

## CHAPTER V

In two days' time the whole country had heard the news. The mystery of Blair's Hollow was revived and became a greater mystery than ever. The woman was dead, the man had disappeared. The cabin stood deserted, save for the few household goods which had been left just as they were on the day of the funeral. Not an article had been moved, though the woman to whom Tom De Willoughby, as the person most concerned, handed over the discarded property, did not find the little trunk, and noticed that articles had been burned in the fireplace in the front room.

"Thar wus a big pile o' ashes on the ha'th," she said to her friends, "sorter like as if he'd been burnin' a heap a little things o' one sort or 'nother. It kinder give me cold chills, it looked so lonesome when I shut the door arter the truck was gone. I left the ashes a-lyin' thar. I kinder had a curi's feelin' about touchin' on 'em. Nothing wouldn't hire me to live thar. D'Willerby said he reckoned I could hev moved right in ef I wanted to, but, Lawsy! I wouldn't have done it fer nothin'."

But that which roused the greatest excitement in the community was Tom De Willoughby's course.

At first Mrs. Doty's story of Big Tom's adoption of the child was scarcely accepted as being a possibility. The first man who heard it

received it with a grin of disbelief. This individual was naturally Mr. Doty himself.

"Minty," he said, "don't ye let him fool ye. Don't ye know Tom D'Willerby by this time? Ye'd orter. It's jest some o' his gas. Don't ye s'pose he hain't got no more sense? What'd he do with it?"

"Ye can believe it or not," replied Mrs. Doty, sharply, "but he's gwine to raise that young'n, as shore as your name's Job. Mornin's got her this minute."

Mr. Doty indulged in a subdued chuckle.

"A nice-lookin' feller he is to raise a infant babe!" he remarked. "Lord a massy! if thet thar ain't jest like one o' his doggoned tales! He is the derndest critter," with reflective delight, "the derndest! Thar ain't nothin' in Hamlin to come up to him."

But the next day even Mr. Doty was convinced. After his customary visit to the Cross-roads, he returned to his family wearing a bewildered expression. It became a sheepish expression when his wife confronted him on the doorstep.

"Wal, Job Doty," she remarked, "I guess you've found out by this time whether I was right or wrong."

"Wal," answered Mr. Doty, throwing his saddle down on the porch, "I reckon I hev. She's thar shore enough, 'n' it seems like he's gwine to keep her; but I wouldn't hev believed it ef I hadn't seen it, doggoned ef I would! But, Lord, it's like him, arter all." And he brightened up and chuckled again.

"I reckon he don't scarcely know what he's tuk in hand," said Mrs. Doty.

"Him!" answered Mr. Doty. "Tom! Lord! 'tain't a-gwine to trouble Tom. He'll get along, Tom will. Tom'd jus' as lief as she wus twins as not, mebbe liefer. It'd be a bigger thing for him to engineer 'n' gas about ef she wus. Ef you'd seen him bring her into the store to the boys 'n' brag on her 'n' spread hisself, I reckon ye wouldn't hev minded 'bout Tom. Why, he's set on her, Minty, a'reddy, as set as he kin be."

The Cross-roads post-office had indeed been the scene of a sort of informal levée held by the newcomer, who had been thus presented to her fellow-citizens. One man after another had dropped in to hear the truth of the story related, and each one had been dumfounded at the outset by Tom's simple statement of fact.

"Yes, I'm going to keep her, boys," he said. "She's in the back part of the house now. According to my calculations, she's drunk about three quarts of milk since morning, and seems to stand it pretty well, so I suppose she's all right."

There were a great many jokes made at first, and a general spirit of hilariousness reigned, but it was observed by one of the keener witted ones that, despite his jocular tone, there was an underlying seriousness in Tom's air which might argue that he felt the weight of his responsibility. When the women began to come in, as they did later in the day, he received them with much cordiality, rising from his chair to shake hands with each matron as she appeared.

"Come in to see her, have you?" he said. "That's right. She's in the back room. Walk right in. Mis' Simpson and Mis' Lyle, I'd like some of you ladies to have a look at her. I'll go with you myself and hear what you have to say."

He made the journey each time with a slight air of anxiety, leading the way to the wooden cradle, and standing over it like a Herculean guardian angel, listening attentively to all the comments made and all the advice given.

"She seems to be getting on pretty well, doesn't she?" he enquired.

"Lor', yes!" said one matron; "jest keep her kivered up 'n' don't let no air strike her, 'n' ye won't hev no trouble with her, I reckon."

"No air?" enquired Tom, in some trepidation; "none at all?"

"Wal, thet's my way," was the answer. "Some folks does different, but I

didn't never expose 'em none till they was more'n amonth old. New-born babies is tender things!"

"Yes," said Tom. "Good Lord, yes!"

His visitor started at him perplexedly for a moment.

"Wal," she said. "My man allus used to say they kinder skeered him 'long at the first--he kinder felt as if they'd mebbe come apart, or sumthin'. They allus sorter 'minded me o' young mice. Wal, you jest tell Mornin to giv' her es much milk as she calls fer, an' don't let it bile too long, 'n' she'll come on fine."

The next visitor that entered uttered an exclamation of dismay.

"Ye're gwine ter kill her!" she said. "Thar ain't a breath o' air in the room, 'n' thar ain't nothin' a new-born baby wants more 'n plenty o' air. They're tender critters, 'n' they cayn't stand to be smothered up. Ye'll hev her in spasms afore the day's over."

Tom flung the doors and windows open in great alarm.

"It is hot," he said. "It's hot enough out of doors, but Mis' Simpson told me to keep her shut up, and I thought she'd had experience enough to know."

"Jane Simpson!" with ill-concealed scorn. "She'd orter! She's had six to die in their second summer. I reckon she told ye to give her half-b'iled milk as often as she wanted it?"

Tom reflected in manifest trepidation.

"She did tell me not to boil it too much, and to give it to her when she called for it," he said, slowly.

"Wal, if ye don't want ter kill her, take my advice an' bile it a good half hour, 'n' don't give it to her oftener than once in three hours. She'll cry fur it, but ye needn't mind. Ye'll get used ter it. I don't believe in lettin' young uns hev nuthin' out o' their reg'lar time."

The next caller found Tom somewhat discouraged. He preceded her into the reception-chamber with less alacrity than he had shown in his previous visits.

She was a younger woman than the rest, and when she reached the cradle's side, she bent down and rearranged the cover with a soft touch.

"She's gwine to be a purty little thing," she said; "she'll be sorter dark-complected, but she's gwine to hev purty hair 'n' eyes. Ye'll be right proud of her, Tom, when she's grown, 'n' I guess she'll be a heap o' company to you. Lord!" with a motherly sigh, "it seems sorter curi's her bein' left to a man; but you'll do well by her, Tom, you'll do well

by her. I hain't no doubt o' that. You was always mighty clever with children."

"I'll do all I can for her," said Tom, "though I suppose that isn't much."

The young woman--she had left her own baby in the store with her husband--patted the little pillow lightly into shape.

"Ye'll larn a heap by watchin' her," she said. "Jest watch her close 'n' she'll teach you herself. What do you do about her milk?" anxiously.

"I've been told to do several things," said Tom. "I've been told to boil it half an hour and not to boil it at all, and to give her all she wanted and not to give her all she wanted. I'm a little mixed about it."

"Wal, I hain't had but five, but I've allus let it come to a bile an' then kinder used my reason about givin' it. Seems like the mejumer ye air with children, the better. But, Lordy! I guess Mornin knows. She raised her young mistress's."

She kissed the child before she left it, and when she reentered the store, hurriedly took her own struggling offspring from its father's arms, settled its pink dress and sunbonnet with a nervous, caressing motion, and, carrying it to the door, stood with it pressed against her breast while she seemed to be looking out at the distant mountains. She

did not move until her husband had completed his purchases and came to her. And when she followed him out to take her place in the waggon, her eyes were bright and moist.

"Don't ye take the Blair's Holler road, Dave," she said, as he touched up his horses. "Go round by Jones's."

"What's yer notion, Louizy?" he asked.

"'Tain't nothin' but a notion, I reckon," she answered; "but I don't--I don't want to hev to pass by that thar grave jest to-day. Take the other road."

And being an easy-going, kindly fellow, he humoured her and went the other way.

In the store itself the spirit of hilariousness increased as the day advanced. By mail-time the porch was crowded and Tom had some slight difficulty in maintaining order.

"Say, boys," he said, "there's got to be quiet here. If we can't carry on the establishment without disturbing the head of the household at present asleep in the back room, this post-office has to close and you can get a new postmaster. That'd suit you, I daresay. Some fellow, now, that wouldn't half'tend to his business, not more than half, and that hadn't legislative ability enough to carry on a precinct, let alone a county.



You want a man of that kind, I suppose. That's what you're working for."

"Tom," said one of the younger ones, "bring her out 'n' let's see her.

You've been braggin' on her all day, but ye hain't let us see her."

Half a dozen others joined in the cry.

"Yes," they said, "bring her out, Tom."

Tom did not rise from his seat. He tilted his chair back and balanced himself on his heels, his hands thrust into his pockets.

"Boys," he said, "I'll bring her out on one condition, and that is that there shall be no shins. I wouldn't have her scared or upset for a good deal. There's a joke in this sort of thing, I daresay; but it ain't all joke. If I bring her out and show her, there's to be no crowding and no row."

It was agreed that there should be none, and he left his chair and went to the inner room again. When he returned, the men who had been lounging in the porch had come in, though perhaps not one among them understood his own unusual interest in the affair. Babies were not rarities in Hamlin County, every cabin and farm-house in the region being filled to overflowing with white-headed, sunburnt youngsters. And yet when Tom appeared there was a moment of silence. The child was asleep, its tiny black head resting peacefully against the huge chest of its bearer. There

was no trace of confusion or awkwardness in his face, he seemed well content with his burden, and perhaps it was the quiet of his manner as much as anything else which caused the slight hush to fall upon those around him.

At last a middle-aged farmer stepped forward. He gave the child a long and rather curious look.

"Gal, ain't it?" he enquired.

"Yes," Tom answered.

"Wal, 'tain't a bad thing fer her she's got some un to stan' by her; gals needs it."

Tom gave her a long look too. She was sleeping very quietly; it might have been her mother's breast she was lying against.

"Well," he said, "here's a man to stand by her," and then he raised his head and looked at the rest of them.

"Boys," he said, "that's a promise. Remember it."

And he carried her back.