CHAPTER VIII

He was on his way homeward early the next morning, and by noon his horse had climbed the rising ground from which he could look down on the Cross-roads and the post-office baking itself brown in the sun. Catching sight of the latter edifice, he smiled a little and shook the bridle against his steed's warm neck.

"Get along, Jake," he said. "I'm in a little more of a hurry to get home than usual--seems that way anyhow."

The eagerness he felt was a new experience with him and stirred his sense of humour even while it warmed his always easily moved heart. It had been his wont during the last eight years to return from any absence readily but never eagerly or with any touch of excited pleasure. Even at their brightest aspect, with the added glow of fire and warmth and good cheer, and contrast to winter's cold and appetite sharpened by it, the back rooms had always suffered from the disadvantage of offering no prospect of companionship or human interest to him. After the supper had been disposed of and the newspapers read and the pipe smoked, there had only been the fire to watch, and it was quite natural to brood as its blaze died down and its logs changed to a bed of glowing cinders. Under such circumstances it was easy to fall into a habit of brooding too much and thinking of things which had better been forgotten. When there was no fire, it had been lonelier still, and he had found the time hang heavily,

on his hands.

"But now," he said, shaking his bridle again, "there she is, and it's quite queer, by thunder, how much she seems to give a man to think of and what will it be when she begins to talk." And his smile ended in a jovial laugh which rather startled Jake, who was not expecting it, and caused him to shy promptly.

She was not asleep when he entered her presence, which was so unusual a state of affairs that he found it a little alarming.

"Hello!" he exclaimed, "there's nothing wrong, I hope."

"Wid dat chile?" chuckled Mornin, delightedly. "I sh'd think not, Mars' D'Willerby! Dat ar chile's a-thrivin' an' a-comin' 'long jes' like she'd orter. Dar ain't a-gwine to be nothin' wrong wid dat chile."

"That's a good thing," said Tom.

He sat down by the cradle's side and regarded its occupant with an interest as fresh as if she had just appeared for the first time upon his horizon. She had been imbibing a large quantity of milk, and the effect of this nourishment had been to at once compose her spirits and slightly enliven them. So she employed the passing moments by looking at Tom with steadfast and solemn eyes--not, perhaps, very intelligently, but still with a vacant air of interest in him in his character of an object.

"Why," he said, "she's grown; she's grown in thirty-six hours, and she's improved too. Oh, yes! she's coming along nicely."

He touched her very carefully with his large forefinger, a liberty which she did not resent or even notice, unless the fact that she winked both eyes might be regarded as a token of recognition.

"We'll have a box full of things here for her in a couple of weeks," he said. "And then she can start out in life--start out in life."

The last four words seemed to please him; as he repeated them he touched her cheek again, carefully as before.

"And start out fair, too!" he added. "Fair and square--as fair and square as any of them."

He remained a little longer in his seat by the cradle, talking to Mornin, asking her questions and delivering messages laden with advice from little Mrs. Rutherford, which instructions Aunt Mornin plainly regarded as superfluous.

"Now, Mars' D'Willerby," she giggled in amiable scorn, "didn't I raise fo' o' my young Mistes's? Mornin ain't no spring chicken. Dar ain't nuffin 'bout chillun Mornin h'aint heerd. Leeve dis yere chile to Mornin."

"She ain't going to be left to anyone," said Tom, cheerfully, "not to the best woman in Hamlin County. We've got to make up to her for two or three things, and we're going to do it."

Having relieved himself of which sentiment, he went to his place at the table and ate a mighty dinner, during his enjoyment of which meal he did not lose interest in his small silent partner at all, but cast proud glances and jocular sallies at her every few mouthfuls, partaking of her, as it were, with his mountain trout, and finding her add flavour and zest to his hot corn-bread and fried ham.

When he had ended his repast with an astonishing draught of buttermilk, and was ready to go into the store, she had dozed off cosily again and was making the best of her opportunities, so he only paused for a moment to give her a farewell glance.

"Yes," he said, "Felicia--that'll do. When you come to the meaning of it, I don't know of anything else that'd seem to start her out as fair--Felicia!"

And though he said the word in a whisper it seemed to reach her ear in some mysterious way, for she stirred slightly, though not as through any sense of disturbance, opened her eyes upon his big figure and, closing them the next instant, sank into soft sleep again with the faintest dawn or ghost of a baby smile upon her face.

So, nestling under the patchwork quilt and sleeping the hours away in the small ark stranded in the chimney corner, she began life.

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Felicia was received by Talbot's Cross-roads with some difference of opinion.

"I'd rather had Mirandy or Lucretia," said Mrs. Doty. "Flishyer ain't nigh as showy as a heap o' other names, 'n' like as not, folks'll be callin' her F'lish. Now thar's Vangerline 'n' Clementine 'n' Everlyne that'd ha' bin showier then Flishyer."

"Tom," put in Mr. Doty, with his usual enjoyment of his friend's weakness and strength, "Tom he'd a notion 'bout it. He said it meant som'n 'bout her a'bein' happy, 'n' he 'lowed it'd kinder give her a start in the right direction. It's jes' like Tom. He's full o' notions when he gits started. I'll back him agin any man in Hamlin fur notions when he gits started. Lord! it's jes' Tom all over!"

Through a disposition to take even names easily and avoid in all cases any unnecessary exertion, Mrs. Doty's pronunciation was adopted at once, which was perhaps the principal reason for a fanciful change being made not long afterwards.

Against "F'lishyer" Tom rebelled loudly and without ceasing, but without effect.

The fanciful change came about and was adopted in this wise. In the course of a couple of weeks the box of little garments arrived from Barnesville, accompanied by a warm-hearted note from Jenny Rutherford.

The unpacking of the box--which was not a large one, though it seemed to contain an astonishing number of things, most of them of great length and elaborateness--was to Tom a singularly exciting event, so exciting that he found himself wondering and not at all sure that he understood it.

When he opened the box--Mornin standing at his side, her charge in her arms--he did it with tremulous fingers, and when, having laid one article after another in a snowy drift upon the bed, he drew back to look at them, he found it necessary after a few moments' inspection to turn about and pace the floor, not uneasily, but to work off steam as it were, while Mornin uttered her ejaculations of rapture.

"I never seen nuthin' like 'em afore, Mars' D'Willerby," she said with many excitable giggles. "Dis yer chile's a-gwine to take the flo' shore as yo' bawn! Sich a settin' out as dat is! She'll git ter puttin' on airs afore she's a year ole. We'll hev ter give her a settin' down wunce 'n a while to keep her straight. Mis' Rutherford, she wus boun' to do it up in style, she wus!"

Tom took one hand out of his pocket and ruffled his hair with it, and then put it back again.

"Your young mistresses now," he suggested, "I suppose they are about such things as their mothers made for them."

"Lordy, dey's a heap finer, Mars' D'Willerby--a heap finer! Dey wus rich folks' chillun, but dey never hed sich a settin' out as dis yere--not one on 'em."

"They didn't?" said Tom, with secretly repressed exultation. "Well, if they didn't, I guess she'll do. They are rather nice, I reckon--and I meant they should be. Say, Mornin, suppose you dress her up and let me show her to the boys."

He himself picked out the sumptuous long-skirted garments she was to wear
and watched with the deepest interest the rather slow process of her attiring. He was particularly pleased with a wonderfully embroidered white cloak and lace cap, which latter article he abstractedly tied on his great fist and found much too small for it. His triumph, when she was given to his arms, he did not attempt to conceal, but carried her into the store with the manner of a large victor bearing his spoils.

"Now look here, boys," he announced, being greeted with the usual laughter and jocular remarks. "This ain't the style of thing we want.

Hand a man a chair."

His customary support being produced, he seated himself in it, keeping his charge balanced with a dexterity and ease quite wonderful to behold.

"What we want," he proceeded, "is a more respectful tone. Something in the elaborate chivalric style, and we're going to have it. What we want is to come into this establishment feeling that there's no risk of our being scared or upset by any durned fool startling us and setting our delicate machinery wrong. We've come here to stay, and we expect to be more familiar with things as we grow older, and the thing for us is to start out right without any disagreeable impressions. We don't want to say when we're brought in here--'Why, here's the place where that fool gave me such a start last week. I wonder if he's here again?' What we want is to feel that here's a place that's home, and a place that a person's likely to look forward to coming to with the view to ah--I should say to a high old time of an agreeable description."

"She's a-goin' to be a doggoned purty critter," said a lounger who sat on a barrel near by.

"She ain't nuthin' like her mother," said another; "though she wus a purty critter when I seed her."

He had only seen her in her coffin.

"She ain't like her father," put in another.

Tom moved in his chair uneasily.

"She won't be like either of them," he said. "Let that go."

There was a tone in his voice which more than one among them had now and

again noticed with some slow bewilderment during the last few weeks--a tone new to them, but which in time they grew used to, though they never understood its meaning.

"Kinder," they used to say, "as ef he wus mad or--ruffed up, though it warn't that exactly, either."

"Black eyes, h'ain't she?" inquired the man on the barrel.

"Yes."

"An har. That's my kind er women, black eyes an' har, and kinder spirity. They've more devil to 'em 'n' is better able to take care of 'emselves."

"She's got some one to take care of her," answered Tom. "That's my business."

"You've got her mightily fixed up, Tom," remarked Mr. Doty, who had just

entered. "You'll hev all the women in the country flocking up. She sorter makes me think o' the Queen o' Sheby. Sheby, she wus great on fixin'."

Every man who entered, seeing her as she lay in state in Tom's lap, was drawn towards her to stand and wonder at her vaguely. There developed a tendency to form small and rather silent groups about her. Infancy was no novelty in this region of numerous progenies, but the fine softness of raiment and delicate sumptuousness of infancy were. More than one man, having looked at her and wandered away, was unable to resist the temptation to wander back again and finally to settle in some seat or box upon a barrel, that he might the better indulge his curiosity and interest.

"Ye must hev spent a heap on her, Tom," was said respectfully again and again.

The fact that "a heap had been spent on her" inspired the audience with a sense of her importance, which amounted to reverence. That she represented an apparently unaccountable expenditure, was considered to reflect credit upon her, however vaguely, and to give her a value not to be lightly regarded. To Mr. Doty the idea of the "Queen of Sheby" appeared to recur persistently, all his imaginings of the poetic, the dramatic, and luxurious being drawn from Scriptural sources.

"I can't think o' nuthin' else but Sheby when I look at her," he remarked several times. "She 'minds me more o' Sheby then anything else 'n

Scripter. Minty'll jest hev to come ter see her."

This boldness of imagery struck a chord in the breast of his hearers which responded at once. It was discovered that more than one of them had been reminded in some indefinite manner of the same distinguished personage.

"When she was consider'ble younger then in Solomon's time," said one gentleman with much solemnity.

Tom himself was caught by the fancy and when his charge was referred to occasionally in a most friendly spirit as "Sheby thar," he made no protest against it.

"It's a thunderation sight better than 'Flishyer,'" he said, "and if it comes easier to you fellows, I've no objection. Sheba ain't bad. There's a kind of swing to it, and you can't get it very far wrong. The other's a good name spoiled, and it's a name I've a fancy for saving for her. I gave it to her--I'll save it for her, and it shall be a thing between us two. Call her Sheba if you like."

So it fell out that Mr. Doty's Oriental imaginings sealed her fate and gradually, by a natural process, Felicia was abandoned for Sheba, even Tom using it upon all ordinary occasions.

Having in this manner begun life, a day rarely passed in which she did

not spend an hour or so in the post-office. Each afternoon during the first few months of her existence Tom brought her forth attired in all her broidery, and it was not long before the day came when he began to cherish the fancy that she knew when the time for her visit was near, and enjoyed it when it came.

"She looks as if she did," he said to Mornin. "She wouldn't go to sleep yesterday after I came into the room, and I'll swear I saw her eyes following me as I walked about; and when I carried her in after she was dressed, she turned her head over her shoulder to look round her and smiled when she had done it and found nothing was missing. Oh! she knows well enough when she gets in there."

The fancy was a wonderfully pleasant one to him, and when, as time went on, she developed a bright baby habit of noticing all about her, and expressing her pleasure in divers soft little sounds, he was a happier man than he had ever thought to be. His greatest pleasure was the certain knowledge that she had first noticed himself--that her first greeting had been given to him, that her first conscious caress had been his. She was a loving little creature, showing her affection earlier than most children do. Before she could sit upright, she recognised his in-comings and out-goings, and when he took her in his arms to walk to and fro with her, as was his habit at night, she dropped her tiny head upon his shoulders with a soft yielding to his tenderness which never failed to quicken the beatings of his heart.

"There's something in her face," he used to say to himself, "something that's not in every child's face. It's a look about her eyes and mouth that seems to tell a man that she understands him--whether his spirits are up or down."

But his spirits were not often down in those days. The rooms at the back no longer wore an air of loneliness, and the evenings never hung heavily on his hands. In the course of a few months he sent to Brownsboro for a high chair and tried the experiment of propping his small companion up in it at his side when he ate his supper. It was an experiment which succeeded very well and filled him with triumph. From her place in the kitchen Mornin could hear during every meal the sound of conversation of the most animated description. Tom's big, kind voice rambling cheerily and replied to by the soft and unformed murmuring of the child. He was never tired of her, never willing to give her up.

"What I might have given to others if they'd cared for it," was his thought, "I give to her and she knows it."

It seemed too that she did know it, that from her first gleaming of consciousness she had turned to him as her friend, her protector, and her best beloved. When she heard his footsteps, she turned in Mornin's arms, or in her cradle, to look for him, and when she saw his face her whole little body yearned towards him.

One afternoon when she was about eight months old, he left her at the usual time. Mornin, who was working, had spread a big red shawl upon the floor and seated her upon it, and when Tom went out of the room, she sat still playing in the quiet way peculiar to her, with the gay fringe. She gave him a long earnest look as he crossed the threshold, a look which he remembered afterwards as having been more thoughtful than usual and which
must have represented a large amount of serious speculation mingled with desire.

Tom went into the store, and proceeded to the performance of his usual duty of entertaining his customers. He was in a jovial mood, and, having a larger number of visitors than ordinarily, was kept actively employed in settling the political problems of the day and disposing of all public difficulties.

"What's most wanted at the head of things," he proclaimed, "is a man that's capable of exerting himself (Mis' Doty, if you choose that calico, Job can cut it off for you!) a man who ain't afraid of work. (Help yourself, Jim!) Lord! where'd this post-office be if some men had to engineer it--a man who would stand at things and loaf instead of taking right hold. (For Heaven's sake, Bill, don't hurry! Jake'll give you the tea as soon as he's cut off his wife's dress!) That's the kind of men we want in office now--in every kind of office--in every kind of office. If there's one thing I've no use for on God's green earth, it's a man with no energy. (Nicholson, just kick that box over here so I can get my feet

on it!)"

He was sitting near the door which connected the back part of the establishment with the front, and it was just at this juncture that there fell upon his ear a familiar sound as of something being dragged over the floor. The next moment he felt his foot touched and then pressed upon by some soft unsteady weight.

He looked down with a start and saw first a small round face upturned, its dark eyes tired but rejoicing and faithful, and then a short white dress much soiled and dusted by being dragged over the bare boards of the two storerooms.

His heart gave a leap and all the laughter died out of his face.

"My God, boys!" he said, as he bent down, "she's followed me! She's followed me!"

It was quite true. She had never crawled far beyond the limits of the shawl before, but this morning her longing had given her courage and strength, and she had set out upon her journey in search of him.

Those about him burst into loud, admiring laughter, but Tom did not laugh at all. He lifted the child to his knee and held her encircled by one arm. She was weary with her exertion and settled at once into an easy sitting posture, her head resting against him while she gazed quietly

from under her upcurled lashes at the faces grouped about her. Their laughter did not disturb her now that she had reached her haven of safety.

"To think of her a-followin' him!" said Mis' Doty, "'n' her never sot off nowhars afore. The purty little critter! Lord! Tom, she's a-gwine ter be a sight when she's grown--with them eyes and har! An' ter think of her a-slippin' off from Mornin an' makin' up her little mind to follow ye. I've never had a young 'un to try it that early in all I've raised."

"Lordy!" said Mr. Doty, "she's as sot on Tom 's he's on her, 'n' ef ever a man wus a doggoned fool about a young 'un, he is about that'n; 'n' fur bein' a doggoned fool"--triumphantly--"when he sets out ter be, I'll back Tom agin any man in Hamlin."

Tom said but little. He made no more jokes. He kept the child with him through the rest of the day, holding her upon his knee or carrying her out upon the porch.

When at supper-time he carried her back to the room, she was asleep and he laid her in her cradle himself. He moved about very quietly afterwards and ate his supper alone with frequent glances at the sleeper.

"Don't take her away," he said to Mornin when she came in; "leave her here."

"'N' hev her a-wakin' 'n' disturbin' uv ye, Mars' Tom!" she responded.

"Leave her here," he said, laying his hand on the head of the cradle. "She'll not disturb me. We shall get along finely together."

She was left, Mornin taking her departure with manifest disbelief in the practicability of the plan. And then, having drawn the cradle to his bedside, Tom put out the light and retired himself.

But he did not sleep for some time; having flung his mighty body upon the couch, he lay with his arms thrown above his head gazing at the darkness and listening to the soft breathing at his side. He was thinking over the one event of the day.

What might have seemed a slight thing to many men had struck deep into his great heart.

"My God!" he said, a touch of reverential tone in his whisper, "to think of her following me!"

And he stretched out his hand in the darkness and laid it upon the side of the cradle lightly, and afterwards fell asleep.