

## CHAPTER IV

When a few minutes later he went into the back room, he found Aunt Mornin sitting before the big fireplace in which burned a few logs of wood. The light the snapping sticks gave fell full upon her black face, and upon the small bundle upon her spacious knee.

As he entered she turned sharply towards him.

"Don't nobody keer nothin' for this yere?" she said, "ain't nobody comin' nigh? Whar's he? Don't he take no int'rus' in the pore little lonesome child? I 'spect yo'll haf to take it ye'self, Mars' De Willerby, while I goes in dar."

Tom stopped short, stricken with a pang of remorse. He looked down at the small face helplessly.

"Yes," he said, "you'll have to go in there; you're needed."

The woman looked at him in startled questioning.

"Mars De Willerby," she said, "does dat ar mean she's cl'ar gone?"

"Yes," answered Tom. "She's gone, Mornin."

With the emotional readiness of her race, the comfortable creature burst into weeping, clasping the child to her broad bosom.

"Pore chile!" she said, "an' poor chile lef behin'! De Lord help 'em bofe."

With manifest fear Tom stooped and took the little red flannel bundle from her arms.

"Never mind crying," he said. "Go into the room and do what's to be done."

When left alone with his charge, he sat down and held it balanced carefully in his hands, his elbows resting on his knees. He was used to carrying his customers' children, a great part of his popularity being based upon his jovial fondness for them. But he had never held so small a creature as this in his arms before. He regarded it with a respectful timidity.

"It wasn't thought of," he said, reflectively. "Even she--poor thing, poor thing--" he ended, hurriedly, "there was no time."

He was still holding his small burden with awkward kindness when the door opened and the man he had left in the room beyond came in. He approached the hearth and stood for a few seconds staring at the fire in a stupefied, abstracted way. He did not seem to see the child. At last he

spoke.

"Where shall I lay her?" he asked. "Where is the nearest churchyard?"

"Fifteen miles away," Tom answered. "Most of the people like to have their dead near them and lay them on the hillsides."

The man turned to him with a touch of horror in his face.

"In unconsecrated ground?" he said.

"It doesn't trouble them," said Tom. "They sleep well enough."

The man turned to the fire again--he had not looked at the child yet--and made a despairing gesture with his hands.

"That she--" he said, "that she should lie so far from them, and in unconsecrated ground!"

"There is the place I told you of," said Tom.

"I cannot go there," with the gesture again. "There is no time. I must go away."

He made no pretence at concealing that he had a secret to hide. He seemed to have given up the effort.

Tom looked up at him.

"What are you going to do with this?" he asked.

Then for the first time he seemed to become conscious of the child's presence. He turned and gave it a startled sidelong glance, as if he had suddenly been struck with a new fear.

"I--do not know," he stammered. "I--no! I do not know. What have I been doing?"

He sank into a chair and buried his face in his trembling hands.

"God's curse is upon it," he cried. "There is no place for it on earth."

Tom rose with a sudden movement and began to pace the floor with his charge in his arms.

"It's a little chap to lay a curse on," he said. "And helpless enough, by Gad!"

He looked down at the diminutive face, and as he did so, a wild thought flashed through his mind. It had the suddenness and force of a revelation. His big body trembled with some feeling it would have gone hard with him to express, and his heart warmed within him as he felt the

light weight lying against it.

"No place for it!" he cried. "By God, there is! There is a place here--and a man to stand by and see fair-play!"

"Give her to me," he said, "give her to me, and if there is no place for her, I'll find one."

"What do you mean?" faltered the man.

"I mean what I say," said Tom. "I'll take her and stand by her as long as there is breath in me; and if the day should ever come in spite of me when wrong befalls her, as it befell her mother, some man shall die, so help me God!"

The warm Southern blood which gave to his brothers' love-songs the grace of passion, and which made them renowned for their picturesque eloquence of speech, fired him to greater fluency than was usual with him, when he thought of the helplessness of the tiny being he held.

"I never betrayed a woman yet, or did one a wrong," he went on. "I'm not one of the lucky fellows who win their hearts," with a great gulp in his throat. "Perhaps if there's no one to come between us, she may--may be fond of me."

The man gave him a long look, as if he was asking himself a question.

"Yes," he said at last, "she will be fond of you. You will be worthy of it. There is no one to lay claim to her. Her mother lies dead among strangers, and her father----"

For a few moments he seemed to be falling into a reverie, but suddenly a tremour seized him and he struck one clenched hand against the other.

"If a man vowed to the service of God may make an oath," he said, "I swear that if the day ever dawns when we stand face to face, knowing each other, I will not spare him!"

The child stirred in Tom's arms and uttered its first sharp little cry, and as if in answer to the summons, Aunt Mornin opened the door.

"It's all done," she said. "Gib me de chile, Mars De Willerby, and go in an' look at her."

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When he entered the little square living room, Tom paused at the foot of the bed. All was straight and neat and cold. Among the few articles in the one small trunk, the woman had found a simple white dress and had put

it on the dead girl. It was such a garment as almost every girl counts among her possessions. Tom remembered that his sisters had often worn

such things.

"She looks very pretty," he said. "I dare say her mother made it and she wore it at home. O Lord! O Lord!" And with this helpless exclamation, half sigh, half groan, he turned away and walked out of the front door into the open air.

It was early morning by this time, and he passed into the dew and sunlight not knowing where he was going; but once outside, the sight of his horse tethered to a tree at the roadside brought to his mind the necessity of the occasion.

"I'll ride in and see Steven," he said. "It's got to be done, and it's no work for him!"

When he reached the Cross-roads there were already two or three early arrivals lounging on the store-porch and wondering why the doors were not opened.

The first man who saw him, opened upon him the usual course of elephantine witticisms.

"Look a yere, Tom," he drawled, "this ain't a-gwine to do. You a-gittin' up 'fore daybreak like the rest of us folks and ridin' off Goddlemighty knows whar. It ain't a-gwine to do now. Whar air ye from?"

But as he rode up and dismounted at the porch, each saw that something unusual had happened. He tied his horse and came up the steps in silence.

"Boys," he said, when he stood among them, "I want Steven. I've been out to the Hollow, and there's a job for him there. The--the woman's dead."

"Dead!" they echoed, drawing nearer to him in their excitement. "When, Tom?"

"Last night. Mornin's out there. There's a child."

"Thunder 'n' molasses!" ejaculated the only family man of the group, reflectively. "Thunder 'n' molasses!" And then he began to edge away, still with a reflective air, towards his mule.

"Boys," he explained, "there'd ought to be some women folks around. I'm gwine for Minty, and she'll start the rest on 'em. Women folks is what's needed. They kin kinder organize things whar thar's trouble."

"Well," said Tom, "perhaps you're right; but don't send too many of 'em, and let your wife tell 'em to talk as little as possible and leave the man alone. He's got enough to stand up under."

Before the day was over there were women enough in the hillside cabin. Half a dozen faded black calico riding-skirts hung over the saddles of half a dozen horses tethered in the wood round the house, while inside



half a dozen excellent souls disposed themselves in sympathetic couples about the two rooms.

Three sat in the front room, their sunbonnets drawn well down over their faces in the true mourner's spirit, one at the head of the bed slowly moving a fan to and fro over the handkerchief-covered face upon the pillow. A dead silence pervaded the place, except when it was broken by occasional brief remarks made in a whisper.

"She was a mighty purty-lookin' young critter," they said. "A sight younger-lookin' than her man."

"What's the child?"

"Gal."

"Gal? That's a pity. Gals ain't much chance of bein' raised right whar they're left."

"Hain't they any folks, neither on 'em?"

"Nobody don't know. Nobody hain't heerd nothin' about 'em. They wus kinder curi's about keepin' to themselves."

"If either on 'em had any folks--even if they wus only sort o' kin--they might take the chile."

"Mebbe they will. Seems to reason they must have some kin--even if they ain't nigh."

Then the silence reigned again and the woman at the bed's head gave her undivided attention to the slow, regular motion of her palm-leaf fan.

In the room beyond a small fire burned in spite of the warmth of the day, and divers small tin cups and pipkins simmered before and upon the cinders of it, Aunt Mornin varying her other duties by moving them a shade nearer to the heat or farther from it, and stirring and tasting at intervals.

Upon a low rocking-chair before the hearth sat the wife of the family man before referred to. She was a tall, angular creature, the mother of fifteen, comprising in their number three sets of twins. She held her snuff-stick between her teeth and the child on her lap, with an easy professional air.

"I hain't never had to raise none o' mine by hand since Martin Luther," she remarked. "I've been mighty glad on it, for he was a sight o' trouble. Kinder colicky and weakly. Never done no good till we got him off the bottle. He'd one cow's milk, too, all the time. I was powerful partickerler 'bout that. I'd never have raised him if I hadn't bin. 'N' to this day Martin Luther hain't what 'Poleon and Orlando is."

"Dis yere chile ain't gwine to be no trouble to nobody," put in Aunt Mornin. "She's a powerful good chile to begin with, 'n' she's a chile that's gwine to thrive. She hain't done no cryin' uv no consequence yit, 'n' whar a chile starts out dat dar way it speaks well for her. If Mornin had de raisin' o' dat chile, dar wouldn't be no trouble 't all. Bile der milk well 'n' d'lute down right, 'n' a chile like dat ain't gwine to have no colick. My young Mistis Mars D'Willerby bought me from, I've raised three o' hern, an' I'm used to bilin' it right and d'lutin' it down right. Dar's a heap in de d'lutin'. Dis yere bottle's ready now, Mis' Doty, ef ye want it."

"It's the very bottle I raised Martin Luther on," said Mrs. Doty. "It brings back ole times to see it. She takes it purty well, don't she? Massy sakes! How f'erce she looks for sich a little thing!"

Later in the day there arose the question of how she should be disposed of for the night, and it was in the midst of this discussion that Tom De Willoughby entered.

"Thar ain't but one room; I s'pose he'll sleep in that," said Mrs. Doty, "'n' the Lord knows he don't look the kind o' critter to know what to do with a chile. We hain't none o' us seen him since this mornin'. I guess he's kinder wanderin' round. Does any of you know whar he is? We might ax what he 'lows to do."

Tom bent down over the child as it lay in the woman's lap. No one could

see his face.

"I know what he's going to do," he said. "He's going away to-morrow after the funeral."

"'N' take the child?" in a chorus.

"No," said Tom, professing to be deeply interested in the unclosing of the small red fist. "I'm going to take the child."

There were four sharp exclamations, and for a second or so all four women gazed at him with open mouths. It was Mrs. Doty who first recovered herself sufficiently to speak. She gave him a lively dig with her elbow.

"Now, Tom D'Willerby," she said, "none of your foolin'. This yere ain't no time for it."

"Mars D'Willerby," said Aunt Mornin, "dis chile's mother's a-lyin' dead in the nex' room."

Tom stooped a trifle lower. He put out both his hands and took the baby in them.

"I'm not foolin'," he said, rather uncertainly. "I'm in earnest, ladies.

The mother is dead and the man's going away. There's nobody else to claim her, he tells me, and so I'll claim her. There's enough of me to take

care of her, and I mean to do it."

It was so extraordinary a sensation, that for a few moments there was another silence, broken as before by Mrs. Doty.

"Waal," she remarked, removing her snuff-stick and expectorating into the fire. "Ye've allus been kinder fond o' chillun, Tom, and mebbe she ain't as colicky by natur' as Martin Luther was, but I mus' say it's the curi'sest thing I ever heern--him a-gwine away an' givin' her cl'ar up as ef he hadn't no sort o' nat'ral feelin's--I do say it's curi's."

"He's a queer fellow," said Tom, "a queer fellow! There's no denying that."

That this was true was proven by his conduct during the time in which it was liable to public comment. Until night he was not seen, and then he came in at a late hour and, walking in silence through the roomful of watchers, shut himself up in an inner chamber and remained there alone.

"He's takin' it mighty hard," they said. "Seems like it's kinder onsettled his mind. He hain't never looked at the child once."

He did not appear at all the next day until all was ready and Tom De Willoughby went to him.

He found him lying on the bed, his haggard face turned towards the

window. He did not move until Tom touched him on the shoulder.

"If you want to see her----" he said.

He started and shuddered.

"What, so soon?" he said. "So soon?"

"Now," Tom answered. "Get up and come with me."

He obeyed, following him mechanically, but when they reached the door, Tom stopped him.

"I've told them a story that suits well enough," he said. "I've told them that you're poor and have no friends, and can't care for the child, and I've a fancy for keeping it. The mother is to lie out here on the hillside until you can afford to find a better place for her--perhaps at your own home. I've told the tale my own way. I'm not much of a hand at that kind of thing, but it'll do. I've asked you no questions."

"No," said the man, drearily. "You've asked me no questions."

Then they went together into the other room. There were twenty or thirty people in it, or standing about the door. It was like all mountain funerals, but for an air of desolateness even deeper than usual. The slender pine coffin was supported upon two chairs in the middle of the

room, and the women stood or sat about, the more easily moved weeping a little under the shadow of their calico sunbonnets. The men leaned against the door-posts, or sat on the wooden steps, bare-headed, silent, and rather restless.

When Tom led his charge into the apartment, there was a slight stir and moving back of chairs to make way for him. He made his way straight to the coffin. When he reached it and looked down, he started. Perhaps the sight of the white dress with its simple girlish frills and homelike prettiness brought back to him some memory of happier days when he had seen it worn before.

The pure, childlike face had settled into utter calm, and across the breast and in the hands were long, slender branches of the thickly flowering wild white clematis. Half an hour before Tom had gone into the woods and returned with these branches, which he gave to one of the younger women.

"Put them on her," he said, awkwardly; "there ought to be some flowers about her."

For a few moments there reigned in the room a dead silence. All eyes were fixed upon the man who stood at the coffin side. He simply looked down at the fair dead face. He bestowed no caresses upon it, and shed no tears, though now and then there was to be seen a muscular contraction of his throat.

At length he turned towards those surrounding him and raised his hand, speaking in a low voice.

"Let us pray."

It was the manner of a man trained to rigid religious observances, and when the words were uttered, something like an electric shock passed through his hearers. The circuit-riders who stopped once or twice a month at the log churches on the roadside were seldom within reach on such an occasion as this, and at such times it was their custom to depend on any good soul who was considered to have the gift of prayer. Perhaps some of them had been wondering who would speak the last words now, as there was

no such person on the spot; but the trained manner and gesture, even while it startled them by its unexpectedness, set their minds at rest.

They settled themselves in the conventional posture, the women retiring into their bonnets, the men hanging their heads, and the prayer began.

It was a strange appeal--one which only one man among them could grasp the meaning of, though all regarded its outpouring words with wonder and admiration. It was an outcry full of passion, dread, and anguish which was like despair. It was a prayer for mercy--mercy for those who suffered, for the innocent who might suffer--for loving hearts too tender to bear the bitter blows of life.



"The loving hearts, O God!" he cried, "the loving hearts who wait--who----"

More than one woman looked up from under her bonnet; his body began to tremble--he staggered and fell into a chair, hiding his face, shaking from head to foot in an agony of weeping. Tom made his way to him and bent over him.

"Come with me," he said, his great voice broken. "Come with me into the air, it will quiet you, and we can wait until--until they come."

He put his arm under his and supported him out of the house.

Two or three women began to rock themselves to and fro and weep aloud hysterically. It was only the stronger ones who could control themselves. He was standing at Tom's side then; when they came out a short time afterwards, walking slowly and carrying the light burden, which they lowered into its resting-place beneath the pines.

He was quite calm again, and made no sound or movement until all was over. Then he spoke to Tom.

"Tell them," he said, "that I thank them. I can do no more."

He walked back to the desolate house, and in a little while the people

went their ways, each of them looking back a little wistfully at the cabin as he or she rode out of sight.

When the last one was lost to view, Tom, who had loitered about, went into the cabin.

The man was sitting in the empty room, his gaze fixed upon the two chairs left standing in the middle of it a few paces from each other.

Tom moved them away and then approached him.

"The child has been taken to my house," he said. "You don't want to see it?"

"No."

"Is there anything else I can do?"

"No, nothing else," monotonously.

"Are you going away?"

"Yes--to-night."

Tom glanced around him at the desolation of the poor, bare little place, at the empty bed, and the small trunk at the foot of it.

"You are not going to stay here alone, man?" he said.

"Yes," he was answered. "I have something to do; I must be alone."

Tom hesitated a moment.

"Well," he said, at length, "I suppose I've done, then. Good-bye."

"Good-bye," he was answered. "The Lord--the Lord will reward you."

And then Tom crossed the room slowly and reluctantly, passed out, and closed the door after him.

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When he opened his own door, he struck his foot against something and stumbled over it. It was a primitive wooden cradle--somewhat like a box on rockers--a quilt of patchwork covered it, and upon the small pillow rested the round black head of his new possession. He stopped short to regard it. Aunt Mornin had left it there while she occupied herself with preparing supper in the kitchen. It really looked quite comfortable. Gradually a smile established itself upon Tom's countenance.

"By thunder!" he said, "here you are, youngster, ain't you? You've come to stay--that's what you've come for."

And, being answered by a slight stirring of the patchwork quilt, he put his foot out with much cautiousness, touched the rocker, and, finding to his great astonishment that he had accomplished this much safely, he drew up a chair, and, sitting down, devoted himself with laudable enthusiasm to engineering the small ark with a serious and domestic air.