they were "Northerners" who for some unworthy object had taken up their abode within the bound of civilisation; but this idea was frowned down as being of a wild nature and not to be encouraged.

Finally the general interest in the subject had subsided somewhat, though it was ready to revive at any new comment or incident, which will explain the bodily awakening of the sleepers on the post-office porch when Mr. Stamps made his announcement of the approach of "thet thar feller."

Up to the moment when the impulse seized him which led him to take his place behind the counter as the stranger entered the store, Tom De Willoughby had taken little or no part in numerous discussions held around him. He had listened with impartiality to all sides of the question, his portion of the entertainment being to make comments of an

inspiriting nature which should express in a marked manner his sarcastic approval of any special weakness in a line of argument.

Among the many agreeable things said of him in his past, it had never been said that he was curious; he was too indolent to be curious, and it may be simply asserted that he had felt little curiosity concerning the popular mystery. But when he found himself face to face with his customer, a new feeling suddenly took possession of him. The change came when, for one instant, the man, as if in momentary forgetfulness, looked up and met his eyes in speaking. Each moved involuntarily, and Tom turned aside, ostensibly, to pick up a sheet of wrapping paper. The only words exchanged were those relating to the courtesies and the brief remarks heard by the loungers outside. After this the stranger rode away and Tom lounged back to his chair. He made no reply to Stamps's explanatory aside, and no comment upon the remarks of the company whose curiosity had
naturally received a new impetus which spurred them on to gossip a little in the usual vague manner. He gave himself up to speculation. The mere tone of a man's voice had set his mind to work. His past life had given him experience in which those about him were lacking, and at the instant he heard the stranger speak this experience revealed to him as by a flash of light, a thing which had never yet been even remotely guessed at.

"A gentleman, by thunder!" he said to himself. "That's it! A gentleman!"

He knew he could not be mistaken. Low and purposely muffled as the voice

had been, he recognised in it that which marked it as the voice of a man trained to modulated speech. And even this was not all, though it had led him to look again, and more closely, at the face shadowed by the broad hat. It was not a handsome face, but it was one not likely to be readily forgotten. It was worn and haggard, the features strongly aquiline, the eyes somewhat sunken; it was the face of a man who had lived the life of an ascetic and who, with a capacity for sharp suffering, had suffered and was suffering still.

"But a gentleman and not a Southerner," Tom persisted to himself. "A Yankee, as I'm a sinner; and what is a Yankee doing hiding himself here for?"

It was such a startling thing under the circumstances, that he could not rid himself of the thought of it. It haunted him through the rest of the day, and when night came and the store being closed, he retired as usual to the back part of the house, he was brooding over it still.

He lived in a simple and primitive style. Three rooms built on to the store were quite enough for him. One was his sitting- and bedroom, another his dining-room and kitchen, the third the private apartment of his household goddess, a stout old mulatto woman who kept his house in order and prepared his meals.

When he opened the door to-night the little boarded rooms were illuminated with two tallow candles and made fragrant with the odour of

fried chicken and hoe-cakes, to which Aunt Mornin was devoting all her energies, and for the first time perhaps in his life, he failed to greet these attractions with his usual air of good cheer.

He threw his hat into a chair, and, stretching himself out upon the bedstead, lay there, his hands clasped above his head and his eyes fixed upon the glow of the fire in the adjoining room, where Aunt Mornin was at work.

"A gentleman!" he said, half aloud. "That's it, by Jupiter, a gentleman!"

He remembered it afterwards as a curious coincidence that he should have busied his mind so actively with his subject in a manner so unusual with him.

His imagination not being sufficiently vivid to help him out of his difficulty to his own satisfaction, he laboured with it patiently, recurring to it again and again, and turning it over until it assumed a greater interest than at first. He only relinquished it with an effort when, going to bed later than usual, he made up his mind to compose himself to sleep.

"Good Lord!" he said, turning on his side and addressing some unseen presence representing the vexed question. "Don't keep a man awake: settle it yourself." And finally sank into unconsciousness in the midst of his mental struggle.

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About the middle of the night he awakened. He felt that something had startled him from his sleep, but could not tell what it was. A few seconds he lay without moving, listening, and as he listened there came to his ear the sound of a horse's feet, treading the earth restlessly outside the door, the animal itself breathing heavily as if it had been ridden hard; and almost as soon as he aroused to recognition of this fact, there came a sharp tap on the door and a man's voice crying "Hallo!"

He knew the voice at once, and unexpected as the summons was, felt he was not altogether unprepared for it, though he could not have offered even the weakest explanation for the feeling.

"He's in trouble," he said, as he sat up quickly in bed. "Something's gone wrong." He rose and in a few seconds opened the door.

He had guessed rightly; it was the stranger. The moonlight fell full upon the side of the house and the road, and the panting horse stood revealed in a bright light which gave the man's face a ghostly look added to his natural pallor. As he leaned forward, Tom saw that he was as much exhausted as was the animal he had ridden.

"I want to find a doctor, or a woman who can give help to another," he said.

"There ain't a doctor within fifteen miles from here," began Tom. He stopped short. What he saw in the man's face checked him.

"Look here," he said, "is it your wife?"

The man made a sharp gesture of despair.

"She's dying, I think," he said, hoarsely, "and there's not a human being near her."

"Good Lord!" cried Tom, "Good Lord!" The sweat started out on his forehead. He remembered what Stamps had said of her youth and her pale face, and he thought of Delia Vanuxem, and from this thought sprang a sudden recollection of the deserted medical career in which he had been regarded as so ignominious a failure. He had never mentioned it since he had cut himself off from the old life, and the women for whose children he had prescribed with some success now and then had considered the ends achieved only the natural results of his multitudinous gifts. But the thought of the desolate young creature lying there alone struck deep. He listened one moment, then made his resolve.

"Go to the stable," he said, "and throw a saddle over the horse you will find there. I know something of such matters myself, and I shall be

better than nothing, with a woman's help. I have a woman here who will follow us."

He went into the back room and awakened Aunt Mornin.

"Get up," he said, "and saddle the mule and follow me as soon as you can to the cabin in Blair's Hollow. The wife of a man who lives there needs a woman with her. Come quickly."

When he returned to the door his horse stood there saddled, the stranger sitting on his own and holding the bridle.

Tom mounted in silence, but once finally seated, he turned to his companion.

"Now strike out," he said.

There were four miles of road before them, but they scarcely slackened rein until they were within sight of the Hollow, and the few words they exchanged were the barest questions and answers.

The cabin was built away from the road on the side of the hill, and leaving their horses tethered at the foot of the slope, they climbed it together.

When they reached the door, the stranger stopped and turned to Tom.

"There is no sound inside," he faltered; "I dare not go in."

Tom strode by him and pushed the door open.

In one corner of the room was a roughly made bedstead, and upon it lay a girl, her deathly pale face turned sideways upon the pillow. It was as if she lay prostrated by some wave of agony which had just passed over her; her breath was faint and rapid, and great drops of sweat stood out upon her young drawn face.

Tom drew a chair forward and sat down beside her. He lifted one of her hands, touching it gently, but save for a slight quiver of the eyelids she did not stir. A sense of awe fell upon him.

"It's Death," he said to himself. He had experience enough to teach him that. He turned to the man.

"You had better go out of the room; I will do my best."

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In a little over an hour Aunt Mornin dismounted from her mule and tethered it to a sapling at the side of the road below. She looked up at the light gleaming faintly through the pines on the hillside.

"I cum 's fas' 's I could," she said, "but I reckon I'd orter been here afore. De Lord knows dis is a curi's 'casion."

When she crossed the threshold of the cabin, her master pointed to a small faintly moving bundle lying at the foot of the bed over which he was bending.

"Take it into the other room and tell the man to come here," he said. "There's no time to lose."

He still held the weak hand; but the girl's eyes were no longer closed; they were open and fixed on his face. The great fellow was trembling like a leaf. The past hour had been almost more than he could bear. He was entirely unstrung.

"I wasn't cut out for this kind of thing," he had groaned more than once, and for the first time in his life thanked Fate for making him a failure.

As he looked down at his patient, a mist rose before his eyes, blurring his sight, and he hurriedly brushed it away.

She was perhaps nineteen years old, and had the very young look a simple trusting nature and innocent untried life bring. She was small, fragile, and fair, with the pure fairness born of a cold climate. Her large blue-gray eyes had in them the piteous appeal sometimes to be seen in the eyes of a timid child.

Tom had laid his big hand on her forehead and stroked it, scarcely knowing what he did.

"Don't be frightened," he said, with a tremor in his voice. "Close your eyes and try to be quiet for a few moments, and then----"

He stooped to bend his ear to her lips which were moving faintly.

"He'll come directly," he answered, though he did not hear her; "--directly. It's all right."

And then he stroked her hair again because he knew not what else to do, seeing, as he did, that the end was so very near, and that no earthly power, however far beyond his own poor efforts, could ward it off.

Just at that moment the door opened and the man came in.

That he too read the awful truth at his first glance, Tom saw. All attempts at disguise had dropped away. His thin, scholarly face was as colourless as the fairer one on the pillow, his brows were knit into rigid lines and his lips were working. He approached the bed, and for a few moments stood looking down as if trying to give himself time to gain self-control. Tom saw the girl's soft eyes fixed in anguished entreaty; there was a struggle, and from the slowly moving lips came a few faint and broken words.

"Death!--They--never know."

The man flung himself upon his knees and burst into an agony of such weeping that, seeing it, Tom turned away shuddering.

"No," he said, "they will never know, they who loved you--who loved you--will never know! God forgive me if I have done wrong. I have been false that they might be spared. God forgive me for the sin!"

The poor child shivered; she had become still paler, and the breath came in sharp little puffs through her nostrils.

"God--God!--God!" she panted. But the man did not seem to hear her. He was praying aloud, a struggling, disjointed prayer.

"O God of sinners," he cried, "Thou who forgivest, Thou who hast died, forgive--forgive in this hour of death!"

Tom heard no more. He could only listen to the soft, panting breath sinking lower and lower.

Suddenly the piteous eyes turned towards him--the stranger--as if in great dread: perhaps they saw in the mere human pity of his face what met some sharp last need.

He went to his old place as if in answer to the look, and took the poor little hand once more, closing the warmth of his own over its coldness. He was weeping like a child.

"Don't be afraid," he said; "--not afraid. It's--it's all right."

And almost as he said it, with her eyes still fixed upon his own, and with her hand in his, she gave a low sob--and died.

Tom touched the kneeling man upon the shoulder.

"There's no need of that now," he said; "it's over."