CHAPTER VII

The next day Tom went to Barnesville. He left the Cross-roads on horseback early in the morning, and reached his journey's end at noon. He found on arriving at the town that the story of his undertaking had preceded him.

When he drew rein before Judge Rutherford's house and having dismounted and tied his horse to the fence, entered the gate, the Judge's wife came out upon the porch to meet him with her baby in her arms.

She greeted him with a smile.

"Well," she said, "I must say I am glad to see you. The Judge brought us a nice story from the country yesterday. What have you been doing at the Cross-roads? I told the Judge I didn't believe a word of it. There, sit down in this chair and tell me right away."

"Well," answered Tom in a business-like manner, "it's true or I shouldn't be here to-day. I've come to ask your advice about--well, about things in general."

Mrs. Rutherford uttered a little cry of delighted curiosity and surprise.

"Gracious!" she exclaimed, "I never heard such a thing! Mother!" turning

her head to call to someone in the room beyond, "it's all true about the baby. Do come and hear Mr. De Willoughby tell about it."

She sat down on the steps of the porch laughing and yet regarding Tom with a half sympathetic, half curious look. It was not the first time she had found him unexpectedly mysterious.

"Where's the father?" she said. "Didn't he care for the poor little thing at all? The Judge heard that he was so poor that he couldn't take care of it. Hadn't he any friends? It has a kind of heartless sound to me--his going away that way."

"He was poor," said Tom, quietly. "And he had no relatives who could take the child. He didn't know what to do with it. I--I think he had a chance of making a living out West and--the blow seemed to have stunned him."

"And you took the baby?" put in Mrs. Rutherford.

"Yes," Tom answered, "I took the baby."

"Is it a pretty baby?"

"Yes," said Tom, "I think it is."

Just then the Judge's mother came out and he was called upon to tell the story again, when it was received with interest even more excited and

wondering than before. The older Mrs. Rutherford exclaimed and looked dubious alternately.

"Are you sure you know what to do with it?" she asked.

"Well, no," said Tom, "I'm not. I suppose I shall have to educate myself up to it gradually. There'll be a good deal to learn, I suppose."

But he did not appear at all discouraged, and presently broached the object of his visit, displaying such modest readiness to accept advice and avail himself of all opportunities for acquiring valuable information, that his young hostess was aroused to the deepest admiration, and when he proceeded to produce quite a large memorandum book with a view to taking an immediate list of all required articles, and established rules, she could scarcely contain her delight.

"I want to do it all up in the proper way," he said.

Thereupon he was borne into the house and a consultation of the most serious practical nature was held. Piles of the last baby's pretty garments being produced to illustrate any obscure point. The sight of those garments with their embroidery and many frills fired Tom with new enthusiasm. He could not resist the temptation to pick up one after another of the prettiest and most elaborate and hold them out at arm's length, his fingers stuck through the sleeves the better to survey and display them to advantage.

"Yes," he kept saying, "that's the kind of thing she wants--pretty and with plenty of frills."

He seemed to set his heart especially upon this abundance of frills and kept it in view throughout the entire arrangements. Little Mrs. Rutherford was to take charge of the matter, purchasing all necessaries and superintending the work of placing it in competent hands.

"Why," she said, laughing at him delightedly, "she'll be the best dressed baby in the county."

"I'd like her to be among the best," said Tom, with a grave face, "among the best."

Whereupon Mrs. Rutherford laughed a little again, and then quite suddenly stopped and regarded him for a moment with some thoughtfulness.

"He has some curious notions about that baby, mother," she said afterwards. "I can see it in all he says. Everyone mightn't understand it. I'm not sure I do myself, but he has a big, kind heart, that Tom de Willoughby, a big, kind heart."

She understood more clearly the workings of the big, kind heart before he left them the next morning.

At night after she had put her child to sleep, she joined him on the front porch, where he sat in the moonlight, and there he spoke more fully to her.

He had seated himself upon the steps of the porch and wore a deeper reflective air, as he played with a spray of honeysuckle he had broken from its vine.

She drew up her rocking-chair and sat down near him.

"I actually believe you are thinking of that baby now," she said, with a laugh. "You really look as if you were."

"Well," he admitted, "the fact is that's just what I was doing--thinking of her."

"Well, and what were you thinking?"

"I was thinking--" holding his spray of honeysuckle between his thumb and forefinger and looking at it in an interested way, "I was thinking about what name I should give her."

"Oh!" she said, "she hasn't any name?"

"No," Tom answered, without removing his eyes from his honeysuckle, "she hasn't any name yet."

"Well," she exclaimed, "they were queer people."

There was a moment's silence which she spent in looking curiously both at him and his honeysuckle.

"What was her mother's name?" she asked at last.

"I don't know."

Mrs. Rutherford sat up in her chair.

"You don't know!"

"She was dying when I saw her first, and I never thought of asking."

"But her father?"

"I didn't think of asking that either, and nobody knew anything of them. I suppose he was not in the frame of mind to think of such things himself. It was all over and done with so soon. He went away as soon as she was buried."

Mrs. Rutherford sank back into her chair.

"It's the strangest story I ever heard of in my life," she commented,

with a sigh of amazement. "The man must have been crazed with grief. I suppose he was very fond of his wife?"

"I suppose so," said Tom.

There was another pause of a few moments, and from the thoughts with which they occupied it Mrs. Rutherford roused herself with a visible effort.

"Well," she said, cheerily, "let it be a pretty name."

"Yes," answered Tom, "it must be a pretty one."

He turned the bit of honeysuckle so that the moonlight fell on its faintly tinted flower. It really seemed as if he felt he should get on better for having it to look at and refer to.

"I want it to be a pretty name," he went on, "and I've thought of a good many that sounded well enough, but none of them seemed exactly to hit my fancy in the right way until I thought of one that came into my mind a few moments ago as I sat here. It has a pleasant meaning--I don't know that there's anything in that, of course; but I've got a sort of whim about it. I suppose it's a whim. What do you think--" looking very hard at the honeysuckle, "of Felicia?"

"I think," said his companion, "that it is likely to be the best name you

could give her, for if she isn't a happy creature it won't be your fault."

"Well," said Tom, "I've set out to do my best and I'd like to give her a fair start in every way, even in her name, though there mayn't be anything in it, but I'd like to do it. I suppose it's time I should be having some object in life. I've never had one before, and I've been a useless fellow. Well, I've got one now by chance, and I'm bound to hold on to it and do what I can. I want her to have what chances I can give her on her side, and it came into my mind that Felicia----"

He stopped to consult the honeysuckle, as it were, and Jenny Rutherford broke in:

"Yes," she said, "Felicia is the name for her, and it's a beautiful thought----"

"Oh!" interrupted Tom, bestirring himself uneasily, "it's a natural thought. She needs all she can get to balance the trouble she began life with. Most other little chaps begin it in a livelier way--in a way that's more natural, born into a home, and all that. It's a desolate business that she should have no one but a clumsy fellow like me to pick her up, and that there should be a shadow of--of trouble and pain and death over her from the first. Good Lord!" with a sudden movement of his big arm, "let's sweep it away if we can."

The thought so stirred him, that he turned quite around as he sat.

"Look here," he said, "that's what I was aiming at when I set my mind on having her things frilled up and ornamented. I want them to be what they might have been if she had been born of a woman who was happy and well cared for and--and loved--as if she had been thought of and looked forward to and provided for in a--in a tender way--as they say young mothers do such things: you know how that is; I don't, perhaps, I've only thought of it sometimes----" his voice suddenly dropping.

But he had thought of it often, in his lonely back room one winter a few years ago, when it had drifted to him that his brother De Courcy was the father of a son.

Mrs. Rutherford leaned forward in her seat, tears rose in her eyes, and she put her hand impulsively on his shoulder.

"Oh!" she cried, "you are a good man. You're a good man, and if she lives, she will tell you so and love you with all her heart. I will see to the little clothes just as if they were Nellie's own" (Nellie being the baby, or more properly speaking, the last baby, as there were others in the household). "And if there is anything I can ever do for the little thing, let me do it for her poor young mother's sake."

Tom thanked her gratefully.

"I shall be glad to come to you often enough, I reckon," he said. "I guess she'll have her little sick spells, as they all do, and it'll help wonderfully to have someone to call on. There's her teeth now," anxiously, "they'll be coming through in a few months, and then there'll be the deuce to pay."

He was so overweighted by this reflection, that he was silent for some minutes afterwards and was only roused by a question requiring a reply.

Later the Judge came in and engaged him in political conversation, all the Judge's conversation being of a political nature and generally tending to vigorous denunciations of some candidate for election who belonged to the opposite party. In Barnesville political feeling ran high, never running low, even when there was no one to be elected or defeated, which was very seldom the case, for between such elections and defeat there was always what had been done or what ought to have been done at Washington to discuss, it being strongly felt that without the assistance of Barnesville, Washington would be in a sorry plight indeed.

To-day the Judge had been engaged in a livelier discussion than usual as he rode homeward with a select party of legal brethren from court at Brownsboro, and consequently made his appearance blustering and joyous. He bestowed upon his wife a sounding kiss, and, with one arm around her waist, shook hands with Tom in a gust of hospitality, speaking to both at once.

"Howdy, Jenny? Howdy, Tom? It's a coon's age since we've seen you, Tom. Time you showed yourself. How are the children, Jenny--and what's Tom Scott been doing? What's this we hear about that stray young one? Nice tale that is to tell on a fellow. Fowler heard it at Brownsboro and like to have killed himself. Lord! how hot it's been! I'm ready for supper, Jenny. Sit down, Tom. As soon as I get through supper, we'll have a real old-fashioned talk. I've been suffering for one for three months. Jenny, tell Sophronia to spread herself on her waffles, for I've been getting some mighty poor stuff for the last few days. What do you think of Thatcher running for the Legislature? Lord! Lord! what a fool that fellow is! Most unpopular man in the county, and about the meanest too. Mean? Lord! mean ain't the name for it! He'll be beat so that any other man wouldn't want to show his head, and it won't make a mark on him. Nellie's asleep, ain't she, Jenny? I've got to go and look at her and the rest of them. Don't you want to come along, Tom? You're a family man yourself now, and you ought to take an interest!"

He led the way into the family-room at the back and, taking the candle from the high mantel, moved it triumphantly over the beds in which the children slept.

"Here's Tom Scott!" he announced. "Tom Scott's got to have a crib to himself. Look at him now. What do you think of that for a boy? He's five years old next month, and he about runs Barnesville. The boys round here are just ruining him with making much of him and setting him up to tricks. He just lives round at the stores and the post-office. And what

Tom Scott don't know ain't worth knowing. Came home with six jack-knives in his pockets the first day Jenny turned him out in pantaloons. The boys tried themselves to see who could do best by him. You could hear them shouting and laughing all over the town at the things they got him to say. I tell you he's a case, Tom is. Last election he was as stirred up as any of us. Hollered ''Rah for Collins' until he was hoarse and his mother brought him home and gave him syrup of squills because she thought
he had the croup. What do you think he did, now? Went into Barton's store and ordered a bushel of chestnuts to be sent down to my account and brought 'em out and set on the horse-block and gave a treat for Collins. I was coming up home and saw the crowd and heard the hollering and laughing, and there was Tom in the middle baling out his chestnuts and hollering at the top of his voice: 'Come on, boys, all you Collins men, here's a treat for Collins!' I thought Collins would have died when he heard it. He laughed until he choked, and the next day he came to see Tom and gave him a gold eagle and a colt. He says he is going to give him a little nigger to look after it, and he'll do it. Oh, Tom Scott's the boy! He'll be in the White House forty years from now. He's making a bee-line for it right now."

And he bent and kissed the little fellow's sunburnt rosy cheek.

"His mother and his grandmother can't do a thing with him," he said, rapturously, "and it's as much as I can do to manage him. Oh, he's a case, is Tom Scott!"

And with this tribute to his character, he left him to his slumbers, with his sturdy little legs occupying an extensive area of crib and his face resting on his small brown arm.

After this, the Judge went to his supper and consumed a large quantity of fried chicken, waffles, and coffee, afterwards joining Tom on the porch, smoking his pipe and stigmatising Thatcher in a loud and jovial voice as the meanest man in Hamlin.

But for this resonant jovialness of voice, his denunciation of the Democratic Party, which was not his party, might have appeared rather startling.

"There isn't an honest man among them," he announced. "Not a durned one! They're all the same. Cut each other's throats for a dime, the whole caboodle. Oh! damn a Democrat anyhow, Tom, 'tain't in the nature of things that they should be anything but thieves and rascals. Just look at the whole thing. It's founded on lies and corruption and scoundrelism. That's their foundation. They start out on it, and it ain't reasonable to expect anything better of them. Good Lord! If I thought Tom Scott would join the Democrats, I believe I'd blow his brains out in his crib this minute."

Tom's part in this discussion was that of a large-minded and strictly impartial listener. This was the position he invariably assumed when

surrounded by political argument. He was not a politician. His comments upon political subjects being usually of a sarcastic nature, and likely to prove embarrassing to both parties.

"Yes," he said in reply to the Judge's outpourings, "you're right. There ain't a chance for them, not an eternal chance. You can't expect it, and it ain't all their fault either. Where are they to get their decent men from, unless some of you fellows go over? Here you are without a liar or a fool among you--not a durned one--made a clean sweep of all the intellect and honesty and incorruptible worth in the country and hold on to it too, and then let out on these fellows because there isn't any left for 'em. I'm a lazy man myself and not much on argument, but I must say that's a weak place in your logic. You don't give 'em a show at the start--that's their misfortune."

"Oh, go to thunder!" roared the Judge, amiably. "You don't know the first thing about it and never did. That's where you fail--in politics. The country would be in a mighty poor fix if we had many fellows like you--in a mighty poor fix. You're a good citizen, Tom, but you ain't a politician."

"That's so," said Tom. "I ain't good enough for your party or bad enough for the other, when a man's got to be either a seraphim or a Democrat, there isn't much chance for an ordinary fellow to spread himself."

Whereupon the Judge in an altogether friendly manner consigned him to

thunder again and, evidently enjoying himself immensely, proceeded to the most frightful denunciations of Thatcher and his party, the mere list of whose crimes and mental incapacities should have condemned them to perdition and the lunatic asylum upon the spot without further delay.

While he was in the midst of this genial loud-voiced harangue, his wife, who had been in the back room with the baby, came out and, on seeing her, he seemed suddenly to forget his animosities and the depraved political condition of the country altogether, becoming a placable, easily pleased, domesticated creature at once.

"Got Nellie to sleep again, have you?" he said, putting his hand on her shoulder. "Well, let's go in and have some music. Come and sing 'The Last Rose of Summer.' That's my favourite; it beats all the new-fangled opera things all to pieces."

He led the way into the parlour, which was a large square room, regarded by Barnesville as the most sumptuous of reception chambers, inasmuch as its floor was covered by a Brussels carpet adorned with exotics of multifarious colours, its walls ornamented with massively framed photographs, and its corners fitted up with whatnots and shining hair-cloth seats known in Hamlin County as "tater-tates," and in that impressive character admired beyond expression. Its crowning glory, however, was the piano, which had belonged to Jenny Rutherford in her boarding-school days, and was the delight of the Judge's heart. It furnished him with his most cherished recreation in his hours of repose

from political conflict and argument, inasmuch as he regarded his wife's performance seldom to be equalled and never surpassed, and the soft, pleasant voice with which she sang "The Last Rose of Summer" and other simple and sentimental melodies as that of a cantatrice whose renown might have been world-wide if she had chosen to turn her attention to its development.

"Lord!" he said, throwing himself into one of the shining arm-chairs. "There's nothing like music, nothing under the shining sun. 'Music hath charms to soothe the savage breast.'"

This in his most sonorous quotation tones: "Let a man get tired or out of sorts, or infernal mad at a pack of cursed fools, and music's the thing that'll set him straight every time, if he's any sort of a fellow. A man that ain't fond of music ain't of any account on God's green earth. I wouldn't trust him beyond a broom-straw. There's a mean streak in a man that don't care for music, sure. Why, the time the Democrats elected Peyton, the only thing that saved me from bursting a blood-vessel was Jenny's playing 'My Lodging's on the Cold Ground' with variations. I guess she played it for two hours hand-running, because when I found it was sort of soothing me, I didn't want her to break in on the effect by beginning another. Play it for Tom, Jenny, after you've sung awhile. There's one thing I've made up my mind to--if I had fifty girls, I'd have 'em all learn music if they didn't know anything--not the operatic kind, you know, but enough to teach them to sing to a man like Jenny does. Go on, Jenny."

The sustaining and cheering effects of Sophronia's fried chicken and waffles probably added to his comfortable enjoyment, which was without limit. He leaned back in his armchair as far as the stiffly ornamented back would admit of his so doing and kept time with his head or his feet, occasionally joining in on a chorus with startling suddenness in an evidently subdued roar, which, though subdued, was still roaring enough, and, despite the excellence of its intention, quite out of tune enough to cause the wax flowers in their wax basket on the table (both done by Jenny at boarding-school) to shake under the glass shade until they tapped against its side with a delicate tinkle.

It was while this was going on that Tom, sitting near a side table, picked up a book and almost unconsciously opened it and read its title. Having read its title, an expression of interest showed itself on his countenance and he turned over a leaf or so, and as he turned them over dipped into them here and there.

He had the book in his hand when Jenny Rutherford ended her last chorus and came towards him.

"Do you go much by this?" he asked.

She took it from him and glanced at it.

"I brought Tom Scott up on it," she said. "Mother wasn't with me then,

and I was such a child I did not know what to do with him."

"Seems to be a good sort of book," said Tom, and he turned over the leaves again.

"It is," she answered, smiling at him. "There are lots of things in it every doctor don't know. It was written by a woman."

"That's the reason, I reckon," said Tom.

He laid the book down and seemed to forget it, but about an hour after when his bedroom candle was brought and he was on the point of retiring for the night, he turned upon the threshold of the sitting-room and spoke to his hostess in the tone of one suddenly recollecting himself.

"Where did you say you got that book?" he inquired, snuffing his candle with his thumb and forefinger.

"I didn't say at all," answered Jenny. "I got it from Brough & Bros., Baltimore."

"Oh, there!" he remarked. "Good-night."

When he reached his room and shut himself in, he set his candlestick on a table and proceeded to draw from his pocket the memorandum-book, also producing the stump of a lead pencil.

Then he made as he stood up before the looking-glass and in the flickering light of the candle, an entry which was as follows: "Advice to Young Mothers, Brough & Bros." He made it with a grave countenance and a business-like manner, and somehow, owing it may be to the small size of the room, its low ceilings and many shadows, or the flickering of the candle, his colossal height and breadth of body and tremendous look of strength had never seemed so marked nor appeared so to overpower the objects surrounding him.

Having completed the entry, he shut up the book and returned it to his pocket with a relieved air.

"If a man ain't a young mother," he remarked, "I guess he can get the good of it, if he gives himself time. And what she wants"--rather hurriedly--"is to get as good a start as if she had a young mother."

And he sat down and pulled off his right boot in so absorbed a frame of mind, that he aroused presently with a start to find that he was holding it as if it had been made of much less tough material and required handling tenderly.